

## Geoff Page

### *Agnostic Skies*

Five Islands Press, 2006, 84 pp

Reviewed by

### Robyn Rowland

*Agnostic Skies* is Geoff Page's seventeenth book of poetry. A significant voice in Australian poetry, he has won, among other awards, the Patrick White Literary Award and the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry for his last book, *Darker and Lighter* (Five Islands Press, 2001). In a broad body of work which includes prose and verse novels, the breadth of his range is impressive, encompassing a movement between politics, satire, lyricism and topics as broad-ranging as terrorism and jazz.

The title of this book is a challenge to the reader. It extends Page's previous entanglement with the topic, as if he can't stop the niggle it gives him in terms of his attitude to politics, religion and the nature of being human. But what is he really saying about 'agnostic skies'? Exploring this question takes us to the deceptively simple face of the poetry and beyond it: between the lines. In his poem 'Reading in silence/reading aloud', Page writes:

*The poem lives between two souls –  
the one who set it down in type  
the other in a shaft of light  
with what she hears between the lines.*

*Agnostic Skies* is a book that maintains a similar movement of ideas to Page's previous book, *Darker and Lighter*. That is to say, although the poems are individual, they form a kind of daisy chain so that we might move from a group of landscape

or urban poems into a group of poems on music and through them into political depths, linked sometimes by imagery, sometimes by the subtleness of an idea. Here though, there is less satirical verse and more poems that punch out the doubt that Agnosticism requires.

Throughout, the poet seems to be testing the way of poetry, the need for it, the position for it among these things. And poetry itself has more than one position. On the one hand, he writes:

*Poetry is silence, surely,  
a matter of the inner voice –  
and what it and the moving eye  
can lovingly arrange between them.*

But then ..

*Poetry is in the mouth...*

and, still ...

*But poetry is in the voice  
the way that salt is in the sea. ('Reading in  
silence/reading aloud')*

This intimates the finely realised tone of this book: that of equilibrium. It is not a confused juggling, but a careful movement between opposing ideas, events, belief. Even his own claimed Agnosticism is a balance between his frequent references to God and his total faith in disbelief.

In its most negative definition, Agnosticism is scepticism. But in Huxley's original form it is the belief that there is not a way to know about God – no evidence either way. It holds the question of God and soul open, neither knowing, nor not knowing. But of course, it still means a relationship to God in a struggle with the concept. A bit like going to Ireland and realising a person can never be Irish without relating to Catholicism. We may reject it, or accept it, but we can't not relate to it. Bertrand

Russell, arrested during World War I for anti-war activities, had to fill in a form on entering prison, and defined his religious affiliation as "Agnostic". A prison officer is reported to have said: 'Ah yes; we all worship Him in our own way, don't we.'

Page has told us about his Agnosticism in *Darker and Lighter*. He wrote there in 'Credo'

*The dark-night-of-the-soul agnostic  
prefers the right to doubt*

...

*He builds no temple out of bricks  
and does not like to preach.  
He thinks conviction more impressive  
slightly out of reach.*

In this new book, Page (or his narrator) is constantly irritated by God, constantly moving towards and in conversation with elements of god-ness. His landscapes are full of the divine dilemma. Even the Friesian cows in 'Ruminants' have

*... said already all they know  
of what's out there beyond the light*

*and all our rumination.*

From cows to Christ, the unknowingness continues. In the poem 'Thirty Three', Christ is robbed of old age and deterioration, as well as youth and family. And at his death 'about those things he knew not of / he knowingly refused to speak'. But the Christ story failed us. It became a straight jacket and in the book, organised religion gone wrong is listed – with the Taliban, the Nazis, the Stalinists, the witch-hunters – as problematic, cruel, unforgiving. There's a sense of disappointment in the poem 'The Revelation', where the manger-birth becomes a death as

*The destiny it wore within*

*would bear no variation.  
Starting out from shepherd's talk  
it vanished in translation.*

Religion is always failing us, yet paradoxically, the Agnostic becomes companion to the Christian in 'The Brightness', a response to an Al-Quaeda video that promises 'We will get rid of those / who are not believers. / There is no brightness for them / in this world or the next':

*Non-believers? Hey, that's me!  
Middle-aged, mild-mannered me,  
under wide agnostic skies...*

Violence done in the name of religion is repulsive to the narrator, as is the 'certainty' that stamps its intolerance. In 'Down with beauty!' 'Long live death!' the 'holy men sweep up the dead', and in 'The Stalinists, the Taliban', 'the certain like their sonnets neat. / And need your screams to be complete.' With all this brutal certainty before him, the poet is reaffirmed as 'faithful in my disbelief.'

Writing of Arthur Stace's persistence in chalking 'Eternity' all over Sydney, Page asks the question:

*Was it just the Christian claim:  
the Cross that cut all time in two,*

*the choice of Hell or Heaven?  
Or was it something vaguer  
out beyond the clouds?*

And beyond the clouds is where his gaze lies in his metaphysics. In his previous concrete work, uncluttered by image and adjective, he has carved out the land for us and some of his pastoral poems are evocative in their portrait of a life gone by. But in this new book, he finds his life situated inside the apartment block. 'I cultivate the sky' he wrote in *Darker and*

*Lighter* and his gaze in *Agnostic Skies* is still drawn constantly to sky, to clouds, to the changing uncertain nature of its canvas.

In 'Vers Libre' a skateboarder is writing poems in the air; and in 'The Bride is flying', based on Rosemary Laing's photograph of a bride levitating over the Blue Mountains, the bride is free, flying out and 'she almost has the knack of it, / correcting as she goes'. Even his book covers are crowded with treetops, with the sky on *Agnostic skies* drowned, it seems, in clear water. Clouds are dominant on both covers. They remind me of the Katoomba photographer Harry Phillips and his exquisite photographs of clouds, struggling to interpret these as signs from the heavens.

But beside this lightness of sky, there is a darker reality in political poems against violence and imperialism. 'Convergence' is a powerful and chilling poem tracking the coming together on the Alice Springs desert highway of an English couple and the man who is to become a killer. There is a sense of the inevitable unnecessary meeting of these paths, built up through a layering of common everyday detail. Agnosticism is its own moral position. I don't think Page's conviction is, as he claims, 'out of reach'. The poet sets out the limits of our humanity in these poems and in poems on terrorism, nationalism, our appalling immigration policies, our appalling Aboriginal policies ('The Afternoon of A.O. Neville' or 'The Revisionist').

Each socially and politically confronting poem here is barefaced, set down in such a way that we cannot avoid seeing the wrong done, though the Agnostic edge gives us a two-sided coin. 'Threnody at Terre Haute' is a poem emerging out of the execution of the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people when he blew up the Alfred P. Murrah federal building.

He insisted the bombing was necessary to send a message to what he called an out-of-control government. McVeigh's bombing was an act of vengeance for the FBI's attack on the compound of the Branch Davidian cult at Waco.

He confessed to the bombing, expressing no remorse and calling the dead children 'collateral damage'. Executed by lethal injection in Terre Haute, he invited Californian conductor/composer David Woodard to perform a requiem on the eve of his execution, which was performed at St. Margaret Mary Church near the penitentiary, to an audience that included the next morning's witnesses. He chose 'Invictus', a poem by 19th century poet William Ernest Henley as his last statement. Through that poem, with its claims for nobility in death and life – 'I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul' – Mc Veigh implies his own justification for a certainty of belief that what he did was justified, right in God's eyes, and because of that, he does not fear death.

In Page's powerful poem of response to the execution – a threnody (lament in music or song) – 'Threnody at Terre Haute' – he argues

*We should have left him living till  
it started seeping through,  
the singularities of death,*

*the whole one hundred sixty-eight,  
the sentences unfinished  
of the children in the crèche,*

The poem continues on through moments in the days of various victims of the bombing - their ordinariness, their suspended half-finished lives. 'We should have let him wriggle', Page says; 'we should have let him listen' to the 'long collective wave or whisper' of pain from those left behind, enough to see that what

he did was only repetition, that he was not “captain” of his soul, nor “master” of his fate’. Instead we ‘squeezed oblivion in his veins / thinking it must be revenge.’ And in a poem that makes the reader feel angry and vengeful, we’re turned to question our own sins of vengefulness, as his death was just ‘One more added to the rest ... / one hundred sixty-nine’.

This not to say that there are not humorous poems in the book. ‘Algebra’ deals with the multitude of relationships that arrive with the ‘x’; and there are love poems such as the delicious ‘Melons’. Some poems are evocative of time passing and age moving in, such as ‘Twenty four’. And painting, photography and music are also used to good effect in many poems. I particularly like ‘Land and Sea’, not least because it introduced me to William Robinson’s surreal landscapes. These paintings pose a question about the greatness and mystery of creation. Stunning in their beauty, they have a spiritual air, a quality of other worldness, located in the concrete Australian landscape. Things are, in Page’s interpretation of this work, still unfinished, unanswered, and ‘the world is full of wildness still’.

Page uses, but is never captured by form. Throughout *Agnostic Skies* he continues with his authentic, personal voice. Remember that ‘poetry is in the voice / the way that salt is in the sea.’ But this voice somehow still carries the land in it, the Clarence River and the stories of pastoral life. I don’t know why that is so distinct for me. But I think it has to do with his rhythm: so strong, that rhythmic voice, often rhyming, carrying within it a sense of familiarity and a sort of comfort. It adds to the balancing act of social commitment with non-judgement; of knowing while not-knowing. In this buoyant form, despair is absent. In his poem ‘At Tosolini’s’, where agnostics share coffee while the church bells ring at funerals for

the ‘certain’, he writes that ‘we can never quite believe/ and yet we don’t despair’. A kind of circular music pervades his language. Though sometimes he desires to change his regularity of form – to write, for example, in American free verse – he tells us in the clever turning of ‘I Think I Could Turn Awhile’, that he won’t/can’t, because: ‘That rhetoric is / someone else’s ... / I’d hear the clipped / iambics calling, / my template just / below the line.’

Page’s work is strongly located in the concrete images of ordinary living. Through them he rehearses with us the dilemmas and contradictions of politics and moral position. Yet he still retains a lyric surprise. In his uncharacteristically ethereal poem ‘The Cello Sonatas of J.S. Bach’, the sonatas are

*‘made of passageways and stairways,  
halls that do not have an ending,  
stairs with landings halfway up  
to show the sudden stars.  
The architect loves repetition ...  
with secret variations  
you don’t quite see at first.’*

We also might not see at first the deeper concerns Page locates within his own work. Yet in spite of his grappling with politics and religion, it may be to beauty that he finally gives his faith, as, taking us on a surreal glide towards the stars, he advises:

*Play it late, say 3 a.m.,  
and like some wild, forgotten child  
you’ll run all night the empty stairwells*

*flowering in the dark.*