

C.D. YEABSLEY: Interview with Bruce Dawe

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CY: What is the attitude of your students towards poetry?

BD: I find that they don't like poetry of discourse because that is foreign to the Australian culture - discourse as a reasoned, step by step discussion about a philosophical, socio-political or aesthetic issue.

CY: Does that rule out metaphysical poetry?

BD: You have to sneak it in by the back door by way of its comic elements, for example, a poem like Donne's 'The Flea.' You can have success, too, by using poems which involve a psychological complexity with which they're familiar, as young romantics, like Drayton's 'Since there's no help' or, an earlier poem, Wyatt's 'They flee from me', which students can relate to in terms of their own experiences of love.

The discourse poems tend to involve various levels of allegory or levels of political and cultural reference, and that's where you lose them. There's a problem of course, with something like 'To his coy mistress'. Although it's a fine poem with a great sense of fun and absurdity in it, the fun and absurdity are double-edged because you feel absurd yourself by the time you've indicated what the Humber is and how the Ganges comes into it. Anything outside the immediate field of reference will become pretty dull for them - We'll be moving into the field of footnotes.

CY: Are you worried about the fact that students can't pick up historical and cultural allusions?

BD: I take it as inevitable that we won't be very interested in the Duke of Buckingham, of James II, or Colly Cibber, or court intrigues appreciated by Pope, or Dryden, or Swift unless we have a specific interest. The test of a poem is that if the references honeycomb a poem to such an extent that it can't survive without them then, in one sense, it's not a poem that you grieve for losing.

We tend to be ahistorical. For example, if you try to teach Auden you really have to sketch in something of the intellectual atmosphere of the 1930s, otherwise what does it all mean? It's a bit like a new building - you have to bring along strips of lawn and do a deliberate cultivation job otherwise it's very barren.

CY: Do you think enough is being done to further studies in Australian literature?

BD: No I don't! I think, for example, that it's anomalous that our National University has so few courses in Australian literature. If you enrolled your South American son at the A.N.U. to come to first hand grips with the heartland of Australian literature you'd be very disappointed. I just think it's odd that the National University, which is so well funded, and has had people like Alec Hope as professors there - well, they haven't honoured his memory very well.

The post-war period in Australian literature has been extraordinarily rich and it's quite anachronistic that, with all the Aussie boosting that goes on through the media, we have such a desultory attitude towards the study of Australian writers.

CY: Do you think that the analysis of poetry should be taught in schools?

BD: Yes I do. I think it's very important. That it's taught with varying degrees of success is really a bit like what Chesterton said about Christianity, "It's been found difficult and not tried". There has to be an awareness of the sorts of difficulties of poetry if any kind of sympathy is going to remain with the students when they leave school.

One way of de-mythologising poetry is the practice, common in South Australian schools, of having a poet-in-residence. This allows students to read and write poetry in a workshop situation - a kind of crash course. The other advantage is that students become aware that poetry is a living art form and not something confined to the Nineteenth Century.

CY: Is poetry chiefly read by other poets?

BD: I don't think so. I've taken part in a lot of poetry readings and I've had no indication that a majority of the audience writes poetry. The audiences are very varied - in pubs, coffee places, theatres, campuses, summer schools. I think one of the most interesting audiences of all is at the Friendly Street poetry readings.

CY: Do you see any sign of new developments in Australian poetry?

BD: I can't make a judgement. I am, and always have been, outside the scene, not by choice but through circumstance. I went from being a dropout student to being a labourer, a general dogsbody. Now I live in Toowoomba which magnificently fulfils that expectation of making you feel that you're not the flavour of the month, especially if you have the opinions that I have.

CY: Is there something uniquely Australian about our poetry?

BD: Various people have worked on that question. Once you start to define those Australian qualities you find to your surprise, and sometimes consternation, that people elsewhere have those qualities too. It doesn't take away from Australia, it just proves that we're human beings too.

But I think one thing that's pretty true, and this has been reflected in the other arts as well, is that we've become less self-conscious. We're not taken in by all this Aussie kids are Weetbix kids, or if you've never held a bat you don't know what it's all about. In a sense we have to become less Australian to become more Australian.

CY: What about the laconic style?

BD: That seems to me to be one thing which is more likely to be Australian. That's what endeared Henry Lawson to many people. It's the assumption that one's worth is not measured by the volume of one's rhetoric but by some inner quality.

Australia is a large country. It swallows up artistic reputations at a rapid rate. The air's fairly dry; the leaves are a kind of dull green so they make rather poor laurels. I've always taken a moderate position, not crouching but not standing on tiptoe - you get bowled arse over turkey very quickly. If you don't stand quite as high up you've got less far to fall.

CY: What is poetry?

BD: I've never worried about definitions. Take a poem like 'Enter without so much as knocking.' If somebody said it's just chopped up prose, I'd say fine, it doesn't worry me. If they said to me the latest analysis from our most advanced laboratory tests shows that most of your poetry is in fact prose, I wouldn't question the validity of their scientific knowledge at all. It's what I want to write.

When I started I worked in very obvious rhymed forms because that's the way, in those days, most people came to poetry; in my case through my mother declaiming fully rhymed and highly sentimental poems which I can still recite.

An ability to write in both forms - both less and more structured - is useful. Sometimes you want to work on a metaphor, which is particularly meaningful, without any sense of being hemmed in by formal requirements. If you have to worry about the formal elements at the same time it's a bit like juggling swords and watermelons - difficult, because they're so different. However, a competence in both forms will be some kind of guarantee that you won't be slack or sloppy or merely write chopped up prose; that speech cadences will have had some sort of tougher schooling.

CY: Are religious and political beliefs important to you as a poet, rather than as a person, if such a distinction can be made?

BD: I always think it proper and reasonable to write out of whatever one's social responses are without any sense of shame or apology. On the other hand I know I can often be wrong or ill-informed about those areas.

I also write out of more personal things. People who categorise me as a satirical poet forget that the satirist is also a person. However large or sweeping the declamation or the exposure of folly, they come down to the fact that they will often be closely related to the perception of what that folly means in personal terms - in terms of himself, or his family or those he loves or those he knows as people.

CY: Where do you get your ideas from?

BD: Sometimes from films, or books. I'm reading a history of Ireland at the moment. I read a bit of Science Fiction. I don't read literary journals because I don't get the time.

CY: Does a line just come sometimes?

BD: Sometimes a line just comes into your head. The first three lines of 'Life-Cycle' were like that; the rest I staggered with. When a line comes you hope the rest of the poem comes with it. Those lines or fragments or metaphors that come to you have their own kind of validity.

I have a line at the moment, which is just a couple of phrases, about the two young policemen who were killed. I want to use the word slain, rather than murdered or killed, because it opens up a larger field. It has something like the sense of feloniously but in a dark way.

One understands goodness. I don't think human beings can get to the bottom of evil. Evil and good are dimensions which creatures other than ourselves don't have to contend with. Dogs only know dogginess. I'm not a philosopher. I don't have any natural mechanisms or a framework to assist in understanding. I don't have a fleet foot for getting to the finishing post.

A schoolgirl once asked me what is my philosophy of life. I told her, "Stay confused. It's healthier." I distrust intensely people who have too slick or too clear or too articulate a philosophy because I have a feeling that where most people live that wouldn't apply anyway, and where they live their beliefs can be a terrifying invitation to tyranny, oppression and madness.

CY: Having got your ideas, or maybe a line, what then?

BD: Writing a poem is a bit like chasing a greasy pig; you can end up falling on your face a lot while you're trying to catch it.

Water finds its own level. If you find that this form rather than that form is the way in which your thoughts are starting to flow again, like the water, then that will be the way you will go. Sometimes that will be impeded by the very idea of rhyme. It's really how the thought processes are feeding into the writing hand which determines how much freedom or strictness you can accommodate without losing track of the argument.

CY: Are you conscious of techniques as you write?

BD: Alliteration I like and find myself at ease with because when I was young I was a terrific fan of Dylan Thomas. Rhyme I'm not quite so easy with. It's like choosing clothes. I don't have much colour sense and I don't know what will go with what until I try it on. So with a poem; you try this and you try that to see if it matches.

CY: Can you be taught to write poetry?

BD: You can learn some skills relating to it but you must have the intuitive capacity to go along with the skills. Sometimes people are basically writers anyway and just need a bit of encouragement.

What writing schools offer as much as anything is a sense of communion and fellowship, a reassurance that though writing is a lonely art, we are not alone. In a country like ours its finest writers could live and die and it wouldn't matter a damn, but if Wally Lewis has a broken arm the flags are at halfmast.

CY: Do you see yourself as having a particular role in Australia?

BD: I often think of that line from 'Hamlet' when he tells the players that they're "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time" and that's the kind of thing that I'd like on my literary tombstone. I don't look to posterity or to being in some kind of canon. I'd rather just record the average life than write about the great figures; ordinary people who won't get the big obituaries in the paper but who are the very stuff of life.

CY: Have your overseas trips helped you at all?

BD: Not me, no. I don't think it's been of any significant value at all. I'm happy not to go. If people said to me tomorrow we'd like you to go somewhere else, the odds are I'd say no. I'm happy to be grubbing around in my backyard. When I travel, even around Australia, I don't really look at things, I go to meet people. Travel, in some ways, is an escape from the self, and I think you can learn a lot without going past the end of your street.

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