

**Geoff Page. *60 Classic Australian Poems*. Sydney: UNSWP, 2009, 288pp.**

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Geoff Page's selection of 'classic Australian' poems is a brave effort to display the development and achievement of a body or work that will bear comparison with any in the 'Anglosphere'. Page also claims to focus on poems that strike him as 'unequivocally enjoyable, even if that enjoyment is sometimes hard-won' (12). I doubt that readers will entirely agree. The book occupies a space somewhere along the spectrum of middle-school poetry text and teach-yourself poetry appreciation manual. The same might be said of his 2006 anthology, *80 Great Poems from Chaucer to Now*. The structure of each is strikingly similar to Ruth Padel's *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (2002), a concatenation of poems with commentaries culled from her UK weekly *Independent on Sunday* column. Page and Padel are enthusiastic teachers, but the whiff of the classroom is palpable in their methodological rigour and tone.

The didactic impulse is rife elsewhere: in Neil Astley's popular themed anthologies *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times* (2002) and its sequel *Being Alive* (2004), in Edward Hirsch's more discursive though to many minds overly pedantic *How to Read a Poem* (2000), and a plethora of other books aimed at assuring readers that they learn how to enjoy poetry. Astley's collections constitute armchair, bedside or travelling companions; poems range across loss, physical or spiritual journeys, and so on, with tactfully brief introductory remarks on the matter of each grouping. Other collections and how-to volumes extend the pleasure further, by assuming that readers already enjoy poetry. Some omit or abridge the crash course on metrics, figures and forms, to highlight images and the versatility of language: notable examples are Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux's 1997 *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, and Kenneth Koch's anthology appended to his 1998 essays *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. Addonizio, Laux and Koch celebrate the life of the poet and the joy of writing; their comments, short and illuminating, exuberantly convey their sense that every poem is an event rather than a subject for vivisection.

Page's distinction is to be first in the field focusing so closely on such a range of Australian poems, so I expect his book will have appeal in and beyond Australia. The poems easily stand comparison with any in Padel's museum. Like Padel, Page adopts a straightforward pedagogical manner. The voice is no-nonsense, insistent that poetry is good for us, and that, while emotion is well and good, we must get a handle on the technical stuff that goes into a poem if we want to know what it's really about. Like Padel, Page insists on the 'classic' status of poems that have been relatively recently hatched, and like her, he is determined to persuade those who believe poems should rhyme to see that blank verse and free verse can be more than cut-up prose. I wonder if anyone still considers rhyme the hallmark of poetry, and I confess that I'm with high-school and first-year university students in finding the foregrounding of technique a turn-off. Student writers of poetry can write in prescribed forms if asked to do so, but I've rarely met one who does so by choice, or one who is overly concerned to ensure that a reader might mistake the insertion of the odd dactyl for a daring abrogation of a centuries-old reverence for iambic regularity. The insistence on

form compounds my curiosity about the book's undeclared agenda: restoration of rules? Bracing callisthenics to build rigour in reading exercises? I don't spontaneously turn every poem I meet inside out, making it a sort of verbal Pompidou Centre, its structural elements more evident than the purpose of the thing, but I may be on a limb here. The senior English exam preparation modality at work in Page's commentaries (as with Padel's) could have broad appeal among educators of a different bent. English literature syllabus committees have perhaps reinforced the idea that poetry is a matter of Q and A, and bent discussion of it to a bureaucrat's vision of an adequately ticked set of QA boxes. Perhaps this is unkind.

At all accounts, Page's and Padel's collections follow an inexorable formula: first, and unexceptionally, presentation of a poem, then an abbreviated biography of the poet and a note on circumstances of the poem's composition, then a paraphrase of the work, and finally, dutiful instruction in the structural, syntactic, figurative and metrical characteristics of the exhibit. The earnestness is never in doubt. A dozen poems and commentaries into the book, I began to feel as if I were being chivvied for an exam by a diligent dominie; another twenty, and I wondered if Page had ever read former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins's memorable poem about teaching poetry, and contemplated its concluding lines:

I want them to water-ski  
 across the surface of a poem  
 waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
 is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
 and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
 to find out what it really means.  
 ('Introduction to Poetry', Collins 16)

Like a fussy ballet critic, Page won't let a wayward foot in the metrical dance go unremarked. We are repeatedly asked to pay attention to the tripping trimeter's meretricious associations, or the suppleness of the four-stressed line; to recall John Donne's unorthodox ways with the pentameter, Chaucer's stamp on the *aabb* couplet, Pope and Swift's adaptation of the same, Milton's prior employment of blank verse, and, lest we forget, the extent to which we have read free verse in the King James Bible without a thought for its malign effects on our understanding that good poetry must rhyme. Page winkles out the spondees, anapaests and dactyls from their hidey holes in the lines, exposes them to the light, pops them back in their stanzas and often as not leaves us with a remark to the effect that other (even most) poets might have been happy to stick to more regular metre throughout, but the poem under interrogation evidences a different predilection. We're also told how and where to see 'well chosen' sound and other verbal effects. The cumulative effect of such programmatic instruction is counterproductive. It is a relief to simply read the poems and skip or merely dip into the commentaries for some indication of the book's purpose, or to see what Page makes of an expression or reference when curiosity is particularly provoked.

Page's stated aims include a resolve to 'rejoice in Australian poetry as a "broad church", to get away from narrow preconceptions of what it might or should be' and 'to focus on a group of poets who were prominent in the middle-to-last decades of the last century but whose work is now in danger of dropping, undeservedly, into obscurity' (12-13). These are noble aims, and a few of Page's choices support the former claim tolerably, though the selection is on the whole conservative, and some comments on the state of Australian poetry at different periods run counter to a 'broad church' view. Few poems startle on account of their pyrotechnical style; none break taboos of any consequence (J.S. Harry's 'Mousepoem' contains 'a four-letter word' (six letters, actually)), and Page clearly favours plain unvarnished tales—first or third-person narratives, monologues and ruminations on family or other relationships.

Almost one-third of the poems concern family connections: from Mary Gilmore's 'Nationality', Christopher Brennan's 'We sat entwined an hour or two', and Lesbia Harford's 'I'm like all lovers, wanting love to be', through to Robert Gray's 'In Departing Light', Alan Wearne's 'A World of Our Own', and Anthony Lawrence's 'The Drive'. (Some of these are extraordinary: Harford's poem a thing to rejoice at on meeting again, and Gray's a tour de force.) Another fifteen poems (from Adam Lindsay Gordon's 'The Sick Stockrider' to Bronwyn Lea's 'Girl's Night on Long Island') work the oracle on death. A further dozen, from Brennan's 'We sat entwined an hour or two' through to Stephen Edgar's 'Another Country', concern love, marriage, and cognate afflictions (if C.J. Dennis's 'The Play' and Dorothy Hewett's 'The Witnesses', a girl's account of a rape, can be tweaked into such a labelling).

As we might expect from Page, war and politics bulk sufficiently to admit works expressing moral outrage (Jennifer Maiden's 'Costume Jewellery', one of her best), chagrin (Chris Wallace-Crabbe's 'Other People'), and varieties of nostalgia and alluring reconstruction (Clive James's 'In Town for the March' and Alan Gould's 'A U-Boat Morning, 1914'). A tone of moral earnestness, even what Page calls 'secular Protestantism' (in relation to James McAuley's ruminative memoir 'Because'), infuses more than the poetry of war and politics, though. Three poems at the start of the collection, and a dozen others set in recognisably agricultural or rural locations, reinforce a dour Hesiodic note: one behaves decently as one can (observes the rites?), whether the gods are present or not, or even whether they exist or not, because doing so serves self-interest—whose unvoiced premise is patriarchal sentimentalism at the heart of social order. This premise holds true of the rapists who go off whistling after the act in Hewett's poem, or the males in poems by Harford, McCuaig, Manifold and Llewellyn, where women must assert, trenchantly, hopelessly or mockingly, their individualism. The final 'masculine' poems in the anthology reinforce this sombre drift: the show concludes—apart from Bronwyn Lea's 'Girls' Night', a different cocktail of griefs—with Philip Hodgins's 'Shooting the Dogs' and John Kinsella's 'Drowning in Wheat': bleak themes to ring in the millennium, but if the collection is appointed to be read in schools, Page's hope that certain works can be saved from dropping into obscurity may find fulfilment.

I could wish, in light of this last possible eventuality, that Page had amended some sweeping assertions. One instance is the remark that Lesbia Harford was writing at 'a time when many Australian poets were still in the sway of late Victorian poeticisms' (56). Page is not alone in writing literary history with little recourse to the extensive periodical and monograph literature of Before-Slessor Australia. A habit of

cannibalising previous anthologies (and, with some anthologists, of outsourcing the research in order to top-up the tired canon with a few contemporary ring-ins according to taste) maintains the hegemony of ignorance a treat. This custom is nowhere so evident as in the recycling of received wisdom, and I regret that Page seems not to have delved further into newspaper, journal (including dissident or underground poetry publications), and obscurer anthology and monograph publications to locate classics from other milieux than the mainstream press. Page admits Dennis's rickety monologue 'The Play', as a sort of mould-breaking work on the strength of its slang infusion, though a dozen other pre-World War One and wartime poets might challenge his contention about Dennis's refreshing avoidance of poeticisms. Little perusal of World War One period publications suffices to see that however stilted or old-fashioned 'many Australian poets' might have been in 1917, many others were capable of demotic at least as up to date as Harford's—or Dennis's. Nor did a taste for tired conventions desert later poets than Harford; for inverted word order and preciousness of vocabulary approaching a variety of gongorism, Francis Webb's 1960s-vintage 'Harry' (131-132) takes the sacramental wafer.

The matter of omissions from the anthology is hardly the point of my remarks. I take advantage of the occasion to flag a broader concern for the anthologist's art. Page's account of a classic, at least, is flexible enough to admit contemporary works that he would happily take with him into the future or which assist his getting there, and his 'two inescapable criteria' for this condition are that the poem 'must be: a. emotionally moving (often with moral implications); or b. memorably entertaining' (13). This is hardly a dichotomy: it's a gloss on the Horatian adage concerning poetry's role in moulding the heart with kindly teaching (II.i.126). Page acknowledges the emotional effect of a poem like Bruce Dawe's 'Drifters' and though he enjoys the comedy of A.B. Paterson's 'The Travelling Post Office', Douglas Stewart's 'Leopard Skin', and Alan Wearne's 'A World of Our Own', he discerns the pure Hippocrene in even the lightest verse. None escape Inspector Page's checklist of techniques that guarantee a poet's assiduous attention to the important stuff.

The UNSW Press blurb's announcement that the book is 'an outstanding introduction' (amended on the jacket to 'superb introduction') to Australian poetry from the nineteenth century to the present will leave the book exposed to sniping by literary barrowmen touting near-rival publications, but few editors have gone, or will go about their business with the determination, bordering on doggedness, that Page brings to scrutiny and rationalisation of every work selected. The collection does not aim to scope the progress of Australian poetry in the twentieth century, as the 1992 Gray and Lehmann anthology does, nor the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as John Kinsella's 2008 anthology and others; nor does it, despite its predominant twentieth-century emphasis, predominantly represent relatively recent Australian poetry such as the Tranter and Mead, and the Brennan and Minter collections have done, or as the in-press Puncher & Wattman anthology of Australian poetry from 1986 to 2008 will undoubtedly do.

I expect high school teachers will want to compare their readings of some of the poems with Page's. Some may welcome a crib that provides ready-made responses to prac-crit matters. My municipal library and university library both hold copies. A university colleague, despairing of viable alternatives to the out of print Tranter and Mead anthology of modern Australian poetry, has set the Page collection for a course

on Australian Modernism—a feasible stop-gap, given Page’s hopscotch steps around a handful of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century poets in order to get to Slessor and the moderns as quickly as possible (a move that may cast the label ‘classic’ into critical contention). Though Page’s selection is relatively unadventurous, including many works that have appeared in others’ anthologies, some selections are so unusual as to border on eccentricity, and this will provide a talking point for reading groups as well as teachers and students. Page’s book points the way to further reading in a manner that highlights idiosyncrasies of the entire collection: he appends a six-page list of poets and titles that might form a further collection. I am fascinated to see my name up there with so many old and new luminaries, but my impression is that the list still remains a remarkably conservative one, even if it finds space for Pi O and a small number of more interesting recent boundary-pushers.

I have carped at the pedantry of Page’s emphasis on the mechanics of versification, but I believe that anyone interested in the minutiae of such features may find his observations helpful. For my part, I’d have preferred less formula, fewer words, but more focus on how poets get their lines to sound the way they want them.

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