

Starting from Melbourne: The Coherence of Chris Wallace-Crabbe

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Chris Wallace-Crabbe has always been an engaging literary critic and acerbic commentator on Australian culture, and his literary essays, criticism, reviews and fiction have been generally discussed in isolation from his poetry. In this essay, I trace some of the illuminations that his essays, criticism and writings on poetics shed on the preoccupations revealed in his poetry. These preoccupations, pervasive and porous, include the phenomenon of poetry, the exploration in his poetry and prose (and that of other writers) of what he calls “value”, the yearning for some system of belief of which language is a volatile expression, and the correspondence of images or myths of individual and national identity with changing circumstances. They constitute a unified and coherent pattern of testing language’s capacity to foreground desired “meaning” while holding in balance accretions that threaten the overthrow of precision.

One of Wallace-Crabbe’s referential markers throughout his verse is the character of his home city, which at times provides a filter through which other localities and modes of living are viewed, but which alters in light of his actual and intellectual journeying. As satirist and writer of verse that has sometimes been categorised as light verse, personal lyrics, or merely directed to fellow academics, he has expressed frustration with labels, including varieties of postmodernism and nationalism, which latter he has consistently probed in poetry and his prose writings. He has also waged polemic against what he sees as obscurantist or misleading ways of presenting or describing poetry, and the tone has correspondingly ranged from playful engagement through to impatient dismissal.

Wallace-Crabbe’s prose, like his poetry, seems to me distinctively of Melbourne—by which I mean a certain tone of wry urbanity as he ruminates on the pleasures of parochialism and cosmopolitanism, tribal allegiance and truth to oneself, high culture and pop culture, order and turbulence. He doesn’t muffle his blows against what he sees as ideologically driven literary critics, educators, bureaucrats or politicians, though he wields satire in his verse with élan that makes many of his best-known contemporaries’ efforts

in the mode seem timorous, vindictive, or obtuse. He acknowledges, and seeks to clarify, with a genial candour, apparent contradictory impulses that fire his enthusiasms.

In his most recent collection of essays, Wallace-Crabbe counts among “ideological bullies” those schoolteachers and academics who dislike poetry because it is “an art not easily reducible to the coarse readings that they wish to impose on it”, and who correspondingly pass on their distaste to their students (“In the Pop Age”, *Read It Again* 46). In “Poetry, Prophecy and Vestiges”, another essay in the same collection, he endorses James McAuley’s view (expressed in a period “long before the arrival of serious managerial nonsense on our campuses”) of the propensity of the “scholar-teacher” to fall upon “an author who attracts him as a beast of prey upon a victim” (25). It’s demoralising to be reminded of the intensity and longevity of the attack upon literature by its ostensible allies in the academy (and the struggle of poets and writers to defend their art against such treasonable clerks).

In the matter of discerning and epitomising what underlies a body of another poet’s work, Wallace-Crabbe more often than not offers a point of view with such clarity that one wonders why the matter hasn’t been scrutinised, assessed and enunciated so well before. One such distillation occurs in “The Absence of Metaphysics”, a lecture delivered at (and published by) James Cook University in 1983:

What I am asserting is that I find remarkably few Australian writers, even among the best, whose work bears witness to a system of metaphysical beliefs which genuinely informs that work. And this is intimately linked with the fact that there are no writers here whose work commands the kind of overwhelmed allegiance to a whole way of thinking and feeling that we find demanded by the work of Blake or Lawrence or Yeats or Shelley or Beckett or Proust. (15)

Wallace-Crabbe seeks coherence in poetry and life—difficult enough, as he often attests in his poetry, when one is *in medias res*. The interest in poetry that embodies some “metaphysical belief” provides a clue to his concern to image forth in his own poetry a concern with values worth maintaining. It also characterises his critical essays from the 1960s to the present. In a 1962 essay contributed to Grahame Johnson’s *Australian Literary Criticism*, Wallace-Crabbe sought some firm “moral criteria” in *Such is Life*, but, as W. M. Maidment observed, his search resulted in a moral judgment that appeared to confuse Furphy as author with Tom Collins as character (33). No such wobble appears in the JCU lectures, where Wallace-Crabbe gets closer to the various “systems” that underpin poetry of writers as various as

Brennan, Baylebridge, McAuley, Stewart, Campbell, Hart-Smith, FitzGerald, Wright, Tranter and Forbes.

These poets' "systems" range from idealism (Brennan, Baylebridge) through to anti-metaphysical modes of thought (Tranter and Forbes). En route, Wallace-Crabbe canvasses McAuley's journey from "apocalyptic to sardonic late-Romantic and vision-hungry" early poetry through to belief in a melange of "mediaevalizing Catholicism (which included a firm sense of the 'normal society' and the 'perennial poetry') with Andersonian realism in epistemology and sceptical pluralism as a basis for social organization" (17). Wallace-Crabbe could unpack this baggage in greater detail than the space of his lecture permits, but one senses that, for all he appreciates McAuley's commitment to holding a position, McAuley appears in the light of a Laocoön rather than a light-bearer. In Stewart, Campbell and Hart-Smith, Wallace-Crabbe finds positivist assumptions that enable convincing renderings of experience without offering any philosophy or ideas. If Wallace-Crabbe's 1983 account could not locate any "systematic" ontology in the poetry of Judith Wright, he usefully discriminates between her "recurrent hunger for transcendence or immanence" (20) that not even later commentators would convincingly argue was crystallised in a unified and unifying bio-aesthetic.

Wallace-Crabbe's comments on the "anaesthetic" poetry of Forbes and Tranter include the crispest encapsulation of what he calls this "self-destruct" poetry's foundations in scepticism and nihilism concerning language. He can identify the joyous reception of such poetry while emphasising its anti-humanist and anti-metaphysical assumptions (23). The lecture underscores Wallace-Crabbe's probing, in his own poems, for a "human" resolution of contraries that will make of poetry more than a solipsistic exercise or jokey parlour game. He perceives the provisional nature of poetry and the world, and if we tend to see his recent essays as glosses on his own verse, or draft position statements (a "poetics"), I think it wise to watch the ball closely. In his most recent essay on John Forbes, "Strangled Rhetoric and Damaged Glamour", Wallace-Crabbe observes:

One last point: few or no poets perform in fact according to the dictates of their poetics. Practice entails ambiguity: the truest poetry is the most feigning, or the most perplexedly yearning. And in this respect attention should certainly be paid to the fact that Forbes wanted to bespeak left-wing politics, but had to do so at the end in a poetry that by his definition could not bespeak anything in the external world. Did he contradict himself? Very well, he contradicted himself. (*Read It* 105)

This mode of criticism characteristically probes and worries in order to get at the bones of an argument. One of his consistent concerns is with why he writes about the things he does. Such self-reflexiveness may make him a writer's writer, or an essayist's essayist, but it's more engaging than that. Wallace-Crabbe's passions and doubts are infectious, and his writing is like good conversation with a speaker who is thinking on his feet, drawing effortlessly on a reservoir of cultural and social reference. Peter Steele noted, as early as 1970, that Wallace-Crabbe "broods in a world which broods in him", and that he "doubts, as R. P. Blackmur said of Montaigne, 'in order to bring his mind, not to obloquy or disuse, but to responsive action'" (152). It is this ruminative dialogue with self that pre-empts easy objections to his conclusions. While his poems may overtly appear to work through to conclusions that will strike some readers as wrapping up, in a didactic tag, the matter the works contain, the poems also contain dissonant elements that open out their argument even while the concluding lines neatly resolve the technical problem posed by each work.

The self-questioning impulse runs through his writing about his city: proprietorial and defensive, it's expansive enough to encompass the faultfinding that is the provincial's prerogative. "Citizen", a much-discussed poem from his 1959 collection *The Music of Division*, portrayed a disgruntled suburbanite "numbly" picking his way among the traffic rolling "[t]oward the solemn ritual of work", "[a]mong the houses where the world had sinned" (25). The poem concludes:

'Complacent city with your brazen bells
and morning song . . .' He called for words to cease,
For citizens to know their proper hells
and anger to bloom green upon the trees.

While the last lines lock down the poetical structure, the reverberation of "proper Hells" invites readers to contemplate each citizen's private torment, though as the focal character of the poem implies, their consciousness does not extend so far as his own. Whether we're to believe that Wallace-Crabbe endorses such a conclusion is a moot point: that focal character is not so easily identified with Wallace-Crabbe himself, and the private hell may strike us after all as a figment of the character's imagination. "Melbourne", a poem included in the 1963 collection *In Light and Darkness*, ripens the thought, describing the city in terms of negatives and equivocations, as located "Not on the ocean, on a muted bay". The matter of authorial positioning may be less ambiguous than that in "Citizen". In "Melbourne", the citizens' blood, like the water of the bay "flows easily,/Not warm, not cold (in all things

moderate)". The city stifles thought: "Ideas are grown in other gardens", and "Old tunes are good enough, if sing we must" (4). Disgruntlement rises to curmudgeonly finesse in the concluding stanza:

Highway by highway, the remorseless cars
Strangle the city, put it out of pain,
Its limbs still kicking feebly on the hills.
Nobody cares. The artists sail at dawn
For brisker ports, or rot in public bars.
Though much has died here, little has been born. (5)

Wallace-Crabbe's sometimes ambiguous accounts of Melbourne in such early poems are close-ups of one of the "five teeming sores" of A. D. Hope's 1939 poem, "Australia" (*Collected Poems* 13), though he does not always add the equivalent of Hope's salutary grace-note. Wallace-Crabbe's poetry would in subsequent years ring many changes on his own frustrations and impatience with Australia. "Traditions, Voyages", a poem from *The Rebel General* (1967) addresses a history of Jamaica, to claim that "We had, perhaps, our Middle Passage too,/Irishman and felon stank in the holds/When frail barques ferried the Enlightenment,/Already dim and faint" (10). In what is a near-trademark gesture by Wallace-Crabbe in these poems on his natal land, the poem concludes with a scrap of autobiographical reference: "My heel grinds in the white sand/As I am driven to confront/Drab skyline, yellowing papers, a fat land". The distaste is palpable, like that of Patrick White for the denizens of Sarsaparilla, that fictional suburb of the other great wen, Sydney. Both writers drew sustenance—Wallace-Crabbe still does—from this *odi et amo* attachment to place. David McCooey noted in 1998 that "the hells and anger" of Wallace-Crabbe's suburban citizens "are presented through intensely suburban imagery, suggesting that the hell of suburbia is of a piece with the suburban paradise", a paradise of nostalgic myth that ignores the "new suburb" that lies "just behind" even such idealisations as Streeton's bucolic images of Heidelberg (106).

Such contradictory sentiments (stubborn attachment to and sometimes desire to remove from one's locality) are not limited to the Melbournian temperament, though Wallace-Crabbe has been consistent in canvassing the range for more than forty years. In "Melbourne in 1963", an essay published in the *Current Affairs Bulletin* series in that year, he noted that "Barbarous drinking conditions, dead Sundays, and an ineradicable cult of mediocrity deter [the citizens] not at all". Further, "The prospect of going to a smaller State capital or to a provincial city seems like a living death and there is little impulse to emigrate to Sydney" (165). Many inhabitants of those smaller cities (and fanatical Sydney loyalists) might reciprocate the sentiment,

but Melbourne has exercised allure for as many who have rejoiced in its contradictions and lived there for any appreciable time—even in that “dead” era of the early 1960s. Wallace-Crabbe’s Melbourne soundings, though, in verse as much as in prose through the 1960s to the 1990s, record the resignation of a navigator stranded in mud. His 1990s poems and essays reveal another tack, to a stronger current bearing him and the raft of his city into international waters. In part, the fluidity of his work may reflect his frequent journeys abroad, which supply welcome derangement of fixed perspective that such travel confers. In those later poems, the very language he employs is scrutinised as to its adequacy to contain a precise sense of place or time.

That shift is evident in many of the poems in his 1988 collection, *I’m Deadly Serious*, a book in which he takes stock of his father’s death and ponders his own and others’ fates. Impatience with received versions of history runs through “Sporting the Plaid”, concerning a Victorian-era military grandparent. Sarcasm tinges irony in the final lines summing up a life spent “ensuring the flood of opium/for a smoky god and fleshpink empire” (33). Here, Australia is a matter of “Caledonian societies, tatty diamond mines and a second family” for “the old buck” in his retirement from service of the Raj. Wallace-Crabbe’s avowed kinship with such a Colonial founding father expands our sense of his uneasiness with contemporary Australia. An earlier poem in the same collection, “Stuff Your Classical Heritage”, extends the argument over and with language:

Gull, grevillea, galvo, Gippsland, grit—
just singing out the chorus, bit by bit
will get me some purchase on the primal scene. (8)

That first line’s catalogue of familiar dinkum touchstones will be reprised in poems throughout the 1990s and beyond, where Wallace-Crabbe rolls out a clutch of clattering alliterations like a kid disclosing a fresh-won handful of new marbles. The purpose, though, is intrinsic to his scholar-poet apologia:

By naming, I seem to crush the past
like a mattress, hard down to history’s
rusty cabin-trunk: stick it in the cellar.

In a way, I preach the destruction of Europe,
that mental Europe which I love so much.
Cancel it. Smother it with ripe new words
or old ones triumphantly misapplied. (8)

The signal inclusion of “triumphantly” sounds a conciliatory note in a collection otherwise preoccupied with loss and liberation. In “Objects,

Odours”, Wallace-Crabbe speaks of “the steady, flowing,/interminable guff/of your grey elders and betters” that darkens the schoolchild’s or adult’s awareness of the world until, contemplating the tangible “language of wood” in “an empty schoolroom/or a webby toolshed’s/damp lattice”, one begins to “catch some crude gist/spot on, gingerly” (*I’m Deadly Serious* 9). Such growth of individualism is a product of acknowledging the “rough concordance” of words and their relationship, however “crude”, with things thought and felt.

It may be that other shifts occur in Wallace-Crabbe’s verse and critical writing around the end of the 1980s, but I note a more intense focus on language itself that will inform the writing of the next decade and a half. Concomitant with this concentration is the increasing tendency to dwell upon poetics rather than upon issues of nationalism in Australian fiction and poetry. Compare, for instance, the essay topics in *Read It Again* with the more restricted “national” themes of those in *Melbourne or the Bush*, or Wallace-Crabbe’s editorial comment in *Six Voices: Contemporary Australian Poets* on his selection of poems that might reflect “how life is on this continent”—poems which might reveal that “the modes of desperation current in so much Western culture are not necessarily essential truth” (4).

Another feature that will become apparent in the poetry towards the appearance of *By and Large* (2001) and *The Universe Looks Down* (2005) is the interest in expansive sequences of poems. The ten “Sonnets to the Left” in *I’m Deadly Serious* constitute an easy discursive-digressive meditation on the idea of progress. Wallace-Crabbe can “rejoice” in “antibiotics, the dental drill, clean drains” and much else about modernity, while acknowledging the problem of “[t]rying to find a frame in which to fit/Large things that progress bundles out of sight:/Grief, awe, terror, transcendent light” (27). This is a striking statement: the nifty subversion of the idea of progress with reference to the “Large things” with which “deadly serious” poetry is concerned will serve for a leaping-off point for subsequent sonnets commemorating idealism that has taken a dive. These rueful poems address Judah Waten’s unreconstructed Stalinism, and other “isms” of the left (Sonnet II 27), as well as the contortions of theory by which the Left abandoned its vaunted roots in the proletariat and embraced “new brands of foreign cringe” and bourgeois manners (Sonnet VI 29). Wallace-Crabbe is dismissive of American claims of friendship, and the sonnets move through rejection of both American and Comintern priorities for other nations, to acclaim the “Fuckwit and smartarse, trendocrats and folk” element of the ocker temperament that he wryly celebrates in the person of “that bold Rhadamanthus” and “our patriot”

Jack Lang (Sonnets VIII and IX 30-31). The sonnets don't conclude with this "rough platoon of sonnetry/affirming Land Rights and democracy" (31), but with a capstone poem (Sonnet X) that offers a sort of vision splendid, of a nation-state that has hauled itself out of "fiscal mess" through its homespun ideals and effort, to a land "peacocked" with tribal sites (31). Nice try, one might say, in retrospect, recollecting certain optimistic projections of the Bicentennial era.

Twenty years later, in "Modern Times", the acidulous series of forty sonnets at the heart of the collection *By and Large*, Wallace-Crabbe takes a shorter view of "progress": "[t]here rise in broken, dopey ranks/the newer generations of despair". This dispensation is relieved only by a personal sense that one has been "reborn many times" by refusing to despair (62). The sustaining element in Wallace-Crabbe's case is a growing sense of the absurdity of politics, deluded leaders and idealists, and the saving grace of comedy. In this respect, the tone of Wallace-Crabbe's performance resembles that of Juvenal in his third Satire, a monologue on what Gilbert Highet called "the power and vileness of the big city" (65), a place where honesty was not rewarded, an impoverished underclass existed side by side with corrupt wealthy nobles, and the sacred native landscape was ruined and profaned by "expensive marble in the baroque style, gorgeous and unreal" (69). Taken together, "Modern Times" corroborates Wallace-Crabbe's remark to Paul Kane that the role of the creative artist "may sometimes be cheeky, subversive or satirical but at root, beyond all this, the arts are concerned with value; or if you like, with *values*" (106). The "cheeky", satirical and angry moods of "Modern Times" are those of the decent citizen-worker, like Chaplin's character in the 1936 silent movie, desperately trying to meet his employer's increased demands and thereby exacerbating the conditions of subservience that culminate in rational collapse. As I will shortly argue, "Modern Times" reprises the Chaplinesque absurd in a series of disquisitions on the national capital's reification of myths of unity.

Between the "Sonnets to the Left" and "Modern Times", the romance with language has deepened. In "The Inheritance" (included in the 1990 collection *For Crying Out Loud*) an ostensible accommodation appears in the easier vernacular, the self-deprecation and overall caginess of reflections on the Englishness of the English language. This is quite deceptive, though. "Dunked into life," he claims, "I let this language buoy me up," and the poem looks over inherited words again, as if they were museum specimens: "nasty, nice, nectarine, nasturtium, noun". He remarks of his earlier saturation in the language, "I couldn't see it didn't fit,/making it do so anyway,/eliding

what was grossly wrong.” In this review of earlier assumptions, Realpolitik is skewered: “City Fathers/had long conspired with Empirespeak/by cancelling native foliage”, and “Empirespeak”, “this international currency”, is now seen for what it is: “as cunning as a leaning dunny”. In a grotesque final comment Wallace-Crabbe remarks, concerning this language, “We swim along with it. We swim and drown” (27). This excremental view of language is much more playfully, even joyously, reprised in “Puck Disembarks”, another poem of the era in the same collection. Here, Wallace-Crabbe conjures a Fellini-esque vignette that has Puck taking stock on arrival in Australia, of “a wilderness without fairies or dairies,/Whose Dreaming he cannot read”, a country where mosquitoes lead him to think of swallows, and where the “alien magpies can sing like Titania/In love with a kangaroo”. Puckish tricks include watering the gin and selling it to “snubnosed natives”, and daubing on the commissary tent “George the Turd”, until at length this transported larrikin sprite comes to love this “paradise of Schadenfreude” (43). The avowal of Schadenfreude catches the tone of Wallace-Crabbe’s earliest pensées: the postcolonial hero regarding fellow beings and taking consolation, if not pleasure in the thought that others most appear foolish when parading their self-esteem.

In poems that precede “The Inheritance” and “Puck Disembarks” in *For Crying Out Loud*, Wallace-Crabbe seems, by contrast with his earlier lyrical practice, to toss the language in the air and enjoy its coruscations. Each stanza of “Puck Disembarks” is metrically neat, rhythmically supple, cunningly rhymed, and concludes with a brilliant phrase that undercuts the formal language of the preceding five lines, so that Puck observes “The foliage looks pretty crook” and “This land is all wombat-shit”. In “The Life of Ideas”, another plunge into childhood reading and fascination with language, Wallace-Crabbe ravel out strings of words relating to plants and their properties, words that jostle each other so as to highlight their arbitrariness. He concludes, “Language is the language of languages” (2). This view of language as a thing at once spontaneously utile, intellectually engaging and tantalisingly inexact stirs meditations on the poet’s craft in succeeding volumes, all of which contain works characterised by shifts in register from pungent demotic to sometimes noble speech.

The poems of *Rungs of Time* (1993), *Whirling* (1998) and *By and Large* demonstrate increasing international perspective and global concern that situates the regional even more sharply as a barometer of cultural and political pressures. David McCooney finds a “more elegiac, self dramatising persona” that characterises *Whirling* (McCooney, *Cambridge Companion* 178) and the poems of that volume appear to bear out the disorientating effects

of personal grief in almost every topic Wallace-Crabbe dwells on. “Modern Times”, the worry-bead of sonnets that gives weight to *By and Large*, illustrates the efficacy of taking the part for the whole. In the first poem of the series, “Canberra” turns to synecdoche: “Crumbs it is capital to be here, dozing/Through a dream city” (37). This comical twist on Whitman’s loafing and inviting his soul accretes irony as the poem tries on the varieties of language that might fit the local, national and global circumstances that propel the sonnets. In Sonnet XXX, Wallace-Crabbe underscores this new “Song of Myself” with his opening line “Starting from Canberra, we’re back in Melbourne,/My street as rich as a landscape by Bellini”, thus simultaneously sporting a maturer vision of his home city (55). By contrast, the township of Canberra is “deployed like a classical symphony/Over which the insufficiently mad ministers/Are planning to unfuck the economy” (37). Wallace-Crabbe’s cabined and confined city of Melbourne in the somnolent 1960s, 1970s and 1980s has become a place of departures and arrivals where “the heart of freedom’s found/walking suburban streets at night”, while the federal capital provokes contemplation of the grander illusions that hold a nation together: a “bunfest on Mateship,/that oldest vessel in the Federation navy”, and similar myths (24). The physical descriptions of Canberra in the poem do not convey the lived-in feel of a city to anything like the extent that images of Melbourne do here, and elsewhere in Wallace-Crabbe’s poetic and prosaic accounts of the southern metropolis. Canberra is a site of memorials to mythical values (duty, nationhood, perhaps pragmatism) that may add up to a national imaginary. The punning affirmation that “it is capital” to be in Canberra is less evidence of what Dennis Haskell sees as Wallace-Crabbe’s propensity to adopt an Audenesque distance from his subject than to cover in rueful irony his chagrin at the reality behind the myths (281).

I think this sense of the capital’s unreality stems from Wallace-Crabbe’s authentic sense of what it is to live in an all too human entrepot city, a fallible cosmopolis. Melbourne paradoxically provides Wallace-Crabbe and many of its *littérateurs* with an unusual sense that one resides in a civilised and civilising enclave of however many millions. Perhaps because of, rather than despite, its notorious historical busts and booms, or the longueurs to which Wallace-Crabbe referred in his 1963 essay, Melbourne underwrites its poets’ confidence in their visions, whether O’Dowd’s optimistic faith in the coming fulfilment of Democracy, Furnley Maurice’s in egalitarianism of the sort exemplified in his “Melbourne Odes”, through to Vincent Buckley’s and Peter Steele’s miscellaneous visions of a Just City, or the racketsy anarchism of Alan Wearne and π.o. All these poets are in a sense licensed, like Wallace-Crabbe, to criticise as well as celebrate as the mind and spirit

dictate—perhaps in any other city but Melbourne, an avowal of a writer’s licence to speak on civic standards or moral values might provoke change of topic or laughter.

The edge of self-deprecation in Wallace-Crabbe’s verse-satires and prose ruminations on the values associated with his city could suggest to some reviewers that, in his earlier work, he gives way to youthful frustrated idealism or, in his later work, to merely sportive ambiguity. Either way, that would be a pity; as Haskell notes, Wallace-Crabbe can simultaneously manifest detachment from the scene and reveal his own “heart” (28).

Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry is protean to a greater degree, I think, than has been remarked upon in reviews of individual collections or his *Selected Poems 1956-1994*—though Peter Steele gave out the text in his review of Wallace-Crabbe’s earliest work with the remark that “The trouble with poets, from a critic’s point of view, is that their work is protean in kind” (149). Wallace-Crabbe’s work has subsequently not always been brilliantly served. The reason’s clear enough: particularly in the past ten years, few reviewers—McCooley is a notable exception—appear to have systematically read his works, both criticism and essays, from the first publications through to the most recent. While individual collections of poems may be said to have about them a particular tone or mood (edgy or acerbic, perhaps, in the case of the first two or three collections, reflective, occasionally satirical and even playful, as in the 1970s volumes, through to the profound reflections on time, memory and language in *The Emotions Are Not Skilled Workers*, *The Amorous Cannibal* and *I’m Deadly Serious* in the 1980s), brief book-review summaries understate the variety within each collection and over all. The appearance in these and other volumes of poems that are, by some accounts satirical in intent or “light” in nature may account for mislabelling of Wallace-Crabbe. Wallace-Crabbe’s appeal to a broad range of readers and listeners (at a wide range of venues) may make him unusually prone to be mislabelled by those who qualify the word “poet” by “academic”: he is less likely than Peter Porter or Les Murray to send readers to their dictionaries and compendia.

This business of mingling different approaches and modes within a single volume is crucial to any consideration of Wallace-Crabbe’s most recent poetry. What Wallace-Crabbe observes concerning the poetry of A. D. Hope might be applied to his own poetry: “Attempts to characterise A. D. Hope’s poetry fail very frequently,” he writes, “because of a common tendency to see his oeuvre holistically. Simple caricatures emerge, portraying him in bold strokes as neoclassical, Parnassian, art nouveau, anti-modernist, remorselessly

iambic or whatever” (“True Tales and False”, *Read It* 72). Martin Duwell wrote perceptively, if holistically, of “the familiar features” present in Wallace-Crabbe’s *By and Large*, listing “a baroque and intense intellectual ambit combined with playfulness; a deep love of the sharp thinginess of the world combined with a love of the expressiveness of words we use to contain it; and, last but far from least, enjoyable phrasemaking” (51). While acknowledging all these qualities, Duwell found that “the reader’s pleasure seems more attenuated”, and he proceeded to remark on the “intriguing” central section of the book, the “Modern Times” sonnet sequence which he found “full of deliberate vulgarities: terrible jokes that only a Freudian could love” (51). The poet has hopped out of his box, and more worryingly gone off on a strange new tack, cracking awful jokes and, to the reviewer’s mind, even failing to complete one of the sonnets (number IX, concerning the Holocaust).

This last failure is no lapse at all: the poem possesses fourteen lines of which three consist of dieresis dots. In terms of technique, the poem has some kinship with Ezra Pound’s 1916 poem modelled on a fragment of papyrus (115), but it deals with a more lamentable fate. In terms of broken lines and fragmented grammar underscoring the theme of horror, loss and fragmentation of consciousness, the poem has more in common with a vast range of Jewish, German, Austrian, Russian, Polish and other poetry recording the experience that Wallace-Crabbe broaches. In short, the poem works; following Sonnet number VIII, which conjures the threatening intimation by a Kafkaesque bureaucracy that it has “noticed” the citizen-subject of the poem, the fragmented Sonnet IX seems uncannily apt. The ensuing poem takes up the theme of the failed *Aufklärung* with “The time comes when you want to start again;/Rewriting Western Civ is a bed of nails” (43).

The poems in the first and third sections of the book, which sandwich “Modern Times” might be characterised more easily in terms of those intellectual and technical features that Duwell enunciates. Cassandra Atherton, though, commenting on evidence of the reinvigoration of earlier themes in *By and Large*, emphasises the “autobiographical nature of the creative process” and focuses on resurgence of a “visceral, sexualised” persona in many of the poems that frame “Modern Times” (38).

What Duwell and other reviewers did not or could not (because of editors’ restrictions) make of such poems as “Cloud Chambers of Taxonomy” might be clarified in Wallace-Crabbe’s self-styled “rope of stories” that make up *The Universe Looks Down*. Here, the catholicity of allusiveness—including

stylistic allusiveness that may stymie reviewers confronted with witty verse not written in blindingly obvious jokey form—seems to me bound to elude encapsulation in snappy reviews. Do we have any reviewers who can spot Ariosto's Renaissance flying circus, Byron's Pulcian, Ariostan, Bernian and Whistlecraftian modes and Auden's *Letters from Iceland* all fleetingly and flyingly engaged in an extended serio-comic narrative that reads like an anime in which B. S. Johnson, Michael Moorcock, and the best sports writers in Australia have had a hand? Again, McCooey, observing "the ludic and stylistic elements" in Wallace-Crabbe's work up to 1996 ("The Recent Poetry", 333) may be the exception that proves the rule. But one doesn't have to tabulate all the degrees and inclinations of wit in the tale in order to be able to read it at a gallop and admire the stretchy bounce of the stanza Wallace-Crabbe has invented that allows him to switch from story to story and from narrative to digression as the mood takes him. If this is Wallace-Crabbe's most sustained essay in light verse, it's his most serious single poem—the apogee, so far, of what he has to say that is profoundly worth saying. Its plain-dealing, often racy, sometimes hip language, as well as its abrupt changes of scene and perspective, mimic visual novels and comics, and it's not fanciful to conceive of the poem as a movie, perhaps in manner of the recent translation to film of *Tristram Shandy*, or some early film treatments of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

The Universe Looks Down, for all its commonality with science-fiction plots, is "grounded" in the writer's striving for language to convey the nature of artistic creation. The characters of this story—fictional emanations of the author, occupying a Star-Trek-type craft capable of penetrating inner as well as outer space—no sooner conceive of things than those things are become real. Wallace-Crabbe plays with this notion from several angles, "realising" situations that have foundation in personal and public history and even querying the concept of realism: the narrator remarks that he might, "with Brian MacFarlane" long ago "[h]ave contracted realism, like a 'flu" (61). He carries his imaginative quest to the end of the poem, when his characters "escape from lives inside my text . . . into the various What's Next/Aspects of what we mean by the world" (64). This is serious play under the guise of comic verse: at the conclusion, Wallace-Crabbe reveals his female hero, Milena, as himself, "framer of the dance in which this handful/Of heroes tried out, variously, What could be shaped" (67). The light-verse epyllion closes with an endorsement that "we are both what we love and what we mean": in quasi-musical terms, one might say, the diapason closes full in love. The poem is witty, or ludic in the sense that Sidney's "zodiac" of wit or Coleridge's "imagination" proposes: it endorses the poet's freedom

to figure forth things that never had existence in such form. This serious business challenges our idea of creation, and unsurprisingly, the characters in the poem turn to geometry, philosophy and theology in their pursuit of “meaning”. The hero-figure Milena is at once beloved woman, perhaps muse, and counter-ego of the poet.

Like Auden, Wallace-Crabbe uses light verse as a litmus paper of society. We might dispose of Auden’s view that light verse is the product of an integrated society, if it were not for the fact that so much of what Wallace-Crabbe has packed into *The Universe Looks Down* is familiar territory for Australian readers navigating often discordant “information” rather than congruent images from local, national and global media. One of the most illuminating essays on Auden’s light verse is Wallace-Crabbe’s “The Good Christian Practises Light Verse”, a signal inclusion in his 1979 critical volume, *Toil and Spin: Two Directions in Modern Poetry*. There, Wallace-Crabbe argues that Auden’s light verse covers “unmentionable private experience” while posing as a virtuosic game (47). Auden’s concern for order and calm is the counter to deeply unsettling events and promptings, and the essay reveals Wallace-Crabbe’s affinity with such an approach to the serious business of light verse. Wallace-Crabbe’s earlier poems expressing alarm at the way Australian and European society has tended were marked by a note of disappointment that people behave the way they do. In *The Universe Looks Down*, he has exploded the scope. Now Asia and the Pacific, Africa and South America contribute their characters to the plot, and playfully cocking snooks at postcolonial and postmodern theory, Wallace-Crabbe’s deep inner and outer-space time-voyagers populate a virtual world that simulates the multi-dimensional world we in fact inhabit.

In an early essay on A. D. Hope, Chris Wallace-Crabbe noted concerning “[t]hat extravagant piece, ‘Soledades of the Sun and Moon’”, that: “It is rather like those bravura pieces which the Augustans wrote for Saint Cecilia’s Day, a species of light verse, but a light verse of elevation rather than of frivolity” (99). If Hope was on occasion grandly bardic or baroque in his eloquence when he let the images play themselves out (as in the “Soledades”), what Wallace-Crabbe sees as a Dionysian and Apollonian contest in the poet’s mind could subside into “beautiful nonsense”. This sort of nonsense, though, strikes me as different in degree from the “hits, skits and jingles” variety of late Victorian and early Federation period verse, or its modern equivalent, rhymed (or not) causeries on quaint folkways, such as Peter Porter’s “How to get a Girlfriend”, or Murray’s “Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil”, “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever” or “Downhill on Borrowed Skis”.

I don't think that even the "fun" variety of light verse is wholly free of a didactic streak, if by didactic, "information" rather than preaching is understood. What such verse clearly does is dismiss the *esprit de sérieux* that some minds associate with art worth attending to. In its more ostensibly "mock" forms, light verse can be deadly serious, as Wallace-Crabbe's earlier book title intimates.

The Universe Looks Down may reinforce some readers' perception of Wallace-Crabbe as a sharp analyst of individual and collective human folly. It will perhaps persuade others that he is a kind of skilful-slangy versifier of quirky or cranky observations on topical matters. To simplify his writing either way seems perverse. Wallace-Crabbe's observation on A. D. Hope's poem "Pseudodoxia Epidemica", that "the house of suggestion has many mansions" might be applied to this latest long poem of his own ("True Tales and False", *Read It* 118). Wallace-Crabbe's criticism of others' poetry illuminates more than those poets' productions, and it seems to me useful to keep this in mind while reading his own. Of Heaney, for instance, Wallace-Crabbe claims that he "brings a native lustre to the tarnished grail of our imperial language by burnishing its ambiguities" ("Inside Outsiders", *Read It* 118). Here is the delight in language that Duwell perceived in Wallace-Crabbe's verse, but with a twist: the polishing of the "imperial" grail is a recognition of the business that engages both Heaney and Wallace-Crabbe. From his earliest essays on Australian literary nationalists through to the urbane cast of local and international writers and artists (including those home-grown stylists Ned Kelly and Sidney Nolan) whom he considers in *Read It Again*, Wallace-Crabbe has turned over the language, puzzling at its curious ability to contain all of the contradictions of the past in words that signify something at once alien and familiar to its remote, post-imperial inheritor and user.

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