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“The Edge of Something”: Stasis and Rebirth in the Recent Poetry of Chris Wallace-Crabbe

CASSANDRA ATHERTON
University of Melbourne

We sketch clear selves against a universe we do not really
know at all/Nor why there should be selves that rise and fall.
— Chris Wallace-Crabbe¹

IT'S HIS VOICE YOU REMEMBER LONG AFTER YOU LEAVE HIS office; an actor's voice, deep and rich and round. Now golden light fills the darkened room, but in 1995 when I first met Chris it was the shadows of books and the office's antechamber with which I was confronted. Chris's fourth year writing subject was so popular that entry was by invitation only. Students submitted a folio of writing and waited to hear if they had been accepted. The seminars took place in his office, an office that had a red and white “Australia Post” sign changed to “Australia Poet” on the door. It was an amazing course, a “golden” experience in which Chris would read excerpts from his favorite poetry and discuss our attempts at writing. At the end of the seminar he wrote us a poem entitled “For My Students.” I had it framed. It was the beginning of my friendship with one of Australia's most significant poets.

Wallace-Crabbe's reputation is known not only to readers in Australia but also England and America. He considers Harvard his second home since his appointment as visiting Professor of Australian Studies. For him, a visit to Harvard is like a walk down Lygon Street in Carlton, Melbourne. Chris is stopped by colleagues and fans alike, eager to reminisce. To me he is much more than an important Australian poet and I find myself in a unique position to read and understand his poetry in a more personal context. I have had many discussions about his poetry with Chris, particularly since the publication of *Whirling*. As a result I have been privileged to read in addition to his published poetry, much of the unpublished poetry he has written since 1991. During the time I have known him his poetry has gone through a noticeable sea change from a pensive and philosophical resignation to a renewed engagement with the sensual and the sexual since *Whirling* (1998) and even more obviously in his latest collection *By and Large* (2001). In large part these changes, I will argue, are closely connected to the changes in his personal life and in particular his partnership with the painter, Kristin Headlam.

In a 1999 interview with his now deceased friend Graham Little (2), Wallace-Crabbe reflected: “I think I, and my poetry, have had to deal a great deal more about loss in later life—Even to a cheerful chap like me there is a sense of things slipping away, things passing away.”

In this profoundly personal way Wallace-Crabbe by personifying his poetry emphasizes its autonomy and highlights the autobiographical nature of the creative process; as the poet enters a cycle of loss and despair, so too must his

poetry mirror his preoccupations. The beginning of this cycle is evident in *Whirling*, the collection described by another of his friends, Robert Dessaix at the book launch as “autumnal,” an adjective which purposefully conjured a philosophical resignation to the inevitability of endings and one which David McCooey reiterates in his summation of the tone of *Whirling*: “Despite the lighter poems, the autumnal note is present throughout the volume.” (McCooey, *Australian* 31) With the inclusion of poems like “Wet Ghost,” in which a dead horse “fell dead—then fell to bits” and “More Loss,” with its yearning for the “green past—washed away” (W-C, *Whirling*, 46, 51), one reviewer, Anthony Lawrence, characterized the book as “chronicl[ing] [Wallace-Crabbe's] attitudes to ageing and death,” (Lawrence 23) evidenced by the inclusion of two poems for his dead son—“Erstwhile” and “Years On”—and the plethora of poems celebrating his dead friends—“Memories of Vin Buckley” and “Wittgenstein's Shade”—addressed to Gwen Harwood. Though this awareness of death seems natural for a man in his sixties who has lost his eldest son and many of his friends, it is also an indication of his authorial control and self awareness.

In his essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature*, McCooey affirms this conflation of the experiences of the poet and his work through his identification of Wallace-Crabbe as a poet with an “abundant engagement with the world, the self and their transformations” (McCooey, *Cambridge* 177) and identifies a “shift made towards a more elegiac, self dramatising personae” (McCooey, *Cambridge* 178) since the late 1970s, to explain the intersection of self and poetry in Wallace-Crabbe's oeuvre.

It is my intention to explore, from a very personal viewpoint, another more subtle shift in his poetry since *Whirling* and the simultaneous rebirth of his poetic personae as a visceral, sexualized one. I will argue that the melancholic and somber self of *Whirling* has been re-invented as a reinvigorated and sensual self that emerges fully, not only in his newest collection, *By and Large*, (3) but in many of his most recent published and unpublished poems.

“Brinny” was the first of his recent poems, written in 1991, to be composed and clearly reveals a transition period preceding this renewal of self. Chris described the poem to me as being “about a stone wanting to be a leaf; a very stoic stone with the river flowing over it, but nevertheless a stone wishing it was something else” (4):

Little by little,
things have been passing over me,
liquid, furry, ephemeral,
slowcoach aeons and banks of cloud.

The personification of the stone becomes a metonym for all of life's lost opportunities. A brinny, a small stone for throwing, is an image full of possibilities. It may soar elegantly through the air and land gently on the crest of a wave. It may travel a long way but then speed recklessly towards a sandbank. Or it can plummet only a few feet from the person who threw it. However, it is the stone's stasis which is of prime significance as it represents the poet's reflective state.

"Little by little/things have been passing over me." The repetition of "little" and "happen" and the resigned tone undercut the dissatisfaction implicit in the poem. The brinny hopes for a better life but does nothing but "shift a bit—mostly—just [lying] around/while happening happens to others/who then go away." The stone is restless and resents its solitude and abandonment but it is its passivity and ineffectuality that is the most frustrating as it signals an impediment to the progression of a new self.

"Brinny," I will contend, is the beginning of a significant new phase in Wallace-Crabbe's poetry. 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, like a brinny, relishes the possibility of soaring into the future. In this way, the autumnal tone of *Whirling* is forgotten as his poetry is reborn into an Indian summer. Though "things may have been passing over" Wallace-Crabbe, they are now passing over him in a "liquid, furry, ephemeral way." "Brinny" is unique in that it encapsulates his fear of inertia, yet it is only through this contiguous moment of stasis that he can progress to the endless possibilities that resonate in his most recent poetry: "The Velocity of Dreams," "Indochine" and "An Die Musik".

"Brink" a prose-poem from, *By and Large*, emphasizes this stasis by drawing attention to boundaries: "An edge. Yes, the edge of something. But is it in space or time?" In this poem, unlike "Brinny," he is able to leave the past behind and anticipate possibilities rather than endings. "Brink" ends with the prophetic words: "And go," positioning the speaker "on the brink" of a new identity.

Wallace-Crabbe's recent poetry reverberates with the sensual and sexual. Although his poetry has always explored the sensuality of language and the natural world, there was a palpable resistance to the overtly erotic in *Whirling*, and a surrender to the more romantic and elegiac. His ability to revitalize themes explored in his earlier poem, "In the Wilderness," is encapsulated in "Leda." This poem also foregrounds a work of the visual arts in a way not seen in his poetry before. The influence of Kristin Headlam can be seen here and in several other poems from this period. "In the Wilderness," from his 1980 collection, *The Emotions Are Not Skilled Workers*, explores a very private

sexual moment in second person. It is a much more confronting poem and works voyeuristically by placing the reader at the scene and encouraging the reader to watch. In "Leda" Wallace-Crabbe deflects the overt sexuality of "the brown beak push[ing] between her lips" through the use of a dramatic monologue. He juxtaposes the voice of every man, "Call that art eh?" with a classical painting to explore the way in which Leda can be viewed simultaneously as a pornographic work depicting bestiality and as an archetype.

—the sliding serpent of a neck
passes the sixgun of her upright nipple
fancy those feathers on your solar plexus?
That flashy painter was having quite a day
just bunching so much bird between her legs - -
some literal mindgame having substituted cob
for cock.

The form in "Leda" not only allows Wallace-Crabbe to explore and celebrate the raw sexuality of the painting but to expose the cultural rejection of women's sexual enjoyment with Leda's "post-pulsating skin" and the use of the vernacular phrase "we're led to believe she might have been in luck."

Leda, herself, is alluringly described as a "Mistress of purified bestiality" invoking images of sado-masochism when juxtaposed with the blunt cynicism of, "her shafting has been disguised as classical."

Similarly, "A Vignette" foregrounds voyeurism, this time mutual desire between a couple "in a smiling fivesome." The sexual tension is built through the series of facial expressions; from smiles "approaching a downright wink" to the "hot strippy look" he gives her "across the pubby small talk."

Though the couple never touch each other in this poem, the escalating desire set against a very familiar background of "usual things" heightens the voyeuristic element. The reader is privileged, positioned with the narrator; voyeurs of the couple's desire. In the last three lines of the poem, the "strippy look" recalls *Amorous Cannibal* (1985), as here the protagonist wishes to "off with that blue-and-white guernsey,/take her and eat her alive."

This rebirth of interest in overt sexuality in his poetry is reminiscent of poems such as "The Amorous Cannibal" and "In the Wilderness." However, in his recent poetry the focus has shifted to that of an omniscient observer, "I saw them at easy banter—two of them smiled away particularly" rather than the more personal involvement of second person, "I am entirely you-flavoured/your being marches through me" (*Selected Poems* 41). In this way, Wallace-Crabbe deflects the attention away from the immediate experience to the more mature awareness of the vitality of sexuality.

In "Lightness" voyeurism is once again employed. It has a delicate but languid resonance; very different from his usually fast-paced narratives. The layout ensures that the words appear to float across the page due to the positioning of every second line:

so full her life
of fanciful shapes
we found her asleep
with a flautist

What undercuts this apparent stasis is "their moth-like breathing appearing/to rock the hammock." Wallace-Crabbe breathes life into the stillness. The "moth-like breathing" and the moth-like breath a flautist requires to play his phallic instrument are gently erotic. So, too is the redness of the oriental japonica and the mention of its "early-flowering." It is a soothing and innocent piece. There is a very positive experience not just for the flautist and his lover, but for the "we" who first spy the two in the hammock. This kind of shared personal space is a clear departure from the many poems exploring solitude, loss and regret in *Whirling*.

"The Rescue Will Not Take Place," "Western District," and "Cho Ben Thanh: Richmond" all touch on the sensuality of everyday life. In "The Rescue Will Not Take Place" Wallace-Crabbe asks: "What do we live for?" In many of the poems in *Whirling*, the answer may have been elusive and the failure to find it a source of regret: "God allegedly knows" (*Whirling* 51) and "Everything under that sky/believes in living with its golden opposite" (*Whirling* 37). In "The Rescue Will Not Take Place" we see an obvious sign of his ability to reinvent images in his poetry as he states that, we live for "A Wednesday, then, sunbeatenly soft/and otherwise erotic as peaches or/Indian turtledoves." The sensuality of life itself is also referred to in his poem about the Vietnamese occupied suburb of Richmond, "Cho Ben Thanh: Richmond," but this time it is "Sundayesque" and he is "lightly erotic in sandals." Lightness remains a key requirement for eroticism and the juxtaposition of the stillness of death and the movement of life is foregrounded in the line: "I flower to the car radio's piano concerto,/completed after somebody's death." This is reminiscent of the flautist and the red japonica in "Lightness." In "Western District" the languidness returns as the protagonist and his partner "drows[e] in pale pasture/fragrantly—all day." Despite "the century drying out," we see the smoke from the burning paddocks as "sexy": the "Heaped curls of a teutonic goddess." Movement and stasis are juxtaposed again and slight movement eroticized.

This can be seen in "In A Scruffy December" (*Snow Quarterly* 2002), which sensualizes the lovers through a juxtaposition of nature and the body: "bees working over thick lavender" and "your play of stripes" are busy, active images. Kristin favors stripes and stripes are sexy in Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, like the "blue-and-white guernsey" in "A Vignette" and the "stripey honeyeater" in "The Long Goodbye." "In A Scruffy December" is a poem very much of the present and written in a satisfied tone. There is a satisfaction in togetherness; for "the delectable way/we are." Furthermore, the spring sun and the unnamed lover both leave their mark:

foxy beloved
freckled and tickled by
slant fingers of emerging sun.
Your body
has left fingerprints all over me
like warm forget-me-nots. (Unpublished)

The final simile reinforces, in a more playful manner, the importance of memory. It is an ironic statement for Wallace-Crabbe as his previous collection of poetry often concerns itself with haunting memories of his poet friends and the impossibility of forgetting, especially in "The Years," a poem for Evan Jones and "Memories of Vin Buckley, Spelt From Sibyl's Golden Leaves."

In his recent poetry, Wallace-Crabbe confronts the past within the present, illustrating his ability renew his poetry. Building on the elegies for his son in *Whirling*, his search for a new self is evident in his struggle to understand the bond between nature and mankind. In a personally revealing moment, he states that "One life is like the figure of a shadow gliding/rapidly over a glassgreen sea." Much of his later poetry concerns this kind of movement. It is a sprint for a very transient meaning of self. The title of the poem, "One Life," gives the first line its completeness and thus reiterates how incomplete is our understanding of self. In "Low Tide Walk" Wallace-Crabbe confirms this with his fear that "A meaning of my life is far beyond my reach"; but he is pragmatically open: "So our lives mean nothing to art/but every bloody thing to Interpretation."

What lies at the core of Wallace-Crabbe's search for, and reinvention of, self is the fear of mortality, or, worse, of nothingness. What he is afraid of finding in his "trembling diary" is, indeed, nothing. A fear he reiterates in "Quizzical Carlton Blues," when he states:

Not bound by my life
nor even dependent on quarks and quanta
it's the non-being at the very heart
of all our being. It merely expands
like the unseen, epiphanic ether. (W-C, BL)

In essence, Wallace-Crabbe's recent poems are far less melancholy than his previous collection, *Whirling*. In "Presentables" he argues that "At the core of being/spins a nothingness," but he emphasizes that it is others who say this and "they are wrong/in the long, short run." He continues to question his future, trying to articulate how others will remember him and his poetry. In the fantastical dream sequence "Forest Murmurs," he meditates on the idea of being able to anticipate the future through the use of first person. The protagonist cannot participate in the antics of the drunken men for, like Siegfried in Wagner's opera:

I had already
licked the dragon's blood from my finger
and I knew that I too was going to die

Drinking the dragon's blood allows Siegfried a moment of understanding, it then becomes ironic that in this contiguous moment, the protagonist foresees his death. It is

tantalizing to be offered such a glimpse into the future, but confronting for Wallace-Crabbe who has stated recently that his "fantasy is that I will live forever" (W-C, "Kit Lost").

"Amid the Comings and Goings" (BL) appears to be a return to the melancholy tone of *Whirling* where, not only does his "errant son remain away now for/a third night in a row" but he wistfully muses that:

Never this time will I have been able
to produce any dulcet piece like
Eugene Onegin: so very grown up to come
from a life so anxious and violent

It has the same self-deprecating tone as "Excess Is Comely," where the protagonist asks the reader:

Don't you occasionally wonder
What the hell it can be
that champions have

and ends with the thought:

Something a damn sight more
than the poor old rest of us
at any rate. (Unpublished)

The form of these two poems is interesting for the way it considers its subject-matter. "Amid the Comings and Goings" has a rigid structure with every second line indented. This juxtaposes hope and despair and the need to accept these limitations. "Excess is Comely" is a lighter view of this reality and the positioning of the lines is far less rigid. It plays with the sentiments "some sort of extra vitamin/that makes the sonata/just about break your heart," rather than brooding over them as the former poem does: "Our lives mean nothing to art."

Wallace-Crabbe is always eager to present himself as ordinary. In this poem he elevates those he sees as "champions" to emphasize that he is a member of "the poor old rest of us." This laconic, self-deprecating tone is part of what gives his poetry its Australian flavor. He captures the essence of what we admire about those with talent; that which we cannot find the right balance between awe and envy to express.

One of the ways in which Wallace-Crabbe traditionally signals that he writing autobiographically is by annexing the figure of Puck: "The warm stars seem to go/ walking all over my body. My very name/ has wandered away" ("Puck in January," *Selected Poems* 39). Puck, alluding to Shakespeare's impish goblin in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, taunting the pompous and teasing his audience. For Wallace-Crabbe, the adventurous Puck must have had "a spoor which predetermined [him]" ("Puck Will Tell You," BL). Puck observes, experiences and dreams, activities important to Wallace-Crabbe and his poetry.

Puck is a profound figure, one of the first characters, and certainly the only named character, to emerge in Wallace-Crabbe's earlier poetry. Puck did not appear in *Whirling* but in *By and Large*, it is he who provides answers to the questioning self, a self that sometimes eludes the poet. In "Puck

Will Tell You," we find the notion of our "present [re-invent[ing] the past," and like many of Wallace-Crabbe's poems of confrontation, it is written in second person. This poem considers the possibility of a new self waiting to emerge; of a new self embedded somewhere in the past. In a contiguous moment Wallace-Crabbe extrapolates: "Flicking through the diary you abruptly find/your present has reinvented the past." It is only when he reaches the end of one stage in his life that he is able to see how the past holds "a shadowing of now" (BL).

One of these shadows is Wallace-Crabbe's fascination with art and music. Indeed, Wallace-Crabbe has identified art and music as two of his favorite muses. In his recent poetry, however, he allows his highly attuned visual skills to emphasize art in preference to music. Employing the artist's eye, he creates very sensual images, reaffirming his return to a physical engagement with the world. His partnership with the artist Kristin Headlam has quite obviously had an impact on his writing. Though his books of poetry have always celebrated pictorial art, his recent poems have foregrounded this interest. Wallace-Crabbe likens the empty page to a canvas on which he paints his words.

"Through the Looking Glass" is the best example of this new way creating images. In a mirror technique, Wallace-Crabbe describes the painter who is simultaneously capturing his image: "While you stand like that/examining my head and bust—I am portraying you." By capturing the reflection of these works in progress, Wallace-Crabbe achieves a juxtaposition of pictorial art and poetry. In *Whirling*, individuals are not described in a painterly way, but here, Wallace-Crabbe describes the painter's face in detail. The relationship between the protagonist and his lover is therefore uncommon and private. He ends with the need to capture not only her physicality but to capture her "thought's flicker and flame." In the last stanza both arts are blurred as the poet chooses tools for sketching rather than for writing:

My kind of charcoal
would be utterly keen to trace
the hairline where your mind
has drifted from the easel (BL)

and of course defers to the artist as the one who can capture in oils what he cannot capture in charcoal.

This admiration for the skill of the artist is also the subject of the poem "Daphne Fitzroy." Sitting at a bar in Fitzroy, he sketched a profile of a woman he named "Daphne." He captures not only her physicality but also her movement. Like an artist he considers light, dark and color, as a poet he captures sound:

Light slanting down from the left,
now she fondles
a fancy bottle of cr?me de cacao
and laughs like a drain
behind her angled, rising cumulus of smoke. (BL)

"Return of the Exile," Wallace-Crabbe told me, is a poem written for Kristin Headlam. It is reminiscent of Keats's

"To Autumn," with its images of "yellow-bent trees burdened with apples" but with the house at the center of the season. The poem is rich in color and texture and describes images associated with Kristin Headlam returning to Launceston, in the southern island state of Tasmania, her father's car, a "Jowett Javelin braided in wisteria," "everything glazed with a personal history." It is a poem that takes snippets of her life and presents them as a rich historical canvas detailing her existence before he met her. The final two lines: "You can't swim into the past./ Oh yes, you can" (BL) is resonant with confident finality. The past in this poem is not something to regret and relinquish; it is simply an exciting part of each of us. This idea is revisited in the playful two-line poem "Duet":

Memory proves to be an infallible organ.
Inflatable too, she said. (unpublished)

A more recent poem, "Making Many a Moue," refers with pride and affection directly to the appearance of Dora Pamphlet, Kristen's dog, in her prize-winning self-portrait that won the Moran Art Prize in 2002.

she's quite a one for animals
whether up on her bed
or straight from central casting
fodder for those dramatic vignettes
with all such personalities
from head-cocked galah
to homebody mister wombat.

"In the Scent of Eucalyptus" employs this same painterly technique to describe a woman "garden[ing] at midnight." Instead of "sketching" her description he resembles "The Great Printmaker" (BL) recording it all in "black and white." Colors are cloaked in "Indian ink" except for "the eye of Mars a little red." This is similar to "The Yes in Phenomena" where Wallace-Crabbe questions "what just might be found/behind the green-black shadow/at the back of a canvas in which/the comedy goes on." Among the sensual perfection of the "stunted nectarine[s] shiver[ing]" and the "engaging strokes" of the "Soft north wind," (BL) Wallace-Crabbe struggles with his definition of art. He merges art forms to produce a kind of cross-disciplinary poetry. In the same way that writing crosses genres, it provokes the poet to ask:

Does art consist in trying to copy this down
in verbs or little strokes,
in daubs and melodies? (BL)

This search for meaning continues in "Picasso" where Wallace-Crabbe tries to demystify the mystery at the heart of all paintings, where metonymically the zigzags that signify music in a Picasso painting are at once "visual clones" of music and simultaneously just "bits of paper." Painting, like poetry, can play with images and have many different meanings for different audiences.

For this reason, Wallace-Crabbe has always deliberately played with language in his poetry. He employs double entendres, puns, colloquialism and layered meaning. He

enjoys presenting everyday objects in an unlikely way so that we see them for the first time, such as in this description:

Innocent cylinder with a wound,
You have kept the grape's rich blood
From the disillusioning breath of day
At your own cost. ("The Cork," unpublished)

In "Water" he states,

Yes, but language feels to me
rather like the taste of water,
a flavour so frankly beyond all naming,
it is so general, clear and ready
to flow out,
filling our every need. (BL)

Again, poetry is compared to art, this time in a simile where language becomes "like a suite of beautiful drawings."

In three poems, Wallace-Crabbe exploits his knowledge of grammar to wittily tease his audience. The best of these poems is "Theme and Variations for the Pornograph":

Expletive!

The noun is coming to verb her
over and under again.
This young stud has three gorgeous substantives
to deal with adjectivally
for sweaty hours.
His adjective noun
has turned stiff as a chopstick
but given what is present participle
it won't be for long. (Snow Quarterly)

This is a witty and unusually erotic poem for Wallace-Crabbe and, once again, illustrates the shift in his writing since *Whirling*. "True Enough, I Do Like to Think of My Words" also exemplifies the shift in Wallace-Crabbe's recent poetry and confirms that this eroticism is not an aberration:

as little actors on some painted stage
the verbs nounlike with swords and thews,
and adjective, butler or saucy maid.

Similarly, in "Knowing the Score: Essence and Accident" Wallace-Crabbe returns to his central quest for meaning. This time he resolves many of his concerns: "I don't know whether we know the score/nor if it matters whether we do" (BL). He defines the self as "a malleable being" and it is this description which best characterizes his ability to constantly renew himself through his poetry. Like the knight in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" meaning is the transitive verb "drifting through a wilderness of hairy nouns—peregrine, and palely loitering." □