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Much More You Could Say: Bruce Dawe's poetry

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Bruce Dawe's reputation as a vernacular poet can be a disadvantage. I once heard an eminent Australian critic remark that once you'd read his poems there wasn't much more you could say. The implication was that his work had an immediate appeal but no depth and that to exercise one's critical faculties on work so colloquial in pitch and perspective would be a waste of a well-trained mind. At the same time I encountered the poetry of Philip Martin.¹ Martin is a writer Dawe acknowledges as his friend and mentor, yet Martin's poetry seems at first very different: the accent is more cultivated and the focus more personal. There is, however, at least one important similarity: both practise 'the art that conceals art', exercising great control of rhythm and speech stress to create an apparently uncomplicated voice. It is only when you do read their poems — that is, read within rather than over their poems — that you find there is much more you could say.

Dawe himself has been partly responsible for the notion that his writing is as easily turned as a sausage on a barbecue. In many of the interviews he has given he has shown himself reluctant to discuss his writing methods, insisting that he does not understand how he does it, does not labour over drafts and re-drafts, and does not intend to be profound. Comments such as the following (from a 1972 radio broadcast) are, in part, a way of making poetry seem part of the everyday:

Finally, I would like to stress the fact that a poet is a person like any other. He may well be the postman with his whistle,

¹ Philip Martin, *New and Selected Poems* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988). Dawe's debt to Martin is acknowledged in Ken Goodwin, *Adjacent Worlds: A Literary Life of Bruce Dawe* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988) and Peter Kuch, *Bruce Dawe* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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the labourer leaning on his shovel on the building-site
dreading the day they invent rubber-handled shovels, the
gardener next door, the clerk across the street, the father
strolling in the park with his kids, the bloke at the footie
screaming his lungs out, the teacher who (rumour has it)
“writes a bit”.²

This is also a disarming way of naming an audience and claiming a place within it. Dawe’s poetry wants to keep contact with and to celebrate the ‘battlers’ with whom it identifies (from whom it originates). To do this it refuses what he calls ‘the Byronic Wildean archetype’³, the image of the poet as an extraordinary and alienated person (an image which was popular in the counter-cultural climate of the late 60s and early 70s when Dawe made this remark). There is, of course, a danger in such self-presentation: it can easily obscure the fact that Dawe’s involvement with language is something more than a casual affair.

Not surprisingly, a closer reading of Dawe’s talks and interviews reveals his care for language. Indeed the overall effect of these interviews and talks is to create a speaking position that is at once self-deprecating and simple and to convey a belief in poetry that is at once evasive and fervent. In the very broadcast where Dawe performs the poet as ‘a person like any other’, he also remarks that the writers he admires are those ‘who *make things real in new ways*’.⁴ Introducing his own poetry for *Sometimes Gladness*, Dawe describes writing poetry as a ‘mix-and-match outfit’, a work of associative thinking, remarking, for example, that ‘To be in love ... may seem like being in a state of siege; to be in a city may seem like

² Bruce Dawe, ‘And Let the Last Word Be With the Poet Himself’, in *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, ed. Ken Goodwin (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1990), p. 11.

³ *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, p. 12.

⁴ *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, p. 11. (His emphasis.)

being caught up in a dream.’⁵ This kind of sideways thinking makes poetry a profound form of wordplay, a wordplay which Dawe’s (best) poetry sustains by disturbing the vernacular voice that made it famous, disrupting its surface with uncertainties, evasions, unexpected intensities, even mysteries, and unsettling insights. As a result, Dawe’s language is too knowing (and unknowing) to be merely an imitation of Australian speech patterns. In the same introduction, Dawe goes on to remark that the poet’s task is to find in words the shape and movement of the inner feeling that prompts any one poem into being. Critics wanting to do a political reading of Dawe might argue that this suggests a traditional, almost religious, understanding of creation since, in Genesis, God creates the world from chaos and Dawe sees art in similar terms: ‘It is the formlessness of things we find hardest to handle; art is one way of giving handles to those things’ (SG, p. xi). I want to do something more practical. I want to suggest that, because Dawe’s poetry is a work of embodiment, more attention needs to be given to his use of rhythm and sound. Unless readers appreciate the subtle variations Dawe can accomplish with rhythm and sound, they may be interested in his poetry but they are unlikely to be implicated in it.

Reading poetry may be complex, but it is not as complicated as some readers make it. They tend to hold it off at mind’s length and stare at it, as if to subdue it into meaning something, anything. They would be better advised to invite it in, to let it into their breaths so they can catch the shape and feel of it, to let it into their hands so they can go with the rhythm of it, to let it into their eyes so they can see that observation lies behind association. This may not make the poetry less complex (poetry is meant to apprehend us before we comprehend it), but it will show that poetry wants the body, not just the mind, and that it is less complicated (and less intimidating) if readers recover it as a sensate experience than if they treat it as a highly rarefied

⁵ Bruce Dawe, ‘Introduction’, *Sometimes Gladness* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1989), p. xi. Subsequent references are to this edition (abbreviated as SG) and are included in the text.

activity. Many readers want poetry to be logical; they want to read in straight line till they get to the end of it (a race to see who drops first); but poetry, of course, won't run the race that way. It will keep sidetracking. A skilled reader of poetry learns that if, as Dawe maintains, writing poetry is 'a mix and match outfit', so is reading it. I want, then, to pay Dawe the compliment of treating him as a true poet, not just an easy one, and look closely, practically, at how he works and plays with words.

A useful way of understanding how a poem works is to change its words for a moment and see what goes missing. Any reader who changes the first line of 'Drifters' will soon realise that Dawe's poetry is not as easy as it looks. Change 'One day soon he'll tell her it's time to start packing' to 'It won't be long before he tells her it's time to start packing'. In terms of intelligible content there is no substantial change. Yet the meaning is very different because the heavy stresses have disappeared. The poem opens with at least three heavy stresses: 'One day soon'⁶ incorporates at once the oppressive word of the 'he', the word which generates restless activity, and the heavy heart of the woman who has to live with the expectation of never settling down. Ken Goodwin says 'the circumstances are related from the wife's point of view',⁷ but this is not quite true. While the point of view is very close to and sympathetic to the wife, it is the speaker's point of view, not the wife's. The speaker is sufficiently detached to show that the husband has not yet said they will have to move, but that the wife is, no doubt with good reason, imagining it. Goodwin, therefore, sees the ending of the poem as her act of nostalgia. It is more than this. The point is that her past has been projected into her future and is weighing her down. The irony is that she is held down by movement. This too is played out in rhythm: the hasty rhythms

⁶ Some readers might decide there are six, giving full stress to each of 'he'll tell her', but I suspect vernacular would soften and shorten 'he'll' and 'her'.

⁷ *Adjacent Worlds*, p. 67.

that run out from 'One day soon he'll tell her' signal that the husband's word generates a domestic version of 'the shapelessness of things'. It is worth noting that the detail of the kelpie pup serves a purpose other than realistic description: the man's restlessness is, by association, like the pup 'dashing about, tripping everyone up'. As the poem then moves more closely to the woman the rhythm begins to prefer double stresses and this slows it down in a way that recapitulates the opening phrase (which is almost like the woman's musical code): 'first thing she'll put', 'loaded ute bumps down the drive past', 'won't even ask why' 'held out her hands bright'. If 'first thing she'll put' is read as four stresses, the speaker can be heard halting on the woman's abandoned hope. This is immediately corroborated by the fact that what she will pack first is 'the bottling-set she never unpacked from Grovedale'. The bottling set may act for some readers as a reminder of the woman's social and economic status, but it is also a simple and effective metaphor for a nourished self and a life lived in tune with the seasons. If the woman feels it is no longer worth her while to unpack her preserving jars, she has discarded a self-defining activity and feels herself discarded. Throughout the poem images of fruit support her decision: she is never in the right place at the right time. The blackberries that were bright and full in the past will be those showing 'their last shrivelled fruit' as she leaves. At the same time these blackberries are associated with the only moment when the woman speaks in the poem:

and when the loaded ute bumps down the drive past the
blackberry-canes with their last shrivelled fruit,
she won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where
they're heading for
-she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'

This is also the final moment. Dawe's skill as a poet is evident in his decision to reserve her voice so that the end of the poem coincides with the end of her dream, a dream which

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nevertheless breaks open the settled and defeated voice in which the woman has been placed, exposing rather than ending the story. The images of fruit are not, then, incidental: they reinforce the poem's rhythms and time frames, ensuring that its tone is finally caught between dream and defeat. This ending intensifies and sustains that tone. A reader who cannot tell the difference need only start the poem with:

When they came here, she held out her hands bright with
berries, the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'

One day soon he'll tell here it's time to start packing....
she won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where
they're heading for.

This rearranged poem would carry the same story and the same information, but it has a different breath-and-bodyshape. It will give a more simply defeated tone and the woman's voice will sink beneath the surface. Dawe's ending is powerful because it resists the linear narrative of the woman's increasing powerlessness, revealing her just at the moment when she is about to disappear into silence. It may be a simple trick of positioning but it is effective, and it is not something you learn just by imitating vernacular cadences. Dawe's ending is also powerful because it gives the husband a name, a name contained within a memory, implying that the woman is also remembering how she used to be able to speak with her husband. If this possibility is read in the light of the image of 'shrivelled fruit', it is possible to see the poem as an image of withered love.

It is also important that the last word of 'Drifters' is 'wish' since so much of the poem is concerned with the effects of decision-making and with oppressive and repressive acts of will. Indeed it is possible to trace the spine of the poem as a line beginning with 'he'll tell' and extending through 'will yell', 'will start', 'she'll go out', 'she'll put', and 'she won't even ask' to 'she'll only remember'. Obviously the 'will' refers to the future, but it also carries a submerged meaning to do with

the man's decision and its impact on what other family members want. Goodwin says that Dawe based the poem on his father and the family's own experience of moving around with his father in search of work, that 'At the time of writing the poem Dawe thought that his father made something of a profession of looking for rather than securing work.'⁸ Later he decided this perception of his father was, in Goodwin's words, 'too unsympathetic to be just'. But a careful reading shows that this is not simply a poem about a woman at the mercy of her husband's will. This woman is defeated by her own imagination: she already knows 'she won't even ask why they're leaving this time'. Her 'won't' is something more than the reactive movements that have so far characterised her in the poem: it exposes in her will a prevailing and determining negativity. This is then qualified by 'she'll only remember', but while this checks the negativity it cannot cancel it since her refusal and her remembering are part of her repressed imagining. Dawe, then, has carefully positioned her 'wish' so that its ambiguity is potent: 'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish' fools us into believing this woman's desire can still make itself felt, yet it is spoken as something that will not be said.

'Weapons Training' dramatises, in the voice of a drill sergeant, a more aggressive response to repression. I had always thought the voice was designed to repel the reader, but Dawe's account suggests otherwise:

First and foremost I was interested in the language, the spray of metaphor, which recruits (particularly those in the front rank on parade-grounds) get in good measure from drill instructors. For all their shortcomings drill instructors are inheritors and transmitters of the oral tradition...actors in a theatre, performers in a military NIDA...It was only a

⁸ *Adjacent Worlds*, p. 67.

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secondary consideration to me at the time of writing the poem that the language was potentially sexist and dehumanising.⁹

Dawe's 'spray of metaphor' is less innocent than he pretends. It indicates that the poem is a celebration of the energetic and colourful language used by an army instructor who takes it for granted that every man with a good gun wishes he had hold of a 'woman's tit'. It also indicates that the instructor spits rather than speaks his monologue. What Dawe does not say is that 'spray of metaphor' implies that the voice sounds like a spray of bullets, a possibility which makes the poem more dangerous since it means that the 'potentially sexist and dehumanising' language is no longer 'only a secondary consideration'. A close reading of the poem's rhythm will show that this darker possibility is just below the surface of the instructor's voice. 'Weapons Training' relies on a voice created by a rough, mid-line clamping of the breath (it is like a caesura turned surly). This gives the monologue its constricted sound. It also exposes a disjunction in the voice, a disjunction that in turn allows the reader room to resist. So the poem is doing more than Dawe admits when he refers to it as if it were simply a dramatic enactment of parade-ground ritual. Once again, a simple way of showing this is to re-write it, re-lining it so that it works with a shorter breath and does not have the sharp intake at mid-line. In such a version, the poem would go something like this:

And when I say eyes right
I want to hear those eyeballs click
and the gentle pitter-patter of falling dandruff
you there what's the matter
why are you looking at me
are you a queer?
look to your front
if you had one more brain it'd be lonely

⁹ 'Poet Dawe Explains More', *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, p. 38. Dawe is answering questions supplied by Year 12 students from Kidman Park High School, Adelaide.

This version does not take away from the diction and imagery which convey the instructor's 'oral tradition': phrases such as 'if you had one more brain/ it'd be lonely' and 'the unsightly fat/between your elephant ears' remain as recognisable signs of the aggressive culture into which the recruits are being initiated. Yet it is a very different poem. Breath and surface meaning are now more in line; the effect is smoother. There is no longer the same sense of the voice itself being 'a burst/from your trusty weapon'. In other words, this removes the coil and violence. Consequently readers are less likely to be as threatened by the voice: if they don't like the sexism, racism and homophobia that bolster this crude heteromasculine performance, they already have enough distance from it. On the other hand, readers who are prepared to accept that tough times require tough talk are not going to be disturbed by any instability in the voice. Either way, once the gap goes from it, the voice loses its power to encircle the reader and the reader no longer has the need and space to contest its power.

Another effect of my rearranged lining is that the rhyme scheme is repositioned. Dawe's version is employing its end-line rhyming in a manner which, because it is (in this case) so truculent, helps constrict the voice. Moreover, the rhymes, like the mid-line pause, often signal repressed anxieties. If you alter the rhyming of 'tit' and 'nit', you further disguise the heteromasculine anxiety that assumes the male is less stupid if he can exercise power over a woman's body. If you let go the rhyming of 'hear' and 'queer', you give less prominence to the homophobic element, just as any fiddling with the 'position'/ 'ignition' rhyme will weaken the association of weapon and penis. I am obviously doing a suspicious reading, but a change in the rhyme scheme would make it more difficult to do such a reading. And if I did not have the final rhyme of 'said' with 'dead' I would not have been alerted to the possibility that the poem realises all along that it is not the enemy of the discourse so much as the discourse of the enemy which is killing the men.

If 'Homecoming' displays a very different attitude to war, this is because it has found a different rhythm as well as a

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different feeling. In 1972, while the Vietnam War was still being fought, Dawe recorded the feelings that prompted the poem:

Unlike many whose concern for the unfinished war in Indo-China is of recent vintage, I have followed the fortunes of that tragic country for twenty years, and recall how I walked home to the place I was living at in Melbourne bemused by the news of the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. There is a stage one reaches sometimes in understanding some process where anger, revulsion, scorn or hate no longer seem to apply. A stage, in fact, where the sum of human misery, confusion, and blind slaughter is so overwhelming that all that is left for one to feel is a kind of love and the desolation born of love. This war, where both sides seem so unable to understand each other that the supreme rationale appears to be summed up in devising new ways of murdering each other, has an inevitability about it which Sophocles would understand. So one fixes one's gaze on this same process, the thread through the murderous maze. And one *sings* the process, because there is nothing else left to do.¹⁰

According to Goodwin the poem, written in 1968, was more immediately inspired by a magazine cover featuring a photograph of 'a US tank returning to base with dead and dying soldiers draped over it' and a story telling how the very transport planes used to shuttle in dead bodies were returning to Vietnam with fresh loads of troops.¹¹

In order to sing this desolation, the poem employs a swaying, gathering breath that holds at once the rhythm of repetition (the monotony of war) and retrieval (the labour of homecoming). This rhythm is the vocal correlative to the central image of the spider's web. The poem opens: 'All day, day after day, they're bringing them home'. Try a different version:

¹⁰Bruce Dawe, 'Rhythms and Realities', *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, pp. 36-37. (His emphasis. This was an ABC radio broadcast, 18 July 1972.)

¹¹*Adjacent Worlds*, pp. 85-86.

They're bringing them home.
All day. Day after day.

This voice is holding back. It is not swinging in the web of sorrow. It is also more positive, as if the poem is about arriving home, when the original opening emphasises that it is about labouring through time with the dead. The full-stops give the impression of self-contained moments; the commas convey a cumulative experience. Even as simple a word as 'bringing' is important because it inclines the address and the action in the reader's direction. So it implicates the reader. Change 'bringing' to 'taking', for example, and you have an address and action that are moving away from the reader. And if you were to change 'bringing' to 'bearing' or 'conveying', you would lose the reference to the colloquial expression, 'bring it home to someone'. To bring something home is to make someone feel and understand an experience, even to recognise their involvement in it, and this is the poem's intention. The phrase, 'bringing them home', is repeated three times in the first part. As well as suggesting bodies piling up, this repetition implies that the reader is being drawn into the 'bitter geometry' which will, by poem's end, include homes and families, even dogs, in this one long sentence of war. It is, of course, significant that the whole poem is one sentence: this is the grammatical face of 'the spider grief' as he 'swings in his bitter geometry', drawing the jungles and suburbs together.

The webbing is also played out in the poem's rhythm. Rhythm, which is not quite the same as metre, is sometimes difficult to determine and describe. For example, Ken Goodwin's account of the rhythm of 'Homecoming' is not the one that I want to give. Goodwin writes:

In a reflection of the theme of the poem many of the lines begin with a regularly accented rhetorical phrase and then break up into rhythmical disorder. The third line, for instance, begins with the now established rhetorical pattern 'they're bringing them in' with its established rising rhythm of five syllables including two accented syllables. Then it breaks up into unpredictable rhetorical and rhythmical patterns, each

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phrase with its own distinct rhythmical arrangement. It is a metonymic indication of the contrast between the orderliness of the military support arrangements and the chaos of the front-line deaths.¹²

However, in reading a line such as ‘they’re bringing them in, piled on the hulls of Grants, in trucks, in convoys’, I would have the first syllable stand alone, reminding me that it works vertically as a repetition, then interpret ‘bringing them in, piled on the hulls’ as two instances of /xx/. The ending, ‘of Grants, in trucks, in convoys’, then becomes iambic, tightening the movement slightly and emphasising the struggle, with the double stress on ‘convoys’ miming a movement loaded down with bodies. Goodwin’s reading sees the rhythm as a work of contrast, mirroring the contrast between the front-line and the ‘military support arrangements’, and, later, between ‘the chilling horror’ of war and ‘the homeliness of civilian life’. I hear military and civilian experience being woven together by the poem; I do not hear ‘many of the lines begin with a regularly accented rhetorical phrase and then break up into rhythmical disorder’. It could be that rhythm, in this poem, is best scanned across the whole piece (like one long line turning in the breath). If this is done the basic unit becomes /xx/. This, I would argue, makes the voice itself the spider’s web. In other words, the primary rhythm is organised around the rhythm of ‘bringing them home’, where the two stresses (at the beginning and at the end) are like the connections of the web and the two unstresses in the middle are like the curving strands. Other examples of this can be found: ‘day after day’, ‘bringing them home’, ‘picking them up’ ‘those they can find’, ‘bringing them in’, ‘piled on the hulls’, ‘zipping them up’, ‘tagging them now’. The rhythm becomes more predominantly iambic when it gets to the hair cuts and wants to get the planes moving, but the curving voice returns in ‘shadows are tracing the blue curve of the Pacific’. I am not saying the poem is metrically regular, only that it uses this unit as the principal factor in the organisation of its rhythm, and that the primary effect of this is

¹²*Adjacent Worlds*, p. 86.

to hang grief in its voice. This is the voice that can be heard holding the final moments:

and on to cities in whose wide web of suburbs
telegrams tremble like leaves from a wintering tree
and the spider grief swings in his bitter geometry
-they're bringing them home, now, too late, too early.

On the evidence of these three poems it would seem there is more you can say about a good Dawe poem, especially if, instead of being fooled by his vernacular surface, you pay attention to the complexities in his rhythms, which signal the complexities of his images, tones and perspectives.¹³ It is these complexities which account for the fact that his poems can attract quite different readings. This is the case with 'Life Cycle' and 'And a Good Friday Was Had By All'. 'Life Cycle' discovers something quasi-religious in football rituals and so some readers feel they must decide whether it is saying sport is a substitute for religion or saying religion is just a game that ought not be taken too seriously (and certainly not as seriously as sport). A more considered reading will probably have to settle for something in between. Apart from the fact that many of Dawe's other 'life-cycle' poems, such as 'Homo Suburbensis', are affirmations of vernacular ritual, the tone of 'Life-Cycle' is too affectionate for simple parody, whether of sport or religion. It is worth remembering that the dedication is part of the poem, that Big Jim Phelan, a Collingwood committee man, was 'the man who became a surrogate father to (Dawe) in Melbourne in the 1950s',¹⁴ and that 'for Big Jim

¹³Peter Kuch makes a similar point, finding in Dawe's extensive use of ellipsis evidence for a postmodern reading: 'Thematically, ellipsis gives him access to the puzzlement and the absurdities of contemporary life, the extent to which habit, custom and ritual seem to promise but rarely yield coherence. Many of Dawe's poems are about experiences or events that are on the way to being understood. Structurally, it enables him to give his poems a melodic shape, to phrase them, and so represent effectively and economically the interestices, the gaps and silences, the discontinuities of experience.' (*Bruce Dawe*, p. 81)

¹⁴Goodwin, *Adjacent Worlds*, p. 70.

Phelan' might key the poem to a note of affectionate mischief. Goodwin remarks that Dawe 'often protects himself from any accusation of solemnity by sliding out at the end on a minor note',¹⁵ but such notes are also Dawe's way of protecting, if not solemnity, seriousness. In 'Life-Cycle' the final note is minor not because the footballers' faith is being devalued but because the rising voice cannot quite believe its own fervour. A slight heightening in diction and inflection conveys affectionate humour, but not mockery. So 'passion persisting' is a little too self-consciously alliterative to be solemn, but it is nevertheless affirming an ongoing dream. The juxtaposition of 'old-timers by boundary-fences' and the dreams of mythical creatures is comic, but it also releases a sudden and recognisable sadness into the poem, just enough to counteract any suggestion that the old-timers are fools. This may be a gospel of the Drawl more than the Word, but it is still a celebration of everyday ceremony. From the ambiguous title to the cleverly inflected and ambiguous reference to Simeon with which it ends, this poem is 'for Big Jim Phelan', making the kinds of jokes that only families can make of and to their members.

Perhaps only a member of the Christian family could write the kind of joke that is 'And a Good Friday Was Had By All'. Kuch, realising that there are many differences inherent in 'Christian', locates Dawe quite specifically and accurately within a 50s Melbourne Catholic scene which stressed incarnation, immanence and social involvement. Whereas James McAuley's Catholicism and poetry might well be described as hierarchical, Dawe's is demotic.¹⁶ In keeping with a postmodern preference for uncertainties, Kuch then shows how 'And a Good Friday Was Had By All' writes against its own iconographic tradition. The image of the 'springboard' diver is 'a violation of collocation that radically recontextualises the event', while the poem's intertextuality inclines not so much towards the gospels as towards Josephus's

¹⁵ *Adjacent Worlds*, p. 70.

¹⁶ Kuch, *Bruce Dawe*, pp. 62-67.

history and Hemingway's 'To-Day is Friday' (which contains the line, 'He was pretty good in there to-day'.) Furthermore, the poem avoids the question of Christ's divinity and excludes the supernatural. So 'Dawe's Roman soldier remains puzzled by what has happened, while that puzzlement itself remains firmly lodged in the gaps and silences of his everyday life.'¹⁷ This is a very sophisticated argument, but I am not entirely persuaded. Nor am I persuaded by Dawe's own account:

The Gospel of St. John has always been my favourite — especially such passages as: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend...", so I thought, then, of those frequently recorded cases of people who die trying to save others in a fire — and of the wondering attitude those who witness such terrible events have — a puzzlement such as, one imagines, the centurion had, witnessing Christ's death...¹⁸

While this reading is credible, it minimises the extent to which the poem is resisting a clear-eyed, theological understanding. The 'blind man' is, in a sense, the poem. I would, then, see the poem more darkly than Dawe but less darkly than Kuch. I would pay more attention to the final image, that of 'a blind man in tears'. This seems to me to break free of the speaker's uncertain control, whereas Dawe gives control back to the centurion's awe and Kuch gives control back to his mistrust. Kuch effectively rewrites the order of the final images:

It becomes obvious that the Roman soldier is impressed by the way that Jesus has conducted himself. His reference to the 'drill-sergeant' who 'thought he was God' but 'wasn't a patch on...this Nazarene, the 'whole damned creation', and his reference to 'a blind man in tears', betray his feelings that there might be some theological significance in what has happened. But such feelings are shown to coexist in tension with the soldier's belief that someone in authority 'must have had it in for' Jesus, and that the only people who apparently

¹⁷Kuch, p. 74.

¹⁸Bruce Dawe, 'Until the End of the World', *Bruce Dawe: Essays and Opinions*, p. 88.

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are sympathetic to him are a few women and some curious bystanders.¹⁹

In this reading, the 'blind man in tears' no longer has the final say (which now goes to women and curious bystanders who, in the poem, appear before the blind man). Instead the image turns back into the poem, almost disappearing as one of three possibilities for 'theological significance' which the centurion will not contemplate. This is to ignore the simple, writerly fact that an image or word placed at the end of a poem can be invested with added authority, inviting the reader back into the poem and also out in front of the poem. The 'blind man in tears' is such an image: it is sudden, surprising, gripping and it exercises more power than the images of the sergeant and the diver. Nor is it of 'theological significance' in the way that they are. They use wordplay in 'God' and 'damned creation' to introduce and restrain the possibility of real transcendence, but the 'blind man' image acts as an unexpected exposure of human need. If it is 'theological' at all, it is because it marks the absence of (which is also the hope for) saving presence. The image, then, does not only return to the silences within the voice: it escapes into a silence before the voice, snagging the poem on a 'puzzlement' which is neither faith nor doubt.

Since the Australia which recognised itself inflected in Dawe's poetry is disappearing, it is worth remembering that moments such as this, when a speaker begins to hear his voice dividing within itself, occur often in Dawe's poetry. They indicate a self-critical and transformative dynamic in what might appear to be an imitative, even dated, vernacular. They also reveal a poetry that is evading, even as it attracts, the ideas which different critical and cultural interpretations want to attach to it. In this way Dawe's poems may well continue to speak of recognition, even if the only ones to hear are the slow listeners.

¹⁹Kuch, p. 74.

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