GOLDEN LEAVES: Memory and Sobriety in Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s Poetry.

The Australian Centre faces east on Barry Street across the old elm trees of University Square, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s study, if you can find it among the labyrinthine passages, has one window that faces north. His office window ironically looks into a “beloved pittosporum”, subject of the first critical sentence ever written about his poetry. Ian Mair in an article for The Age in 1959 wrote, “And then there is Chris Wallace-Crabbe for whom no pittosporum hedge is opaque.” He has committed it to memory. It is no surprise given that memory is a subject conscientiously explored in his poetical oeuvre. Last August, on one of those mornings, Wallace-Crabbe recited some of Vin Buckley and Gwen Harwood’s poetry. The words filled his study, some of the poetry brought to life was imbued with memories of past conversations with poets and academics.

In an interview with Graham Little in 1994 Wallace-Crabbe revealed, “there is a sense of things slipping away, things passing away, but it’s become much more acute since I’ve known people close to me vanishing from this conscious life in which we walk around…older friends like Vin Buckley and Alan Davies who were also university influences and imaginative influences on me. So they were kinds of surrogate, benign fathers.”

The poignancy of this statement is heightened with the knowledge that five years after this interview Wallace-Crabbe would be mourning the loss of another academic friend. He was dining with Peter Steele and Graham Little in Lygon Street when Graham had a heart attack and died. Death at such close proximity is confronting for someone who, as the self-confessed ‘baby’ of his literary circle of friends, had to confront the deaths of his older generation of friends as well as that of Little. As a tribute to the many close relationships he formed with some of Australia’s finest poets and academics, Wallace-Crabbe immortalises them in his poems, fondly remembering private moments they shared. In “Old Friend” a poem to Graham Little, Wallace-Crabbe speaks directly to him, poet to poet, celebrating his positive attributes and recalling the strengths of his poetry:

You were the wonderful talker,
famous for your measured rhythms
and curiously gentle diagonals.¹

Similarly, he conjures the halcyon days with Vin Buckley and Gwen Harwood by inducing memories of their time together. Just as reciting their poetry aids in keeping their memory alive, these poetical reminiscences defeat the finality of death. ‘Memories of Vin Buckley Spelt From Sibyl’s Golden Leaves’ and ‘Wittgenstein’s Shade’ (a tribute to Gwen Harwood and her love of Wittgenstein’s philosophies) resuscitate the personalities “Vin” and “Gwen”, not just their poems in volumes and anthologies.

The elegant autumn weather
Filling goldcoined Grattan Street
Brings you obliquely back again

Dear Gwen,
I like to believe
That every softened evening
An austere, courteous ghost
Comes in glidingly and stands
By your bed or chair,

In ‘The Life of Ideas’, a poem for A. F Davies, Wallace-Crabbe connects grief with the horror of forgetting by describing the cacti in the Botanical Gardens:

It is raw grief can lock us into process
The linkage also grown from forgetting
As uncollected plants may haunt this rockery.”

This refusal to forget that which “loom[s] largest in that memory” accounts for the very personal grief of losing a son. After the publication of “I’m Deadly Serious’, Wallace-Crabbe commented, “Over the last few years not only have the remaining members of the previous generation died in my family, so that I’m the eldest left, but also my own eldest son has died. I feel like adapting Dr. Johnson’s remark about ‘Sir, when a man knows he must die tomorrow, it concentrates the mind wonderfully.’

His “Elegy’ to his son has most recently been set to music:

“so that I wish again
it were possible to pluck my son
out of dawn’s moist air…

to sweep under his plunge
like a pink-tinged angel
and gather him gasping back into his life.

In fact, it is these tributes, linked with what he terms his extensive “internal library” which may have provoked the repetition of the question: “Have you ever heard the havoc of remembering?” in his poem ‘Introspection’. Remembering, for Wallace-Crabbe, may occasionally be an elusive “gold coin”, and sometimes “like an old cow/trying to get through the pub door/carrying a guitar in its mouth” but it is most often linked with the threat of forgetting; of memories gone, “never to be found again.” In ‘The Universe Looks Down’ a poem he has nicknamed the ‘behemoth’ for its length and breadth, and which will be published later this year, Wallace-Crabbe states, “By loss of memory we are reborn/But memory is the active root of power.” Perhaps for this reason, he is a cataloguer of things. It allows for easy retrieval and sharpens the process of recall: “I
suppose there is a bit of cataloguing in what I do. I would like to know the names of everything.” Postgraduate students at The University of Melbourne often comment on Wallace-Crabbe’s ability to recite a quotation or share an anecdote on every subject, from trees to cricket to hamsters. (It is a standing joke that he intends to incorporate the line “release the tiny hamster of desire” into one of his future poems.) He can quote Keats or Auden or Zbigniew or even articles from *The Age* or *The Australian* without hesitation. A discussion of Gwen Harwood’s poetry leads him to colourful memories of their time together in Melbourne. He has folders full of their correspondence, now housed in the Baillieu’s archives and fondly remembers and quotes from her ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ poems.

Place has always been central to Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry and pervades many of his memories. It is with affection that he talks at great length in interviews about his Aunt Violante in Black Rock. By all accounts, a formidable and very intelligent woman, she features as a constant in his childhood years:

> We were inertly happy. Perhaps my deepest childhood image is that of slipping into the deliciously cold sheets in Aunt Violante’s sleepout at Blackrock, under a row of windows which gave onto apple trees, their leaves as bright green as European culture itself; beyond the apple trees were flowing gums, yellow cape broom, bougainvillea, and chooks.

His descriptions of Blackrock are always sensuous and full of colour; flowers, fruit and trees feature strongly in his writing and memory. Though he has often stated how he enjoys composing poems on aeroplanes, it was amusing to hear that about a year ago, when Wallace-Crabbe’s car broke down on the way to the airport, he composed a poem about a tree near his broken-down car. This is not an unusual scenario; he is rarely flustered or put out when he is outdoors. While he waited for the RACV, he used the opportunity to write a poem by the side of the road, commenting on what a positive experience it was for him.

Place and memory are combined in the poem ‘Reality’ as Wallace-Crabbe grapples with the “dumb tides of memory” in an effort to capture a lost moment with his dead father:

> A lost boy in another body
> I reach yearningly backward, Dad,
> keen to capture you entire,
> if memory permits entirety.

As the memory of a father-son moment is relived, Mt. Martha is described as it “rests/Steady on the shallow amber beyond”, locating the memory and anchoring it in a space. Like his memories of Blackrock, amber hues pervade the narrative, tingeing the memory with the gold colours of his childhood. Similarly, in ‘Sunset Sky Near Coober Pedy’, place is specifically tied to colour. Wallace-Crabbe is keen to highlight the reds and yellows in the night sky, the “apricot radiation…easterly pinks and peaches”, before blending shades of blue into the poem to create a “mauve, powderblue and cream”
emphasis. It is not surprising that at the end of the poem he returns to the “blush and incandescent copper” of dusk to suggest the beauty of the place; nature’s beauty is often described in these warm tones. Wallace-Crabbe does not grapple with his memory in this poem. The images are vivid and described as the brush strokes of:

…drunken painters of genius
Who, visited by vast hallucinations,  
Daubed them all over a monster’s mural hall.  

By using the terms “streak, dash, fluff…dollop or smear”, the boundaries of poetry and painting are blurred as the poem is transformed into a canvas filled with the colours of night. In this poem a meaning of the world becomes secondary to the satisfaction of soaking up the ‘sunset sky near Coober Pedy’. Art, like music, has always been one of Wallace-Crabbe’s passions. He has collaborated with the artist Bruno Leti on “The Golden Apples of the Sun” and has recently written a suite of poems based on some of Leti’s art. Wallace-Crabbe has experimented with printmaking and etching, and is an accomplished drawer of what he has termed “biomorphic shapes that constitute the language of the world.” His brother, Robin, is a painter and it is no coincidence that his partner, Kristin Headlam is an accomplished artist who won the Moran art prize in 2000. Her latest exhibition in November 2001 showcased a series of ‘garden’ paintings featuring the crisp, iridescent greens of nature. The colours and the beauty of nature explicit in her paintings express the same pantheistic philosophy of many of Wallace-Crabbe’s poems.

“Sacred Ridges Above Diamond Creek”, written for Les Murray, is another poem where memory and place overlap. This poem explores the “totem beasts” which Wallace-Crabbe has stated have “a kind of magical possession of the land even though it’s been overlaid with asphalt and suburbia” These beasts, rather than the colours of the land, are central to the poem. They are the “primal kin of the region I choose to live in.” They represent a past that Wallace-Crabbe pays homage to, a past struggling against all that is so easily forgotten:

I want to make some kind of gesture of alien response,  
Response no longer alien, response finding its feet,  
Salute with my feet and my hands and my heart to the totem beasts,  
By whose names this district was patched and pierced like tartan  

If, as Wallace-Crabbe has said in his most recent book of poems, “By and Large”, that “One life/is like the figure of a shadow gliding/rapidly over a glassgreen sea” then Wallace-Crabbe’s rapid glide has been marked by many changes. In “Falling into Language”, a book of essays on language and memory, Wallace-Crabbe posits, “I am what I was yesterday but surely not what I was years ago.” This is certainly true of the different selves inherent in his poetry and connects with his suggestion that one of the reasons “The Foundations of Joy” is an “interesting little book”, is because “that’s the one where I’m hunting around to see who I’m going to be next.” Though there are constants in Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry which have led to critics identifying him as an
“endearingly slangy, yet ostentatiously philosophical Australian poet,...at once urbane in his, sometimes European cultural allusions...and at home in his native Antipodean evocations”, xviii the different stages of his life have had an impact on his poetry. His last two books of poetry are the clearest examples of the connection between life and art. *Whirling*, with its often sombre tone, reflects a period in Wallace-Crabbe’s life where he was dealing with endings; the end of a particular way of life. *By and Large* concentrates on the new beginnings that spring from these endings. Perhaps for this reason, Wallace-Crabbe was amused by an award winning critique of his work by Oliver Dennis who stated, “In it, there is the sense of the poet rounding off his career, of tying up loose ends...And one gets the feeling this might be a final offering.” xix Although Wallace-Crabbe may once have said that

time,
that sarcastic medium,
ransilvery through my fingers
like sand, or bonemarrowxx,

he is adamant that there are more poems to be written and more selves to be explored through his poetry. His life is not slowing down; there are no last offerings. Wallace-Crabbe may not be fond of the telephone, maybe it is a peculiarity of poets as Gwen Harwood hated them also, but every time he is asked how he is, he replies: “as happy as a turtle” .. For this reason Wallace-Crabbe could be describing himself when he states:

the big turtle races on,
faster and even faster.xxxi

As he “races on faster and even faster”, it is obvious that his memories will always remain in the foreground of his work. In this interview with Graham Little, Wallace-Crabbe finds a space between remembering and forgetting where friendship and poetry coalesce. When Graham asks him to “give us a picture of you doing your first writing”, Wallace-Crabbe answers:

I might have been sitting in the garden while dad was digging the carrots further down the garden, or putting in the silverbeet. Or else I might have been sitting in the sunroom at the back of the house in Domain Road, on a steep block, with a huge view from the sunroom windows. Over Richmond. Over the Bryant and May factory, and the Rosella tomato sauce factory...what I may have been writing is a very interesting question. It’s beyond the memory threshold Graham, I can’t reach right back into that.xxxii

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i ‘Old Friend, i.m Graham Little’, unpublished.
iii ‘Wittgenstein’s Shade’, *Whirling* p32
v Interview with Carole Oles 1988
vi ‘Elegy’, *Selected*, p87
vii ‘Introspection’, *Selected* p45
Wallace-Crabbe has been working on it for many years and it will finally be published this year.

Interview with David McCooey 1998

‘Reality’ in Selected p111

Sunset Sky Near Coober Pedy, Selected p109

McCooey interview

‘Sacred Ridges Above Diamond Creek’ in Selected, p65

Ibid

‘One Life’, By and Large, p63


Reading

Oliver Dennis, “Gingering Up Mortality” in Acumen, September 2001, p96

‘For crying Out Loud’ in Selected p96

‘Tributary’

Interview with Graham Little, 1994