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**Critical Literature Review
(ANTA602)**

Antarctic poetry: theme, criticism and analysis

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Abstract:

For over two hundred years, Antarctica and the Southern Ocean have been a source of inspiration for poets, and today the number of pieces in the Antarctic poetry canon numbers in hundreds. Yet despite the significance of this group of texts, there is a dearth of critical literature focusing specifically on Antarctic poetry. This review will analyse criticism from a range of Antarctic literary fields, namely narrative fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, by a number of authors, collating perspectives and opinions on canonical themes and motifs. These will explore notions of Antarctica as: a wide, white expanse and blank slate for writers to attempt their mark; a transformational landscape, one that fundamentally changes the people who visit it; a place of stark contrasts; a space where heroic era history acts as both narrative and metaphor; and a contemporary, lived environment, where the natural environment and daily goings-on provide inspiration. Using these thematic categories as a framework, a selection of poems by Chris Orsman, Bill Manhire, Bernadette Hall and Owen Marshall will be analysed, and recommendations made for future research in Antarctic poetry.

Published in 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is arguably the first example of Antarctic literature, and certainly the first piece of

Antarctic poetry published in English (Leane, 2015). Since its publication, Antarctica and the Southern Ocean have inspired the production of “an abundance of poetry out of proportion in relation to its transient human population” (Truswell, 2014: 28). As a group of texts, Antarctic poetry is diverse, ranging from long narrative epics to short-form impressions, from stories of heroic explorers to depictions of the landscape, biodiversity, or life at a research base. The number of poems in the Antarctic literary canon is estimated to number in the hundreds (Leane, 2012), a count that continues to rise as contemporary poets engage in new ways with the imaginative landscape of the far south.

When compared to scientific, historic, economic or political accounts of Antarctica, imaginative literary texts like poems afford important and distinctive insights. In *A Spiritual History of Ice* (2003), Eric Wilson groups historic perspectives the polar regions into two categories: the exoteric and the esoteric. The exoteric perspective understands these icy places as physical bodies, comprehensible through scientific study, managed through policy-making, as harsh challenges to be overcome or as raw materials to be commodified (Wilson, 2003). In contrast, the esoteric way of seeing “considers internal depths, invisible mysteries, and individual experiences” (Wilson, 2003: 3) of the polar regions. Within this dichotomy, Wilson describes poets as “esoteric visionaries” (2003: 3), and as some of the first people to render ice and icy places in a positive aesthetic light. As such, the insights that Antarctic poetry and other literature afford can convey a unique perspective that may not be accessible through other texts.

Within the Antarctic literary canon, poetry is interestingly positioned between fiction and non-fiction (Gill & Waters, 2009). Depending on the poem in question, this medium can convey purely imaginative concepts, be biographical or autobiographical, or contain accurate depictions of the continent, its people and environment. In Elizabeth Leane’s *Antarctica in Fiction* (2012), perhaps the most in-depth study of Antarctic fiction to date, the author makes a distinction between the objectives of narrative fiction, including some long-form poetry, and shorter Antarctic poems:

Short poems are usually less interested in telling a tale than in teasing out the meanings of a specific event, issue or emotional state. Often, they are concerned with the task of finding a language appropriate to the continent. (2012: 17)

Many of the poems in the Antarctic canon do not fit within narrative fiction, nor do they sit comfortably in non-fiction genres like autobiography. Gill & Waters' (2009) review of the critical debate surrounding poetry and autobiography – namely: 'can autobiography be written in verse?' – concludes that this academic discourse is still active, and poetry's place uncertain. Despite this, critical responses to Antarctic autobiography, like Joanna Price's (2015) article analyzing Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita* and Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*, provide pertinent insights to understanding non-fiction, biographical and autobiographical poetry.

Justifying her decision to exclude poetry from her analysis of Antarctic fiction, Leane described poetry as "too important to be forced into the interstices of an analysis focussed on narrative, or to be included only as an afterthought" (2012: p17). This suggests that this group of texts deserves separate and specific treatment from both fiction and non-fiction. However, the dearth of critical research on Antarctic poetry, especially on works published beyond the nineteenth century, would indicate that Antarctic poetry is not receiving sufficient focused study.

The poetic work that has received by far the most critical attention is Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and the academic literature contains relatively frequent analyses of this epic poem. Truswell's study explores science and art in Antarctic epic poetry, dissecting Coleridge's allegorical presentation of the Southern Ocean as punishment for the mariner's crime against nature (2014). Wilson draws an analogy between the mariner's violence towards the poles as being a form of violence towards the self (2003). Leane takes a different tack, instead focusing on the musicality and sound of this poem, and how this contributes to its descriptions of icy landscapes, fear, and danger (2015). While these and other analyses of Coleridge's epic poem are important facets of Antarctic critical literature, they all but ignore contemporary poetry, and in doing so situate the academic discourse with late-eighteenth century texts.

For some critics, this identification of a pre-twentieth century Antarctic literary 'golden age' rings true. In *The Ice*, Stephen Pyne goes so far as to call Antarctica an "aesthetic sink, not an inspiration...[its] landscape eras[ing] those elements ... that made other newly discovered worlds accessible" (1986). Writing in 1986, Pyne asserts that there is no school of Antarctic literature, that the far south has been a "wasteland for imaginative literature" (1986), and that after the publication of works by Coleridge, Poe and Cooper, Antarctic literature stagnated. The continued contemporary focus of literary analysis on these eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts corroborates this perspective. When Leane began investigating Antarctic fiction, the common concepts she came across echoed Pyne's perspective: the far south was seen as a place beyond representation, a white blankness that precludes clear depiction, as "traditionally unwritable" (2012: 1). However, delving below these superficial notions into the diverse canon of Antarctic fiction, Leane soon realised that this homogenous, static view did not hold, that the commonly espoused perception of Antarctica as unwritable was a false construction. She found huge diversity in the group of texts that make up Antarctic literature, with a range of subjects, styles, themes and motifs. She determined it foolish to look for any single commonality that might link them, as "many contradictory and competing versions of the continent that can be evident even within one text." (2012: 8).

To avoid characterising Antarctic fiction as homogenous, while still allowing for an ordered approach to its analysis, she began to organise the many diverse texts in this canon by identifying "themes around which far southern narratives cluster" (2012: 16). Antarctic literary themes have produced characteristic and recurring plots, characters and motifs, and these are not confined to fiction; they are also pertinent to the critical analysis of poetry. This review will draw together perspectives on Antarctica literature, including critical analyses of narrative fiction, non-fiction and poetry, to tease out those themes and motifs that commonly run through these works. It will then use these thematic categories to explore selected works of four New Zealand poets: Chris Orsman, Bill Manhire, Bernadette Hall, and Owen Marshall. Each of these poets has been an Antarctic arts fellow with New Zealand's Antarctic program, Orsman and Manhire in 1997/98, Hall in 2004/05 and Marshall in 2009/10. Analysing their poetry in the context of critical research focused on literature

and writing generally will help show how Antarctic poetry may both ascribe to and differ from established themes. This brief review will help identify gaps in the literature, and recognize areas requiring further critical study.

Antarctica as a blank white slate

In 2004, Bill Manhire edited an anthology of Antarctic writing titled *The Wide White Page*. This title is a common trope in critical and popular literature of the far south, and encapsulates many writers' perception the continent as empty, pure, and unoccupied. Antarctica's whiteness and emptiness is often identified in the critical literature (Price, 2015, Leane, 2012, Wilson, 2003, Pyne, 1986), and its centrality to poets' experience of the far south is well supported. In Bernadette Hall's 'Heaven' (2007), she describes a moment "When there is white only, / when everything is coloured white / the land, the sky, the ice and the horizon" (2007). Bill Manhire's 'Forecast' (2001) presents a similar vision: "White inside the weather / white shadow, white shine: / low and high / white all the time."

Literary depictions of this white uniformity serve at once to convey the sheer extent of Antarctica's icescape, and also present the continent as a space largely devoid of human presence. In her analysis of narrative non-fiction, Price attributes the appeal of Antarctica to its relative lack of human history and culture, calling it a *tabula rasa*, Latin for 'blank slate' (2015). This notion is echoed by Wilson, who describes Antarctica as unmapped space, with ice "serving as a blank screen on which men have projected deep reveries" (2003: 141). The difficulties poets face in both describing and populating this blank slate is articulated in Orsman's poem 'Mappa' (2008): "...we have no internal GPS / ...to convey what the landscape is doing / where mastery of scale is thwarted / ...the horizon being skewed / on all sides – shifting and dipping / with the eye's progress". In writing Antarctica, Orsman is grappling with his own inability to communicate impressions and thought.

Yet despite this, there is a human tendency to 'impose something', to attempt to draw order and control over both the self and the environment (Wilson, 2003). Leane describes writers' "marks on the page [as] ... pathetic attempts to master the

continent's vastness" (2012: 1), to gain a foothold in an overwhelming and indescribable environment. Owen Marshall's 'Snow Poem 10: Flags' (2010) captures this sentiment well:

*In red, yellow, green and blue they flutter
on the ice beyond the base, and black ones
too, which signal threats. Some mark tracks,
others activities, some are gathered in
multi-coloured flapping rookeries, free for use.
They are a minor but defiant intrusion on
the world of black and white, as if a gala has
been set up, but no people yet have come.*

Here, Marshall expresses this sense that humans can only grasp control of the very edges of Antarctica, in the same way that writers can only make tentative marks on the page. These flags see humans 'imposing something'; significantly, flags are a colonizing symbol that traditionally precedes human settlement and control. Yet while the flags signify human presence, here they do not signify human population. Their erect positions and vibrant colours are temporary, transient and insubstantial, dominated by the interior white expanse over which they can exercise no control.

Antarctica as a transformational landscape

While writers may have a limited capacity to alter the Antarctic landscape, the continent's power to create, catalase or otherwise induce a change in them is well recognised in the critical literature. The personal impact of visiting Antarctica is captured well by Victoria Nelson: "what is farthest away and most hidden is, paradoxically, always what is most important: the journey to the poles is a journey to the center of the soul" (2003: 163). Wilson's analysis of the spiritual significance of the poles resonates with this notion, as he describes Antarctica as a place where a person can discover "the eternal center of oneself" (2003: 142).

It is common for fiction writers to present Antarctica as a transformative landscape, and their journey there as personally altering, cleansing, or otherwise touching (Leane, 2012). This notion of cleansing is pursued by Price in her analysis of Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*; she describes the author using the Antarctic landscape as a 'discursive space' to confront memories of a traumatic childhood (2015). Antarctic poetry offers many examples of this theme, as in this stanza from Chris Orsman's poem 'Ascents' (2008):

*As if the map itself was the map of our lives,
the page of all revelation,
shuttering time in its brazen mask,
and we must find a new name
for this permissive
engrossing present.*

Linking the map of Antarctica to the self, Orsman articulates the deep sense of connection, awareness and purpose he feels when on the ice. His reference to an 'engrossing present' underscores a full engagement with the present moment, which suggests that being in Antarctica is a way of seeking and finding a new state of being. Manhire's poem 'Song' (2001) follows a similar vein:

*For the first time in a long time
there is sun making sunshine,
the heart sings which was once sighing
for the first time in a long time.*

*Now the world is the world without trying:
the line releases the next line
and the next line, and the next line –
for the first time, for the first time,

for the first time in a long time.*

The repetition and simplicity of this poem sees Manhire unable to pinpoint exactly what it is about Antarctica that causes his upturn – it seems to just happen ‘without trying’. His entry into a better state of being, and Orsman’s in the piece above, are significant in the context of Leane’s analysis of fiction; in which the change or transformation that people undergo on the ice is “almost always a positive, enriching one, even if the process itself is traumatizing” (2012: 136).

Antarctica is a place of contrast

Perhaps it is the juxtaposition of both large, incomprehensible exterior landscapes and internal personal transformations that imbues much Antarctic writing with a strong sense of contrast. This concept is visited many times throughout Wilson’s book: Antarctica is described as a place where “a Romantic poet finds in the frozen plane the universal no-color behind all particular hues” (Wilson: 3), as “no color and all colors, void and plenitude” (Wilson: 6) and as a “cartographical combination of alleged knowledge and admitted ignorance” (Wilson: 155). For many writers, it seems as though Antarctica can be two disparate things concurrently, and notion well expressed in Owen Marshall’s ‘Snow Poem 3: Metaphysical Pole’ (2010):

*On a pillar in the McMurdo bar
was written, ‘metaphysical pole’.
Topics of conversation seemed
mundane enough, the loud music
country and western. Yet there
was something transcendental in
emerging at midnight into blinding
sun.*

In this poem, contrasts exist between the crowded, noisy interior and the open, expansive exterior – the basic binary of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that is so meaningful in Antarctica’s extreme environment. Linked to this is a distinction between the mundane, generic ‘humanness’ of the McMurdo bar and the awe-inspiring external landscape.

Antarctic heroism as narrative and metaphor

Of the Antarctic literary canon, a great deal focuses on the Heroic Era of continental exploration during the early twentieth century, on stories of Scott and Shackleton's expeditions, triumphs and failures. Glasberg describes Antarctica during this period of history as a "clean white space, where Europeans could pursue an 'unashamed heroism'...[in] an elemental struggle to survive" (2008: 642). Price's commentary on Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita* describes her preoccupation with the Heroic Age, with the stories of endurance and suffering that continue to capture the minds of contemporary writers (2015).

Orsman's collection of Antarctic poetry, titled *South: An Antarctic Journey*, recounts and creatively explores Scott's fatal expedition to the South Pole. This journey provides a narrative thread throughout this collection of poems, and the slow-building tragedy of the failed expedition is well captured in 'Spring Portraits' (1996):

Five men:

they'll carry their faces

to the Pole,

five portraits

the picture-man took

before they left.

I'd like to say

that when they'd gone

the plates developed

no faces,

only ghosting,

and you could see

that continent
shining through

visages there.
It didn't happen

that way: each face
was crisp and clear,

each eye
was a cherry

in which
foreknowledge

was absent,
and their grins held.

Describing the last portrait taken of the expedition party before they set out, Orsman underscores the tragedy of Scott's expedition by juxtaposing the hope and determination of those five faces with the reader's knowledge that they are doomed to fail. With the power of hindsight, he uses reference to a photograph to bring a historic moment closer to the present.

Yet contemporary retellings and revisits to the heroic age do more than recount past events; used metaphorically or symbolically, narratives of heroic endurance can help modern writers face past memories and traumatic events, or contextualise their visit to the ice (Price, 2015). Leane describes Antarctica as "no less important to a text when it is deployed primarily as a metaphor, rather than a setting" (2012: 5), and a metaphor of exploration, of voyage and return, remains relevant for contemporary writers. This is because, unless they prove fatal, no journeys to Antarctica are permanent. Going, seeking, exploring, then returning are all aspects of modern travel

to the continent that can be overlaid on the great expeditions (Leane, 2012). This can lead modern poets to link their experiences to those of the explorers', as in Manhire's 'Outside the Hut' (2001):

This pick still works.

These picks still work.

*

I could dig with those spades

And hammer in those nails.

I could look out to sea

And spy the long awaited sails.

In this poem, Manhire connects with the explorers through physical space and objects, as though their historic lives remain frozen in stasis, ready to be picked up again like a tool. Perhaps the timelessness he registers on visiting the huts is due to the fact that in a place so unpopulated, history can remain unsullied. Perhaps the timeless presence he feels in these places is due to their being so sparsely populated that living history can remain unsullied. On another level, the journeys of these early explorers may resonate with those reasons people remain fascinated with the far south: as discussed above, Antarctica allows for exploration, not just of the land, but also of the self.

Poems describing contemporary lives and environments

While there remains a present focus on heroic era exploration in Antarctic literature, perspectives on contemporary activities are also prominent in Antarctic poetry. Elena Glasberg, in her research on science, fiction and belonging in Antarctica, notes that while "fascination with survival ... persists to this day in both serious and parodic retellings of the Heroic Age", Antarctica is increasingly being understood as a "region connected to global processes of capital and human culture" (2008: 642). Indeed,

now that the series of 'firsts' that characterized heroic exploration have largely been attained, the far south is beginning to lose its pull as a heroic plot generator (Glasberg, 2008). Other human activities, as well as descriptive poems about the natural environment, are coming to the fore.

There has been a significant output of environmentally focused Antarctic poetry, work that celebrates biodiversity, landscapes and seascapes. Truswell describes this poetry as dealing with "what is now understood, through science, as the true nature of the Antarctic continent: its visual surroundings; its place as a keystone within the ancient Gondwana continent, and the changing nature of its past environments." (2014: 28).

Poetry describing Antarctica's biodiversity commonly features in the collections of Antarctic arts fellows. In Hall's poem 'On the Malamute Trail' (2007), the reader looks "out over the ice sea, / the Adelie rookery / heard the ah-ah-ah-ah clatter of the chaps / flippers articulating across their white chests" (2007: 19). Perhaps the proximity of New Zealand's base to Adelie populations makes them a popular subject, as these birds also feature in Manhire's 'Adelie' (2001): "the rookery's / tucked under the headland, / deep centuries of guano". It is not just charismatic fauna that receive a mention; in Orsman's 'Fast' (2008) he describes the Dry Valleys as having "two signatures of life: / rock-based lichen, / its discrete fungi / dissolving the stone; / moss in an ancient creek-bed". Poets also weigh in on how humans impact this environment, as in Manhire's poem 'Some Frames' (2001): "Antarctica! / Where a single / footprint lasts / a thousand years / and here we are / with our / thousand footprints / etcetera".

Antarctic non-fiction poetry also explores how people, including scientists, base staff, and the writers themselves, conduct their lives in Antarctica. Leane identifies a 'new Antarctic fiction', which features "non-fantastic narratives which take place in the here-and-now and focus on everyday experience...situation, character and personal interaction" (2012: 134). Similar foci can be seen in Antarctic poetry, as the daily operations and trivialities of life on base, routines, activities and small personal interactions become subject matter, as in Bernadette Hall's 'The Ponies' (2007):

*We stomp out with saws. We cut big square
blocks out of the glacial flow we're standing on.
The blocks are light, just water bubbles looped
With air, easy to cut and easy to carry.*

*I spend far too much time, of course, smoothing
One small face to perfection. But that's what I'm like,
Always trying to write the next poem.*

The others just get on with it.

Here, Hall is creating a rich description of the process of cutting and building with ice bricks, a common activity in Antarctica, but one that retains its point of interest once the poem travels north – to countries and readers who are not experienced in the extreme Antarctic landscape.

Concluding remarks

There is currently a dearth of critical literature exploring Antarctic poetry, especially those works published in the later part of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. While the canon of Antarctic poetry continues to grow, fed significantly by Antarctic arts fellowships both within New Zealand and globally, academic discourse is not keeping current. Critics are choosing to revisit poetic works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those that are already supported by an established academic discourse, or to exclude poetry from their research for fear they will not do it due justice. While it is possible to examine contemporary Antarctic poetry within the thematic categories and analytical frameworks of narrative fiction and non-fiction, these should be considered a jumping off point for dedicated poetry analysis. A renewed focus on modern works, on poems that extend beyond narratives of heroic exploration to focus on present-day lived realities, will help literary critics bring Antarctica and its canon into sharper contemporary focus.

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