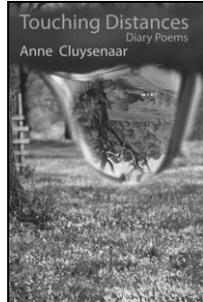


SOWING THE SEEDS OF CONTINUANCE THE ECOPOETRY OF ANNE CLUYSENAAR



*“In Batu-Angas, Anne ponders
‘the tenuous job of the poet’ and
sees the arts as having an
intrinsic evolutionary role ...”*

Anne Cluysenaar’s parents were painters. The family immigrated to Britain from Belgium before WW2. After moving to Southern Ireland, Anne took a degree at Trinity College Dublin, became an Irish citizen and her first collection *Nodes* appeared from the Dolmen Press. Having taught literature, linguistics and stylistics, she then ran, for the last thirty years or so of her life, with her husband Walt, a smallholding on the Welsh borders.

A few years before Anne Cluysenaar tragically lost her life, she and I began work on some writing that was to be an ecopoetics conversation-piece. Though we didn’t get it finished, it explored poetry-writing in the context of our time, where the natural world is imperilled, with 97% of the scientific body agreeing that global warming is human-caused. We are all used to hearing reports about melting arctic ice, species extinction, extreme weather events, desertification and, in the face of such news, one question that Anne and I were exploring was *what can poetry do?*

The word *eco*, of course, is from the Greek, *oikos*, meaning ‘home’ and, according to Alfred K. Siewers, *ecopoesis* is ‘a language-art of empathy that is essential for human development in the physical environment, and which ultimately is based in the imagination’. Siewers reviewed Anne’s collection *Batu-Angas* in the *Temenos Academy Review* 12¹, where he praised the work for ‘its relevance in pointing toward the essential role of poetry in shaping a saner twenty-first-century culture of science’.

Batu-Angas was the culmination of several years’ ‘poetic participation’² in the life of Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer, with Darwin, of natural selection. It was Wallace’s letter to Darwin, sent in 1858 from the island of Ternate in the Malay Archipelago, which prompted Darwin to finish and publish *The Origin of Species*.

In reading Wallace’s autobiography, *My Life*, and researching his work, Anne found herself ‘enthralled’ by this polymathic figure, with his ‘unshakeable love for life’.³ Wallace the scientist was also an advocate of the arts and validated spiritual experience. It was his ‘very lack of total faith in a materialistic scientism, and his complexity as a person approaching scientific discovery with wonder’ that, according to Siewers, made him ‘a very fitting focus’ for Anne’s poetic reflections on ‘the role of poetry ... as itself serving an environmental function’.

In *Batu-Angas*, Anne ponders the ‘tenuous job of poet’ and sees the arts as having an intrinsic, evolutionary role: ‘Deep time stretches on either side of our present existence. Perhaps modern scientific insights *need* [my emphasis] to be accompanied by arts capable of facing these dizzying perspectives in terms that enable us to keep our emotional balance’. And, as is evident throughout Anne’s work, she leaned again and again into ‘dizzying perspectives’ of deep time and brought back

news in her poems. We can see this abiding theme in all her latest collections, from *Timeslips* (1997) – “At sunfall, among the swifts, / noctules. Still finding their way / by echoes. After fifty million”⁴ – on through *Batu-Angus*, where “the green and white” of a spider is “a multi-millennial meditation”⁵; in her sequence *Through Time in Migrations* (2011) and in her last book, *Touching Distances* (2014), where she imagines (in *January 9*) the feet of the preserved footsteps found in the River Severn mud: “two men and a boy ... Seven thousand years, give or take a few hundred, / between them and us”⁶.

Anne was a poet of wonder. In poem after poem there is both an intellectual and imaginative energy brought to bear on her subject, and her poems reflect her sense of being in relationship with ‘others’, whether human or animal, plant or mineral. According to philosopher Ronald Hepburn, ‘wonder’ is an ecological virtue. There is, with wonderment, a sense of ‘the gratuitousness of the object and its qualities’, invoked, too, by ‘the mystery of the sheer existence of the world’⁷. Anne catches at this, for example, in her *Batu-Angas* poem XIX: “Now I know the precise angle / Wallace himself held the bird at, / ... / witnessing another of life’s / inexplicably useless wonders”.

Anne possessed a steady kind of *regard*, in two senses of the word: (i) a mode of sustained ‘looking’ which leads to (ii) a regard and care for that which is the object of her attention. Wonder as a mode of sustained regard can transform and inform the perceiver; Anne translated her experience into poem after poem, leaving behind her the traces of a life lived at depth.

The word *poesis*, ‘to make’, reminds us that one meaning of *ecopoesis* is ‘home-making’, and that the act of writing poetry, with its sustained attention to detail, is crucially involved in this. It can be argued, as Siewers suggests, that science, on its own, may not succeed in awakening people’s *felt* responses to climate change. Poetry has a ‘crucial role to play’ in helping us understand ‘who we are and who we need to be’ and, in Anne’s poetry, he sees a truly ‘participatory sense of nature (of life related at deep levels)’.

For Anne, the making of a poem is like the making of home, with each poem like a “seed of Continuous. / An impulse towards survival. / Desires to hold in mind / through the flux and reflux of ice”.

In an interview I did with Anne for *Planet* magazine⁸, I asked her how art-making fits into evolution. ‘What is the ‘tenuous job of poet’ today?’

I’ll end by letting Anne answer in her own words:

From deep in prehistory onward, *Homo sapiens* has created art. If art had nothing to do with survival it would not have been given time and attention by people existing on the edge of possibility. Cave drawings and sculpture – even a tiny figure like the Vestoniče Venus, which I evoke in the last poem of the sequence – seem to me to provide metaphors for what art, as distinct from science, offers the individual and the group. Language-arts (though time obliterated the earliest) must have been the first and, as creatures, we are after all unique, in that thoughts and attitudes may be more critical to our survival than understanding. ‘We’re the only animal that evolves in its mind’ – Steve Jones. [...] Science is facing us now with deep-time perspectives which challenge humanity to find a new sense of balance. I think poets, even if they don’t make discoveries, may ‘sow the seed of continuance’ by helping us recalibrate what goes on in our heads and retain, however much bad news we may know or think we know, a sense of life’s wonder.

Fiona Owen

¹ All references to Siewers are from this review (2009).

² From Anne’s introduction to *Batu-Angas* (2008), Seren.