



SOMETIMES GLADNESS

Collected Poems 1954 to 1997
FIFTH EDITION

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Introduction

Like other poets before me, I am frequently asked: 'Why do you write?' The most interesting aspect of this question is its frequency, and I have often wondered whether novelists, short-story writers, and playwrights are as often asked as those who write poetry (of course, they are sometimes the same people). The motives of poets are, I suspect, assumed to be more mysterious than those of their fellow-writers.

And when one answers: 'Because I feel like it . . .', one senses the disappointment: so simple an explanation for so seemingly complex a literary form! On closer inspection, or in following up the question in discussion, it can turn out to be more complicated, but the nearer view should not be seen as any more the truth than the farther view. Both are true, just as Montaigne is speaking the truth when, in the middle of his essay on friendship, he explains his exceptional relationship to a friend by saying simply: 'Because it was he, and because it was I.' There is much more to any special attachment than that – but it must come back to that in the end: *one does it because one feels like it.*

Not, one insists, in the hope of fame. In this country we leave that prospect safely with sports stars, pop-singers and quiz-show comperes. Not because we feel, to begin with, that we have something to say; we can *never* be sure that it will be other than a false start anyway, and the illusion of 'divine fire', 'inspiration', is rather harder to sustain beneath these muse-depopulated heavens than elsewhere! No, we write out of a need to come to terms with some concern, something 'bugging' us – the popular American expression fits well here for that inward feeling which we need to get out there where we can come to terms with it, where it can be seen to have a shape, a character. It is the formlessness of things we find hardest to handle; art is one way of giving handles to those things.

What kind of concerns am I thinking of? Well, such questions as what it is like to be in love, or in a war, or in a city, or in a dream, or perhaps all these together, because the experience of living may be like any or all of these at once. To be in love, for example, may seem like being in a state of siege; to be in a city may seem like being caught up in a dream. We are, to paraphrase Tennyson, a part of all that we have

met, and much else besides. We look for the means of expressing our experiences of feelings in sounds and metaphors which will suggest, evoke, these inner states, these concerns.

If we succeed to some extent in dealing with these concerns, the skills we have used nevertheless remain mysterious in their origins and occasions. We cannot predict when they will prevail, and when not – and bad poems, like dropped catches, proclaim our common humanity. We all have to write them in order to write better ones, and it does not do to lament them. When the French officer surrendering at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 hesitated, at the entrance to his bunker, to step on the body of a dead Viet Minh soldier, the Viet Minh commander is reported to have said: ‘Step on him. He has done his bit for the revolution.’ We should see our least successful poems in a similar phlegmatic light – they, too, have done their bit for our cause.

Looking back over what I have written, I note the number of metaphors I have used to externalise my ideas and feelings about the writing process. Metaphors have the appeal of a mix-and-match outfit. We will search about in the dark analogy-wardrobe for what seems, feels, appropriate, and try it on. But here again there are problems, since we don’t always know exactly what it is that we wish to express, or what the party is for. This is a point worth developing. It is sometimes assumed that the writer will be always in the best position to know what was meant in making this or that choice of language, and that the critic (in the classroom, in the critical article) must or should defer to the writer. Not so. A writer’s choice of language must of necessity be intuitive. There is a choosing process going on, but it will hardly be a conscious, intellectualised one, any more than it would be with, say, a cricketer or a tennis player. Like them, writers will make their choices on the basis of what they have learnt, or failed to learn, earlier, elsewhere, at the nets, and in previous games. The practice sessions are where conscious choosing takes place (‘left foot forward, get behind that ball’ and so on). Should we find ourselves studying a text closely, we are, potentially, in the same situation as the player in a practice game, or at the nets; we are learning, by a process of breaking down, of consideration of the component parts of the action, what, technically, is involved. But, out on the court, at the

wicket, we are into the real thing, where our response to the challenge either succeeds or doesn’t. Of course, we can rationalise our intentions afterwards (‘Well, I meant this . . . or that . . .’) but it should not be taken always as the last word on the matter by others – it is still what Americans call ‘Monday morning quarter-backing’, being wise after the event, and the instinctual nature of the event itself should act as a corrective to any belief that the author necessarily knows best.

Of course, like all analogies, this one will not completely work – we can go back to the poem, in a way that we cannot go back to the wicket and replay the yorker that took out our middle stump or back to the court to return the cross-court volley that left us flat-footed. But writers do not necessarily take much comfort from that knowledge. The writing process will, in every writer’s case, be partly instinctive at the time of first writing. The sheets of paper on which we have scrawled may be still there on our return, but our inner state can never be exactly the same. The pressures that forced that concern up into the light of day will not be in the same state, even though one is still activated by the same concern; thus, carrying on as if one has not broken the process will be impossible. However, it is possible that the problem (if it was a problem of composition that broke the run of thought and not something else, like a hungry cat purring for Kit-E-Kat, or a knock at the door) may be resolved by the break in writing. How often it has been found that a problem seems to resolve itself once one has left it alone for a while!

One of the elements of the experience which we can resurrect to some extent is, in fact, the *sound* of it. A poem sounds itself into speech, into words, and the symbolic record of that progress lies on the page before us. We need to recognise this and get into the habit of hearing the poem which came, originally, out of silence into the head of the poet and needs now to be returned to that natal element, in the head of the reader. Just so, it is said, our relationship to the sea is a recognition of our origins in that maternal ocean from which we all came. Our initial reluctance to hear the poem may, of course, be in part a reflection of that wariness about our inner selves which Australian cultural traditions have in the past encouraged. To confront our private selves in public was, for generations, considered not

'on' for many Australians who skittered nervously away from that kind of confrontation as a threat to their sense of identity. This is changing; we can no longer afford (could we ever?) this gawkiness about our feelings, this national awkwardness. Too many good people get lost this way, and the omnipresent influence of the media, of the shallow and dehumanising value-system purveyed by the consumer society ('Happiness is a Kellogg's breakfast'), make it all the more important for us all to get over that simple-minded view of ourselves which was a stereotype fifty years ago, and which does not do justice to our possibilities as people.

A poem, then, often begins as either a metaphor or a series of sounds at a distance, like those you hear when just too far away to identify the tune – out of reach of certain words, and yet . . . and yet . . . mmm . . . You put them down, searching for the words that will start to take on a direction, an identity, just as a musician searches in a forest of sounds for the ones that will lead onwards into some density, into the self, into the world. And sometimes, just sometimes, you are lucky.

A second question often asked is: 'Why do you publish?' This is a portmanteau question, with several others stuffed inside it, such as: 'Can't you just write?', and 'Doesn't publishing cramp your style?', and 'What good does publishing do, anyway?'

Let's take the first of these and see where it leads us. I publish because that's one way of 'going public', and I believe writers, like other artists, have an essential place in the public forum. They are voices for a range of private and public feelings, private and public ideas. Hopefully, they will often remind others of the relationship between these two aspects of ourselves. Each of us is both a private person and a public person, an 'I' and a 'we', with a private fate and a public fate. No society which wants to remain healthy can ignore this double rôle in which each of its citizens lives. Writers, by the very act of writing and publishing, will be trying to remind themselves and others of that fact. This doesn't mean they are necessarily writing with a specific public in mind. Even defining such a public would be a major exercise, in any case, since for poetry, as for the arts generally, publics are very diffuse.

Of course, we can 'just write', and, since we can hardly identify those who may want to read our work beforehand, 'just writing' is the first stage for all of us. The knowledge that others may read what we have written (many others, perhaps: thousands in a literary magazine, thousands more in a Saturday newspaper's literary pages, even more as a set text for study) is certainly an incentive, as long as it doesn't become our only or main reason for writing.

If it does, if this 'public' becomes a constant factor in our thinking, it can lead us a long way from home. We have, finally, to do what we do for the work's sake: no other motive is personal enough to sustain us without changing us. Poets in dictatorships may need to keep the public (and that dubious guardian of the public interest, the Party) continually in mind. Poets, in less rigidly authoritarian societies like our own, should resist the temptation.

What good, finally, does publishing, 'going public', do? I think that publishing poetry, and the reading of other people's published poetry, helps us to see ourselves and our world more clearly. If we are confused, then it will help us to see our confusion for what it is. If we are lonely, then it will help us to recognise that we are not alone in our loneliness. If we are hopeful, or angry, or loving, or sad, then it will help us to see these as universal experiences that proclaim us human, at the same time as they celebrate our individuality – that essential characteristic always under attack somewhere in the world, and always somewhere (thank God!) defended.

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