

# “There Was Never Any Gift Outright”: Australian Poet Simon West Discusses Poetry and Place in His Fourth Collection *Carol and Ahoy*

Roberta Trapè

The University of Melbourne, Australia

Simon West was born in Melbourne in 1974 and grew up in Shepparton, a large town in North-Central Victoria. In 1996, following undergraduate study in English Literature at the University of Melbourne, he left Australia to travel in Italy. He found work in Northern Italy, outside Turin, in one of the valli valdesi, the valleys in the Cottian Alps where Waldensians settled in the thirteenth century. After a number of years living in Turin, he returned to Australia and re-enrolled at the University of Melbourne. There he obtained a Bachelor of Letters and then a PhD in Italian Literature. His dissertation, “*È tant’e dritta e simigliante cosa*” *Translating the Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti*, developed into *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti* (2009). He published his first collection of poems, *First Names*, in 2006. After publishing his second book of poetry *The Yellow Gum’s Conversion* (2011), he was awarded the Australian Council Fellowship as the poet-in-residence at the B.R. Whiting Studio in Rome, where he spent six months in 2012 and wrote some of the poems of *The Ladder* (2015).<sup>1</sup> *Carol and Ahoy*, his fourth book of poems, was published in

**1** In Trapè 2017, 193-211, I have analysed Simon West’s third collection of poems; the book, with its multilayered places, mirrors West’s journeying into the Italian past and at the same time his ties with his own country. The focus of the essay is the historical



**Edizioni**  
Ca Foscari

Submitted 2019-05-17  
Published 2019-12-19

#### Open access

© 2019 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



**Citation** Trapè, Roberta (2019). “There Was Never Any Gift Outright”: Australian Poet Simon West Discusses Poetry and Place in His Fourth Collection *Carol and Ahoy*. *Il Tolomeo*, 21, 285-294.

DOI 10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2019/21/025

2018. West lives in Melbourne, where he works as a translator and part-time university lecturer. He returns frequently to Italy. Many of his essays on poetry have recently been collected as *Dear Muses? Essays in Poetry* (2019).

ROBERTA TRAPÈ Simon, in "Waking on a Summer Morning" you write

I asked if a verse were no more than a toy,  
then heard the blackbird's carol and ahoy,  
and the traffic's tidal snare drum sough. (21)

A phrase that points the reader back to the evocative and beautiful title of your new collection of poems.

SIMON WEST The title is a little mysterious on first impressions. The word *carol* is more familiar to readers in English as a proper name, and *ahoy* is an exclamation. But here they point to two important tasks of poetry – to celebrate the world in verbal song, and to call things to people's attention. It is in this way that poetry becomes much more than a self-indulgent toy, though it should also be playful.

RT There is a freshness and joy about the places, the blackbirds and traffic, the colours and light which you celebrate in these new poems. It's as if you were encouraging the reader to step into a new world.

SW It depends. There's a stereotype about poetry that says the poem is merely a refuge in which the poet indulges in explorations of his or her emotions; or that it is a form of escapism into some idyllic landscape where the poet can commune with nature. If you mean stepping into a new world as a form of escape then no. I think of poetry rather as encouraging the reader to see the actual world which we hold in common more clearly. Heraclitus is recorded as having said that there is a single common universe for those who are awake. It is in sleep that each of us turns away into our own private worlds.

RT Your previous collection, *The Ladder*, is characterised by the presence of both the Australian and the Italian landscapes, and your poems create new imagery that often presents a powerful juxtaposition of past and present, in Italy as well as in Austral-

---

dimension of space in West's poems. The images of Italian and Australian places, both landscapes and cityscapes, evoke forms through which Italian and Australian nature and culture declare their presence through multiple layers of time. The poems deal with the relationship between past and space, the movement between past and present, and between the physical and the metaphysical. In the evocations of such crossings Australia and Italy meet in an in-between space that the reader is invited to share.

---

ia. A sustained focus of your poetry is the historical dimension of space, in both Italy and Australia. In this new book, *Carol and Ahoy*, the space is essentially Australian, observed from different points of view, complex, mysterious, acknowledging the indigenous gaze, the convicts' dreams, the explores' maps, the settlers' diaries. The book opens with "River Tracks":

Never a straight line or a single course,  
never blue. Most maps mistell you.  
Eager to find where you finish,  
they mistake your daydreaming, your loops  
and faux pas and odd sidesteps,  
your misgivings and floods of largesse. (11)

[...]

Black names that gave white settlers license to the land.

[...]

Rarely have you had to hop, skip and jump  
through drought like your cousin the Broken.  
From the up-high of satellite and migrating bird, you know  
their course by impulse,  
you're as unkempt as a camper's hair, as fickle and  
fractious as a child,  
you are running hand-first through the dark, going the  
long way to the sea. (12)

SW Yes, rivers are an important presence in this new book. I grew up on the edge of town, across the road from parklands which had been left free of development because they were the floodplains for the two rivers that met there, the Goulburn and the Broken. Those floodplains are important for the River Red Gum, a common eucalyptus variety that needs periodic flooding in order to survive. Given the right conditions they can grow for hundreds of years, developing massive trunks. The Latin name for them, interestingly, is *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, because they were planted by the Camaldolese monks in the nineteenth century to help dry up swamplands between Rome and Naples. That story appeals to me, as you can imagine, because of its link between Australia and Italy.

You mention the historical dimension to space, and that's something I've always found fascinating about Italy, where there are so many visible signs of the past that survive in the landscape, and in places like Rome there are many layers of human habitation built on top of each other. That stands out for an Australian visitor. My challenge in this new book was to celebrate that same historical depth in the landscapes where I grew up. The stories are still there, they are just harder to find.

RT Indeed there are some powerful images in your fourth book of poems that evoke the way Australian nature and culture declare their presence through multiple layers of time. The Australian places you return to in *Carol and Ahoy* are those forested floodplains, which must have been imprinted on your sensibility by early experience. But that may not be the only reason why they have stayed with you and drawn you back. In "Floodplains on the Broken River", you write:

We dwelt across from bushlands where the Broken  
brought the town to a halt. As far as Mooroopna  
old red gums filled the floodplains  
and farming yielded to a stand of bush.  
[...]  
Bush-ground was time-heavy and intricate,  
steeped in the elements, layered like an archeological dig.  
(16)

And in "Back at the Broken River":

I've often sat on these banks and let he eye  
float in the bush on the far side of the water.  
[...]  
but sitting here again I'm overwhelmed  
by the measureless convolution of matter,  
the ramifications of complex things as weird  
and vast as a vista of mountains. (24)

sw That historical depth can be found in the natural world as much as the human. I was fascinated, for example, by the way leaf litter - the detritus from those eucalyptus trees particularly - remains on the ground for years, building up in layers. The eucalypt is not deciduous, but drops leaves and branches throughout the year, particularly when it's suffering heat stress. It takes a long time for that material to break down, the leaves slowly changing colour as they oxidise, forming a beautiful mosaic.

RT These are complex, layered places, of decay but also rebirth, where the old and the new, the dead and the living are beautifully entwined. It's not surprising that they speak powerfully to a poet so sensitive to the layers time, and the dialectical relationship between past and present.  
You write in "The Magic Box - Nonna Tells a Fairy Tale"

The present  
for all its fears is porous, the past survives. (45)

SW Yes. That's right. It's important to make a distinction between living in the past and relating to the past. In Australian poetry a dominant rallying cry has been that of the need to start afresh, to leave the baggage of our colonial past behind in order to celebrate what is distinctly Australian in the landscape and in our cultural mores. I'm all for the challenge of capturing these new experiences and points of view in poetry, but I think it's naive to believe you can best do that by rejecting the past. Languages don't work like that, nor do cultures more broadly. I love that image Dante puts at the beginning of *De monarchia* of the tree flourishing on the banks of a river. He takes it from the first simile to appear in the *Psalms* - the man who follows God is like a tree planted beside a river which yields its fruits in season and whose leaf never withers. In *De monarchia* the river no longer stands for divine law (though Dante may have expected readers to have that in the back of their minds), but rather the artistic legacy of our forebears, the cumulative knowledge of the past as it comes down to us in cultural traditions and works of literature. In this way he links the image of personal growth to the classical topos of the thirst for knowledge. But he then talks about the responsibility that tree/artist has to bear fruit and transmit the knowledge it has been nourished on to future generations. It is so characteristic of Dante's long vision, yoking classical and Christian traditions while stretching its sight into the future. The Australian poet Robert Gray in his poem "To a Friend" says, "In writing, it wasn't renown I was after; / it seemed instead an offering to one's ancestors". Dante reminds us that poems are both offerings to our ancestors and prayers for our children. They need to look backwards and forwards simultaneously.

RT In your beautiful poem "On a Trip to Van Diemen's Land" you conjure "sentenced men", your ancestors, and at the end of the poem you write:

The stream below says make your ancestors.  
 Choose that wild goose John Boyle O'Reilly, shipped  
 to a land of Oyster-and-Ale. Take poets who sought  
 to shape examined lives in song. Their gifts  
 are prayer and tribute, just as, fleeing Troy,  
 Aeneas shouldered his father, son and Lares.  
 And before your own transport to fog-thick seas  
 Cling to the past and sing its legacies. (15)

The powerful image of Aeneas's flight from burning Troy closes the poem. Aeneas takes with him his son, the family gods and his father Anchises, who will serve as a wise counselor to him while making his way toward Italy. The father is a link with the past as well.

SW That moment of Aeneas fleeing Troy is a good example of finding that balance between keeping your eye fixed on both past and future. The three things he takes with him symbolise the broader community traditions in the Lares, his own history in his father, and his son who represents the future. The poem on Van Diemen's Land is about how difficult it has been in Australia to look through time - as the name Van Diemen's Land itself tells us. The name was wiped out and replaced with the current name, Tasmania, because people wanted to rebrand the island as a great place for immigrants in the nineteenth century, and Van Diemen's Land was tainted by its association with convicts and the penal settlement. The past was too painful and people wanted to start with a blank slate. In many ways Australia today is having to face up to the consequences of that collective repression, particularly our expropriation of the continent in the name of civilisation and progress, and our damage and in some cases destruction of the many indigenous communities and cultures that have lived here for thousands of years.

RT Australian space in the book is certainly a space of encounters but also of great tensions and violence, for example between indigenous people and settlers in the compelling poem "The Limits of Parable" written from the point of view of the squatter E.H. Curr. Three natives, "erect as reeds, stood among the crooked boles of river gum" witnessing "the crash and devastation and each novel sign of [the white men's] sudden possession".

SW Curr was one of the first Europeans to go through the area of north central Victoria where Shepparton is now located. And he was certainly the first to live there for an extended period. He was young when he went - in his mid-twenties - and apart from a couple of ex-convicts whom he employed as labourers to help him set up his sheep runs he was alone. His memoir is fascinating for its descriptions of his interactions with the indigenous communities of the area. He learnt their language, and often talks of his admiration for their culture and for particular individuals. And yet he was of his time in whole-heartily believing civilisation and progress were on his side and vindicated his dispossession. The parable of the Talents, seen in this light, takes on a frightening dimension.

RT In the impressive poem "Goulburn Valley Eclogue", "[t]wo poets are talking at Jim's place. Scott, the younger man, is a struggling dairy farmer" (52; italique dans l'original). Scott says

What right have we to sing a stolen land?  
The cocksure shouts and cooees of those settlers  
have given way to guilt that mutes our songs.

Jim

There was never any gift outright.  
 What they wrote back then, the squatters,  
 weren't songs so much as naming rights. (54)

SW I've always been struck by that poem by Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright". It's a beautiful poem, but one that we would have difficulty agreeing with in Australia. He writes, "The land was ours before we were the land's", and describes it as "still unstoried, artless, unenhanced". There is no recognition of the dispossession of the Native Indians or their traditions of inhabiting of that land. I find that a bit shocking. He makes it too easy.

RT But in the closing lines of the poems Jim says:

But don't pool in your own despair.  
 These twisting rivers and the towering forms  
 of river gums, our footfalls over ground  
 uneven for the accretions of the bush,  
 all this is in our blood.

The shadows of a storm approaching from the west close the poem, and a celebration of poetry, a new poem to share.

SW For one of the speakers in this eclogue, Scott, that knowledge of colonial guilt stymies his ability to write and he's bitter about his lot - this inheritance he didn't ask for and finds himself having to deal with. Jim, on the other hand, is more optimistic and sees in the writing of poetry a source of redemption and reconciliation. Of course, Virgil's own eclogues deal with these very questions of land ownership, and colonialism, and I've always been interested in the parallels between our own colonial predicaments, and those the *Aeneid* recounts, and the whole question of what remained of Etruscan civilisations after the rise of Rome.

RT Virgil is a strong presence in *Carol and Ahoy*. Your father, to whom the book is dedicated, is remembered in two wonderful poems "Swimming" and "The Twofold Tree"; the former evokes a vision with water, grace and peace, the latter translates a passage from Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the cremation of Misenus.

SW The twofold tree is, of course, the golden bough, the key Aeneas needs to find in order to enter the underworld. But it was really a piece of mistletoe - a parasitic plant that grows on a host. We have a lot of varieties of mistletoe indigenous to Australia. It struck me that that might be another way to think about colonialism in Australia. Some types of mistletoe come to resemble the host eucalypt so well it's hard to distinguish them at a glance.

RT The readers find suggestive references to Virgil in the poems of *Carol and Ahoy*. References to Maenads and oracles in "Agave on the Victorian coast". In "A Twenty-First-Century Poet Timidly Addresses the Muse" you close your poem with an invocation: "Stand by me, Muse. Without you we would howl". For quoting the classics in your books you have faced indifference and even hostility from some in the Australian literary community who advocate, as we've discussed, a rejection of the past in favour of 'the new'.

SW Like the twofold tree, we cannot deny our double identity in Australia. I'm grateful for my experiences in Italy and in bilingualism - for being fork-tongued, if you like - because they have forced me to accept and celebrate that complexity and doubleness within myself.

I've suddenly realised there are a lot of trees in this new book again, and I keep going on about them here too. Writing about trees might be construed as old fashioned, but as with the twofold tree, I'm interested in the way such things resonate beyond themselves. What is a symbol if not something that continues to have ramifications of meaning? We continue to write about trees because they still have something important to tell us.

RT So, can we consider your new book as a continuation of *The Ladder* in also dramatizing the encounters between your land of origin, Australia, and Europe? In "The Turtles and the Waterfall - A Dream" that's what seems to be happening.

I stand outside the house. I have returned  
to meditate on what still fosters me,  
[...].  
Old friends arrive and crowd the lawn. We need  
more chairs. I search outside the shuttered house,  
for we had stacks of chairs last week,  
lent for my father's wake. But now the grounds  
are wide with stands of giant oaks in leaf,  
torsos and pockmarked plinths. I stop to mount  
a toppled column whose flutes gleam with rain.  
And every chair I find has a broken frame.

I wander and my wondering is a key  
until I think my friends have been ignored.  
I turn, but turning see a cairn  
and at its peak a spout whose water pours  
into a pool. Here turtles wait to climb  
the waterfall, rock climbing to its source.  
And I, a child-like man of forty-five,  
clutch at this vision, enchanted, terrified.



And now I'm standing in that square in Rome  
 where four bronze turtles scale the fountain rim,  
 stubborn as salmon to get home.  
 [...].  
 But here the four long-limbed epebes keep  
 a timeless eye on time and never sleep.

In the countryside of Shepparton, the poet is reflecting in a dream-like sequence on what has nourished him over time. And suddenly a sublime vision - he is "enchanted, terrified" - of turtles climbing to a source of water, and then a glimpse of himself in Rome in the harmonious little piazza Mattei, in the Ghetto, looking at the fountain, "where four bronze turtles climb the fountain rim". The living landscape of Australia, and Italy, where statues "keep a timeless eye on time, and never sleep", both past and present, are sources from which you find nourishment.

sw That poem dramatises well the coming together of those two worlds in the narrator's psyche. It reminds me of another way in which I've tried in this new book to engage with our literary heritage in English, and that's in the use of rhyme and metre. I don't want to fall into a facile dichotomy in which free verse is equated with a rejection of the tradition. There are good free verse poets who have an ability to hold past and present together - Les Murray and Robert Gray are great examples here in Australia. But it did seem to me that form could be another way to do that. We have a respectable tradition of formal verse in Australia. Poets like Hope and McAuley, for example, but they had largely rejected Australia in their poetry in favour of a highly-cultured internationalism. Judith Wright and John Shaw Neilson managed to celebrate what was particularly Australian with a formal sensibility. I wanted to extend that - to find a way to talk sincerely and with a vigorous syntax and authentic lexis about the here and now.

I'm glad I allowed myself to give more credence to rhyme particularly. It seems to draw the poem taut and anchor each line. It's like a musical chord, it can't be broken down into its constituent notes. Or like an Om it resonates in the chest as much as the head. And there remains something mysterious and inexplicable about rhyme that is at the heart of poetry. It reminds me of what Emily Dickinson says, "And through a riddle at the end sagacity must go". Not that I'm advocating a poetry of obscurity or rhetorical pyrotechnics. Rhetoric should not be an end in itself or it obscures reality, rather than helping to shape it. I aim at clarity, but I also try to give each word space to breath. There

needs to be chemistry between each word in a poem otherwise it falls flat. And it's as mysterious as the chemistry between two people. Perhaps the poet's a bit like a verbal match-maker. Rhyme exemplifies that chemistry when its working well, but it should run through other words in the line too, and there are other ways it can do so. It's that dynamic organisation of content, syntax, rhyme and rhythm that Yeats admired in the Elizabethans and achieved himself in his later work.

RT Your lines Simon certainly talk sincerely and vigorously about the here and now, but they are also for us readers an invitation to go forward, to plunge into the unknown, to cross boundaries and to explore complexity, even though this entails a danger of losing something familiar.

SW I've always liked the way it's customary to say *permesso?* on entering a house as a guest in Italy. The word is like a ritual for acknowledging the moment of crossing a threshold or boundary into a new world. When you enter a strange house for the first time all your senses are on high alert. You take notice of furnishings and light, you move around to get a sense of the place. You're conscious of being in someone else's private world, and you take your bearings anew. It's as if the new room stimulated you to experience yourself in a new way too. I see similarities with the way we encounter a poem. It's interesting that in English we use the Italian word stanza to denote a paragraph of poetry. We step into a room built of language when we discover a poem that excites us. Perhaps we lose something familiar in the process, but we gain much.

## Bibliography

- Trapè, Roberta (2017). "Simon West's *The Ladder*: Space and Its Historical Dimension in Italy and in Australia". *LEA - Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, 6, 193-211.
- West, Simon (2006). *First Names*. Glebe, N.S.W.: Puncher & Wattmann.
- West, Simon (2009). *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: a Critical English Edition*. Leicester: Troubador.
- West, Simon (2011). *The Yellow Gum's Conversion*. Glebe, N.S.W.: Puncher & Wattmann.
- West, Simon (2015). *The Ladder*. Glebe, N.S.W.: Puncher & Wattmann.
- West, Simon (2018). *Carol and Ahoy*. Glebe, N.S.W.: Puncher & Wattmann.
- West, Simon (2019). *Dear Muses? Essays in Poetry*. Glebe, N.S.W.: Puncher & Wattmann.