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Ecopoetry and the Imaginative Impulse

A critical and creative thesis presented for paper 139.861 to fulfill the requirements of the Master of Creative Writing

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Abstract

This thesis uses two methods of investigation – a critical essay on the poetry of Dinah Hawken and a collection of poetry – to explore the relationship between contemporary poetry and the natural world.

The critical essay examines Hawken’s nature poetry published in eight collections in New Zealand between 1987 and 2015. In order to better understand her intentions and techniques, it explores her work alongside an investigation of ecopoetry, a genre that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. It begins with a brief summary of the rise and various definitions of ecopoetry, and explains how Hawken’s work aligns with the genre’s basic terms of reference. However, it sets Hawken apart from much ecopoetry, arguing that though at times her work explicitly references human environmental degradation, it more often portrays nature as resilient, not vulnerable as nature is typically depicted in ecopoetry.

Specifically, this thesis argues that Hawken’s nature frequently models ways for people to better cope in a technological age. Many of her poems draw a link between inner and outer worlds, that is, between nature and consciousness. In these ways, her work is distinct from much ecopoetry which is polemic. Polemic ecopoetry tends to rely on literal descriptions and rhetorical assertion because its primary aim is to raise awareness of environmental concerns. Instead, Hawken’s work often aligns with a critical school of thought that suggests there is a larger catchment of ecopoetry that includes those poems more akin to a Romantic engagement with nature, specifically the notion that nature has a positive effect on consciousness. Such poetry uses the language of figure and imagination. The essay explores the ways in which Hawken has negotiated the tension between the polemic most often associated with ecopoetry and a poetry of perception that is more Romantic in its aesthetics, during
the thirty-five years she has been writing about relationships between people and the
natural world.

The creative component of the thesis is a collection of my poetry that has been
shaped and informed by the investigation of the critical essay. My poetry, too,
struggles with the tension between poetry of polemic and of perception as it explores
relationships between people and nature with an awareness of environmental
concerns. In some cases, it adapts strategies and techniques observed in Hawkens
work. For example, some of the poems project nature as modeling composure and
resilience. By suggesting that nature is important to us, these poems are implicitly
ecopoetic. Other poems are more in line with mainstream ecopoetry. For example,
some draw explicit attention to environmental degradation, particularly settler
deforestation for farming in New Zealand resulting in the loss of indigenous trees and
birds and their replacement by destructive exotics. Other poems contemplate the
constructedness of landscapes so familiar they seem natural. Throughout the writing
of these poems, I have become aware of the need to temper polemic and to aim for
perception in order to gain the emotional resonance important in lyric poetry.
Acknowledgments

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I would like to acknowledge New Zealand Poetry Society for providing me with crucial encouragement over the past eight years and membership of a vibrant poetry community. My poem “Biking to the Manawatu River” – included in this thesis – is the winner of the society’s 2015 International Poetry Competition and will be published in the society’s anthology scattered feathers. A version of my poem “Bumblebees” from this thesis will also be published in the anthology.
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