

Beyond My window

Lesley Williams, English Department, Adelaide University

Beneath the surface of me (1)...a philosophical daydream on the metaphoric and practical qualities of Utopia

At the tip of each fine frond of the Melaleuca, fat drops of rain collect and gleam wetly with reflected light, until a wrenching wind-gust launches them back into the saturated grey backdrop of afternoon, into the swift flow of water channelling a depression along the edge of the mown space just beyond our fence. Parrots, three, bright orange at chest and crest, a hint of green, turquoise winged, dance and dash through short watery grass, gather wash-away seeds with gusto.

All the birds are energised by the rain. A dozen sparrows peck and twitter in the Hakea. Two blackbirds chase a nosy yellow-wing away from their nest-site in the ivy-covered tank stand.

I sit, as rain and wind become a billowing tent tucking me inside in warmth and lassitude. No temptation, and no necessity, for a walk in the wet world. No damp penetrates my metaphor, even as the world outside sheds water like the wild edges of a waterfall. I am enticed into reverie...

...hill country to the north east of Broken Hill. The road, wet with rain, dips and sways from one crest to the next. The act of driving is a pattern of slight steering adjustments. The car sweeps toward the high arch of a rainbow.

Isn't this desert country? Shouldn't there be dust, heat, flies? Naive pre-suppositions of a novice in her own land.

At the break of one crest, higher than the others, my journey comes to a sudden halt. The car stops at the edge of the world. Below me lies the Mundi Mundi Plain.

I sit in the car, radio playing softly. The land before me is still-life distorted by the slow movement of water down the windscreen, surrealism in action. Rain, car, radio, dissonant harmony and clear melodic voice, Bernstein, piano, my only reference points to the life that I know, my space.

Laid out before my gaze, a 240 degree sweep out and across a lowered horizon, a giant jigsaw; gibber rock and earth interlocking with grass tussocks, flat land beneath a watercolour sky. As the rain stops, the rainbow arcs north toward the centre of the plain.

My eyes fix on colour. Red earth, iron rock, golden grass green-tinged, slated greys, backdrop to opalescent arcs hanging above the plain. There is a beckoning, a yearning.

I leave the car, walk to the edge of the cleared space that hangs above the plain below. Air pushes at me from behind, drags at the edges of my clothes, at ragged tufts of grasses, tugs at me, down, away. I hold myself hard against the wind and breathe, deep, that wetted earth moulder tart like the tang of light wine. It fizzes in my veins and my feet respond with a dance that promises to carry me off, down the road that has become a rollercoaster dip direct to the end of the rainbow, as though my feet have slipped into the Red Shoes and fate skips out ahead of me.

My breath captures the chill of the air, my fingers hold tight to the door of the car. I gaze out across the plain.

I feel a grounding note of existence, it penetrates and holds; into time, that yearning deep breath; that dance, into a freedom of space. For one moment, while I stand at the edge of the plain, looking out to horizons unknown to me, Utopia becomes real...

I come back to the rain. The glass in these windows is old and distorted. Trees waver in a

downwardly vertical pattern as my mind shifts time. As I write, I listen to music. Sarah Hopkins (2), Australian cellist, composer; the voices of women chant, sound to hold sound, fusion of voice and didgeridoo. I am reminded of the Songlines (3), reminded of people who know how to live in the reality of that plain. If my feet had responded to that tug of wind and space...

...too far out to the horizon, beyond the point of no return, I wilt under the sun, dessicate, become part of the landscape; shards of bone, or scattered teeth, as eagles and crows rise on the wind...

...back again, to the resonant peal of bells, dissonant yet congruent harmony, past in present toward future. Voices join the sound, based in the real, synthesised, deep-toned like the bells; flow one voice and sound into others, fade, build, flow, like a slow tide on a hot summer night, pour onto sand and slide away, intense and cool against the fading heat of day.

I have in my head Utopia as metaphor for a moment of freedom, a dreamspace that seeps out to encompass that once-seen landscape, flows back, expands and contracts time and feeling. Utopia as dynamic process rather than impossible dream; as that momentary experience of freedom from my own limitations, hanging out there above the Mundi Mundi Plain.

Space as medium...

Space, apparently open and unchallenged, has led me to a dynamic process I can define as a place of mind; Utopia. How do I now locate that place? I read that 'ideas of space cannot be separated from practice...' (5) and that 'space is a practiced place...' (6). Well. My mind is a practiced and practising place; practising Utopia in the spaces of that mind. Mind that I think of as

synergism
space/thought in motion
uncircumscribed by
recognisable boundaries

So where and how do I locate Utopia? Is that place inside my head the only location of the practice and the spaces of mind?

The space inside my head, and the space between me and the radio, is filling now with Toccata and Fugue, wildly triumphant blasts of air somewhere in space.

I am feeling my way through a multiplicity of spaces. Space as container, as conductor and conveyer of sound, as vision, as thought; and space as time.

Time, where 'the past will always haunt the present...' and therefore 'the space of the old is the space of the new...' (6). Future haunts present as thought-space, with its ideas, hopes, wishes, plans; influence on perception and direction; 'horizon of futurity...' (7), everchanging.

Think about the fact that space, the shape of space, is determined by movement in a dynamic, dialectic relationship with the object in space (8).

I sit here seduced by a vision of space as the shape of change, by the idea of travelling through a double metaphor; my utopia of the plain as freedom in thought, circumscribed within this tent of rain. Words, ideas, rise and fall away. I write, each moment a lodestone of possibility. Pauses, interruptions, go unrecorded except perhaps as punctuation. A full stop; that moment when my head lifts to scan the world beyond the glass as a lessening of rain-sound draws my attention outward, to note smoke from my neighbour's chimney as it drains toward the ground, swirls up in ferocious curls, drifts back across the roof. I turn up the heater; a sluice of cold air slides unchecked across the windowsill.

If I am very attentive-because I am kinesthetically inclined, rather than visual or auditory-a

fleeting glimpse of the desert plain flickers in and out of existence like scenes in an old penny slot-machine. I look and the scene presented to my eyes is somewhere beyond and behind them. If I breathe deeply into this scene, my body relives that moment as the car swept over the rise. I am my vantage point for moments of freedom, energy, expansion. I dance in light, space and air; dreamspace as conscious action.

Is that where Utopia is? No-place; not because it doesn't exist but because it has no fixed abode in space. Like space, it changes and moves with movement; it belongs within the dreamer but is more than a dream, its very presence induces action and enhances the vitality of space lived. Space as medium, mindscape made real through small grace-notes of daily existence, slightly blurred perhaps through the lens of memory or daydream but crystal clear in feelings generated by desire or hope or what-if, or even if-only. This is a human capacity that needs to be celebrated; this ability to create and recreate a daily life. Somehow we've come to a cultural low that is of the opinion that our ability to generate ideas should only be served in the interests of making money; our ability to generate ideas, recreate scenes, bring imagination to form for our own sake is somehow worthy of derision. We still strive to separate ourselves from ourselves, but, as an embodied subject, 'is not to see always to see from somewhere?' (9).

I add to myself with a silent laugh, 'is not to think always to think from somewhere?' This, it occurs to me, comes uncomfortably close to Descartes, beyond whom, as a culture, we still seem unable to move (10). Does this make me a Dualist? I reject the thought. For me, mind and body are inextricably intertwined. Maybe I am a Phenomenalist?

Phenomenon: (philos.) the object of perception, experience: (Kant) a thing as it appears and is interpreted in perception and reflection, as distinguished from its real nature as a thing-in-itself (11).

Sounds promising. Me as others see and know me/ me as myself. But,

a Phenomenalist does not believe in the existence of things other than as they are only mental constructions out of phenomenal appearances;

this is the 'ism' closest in western tradition to the 'tree in the forest' koan.

I keep bumping into that tree and it seems to me that it is always going to bend the airwaves in the same way. If another creature's senses detect it differently, that does not detract from the treeness of the tree or the fact that if I am there I will hear its sound and if I am not I can imagine its sound and so it lives on in my imagination as well as being where I left it time and time again: until the local Council decides in its wisdom that the forest is gone and this tree detracts from the view of the car yard where passersby might miss seeing just the car they wish to buy so with the backup of modern technology, the tree disappears overnight, roots and all, and who could ever prove it had existed?

I decide that none of the 'isms' really fit with my way of thinking although Idealism,

the tendency to represent things in their ideal forms rather than as they are

that's me, in the past. Utopia as ideal, utopia as impossibility, utopia as no-place. Until the Mundi Mundi Plain, when I began to recognise the possibility of a multiplicity of forms, of spaces; the vitality of space.

Do we only engage with space as vital if we are aware of its properties; its viability as life-support, its movement, its carrying capacities, its inviolability as a medium for action? Literally, without space we do not exist. Is this something that we can put our minds to and know? If space is change, a process, it cannot be considered an 'object'. As not-object, does it become less readable? Spatialised representations, maps and graphs as readings, are 'representations of a particular culture's values and perceptions of the land'. These, generally, do not portray the 'lived-in-ness of space, its praxis' (11). Behind me, mirrored in the window when I sit here at night, hangs a painting by Mary Dixon, 'Honey Ant Dreaming'. This is a

spatialised representation of the lived-in-ness of space. I have not learned to read this map, but I am drawn into its narrative by the movement of ants. I recognise the shape of four people, flanked by coolamon and digging stick. The people are not outside, but within the space of the story. Like listening to opera without understanding the words, I can understand the vitality, the potential for movement, the colour and the life of the land. My feet can move about in imagination and tread the bare patches of earth in the interlocking puzzle that confronts me. It shows me something of how to traverse the silent spaces of the plain, should I find myself once more wanting to fly away.

Grace-note

I resonate with the cultural philosophy (13) that holds life, the body, as part of the experience, not as the servant of the mind; of the use of metaphor to enhance perception and as dialogue between experience, reflection and action, a dialogue to hold us to the earth, bring us into contact with thought and feeling combined. A dialogue such as this allows me to belong to the earth, to know that I am here.

The rain stops. I leave my daydream. Outside the back door, a blackbird splashes madly in the birdbath, his bright beak preens among feathers as he retouches his already glossy image. The air is damp and fresh. I breathe deeply for a moment or two, then give in to my body's reluctance for exercise and return to the keyboard, pausing only to insert a CD; sounds of the sea, birdsong. I would walk if the sea were close by. Utopias abound. I have added to my mindspace since that time long past, listen...

splash surge

retreat

curl in on myself
open out to the wind

spit ice-filled foam
swallow salt and
grains of sand

absorb the sun
flash back at the moon

and follow faint star-paths
to shore
on clear dark nights

Notes

1. 'Beneath the skin of me' is a quotation from Carmel Bird, *Crisis*. Milson's Point, NSW: Vintage, 1996 (p7). It is one of those phrases that lodges in the mind and demands to be used.
2. CD. Sarah Hopkins. *Reclaiming the Spirit*. Red Hill: New World Productions, 1994.
3. See Bruce Chatwin. *The Songlines*. New York: Viking, 1987.
4. See Buchanan, Ian. 'Lefebvre and the space of everyday life.' *Southern Review*. 27:2 (1994). 127.
5. de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. 117.
6. Buchanan, 129.
7. Lloyd, Genevieve. *Being in Time*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993.
8. Buchanan, 130.
9. Gill, Jerry H. *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*. New Jersey, London: Humanities Press, 1991. In this quotation, Gill (11) is quoting Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (67).
10. See discussion of dualism in the formation of modern political landscapes in the introduction to *Plumwood*, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993.
11. This and subsequent definitions are taken from the Collins English Dictionary, updated Third (Australian) Edition.
12. Buchanan, 130.
13. This philosophy is the work of Merleau-Ponty, discussed in Gill (as above).