

**FORESTERS OF NEUTRAL GROUND? POETS AND THE ECOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE  
EASTERN CAPE**

By

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**Abstract**

Thomas Pringle was only the first of many poets to write of the intricate interlacings of the natural world, racial politics, and land-use in the Eastern Cape. The pragmatics of warfare and land-utilisation, it is still poorly recognised, were and are deeply influenced by aesthetics of landscape and its natural denizens. Poetry offers a unique lens on, and expression of, the aesthetics upon which the human treatment of the natural vegetation and animals is founded. An ecologically-orientated literary criticism - or ecocriticism - which is still an embryonic discipline in this country, thus has enormous potential in elucidating current perspectives on local manifestations of the great crisis of our times, the ecological climacteric. Pringle's evocation of abundant wildlife, racial tensions, and white hunting ethics in his poem 'The Forester of the Neutral Ground' (1834) balances ironically against the current rush to restock the Eastern Cape with commercially viable game, often at the expense of indigenous peoples. This paper takes Pringle's poem as a starting-point from which to explore the relationships between poetry and ecology in a number of poets, concentrating on contemporary writers Robert Berold, Chris Mann, Mzi Mahola, and Don Maclellan. Their poems evidence both the metaphysical tensions of the Nature/Culture dichotomy, and of efforts to forge a new locally-rooted language within which to express at-home-ness and, in some cases, a new aesthetic for ecological sustainability, a resacralised equilibrium with our deeply damaged corner of the globe.

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I want to begin with a painting by Thomas Baines, dated 1848, a view of the early Grahamstown looking more or less south up Potter's Row and Hill Street (*Fig. 1*). Three details are of interest to us here. The first is the aspect of the ridge we now know as Mountain Drive: entirely bare of trees. This will be of some satisfaction to supporters of Working for Water, who have been assiduously clearing the ridge of eucalypts, pines and Port Jackson willows over six years or so; the grassland that is consequently regenerating might be seen as aesthetically more true to the real character of the ridge, somehow more authentic, here confirmed as original by history. Well, maybe. Others lament the demise of the beautiful rows of silver gums above Grey's Dam, venerable established trees those folks have grown up with as part of their natural landscape. Second detail (while we're on trees): it's hard to say whether these trees low on the left-hand side of the painting are more alien species, or remnants of indigenous vegetation imperfectly rendered. It has frequently been pointed out how the early European artists often seemed to fail to *see* what was in front of them, their renderings overwhelmed instead by the painterly conventions in which they had been trained. (The influence of compositional techniques inherited from eighteenth-century European landscape conventions is evident in this painting; and I will be showing how something similar happens in written poetic techniques.) The third detail is the tiny dot of white high on the ridge, which I take to be the British military semaphore station, part of the communications network established to conquer the Xhosa. One can still see the foundations of that station, right next to a white-roofed toposcope, which uses the same techniques of mapping, straight-line sight, and navigational coordinates as its more aggressive precursor. Both semaphore station and toposcope draw on what might be called an aesthetic of geometric imposition, now equally evident in the straight lines of fences, powerlines (power in more than one sense), streets, and rows of pineapples visible everywhere, paying scant attention to opposing curvatures and impediments of the topography.

This brief discussion broaches some of the questions I explore in this paper, questions relating to the conjunctions between European artistry (in the form primarily of poetry) and the ecologies of the region, as they unfold in historical time. What is the natural? How is it depicted, and why? And what effects outside the artwork do such aesthetics have on the historical treatment of the environment?

Neither poetry nor ecology, as we will see, are separable from the local racial dynamics, technological developments, and global economic pressures of which I take our history to be composed. Even more importantly, I want to argue that *aesthetics*, in the sense of *an awareness of emotionally affective standards of beauty, ugliness and social appropriateness*, is fundamentally and unavoidably implicated in all these facets. Some aesthetic, whether conscious or unspoken, whether adopted wholesale or resisted and modified, underpins or deeply affects many, if not all, our pragmatic behaviours in the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of the ecological: the killing or preservation of certain species or habitats, the assessments of domestication and wilderness, the division and treatment of landscapes, are all

profoundly aesthetic in character. The subjective and emotional elements in such appraisals and behaviours are precisely what get excised from many histories, which seek more easily verifiable material or political causes for historical eventualities. I want to argue here, however, for a history of the subjective experience, a history of the unspoken undercurrent, a history of the emotionally affective, and to suggest that poetry must be a primary source for such a history.

So I'm less interested in *what* one can learn synchronically about an ecosystem, in the way a scientifically-aligned ecologist might, so much as in *how* an observer (or poet) views and expresses his awareness of his ecological surroundings, diachronically or at that particular moment in history. I want to ask of certain poems - as we might ask of Baines's painting - the following kinds of questions. What prompted this particular stance or point of view? What, in the language or medium, evidences tensions between inherited convention and the impress of the local? What are the linkages between the aesthetics of the delivery, and the pragmatics of behaviour on the ground? What is the emotional content of this expression, that viewpoint, those behaviours? What kinds of sense of self, of belonging, of experience of being and in-dwelling, are being articulated and built in this confrontation with the strange? What can we learn from this historical focus on a particular mode of expressiveness, about other articulations or interfusions of aesthetic expression and treatment of the natural environment? What, finally, constitutes a consciousness of ecological caring?<sup>1</sup>

Lets launch directly into an example.

It was, plausibly, from the very site of the semaphore station on Mountain Drive that Thomas Pringle (often touted as the Eastern Cape's founder-poet) looked out towards the Katberg and the Winterberg, over what had then (in 1820) just been labelled the Neutral Ground. This area, between the Keiskamma and Great Fish rivers, was so-called because Ngqika's Xhosas had just been forcibly evicted, and it was quickly reverting to wilderness (*Fig.2*. See Mostert 533, 549). In the liberal, even maverick, mind of Thomas Pringle, it evoked precise and painful memories of the Highland clearances of his native Scotland. There was of course nothing neutral about this ground - a euphemism for conquest as masking of the realities as the same tract's subsequent colonial name, the Ceded Territory. In a more fundamental sense, too, there is no such thing as neutral ground: all terrain (that which pre-exists our human presence) is necessarily *viewed*; in being viewed, it becomes landscape and, as both Theodor Adorno and JM Coetzee have pointed out, no landscape is not simultaneously a culturescape. The terrain is necessarily seen through acculturated eyes which are inescapably blind to some aspects, judgemental of others, selecting, categorising, composing, inwardly familiarising or rejecting, domesticating, assessing for practical uses, being frightened or charmed according to both pre-existent conventions and entirely novel accommodations of the strange. In short, neutrality is not available to us.

That said, it is fascinating to observe the struggles within Pringle's mind and language as he - newly arrived but precociously critical and observant - gazes across the Neutral Ground and composes a poem entitled The Desolate Valley . A billowy waste of mountains, wild and wide , he calls it, with alliterations which overburden the line but also alert us to the importance of concepts of waste and wild (or wilderness ) in Pringle's aesthetic of landscape. No one, as far as I know, has unpacked the evolving connotations of these words in the South African context as, for instance, Max Oelschläger has done for North America. In this poem, the Winterberg and the Katberg (their Dutch names even then seemed more naturalised and authentic than any English name could) are regarded as wild precisely because Pringle finds himself struggling to forge an adequate language to describe their alien contours:

Far up among the forest-belted mountains,  
Where Winterberg, stern giant old and grey,  
Looks down the subject dells, whose gleaming fountains  
To wizard Kat their virgin tribute pay,  
A valley opens to the noontide ray,  
With green savannahs shelving to the brim  
Of the swift River, sweeping on his way  
To where Umtoka hies to meet with him,  
Like a blue serpent gliding through the acacias dim. (Pringle 50)

Stern giants , dells and virgin fountains seem inappropriately pastoral, too English and Romantic in connotation; the very archaism of the language (archaic and self-consciously poetic even for that time) correlates to an experience of (even a desire to find) this place somehow mythically massive, primaeval and extraordinary. This is in itself a symptom of European Enlightenment, superiorist attitudes, with which Pringle would find himself ambivalently at odds. Against this Englishness, savannahs and acacias move halfway towards a localisation of language, though only halfway. And against the impress of wilderness , the careful composition, closely analogous to that governing Baines's painting of Grahamstown, tames and controls, orders and rhymes. It moves from backdrop to foreground, the features interlock like spurs, the river performs the same leading-in function as the street and the winding road in Baines's painting.

This all reflects a deeper antithesis. The valley flanks a mountain-wilderness which is both majestic and melancholy , both romantic and a Vale of Desolation . The source of the contradiction gradually becomes obvious. On the one hand, over the next two stanzas, Pringle exuberantly enumerates the numbers of wild animals present, more than the eye may count , Earth's old gigantic broods . He evinces an appreciative but displaced nostalgia for a more ancient, pre-human realm of existence, teeming, both alarming

and charming in its tameless pride . In the fourth stanza, the human observer (an imagined, for the moment impotent hunter) is set apart from an admired but clearly little-understood wildness:

Then, couched at night in hunter's wattled shieling,  
How wildly beautiful it was to hear  
The elephant his shrill *reveillé* pealing,  
Like some far signal-trumpet on the ear!  
While the broad midnight moon was shining clear,  
How fearful to look forth upon the woods,  
And see those stately forest-kings appear,  
Emerging from their shadowy solitudes -  
As if that trump had woke Earth's old gigantic broods!

The almost magically conjured elephants are both wildly beautiful (a usage apparently antithetical to that of a more repellent waste wilderness) and fearful, both pastorally moonlit and primordially forbidding. The simile of the trumpet domesticates their strangeness even as Pringle tries to evoke it. That to Pringle they seem to emerge from solitudes indicates his lack of understanding of a working, communitarian ecology out there: it's a projection of his own alienation from the natural, an alienation implicit in the hunkered presence of the hunter. We know what will happen to the buffalo and elephant come daylight.

For the moment, as Pringle was aware, the game is plentiful partly because the native peoples have been obliterated: The Oppressor's hand was strong. There remain only the remnants of abandoned paths, crumbling ruins of old Caffer cabins, the residue of (interestingly) *Nature's* savage tribes (my italics). There is another crucial equivocation here. Indigenous humans and their lowing herds subsist in opposition to the wildlife, but in aligning them here *with* the wildlife, Pringle both obscures who the Oppressor is, and lays the ground for another aspect of the destruction: the collapse of Christian teaching. The mission station, too, is a roofless ruin, scathed by flame and smoke. The poem's central question, it turns out, is Shall EVIL baffle GOOD? The answer, or hope, is that for a season Satan (prefigured in the serpent of the wild river) may prevail, but that in due course Good, figured in conventional Biblical agricultural metaphors as the revival of seeds and harvests, will prevail, and the unburied bones/ Of Ghona's children withering in the blast (for whom Pringle seems to evince at least a passing sympathy) will awake and shout - Our God is nigh! .

Without really exploring it, Pringle has outlined the network - the ecology - of violence that then prevailed on the colonial frontier. Chief Ngqika's Xhosa people had been cleared out, but they in turn had destroyed the

missions; in tandem, the struggle of agriculture to prevail over wilderness, common to both black and white farmers, is figured as moral conquest. As a moral (Christian) presence recedes, so Nature reasserts itself, antinomously beautiful and sobering:

Now the blithe loxia hangs her pensile nest<sup>2</sup>  
From the wild-olive, bending o'er the rock,  
Beneath whose shadow, in grave mantle drest,  
The Christian Pastor taught his swarthy flock.

(This notion of the wilderness taking over again, practically a trope for colonial fears, is intriguingly echoed in some contemporary poems: Don MacLennan's image, in *Notes from a Rhenish Mission* [2001], where a peppercorn tree split the paving stones/ and cracked the whitewashed wall [8]; or Quentin Hogge's poem *Settler's Day - Decay*, in which Weeds rank through the mosaic floor of an abandoned settler home.) The critical edge of Pringle's poem, then, is muted by the presence of inherited tropes and imperialistic moral systems, by (at least at this point<sup>3</sup>) Pringle's unwillingness clearly to identify the perpetrators of the violence, and by a symptomatic irresolution between the lexes of pastoral pleasure and threatening wilderness. Nevertheless, one can observe, in the embryonic emergence of a subjective self which is straining to counterpoint the moral and political conventions it has inherited, certain aesthetic tensions and tropes which correlated to, even governed, the European invaders' racial and ecological attitudes, their military strategies and conceptions of land-use.

Similar tensions, slightly differently configured, are also implicit in Pringle's other poem about the valley, *The Forester of the Neutral Ground* (Pringle 58-61), which he subtitled *A South African Border-ballad*. (The allusion to Walter Scott and the Highland clearances is deliberate.) Here, a similar confluence of environmental and political issues makes itself felt in curiously rifted ways, the apparently unconscious fissures in their portrayal being as significant as the poem's more explicit purposes.

The ballad opens with the speaker joining a perfect stranger in the midst of the Neutral Ground to hunt its abundant noble game, and neither asked each other of nation or name. In surviving the comradely dangers of the hunt, an uncommon (neutral) trust between Dutchman and Englishman develops, and the stranger tells his story. He is, he says, the son of a Heemraad - a magistrate - one of seven sons, who had gone native to the extent of insisting on marrying a woman who was not, as his father had urged, from the *black* taint free (italics in original). He is derided by his furious family for thus lowering himself to the servile race, but the pre-marriage day confrontation is interrupted by brother Roelof galloping home/ From the pastures to announce the presence of Bushmen. The speaker is called to join the chase: Bold

Arend! come help with your long-barrelled roer [rifle] . This foray (then a common enough activity, whether or not provoked by cattle-rustling by the hard-pressed San peoples) turns out to be no more than a diversion, during which the hapless brown bride-to-be Dinah is sold. The speaker tracks her down, however, rescues her, and like wild-pigeons they flee to the mountains of the Neutral Ground, where they live a quasi-pastoral life of partial solitude and (non-pastorally but necessarily) violence against nature:

I ve reared our rude shieling by Gola s green wood,  
Where the chase of the deer yields me pastime and food:  
With my Dinah and children I dwell here alone,  
Without other comrades - and wishing for none.

I fear not the Bushman from Winterberg s fell,  
Nor dread I the Caffer from Kat-River s dell;  
By justice and kindness I ve conquered them both,  
And the Sons of the Desert have pledged me their troth.

I fear not the leopard that lurks in the wood,  
The lion I dread not, though raging for blood;  
My hand it is steady - my aim it is sure -  
And the boldest must bend to my long-barrelled roer.

The elephant s buff-coat my bullet can pierce;  
And the giant rhinoceros, headlong and fierce,  
Gnu, eland and buffalo furnish my board,  
When I feast my allies like an African lord.

And thus from my kindred and colour exiled,  
I live like old Ismael, Lord of the Wild...

Against the background (which is in fact the substance of the colonial dynamic) of the suppression of the indigenous races (the hunting down of the San as vermin; wars against, and enslavement of, the Xhosa), and the analogous wars against the threatening aspects of the wilderness, wars conducted through both the roer and the cow, Pringle develops his moral theme. The exiled Arend becomes his hero, a Wild eccentric<sup>4</sup> who finds allies amongst the indigenous peoples, conquering them (still a revealing term) through justice and kindness - and the bounty and patronage provided by the superior destructiveness of his weapon. (And

with whom and what did he trade for gunpowder, one wonders?) Arend, for all his exile and a certain new-found communalism, is still in this sense in the vanguard of capitalistic conquest (as were the *trekboers* who would in another decade or so follow in greater numbers beyond the reach of British rule). He is, after all, the Forester, not only a wilderness-dweller and huntsman, but a manager.<sup>5</sup> The critique of Dutch racial exclusivity, and a more coy critique of British rule up to that time, is continued in the poem's final stanzas, but British rule, in an idealistic form, is still finally held out as an article of hope. Arend worries about the future of his mixed-race children in what he obviously envisages as the inevitable (re)colonisation of even these wild regions:

Then tell me, dear Stranger, from England the free,  
What good tidings bring'st thou for Arend Plessie?  
Shall the Edict of Mercy be sent forth at last,  
To break the harsh fetters of Colour and Caste?

What is of interest to us here is the role of the natural ecology in this picture. Nature is at once resource, haven, and antagonist - and, for Arend Plessie, so are the indigenous peoples, who are thus again aligned with the natural. There is another hint here of a certain admiration for the untrammelled abundance of the natural, but also a fearfulness which is as much iconic (almost heraldic in Pringle's diction) as empirically-observed. In Pringle's mind, the natural ecology and racist politics are inextricably entwined, in ways which even he does not here fully realise or explore but which are everywhere evident. The natural also, in his poetic endeavour to destabilise his own inherited Romantic and pastoral dictions, so painfully inappropriate to this harsh countryside, could be utilised almost allegorically to highlight his unusual moral purpose, even as that nature was in the process of being destroyed. This treatment is evident also (in both the poems touched on here) in Pringle's tendency merely to list animals and some of their most obvious traits: there is little sense of an *ecology* at work.<sup>6</sup> The animals appear from the jungles, run away, are shot, mysteriously disappear again. They are not identified with, are a mere tableau, a series, almost, of verbal targets. In this superficiality, such a treatment attains only a specious affinity with nature because ... it reduces nature to raw material (Adorno 97). Landscape and animals are as much a resource for Pringle, defining his version of both the abuses and the civilising redemption of the colonial presence, as they are for the fictional, patrician Arend Plessie. This is a stark example and reminder that, as Robert Harrison has explored in his wonderful book *Forests*, the wilderness is historically that out of which, and against which, civilisation has been carved; the forest is, in Harrison's phrase 'the shadow of civilisation'.

While he is a unique figure at a unique point in history, Pringle reflects in his work the tensions and problematics being worked out on practical levels throughout the Eastern Cape: his usages of language and form are synecdoches of those wider processes and struggles. Most importantly, I want to suggest, the

aesthetics of the natural displayed here are as integral and as affective as more pragmatic concerns in those everyday processes: nature-aesthetics, treatment of both wildlife and native peoples, and patterns of land-use, all broached in these poems, are absolutely inseparable.

### **Unpainted lands within the land**

The problems broached by Pringle, perceptively for his time if as yet clumsily expressed, have scarcely receded in the intervening 180 years. Pringle's descendants, and others like them, continue to grapple with the interlocking problems of global politics and local ecologies, and with forging authentic modes of in-dwelling. While Pringle scarcely gave himself time to develop deep feelings of at-home-ness (he lived here less than two years), present-day white poets, even those born here, continue to address the issue of belonging. Chris Mann, Rob Berold, and Don MacLennan, amongst them, do so in ways no less historically contingent and resonant. In the cases of Mann and Berold, their views are directly informed, their vocabularies and forms influenced, by scientific ecological knowledge not available to Pringle. Most of the wilderness described by Pringle has been eradicated, the wildlife shot out, the land carved up into racially aligned farms and townships. Many white inhabitants have largely ignored the natural ecosystems, or attempted to neutralise their presence. There has been an opposing conservationist movement, of course, manifested in national parks, designated wilderness areas and, most recently, a massive upsurge in game farming and white-owned private hunting enterprises, in which poorer black communities are often still further displaced.<sup>7</sup> No expression of ecopoetic in-dwelling, then, though often stimulated by a neo-Romantic desire to find allegedly pristine natural beauty, can ignore the underpinning clash of regional politics and different communities' notions of appropriate land-use. All these poets also suggest, I think, that a caring mode of in-dwelling, a lifestyle of ecological equilibrium, is attainable only in opposition to, or in the interstices of, global commerce and political manipulations and rhetorics. In attempting to tease out and express these hidden dimensions - the unpainted lands within the land, in Mann's phrase - the great historical crisis of our times is in fact being directly addressed.

This is caught in a number of poems in Chris Mann's significantly-titled collection, *Heartlands* (2002). Mann has worked for many years in rural development projects, and his direct, approachable, sometimes almost chatty poetry is suffused with local vernaculars, part of a Wordsworth-like project to promote the reading of poetry written in the common tongue, and tautened by an activist agenda of social betterment.

Mann is under no illusions about the difficulty of such a project, or the difficulty of defining common ecologically-sound practices and languages. In the poem 'The Clay Pits of Grahamstown' (*Heartlands* 13), he confronts, on an intimate scale, the damage of industria. These and similar clay pits were nodes of conflict

as early as 1821, in Pringle's time, when the conquest of the Neutral Ground prevented Xhosa people from accessing one of their primary sources of cosmetic adornment, the white and red clays (Mostert 548-9). Today, the kaolin is being commercially mined. Only the mimosa trees which top its squat cliffs remain of the natural vegetation; the place is now littered with cartons and plastic bags and smears of oil; yellow pay-loaders (a deft pun) gouge and cart the kaolin away in truck-loads to cities whose culture has the land in its grip. The product, Mann also uneasily acknowledges, is built into the very tools he's using to write the poem, the keyboard I tap, the page, the ink you read - keyboards and inks manufactured, most likely, in Germany or Japan.

The promotion of some kind of antidote faces not only the indifference of globalising industria<sup>8</sup> but also local cultural rifts. In *Wording the Gap in the Hinterlands* (*Heartlands* 27), the poet, amidst a distinctively Eastern Cape landscape of aloes and thorns, talks to two teachers, they in an English collage, himself in minimalist Xhosa. Together, they struggle to express a response/ to water-lilies, a bridge, a stream :

A pause, a silence like a kloof  
suddenly chasms apart your talk.

You sense the borders of wordscapes,  
of unpainted lands within a land.

Words - how they undo and make us,  
as much the frontier as the pioneer.

As we've seen, the terms *frontier*, *borders*, and *pioneer* have peculiar resonance in the Eastern Cape. What, linguistically, these borders reveal to Mann are those unpainted areas of life which have not yet found their adequate language. Nor, in this poem, is such a language created: in a sense, it is still the chasms themselves which both undo and make these denizens. Nor are the borders only between locals and their antipathetic languages; they are breached, or modified, by the global: the two teachers are reading a gloss-faced postcard/ sent by a friend studying abroad - a subject perhaps more important to them than the local ecology.

A little closer to the theme of the natural is the poem *Hlambeza Pool* (*Heartlands* 12). It opens idyllically, but Mann's phrasing indicates that such an idyll is constructed, culturally pre-configured:

The pool is as you'd suppose it to be:  
green and narrow, mirroring cycads  
and ferns, the crags of a deep ravine.  
Spined succulents thicket the banks,  
the pleated rocks and surface shales.

And the poet's group is also as you would imagine us (he is making assumptions about his readership, too), culturally embedded and surrounded by the societally resonant material objects and topics of conversation specific to their status and time:

sprawled on rugs with thermos flasks,  
discussing new software and hardware,  
exchanging stories of burn-out, stress,  
armed robbery and patients with Aids.

The pool is a natural haven from these modern pressures, even though horseflies and mosquitoes - pale shadows of Pringle's lions and buffaloes - make a more rapacious nature's presence felt. So does the presence of other, previous visitors. The swimmers, playing in what they (Eurocentrically) proclaim a green cathedral, discover evidence of a different spirituality: Xhosa votive offerings of pumpkin-seeds, beads and tobacco floating in boats of paper.<sup>9</sup> The discovery makes the visitors uneasy, internally exiled again, as if they have violated some more authentic spiritual presence: Perhaps we shouldn't have swum here. With that presence, however - that of the Xhosa ancestors, intercessors, their links with God - the poet himself then tries to connect, interestingly through or along with an invocation to nature:

I feel the cycad fronding of the unknown  
breaking out around and inside us again,  
then glimpse deep in a pool of memory

the faces of the living-dead, the shades.

Precisely what this fronding of the unknown might be, just what kind of presence such culturally different ancestral spirits might have for this dislocated white man, just whose memory is involved, is difficult to say; indeed, it is perhaps unspeakable. Perhaps, as Mann puts it in another poem, The art is in the omissions.<sup>10</sup> An uncharitable reading of this might be that Mann, like Pringle, is aligning the indigenes with nature, or idealistically proposing that they have a more organic, ecological relationship with the natural - a

dubious atavism. Alternatively, the poem's ending may be said to hold out a hope that, in this common locale of natural beauty and spiritual resonance, some redemptive reintegration, some advance beyond the fragmented past, might be effected. As it stands, however, it seems a fragile, even artificial move; the awkwardness is encapsulated in the title, Hlambeza Pool : *hlambeza* means purify - a name for the pool which Mann invented himself (Mann, pers. comm.).

If the attempt to reach back into native cultures for a renewed sense of in-dwelling is fraught with difficulties, there are other possibilities. One can go even further back into the geological past, the ecological grounds of life itself. In First Memories of Place (*Heartlands* 31), Mann figures his first memories as archaeological sites : they are cave-beds of personal time , like spoor sealed on tidal banks , evidence of his fern and cycad years . Here Mann performs a kind of phylogeny-recapitulates-ontogeny metaphor: his childhood is the sedimented antediluvian, symbolised by the cycad, relic of former ages as well as a rarity unique to the Eastern Cape. In that image, in-dwelling and ancestry are captured at once - an ecology of prehistory, if you like.

Robert Berold, resident of a deep valley near Grahamstown, does something similar in Geologic (*Fires of the Dead*, 48). He begins with the gritty but ephemeral realities of his locale - A cough upriver:/ the crows gloat - and the fragility of his human family heirlooms : Some will be used, some stored/ some broken and some sold . The violent politics of his times also intrudes: the killers wipe their weapons/ legalise their crimes . Against all this, he searches out a firmer foundation for belonging, the geology of the land itself: I need its geologic time/ to bring a little rest , and: Only tethered to the earth/ can I begin to face my times . Just what such tethering involves of course is our central question here: geological time scales, as Berold knows, are just as imaginary as any other mental construct, and in that scale logic doesn't take one very far .

What's hidden in this older time  
is fragrant, difficult to see.  
But it's the closest thing I have  
to certainty.

At the end of the poem, Berold is therefore returned to the immediacy of the senses, allusively observing not so much the natural as man-in-nature - my mind moves to the rowboat, river,/ cattle grazing, crunch of passing car - but not (as Mann is wont to do) imposing any explicit meaning upon them.

These last-cited items nevertheless imply the human conquest of the natural, unrolling history itself in its

sequence of boat, cattle, and car. But Berold wants to root himself in the deeper undertow of the land as it was, or once must have been - imaginary though that connection inevitably is. This tension is most beautifully expressed in *Property* (*Fires* 43), a poem which pre-dates but speaks ironically to the country's present-day concern with land redistribution. Here, the poet travels through spacious but imprisoning farmland, the long, dark strands/ of fences tying tight/ the insects, air and brittle grass .

And thinking  
how the unseen farmer owns the land  
and how his labourers cannot.  
And wanting all these thoughts  
to disappear so I could see, unhampered,  
the country as it was in the beginning.

If this is the poet's first step towards thinking (imagining) beyond the mainstream of interlinked agricultural and racial conquest, the second is to describe the imagining, not in escapist ignorance of the abusive present, but from within it as well as through it:

And that's  
what happened. The fence and road  
were still there, but the land  
revealed itself, warm under  
half a blanket of cloud, free  
as the insects knew it. All  
we truly owned then were ourselves,  
half awake, still yawning.

There is a suggestion here of the ancient mystic truth: to know oneself is in some sense to lose oneself, too, to realise that one finds belonging not by owning place, but by being owned by it. In his life-long pursuit of social betterment, Berold helped administer a number of co-operative efforts amongst local communities in Grahamstown, many of which were ironically conducted from the precincts of an abandoned power station, the subject of *Economies* (*Fires* 38-9). In this poem, Berold contrasts three systems: the defunct economies of the coal-fired power station; the new electrified machineries of the present carpentry business; and the natural economies of the forests which have fuelled the first two. The power station itself (like Pringle's mission station) is in danger (if that's the word) of being recolonised by the flowers at the railway siding and turtles among weeds in the old cooling ponds. Berold's discussion then unfolds into a stinging but ironic critique of the newer globalised plunder of original forests:

The screaming noise a thickener  
skinning mahogany, at 3000 rpm,  
felled in rain forests, Singapore or Java,  
brought here by multinational loggers

who own the ships, the merchant banks.  
Exchange rates swarm around the dollar,  
the frantic economies of produce! produce!  
To rescue falling profits.

The forests true economies,  
their cash flow: sunlight, water,  
reinvestment: detritus to the soil,  
dividends to birds, bacteria.

Falling to the chainsaws,  
these tall economies become commodities.

This is a fuller account than we've so far encountered of both global economics and natural ecosystems.<sup>11</sup> Berold moves closer than either Pringle or Mann to creating a new language for his place of dwelling by ironically trying to rehabilitate the rhetoric of global finance. This is a basis for a move back to the only real area over which one has final control: the self, sweating, limited, wounded, but also capable of imagining:

And I stray wearily to last night's sheets,  
awaken bolt upright, then dreaming again

at the speed of aeroplanes, traversing rivers,  
silver-blue runways, unable to land.  
I awake to coins in my arteries,  
sun beating on the ozone lid of the sky.

A sense of localised 'home' is riven by the poet's awakening to the global scale of ecological problems: those coins in the arteries could be the source of a new kind of wealth (a new consciousness), and (or) a sign that even the very blood has been colonised by financial marketeering; the sky is that under which he lives, but is also a crucible of industrial damage to the ozone layer, under which he is slowly being cooked.

Where to from there? Berold begins to chart, I think, an authentic language of in-dwelling in his later collection, *Rain across a paper field* (1999). That language leaves even the rhetoric of ecology behind, but not its awareness: it dissolves itself in all that can be felt in the present, as well as including its mysteriousness: Still not sure what happened,/ how the earth's internal organs moved ( the town's new houses , *Rain* 24). But in leaving behind the inherited tropes and attachments - the ink of the cathedral , the light of my parents' house - he looks forward both to renewing human love and to the fragrant immediacy of a nature that he knows will outlast him:

Boubou is hidden but his song is clean  
he'll be here when our violence is gone  
Boubou's song has turned to a call  
which enters my memory as I walk on

Is it a call or a calling, how would I know?  
Only time and attention will tell  
All I know as the world turns to iron  
is this birdsong and this particular smell ( Boubou , 25)

Ironically, that attention beggars the efficacy of language itself: where poetry is most efficacious is in questioning its own possibilities. What one hears in the world is a voice not quite recordable/ but speaking . It rises out of concealment, and flows back into silence:

where the oxalis hides  
under streaked clouds  
that's where to find your voice  
silent one

where the herb smell  
permeates your clothes  
when the earth is bare  
and nothing flows  
that's when your voice calls ( testimony , 31)

Yet this is not the whole story: a language of some sort is still intervening here, an artistry through the lens of which the ecosystem is being displayed. Grahamstown poet Don MacLennan takes the discussion this next, more philosophical step, and reminds us forcibly that history, too, is a matter of perception and of language,

and of perception forged *by* language.

### **I am listening**

Listen, listen amongst the particles, exhorted South Africa's finest poet, Sidney Clouts. Like Berold, he is attentive to the inexpressible, to (in William Blake's terms) the divine contained within and manifested by the Minute Particular. An underlying question throughout this paper has been: How does one move from Pringle's position of stiff, self-conscious alienation into this space, pledging to be receptive (Adorno 108), whilst remaining within the confines of language, which by its very nature distances, reduces, commodifies, alters? Language changes terrain into landscape into culturescape; no landscape can be perceived, let alone written about, without culture. Or as Bate frames it: To describe an ecosystem, you have to stand imaginatively outside it, you cannot be simply (naturally, unthinkingly) dwelling within it (Bate 268). Yet poetry, or some kinds of poetry, what Bate suggests we call *ecopoetics*, renounces the mastery of enframing knowledge and listens instead to the voice of art (269). This sounds, I know, profoundly ahistorical - and so it is, in the conventional sense, but I want to suggest, one last time, that history as an empirical method of enframing knowledge is deeply impoverished, if not utterly inadequate, if it does not include and account for the unpainted subjectivities (the aesthetics) of which *every* historical actor is constituted. My approach here takes the view that language, as a primary technology of revealing the world to ourselves, becomes - to draw on both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty - not a representation of things but thing-ness itself, dwelling within its interpenetrative context: dwelling occurs only when poetry comes to pass, claims Heidegger, and conversely Poetry first of all admits man's dwelling into its very nature, its presencing being (cited in Bate 261).<sup>12</sup>

The poetry of Don Maclennan offers the Eastern Cape's profoundest example of this attempt. Here I will focus on only one of his twelve published collections: *Rock Paintings at Salem* (2001). Salem is a tiny hamlet some twenty kilometres south of Grahamstown, an important settlement in the 1820s when Pringle's party and other hapless settlers were dumped in the Eastern Cape to fend for themselves as best they could. In a narrow rocky kloof very close to the village, imposing overhangs conceal some of the better examples of San (Bushman) rock art in the district. They are a melancholy, resonant, endlessly elusive reminder of the appalling history of slaughter and enslavement imposed on them, as Pringle outlined it. There's a sweet representation of the interconnections in another of Baines's paintings, *Baviaans River* (1849; *Fig.3*). Above a frieze of San rock-paintings is visible an egregious graffito, 'T.Pringle 1825'. Whatever one thinks of such an act (nowadays thoroughly deplorable), it is a common way of announcing a presence, of assimilating oneself to a place, and most importantly of associating oneself in some way with one's artistic predecessors. Pringle was, as far as he was able, sympathetic towards the Bushmen, deplored their being

hunted down as vermin, and doubtless expressed his own desire for a rapprochement with the Sons of the Desert in Arend Plessis' accommodation in Forester of the Neutral Ground .

The settler figure, sketching in the foreground of this painting, could as well be Don MacLennan at Salem. In his meditation on these paintings, which seem now so intricately a part of the natural surroundings, MacLennan attempts to transcend the limitations of both his time and his self, to find in shared artistries the transcendence which redeems one's boundedness in one's own language and historical contingency, while simultaneously finding a mode of true in-dwelling. In this, he joins a string of white poets who have attempted to root themselves, with varying degrees of success and portentousness, by identifying with San paintings or folktales.<sup>13</sup> What distinguishes MacLennan, however, is that he does not attempt to become Bushman or to impose a meaning on the paintings themselves, even to translate them: rather, his sequence of thirty-four fragments allow meaning to surface from more integrative vision of the place itself. Place, art, and living people interpenetrate. MacLennan recognises that the language of the embedding ecology *and* of the paintings is inexpressible, that nature's language is not propositional (Adorno 109) - and this endows his own propositions with a plangent wisdom.

The sequence begins with a simple description of the setting, its enclosure in the enfolding hills (1).<sup>14</sup> The site is accessed, interestingly, over obstacles both wild and man-made - thorns and scree/ and barbed wire fences - reminding us again of the imposition of boundaries which care nothing for natural features or inheritances, but have also failed entirely to eliminate them (4). There is no name to attach to this place: The clean stream chattering/ two hundred feet below/ makes no suggestion (2). In this cleansed space of wind and sun, one can begin a process of meditative transcendence, at least momentarily freed from egotism and ideology.

I feel empty,  
yet this place  
does not deny  
my being here.  
It's warm enough  
to remove my jacket  
and cuddle up to boulders  
that have absorbed the sun. (7)

This is the necessary prelude to absorbing the true meaning of the paintings and *their* ancient relationship to the ecology. (By true I guess one can only mean something like organically experienced , a

recognition of relationship in which occurs, in Merleau-Ponty's words, a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside [cited in Abram 1996:91].) MacLennan acknowledges the poverty of most attempts to appropriate San artistry. His companions take photographs, prints falsifying in their shininess. Others have reduced these marvellous works to the bonbons/ of nostalgic coffee table books,/ complexity reduced to child-like simplicity, and to harmless fictions behind which we hide our fear/ that life may have no meaning/ after all (17). The essential step to avoiding this imperialistic, acquisitive reductionism - no less reprehensible, in its way, than calling the people themselves vermin - is a thorough-going, honest humility. MacLennan acknowledges the limits on empathetic imagining: how can we enter/ this other world/ of blood-red figures freed/ by healing acts/ of which we're ignorant...? (6). Moreover, his own art is humbled, fragmentary, no longer a coherent narrative, a pile of broken pieces and worn-out substantives analogous to the charred shells of mussels he finds lying at his feet (13). His own physical cuddling up to boulders is prayerful and vulnerable.

Such self-deprecation, however, is also a sign of fallen woundedness, and thus is foundational to a countering nostalgia, which is really a looking-forward, a longing for the healing, the reverberation which these paintings come to represent for him. That healing lies (though MacLennan does not express it quite this way) in a sense of ecological wholeness which has been somehow lost: The radiance has ended:/ we are stranded/ on a foreign shore (27). (In the wake of Pringle's settlers, that's a telling image.) It is as much a sense of himself, of his own belonging, of in-dwelling, which has become ghostly, just as the paintings have been faded by the weather and besmirched by subsequent paltry graffiti, inducing an insistent sadness (3). He takes this longing to existential levels:

How do I know myself?  
The air is saturated  
with longing:  
that's how I know. (10)

In a sense, the creation of the poetry creates that longing. And again:

I grieve for my  
lost place on earth,  
for everything now  
walks away from me,  
mocking my inability to grasp

the endless multiplicity of things. (8)

This, surely, is the problem I outlined earlier, the problem of creating meaning without abstraction, without ideologising an imagined whole. (It is also of course the problem of historiography generally.) MacLennan implies that to long, to search, is also *how* we know, and that with appropriate receptiveness, a certain dislocation from attachment to this time and situation, one can begin paradoxically to identify unifying (ecological) essences within the place. The dislocation is neither abstracting nor permanent, but rather a process of perpetually losing self to rediscover self (16).

In one sense, this leads only to the inexpressible immediacy of the concrete: the texture, weight and warmth in the hand of stone tools otherwise silent (20). This is nevertheless a kind of transcendence, as Merleau-Ponty puts it:

What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each colour, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, becoming fundamentally homogeneous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself. (Cited in Abram 1996:90)

In reenacting the pragmatic activity of lighting a fire to heat water - which he must surely share with his ancient precursors - MacLennan imagines he can all but hear and smell the San dance around a similar fire (5). But - here is the fundamental paradox - such perceptions are evoked by imaginative art itself. Art speaks for the artist where he can only/ smell a metaphor (23). In appreciating the natural presences, one is also identifying with the common human energies expressed in the artwork. For MacLennan, that energy is boiling (6); the San figures dance in life-blood (a particularly fruitful image, evoking colour, the San artists' technique of using actual blood, and the holistic importance to them of these images) presents a whole critique of his own fragmentariness (15). He, the modern poet, longs to become as the ancient shaman, depicted on the cavern wall, who refashioned language/ secret as stones/ he lured out/ of his inner world, and so conjured images/ that spoke the essence/ of all things (14). In that evocation lies the power of poetry itself, which is also necessarily the inner, enfolding, as Blake again would have said, the infinite and divine.

What can that essence be? What can be meant by divine (29)? Though he uses that word, MacLennan recognises that these problematic abstractions need to be embodied, and can only be embodied in the local and the felt. Place is all: The rocks rise/ into the amber dusk, telling us that we/ have forgotten how to pray

(26). Yet it is not purely place: it takes art to show us what place *means*, and why it should mean: Like love it [art] yearns/ to be embodied;/ inchoate, it wants/ a place to be (18). If place needs art to mean, to be revealed in its miraculous being (Heidegger's *Dasein*), in a strange way it is art which becomes the place itself:

The artist  
is a medium  
through which creation  
shows its face,  
making art a place  
of strange and yet  
familiar exile. (19)

Here is the problem of ecological in-dwelling encapsulated. Since things, like the stone tools scattered here are locked inside/ a prison house of silence (21), Home is not earth/ but images (24). As Adorno, again, puts it, Natural beauty as an appearing quality is itself an image (Adorno 99). One cannot escape the precepts of one's own vision; an unmediated natural beauty is unattainable. This is my argument encapsulated: aesthetics is essential to history.

And yet, it is precisely the generation of such images, because they *are* images, which points at the inexpressible undertow of being-in-place, of in-dwelling amongst not-images. MacLennan puts it this way:

That which moves  
the human heart  
thrives on being alive  
amongst the deadly  
transience of things.

Then fire the imagination  
with dancing figures  
on the shelter wall,  
flickering outlines  
of a tale that none  
can prove or disprove  
but by living it. (32)

We have, indeed, little more to work with than flickering outlines - determinate undefineability, in Adorno's term (105) - but we can root ourselves through an art which lives us into being (30), which by feeling back along the ancient lines (30), can keep alive in memory/ our divine capacity/ for courage, trust,/ love, and beauty (29). The resolution for the antinomies between art and objects, self and not-self, past and present, global and local, language and silence, is for MacLennan relational - ecological, if you like. In-dwelling turns out to be that mindset, towards which art points, in which all things interpenetrate: the poet grows through the world until he realises it penetrate[s him]/ more deeply than [he] knew (20).

The paintings are silent,  
but other things speak:  
the frantic water  
bubbles in the billy;  
a robin whistles  
in the thorn tree  
that leans over the kranz. (33)

MacLennan ends his series with a renewed sense of simplicity and in-dwelling, but one arrived at, like Blake's *Organized Innocence*, after much struggle, a *delight/ in the radiant/ blue light* which does not pretend to be outside culture or history, but does transcend it.

MacLennan's final section (34) consists of a single line: *I am listening*.

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## Notes

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1. I will not conceal the fact that my motive for writing on such material in the first and last place is motivated by a consciousness of the global ecological climacteric, in which we are all inescapably involved, and a concern to find ways in which literary study (ecocriticism or ecopoetics) can engage with the great crisis of our times.
  2. *Loxia* is interesting: a species-specific name (cross-bill), but of an English, not an African bird; this seems to be the closest Pringle can get to describing what is presumably one of the weavers. The *OED* (IX, 73), ironically, cites Pringle as the sole example.
  3. Pringle's commitment to the well-being of the oppressed peoples is debated, but his critique of British rule was frequently staunch. The critical literature is now perhaps greater than the weight of the poetry can bear, but see especially Clouts 1971; Klopper 1990; Voss 1991; Shaw 1998.
  4. My use of the term 'eccentric' does have resonances, I think, with David Rothenburg's and Irene Klaver's conceptualisations of 'wild': Wildness is as vital for the self as for the other. It prevents any closure of communities with its imminent danger of stigmatizing the other into Jew, woman, wolf, or woods [and] implies a political and ethical commitment to resisting any encapsulation or segregation of otherness (Klaver 123). Pringle, through Arend Plessis, is at least reaching in this direction.
  5. The term 'forester' was managerial even in Shakespeare's time (see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.100); an 1821 usage also equates it with 'pioneer' (*OED* VI, 63). See also Schama on varieties of the English forester-figure.
  6. To be fair, there is a somewhat more closely-observed such ecological sense in Pringle's poem 'Evening Rambles', despite its strong Wordsworthian influence.
  7. Angus Sholto-Douglas of Kwandwe conservancy, a game ranching/hunting development within the old 'Neutral Ground', is Arend Plessis's successor as 'Forester'. A Xhosa woman I happen to know of can no longer visit her own parents' graves which have been fenced off in an area of Kwandwe now restocked with buffalo and lion.
  8. A contemporary case is a nearby coastal development at Coega, in which massive but labour-light industrial development, fuelled partly by government arms-deals, is wrecking a section of coastline, including endemic plant species and a crucial penguin colony, all in defiance of environmental impact assessments which opposed the enterprise on ecological grounds.
  9. Ironically, the paper, the beads and the tobacco are themselves all non-indigenous - but they have become indigenous: where does one draw such boundaries, then? As Mann puts it in the poem 'Rini Bougainvilleas' (*Heartlands* 37): 'What is indigenous endures,/ you think, but what endures/ becomes like bougainvillea/ indigenous within its niche'. Clearly this is also his hope for the white man.
  10. 'Unveiling a KwaNamatha Shade' (*Heartlands* 26).
  11. Chris Mann has explored it at considerable length in 'Money: a satire' (*Business Day*).
  12. David Abram discusses Merleau-Ponty's ecological ideas in Macaulay 82-101, and Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger together in Rothenburg 97-116.
  13. Based on transcripts made in the 1860s by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, for instance, Stephen Watson and Alan James have turned San material into contemporary verse. See Janette Deacon and Thomas A Dowson, *Voices from the Past: /Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection* (Wits UP, Johannesburg,

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1996); Stephen Watson, *The Return of the Moon* (Snailpress, Cape Town 1991); Alan James, *the First Bushman s path* (2001). For further discussion, see also Pippa Skotnes, ed. *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushman* (University of Cape Town Press, 1996).

14. I designate the sections of *Rock Paintings at Salem* by italicised numbers; the self-published text is not paginated.