

Bruce Dawe: Language, Self and Place

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Land possession and its importance to individual and communal identity is generally associated with indigenous peoples, not just in Mabo-conscious Australia but around the world. Even urban Australian Aborigines have found a relationship with the land that extends into the realm of the sacred crucially important in their efforts to establish or re-establish a sense of individual or group dignity. At their best, Aborigines' sense of themselves, as expressed in literature, theatre and especially art, is tied to a mythology of the land in which they are part of it. As has often been remarked, the latter is an alien mode of thought to the European mind, habituated to a Cartesian disjunction between self and object which makes land readily available for use rather than an intrinsic element of identity. Robert Frost in his poem 'The Gift Outright' declares 'The land was ours before we were the land's. / She was our land more than a hundred years / Before we were her people' (*Selected Poems* 202). Frost's is a nationalist poem, concerned with America's winning of independence from England. However, it is also possible to see the poem as struggling towards an Aboriginal sense of a people's being 'possessed' by the (feminised) land. The realisation of this struggle is limited; amongst other things, Frost's concept of time is related to history rather than mythology, despite his use of 'our' and 'we' to collectivise the American people over many generations.

Les Murray has noted how 'Some of the immense dignity of traditional Aborigines ... comes from their sense of being the present forms of eternally existing beings' (*Persistence in Folly* 10) and has pointed to the stasis which this timelessness allows in the Wonguri-Mandjikai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone, 'with its total acceptance of an intimately known and coherent world' (23). This timelessness and this total acceptance are extremely difficult for modern, urban Aborigines and hardly possible for white writers. Thus at first glance the work of Bruce Dawe—urban, Anglo-Saxon, male and born in the generation which has been dedicated to economic and industrial development of Australia—might seem irrelevant to the issue of land and identity. Dawe is known as 'that poet of Middle Australia who does not mind the tag' (Frizell) and whose work displays what Dawe has described as 'sympathetic treatment of popular speech images and rhythms' (*Southerly* 236). He is not known for his sense of place, but Dawe is, I want to argue, an important writer in establishing links between land, language and identity for white, especially urban white, Australians.

This is most directly apparent in a poem which echoes Robert Frost's, 'When First the Land Was Ours' (*Sometimes Gladness* 236), whose epigraph from the native American Chief Seattle expresses the Australian Aboriginal attitude: 'The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth'. The poem is dedicated to soil scientist Brian Roberts and concerns land and river degradation. Dawe portrays the white destructive attitude of usage as initially one of innocence:

When first the land was ours we thought
that things would never change
—there'd always be the same green hills,
clear rivers and rich range ...

Characteristically, the poem includes Biblical references amongst the Australian diction. After we have 'ring-barked, burned and bulldozed' the consequences are both catastrophic and inevitable:

The bird-life fled, the locusts spread,
and Exodus followed soon
—the land was bright beneath the night,
but dark beneath the noon ...

This inversion of the normal effects of light—one is tempted to say 'God's light'—indicates a time and place which are 'out of joint'.¹ The phrasing suggests a poem behind 'When First the Land Was Ours' more important than Frost's and of similar religious spirit: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Dawe's argument for preservation of the land is not an economic one but emerges from a deeper spiritual attachment:

For we are part of the shimmering web
that binds the vast and small,
and what is done to a single strand
has meaning to it all
—the earth was *never* ours, instead
we were the earth's deaf sons ...

Fundamentally, this is also the lesson of Coleridge's poem, even though his principal setting is the ocean:

He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

This intricate involvement with 'the shimmering web' is intrinsic to our identity. Human will has power—Dawe declares, 'what we get / must spring from what we give'—but within a pattern and purpose larger than ourselves and to which we have responsibilities:

The world's good is our own best good,
the land's health is our own
—we were not meant to pasture sand
or harvest fields of stone.

Although the tone is moderated from that of Coleridge or Wordsworth, there is much of Romanticism in this environmentalist stance by which 'we receive but what we give'² and can find in nature something like Wordsworth's 'anchor of ... purest thoughts'.³ It is through nature that the Romantics saw the contact and connectedness which solved the problem of alienation posed by Cartesian dualism.

Many of the views expressed or implicit in 'When First the Land Was Ours' have been reiterated in recent, as yet unpublished poems by Dawe. 'In a Time of Drought' sees that near the Warrego Highway 'the land lies blurred blue-grey / like a fugue' while 'the sun glowers like a furnace, / it is angry with us'. In one of Dawe's many uses of Biblical touchstones the speaker finds that 'the palmists have said their piece / ... and gone' and only he is left as elegist.

Dawe has been described as 'a fervent supporter of Aboriginal land rights' (*Chronicle* 27) and 'Exodus 2088' presents a vision of Australia at the tercentenary of white settlement when the whites, 'the invaders and their brittle technocrat ways', have

recently left. With their departure Aborigines are rediscovering 'old skills of survival' as well as exchanging 'for their grunge gear the fur pelt', and the animals are rumoured to be 'moving back in ... / to the green lands from which they, too, had been driven'. 'On a Real-Estate Developer' likens its subject to, at the end of the Cretaceous period, 'the very last / thunder-lizard', a creature of 'scaly bombast' and 'predatory vision' who is 'deafened by the echoing sound / of his own bellowing voice' and about to go the way of the dinosaurs. To find your identity completely separately from nature is to guarantee self-destruction.

Behind these poems, Dawe, a convert to Catholicism, maintains a fundamentally pre-Enlightenment sense of identity achieved through relationship with God. In Dawe's case this relationship is unobtrusive and principally manifest in his adherence to a set of values—although 'set' is too tidy a word—which he sees as endorsed by God. The degree of security this provides contrasts with the insecurity of Dawe's early life, and perhaps counters it. Ken Goodwin reports that the poet's mother and father

were not well-matched and the young Dawe suffered from feelings of insecurity and a sense of the transience of life. As he, his mother, and older brother George moved from place to place, he must have gained the impression that life was a puzzling and nomadic affair, lacking a fixed centre. (Goodwin 7)

This transient life is most famously presented in 'Drifters', but also appears in the recent 'Rooming at 240 Cardigan Street, Carlton' (*Mortal Instruments* 114) and the new, unpublished poem 'Choosing a Tenant', which sympathetically describes a family of 'kids brawling in the backyard', a 'wife shrill / with weariness', and who will 'clear out, late at night, owing a month's rent'. Each of these poems presents people who cannot gain a sense of identity from place because of their nomadic life. Dawe has described 'Drifters' as a poem 'dealing with my mother's longing for stability and harmony in the home when my father was restless and unsettled (and usually unemployed)'. ('Other People's Lives')

Dawe's early life, then, was very much working class, a class to whose values Dawe still unselfconsciously adheres. Asked about it by a journalist, Dawe replied:

It's not easy to outrun your background. You think that if you catch a few buses, board a few trams, duck down a few more alleys, then you'll be free of it. You think you're away, but you can't escape it. (*Sunday Mail*)

The economics of working class life require a stoic capacity to tough things out, a willingness to adapt yourself to a social and economic framework larger than you. The social framework allows no indulgence in the middle and upper class concept of self-realisation. But what can be gained is a sense of community, a willingness to share when you are in luck and to accept from others when you are not. The self, like everything else, just has to be accepted and dealt with; the self might be constrained but you are saved from modern, boutique, existential angst. Interestingly, the same kind of discipline and lack of self-aggrandisement as Dawe's can be detected in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, whose farming background is an Irish version of working class.

This combination of religious belief and working class background provides Dawe with the certainty of identity that underpins his moral attacks on social and political grandees, and saves the attacks from any touch of sanctimoniousness. Of course, Dawe's charges assume a degree of achieved identity in those he attacks: a sense of identity is necessary for moral responsibility. The fragmented, volatile and uncertain self of much modern literature or psychology is nowhere present in Dawe's work—no

more than is the 'self' which is only a signifier for arbitrary significations. In Dawe's work language means—it names and refers unquestionably to a world of actions and responsibilities. Dawe in fact is contemptuous of media distortions of reality and of modern psychologising and psychoanalysis. In a very recent poem, 'Choreographing the Cosmos' (September 1997, unpublished), 'media masters of both wind and moon / sway our world below with their persuasion' and 'orchestrate / ... thoughts and feelings of which, until now, / you hardly knew yourself to be possessed'. In another unpublished poem of the same date, 'Some Old Testament Characters with Big Problems Get the Latest Treatment', the fate of various Biblical figures, from Adam and Eve to Jonah, is questioned and answered with a refrain:

Where are Adam and Eve, now they've been ev-icted from Eden Estates
(for conduct unbecoming, etc., etc.), their glory days forever gone?
In counselling ...

Together with an assortment of 'Canaanites', 'Stalagmites', 'Trilobites' and others 'they ... have been counselled within an inch of their lives / whether they needed it or not just like the rest of us'.

Dawe's whole cast of mind is communal and his sense of the purpose of being is tied up with a sense of community. In an address given when he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) by the University of Southern Queensland in April 1995 Dawe confidently declared:

... we are put in this world to do good—to find, if anything, an ever larger usefulness. Each of us, you could say, is a piece of the shattered mirror; in our lives and in our work we still seek to reflect a fragment of that overarching sky whose total meaning we feel the world should possess. It is as though there is still, within us, some memory of a time when the mirror was whole, and the world was one. Every time we find ourselves caught up in a process of creation we may be responding to ... that impulse to believe in such a time, and in the possibility of such a world.⁴

One could certainly see this as the impulse behind Dawe's own poems. In 'Ladybird, Ladybird', written in April 1997, Dawe laments the fragmentation of shared life in one street. He has seen the street 'lose direction, fragment into discrete particulars' now that 'Conversation over fences is a dying art'. These days 'the young come and go endlessly, leaping in and out of vehicles like grasshoppers in a wheatfield' and 'the generation-gap / is deeper than the Marianas Trench'. The poem is in fact a forecasting elegy for identity no longer found through contact with others in a particular place: 'When the last of the earlier generation die or retreat to nursing-homes / the street will be blank, memoryless, like an abandoned bee-hive'. The ladybird will find no home to fly away to.

Even when Dawe might seem to be focussing on solitariness a sense of community is present. 'Homo Suburbienis' presents 'One constant in a world of variables /—a man alone in the evening in his patch of vegetables' (SG 108). In his suburban patch of 'green / confusion' he can offer 'Not much but as much as any man can offer'. True to the poem's dispassionate, science-alluding title the man is observed in isolation, but this is the suburbia in which most Australians live; as he stands there he smells the burning of 'somebody's rubbish' and hears 'the clatter of a dish' as well as 'a dog, a kid, / a far whisper of traffic'. On his cultivated land his solitariness is clearly temporary; this is neither the Garden of Eden nor Walden.

The garden, and the man's relationship to it, are, however, authentic, and contrast

with the pseudo-community and fake identity promulgated by the media. In the dis-integrating community of the 'Ladybird' street 'the pearl-grey 51cm screens ... / offer a pethidine window on the world'. In another unpublished poem, ' "All Ye Need to Know ... " ', television newscasters with 'faces the woven masks of gods / bring us the bright rubble of the world / broken into quick fragments' so that 'the riots / sparkle like spilled necklaces'. The effect of this intellectual and emotional diet of infotainment is a wombat-like bewilderment:

... meanwhile back at the place
 where the heart used to be there is
 the kind of quiet that comes when the storm ceases
 and those ravaged creatures the eyes
 creep up from their blinking cellars ...⁵

Television provides masks of events and selves that cannot be authenticated, but even in critique Dawe employs humour. Humour is an integral element in Dawe's populist, and therefore communal, aesthetics:

Humour is the leaven of any poetic get-together and rightly so; among the greatest communal moments are those of shared grief and shared laughter, and the more our lives are made complexly separate the more these moments are needed to assure us that the centre still holds. When this sharing takes place poetry regains its lost soul as a truly communal art, like the folk-song. (*Southerly* 244)

Humour implicitly involves a quality of sharing and is a means by which people establish a sense of self through group identification. That identification may manifest itself in many forms. In 'Life-cycle' the form is that of Aussie Rules barracking, specifically in Victoria, and its particular language, from 'Carn, ... Carn' to 'Ooohh you bludger', by which 'the covenant' of belonging 'is sealed' (*SG* 76). A particular place can be interlinked with a particular language, and in general terms, Dawe's popularity is partly due to his (often humorous) use of a language which affirms for Australians their sense of themselves as Australians.

The barracking of 'Life-cycle' can readily be seen as a kind of ritual, its 'passion persisting, like a race-memory, through the welter of seasons'. Ritual is also a force for constructing or reifying individual or group identity but it does not automatically do so. In an interview Dawe once said 'Ritual ... has its own meaning' but continued 'I'm not so in love with ritual that I don't see that it may become an empty thing' (Kavanagh 34). Dawe's portrait of his home city, Toowoomba—'Provincial City'—concludes with observation of a Saturday night ritual: 'the angle-parked cars ... full of watchers, / their feet on invisible accelerators, / going nowhere, *fast*' (*SG* 124). In this act of observation, Dawe is defining his own identity in relation to the place by asserting his separation from it.

'Provincial City' makes mention of Toowoomba's Drayton Cemetery, in the sunlight glittering 'like a dream'. In a later poem named after the cemetery he laments the loss of meaningful ritual:

Here where once families come to mingle their living dust with the dead
 to exchange the dank water of old gossip for the fresh water of new
 ...
 —all that is left is the wind, the birdsong, the lorn sunlight. (*SG* 175)

'Living ritual', Dawe declares in the same interview, 'gives people a direction, a purpose, an aesthetic, a shape and sense of themselves' (Kavanagh 35). Identity signifies

continuity over time, but memory is out of place 'when the sick breath of civilization is busily whispering *Forget*' (SG 175).

Identity is a complex concept which cannot be understood by reference to place alone. Intrinsic to it is some sense of language and some degree of memory. Enough time must be spent in a place to generate a history—personal, cultural or national—or a mythology. Otherwise one is placed in the condition of the speaker of 'Any Shorter and I'd Have Missed It Altogether' who found 'everything over, almost as if it had never / happened at all' (SG 42). The unpretentious tone, wry humour and frequent irony of Dawe's poems is wedded to a sense of the fragility of white Australians' grip on their own country. 'Australians', he has said, 'are natural ...; we see the distance between appearances and reality in our very tenuous hold on this vast continent, in our perception of the gap between big talk and tiny moral stances ...' (Letter, Klein). Robert Langbaum has noted that the word 'identity' was 'first used to mean personal identity by the empiricist philosophers Locke and Hume' who 'cast doubt on the unity of self' (Langbaum 25). This has resulted in what Charles Rzepka in *The Self as Mind* describes as 'a suffocating self-enclosure, alienation, estrangement and isolation' (12). Dawe's background, temperament and communalist aesthetics mean that his poetry does not exhibit this philosophical debilitation, even though he might observe its effects in others. Very often it seems to derive from an identification of identity entirely with consciousness. It may be tempting to see Dawe's poetry as entirely a poetry of consciousness since it is so often a poetry of moral messages and satiric attacks. But Dawe's language is not just populist and does not simply name, even if a belief in referentiality is at its base. Seamus Heaney has said that 'When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the condition of overlife and rebels at limit' (Heaney 16). In its images, rhythms and transformative metaphors Dawe's poetry provides a language of excess, and appeals to the unconscious mind. This provides an openness which counterpoises the tendency to closure in Dawe's decisive moral stances. It is at the level of the unconscious, of instinct that Aboriginal or white identification with the land or with place is forged. For Dawe, having a place, rather than any particular place, matters. The poem 'Rooming at 240 Cardigan Street, Carlton' names a place precisely, only to emphasise the transient boarder's feeling of 'being locked out' of the sense of identity which place can provide. It is worth remembering that Dawe's first book was titled 'No Fixed Address'.

But, as his poetry shows, Dawe's is an unfailingly social sensibility. Identity, for Dawe is crucially formed through contact with people as well as with place. Thus, Dawe's aesthetics are decidedly humanist. Writing of Saul Bellow, Michael Glenday cites Jacques Maritain's classic contrast between 'a humanism which is theocentric or truly Christian; and one which is anthropocentric ... the first kind of humanism recognises that the centre for man is God' (*True Humanism* 6). This is very much Dawe's position, but he believes that on earth human beings have free will and a responsibility for their own destiny. Thus his poetry suggests the terms that Glenday sets out principally for anthropocentric humanism: 'humanism finds its strength in the participative and interactive, and contends that the dignity of man and the survival of humane sensibility can only be achieved through the social contract' (7). Individual identity comes from communal identity.

Notes

1. *Hamlet*, l.v.189.
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode'.
3. William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey'.
4. Address on the Occasion of the Awarding of the Degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa). (Toowoomba: The University of Southern Queensland, 21 April 1995).
5. Fryer Library, UQFL 111, Box 10.

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