

Poetic Island

Poetic writing in three Tasmanian novels about convict women, Oliné Keese's *The Broad Arrow*, Robert S. Close's *Eliza Callahan* and Rachel Leary's *Bridget Crack*.

Surely, from time to time, you'll have turned to the back of a novel and found it described as 'poetic'. A little wonder has drifted into your mind, asking, "what does that mean"? Pete Hay has written, "I have called Tasmania 'an island of poets' so often that it has become a cliché."¹ *What does he mean?* You'll find any number of theories about what poetry is, but that's not what this essay is about. It is, rather, a personal reflection on poetic writing in a Tasmanian context. This is formulated around a survey of several novels about convict women that are well worth discovering. Underlying this, my purpose is to question why poetic forms might seem useful to Tasmanian writers, and why particular kinds of Tasmanian poetic writing might help us reconcile human ways with ourselves, and with Earth's other species and natural systems.

I'm starting with one of the earliest "Tasmanian" novels – Oliné Keese's *The Broad Arrow: being pages from the history of Maida Gwynnham, a Lifer*. Published in 1859, this is a fascinating text which has just been reissued in a new critical edition by Sydney University Press. In it, Jenna Mead has restored material that was cut from earlier editions, which makes it an interesting edition for cultural studies. The other works I will survey, below, are Robert S. Close's novel *Eliza Callahan*, published in 1957 – you will probably have to search second hand bookshops or libraries for this – and Rachel Leary's recent novel, *Bridget Crack* (2017), which is currently shortlisted for the Tasmanian Premier's Award 2019.

Oliné Keese was known for her poetry, and published a collection, *Lyra Australis*, in 1854, but the closest *The Broad Arrow* gets to poetry, at least the sort I am interested in, is in the author's bizarre pen name. It is a mutation of Caroline Leakey, her real name and the name I prefer to use. I think her work merits proper attribution, and surely she is no longer afflicted by any sensitivities that might have originally prompted her to adopt a pseudonym.

As *The Broad Arrow's* clunky nineteenth-century title informs us, Leakey's novel tells us of Maida Gwynnham, a daughter of English gentry falsely convicted and transported to Van Diemen's Land for infanticide. Although innocent in this respect, Maida is crippled by remorse for having allowed herself to be seduced and for aiding her lover in a forgery. Despite being the central character in *The Broad Arrow*, Maida is almost mute. The narrator thinks and feels on her behalf, and those thoughts are heavily informed by religious doctrine and reflection on its application to everyday life in colonial Van Diemen's land, mortality, living an ethical life and the treatment of convicts. The novel is a carefully reasoned morality tale. Its tenets are primarily expressed through dialogue and the omniscient eye of the narrator, in passages such as the following: "I pray God that my will may never again be my guide, ma'am. To be left to my own devices would be to be given over to evil," exclaimed Maida, the fire fading from her glance, and an expression of pain gathering on her countenance".² Although there are conventionally poetic devices (metaphor, for example) in these words, they have little room for subjective interpretation or slippage. Their meaning can be understood cerebrally, without significant need for one's empathetic imagination. The narrator tells us Maida's thoughts and that her expression is pained, rather than describing her features in a way that would leave readers to interpret for themselves her gestures, tone of voice or facial expression.

It is poetry that uses the latter techniques, directly communicating physical sensations or emotions, which interests me most in Tasmanian writing.

I don't wish to say that poetry may not be cerebral. Poetry can be anything if it wants – that is the wonder of poetry. But there is a kind of poetry that communicates directly, via languages other than linguistic, words-based ones – visual, gestural, musical or other aural languages, for example. Leaping a century forwards in time, what I am talking about can be seen in Robert S. Close's novel *Eliza Callahan*. Published in 1957, *Eliza* is another story about a convict woman, but it is certainly not moralizing. Some might even find it a bit racy.

Eliza is a spirited and reckless Irishwoman, transported mainly as a consequence of her own frivolity and ultimately, again, for becoming involved in currency crime (this is a common theme in these novels). Subjected to the 1820s Van Diemonian assignment system, Eliza's character brings her into conflict with her masters, sees her abscond as she goes looking for old friends and fun, and help a desperate friend escape capital punishment. This precipitates her own flight, which leads to the happy coincidence of finding herself secreted in the cart of handsome John Batman. The novel's romantic plot culminates in Batman's heroic exploits (I won't give all away) making it possible for them to marry and depart for the sunnier shores of Victoria.

Close's writing is emotive and sensual; in fact he was found guilty of obscene libel over another book, *Love Me Sailor* (published in 1945). In *Eliza*, empathy for the heroine is stimulated through descriptions of emotional states, such as loneliness, but also through how Close depicts physical experiences. His descriptions are written in ways that may arouse actual or empathetic physical or imaginative responses in readers. For example, when Eliza, discovered in Batman's cart, is invited to join him on the driver's seat, Close writes: "[h]is hand gripped hers and it was like a sweet fire through her as she climbed aboard. And by the sudden way his eyes looked up into hers as their hands unclasped, she knew he wasn't mistaking her own hand for a wet fish either. It put a strange singing through her veins . . ." ³

Passages such as this are, of course, standard fare in romantic and erotic fiction, but it is important to note how writing of this kind enables readers to go beyond the denotative meanings of words and read in more poetic ways – the significance of the words opens up to the excessiveness of actual human experience. This occurs because reader identification causes unthinking neural processes to take place, simulating actual feeling or sensation. The reader has the impression of actually feeling the represented sensations or emotions, enabling them to contextualise and make meaning from the story in ways that elude the logic of purely linguistic means of communication.

Writing like Close's communicates meaning through non-verbal languages of gesture or feeling, visual symbols, or sound. What is really quite magical about this mode of communication is that words are being used in ways that translate these other languages into a linguistic form. And this seems to be a particular kind of poetry that could offer much insight into some of the value of Tasmanian writing, particularly the writing of the last twenty years or so.

Writing that elicits emotional and sensory responses, such as Close's, tends to be regarded as low-brow and of little cultural value. Consider Virginia Woolf's work though. She uses similar techniques, but her writing is not all about sex, romance and excitement. It explores more abstract ideas, so it is not regarded as populist or low-brow. Yet Woolf depicted bodily interactions between characters

and their surroundings as though they were a kind of conversation. In fact, it has been suggested that she purposely used the technique of describing the sensory and emotional experiences of humans in detail to unsettle conventional linguistic reasoning systems.⁴ This is illustrated in *To the Lighthouse*, where Woolf juxtaposed Mrs Ramsay's way of understanding the world through feeling against her husband's unassailable, linguistics-based logic. Through Mrs Ramsay, Woolf observed that, "[t]o pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency There was nothing to be said".

Mrs Ramsay cannot possibly oppose her husband on his terms, by using conventional, patriarchal language. Even their son, James, perceives this, noting that "[w]hat [Mr Ramsay] said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word . . .". Mrs Ramsay's response therefore, is to communicate her feelings primarily by actions – by caring for her family, preparing meals, and simply being present. Although this leaves her feeling like ". . . nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions", the nonverbal, seemingly illogical means that she uses to communicate offer Mrs Ramsay some agency.⁵ How she achieves this could be compared to the ways in which the non-human world itself may have agency, an idea writers like David Abrams, Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett have elucidated.⁶

Through such a lens, Close's animal-like depiction of Eliza, which might typically be considered misogynistic, can be viewed in a different light. What Close actually does is expose the sensory and emotional life of humans, and the ways that we communicate with our world and each other, in ways that go beyond words and exceed our rational, consciously thinking mind. It is a technique that appears even more vividly in Rachel Leary's recent novel, *Bridget Crack* (2017). This is a work which fairly hums with the kind of poetry that expresses sensory and emotional languages. *Bridget Crack* is very comparable to *Eliza Callahan* and *The Broad Arrow* in many ways – it is set against the background of the 1820s assignment system and sees its protagonist transported for naive entanglement in a forgery. Even the bushrangers Bridget joins are based on the same Brady gang, who Eliza can thank for her happy ending. Bridget's involvement with them is far more brutal, however – she is abused, entrapped and desperately dependent on them for survival after having escaped from a callous master.

Leary depicts Bridget as intelligent, clear-sighted and resilient, and this resilience is connected to her ability to accurately perceive and adapt to the world around her. Bridget's eyes have a "sharpness" that enables her to accurately read people and the environment, and the threat or otherwise that they pose. She is constantly in communication with the world around her, even though sometimes all it gives her is a "criminally silent horizon" – it is a world that is frigid and monochromatic, with vegetation that prods, tears and confounds travel. Crack's Tasmania is no sublime wilderness offering at least the hope of spiritual salvation, yet communion with it helps Bridget decide on what actions she should take. When she absconds from her callous master, Pigot, for example, her decision to do so comes from contemplation of the sky. Leary writes: "The brightest of the stars spun dusky fingers of light at her. Can't stay here, it said. Have to get away from this place".⁷

In contrast to Bridget, Marshall, a respectable citizen fascinated and perplexed by Bridget, and to whom she was first assigned, is incapable of this kind of communication. Leary seems to suggest that his immersion in imperial British culture prevents him from understanding the world in other ways.

She alludes to this in references to his love of Romantic writers such as Mary Shelley and William Wordsworth, and suggests that he cannot understand non-linguistic means of expression like painting or singing. When he contemplates at the landscape, or tries to discover it, it confounds him, and he reverts to mulling over his existing thoughts and frustrations. To put it simply, he thinks too much, and, as a consequence, is afflicted by an all-pervasive impotence. He can neither protect the Aborigines, nor heal his marriage, nor save or capture Bridget. He sees himself, and perceives others as seeing him, as weak, and his life as a failure. Ultimately he finds he must leave Van Diemen's Land, for there is "[n]othing there for him". He has not learnt the languages of the land and fears the Van Demonian environment, finding in it only a "sense of spiritual danger".⁸

In contrast to Marshall, Bridget's awareness of her surroundings enables her to exert far more control over her life. Her decisions may not deliver an easy life, but they alleviate pressing dangers. By being open to her environment and communing with it, Bridget comes to understand Van Diemen's Land in a way that Marshall never could, and she even discovers that it might be possible to make a good life in there, something she had wondered about when she first arrived. Towards the end of the novel she dreams of arrival at a "land that was theirs", and a future which "will be alright".⁹ This is an extraordinarily positive message to find in an otherwise unrelentingly dark novel, and I think it can only be understood by recognising how Bridget's ability to speak the other languages of her environment offers her strength and opportunity.

Leary enables readers to understand Bridget's decisions by depicting her interactions with the environment in a poetic language that communicates feelings and sensations. Because we can sense or mirror Bridget's experiences in all their excessive detail, we can make sense of them in ways that might not be possible if we were pressed to explain them in the logic of conventional language, as Mrs Ramsay, for example, feels she must. Pete Hay takes a similar approach in his poem, "Sound to the World". In this, Hay describes how a woman, Gentle Annie (apparently an ex-convict) seeks refuge in the natural world and eventually relinquishes herself to it: "there is the swete musick of the catrack / there is this wee cretur here who sits all copy shine / in the autumn sun I cood watsh it all morning / offen I do."¹⁰ Although this passage is narrated by Annie, it communicates sound and light and a sense of physical being in that environment, allowing the reader to feel immersed in Annie's world and thus understand her in richly excessive detail.

It has been useful to consider writing concerning convict women because their experiences were often so excessive that they were not well served by conventional, patriarchal language. Authors like Leary and Close have, therefore, striven to represent their experiences by portraying the non-verbal ways that they communicated them. By poetically depicting their feelings and sensations, effectively translating the languages they "spoke" into more conventional linguistic systems of communication, they offer us ways to better understand such women and, ultimately, ourselves.

But to move towards the future of Tasmanian writing, it is not essential to remain with convict women. It is more useful to think about how, by stretching the ability of written language to represent interactions between humans and their environment, Tasmanian writers offer us ways to better understand our place in a world and social relationships. The island's writers enable us to see glimpses of a world beyond the limits of our cultures and the perceptual goggles bestowed upon us by our existing semantic systems. Perhaps such insights might help us begin to heal many of the rifts that have grown between humans, amongst ourselves, and between us and the rest of the world.

Through such healing perhaps, like Bridget, we might learn to adapt and survive in a rapidly changing world.

Fewer and fewer people in today's world know how to read the signs the nonhuman world uses to communicate with us. Tasmanians, however, are not as highly urbanised as people in most other places. We still live relatively close to the natural environment, and many of us have lived long enough in this particular island system to have learnt to recognise its patterns and perceive how those are changing. Because many Tasmanians have such awareness they have the opportunity to translate what is currently culturally excessive and contribute to the eventual recognition and integration of such material into our cultural systems, as we begin to make sense of such information. For this reason, Tasmanian writers, who remain relatively close to the natural environment, will be of increasing value to the world. Lutruwita speaks with many voices – poets amplify these voices so that humans may hear them.

Bio

Daniela Brozek Cordier was made by Tasmania's wild and human places, with a family history on the island traceable to 1804. She has guided on the Overland Track, taught English in Czechia and France, worked in tourism and marketing, grown and sold plants, and was an environmental consultant for over a decade. She is principal of Bright South, a business which aims, above all, to help the communicators of lutruwita thrive.

¹ Pete Hay, "Memory in a fractured island: an introduction to the literature of the island at the end of the earth". Paper delivered at *The Tower at the End of the World* Conference, Faroe Islands, May 2017; <https://petehaywriter.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/memory-in-a-fractured-island-2.pdf>

² Oliné Keese [Caroline Leakey], *The Broad Arrow; Being Passages from the History of Maida Gwynnham, a Lifer*. USyd ebook, p. 291, <http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00038.pdf>; see also USyd Press's 2019 re-edition, edited by Jenna Mead.

³ Robert S. Close, *Eliza Callahan*. W. H. Allen, 1957; p. 227.

⁴ Louise Westling has read Woolf's writing from an ecocritical perspective, and she described Woolf's writing as a "conversation" – see Louise Westling, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World", *New Literary History*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Case Studies (Autumn, 1999), p 866.

⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, Oxford UP, 2008 [1927], quoting from pages 8 and 29.

⁶ See David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world*, Vintage 1997; Donna Haraway, "Encounters with Companion Species: Entangling Dogs, Baboons, Philosophers, and Biologists", *Configurations*, vol. 14 no. 1-2, 2006, pp. 97-114; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*; Duke UP, 2009.

⁷ Rachel Leary, *Bridget Crack*, Allen & Unwin, 2017. Quotes from pages 20, and 12 and 15, and 9, respectively.

⁸ Quotes: IBID, pp. 309, 283, respectively.

⁹ IBID, pp. 310-311.

¹⁰ Pete Hay, *Physick*, Shoestring Press 2016, p. 9