AMBITION POETRY BY WOMEN: PART 4
RADICAL LANDSCAPE POETRY

‘a spark that meets the idea of itself, apparently fearless’

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’.

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:

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 swunged 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 US – poets who, according to Tarlo, have ‘complex and thought-provoking slants on locality, pastoral, land politics and ecology/environment.

In general, this radical landscape writing has at its heart, ‘Close observation, but not over-assumption […]’ 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’:

sort them one from another without intention some bred for stoicism the patterning of others a question of love […]
A similar pressure comes from Elisabeth Bletsoe, a Dorset naturalist, whose work combines visceral exactness with a sense of the natural world as spirit; an air-born, breathing world of partial life, decay, renewal:

I torce the necks of wounded gamebirds,
shock of come-apart cervicals, reflex
wingjumps, (feeling)
a pulse not my heart,
the once-complete potential in
soft declension of egg-buds

(Cross-in-Hand)

There is a sense in these poems that the writer is one of utter integrity in attempting to both document and embody the real, fragmented, inconclusive stirrings (cognitive and emotional) experienced in our encounters with our environment, and it is this same integrity which often makes the work of the reader so much harder, as with Wendy Mulford’s *A Tale of Loss*, 2, in *CODA*:

gold hard lithe hard leaps shadow-ward
a torn pole striking out a spar across the
dirty ocean of
loss yes off course loveliness
tall backed straight skyward dropping
off the page aureole glory hard
glowing toes point back to
earth hammered
whips irradiate

Reading the above sequence, I longed for the forward-energy of a sentence, the direction of a comma, for a more sympathetic syntax, to quell the unease in my stomach. I try to accept my unease in the face of this determined integrity and in the knowledge from my own writing that there can be a great temptation to sail over contradiction or disturbance, to over-determine, deliver closure – but I cannot ignore my delight when I encounter, amongst the radicals, writing as lyrical as this, by Zoë Skoulding:

as the vein runs
under fragile reconstructions
of what was holding us together
*the river made of time and water*

[...] runs through us
the river sings between between rose and gold the blood
runs between us outlines of fish
in the shadows slipping green
on this side of the river we and on that side they

(The New Bridge)

In fact, there is plenty of lyricism in the experimental work, and plenty of linguistic innovation in what we call the mainstream. Here is Alice Oswald in *Woods etc.*, for example, in *Story of a Man*:

and all day, all he could breathe
was the crow ’s-foot tracks of sighs ‘ small hollows in the air

then in the half light, it half thawed,
he half, with a mist-hand, waved.
alive in his skin-ruins.
at last at last he could think clearly
However, in the same volume, the following poem of Oswald’s is more ‘traditional’, at least, in its more anthropomorphic approach to nature:

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what is water in the eyes of water
loose inquisitive fragile anxious
a wave, a winged form
splitting up into sharp glances
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*(Sea Poem)*

and similarly with Kathleen Jamie in the poem *May* in *The Overhaul*:

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How can we bear it? A fire-streaked sky, a firth
decked in gold, the grey clouds passing
like peasant folk
    lured away by a prophecy.
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In both Oswald and Jamie the poems take a knowable shape, mostly left-justified on the page, and they are satisfying in the way they form a sentence or an argument, in how they proceed with recognisable logic. These two poets place the human within nature and from inside investigate what it is to be human in the presence of the non-human. The blurb for *Woods etc.* puts it this way: ‘Oswald’s theme is nature, but her listening syntax locates a human pulse inside the workings of the phenomenal world’, whilst on the back cover of *The Overhaul* Jamie is described as continuing her ‘lyric enquiry into the aspects of the world our rushing lives elide, and even threaten.’

But there is a significant difference between the two ‘camps’: with much of the radical landscape poetry, the reader’s experience is often more cerebral than sensuous. Without metre or a particular music, without a conjured image or a patterning for the eye to behold, our experience is intellectualized: we are occupied in searching for those images or patterns or with ranging over the whole to comprehend a particular formulation – and far from being able to rejoice at an artful simile or metaphor, in a known or imagined relationship between language and referent, we are instead concerned with trying to understand the significance of the words’ relationship to each other. This is precisely the undertaking of the modernists, resisting traditional linguistic hierarchies and systems and, as Tarlo puts it, ‘eschewing the lyric ‘I’ in favour of a sense of self and poet which, in the case of Frances Presley, for example, emphasises the ‘plurality and the commonality of experience, as well as its transience.’

According to Tarlo, this experimental writing precisely privileges ‘textuality, verbal surface, and wordplay’, as in the case of Maggie O’Sullivan, whose drive is to ‘speak’ a nature which cannot be fully articulated. Here is an extract from her *Hill Figures* in a much earlier anthology of women’s radical poetry:

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nailed Eagles   beryl alter vasish
    Owls, Blood-bed
Bird-gear       turbulent
    Ruled
    it,

    Raven

    blue acquiescing tar
        thread
    the.air.it.will.be.tinned.
    pull —
    feather against call —
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Although legitimate divisions can be made between the enterprise of Tarlo’s selected poets and the mainstream for analytical purposes, in reality it seems there can be no firm boundaries, no permanent fixings into this or that school of poetics.
In another recent Shearsman anthology of experimental poetry, for example, Carrie Etter’s *Infinite Difference*, Isobel Armstrong says that for her the word ‘poem’ ‘still retains the vestiges of “singing” – the body used as a vocal instrument, print imprinted with the body’s effort’¹⁸, whilst Carlyle Reedy, for whom there is self-confessed ‘fervency about translating from within the organism and its sensory apparatus a recognition of the truth of life and the intense destructivity of abstracted systems’¹⁹, writes of women’s experience of war with exquisite sensuousness in *To the Margin*:

She died, recalling the women
Outside in her slip […]
[...] Is her
Light wrap a drawing of form,
A material so soft it issues upward,
[...]
She appears to recall detail
[...]

In conclusion, what is exciting about these radical, modernist poets is the materiality of their texts as texts. They *present* rather than attempt to capture flow, breath, body and sound in an embodiment of our inconclusive human relationship with the natural elements. Here we have a group of women poets taking bold risks, aesthetically and politically, using the page as an ‘open field’, and, crucially, repudiating any ‘feminine’ impulse to provide a necessarily comfortable journey for their readers.

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² Tarlo, p. 7
³ In Tarlo, p.157
⁴ One of the ‘Black Mountain’ poets, Charles Olson argued the case, in 1950, for ‘open field’ composition in poetry instead of traditional closed poetic forms, in which form embodied the content of the poem, each line to be a unit of breath and of utterance.
⁵ Tarlo, p.14
⁶ Tarlo, p.13
⁷ In Tarlo, p.11
⁸ *Zeta Landscape* 2, in Tarlo, p. 112
⁹ In Tarlo, p.104
¹⁰ In Tarlo, p. 58
¹¹ In Tarlo, p.131
¹² Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.*, Faber (2005), p.30
¹³ Oswald, in *Woods etc.*, p.3
¹⁴ Kathleen Jamie, from the third of *Five Tay Sonnets* in *The Overhaul*, Picador (2012), p.7
¹⁵ Cited by Tarlo, op. cit. (2007)
¹⁹ Carlyle Reedy in Etter, p.26