

Literary Studies Convention @ Wollongong 2015

12B: Building 20 Theatre 3: The Sacred

Lyn McCredden, 'Literary Studies and the Sacred'

Natalie Seger, 'Michael Heald, Judith Beveridge, and the Poetics of Sacred Space across Australia and India'

[Draft]

'Natives of Transience': Michael Heald, Judith Beveridge, and the Poetics of Sacred Space across Australia and India.

'There is a way of seeing that sees through your love of this place'...words of Jelaladi'n Rumi that form the epigraph to Michael Heald's second volume of poetry, *Focusing Saturn*, have a relevance to his work that seems to deepen as time progresses. The lines bears looking at from many angles: the way of seeing that 'sees through', as if seeing through a veil – or witnesses the moment of its lifting; or 'sees through' as if seeing through a lens – particularly apt to this volume and its many acts of 'focusing'. 'A way of seeing' may allude to the 'way of seeing' of Vipassana (the technique of meditation that Heald practices and which has an increasing claim on his poetry. 'Vipassana' is a Pali word that means to see things as they are, to see into them, to see deeply. 'Love of this place' I read, as I think anyone familiar with Heald's poetry and its relationship to this continent would, as a problematic love of *this* place, Australia, seen *through*, expressed, in imagery abundant with the specificity of its natural environments, seen through a lens ground by the discipline of meditative concentration, or perhaps even mythologies of landscape and place 'seen though' altogether.

To start looking at some of these in more detail, I'll refer to a work that reopens the conversation about the relationship between spirituality and place in Australia, Lyn McCredden, Frances Devlin-Glass and Bill Ashcroft's *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature*. From its introduction: 'this is the sacred imagined as earthed, embodied, humbled, local, demotic, ordinary and proximate. It is also the sacred of interrelationship – an ethics which is open not just to the agency of human ego but also to the other, to the land, and to that which is not human...(3). Judith Beveridge is another poet attuned to such definitions of the sacred, and the poems of both Heald and Beveridge at times employ these markers of the sacred to connect *knowledge* of spirituality to an *experience* of it, to a person's lived reality. One way in which this relationship, or connection, is expressed in their work, and one which speaks to these intersections between the local, the proximate and the body, are two different approaches to the idea of sacred space. And I speak about them today as part of a broader concern with the importance of experience within spiritual traditions, and the aptitude of literature, specifically poetry, to making this importance known.

Throughout this paper I will test a few ways in which we might understand how this works: in understanding the sacred as active and meaningful through internal experience, how then to talk about its relationship to place and space? The contrasting poetics of Beveridge and Heald allow us to look at this from different angles. Beveridge gives her reader richly imagined depictions of historical people and events – this is seen in her earliest poems about the Buddha and his times, 'The Buddha Cycle' in her volume *Accidental Grace*, through the long sequence about Siddhatta Gotama's journey from prince to Buddha in 'From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree' in the collection *Wolf Notes*, and in the recent *Devadatta's Poems* – a volume written from the viewpoint of Siddhatta's jealous cousin. Michael Heald does something quite different: most of the poems in his third volume, *The Moving World*, risk an intense singleness of focus on the technique of Vipassana meditation, a technique that the Buddha taught; it is a personal account, as Heald says in his own essay about the volume, 'of an experience which struck me with extraordinary force'. Experience – Heald,

and the Vipassana technique insist – is always located within the body – or the ‘mindbody’ to use a word Heald has coined.

Unlike Heald’s speaker and his volume of experience gleaned from sitting on a meditation cushion, Beveridge’s characters are never still, their bodies move – with great trials – throughout the hugely varied landscapes, cities, climates and place names of Northern India, making the journeys – physical and spiritual – that others in reality and over centuries would later trace. A tenuous common ground between Beveridge and Heald is the notion of (what we could later term) pilgrimage, of moving through sacred (or what would *become*) sacred spaces; in Beveridge, we can begin to understand the idea of pilgrimage as meaningful *because* of the internal transformations it provokes – its effects on the mindbody. This is a notion that lays the ground for approaching Heald’s more experimental depiction of spiritual progression as earthed, proximate and located in *this* country. I hope to show that Heald’s poems often refer to the specifics of a place to, quite paradoxically, reveal that the experience of meditation is ultimately independent of any place. And, further, this locating of the practice in the particulars of natural environments, in immediacy and proximity, is a way of unsteading the category of ‘Buddhist’ that Heald’s work so skilfully avoids, and extending its relevance to, as he puts it our own ‘present cultural moment’.

Roughly a third of Beveridge’s *Devadatta’s Poems* carry an Indian place-name in their title, and almost all engage with the reluctant monk’s comings and goings upon the varied landscapes and communities of the Gangetic plain. Even more than the ‘Bodhi Tree’ sequence, *Devadatta’s Poems* is a volume that makes you want to draw a map. Consider the start of its opening poem ‘Getting to Sarnath’:

To get to the monastery outside Sarnath

I had to cross the Ghagara and Gomati rivers.

I had to take a mule

Over the Churian foothills where there were bands

Of marauding, blue-skinned hunters.

I had to pass into the jungles

full of tigers, rhinoceros, wild dogs. I had to cross
the fields and the towns owned by the Koliya
and Moriya clans... (5)

If we look at Beveridge's three sequences about the Buddha's times as a whole, as well as presenting a drama of Siddhatta and the characters of the Pali Canon who surround him, they constitute a dramatisation of space, an animation of the ground travelled, paths made. They invoke the power of naming and the repetition and cataloguing seen in the Pali Canon (on which it often draws). Across her career Beveridge herself moves away from the Buddha's story and keeps returning: tracing steps forwards and back to many of the same images (the moon, rain, Yasodhara's long hair), and the same names (of places and people). Historical figures from the Pali Canon who appear in Beveridge's early 'The Buddha Cycle', appear again in *Devadatta* in the poem 'The Buddha at Uruvela', bridging nearly 20 years of writing.

Another persistent theme (which increases through the three sequences) is a fixation on the earthy particulars of an ascetic life: the bitter Devadatta regretting 'I should gather stones off a turning and make / a memorial to all the years / I took my measure among bullock droppings, / the white bones in the fields'. Devadatta almost relishes extreme discomforts in 'At Rajkote, after the rains retreat':

I had just walked out of the reeds at the confluence
of two rivers. Brown frogs stuck in my hair like gouts
of flung mud, my skin was whip-stitched, lacerated
with leeches. I was walking a path hazardous
with snakes, meridians breaching my footsteps

while I mush-stepped in the high grass. (16)

These bodily sensations, coupled with the sound and sensation of the words themselves, in the reader's mouth, brings the experience of the often harsh life of a wandering monk close, brings it towards us through categories of experience itself.

[In a similar way, yet entirely different context, Michele Grossman speaks of Mark Minchinton's *Kellerberrin Walking*: 'At one point Minchinton says 'I want the land to be written on my body, even if it's just pain in my knees': he gets a whole dictionary of rashes, bites and cramps in return...[his] body itself becom[ing] the limping, groaning burden of the text' (*Journeying* 85)]. Yet Devadatta's perception of the sacredness in landscape within the body is a relatively superficial, externally-oriented one. We could argue that Devadatta remains too concerned with things external to him, different to Siddhatta in the 'Bodhi Tree' sequence, and very different again to Heald in *The Moving World*, in which the opening poem 'Setting Out' records the beginning of a journey 'to that fabled direction / inward'.

To pause here and offer some background: Robert Gray has called *The Moving World* 'A daring and triumphant project'. I venture that the primary way *The Moving World* is 'daring' is in its focus on the *practice* of Vipassana meditation with slight reference to the theory which supports it. And, importantly, unlike Beveridge's work, Heald's does not make the person of the Buddha a focal point. The word 'Buddha' is not mentioned in at all in *The Moving World*. This is quite a remarkable omission, given that the entire volume is openly based on a technique of meditation he taught. The omission points towards the differences between Heald's and Beveridge's approaches: Beveridge explores this territory in a mode that is much more familiar to the general reader – drawing on words and imagery gleaned from suttas and weaving them into poems through recognisable, though sophisticated, devices. The poems of *The Moving World*, on the other hand, attempt something quite different in their response to a personal experience of a meditative technique. Though they frequently encounter the same theoretical ground as Beveridge's poems, Heald's seem to require knowledge of it. Their mysteriousness, I am suggesting, and Tim Parks has also

said this, is a part of an invitation to their readers to experience the technique for themselves.

The difficulty of approaching these poems without a theoretical context has prompted Heald to offer one himself – it's the only sustained critical response to the volume to date. His essay, which I referred to earlier, 'Reinhabiting the Body, Decolonising Australia: Poetry, Meditation and Place in *The Moving World*' reveals his encounter of Vipassana, and positions *The Moving World* as a response to this experience (165). In short, his response to the meditation focuses on two revelations: One is the opening of a world of physical sensation, the fact the body can be felt without any external touch in a way that lies beneath our ordinary everyday awareness; in the poem 'Presence' it is: 'The way you can feel your body / though it is not being touched: like the hand / of existence resting on you'. The other is the persistence of change and motion in the world and the self. Focusing on this constant change with the aim of developing equanimity towards the sensations that arise is a meditator's path to the eventual release from suffering.

The close of the poem 'Vedana' (Vedana is Pali for bodily sensation) places these concepts both within the earth and beyond it. Sensations are, the speaker says:

The very roots
of suffering, their hold
reaction:

without which

they draw free,
wither away
like tendrils of mist.

Heald's essay goes on to refer to the power of meditative concentration to shift perceptions of the self's stability and boundaries. He relates these shifts others inspired and necessitated by inhabiting this continent, encountering Indigenous

cultures, and in response to our colonial and post-colonial histories. But while Heald, in his essay, can approach with hindsight some of the ways these poems of meditative concentration can be incisive comments on his ecological and political concerns, it is *The Moving World* itself that animates poetry's ability to bring into the experience of reading aspects of lived reality that cannot be said or recognised, but for the poem. The poem is where and how what is unsayable about the experience emerges.

There are poems in his previous volumes which connect meditative experience to his ecological and cultural concerns. 'Catchment', from *Focusing Saturn*, is a series of poems about deforestation in Tasmania. And among its wry characterisations of politicians are a hint of what is to come in *The Moving World*, lines that respond to tension and loss by attending to sensations with equanimity as opposed to reactivity. This is 'Watching', from that sequence:

As I sat in meditation
a cool wind arose and pushed:
the hatred of cold began,
but as I watched,
feeling my skin bristle,
entering the spaciousness
in the absence of warmth, I saw
these hills, clothed now
in a sighing plenitude,
stripped bare by an impetus
I could no longer hate
and only name with the call
of one creature approached by another
threatening to tear its flesh. (69–70)

The speaker's awareness is focused on what can be felt on and in the body – on a 'cool wind', the cold and the 'skin bristl[ing]' – and on the mind's tendency to react to it. The 'hatred of cold', however, is replaced with a growing equanimity

where it becomes instead a mere 'absence of warmth' with its own 'spacious' quality. The body and environment both participate in an experience as the effects of clearing the once forested, 'clothed' hills are expressed in human terms of suffering.

The networks of empathy seeded here are developed in 'Time's Arrow', in which the particulars of a very different landscape are again an evocative presence. 'Time's Arrow' is a new, currently unpublished poem that speaks of time and suffering, and a deeply focused, skilful approach to healing:

The earth's hardness presses
ache through my body as I sit

striving to demur from the bodymind's
objection to discomfort, to stay

its reflex hatred of pain, craving
of pleasure: to know sensation

in its pristine flow
before judgment, when suddenly

the tumultuous heat of aching
and the earth's unyieldingness

disengage - are simultaneous, merely -
two phenomena side by side:

as if my knowing of time had only just
come into focus, and causation had been

nothing but a blurring of events one
into another, resolved by a steadied watching.

Like a heat haze over the stony land,
the effervescence of my aching

plays out free, now,
of the ground's solidity,

and this easing apart of cause
and effect feels like a great wound

closing, as if time's arrow had been
drawn from my heart; as if

now it is self-evident
there is nothing to blame.

There is a fluency of language about meditation here, remembering that this is after *The Moving World* and its sustained descriptions of sensation, transience and meditative concentration. The speaker's possession of agency within objectivity is the great power of this poem; the speaker is the observer on the cusp of previously misunderstood 'blurred events', and a clear perception of the workings of causation. Yet, in a gesture of humility and attentiveness, the speaker is a part of all he sees: he is not separate from the earth's hardness (as it 'presses ache' into his body) but becomes separate, instead, from the illusions that say 'I am' – I am distinct from, and above and therefore reacting to that hardness, that heat. The poem positions the speaker within the specifics of a natural environment in which his sensations participate – the hardness of the stony land, the heat haze – in order to speak directly of the processes of causality always already at work within it.

There is a hinge in the poem – as in many other Heald poems: a clicking of focus, where 'the heat of aching' and 'the earth's unyieldingness' 'disengage'. The sense of focus – the meditative concentration – cultivates a response *other* than the

‘reflex hatred of pain’ – and when the object of that search crystalizes in the speaker’s mind, he can see, with the clarity of equanimity, that in this moment the earth is not to blame, it is not ‘causing’ pain in any ultimate sense, just apparently – and what such close attention to these changing, impersonal particulars leads to stretch far beyond them: when the sensation and reaction – ‘disengage’ – it engenders ‘the great wound closing’: habitual reaction is eclipsed by an attentive acceptance.

The moment that the two ‘disengage’ is transformative, and perhaps far-reaching. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is the way Heald reveals Vipassana’s profound *independence* of place – (another disengaging) - that enables the poetry arising from it to comment on *this* specific place, with its own particular histories. Through a careful and skilled use of imagery, Heald presents the Vipassana technique as quite apart from Burmese Buddhism, though the technique was preserved there, or Indian Buddhism, because it originated there, but as existing – actually powerfully inhabiting – wherever the practicing self is. Heald has said that the ‘exclamations of *The Moving World*...resonate with and have arisen out of some of the fundamental tones of response to the Australian situation. They can be heard, for example, as one modulation of the sense of shame and spiritual smallness, and yet also the concurrent sense of possibility, that inhabiting this continent has evoked’.

In emphasising the centrality of experiential knowledge to the success of Heald’s poems this I’ve attempted to speak against the idea of the sacred as necessarily defining something static – a sacred object, thing, artwork, a place – urban or natural space, but instead something dynamic, something that can enliven this ‘concurrent sense of possibility’. I’ll finish with the closing poem from *The Moving World* ‘In this Garden’, a short lyric attending to moments from the particularity of Heald’s own garden:

In this garden, parrots come
and strut around the grass
as if they own the place,

but when you look again
are gone.

The slick red at their breast catches up
A moist burning of my own there:
anxieties that, likewise,
come and go,

natives of transience. (*Moving* 82)

The poem's attitude of meditative concentration attends to the specific within the network, applying a detached and compassionate awareness equally to the parrots and his own inner life, positioning his own anxieties as aspects of existence that have as much to do with himself as the parrots that arrive at and depart from the garden – interdependent phenomena that are always at work and always awaiting the right kind of awareness to bring them into dynamic interrelationship. This attentive equanimity is a spiritual activity that here *makes* sacred space, it activates and enlivens a place; a place for reaching a depth of understanding of the self and community, in its past and present inflections, space that is always in a process of creation.