

Motion and Emotion: Urban Affect in John Burnside's 'Gift Songs'

By Tom Bristow

Urban History

The first of the four quartets in *Gift Songs* opens with a walking figure that is considering concerns and coordinates for the site of lyric:

I'm walking through the windless innertown,
—breeze-blocks, mongrels, smashed glass,
chantiers—
walking towards the sky, and the smell of the tide
and reading the names from a map, *rue Lumiere*,
impasse de Toutes Aides,
impasse de l'Ocean.
Somewhere a bell is ringing,
though whether it comes from the church
or out to sea
I cannot tell;
when evening falls, the water bleeds away
towards a rose horizon where the boats
go out to fishing grounds and other
port-towns much like this ('St Nazaire' 1: 13-26)

Walking is a free expression of autonomy. It offers the poet a means to give expression to subjectivity that appears limited and yet is imaginatively open to tracing itself anew within the matrix of the spatial dynamics of the locale.

Here, it is clear that the poem is foregrounding uncertainty ('Somewhere'; 'I cannot tell') while suggesting relations between objects in place. These triplets are amalgams of the walker in the space of breakdown: 'smashed glass' 'mongrels' and '*chantier*' (shipyard and building site). While the site is alive to the footsteps of the poem's voice, the movement through the scene is ultimately conditioned by the environmental conditions (the oncoming dusk and urban

decay). The final move is democratic; there are other spaces ‘much like this’. Such an appeal to spatial commonality might seem ignorant of local flavours and yet it lends itself to abstractions wherein the experience is not for an elect few. Burnside is leading us towards his version of negative capability. Moreover, the abstract watermark, supported by uncertainty, tricks the mind to shift focus from the appearance of things to their positioning in time. As a product of the poem’s animation of space, time becomes the ground from which we begin to map the commonplace: the holy turned unholy; the transcendent turned immanent. Paradoxically, the abstraction leads to material focus in the quartet, ‘Saint-Nazaire.’

The Itinerant ‘I’

On the bridge to the small Moroccan quarter of the commune Saint-Nazaire, Burnside finds a sign of approximately two and half meters square, which reads: ‘wandering at night amongst lights that are dispersing a narrative’; it is a significant architectural moment for any *flâneur*, and something that the line could dwell on. However, the site-specific work of art is moved through at speed to keep the subject position in motion in the quartet that takes its name from the place—the line is perhaps already over-determined by the urban environment. Motion, however, is not to be equated with complete freedom as it is coloured by the installation; pedestrians are written into a narrative that always already precedes its readers. This issue is amplified at night, for the lights condition where the walker can go.

There is a strange illustration of the human figure within a light-defining space that clearly marks out a world appearing to mind, the ordinary freighted with metaphysical significance:

On the bridge to Petit Maroc,
a legend: VAGUER LA NUIT
DANS DES LUMIERES NARRATIVES,
an invocation, maybe, or a prayer,
but, really, all there is is what it says:
the wind in my eyes
and the cold making light of the air,
as I wander from lamp to lamp, to the edge of the night,
and stand out on the quai des Marées
looking out
to the ocean. (38-46)¹

The following is at stake: the extent to which humans generate space, and how our spaces configure us. The poem instances the capacity of urban lighting to illuminate but nonetheless to shroud the space; it points forwards to the closing line of 'An Essay Concerning Light': 'hiding the source itself, in its drowned familiar.' There is something more to 'all there is' in this poem; there is the question of how to conceive of and then make our entrance into what 'is', whether these two acts are separate at all is another question.

The legend refers to a bright blue public art installation alive at night, partly secured to generate tourist interest in an urban estuary area with its docklands and former submarine base. While natural light ordinarily transforms earth and sea to provide a source of narrative material for any visitor, the poem speaks of the place as redefined by the body and the binding force of scripture as instanced by the signage — literally lyricism inscribed in the material read as one passes through the space. The poem has become entangled in a literary space where the imagination is engaged in the course of traverse.

The generative sense of world-making exemplified by the sign's relation to the pedestrian is interwoven with the need to register the body and the felt world of the walker in the poem. We are given a sense of the wind, and the cold, indicating temporal, climatic conditions that are conditioned by factors far beyond this scene; they have potential to trigger the emotions. Earlier in the collection this tactile texture to the poem came from the haptic world: 'that cold and salty pact / the body makes with things unlike itself' ('Ama et fac quod vis'). In these moments, Burnside's lyricism of the corporeal 'I' locates an interactive space albeit framed by an imaginative condition which gestures towards the commonplace of this experience; its unholiness.² However, there is something metaphysical in the way that the poem outlines how place and self are constructed through exchanges across such impersonal public monuments that have meaning to us individually and to systems of language that gesture towards something other than themselves.

'Making light of the air' is a pun on thinking of space (and our oxygen) as insignificant, while also remarking on the act of making; of thinking on poetry and of urban planning reclaiming space. Furthermore, it reminds us of the birds of 'Ny-Hellesund' who are 'becoming the air' and exist 'for nothing' (above)—that is to say, to exist for nothing, the value of the birds is not immediately, or even at

length, evident (which is not to say that they are without value). While he is working out a sense of freedom within the spaces of partly coerced comprehension and the spaces that invite contemplation of the world yet to be, Burnside appropriates text from the art installation. Already examples of narrative reification, these lines ironize a collective narrative promoting the experiential modes of connection once placed in the poem. This sense of connection as literary and real is established through the emphasis on walking and how walking generates a recomposed scene to all residents and all tourists; this has curious effects. To keep with the signage is to stay within the constructed world; to keep with the elements is to remain within the unfolding world, which in Burnside's four quartets is linked to eternity. Both worlds operate within a single accumulation of sense impressions and bodily knowledge wherein it seems that a successful response to one code will result in a failed response to the other. Neither epistemological reflection is exploited nor mobilised for lyricism. Thus, this moment qualifies what I have alluded to as indifference to what is presented before the self. How might ethics arise out of this scene?

The poem and the figure move on (unmoved), neutrally, standing out in the affective field of the landscape composition; yet not unlike an Edward Hopper figure, vacant and fixed in place like the quay 'looking out / to the ocean.' This is 'going in' to place with the slightest or most transparent footprints as a means to register the human within an array of various forms of life, and the conditions for life. Here, personhood is indebted to witness; unrealised potential for emotion and empathy are accented as grounds of being over individuation. I read this quietness as a mode of being within place, of simply being there as one part of the scene—neither constructing nor receiving the attributes of the scene, merely acting or positing oneself within the space that is held in stillness with an implicit intuitive feeling of a larger plane of immanence and dynamism haunting the moment. There is earnestness about this disposition to be within the array of such complex presencing; and yet there is something non-egotistical, too: a wandering figure, understated as a part of the geography; merely being. This is a place involving the human but not reduced to human understanding or concerns. Like Wallace Stevens's world, it is one of composure: of scene, of self.

With this sense of composure in mind, the lyric that replays the energy fields evident in the world keeps the verb and present participle alive. It offers up the communion of poetry as a form of dissidence. In *Gift Songs* poiesis (making) maps

'the gradual dead / drifting between the trees like gusts of wind' ('De corporis ressurectione' 8-9); a moment from the collection's first page signifies broad timescapes deconstructing finitude and animating a sense of place as if these were one thing in conversation with (and thus enworlded by) the invisible and defining properties of our world. Gift Songs speaks to the variety of ways of finding ourselves as part of the more-than-human world; locating the ways that we bring ourselves to the world and to others. We can find ourselves in emotional spaces conducive to embracing the world in its openness; we can be alienated by both the heterogeneity and multivalency of our spaces and experiences. Our intellectual and spiritual openness is framed only by a new poetics of an expansive self-actualisation where the world is not reduced to a product of the human imagination; it merely *is*.³

References & Further Information

This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming [*The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*](#) by Tom Bristow, Palgrave Macmillan (2015).

¹ Burnside deletes the quotation marks that are present on 'Nuit De Docks' conceptualized by the urban renewal artist, Yann Kersalé. The work significantly transformed the space at night.

² For Henri Lefebvre, cities are situations: 'a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact' to be made distinct from 'the urban, a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought'. Henri Lefebvre, in E. Kofman & E. Lebas eds, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996).

³ See Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991); Freya Mathews, 'Introduction: Invitation to Ontopoetics' in *Philosophy Activism Nature* 6 (2009) pp.1-7.; Gregory Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* (Ayelsbury: Intertext, 1972); Paul Shepard, *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Consciousness* (Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1978).

(c) The Bottle Imp