

Poetry and Politics: In conflict or conversation? Aboriginal poetry, Peter Skrzynecki, and Bruce Dawe

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In March 1999 Les Murray, Australia's most published poet, and John Howard, the nation's most senior politician, collaborated on the writing of a new preamble for the Australian constitution. The outcome of this blatant marriage of poetry and politics was less than satisfactory. There was much public outrage and debate over the use of 'mateship' and the suggestion that the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had 'inhabited' rather than owned the land. The poet and the politician made compromises. Murray 'despised' the final version. He railed against what he saw as the politically correct interference with his craft: 'At least in literature you have the privilege of not having your words changed by people who have no ear and no vision'.¹ He lamented that he had broken his long-held policy not to meet prime ministers and politicians but had done so, he said, because he relished the chance offered him 'to affirm the place of the Aboriginal people in Australian society.'² Could he not have achieved that affirmation through his poetry? Has poetry no role to play in informing the imaginative, political consciousness of an individual or nation?

At first blush it may appear that poetry, a seemingly private language of lyric or personal experience, would have at best a very tenuous relationship with the public reality of the political. Indeed those who argue that art should be produced for art's sake, free from the tyranny of meaning and purpose, would insist that poetry and the political must operate in separate spheres. But what exactly does the term 'political' mean? 'Political' refers to the way a society organises its social life and the power relations which that organisation involves. Poetry which deals with the nature of relationships, language, history, existence, oppression, and death is, therefore, political. The relationship between poetry and the political is, however,

more subtle and more profound than this neat equation suggests. The following readings of poems by a number of Aboriginal poets, by Peter Skrzynecki, and by Bruce Dawe, seek to uncover ways in which individual poems can offer a deeper understanding of some of the moral and political questions facing contemporary Australian society: black / white relations, asylum seekers, unemployment, and globalisation.

Poetry is a highly crafted piece of language. It is a language of distilled emotion, of constructed rhyme, rhythm, syntax, silence, metaphor, and tone. It is visually and aurally arranged in order to elicit a response *in* its audience. That is to say, poetry is written with a public audience in mind. As Bruce Dawe explains:

I publish because that's one way of 'going public', and I believe writers, like other artists, have an essential place in the public forum. They are voices for a range of public and private feelings, private and public ideas. Hopefully, they will often remind others of the relationship between these two aspects of ourselves. No society which wants to remain healthy can ignore this double rôle in which each of its citizens lives. Writers, by the very act of writing and publishing, will be trying to remind themselves and others of that fact.³

Poetry has the capacity to influence and inform the perception, imaginative experience, and mindsets of its audience. How? Through its capacity to engender empathic imagination. Poems, like other forms of literature, invite their audience into the presence of truths which are discovered through participative awareness, through a preparedness to listen and to engage imaginatively with narrative voice and form. Les Murray has sought to explain, through the concepts of 'Narrowspeak' and 'Wholespeak', how poems model certain truths, certain ways of communication. According to Murray 'Narrowspeak' is the language of forensic argument, the language of mind only, the language used to conduct business and politics. 'Wholespeak' is the language of the whole being: heart, mind, dream, breath, body. 'Wholespeak' is primarily the

language of poetry. Murray suggests that humans are not rational but poetic, and poetry, he argues, models the way we think:

The usefulness of poetry ... or the way in which it is of the essence, lies in what it models and maybe consummates in the wider range of our life. I suggest that it models the way we really think. Certainly it does that better than forensic logic, which only models how we talk when we want to win arguments and avoid mistakes. It also models something much wider than the simple conveying of information. What it does model is the whole simultaneous gamut of reasoning, envisioning, feeling and vibrating we go through when we are really taken up with some matter, and out of which we may act on it. We are not just thinking about whatever it may be, but savouring it and experiencing it and wrestling with it in the ghostly sympathy of our muscles.⁴

Those readers sceptical of Murray's argument need only recall the dramatic emotional power generated in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994) when Matthew reads W. H. Auden's 'Stop all the clocks' as his eulogy for Gareth, or more recently the scene in which (another) Matthew, the stoic, silently-grieving father of *In the Bedroom* (dir. Todd Field, 2001), is undone in the middle of a poker game by his friend's recitation of Blake. It is not only the meaning of a poem that is important it is also its significance, the way in which it can be understood. Meaning and significance are two separate stages of comprehension:

Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his [/her] own existence. Only the two together can guarantee the effectiveness of an experience which entails the reader constituting himself [/herself] by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself [/herself].⁵

That absorption can be as much a physical, emotional, and/or sensual experience as a rational one. In order to be open to such a level of engagement the audience must consider some important questions: What sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the poem? How should I listen to the poem? What must I be open to?

Aboriginal poetry

For Aboriginal poets there is no distinction between the personal and the political. In order to attract a large reading public they must publish their poetry in the language of the white colonisers, 'the alien English tongue'.⁶ Aboriginal poets have responded to that imposition in a variety of ways: through parody and subversion of established poetic diction and form; through a mix of linguistic registers; and through a marked preference for Language (the poet's native tongue) over English. Kevin Gilbert's 'Kiacatoo' graphically depicts the bloody massacre of the speaker's tribal ancestors in the rhyme and metre of many traditional Australian bush ballads. Like those ballads 'Kiacatoo' celebrates heroism and survival against great odds but it is not the survival of 'Man' against nature, it is the survival of an innocent black child against the murderous guns of the white 'dispersal' party. Gilbert amplifies the horror of the violence and carnage that took place on 'the banks of the Lachlan' through his tight control of rhythm and rhyme:

and singly the shots echoed later
to quieten each body that stirred
above the gurgling and bleeding
a nervous man's laugh could be heard ...

'Kiacatoo' is free from punctuation. There are no commas, no full-stops. Significantly there is no full-stop after the final word, 'death', perhaps suggesting that the cycle of this narrative of destruction has not yet reached an end.

Jack Davis's 'A Letter to the Shade of Charles Darwin' satirically appropriates the mode and language of

communication of the colonial aristocracy and the likes of A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, who sought to ‘uplift and elevate these people to our own plane’.⁷

We sincerely wish to thank you
for the assistance you have unwittingly given us
in the occupation of this continent
It is better far better that we
that we the intelligent and superior ones
were able to enlighten and lighten the burden of those poor
miserable halfstarved
bottlenosed caricatures
of humanity who aimlessly wandered this land
for centuries before our arrival
It was better far better that we
that we led them out of barbarism
into the era of Christendom by baptising⁸
bibling blanketing and clothing them ...

Davis’s choice of the letter form demonstrates his familiarity with that formal mode of correspondence while simultaneously undercutting the bureaucratic method and mindsets which so harshly controlled every aspect of Aboriginal lives.

Eva Johnson has also employed the letter form to great effect. ‘A Letter To My Mother’ powerfully articulates the loss experienced by a separated child as well as that child’s determination to reclaim, for herself and her mother, a shared identity and culture:

I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now
White fulla bin take me from you, I don’t know why
Give me to Missionary to be God’s child.
Give me new language, give me new name
All time I cry, they say—‘that shame’
I go to the city down south, real cold
I forget all them stories, my Mother you told
Gone is my spirit, my dreaming, my name
Gone to these people, our country to claim
They gave me white mother, she give me new name

All time I cry, she say—‘that shame’
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.

I grow as Woman now, not Piccaninny no more
I need you to teach me your wisdom, your lore
I am your Spirit, I’ll stay alive
But in white fulla way, you won’t survive
I’ll fight for Your land, for your Sacred sites
To sing and to dance with the Brolga in flight
To continue to live in your own tradition
A culture for me was replaced by a mission
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.

One day your dancing, your dreaming, your song
Will take my your Spirit back where I belong
My Mother, the earth, the land—I demand
Protection from aliens who rule, who command
For they do not know where our dreaming began
Our destiny lies in the laws of White Man
Two Women we stand, our story untold
But now as our spiritual bondage unfold
We will silence this Burden, this longing, this pain
When I hear you my Mother give me my Name
I not see you long time now, I not see you long time now.

The ‘I’ of the poem has lost the most essential aspects of her identity: her name and her language. The attempt to erase from the (stolen) child’s memory any trace of her family, language and culture is captured in the repetition and linkage, through rhyme and positioning, of ‘name’ and ‘shame’. Similar stories are told by ‘no more’ ‘your lore’ and ‘tradition’ which gives way to ‘mission’.

‘A Letter To My Mother’, through its mix of linguistic registers, captures the sense of loss and cultural dislocation brought about by children being forced to forget their native tongue. The daughter writes to her mother in the ‘new language’ of her ‘mission’ education. In that new language she defiantly asserts her intention to reclaim her mother’s stories, lore, and tradition. In her emotional turmoil, however, the now-grown ‘Woman’ slips easily into her pre-missionary language

and speaks as the sad and lonely ‘Picaninny’ she still is. The daughter never does hear her mother’s voice. She is never given her ‘Name’.

Noel Rowe has written of this poem:

When *Bringing Them Home* was first tabled in parliament and Prime Minister Howard began his sorry refusals, I had this fantasy (or was it a dream?) that Eva Johnson would come into the House and say her poem ... And anyone who attended to the poem would move into a companionable mode of knowing, would be taken out of the oppositional mode that sustains and embitters our dominant political processes.⁹

If those who listen to, or read, Johnson’s poem allow themselves to be drawn into the space of the poem, they have an opportunity to *feel*, even if only a little, some of the pain of the separated child, and to experience the injustice dealt her in the denial of her language and culture. Such an audience would listen with their hearts and minds, would be open to the language of ‘Wholespeak’, rather than the ‘Narrowspeak’ used by government ministers who proffer percentages and semantic arguments as to the existence of a ‘Stolen Generation’.

The third strategy employed by Aboriginal poets against the imposition of an ‘alien tongue’ is a refusal to preference English over Language. Julie Watson Nungarrayi and Jennie Hargraves Nampijinpa, to name just two, publish their poems in Language first and offer English translations second. The effect of this privileging of Language is threefold. First, it affirms the ongoing existence and strength of the poet’s native language. Second, it engenders a respect for that language in the following generation, because children not only hear poetry in their own language, they have the opportunity to read their language in a published book. Language and culture are thereby shown to be powerful, living realities. And third, it relegates the English-speaking audience to second place, a place of discomfort and dislocation, a place of unknowing that otherwise has been the experience of so many Aboriginal Australians since 1788.

Jennie Hargraves Nampijinpa's 'Yuntalpa-Ku' ('Child, leave the tape recorder') is directed at Aboriginal youth. The poem coaxes, rather than lectures, the child to 'leave' the destructive elements of white culture alone: 'leave the tape recorder', 'leave cigarettes alone ... leave the grog alone too'. 'Yuntalpa-Ku' sets up an either / or choice: go with the 'White man's [destructive] things' or come with the sustaining culture of the black. The insistent 'leave', 'Leave', 'leave', 'Leave' moves to an equally insistent, but warmly affirming, 'Come', 'come', 'come ... own culture':

Yampiya kardiya-kurlangu	Leave the White man's things
waya pama kunjuru pitiyawu	music, grog, cigarettes, video
manu nyiya-kanti-kantiji!	and those other things as well!
Yantarni yawulyu-kurra manu	Come to the ceremonies
purlapa-kurra	
yantarni wirlinyi-kirra manu	come hunting and dancing,
wirntinja-ku	
yantarni kajinpa nyuntu-nyangu	come, so that you can know your
warlalja kurwarri	
milya-pinyi	own culture

Language is the key to the possibility of the continuance of Aboriginal culture. Many contemporary Aboriginal poems (and stories) attest that it is Language which feeds memory and, therefore, identity. Memory and identity are inextricably linked. Errol West's moving lament, 'There is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird, the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am', articulates this nexus between language, memory, identity, and culture. West's is a poem of negation and loss: 'There is no one', 'No old women', 'No old man'. It is only the '*spectre* of the past' (my italics) which 'dwells within' him. Uncle Leedham is his 'fondest memory'. He 'remember[s]' the 'pleasure' of being carried on his shoulders. But he needs more than these glimpses of the past to fill the lack that he feels, to make him whole. The repetition and linkage of memory and selfhood stresses the relationship between the two:

I search my memory of early days to try to make my presence
real, significant, whole.

I use my childhood memories of places, people and words to
re-create my identity.

The speaker of this poem, like the daughter in Johnson's 'A Letter to My Mother', absorbs the spirit of his ancestors and seeks, with the help of his culture, to right the injustices of the past. But he is floundering in confusion because there is no one to teach him what he needs to know. Like Johnson's 'I' he too has lost the language of his childhood:

Though wretched the invaders were - for me they created a
greater wretchedness for they, at least, spoke their
language, understood their role, yet it was nothing to be
sought

My great-grandparents knew their culture and it could not be
taken from them,
Through the minutes since their life it was taken from me—

West's poem also articulates another central theme of much Aboriginal poetry: the past as a continuing present which defines the self. Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal's 'The Past' powerfully dramatizes this point:

This little now, this accidental present
Is not all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past.

Oodgeroo's suburban 'I' is 'haunted by tribal memories'. Now uncomfortably comfortable in her 'easy chair before electric heater' she slips into reverie and is transported back to 'the camp fire in the bush among / My own people, sitting on the ground'. That scene and that time of community and belonging '[a]re but since yesterday':

... a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest
Are in my blood.
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me.

Oodgeroo, under the name Kath Walker, was the first published Aboriginal poet. Her stated aim in publishing her first volume of poetry, *We Are Going* (1964), was to 'bring out' Aboriginal voices: 'I'm putting their voices on paper ... their cry for help ... I don't consider it my book, it was the people—'.¹⁰

Kevin Gilbert's *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (1988) was the first published anthology of Aboriginal poetry. Significantly, it was published in Australia's bicentennial year, a year which celebrated, in vastly different ways, the establishment of white culture and the survival of black. Gilbert introduces the anthology by directly addressing the question of Aboriginal voice, oral tradition, and the need to publish, despite little education, in English. The title of the anthology is most telling: *Inside Black Australia*. By attending to the multiple Aboriginal voices represented in the anthology the reader has the opportunity to enter into, to come *inside*, the world(s) of the poets and thereby understand a little more what the experience of being Aboriginal in Australia might feel like.

The private voices of many Aboriginal children taken from their parents were publicly aired in the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (1997). *Bringing Them Home*, by remaining 'faithful to the language used by the witnesses quoted',¹¹ opened up a space that allowed its readers to experience the power of voice and memory, to be open to the feel of lived experience. Carmel Bird's *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (1998), though on a much smaller scale, achieved something similar. In addition to her selection of first-person narratives, Bird also offered a range of public responses to the stories. There has been, since 1998, something of an explosion of Aboriginal voices in the public arena seeking to tell what were once considered to be private stories. At the conclusion of Jane Harrison's production of 'Stolen', the five Aboriginal actors step out of character, identify themselves, and speak directly to the audience about their personal experiences of the policy of child separation. That crossing over from dramatic character to named individual operates to unsettle the audience. It takes them out of the

darkened theatre space of fiction to that of actuality. Most recently Phil Noyce's production of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (dir. Phillip Noyce, 2002) has taken a wide audience into the space of the Gibson Desert to journey with Molly, Daisy, and Gracie home to Jigalong. The film's audience, like those who attend to poetry in a companionable mode, is drawn into the world of those stolen children and the felt anguish of their mother, grandmother and tribal community.

Immigrant poetry: Peter Skrzynecki

Issues of language and identity are also of central importance in much of the poetry written by immigrants to Australia. The variety of approaches to such issues can be seen from even the briefest of glances at, for instance, the dizzying word games of Ania Walwicz: 'that's me i did i did i say this lala did i do lala i did i',¹² the aggressively confronting performance poetry of ΠΟ: 'Fuken WOGZ givi-s'ee BEE-a!' ... W(((o!)))G, W(((o!)))G, W(((o!)))G;¹³ and the more lyric, meditative poetry of Peter Skrzynecki: 'At thirteen, / Stumbling over tenses in Caesar's *Gallic War*, / I forgot my first Polish word' ('Feliks Skrzynecki').¹⁴ Skrzynecki's *Immigrant Chronicle* (1975) can be read as an autobiographical account of the poet's post-war migration to, and life in, Australia. The poetic 'I', like Skrzynecki himself, arrives by migrant ship in Australia in 1949, is interned in a migrant hostel in Parkes for two years, lives with his Polish father and his Ukrainian mother at 10 Mary Street, Regents Park, and attends St Patrick's College, Strathfield. The individual self could, therefore, be read as the 'immigrant' of the title and the volume of poems a journal of that self who moves through specific locations and times on a cyclic journey. That journey sees the child who fled war-torn Europe now an adult and a parent, drawn to yet resisting a return to Warsaw ('Post card'). Indeed by titling the poems in such a way as to specifically locate the experiences narrated—'Migrant hostel: Parkes, 1949-51', 'Immigrants at Central Station, 1951', '10 Mary Street'—Skrzynecki seems to encourage such a personal reading. But the poetry also

chronicles a much larger story. It seeks to investigate and dramatize some of the deeper complexities involved in mass migration, assimilation, and cultural and linguistic dislocation.

Although published in 1975, *Immigrant Chronicle* can be read in light of the contemporary debate on asylum seekers and the government policy of mandatory detention currently embroiling the Australian nation. Much of the poetry dealing with migration and cultural adjustment is written from the perspective of the immigrant, thereby offering its audience the opportunity to understand a little better the felt experience of dislocation. The poetry lifts the 'barrier' that separates the immigrants from the Australians outside the 'main gate' ('Migrant hostel'), and invites its audience inside the actual and *perceived* spaces of otherness experienced by first-generation migrants and their children.

This perception of otherness is emphasised by the line endings in 'Immigrants at Central Station, 1951': 'us', 'us', 'other', 'them'. The audience is made privy to the deep anxieties and tension of the immigrants in transit. The opening line sets the tone of the poem: 'It was sad to hear ...', which is echoed in stanza four, 'But it was sad to hear ...'. These people, like those we meet in 'Crossing the Red Sea', have fled '[f]rom the sorrow / Of northern wars'. They have arrived in an unknown land, a land of supposed freedom, a land of vast empty spaces, but they feel trapped, frightened, and depressed:

The air was crowded
With a dampness that slowly
Sank into our thoughts—

And later:

...space hemmed us
Against each other
Like cattle bought for slaughter.

They carry their traumatic memories of the War with them. Half a world away they wait expectantly at the railway station and

feel, as millions of European Jews must have felt, 'like cattle bought for slaughter'. Like cattle they are powerless. They huddle in a group awaiting their fate, a fate suggested by the 'red' signal that drops 'like a guillotine'. Of course, they are not about to be killed, but the poem suggests, through its imagery and tone, that this is how they feel. They are guarded by pigeons. The 'train's whistle' is '[l]ike a word of command'. Only time is set free. Time, which 'waited anxiously with us / Behind upturned collars', 'ran ahead' while the immigrants stand still wondering, hoping, fearing what this new world beyond 'the space of eyesight' will bring.

That same sense of uncertainty and anxious expectation is powerfully portrayed in 'Crossing the Red Sea'. So too is the sense of irrevocable loss experienced by the immigrants who have little choice but to leave their beloved country:

Many slept on deck
Because of the day's heat
Or to watch a sunset
They would never see again—

The sunken-eyed passengers are little more than shells. As the ship gets under way they allow themselves to feel and speak again: 'voices left their caves / And silence fell from its shackles / Memories strayed', but dialogue is little more than 'Patches and shreds'. The image of the cave suggests a place of hiding, perhaps even of sanctuary where these people, in order to survive, have hidden their inner thoughts or opinions. But the cave imagery also suggests that these shattered people harbour within themselves a dark and hollow space, a lack. On this sea crossing it is not the ocean that is fierce and powerful but the deeply-tortured psyches, the 'Walled-up griefs' of the migrants. They are barely holding themselves together. They cannot allow themselves to speak of or contemplate the 'finalities / Of surrender'. In that phrase Skrzynecki captures the traumatic emotional rupture felt by those forced to leave the country of their birth. They are 'beckoned' towards their new home, so there is a sense of welcome and perhaps of hope, but the

weightiness of 'surrender' seriously qualifies any sense of hope. To surrender is to go under, to admit defeat, to give up, to yield. The migrants wish to surrender neither to their emotions nor to letting go of their country. They flee their now-Communist country in the same year that the red flag of Communism is raised over China, 1949. While there may be peace and renewal on the other side of the Equator, they can see only as far as the 'blood-rimmed horizon'. This Red Sea does not part to offer even a glimpse of the 'Promised Land'.

'Migrant hostel: Parkes, 1949-51' shows what lay ahead for these migrants: internment in a country town. The mass movement of humanity that passes through the hostel is dramatized in the 'busloads' that come and go. There is a sense of menace in the 'Sudden departures from adjoining blocks / That left us wondering / Who would be coming next'. It is not individuals but 'Nationalities' who seek each other out in an attempt to locate themselves: 'Like a homing pigeon / Circling to get its bearings'. Here is a place where to survive one must act 'instinctively'. It is a place whose inhabitants are left 'wondering', 'sensing', 'unaware'. It is a place that demeans the human spirit. The migrants feel acutely the isolation and otherness imposed by the 'barrier at the main gate' that separates them from the Australian community. The boom gate is menacing and accusing. Its power is both physical and psychological. It rises and falls 'like a finger / Pointed in reprimand or shame'. Significantly, the migrants need 'its sanction'. Powerless to determine their destiny they exist, rather than live, in limbo. Their sense of futility and frustration is powerfully articulated in the final word, 'dying'.

Skrzynecki's poetry is not about Afghan or Iraqi refugees. The Parkes hostel is not Woomera or Villawood. Indeed by using the final stanzas of the last poem, 'Post card', as the epigraph for *Immigrant Chronicle*, Skrzynecki signals the very personal journey his volume of poetry has enacted. The adult poet, haunted by a postcard of Warsaw 'refuse[s] to answer' the call of a cultural space he insists he never knew 'Except in the third person'. Is not his poetry an answer to those 'voices' of

his past that call him back? The chronicle is not a linear history. It is rather a journey of crossings and re-crossings across borders of self, place and time. It can be read as a cyclic conversation across generations that deals with loss and return, identity, and the experience and perception of otherness. It is imaginatively possible to extend that conversation to include the current situation in Australia of detained refugees. In empathizing with the gentle, hardworking Feliks Skrzynecki, the distressed and lonely Kornelia Woloszczuk, the confused yet loving adolescent son, and the nameless immigrants who seek to make a new life in Australia, we are taken beyond the boundaries of one Polish / Ukranian / Australian family to a much larger canvas.

Poetry and social conscience: Bruce Dawe

At the conclusion of a recent production of *The Flood Drummers*, a political fable that dramatizes the consequences of corruption, lies, and the sacrifice of human life for political gain, the play's cast and director projected the words 'Free the Refugees' onto the set. A member of the audience wrote to Brett Sheehy, the artistic director of the Sydney Festival, stating that he was 'deeply offended' and his 'evening was ruined' by what he saw as the production's descent into the political. Sheehy responded to the criticism stating: 'It has always been a role of the arts to keep vigilant, to diagnose our social illnesses, and to sound the occasional clarion call for insomnia in the face of apathy'.¹⁵

Bruce Dawe's poetry sounds such a call. For Dawe poetry is a way of resisting the 'shallow and dehumanizing value-system purveyed by the consumer society' in order to explore and celebrate 'our possibilities as people'.¹⁶ Dawe's early poetry is scathing in its attack on what he sees as an increasingly materialistic and Americanized Australian society. In his later work he continues to focus his artistic vision on social ills—unemployment, violent crime, and environmental disregard—

compounded, the poetry suggests, by individual apathy. He employs irony and satire to disturb that apathy.

Satire assumes a moral viewpoint. Dawe's use of satire affirms his belief that poetry can educate its audience to appreciate that viewpoint. His readiness to publish in newspapers, in addition to literary magazines and books, has ensured that his poetry is, and has been, available to a wide reading public. Much of that poetry captures the rhythms and intonation of the Australian vernacular: 'Even those who would like nothing better / Than to call it quits and go to bed ...' ('Everybody Sing'), and elsewhere, 'Anyway, pretty soon he was old enough to be / realistic like every other godless / money-hungry back-stabbing miserable / so-and-so ...' ('Enter Without So Much as Knocking'). This use of the Australian vernacular generates the perception that Dawe's poetry is easily accessible and can be readily understood. On one level that perception is correct. But that seemingly easy accessibility is also the source of the poetry's subversive power. The poetry derives its force from 'working off and against the generic assumptions and conventions normally associated with such language'.¹⁷ Dawe repeatedly turns the vernacular back on his audience to demonstrate that the situation, so often abstracted, so often something that happens to or is about someone else, is actually very much to do with themselves.

'To Be a Poet in Australia' offers a clear example of this strategy. The audience sympathises with the poet's predicament in the opening stanzas. We recognise the beauty of the common experiences expressed in stanza III. The tone of the poem then shifts to become increasingly pitiful and sardonically humorous. The audience smirks at the closing image of the poet as a dog fetching sticks: 'returning with gripped sticks in one's jaws / a hopeful look / and a tail wagging excuses'. It is only then we realise that this final image is an indictment on, and challenge to, us. 'To Be a Poet in Australia' is more a satiric attack on Australian society than an account of the life of a poet.

The poet in 'To Be a Poet in Australia', like the 'chosen and responsible' 'spokesman for sorrow' in 'Kummerstadt', is

someone removed from the intimate pleasures and company of society. Bruce Dawe, as poet, both is and is not removed from Australian society. His poetry engages with everyday events in the familiar tones of everyday speech, yet the perspective encountered most often in his poetry is one of ironic distance. He employs the dramatic monologue, his favoured poetic form, to convey this sense of distance. The dramatic monologue relies on the ability of its audience to appreciate the ironic gap between what the speaker thinks they are saying and what they are actually revealing about themselves. The audience, at a somewhat superior remove, is amused by the speaker's unwitting exposure of themselves. Dawe encourages his audience to enter that distanced space of observation, seemingly secure in the knowledge that it is the speaker, not themselves, that is under scrutiny. But the audience is implicated. The poetry makes us recognize ourselves in the language of the speaker and in so doing involves both sympathy and challenge. 'Doctor to Patient' (1983), a poem about youth unemployment, exemplifies this strategy.

'Doctor to Patient' was inspired by what Dawe describes as the 'chillingly abstract way in which unemployment figures are quoted by politicians with jobs'.¹⁸ Too often the Australian public has witnessed television and media interviews in which a government minister rationalises unemployment figures in terms of percentage points. Unemployment, it would seem, is a question of numbers and stock-market responses rather than individual pain and despair. Dawe satirises this impersonal approach by translating that political speak into the polite, cool tones of a clinician. The poem opens in what might appear to be an unexceptional way. The doctor offers a fairly standard greeting: 'Please sit down. I'm afraid I have some / Rather bad news for you'. But the doctor is not at all 'afraid'. Indeed the poem is constructed in such a way as to show that the doctor feels the news really isn't too bad at all:

Oh yes, and, by the way,
you will be relieved to know the disease
is only in a minority of cases terminal.

The youth is summarily informed of the ‘diagnosis’:

...you are seventeen
and you have contracted an occupational disease called
Unemployment. Like others similarly afflicted
you will experience feelings of
shock, disbelief, injustice, guilt, apathy, and aggression.

From the outset the individual has been relegated to one of a group: ‘like others’. The doctor knows exactly what ‘feelings’ this individual will ‘experience’ and what he / she will later discover because the ‘disease / Is universal’.

The audience observes this consultation aghast at the doctor’s insensitivity. We understand the significance of what the youth may be feeling. We would not treat the youth in this clinical, heartless way. It is here Dawe works his characteristic manoeuvre. He turns the poem back on us. The audience, as ‘others’ and ‘our’, is implicated in the dismissal of this abject youth:

However, you will discover, as time passes,
That your presence in itself will make others
obviously uncomfortable. Try not to let
your shadow, at this stage,
fall across your neighbour’s plate

...

Please remember
you have now become our common vulnerability
personified.

The poem implies that the audience is part of the community that overlooks the individual disaster of each and every unemployed person.

Dawe’s choice of a disease as a metaphor for unemployment also implicates society as a whole. On an individual level ‘the disease / is only in a minority of cases terminal’, but unemployment is a far more endemic and dangerous disease. It is an illness that affects all of society. It is a rotting sore that

diminishes the unemployed and the employed alike because it breeds a society based on inequality. The poem dramatizes the way in which disadvantaged, unemployed members of that society are both lonely and isolated. It is the disease of unemployment, not just the individual unemployed youth, which is 'our common vulnerability'. Again we see the use of 'our', an echo from Dawe's belief in 'our possibilities as people'. Though disgusted by the materialism and selfishness of some elements of Australian society, Dawe continues to have faith in the goodness of people and the ability of poetry to tap into or nourish that goodness.

Conclusion

In 'Doctor to Patient' Dawe sets up a conversation between the broad, impersonal political issue of unemployment and the individual's traumatic experience of it. His approach, in this instance, is almost a mirror image of that taken by Skrzynecki. Skrzynecki's primary poetic focus is the individual experience but, as has been argued, that experience can be read as part of a larger dialogue on questions of displacement, identity, and migration. The Aboriginal poets discussed do not recognise any (artificial) distinction between the private and public, individual and community. The voice of private experience is the voice of public history. Common to all these poets is a faith in the power of poetry to engender empathic imagination and in so doing to open up a new or deeper space of understanding for its audience.

Poets are products of their times but good poetry—yes, it is possible to make such qualitative statements—though it may address specific topical issues, transcends borders of time and place to address universal questions of human existence. Does it have the power to change political reality? Is there a role for poetry in a post-September 11 world? That question has been asked many times since the terrorist attacks in America. A common response to it has been to quote Theodor Adorno: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.¹⁹ But Adorno later

wrote: 'I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric ... [But] literature must resist this verdict ... It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it'.²⁰ That voice of suffering and injustice can speak through poetry. Whether it speaks on an individual or global level it operates to expand and extend its audience's consciousness. Poetry can influence mindsets. And it is mindsets which ultimately determine action.

Endnotes

- ¹ Tony Stephens, 'They turned my poetry to mush', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 1999, p. 8.
- ² Stephens, 'They turned my poetry to mush', p. 8.
- ³ Bruce Dawe, *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems, 1954-1987*, 3rd edn (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1989), p. xiv. All Dawe poems cited are taken from this edition.
- ⁴ Les Murray, 'Poems and Poesies', in *Blocks and Tackles: Articles and Essays* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990), p. 170.
- ⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 151.
- ⁶ Kevin Gilbert, *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988), p. xv. For Gilbert's discussion on 'What is an Aboriginal poet?', see p. xvi. With the exception of Davis's poem, all cited works by Aboriginal poets are taken from Gilbert's anthology.
- ⁷ Cited in Kim Scott, *Benang: from the heart* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999), p. 11.
- ⁸ *Indigenous Australian Voices: A Reader*, ed. Jennifer Sabbioni et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 259.
- ⁹ Editorial, *Southerly* 61:3 (2001), 5.
- ¹⁰ Kath Walker and Jim Davidson, 'Interview: Kath Walker', *Meanjin* 36 (1977), 429.
- ¹¹ *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: HREOC, 1997), p. 20.
- ¹² 'lala', in *Boat* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1989), p. 79.
- ¹³ *24 Hours* (Melbourne: Collective Effort Press, 1996).

- ¹⁴ *Immigrant Chronicle* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975). All cited poems by Skrzynecki are taken from this volume.
- ¹⁵ ‘Audience must entertain art’s great theme: humanity’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2002, p. 13.
- ¹⁶ *Sometimes Gladness*, pp. xiii-xiv.
- ¹⁷ Paul Brock, ‘A View of Bruce Dawe’s Poetry’, *Southerly* 42:2 (1982), 232.
- ¹⁸ ‘The Arts, Entertainment and Social Conscience’, in *Discerning the Australian Social Conscience* (Richmond, Vic.: Jesuit Publications, 1999), p. 323.
- ¹⁹ ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), p. 34.
- ²⁰ Cited in Eric L. Santner, ‘History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma’, in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘final solution’*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 144.

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