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David Musgrave, *Anatomy of Voice*
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David Musgrave has won many, perhaps most, of Australia's major prizes for single poems, and it's perhaps less known outside of Sydney and Melbourne that he has put what he has won, and much more, into publishing other poets' work through his prolific Puncher and Wattmann press. Many poets think of him as the first go-to publisher of their manuscripts, rather than as one of Australia's most outstanding poets. Now, as a result of another discerning publisher's recognition, readers have additional opportunity to experience the appeal of his writing.

His most recent book, *The Anatomy of Voice*, does credit to Jacinta Le Plastrier and her colleagues at Gloria SMH Press, who recognised the unusual candour of the poetry, its engagement with serious concerns, and its inventive structure. The publisher describes *Anatomy of Voice* as a book-length poem and presents the text in a way that handsomely emphasises the ghosting of the "voice" of the book's subject in the poet's mind: sequences of words are printed in reverse on the verso of each poem in the first part or section of the book, so as to show through as titles: "host guest ghost"; "skull skin skein"; "ear ere air" and so on. These put me in mind of the monumental work of New Zealand sculptor Mary Louise Brown, whose sequences of words on public sculptures in Auckland and Wellington streets and parks similarly challenge pedestrians and observers to reflect on the effect of a small alteration—progressive vowel shifts that create a syntagmatic puzzle half resolved at the end of a walk.

The Anatomy of Voice is dedicated to its "only begetter," identified as "Mr W.M.," Musgrave's gifted mentor and friend, William ("Bill")

Maidment, lecturer and scholar of Early Modern and later English at Sydney University. About whom, more, anon.

Going by title and form, the poem's most apparent ancestor is Richard Burton's 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a prose work in three "Partitions" that proclaimed an intention to explore the nature, causes, effects and cure of that condition. In our century, melancholy still interests mind scientists who describe it as a state manifesting degrees of sadness, mourning, disengagement and associated emotions. John Donne knew it, and so did Coleridge, who enacted it in his great poem "Dejection: an Ode." Musgrave's "anatomy" grows from similar ground, grief made all the more poignant by recollection of the voice of his departed friend. That voice, and "voice" in its many connotations—utterance, conversation, eloquence, persuasion—is at the heart of his book, whose contents, divisions, paraphernalia and scholarly apparatus reinforce indebtedness to Burton's work, while playing fast and loose, as Burton does, with any declared plan. Musgrave's first Partition, outlining the "voice in mind" that haunts the poet, visually mimics the aural effect of the recollected voice, through keywords printed in a way that images the slipperiness and distortion of language and memory. Individual poems in this section sample historical, physiological and mythical accounts of voice, song, echo, and silence.

The second Partition, a series of visual emblems incorporating modern texts, acknowledges the sixteenth and seventeenth century scholarly pastime familiar to Burton's contemporaries. Maidment was a connoisseur of emblems and emblem books, the visual poetry of earlier times, whose origins include architectural decorations as ancient as Pharaonic Egypt's. Renaissance humanists' emblems were printed images accompanied by didactic verses on fate and the "humours" that were thought to determine dispositions to anger, courage, introspection, patience and the like. Emblems, circulated among friends, provided witty reflections on virtue, equanimity, and recognition of folly. Following Maidment's fascination with emblems, Musgrave amusingly cites a letter from Maidment that reported a quasi-modern "emblem-type poem" ("not by Hokusai") discovered on a scroll in the British Museum:

> When I wake up early in the morning
> the song of the nightingale on the plum-branch
> is much more entertaining
> than the moralizing of parents.

So we have a poem in a letter in a poem that treats with emblems and verses concerning enjoyment of the world versus conformity to others' desires. This recursive verbal performance, presenting the past contained in a present that has already passed, aptly suggests the process of memory and the insistence of recollected voice. Rather than dwelling on morbid sense of loss, Musgrave, following Maidment, offers the timeless tension between sombreness and joie de vivre and its resolution in a witty endorsement of an overriding life force.

This paradoxical situation suggests that if the world of the humanists offered good grounds for melancholy and depression, it still provides cautionary advice in a response involving introspection, intelligence and wit. Melancholy still seems a gloomy topic, and considering the news cycle's dire focus on misery, it is difficult to declare what's to be happy about at any time. Keats's prescription for dealing with a variety of love-melancholy—giving oneself up to meditation upon the glum mood—may result in some epiphanic breakthrough, though more creative immersion in handling the crisis (such as the act of writing such a poem as Keats'—or Musgrave's) seems to offer greater chance of joyful resolution.

Musgrave's poems do not dwell on anything like the recurrent 24-7 news, and his poem addresses a more interesting idea of affection: not love alone but the harder topic of friendship. His poem takes another cue from Burton's mouthpiece, the Latin poet Democritus Junior, who declares, "I write of melancholy by being busy to avoid melancholy." This is excellent advice. Early Modern English musicians and painters paid loving attention to the portrayal of melancholy: think of the famous John Donne portrait in the English National Gallery, or Isaac Oliver's portrait of an unknown melancholic man, produced in the same era, or Anthony Holborne's pavane "The Image of Melancholy," from a suite of works bearing the same name as Edmund Spenser's sequence "The Teares of the Muses." Queen

Elizabeth the First is said to have been an excellent musician and to have played the spinet to shun melancholy when she was alone. Ruth Padel's poem on "Mary's Elephant, Elizabeth's Spinet" portrays the English queen's paradoxical recourse to music in a world of State terror.

Some thirty years past, Alec Hope wrote to me, to the effect that a poet can be far from unhappy when writing of melancholy matters. His comment, like Burton's catches the spirit in which I read Musgrave's book, whose title acknowledges the grandiosity of Burton's: *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up*. If that witty approach doesn't also suggest Musgrave's tone, then I don't know what does.

Going by the echo of Burton's title then, we might expect a disquisition divided into philosophical, medicinal and historical parts, with another thrown in for luck. But intentionally or not, Burton's title is witty (consider the phrase "opened and cut up"), and his book is a chameleon, an encyclopaedic essay on thought, embodying, like Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, its substance in a serpentining form. So, too, Musgrave's poem shifts, gathering images and supplementary text, in a bravura display of easy erudition, to illustrate aspects of the personality, interests and voice of the subject—and those of the author for good measure.

The performance brings to mind certain shadowy Australian ancestors of the long poem-sequence treating with psychological and philosophical concerns. One such is Christopher Brennan's 1913 *livre composé*, *Towards the Source*, built of parts whose titles and topics reflect analogous concentration of thought and existential crisis: consider "Twilight of Disquietude": "The years that go to make a man" and "What do I know? myself alone." Is it too ingenuous to also think of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and its speculative "time present and time past / are both perhaps time present in time future, / and time future contained in the past"? Eliot's speaker declares "my words echo / thus, in your mind." Another multi-divisional poem, *The Wasteland*, gets a

nod in poem 4 in Musgrave's third Partition; Eliot presents us with one "unreal city," Musgrave with three. Anyone who has driven through Scone in New South Wales might appreciate the unreality of labelling that town a city along with Newcastle and Sydney.

The poem's dedication, with its keyword, "begetter" suggests its character as a kind of love-letter. Bill Maidment received that sort of admiration and affection from several generations of students and fellow teachers. He represents a world now gone, when an Air Force radio operator, journalist, plein-air geographer and adventurer, forensic critic, collector of Australian folklore and arcane Renaissance knowledge, and brilliant lecturer could exist in one person, and hold a packed lecture theatre in such thrall that the listeners erupted in applause not only at the end of lectures but sometimes following a bravura exegesis.

Maidment eschewed academic preferment and honours, which endeared him more. Many of Musgrave's fellow students attribute greatness to Maidment—and not only students in Musgrave's generation. I also wonder at my good fortune to have been inspired by his conversational and scholarly genius. Maidment was at home in discussing classical rhetorical tropes, coded language in Romantic novels, mythical, zoological and botanical allusions in Lawrence, and the subtleties of Joseph Furphy's novels. He elucidated, in an Honours class, the tragi-comic episode of Tom Collins and Nosey Alf in *Such is Life* in a way that revealed Furphy's genius in having Collins, that other "riparian philosopher," remark to readers that Alf was "the most interesting character within the scope" of the book. Maidment also brought to interpretation of that comic masterpiece his personal experience of rowing the length of the Murray River. He knew its anabranches and billabongs as well as he knew those of the late-Victorian cultural landscape.

People I've recently spoken to have lit up at hearing of Musgrave's project in this book. Leo Scheps, Pacific historian, cultural commentator and my contemporary, recalls Maidment's "gentle irony, humanity, [and] lack of dogma," and as "Softly spoken and never assertive or impatient with students. He always came up with unexpected readings & insight." He reminded Scheps of an Aristotelian philoso-

pher friend who, like Maidment, was "personally influenced by the illustrious [John] Anderson, which would explain a lot." My mention of Maidment had sent Scheps back to re-reading Lawrence in order to recollect Maidment's lectures.

The actor John Flaus, another fellow student, recently showed me his forthcoming collection of short philosophical poems, with the comment, "It has long been my intention to dedicate them to the memory of a great scholar: W.M. Maidment. Bill was the major influence in my intellectual development." The poet Vivian Smith told me that in the course of his own academic career at Sydney University, Maidment was the best teacher he'd known. And Musgrave's elegy has had its fans ever since a draft section appeared in *Snorkel* magazine.

The death of such a beloved person as Maidment is a great provoker of self-examination, and many poets have sought the "cure" for grief that poetry offers—witness Milton's "Lycidas," Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard," Shelley's "Adonais," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain," Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," Plath's "Daddy," Bishop's "One Art," or Lowell's "For the Union Dead." So with Musgrave's poem, which has for me that same air of dramatising the nature of chagrin and sorrow, and of revealing the selves within that entity we call "self" while working toward consolation founded on memory of the subject's best qualities.

I don't know that we have many truly great elegies in Australia—"great" in terms of revealing why we admire another's qualities, and exploring the emotional grounds on which friendship rests. How many magisterial Australian elegies of the last one hundred years can we name? I'd posit Zora Cross's "Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy," A.D. Hope's "Ode on the Death of Pius the Twelfth," Fay Zwicky's "Kaddish" and Peter Porter's "An Exequy." Add what you will, but think of the nobility of temperament and thought such poems confer on subject and writer alike. I think I can get away with words like "nobility" and "virtue" (problematic as both are) in speaking of elegy. We don't revere any moral quality less than the best. We deplore the death of some member of our circle at times—perhaps because it calls into question the stability of a shared world-view or commitment to some art, but sometimes our poets'

records of a writer's passing remind me of the notice friends at a party take of someone who has left the room while the party carries on. There may be hidden treasures in Boomer-Gen poets' remarks on the deaths of their contemporaries—Michael Dransfield, Charles Buckmaster, Vicki Viidikas, Martin Johnston, John Forbes, Robert Harris, and others. But it seems to me we're too casual, perhaps too much in a hurry to get on with our own grabs at fame.

It's all the more wonderful then, when such a work as *Anatomy of Voice* appears. Musgrave's contribution to the genre is an unusually eloquent disquisition on the ways in which endearing traits and fine expression of thoughts and emotions are worth preserving and emulating. So in this sense, the scope of the book is ground-breaking. I know nothing like it in Australian poetry, in its simultaneous meditation on the phenomenon of voice—the recalled voice of the dead hero, "voice" in general, and also poetic voice. These aspects compel attention, but they have special urgency for a poet. They stem from the fundamental rhetorical work of fitting words to occasion. As readers, we might contemplate, as Musgrave has, the question, what is the voice of David Musgrave?

Do poets have authentic voices, even, and especially when they inhabit voices of characters they have heard or imagined? Assuming there is such a thing, what is the authentic voice of Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, of Shakespeare in his plays and poems, and in his sonnets to another "Mr W.M."? Keats remarked that strictly speaking, a poet has no personality. I'm rejoiced to meet an analogous and wholly characteristic comment by Maidment reproduced as a footnote on page 67 of Musgrave's *Anatomy*: "I don't believe in the self. I don't think that there is such a thing. I think that there are selves if you want to call them that."

I leave other such insights for readers to discover, but ask this: why restrict the question of voice to a concern of poets? What constitutes any person's authentic voice?

The seriousness of such questions as the poem raises is critical in an age obsessed with "performing" the self (whatever that might mean). And for all the seriousness, Musgrave marshals scholarship as entertainingly as Robert Burton or Sir Thomas Browne might, and he adds the insights of modern satirists and comic writers to those of

contemporary clinicians. In this, he displays delight in having such a range of writing to play with. Milton and Handel's "hide me from Day's garish eye" becomes bathetic: "I sought to hide from the Day's garish eye / by walking in the bush"; St Augustine's grand announcement, "To Carthage then I came," is transmogrified in "To Glasgow then I came." And note how Musgrave smuggles in a line of Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion* (I leave that for you to discover). More oblique borrowings abound: Kafka's remark on the sirens' silence as "voice at its purest" gains in poignancy when the siren is understood as the dead mentor-Muse. The poems in this *Anatomy* seethe with such transmutations that re-endorse and give life to what was written before. They also compel reflection on the nexus of life and art, and the problematic involvement of mimesis.

The ironic undercutting of literary texts nowhere lessens the essential seriousness of elegy or the toll of grief. Instead, it reinforces shared values of the poet and the deceased friend, while leaving ample room for such distressing recollections and dreams as generally accompany loss of parents, children, spouses, lovers, and friends. These phenomena are the stuff of classical and later poetry as well as modern psychiatry and counselling. Anxiety? Yes, for many poets, there is a sense that poetry is not up to the occasion, even when it gives rise to poems like Petrarch's monologue addressed to his deceased friend Sannuccio, telling him to greet Laura in heaven. Do such poems simulate emotion? Mallarmé constructs poetic "tombs" for the shades of beloved poets Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and a final unfinished "tombeau" for his own son, Anatole, which seems to immure Mallarmé himself with the person he mourns. The effect on a poet, of "dismaying" (literally, un-making himself) is no less intense in *The Anatomy of Voice.*

Musgrave's style embraces street patois and learned obliquity: hip talk or obscure, according to a reader's willingness to step into deep waters. It's the teacher and scholar in Musgrave, I expect, as it was in his mentor. Musgrave's quest, for the right words and forms to handle grief and emerge in celebratory mood, takes him through a labyrinth of possibilities mirroring Burton's employment of the self-distancing

mode of Rabelais, Spenser, Cervantes, and later exponents: Joyce, Beckett and Borges, for whom language was a lolly shop and pharmacy. Samuel Johnson deprecatingly called Burton's language "a tissue of many languages; a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another." But Musgrave's heterogeneous expressions, drawn from older and more recently discovered older regions, are kindly yoked and mostly plain sailing. Where the language is most baroque, it is actually funny, as in the "list-poem" on the bush walk (number eleven in the Third Partition).

That bush-walk, by the way, is not the first example of Musgrave's and Maidment's delight in the loveliness of Australian land, rivers, fauna and flora. Musgrave celebrates the pleasure of being away from cities and even, in a splendidly lifted phrase, being away from "the pleasant haunts of men and herds." Like Maidment, he goes deeper into country. Look out for such flashes combining quintessential Australian and classical Greek phenomena as "the crackling of fire / the din of stone on wood / the brekekek of frogs," in the early part of the book and, in the third part,

> a river in summer
> rivergums   silver wattle   cicada-
> realms,
> their bluff of sound

These, like the expression, "As I walked down Cathedral Street," link old Sydney with remoter folklore and early modern lyric, abridging time like memory.

The final poem in the book reconciles the world of the poet and that of his subject in a classy resolution that finds the poet and his subject driving solo in liminal light through forest at different times—a perfect return to the

> host   guest   ghost

of the book's first Partition.