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“Read it Again: Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s Non-Fiction.

If the test of a good book is: Would I read it again?” then it is a very good book indeed which invites multiple readings of its multi-layered narrative written from the heart. Wallace-Crabbe’s book of essays certainly stands up to not only a second reading, but also a third, a fourth and a fifth. Read It Again asks the reader to re-read a variety of poets and poetry again, considering them in a new light.

Wallace-Crabbe opens his introduction with the understatement, “I am a poet”. But Wallace-Crabbe is far more than that. Labelled at various times, “wordsmith”, “quotidian” and even “time lord”, he eludes definition. Read It Again showcases only one of his many roles, that of poet-critic. Poets make the best critics of poetry and yet good poet-critics are hard to find. It may be because the two roles, that of poet, and that of critic, appear to be oxymoronic, or at the very least mismatched. Assimilating the creative and the analytic and encouraging the poet and critic to co-exist in the term ‘poet-critic’ advances both crafts; poetry is composed self-reflexively with its own critical analysis in mind and literary criticism is enlivened by the poet’s rich lyricism.

T. S. Eliot is perhaps the most distinguished example of poet-critic in the twentieth century and although he has been criticised for writing literary criticism as propaganda for his own preferred genre of poetry, it is his style and the way in which his two crafts inform one another that make him exceptional. T. S. Eliot is one in a long line of ostensibly British poet-critics such as John Dryden, Dr Johnson, Alexander Pope, S.T. Coleridge and William Empson and in American literature Randall Jarrell and Adrienne Rich as well as the writer-critics such as Henry James, Ralph Ellison and Mary McCarthy who clearly fit this tradition of creative-analytic personality. However, Chris Wallace-Crabbe paves the way for a tradition of Australian poet-critics very different from the British or American tradition.

Wallace-Crabbe is one of Australia’s finest poet-critics. What makes him particularly significant is the way in which he forges a new identity for Australia in poetical criticism, not just making it part of the tradition of Australia’s British heritage. While Read It Again discusses Keats, Wordsworth and Hardy, there is something distinctly multi-cultural about Wallace-Crabbe’s approach. His book, like Australia, is a melting pot of poets and poetry and new ways to use language. Robert Browning is juxtaposed with Seamus Heaney, Gig Ryan and Bruce Dawe. Even Pi O’s verse is applauded for its “voice of middle-Greek Australia.” Professor emeritus in The Australian Centre at The University of Melbourne, Wallace-Crabbe is also an academic. He has the added responsibility of teaching and guiding young people in the poetic tradition. His lamentation: “Hardly anybody reads poetry after secondary school” is his personal fear of what he sees as pervasive in society. This reflects his tri-fold concern as published poet, critic and teacher and it is this concern that he returns to many times in his essays. In self-referential statements, Wallace-Crabbe is even pondering the readership of this text.

In Read It Again Wallace-Crabbe draws on his enormous internal library, his mental Alexandria, to quote from, and refer to, multifarious sources. In this, he can be compared to Harold Bloom. His prose is witty and meanders beautifully from one text to the next, as they occur to him. He identifies and applauds each poet’s “anxiety of influence”. The effect for the reader is akin to pulling books from a shelf and reading selections from each, in this case many of Wallace-Crabbe’s treasured tomes. In juxtaposition each poet and poem is given new life, different reverberations and tensions.

His prose is punctuated with unique Australianisms (“Oh crikey, yes, poetry can arouse resentment”) and peppered with descriptions that could only be written by a poet. In his first essay,
Wallace-Crabbe discusses the language of poetry, why poetry is not prose. He focuses on the poet’s use of tropes by using his own metaphor to discuss the role of the literary theorist:

> From a more realistic individual perspective, that is to say, from a psychological point of view, the choice in practice for an anarchist literary theorist must lie between a ringmaster, like Lacan, whipping the tropes and epigrams all the way around the ring, dotty with sawdust, and being a limp fish, passive in one’s renunciation of all discursive power.

The metaphors of ringmaster and limp fish are witty and evocative. Wallace-Crabbe is able to convey in a few words what might take the ordinary critic paragraphs to do by using the craft of the poet. If poems are highly condensed forms of communication then this book of essays communicates far beyond the page. Each discussion is a conceit waiting to be unlocked for an even deeper analysis.

Wallace-Crabbe’s easy, fluent style is seductive but it is his wit and unique sense of humour that enlivens this text. When discussing the poet and his place in modern history, he underlines the crucial issue of the poet’s economic context and how it impacts on his subject matter. He states rather cleverly:

> Neither in the buoyant 1980s nor in the downsizing decade of the nineties did Australian writers seem willing to stick their necks out, except in sexual matters (which is not exactly their necks which are exposed): a game long since won, by and large. Sex is easy.

This wit undercuts some of the seriousness at the heart of many of Wallace-Crabbe’s concerns while simultaneously allowing him to tackle some contentious issues about Australian poetry:

> If our poetry is to attach itself to major social concerns, where are the poems today that empathetically enter the gritty worlds of our unemployed and homeless fellow citizens? Poets or novelists tend to be over-confident of their art-authority as members of some common weal; the author is not dead, but half dead, lounging on the front verandah reading Ashbery.

However, his prime concern is the complicated question of what is poetry? Or perhaps what does the term poetry encompass? Wallace-Crabbe asserts that there can be no objective measure for what we label poetry. Poetry is all shapes and all forms, often random but never ‘easy’ as the poet has many considerations such as the choice of syllables and harmonies within each text. The oral and aural nature of poetry is addressed in the discussion of verbal artists like Jorie Graham and Vincent Buckley. Wallace-Crabbe flags performance poets “at their work in pubs”, fondly reminiscing about “giv[ing] readings with them in their venues and enjoy[ing] it.” It is this investment in the personal that makes this book so riveting, a poet exposing his innermost thoughts about the craft of poetry, his influences and who he considers his forebears are indeed laid bare. And then there is his family tradition invoked in “as my Aunt Violante used to say.” He is still keen to distinguish poetry from prose and the fact that poetry must be different from prose. He separates the two with his discussion of tropes and Rilke’s word-kernels, focusing on the poem’s univocal nature. The most endearing element of the text is the way in which Wallace-Crabbe delights in language while he simultaneously analyses it. While discussing Marvell’s Mallarmean moment of climax, he enthuses rather poetically:

> 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.
Similarly, his essay on John Keats provides us with a new reading of this enigma. Is it indeed that “we know too much” about him and is this why Keats continues to “baffle and intrigue” us? Using his letters, Wallace-Crabbe suggests that Keats’ “psychological quicksilverishness” is the result of multiple performances or selves. Keats’ ability to fracture the self and Wallace-Crabbe’s identification of what he sees as Keats’ outward looking approach creates an important space between the poet and the text, a space which can be read by the critic in an attempt to understand the figure of Keats. In addition to this, Wallace-Crabbe provides a masterful psychoanalytical reading of Keats, his poetry and his life. Most valuable is his reminder of Keats’ incredible humour and comedy and Wallace-Crabbe captures this in, “As a speculative airy pig, he turns up truffles”.

Moving on from Keats as a canonical poet and ‘forebear’, Wallace-Crabbe tackles new forms of poetry. He argues “Oral poetry slips away from the critic’s pen”. This is an important observation given the growing body of performance poets and indeed poetry slams. How will these texts last, or is their transience an essential part of the pleasure and importance of the genre? As Dickinson has argued, “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet”. Wallace-Crabbe explores this by provocatively questioning the relevance of poetry in the Age of the video clip? This point is made more apparent by his artful comparison:

> poetry has the misfortune to be written in the medium of language…the same medium is commonly used in gossip, in story-telling, in newspaper articles, in parliamentary debate, even in e-mail messages.

But, given these views, what is particularly impressive about Wallace-Crabbe’s text is his immersion in popular culture as well as high art. His discussion of ‘the Pop Age’ where students are reared on television and everything is impermanent or disposable: “in our present culture, the book is no longer the pivotal point.” But this essay is also a requiem. Poetry as we know it, or knew it, cannot be the same in this era of electronic texts and visuals where

> Modern Australians live in a concourse or babble of discourses. We make our way through the bubble and-squeak of chopped-up value systems.

Poetry and Australia are in many ways synonymous. As Wallace-Crabbe describes:

> poetry looks different on the page, wizened and isolated, grandly surrounded by a sea of white paper out of which it has somehow risen, like Venus quivering in her half-shell. Thus it is islanded from other forms of language, even if they sit beside it on a magazine page or in a chunky anthology.

This island of poetry on the page mirrors Australia. Both are isolated and surrounded by a sea of ocean or white margin. However, in this description Wallace-Crabbe makes it clear that in juxtaposition with all other countries, Australia is unique. Australia is “Venus quivering in her half shell” naked and vulnerable, waiting to assert her beauty.

This discussion of poetic form leads Wallace-Crabbe to an assertion that Australia is often defined in terms of its landscape and its “otherness”. As he quips, “Loving a sunburnt country is a characteristic defence against the green, suasive mother languages of Europe.” In this way, landscape is discussed as originally a painter’s term. This focus on painting complements Wallace-Crabbe’s essay on “Sidney, Nolan and Co” where he argues that Sydney Nolan captures the spirit of Australia in his paintings of Ned Kelly, the Australian bushranger. He discusses the biographies of both Nolan and Kelly, outlining both their adventures. He concludes:
It was Nolan’s destiny to bring Kelly to life but this time as a visual icon: an image so striking that it was in time to be used as one of the dominant motifs for the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. The “tin can with a slot in it” is a simple black shape that we can all recognise: strangely flat, its slot either containing rolled eyes or else completely see-through, a frame through which to glimpse the unresponsive world below.

This “unresponsive world” discussed in his essay on the “Escaping Landscape” in many ways mirrors Wallace-Crabbe’s essay on “The Escaping Word” where he introduces an explication of his own poem, “A Lowly Cattle Shed”, with a typical use of adjectives:

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 champagnesque season of surf, hot sand, sunburn and cold ham.

He states, “It says to readers, beautifully, if we’re all lucky, ‘Slow down, mate, what’s the hurry?’” Read It Again will invite you to both slow down and read it, and the poetry it discusses, again. In this fast-paced electronic age, poetry, argues Wallace-Crabbe, should be lingered over and savoured like a good cognac.