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ARTICLE

Forms of Life for Meaghan Morris

Pam Brown

Corresponding author: Pam Brown, 147 Lawrence Street, Alexandria NSW 2015 Australia. p.brown@yahoo.com

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Meaghan once remarked (I think to the poet and art critic Ken Bolton) that she didn't like poetry because of all the empty space on the page. A quarter of a century ago in 1992, in *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*, she said she was 'a desultory reader of poetry' and that reading poetry might induce a 'scary cultural estrangement'.¹ In the foreword, she extrapolates the 'awkward' place of poetry in cultural studies then as being more an American problem than an Australian one but nearly a quarter of a century later I wonder if poetry has made an individuated local spot for itself, or even if it cares to. I mean, 'should poetry worry?'

On the other hand Meaghan wrote: 'As well as lending cultural comfort and rhetorical support, the poems I discuss ... here ... deeply and directly *structure* the essays in which they appear. This is not for "aesthetic effect"; I do not believe that criticism is, or can ever be, a mirror to art. It happens, to put it bluntly, because the poems gave me *ideas*.' In the following paragraph she concludes: 'I read the texts in order to learn more about the complex networks of living by which they are shaped, and in which, *as* poems (or "forms of life", in Deleuze and Guattari's terms), they participate.'²

Like everyone else here I love Meaghan's essays and have done so for a long time. Back in the late 1980s I stole an expression of Meaghan's from her essay 'Room 101 Or a Few Worst Things in the World'. The expression is 'modes of goo'.³ The Generic Ghosts, that is my collaborators and I, used it as a subtitle for one of our performance texts. I'll read a poem from my recent book *Missing up* that refers back to 'modes of goo' in passing:⁴

Hi fax

(in memory of my stealings)
 winter goes grey,
 as it should,
 somebody up there loves me
 gets moody, funky
 never no turning back
 like
 1984
 the year of our fax machine
 & the 'o's of Adorno
 at your place,
 not mine
 & the modes of goo
 we wrought so well,
 someone tried to
 'save me' from you
 & they did
 I tried to groan
 Help! Help!
 but the tone
 that came out
 was that of
 'polite conversation'
 ~
 clutching a cardboard cup
 of cold coffee
 throughout
 the 25 minute presentation –
 his blazon
 of casualness,
au courant,
 a provisional philosopher
 fingering the bottom of the jar
 for crumbs
 go straight to mute
 ~
 but hi anyway,
 fax something by you
 to say for you,
 we'll suck
 the last poetic drops
 & reject the 'market'
 for good & sure,
 your duty to consume
 scorned,
 never never no

never no turning back
 & what do you reckon,
 my wintry shadow,
 my fraudulent duplicate,
 somebody up there?

~

And I'd like to present another 'form of life'—an extract from a long poem called 'Left Wondering':⁵

making a list
 of mistakes & failures
 then
 new books arrive
 & magazines -
 haven't cut
 the heat-sealed packets yet
 if I read Giorgio Agamben
 I can't always digest
 the decade-old
 being stuff
 the coming being
 is probably here by now
 spherifying some ravioli
 in a techno pleasure dome
 dream kitchen
 am I so docile
 so swayed
 by my media network
 reactions -
 following
 the sociology ninja's
 shortcut through
 the digital humanities graveyard
 to the warehouse cafe
 to get a chai latte
 for Cthulhu

(?)

*

like you don't 'die'
 you 'pass'
 in this particular
 schema or schemata
 used to be scheme
 but that was tiring
 tiresome

like
 deciding your own

ethics
 weighing up
 compatibility propositions –
 anarchism
 as against existentialism
 for example
 *

burglary
 looks like a good idea
 if I read Kate Lilley
 but none of the new books
 are poetry
 I am missing
 a prompt –
 *

failure results
 from making mistakes
 from pontificating
 with our mouths filled with pie
 (peter culley)
 *

the tapes
 (cassettes) were peculiar
 when we played parts of them
 decades later
 weak, really too slow, really
 but funny
 &
 kind of
 embarrassing
 yet ‘of the times’
 ‘in today’s saturated mediated performative bowl’
 I’m glad to have lived
 in the time
 of
 so many
 women of influence
 &
 in the time
 of the young women
 to come
 - the coming women -

my list begins
 *

About the author

Pam Brown has published many chapbooks and nineteen full collections of poetry. She has been writing, collaborating, editing and publishing in diverse modes both locally and internationally for over four decades. She lives on unceded Gadigal land in Alexandria, Sydney.

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Notes

1. Meaghan Morris, Foreword, in her *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*, EMPress, Sydney, 1992, pp. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.
3. Meaghan Morris, 'Room 101 Or a Few Worst Things in the World', in her *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, Verso, London and New York, 1988, p. 194.
4. Pam Brown, 'Hi Fax' in *Missing up*, Vagabond Press, Tokyo and Sydney, 2015, pp. 74–6.
5. Pam Brown, extract from 'Left Wondering', in *Click here for what we do*, Vagabond Press, Tokyo and Sydney, 2018, pp. 66–70.