
*Contrary Rhetoric* collects ten lectures given between 2002 and 2004 by poet and critic John Kinsella at the International Centre for Landscape and Language at Edith Cowan University. Over the course of these lectures, Kinsella ranges widely – addressing topics from the rural to the urban, the Western Australian Wheatbelt to the meanings and importances of the letterbox, the poetry of Elizabeth Brockman to Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. Andrew Taylor’s introduction emphasises the importance of the eclectic nature of Kinsella’s work and the collection’s sensitivity towards language’s power to both dominate and distort, and language’s potential to maintain important moral and ethical viewpoints. Indeed, it is through language and power that poetry and landscape, Kinsella’s principal concerns in this series of lectures, are linked.

Land and language are vehicles for oppression and control. The landscaped world, for Kinsella, is ‘nature reconstructed or redirected by humans’, whether this is through deforestation, farming, urban growth, or even reforestation and conservation, or as seen through the lens of art, poetry, or literary criticism. Through a characteristic blend of personal, poetic, critical, and political digressions, each lecture addresses questions of belonging (topographical, cultural, national), interrogating how the basic sense of belonging is constructed and filtered by landscape’s history, construction, and reach. *Contrary Rhetoric* is best read alongside the volume of poems, *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful*, with which it was published simultaneously. Each volume offers mutual insight into the work of Kinsella and his vision of literary and philosophical constructions of the sublime and the aesthetic as vehicles of possession and control: in the context of a now globalised and polluted world, the poet argues, these categories must shift.

Throughout *Contrary Rhetoric*, Kinsella espouses the importance of reading broadly, whether in respect of the contents of an anthology: ‘the boundaries of what would be anthologizable as literature would be challenged’; or the process of literary criticism: ‘[t]here is no right or wrong way of looking at a text from my perspective, and indeed both biographical and textual approaches are necessary for either to have constancy’. Each lecture promotes a hybridity of reading, and challenges the sanctity of the boundaries created by both poetry and politics. Various lectures address Kinsella’s own ‘Wheatbelt Trilogy’ (*The Silo* [1995], *The Hunt* [1998], and *The New Arcadia* [2005]), contextualising the composition of the poems or using the poetry to further the poet’s expositions of rural Australian life and art: the practice of these poems, and indeed, of this volume of lectures, is ‘about the rewriting of views of place’. Kinsella places his own work (as poet, prose writer, academic, activist, and anthologist) alongside that of other Australian poets, and in turn places the poetry of Australia firmly in the context of a global world literature.

As well as a hybridity of reading, Kinsella counsels a hybridity of writing and approach. His own poetry is an attempt to ‘be simultaneously formal and innovative’, and he adopts this perspective in his studies of other poets. Digressions are frequently made, but in all cases the boundaries of poetic form are challenged, new forms discovered, and old ones re-vivified (the lecture on Kinsella’s translation of *Götterdämmerung* into English is particularly enlightening in this respect), it is also important to challenge
cultural forms through a deconstructive-reconstructive process. *Contrary Rhetoric* looks at ideas of the rural, of the pathetic fallacy, of nationalism, and of the pastoral in this respect. In the volume’s central lecture, ‘Is there an Australian Pastoral?’ Kinsella initially exposes the idea of pastoral as ‘a term of investigation as much as a term of convention’, writes of the ‘inverted pastoral’ of Australian rural poetries, and writes against the idea of traditional pastoral’s ‘control or denial of nature’ and Australian nationalism in general. Along the way, references are made to Kinsella’s own poetry, shearing folk-songs, Theocritus, Australian land law, Les Murray, country house poetry, Terry Gifford’s *Pastoral*, and Wittgenstein: Kinsella’s new pastoral is one of a hybrid vision, ‘a mixing of the codes’, and seems set fair to become a classic text of eco-criticism.

The hybridity of reference and divergent scope in ‘Is there an Australian Pastoral?’ also characterises the other lectures in the volume. So too does the poet’s frequent reference in his criticism to his own work as a poet. It is this very hybridity balanced with individuality which places Kinsella’s critical work firmly alongside his belief in the importance of political decentralisation, his impulse towards an understanding of all aspects of the world we live in, and what Taylor calls his ‘pacificist / anarchist / vegan ethic’. The wide-ranging nature of the references given in each of these lectures makes it an indispensable text for the study of Australian literature’s wider contexts. The blend of biographical and textual criticism means that some lectures provide excellent overviews of the work of various poets, in particular Michael Dransfield (‘Michael Dransfield as Landscape Poet’), Dorothy Hewett (‘From Paranoia to Celebration: The Shifting City and the Shifting Bush’), Deborah Brockman (‘The Case of Elizabeth Deborah Brockman’), and Henry Clay (‘Henry Clay – Racist or Not?’). Equally, frequent references given to and contextualisations and criticisms of his own poetic processes mean that the volume is also an excellent companion to Kinsella’s own poetry. For more detailed studies by Kinsella on his life, the reader must look to *Fast, Loose, Beginnings* (2006), on poetry and landscape to *Dislocated Poetics* (2007), and on the poet’s politics to *Activist Poetics* (2010). However, as a broad introduction to Kinsella’s poetry and his criticism, *Contrary Rhetoric* is as good a place as any to begin.

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