

AMBITIOUS POETRY BY WOMEN: PART 4 RADICAL LANDSCAPE POETRY

*'a spark that meets the idea of itself, apparently fearless'*¹

There have been a number of anthologies of what we might call *avant-garde* or 'modernist' poetry published in the UK recently and whilst many of us may feel that we could never belong in this camp, it is exciting and potentially inspiring for our own development, I think, to investigate how women poets are currently working within this movement.

In her Shearsman Press anthology, *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*, Harriet Tarlo presents landscape poetry by men and women writing within the modernist tradition. She distinguishes this selection of work from 'eco-poetry' by its engagement with nature/culture issues through form rather than political content; and she uses the term 'radical' here to describe formally experimental, innovative work by poets who are concerned with what she terms the 'revealing/concealing relationship between the human and the non-human worlds'.²

These poems characteristically use 'open form' text that responds spatially and aurally to the natural phenomena encountered rather than to a pre-given poetic pattern, often juxtaposing languages from different discourses or terminologies (such as the scientific with the spiritual). They look to etymology, the splitting of individual words and sonic experiment to question our modern relationship with the natural world, as in Helen Macdonald's *Poem*³:

Bright the what, reins wherever you go something
keeps at the forefront & might this be a while here
rest a little, see how easy the land fits like a lamp
the hand as it keeps, small fowles pruneth

[...]

[...] trees swung and crashed with vernal fire

where the sere and drouth is stood & picking strings out
of ligament, music. Try a distance off, listening with care
trust as amused as an arm open to sensate pleasure
the land is falln over.

The women represented in Tarlo's book are: Elisabeth Bletsoe, Helen Macdonald, Wendy Mulford, Frances Presley, Zoë Skoulding, Harriet Tarlo herself, and Carol Watts. All are well established poets, most published by small presses such as etruscan books, Odyssey, Reality Street Editions and Shearsman. The women in this anthology are part of a community of avant-garde poets that includes Ian Hamilton Finlay and Maggie O'Sullivan in the UK, and Lorine Niedecker and Charles Olson in the US⁴ – poets who, according to Tarlo, have 'complex and thought-provoking slants on locality, pastoral, land politics and ecology/environment'.⁵

In general, this radical landscape writing has at its heart, 'Close observation, but not over-assumption [...]'⁶ and in these ways, radical landscape poetry stands in distinct contrast to Pastoral poetry, which might be said to take nature as the steady counterpoint to human volatility. In fact, Carol Watts has described her own sequence, *Zeta Landscape* – an examination of the life of a Welsh hill farm through calculus and economics – as 'lyric nature poetry put under pressure'⁷:

sort them one from another without intention
some bred for stoicism the patterning of others
a question of love [...]'⁸

