

Why I Write

Pete Hay¹

This island, my home, demands writing from me. Don't turn away. I do not intend anything mystical by this. I merely allude to a state of mind, a quite prosaic thing when all is said and done, like the 'call' on a sunny day to fish or to walk in the hills or to play golf. And if I were a Newfie, or a Sicilian, or a Falklander, or a Patagonian, or a Tahitian, or an Alaskan, or a Himalayan I would probably still write. If I were a Sydneysider, a Londoner, a Los Angelist, an Osakan or a Berliner I probably would not. I write because a charge from deep within a scape fixed in time and place asks writing from me. Were I to exist within a place that did not press so tangibly upon my soul's quick I would, I think, seek meaning elsewhere, and be not much given to the craft of words. Forgive me, but no such impress would be present in any of the world's 'great' cities which seem so much, thanks to the globalisation of architecture, commerce, urban design and building technologies, to be mere variations upon each other. But this is surely a failing in me and not intrinsic to those cities.

Nevertheless, I am, in some unavoidable respects, an internationalist. I write to explore a much-loved island's here-only uniqueness: and yes, this is, a moment's reflection confirms, *primarily* why I write. But I seek also the unpredictable edge of its intersection with the world. I want to move from my island's particularity to universalised abstractions of islandness. I want to move from the physicality of life at the planet's rim to a critique of globalising processes that seems to me to be locked *within* how we are and how we might be here in Tasmania.

Ambiguity, tension, contradiction are, then, the signature-stuff of my life and my times. There is the tension, of which I have written elsewhere, between the tunnelled, options-closing dictates of academic analysis (the business of my day job, which I musn't give up) and the room-to-breathe, options-opening invitation of 'creative writing' (oh, the hubris of it!). There is the tension between a storied living in the hard here and now – and the hard here and then – of a given place ('place', indeed, is constructed by its shared wealth of story) and the abstraction of the

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scholar's realm of ideas; of boundary-transcending universality. Wherever I look articulate ambiguities tug away – nature and culture; human technological progress and the extinction of species; the virtual other-worldness of generational and gender understandings; past and present more broadly; tradition and capital; steel and glass technologies and human scale. I am a pilgrim within confusion.

I try to write this confusion. Not to resolve it: merely to test it; to poke around in it. Most of my essays, certainly those that are longer and comparatively more ambitious, set up a conversation between contested ambiguities, and recently oppositional tensions have become overt in my poetry, too. Little is resolved in these dialogues; there is almost never a winner and a loser. Yet I *am* more interested in some sides of my dichotomies than others; and I do want to promote some interests and perspectives at the expense of others. The interests of other life over human. Embodiment over abstraction. Story over analysis. The exploited and the meanly used over exploiter and user. The vernacular over the high-tech, the transnational and the postmodern. Perhaps especially this. The local over the global.

So it was that, some years ago, I began writing small nature/place essays. They were written for a variety of purposes – exhibition catalogues, wilderness calendars, newspaper commentary – in time broadening into highly subjective essays that began to stray quite far from what is conventionally thought of as a 'place' (or nature) essay – though I still consider them so. They involved a small commitment of time (often less than a poem demands) and they had a small, largely local readership. Yet I found myself valuing them over more laboured, time-consuming, exhaustively researched and reasoned academic papers written for a still small, but international, audience. I enjoyed the discursive freedom from the rigidities of academic discourse, such that I cannot now write in the academic mode without going off into the unacceptable flights of fancy of the essayist. And I enjoyed the freedom to be blunt and literal; to escape the poet's need to perpetually allude and signify. Such that I cannot now write poetry without reverting to the unacceptably prosaic.

I looked to what moved through an island's time and its space – and these became my subjects. How does wind move here, in the wild shorelands of the west, in the over-tilled red soils of the Coast, in the throat of the dusky robin, in the tenacious moorland of the high country, in the ashed waiting of eucalypts after fire, in the gentling, saturated mantle of the rainforest (and here it is surely the merest sigh, gathering the slow sweep of remote ages)? How does water move here, how does it rage at the dam's shock of wall, how slip through pinched mountain rock, slide through plainland aquifers, ruffle the heads of kelp in the forests of the coastal sea? And people, the ambiguous legacy of people. Not the first people – it is not for

me to write of and for them; but it is for me to write about what it means for us whiteys to have wrought such a way of change in so pitifully few years. And I would write of convictism, its tenacious legacy, the blight of it on the stories we were owed. I would write of the absence at the heart of the land that has the shape of thylacine. I would write of those who work to recover the stories. I would write of the good people who cut and dig, and the good people who seek to end the cutting and the digging, and of the avoidable tragedy that has such good people at each other's throats. I would write of the mean and dreamless folk who control the island's political and economic life, for it is my intent to be political, and is my intent to be subversive. And I would write *for* Tasmanians. I have no interest in a constitutional abstraction known as 'Australia', and I do not care if I am read by 'Australians' or not. And I would link what I write to what I know of the world, its implacably grinding tides, its generosity, its promise, its cruelty, its disarray.

It all sounds most portentous. But I write when there are no dishes in the sink, no essays to grade, no weeds to pull, no invitations to the pub. And there are times when I simply have nothing to say. Then I seek the old hewn stones and the thumbprinted bricks, or the ancient, viridescent, vaulted galleries of myrtle. The clamorous voices crowd in.