

*“Dry and Upside Down” on Telegraph Wire: The Geopoetics of the Line in Australian Poetry*

**Martin Leer**

**Copyright © Martin Leer. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged**

**Abstract:** This essay traces what it sees as a *geopoetic* trope in Australian literature: the poetic verse-line as a boundary-fence. Basing itself on poems by John Kinsella, Judith Wright, Phillip Hodgins, Randolph Stow and Les Murray, the poem argues for a development of this trope in the context of the wider geopoetic endeavour in which Australian landscape poetry has been involved: of coming to terms with a new environment and the Aboriginal culture already geopoetically there. Following Tim Ingold’s reinterpretation of the line in human culture in *Lines: A Brief History*, it sees the line, rather than metrics or rhythm (or the line as a reflection of breaks in rhythm) as the defining characteristic of verse in an age of writing. The verse-line is how poetry spatially imprints the temporal order of a culture on a perceived world, but also how it reflects on that world within the space of a poem. Traditional European poetry measures the verse-line as a plough-furrow (the etymology of *versus*), a retracing of patterns, which the essay argues, New World postcolonial literatures de-measure: in Canadian landscape poetry the line becomes the overwhelming horizon; in Caribbean poetry the *tidalectic* wave; in Australian poetry the boundary fence, ambiguously demarcating what is inside and outside.

**Key words:** Australian poetry, the verse-line, the line in human culture, boundary fence, geopoetics, parrots, literature and the environment, Judith Wright, Randolph Stow, Les Murray, Phillip Hodgins, John Kinsella.

“Links”, the first poem in Harold Bloom’s selection of John Kinsella’s poetry *Peripheral Light*, begins with this evocation of the Western Australian landscape:

There are days when the world  
buckles under the sun, trees blacken  
to thin wisps, spinifex fires,  
and white cockatoos, strangled  
in telegraph wire, hang  
dry and upside down (Kinsella 2004, 3)

The fate of these poor cockatoos is of course a wry allusion to two of the best-known geographical and geopoetic tropes about Australia. There is its dryness, its extreme ecological fragility, most fragile of rich nations as writers like Tim Flannery never tire of pointing out (Flannery 1994); its “fire ecology”, with eucalypts and other plants ever ready to burst into flame, the admonitory *Burning Bush* of the title of Stephen Pyne’s “fire history” of Australia, furthest from the *Vestal Fire* of his fire history of Europe (Pyne 1991, 1997). And there is the Antipodean *upside-downness*, the *counter-continent* which grew from Ptolemaic geographical theory to be finally caught in a much-reduced form in the net of longitude and latitude of modern cartography, but which was still a “land of contrareities” to early European-Australian versifiers: black swans, mammals laying eggs, etc.

Such geopoetic tropes still matter in Australian poetry and even wider Australian society, because European-Australian culture is still in a process of *coming to terms* with its environment. The tropes have not completely settled into ridicule, though many writers have tried. Perhaps landscape tropes never do completely settle into ridicule, since they are part of how we have scaped and shaped the land our cultures inhabit (and en-habit): Britain is still an island and looks a bit like a sceptre on a map, Switzerland still has a lot of mountains, however much we may criticise and ridicule what nationalist ideology has made of this. And Australian literature has been remarkably creative with its geopoetic tropes, perhaps in the absence of other social tropes: such popular culture tropes as the beach and surf are no less geopoetic than the Antipodes or the Outback. Indeed many of these superficially contradictory tropes interpenetrate in “Links” in the way that the poem is constructed around the epigraph from Simone Weil: that “every separation is a link”, as the sea and the dry interior are linked by separation in the poem. And this introduces in fact the third master trope of Australian *geopoetics*, which becomes explicit in the second stanza:

The sketchy border trees  
offer little protection  
from the sun as we negotiate  
the edge and fine line  
between sand and vegetation (Kinsella 2004, 3)

This trope, which sees Australia as an inhabited periphery with an alien, red or dead heart is probably even more ubiquitous than the “dry and upside-down” tropes in Australian literature, perhaps because it is closer to a commonly agreed geographical reality and grew from the history of inland exploration rather than preconceived European theories (see also Leer 1991). This trope is central to work by novelists from Henry Handel Richardson to Thea Astley, from Christina Stead to Kate Grenville, from Patrick White to David Malouf and Peter Carey. Let alone the poets: from A.D.Hope’s over-quoted apophthegm about “second-hand Europeans”, who

“pollulate timidly on the edge of alien shores” to a recent poem by Les Murray, where he sees the continent as “four Great Britains converging on Mars.” In Murray’s use of this trope, by the way, it is not just spatial, but temporal: Australia by its very geographical nature reconceptualises European cultural categories (as with the Centre which is also the Outback), among them the most important European geopoetic importation, as Murray sees it, the four-season year, which in Australia has become *convergent* rather than *cyclical*:

In fact and in image, summer is the dominant season of the Australian year. It is our most Australian season, generator of the greatest number of indigenous images (...) Summer is the blazing core of the year and the other seasons can be seen as its surrounds (Murray 1985, 69)

So much, for the moment, about the tropes, the topology (in Curtius’ sense) of Australian *geopoetics*, which I should probably specify that I am using here in an extension of the *géopoétique* founded by the Scots-French poet Kenneth White, but also used extensively by, among others, the Caribbean poet, novelist and theorist Edouard Glissant. It refers in my extended sense to the way the earth, geography, the environment is apprehended and given poetic form in literature. But it may also be used in the way it was used by the geographer David Matless at the conference in Cambridge in October 2008 on contemporary poetic geographies, where this essay was first presented as a paper, for the poetics through which geographers conceive of their subject: Humboldtian panoramism, Darwinian evolutionarism, Ratzelian determinism, Vidalian possibilism, Marxist economism, humanism, scientism, urban planning, environmentalism etc.

In a debate with the novelist Michel Butor at the University of Geneva in March 2009, Edouard Glissant claimed that the great difference between the geopoetics of European literature and culture and that of the “New World” is the difference between what is *mesuré* (measured in a geometric, musical and poetic sense) and what is *démesuré* (exceeds or works against those measures): Glissant’s literary examples of the *démesuré* were the prose of William Faulkner and the poetry of St. John Perse. Without wishing to step into such a binarism, this essay is also about this question of measure, and about how geopoetic tropes en-form poetry, how the tropes through which the environment is perceived and conceived “negotiate/ the edge and fine line” by which poetry appears on the page, and “the edge and fine line” between the world’s being-in-the-poem and the poem’s being-in-the-world. My basic criterion for poetic form and poetic measure is simple: that poetry comes in lines. But lines in human culture are far from simple, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold points out in his beautiful recent book *Lines: A Brief History* (2007).

In Kinsella’s “Links” it is surely not too far-fetched to see the telegraph wires with cockatoos hanging from them as a figure for the lines of poetry dealing with nature. But *nature*, or especially *Nature*, may be a basic *misconception* here, as Timothy

Morton points out in his recent critique of ecocriticism *Ecology Without Nature* (2007). As the landscape historians Brinckerhoff Jackson and Stilgoe showed in the 1980s, in *landscape* it is impossible to separate *nature* and *culture* (Stilgoe 1982, Brinckerhoff Jackson 1983) and an even more radical Heideggerian version of this argument underlies Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* (2000).

Kinsella's *Disclosed Poetics* provides a gloss on the cockatoos in its disquisition "on the necessity of parrots in poetry" (Kinsella 2007, 16-30): parrots are a cliché in Australian poetry, both for their exotic beauty (white cockatoos are not native to Kinsella's West Australian Wheat Belt) and for their "parroting" of language (in the figure of Descartes' parrot): "Though we 'deploy' the parrot in different ways, the parrot becomes an alter ego, a conscience, counterpoint, antagonist, most-often indifferent companion, of address" (Kinsella 2007, 19). Their ambivalence goes further: "The bird's 'non-belonging' becomes metaphor for colonisation on an obvious level, but also, since they are declared vermin, for their status in 'uncaring' Australian society" (22) and

the birds actively inculcate themselves into the imagination of those who encounter them on a variety of levels: that they are monitors (like frogs) of the health of an ecosystem and therefore political and environmental symbols; that they have a symbolic function in the imagination of contradiction – damnation and deliverance – and that though deployed as nationalist jingoistic icons or default positions (easy observation like 'gum trees'), they are equally used iconoclastically. (Kinsella 2007, 25)

In Australian landscape poetry generally, birds are often *alternative eyes* in the landscape, a consciousness (and not just a conscience) alternative to the human, and often in Kinsella's early poetry the only sign of life in a desert of wheat monoculture and salination caused by irrigation. All this hangs dry and upside-down on the wire of the line. The second line, negotiating "the edge and fine line/ between sand and vegetation" is, however, already different, not so clearly imposed on the landscape by colonial humanity. In much postcolonial literature, linearity is perceived as inherently imperial and colonial, alterity as cyclical or at least non-linear. But, as Ingold points out,

Colonialism is not the imposition of linearity on a non-linear world, but the imposition of one kind of line on another. It proceeds first by converting the paths along which life is lived into boundaries in which it is contained, and then by joining up these now enclosed communities, each confined to one spot, into vertically integrated assemblies. (2007, 2-3)

This corresponds to the topology of the line set out in the cognitive historian of geometry Reviel Netz's book *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, a history that takes us from the conquest of the American West through concentration camps to contemporary industrial farming of animals:

Define, on the two-dimensional surface of the earth, lines according to which motion is to be prevented, and you have one of the key themes of history. With a closed line (i.e. a curve enclosing a figure), and the prevention of motion from outside the line to its inside, you derive the idea of property. With the same line and the prevention of motion from inside to outside, you derive the idea of prison. With an open line (i.e. a curve that does not enclose a figure), and the prevention of motion in either direction, you derive the idea of border. Properties, prisons, borders: it is through the prevention of motion that space enters history. (Netz 2004, xi)

Nowhere is this question of lines in the landscape more apparent than in Australia with its alternative systems of lines inscribed on and embodied in the landscape: the endlessly complex system of Aboriginal song-lines and dreaming-tracks overlaid with the European settlers' absurdly ineffectual, barbed-wire rabbit-proof and dingo-proof fences. Measure and *de*-measure turned upside down. Verse-lines, I would argue, perhaps somewhat outrageously, take from this their basic geopoetic *figura*. In European-Australian landscape poetry verse-lines represent and embody boundary-fences, much as according to etymology and Seamus Heaney (Heaney 1981), verse-lines represent plough-furrows in traditional European verse.

In coming to terms with a new environment the immigrant verse-lines seem to seek new embodiments in the New World. Measure is de-measured. In the Canadian landscape poetry of Al Purdy, Robert Kroetsch or Margaret Atwood they come to represent a horizontality so overwhelming that vertical humanity has to go underground in order to survive: "the gopher was the model", as Kroetsch repeats about Prairie towns with their grain silos in *Seed Catalogue* (Kroetsch ([1979] 2004). In Caribbean seascape poetry, obviously, verse-lines are waves: "the pages of the sea" is a kenning in Derek Walcott's verse and his *Omeros*, if an epic at all, is an epic of the metamorphic line, which by turn depicts trireme canoes (the *terza rima* graphic appearance of the poem), slave ships, ships of the line and lines of African warriors with their reflections in a river, along with waves. In Kamau Brathwaite, even more complexly, the line is the wave and the shore on which the shock-waves and the flotsam and jetsam of the Middle Passage are cast up and find *groundation* and not least the paper membrane on which an essentially oral art leaves its *tidalectic* traces (to use Brathwaite's own terms).

The Australian boundary-fence verse-line, I would argue, comes similarly charged with "the other side"; it is almost more an evocation of what is beyond than what is

known. But this has only reinforced the desperate linguistico-metaphysical need of boundary fences so memorably expressed in David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon*. When Gemmy Fairley appears on the boundary fence in 1860s North Queensland, shouting his "Do not shoot ... I am a B-b-british object", it seems as if

... in the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of that land over there that was forbidden to them, had attached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them ... (Malouf 1993, 2)

To the settlers of colonial Queensland in Malouf's novel, "the very ground under their feet was strange", and Gemmy, the white black man, enters their world geographically and linguistically as well as racially as the living expression of Milton's textbook oxymoron "darkness visible". Having forgotten his stuttered English while becoming fluent in several Aboriginal languages, Gemmy defines for the settlers the edge of humanity, if not everything: "You had to put yourself the hardest question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. *It*." (Malouf 1993, 40)

This is the linguistic boundary fence against which Australian culture defines itself, the border of *it*. The characters in *Remembering Babylon* can be read as allegories of the dominant theories of language in relationship to the world, with an interesting preference for the magical and religious (Gemmy, Janet McIvor/ Sister Monica) over the conventional, Wittgensteinian (George Abbott, the schoolmaster). A boundary-fence verse-line marks a different border between the speakable and the beyond-speech from the plough-furrow verse-line, which is ineradicable and periodically renewed. The boundary fence is more reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's famous diagram of language as the interface between a plane of thought and a plane of sound imagery, echoing—and *tidalectic* rather than dialectic—sets of lines which never meet (Saussure 1959, 112, as commented in Ingold 2007, 8-9).

To me this figure of the division which founds structuralism is also, phenomenologically, the image of the-world-in-the-poetic-line and the-poetic-line-in-the-world. A high point of this duality is reached in Australian poetry in Philip Hodgins' "Midday Horizon":

The summer's worn-out paddocks  
aligned as neatly as quatrains on a page,  
one of those highly buffed duco skies,  
and in between, a fine graph line

as nervy as a lot of black snakes in the heat.  
Great sheets of mirage are lying there  
as bright as new galvo.  
You squint into the glare until your eyes  
are nothing more than two short twitching lines  
and see on the horizon  
the standing shadow of a eucalyptus tree.

The ways in which verse-line and world, colloquial mundanity and artifice, perception and representation reflect and refract each other in these lines reach a shimmering point of elegance beyond my powers of commentary. And yet it is of course nothing but a spell-binding defamiliarisation through the deployment of Australian clichés:

A big mob of sheep is moving to the left,  
breaking up and catching up  
in slow eddies like a lava flow.  
Seen through the hot distorting air  
clear flames seem to be tearing off the mob.  
A man is walking sheep-slow behind them.  
From where you are  
his shape is continually being modified  
as if he were walking through different dimensions.  
Sometimes he seems to slip into separate pieces,  
then pull back together, temporarily.  
The same thing is happening to the tree.  
The man stops  
and a low piece of him draws right away this time.  
It must be a dog.  
You notice the silence, how near it is.  
There's no threat that you can see  
and yet the thin exposed horizon trembles (Hodgins 2000)

Paddocks, quatrains, mirages, squinting eyes and horizon are brought together in one verse-line drawing, ending on the suggestive boundary-fence combination of

silence, threat and horizon. To have reached this point, where trope becomes form in the generation of Hodgins and Kinsella, Australian landscape poetry and geopoetics have had to go through a rapid development after a late acceptance, in the mid-twentieth century, of some of the effects of poetic modernism. This came, however, not as a topography of the poetic line, which I would argue only becomes explicit in the “paternal generation” of Hodgins and Kinsella, in writers like Malouf, Murray and Randolph Stow.

In the poetry of the “grandparents”, especially Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright, it arrives as a matter of time and timing, not irrelevant to geopoetics. As I have argued elsewhere (Leer 1996), Slessor and Wright develop different versions of *double time*, a combination of two modes, forms and periodicities, which are contrasted and overlaid. De-measuring begins as doubling. In Slessor it is clocktime vs. space-time, which modify to *chronos* (time as sequence) vs. *kairos* (time as decisive moment) and the time of metrics and the metronome vs. time held through echo, time standing still, for which Slessor’s image is always somehow the sea. In Wright’s poetry it is European-derived pastoral time vs. Aboriginal Dream-time. In *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), one of the few truly visionary works of Australian literary criticism, Wright developed this duality also in terms of European-Australian attitudes to the continent: her famous theory of the *double aspect* of attraction and repulsion to the country, which often coexist in the same writer, but also run like a systole and diastole through the successive great generations of Australian literature and landscape painting: most graphically the pastoral impressionists of the Heidelberg School in the 1890s and the tortured Expressionists of the 1940s and 50s, who have their literary equivalent in the novels of Patrick White.

Judith Wright’s first collection *The Moving Image* (1946) took its title from Plato’s “Time is the moving image of eternity”, and the poems in it, like the title poem, both time and space themselves in a pattern, where each line is a new image, which however reflects back on the opening through echo, rhythm and rhyme:

Here is the same clock that walked quietly  
Through those enormous years I half recall  
When between one blue summer and another  
Time seemed as many miles as round the world  
And world a day, a moment or a mile ...  
Only the sound of the clock is still the same ... (Wright 1990 14)

The landscape is made up of hauntingly frozen moments of the past: “the apple-gums/ posture and mime a past corroboree ... ” in “Bora Ring”, and in “Nigger’s Leap, New England” dusk is apostrophied to provide “the time for synthesis” to cover the confrontation for which the landscape, the escarpment, the “spine of ridge”

is the symbol, the other side of the boundary fence of conquest guilt, of which Judith Wright is Australia's greatest and perhaps only poet: "Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers/ and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?" (Wright 1990 8) On the one hand, Wright's geopoetics is informed by a knowledge of the Aboriginal conception of the landscape as the traces of the events and ancestors in the Dreaming, and on the other hand by the impossibility of a merging of Aboriginal and White culture. Two of Wright's tree elegies provide examples of how the verse-lines come to represent graphically two different aspects of her geopoetics. In "The Cycads" the horizontally successive time-layers of the strata-lines are contrasted with the vertical *ab origine* time presence of the cycads' trunks (if cycads have trunks?), ancient relics of another stage of evolution and landscape:

Their smooth dark flames flicker at time's own root.  
Round them the rising forests of the years  
alter the climates of forgotten earth  
and silt with leaves the strata of first birth. (Wright 1990, 29)

In "Eroded Hills", by contrast, the lines represent those cleared and eroded hills anthropomorphised:

These hills my father's father stripped,  
and, beggars to the winter wind,  
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped –  
humble, abandoned, out of mind. (Wright 1990, 49)

But in both poems *metaphor* becomes the bridge between past and future, and between inside and outside of that demarcated European mind, which Wright's poetry cannot escape. The cycads move into the mind: "Take their cold seed and set it in the mind/ and its slow root will lengthen deep and deep." The thoughts move into the landscape of eroded hills to replace the cleared trees: "When the last leaf and bird go/ let my thoughts stand like trees there." These complementary moves could be used to illustrate the very figure of metaphor as well as Wright's double political commitment to Aboriginal land rights and the environment, which it is sometimes argued took her away from poetry, either because such political commitment is seen as inherently anti-poetic or because poetry is seen as an ineffective vehicle for politics. If I were to enter this debate I would rather suggest a certain impasse in geopoetic form, which Wright could not overcome and did not think Australia had overcome in its relations to the environment and Aboriginal inhabitants. In the sequence "For a Pastoral Family" from her last collection *Phantom Dwelling* (1985) nevertheless, the boundary fence hovers as the overriding

figure for the morale of her class and the mood of her verse: the sense of a “sure and conceded ground” and “a marginal sort of grace” hover in the cleared space:

Our people who gnawed at the fringe  
of the edible leaf of this country  
left you a margin of action, a rural security,  
and left to me  
what serves as a base of poetry,  
a doubtful song that has a dying fall. (Wright 1990, 226)

The next stage in my brief sketch of the history of Australian geopoetics is reached in Randolph Stow, whose poetry and even novels are today so underrated that they are constantly in danger of going out of print. But in Stow's geopoetics we see, I would argue, the point at which the continent of Australia enters literature *kinetically* as *embodied form* beyond *metaphor*, in accordance with certain aspects of a symbolist poetics in which Stow's work inscribes itself, and which takes in Joseph Conrad as well as Rimbaud and St. John Perse. This kinetic entry, however, takes a deeply disturbing form for the European consciousness which Stow's poetry and prose delineate: “O sleep, you are my homestead and my garden,/ my self's stockade, identity's last fortress”. In poems like “The Land's Meaning” and “Strange Fruit” the boundary fence of the verse-lines and the demarcation of identity against the environment suffer a centrifugal breakdown, which is also a breakdown of the persona into two, seen in the parenthetical structure of “Strange Fruit”:

... your campfire falters, and firelight  
folds, and will clamp around you its charcoal calyx,  
and already for many hours your eyes (my terror)  
have drowned in deep waters of dream, till I grow fearless

(Embers of crocodiles love you from the mangroves.

Dingo ears yearn, yearn towards your tranquil breathing.) (Stow 1971, 37)

These poems first appeared in the collection *Outrider* with illustrations by the painter Sidney Nolan from the period where he painted see-through human figures against totally overwhelming landscapes. This is usually read as an affirmation of their symbolic-mythical presence, but in Stow's poetry it moves in the other direction: “in pauses, when thinking ceases,/ the footprints of the recently departed/ march to the mind's horizons, and endure.” (“The Land's Meaning”, Stow 1971, 36) The mind moves towards a kind of weightlessness in place-memory, while the

landscape really shines through the figures: “his eyes blurred maps/ of landscapes still unmapped.” A strange homoerotic assimilation of mind and landscape occurs, which carries an element of panic (another name for which is suicide), but which is also a stage in the approach to the sublime and religious ecstasy.

If Stow's geopoetics expresses a *centrifugal breakdown*, Les Murray's expresses a *centripetal transformation*, which is however no less an *embodied form*, or perhaps even more so, in that it involves a transformation of the poetic line itself. Les Murray's work is a key poetic exhibit in a somewhat overlooked book by the poet and art critic Gary Catalano entitled *An Intimate Australia*, in which Catalano argued that Australia in the 1970s and 80s saw an important shift in attitudes away from the attraction-repulsion model of Judith Wright, which built on a sense of the continent as inherently Other in its grandeur, sublimity and indifference to human life. The arts—painting, photography and poetry above all—were beginning instead to portray a country of intimately known details: Murray's sequence *The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle* (from 1975) is an important case in point.

Murray's early poetry inscribes itself in a rather Wrightian landscape, indeed stands in a rather Bloomian relationship to Wright. Signal poems use the verse-line as a kind of archaeology of the European conquest: “Noonday Axeman” with its repeated refrain of “Axe-fall, echo and silence” sounds out the zone of cleared land; “Toward the Imminent Days” returns to the plough-furrow; and *Walking to the Cattle-Place* centres on the connection between language and cattle-herding in Indo-European, Semitic and Bantu civilizations. But Murray's is only rarely a *mythos* of conquest guilt, much more often about the dispossession and relegation of the rural poor, from whom he comes, a class ethos very different from the cultured branch of the squattocracy, which forms the background of Wright and Stow. It is, however, by the incorporation of an Aboriginal perspective that Murray achieves a questioning and beginning transformation of the boundary-fence verse-line at the end of the poem “Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights I Visit the Farm I Shall Not Inherit”:

... I see the only lines bearing  
consistent strain are the straight ones: fence, house corner,  
outermost furrows. The drifts of grass coming and canes  
are whorled and sod-bunching, are issuant, with dusts.  
The wind-lap outlines of lagoons are pollen-concurred (Murray 1998, 93)

A more organically shaped verse-line is evidently needed to catch a semblance of this multi-contoured landscape in constant movement. And Murray found it in Ronald M. Berndt's translations of the great Aboriginal song-cycles of Arnhem Land, especially the *Wonguri-Mandjikai Cycle of the Moon-Bone*, which becomes

the model for *The Bulahdelah-Taree Cycle of the Moon-Bone*. A translated model of what Murray, like evolutionary ecologists, terms *convergence*: an approximation of form rather than an appropriation of content. The Aboriginal song-line has had a longer time to adapt itself to the Australian landscape, which Murray sees as imposing a stretching of categories, including the horizon. In the poem, the horizon-line overflows, is longer than the width of the page allows. But the line also breaks up; a different line emerges. “High-speed lines”, as Murray has said of the Central Australian desert and Papunya Tula Aboriginal art, “gives way to points and clusters” (Murray 1985). Like the line Tim Ingold abstracts from Nancy Munn’s classic study of *Warlbiri Iconography* (Ingold 2007, 98-101), this is a line which is no longer the shortest distance between point A and point B, but a *walking around a place*, which happens in Aboriginal art and in Aboriginal song-cycles with their constant repetition and return to *Wunger-places* where the Dreaming inheres. Murray’s poem enacts and embodies a movement from the city back to such “White Dreamtime” places in his home region on the North Coast. In the second section the verse-line mirrors the undulations of the snake of cars driving along the Pacific Highway. The de-measured overlong line moves up and down hills, allows for action and reaction to spill over and out in flexible modules of lines and half-lines, a trans-formation which also modifies individual metaphor into a chiasmic system of repetition and riddling analogy:

It is the season of the Long Narrow City; it has crossed the Myall,  
it has entered the North Coast,  
that big stunning snake; it is looped through the hills, burning all  
night there.  
Hitching and flying on the downgrades, processionally balancing  
on the climbs,  
it echoes in O’Sullivan’s Gap, in the tight coats of the flooded-gum  
trees;  
the tops of palms exclaim at it unmoved, there near Wootton.  
Glowing all night behind the hills, with a north-shifting glare,  
burning behind the hills ... (Murray 1998, 138)

The line is still an expression of *moving through* a landscape – just as things move through the line, which seems to have acquired an inside and an outside: “Parasites weave quickly through the long gut that paddocks shine/ into;/ powerful makes surging and pouncing: the police, collecting/ Revenue”. Gradually, inside and outside are connected in a digestive absorption:

The heavy gut winds over the Manning, filling northward,

digesting the towns, feeding the towns;  
they all become the narrow city, they join it ...

Only in the next section when people step out of their cars does the line begin to mirror the movement *around a place* and a kind of dance:

It is good to come out after driving and walk on bare grass;  
walking out, looking all around, relearning that country ...  
stepping behind trees to the dam, as if you had a gun,  
to that place of the Wood Duck,  
to that place of the Wood Duck's Nest,  
proving you can still do it; looking at the duck who hasn't seen  
you,  
the mother duck who'd run Catch Me (broken wing) I'm Fatter  
(broken wing), having hissed to her children.

This residual violence, where the line's moving round the place is by stealth, the reaction of the duck by instinct and the dance imagined, is turned round completely in the next section, which comes to be perceived from the alternative consciousness in the landscape:

The birds saw us wandering along.  
Rosellas swept up crying out *we think we think*; they settled  
farther along;  
knapping seeds off the grass, under dead trees where their eggs  
were, walking around on their fingers,  
flying on into the grass.  
The heron lifted up his head and elbows; the magpie stepped aside  
a bit,  
angling his chopsticks into pasture, turning things over in his head. (Murray 1998, 139)

Defamiliarisation has become personification, or rather a hunting culture's recognition of the personhood of animals (see Ingold 2000, 89-110), as the line is less and less a movement through and from, but a series of displacements within a landscape. The parrots are "deployed" strikingly, not as dead signs, but as living

signifiers. Consciousness has come to reside dispersed in places within the landscape, rather than in auto-mobile human minds.

The boundary-fence is still there in Murray's verse, but it has been breached, and the other side has become familiar, as in "The Gum Forest":

After the last gapped wire on a post,  
homecoming for me, to enter the gum forest. (Murray 1998, 150)

The boundary-fence verse-line in Murray's verse develops the kind of multidimensionality that Philip Hodgins can later use, though Murray's lines really want to curve and become encircling waves. Fence-lines have entered so deeply and ecologically into place that in "Leaf Spring" they sound the landscape of memory from deep under-ground:

... Contour-line by contour  
cattle walk the hills, in a casual-seeming  
prison strung from buried violins. (Murray 1998, 286)

In Murray's later verse the visual tends to recede in favour of the oral and aural, and so the verse-lines become echo-soundings, most spectacularly perhaps in some of the poems in *Translations from the Natural World* like "Bats' Ultrasound" and "Spermaceti", where a large range of species are given voice to express their sensuous worlds. But of course these echo-soundings still mark a boundary for a species, a voice, a me (or a we) and a self-centered metaphysical ecology:

I sound my sight, and flexing skeletons eddy  
in our common wall. With a sonic bolt from the fragrant  
chamber of my head, I burst the life of some  
and slow, backwashing them into my mouth. I lighten,  
breathe and laze below again. And peer in long low tones  
over the curve of Hard to river-tasting and oil-tasting  
coasts, to the grand grinding coasts of rigid air.  
How the wall of our medium has a shining pumping rim ...  
... Eyesight is a leakage  
of nearby into us, and shows us the taste of food  
conformed over its spines. But our greater sight is uttered.

I sing beyond the curve of distance the living joined bones  
of my song-fellows; I sound a deep volcano's valve tubes  
storming whitely in black weight; I receive an island's slump,  
song-scrambling ship's heartbeats, and the sheer shear of current forms  
bracketing a sea-mount. The wall which running blind I demolish,  
heals, prickling me with sonar's. My every long shaped cry  
re-establishes the world, and centres its ringing structure. ("Spermaceti",  
Murray 1998, 386)

This is obviously a hard act to be up against for Kinsella as the third link in a Bloomian chain. Kinsella returns to Wright's environmental activism, anathema to Murray. Kinsella claims his writing as a form of activism through deconstruction. In *Disclosed Poetics* he deconstructs the mode of pastoral, the concept of landscape and the lyrical voice: he does not completely disavow any of these, but exposes their inherent contradictions, their *aporias*, which tend to be released in violence. Even Kinsella's obsession with salination *discloses* a contradiction: the beauty as of an abstract painting in striking colours across a near-dead landscape. *Disclosure* works against *closure* and *enclosure*, with all their connotations in poetry and landscape history. Kinsella sees himself as writing from within a damaged environment: a video installation for the conference where this essay was first presented as a paper showed a gravel pit in heavy wind, with Kinsella's disembodied voice, talking. The embodiment and *haecceitas*, the metaphysics of presence in Murray's geopoetics is deconstructed, and yet the boundary-fence verse-line remains. It is where the *aporias* gather, as in the poem "Intermitting" from Kinsella's latest collection *Shades of the Sublime and the Beautiful*:

Outside, intermitting thunder  
habituating  
    the place of lightning  
a spectrum flourished  
    where wire was stretched  
        thirty-three years ago  
just broken through – rust;  
    a pair of massive wedge-tailed eagles  
flew towards each other then counter-circled  
    creating a cylindrical reservoir,  
a dead zone.  
    The unsolved beacon, an avatar



Pyne, Stephen (1997) *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History, through Fire, of Europe and Europe's Encounter with the World*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Stilgoe, John (1982) *Common Landscape of America* New Haven: Yale UP.

Stow, Randolph (1971) *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems*. Sydney; Angus and Robertson.

Wright, Judith (1965) *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. Melbourne Oxford UP.

——— (1990) *A Human Pattern: Selected Poems*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Martin Leer is *Maître d'enseignement et de recherche* and Head of the section for Contemporary Literature in the English Department of the University of Geneva. He participated in the first conference of EASA at the University of Berne organized by Werner Senn. Among recent publications: *Other Routes: 1500 Years of Asian and African Travel Writing*, coedited with Justin Edwards, Tabish Khair and Hanna Ziadeh, Oxford: Signal Books and Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006; *Bodies and Voices: The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse*, coedited with Merete Borch, Bruce Clunies Ross and Eva Rask Knudsen, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008, which contains an essay by Werner Senn on the poetry of Philip Hodgins; and "Willing Suspension of Disbelief: A Literary Critic Looks at Financial Meltdown" in *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist* 192 (Dec. 2008- Jan.2009), 16-22.