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New and Selected Poems

by Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Carcanet, 2013

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Reviewed by CASSANDRA ATHERTON

On the eve of his eightieth birthday, it seems appropriate that Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s New and Selected Poems offers readers an insight into his rich oeuvre and the opportunity to remedy, at least on a small scale, what Michael Sharkey (2007) has argued is the ‘few who have systematically read his works….from the first publications through to the most recent’. Wallace-Crabbe has published twenty-five books of poetry, from The Music of Division (1959) to the recent publication New and Selected Poems (2013). He has another book, My Feet Are Hungry, forthcoming from Pitt Street Poetry, as well a New York collection, Afternoon in the Central Nervous System, currently in press. Wallace-Crabbe’s first Selected Poems was published in 1975 and a second, entitled Selected Poems 1956-1994, appeared in 1995. With Wallace-Crabbe’s prodigious oeuvre ever expanding, it seems that his selected poetry collections never quite capture his most recent work. However, the inclusion of new poetry in this selection makes it more up-to-the-minute’ even if, with Wallace-Crabbe and poetry, it is a New York minute.

While many critics and reviewers have prioritised Wallace-Crabbe’s larrikinism and playful use of strine in his poems, this praise is often at the expense of any analysis of the poetry’s gravitas. In this way, Wallace-Crabbe’s appeal to the Kunderanian light/heavy dichotomy of ‘being’ is often overlooked in the trickster moments where comedy displaces gravity:

Dear self,
You flip out of anyone’s grip
like a wet watermelon seed…
there you are…
off again.

In this way, in comic guises, such as ‘The Joker’, ‘wet watermelon seeds’ are used as a diversionary metaphor for the slippery self and Wallace-Crabbe’s nod to Pessoan heteronymic writing.

Indeed, reading Wallace-Crabbe’s poems chronologically lays bare his many ‘performances’ over time. In an interview with Barbara Williams, he stated:

One of my main areas of concern has been what I want to call psychomachia – finding different ways of dramatizing how the part of self…of one’s identity, sit down together, war with one another, interact…I invent topoi. (1987)

The internal dramatic movement of his poems leads to some sophisticated game playing and the biggest game, at the heart of his oeuvre, is the enticing way Wallace-Crabbe invites readers into the puzzle of his religious beliefs (or lack of them) and then, with a kind of prestidigitation, draws readers away, again. Indeed, tantalising statements are scattered through poems across the years, perhaps culminating in the new poem, ‘An Autumnal’ with lines such as: ‘When I come back to this garden after my death…I wonder just what my airy after-self will find…But I’ll be dead’.

I like to think that Wallace-Crabbe is amused by the critics’ determination to pin down a belief system in his poetry. In his own words, he is ‘not a religious man, but not an atheist either’ (2000). To readers, interviewers and critics he is a transcendentalist, (anti-theologian), agnostic, existentialist. Indeed, perhaps as a response to this obsession, Wallace-Crabbe ends the first section of his new poems in this selection with a juxtaposition of ‘The Poem of One Line’: ‘Whatever Christ meant, it was not this’, with his more wondrous and lonely ‘That Which Is’. One of Wallace-Crabbe’s personal favourites and a poem which he stated, at his symposium last year, defines his new poems, ‘That Which Is’ foregrounds ‘a brave form of ontological inquiry’ (Koshland, 2014):
Admit it, then:
We are surrounded by the prodigious being,
By the isness that may be everything
Here and there,
Such universe of proffered being
Into which we are all of course plunged,
And it’s no bad thing,
Given our wayward, hungrily wafting minds,
To have been granted extensive something
To take a firm grip on. To smell.

The way in which the narrator is ‘plunged’ into ‘isness that may be everything’ is a sublime moment. The poet experiences divisions between parts of himself, resulting in a Kantian focus on the way the senses produce the world: ‘To smell’. It is a weighty moment that complements the lightness of the ‘hungrily wafting minds’.

Thirty-six new poems provide the opening text of New and Selected Poems (2013). I would have liked these poems to appear at the end of the book, rather than at the beginning, largely because it would have created the feeling that the poet is still writing and that there is no end to his new poems. However, it is interesting to read the rest of the book through the frame of the new poems; it offers a true retrospective on his previous collections of poetry. It is a shame that every poem doesn’t begin on a new page. While I understand this is costly and may have prevented as many poems being included in the book, it does compromise poems such as ‘The Secular’ which is a 17 line poem beginning at the bottom of page 63 after ‘In Light and Darkness’ and ending at the top of the following page before ‘Wind and Change’. It appears squashed into the leftover space, rather than celebrated as a compelling poem on the ‘abundant secular’.

New and Selected Poems contains the best poems from fourteen of Wallace-Crabbe’s books of poetry. From the Nabokovian ‘The Amorous Cannibal’ with its focus on lust, language and the cheeky play on oral sex:

Suppose I were to eat you
I should probably begin
with the fingers, the cheeks and the breasts
yet all of you would tempt me,
so powerfully spicy
as to discompose my choice

to, ‘The Domestic Sublime’ with its opening image of the deodorant ‘rolling into an oxter’ juxtaposed with ‘clubbable and promiscuous coat hangers’ and the ‘ripe sex’ of the garlic clove. ‘The Domestic Sublime’ is one of Wallace-Crabbe’s poems that has been set to music by Katy Abbott as a song cycle for a soprano (I believe Greta Bradman, Donald’s granddaughter, was the soprano who first performed it). Linda Kouvaras has also composed ‘Three Settings of Poetry’ by Wallace-Crabbe.

However, it is the poems about Wallace-Crabbe’s oldest son, written across the years, that I always find most devastating for their torturedness. In a kind of quaternion he includes ‘An Elegy’, ‘Erstwhile’, ‘Years On’ and ‘Oh Yes, Then’ in this selection. In ‘Oh Yes, Then’, which ends New and Selected, Wallace-Crabbe muses on what will become of his family when he is ‘rotting patiently where/my eldest, Ben, now lies’. In the final stanza, he states:

Where will you be, the flamingly
joyous hearth of my heart?
I can’t get the answer, no matter how
I tune up the shawms of art.

The moment Wallace-Crabbe’s longing for his son ends, the torture of being without his lover/soul mate begins. It is the eternal riddle that Wallace-Crabbe cannot solve; the double bind that love and death presents.

Wallace-Crabbe will, no doubt, have another Selected Poems published in the next decade. However, this New and Selected is ‘unbearably light’ and, in the end, a wonderfully weighty volume of poetry.

CASSANDRA ATHERTON is the editor of Travelling Without Gods: A Chris Wallace-Crabbe Companion (MUP, 2014).