

Andrew Taylor: Australia's Poet of the (Extra)Ordinary

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Abstract

Andrew Taylor (1940-) has been regarded as one of the most significant living Australian poets largely due to the fact of his unusual use of the poetic language and the selection of topics. He undoubtedly belongs to the group of the poets, like John Kinsella, who create mastery in their so-called 'niche' market, quietly continuing to produce compositions of remarkable quality, and receiving national and international recognition for their achievements. Andrew Taylor's *Impossible Preludes (Poems 2008-2014)* is a unique and beautiful retrospective on life, love and everything in between, with its full array of extraordinariness embedded in the ordinariness of everyday life. Each line is a story within itself, painting a picture for the reader to follow as vividly as one might expect in an art gallery. Every poem is full of colour and weight as it takes you on a journey into the mind of this creative and talented individual. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to disclose these elements in Andrew Taylor's poetry that make it so extraordinary in its ordinariness and find out possible sources of this idiosyncrasy.

Keywords: Andrew Taylor, Australian poetry, extraordinary, ordinary

Introduction

Born and bred Australian, Taylor has developed an interest in the world within and without his homeland. In his previously published volumes of poetry, such as *Travelling* (1986) or *Sandstone* (1995), his attention concentrates upon the homely landscapes, either big Australian cities like Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide and Perth or he travels along country paths, in bushland or the beach.

However, later volumes, such as *Götterdämmerung Café* (2001), *Rome* (2005), *Regret about the Wolves and Other Poems* (2006) or *The Unhaunting* (2009), take the reader to the world outside Australia, particularly to Germany (Wiesbaden), Italy (Rome) or Poland (Opole). "Two Dates," from the volume *Impossible Preludes*, is certainly a very unusual poem not only because these "two dates" denote two different times – though close to each other – but rather because they indicate two different spaces situated in two different geographical and climactic zones, one in Europe, Wiesbaden in Germany, the home town of Taylor's wife, and the other in Australia, Perth, W.A. where they spent two decades together.

The first part starts on the date marking the beginning of Northern hemisphere winter, 22 December:

"Two Dates"

1. 22 December 2011, Wiesbaden

So this is the official
start of winter.

Was that what Tuesday's snow
was all about, not some meteorological mistake
or an over-eager Frau Holle
plucking her goose too soon?
Its tatty remnants still spread

like a picnic's leftovers
on the lawn, a robin
warily inspecting them, while busy
as usual blackbirds hop and pose.
Even our squirrel is out
a fluent darting redcoat
in the rain. Parsifal
go back to your shelter, your hoard
of hazelnuts, before you catch
cold. This is officially
winter, you're supposed to snooze. (13)

The poet seems to be amazed at the sight of snow, so uncharacteristic of Australian landscape, particularly at that time of the year, when the Aussies prepare for Christmas at the beach and suffer from the heat. In contrast, the native German animals and birds prepare themselves for the winter sleep whereas patches on snow on the lawn recall the picnic leftovers in the poet's mind.

The other part of the poem takes us back to Australia in time to celebrate Australia Day not so much as the political or national holiday, but rather as a stunning summer contrast to European winter:

2. Australia Day, Perth, 2012

You'd think the lawn would melt
in this heat and trees
burst into incandescence,
the flippy tails of wagtails wilt
and dangle and ants under paving
too hot to touch would coalesce
into tiny deposits of coal.
People on the beach
would bleach and generations hence
children would scuff their ossified
iPhones a few bones and a towel.
Seven more days of this
while Queensland's flooded
again! This is Australia
and we accept thee
for hotter and for colder
for dryer and for wetter

Until death ... ah well/ it's not so terminal yet. (14)

The beach, the symbol of Australian lifestyle, democracy and personal freedom, serves here as a sharp contrast to European wintery lawn, itself full of life and scorching heat. Northern December and Southern January are poles apart even though they are close to each other in the calendar. They can also be read – metaphorically – as death and life, winter and summer, frost and heat, sleep and activity, night and day.

The next poem from the volume, "River," is still different. This time, river, a geographical feature, is a starting point for the poet's philosophical reflection of the nature of passing time:

How can we measure
a reflection's depth
how can we figure
what my kayak inscribes
on what it means
to be a universe's mirror?

The river sleeps
its face sleeps
it's a sheen of perfection
as I dig my paddle in it
stirring at all that deeper
is not asleep

How can one define a river?

A thin downhill of water
a living a fishing a swimming
a highway that never finishes
a place for walking
a place for reflection?

You're on the opposite bank
of my dream
you're wading waist deep
into the current
that's sweeping us further and further
together (26-27)

Written in couplets, the poem seems to be a reflection on reflections, embedded deeply in transcendental, Emersonian philosophy of nature, to which Andrew Taylor gave a specifically Australian pragmatism of everyday objects, like a kayak, alongside simple activities like paddling and swimming. His ability to define simple phenomena like a flowing river ("a thin downflow of water," "universe's mirror") is absolutely amazing and extraordinary. He uses simple vocabulary to speak of

great things, universal problems and dilemmas just in order to get his message across to his readers who need simplicity and straightforwardness in the times of complexity and perplexity.

References

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Bio-note

Ryszard W. Wolny is Professor and Director, Institute of English and American Studies, University of Opole, Poland. His interests focus largely on British and Australian literature and culture. He is an author of about a hundred scholarly publications which include, among others, *The Ruinous Anatomy: The Philosophy of Death in John Donne and the Earlier Seventeenth-century English Poetry and Prose* (Perth, Western Australia, 1999), *A Cry over the Abyss: The Discourse of Power in the Poetry of Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne* (Opole 2004), *Australia: Identity, Memory, Destiny* (Opole 2008), *Crosscurrents: Culture, Literature and Language* (Kielce 2008), *On Time: Reflections on Time in Culture, Literature and Language* (Opole 2009), *Culture and Postcolonial Studies* (Kielce 2012).

Within the last five years, he completed a monograph entitled *Patrick White: Australia's Poet of Mythical Landscapes of the Soul* (Wrocław 2013) and edited (or co-edited) *Evil Ugliness Disgrace in the Cultures of the West and East* (Opole 2013), *The Masks of Ugliness in Literary Narratives* (Frankfurt 2013), *Poisoned Cornucopia: Excess, Intemperance and Overabundance across Cultures and Literatures* (Frankfurt 2014), *Outlandish, Uncanny and Bizarre in Contemporary Western Culture* (Wrocław 2016), *Disease, Death and Decay* (Opole 2018) and *Redefining Australia: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Perspectives* (special issue of *Anglica*, Warsaw 2019). Currently, he is working on *Littoral Modernism: Patrick White's Theatre of Australia* (Frankfurt 2019). He is a co-editor of Peter Lang series *Silesian Studies in Anglophone Cultures and Literature* (with Ewa Kęłbowska-Lawniczak).

Ryszard W. Wolny is member of ESSE (European Society for the Study of English), EASA (European Association for the Study on Australia) and IAUPE (International Association of the University Professors of English, Chair of Australian Panel). In 2017, he was elected President of Polish Association for the Study of Australia and New Zealand and, in 2018, Vice-President of Polish Association of the Study of English. In the years 1992-2000, he undertook postgraduate studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. In 2019 he was a Visiting Professor to Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.