Autoethnographic Poetry: Into the Dark, Inspired by Wendell Berry

Description

The AutoEthnographer

The Golden Shovel form, invented by Terrance Hayes to honour Gwendolyn Brooks, writes â??towardsâ?• the selected text. In this form, one word from the

guide text forms the last word of each line of the new poem. For this work, I posed myself a question â?? *what are the key things that preoccupy me, now, in relation to the climate crisis? â??* and then sought to construct a phase poem around part of a quotation from Wendell Berry (2002) that had been important to me when I was in the early phases of setting the direction of my doctoral studies.

AUTHORâ??S MEMO

My doctoral inquiry, which I completed nearly a year ago (Aamli, 2020), began with a dawning sense of horror at the seriousness of emerging data warning about impeding global climate breakdown. From this starting point, I was drawn to explore individual and institutional responses to climate crisis. Initially I examined my own responses, before broadening gradually, first to small group inquiry, and eventually, to trying to place these local stories within a wider cultural context, present and historic.

My framing was broadly autoethnographic (Adams, et al, 2013), although I stopped short of formally identifying my thesis as Autoethnography, as I felt that the to-and-fro between personal and societal dynamics were insufficiently developed at that time.

Poetic and arts-based research methods were my primary modes of inquiry (a key text was **Faulkner**, 2019). I came to understand poetry as an effective mode for communicating with the individual â?? and collective? â?? sub-conscious and following completion of the doctorate, I have continued to explore the usefulness of various poetic forms as a mechanism for providing access to suppressed internal voices.

I am particularly interested in the role that constraint can play, in helping to push us towards a dialogue with those typically ignored, suppressed perspectives. A structure acts as a psychic â??netâ?•, that catches and contains our conscious controlling narrative.

I suspect that our subconscious preoccupations bubble into expression, influencing the flow of the poetry, while the consciousness that usually controls the messages is distracted by whatever â??ruleâ?• has been introduced â?? rhyme or meter, or a set pattern of words to follow, per the *sestina* or Golden Shovel (Hayes, 2010; Kahn, et al, 2019).

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For this work, I posed myself a question â?? *what are the key things that preoccupy me, now, in relation to the climate crisis? â??* and then sought to construct a phase poem around part of a quotation from Wendell Berry (2002) that had been important to me when I was in the early phases of setting the direction of my doctoral studies.

I inverted the Golden Shovel structure, using Berryâ??s text as the first word in each line and writing â??awayâ?• from Berryâ??s source material to create something new. There is no intention to suggest that the resulting poem is Berryâ??s point of view; the voice, the questions, the pre-occupations, are my own. However, I do take seriously the idea that my poetic material is, at some level, in dialogue with

Berry, as well as using Berryâ??s text as a synecdochal representation of my wider doctoral readings and research.

by Paula Aamli

> *â??We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard of our behaviour toward the world â?? to the incalculable disadvantage of the world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not only our own creativity â?? our own capacity for life â?? that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled.â?• (Berry, 2002, p. 20)*

The Autoethnographer

Dark Side of Progress

After Wendell Berry â?? I

We drift through time in vessels of enmeshed flesh, dreaming of the infinite,

have stashed caches of toxic secrets in caverns weâ??re hiding from the future,

lived lavishly, heedlessly beyond our means, hoping the costs will be settled

by generations not yet thought of. *Give me more, a little more, more please!*

The chorus of our lust, unsated, unquenchable, damns us. Yet I question the

assumption that what drives us to excess can be removed from our psyche,

that human cultures would still function if stripped of all wanting, all trying.

What I think we learn from evolution is *life ardently insists on coming to be.*

Was the first single-cell life content simply to float in a billion-years-ago sea?

Good chance that the mere act of flickering into being was miracle enough,

for the next few millennia, anyway. But eventually the energy rises, pushes

us forward and, given time, aeons of it, we can become an entire rain-forest.

Would be a happy ending â?? a happy continuation â?? if we only respected it,

being one part of a vastly larger community. But we demand exceptionalism.

Good and bad is measured according to usefulness, ease of consumption,

for whichever human clique is holding power at the moment of measuring.

The winners shift around a bit, according to culture, by generation, but the

world, and its wide diversity of life, loses each time we carve another slice.

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Shaky Foundations

After Wendell Berry â?? II

And â?? just like that

this seeming refuge

has been conceded,

been shaken. Faith

based on security,

on our safety here,

the separation from,

even untouchability,

flimsier than tissue,

assumption failed,

that somehow, alone,

we would escape it,

could evade, avoid,

know the secrets,

with the resources,

any consequences.

Certainty failsâ?¦

What previously

was considered a

good way to live,

even aspirational,

for us condemns

us to peril instead.

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Questions for the Looking-Glass Moon

After Wendell Berry â?? III

We howl at the moon â?? *have you seen how beautiful we are?*

have *you seen that humans have learnt to number galaxies?*

fulfilled *our colonial fantasies on every island encountered?*

the *ambition that will not be quenched while we can conquer?*

danger *that we set the atmosphere on fire hunting the stars?*

of *languages that fell silent because we stole the children away?*

this *disease tearing through like wildfire â?? when will it end?*

by *hurling abuse, how we hope to make life fairer, kinder?*

making *dissent by the campfire, who sees mother bleed?*

our *children may judge, but can they live without the fire?*

personal *freedoms, at what point cease to be sacrosanct?*

pride *holds the lions together, so why does pride divide us?*

and *will the sun continue to rise, once the lands are silent?*

greed *that gobbles all of autumnâ??s berries, an evil instinct?*

the *patient eat last, so does that make them more foolish?*

standard *accounting tells us, live for now, and should we?*

of *course, achievements break norms for progress, why not?*

our *enemies are doing wrong, and so, should we be good?*

behaviour *(un)controlled/contained, nature or nurture?*

toward *a brighter future for all or toward catastrophe?*

the *world is not enough, and so, where to go from here?*

world *being insufficient for us?* The moon has not replied.

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The Masterâ??s House

After Wendell Berry â?? IV

To wrens, finches, pigeons, magpies,

the occasional garden visitors, also

incalculable multitudes of microbes

disadvantage to be too large, bright,

of interest to garden conquistadores

the slugs seem worth fighting with

world not large enough for sharing

and everything must be made tidy

every wayward weed, enemy agent

living unauthorised in the cracks

thing that challenges my mastery

in this tiny urban patch I rule over

it shall not be tolerated. I attack.

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The Way Ahead

After Wendell Berry â?? V

And is there another way?

now we know the danger

perhaps time to decentre

very dangerous, our game

close to the limits of life

to what can be tolerated

too quickly this unravels

late last minute efforts

our only way forward

great perils approach

error evaded, resisted

has slowly undone us

become peril-familiar

clear this wonâ??t be easy.

Take This Cup (Away)

After Wendell Berry â?? VI

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It may be that in this last moment, we swerve. This

is the Hero fantasy the West is so fond of, but will

not be a world worth saving, if we save the rich

only, leaving the needy to burn, starve, drown,

our consciences seared by too much suffering,

own children choking on poison-altered air.

Creativity co-opted, to peddle distractions

our planet and pockets are better without.

Own your way to happiness! Reduced

capacity to question, alter course

for a simpler and lighter-touch

life shaped by the awareness

that we are part of all that

is and no longer being

stifled, intoxicated

by consuming.

Our best hope,

arrogant or otherwise â?? the

assumption that change is possible.

Another Dawn

After Wendell Berry â?? VII

The AutoEthnographer

The best I can say, in closing, is â??

Creation continues (to astonish)

itself, the chill of a cold morning

is exquisite, vanishingly delicate

stifled so quickly, yet returning.

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Appendix â?? Wendell Berry, Extended Quotation

We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard of our behaviour toward the world â?? to the incalculable disadvantage of the world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not only our own creativity â?? our own capacity for life â?? that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled.

We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it. (Berry, 2002, p. 20).

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