

III: Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2000

Chris Wallace-Crabbe: *The Escaping Word: Poetry and the Ineffable*;  
Esther van Stralen on viola playing Ross Edwards' *Enyato II* and Bach's *Fifth Cello Suite*

Introduction: Jennifer Gribble

It is my pleasure tonight to welcome Professor Chris Wallace-Crabbe from the Australian Centre, at the University of Melbourne and Esther van Stralen who will play Ross Edwards' *Enyato II* and excerpts from Bach's *Fifth Cello Suite*.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe, poet and critic, is the author of many volumes: poetry, essays, a novel, criticism and his most recent title is *Author, Author* of 1999. His most recent poems are *Whirling* brought out in the Oxford Poets Series in 1998 and in 1996 his *Selected Poems* won *The Age* Book of the Year Prize.

Chris will talk to us this evening under the title of *The Escaping Word: Poetry and the Ineffable*. Please join me in welcoming Chris Wallace-Crabbe.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

The words we cannot say, we try to say.  
We just can't say what we would fully say.  
Our bodies may have more than we to say.  
Who stumble finding what there is to say.

Too much was said for years before we said  
What, in these worn-out words, could not be said.

'Truth and Silence'

Poetry is different from prose. We all agree on that, at least, even though there are borderline cases to keep the roaming critical mind alert and nippy. Writers as various as Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, Dorothy Porter and Sir Thomas Browne tease those categories for us. But that boundary fence is not my concern here.

I would like to think about that category of overdetermined texts which we have called poetry, or more precisely lyric poetry, since Elizabethan or Stuart times; and, more particularly about its raids on the ineffable, the mysterious. Mainly we shall be thinking about Romantic and Post-romantic literature, in which, it must be confessed similar raids have concerned prose writers. Thus Kipling once wrote,

I worked the material in three or four overlaid tints or textures, which might or might not reveal themselves according to the shifting light of sex, youth or experience.

While Vladimir Nabokov, a deeply Post-romantic, which is to say modern writer, opined about the mystery of writing that literature ‘appeals to that secret depth of the human soul where the shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships.’

The secret depth of which he speaks is surely that which so much modern poetry has evoked, wished for, bent its artifice towards. When I say modern here, I am talking about the texts which are beginning to be post-Christian round about the time of Marvell and Traherne, seventeenth-century selves for whom the new Protestant tradition has shaken the fixed symbols from their place in stable iconography.

Thus Marvell’s stunning, crafty and deeply seductive poem, ‘The Garden’, did not so much go about domesticating the scriptural Paradise garden as relocate it in a brave new world of tremulous individualism, in which the reflective, questing soul tries to look at what happens in the spaces around the familiar deeply-bedded Christian symbols, arriving ultimately at a Mallarméan moment of climax: an exciting disembodyment of creation:

Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less  
Withdraws into its happiness:  
The Mind, that ocean where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find;  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other Worlds, and other Seas,  
Annihilating all that's made  
To a green Thought in a green Shade.

For a brief aesthetic moment here, the poetic mind annihilates God's creation, taking on the full power of transcendence itself, and generating something like the evanescent shadow of a celadon bowl, or ... but one cannot say further what a 'green Thought in a green Shade' might actually be.

In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, the profound critic William Empson observes that the last two lines are 'either contemplating everything or shutting everything out. This combines the idea of the conscious mind, including everything because understanding it, and that of unconscious animal nature, including everything because in harmony with it.' In this sense of harmonious doubleness, we are on the road to the Wordsworth of 'Tintern Abbey', to that central cusp or kernel in English Romanticism which trembles between narcissism and a sense of divine immanence. Turning eastwards, Empson goes on to say of Marvell that 'So far as he has achieved his state of ecstasy ... he is "neither conscious nor not conscious" like the seventh Buddhist state of enlightenment.'

The Romantic tradition, of course, presses this role of the part-conscious consciousness further. Our great Romantic critic, Christopher Brennan went so far as to claim that 'Man's task is to spiritualize, idealize, humanize – the terms are all equivalent: is not human pride here evident? – to humanize the world; and the challenge proceeds from the infinite.' Australians have often felt uncomfortable with Brennan. He was too big for his time, here at least. And in poetry his rhetorical

pyjamas were often too big for him, blurring the figure that he should have cut. It comes clear in that wonderful peregrine sequence, 'The Wanderer', and, more concisely, in the haunted lyric that begins,

Where star-cold and the dread of space  
in icy silence bind the main  
I feel but vastness on my face,  
I sit, a mere incurious brain,  
  
under some outcast satellite,  
some Thule of the universe,  
upon the utter verge of night  
frozen by some forgotten curse.

The ways are hidden from mine eyes  
that brought me to this ghastly shore:  
no embers in their depths arise  
of suns I may have known of yore.

Here, then, is a lyric which deconstructs the planet itself. And also human knowledge. He speaks, who cannot speak, in a place which is not a place, outside time. Can the persona, who feels 'but vastness on my face' also be the poet, a human being lodged in society and discourse: a Sydney man, indeed?

As with all poetry which reaches for the ineffable, this will finally evade synopsis. Its quatrains are an intimate part of its being, for example. As Susanne Langer has daintily put it, 'a work of art is an expressive form somewhat like a symbol, and has an import which is something like meaning, so it makes a logical abstraction.'

Let's now, by way of innocent example, take a Decembrish lyric of mine, which alludes to the multiple, haunting, sliding, imprecise slather of meanings for Christmas which persist for us up here, even where Christmas begins to mark the champagny season of

surf, hot sand and cold ham. Like all poems it has its literary antecedents, among them Hardy's magical, tiny poem, 'The Oxen', which first caught my eye when I was about eleven or twelve. But its surfaces, as deep memories may well do – and that's another point about poetry and its sources – half-a-century-later. It's called 'A Lowly Cattle Shed'.

Sweet enough, those  
 carols choiring away on wireless.  
 Whatever the piece is,  
 we are late in it, vaguely summering on.  
 Some rooms have the pine smell  
 rich and green among its resins now  
 and I just can't help  
 thinking along with hairy shepherds or Eastern kings  
 as they get up close  
 to that shelter where the Baby lies in straw:  
 all for a moment so real,  
 stone walls, timber, donkey, amiable ox  
 and in the midst,  
 his pink arms reaching up to the simple music,  
 my dead son  
 Decembring round again.

The poem says – but oh dear yes, what is the *saying* of a poem, evocatively there on its otherwise white page? – that I just can't help 'thinking along' with the feral shepherds and ambiguously gorgeous Magi (whether they might have been shamans or potentates) and exactly that thinking-along is here invoked. So is my dead eldest son, verbally there for a verbal instant, as he was and as he never was, infantile in the Christmas crib. By giving us the substantial namings of pine smell, hair shepherds, sandstone, timber and amiable ox, this lyric has created a small habitation for the ineffable: that is to say a brief concatenation of feelings, which could not really be

named in any linear logic. And its Christian materials do their serious gesturing, for all that I am not a Christian myself.

All of the cultural past, all the language's incorporated vitamins, lie behind a mere actual poem, urging it on and filling its veins with past meaning. Poems are overdetermined like dreams, but perhaps like a dream with a conscience, or even a super-ego. They have tumbled or grown into a form; and form adumbrates a particular moral sense, a little hurdle of answer in the pathless wilderness. A poem stops our fluid attention for a wee while. And the shape of a poem has its moral significance, even if that significance be a oncer. It says to readers, beautifully, if we're all lucky, 'Slow down, mate, what's the hurry?'

Reaching for what cannot be said simply, what can't be laid out in linear, discursive diction, poetry is language charged with orchestration: made to be read thrice, at least; needing to be read aloud, at least in the muffled theatre of your head. A poem tries to take English (or French, Italian, Urdu or whatever) and turn the chain of words into an inexhaustible form of language. It may seem utterly plain, like a deep still pool, or else display the brush strokes by which its effects have been rendered: Hopkins chose the latter path, paying tribute to his immanent God through a rich density of hammered words, and Keats had chosen the same path, to build a world from which the gods were already vanishing over the hill, played out or worn out:

As when, upon, a tranced summer-night,  
Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods,  
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,  
Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,  
Save from one gradual solitary gust  
Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,  
As if the ebbing air had but one wave;  
So came these words and went...

Apart from its wonderfully kinetic, almost haptic, internal drama, this passage pays tribute to the transience of utterance, the way diction falls away. The words in question – a speech of twenty lines, in fact – came and went, being mere victims of time. And Keats captures their goingness, and their gone-ness.

An intensely characteristic poet, Keats sought again and again to capture the illogical duplicity of our experiences. The ‘cold pastoral’ or his Grecian urn is both animate and ceramic, both living and dead, while the ‘Nightingale’ line, ‘I cannot see what flowers are at my feet’ is followed by an enumeration of just those flowers of which the consciousness is seemingly nescient. The ode in question comes to an end (So to speak, since Keats’s endings are not closures, but doors back into the world) with the rich questioning doubleness of ‘Fled is that music – Do I wake or sleep?’

It occurs to me today that precisely this ending was simmering over the coals of my memory when I wrote the following quatrain in America, thirty-five years ago:

Into my dream in this foreign land  
A host of forceful phantoms crept  
And I work with one concern on hand:  
Do I sleep or am I slept?

More broadly, turning to matters of general application, the interrogative mode is an axle of poetry, especially of recent poetry. Think of Yeats asking ‘What is Joy?’, and ‘Why should not old men be mad?’, and ‘Did she put on knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?’ Or, turning to one of our contemporaries, think of Peter Steele’s ‘What should we do with dreams?’ One might curmudgeonly call such questions rhetorical in the diminishing sense of such matters, but they are deeply real; they inquire of the world how it goes, where we go, or how the entire bag of tricks was put together....

It may be that whole poems, even on the scale of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, are cast in the interrogative mood. The island of that play is a Poem’s World, a temporary

stopping-place of brute probability. It contains its own poet-king, Prospero, who, when the form is due to be rounded-off, can assert within his own poem that 'Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air,' and 'shall dissolve'. Each lyric poem is a Prospero's island, briefly there in front of us, charged with metaphysical affect, hinting both at Caliban-like earthiness and its weightless Ariel.

Such is the cast with my recent, plaintive, unashamedly ontological lyric,

We Being Ghosts Cannot Catch Hold of Things

What a piteous quest we have  
to brood upon down here

given that Meaning is a blind god  
who limps through the actual world

seeking any attachment,  
looking for good company.

Just on occasion one hears  
the tap-tap-tap of her stick

or his (it can hardly matter  
thus far beyond all gender):

echoes that aim obliquely  
at lovely natural things

which might, if wishes were horses,  
be ever so gently handled and stroked



and Meaning at last  
    come home  
in a susurrus of bay leaves.

But such effects – the deferral of meaning, the inaccessibility of absolutes, Truth’s evasiveness, the cloud-capp’d palaces, the yearning symbol’s escaping bundle of hay – may be had without the language of metaphysical explicitness. Much landscape poetry leans toward the ineffable: does so without having explicit designs on us: without, for example, those straining final couplets in which Hopkins could at times try to make God’s immanence over-explicit, assertive in a way that was redolent of Henry Purcell’s trumpets.

In this respect I think of Edward Thomas’s exquisite pastoral lyric, ‘Adlestrop’ with its deeply eloquent refusal to spell out implications or desiderata. Like a film by Francois Truffaut or Erik Rohmer, it refuses to rule a line under its ending, a Q.E.D. Nor does it attach significant to its rather naïve place-name; although the speaking power of proper names in lyric poetry is a fascinating issue, not to be pursued here.

Yes, I remember Adlestrop –  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop – only the name

And willows, willow-herb and grass  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Further and further, all the birds  
of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Lovely, isn't it? And yet it declines to take on board the cubist or symbolist condensation we look for in modern poetry. It has no metaphors, and only one simile. It does exactly what we tell young writers not to do, stringing things together with a string of *ands*: there are no less than eight of these little conjunctions in the last eight lines.

A plain poem, then, in four rectangular quatrains, about an insignificant place (certainly not a Burnt Norton or a Little Gidding) with its deserted railway platform, somewhere in the countryside near the border of two counties. And yet it has its movement to open resolution through the blackbird's carolling, 'and round him, mistier, / Farther and farther, all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.' Unless it be Freud's Oceanic Feeling, there is no cognitive name we can give to a mere gesture of expansiveness, and yet this fanciful sense of two counties drowned in song gives completion to the plangency of that little railway stopping-place.

Again, there is that white paper around and beyond the stanzas which, at the end, hints at the larger space, the unnamed places; it contains the beyond or unnamable to which all our hearts yearn, at some time or other. Whiteness, you might say, contains all colours. But let me turn back to wordless nature, to that gorgeous material all around us.

Sometimes one thinks of the impossibility of doing anything useful with the imperturbability of landscape. Given a kind of pleasure that is plural, boundless, non-linguistic, just common or non-garden emotion, it slips away from the extreme reaches of culture. This occurred to me one afternoon of late when staying in the Kiewa Valley, amid the fringes of the Victorian Alps. Looking at those flat meadowgreen paddocks,

parade of river redgums, frieze of dustblue ranges, light gleaming on the billabong, egret white at the edge, you find it abolishes scar-tissue. You are not here: sort of there. *There* takes you out of yourself, there abolishes ego. It releases something. You have become other. And the borderline between this kind of *Erhebung*, this exaltation, and a more strictly religious afflatus has always been very hard to define.

One way of raiding those vast savannahs of nameless nature, those Davy Jones' lockers of the undulating subconscious (ontological regions to which religion pays hopeful court) is to intensify discourse with all the art at one's recall. This was the way of Hopkins, in whom we may perceive a resemblance to his Protestant junior on the Continent, Vincent van Gogh. We might call this the Way of Intensification, charging every rift with ore. It can declare that 'as kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame / As tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's / Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name', at the risk of absurdity or at least a pulled hamstring.

The other way, a path of abstention, is that of linguistic reduction: rigorous understatement; which may seek to avoid mimesis altogether in its *via negativa*. In this respect one can readily invoke the later Judith Wright, who cast aside her landed, deep-rooted self to write such minimal poems as 'Unless':

Had a whole dream once  
full of nothing else.

A bottomless pit,  
eyes bulged out  
across it,  
neck stretched  
over it.

A whole life I know of  
fell into it

once;  
and never came back.

I do not know how satisfactory this bone-dry sparseness is, in the long run. After all, less is less. But it is one kind of raid upon the inarticulate. A Lenten genre, it seems to abjure worldly pleasures and empirical certainties. Although lacking in certainty, it borders upon the secular, refusing by the skin of its teeth to allow space for the mystical. Admirably honest, it is not, however, the path I would have chosen.

Even a poem resting upon a social ground may partake of this quality of lyricism, this non-discursive curtailment: action concentrated upon a gesture or a motion which is not easily summarized: the kind of thing Henry James generated great torsion in his narratives to suggest or imply. Such a non-discursive lyric is Ezra Pound's 'The Encounter', Pound being another anxious, aesthetic exile, much as James was:

All the while they were talking the new morality  
Her eyes explored me.  
And when I arose to go  
Her fingers were like the tissue  
Of a Japanese paper napkin.

This is the secular ineffable, if you like: a sexy relation to the kinds of effect which are mainly being explored here. But it, too, is part of poetry's reaching towards emotions or impulses which can't be simply named: won't be pinned down.

We could, of course, turn agency around, and say that the poem is an almost impersonal congeries which chooses *us*: it seeks the poet because it desires to be born. Thus Supervielle has said, '*Le chant interieur s'élève, il choisit les mots qui lui conviennent.*' ('The lyric rises of its own accord, choosing the words which suit it.') The white paper around a modern lyric stands not only for what might be, what transcends it, but also for the mysterious past or primal chaos out of which it somehow arose. You might call that vast surrounding whiteness non-being, but you may also see it as the ineffable.

I am not of course denying that a tangible event can trigger a poem into being. The poem with which I conclude had a simple source. Staying in central Massachusetts in winter, I found my hosts' daughter disconsolate one day. She had written a love poem for her departing boyfriend, but had somehow lost it. As a good guest, I wrote this poem by way of consolation, and with its superior savvy it discovered more than it would have intended.

### The Missing Lyric

Somewhere in the corner of every life  
there lurks or lies a poem that was lost;

it haunts the corners of your consciousness;  
you blame yourself (or else the Universe).

The poem snuggles in its private corner.  
Its lines are down there humming secretly,

thinking of you. It's having guilty dreams  
and schemes, or dark reflections, out of sight,

feeling it popped you in an oubliette.  
It's really quite ashamed, now, of itself,

having been told to take good care of you.  
Come on, it sobs; come back and pick me up.

Afternoon, morning, just remember this:  
the poem thinks of life as hide-and-seek.