1981

Vernacular and middle styles in Australian poetry

Mark Oconnor

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Oconnor, Mark, Vernacular and middle styles in Australian poetry, Kunapipi, 3(1), 1981.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol3/iss1/7
Vernacular and middle styles in Australian poetry

Abstract
It is generally recognized that there is a move at present towards the vernacular style in poetry; and it seems obvious that this bears some relation to the increasing literary confidence and national assertiveness of the sixties and seventies, and to the upsurge in other Australian art-forms, most notably film and drama. Undoubtedly there has been a change not only in the writers but in public taste. Readership or audience that wants the home product and the local theme is one of the phenomena that connect the new drama, the new films, and much of the new poetry and the new short stories.
It is generally recognized that there is a move at present towards the vernacular style in poetry; and it seems obvious that this bears some relation to the increasing literary confidence and national assertiveness of the sixties and seventies, and to the upsurge in other Australian art-forms, most notably film and drama. Undoubtedly there has been a change not only in the writers but in public taste. Readership or audience that wants the home product and the local theme is one of the phenomena that connect the new drama, the new films, and much of the new poetry and the new short stories.
It is not surprising therefore that we have a movement in poetry, as in drama, that rejects the Anglophile limitations of the past and interests itself in exploring characteristically Australian resources of language as well as subject-matter. But the question remains: whether we can expect anything quite as broadly Australian and dialectal as the new drama. Hasn't that already been tried and discredited by earlier generations of poets? Poetry, after all, is not a local art in the same way as drama: if we are to achieve something in poetry comparable in originality to the new drama, it may well be the work of poets who have come to use Australian material and idiom in a more subtle and subdued way than most of the dramatists.

The odd thing is that some of the poets are having remarkable success with intonations and idioms of the sort that might be classified as broad Australian. As good a place to start as any is with Geoff Page, author of *Cassandra Paddocks* (Angus & Robertson, 1980), who combines awareness of international models with a dry grasp of popular idiom:

...Don't worry says
the one called Tiger,

the pit-prop at the face
a fraction short,

*She'll tighten up*
*when the world turns over.*

('Learning', 1974)

Here the use of 'she' for 'it' is only the most overt feature of a passage that perfectly captures both the rhythms and the bravado of the Australian vernacular.

Page's elegant mastery of the wispy four-words-a-line style (what in lesser poets deserves to be described as the drip-feeding style) suggests American influence; and in fact he can move a long way in the 'international' direction, as in his remark on the canvases in the Hall of Victories at Versailles:

Defeats were not commissioned
or, if they were,
grace London or Berlin.

Around four walls
*La Victoire De La Patrie* —
closed circle.
Go out
where you came in.

('Closed Circle', 1974)

But perhaps he is most at home manipulating the terse statements and flat cadences of broad Australian speech, as at the conclusion of his 'Landing of Christ at Gallipoli':

Seeing him wave that blood-red bayonet
I reckoned we were glad
To have him on the side.

If Page's rank as a poet is not as high as his mastery of form and vernacular intonation might suggest, it may be because he lacks as yet a certain intellectual subtlety, and seems happiest (as in these examples) with large and simple ideas, like the wrongness of religious or national chauvinism. It may not be fanciful to see this defect as associated with the vernacular style. The Australian vernacular (which is a matter of intonation and choice of words rather than a dialect) is not simply an alternative form of the English language: it is felt even by most native speakers as a specific form of English, one more appropriate to some uses than to others. In this it resembles literary Scottish which becomes much more 'braid' on a 'hamely' subject than on an elevated one. (As early as the fifteenth century the Scots poets had worked out a system of stylistic levels in which the proportion of specifically Scots words fluctuated in inverse proportion to the solemnity of the theme.) There is something of the same feeling in the Australian vernacular: a certain populist contempt for more artificial and inflated modes of diction. The cover of John O'Grady's *Aussie English* gets the feeling right, I think, with its confident Aussie knocking the English vowels for six. No doubt historically it originated in part as a deliberate rejection of the more cultivated speech of the governing class; and it retains even today a certain air of populist cheek.

The result is that the vernacular speaker who can be drily witty about taking a chance on a short pit-prop may be tongue-tied on more sensitive or less 'virile' issues. The problem for a major poet is to turn the cheeky deflating vernacular into a genuinely adaptable middle style in which 'all things worth saying may be said'. This involves ignoring Barry Humphries-style comic exaggerations and listening instead for the subtle cadences of the living vernacular.

The established master of this tradition is Bruce Dawe who handles the
familiar realities of contemporary Australia with an inwardness and rhetorical delicacy that make him deservedly one of our most popular poets. His 'Life Style', dealing with the religion known as Australian Rules, is I think the only poem to have made the sporting page of the *Melbourne Age*:

...And the tides of life will be the tides of the home-team's fortunes
— the reckless proposal after the one-point win,
the wedding and honeymoon after the grand-final...

They will not grow old as those from more Northern States grow old,
for them it will be always three-quarter-time
with the scores level and the wind advantage in the final term...

For an Australian this offers much the same shock, or joy, of recognition as the new drama: a satisfaction at seeing familiar things recognized in art. In fact in a century when long-term changes in the intonation of spoken English have destroyed the traditional metres and eroded the popular audience of poetry, it is remarkable to what an extent the repeated joy of recognition in Dawe's work works like a structural substitute for metre, giving his work a popular almost balladistic feeling without detracting from its modern discursive complexity.

Not that Dawe has exorcized the element of mild larrikinism so often conveyed by the vernacular. Rather he has extended its range by a bold admixture of other styles ('Go easy, kids, here sleep your history's parents') and references ('They will not grow old...'). In fact if there is a characteristic feature of educated Australian, as opposed to British, sensibility it may be precisely this tendency to mix levels of style without feeling the incongruity. — A kind of literary democracy. Les Murray who claims that 'There is no such thing as a native Australian high style' adds that 'There is a lovely middle voice about Australian poetry at its best'. It is probably the best sensibility and the most useful style to have in an age increasingly conscious of process and of the interconnectedness of all worlds: astronomical, cultural, biological, technological and moral.

Dawe extends his range too through the manipulation of various narrative personae and often of a supposedly public Australian voice:

For a while there we had 25-inch Chinese peasant families
famishing in comfort on the 25-inch screen...
At times he deals in such broad ironies and simple colloquial certainties that one is misled into thinking his English more Australian than in fact it is, and also into underestimating the subtleties of feeling that come from elaboration of some comic-seeming inconsistency. The progression in a Dawe poem is often from broad local comedy to subtle universal tragedy, as in the close of his foot-slogger’s view of the Crucifixion (‘And a Good Friday Was Had By All’):

…Orders in orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand — we had a
 Drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn’t
a patch on you
then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread
so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him
and the curious ones who’ll watch anything if it’s free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.

Les Murray, unlike Dawe, does not so much mix the vernacular with more literary styles as seek to make it do duty for everything. Even his earliest work was remarkable for vivid use of a heightened natural speech:

It began at dawn with fighter planes:
They came in off the sea and didn’t rise,
They leaped the sandbar one and one and one
Coming so fast the crockery they shook down
From off my shelves was spinning in the air
When they were gone…

(‘The Burning Truck’)

In his later work this has evolved into the subtle delineation of social types and nuance:

CI: the detectives. After the age of belief
we’re what happened to mystery. Our model explainaway trade
brings complex relief
Not quite your suave Sherlocks, we know
fences, sperm, payoffs, the squalor of minds, and where
the husbands go.

('The Police: Seven Voices')

The comedy is much less broad than in Dawe. Indeed the vernacular is
no longer comic, though it remains ironic. There is a much greater
interest in abstract ideas, and the voices occasionally step out of
character to point out the philosophical implications of their stance.
(Murray must now rival Hope, though in a very different medium, as
Australia's major poet of ideas.) Yet the most obvious stylistic quality,
apart from a fine ear for idiom, is a rigorous concision. Intellectually
Murray has, in common with Hope and Judith Wright, an awareness of
the interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds, and of the
relevance to human experience of all sorts of facts which a lesser mind
might write off as specialized knowledge.

More recently he has been experimenting with the roomier format of a
verse novel. The following passage shows his skill at rendering social
argument in concrete terms, as well as the characteristic vernacular
reliance on short un-conjoined sentences and flat ironical statements:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In that other Depression, there was some kindness;} \\
\text{this one's like fellows crossing a plain} \\
\text{under sniper-fire. One here, one there} \\
\text{goes down with his boat and colour TV} \\
\text{and he's ignored. Or we're told to kick him —} \\
\text{Unemployment's not allowed under Socialism.}
\end{align*}
\]

(The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, 1979)

The tendency of Australians to think of their own idiom as, if not a
patois, at least something to be abandoned when attempting to be serious
or poetical is so strong that Murray's and Dawe's achievement in using it
as the medium of non-comic verse is even more remarkable than the
achievement of the dramatists in creating an audience that could accept
the matter-of-fact use of Australian accent, settings, and reference. The
drama, after all, has often chosen to mock the broader vernacular
speakers for the amusement of the new university-educated classes.

Murray and Dawe are so prominent among the form poets of the
present that it may be necessary to remind ourselves that their vernacular
is not by any means the natural speech of all Australians. Murray's in
particular is largely the language of that rural Australia which most Aus-
tralians have left in this or the last two generations; and its cryptic
allusions require considerable footnoting for city dwellers. It is such a rich language that it would be a great pity if it were to fade out of use like the Roman dialect of Trilussa's poems. Yet the worldwide pattern, despite certain resurgences of regional politics, is for the diminution of dialects. And for the growth of city populations, and of international urban ways at the expense of rural ones. (Indeed Murray with his conservative attitudes to issues like population-control sometimes presents a fine picture of a man standing on his head to saw away the branch by which he is supported. It is one of the paradoxes of pioneering societies that to be a conservative, as opposed to a conservationist, is to be a supporter of the very forces that will transform that society.) It is probably true, too, that the vernacular offers less to female than to male authors.

Clearly it would be a great mistake for younger poets to follow Murray's or Dawe's vernacularism as matter of fashion rather than conviction; and no doubt it is the last thing these two poets would wish. To realize that an Australian poet's natural voice need not be vernacular, or at least not that sort of vernacular, one need only think of such names as Judith Wright, David Campbell, David Malouf or Rosemary Dobson. There are many vernaculars in Australia, and some of them have a distinctly American or British tinge.

If there are many readers who will feel the joy of recognition in Dawe's 'Life Style', there are many others who will find it rather in the style and sensibility of Dransfield's

wakes. bluejean morning, sound of
rain at the window. she has gone, leaving
what one leaves of the night before. the grey feeling
like a visual headache is not altogether
banished by candles or flickering
walls which enter and withdraw from seeing...

('Geography I')

or in Robert Gray's international limpidity:

there glides up against me what seems
an icy cat.
Thin as goat's milk
the first daylight

or Bruce Beaver's Saul Bellow-like erudition:

At Surfers' Paradise were Meter Maids
glabrous in gold bikinis.
It was before your country's
president came among us like a formidable
virus.

(Letters to Live Poets, no 1)

The achievement of poets like Murray, Dawe and Page, therefore, is not that they have established a prescriptive style, but rather that by establishing even the broad vernacular as a literary language they have won for every Australian poet the right to seek his or her individual voice somewhere in the gamut between international English and vernacular Australian. It is the more remarkable that they should have achieved this at a time when so many of the younger poets were looking for a quick sell-out to West Coast American influence, abandoning the flexible discursive freedoms of the middle style for the jerky surreal syntax of a movement that seems in retrospect to have put its main energies into promotion rather than communication.

Yet even here we should be just. The exaggerated claims made by the late-sixties and seventies underground for often mediocre or derivative work have made them tempting comic material for anyone rehearsing the literary history of the last dozen years. At best they made the same error as the Ern Malley victims, mistaking a style of very limited popular appeal for a great-leap-forward in poetic technique. Yet some were in fact seeking in the West Coast American tradition precisely the colloquial freedom and naturalness which the Australian vernacularists have achieved. Nigel Roberts for instance penned a poetic statement (printed in the appendix of The Applestealers) containing an attack on university English which Les Murray might well have echoed:

where the tradition / of
english spoken poetry / was
still British / so
the dead
   could be spoken to / in
   their own tongue

though he may have confused vernacularism with artistic nonchalance in opposing this to the view of those

who saw / poetry
    as a natural activity
— as something to do / amongst
    many other things...
What the Australian poet needs, it is clear, is freedom to use his or her 'ain vulgaire'. It is necessary to be free not only of alien brands of English but of overseas notions of stylistic levels and of poetic and non-poetic subjects and treatments. We have a different continent to describe, and overseas rules are bound to constrict and distract us from what we want to talk about. America, for the English language, was only the New World: that is a newer Europe with much the same animals, trees, climates, and techniques of living. Australia is much more different from America and Britain than either from the other. And it is partly the existence of this great undiscovered continent's-worth of subject-matter awaiting description that recommends to us the flexible permissions of a discursive middle style rather than the more extreme stylistic fads which sometimes reflect, in the two Old Worlds, a certain exhaustion of external subject-matter. The Australian middle styles have held off the challenges of the Angry Penguins era and of the Balmain seventies, and seem at present more broadly based than ever. The problem of Australian English in the crude sense has been solved. What remains for each poet is the problem of hearing and developing his or her individual voice, whether it be what Professor Mitchell would classify as broad, educated, or cultivated Australian.

NOTES

1. See for instance Mark Macleod, 'Soundings in Middle Australian', *Meanjin* 39, i, April 1980, pp. 103-11.