

Interactive comment on “This bookmark gauges the depths of the human: how poetry can help to personalise climate change” by Sam Illingworth

Anonymous Referee #3

Received and published: 30 September 2019

I can envisage there being value in an overview and analysis of poetry with relation to the environment that uses categorisation and similar procedures, perhaps along the lines of the ‘distant reading’ methodology of the Stanford Literary Lab; or, on another track entirely, an analysis of how poetry has been or can be used in public engagement contexts, or perhaps in self-conscious collaboration with scientists and/or communicative agendas. However, the sample of work here was too small to support the first endeavour, and the second did not seem to be at issue, though the model of communication which underpinned the essay suggested this as the most appropriate context. Broadly speaking, the article requires much more nuanced framing and discussion. Even given the journal’s remit of raising awareness of the importance and value of science communication from a scientist’s point of view, and understanding that poetry

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is being examined within that context, the discussion here cannot avoid involving concepts, ideas and methods that are well-established in non-science fields, which bear on the discussion of poetry in any disciplinary or cultural context, and which are currently absent or insufficiently considered.

I am afraid that I found the discussion of poetry to be reductive, ahistorical and simplistic. What evidence is there for poetry being ‘something that can transcend cultural barriers’ (cf. issues of translation, cultural capital, marketing and publishing economies, etc), and why should poetry, any more than any other medium, be able to ‘contextualize and personalise a global problem’? Particularly when one imagines the tiny readership for Magma and other poetry in comparison to other mediums! How does the fact that much poetry since at least the high modernist period has been criticized for being – and in some cases deliberately has been – difficult, oblique and non-referential, relate to the presentation of it as establishing a ‘common language’? A claim which seems to unconsciously draw on Wordsworth’s 1802 Preface to Lyrical Ballads (‘a selection of language really used by men’, etc), but struggles to account for much of the actual writing, publishing and reception of poetry since that time. A single issue of Magma is not sufficient to prove the overarching argument claimed – which would need to be revised to at least take into account the particular nature of that publication and of poetry magazine publication more broadly (readership, aesthetic, and so on). There exist many other collections of environmental poetry which would deepen the context for this argument, and also greatly complicate it (e.g. The Ground Aslant, ed. Harriet Tarlo; The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet ed. Alice Oswald). More incidentally, but perhaps still tellingly, Shelley’s treatise was written in 1821 and published in 1840 (unlike your edition) – and the original historical context in which the poem was written goes a long way towards explaining its thinking and intent, which has since undergone, it is an understatement to say, considerable discussion, revision and contestation.

While the coding of poems by categories might potentially yield some useful analysis, I do not think it is sophisticated or subtle enough here to answer ‘RQ1: how have poets

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interpreted the, at times, esoteric principles of climate change?' (140). Perhaps it is simply a case that the RQ needs rephrasing, but there are basic questions here that are being conflated, perhaps the most pressing of which is: can the poets' interpretations of climate change (and surely the more appropriate word would be something like 'renderings' or 'representations of') be assumed to be identical with those of readers? And as the answer is surely 'no', where does that leave the communication argument? Complex questions of poetic functioning, representation and of reading/interpretation are being overridden.

It is unclear to me whether sections of poems could be and were multiply categorized. For instance, 'But these fields are, / again, under water, brought / to the brink of drowning' was mentioned for being categorized as 'the present', but is it not also 'reaction' and 'habitat'? More broadly, the categorizing needs to be much tighter and more targeted to be operable. For instance, 'Reactions', 'those poems that explore the reactions that humans have towards climate change' – it is hard to see how any poem dealing, however tangentially, with climate change wouldn't fall into this category? The positioning of the extracts from the poems narrows down the possible complexity of the questions under discussion, and of the extracts themselves. A minor instance: the author states that poets 'had clearly chosen to write sections of the poem in a language other than English as it enabled them to more fully express what it was that they meant to say about climate change', but other possible reasons can surely be envisaged (e.g. questions of cultural capital, identity formation, deliberate estrangement of Anglophone reader etc.).

The conclusions reached were rather anticlimactic and commonplace. For instance, is it news to anyone that 'using only a singular official language (i.e. English) or technical language (i.e. science) is not sufficient to interpret and communicate the causes and consequences of climate change, and that by doing so we are at risk of ostracising those communities that are not fluent in these chosen languages' (564-8)? The question of communication is reduced to the overly narrow purview of issues such as

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language (which is in any case too casually categorized and understood – there are very many theories of poetic language which needed to be taken into account here, e.g. Jakobson's Functions of Language, 1960, itself much contested since) and subject matter; and more consideration surely needs to be given to questions of ideology and its formation and perpetuation, within which communication takes place. The idea that climate change 'is discussed less widely than is needed for meaningful action to take place' (572-3) obscures the fact that climate change is surely discussed very widely and with great frequency (see any newspaper), and the implication that more meaningful action awaits better communication needs at least some reflection and justification, and probably qualification.

Interactive comment on Geosci. Commun. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/gc-2019-19>, 2019.

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