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Harriet Tarlo, ed., *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011), 180pp.

Terry Gifford and Christopher North, *Al Otro Lado del Aguilar* (Kingsbridge, Devon: Oversteps Books, 2011), 86pp.

... language can only take you so far/sometimes you have to step out
Ian Davidson

Perhaps more than any other form of creative writing, experimental poetry takes the gap between language and the real as its point of departure. Though many ecocritics have therefore left it aside as an art primarily enamoured with formal language play, Yorkshire poet Harriet Tarlo argues that experimental landscape poetry should be embraced for its unusually sophisticated insights in the multifarious relations between language and the environment. After years of preparatory work, her anthology *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* has now been published, and it more than proves her point.

The work of the sixteen British poets in the anthology is incredibly rich both in form and content. It is never satisfied with merely evoking an environment, but it will always add a layer of painfully self-reflexive, philosophical questioning. Often this questioning engages with the inadequacy of language, when faced with the real: “the real issues so sudden and direct / it takes the breathaway” (Colin Simms). As expected, these poems engage in an inspiringly varied range of language experiments, from open form poetry that uses the whole space of the blank page, to dense ungrammatical writing, to the ruthless cutting up of words and sounds. Helpfully, in an earlier essay Harriet Tarlo explains the difference between the non-realist, non-prescriptive poetry in *The Ground Aslant* and ecopoetry (that, according to Buell and his followers, would consist of exemplary, “environmentally-sound’ writing,” Tarlo, “A Preview” 195). In addition, the anthologized radical landscape poetry would also be more innovative, than the much more extensively discussed poetry written within the (post-)pastoral tradition (as studied, e.g., by Terry Gifford). Here, Tarlo opens a tantalizing new field for research. As ecocriticism has shown, in spite of all the theoretical talk of the need for another environmental imagination, it is extremely difficult to create literary texts that really break with romanticism, or, say, anthropomorphism. Experimental poetry is one of the very few genres where the radicality of such experiments is not sacrificed to the wish to be readable. Unconcerned with the issue of readability, Tarlo emphasizes the productive force of the experiment with form that is the key element in the anthology: “it is *in* the

form that the radical ideas, philosophical and ideological exist and are made manifest” (“A Preview” 198). A deeper exploration of the tensions between cultural critique, language experiment, and the constraints posed by the need to be readable would nevertheless have been welcome.

In her introduction to *The Ground Aslant*, Tarlo offers an extensive description of the different aspects of the radical landscape poetry in the anthology, such as language experiment. The specific forms of this experimenting may happily surprise the ecocritical reader, for these poets offer many unexpected and humorous ways to deal with the problem of the inadequacy of language. Some poets approach the problem of language by granting the landscape itself the capacity to communicate. A moraine is then seen as “tectonic laughter,” and the land animated by “the joy of finding form / stuttering out / different birds” (Carol Watts). Several poets evoke the landscape’s spatiality by adopting a geometrical discourse of sorts, one that measures and identifies lines, curves, angles and relations, often in a playful way (Ian Davidson, Mark Dickinson, Peter Larkin, Peter Riley, Carol Watts). There is no hope, though, to grasp the land’s totality. Poets rather focus on “the hint / of a touch (...) / the suggestion / of a breath” (Thomas A. Clark), or they acknowledge the untraceable multiplicity of the environment, “a nerve chart / of disconnectedness” (Tony Baker 92). I especially liked Peter Larkin’s *Lean Earth Off Trees Unaslant*, 3. In sentences that defy grammar, the landscape is here described as the dizzying urge to lean upward; it is an entanglement of trees “leaning skyward,” “counter-lurch” and “Falling upward,” or “Trees surmounted their own lying against the grain of world.” This poem, enriched by Heideggerian references (earth, world, gift), testifies to the precariousness of existence between the Heideggerian revealing / concealing that is also the subject matter of other poems. It is striking how many poems are concerned with vertigo and disorientation (e.g. Peter Riley’s strong poem “Vertigo,” or Ian Davidson’s “fish, flesh and fowl” 100, Carol Watts, Zoë Skoulding 133). In words and syllables that are falling apart, some poems even express the poet’s “wish to undo ourselves” (Mark Goodwin, 155, see also Frances Presley, 76).

This reflection on the falling apart of human subjectivity raises the question of agency. Though literature should not be judged for its success as a tool for social change (as some ecocritics hold), its value does not necessarily lie in the radicality of its deconstructions either. Moving between these two extreme positions, many poems in this anthology testify to a painful desire. As Tarlo explains in a 2007 essay, this desire is not the desire of “ecstasy and transcendentalism we associate with earlier or traditional ‘nature poetry’” (12); it is, instead, often expressed as a wish to *relate*. What seems to be missing, though, is the expression of the desire to engage in *social* action, or share the *social* life of a rural community – a desire that, admittedly, is associated with the pastoral rather than with radical poetry. This alternative path is explored in a collection of ecologically inspired, post-pastoral “poetry of place” that was also published in 2011. It was partly written by the very poet Tarlo mentioned to characterize the different nature of her anthology: the English poet Terry Gifford, author of a well-known study on the (post)pastoral. Together, Gifford and his fellow poet Christopher North, also from

England, offer around thirty poems that were written in, and on, the mountain villages in the Sierra Aguilar in Spain where they are both living. The poems suggest that the poets find a way to connect with their new environment in sharing work (harvesting), sharing festivities, and, sometimes, in sharing their poetry. The sharing is never fully successful. The fact that the collection is bilingual (English-Spanish) both bridges and emphasizes the gap. The poets refer to the difficulty of learning Spanish, and even if Gifford wants his poems to “be read aloud using the whole body,” in the language “of Spanish gesture” (39), this is hard for him to accomplish. Christopher North sighs that he cannot share his poetry with the villagers, as “they show it too much respect” (40). Conversely, some poems show how hard it is to resist the temptation to associate one’s neighbours with the pastoral. The poets are well aware of these contradictions. If notions of the pastoral or romantic wholeness are evoked, they are also subverted and problematized. Thus, Gifford disturbs his musings on “this threshing circle holding all history” with a reference to class differences (“the white refurbished farms of the rich”), and references to everyday village life. Reflections on the inadequacy of language abound (“I tried to calm you but became another obstacle of words – wild, guilty” (17), and images of the rural are interwoven with references to urbanisation and technology. While Gifford’s poems engage with these issues in a rich narrative style with effective language play and humour (perhaps also for the sake of accessibility), Christopher North grants even more place to word play and experiments with form. His efforts to describe the landscape, animals and objects are sometimes consciously overdone, so that the process of giving meaning itself is thematized. Thus, he plays with the device of anthropomorphism to problematize it: “No swallow is depressed, downcast or repressed; / they seem in permanent ecstasy” (59); and, in contrast: “a leaf then leaves / a stone then stones” (57). Among the poems that question the adequacy of words (61, 65), there is a deliciously irreverent one on the “farting-language” of the Plaza motorbikes (63). As a device for social integration these poems are perhaps not successful, but they are great poetry. Together, the eighteen poets in these two collections make their readers aware of the tensions that must be addressed in all poetry that seeks new ways to relate to the environment, be it radical landscape poetry or a post-pastoral poetry of place: the tensions between language and the real, the desire to experiment and that of being understood, and the desire for poetry and that for social action.

Works Cited

- Harriet Tarlo. “Radical Landscapes: Experiment and Environment in Contemporary Poetry.” *Jacket* 32 (2007). <<http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-tarlo.shtml>>. Web.
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