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I'M BEING SERIOUS:**

**Three Studies in
Seriousness and Wit
in Contemporary
Australian Poetry**

by

Jennifer Strauss

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1990

The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1989

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Preface

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

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Modulations of High Seriousness: the Later Poetry of Judith Wright

Since the three poets that I am discussing are not perhaps the most predictable of companions, it may be helpful to start with some indication of the general framework within which I am considering them. From time to time we become aware that certain terms which are items in the standard lexicon of criticism and reviewing have become problematic. They may have worn so thin that they have little or no semantic force and serve as mere markers of approval or disapproval; or they may exhibit their detachment from the original context of ideas in which they functioned securely by beginning to slide about, creating as many problems of definition and communication as they solve. It seems to me that something of this nature has overtaken the terms "seriousness" and "wit" and that it has done so as a result of changes in our sense of our existence, changes most symptomatically displayed in our very concept of language as well as in our use of it. There is an eloquent description of these changes in Italo Calvino's "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature":

If we had to give a brief definition of this process we could say that the notion of man as the subject of history is finished--the antagonist who has dethroned man must still be called man, but a man very different from what he was before All the parameters, categories, and antitheses that we once used to define, plan, and classify the world have been called into question. And not only those most closely linked to historical values, but even the ones that seemed to be stable anthropological categories--reason and myth, work and existence, male and female--and even the polarity of the most elementary combinations of

words--affirmation and negation, above and below, subject and object.¹

My reference to Calvino is not an example of the colonial cringe, an assumption that an idea must always be validated by quoting it from a European, who is bound to have said it better. In fact, the kind of correspondence between Calvino's views and many of Wright's concerns seems to me merely to confirm that Australians can now feel themselves citizens of the whole intellectual world without having surrendered their Australian passports, something that each of my chosen poets demonstrates in his or her different way. But in addition, what Calvino has to say in this essay seems particularly relevant to the kind of seriousness that distinguishes Judith Wright's poetry, and so you will find me returning to him from time to time.

For the moment, however, let me pause on the terms seriousness and wit as categories by which we classify literary performance and consider whether they too are called into question, in themselves and in combination. Are seriousness and wit a polarized pair? Is the function of the "and" in my title oppositional or cumulative?

In many ways the terms may be seen as synonyms for that earlier pair in whose problematic relationship Chaucer took such interest, namely "game and earnest." The twentieth century sense of seriousness, however, is still largely derived from that eminent Victorian, Matthew Arnold, who saw high seriousness as the definitive mark of great poetry. This quality was partly a question of subject matter, but even more one of attitude towards the subject matter. The distinctive attitude of the writer of high seriousness is one of reverence, and it is of interest that this attitude, often identified as characteristic of Wright,² is one that she herself

presents in "Romanticism and the Last Frontier" as central to the importance of Wordsworth.³

To underpin the ideal conformability, the direct ratio relationship within high seriousness of subject matter, attitude and rhetoric, philosophical views which believe in the desirability and the reality of unity are necessary. Excision of the peripheral and the dissonant requires confidence about the existence and definability of the central, of unity, of absolutes. And the writer also needs confidence in the capability of language to express experience, and in the activity of poetry itself as something more than mere entertainment.

Whereas the "art for art's sake" movement was truly oppositional to Victorian high seriousness, the same can not be said for much of the twentieth century criticism that argued for the restoration of wit and irony to a high place in the literary hierarchy. Indeed critics like Eliot and F.R. Leavis were in many ways affirming the romantic principle of fullness of experience as well as that of unity, by insisting that literature which accommodated playfulness and the pleasurable intellectual appreciation of incongruity along with seriousness was superior in its combinative quality to a more single-minded high seriousness.

Now you may at this stage suspect that I have set my three poets up so that I can do a kind of Goldilocks and the three bears routine of "This poetry is too serious" (Wright); "this poetry is too witty" (Forbes); but "this poetry" (that of Wallace-Crabbe), "being something of both, is just right." But I assure you that this is not my intention. It may be true that the crude distinction I have just made has some appropriateness; but it is not so much the distinction of kinds as the evaluation of "this is just right" that I am refusing. I

happen to be entirely in agreement with Judith Wright when she says:

Poetry is large; it has room for everything, and for all ways of looking at the world and dealing with experiences. It demands nothing except unfailing honesty and perceptiveness, but it does not like the ascendancy of formulas and fashions.⁴

There is certainly no doubt that Wright is and always has been entirely serious about the activity of writing poetry, the importance of poets to human existence. We can take further extracts from the lecture quoted above, a lecture delivered as part of a seminar on Literature in Australia in 1965--a kind of median point in her career-- and they will still serve well enough to define her position. She argues that "real poetry," being both local and universal, must always to some extent be understood in terms of its particular context as that context has developed historically:

Our poetry has its roots in the past, as we ourselves have; we draw nourishment from them even when we know little about them; and we live in a world where cause leads to effect, even in the sphere of art which we sometimes regard as subject to its own laws only. (1-2).

She sees Australian history as marked by a materialism which is above all expressed in an attitude to the land itself "as a property to be exploited rather than an inheritance to be cherished." In this materialist society, moreover, the progress of technology has meant that "change, rather than consolidation, has been the condition of Australian life." The qualities that she values, a search for what is permanent, and the practice of "contemplation and elaboration of thought have not been a mark of Australian poetry, and

their rare practitioners ['serious' poets of the past like Harpur, Brennan, Neilson and Furnley Maurice] could not until recently expect much appreciation ... Even today," she continues

we are apt to prefer "poetry of occasion" and poetry of immediately intelligible bearing, and the poetry of action and description and narration to the work of poets who insist on contemplation and on the development of their own personal bent and values. (4-5)

But, Wright argues, it is exactly because poetry speaks, in the midst of materialism and technology, to

the continuing core of man, his feeling, and his desire to be a whole and rounded personality that the best kind of poetry being written today is personal poetry written by poets who insist on being completely faithful to their own experience, on listening to inner rather than to outer fact, on being themselves in the face of all distractions and following the line dictated by personality rather than by theory Poetry is one of the last subjective tasks in a time devoted to the object, and as such it is probably the most important. (11)

This is remarkably close to Calvino's position that:

What we ask of writers is that they guarantee the survival of what we call *human* in a world where everything appears inhuman; guarantee the survival of *human* discourse to console us for the loss of humanity in every other discourse and relationship. And what do we mean by *human*? Usually, whatever is temperamental, emotional, ingenuous. (95)

And closer to home there is also a striking correspondence between this thoroughly humanist view of the role and importance of poetry and the terms in which Alec King reviewed Wright's 1966 volume, *The Other Half*, praising her for poetry "that feels in its bones the need here, there and anywhere in our racketty society for more sane and pure comprehension of the permanent motions of our human life."⁵

But while her idea of what poetry ought to do seems to have changed little over the years, there have been changes in the way that she has set about this "last subjective task." The nature of the changes in rhetoric are clear when we compare two poems, one early and one late, each based on the figure of the dance, a traditional symbol of unity in diversity. Here is part of "Country Dance" from the sequence "The Blind Man" in her 1949 volume *Woman to Man*:

Streamers and boughs are falling, the dance
grows faster.
Only the lovers and the young are dancing
now at the end of the dance, in a trance or singing.
Say the lovers locked together and crowned with
coloured paper:

"The bit of black glass I picked up out of the
campfire
is the light the moon puts on your hair."
"The green pool I swam in under the willows
is the drowning depth, the summer night of your
eyes,"
"You are the death I move to." "O burning weapon,
you are the pain I long for."

Stars, leaves and streamers fall in the dark dust
and the blind man lies alone in his sphere of night.

Oh, I,
red centre of a dark and burning sky,
fit my words to music, my crippled words to
music,
and sing to the fire with the voice of the fire.
Go sleep with your grief, go sleep with your desire,
go deep into the core of night and silence.
But I hold all of it, your hate and sorrow,
your passion and your fear; I am the breath
that holds you from your death.
I am the voice of music and the ended dance.⁶

But in "Smalltown Dance" from the 1985 volume *Phantom Dwelling* we have a quieter, if ancient, dance performed by the two women who "find the square-root of a sheet":

High scented walls there were of flapping white
when I was small, myself.
I walked between them, playing Out of Sight.
Simpler than arms, they wrapped and comforted--
clean corridors of hiding, roofed with blue--
saying, Your sins too are made Monday-new;
and see, ahead
that glimpse of unobstructed waiting green.
Run, run before you're seen.

But women know the scale of possibility,
the limit of opportunity,
the fence,
how little chance
there is of getting out. The sheets that tug
sometimes struggle from the peg,
don't travel far. Might symbolise

something. Knowing where danger lies
you have to keep things orderly.
The household budget will not stretch to more.

And they can demonstrate it in a dance.
First pull those wallowing white dreamers down,
spread arms: then close them. Fold
those beckoning roads to some impossible world,
put them away and close the cupboard door.⁷

The back cover of *Phantom Dwelling* speaks of this as "a return to the poet's artistic beginnings and surely one of her classic poems." This very beautiful example of music made from "the scale of possibility" may indeed become a classic, but it will be one of a very different kind from the ecstatic early poems, and if it constitutes a return to her beginnings it is one which demonstrates very clearly a proposition from one of her favorite philosophers, Heraclitus: that one cannot step twice into the same river.

The kind of changes demonstrated by these two poems have been variously seen as development or decline. Wright's exasperation with readers and anthologists who only want to listen to the early modes has been made known in no uncertain terms: it flashes out--to be disposed of with a casual authority--in "Skins," also from *Phantom Dwelling*: "You ask me to read those poems I wrote in my thirties?/ They dropped off several incarnations back."

Put like this, the changing sounds a fairly benign natural process; at the time it may have been experienced as more strenuous. Harry Heseltine, in a sympathetic essay concerned particularly with the 1950s, takes "The Traveller and the Angel" with its references to Jacob's wrestling with the angel as central to what he sees as her developmental problem in this period.⁸ Although he notes that the poem

closes in "fearful inconclusiveness and uncertainty" (167), he does not see this as offering support for those negative criticism with which he disagrees, while listing them as

a certain tendency to bolster assertion with rhetoric, a loss of confidence in both the movement of the verse and the composing self, a loosened grasp on her humanistic optimism without even the compensation of a convincing despair. (164)

His analysis postulates a considerable degree of consciously willed development. He speaks of the need for an "exercise in strategic survival" to solve the problems of maintaining "the impetus of a dazzling start" (163), and concludes

Knowing the kind and quality of her earlier successes, able at will to repeat them, she yet made the harder choice of seeking, through private struggle, to wring from poetry a new vision of the world. (170)

But one may wonder whether a new vision was not *necessitated* by something to which Heseltine rightly draws attention: a shift in the experienced quality of Time. This had become less the philosophically observed "moving image of eternity" that presides over her first volume and more the force which must be paradoxically praised by David's harp in "The Harp and the King" even while it betrays and takes away the life it gave.

In later poems, this double action is to become the patterning hall-mark not so much of Time itself as of those who, choosing life, must choose to live--at least in the body--under Time's terms. So, in the section of "Habitat" where she addresses her house as a kind of alter ego, we find:

... We choose or reject

what passes us on the streams that circle the
world.

Some things enter and leave, some become at
home,
some are unanswered irrelevant, turned away.
A kind of weaving
goes on all the time in houses, its patterns
determined by the years of taking and giving.⁹

And in "Black/White" the image is part of the pattern of
oppositions that must be taken up again when life is resumed
after illness: oppositions of despair and affirmation, living in
the daylight world and in that of night,

But still here's day, here's night,
the checkerboard of yes and no
and take and give. (*Alive* 45)

Finally, in the title poem of *Fourth Quarter*, when the
"last lemon-quarter grin" of the moon mocks with the
knowledge that it will return while the speaker "won't be back
again / or not this way," and tempts her to "throw it in," her
defiant answer is

Grin in the sky,
I'm taker still and giver:
there's your reply.¹⁰

Other critics identify different preoccupations as
sources of development. Sturm, for instance, approves the
move away from an early stage of looking at "particularities
of place and time in Australia" to *The Gateway's* "symbolic
probing of Australian particularities for the light they might

shed on more universal qualities of human experience."¹¹ The hostile reaction to this very move by Elyne Mitchell in *Southerly* No 1, 1955 is among a list of passages exemplifying the kind of criticism enumerated by Heseltine and slated as mean-spirited and inept by Frank Kellaway, who argues for respect for Wright's "continued struggle to understand experience in terms of her own philosophy [which] involves a continuing effort to absorb and digest the concepts and symbolism of Jungian Psychology."¹²

The arguments put forward by Heseltine, Sturm and Kellaway are by no means incompatible with my own position that Wright's poetic development involves an initial temperamental and philosophical situating of herself and her poetry in the realm of traditional high seriousness, a struggle to develop in this dimension, and a partial surrender of the territory as untenable, a situation described in the penultimate poem of *Collected Poems*, "The Unnecessary Angel." This is the end of a poem which obviously invites us to see it at least in part as a response to Wallace Stevens's "The Necessary Angel," that great statement of the importance of the imagination:

Yet we still can sing,
this proviso made:
Do not take for truth
any word we said.

Let the song be bare
that was richly dressed.
Sing with one reserve:
Silence might be best.

But it was not silence towards which Wright turned but towards growth, and growth into a different kind of seriousness, one both marked by and affirmative of the

characteristics of pluralism: a sense of multiple and mortal identities as person and as poet, doubt, and--necessarily--a different kind of rhetoric. That this process is completely achieved and exemplified in *Phantom Dwelling* is very much the view taken by Keith Russell in his review of that volume:

We see a mature poet taking every advantage of her age ... the poet demands less of herself and of her readers, and less of the world as Nature. Her ease is real, hard won, and not to be misread as complacency ... a noble and defiantly passive mistress of things mortal." And on style: "a voluptuous, humanistic pluralism allows poem after poem to forgo expected polemics and strategies of rhetorical balance."¹³

Consider for instance the final poem "Patterns." Among other things, this involves ideas about absolute and universal principles of matter or of states of being and the human experience of these as conflicting. Within the realm of high seriousness there have always been two possible ways of handling this. One is transcendent: to seek to imagine entry into the realm of pure and eternal absolutes, the implication often being that in the ultimate absolute of the Platonic or the divine One, all others will be resolved into unity. Andrew Taylor has drawn attention to a hankering after transcendence and the transcendental signifier in some of Wright's poems;¹⁴ but in "Patterns" she seems to have abandoned the transcendental, to have accepted "the limits of possibility" when she says "Impossible to choose between absolutes, ultimates. / Pure light, pure lightlessness cannot be perceived."

In such a human condition, and under the impact of apparently unique historical events for which man is responsible, such as the explosion of the atom bomb, it is

impossible to follow the injunctions of ancient wisdom such as that of Heraclitus:

All's fire, said Heraclitus; measures of it
kindle as others fade. All changes yet all's one.

We are born of ethereal fire and we return there,
Understand the Logos, reconcile opposing principles.

The very basis of such wisdom, and of the symbolic structure that both expresses and sustains it, is called into question with the speculation "Perhaps the dark itself is the source of meaning, / the fires of the galaxy its visible destruction."

But manifestations of light and darkness, however problematic their significance, do exist and can be perceived, not merely as an external part of our experience, but as somehow contained within ourselves: "We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness." With this final line, which follows her rejection of the prayer to Agni, the fire-god, for the triumph of fire, she accepts the other way, that of immanence, of dealing with absolutes as manifested within the conflicting particularities of the actual world--and indeed she can be seen as more inclined from the beginning to take that position. The tension of polarities is always present in her poetry, and she sees an awareness of it as an essential component of modern consciousness if it is to deal with major contemporary themes.¹⁵ But whereas the early poetry often relies on and celebrates--sometimes ecstatically--the powers of consciousness and language to achieve visionary moments of synthesis, the later poetry is more sober in tone and ragged in argument in its acceptance and affirmation of the need to live out the conflicts as they are contained, but always imperfectly understood and incompletely manifested, in our own temporary persons and histories.

One sign of acceptance of the temporary nature of our being is the surrender of the notion of a fixed identity (the quest for which has been a traditional trope of high romanticism). Wright's acceptance of multiple identities in "Skins" is, in this new mode, characteristically deflected from a grandiloquently general closure into that already-quoted defiance of her critics' desire for her to stay the same. One of the poems which signals this kind of change in the quality of Wright's endings is "Interface" from *Fourth Quarter*, although it does in a sense have its rhetorical cake as well as refusing it by concluding:

If you mourn its choice [of death], remember,
not only whales have made it.
Whole people, countries, nations
have died in the same way.
Galaxies may be strewn
with staring burnt-out planets
which took that path.
But this is to mourn a whale--
only a whale. (8)

And it is also true that the tonal quality of "Skins" retains a celebratory notion of growth through change if one reads it remembering "Snakeskin on a Gate" (CP 245) in which, seeing both the shed skin and the new "shining" snake, she concludes "Like this from our change, my soul, let us drink renewal." If we are looking for evidence that there are reconciliations, and even new grounds for celebration, in the later poems' world of "late season's grace" we may find an instance in "Hunting Snake" (*Phantom Dwelling* 23). The enhancement of the speaker's life that comes from seeing the snake "cold, dark and splendid" is a strong contrast to the psychic experience in "The Killer" (CP 53). In the earlier poem, rejection and destruction of the snake only intensifies

the fear which motivated it and adds the further psychic burden of guilt as the speaker becomes the killer of the title.

For a world of doubt, what better than a doubtful song we may ask; we may also have to acknowledge that it is all that our local history will afford us. This is the position taken at the end of "To my Brothers" (from the sequence "For a Pastoral Family")¹⁶

Our people who gnawed at the fringe
of the edible leaf of this country
left you a margin of action, a rural security,
and left to me
what serves as a base for poetry
a doubtful song that has a dying fall.

(*Phantom Dwelling* 17)

One may well compare this with the sense of a rich heritage discovered in "South of my Days"--"the high lean country / full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep." Or one may admire the energy with which the prophetic and inspiring burst of language "leaps" from destruction in "Flame Tree in a Quarry" (*CP* 62) and compare that with the more tentative sense of language and the division between the speaker and the natural world that we find in the "Summer" of *Phantom Dwelling*: "In a burned-out summer, I try to see without words / as they do. But I live through a web of language." (44)

However, the ambiguities of "web of language"--as that which connects and that which obscures, as that which gives life as much to the singer as the singer gives life to the song--should make us pause before assuming too easily that Wright's views of the possibilities of language have become increasingly pessimistic and limited. One might indeed argue

that to be able to say "I live through a web of language" is more positive than the lament "no net is strong enough to hold the world" by which she renders, in the early poem "The World and the Child" (*CP* 39), the Sartrean dictum that "through our language we cannot know the world."

I had expected when I began thinking about this lecture to talk extensively of Wright's ideas about language: but I have found that at least two other critics--Terry Sturm fairly briefly and Shirley Walker very extensively--have set out the kinds of philosophical concepts that influenced her thinking about language and have examined the ways in which these affect the development of her poetry.¹⁷ So I propose to content myself with not so much a summary as a conclusion. It is clear that Wright was affected by the acute anxiety about the nature and the functional efficacy of language that marks the twentieth century. For while anxiety about language is a recurring philosophical phenomenon, it has been perhaps more acute in the twentieth century than ever before because it has gone straight past anxiety about the skill or craft of the potential user to a theoretical questioning of the potentialities of the thing itself, a questioning which not only goes further than before in suggesting the arbitrariness and slipperiness of language, but insists that this is the essence of language, not the product of contingent flaws.

These ideas have, however, probably outraged or intrigued writers and critics rather more than they have affected the common reader. And many readers of Wright's poetry would probably be quite content with the fairly pragmatic theory that she advanced in her two lectures "The Writer in Crisis" where she argues that, instead of lamenting the decay of a world view that can no longer be believed in and seeing language as implicated in that decay, we must recognize it as an historical and social phenomenon, "a crystallization of our experience in common" and we must be ready to

participate in claiming the power of language to name the flux of our own time.

Wright's discussions of language are interesting; but not nearly as interesting or problematic as the poetic practice in which we see her wrestling with the angel of language as estrangement even while she never ceases to hold on to it as the only means of living in knowledge and love. Surely one of the things we value in poets is exactly their capacity to persuade us for a moment that we are hearing a language that is completely realized, essentially adequate; and this is no less true if we also value the power of poets to let us take pleasure in our own anxiety that this can never be. The poets who do the latter operate classically through wit: but Wright, for the most part, comes to both activities soberly, even in her ventures into satire.

Let us go back to the way in which Wright was received with delight as a serious poet when she first appeared in the 1940s. She answered a communal need to be able to take ourselves seriously as being simultaneously intimately located in Australia and fully involved in major human issues, perceiving the universe, nature, time, mortality, sexuality. The question of subject matter is pertinent: high seriousness tended to deal in large topics or at least topics largely conceived. It could involve seeing eternity in a grain of sand--small bits of nature being granted large significance through a microcosm/macrocasm concept that had become commonplace for physical nature but less so for social existence. Domesticity tended to be excluded, and it is instructive to note the way in which A.D. Hope constructs his praise of Wright's work as "profound" in its breaking of new thematic ground.

He argues that her profundity is not a matter of philosophical thought but of metaphysical vision, "the power

of cracking open the stuff of experience, of opening new powers of seeing, new modes of experience" and that she has done this for one of "the large areas of common human experience over which poetry has not exercised this function," that is, gestation and birth. This is something, he says

that only women can deal with and women poets have on the whole avoided it except in a domestic, cosy and trivial way. But this is what Judith Wright deals with as a woman and a poet of the deepest insight and remarkable revelatory power.¹⁸

However, from "Habitat" (the first poem of her 1973 volume *Alive*) onwards, we can see Wright defying the exclusion of the domestic from the realm of the serious, and the title "Smalltown Dance" may in itself be an ironic refusal of the grander scale for which she had won such praise, however flattering it must have been.

It is true that Hope scolded her for deficient technique --but it is a scolding that contains within itself the suspicion that the very effects he praises could not be obtained within the accomplished formal verse he demands. For the general audience, Wright's early technique must have been close enough to formality to re-assure without inhibiting response. It looked comfortably like poetry with its fairly regular stanza patterns, its frequent but not overinsistent use of rhyme, its general reliance on iambic pentameter or ballad lines. What Australian readers found that was new within these familiar formal structures was the mundane-- our familiar landscapes and lives--made numinous through metaphors which allowed us to believe in the mind and nature as one, not just in Wordsworth's lake district but on our own doorsteps.

It was a rhetoric for celebration as in "Bullocky": but it was also a rhetoric for tragedy. And in that vein Wright achieved the impressive "Niggers Leap, New England"--her first poem on what is sometimes called "the aboriginal theme." The poet initially appeals to night to

Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

But in the second stanza night becomes something much more complicated than a comfortingly obscuring darkness, and the poem ends with:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at the last. We should have
known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange
(CP 15)

In its inexorable patterning of archetypal images of night and day into "a time for synthesis"; in its valorizing of general experience as symbolized by the particular place, object or event, it is a splendidly consistent piece of high seriousness, or, if you like, high romanticism. Its ethical and political effect may seem so obvious to us that we have to struggle to remind ourselves that it is all a matter of implication: and that the implication resides as much in writing on the topic at all in this manner as in anything stated in the text. Mary Gilmore's "The Myall in Prison" intends to be a political poem, one that will make us think about what

aborigines suffer under the system of justice to which we have conscripted them. It is quite unlike Wright's poem, of which Vincent Buckley has said:

She is not precisely offering an indictment of our treatment of the aborigines; that sort of complaint is not really in keeping with her general attitude to poetry. Although the suggestion of guilt and terror is unmistakably there, she is making a point not so much about man's injustice to man as about the general catastrophe of life in which the aboriginal cultures, like all others, have been implicated. Her concern is, in a way, a moral one, and it is a concern with the calamitous nature of life itself.¹⁹

Moral then, but not overtly political--at this stage. And one of the ways in which Wright's attitudes have changed along with her rhetoric has been towards a more actively political stance, a more personal and particular involvement, a more direct and even judgmental voice--at least on issues of ecology and the aborigines, and perhaps in the emergence of a strain of feminism, heard for instance in "Eve to her Daughters" (*CP* 234). It is a strain that might indeed be called ecological feminism, and involves the notion that women, like the aborigines, have a special and direct relationship, a belonging to the physical world of earth.

In "Two Dreamtimes" (*Alive* 22) this allows her to enter into a sisterhood with the aboriginal poet Kath Walker: but it is a sisterhood which is partial, although unsentimental, because of its acknowledgement of the shadow of a history of racial oppression that lies between them and makes differences in any joint claim to dispossession, since Wright's relationship to the land is affected by an inherited guilt over the dispossession of the aborigines. Indeed, it is the psychic destructiveness of unpurged guilt as much as the

suffering of the aborigines that is the subject matter of "The Dark Ones":

On the other side of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound.

In the town on pension day
mute shadows glide.
The white talk dies away
the faces turn aside....

Go back. Leave us alone
the pale eyes say
from faces of pale stone.
They veer, drift away.

Those dark gutters of grief,
their eyes are gone.
With a babble of shamed relief
the bargaining goes on.

(*Fourth Quarter 22*)

And yet it seems that neither in the metrically relaxed discursiveness of "Two Dreamtimes" nor in the unrhymed ballad form of "The Dark Ones" has Wright achieved quite the conviction and poetic confidence that marked "Niggers Leap." I do not simply mean confidence of argument--for part of the point of both poems is that they deal with more complex and unstable states of feeling, that they see life in a more complex way, that they could not possibly be said in the manner of the earlier poem. It is rather a matter of having a convincingly achieved manner of their own. It is just this that is finally arrived at in *Phantom Dwelling* with "Victims" a poem with a

nexus, a knot of feelings related to those in "The Dark Ones."
She speaks of the attempts of the Australian community to
absorb the survivors of the Holocaust, survivors such as the
sixteen year old Czech boy who "had once been forced to carry
/ other children's corpses / to the place of burning."

But when we saw him walk beside
our own children
darkness rose from that pit.
Quickly but carefully
(he must not notice)
we put our bodies
between our children and the Victim.

Absit omen, you gods--
avert the doom,
the future's beckoning flame.

Perhaps he did notice. At last
he went away.

In what back street of what city
does he keep silence, unreadable
fading graffito of half-
forgotten obscenity.

Think: such are not to be pitied.
They wear already
a coat of ash seared in.
But our children and their children
have put on, over the years
a delicate coat of fat.

(Phantom Dwelling 13)

This poem, with its thoroughly disquieting ending, would seem to meet very convincingly Calvino's criterion that literature is "efficacious" when it keeps its voice low, "without emphasis of any kind, using modest and doubtful language." It also meets quite exactly the exacting standards set by him for "a type of education through literature." He argues that literature, to educate, must know itself and distrust itself. However the function of recognizing our lack of innocence, of discovering in everything we say and do the hidden motives of a white man, or a male, or the possessor of a certain income or the sufferer of a particular neurosis should not be to generate either a universal sense of guilt or an attitude of universal accusation. Rather, he says

when we become aware of our disease or of our hidden motives, we have already begun to get the better of them. What matters is the way in which we accept our motives and live through the ensuing crisis. This is ... the only way of inventing a new way of being (100).

And it is at "inventing a new way of being" that we find Wright paradoxically at work in *Phantom Dwelling*. I say paradoxically because what she is inventing is a new way of being old, of being vital in that condition in which we are too often expected to surrender living. Three poems from her previous volume *Fourth Quarter* may be seen as encapsulating the stages of her development to this point: "Growing-Point", "Twenty-Five Years" and "Boundaries."

In "Growing Point" she remembers--and thereby re-evokes--a past condition of instinctive energy shared with nature:

A child in early spring, I stared
up at the sapling's growing-point;
a gathered strength, a total thrust
muscling itself, its swirl and sheaf
to one high clench of folded leaf.

.....

I knew no word for growing-point,
but in myself the sapling rose,
an aim, a need, a leap to air;
where weighted, rounded, bough on bough
the tree fills out its limits now. (22)

In "Twenty-Five Years" however, the experience of memory, that great numinous force of romantic poetry, is, like language, not adequate. And despite the attempt to deal rationally with the recognition of loss as unassuageable by memory, there breaks on the speaker an intimation of the true situation, of the isolation of human consciousness from its objects, of what is meant by the death of the subject:

Confront it then with deliberate irony.
Can't you be glad that time takes off the edge
that used to cut so deep?
It's calm that wise men praise, not grief, not rage.
Turn over. Sleep.

But then the drowning wave--not memory--
that hurls me gasping down. Each vein, each artery
floods with a salt recall. Rescue. Throw me a rope.
It's not the past that dies. It's I who die. (54)

It is against the experiential weight of such an intimation of annihilation that "Boundaries" reaffirms a consolation, a superior reality which answers over a long distance the panic that had been recognized in Wright's poetry

as early as *The Moving Image*, when she wrote, with a certain theatricality, in "Waiting": "But the circling days weave tighter, and the spider / Time binds us helpless till his sting goes in." (CP 9)

But helplessness is not a part of the world of *Phantom Dwelling*; nor are grand gestures of defiance. It is from nature that she accepts the "ancient orders. Use all death / to feed all life"--and out of context that might sound like reaching for largeness, except that it is nature scaled down, microcosmically at work in the "Backyard", that we are looking at. And again and again in this volume she works in the space that had been paradoxically liberated for her in "Boundaries." Starting with the way in which a scrap of leaf can be photographed so that it reveals the pattern of the whole leaf, she goes on:

the whole plant-history's coded in one seed
and not just plant: the whole planet, its changes,
its wobble and spin, air, water, stars,
the sun's force, the moon's pull, wax and wane.,
You might find ways to photograph all that.
But there's no need.
I've seen even a hat
build under itself a person long since dead.
That lock of wild bronze hair
that Byron cut off from a girl's head
sprang under my touch alive with the whole girl.

It's just that we think in limit, form and time.
Only language invents
future and past (now's gone before it's said).
What's I, what's here?
It's the whole flow that's real,
the whole change pouring through the lens of eyes

that first distinguish, then forget distinction;
record the many, then rejoin the all.

(Fourth Quarter 69)

It is a prescription for serious writing and for serious living: Wright has never thought of separating the two.

ENDNOTES

1. Calvino, Italo. "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ-Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) 90-1.
2. See, for instance, Bruce Bennett, "Judith Wright, Moralist." *Westerly* No. 1 (1976): 74.
3. "Romanticism and the Last Frontier," *Because I Was Invited* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975) 71.
4. "Inheritance and Discovery in Australian Poetry," *Literary Australia*, eds. Clement Semmler and Derek Whitelock (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1966) 11.
5. Alec King, "The Look of Australian Poetry in 1967," *Meanjin* 27 (1968): 177.
6. *Collected Poems 1942-1970* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971) 67. Hereafter referred to as *CP*.
7. *Phantom Dwelling* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1985) 8.
8. H.P. Heseltine, "Wrestling with the Angel: Judith Wright's Poetry in the 1950s," *Southerly* 38 (1978): 163-71.
9. *Alive: Poems 1971-2* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973) 13.
10. *Fourth Quarter and Other Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1976).
11. Terry Sturm, "Continuity and Development in the Work of Judith Wright," *Southerly* 36 (1976): 163.

12. Frank Kellaway, *Overland* 50/51 (1972): 90-2. Kellaway cites critics from the same period as Heseltine and beyond, from Elyne Mitchell to Vincent Buckley in 1968. He notes criticism of abstractness, generality, portentousness; also that "when she is bardic and oracular [she] is slammed for that; but when she writes a book of simple, often humorous poems about birds for her daughter, some critics complain that there is a falling off again" (91).

13. "Elders and Betters?" *Quadrant* 30.7. 7/8 (1986): 114.

14. Andrew Taylor, "Always the Other Half: the Poetry of Judith Wright," *Reading Australian Poetry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987) 85-97.

15. For instance Sturm notes (p.165) her comment that Shaw Neilson lacked the "opposing tensions" of modern self-consciousness, necessary for "any convincing poetic realization of the central issues in contemporary life."

16. The title may well be read as indicating that the poem is also for all Australians; a kind of summation of long years of involvement in the consequences of having inherited a country stolen from its first or aboriginal inhabitants.

17. See Terry Sturm, "Continuity and Development in the Work of Judith Wright," *Southerly* 36 (1976): 161-76; and Shirley Walker, "Judith Wright's Linguistic Philosophy--'It's the word that's strange'," *ALS* 8 (1977): 7-15; "The Philosophical Basis of Judith Wright's Poetry," *South Pacific Images*, ed. Chris Tiffin, South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (Brisbane: Academy Press, 1978): 158-72; and *The Poetry of Judith Wright* (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1981).

18. A.D. Hope, "Judith Wright, *The Two Fires*, rpt. from *Sydney Morning Herald* in *Native Companions: Essays and Comments on Australian Literature 1936-66* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974): 79-81. Nothing can demonstrate more strongly the divergence of critical opinion of Wright than to place Hope's generous and discriminating praise beside such "downhill-all-the-way" carping as Cecil Hadgraft's "It is doubtful if very many of [these later poems] give us that sudden new and fresh vision of our world and our experiences in it which her earlier volumes provide. It is to those that most of her readers will turn" (*Australian Literature: A Critical Account to 1955* [Melbourne: Heinemann, 1960] 196).
19. Cited by G.A. Brennan in "The Aborigine in the work of Judith Wright," *Westerly* No. 4 (1972): 49.

John Forbes: A Ludic Voice

The reader who opens a slim volume of poetry at the title "Ars Poetica" may well feel entitled to expect seriousness, a manifesto. What greets us in John Forbes's "Ars Poetica" from his 1980 collection *Stalin's Holiday* is this:

Raving against the space
where the poem sounds
like a revolving door that
makes a noise a car makes
bumping into the dole--
that's the target. And don't
forget President Kennedy
travelling on the SS France
things are more like
they are now than they have
ever been before,
clear somehow, like
physical fitness. You
celebrate your indifference

.....

..... It's almost
pure debauchery, as prayer
is for example: your heart
is full of hatreds more
intricate than fractures
in shatter-proof glass.
Put a brick through
a real estate agent's window
and it bounces back
and cuts you. That's what
I mean about targets. Or
you can read Mayakosky/he's
a sort of Communist Bruce Dawe¹

It hardly seems serious--and yet we cannot help suspecting that it *is* a manifesto, and one that declares that we are in a poetic world quintessentially different from that of Judith Wright. It is so much a poetry of game rather than earnest that we might feel we were encountering the true *homo ludens*, if it were not that this poetry is almost entirely a matter of the presence of a voice rather than of a personality. The man remains resolutely hidden, playing the invisible poet, that role devised by Hugh Kenner for T.S.Eliot: in "The Poem on its Sleeve" he tells us "I stay in a territory / expunged or out of reach, like a scene of / bluegums & kangaroos, painted crudely on / a tea-tray."² But the voice is there and it offers something that speaks tantalizingly both to and for certain strands of twentieth century experience.

To be tantalized is not always gratifying, as can be seen from Chris Wallace-Crabbe's recent review of *The Stunned Mullet*:

It is the aim of John Forbes's poetry to give pleasure by withholding pleasure ... the reader being constantly placed in the position of a baffled donkey, the carrot repeatedly placed in front of him (or her, but I have a strong inkling, despite the book's dedication, that these are poems designed for a male aesthetic, rather than a female taste) and then abruptly withdrawn with a flourish, a formal flick of the wrist ... Mostly John Forbes writes as someone who wants to subvert discursive themes, escape tangentially from an aud-ible self and avoid giving names to the creatures and objects of his Eden.³

Those who have observed reviews over the years may find a certain irony in this, given that Wallace-Crabbe himself has at times been identified as elusive, if not

positively evasive.⁴ But on Wright he speaks unequivocally and in a way that sums up much of what I was saying in my previous lecture:

Throughout her career Wright has continued to offer to her readers one of the things they most hunger after in the twentieth-century poetry: an unmistakable seriousness of manner in her treatment of serious concerns.⁵

As we have seen, one of those serious concerns with which she has dealt in her later poetry is the prospect of old age and death, and she has done so in such a way that her art speaks to the feelings, bringing light to what a fellow poet, Gwen Harwood, has spoken of as "the obscure chasm where my heart / grapples its deep, its rooted fears."⁶ What then does Forbes have to say of last things in "Death, an Ode":

Death, you're more successful than America
even if we don't choose to join you, we do.
I've just become aware of this conscription
where no one's marble doesn't come up;
no use carving your name on a tree, exchanging vows
or not treading on the cracks for luck
where there's no statistical anomalies at all
& you know not the day nor the hour, or even if you do
timor mortis conturbat me.....

.....
but what gets me is how compulsory it is--
'he never was a joiner' they wrote on his tomb.
At least bingeing becomes heroic & I can see

why the Victorians
so loved drawn out death-bed scenes:
huddled before our beautiful century, they knew
what first night nerves were all about.

(*The Stunned Mullet* 43)

Our first reaction on hearing this--and remembering
"Ars Poetica"--may be to agree with Graham Rowlands:

there are many things Forbes *doesn't* aim at doing--
moralizing, theologizing, propagandizing, narrative,
realism, expressing emotion from the extremes of
agony or ecstasy. He doesn't even take seriously *not*
taking things seriously ... We should be grateful that
Forbes at least takes writing his poems seriously.
Unlike most Modernists, however, he doesn't take his
poems about poems seriously. ⁷

And yet Kevin Hart, as serious a poet and critic as you could
wish to find, has this to say:

No critique of religion or humanism, however acute
and searching, can suspend the everyday longings and
problems of being human. And nowhere is this more
clear than the beginning of "Death, an Ode" where
Forbes's wit concentrates rather than deflects the
ultimate human situation. ⁸

What then is there in wit that can either deflect or
concentrate the human situation, and is there something that
makes it more likely that it will be deflection in Forbes's
case? And at this stage it may be useful to resort to lexical
definition. The Shorter Oxford offers this for wit as a
literary term:

That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness; later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way.

There is of course something distinctly paradoxical here in the conjunction of "apt association" and unexpectedness. And since for a writer like Forbes the very idea of apt expression, if it implies some intrinsic connection between language and independently existing ideas or knowledge of objects, is questionable, then we can expect to find that it is surprise that is predominant, that his wit resides in a shock of juxtaposition which *remains* disconcerting or absurd, sometimes even bizarre, rather than resolving into the "surprising but then familiar" effect of much traditional wit. One might note here too the emphasis on wit as provoking amusement through brilliant and sparkling utterance, and question whether that is indeed "always" the way the word is used: we are after all quite accustomed to hearing the noun in the company of qualifying adjectives such as subtle or quiet. Nor does the definition specify notions of interplay of intellect and feeling or of *playfulness* of ideas or language and this latter seems a current "use" particularly relevant to Forbes, even if notions of quietness or subtlety are not much called on by those critics and reviewers who almost invariably call his poems witty.

With all this in mind, how does one place wit within Forbes's general aesthetic, which is very much one of the poem as linguistic process. In interviews he shows little willingness to discuss the purpose of poetry in the way that we have seen Judith Wright or Chris Wallace-Crabbe doing: "If you knew what poetry was for," he has said, "you wouldn't bother doing it."⁹ He has, however, been prepared to discuss in such interviews the processes of writing, the ways it can

be done and the ways he chooses to do it, and the influences that have led to his aesthetic.¹⁰

To Martin Duwell he declared that his interest in aesthetic theory originated not with poets but with learning about rhetoric through the analysis of the terms of art criticism which he encountered in the Visual Arts Department of Sydney University, notably from Donald Brook, whom he describes as that somewhat unlikely thing "a sort of logical positivist aesthetician" (80). And yet one can see Forbes gravitating here towards something which is one persistent trait of his poetry--a liking for the unlikely, as in:

so the poem can't escape,
trapped inside its subject
& longing to be a piece of flesh & blood
as

Ten Pounds of Ugly Fat
versus
The immortal Taperecorder
forever.

That is a passage from "The Conceptual Head," part of the long poem "Four Heads and how to do Them" which bears in its subject matter the marks of his aesthetic training in visual arts and demonstrates a witty and knowledgeable grasp of the modes in which the creative imagination can be set to work. It has become--and with justice--his anthology piece, and partly because of that, but also because he himself gives a

useful account of its genesis and progress in the Duwell interview (75-6), I do not propose to deal with it here.

As for specifically poetic influences, he shares in the mid-century turning of attention to American writers. Andrew Taylor and Chris Wallace-Crabbe looked above all to Wallace Stevens and to some extent to Robert Lowell. Stevens was admired too by those who saw themselves as the young turks of Australian poetry in the sixties, but he had something of the status of an elder of the tribe; the poets they discovered with the impact of immediacy were more likely to be Berrigan, Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. John Tranter has specified Forbes's "Four Heads and how to do Them" as endorsing and enacting O'Hara's motto "You just go on your nerves,"¹¹ but it is in practice generic to Forbes's poetry and to the effects of irrationality and outrageousness that this often generates.

There was something else of major importance: from O'Hara, Forbes has said, he learned "how the self is a composed thing" (Duwell 75). Now this idea, while it does not exclude Freudian or Marxist ideas of the construction of the self, is not primarily concerned with psychic or social experiences but with linguistic ones, and imposes a further limitation on any notion of human identity as freely chosen and free to express itself in an independently existing language from which it can compose its works of art. Forbes thus unmistakably joins the post-modernist abandonment of certain Romantic conceptions of the artist's distinctive, even unique, sensibility as the crucial component in the creation of a work of art. "Language," he says "is not something lying about that we pick up and use like a tool. It's inextricably linked up with the whole arrangement whereby we experience ourselves and then experience the world" (Duwell 76-7). Or again: "There's no such thing as an unmediated sensibility" (personal interview). This has, naturally

enough, an effect on the way in which the speaking voice of the poems is to be grasped--and for many readers it must be said that it is grasped with some difficulty. Because the language of the poems is so idiomatic, the syntax so conversational, the poems often have a surface effect of personal monologue. But they will not fit the expectations of dramatic monologue, even of the most modernist kind. There is no persona as character, however vestigial: only a voice speaking, and speaking only for the duration of the poem.

Moreover, the way in which it speaks blurs two of the distinctions to which we are conventionally accustomed: the distinction between self and other(s) and the distinction between speaker and audience. One of the ways in which this scepticism about such distinctions of identity emerges in the poems is through a sometimes disconcertingly ambiguous use of the pronoun "you."

When a speaking voice deals in "I" and "he, she, it, they" (the first and third person pronouns), we are comfortably in the realm of self and other; and if the speaker turns to invite us in by addressing us as "You" we do not feel that we have lost our separate identity as dear audience, even though we may be being invited to recognize elements of common experience with what is going on in the world of the text. We have also got used, I think, to occasions when "you" is used as a stand-in for the impersonally generalized "one" which has served for a long time to implicate the speaker and hearer in a shared common experience. This kind of use, along with the traditional use of direct second person address to a fictional entity within the poem, can be recognized in the already-quoted opening of "Death, an Ode."

It is not only that our capacity to get a purchase on the reference of these pronouns leaves us with energy to spare to respond to the wit that resides in the apparently effortless (and hence unpretentious) juxtaposition of contemporary historical references to the Vietnam War and conscription with literary references to medieval poets. I say medieval because, while many poets beside Shakespeare in *As You Like It* have used the pastoral figure of the lover's attempt to memorialize his love and his beloved by tree-carving, it is the proem to Book Two of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* that most clearly recognizes this as just one among the possible linguistic strategies of commemoration.¹² The other medieval reference (one which in itself points back to classical and Biblical utterance) is of course the refrain from Dunbar's "Lament for the Makers": the fear of death disturbs (and perturbs) me. This has become so well-worn a tag that it is unlikely to generate poetic energy by its mere presence. Energy comes rather from the breaching of grammatical consistency, the jarring slippage from the safely distancing, intellectually postulated "you" of the preceding line to the "me" which implicates both poet and audience in the personal and direct prospect of death, even as the very use of quotation (and in a foreign language) pulls self-consciously in the other direction.

There are, however, times when the "you" in a Forbes poem seems to constitute an unidentifiable existence residing somewhere between (and partially common to) speaker and audience. The title poem of *The Stunned Mullet* has so far defied my best efforts to locate as observer and/or observed the middle one of the three "yous" that appear in it. Despite this fact, I enjoy this poem--and not only for the passing witticism that points to false scales as "in fact a cunning mechanical contrivance / like Bob Hawke's hair." So I am reluctant to endorse Chris Wallace-Crabbe's exasperation with the use of "you" as a dodgy syntactic device for refusing

"any declaration of authorial presence" (*Scripsi* 195) and will content myself with saying that this syntactical difficulty, along with the non-naturalistic imagery and the non-sequential narrative, place this among the poems that have led some to classify Forbes as a surrealist. For example, Christopher Pollnitz, reviewing *Tropical Skiing* in *Southerly* 36 (1976) declared "these poems are surrealist objects moulded in plastic language" (467).

Now surrealism, with its willed re-arrangements of the conventional dispositions of the sense-data of everyday perception certainly meets the prescription that wit should provide surprising juxtapositions, but it can nonetheless be seen as exceeding the territory of wit in two ways: when it becomes fixed in conventions of the purely sensorially outrageous (or the outrageously sensational) and when its new arrangements are so dominated by intellect that they start to move towards the allegorical, an intellectual system. Forbes himself obviously values the energy that he sees as characteristic of the surrealist poem, but rejects literary surrealism as a system of style, saying

no two surrealist poems should be the same, though they are. Surrealism became a style and surrealism as a style is a defeat in its own terms. That's where the European Surrealists went wrong and where the Americans, thanks to their painters, went right; because they realized that what they wanted from their psyches was not images, which would invariably be just functions of their culture, but energy. Constructed images of the self just can't provide any energy. You can only get energy by

refusing to pretend that these images have any validity beyond the fact that you've constructed them.

(Duwell 79-80)

We are not, of course, obliged to believe that poets always know best about their own work, but Dennis Haskell agrees that surrealist is not an entirely appropriate label for Forbes, although he approaches the question more as a matter of tone:

it would be wrong to characterise Forbes as a "straight" Surrealist. His verse frequently seems not so much an exposition of Surrealism as a mockery of its methods. Forbes's references are specific and precise but his statements are offered to us quite gratuitously. The connections are there but they are ludicrous if approached with the reverent seriousness of the surrealists. ¹³

One aspect of Forbes's aesthetic and his practice to which Haskell draws attention is its scepticism. He is not alone in this. Gary Catalano, for instance, says that "the concept of which Forbes is most sceptical is that mundane one--experience,"¹⁴ and this is a point taken up in Haskell's more extensive discussion. Writing in 1977, he claimed that Forbes lived "in a mental colony of poets in Surfers Paradise, maintaining a consular relationship with their sister cities in New York and San Francisco." He saw him as distinguished from these other writers by his wit and intelligence but sharing with them "an intense scepticism as to whether meaningful rational statements (and this lies behind the apparent irrationality of Forbes's verse) can ever be made." In Haskell's view, this scepticism was also comprehensive, extending to self-identity as well as to "social and moral values, particularly those of a modern world which is seen

as sensationalist, mindless and consumer-oriented":

A scepticism which can extend to seeing experience as a 'blaze of nothing' ('Love's Body') can lead to a number of things--a search for values to be made out of that scepticism, a cessation of all writing, a blowing out of one's brains, the assumption of value in oneself and indulgence in denunciations of the modern world from this comfortable perspective of a poetry that is arbitrary and *merely* arbitrary. (142-3)¹⁵

I suspect that a distinction between the arbitrary and the merely arbitrary would be seen by Forbes as pointless; just as he would probably be unresponsive to Gwen Harwood's claim for a "truth beyond the language game."¹⁶ It is not that he bothers explicitly to deny that there might be such a thing, but poetry cannot be involved in it--and he appears to have even less intention than Judith Wright of translating into action the idea that "Silence might be best" ("The Unnecessary Angel"). This is not very surprising if one recognizes that for Forbes language is not something secondary, something that, through an independently existing skill or craft, can be made to contain or express primary experience: language is experience. The process of writing the poem is not one of setting down an existing reality: it is one of discovering what can be said.

It follows that there are special features to his conception of what is involved in various aspects of language as they operate within a poem. Consider, for instance questions of symbolism and of metaphor and simile and of the relationship of these figures to reality or truth.

Traditional critical wisdom tends to organize discussion of these along lines drawn up by realism and

symbolism, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe exemplifies this in his introductory essay to *Toil and Spin* when he argues that the main streams of twentieth century literature can be seen as "broadly corresponding to the two poles of realism and symbolism: I write what I see, or by craft I succeed in tapping the eternal verities." He sees the latter as providing the main thrust of "experimental modernism," in which difficulty has been the expected norm. "Experimental poetry is an honorific term in our time and we associate it with a high, symbol-carrying and formally-self-conscious body of work." And he identifies the development of "an almost mannerist intensification of the poetic idiom" as part of this, arising because "in a prolonged cultural situation where old beliefs and structures are felt to be moribund, writers have more and more found that the wordy surface of their medium is an available reality which can be known and mastered" (1-2).

The development of a mannerist intensification of poetic idiom might very well be seen as characteristic of Forbes, who declares his liking for "flowery baroque surfaces." What Wallace-Crabbe dislikes about Forbes, one guesses, is that there is no commitment to underlying eternal verities: surface is all. Nor is it a surface that has any commitment to realism. The metaphors make both feeling and judgement clear when Wallace-Crabbe writes "If anything he worships language itself; he kneels at the altar of its slippages." (*Scripti* 196). In fact Forbes seems to fall outside Wallace-Crabbe's *Toil and Spin* scheme of things altogether--and the reason for this is that it is a scheme of representation, and Forbes is the very model of a non-representationalist. This is the point made by Kevin Hart,

who prefaces it by defining his own way of cutting the poetic cake:

There are those who think of writing as representing their thoughts, feelings, or the world at large; and there are others who see the task of writing as questioning the very concept of 'representation.' Whereas the first group tends to judge poetry by its clarity, sensuousness, and involvement with human concerns, the second group prizes poems which resist reduction to simple meanings, unsettle the reader, and celebrate the play of surfaces. (95)

This makes understandable, I think, an interesting reversion in Forbes's poetry to the simile as rhetorically respectable after a period in which metaphor was all because it had to do with imagination, whereas simile belonged to the inferior realm of fancy. Wallace-Crabbe quips, in an apparent reference to "The Poem on the Sleeve," that Forbes's poems "wear similes on their sleeves like chevrons" and speaks of this (with very persuasive phrasing) as an alignment with the "post-modernist revolt against the too-suasive expressiveness of metaphor (*Scripti* 194)." What was seen as expressed through metaphor was not merely the juxtaposition, but the union of disparate elements of experience, including the perceiver and perceived. Metaphor's penetrating and generative power could be seen as something akin to the unifying effect of consummated sexual passion: to the holder of such a view, it must seem that Forbes's rhetoric is all a matter of polymorphous foreplay, of caressing of surfaces.

In this pursuit, the simile, unburdened by any weight of essentialist truth, can come into its own, although it will not be exactly the simile that we were taught to identify in primary school. When Forbes attacks the concept of language

as a tool in his interview with Duwell, the latter invites him to extend this to an attack on similes, but Forbes answers obliquely: "To me similes are only interesting when they manage to bring in things completely different to the object you're talking about" (77). In his poetry similes are above all about the assertion of unlikely likenesses, and they tend moreover to slide into one another, as at the beginning of "Afternoon papers":

The city fits the Harbour
the way a new suit
fits a politician like applause
as if a drowned river valley
was glad we're here,
(*The Stunned Mullet*, p.11)

This calm grammatical assertion of fluid and surprising likenesses does constitute a major ground for calling Forbes witty--whether it is always amusing is another matter. Asked in interview at Monash if he considered his poetry witty, he began, with what was obviously a kind of clearing of the ground, by saying "I don't try to be funny--or hardly ever." While he sees word-play as both witty and energizing, he rejects that tradition of wit which involves taking an existing idea and putting it into "attractive form." He sees the writing of the poem as properly a process of discovery--not so much of a case of *solvitur ambulando* as *viditur ambulando*.

And this is largely a process of discovering what language will allow to be perceived, since in his view perception is never primal but always mediated by an existing language. Indeed the only way past the paralysis of self-con-sciousness is to accept that one's speech is always one of mediated sensibility; to give up the dream of recovering or discovering "the innocent speech of the first

Adam" which named the creatures without equivocation. When he said this, I was reminded of the Frank Littler painting chosen for the cover of *The Stunned Mullet*. Called "Words Cling to a Head" it provides a suggestive analogue to the poetry. The head stares, ambiguously wide-eyed, out of a crowd of clinging human forms, partially dismembered and erratically labelled, but constituting nonetheless--with the head--a formally witty arrangement. But not one which is content free.

For in the end, Forbes is too intelligent not to know that the truly content-free poem is as much an impossible dream as the poem which has not merely enacted its values but somehow fully realized its content (i.e. spoken about something adequately named). He can be discovered falling into critical analysis of content himself concerning the title poem of *Stalin's Holiday*, which he describes in the Duwell interview as integrating

what I think of as my aesthetic with my attitude to life ... It's a poem I'm really happy with. It manages to get the feeling I had about language and the feeling I have about my own situation together ... I see Stalin as a sort of logical endpoint of an idealist system. It's that European approach to running the world by ideology, by assuming that all the conceptual words link up but not looking for where the links actually are and forcing or forging them--with unpleasant results for the slag. (83)

Nor will critics let him off the hook of content. In uncharitable mood, Chris Wallace-Crabbe says that the topics that come up are "Water, money, television, fame, stimulants and the Harbour: exactly what we might expect of a Sydney writer" (*Scriptsi* 196). Leaving aside Kevin Hart's more respectful suggestions about "Death, an Ode," let us look

at a couple of poems that Wallace-Crabbe could point to as exemplifying his nominated topics. But before doing so, a final word on surrealism.

It is possible to see surrealism as an attempt to master the irreducible of content by wresting it away from "normal" descriptions, settings, narrative development. It then becomes a supremely romantic version of "creativity": and hence prone to religiosity, as Haskell claims. But Forbes exhibits a cheerful scepticism about surrealism. In interview he quoted with apparent pleasure Peter Porter's phrase that he is a semi-domesticated surrealist; then went on, perhaps mischievously, to say that he is really something of a social realist, but that "a social-realist has got to be grotesque."

Now grotesquerie is often considered as a form of wit: distortions are superimposed on the "norm" but have their effect only because the palimpsest remains dimly perceptible. Something of this is going on in "The Stunned Mullet" or in the title poem of *Tropical Skiing*:

Was that a baby
or a shirt factory?
no one can tell in this weather, for tho
the tropics are slowly drifting apart & a
vicious sludge blurs
the green banks of the river, a chalet
drifts thru the novella where I compare thee
to a surfboard lost in Peru,

flotsam like a crate of strong liquor
that addles our skis
& when they bump
it's a total fucking gas
(*The New Australian Poetry* 267)

I want, however, to close with two poems which seem to offer less ostensible difficulty, a rather more accessible wit. The first of these is "TV," which starts with a positively defiant demand for the surface, not the content:

don't bother telling me about the programs
describe what your set is like the casing the
curved screen its strip of white stillness like
beach sands at pools where the animals come
down to drink and a native hunter hides his
muscles, poised with a fire sharpened spear

Having thus slid, via simile, into the evocation of a television documentary, it then moves to bizarre narrative about the anthropologist maker of the film, the whirl of whose

hidden camera sends gazelles leaping off in
their delicate slow motion caught on film
despite the impulsive killing of unlucky Doctor
Matthews whose body was found three months later
the film and camera intact save for a faint,
green mould on its hand-made leather casing
(*The New Australian Poetry* 262)

Indeed Forbes's wit seems to reside sometimes not so much in surprising us by the juxtapositions that are put in as by surprising us by omissions, elisions and shunts of expected narrative continuity or logical argument. If we expect some kind of resolution about containment (casings)

or the way in which things escape from containment from this poem, we are denied it. It looks an extremely compact utterance, and tempts us to describe it as a single sentence, but in fact it comes in as if in mid-conversation and refuses us the closure of a full stop at the end. While I would not want to insult the author by even murmuring the word mimesis, it does seem to me to be a poem which catches perfectly the combination of precise image and a sort of oceanic mindlessness that is part of our experience of watching television.

In *The Stunned Mullet* we find another TV poem, this time more located perhaps in the idea of performance--even a particular performance, that of Paul Keating reading his budget speech. In "Watching the Treasurer"

his bottom lip trembles and then recovers,
like the exchange rate under pressure

buoyed up as the words come out--
elegant apostle of necessity, meaning

what rich Americans want, his world is
like a poem, completing that utopia

no philosopher could argue with, where
what seems, is & what your words describe

you know exists, under a few millimetres
of invisible cosmetic, bathed

in a milky white fluorescent glow.

It was the opening lines of this entertaining and acute poem ("I want to believe the beautiful lies / the past spreads out like a feast") that led Kevin Hart into his argument that

Forbes is not as detached as he tries to make out:

When a poem begins "I want to believe the beautiful lies" we know, full well, that we're dealing with someone who values the aesthetic over the moral and the religious, yet someone who *wants* to believe those 'lies', those powerful systems of representation within which we live and die. (95)

This may well be true, but suppose that we want what does not exist, that there is no "utopia ... where what seems, is." In a poem that approaches the dangerously serious condition of satire, Forbes remains finally true to his aesthetic. Our speech is all performance, the poet's as well as the politician's, and he pays Keating the compliment of suggesting that he is doing it well. Television is the great medium of performance, of beautiful lying: to write about it in this way is not so much to be democratic in one's taste (as Wallace-Crabbe suggests) as to be alert to the media of seeing and seeming that constitute our lives; it is to come pretty close to that serious matter, criticism of society and of ourselves. Forbes is quite ready to acknowledge that we sometimes want a break from such activities; so, in "Speed, a pastoral" the escape is both from TV and from poetry:

it's fun to take speed
& stay up all night
not writing those reams of poetry
just thinking about is bad for you
-- instead your feelings
follow your career down the drain
& find they like it there

among an anthology of fine ideas, bound together
by a chemical in your blood
that lets you stare the TV in its vacant face
and cheer....

(The Stunned Mullet 28)

The joke is, of course, that the fun cannot be appreciated until the poetry is written. The trope of refusing expression, like the trope of inexpressibility, begins wittily to reveal its nature as one of those beautiful lies.

ENDNOTES

1. *Stalin's Holidays* (Glebe: Transit Poetry, 1981) 48.
2. *The Stunned Mullet* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1988) 27.
3. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "There are No Names: The Forbes Scan," *Scripta* 5.2 (1989): 193.
4. See, for example, reviews of *The Emotions are Not Skilled Workers* and *The Amorous Cannibal* by Gary Catalano, *Meanjin* 39 (1980): 357-9 and Jennifer Strauss, *The Age* 8 Feb. 1986.
5. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, "Matters of Style: Judith Wright and Elizabeth Bishop," *Toil and Spin: Two Directions in Modern Poetry* (Richmond: Hutchinson, 1979) 122.
6. Gwen Harwood, "Giorgio Morandi," *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975) 18.
7. Graham Rowlands, "Modernism and Non-Modernism," *Overland* 86 (1981): 62-3.
8. Kevin Hart, "Presentation and Representation," *Overland* 113 (1988): 96.
9. John Forbes, personal interview at Monash University, 30 May 1989.
10. See, for example, interview with Martin Duwell in Martin Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry* (Brisbane: Makar, 1982) 75-84 or Forbes's "Statement," *ALS* 8 (1977): 156-7.
11. John Tranter, introduction, *The New Australian Poetry* (St Lucia: Makar Press, 1979) xxiii.
12. "For to thi purpos, this may liken thee / And thee right nought; yet al is seid or schal; / Ek som men grave in tree, som in ston wal / as it bitit...." *Troilus and Criseyde* II. 45-8.

13. Dennis Haskell, "Thoughts on Some Recent Poetry," *ALS* 8 (1977): 141.
14. Gary Catalano, "Form: A Poetry Chronicle," *Meanjin* 40 (1981): 353.
15. At the time, Haskell considered that Forbes had fallen into the last trap in *On the Beach*, from which he had heard him read at Surfers : 'Smugness, paranoia and contempt were the key words of this reading.' [143]
16. "The Wasps," *The Lion's Bride*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson (1981) 5.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe: An Ironist at Work in the Gap between glücklicher Dichter and obiter dicta"

I began my discussion of John Forbes with his "Ars Poetica": a poetic manifesto which impishly applies the most traditional of formal titles to a poem which appears informal to the point of flouting both technical form and the good form, the dictional decorum, of high seriousness. Its principle of being--in verse, feeling and argument--reveals itself, through refusal of definition and closure, as one of openness and diffusion. It is a very far cry indeed from the celebration of form and of the principles of concentration and closure that Chris Wallace-Crabbe had espoused in the mid 1960s in "Nature, Language, the Sea: an Essay."

Here are the closing stanzas of what is unmistakably a poem of high seriousness, and one which appears, in employing the craftsman/maker metaphor for the poet, to commit itself to an implicit acceptance of the notion of language as tool that Forbes so vigorously rejects:

Nature, language, the sea; and opposite

These fluent fields of energy

Man feels that he is bound to chisel

The small hard statues of his poetry

Which bear, like a sheen on marble,

All the assurance of being right,

All the assurance that we come to know

Under the name of form, and know

In the strong humming of completeness

Wherein the formal is at last the good.
Both passionate and moral is
Music that has passed into a shape,

A river which has found its dimpling course
Through the golden fields of Chronos,
Sounding not of loss but clarity.¹

It is true that this should not be taken as a last word, a final epitome of Wallace-Crabbe's aesthetic. Over the ensuing twenty years his poetry has in some ways moved far from what we find here; and yet the movement has been carried out largely in contention with desire for the kind of poetic described and executed in "Nature, Language, the Sea: an Essay." So we should keep that poem in mind while jumping to his 1985 collection, *The Amorous Cannibal*, and to the source of my somewhat cryptic title, the set of seven short epigrammatic pieces called "Squibs in the Nick of Time."² The latter title invites us to enter a discourse that refuses aggrandizement, insists on ephemerality, but if we perceive a pun on "nick" as prison we seem to be suddenly asked to contemplate the possibility that there is something serious adumbrated here: a theme about us all as prisoners in time, with only language to enable us to gain brief flashes of light and sound, and wise-cracks acting as little crackers. Sometimes however the crackers may provide more flash and dazzle than illumination, especially when they deny one the comfort of punctuation, that rational resolver of syntactical ambiguity, as is the case with Number Two:

on the level
he went through
you know who
like a shot off a shovel

As we grind into the worst decade for two
Or three or four, I swing around and see
Your bulky, suited, Russian form push through
This or that minor bookish jamboree
Smiling, and think of old hostility,
Those years when I watched you hard for Stalinism's
Cloven hoof and you (I'm sure) marked me
As bourgeois formalist. Time burns the isms....³

In its totality, this is, I think, a moving poem; and it is useful for showing how the braking force of intelligence does not have to operate to deflect us from the destination of feeling. It can in fact prevent feeling from rushing into overdrive with the kind of excessive statement that provokes the reader's intelligence into pulling the stop-cord and declining the ride altogether. When, for instance, James McAuley asserts "No worse age has ever been-- / murderous, lying and obscene" we are (or should be) more likely to want to start arguing with the absolute nature of the statement than feeling the author's despair.⁴ On the other hand, Wallace-Crabbe's qualification of his superlative defuses our intellectual resistance by anticipation, and in doing so frees us to enter into the rhythmic experience of the poem, which is chiefly responsible for force with which we feel both the weight of history and the counter-force of human action in "As we grind into the worst decade for two / or three or four, I swing around..."

In short, this is a very good poem for making a necessary distinction between solemnity (which is never compatible with wit) and seriousness, which can co-habit with wit, and often does so in Wallace-Crabbe's writing. It is also a poem that reminds us that his work contains intimations of a despair that is no less real for being resisted and is perhaps excessively down-played by Peter Porter, author himself of "The Sadness of the Creatures," when he

It is, however, at Numbers Four, Five, and Six that I want particularly to look, since they are the ones that manifestly speak about poetic practice. Number Six appears to be a straightforward declaration of what many critics would see as Wallace-Crabbe's civilized, rational, ironic relationship with the unsheddable burdens of romanticism and religion:

Approving mystery
with all my heart
I practise disenchantment.

But we should not take even this one too easily. The absence of punctuation leaves us unable to be quite sure whether the phrase "with all my heart" belongs (syntactically speaking) with the participle "approving" or with the verb "practise," that is, whether it is with mystery (and faith) or with disenchantment (and works) that the heart is aligned.

But Number Six does allow us at least the unequivocal first person "I," whereas Numbers Five and Four place the speaker in an ambiguous group identity by the use of the first person plural:

No-one speaks rudely, bar when pissed,
our verse is bourgeois-formalist.

My own reading of Number Five is as a succinct imitation of-- and in its flat succinctness a form of rebellion against-- the kind of poetic persona attributed by common wisdom to the group of "Melbourne" poets that included Evan Jones, Ron Simpson, Vincent Buckley and Wallace-Crabbe himself. This is an interpretation influenced by his poem in memory of Judah Waten from "Sonnets to the Left" in *I'm Deadly Serious*:

reviews *The Amorous Cannibal* almost entirely in terms of Çlan and hilarity--"as fizzy a book of poems as you could ask to read."⁵

The fizziness and the sadness both have something to do with what has become a recurrent theme in these lectures--the writer's conception of the nature and status of poetry and of language. And it is to this that Wallace-Crabbe comes in Number Four of his squibs:

We try to work in the gap between
glücklicher Dichter and *obiter dicta*,
a narrow floodplain
overgrown with puns.

Here "we" can be taken to be poets in general; these find themselves nowadays caught between two traditions of what they are and what they do. As "*glücklicher Dichter*" they inherit the idea of being important, having a special relationship with reality and the essential through language. Through felicity of speech they are worthy to be the lucky, fortunate, blessed bearers of the honourable name of poets. At the other extreme, and especially in the technological and materialist twentieth century, they face the possibility that, far from being Shelley's unacknowledged legislators of mankind, they are the utterers only of incidental and peripheral remarks, the "*obiter dicta*" which in law are opinions not essential to the judge's decision and hence having no binding authority.

And for the poet who refuses either position as an absolute, who tries to work in the gap between them, there is the knowledge that language, the medium of the work, is saturated with ambiguities that arise both synchronically and diachronically--that is, that multiple and unstable meanings

are both an effect of history and of the very system of language itself.

This can hardly fail to be problematic for a poet who, as a critic, praises Judith Wright for answering our contemporary need to hear serious things seriously spoken of, and proposes that "We go to works of literature, to works of art generally, for insights and understanding organized into some coherent form," even if he is prepared to concede immediately "but we also, more simply, can go to them for images: images in which we can recognize some aspect of our condition."⁶ It must also be problematic for a poet who, despite modifications in his art which may be attributed in part to an intelligent acquaintance with deconstructionist theories, remains a representationalist, a joyful if ironic celebrant of what he called, in the 1967 volume *The Rebel General*, "The Secular":

However you look at it,
The abundant secular,
How splendid it all appears
Shifting and coruscating

.....
And stubbornly tangible.

Look, I grant all that you say:
Whoever the creator
He brutally botched the job,
But how tough his furniture
Really is made, piece by piece!
I jump on his solid stones
Or dance on these rustling fields
And hear the sap leap in trees
Already marked for death. (17)

I am using representationalist in the sense that Kevin Hart used it in the passage quoted previously *Ö propos* of John Forbes, that is "those who think of their writing as representing their thoughts, feelings or the world at large ... [and] tend to judge poetry by its clarity, sensuousness, and involvement with ultimate human things."⁷ He also comments that the representational and the non-representational are rarely found in their pure form, and while one can certainly see in Wallace-Crabbe both questioning of representation and unsettling of the reader, there is little in him of that necessary element of the non-representational, abstraction.⁸ There is in fact evidence of active resistance to it in his criticism and his poetry. It seems to be one cause of his lack of sympathy with John Forbes: "The word 'subtract'," he observes rather tartly, "has much in common with 'abstract'."⁹ And in "Amphibious" he writes:

Shall I say I remember, sort of,
the way a body remembers things,
two or three stick-in-the-mud steps
at an edge, then stooping in,
pushing off across that toffee-toned
slight swirling of leisurely water,

.....
and once reaching up into
the lighter overlying medium
to pluck out of green shade a spray
of ever so gracefully descending
rivergum foliage?

Yes, I shall say it,
with all the fervour of hands and feet
quite unaccustomed to abstraction,
feeling for those curved leaves now.

(*The Amorous Cannibal* 54)

But the poet who wants organized and coherent representation of "the abundant secular" will need control: not only perhaps of his poetic form, but of his responses. A prolific poet, Wallace-Crabbe has experimented with control of the latter in various ways. Sometimes, especially in the earlier work on historical themes, he has practised a fairly traditional rhetoric of seriousness. One of the last appearances of this kind is at the end of "The Shapes of Gallipoli," the long poem of the 1980 volume *The Emotions are not Skilled Workers*:

Angels burning
heroic defeat,
a meaningless war,
from these we have drawn
shawls of healing silver
across our lives

At the core of the myth this truth is coiled like a
snake,
that the men who enact it cannot see what pattern they
are tracing.
The men who spoke Australia did not know what they
wrought
for it was only defined by the completion of their
lives.
Icarus gave little thought to where it was he fell.
We remember the spasmodic fire of ghostly riflemen
and the funeral rites of Hector, tamer of horses,
and the shallow sea, lapping still.
Then let our crooked smokes climb to their nostrils,
whose nostrils, time alone will prove,
interminable seasons
passing over.¹⁰

Yet it must be remembered that the poem as a whole interweaves a mixture of voices distinguished both by class and by literary kind: snippets of journalism, a kind of simplistic balladry,¹¹ lyricism, letters, meditation. And hence it demonstrates a preference for the mixed mode that is characteristic of Wallace-Crabbe's mature work but was already present in the title of his second collection *The Music of Division*. Even when he appears to have gone over for a pleasure cruise to the shores of *obiter dicta*, letting off those "Squibs in the Nick of Time" or collecting "The Bits and Pieces" (also in *The Amorous Cannibal*), the poetic work goes on. It is partly that we can see him honing an aphoristic language for a wider sphere in something like "Washing Machine" with its post-modern imagism:

Behind a glass pane
the wardrobes wet personae
play at vertigo

But it is more than that--and more even than just being contented to look at an artichoke or a foot because--as "A Stone Age Decadent" declares--"Just to stare / With care at this or that makes world seem good." And even here, thought is not long exiled. The primacy of seeing over voice which is declared in "Telephone" may be read as a witty condensation of a common experience; it can also be read as a reason for Wallace-Crabbe's resistance to the deconstructive elevation of absence:

Why does it drive me up the pole?
Perhaps my hankering for the whole
man, woman, child, in conversation
and not this echo of depletion
which murmurs through a diaphragm
following some branch-like tram
of thought in disembodiment

piles fuel up all round discontent.
Give me a presence, here to hand
that I may view and understand
but not incapsulated voice.... (27)

Perhaps nonetheless it is the very multifarious and conscious invention of voice in his work that helps to explain why he has had rather less honour in his own country than abroad. Certainly there have been enthusiasts: Alec King wrote in 1968:

In its vitality of image, its resonance and rhythmic dance, all intimately qualities of his thoughtfulness, of the wholeness and liveliness of his reflective responsiveness to life--intimately part of his poetic intelligence--Wallace-Crabbe's poetry has been for me a constant pleasure.¹²

But this opinion had apparently been missed by Gary Catalano when he reviewed *The Emotions are not Skilled Workers* in 1980, saying:

Of all the living Australian poets who have been honoured with the publication of a selected volume, Chris Wallace-Crabbe is one of the least read. I have yet to meet a poet of my generation who expresses any enthusiasm for his work, and if the stray comments of more senior reviewers are any guide, then his work arouses enthusiasm nowhere. Search high and low, all you will find is indifference.

The only reason I can find for this neglect is that Wallace-Crabbe has too complex a poetic personality.¹³

Catalano finds him, in comparison to Buckley and Murray:

a bit more various--or is it more slippery--than we expect an Australian poet to be, and in our neglect of his verse we are probably giving way to a vulgarized idea of what sincerity entails.

I want to capitalize on Catalano's suggestion of comparison with Murray by putting together two poems which have their point of contact in the laconic Australian popular idiom. One is Les Murray's "The Mitchells," which presents, within the deliberate framing of the opening "I am seeing this," a convincingly detailed picture of two men taking a lunch break from their task of raising the pole "they have dug a hole for":

The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam box with a handle. One is overheard saying
drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.

The first man, if asked, would say *I'm one of the Mitchells.*

The other would gaze a while, dried leaves in his palm,
and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement,

say *I'm one of the Mitchells.* Of the pair, one has been rich

but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat.
Nearly everything they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.¹⁴

If I say that this poem is clearly identifiable as part of the idealized and ideally accessible world of Murray's creative nationalism, I do not mean to disparage its achievement, which is considerable--indeed it seems to me to bear very

poems in which the grotesque, the passionate and/or the irrational break through. The fact that they are presented as dreams, nightmares and fairy or ghost stories serves as a sort of control, and they are frequently quarantined to their own poetic space. Two poems of this kind in his recent work are "The Well-Dreamed Man" and "The Landlord of Himself" The former (the opening poem of *I'm Deadly Serious*) shows that there is room for wit in the mystery of dreaming, but "The Landlord of Himself" is more strikingly gothic, elaborated as it is with all the concrete specifics of nightmare:

In the long run he finds no room to take
he is eating his heart out,
the taste is oddly rich
but his shirtfront is tacky with blood like plum-jam
and his fat feet ache.

He paces past the spider's contribution, a ghost of
triangles and joinery
on whom dead forests close,
one lintel threatening to crack his skull.

The plot thickens, architraves brim with nightmare,
wailing a song about a barnyard fox
he plummets from floor to floor,
hands of carved angels letting him go by
down the builder's convenient smooth shaft.

(*The Amorous Cannibal* 6)

It is one of the striking syntheses of "Practitioners of Silence" that this mysterious world of violence and grotesquerie is incorporated into its world of mixed experiences and idioms. "There is Another World but it is in This One" is the title of one of the poems from *I'm Deadly Serious*: "Practitioners of Silence" provides imaginative realization of such multiple worlds. If the key that opens it is

the idiom of deconstruction--the meanings that are in the gaps, this is reconciled with the language of traditional aesthetics at the end. Man and nature, nature and art dwell under the same conditions, and the leap from colloquial minimalism to highly wrought poeticizing realizes the kind of combination that he describes elsewhere, more casually, as his "slang aubade" (*I'm Deadly Serious*: 31).

The containedness of "Practitioners of Silence" depends to no small extent on its stanzaic structure, the four line pattern being interestingly roughed up, but not actually broken, with the mimetically colloquial exchange of actual conversation which is placed symmetrically in the middle of the poem--i.e. the third of five stanzas.

Neither Judith Wright nor John Forbes have given us much discussion of the role that they see for stanzaic form in poetry, although Wright has left us, in "Tightropes" (*Alive* 4) her poetic account of how it feels to write free verse. But Wallace-Crabbe has given a developed account of his views in the essay "Stanzas in Our Time." And they clearly show that he sees the stanza as a major element in poetic organization. He argues first that the patterning of stanzas retains the element of repetition which, as in melody, "curbs and shapes the potential chaos of experience and perception." Secondly he argues that stanzas have a general appeal "to a long-standing, almost Pythagorean hunger for symmetry and numerical ordering, which we all find in ourselves." And finally, within the particular economy of a specific poem, the stanzas can "contain and dramatize the successive stages of a psychological or dramatic progression" (*Toil and Spin* 115-121).

Sometimes the pleasures of stanzaic form can even come from our perception of formal wit, of something unexpected in the way that the paradoxical task of curbing and shaping experience is carried out, in the fit of form and

content. The limerick is a general instance and suggests the playfulness that is also found in a number of Wallace-Crabbe's short poems--"Rondo" from *I'm Deadly Serious* is a kind of formal jeu d'esprit; but not all such playful stanzaic exercises are meant to be funny. "Recollection" is a graceful compliment to Gwen Harwood, to whom it is dedicated, and to Thomas Hardy for whose lyric forms Harwood and Wallace-Crabbe share an admiration.

And in the end, stanzas are a serious matter to Wallace-Crabbe, as can be seen when he talks of their function in modern poets from Hopkins to Berryman:

shaping is a key to how one copes with the chaotic or destructive mechanics of life, winning form and music out of chaos, and demonstrating one's control by a display of precise and exhibitiv art ... Their form has this moral sense: to live on is to keep shaping. (121)

It is also to keep thinking, although poetry is by no means subsumed in the mental. In 1968 Alec King had defended Wallace-Crabbe against what he called the "quite absurd" argument that his role as an academic--and a clever one at that--disqualified him as poet:

His poetry belongs to the school of contemporary reflection, self-conscious understanding; he is at home with its idiom and its mode, with its way of reflecting through structures of fluid metaphor and through the linking of movements of intellection by the interplay of analogies. (180)

King, and Wallace-Crabbe, could still, in 1968, speak of mind as something unproblematic--at least in its existence, even if the nature of that existence is not necessarily unproblematic. In "The Mind is Its Own Place"

(*Where the Wind Came* 43), it "is a dark / and most solitary place" and it is through poetry that the self recovers "blurred music of a world" that has been rendered invisible, inaudible by that darkness and solitariness. But when science and philosophy try to deprive us of the very concept of mind, requiring that it divest "itself / of any belief in the mental," Wallace-Crabbe wittily defends its indispensability in poems like "Mind" and "Abhorring a Vacuum." In "pearlmother dawn," as "slept fragments / fall back into a shape / doing things with cutlery" and the "tiny birds in their twelve-tone clamour / recommend continuity" the "dozy-dim" speaker battles back against the dispersal of his unobserved self, so that

the fiction of personality
nimbs me for a moment like
slant light through a tram door.

It passes. I am lived
by who knows what, the gene's blind way
of making another gene.

Whatever has been writing this down gets out
from behind the wheel and
walks away.

(*The Amorous Cannibal* 8)

And finally to keep on living is to keep on looking and speaking--and perhaps not to yield too much to anxiety about the primacy of one or the other. "Abhorring a Vacuum" picks up to some extent from the earlier "Stanzas Written in Connecticut" with its struggle against the mind's surrender to a void in which "Nothing could mean people":

Pearlbelly, dust of blue,
And under it the snowy
Plains are all pied with tree-dark,
As lives, though strange, are not empty
Or empty only in dream.

.....

Into my dream in this foreign land
A host of forceful phantoms crept
And I woke with one concern on hand:
Do I sleep or am I slept?

The dream bleaches out; I am here
In the height of afternoon
Between the little hills
And a gabled various town
And I see my daughter dancing,
Pure will and sheer delight
Believing in people and action
And the naked wood of trees
And full of things in the sunlight now to be said.
(*Where the Wind Came* 57)

In the balance of that final line lie both tension and resolution. We can play with the tension, asserting language's equality as experience, which is what happens in "Lilt" with the claim that we are all "given to word-games"--"What we say being just as green as the world is" (*Where the Wind Came* 19). But as for the claim for language's absolute supremacy, he gives, in "The Thing Itself," a vividly ironic answer to the notion that "the important thing is to build new sentences." If the undertaking were not, he says, "too mannered / (as gnostic as a shower of rabbits)," he would like to devise a sentence

like nothing on this planet:
a structure full of brackets and cornices,
twigs, pediments, dadoes and haloes and nimbs,

full of nuts, butter and flowers!
sinewy, nerved,
capable of blotches or of waving hair.

That would be a sentence to really show the buggers,
.....

or like a tree
recently invented
by some utterly brilliant committee;

it would glitter, articulate,
strum and diversify.
It would be the thing itself.

(*I'm Deadly Serious* 10)

This witty version of the hubristic grammarian-who-would-be-God reverberates finally with the physical world, so that we cannot see how to disentangle that world's secular abundance from the creating word. The play of wit across feeling and intellect that has continually informed Wallace-Crabbe's ironic perception that we love what perishes, here includes language itself, and yet paradoxically he is still doing what he wrote of in "Nature, Language, the Sea": making out of all this the poem, an object, something added to that wide realm of things themselves that constitute the secular abundance that is the basis of the good spirit, which, characteristically punning, he resurrects from *Where the Wind Came* to celebrate the fact that "The Good Spirit Bounces Back" in *The Amorous Cannibal*.

And the good spirit, for Wallace-Crabbe, speaks with more than one tongue. "Nature, Language, the Sea" had articulated a classically organo-formalist view of art. "The Thing Itself" returns to tercets (one of those tripart structures for which Wallace-Crabbe has confessed his liking); but it returns for a poem which is--among other things--sceptical about the very linguistic will to create which the poem both celebrates and demonstrates. On the other hand, it is the capacity of nature to act as the source of the thing itself that is simultaneously celebrated and questioned in "The Burning Bush" (*I'm Deadly Serious* 42).

At first glance, this may seem a relatively simple poem in which both the will to create and the will to explain are abjured and we are left to unravel for ourselves the nature of the interplay between the brilliantly declarative or exhibitiv powers of nature and a modestly personal scale of humanity. Into the street-scene dominated by the rhus which "blushes outrageously / In the midst of all these houses" are introduced first the memory of the poet's mother, who "were she still alive, / would have delighted in these alien colorations,/ such daubs of japonaiserie"; then the present visual experience ("like punctuation") of "a little old Sicilian woman" who "comes beating up the street / with her plastic bag from the deli / and the bright Virgilian leaves blow round her feet"; and finally the poem concludes

They dub this the first day of winter
and I have slipped into my autumn
so I'm allowed to do anything I like,
so long as I'm up to it. The leaves hanging down
from these gutter elms are brilliantly yellow.

But from the beginning we have been made aware that whatever is exhibited by nature can only be declared by what human speech (located in the poet) is "up to" (both capable of

and actually doing). And in the first and second stanzas of this poem human language seems to be playing with deliberate unease through a range of allusions and similitudes--metaphors, similes, symbols--which retreat from nature as subject even as they embrace it. The rhus, we are told

is like a flame,
if flames were ever so richly, darkly red,
if flames were ever held to deck a garden.
Its colour is too much, it deepens the autumn
and sky withdraws in pastel scarves behind it
making those gestures that prepare for sunset
where a hidden sun puts fringes
around a cloud shaped like Java, a pewter cloud.

It is only at the end that we come to an attempt at language of pure presence. Here, says the last sentence, is nature as the thing itself--"The leaves hanging down from these gutter elms are brilliantly yellow now." But it is too late: our "knowledge" of nature is already irretrievably entangled in a symbolic system to which the poem itself has alluded as if inevitably. We know nature as the leaves from which the Sibyl's wisdom was deciphered; as the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. Will we ever be "up to" seeing these brilliant yellow leaves as the things themselves--or must we always read them as signs, and double signs at that: of the poet's autumnal mortality about to decline into winter; or of the brilliance that may yet be claimed in autumnal maturity (if the poet is up to it). In its complex and interacting juxtapositions of language and nature the poem meets the canons of both wit and seriousness, but in neither matter nor manner is it deadly.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Rebel General* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967) 17.
2. *The Amorous Cannibal* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985) 15.
3. *I'm Deadly Serious* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988) 27.
4. James McAuley, "Explicit," *James McAuley: Poetry, prose and personal commentary*, ed. Leonie Kramer (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988) 228.
5. Peter Porter, "High Season: Wallace-Crabbe's Melbourne." *ABR* May 1986: 9-10.
6. *Toil and Spin: Two Directions in Modern Poetry* (Richmond: Hutchinson, 1979): 122; 18.
7. Kevin Hart, "Presentation and Representation," *Overland* 113 (1988): 95. It may be that Wallace-Crabbe would prefer lucidity to clarity: he dramatizes the need to "clamber towards lucidity" in "In the Rain Forest" (*The Rebel General* 4).
8. The choice of John Brack as the cover artist for *I'm Deadly Serious* seems to me absolutely right: despite the high degree of intellectual patterning in his works, Brack remains recognizably representational.
9. "There are No Names: the Forbes Scan," rev. of *The Stunned Mullet*, *Scripta* 5.2 (1989): 193.
10. *The Emotions are not Skilled Workers* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980) 24. He tends to have one long

poem--inviting the epithet major--for each book. In *The Rebel General* it is the title poem and the Colony sequence; in *Where the Wind Came*, "Blood is the Water"; in *The Amorous Cannibal*, "A Stone Age Decadent"; in *I'm Deadly Serious*, "The Sixth Man (a tale of the Cold War)."

11. Barbara Giles's extreme severity about the diction and rhythm of these sections in her review (*ABR*, Nov. 1980: 40) makes no allowance for the juxtaposition of styles in the poem.
12. Alec King, "The Look of Australian Poetry in 1967." *Meanjin* 27 (1968): 179-80.
13. Gary Catalano, "Stroking it Open: A Poetry Chronicle," *Meanjin* 39 (1980): 357. Cf. Jennifer Strauss on the poet as "Protean performer" and the difficulty of fingering a quintessential Wallace-Crabbe poem in *The Age*, Feb. 8th, 1986.
14. Les A. Murray, *Poems 1961-1983*, A&R Modern Poets (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, rev. ed. 1988) 99.
15. *Where the Wind Came* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971) 15.

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