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In Dialogue with A.D. Hope: 
Dialogue One: Childhood & Adolescence

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[Alec Derwent Hope, born in Cooma 1907, won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, after majoring in English and Philosophy at Sydney University, and returned to a life of teaching and writing from the ‘thirties. His pre-eminence in literary culture was underpinned by his appointment as Professor of English at University College, Canberra, the forerunner of the Australian National University. His work in poetry, translations, and criticism provoked intense response, never indifference. His first published volumes were the satirical sequence, Dunciad Minimus: An Heroic Poem (1950), and selection of poems, The Wandering Islands (1955); amongst the final volumes were the autobiographical Chance Encounters (1992) and Selected Poems (1992). Dialogue One was designed to explore what connections can be made between the life of the child and the values engendered in this formative phase and the adult’s creative work and view of the world; an exploration shaped by what might be seen as a relentless irony inherent in his poetry and his other scholarly productions and by Hope’s view that childhood is a place of the sacred and of secrets that are best protected from the limiting force of definition— somehow best kept suspended between the unconscious and the conscious mind to draw from when enacting a poetic vision of life. To that extent, Dialogue One is an attempt to navigate territory that might be seen as Hope’s mindscape and landscape as it emerged in childhood and adolescence. The following exchange comprises selected excerpts from the transcripts of Ann McCulloch’s videoed interviews in Melbourne 1988, The Dance of Language: The Life and Work of A.D. Hope, as well as from her many conversations with Hope between 1981 and 1996 in Canberra.]

AM: You were born in Cooma. It was snowy that night—a cold beginning?

ADH: Yes! A cold beginning. In fact, my mother told me there was six feet of snow, which was rare in Cooma, on that night. My father was not present; he had gone off on one of his visits to outlying parishes, and he did not get back until I was born. My mother recounted with some bitterness; he drove back through heavy snow, very excited to see his first-born son, rushed into the house, didn’t greet her, leant over and looked at the baby and said, “Is that all it is?” My father was always up to playing practical jokes and, I think, that was one of them.

AM: In relation to his ‘Is that all it is?’ did he change his opinion as you grew?

ADH: I think so; the number of times he had to beat me, I think, showed his opinion suddenly changing.

AM: Could you tell me more about your mother?

ADH: It’s a very long story, of course; I was with her for sixty years. I could say she was the best mother I could ever have had. We were always very close together and for long periods of time, when my father was out travelling or at the war and so on, I think she relied on me a great deal. Because we were alone for most of my childhood, way out in the country of Tasmania, we were thrown together perhaps more so than growing-up boys are; other boys leave their mothers to go to school; there was no school around our place.

AM: Did you help her in the kitchen?

ADH: She taught me to cook. (This is starting to be about me and not my mother) I won
AM: Really! That’s more about your mother than about you because she taught you.

ADH: She also taught me to make things like Scotch shortbreads and things like that. For a long time she had to be the disciplinarian in the house when my father was away and, I think, that was something that went against her nature; punishment in those days was to cut yourself a twig from a poplar tree and be lashed with it.

AM: Did she lash you?

ADH: No! That was my father’s recipe for keeping boys in order.

AM: Do you have ‘archetypal,’ special memories about you mother—ones when you think mother-childhood? Are there images, times, when you were together that have always stayed with you?

ADH: She was always there and one thing merged into another; she never seemed to be ill and she never seemed to change.

AM: Was she beautiful?

ADH: Yes. Very small. I have a photograph of her just before she was married, in a ball dress which was worn in those days. I still think she was an extremely beautiful girl.

AM: Did she read to you?

ADH: Always. Long before I could read, she read stories and poetry, usually on Saturday nights, I think. My father would be away giving his last sermon. Before we went to bed, we always had poetry. We sat around the fire; in bed, I read a chapter of the Bible every night before I went to sleep. We got through the Bible, I think, two-and-a-half times while I was growing up.

AM: Did you like the Bible?

ADH: It’s totally ingrained in me. Whenever I want to write, phrases from it come out of it; I have never thought about whether I liked it or not. Every night, my mother would pause and read ahead and say, “I don’t think you will understand that bit.” When I could read, I went immediately to find the spot to see what I couldn’t understand.

AM: Did you ever write your mother a poem?

ADH: Yes, I can remember about the age of eight, I wrote her a long serious religious poem in ballad stanzas, so I must have been going a long time before that; I could manage it all right. The text of the Bible for each stanza—fifty-two stanzas—to teach her Christian duty throughout the era. I can still see poor mum trying not to laugh and she thanked me very much and said that, perhaps, if I paid more attention to my own Christian duties, things would improve.

AM: Did you go for long walks around the farm and countryside with your mother?

ADH: Not that I remember. My sister, who is eighteen months younger than me, used to go for extremely long walks with me in the bush and sometimes into the neighbouring cow paddock and bull paddock. We found ourselves intrigued by what we took to be a mad bull or a wild cow until we were tired of circling around the tree and went straight for home. This would have been the longest walk, I think, that we took.

AM: Were you scared of the bull?

ADH: Yes, I still have this nightmare of being chased by old bulls.

AM: Do you think it’s the only thing you have been scared of—that bull?

ADH: No, the first dreams I can remember were about lions and tigers and they were attacking the house I lived in. I only saw their paws.

AM: Do you think the tiger is anything like Blake’s tiger?

ADH: No, the main trouble was that we were abandoning the house because it had been attacked by lions and tigers and, for some strange reason, we were getting into chaff bags to be hauled into a cart and driven away and my father wanted me to be put into his chaff bag. I was terrified not being with my mother. That can tell you something about her.
ADH: My little sister—we used to make up long stories in bed and had a saga and each had an island that we populated. We got along pretty well, except when we fought.

AM: When you talk about childhood, I ask you questions about what you remember and you don’t really like talking about it too much. Can you explain to me why it is important that it remains essentially a secret place?

ADH: It is not due to any shyness about my childhood, but mainly because I am quite aware of how much of the sources go back to that, and I keep off it because it was so important to me and I think there are things particularly interesting about it. I was a small boy growing up way out in the country and away from other children. Sometimes I have been reproached for not writing about Australia; practically everything I write has got as its background images and pictures that go right back to childhood.

AM: So there are images and emotions. Do you think they are the greatest source for the artist? That is, do you think that what happens in childhood, or at least our memory of it, is what is drawn from most?

ADH: That’s important for poets. I don’t know about painters or sculptors.

AM: What about language—imagery and words? Can you remember being fascinated with some words as a child more than others when things were being named?

ADH: I learnt to speak when I was about twelve months old, I think. I can quite vividly remember a period of rage and frustration. I could understand a lot of what people were saying, and I was only learning, but my attempt at speaking was laughed at.

AM: Do you remember the sea—you first experience of the sea?

ADH: My father used to put us into the family sulky with a box of provisions, a tent on the back, and drive down to the sea every year, about forty miles from where we lived in Tasmania. I vividly remember the first night we pitched the tent practically on the beach. I had never seen the sea before at that time; it was big and blue and very impressive. I was tired, so soon went to bed. In the middle of the night, I woke up and some one was sobbing. It was a calm night and the sea coming in and breaking onto the beach; some one else was sobbing, too. I was crying my heart out. Although I had been asleep, it affected me in that way.

AM: It was a feeling for the sea; you were sobbing with the sea.

ADH: I’ve always felt it was necessary for me to get back to the sea—at intervals, anyway. I don’t think I would be happy in Central Australia.

AM: Can we go back to your kitchen in you home in Tasmania? Could you tell me what kitchens were like in your childhood?

ADH: Quite easily! The house was a two-storey construction with a veranda in front—all open fires, of course, in those days; the kitchen was added on with a small passage in between that and the house, because so often houses were burnt down if the kitchen was incorporated into the house.

AM: Did your’s burn down?

ADH: Never in my life-time. It was a long room with a huge table—wooden table—scrubbed every day, and windows on both sides and a great range there on which was always a huge pot of black tea—just standing there and heating, keeping warm at one end—fed with wood, and that was one of my earliest jobs, getting up at 6 o’clock in the morning, making my mother a cup of tea, if there were no maids in the house to do it, and then we killed our own pigs—at least, our father’s parishioners came and did this nasty job for us. We cut them up and salted them and they hung in the kitchen ceiling. Very unclean. At the same end of the farm was a great bread oven. It wasn’t used when we first went to the house; we bought our bread from the town. But, during the war, we couldn’t get into town; my mother fired up the oven again. … the whole thing was red hot; she pulled out the wood and put the bread in and, as the oven cooled, it cooked the bread. I remember it was the most delicious bread I had ever eaten.

AM: And what about Sunday nights? Did you sing around the piano and have people over on Sunday nights?

ADH: Unfortunately no. My mother had trained to be a concert pianist and apparently was doing very well and she fell in love with a poor pastor and went off with him. For the next ten
years or so she couldn’t afford a piano, and, by the time we got one, she was stricken with arthritis and that was the end of any dreams of being a pianist. But she constantly played to me, and that is the only contact I had with music even when we went to New South Wales.

AM: Any favourites?

ADH: Chopin Concerto which she played in public before she had met my father. She played all sorts of music.

AM: When you write poetry, you write music—you respond to that music of your childhood, don’t you think?

ADH: I think so. The only music I had at that time.

AM: Your father was a parson.

ADH: Not really. Parson means Church of England; he was a Presbyterian. They called them Ministers.

AM: Did he believe in God throughout his ministry?

ADH: Implicitly! Later on he began to waver a bit, but that’s a totally different story; I didn’t see it!

AM: What about you and God? How do you feel about Him?

ADH: Well, I was brought up to believe implicitly in God, and it was somewhere about the age of eight and nine that my faith began to waver. I was told that, if you prayed incessantly to God, He would answer your prayers, particularly if one were in a crisis. My worse crisis concerned mathematics. In those days as there was no school near us, my mother and father taught me; mother taught me writing, reading; father taught me Latin. Long division was my downfall; it would never come out, and it got worse and worse, and so I began praying very earnestly indeed! It was indeed a crisis. It shook my faith—both in my father and God. It wasn’t until many years later when I was grown-up I reflected that perhaps God wasn’t much of a mathematician, either. Never heard of him doing sums at all.

AM: Did you stop enjoying God—did you stop enjoying the idea of God?

ADH: Oh, no. I still feel—although I have moved away from the religion of my parents—I feel the attraction of someone hovering over you and looking after you and watching you. I wish I believed.

AM: Do you think God should be a woman?

ADH: I’ve considered that

AM: Did you reject it?

ADH: Not as a child; I didn’t even think of it. God has a long grey beard and this doesn’t happen to women…

AM: What about the Greek gods? Who are your favourites in the Greek and Roman traditions? Are there gods you like to think about—hold on to?

ADH: I was introduced to them very early through books of stories about Greek mythology and even to the Nordic Gods. I think I was more attracted to goddesses like Athena, Hera, and so on.

AM: Why?

ADH: They are more like a sort of mum at that age; later on, for other reasons, I learnt that those two particularly were a lot older than the male Pantheon that the Greeks brought into that part of the world. In fact, they fought with the Greek gods and won. Hera was seduced by Zeus rather basely and in the form of a cuckoo—he transformed himself. Every year, she went back to spring in the Argus—her part of the country—renewed her virginity by bathing in the spring.

AM: Did you admire her for renewing hers?

ADH: I thought it was ‘Women’s Lib.’ in action.

AM: How?
ADH: She renounced her husband and took on the cuckoo (Zeus) when he came back in spring. Zeus would then take off above her. She would then return to her husband.

AM: I’m not clear on what this has to do with the liberation of women or who was being duped, mortal man or the male god, which brings me back to you. If you could be a god, which god would you be?

ADH: Apollo.

AM: Ah! Why not Dionysus?

ADH: We’ve discussed women; we haven’t discussed wine. There is a trinity in poetry: wine, women and song. I can’t remember quite clearly, once—don’t know how old I was—deciding that I was called to become a poet—I was in my bath in front of the fire—I sang my acceptance. It was addressed to Apollo, not to Dionysus. In fact, I was wondering how I could write a poem.

AM: Women and drink are necessary means towards creativity?

ADH: A help!

AM: Which helps most—women or wine?

ADH: I’ve written a lot of comic poems in praise of wine because, in Canberra, we have a poets’ lunch once a year; our poems were put in the Christmas catalogue of wines that were being merchandised at the time… But I have written a good many poems about ladies I was excessively fond of at the time.

AM: While you were drinking?

ADH: Not while I was drinking. You won’t take me too seriously on any of that, I’m sure.

AM: I take you very seriously all the time, Alec. Do you believe in telling the truth?

ADH: Telling the truth? My principles on that are—there was a little girl who went off to define a lie, quoting from the Bible, “A lie is an abomination before the Lord, but a very pleasant help in time of trouble.”

AM: So, do you lie often?

ADH: That’s just my attitude, too. No, as little as possible.

AM: Looking back to when you were at High School, Foote Street, can you remember that time of growing into adolescence and how you felt about yourself and the ideas about what you might become?

ADH: Yes, fairly well! I think I told you my father sent me to Foote Street because I had failed to win a scholarship at Bathurst High School where I lived at the time. He thought a bit more competition would do me good. You certainly got a lot of competition there. It was a big school—students from all over Sydney—the brightest boys gathered together in one place. Did they give me a run for my money?

AM: Did you see yourself as being competitive?

ADH: Not particularly… I just sank into the general mass. They are all, as far as I can follow, either dead, in gaol, judges and professors and bright people, scientists, etc.

AM: Were you a good-looking young boy?

ADH: I don’t know. I was a very pretty boy when I was about five. Did you see that photo? My mother used to look at the picture and say, "What a little fiend was hidden behind that innocent face!"

AM: So, you didn’t have any sense of being attractive—that didn’t matter to you—it was not a part of your being to notice that?

ADH: I don’t think so! It didn’t occur to me!

AM: Before you went to High School you were at Boarding School, weren’t you? …Did you like Boarding School?

ADH: Not at first! I started off on the wrong foot! I had been reading too many English boys’ short stories, acted on my impressions, they beat me up a few times and I learnt my
AM: At this age, can you recall any experiences that might be seen as a stepping stone towards your dream to be Apollo?

ADH: No, I never aspired to that! A childish scene: that was not repeated!

AM: At school, did you enjoy any particular subject more than others?

ADH: Oh, yes! I was not very good at mathematics; I preferred English and History. I didn’t seek any language other than Latin, which I didn’t like very much, maybe because of the way it was taught. I began French when I was at Bathurst…and liked it very much. In fact, made up the first three years as I was in Intermediate [Grade Ten] then. I had a very good teacher who was a French woman. She managed to bring me on, so I always enjoyed French.

AM: At the end…you won a scholarship?

ADH: I won a scholarship to Sydney University; it wasn’t a subject area that I had elected—it was medicine, medical research!

AM: Why medical research? Why did the young poet want to become a doctor?

ADH: I didn’t know, but I had a strong feeling that way! Later on, I justified it by saying I want to be my own self; I don’t want people telling me what to do! I guess I could have been a barrister! I thought of that, in fact!…I’m glad I didn’t go in for that! It was only when I finished the University course in Sydney that I won a travelling scholarship which took me to Oxford. It was open for me to go anywhere I liked.

AM: When you got to England, did you think it was a disappointment to your peers that you didn’t like football, being an Australian? Did you play football?

ADH: No, I took up rowing, swimming, running and walking which I liked—but no organised sport, that I remember.

AM: What were your early days at Oxford like?

ADH: They were all right. I was at the University College. I was lucky as one didn’t usually spend one term in college then; you usually go out to the digs. They let me stay there for the whole two years. I thought living in college was very nice. In the early days.

AM: Were you nervous going to a university in another country?

ADH: You see one university, you see them all.

AM: Didn’t you find it different from Sydney University?

ADH: In some ways, it was very different. For instance, in Sydney, I walked out of college whenever I wanted to wander around the town and did anything I wanted to do; there was no discipline there. In Oxford, I had to be in by 9 o’clock or pay a fine. At 10 o’clock, I would be sent down and expelled—though not permanently!

AM: For how long?

ADH: For the rest of the term, as far as I can remember. I was never in too late.

AM: Well, how did you have any fun?

ADH: That’s a good question. I thought it was always a good load of fun. I bought myself a canoe and lived on the river in the summer with my books and had various good friends around the place and lots of fun of various kinds—not wild parties as far as I can remember.

AM: How long did it take you to find your first girl friend at Oxford?

ADH: It’s a good question, too. I can’t remember whether there is any answer to it! I think the real answer is that I never found the right girl friend at Oxford. I found friends in many parts of England. On a couple of occasions, they came up to Oxford and I took them round and showed them the college.
AM: Did you study hard at Oxford?

ADH: I thought so! I didn’t do very well. When you meet your tutor or when you met your tutor in those days he asked you a very sensible question: “Have you come here to enjoy yourself or are you going to average as a first Class Honours?” I said, “Well, Firsts, of course!” hoping to get an academic post in time. So he accepted that. He worked very hard with me and made me work very hard…. In the University College, it happened not to have any English teachers on their staff. They found me a very remarkable set of teachers. I chose to do the language school rather than the literature one. I had for my tutor, C.S. Wren, perhaps the most famous man on the language side in England at that time, O. Onions, the great New Zealander, who settled in Oxford many years before, and Tolkien, the man who wrote The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Then I had to do a few of the late mediaeval studies. I had C.S. Lewis for most of that and, as you can see, I had the pick of the bunch.

AM: Did you have a close relationship with any of these people?

ADH: Of course, there was my tutor whom I saw every week—not very close. I went to lectures and, on one occasion, Tolkien invited us to lunch… We had a delightful contact with him. I am reminded of the South African Bishop I met on the ship who labelled Garibaldi ‘a very bad man.’ After attending a lecture by Tolkien, he saw me looking at some portraits outside the lecture theatre. To my surprise, Tolkien came up to me and was looking at the portrait that had caught my eye. I looked up at him and said, “It is Abraham Lincoln, isn’t it?” He said, “Yes, what a very bad man he was!” Never explained it, though. That’s the sort of thing that happened to me in my relationship with these men; it wasn’t intimate, but it was extremely advantageous to me if I were able to take advantage of it.

AM: A funny word, ‘bad,’ don’t you think? Do you think there are many very bad things in life?

ADH: I think Hitler and all of his gang were extremely bad! And the way they carried on demonstrated it!

AM: So, when you were at Oxford, you spent your weekends away at Miss Talbot’s house.

ADH: Not weekends. There was a woman in England who during the First World War had found friends for people from New Zealand and Australia and for soldiers who didn’t know any one in England. After the war, she continued this for students coming from those countries and South Africa and from the United States. She… said, “What sort of people would you like to go and stay with? … I think I might send you to an old friend of mine down in the West Country called Matilda Talbot, the owner of an Abbey.” This woman was a cookery teacher while in London and met quite a number of literary characters whilst she was there and had stayed and helped her uncle who was the Talbot Registered Photographer… He had died and left her, to her surprise, the Abbey and the village which went with it. She still didn’t have much money; she stayed with her family in Scotland half the year, opened up the Abbey for the next half of the year and usually had it full of students from all over the English speaking world, and there I spent not weekends, but lots of occasions for most of the time I was in England. And I was therefore plunged deeply into English life.

AM: Tell me about that plunging into English life. What do you mean?

ADH: Something of the old feudal system still remained in parts of country England. The people I met were ones that a mere student would never have come across otherwise. The next big house, at about five miles away, was owned by Lord Matthew who was the Field Marshall in the South African War.

AM: So there were well known people. How many of them were interesting to you apart from the fact that they were famous?

ADH: Yes, there were a lot of interesting students who stayed there at one time. I also got to know some of Matilda Talbot’s relations from other parts of England and went and stayed with them. They were also quite interesting and in one case this connection involved three beautiful daughters all of whom had inherited a little bit of money: one had bought a car and another had taken herself to Tibet…. Of course, the mother was wonderful; she was pretty elderly at the time but, through her, I heard a story that probably I wouldn’t ever have heard anywhere else about Tennyson. When she was a very young girl, she had been invited to one of her first big social luncheons. She was sitting far down the table and her host was sitting at the top; Tennyson was next to him. The host called out, "How do you like your mutton cut, Miss…. - thick or thin?" She called back, "Thin, please." She was very nervous and, at that moment, there was one of the most inexplicable silences. Tennyson’s voice booming down the table: "Only fools like their mutton cut thin!" Little contacts like that, that told me stories about people I’ve never met, people from the past; whose works
AM: ...and then you came home. Did you come home in triumph?

ADH: I think I came home with my tail between my legs. I messed up my final exams and was awarded a Third Class Honour instead of a First. Oxford never fails its Honours students. The equivalent of a failure is a Third, but they send you off with something. When I got back to Australia, of course, Professor Holme—the professor who found me the place in Oxford and gave me a lot of help before that—said, "I'm afraid you will have to give up any thought of an academic career." It took me another twenty years to get back to University.

AM: Tell me, Alec, about this academic career? Was there any time when you were at Oxford that you thought, "I don't particularly want to be an academic"?

ADH: I suppose, even though it was a childish thing, seeing as I was devoted to poetry, that is what I wanted to be, but I was perfectly aware that you can't live by it, particularly in England, because it gets a pretty short shrift. In America you can, but not in England and Australia. I had to have a means of earning my bread and butter, and so I had chosen to be a philologist, as they were called in those days, specialising in the group of languages, and I had more or less given that up by the time I had left Oxford, of course. No one would ever take me on again, ...

AM: Were you upset?

ADH: Not particularly. I was gloomy. I came back in the middle of the Great Depression of the late 1930s—no job in Australia—and not much prospect in the future. Things were very bad at that time.... My father got tired of me being around the place. He hated the pseudo-British accent I had come home with. Finally, he said, "I have a tent here; please go around the coast—north of Sydney overlooking the beach—go down there, camp, and I will give you the equivalent of the dole." I went down there and had a blissful three months without a job, living on, with whatever was about, about 30 shillings a week, or something like that! Things were cheap in those days, but I found I was beginning to talk to myself or talk to the bandicoots who came to steal my potato peelings....

AM: Did you write when you were on the beach?

ADH: I recently published a re-fashioning of Marlowe’s Dr Faustus’ Tragical History. I had at that time plans to do this and I wrote my first draft of the thing while I was down there and that was great fun, too. I showed it to my Professor in Sydney who said something equivalent to a very pretty poem—remember [the] remark to Pope: a pretty poem...for Pope but you must not call it Homer. He said as much as though it is not a bad job for a young chap like you but nothing like Homer. So I kept off it for a while, but returned to it off and on for fifty years—finally finished it and published the thing.

AM: You came back from the beach and became a High School teacher for a while?

ADH: ... I went to the Sydney Teachers’ College for one year; I taught for about five years.... I didn’t like teaching and got out of it....

AM: Have you found that annoying in your life that you have had to give time to earning money?

ADH: Oh, yes, particularly as the art I practise is one that no one wants to pay for, except in America, perhaps. Everybody has to work to live and artists, like everybody else, while they are practising the art, they feel driven to pursue an idea when it appears and yet the money-paying job demands priority. This, of course, is not the only struggle for the poet. Still, negative capabilities are not very well understood. The poet, Keats says, if I can remember, men and women are actual objects; the poet is nothing. In order to be successful, he is always having to enter into the body or the ideas or the attitude, enter into these other bodies, and, unless he learns to do that, he will be that false kind of person who is simply exploiting himself.

AM: And so that, in a way, maybe, as you believe that all knowledge is provisional, that...
ADH: I would say that is a necessary condition, but we've turned away from it in general, of being educated in that sense. That's why, in the long run, there are schools of art and music and, in America, for writing and poetry. Essentially an artist has to create himself: he or she must differentiate that kind of life from the other two [contemplation and action], although everybody else, to survive at all, has to have some of all three.