

face to face
Place and Poetry | MARTIN HARRISON

A psychology is always brought face to face with the problem of the constitution of the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

For the spoken version of this paper I read a number of poems, interspersing them with some of the comments made in the prose part of the paper. In this printed version of the paper, however, my aim is that the prose paragraphs focus more specifically on only three poems: 'The Driver', 'The Slope' and 'Incident at Galore Hill'. The hill referred to is a low, isolated ridge about an hour to the west of Wagga Wagga in the Riverina. In the spoken version I also opened with the quote from Merleau-Ponty given above: 'A psychology is always brought face to face with the problem of the constitution of the world'.¹ In trying to prepare the ground for a philosophy which can deal with what he terms the 'phenomenal field', Merleau-Ponty spends a number of pages early in *The Phenomenology of Perception* clarifying what he sees as the limits and traps of several narrowly psychological approaches to perception.² Such psychologies—Merleau-Ponty lists empiricist, Gestalt, Bergsonian and what he terms 'introspective' psychologies—set up the observed world as a transcendent domain which maps consciousness as if it were somehow separated out from the world, as if, to employ his phrase, there are two different 'modes' of being. One of these modes refers to the external observed perceptions and the other to the inward form of observation. The problem is that when defined in terms of this sort of transcendent psychology, being is, as he puts it, 'brought down' to knowledge. Fluent perception is reductively modelled on externally described cognitive structures. But, he goes on: 'As thinking subject we are never the

unreflective subject that we seek to know; but neither can we become wholly consciousness, or make ourselves into the transcendental consciousness'.³

— I

To start: a few reflections about the relation between inside and outside.

This is, in part, an architectural relationship: quite literally so. We walk outside. We walk inside. Light turns to shadow. At night, we have the peculiarly modern experience of walking from an illuminated interior to the dark outside. Whether this inside–outside relationship is marked by a feature as distinctive as light thrown from the open back door into the darkness or whether it is marked by a series of inconspicuous glances through windows, half-noticed exits and entrances as we carry the rubbish out to the carport, or sit out in one of the chairs along the veranda, the place we live in comes to terms with, arrives at its own limits in relation to the environment, the surrounds, the location. It sets up its own field of terms—words, thoughts, markers, journeys—for where it is. In a profound sense, it is the built structure that makes the place. Without a built structure of thought or a built structure of information—or a literal 'building'—there is no-place.

The relationship between the place and its surrounds is a cognitive one and, therefore inevitably, takes place as a psychological movement between inside and outside, a process in which interiorisation and exteriorisation are mutually entwined in each other. (Poetry seems to have a deep connection with the discovery, or opening, of places: imaginatively a poem always takes place somewhere, not just because it is descriptive, but because the thought or image of a poem is staged or positioned 'somewhere'—in the mind, in the play of images, perhaps indeed within a set of descriptive references—but always 'somewhere'.)

At the same time, to show that the poem indicates how the speaker participates in the experience is indispensable in my work. In part, this is a practical way in which poetry can manage the intertwining of interior and exterior experience, without setting one up one term against the other as transcendent or overly structured. (I am not saying that this is a philosophical move, but more just an aesthetic reflection of, or response to, the question.) For in composition, 'we need to move as freely as possible', treating the form of our experience as immanent and expressible mainly through metaphor.⁴ The poem will have series of overlapping vectors of thought and feeling, setting up a space in which a recognisable encounter occurs. Usually I want this to be expressed with an everydayness that locates the moment in the most ordinary sort of sequence: events occur. Without making the issue too overt, too self-reflexive, the change brought about by one's own being there, whether impacting on the place or the moment, is paramount. The relationship between place and no-place is at the front of the mind. In short, someone is always doing the talking, the doing, the looking, the sensing, the listening: the poem need not disguise that fact. 'Someone: a certain

someone', says Jean-Luc Nancy, 'anyone at all, each and everyone, but also this one and none other'.⁵

The Driver

Someone was taping up the road and waved me on,
saying 'It's OK.' In the verge, a couple huddled over,
two other cyclists standing near them. (It seemed wrong to look.)
They were the half-victims, burdened with guilt, placed in time.
The next few corners—I knew the road—these were my thoughts:
first, the jacket draped round the huddled woman's shoulders
like a blurred image in a painting, a few brush strokes in tall grass,
then, against everything, the youthful no-surprise of death,

then fate's blankness—how it's meaningless, a sky
with a single crow winging its black dot across it—
then the permanence of someone's going, leaving, dying,
then how, walking away, the dead unmake an invisible space
we've always known—they're the unthought light where we all walk—
then nagging fear that tragedy, out of the blue, one day marks me
with its sad repeats: some story—some half seen thing—lodged there
like a lifetime's mood. (Already, writing this down,

I sound like a character in my own thoughts.) A half hour
before I got there, some kid hurtled into darkness,
flung forwards, down the slope, into the year's first cooler air,
like a diver swallow-tailing beneath a pool's shaky water,
a melted body sliding under, broken in pieces.
Along the road, spilt flotsam of the paramedics:
a wheelbase for a stretcher, blankets, a frame for plasma.
It was a film set, a nightmare picnic gone adrift.

I drove on, entering my own thought's valley—
its filtered shadow stretched out to now. Rather, until an hour ago.
I was thinking, testing the season's change, some rain.
First stray locusts had started fluttering through new grass,
lifting off, floating onward a pace or two. One follows me in,

to hang there, inside, on the kitchen door. (The bad joke 'Choppers' came to mind.) Outside, greenness has splashed the slopes, gathering more strongly in the gulleys, on the flats—

just now, too, a swirl of firetails lassoes the back steps' sunlight, though my mind's filled with what I saw before the accident: that guy—teenager, really—helmet in hand, geared up, standing on the first of the bends where the road narrows blindly before a one-lane wooden bridge. He was flagging traffic, his streaked blond hair shaken loose from helmet and leather. (I'd slowed down already, breaking, stopping for an instant.) I glanced across. 'What's wrong?' I asked. Then: 'Someone's been killed.'

His words, direct, ignorant, spiral across the space. This comes back, just now, as I step indoors out of the day. His standing there beneath the trees has got to me, the suddenness of things with which no-one could grieve. That moment, travelling at the speed of light, caught me out: under a glimpse of widening sky, disordered rivers hold their flow, the pale-winged locusts float up before they whirl to earth. I imagine rotor blades, and then pale flowers crashing down.

— II

How can we divide the perceiver from the perceived?⁶ For Merleau-Ponty this question presented the particular problem of integrating descriptions of the perceived world with the nature of bodily awareness and position. The risk is that in pursuing this idea of the relationship between body and perception, consciousness becomes, so to speak, fixated on each object, inclining the viewer to forget the fluidity of our involvement with things and the changing nature of sensory awareness. The problem is that we end up regarding our body as itself just a thing and not as 'my point of view upon the world'.⁷

Of course there are other ways to discuss how this immersion of human presence in the world, this merging 'fit' of perceiver and perceived, is structured and shared: how it is embedded in awareness. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson propose a kind of 'conceptual cross-domain mapping' (their phrase) in which metaphor is centrally, as they put it, a 'matter of thought, not just words'.⁸ Metaphor or, rather, the image repertoires that are reiterated in metaphor are basic to thought, they say; metaphor is the creative and conceptual means by which the relation between perceiver and perceived can be articulated. As they rather technically phrase it, metaphor 'projects inference patterns from the source domain to the target domain'.⁹ Here it is worth adding a self-reflexive moment: it is interesting to

watch the metaphors that these cognitive philosophers themselves use—metaphors of topography and land, metaphors of mapping. The very phrase ‘cross-domain mapping’ is poetic, merging the concepts of ‘region’ and the miniaturised projection of a place in a map within each other. Place, interior and exterior, seems never far away.

But poetry has often stressed the core role of metaphor in thought. Poems emphasise how language suggests conative areas of experience, implied and inferred states of mind and perception: these are those elements which embody, which associate, which coincide. In the folk talk of poetry it is what people mean when they talk of descriptiveness or richness or a sense of intimate truth-to-life in poetry. Such language has, to use the phrase that Heidegger applies to a poem of Georg Trakl’s, ‘completion’.¹⁰ The poem goes on its own way, so to speak, losing itself in the variousness of thought and feeling: the experience remains complete.

The Slope

I was about to say how I went out to check.
But the straw-coloured, bare hummock of hillside
has taken all my attention, its thin trees, its scatter
of rocks, its solitary white flowering gum-tree
strangely in mid-flower, unseasonable for spring—

right there on the other side of the valley,
creating some contour for this and the next
cloudless, blue, gleaming sky which is burning
the grass brown, compacting bleached out ground,
starving it, starving roots and roos to death.

Water’s gone underground again this year.
The wet’s a myth, made by dead photographers,
capturing Sydney streets before modernity:
gutters flowed like dirty channels through each lens,
cobble were fresh-washed coal. The air was cool,

like autumn in Siberia. Here, we’ve seen nothing
but heat for months, so that this brusque hill-slope’s
the result—a golden thing with upright strokes of
see-through trees, a shape looming through lost green.
(A race of wild fire would scale it like a wave.)

It's started glaring me down. Whatever great plans
were waiting, they vanished when I looked back,
then looked out, sensing how the cracked, dry earth keeps
soaking up the light. How, too, this light was like
a thought full to the edge, pliant, clear, alive.

It's a line across the roof of mind and eye—
bounding how far anyone imagines what stares
them in the face. The dry hill's a blue hump, blond slope.
It has no aspect, no image, but bodies itself upwards
while instantly—like waking—memory's swept clean.¹¹

— III

Utterance is itself a vector, a constantly mobile place like an eye glancing. This is the case even when we realise that, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, 'any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously re-iterated among all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent'. Seeing for Merleau-Ponty is to enter a kind of system in which a form of communication is already occurring, a system in which, as he puts it, each object is apprehended as being one of several co-existent things because each of them is 'all that the others "see" of it' [*parce que chacun d'eux est tout ce que les autres "voient" de lui*].¹² As he puts it in the example of looking at a house—an example he develops over several pages of the *Phenomenology* devoted to experience and the problem of thought—'the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere [*nulle part*], but the house seen from everywhere [*de toutes parts*]'.¹³ The parts or co-existent things or regions make the communicative system, almost as if it is a performative system of spectating and looking back. Seeing is immersed in such multiplicity. 'I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects ...'¹⁴

When we try to make a more full and coherent account of sensory experience, including hearing, touch, fragrance, movement and so on, it becomes clear that we must add in the memories of our perceptions as well as the gaps and blurs in them. Add them in to what? The picture? 'Picture' simply will not do as a term. That's not what the moment of cross-regional looking and looking back is to do with. The vector requires a different form of realisation from the singular, or even the cinematic image: it has to be a kind of stereophonic or polyphonic moment. It does not crystallise.¹⁵ It requires, in other words, a deep kind of attentiveness to what is, initially, not nameable. One might even say: to what is not seen, what is not fully grasped, to whatever it is that never quite gets into cognition. This mobility is immersed, fleshed, it goes for walks, it walks outside, it walks back in. It could so easily

be confused with the idea of embodiment—that is, a purely intellectualised reconstruction of the physical sense of things—as if somehow that told you what it was. But it is not embodiment. This sense of mobility is much more like the idea of simultaneity that Jean-Luc Nancy talks about, when he says that ‘space-time itself is first of all the possibility of the “with”’.¹⁶ Presence is, he puts it, ‘co-presence’ or at the very least it involves the issue of co-presence, of shared realities. After all it is only language that we deal with or, more accurately, a moment of failure in language.

Incident at Galore Hill

Right then, I was struck by the space, the shadow,
perhaps by neither ... It was the ground's bareness
which stayed with me, not just because
the long term drought affected it,
making things sparse and earth too hard:
it was the grey light, nearly luminous,
which seemed to have swept the place,
exposing twig and trunk. It was
as if a tide of light had cleaned it out,
leaving dry dust to accumulate.

So I kept on walking back to the car, suddenly
struck by the place. It was nothing, yet
it would stay with me. It would haunt
me like a fractured dream. The difficulty
of defining a place that couldn't be one,
that had no sense of habitat
beyond the air, the birds, the slope and slant
of sparse, bush-covered hillside. It
was a gap, a void as much of my imagining,
as of the dry earth, and the young trees sleeping
in the oncoming dusk. There was no event
to shake my focus. I'd driven out of town,
to get my bearings. All around, a flat skyline,
land stretching away to horizons on all sides,
effortlessly reaching there like a shield curved

under the sky's cloud tracks: in summer, a ribbon
of distant trees floating in white suspension
through the heat haze. It was autumn
now, approaching mid-year. So a new cool kept
the horizon anchored, the sky steadying the depth
of the land's incline, the ploughed slopes, dots of trees.
I was about to drive off, though the stillness
held me, the pink-grey light, the dead grasses;
a single flycatcher, doing loops up front
on the dirt road, escaped through the scrubby hakea
nearly beside me. Its fluttering wing-noise—
a card-pack quickly riffled—drew curlicues
across late light: it was immense smallness
mapping first itself, then the gap between saplings,
then me, then the burnished slopes reddening
westwards, then the traces of smoke-blue air dangled
overhead. If there was detail, it was detail
in all of that expanse: overwhelmingly full,
trapped in silence. Nothing, then everything,
took place on that slope. I'd got out for a short
walk over red earth while all the empty farmland fell
through grains of night. Quietness, melancholy,
the dusk air's ecstasy: a tea-tree clump went dark as a well,
around it a whole world of new space, new shadowing,
levered in light and dark, mindful, poised, checking.¹⁷

— IV

Can the poem, then, have the last word? There is a sense in which poetry will always have the last word, and does so for the most obvious—and perhaps least creditable—reason: poems are written down as words, formed as utterances. This is why they can never be adequate philosophical examples. The thing that Merleau-Ponty speaks about—a thing immersed in consciousness and in the interactivity of the perceptual domain where it is positioned—is not a poem. It is a thing out there, a thing in the world: it is, as the philosophical example must presuppose, a thing only partly named and wholly not-experienced. 'Not-experienced', that is, in the sense that a poem performs a whole zone of experience for the reader. A poem

seeks to render descriptively the thing as it is, thereby ruining the philosophical argument. Even Merleau-Ponty's house is a term, a point, a place of philosophical convergence, and not a habitable and vividly evoked place in which to live. Indeed, for the philosopher, we dwell only in the concept of an object and accordingly we live, so to speak, by looks: thus, 'to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it'.¹⁸ This kind of inhabitation acknowledges an immersion in experience, certainly. It offers the concept of engaging with fluid, many-sided senses of a thing. But unlike a poem, philosophy does not realise that experience, does not perform it and make it actual.

One of the functions of poetry is to set up the experiential domain of things. It brings out, as an experienced moment, the point at which Lakoff and Johnson's cross-domain mapping occurs. To live in the house, in short, is to realise it descriptively and sensorily. It is to make it real, on the page. Poetry has this power of description instead of the power of argument. American critic, Angus Fletcher, speaks of this 'descriptiveness' in poetry as part of its pre-Socratic inheritance, that is, before Plato and before writing: instead of prescribing the forms of the world's multiplicity, he says:

the poet as Presocratic insists on *describing* the world. He or she is mimetic in this sense, and ... appears often to affirm that ideas participate in things ... For description is the expressive mode that works *in time*, as poets seek to speak *in time*.¹⁹

A poem can work as a sort of recording device over time and across the range of memory and sensation, setting up an environment of feeling, intuition and insight. It is not an argument or an idea. It is a free movement, a freed-up place, permanently linked into the movement of time and traversed by perceptions, details, events and transitions. Poetry carries out a tracing of things in *their* context of active perception and engagement. Both much less and slightly more than what the philosopher can do, a poem does not seek to express truth but rather, as a moment of intense clarification between thing and subject, to realise psychologically the true conditions for some possible, future moment of truthfulness.

MARTIN HARRISON's latest books are the poetry collections *Summer* (Paper Bark Press, 2001) and *Music* (Vagabond Press, 2005) and a collection of essays, *Who Wants to Create Australia* (Halstead Press, 2004). He teaches poetry, sound and poetics at the University of Technology, Sydney.

1. M Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Henley, 1962, p. 60.
2. Merleau-Ponty, p. 63.
3. Merleau-Ponty, p. 62.
4. Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of the Imagination*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 28.
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S Librett, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 70.
6. '... since the genesis of the objective body is only a moment in the constitution of the object, the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional thread linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world.' Merleau-Ponty, p. 72.
7. Merleau-Ponty, p. 70.
8. Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, p. 123.
9. Lakoff and Johnson, p. 128.
10. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, p. 194.
11. 'The Slope', first published as 'The Wakening', *Island*, no. 97, Winter, 2004.
12. Merleau-Ponty, p. 68.
13. Merleau-Ponty, p. 69.
14. Merleau-Ponty, p. 68.
15. Merleau-Ponty objects to the way that intellectual definitions of the relationship between consciousness and its object make use of reductive models focused around single things, calling such absolute positing of things a form of crystallisation which marks the 'death of consciousness'—in other words, the death of any fluent, bodily, experiential notion of consciousness, which, when fixated on an absolutely posited single thing, starts modelling consciousness on a singular structure of perceiving. See Merleau-Ponty, p. 71.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D Richardson and Anne E O'Byrne, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p. 23.
17. 'Incident at Galore Hill', Martin Harrison, *Music*, Vagabond Press, Sydney 2005.
18. Merleau-Ponty, p. 68.
19. Fletcher, p. 30.