

## Poetically Inhabiting the Impasse in Ron Rash's *Above the Waterfall*

Cornelia Graebner, Lancaster University

*Note that these are notes taken from a work-in-progress for the purpose of initiating a debate within an oral, academic context. Do not quote from this piece without previously consulting the author.*

To what extent can poetry and poetic language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century help us to attain a sense of attentiveness and stillness which distracts – not detracts – from our awareness of stagnation and of pain in certain situations? When does poetry become a painkiller for a continuously open wound? How can poetry make damaging relationships more bearable, instead of helping to unravel and undo these relationships entirely or partially, to create room for Other relational dynamics? As part of a research project on imaginaries of acquiescence – research I can carry out thanks to a fellowship of The Leverhulme Trust – I here want to explore the interaction between stillness and acquiescence, and the fluid relationship between the two, as it is articulated and explored in poetic language.

I will do this through a close reading of two narratives intertwined in Ron Rash's novel *Above the Waterfall* (2015). Ron Rash is a poet, short story writer, novelist and academic based in the Carolinas, U.S.A. His writing in style, language, settings, and metaphoricity is rooted in, and nestles into, the landscapes and social environments of the U.S. American South and particularly, of the Appalachian mountains and the region known as Appalachia. Appalachia – which encompasses the Central and Southern part of the mountain range, from the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia to the Great Smokey Mountains in Georgia – is among the poor areas of the U.S. American South; and it is also an area of outstanding natural beauty. *Above the Waterfall* is set in a valley by a state park. The novel is narrated alternately by Les, the town's sheriff, and Becky Shytle, the ranger in charge of the state park. Both are highly sensitive characters and poetic storytellers. Les operates in his narration what I will term a poetics of social devastation. Becky draws strength from the natural world, from the poetry of 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and from the interplay of perception and poeticization. In both their narrations a silence that indicates the lack of competent interlocutors rubs shoulders with the stillness of complementation and heightened awareness; and both narrators tend to respond to forces of destruction (of the social fabric and the natural world) by drawing on the poetic to negate or overwrite the political. As a result, their responses and reactions appear impassive.

Lauren Berlant has described impassivity as one of several 'affective forms of engagement with the environment of slow death'.<sup>1</sup> Impassivity is one of the 'politically depressed relations' that characterize life in the 'impasse', which Berlant proposes as a 'genre for tracking the sense of the present':

...a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (Berlant 2011: 4)

---

<sup>1</sup> Berlant writes of 'slow death' with reference to survival in contemporary capitalism under the conditions of what I understand as a frayed social fabric; Rob Nixon develops the same concept with reference to the destruction of the natural environment (Nixon 2011).

Becky poeticizes her 'wandering absorptive awareness' in a silent exchange with Hopkins' poetry, and the poetry that she herself writes; Les in contrast is 'hypervigilant' especially when it comes to social or individual wrongdoing or malignant intentions. Their modes of awareness are in both cases to events from the past. Both Les and Becky have been involved in a traumatic event in which they were unable to resist their own fear and horror in situations that were life-threatening to people they care about. Their inability to stand firm and resist in both cases resulted in terrible consequences for these people. Les and Becky are acutely and constantly aware of what they affectively experience as their failure of living up to the demands of a life that had become larger than themselves. A combination of guilt and the inability to believe that they might act differently traps them in the impasse reflected in the topographical limits inherent in the existence of a mountain range.

### ***"A breath I'd not known I was holding": A Poetics of Social Devastation***

Les tracks his survival in the impasse in a language characterized by observational precision and a personal distance to what he observes. What his language conveys, stands in a constant friction with the empathy and compassion he feels for other people, and the emotional impact of the human and social wretchedness and devastation he witnesses in his professional role. It is important to note that even though his language has a distinctly oral quality to it, Les never shares his experiences with any other person except his colleagues. Moreover, no other character in the novel ever asks him about what he experiences all day, or makes any conversational attempt at creating a space where Les could verbally share.

I want to give an example here of Les' narrating two overlapping impasses which converge in his present. The valley is hit by what Les calls the 'meth plague', the production and consumption of crystal meth. As a law enforcement officer, Les and his colleagues Jarvis and Barry regularly raid 'meth houses': places where the drug is produced and/or consumed. Early-on in the novel, they have to carry out such a raid. In the house they find their target, the dealer Rodney Greer, and a young unconscious woman who Les recognizes as the daughter of townspeople Ben and Martha Lindsey:

She wore a green halter top and a pair of maroon sweatpants, no shoes. Every other toenail was painted black, like piano keys. A thin line of drool ran down the right side of her mouth. Television glamorized meth, even when they tried not to. You didn't smell the moldy food, or the vomit, shit, or blood, the meth itself burning your nose like ammonia, or how, once you'd arrested them, you turned your face so you didn't smell their rotting mouth. No, TV couldn't give you that. (78)

Les' observation of a young woman he has known casually since she was a child, and with whose parents he is on friendly terms, quickly switches from the detailed description of a person's body to a distant, indirect description of the environment he finds her in. His sensory perception of the environment – the stench of moldy food, vomit, excrement, and blood, the chemical composition of the meth destroying the very senses that recognize the wretchedness of the environment – is so devastating that he separates it in his perception from the person he encounters, while still conveying to his reader what the environment is like. His apparent lack of emotional involvement creates an impression of impassivity, where emotional implication does not get in the way of the necessary action. Les knows that the young woman has a baby, and he tries to wake her up to find out where her baby might be. When she briefly comes to, she vaguely gestures towards the kitchen.

The potential implications of this gesture translate into a moment of terrified and terrifying suspension:

For a moment no one breathed. It was like we believed if we were still enough that her words and their meaning slide right past us and evaporate. Barry took off his respirator. "No," he said. Just that one word. Then he reached under the Tyvek and unpinned his badge, laid it and the respirator beside the door, and walked down the concrete steps. (...) The CD player was on the counter. I went to it first and hit the eject button. The disk slid out, ENDLESS SUMMER on the label. I set the disk on the counter and took a step into the kitchen. The syringe's needle was pointed towards me. I set my boot toe against the tip and kicked it into the opposite corner, then kneeled in front of the microwave, one hand touching the floor to hold my balance. The microwave door was a quarter open and a bit of pink cloth spilled out onto the kitchen floor. My free hand tugged the cloth and a blanket corner emerged. I let go and set my free hand on the floor as well, because I was suddenly unsteady. The trailer was silent, not even a clock tick or refrigerator hum. *Even if it is, you can stand it*, I told myself. *You will leave this trailer and outside will be the same trees and the same roads and the same sky. The world will still be the world.* Then another thought came. *God help you if this is the vindication you've sought all of these years.*

I raised my gloved hand and settled my fingers on the door's edge. Sweat stung my eyes and I wiped a forearm across them, then across my brow. I told myself to get it over with, told myself twice. (Rash 2015: 81)

The moment of suspension is ended not by the petrified Les taking action, but when

(...) from inside the microwave, not a cry or whimper but just a baby, a normal baby, letting the world know she was awake, maybe a bit hungry. I opened the microwave's door all the way. She lay on the scrunched-up blanket, a pacifier next to her cheek. I let go of a breath I'd not known I was holding, then lifted the baby and blanket out. I nodded for Jarvis to take the child. He tucked the pacifier in her mouth and went outside. (Rash 2015: 82)

The baby's second birth from the metaphorical womb of a microwave is facilitated not by a qualified midwife, but by a terrified law enforcement officer in protective clothing and using a respirator. Another law enforcement officer swiftly removes her from an inhabited rubbish dump with four walls and a roof. No-one holds or cuddles her and, even though she is hungry, there is no food – only a pacifier. Her mother is unconscious, somewhere between life and death, and the man who provides (drugs) for her mother insists on his innocence: "'We didn't harm a hair on that baby's head," Rodney Greer said. "Ain't none of you can claim different.'" (Rash 2015: 82)

Rodney Greer's insistence on direct violence as the only source of harm contrasts with Les' emphasis on 'the world'. Les evokes 'the world' twice: once he defines it as the reliable presence of the trees, the roads and the sky outside the trailer; the second time when the baby appeals to it. The world that the baby appeals to from inside the microwave is unable to appropriately respond to the needs of a creature that vulnerable and helpless.

Les implicit sense of anger, inadequacy and impotence concatenates his suspension in time tied to the specific moment of not knowing whether the baby is alive or dead inside the microwave, to the

impasse that characterizes his life more generally. The impasse started with experiences made during a raid on a meth house a few years earlier, when Les was still married to his severely depressed, suicidal wife Sarah:

There'd been a baby in that house, too, stashed in a crib, wearing a diaper that hadn't been changed for days, the formula in the child's bottle rancid. The biker resisted and we all had scrapes and bruises, with it the fear of AIDS... The return ride had been a nightmare, the cat-piss reek on the prisoners and the baby, who wailed all the way. When I'd come into the main office, the dispatcher said Sarah had called three times since we'd left. I needed to call the moment I got in, Sarah had told her. *If you had seen what I saw today, what I had to deal with, instead of lounging in bed all afternoon, you'd have a damn reason to be depressed.* Those were the first words I'd said to Sarah on the courthouse's pay phone. The last, right before I'd slammed the phone back onto its cradle, *Go ahead and do it then.* (85)

Les puts his own desolation center-stage, and uses it to denigrate Sarah's through emotionally violent language. After this exchange, Sarah does try to commit suicide; she survives and files for a divorce. Les then loses the ability to enjoy most of what he used to enjoy. He engages in what Berlant describes as 'activity toward reproducing life', which is 'directed toward making a less-bad experience. It's a relief, a reprieve, not a repair' (Rash 2015: 117). Repair is impossible for two reasons. Firstly and on a social level, Les continues to witness the ongoing destruction of people and of the social fabric. Beyond the pages of the book that becomes *Above the Waterfall*, the social world has no space for what Les has witnessed and for what he himself is implicated in; there is no interlocutor who is literate in his oral poetics of social devastation. Secondly and on an intimate level, Sarah is unable or unwilling to communicate clearly to him whether she quietly resents Les, or whether she simply recognizes that just as he could not give her what she needed in their private, intimate space, she was also unable to be there for him as he is constantly implicated with a devastated and devastating social world.

### ***"But I look back and when I do my tongue turns to salt": The End of Speech***

Becky Shytle, who Les considers his accomplice, also finds no interlocutors in the social world. Becky is considered a bit of an oddball and a recluse by the local population. Readers eventually learn that as a child, she survived a school shooting – because her teacher put herself in harm's way and protected the children with her own body. As the teacher was leading the children to safety, the shooter came nearer the hidden group, initially without noticing them. Eventually, Becky cannot hold back her tears of terror. She believes that the drop of one of her tears in the dead silence attracts the attention of the shooter, and that she is thus to blame for the death of her beloved teacher: *'Ms Abernathy stands in the basement door, blocking the exit as I run. Close your eyes, a policeman says as he grabs me. But I look back and when I do my tongue turns to salt.'* For months after, Becky obeys her teacher's last request: *'Promise me, children, not a single word'* (Rash 2015: 119). Only after her grandparents take her with them to their farm in the countryside, accompany her silence for several months and provide Becky with the opportunity to nestle her awareness into nature, does Becky speak again.

For Becky, the appropriate balance between utter silence and carefully chosen words is the key to mental balance. She mostly excludes the social world from her experience until, during a time period she relates in hindsight, she is forced to engage with it because the community she lives in is

affected by open-air coal mining. The topography of the area is altered at a high price to the natural environment and human quality of life for the purpose of fossil fuel extraction. Moreover, a child is accidentally killed during the destruction work. The opponents of the project choose different paths; Becky initially joins up with Richard Pelfrey, who rejects all forms of negotiations and stylizes himself as someone who is willing to take any means necessary. When during a protest action Richard launches a brutal physical attack against a representative of the company, Becky breaks her ties with him. He eventually seeks her out and asks her to come with him. He claims to offer her the opportunity to 'no longer [be] a victim of anything or anyone in your past', and tells her that she has seen enough to know that his way is 'the only one that will work':

"I can't believe that," I answered.

"Yes, you can, but it has to be now. Soon we won't have any chance. They've got the technology in place. In five years people won't even know they're in the world, much less care about what happens to it. They will believe that when everything else on this planet dies, they'll be able to disappear into a computer screen. They believe it *now*, most of them."

For a few moments there was only silence.

"What you're saying," I answered. "If I let myself believe that, I couldn't endure living."  
(Rash 2015: 102)

Becky's choice of words and her repeating the word 'believe' twice suggests that what is at stake for her is not to gain a lucid vision or analysis of people's behaviors and dispositions, and possibly own and defend her own vision and pitch it against Richard's on equal terms. At stake for her is what she can allow herself to believe, and the correlation between what she can allow herself to believe and her ability to go on living. Whatever makes up that 'what' is actioned by other people, not herself. Crucially, Becky's perception also zooms in exclusively on the manipulative egomaniac Richard Pelfrey; all other activists or resisters she barely mentions, and their proposals or forms of actions go almost entirely unnoticed. As a result, Becky comes to a binary assessment of the situation. Gratuitous direct violence against persons appears to be the *only* alternative to acquiescence to the *status quo* of the slow destruction of nature and the people who depend on it. Becky rejects the option of gratuitous direct violence against persons for good reasons and sound ethical convictions – and turns inward once again:

After he died, I'd packed provisions for two weeks and gone deep into Shenandoah National Park, followed the trails leading to what was farthest away. Where the trails ended, I went beyond, pushed through a gorge of laurel slicks and over a ridge where I set up camp. One afternoon I'd wandered the woods, found an old homestead with its cairn of chimney rocks. There the fox grape's musky odor thickened the air. Yellow bells and periwinkle spread untended. How many decades such silence, I had wondered, what last words were spoken before the people left. I'd walked back to my camp and opened the only book I'd brought. I settled the poems inside of me one at a time. First "The Windhover," and then "Pied Beauty," by the end of the next week a dozen more. Letting Hopkins' words fill the inner silence. *Inscape of words*. A new language to replace the old one I no longer could interpret. (Rash 2015: 103)

In her constant experimentations with that new language Becky does her utmost to inspire those younger generations Richard dismisses to not *want* to disappear into a computer screen. Much of her work at the state park consists of tours for school children, during which she appeals to their sensory perception, and instills in them a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural environment. But from instilling that sense of wonder and sensory pleasure Becky does not move on to defend the world that is its home; instead, she develops a poetic language that absorbs her into the landscape just like a different kind of person might get absorbed into their computer screen. The circumstances and conditions of these two options differ in that technology thrives and receives powerful promotion and support, whereas nature is exploited and made to perish. Becky knows this full well; when her colleague finds an example of a rare fish species in the river of the state park and asks her whether these fish are endangered, she replies: "A few more dams and they will be." Her colleague suggests in response that "I can put it [the fish] in a bigger bucket if you want to show the kids in the morning", but Becky asks him to release it instead (Rash 2015: 73). Their focus on the immediate question of what to do with the individual fish removes the species, and Becky and her colleague themselves, from the wider implications and consequences of the slow dying of the natural world that gives them stillness and from which Becky can grow a new language to replace the old one that she can no longer interpret. Unintentionally they perpetuate the impasse where slow death encroaches on the fish, because slow dying is part of the make-up of the impasse.

## Conclusion

The story that Les and Becky tell through the poetics of social devastation and through a language re-made through poetry enacts the slow friction between the narrators' 21<sup>st</sup> century awareness of slow violence against humans and nature. Their awareness is met by an assemblage of injustices and impunities: the meth producers never get caught, the dealers are often also users who go back to dealing as soon as they get out of jail, the users live a life of misery and most of them ultimately die, the baby is rejected by its grandparents, the company that is responsible for the child being killed at the open air mining site gets away with a negligible fine, the open air mining goes ahead, the fish in the river ultimately benefit the owner of a hotel who is not interested in their protection or the conservation of their habitat, and Becky's traumatization from the school shooting is beyond recompense or justice. Trapped and entangled in the middle of this assemblage, the accomplices Les and Becky respond with impassivity to implications of social and environmental slow violence. Their impassivity ties them to the impasse where 'the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic' (Berlant). In this context, the poetics and the poetry that ensure their emotional survival also entangle them within the stagnation that perpetuates their suffering, and poetic language thus becomes entangled in what Berlant has identified as a relation of 'cruel optimism'.

Themes to be highlighted and further developed during the presentation:

- Breath
- Injustice and impunity
- Poetry, poetic language, and cruel optimism

## References

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Compassion : The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Rash, Ron. *Above the Waterfall*. New York: Ecco, 2015.