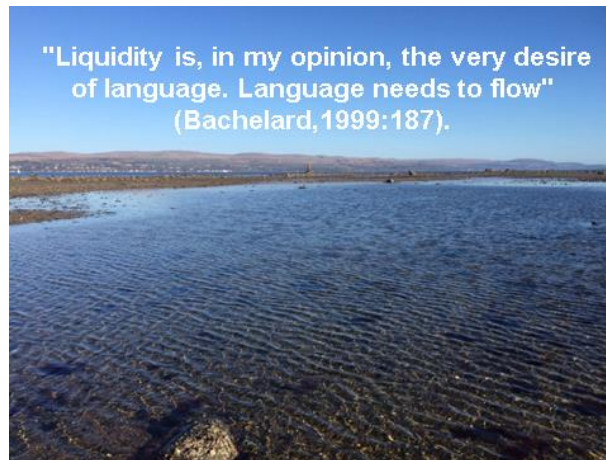


Laura Bissell
Translating Seascapes
Language, Landscape and the Sublime



Introduction: Seas

Seas are complex and contradictory spaces which have fluid and multiple cultural geographies associated with their landscapes. Not a single conception but often perceived as “the sea”, each sea is distinct, but between coastlines they are globally interlinked and have been culturally constructed as both a symbolic and metaphorical site as well as a real place. The landscape of the sea is perceived as knowable and unknowable, local and global, as having both a restorative and sickening effect, and being contaminated and purifying. (Mack, 2011:75). While the sea is often employed as a metaphorical trope, as a “mirror” to human consciousness as Joseph Conrad suggests, *Translating Seascapes* will focus on the seas as a cultural-natural site and explore how attempts to “translate” the sea might offer us a way to consider it as part of a “more-than-human” world and encourage us to engage with wider global environmental and cultural concerns. Carl Lavery asks in his introduction to Green Letters edition on *Performance and Ecology*, “What can theatre do?” In this he explores how aesthetic performance can be viewed as an ecocritical medium; my focus is how poetic language can also have an ecological function in helping us develop our relationships with the natural environment. This paper will ask: “what can poetry do?” Can processes of *translation* assist in understanding the sea as a sublime landscape more fully

and in a more embodied way? Can these processes help us to consider our relationship with the sea in a time of ecological crisis?

Translating Seascapes demonstrates a practical application of Gaston Bachelard's assertions about the relationship between the materiality, movement and liquidity of water as synonymous with language in his essay "Water's Voice" from *Water and Dreams*. In this he claims "Liquidity is, in my opinion, the very desire of language. Language needs to flow" and argues that there is a euphonic relationship between water and its human echo (language). Using "directives" explicated from "Water's Voice" this paper explores performative writing methods that reflect musical processes such as improvisation and composition to "converse" with the sea. Collaborating with sound designer Tim Cooper I explore a translation of the sound of the sea into language. Tim Ingold states: "It seems that, in listening to speech, our awareness penetrates through the sound to reach a world of verbal meaning beyond, And by the same token, that world is absolutely silent... in short, whereas sound is the essence of music, language is mute" (Ingold, 2016: 7). I ask: What might a "poetics of the sea" sound like? One of the definitions of poetics is "the practice of writing poetry, poetic composition" reminiscent of modernist writer Gertrude Stein's use of harmonies, patterns, relations and rhythms. By applying a similar process of composition to words generated by sea sounds, a linguistic seascape as translation of the physical matter is created. Oceanographer Rachel Carson argues that the connection humans feel with the sea is due to "our inheritance from the day, untold millions of years ago, when a remote ancestor, having progressed from the one-celled to the many celled stage, first developed a circulatory system in which the fluid was merely the water of the sea" (Carson, 2014: 20). This paper asks: how can our human connection with the sea (mobilised through sound/poetry) help us understand it and conserve it?

Sea Ecology

In *Ways of the Sea: The Use and Abuse of the Ocean*, Richard Gwynn states that:

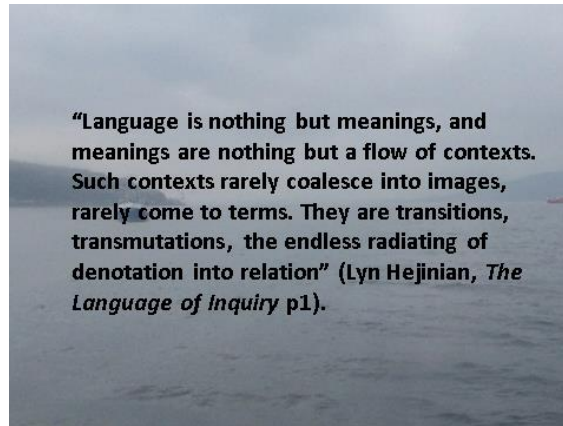
The primary use of the planet's water is as a life-sustaining fluid. Humans cannot live long without it and it is the lack of clean, fresh water that constitutes one of the greatest killers in the 'developing' world. The planetary water supply, or aquasphere, is put to many uses apart from consumption. Excluding agriculture, the predominant use of the oceans and rivers, lakes and streams has been as a means of transport and a direct food reservoir (Gwynn, 1987:1).

Gwynn agrees with Carson that while much of the planet's surface is covered in the water that makes up the oceans, many areas of the world suffer from a lack of fresh or drinking water; an issue that has been exacerbated by human-induced pollution and climate change. Bachelard focuses on fresh water – what he calls “pure water” in *Water and Dreams* - but for the purpose of this article, my attention will be to the salt water that makes up the world's seas. The vastness of this body of water has its own challenges in conceptualising its ecology. How do you analyse a landscape that has no land? How do you engage in an archaeology of a site that cannot easily be excavated or examined? (We know more about the surface of the moon than we do the deep sea bed). How do you trace human paths on a “landscape” that bears no human traces? How do you examine a site constantly in flux, in motion and that enacts erosion and change onto the lands it encounters, minute by minute, day by day? How do you analyse the most vast environment on our planet when we can only engage with it from the edges and surface (and occasionally its depths using scuba equipment) within the limitations that the human body can handle? How do we understand the particular relevance of the sea as a site for examination through the lens of poetry as we enter an era of ecological crisis and uncertainty brought about by climate change and rising global temperatures that endanger the Earth?

Poetics of the Sea

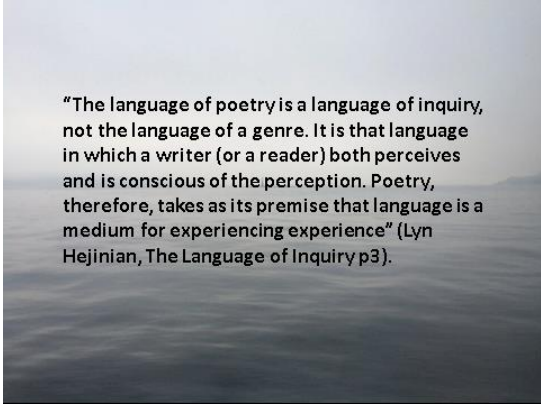
When considering “what can poetry do?” it can be beneficial to consider its role in socio-political activism including feminism and minority rights movements. American feminist poet Adrienne Rich argues that “Poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire” (Rich, 2003: xx). Poetry can help to shape our experiences into language allowing us to communicate a subjective response as well as

enlarging our understanding of experiences beyond our own. While the political potential of poetry has been explored by Rich and others in terms of human experiences, the same could be applied to the more-than-human world. Language poet Lyn Hejinian claims:



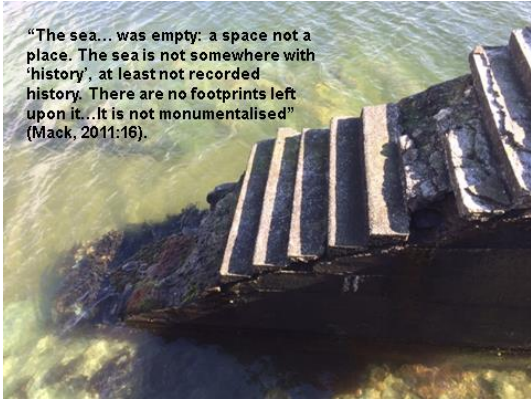
This flow of contexts often render language performative – enacting or performing something while articulating it. I would add that as well as these transitions there are also continual translations of experience into language. Amelia Jones identifies “trans” as the possibility of “change and liminality” (2016:1) and this prefix implies exceeding, moving towards, altering; going across, over or beyond. The “transitions and transmutations” that Hejinian refers to are most potent in the concept of “translation”. Translation can refer to the process of translating words or text from one language into another as well as the conversion of something from one form or medium into another (Oxford Dictionaries). I wanted to use case studies from my own practice to “translate” a phenomenological experience of sea-sounds into language using directives from Bachelard’s essay to create a “liquid language” which could converse with the natural environment.

Poetry as a form already offers us a way of understanding, communicating and sharing an experience of the world through language. Hejinian argues:



"The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. Poetry, therefore, takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience" (Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* p3).

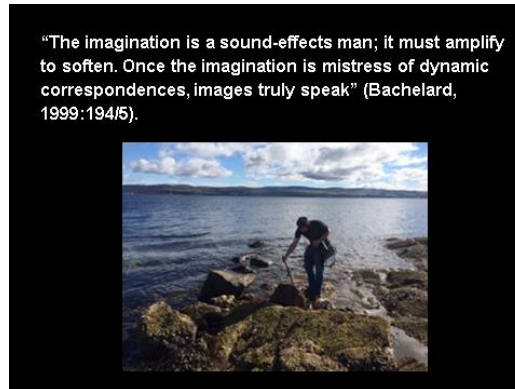
How do we experience the sea? Humans cannot access ocean landscapes in the same way that they might a mountain, a forest or a ruin, and the wetness and depth of the seas allow for human engagement only from its edges or its surface. Representations of the sea through art forms can be perceived as limited. However poetry and performative writing offer language as a way of translating the complex and ambiguous cultural understanding and relationship humans have with the oceans that make up over seventy percent of the surface of the Earth.



"The sea... was empty: a space not a place. The sea is not somewhere with 'history', at least not recorded history. There are no footprints left upon it...It is not monumentalised" (Mack, 2011:16).

It is also important to acknowledge the historic relationship between language and the sea – the First English dictionary of nautical language was published in 1620 followed by William Falconer's *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* in 1789. Sea idioms such as: "All at sea", "cast adrift", "all in the same boat", "plain sailing", a "sea change", to "tide over" are still common currency in our language and are a nod to a time when human's relationship to the sea for leisure, naval security, colonial expeditions and trans-Atlantic trade was a much more explicit part of the cultural consciousness than now.

The Sea (Sound)



At the outset of our collaboration Tim and I went for a walk to record some sea sounds. We walked along the sandy beach of Innellan in Argyll and then the stone and shingle beach at Kirn to the East of Dunoon. The point where humans most frequently engage with the sea is on the beach and there is a long tradition of the seaside as a place for leisure and holidays. On the beach the tidal movements of the sea are most evident as twice daily the tides move in and out, scrubbing and scouring stones, moving weed and shingle, and reorganising the landscape of the shore. Carson discusses how whole ecosystems have adapted to inhabit this tidal beach in *The Edge of the Sea*, and how the movement of the sea water is vital to the species that inhabit the tidal sands. Mack says:

The tides create a shifting boundary between sea and land. Their effect is to emphasize the liminality of the beach as parts of it are successively revealed and then swamped by tidal action. The boundary between sea and land alters on a daily basis. It is a neutral space, neither properly terrestrial nor yet thoroughly maritime, awaiting a metamorphic role (Mack, 2011:165).

Describing the beach as an "ambiguous place, an in-between place" (Mack, 2011:165) the tidal movement offers a unique environment. As Greg Dening states in *Beach Crossings* (2004):

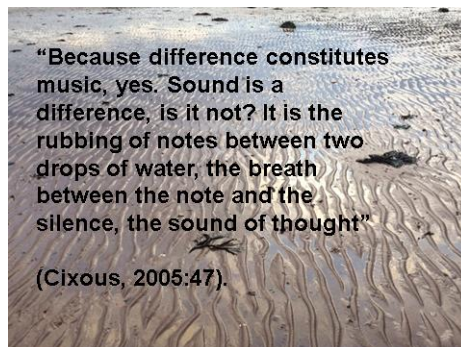
This wet stretch between land and sea is the true beach, the true in-between space...an unresolved space where things can happen, where things can be made to happen. It is a space of transformation. It is a space of crossing. (Mack, 2011:165)

The beach is the site where the maritime meets the terrestrial and it is also the site where humans most frequently come into contact with the sea. The sounds recorded on these beaches are specific to the area of Argyll but also acknowledge the beach itself as a space of possibility and transition.

During a previous collaboration with performance-maker Chris Dugrenier on her work about sea migration called *Parallels*, we had a literal conversation using "water words" that we had generated during a creative writing task. Both of us were using spoken text (although many of Chris's were in French, so a process of translation was ongoing as part of this dialogue). John Hall states in *On Performance Writing*, "Two principles must be in place for a conversation to merit its name: listening and turn-taking. Somewhere in there is the social model of call and response" (Hall, 2013: 104). Chris and I literally took turns in speaking our texts and audio recording the process. We then responded to our experience of listening to the conversation our words created developing and experimenting with sound and the composition of the words. For Tim and I's collaboration, I wanted to apply Bachelard's theories of "the liquidity of language" to attempt to create a conversation with the water sounds that Tim had recorded on our walk. If, as Bachelard claims, "human language has a liquid quality, a flow in its overall effect, water in its consonants" (Bachelard, 1999:15) then the writing I generated using directives from "Water's Voice" should be able to "speak" to the water sounds that Tim creates. This would be distinct from my collaboration with Chris as two human voices generating a dialogue using water words would instead be replaced with human voices using language and the other side of the dialogue would be recorded sound captured in the site-specific environment.

Bachelard states: "To show clearly the vocal unity of water poetry, I shall develop from the start an extreme paradox: Water is the mistress of liquid language, of smooth flowing language, of continued and continuing language, of language that softens rhythms and gives a uniform substance to differing rhythms" (Bachelard, 1999:187). Throughout "Water's Voice" Bachelard speaks of "echoes, doublets and mirrors" which create a sense of the importance of doubling, reflecting or mirroring in this water phonetics: "Water also has

indirect voices. Nature resounds with ontological echoes. Creatures answer each other by imitating elementary voices. Of all the elements, water is the most faithful, 'mirror of voices'" (Bachelard, 1999:193). This suggests that a conversational mode of collaborating would be most effective to convey this, my language would mirror Tim's sounds, his sounds would echo my language. In *Rootprints*, Cixous says:



Tim and I were interested in the differences in our practices and how the spaces in between my poems and his sound explore the relationship of sound and language. Ingold states:

Language, according to Saussure, maps one configuration of difference, on the plane of sound-imagery, on to another, on the plane of thought, such that for every segment of thought – or – concept – there corresponds a specific image. Every coupling of concept and sound-image is a word. It follows that language, as a system of relations between words, is internal to the mind, and is given independently of its physical instantiation in acts of speech (Ingold, 2016: 8).

Ingold asks "how was the sound taken out of language?" and for our collaboration we were interested in the sounds of the sea-words over their meaning. While initial experiments were completely arbitrary, in development the sea words were chosen for their sound and their meaning to create a text with a range of layers to acknowledge the depths, currents and materiality of the sea itself.

Directives from Water's Voice

To generate language that would translate water sounds into words most closely, I extracted Bachelard's key assertions about liquid language to create a series of directives:

Bachelard says: "Much later, I read in Bachofen that the vowel *a* is the water vowel. It is dominant in *aqua*, *appa*, *wasser*. It is the phenomenon of creation by water. The letter *a* marks a primary matter. It is the first letter of the universal poem. It is the letter that stands for the repose of the soul in Tibetan mysticism" (Bachelard, 1999:189).

Directive 1: Create a list of words in which "a" is the dominant vowel sound.

Bachelard continues: "After the 'a' of the tempest, after the howling of the north wind, we are happy to hear the 'o's of water (*eaus*), the whirlwinds and the lovely roundness of their sounds. When we have this happy state, regained words reverse themselves crazily; the stream laughs and the laughter streams" (Bachelard, 1999:192).

Directive 2: Create a list of words in which "o" is the dominant vowel sound (note, this should be the o of *eaus* and not the English *oo*)

These first two directives will generate words with round vowel sounds, what Bachelard concludes his essay with: "not a moment will pass without repeating some lovely round word that rolls over the stones" (Bachelard, 1999:195).

Bachelard states: "And if this aspect of vocal imagination is not easy to grasp, it is because we give onomatopoeia too limited a sense. We think of it as an echo, guided by hearing alone. In point of fact, the ear is much more liberal than we suppose; it readily accepts a certain transposition in imitation and is soon imitating the first imitation. With the joy of hearing man associates the joy of active speech, the joy of a whole countenance expressing imitative talent. Sound is only one aspect of the minologism" (Bachelard, 1999:189).

Directive 3: Create a list of words that sound like water (onomatopoeic)

Bachelard argues that poetic activity has three roots bringing together "visual, auditory and

vocal impressions" (Bachelard, 1999:190). These first three directives do not cover all of the visual aspects of liquid language and so in response to this I added a fourth directive to add to this "aquatic scene". Bachelard says: "If we could group together all the words with liquid phenomes, then an aquatic scene would naturally emerge. Conversely, a poetic scene expressed by a hydrous psyche, by the waters' word, discovers liquid consonants quite naturally. Sound, native sound, natural sound – that is, the voice – places things in their proper order" (Bachelard, 1999:190).

Directive 4: Create a list of words that describe the water (in this case the sea).

Bachelard's "imaginary water phonetics" can be realised through these directives to attempt what Paul Fort defines as "the Word made water." The final excerpt from Bachelard's "Water's Voice" that I am reframing into a directive relates to silence: "Nor is there any great poetry without long intervals of relaxation and leisure, nor any great poems without silence. Water is also a model of calm and silence. Dormant and silent water adds to scenes, as Claudel puts it, 'lakes of song'. Near it, poetic gravity deepens" (Bachelard, 1999:192/3).

Directive 5: Apply silence to poetics as though the absence of sound is a material itself.

Cixous recognises the need for silences as part of the development of a "poetics". She says in *Rootprints*: "As for prose, one of the differences with respect to poetry is precisely that there are no silences. Most of the time, pages leave only a little room for silences, ruptures, spaces. Ideally I would prefer to write my texts as I hear them: that is, as poetry" (Cixous, 2005:66). Using these directives I created texts that attempt to "understand natural voices poetically" (Bachelard, 1999:193). The attempt of language as a cultural construct that translates and communicates a phenomenological engagement with landscape is summarised by Bachelard: "Art needs to learn from reflections and music from echoes. By imitating that we invent. We think we conform to reality, and, instead, we translate it into human terms. In imitating the river the blackbird also projects a little more purity" (Bachelard,

1999:193). Can processes of translation assist in understanding a landscape more fully, more deeply, in a more embodied way? “The stream, the river, the cascade have, then, a speech that men understand naturally. As Wordsworth said ‘it is a music of humanity’: ‘The sad still music of humanity’” (Bachelard, 1999:194).

Having applied the five directives for creating liquid language extracted from Bachelard's "Water's Voice" I used the material generated to attempt a conversation or "correspondence" with the sea sounds. I began by improvising with the material to compose poems to “echo” or "speak" to the water sounds that Tim and I had collected. These were improvised using the material generated from following the directives and were spontaneous written responses created while listening to the sounds. This embodied response to sound through composition of language is similar to the way Cixous considers the process of writing: She says in *Rootprints*. “When I refer to music, it’s because music lets us hear directly that language is produced in an interplay with the body. One writes with one’s ears. It is absolutely essential. The ear does not hear a single detached note: it hears musical compositions, rhythms, scansion” (Cixous, 2005:64).

Once I had created a number of initial texts I began to develop these into different short poems which would each play a role in performing aspects of the sea within a performance score. I arranged these into “Tidal Poems”, “Wave Poems”, “Current Poems”, “Sealife Poems”, “Detritus Poems” and “Deep Water Poems”. Inspired by the visual elements of Tim’s electronic sound scores I began using some maps of the Cowal coastline (the site where we recorded the sounds) to assist me in visually drafting some of the scores. The specificity of place seems important as part of the translation process – these are *particular* sounds from *this* seascape.

The Performance Score is framed as such:

These poems are written in response to a specific body of water, the Firth of Clyde in Argyll. While they are specific to this coastal area in the West of Scotland they could also perform other seas in other places.

While providing a “score” for voices alongside Tim’s sound score, this textual score could also be used as a stimulus for other performances or experiments with sounds of words in relation to seascapes.

One of the Tidal Poems includes elements of directive 1 (“a” sounds) as well as directives 3 and 4 (words that sound like or describe the water).

Violent crash wave
Rock smash shore
Harsh shingle sore
Sea sharp cry
Black cloud sky
Smash shore wave
Black rock
Black sea
Black weed
Sea smashed

One of the Detritus Poems includes elements of directives 1 and 2:

Afloat away
Deep debris
scrap afloat

The Sealife Poems created using the directives nod to the existing sea life in this body of water:

Specks of silver
Shine in shallow water

Dog-face with kind eyes
Selkie friend seeking fish

Arterial algae
Sea anatomy

The Wave Poems use language to demonstrate the repeating waves of various patterns while the Current Poems are of varying lengths and rhythms to perform the different currents

moving through the sea. The Deep Water poems provide a sonic bassline for the text sounds score and have elements of directives 2, 3, 4 and 5 in them:

Deep Slow sleep slow
below

 Seep Low deep down seep deep
sleep

l'eau slow seep low deep below down deep below low

The repetition of these words provides a simple meditative consistency throughout the score.

Conclusion: Translations

By translating Tim's recorded sea sounds into spoken text to acknowledge the phonetic similarities between sea sounds and human language I have attempted to create a "poetics of the sea". We are currently working on creating a live performance integrating vocalists alongside Tim's sound score and I am interested in exploring performing this on the Argyll coast where the sounds were originally recorded. While the poems are at times abstract or arbitrary due to the process of composition, the organisation of the poems into the categories Tidal Poems, Wave Poems, Current Poems, Sealife Poems, Detritus Poems and Deep Water Poems acknowledge the human and more-than-human elements and interventions that have happened to the natural environment. The Detritus Poems explicitly refer to this:

No fish
Life gone
Seabed scraped
Dredged dead
Empty sea
Reefs bleached

Empty sea
Ravaged sea
Poisoned sea
Dirty sea

By using the human construct of language to draw attention to the current issues facing sea ecologies as well as using words and their sounds to create a human “echo” to the sea these attempts encourage a *translation* that will assist with encouraging an empathetic response with the more-than-human world. This paper asked: Can processes of translation assist in understanding a landscape more fully, more deeply, in a more embodied way? I would argue that by engaging in a process to create a poetics of the sea using the concept of “liquid language” explicated in Bachelard’s “Water’s Voice”, poetic language can have an eco-critical function and draw attention to the sea and our relationships to it in a time of ecological crisis.

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