

JOHN M. WRIGHT: Bruce Dawe's Poetry

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*'.. the grasshopper memory leaps
in the long thicket...'
(Bruce Dawe, 'Soliloquy For One Dead')*

It is now widely accepted that Bruce Dawe's is a distinctive voice in contemporary Australian poetry, and that his distinctiveness has to do with his feeling for the unique rhythms of Australian speech. Rodney Hall has written of Dawe that:

.. his unique contribution to the present development of our poetry is his use of Australian speech cadences. It is not a matter of slang. Here, maybe for the first time, we have a voice that would strike the Englishman or American as alien, even while using familiar words.¹

While the second part of this statement seems indisputably true of poems such as 'Life-Cycle', 'Enter Without So Much As Knocking', and 'Any Shorter And I'd Have Missed It Altogether', one wonders whether 'the use of Australian speech cadences' is the major factor that distinguishes his most important poetry, even when it is clearly there. No one would doubt, I should think, that there is a distinctive individual 'voice' in the poems, but it is the whole sense of the world which lies behind the 'voice' that *matters*, as one would think it ought to. And the individuality of that sense of the world has to do with (putting it pretty crudely) a sure sense of the ludicrous, balanced against an exuberant affirmation of the possibility of personal response in a world where the rot of conformity is so prevalent.

The title poem of *Condolences Of The Season*² gives some flesh to my phrase 'a sure sense of the ludicrous':

*a matronly cosmogony of mums
hover above your pram or basinette
and by an infallible process of recall
place each distinctive trait (the eyes, for instance,
which could only be Uncle Tom's, nobody else's,
Aunt Lena's rugged chin, of course and, yes,
who could mistake those ears of Cousin Ted's?)*

It is clear that the drive of the 'Identi-Kitting' process is to dehumanise the infant, 'the eyes... could only be Uncle Tom's, nobody else's'. The whole process denies the child's individuality, denies his incipient *personality*. But the poem is a comic one because the threat is easily parried. Already the child seems to the speaker to have enough resilience to prevent his becoming the kind of person 'the matronly cosmogony of mums' implicitly want him to be - someone who can be categorised, 'each distinctive trait' accounted for. Any feeling of distaste is well controlled by the speaker's confidence in individuality, his belief that his son will be (indeed, is already) as healthily resistant as he is:

*And now it seems that you and I, my son,
must suffer with like fortitude
the diddums chorus, the ickle-man alleluia*

In fact it may seem precious to write about 'Condolences of the Season' in terms of control and resilience; it is such a funny poem, delighting in the social games. There is little sense of threat in the poem, but these four lines betray a certain apprehension and distaste:

*a matronly cosmogony of mums
hover above your prams or basinette
and by an infallible process of recall
place each distinctive trait*

The child is so helpless in the face of all this, he really exists only as a plaything a kind of curiosity. Because the speaker sees that his child will survive all this, he freely delights in the ridiculousness of it all, and any sense of threat is only there humorously. But compare the tone of this poem:

*'Which one's the dog?' you find yourself saying
after the last escape-route has been cut
with the photograph album lying heavily
as a book of judgment on your knees.*

Already, in that phrase 'you find yourself saying' there is some sense of desperation. You say it in spite of your manners and habits - you say what you think you ought not to say, but you cannot help it; it springs from a deep-seated horror at what is happening. In a way this, too, is 'the diddums chorus, the ickle-man alleluia'. People behaving dully, predictably and expecting you to behave in a similar way. No other reply than 'Really lovely, really lovely...' can be made, except the one he finally makes. There is no delight in this poem, no joyous celebration of the ludicrous (joyous because it can be triumphed over):

*'Yes, yes... But which one's the dog?'
Why do they so often fail to understand
that your quake of merriment at your own retort
is only, after all,
the farewell flash of the gaffed fish
whose colours stream already into the gunwales
- the teeth now bared
in the familiar social rictus,
the disconnected eye
and lips hooked open on an interminable mmmnh of approval?*

Even in the expression of an individual perception about social routine, the speaker cannot uphold his confidence in individuality and resilience:

*the farewell flash of the gaffed fish
whose colours stream already into the gunwales³*

The force of the poetic statement surely denies the claim that the speaker's individuality is merging into the general dull conformity, makes such a suggestion look finally almost melodramatic.

When no individual response, other than a desperate one, seems possible, the ludicrous suddenly becomes more than just ludicrous. It becomes horrifying and stifling, the range of possibilities so tightly controlled that individuality seems to be so dependent on the possibility of genuine spontaneity:

*I have to be careful with my boy,
that I don't crumple his immediate-delivery-genuinefold-up-and-extensible world
into correct English forever, petrify its wonder
with the stone gaze of grammar, or turn him into
a sort of Sunday visitor at the lakeside
who brings bags of specially-prepared bread-crusts
to feed to swans who arch their necks and hiss.
(*'Easy Does It'*)*

As he so frequently does when moving to the climax of a poem, Dawe has found the paradigm image. Those swans have a conclusive force in the logic of the poem. It is the very spontaneity of their actions that is so strongly suggestive of their splendour. The swans, one imagines, hiss with far more force because they don't

plan it ahead. This poem relates to 'Condolences of the Season' and differs from 'Which One's the Dog?' in its appeal, a comic appeal, to our sense of the ludicrous. And in Bruce Dawe's imaginative world the ludicrous and the prepackaged, the ludicrous and the learnt patterns (the secondhand responses) bear very closely upon each other. Closely related to all this is a missionary quality in the poetry, a fervent urge to set the world right, or at the very least give expression to the fullness of his outrage. He hisses with the swans. While this impulse in his poetry often becomes dominant to the point of stridency (or something like it), as Philip Martin has argued,⁴ it is also responsible for many of the finest moments. It is more frequently successful when the distancing device of satire is employed. The 'statements' (for example 'Process')⁵ are often too much like student newspaper journalese. His most successful 'protest' poems are usually those where one of the perpetrators of the outrage is allowed to 'plead' for himself:

*Dear one, forgive me appearing before you like this,
in a two-piece track-suit, welder's goggles
and a green cloth cap like some gross bee-this is the State's idea...
I would have come arrayed like a bridegroom for these nuptials
knowing how often you have dreamed about this
moment of consummation in your cell.
If I must bind your arms now to your sides
with a leather strap and ask if you have anything to say
-these too are formalities I would dispense with:
(A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love')*

What we have here is a superb parody of the public servant's language-'these too are formalities I would dispense with', the grand, rhetorical apology for impotence and also the helpless plea of an independent, private 'morality' which must be subservient to the Department or the State (elsewhere characterised as the 'orders is orders' mentality)-'this is the state's idea' set in what is seen as a horrifying macabre parody of a religious ritual. But as the poem proceeds, the question implicit in the details is: 'How much a parody?':

*The journalists are ready with the flash-bulbs of their eyes
raised to the simple altar, the doctor twitches like a stethoscope
-you have been given a clean bill of health, like any
modern bride.
With this spring of mine
from the trap, hitting the door lever, you will go forth
into a new life which I, alas, am not yet fit to share.*

(What *does* the minister say to the victim? What possible need is there for a doctor here? In the last lines the tone is clearly one of incantation.) Through appealing to our sense of the ultimately ludicrous, Dawe can convey his outrage most effectively. The dishonest, underhanded sordidness of the ritual emerges in the opening lines of the poem. The shabbily dressed hangman protests that he would have dressed for the occasion (and in the poem the anonymity of the hangman, who is in one sense only an incidental figure, does seem to be a calculated part of the ritual). By playing out the tragedy of a hanging as farce, the deepest sense of protest finds expression-the real sordidness cannot be hidden. The missionary impulse is most effective when it is not obtrusive; by dramatising the situation as farce of the most cruelly incongruous kind, Dawe is relieved of any need to *state* his outrage; it is dramatically presented by means of a brilliantly conceived apology which Dawe has drawn from the mouth of his created hangman, whose shadowiness seems even more sinister when he is given prominence and a voice, and who would seem in all the obvious ways the most unlikely figure to be addressing us, particularly with such articulately ludicrous obsequiousness. The final and astonishing poverty of all 'this is state's idea' apologies is searingly apparent.

The outrage which shapes 'A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love' is apparently completely different in kind from that which is implicit in 'Easy Does It'. And it might seem that 'outrage' is not the term one would usually employ to define one's objections to 'bags of specially-prepared bread-crusts'. However, I think it can be quite reasonably argued that there is a major link between the two poems, between in fact almost all of Dawe's poems. It is the annihilation of his individuality, the submergence of 'conscience' (if there is one), the readiness to conform unthinkingly that, in the dramatic structure of 'A Victorian Hangman...' enables the

hangman to perform the act. Of course he is a tool of 'the State', but without such pliable tools no state (or 'State', with all the suggestiveness which that capital-letter contributes to in the poem) could hang men. This strain of thought would seem to be central to the poem:

- these too are formalities I would dispense with

He accepts the State's decisions even when they don't accord with his personal preferences. The poem suggests that 'his love' has the same power as his conscience - that of course he is incapable of any feeling because he is not a human being at all, but more like 'some gross bee'. Vital to the poem's shape, then, is this passionate denial of the bureaucratic principle, the submergence of individuality. 'Easy Does It' is quite obviously a poem about individuality, the secondhand, unspontaneous (or limitedly, predictably spontaneous) response is just so inadequate to deal with the vibrant, demanding world. The world ought to be perceived, Dawe seems to argue, unmediated. Trust no-one else's responses as fully adequate. In a society stifled by conformity, only the immediacy of sensitive individual response can offer the chance of a significant life:

*- she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish'.*

The unleashed, soaring lyricism of these final lines of 'Drifters' celebrates one moment of defining significance in a footloose, tawdry life. The only thing that gives meaning to that woman's life are moments of spontaneous engagement with her environment, in a general setting of dullness and impermanence. The force of lyricism in this extract seems interestingly related to the force of outrage (so tautly controlled) at the end of 'A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love':

*Be assured, you will sink into the generous pool of public feeling
as gently as a leaf-accept your role, feel chosen.
You are this evening's headlines. Come, my love.*

Both his 'lyricism' and his 'outrage' are a measure of Dawe's *passion*. In some of his better poems, lyricism balances a sense of loss or poverty:

*I try hard
to forget, saying: If God wills,
it must be so, because of
His goodness, becausebut the grasshopper memory leaps
in the long thicket, knowing no ease. Ah, Joe,
you never knew the whole of it...*

It is, of course, the freshness and clarity, the extraordinary lyrical energy of the 'grasshopper' image that stops this from being cloyingly sentimental. Because of the delicate balance achieved (not only here but in the poem as a whole) between an open lamentation and an immediately evocative affirmation of the vibrant physical world, the poem must be seen as a great elegy. It is not as if celebration and lament alternate crudely, they are inextricably blended:

*Sometimes when summer is over the land,
and the heat quickens in the deaf timbers,
and birds are thick in the plums again,
my heart sickens, Joe, calling
for the water of your voice*

The image of summer has the heavy, tactile quality of memory. It is so abundant, so bright that it seems to bring the speaker's emotions into focus, with a force like sudden sunlight. He cannot now choke back his sadness:

my heart sickens, Joe

But because the poem dramatically presents the speaker's internal landscape, we are not embarrassed.⁶ The landscape is so overwhelmingly redolent of the heart's heat, that it becomes an active force on the speaker; it is too bright to be borne. The vision of the landscape, in the context of the poem, is both a lament and a celebration-and they cannot be separated.

The poem, 'Leasehold' provides another instance of lyricism informing elegy:

*For months, I remember, drunkenness. In the Roaring Forties
of ownership he lost himself endlessly,
running before the gales of alcohol
like a Great Circle clipper,
collapsing in out of the dark, clutching a raffled 3 lb chicken
to his chest as he hit the deck. By the combustion-stove
the morning after, it was impossible to dislike
his dreaming body still in the act of making
its deep-frozen touchdown.*

*But one night, late,
I saw him, slumped at the kitchen-table, come awake
with a shocked cry that cleft the house,
on hearing, in the silence stitched like a coverlet with the tiny sounds
of bird and insect, the old refrigerator by the door
start up alarmingly, abandoning
its muted self-possessed loneliness
as it beat on out to sea with great shuddering strokes.*

It is that final image that embodies Dawe's compassion. We have the sense of a profound loneliness, a man hopelessly lost at sea. In the middle of the night that most homely of all objects, the refrigerator, becomes the agent of fear - and again that sense of the ludicrous is there, but this time in a quite different way. The parallel between the man and the old fridge (with 'its muted self-possessed loneliness') is not over-suggested or factitious, and the lyrical evocation of the fridge's sound is forcefully dream-like. Our final sense is of a deep compassion for the man lost 'at sea', 'before the gales of alcohol'. Clearly the 'deep-frozen' imagery is resonant on several levels, and even the company name 'Great Circle' is suggestive of the similar sense of aimless lost spinning found in the poem about his mother, 'My Mother In Her Latter Years':

*she spins forever in the wholly-bought-and-paid-for
coffin to call her own*

And in both poems that sense of loneliness and futility has developed from the dull, day-to-day grind, the search for proprietorship over something, even if it is only a house, or a coffin. Both these poems seem founded on incongruity-it is an integral shaping element in Dawe's perception of the world. If it can be used to expose the bogus, secondhand, prepackaged and unimaginative, it can be used also as a profound basis for compassion. Alexander Craig has written of Dawe:...

*it's this poet's warm humanity, his sense of all men as 'members of one body', which gives the
hot cutting-edge.⁷*

If he would always assert individuality as a prime value, he would also stress the inability of humans to do much to change the direction of their lives; he is at heart a determinist, as is so clearly apparent in poems like 'For the Duration'. So his celebration of the possibility of spontaneity is a recognition of the difficulties which must first be overcome, and his poetry is often almost consumed by a sense of transience and impermanence-'Drifters' might be seen as a kind of parable of the human experience. He is able to detect what is ludicrous in the ordinary and, as well as often shaping his outrage, and providing the basis for most of his humour, it provides also the possibility of profound compassion. How much more effective 'Leasehold' is than a poem like Geoffrey Lehmann's 'My Father' which resorts to the banality of mannered formal tribute:

Yet in him elemental beauties flash.

Dawe's elegiac impulse does not seduce him into sentimentality. Unlike the Dawe, the Lehmann cannot work through its images alone but is forced to fall back on assertion. He *asserts* what the poem itself has been trying to embody.

The major reason why Dawe is so often able to work successfully almost entirely through his images is simply that his vision is usually so clear, so immediate. He can, for instance, in 'Cattle At Night-fall' evoke an equally resonant sense of the imagination as Keat's sense in 'I cannot see what flower are at my feet...'. The sense of the imagination is tactile, in a darkly, weightily sensuous way:

*.... When I have closed my books with a sigh
and gone out there into the tussocky darkness,
swinging my lantern,
whether any of them, moody beasts of the imagination,
will unfold their fore-legs like clasp-knives, rise
and follow me willingly home.*

Equally suggestive (of something like anarchy, I suppose) is this image, which gives one no hint of any conscious shaping but emerges from the body of the poem with the suddenness of a dream-image, and its movement starkly parallels its sense of plunging-all that sinister energy:

*and, later, as the train rocked slowly over a rusted
bridge, the thought of fish in the darkening water,
diving like planes.
('Renewal Notice', in Dawe's third volume: An Eye For A Tooth.)*

It might be said that this particular kind of lyrical clarity is not typical of what might be called Dawe's 'lyrical impulse', that it is heavier and less clearly celebratory than, for instance, the note struck at the end of 'Drifters' or that of 'the grasshopper memory' in 'Soliloquy For One Dead'. Certainly those images have a quality of sung energy and an unreserved affirmation which sets them clearly apart from those above. But all four are the products of an extraordinary clarity, where images are given tactile flesh, as it were, and not just called up in the mind. The ending of 'Letting Go Of Things' possibly gives an even firmer sense of the poet's evocative energy:

*to be young again in the dark warm with voices
alive with quicksilver kisses, tears,
tigers running through dream-woods
and impossible poetry.*

We have the sense here of a lifetime's experience being compressed into a series of paradigm images, even while the separateness of each is fully preserved. They fall over each other like dream-images do, and their very fleetingness aptly suggests the transience the poem is concerned with. And they gather energy from the first, more tangible memory and soar towards what feels like an image for a final, ultimate fantasy at the end of life.

So this clarity and sureness of image is, then, a distinguishing quality in Bruce Dawe's poetry. But a poet who works so much through images would seem to run certain risks. Dawe does not only run certain risks, he falls (almost delightedly sometimes) frequently into the most hopeless excesses:

*So it is, so it is...
and the elderly nod
as the lace of their lives
is fretted away
('A Slight Indisposition')⁸*

Although it skirts sentimentality, this image of lace 'fretting away' does manage a certain poignancy in evoking the ageing process. But its value is entirely lost because, in the next stanza, the image is forgotten. The poet has found another image to play with:

*And memory twines
like a cat round their ankles
- pussy is always
hungry, they say,
nice fish for puss-cat
bones are what's left of
the wild heap of silver
way out in the bay.*

The final effect is one of confusion, of one image being used in too many different ways. It seems that 'memory', like a cat, is hungry. The cat (which 'twines... round their ankles') eats the fish they offer it. Memory feeds on the elderly (although by what means we are not shown) as the cat feeds on the fish-bones. All that's left of 'the wild heap of silver / way out in the bay' are the bones. All that's left, in the end, of the human, are the bones. That image of the fish at sea is soaringly lyrical, but the final effect of the poem is of an almost morbid insistence on mortality, an almost sentimental pessimism. The imagery *has* a certain poignancy, but also a softness - a too-easy pattern of association. The poem lacks any real unity because the images compete with each other rather than harmonise.

Sometimes almost the opposite is true-the images harmonise altogether *too* well because they are so cliched that we know instantly which standard moves are being made as they are being made. The poem 'Whether The Ideal World Contains Surprises'⁹ is an example of Dawe's equation of conformity and predictability with a sense of unreality, a feeling of the bogus. The only lines which have any force, however, are the final ones:

*A toilet-door being jammed, he shoved a bit
And startled an elderly person having a shit...*

The point would seem to be that one is not meant to defecate in the lavatories of 'Ideal Homes'! The poem tries to create the sense of a conformity so vast that any kind of privacy is destroyed. For the most part the poem is almost as dully predictable and cliched as its subject matter, and the only sense of any compassion for 'the stouter citizens' comes with the phrase:

*when the week's dreams
Reach fever-heat*

Basically the poem is just too laboured:

*our stouter citizens go
On Ideal Homes inspections, hopefully*

*Seeking the earth-bound pleb equivalent
Of the home laid up in heaven which awaits
Superannuated souls. I, too, have strolled*

*Through marble-veneer entrance-halls, and bent
An ear to the salesman-angel at the gates
(Wrought-iron, not pearly):*

'Superannuated souls' has that sparkling ring of confidence, the 'I, too' smacks rather heavily of the kind of condescension one can do without in poetry, and the spelling out of the 'gates' image is stunningly clumsy. It is, in fact, primarily a piece of anti-commercialism, and a poem only secondarily.

If the failings of 'Whether the Ideal World Contains Surprises' and 'A Slight Indisposition' do not at first sight seem closely related, it might be urged that they have their genesis in something common. Dawe's best poems have the directness and clarity that comes only from the deepest kind of response, coupled often with the kind of immediacy that one associates with dream-images-images that frequently present themselves as paradigms and yet seem to have surfaced unsolicited from the unconscious. That is to say that Dawe

has succeeded in making us unaware of the conscious shaping process, even though one cannot doubt its presence. Often the less successful poems seem to have failed because we become too conscious of 'poetic intentions', so that we have the sense of overshaping, too many games being played with language, images being stretched so far that their suggestiveness is lost. When this happens the poem loses its sense of an individually perceived, specific experience which is simultaneously paradigmatic. In such cases the language is often flawed with clichés, simply because the immediacy has been replaced by an imposed patterning of experience towards what, in many cases, feels like a preconceived conclusion. It is a failing of this basic kind which seems to have undermined 'Whether The Ideal World...' and 'A Slight Indisposition'.

Conversely, poems such as 'Soliloquy For One Dead', 'The Not-So-Good-Earth', 'Leasehold', and even 'Miss Mac' must be numbered among Bruce Dawe's best poems because they do not lose that sense of direct experience growing towards the representative, the paradigm. With the exception of the dreadfully crass last line of 'Miss Mac' ('Oh yes, young, young, young, *somebody*'), these poems give no sense of striving for the grand statement, the definitive human truth of the kind found in 'The Flashing Of Badges', 'A Slight Indisposition', and 'For The Duration'. The vast human generalisations do not need to be *stated* in his best poems, they can be dramatised:

*a mouth full of spit, a full quota
likewise of years and no further urge to be clever.
('Any Shorter And I'd Have Missed It Altogether')*

*the whistling
which is only the wind in the chimney's
smoking belly, the footsteps on the muddy
path that are always somebody else's.
('Soliloquy For One Dead')*

The poetic clarity which shapes his best poems and is so clearly exemplified in the extracts above, is, as I have argued, closely related to Dawe's sure sense of the ludicrous. It is this sense which usually manages to keep the poetry firmly in touch with the urgencies of day-to-day life, and which so frequently saves the poetry from sentimentality:

*the bruised blue look of evening
prompts speculations upon the reasons for existence
and sets the apprehensive traveller to fingering thoughtfully
his weekly ticket
('The Rock-Thrower')*

That last line sets the 'speculations' firmly enough in context.

Often, in fact, it seems that it is his sense of the ludicrous that provides the poetic basis of his compassion. Poems like 'Leasehold' and 'My Mother In Her Latter Years' forcefully exemplify this relationship. And it is that same sure sense of the absurd, the incongruous, the futile which antithetically establishes what Dawe means by individual sensitivity and openness-where dull, secondhand responses are shown to be hopelessly inadequate in the face of a world which offers the *possibility* of spontaneity and a sudden freshness of response:

*- she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'*

Notes

1 R. Hall and T. Shapcott (ed), *New Impulses In Australian Poetry*, p. 36.

2 All poems discussed in this essay, unless otherwise stated, are from this volume, which is Dawe's 'Selected Poems'.

3 Notice, too, the rhythmic finality in this line achieved by the combination of alliteration and assonance.

4 P. Martin, *Public yet Personal: The Poetry of Bruce Dawe*; Meanjin, Sept. 1966.

5 Philip Martin refers to this poem in a similar manner. 'Process' is from the second volume, *A Need Of Similar Name*.

6 as we so clearly are by those lines of Lowell's: Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me. Tears smut my fingers.
(*'Grandparents'*)

7 A. Craig (ed.), *12 Poets 1950-1970*, p. 7.

8 This poem is from the fourth volume, *Beyond The Subdivisions*.

9 From *Beyond The Subdivisions*.

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