

## ROBERT HANDICOTT

### A CLASSICAL PAGE, CALLIGRAPHY IN GRAY

Robert Gray, *Grass Script*. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1979. Paper \$5.95. 64 pp.

Geoff Page, *Cassandra Paddocks*. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1980. Paper \$5.95. 67 pp.

On those rare occasions when conversation turns to contemporary Australian poetry, Robert Gray and Geoff Page are commonly mentioned – and sometimes dismissed – in one breath. Both belong to the busy generation of poets who appeared in print in the late sixties, going on to publish slim first collections at the beginning of the seventies. Both identify quietly with the more conservative inclinations of their generation, contributing regularly to *Poetry Australia* and *Quadrant* rather than to *New Poetry* or *Your Friendly Fascist* – and are omitted from avant-garde anthologies such as *Applestealers* and *The New Australian Poetry* as a result. Both are devotees of William Carlos Williams, from whom they have adapted and developed their characteristic forms and sense of craftsmanship, though neither comes near his American mentor for sheer vitality. Both have roots in the North Coast of New South Wales, whose landscape provides the background – and, in Gray's case, the subject – for many poems. And both write poetry reviews for newspapers, and, not surprisingly, admire and recommend the other's work.

With the publication of *Grass Script* and *Cassandra Paddocks*, Robert Gray and Geoff Page have together graduated, as it were, from the Honours school of Paperback Poets to the Masters class of Angus and Robertson. For all the real and obvious similarities, there are important differences between the talents and directions of the two poets; and these are clearly apparent now that each has published a considerable body of work. *Grass Script* is Gray's third book, while *Cassandra Paddocks* is Page's fourth.

a last half-hour,  
the unbreakable logic  
of trains.

The diction could hardly be more simple (“I find myself writing in a language I feel I could have spoken to anyone in an average situation”<sup>3</sup>) and the images are taken from the world familiar to all of us; and yet, as Philip Neilsen writes of another poem in an early review of *The Question*, “the whole is something transcending the part”.<sup>4</sup>

Page’s point, though implied or understated, is almost always readily grasped. “He deals in the finer shades of Everyman emotion”;<sup>5</sup> and his Everyman is recognizably Australian — often wearing a slouch hat. World War 1, old age (in the person of Winifred Amy), death, failed relationships and “the general catastrophe”<sup>6</sup> are recurrent concerns. All these are themes which have immediacy and which, in Page’s handling, are unlikely to puzzle prose-conditioned readers. It is not surprising that some of Page’s earlier work has become comparatively well-known. Several poems have been included in anthologies intended for schools, Bruce Dawe’s *Dimensions* for instance; while the title poem from *Smalltown Memorials* is quoted (actually, misquoted) at the conclusion of Patsy Adam-Smith’s best seller, *The Anzacs*.

Directness of approach and homeliness of theme are not undisputed virtues, however. It has often been suggested that Page is not ambitious enough to be lastingly interesting, that he limits himself too deliberately for his own good. Dane Thwaites, reviewing *Smalltown Memorials*, observes: “there are no obscurities in this book, but neither are there any resting points or shadowy places”.<sup>7</sup> Kevin Hart, the interviewer for *Makar*, presses a question about “falling into slightness . . . avoiding major issues and concentrating on peripheries and incidentals”.<sup>8</sup>

*Cassandra Paddocks* will delight readers who share Page’s preoccupations and respect his unostentatious kind of verse, but will leave unsatisfied those with reservations. Geoff Page is still writing “what comes” with integrity, doing his own thing well. There are numbers of poems which could easily come from *Smalltown Memorials*, and some (*Lunar driving* is an obvious

Geoff Page's work before *Cassandra Paddocks* comprises *The Question* (in *Two Poets*, UQP, 1971), *Smalltown Memorials* (UQP, 1975), and *Collecting the Weather* (Makar Press, 1978). From the outset Page has been praised for his style. Critics (mainly fellow poets) have approved, on the one hand, the restraint and precision with which he creates, in Alan Gould's words, "the timbre of an Australian voice".<sup>1</sup> On the other hand they have admired the "carefully balanced sub-stratum of meanings"<sup>2</sup> he manages to imply, mostly – as he has admitted in an interview – by an unusual use of adjectives and by "juxtapositions", rather than by the conventional poetic devices of simile and metaphor. Both aspects of Page's style are evident in the poem *Detail* from *Cassandra Paddocks*. A grandson is visiting his nonagenarian grandmother in a home. The old lady – essentially Page's own grandmother Winifred Amy, to whom the book is dedicated – speaks briefly of a fellow patient,

the woman  
beached  
in the bed behind her

both legs  
cut off at the thigh.  
He looks around.

Two red coals  
in a crumpled face  
insist

that legs still stride  
from kitchen to copper  
& spread each year

for children.  
The silence comes again.  
Grandmother & grandson.

The years are  
turning transparent.  
The window frames

example) seem to have grown from the same idea as earlier poems. In the new poems about World War 1 and about members of Page's family a kind of strip-mining seems to be in progress: the poet is still finding workable ore (hence *Trench dreams* and *Bathrooms*), but the operation obviously cannot go on indefinitely. Much of the time there is more of almost-the-same. In *Somewhere between 4 a.m. & 6*

Life leaks away  
& houses joined by drifting rain  
are held until a ratchet point is reached . . .

A scatter of clocks  
revives the lie  
that all may not be lost.

This is not very different from *Aubade*:

Turning in our tumbled blankets  
with last night's love  
remembered on the skin

we listen to the world  
fill up with light  
and with our losses.

The sentiments are reminiscent of James McAuley; but the early morning setting is typical Geoff Page in this mood, and is familiar from earlier poems (*Sunrise on the Coast*, *Love at the end*, *Coloratura*). It is a credit to Page's craftsmanship that he is able to make these poems acceptable as variations on a theme, when they skate so very close to repetition.

While subject matter and tone remain predictable, *Cassandra Paddocks* shows Page consciously striving to widen his formal range. Sound development in this area is evident in the title poem; in the unusually experimental *Tensions*; in the long blank verse monologue *Last draft*; and in *Buried and unburied voices*. The last-named is a sequence in which Page contrives, successfully I think, to capture a range of more or less well-known voices from the World War period. He leans perhaps a little too heavily on direct quotation, in the poem about Bill Harney for example; but the vernacular stanzas of *The Bloke* are effective and refreshing:

When Kaiser William made his war  
I was just too old to go.  
Me younger mates joined up as one,  
I had to stay and so

I see the war as one big stoush  
In an alley turned world-wide.  
Me mates are there in the thick of it –  
I help 'em from the side.

There *are* a few new themes, of course. *Dispersal* deals ironically with the relationship between biographer and “great man”; *Poem ending with a title* concerns itself flippantly with “lapsed musicians”; and *In another country* draws, for the first time to my knowledge, on Page’s experiences as a school teacher:

Across a room of half-drunk glasses  
he watches them dancing  
as if in another country – the still heady  
newness of alcohol, the tough beat under the skin

and joins them sometimes  
shifting his different bones  
feeling in their circling closeness  
the steady distances.

I personally prefer the version of this poem which appeared in the last issue of *The Saturday Club Book of Poetry* several years ago: “heaving” closeness and “atlantic” distances seemed more appropriately desperate. Any teacher who has attended a Senior Formal, however, will identify with the feelings.

“School” could become a growth area in Geoff Page’s poetry – it certainly offers plenty of material for a poet who is obsessed with the vanity of human wishes. On the other hand, after *Cassandra Paddocks* Geoff Page may feel he has achieved most of his ambitions. “All I really want to do,” he told Kevin Hart modestly, “is to write several books of the best poetry I can.”<sup>9</sup>

Robert Gray’s previous publications are *Introspect*, *Retro-spect* (Lyre Bird Writers, 1970) and *Creekwater Journal* (UQP,

1974). If Geoff Page's work is often downbeat as if intended to disturb, Gray's poems are characteristically celebratory, as if to inspire praise. He finds and communicates tranquil delight in the most everyday objects and experiences;

These ripe days,  
the heat, the tenderness;  
a white bathtub filled with green water,  
the leaves against the glass.<sup>10</sup>

One realizes that Gray's literary roots, more so than Page's, delve beyond William Carlos Williams to the Japanese tradition of haiku, which had its initial great impact on English poetry at the beginning of this century. *Grass Script*, like *Creekwater Journal*, contains generous selections of haiku, mostly written, as is now usual in English, in three lines without syllabic restrictions, and without obligatory seasonal references and other Japanese conventions. In America Gray might have published several tiny volumes of these poems with a press specializing in the form.

Figures racing to the surf;  
they strike the silver water, crooked  
as roots of ginger.

In a cheap hotel room  
eating fruit —  
it drips on the towel.

The station master,  
looking across the wide, hot flats,  
pours tea-leaves on the tracks.

Japanese haiku is inseparable from Zen Buddhism, and Gray leaves us in no doubt that he believes in the way of Zen. In practice his Buddhism is probably Buddhism-with-a-difference; but what matters is that it provides a philosophical basis for his poetic method. Like the spiritual masters he quotes, Gray does not teach, or, if he does, he does not teach the expected things in the expected way. He responds to "all things" and affirms them, "without getting caught".<sup>11</sup> Where many of Geoff Page's poems are arguments, concluding with a clause that begins with "but" or with "and" meaning "therefore", Gray's poems

consistently lack the sense of something brought to a neat (too neat) conclusion. Poems from *Creekwater Journal* like *Salvation Army hostel*, *Early to rise*, and “Wednesday, the dead, dark / and middle of the week” seemed like almost random extracts from the cosmic “journal”. Moments of time, recreated in words, were invested by the poet’s attention, as by the focussing of a camera, with a significance that was unexpected yet obviously due. One sensed at the same time that things had gone on before and after the particular moments recorded, and that they too had been significant. *Pumpkins*, *Looking After a Friend’s House*, *Flames and Dangling Wire* and other poems from *Grass Script* leave a similar impression on the reader. There is no frame, no conventional finality. “It is all like a mountain river.”<sup>1 2</sup>

More importantly, though Gray’s poems seem to be based almost solely on personal experience, the pronoun “I” occurring in virtually every poem, one hesitates to say, as has been said of Page,<sup>1 3</sup> that Gray evokes significance from the presence of self. We obviously meet a mind and personality in *Grass Script*, but it is one whose aspiration is to live

without me  
as the filament, the grains, the sedimentary content,  
the matter to be taken into account.<sup>1 4</sup>

The “ordinary things” are important, if *To the Master*, *Dogen Zenji* and *Dharma Vehicle* are to be believed, not because Gray observes them, and certainly not “for the enforcement or decoration of moral or religious truth”,<sup>1 5</sup> but because they are there — they are “the atoms”:

So that these transient things, themselves, are  
    what is Absolute;  
these things  
beneath the hand, and before the eye —  
the wattle  
laying on the wooden trestle,  
pencils, some crockery,  
books and papers, a river stone,  
the dead flies and cobwebs  
in the rusty gauze.<sup>1 6</sup>

The poems about Buddhism are obviously important to Gray. The cover blurb for *Grass Script* describes *Dharma Vehicle*, a poem of 14 pages, as “central to the book”; and in one sense it is. But I do not think most readers will consider Gray’s “personal interpretation of the development of Buddhist philosophy” the most valuable part of his work. The poems that are really memorable are those which *embody* Buddhist awareness, crystallizing “transient things” with what the cover blurb unexaggeratedly calls “unforgettable imagistic rightness”.

Robert Gray’s most characteristic poems lack the compression of haiku; and his favourite poetic device is one almost totally foreign to that genre in Japanese – the simile. Robert Adamson, in a caustic review of *Grass Script* in *New Poetry* complains: “In almost every poem Gray discovers an object, an image central to what the poem’s doing – then he immediately looks around to see if it is like something else. . . He strives so hard to affect an image sometimes, his most intentionally serious thoughts seem either silly or grotesque”.<sup>17</sup> For this reviewer, however, Gray’s similes hit the nail on the head time and time again. However lowly a place some poets and critics may have assigned the simile beside the symbol, for example, sharp, surprising visual images have long been a part of good lyric poetry, and they will always give pleasure. When Gray writes, in *Looking After A Friend’s House*,

The moon is settling  
quickly, the way an egg yolk  
slides along  
and off  
a table top,

I am, naturally, aware of the egg yolk, but I certainly see the settling moon. In *Pumpkins*

The rooster is red  
and lacquered as a Chinese box;  
the pumpkin itself  
segmented like a peeled mandarin  
or leather  
on the back seat of a 30’s tourer.

The simile which describes scavengers at a dump in *Flames and Dangling Wire* is not only vivid but, obviously, organically related to the total poem, like an epic simile in Milton:

As in hell the devils  
might pick about amongst our souls, for vestiges  
of appetite  
with which to stimulate themselves,

so these figures  
seem to wander disconsolately, with an eternity  
in which to turn up  
some peculiar sensation.

One could go on and on quoting them. Even when, as in *Late Ferry*, the comparisons come unusually thick and fast – so that for Adamson the poem takes on a surreal quality contrary to the poet’s intention – for me the subject is always distinctly in view, very often with the clarity of sudden recognition.

Where Gray is less successful – and less successful than Geoff Page – is in the poems about human relationships. Here the Buddhist virtue of detachment, of awakening the mind “without fixing it anywhere”, counteracts (or, perhaps, provides an excuse for the lack of) natural warmth, sympathy and understanding. Robert Adamson has pointed this out in relation to the long *Poem to My Father*. In *The Visit* the poet goes home to see his mother; but there is only “wintry sunlight gossip”, and one feels that the lack of communication is caused as much by the attitude of the son as by anything else. When, at the end of *Poem to Kristina*, the poet recognizes his times with Kristina as “times when I was happy / and didn’t think I was”, it is not the real Kristina, the woman of flesh and blood, who seems to be remembered, so much as the image of her in the poet’s mind. In fact, very few poems deal with relationships. Although *Dharma Vehicle* declares that one ought to

care for the body with oils  
and comb the hair and decorate oneself  
to sleep with another,  
and join one’s friends  
in the grove of summer,  
or beneath wide eaves  
in dark weather, when the rain drips,  
bringing wine,

the persona of Gray's poetry seems much more comfortable when free to "wander along the mountainside alone".

This makes quite inexplicable to me the cover blurb's statement that one of the themes of *Grass Script* is "social responsiveness". Only one poem, *The Estates*, deals at all explicitly with what would normally be considered a "social" issue; and it does so completely from the outside, without anger, without irony, without anything resembling a call to action. The important thing is to be "safe from all those lies about what profit has done" – that is, to stay detached. Social responsiveness is anything but a Buddhist theme. In Gray's version of Buddhism, "to know pleasure as pleasure / and pain as pain / and to keep the mind free from all attachment" inevitably leads to the passive conclusion that things are essentially "all right".

I would say, too, that the poems about Gray's trip to Europe (*The Swallows*, *Scotland*, *Visitation*) are far less successful at capturing the "spirit of place" than the best poems in Geoff Page's *Collecting the Weather*. In *Inscription at Villers-Bretonneux*, *Hora Sfakion* and *The Temple of Aphaia* Page deals with his familiar themes of war and death against European backgrounds which are superbly evoked.

The highlight of *Grass Script*, for me, is *Telling the Beads*. Here Gray's philosophy and natural imagery are most convincingly one. The "beads" are drops of dew on nasturtium leaves and on grass "that's loping everywhere, / in all the trajectories of a flea circus":

This is authentic manna, it contains  
no message and no promise,

only a momentary sustenance.

Run the drops from a stalk across your lip

they're lost

in the known juice of yourself, after the  
ungraspable instant.

Long-reputed but unresponsive  
elixir.

Experiencing you, I see before me all the most  
refined

consolations of belief and thought.

Poems as fine as *Telling the Beads* are rare and precious; and it seems hardly fair to point out that there is nothing in *Cassandra Paddocks* comparable with this poem, or with *Flames and Dangling Wire*. If Geoff Page is a compassionate scribe, Robert Gray, at his best, is a visionary. Whatever his future output – and one is tempted to expect great things – the best of his work to date deserves to outlive the great bulk of poetry written in Australia in the 1970's.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alan Gould, "Control and Parsimony", *Poetry Australia*, 72 (1979), pp. 54-59.

<sup>2</sup> Dane Thwaites, "Geoff Page – Smalltown Memorials", *New Poetry*, 24, No. 2 (1976), pp. 96-98.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Hart, "Location and Detail, an interview with Geoff Page", *Makar*, 12, No. 1 (1976), pp. 37-43.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Neilsen, "Taking the Milk Train Home to Mother", *Makar*, 7, No. 1 (1971), pp. 35-37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Love at the end", *Smalltown Memorials*, St Lucia, UQP, 1975, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Thwaites, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Hart, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> One of "18 Poems", *Creekwater Journal*, St Lucia, UQP, 1974, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> "Dharma Vehicle", *Grass Script*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1979, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Neilsen, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> "Dharma Vehicle", *Grass Script*, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, in *Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958, p. 527.

<sup>16</sup> "Dharma Vehicle", *Grass Script*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Adamson, "I Do Not Want to Be What I Am", *New Poetry*, 27, No. 4 (1980), pp. 67-70.

