

**A landscape with too few lovers:
the need for the poetic voice in environmental politics**

A talk by Kennedy Warne, given at the EDS conference dinner, August 1 2018

There is a certain irony in giving a talk entitled “a landscape with too few lovers” in a place whose name means “Tamaki with many lovers.”

Be that as it may, I begin by acknowledging the land and paying my respects to its kaitiaki past and present.

Many of you will know where that line “A landscape with too few lovers” comes from. It is inscribed on one of Colin McCahon’s paintings from 1958. In that year, McCahon had just returned to Auckland after a long, intensive tour of the United States. On his return, he “fled north in memory,” as he put it, to a landscape that was very dear to him, and produced a series of eight paintings he called the Northland panels.

He expressed his affection for the Far North in these words: “The real Far North of New Zealand is unlike any other part of the land. I can’t talk about it, I love it too much. Up there is like standing on a moon. Way down below is the sea and the edge of the world and the beach running to nothing and to Te Rerenga Wairua—and nothing, nothing more—all sculpted by wind and rain, it’s there you bury your heart, and as it goes deeper into the land you can only follow. It’s a painful love, loving a land, it takes a long time. I stood with an old Maori lady on a boat from Australia once—a terribly rough and wild passage. We were both on deck to see the Three Kings—us dripping tears. It’s there that this land starts.”

One of the things you notice about the Northland Panels, and most of Colin McCahon’s work, in fact, is that they depict very ordinary landscapes. McCahon wasn’t drawn to scenic vistas, the places that tourists go. The landscapes he preferred to paint were everyday places, not jaw-dropping scenes. And it frustrated McCahon that his fellow Pakeha New Zealanders took these ordinary places for granted. They endangered the landscape with their indifference, he said. Landscapes need protecting, and McCahon gave the name “Necessary Protection” to the drawings and paintings he created at this time.

It was heartening to hear the Minister for the Environment echo this thought this morning when he said the river that needs protection is the river in your neighbourhood. So much of my journey towards connection to place has happened along the banks of my neighbourhood river, Te Auaunga. I am, as I once entitled a story, a pilgrim at Oakley Creek. I am a volunteer river-keeper, a friend of Oakley Creek, drawing from and giving back to that awa.

McCahon was strongly of the view that people, nonhuman nature and land need to be in a reciprocal relationship. He believed that trees themselves were like a protective skin of the land—even scrubby manuka. (Although who would dare disparage manuka today—the humble tea tree has redeemed itself by making beekeepers rich!) Manuka protects the land it needs, said McCahon, and the land gives it life and a season of red and pink and white flowering. “Take the manuka and the land is lost,” he wrote.

McCahon believed his work as a painter included opening people’s eyes to this relationship. He put it this way: “I saw something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and

not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really yet invented. My work has largely been to communicate this vision and to invent the way to see it.”

When I read those words, “and not yet to its people,” I think of a poem I haven’t been able to dislodge from my head for the past five years: Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright,” which begins with these lines:

The land was ours before we were the land’s.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England’s, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright

Frost called his poem “a history of the United States in a dozen lines of blank verse.” It is the history of New Zealand, too. It is the history of every settler nation. First the desire to possess, to own, to call the land “ours.” Then, later, a long time later—and for some, perhaps, never—the longing to belong, to be possessed, to preserve and respect. A turning away from objectification and towards subjective engagement, from resource to relationship, from land-as-commodity to land-as-identity, from property to whenua.

The second part of my title is “the need for the poetic voice in environmental politics.” Why should there be a poetic voice in any politics? Parliament doesn’t have a poet in residence (yet). Politics and poetry seem like separate spheres.

So what would a poetic voice bring to environmental advocacy? First, because of how poems operate, they can open channels of relationship, triggering and fostering the love of the land and the necessary protection that McCahon spoke of. American poet Jane Hirshfield writes: “Because it thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavour of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one.”

Poetry often arises from the darkness of loss, and we live in a time when loss is all around us. Kauri is now officially a threatened species. Maybe gone in 30 years. Aue! Emotionally, existentially, that hits me like a sledgehammer. We need the poet’s voice to awaken distress in ecological and environmental loss, to help us negotiate sorrow over these deaths—these multiple “die-backs”—and to rouse us to action. Adrienne Rich is one such poet. She writes:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those
who, age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

Wittgenstein famously said: “The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.” The corollary, he added, is that “the limits of my language define the limits of my world.” The poetic voice ranges beyond the boundaries of legal, political and scientific discourse. Unconstrained by the monopoly of the rational, it transgresses the limitations of a strictly material worldview that leads, as Marilynne Robinson writes, to “existence stripped of myth, unhallowed and unhaunted.” It awakens emotion, kindles imagination and invokes the sacred. It opens doors to different ways of knowing and makes manifest a different scale of values.

For decades, ecological economists such as Joan Martinez-Alier have been saying that many deeply significant values cannot be expressed with—are indeed incommensurable with—the language of monetary valuation. In his book *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, Martinez-Alier writes that where human life and dignity are at stake, “the appropriate languages are livelihood, food security, human rights, community territorial rights, and not ‘the internalization of externalities’ in the price system, or the ‘polluter pays principle’, or ‘cost-benefit’ analysis.”

Yet such languages are typically excluded or drowned out during resource-use conflicts, as I witnessed time and again when I was writing a book about the global plight of mangrove forests. Around the entire tropical world—Africa, Asia, South America—these extraordinarily diverse and productive forest ecosystems have been destroyed to create space for shrimp aquaculture, and millions of coastal people displaced. But in a few places I visited, communities were speaking poetry to power, drawing on music, art, dramatic performance and the spoken word to oppose the industrial juggernaut that would dispossess them of a way of life. One evening, sitting under a mango tree on the north-east coast of Brazil, I listened as Maria do Livramento Santos spoke a lament for the lost trees, speaking for the trees as the voice of the trees, ending with the words:

My leaves fall to the ground
As if they were the tears that fall on the
face of a child when she cries.

Given the way that poetry can speak for the living world in the voice of that world, I find myself wondering if perhaps the most important poem to emerge in 21st century Aotearoa may prove to be one that is only nine words long—shorter than a Japanese haiku. *Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au*. I am the river, the river is me. Whanganui’s legislated personhood—along with that of Te Urewera, and soon Taranaki—allows these places to speak as they have never been able to speak before in the Western tradition. A language of nonhuman agency and sentience now has a seat at the table of environmental management.

And it is an intrinsically inspiring language, as even a glance at Te Urewera’s legislative act affirms. Te Urewera is “ancient and enduring, a fortress of nature, alive with history . . . abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty. It is a place of spiritual value, with its own mana and mauri, and with an identity in and of itself, inspiring people to commit to its care.” Te Kawa o Te Urewera, Tūhoe’s management plan for the forest, starts from the proposition that “our fracturing of nature has sponsored our own fragmentation.” Te Kawa disrupts the notion of human superiority over the natural world, and offers in its place that “most difficult of virtues . . . our sense of belonging.”

I thought a good deal about the place of poetry in environmental politics when I wrote about Denniston plateau for *New Zealand Geographic* in 2012. In my 20-plus years of editing, writing and exploring for the magazine, I had never seen a place quite like Denniston: a subalpine sandstone plain, often as not clotted with cloud, but harbouring an almost audacious wealth of life. Something about this upland bog and its bonsai forests got under my skin. Even now, I recall the thrill of putting my hand into tunnels in the moss, feeling for the shells of giant snails, or watching vagrant spiders that lift their forelegs in defence like a boxer or a kangaroo, or turning over thin shards of slate to find brick-red velvet worms.

So I kept going back. The fact that the plateau was due to have a 100-hectare hole dug into it, a pit deep enough to swallow a 20-storey building, undoubtedly focused my mind on appreciating its virtues while I could. A year or so after writing the original story I drove the rough familiar road towards Mt Rochfort and walked to the escarpment edge, an irresistible precipice where you could wish to be Icarus and soar across unbroken forest where birdsong floats upward on draughts of warm air. Mist drifted in from the Tasman, twining among the pillars and outcrops of this sandstone Stonehenge, and soon I was standing in what poet Leicester Kyle called “the world’s bright edge,” a place where “as soon as you stand here you know it: all roads end here and somewhere else begins.”

For me, Kyle’s words have become as much a part of this landscape as the diminutive centuries-old conifers that spredeagle their roots across the stone slabs, the gentians and eyebrights flowering in soaked soil, the koura in the streams, the kiwi on the heath—the incomparable mystery of this plateau.

Kyle lived the last eight of his life up the road at Millerton. He watched Mt Frederick decapitated by Coal Corp or whatever Solid Energy was back then, and wrote a poem about it. Why do miners need to take the top off mountains, he asked, and answered: “Pillage is the privilege of man, who likes to stand sturdily on his given domain and see it go on without end and forever.”

The battle over Denniston seemed to grind its way through courts and commissioners’ hearings “without end and forever.” Each side’s champions slugged it out over matters ranging from the precise threat levels facing plateau wildlife to the size of the projected economic boost to West Coast communities. (Which never eventuated, as we know—but that’s a lesson that is long in the learning.)

Kyle’s poetry offered testimony in a different arena: moral imagination. He believed there were ethical as well as practical choices to be made in regard to the environment, and that poetry could serve as nature’s patron, just as nature is often poetry’s muse.

In 2006, the year he died, Kyle wrote: “I’m fascinated by what poetry can do, what it can achieve, change and record in a region.” But he wondered if it would ever achieve the place in our culture that it has overseas, where poetry has even led revolutions. “In other lands the plants and animals are protected by the love they’re held in and poetically identified by it,” he wrote, “but here this is lacking and our environment is without the most powerful protection it could have.” Without, McCahon’s “necessary protection.”

This is an intriguing thought. Isn’t legal protection the highest protection our treasured landscapes can have? Perhaps. But statutes change, reflecting shifts in political power. Perhaps a shared cultural esteem offers a more resilient and enduring protection than laws

ever can. Kyle wasn't the only Coaster to think so. Down the road at Greymouth, schoolteacher, bookshop owner, poet and author Peter Hooper beat a drum for nature during the Muldoon years and into the 1980s, when the main environmental battlegrounds on the Coast were its living forests, not their ancient carbon residues. Hooper lamented his countrymen's "failure to relate to the community of the land" and wrote that even "crowded England's care of much of her landscape shames New Zealand's creation of a soulless land-utilisation-scape." New Zealand may be a landscape with too few lovers, but it never lacks for exploiters.

For all the influence I am suggesting that a poetic voice may have, I am hard pressed to come up with too many instances of a demonstrable efficacy—winning a battle, swaying an outcome. Even the Lorax didn't succeed in saving the Truffula trees, though arguably Dr Seuss planted something in the hearts of generations of children that has helped save other forests.

On the other hand, art moves in mysterious ways. Perhaps on a cultural scale it operates by tweaking the social licence to operate—that mysterious force that everyone wants to harness. Perhaps social licence is shaped and sustained by inchoate cultural narratives expressed in shared stories and the poetry of place.

I wonder to what extent, for instance, John Hanlon's song "Damn the Dam," which topped the singles chart for 1973, helped tip the balance against the raising of Lake Manapouri. Did Grahame Sydney's paintings and Brian Turner's poems of Central Otago influence public perception of a wind farm proposal for the Lammermoor Range, providing that landscape with "necessary protection"?

Painting, poems and performance certainly played a role in galvanising public opposition to agricultural abuse of fresh water. I think of Sam Mahon's poetic accusation directed to the "Water Thief," lamenting that this generation's

children's children will not grow to see
Or know
that where the river flowed
you once could dip your hand
and drink the water clean from an unspoiled land

Poets specialise in drawing attention to particulars, which then often play the role of the synecdoche—the part that speaks for the whole. Samuel Taylor Coleridge didn't write about marine biodiversity; he wrote about a single albatross, and fixed that bird in the public mind as mythic and iconic. I wonder if, by that act, he nudged his society to awaken to wider values than those that serve human ends. Certainly, Coleridge's ancient mariner undergoes exactly that transformation. It is a poem about an environmental awakening. In the early part of poem the mariner loathes the sea as his personal death-dealing foe:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

His moment of redemption comes when he can look at the creatures he once despised as those who share with him the spark of life:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware

Poetry seems to work tangentially to argument. Jane Hirshfield says: “A lyric poem does not solve any outward dilemma; few answer any practical question, none refastens a single loose shingle to a house. Yet when crisis requires a mode of negotiation with the chaos, entropy, and loss-terror that co-inhabit any human life, people turn toward poems, as a plant requiring its photosynthesized sugars turns toward the sun.”

Hirshfield notes that the word “solution” comes from the root *solutio*, referring to a process medieval alchemists used: making something workable and transformable by making it more fluid. Perhaps poetry operates like this in the metaphysical realm: rendering a problem more malleable and thus more likely to be resolved.

Irish poet Seamus Heaney uses a different metaphor: poetry as a shifter of the tectonic plates of the mind:

Poetry allowed the god to speak.
It was the voice
Of reality and justice. The voice of Hercules
That Philoctetes is going to have to hear
When the stone cracks open and the lava flows.

- “The Siege at Troy”

Heaney said great poetry captures a reader’s attention the way the crowd watched Christ write in the sand with his finger. “Poetry does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, ‘Now a solution will take place,’ it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.”

We all know the language of environmental reports or expert testimony to the Environment Court. Should we not add the voice of longing, of love for disappearing taonga? A voice like Kendrick Smithyman’s for instance:

Lone kauri

Whatever happened, it happened.
In swamp, on lowlands, gum diggers find ancestors.
Sometimes a lot of them lying the one way
as though sometime was
a great wind which put down a bush if not a forest,
trunk by trunk, and they’ve been lying there unseen.
Their wood can still be good enough for working.
Hauled at, they are reluctant to be earth, turned over.
They are pigheaded.

On the climb to Ngapukehau there’s one

Didn't go down, up there by himself standing
over teatree. He's not far from caves of the dead.
Maybe he feels responsible,
He's older. Nowadays

I have to stop for a breather.
He has been lightning smitten and gale struck.
He is failing from the top down.
I like to crouch into and lean my back against.
I say "Brother" and he sighs.

While I was writing about the sea a few years ago, I had these lines from Hone Tuwhare written on a card in front of me:

Dear *Karirikura*, beloved ocean,
we should be lost without you.
But you are here beside us, very close:
soft thunder in our ears.

Isn't that voice—the poet's voice of longing and belonging—needed at hearings on seabed mining, to express values that might not otherwise be brought to bear?

The state renders nature a resource. The RMA does that with the very language of its title. The voice of the poet is needed to push back against the hegemony of that view. The poet makes manifest a more intimate conversation with landscape, one that incorporates other ways of knowing and other types of valuing.

McCahon said love of land takes a long time. Land calls, we respond. Titiro atu, titiro mai—one glance directed at another, the other glancing back. I see, and I am seen. Belonging comes about through knowing a place and letting the place know you. For me, the seeds of belonging were planted over a period of months when I visited my local urban creek, almost daily, to see what I had to say to it, and it to me. It was like beginning a conversation in a foreign tongue—or rather a language once known but forgotten through lack of use.

The word "conversation" comes from Latin roots that mean "an act of living with or keeping company with." How perfect. For a conversation with place is not only verbal—though that is certainly part of it. And the earth is well able to reciprocate with tree talk, rockfall, glacier movement, subterranean rumblings and the manifold voices of the atmosphere as rain, thunder, wind and more.

This conversation can also be with the voice of the senses, of the soul's articulation of respect, reverence and care and of physical responses to the world's promptings. At Te Auaunga I often cup my hands and drink from a spring that the ancestor Wairaka drank from centuries ago. I pick watercress and let the sharp tang fill my mouth. Body and soul, I connect myself to this place and its history, becoming woven into its story.

Here are some lines I wrote in gratitude for being threaded into Te Auaunga's cloak:

Beside Wairaka's spring

Thanks to you
they built a madhouse here

and tapped your source
in deep volcanic cores and
drank your health.

Thanks to you
they planted groves of
oak and sycamore
so lunatics could
shuffle shaded paths
and soothe their souls
beside a waterfall.

Thanks to you
they all were saved
(except for one named Fortune)
when mad Miss Morrow
set the place alight.
Panic crazed the inmates,
scared the staff,
who roped them to a fence and
fought the flames.

Thanks to you
the therapy goes on:
for joggers,
walkers,
Sunday strollers,
and a man who
lifts his trombone to the
trees
and plays *Aida*.

I cup my hands, Wairaka,
and drink to your bold stand:
“Whaka tane!”
“Make me a man.”
I pick the cress that crowds
around your pool.
The pepper pricks my tongue
in each small leaf,
and thanks to you this
madman finds relief.