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The Poet as (Anti-)Theologian

Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s Double Vision

LYN McCREDDEN

Puck and Pan, Orpheus and a myriad fellow poets wander, strut or strum through Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s poetic worlds, brushing shoulders with feathery angels and small ‘g’ gods. Hovering in the middle of these little worlds of myth and wit, Oz vernacular English and the marvellous ordinariness of things, is a poetic presence that is never still. It is by turns sensual, dazed and alone, or regal and almost all-knowing; a writerly presence overflowing with longing for solid, palpable, earthy, languaged shape—‘our greatest joy to make an outline truly/And know the piece of earth on which we stand’—and to make that suffice.

So at many turns we meet the poet’s hedonistic ignes fatui, including a laconically Australian, secular oracle that asks with ‘Robert Browning at Bundanon’:

What’ll we do with the mystical, a question for us all
In an age way past King Arthur, Joan of Arc and bold Ben Hall,
When the shadows of religion are like birdcalls in the bush
And mammon jingles loudest. There’s a wattlebird now—
whoosh!

And here we have it, the double vision of the poet as (anti-) theologian. Aligning himself with Browning, the speaker generates
a defining, post-religious authority, declaring the age to be secular, ironically tilting at myths old and recent, facing off against mammon's jingling crassness. However, the poem undoes this authority as relentlessly as it establishes it. The mystical remains and 'we' have to decide what to do with it; 'religion' disappears in shadows but returns as the 'mystical', as bird calls, as the whooshing of a wattlebird; a residual presence is felt, evanescent but persistent, haunting, heard and named.

This essay traces the architecture of the secular and the sacred in Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, arguing that there is a teasing and distinctive doubleness—both ontological and linguistic—which informs the poetics. It claims that the poet has been throughout his career an (anti-)theologian. That is, one whose unresolved vision and poetic performances characteristically oscillate between the desire to make meaning, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of meaning. This ontological uncertainty produces a poetics that moves back and forward, mixing irreverence, humour and fleshly dismissals or reductions of the sacred—'saluting the god of grass with the rub of my feet'—together with a persistent pressure of the poetic will as language pushes upon what might be called the mystical. Geoff Page intimates something of this oscillation in his review of Wallace-Crabbe's 2013 collection, New and Selected Poems:

it is the philosophical poems which predominate and for which Wallace-Crabbe will probably be best remembered. His poems in this vein are agnostic in the best sense, evocative of all that we can't know while full of the countervailing pleasures we can rejoice in anyway.

However, this essay goes further, seeing the characteristic agnosticism as an ever-present given, but probing such constant unresolve as an indication of a particular kind of ontological desire. It is a restlessness or desire that keeps pitting itself against presences acknowledged, often, as greater than pleasure, greater even than poetry. We need to ask why such a secular wit and imagination insists on asking unanswerable questions of 'the sacred', in which it ostensibly does not believe?
Finally, the essay contends that the poet and his poetry, so full of witty creating, are also *created, even subjected*—sometimes "pinned and wriggling on the wall", sometimes left simply grateful—by time and place and the 'more than linguistic'. This essay is thus arguing for a particular way of thinking—a particular ontology—that does not simply oppose the sacred and the secular. An (anti-)theology tempers Wallace-Crabbe's poetry; sacred intimations—like bird calls—are registered both through the body and the forms of earth; but also in realising/writing/bowing at the limits of the earthly. Thus, Wallace-Crabbe's poetry might be read in the context of what Luce Irigaray has called 'the sensible transcendent', when she asks, 'Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realisation—here and now—through the body?' This formulation is but one of the many incarnational theologies that populate religious and post-religious thought; but it is also a rhetorical question pointing to the often brutal division in religion (particularly Christianity) between the sensual and the spiritual. In the fork of this division, Wallace-Crabbe looks one way, then another. Perhaps we can see him straddling the fork of a tree, accompanied by wattlebirds, while the wild and luxuriant river of earthly pleasure and pain rushes below him. There is some precariousness in this position, a painful, restless weighing up of earthly and heavenly elements, as the poet of the secular age ponders, 'What to do with the mystical'.

In an early poem from 1976, 'The Foundations of Joy', a poem noted by Page, Wallace-Crabbe writes:

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to be naked for a little while
in the very jaws of time
is all that I am asking
of this mad world.
Listen:
silence is playing like an orchestra.  
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What is the bodily self actually asking for? What is it actually registering as possible here? 'This mad world', a throwaway line in
a largely whimsical poem, is an interesting verbal pivot too, with madness able to stand in for both tragic fragmentation and for madcap joy. The understatement of ‘all that I am asking’ stands as a typically whimsical response in the face of time and silence, sensed as looming beyond the powers of poet and man. The willed turning of silence back into the sensual—‘playing like an orchestra’—is part of the poet’s bravado, his desire to make his mark, to create sound and music ex nihilo. There is a kind of hubris that is knowingly self-deflating here, as the speaker stands before us, ‘naked for a little while’, both sensual man and shivering fool.

In a later poem, ‘Why Do We Exist?’, the existential theme remains, though the tone has mellowed and is more self-forgiving, if equally as awed:

The child sits, quiet as a moth,  
under murmuring trees in the garden,  
a blackbird warbling grandly,  
wrens and wattlebirds  
doing their various things  
overhead and around,  
and the child knows  
he is very small in the garden,  
smaller still in the world,  
as nothing in the …  
how do you call it?  
universe.  
So that his being there,  
fragile in a rustling suburban garden  
among heaving ripples of green,  
is a kind of miracle.

In the end he is grateful. 7

There is that wattlebird again! A sign of anything? Nothing more than itself? This is a firmly ‘earthed’ poem, with its birdsong and
'heaving ripples of green'. But it is also a place of 'miracle' and humility. The speaker, a child, bows before the smallness and the createdness of humanity, in a world full of beauty and busy arbitrariness, but it is also a world 'in the end' beyond words, something for which to be grateful.

So, what kind of (anti-)theology is this then, that insists on its own earthy, inventive, darting enjoyments, but that can at different times sit quietly in awe, or turn a direct stare back on the self, pushing the scenery over, speaking from more naked, unknowing, humbled—even grateful—spaces?

In a 2003 essay, Cassandra Atherton argues that Wallace-Crabbe's poetry moves through distinct modes, from the restless and even resentful poetry of his earlier books. Atherton describes what she sees as a 'subtle shift in his poetry since Whirling and the simultaneous rebirth of his poetic personae as a visceral, sexualized one'.

Though pantheism remains at the heart of most of his oeuvre, his most recent poetry is more sensually aware of the world; these more optimistic poems in Whirling are the staple of his most recent collection of poems, By and Large. In this collection, Wallace-Crabbe plays not only with words but ... relishes the possibility of soaring into the future.

There is indeed relish and optimism in the poems of By and Large. But there is also something much more questioning, even in the middle of 'soaring into the future', as if Icarus had turned ontologist in midflight (who wouldn't?). By and Large is dedicated to Wallace-Crabbe's dear friend and fellow academic Graham Little, and carries an epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'I am soft sift in an hourglass'. Further, in this volume's poem 'Easter Day', with its reference to resurrection, the speaker stands in the beauty of the natural world of 'salt-shorn bluegums ... of high/mackerel cloud', asking what art can do, whether it can offer 'to copy this down ... in verbs or little strokes,/in daubs and melodies'. The answer arrived at is as puzzling as the question:
... there has been
another order, one somehow in which
the artist, poor soul, offered to transcribe
epiphanies like
amazing refugees fording the Red Sea
or Christ is risen.
Troubling the stubborn world for meaning
what am I going to glean
from the pulsing northerly wind?
A kind of stroking pressure on my cheek.11

The speaker is again caught in the fork between sacred and secular,
as the institutions and dogma of the religious past tower over him,
the time of another order where artist—poor soul—was of necessity a purveyor of the epiphanic. There is no desire in the speaker to return to such an order, with its official didacticism and its prescribed response: ‘Christ is risen’. But where does he find himself in this new order, this ‘stubborn world’ of elemental beauty and seeming impersonality? But contrapuntally, this stubborn world still seems to offer ‘meaning’, which the artist must glean on the wind, with its caress or impersonal pulse or pressure. The poem oscillates between secular and sacred, and back again, until it becomes difficult, or impossible, to distinguish between them.

Still within By and Large, there are a number of poems that fence with the liminal—invisible, metaphoric or playful—line between here and there, now and then, words and the beyond of words, the sensual and the transcendent: ‘Truth and Silence’, ‘Brink’, ‘Post Script’, ‘Knowing the Score: Essence and Accident’, ‘An Die Musik’, ‘Presentables’, ‘Low Tide Walk’, ‘Water’, ‘And the Bit Where he Takes it Back’. This fencing or oscillating constitutes the musicality of the poetry in By and Large. Rather than relishing ‘the possibility of soaring into the future’, I would argue that By and Large is at turns anxious, at turns playfully self-conscious in its sifting of the elements of time and space in which modern, secular artists find themselves.

In an early 1970 critical essay, fellow poet, colleague and friend Peter Steele wrote prophetically and gnomically of Wallace-Crabbe's
poetic self-consciousness; a doubleness that allows the poet to revel in the world, in language and pleasure, but simultaneously to stand back, 'checking the point':

For one thing, a notable feature of Wallace-Crabbe's poetry is a habit of checking the point and utility of its own convictions and procedures. The most confidently indicative utterances have a note of the subjunctive about them: indeed, in a somewhat masked fashion, this is one of his very themes. 12

This 'habit of checking' experiences in the sensual world produces poems that often teeter on the brink of contradiction. It's a self-conscious checking at the same time that poetic verve and daring are being exhibited. For example, the speaker in 'Post Script' stands at the edge of language, facing out towards 'something quite else', asking what might be 'written/on the sheer, starswept grassland/outside language'. Contradictorily, the poem of course operates through words, and with a nightmarish vision of language and dreams—the extensions or tools of human meaning-making—tipping towards an outer darkness:

... scuffed shadows of a dead god
who once was able to walk around
inside
leaving no footprints
only the near-shape of a dream.
Our dreams are quite broken.
Something quite else is crying in the valley. 13

This is what might be called a deeply post-lapsarian poem. The human has fallen, as has language; but even the god, once belonging inside, once the author of dreams, is dead. And the inside (where the poet stands, peering outwards into silence) is permeated by 'Something quite else ... crying in the valley'. This characteristic poem about the limits of language and the artistic is also an existential poem. If language, art and humankind cannot make meaning, and
there is no inspiring god, then what, the poem bleakly asks, could the source of meaning possibly be?

In a recent critical essay, Andrew Carruthers picks up a similar though differently articulated doubleness in the poetry:

Intimacy for Wallace-Crabbe, then, is double-sided. To be ‘oneself’ is to look at that self from outside, from the standpoint of the other, as in a mirror, to be at once inside and outside. Meaning, rather than being something that one finds ‘within oneself’ is, in the poem ‘We Being Ghosts Cannot Catch Hold of Things’, personified as a ‘blind god/who limps through the actual world’.¹⁴

What emerges in Carruthers’ view is a poet as would-be philosopher, in love with the world and its sensuous pleasures, those ‘lovely natural things’; but simultaneously a poet who registers the slippery failures of poetic language to embody simple animal presence, let alone ‘Meaning’. In ‘We Being Ghosts Cannot Catch Hold of Things’, we read:

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.¹⁵

There is a poignancy to many of Wallace-Crabbe’s liminal, spatial metaphors. The ‘down here’ of this poem embodies a split voice, a god’s-eye view, even as the god is immediately brought down to earth, revealed as blind and limping through the actual world. Liminality is a way of moving back and forward, in the quest for meaning. We see this as simultaneity—the god in the human, both looking for meaning, both limping—in ‘An Elegy’ from For Crying Out Loud, where the speaker grieves for his dead child, with longing:
... 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 this life.16

In the later version of this poem, from the 1995 Selected Poems, the last line substitutes 'his life' for 'this life', making even firmer the specific, embodied nature of the loss. The speaker can imagine divine intervention, as the human and divine are momentarily conjoined, together sweeping 'like a pink-tinged angel'. It is a momentary intervention, but it is also part of a series of imaginings—'so that I wish again/it were possible to pluck'—as the imagination stands up, the agent that brings about the fusion between earthly and sacred, even if only momentarily. But of course this poem is an elegy, and the sense of loss permeates its 'as if', subjunctive mood.

In Wallace-Crabbe's celebrated elegy 'Erstwhile' from Whirling, the speaker is remembering the death of his adult son. The metaphors of loss are spatial:

... we were sad together
on the phone, for a hard while
thinking of you, long gone now. Hence.
Where? Where are you?
In poor fact I can never come to grasp
The meaning of it all, supposing
That to be what religion's all about.
The loss remains behind

like never being well.17

The beloved child is 'long gone now', and 'Hence'. In the poem's central question of grief and loss—'Where? Where are you?'—the speaker stands at the existential threshold between worlds, sending out metaphors of time and space. Such questions can be asked in the
world of 'poor fact', but no answer comes from the other side, which
will not or cannot give its location. Religion's claim to provide such
answers is summarily dismissed for this lone mourner.

The individual drama of grief presented by this elegy is of course
central here. But so, too, is the common drama of belief and unbelief
exposed in the speaker. The dear, cherished, lost son is gone, but for
this speaker there is no recourse in 'religion'. It is a totally personal
loss the speaker is involved in; but it is also a universal, mortal one.

In this we can see the ways in which the historical discourses of
secular and sacred, earthly and divine, and personal and religious are
being generated; or are, in fact, generating the speaker. If we examine
such discourses for their historical particularity, and in the context of
what some would now call a 'post-secular age', it reveals something
about the poetry of Wallace-Crabbe and its double vision. In their
2012 volume *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of 'Religion*',
religious scholars William Arnal and Russell McCutcheon describe
the current historical moment of 'religion':

> aside from the many advances in the field in these past two
generations, before and behind our many words, there is
still something mysterious that lurks just out of eyesight and
therefore eludes our grasp ... Whether we call it power, the
holy, or the sacred—as did our intellectual predecessors—or
faith, belief, experience, principle, ideals, meaning, or value—as
do many of our contemporaries—in the end, *C'est la
même chose*.18

While this essay has been arguing for Wallace-Crabbe's agnostic or
(anti-)theological approach in much of his poetry, it has also argued
that his work springs from a sense, common in modernity, that
'there is still something mysterious that lurks just out of eyesight
and therefore eludes our grasp'; meaning still needs to be made, but
authority over meaning and knowledge is unstable and *not* within
human grasp. In other words, the twentieth century's Enlightenment
inheritance has proven far more ontologically vertiginous than its
originators might have dreamed.
Arnal and McCutcheon employ the ideas of Wittgenstein—that logical-mystical, between-wars philosopher—in their further exploration of the relationship between religion and the secular, and in particular the relationship of the sacred or mystical to language:

when Wittgenstein writes that ‘the expression of belief, thought, etc., is just a sentence … and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus’—[this] turns out to be more than just a little unnerving; for now the ‘thing’ that we can’t quite put into words is not an inner feeling, faith, value, or experience but simply a word. In fact, all we may have are words, sentences, language, systems of signifiers, sets of rules, structures, all of our own making, all of which have a past and a limited shelf life.19

Wittgenstein’s exploration of the limits of language and art, and their relationship to the making of meaning, is in many ways a perfect frame for reading Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry, and indeed much of the poetry of the early and mid twentieth century. In fact, Wallace-Crabbe’s 1980s poem ‘The Thing Itself’ from I’m Deadly Serious can fruitfully be read as a wonderful, playful and Australian version of Wittgensteinian thought, as the poet pushes language’s nose hard up against the thinginess of the world. The speaker dreams of being a god-like creator, going ‘right back,/devising a sentence/unlike any such creature in creation’; desiring to make ‘the thing itself’.20 We are presented with a Puck-like god/author here, who knows it is all play, competitiveness and swagger. In this poem there is also the ‘checking point’ of seeing with Wittgenstein that it—poetry, meaning-making, knowledge—is an unending, playful process.

So, too, is the long, serious, imaginative dance between secularity and the sacred. This dance is what sustains Wallace-Crabbe’s ontological and linguistic doubleness. For Arnal and McCutcheon, many (liberal) scholars of religion in the early twenty-first century:

propose that the modernist invention that goes by the name of secularism is, in fact, religion’s alter ego … and, moreover,
that it is the only means for imagining religion even to exist, because 'the religious' and 'the secular' are ... codependent categories ... the conceptual pairing of the secular with the category of religion provides the intellectual and social conditions in the midst of which, as phrased by Talal Asad, 'modern living is required to take place'.

The poetry of Chris Wallace-Crabbe dances between these two categories, double-visioned, playing across the liminal space between here and there, forming his incarnational (anti-)theology, lodged in the fork of his tree, surrounded by bird calls and the 'heaving ripples of green'. The poet speaks of modernity, but is also spoken by it; he seeks out the secular freedoms of his age but finds the haunting calls of the mystical persist, that 'Something quite else is crying in the valley'.