



St Mark's
Review

A journal of Christian thought & opinion

No. 238, December 2016 (4)

*Poetry and
the sacred*



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Editorial

John Foulcher

I'm grateful for the opportunity to guest edit this edition of *St Mark's Review*, though I'm not quite sure the feast of poetry and reflection before you needs much introduction. I'll be brief, then, and let you draw your own conclusions about the relationship between poetry and the sacred as you read.

In considering collation of this issue, I thought of Australian poets who were not only concerned with the spiritual or religious dimensions of life, but those whose work was among the best this country has to offer. To my delight, almost all the poets I contacted were enthusiastic about offering a contribution, whether it was a poem or two, or a prose reflection on the connection between poetry and the sacred. There are practitioners here from various Christian traditions, as well as from Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds. There are also several who would describe themselves as agnostic but for whom a concept of the spiritual life is essential.

So what is it about poetry which makes it so instructive for our spiritual existence? Geoff Page and I discuss this in a conversation recorded in this issue, while Kevin Hart discusses in his essay the connection between prayer, the poetic impulse and religious practice in the creation and appreciation of poetry. Judith Beveridge considers the ways in which the components of poetry incarnate spiritual impulses, and, in his own personal gospel of writing, Mark Tredinnick looks at the nature of poetry itself and reflects on its intrinsic value in enhancing all human endeavour. Each of these writers comes at the question from different angles, and each uses poetry as a doorway into firmer understanding of life beyond—or embodied—in the material.

In a recent issue of *Quadrant* magazine, poet Alan Gould made this observation:

... I lay through the small hours in wide-awake conversation with myself, hearing the opening squawks and flutes of the dawn chorus. And I asked myself ... All right, Alan, why do you persist?

First and foremost you must write for yourself, surely.

No. To write for myself has always struck me as a paltry and airless motivation.

You have some readers, write for them.

I do, of course, trusting that my fiction (and poetry) has substance, craft and sense ... [But] it is the beggarliness which in turn requires constant vigilance that my behaviour does not slip into the plaintive, eager-to-please opportunism of the beggar. Can I justify persisting in a beggarly vocation?

No, Alan, but you could always write for God.

I don't understand.

Perhaps you do not believe in God?

I'm active in the process of making up my mind.

Putting belief aside, you can imagine God as a presence encompassing the completeness of Reality, can you not? The known and unknown, the evident and the undisclosed.

Yes.

Then you can write in favour of that, and not merely in favour of the effects your effort might have on your own time.

Like writing for posterity? That's self-deluding. And vain.

Not posterity, but your own contribution to an All that does not depend on the present for assessment ...

And listening to the squawks and flutes of the bird-life from the gas-blue daybreak outside, I experienced a mild, not altogether sure sense, that to persist in the business was as much to do with the undisclosed as it was to do with the evident. And therein lay its worth, perhaps.

The undisclosed and the evident. To me, Gould has encapsulated the value of poetry in the spiritual quest with this duality, despite his admission that he's still in the process of deciding about the existence of some kind of God.

Indeed, he implies that the obsession with the question of God's existence seems somehow superfluous to the notion that one writes within a reality that is more than the disclosed world, where one's own shortcomings of perception are compensated for by the certainty that such perception is by necessity flawed. Uncertainty, then, becomes a thing of beauty, and a joy forever.

Perhaps it's this sense of incompleteness, this sense of the inevitable failure of our endeavours which is the attraction of poetry for both writer and reader. Poetry points to a deeper understanding, to another world, while acknowledging the impossibility of making that understanding tangible. It's a place where the sin of our finitude is forgiven, where we can rest with ambiguity, as Kevin Hart suggests.

I like Gould's distinction between writing for posterity, an impulse which is indeed gratuitous, and writing to be part of a greater Reality, to settle in a place where words can take us out of time's reach. Each of the poems here seems to do exactly that. Despite the differences in their creators' beliefs and circumstances, the lion lays down with the lamb in the spaces between their words; swords and ploughshares are mined in the same space.

As I said at the outset, I'm not sure much more needs to be said. One contributor asked me whether I'd be making judgments about what constitutes a spiritual poem or a spiritual observation. No, I replied; if a contributor considered their work spiritual or religious, it wasn't up to me undermine that conviction with judgment. I would allow our readers to explore that space for themselves. My own understanding tends to accord with that of Les Murray, who contended that:

Religions are poems. They concert
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry.

(‘Poetry and Religion’)

In compiling this issue, I gave contributors the choice of providing either work already in the public sphere or new and unpublished work, dependent on their feeling about that which best expressed their views about poetry

and the spiritual life. Where work has been previously published, it has been acknowledged. I am grateful for contributors and their publishers in allowing for this.

As always with the poetic sensibility, the connection between the spiritual and poetry is best expressed in metaphor rather than in argument. Metaphor allows for endless possibilities; it escapes the cage of defining statement. In this sense, perhaps Alex Skovron is speaking for every poet in the extended metaphor of his 'Stylite'; all of us remain perched on our poles, bared to the terror and the beauty of existence, in the hope that we will not descend before we 'touch the clouds at last / with completed eyes'.

Further reading

Each of the poets who have contributed to this edition of *St Mark's Review* has been extensively published. For those who would like to explore further the work of the particular poets who have contributed, here are my recommendations:

Judith Beveridge	<i>Devadatta's Poems</i> (Giramondo 2014); <i>Storm and Honey</i> (Giramondo 2009)
Lachlan Brown	<i>Limited Cities</i> (Giramondo 2012)
Michelle Cahill	<i>The Accidental Cage</i> (Interactive Press 2006); <i>Vishvarupa</i> (Five Islands Press 2011)
Bruce Dawe	<i>Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954–2005</i> (Longman Cheshire 2006)
Anne Elvey	<i>Kin</i> (Five Islands Press 2014)
Russell Erwin	<i>Maps of Small Countries</i> (Ginninderra Press 2016)
John Foulcher	<i>101 Poems</i> (Pitt Street Poetry 2015)
Alan Gould	<i>The Past Completes Me: Selected Poems 1973–2003</i> (UQP 2005)
Robert Gray	<i>Cumulus: Collected Poems</i> (John Leonard Press 2012)
Kevin Hart	<i>Wild Track: New and Selected Poems</i> (Notre Dame UP 2015)
Andrew Lansdown	<i>Fontanelle</i> (Five Islands Press 2004)
Geoff Page	<i>New Selected Poems</i> (Puncher and Wattmann 2013)
Alex Skovron	<i>Towards the Equator: New and Selected Poems</i> (Puncher and Wattmann 2014)

Contributors

JUDITH BEVERIDGE is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *Devadatta's Poems* and *Hook and Eye*, a selection of poems published in the United States of America by George Braziller. She teaches post graduate poetry writing at the University of Sydney. She is one of four editors of the recently released anthology, *Contemporary Australian Poetry*.

LACHLAN BROWN teaches literature and creative writing at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. Lachlan's first book of poetry, *Limited Cities*, was highly commended for the Dame Mary Gilmore award. His second volume of poetry, *The Surface of Your Lunar Inheritance*, is forthcoming with Giramondo Publishing.

MICHELLE CAHILL is a Goan-Anglo-Indian writer who lives in Sydney. She writes poetry, fiction and essays. Her second collection, *Vishvarūpa*, was shortlisted in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. She received the Val Vallis Award and was highly commended in the Blake Poetry Prize.

BRUCE DAWE AO is one of Australia's finest poets. He has published fifteen volumes of poetry and has won numerous prestigious awards including the Patrick White Literary Award. In 2000 he was made an Australian Council for the Arts Emeritus Writers Award for his long and outstanding contribution to Australian literature, and in 2001 he was awarded the Centenary Medal for 'distinguished service to the arts through poetry'.

ANNE ELVEY holds honorary appointments at the University of Divinity and Monash University. Recent publications include, in poetry: *Kin* (2014) and *This flesh that you know* (2015); in ecological biblical studies: *The Matter of the Text* (2011). She is managing editor of *Plumwood Mountain: An Australian Journal of Eco-poetry and Eco-poetics*.

RUSSELL ERWIN lives in the Southern Tablelands where he is a farmer. His latest collection, *Maps of Small Countries*, was launched in Canberra mid-year, 2016.

JOHN FOULCHER has published ten collections of poetry, the most recent being *101 Poems* (Pitt Street Poetry 2015), a selection of his previous nine volumes. A new book of poems, *A Casual Penance*, is forthcoming in 2017. He lives in Canberra with his wife, Jane, who is an Anglican priest.

ALAN GOULD's fourteenth collection of poetry, *Charlie Twirl*, will appear from UWA in February 2017 where the poems, departing from his earlier intrigue with fatalism and character, address music, the mysteries of what we 'see' when we listen. Alan Gould has also published nine novels and two collections of essays.

ROBERT GRAY has published thirteen books of poetry and a memoir, *The Land I Came Through Last* (Giramondo 2008). His work has been widely translated and has been set for study on university and secondary school curricula for decades. He is seen as one of the contemporary masters of poetry in English.

KEVIN HART's most recent books are *Kingdoms of God* (Indiana UP, 2014) and *Wild Track: New and Selected Poems* (Notre Dame UP, 2015). A new scholarly volume, *Poetry and Revelation*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2017, and a new collection of poems, *Barefoot*, is forthcoming from Notre Dame UP in 2017. He teaches at the University of Virginia in the United States.

ANDREW LANSDOWN has written fourteen books of poetry and fiction, with his poetry and short stories being published in over seventy magazines and newspapers, and being included in over sixty anthologies. He lives in Perth, Western Australia.

GEOFF PAGE is based in Canberra and has published twenty-two collections of poetry as well as two novels and five verse novels. His recent books include *Gods and Uncles* (Pitt Street Poetry 2015) and *PLEVNA: A Verse Biography* (UWA Publishing 2016). He also edited *The Best Australian Poems 2014 and 2015* (Black Inc).

ALEX SKOVRON's sixth and most recent collection, *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (2014), was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards. A volume of short stories, *The Man who Took to his Bed*, is forthcoming from Puncher & Wattmann. He lives in Melbourne and works as a freelance editor.