

Warning and consolation

Mark Houlahan

Selected Poems

Ian Wedde
Auckland University Press, \$40.00,
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If you dine at Ian Wedde's, the poetic indications are you'll eat well. Among the many charms of this seductive, fatly packed *Selected Poems* are the number of food groups trailed before the reader, as if ready to serve. The pages are alive with pungent goat cheese and tinned ham, with green peppers and dolma, rice noodles with clams and mussels, February peaches, melons, oysters and a "pale jellied / half pear". In some of Wedde's poetry collections, food is more prominent than others, but the preoccupation with feasting on the good things of this earth is career-long. If you imagine a writer as a kind of chef, then Wedde is one with expertise from all over the writer's menu: as cultural commentator and curator; as short story writer and the author of the great novella, *Dick Seddon's Great Dive*; and, of course, as novelist. In all these genres, Wedde has prepared what Shakespeare calls a "great feast of language"; yet, if

you allow the figure to extend, if genres were courses or food groups, it's poetry that Wedde has served most regularly and faithfully, and it is Wedde's status as a poet that this engaging volume presents to us so resonantly.

In time you'd anticipate a full edition of Wedde's collected poems, but, as a middle ground between the *Collected Poems*, say, and individual collections or one-offs (such as the gorgeous Hawk Press 1975 version of the iconic *Pathway to the Sea*), this *Selected* does exactly what it should. It shows the range of Wedde's work so far (over 42 years of poetic production) with selections from each book enough to suggest their scope. This includes all 60 of the *Earthy* sonnets (which I am especially grateful for, as the staples in my first edition are rusting and the cover is beginning to come away). The table of contents gives successively the dates of each book, and the space between each is marked by a handsome John Reynolds drawing where the dates are also marked. Each poem and collection are then allowed a space to breathe. This also means that Wedde here has declined the chance to play with readers, reinventing his poetic self in the way that Allen Curnow, from the 1970s onwards, had the habit of worrying away at various options for reassembling poems and their chronology, asserting his right to re-invent his own narrative.

Yet are these poems "all of a piece throughout", as John Dryden puts it? Are there through-lines across the decades? It seems fair to suggest so. A central collection is *The Commonplace Odes* (2001). Here, Wedde takes his stance and poetic form from Horace, whose tightly packed, sinuously crafted verse lines have been haunting poets since they were first read 2000 years ago in the court of Augustus, first true emperor of Rome. Wedde's poems are a combination of homage to and reworking of Horace's way of addressing the world. At times, Wedde closely reworks famous lines from Horace, such as in the opening "Epode: A Conversation", effectively, with the ghost of Horace, in which we get Horace's famous claim: "But today I have finished a work outlasting bronze" ("Exegi monumentum aere perennius", Horace, *Odes* 3.30); the claims of poets on papyrus scrolls, vellum, parchment, paper and now digital screens are to be

set against more apparently substantial edifices. Wedde's *Odes*, though, are looser reworkings of Horatian themes. Five- and four-line stanzas are used to control the flow of rhetoric, setting lyric observation within a larger argument, allowing Wedde discursive space to develop his thought. Throughout his career, Wedde has developed forms that calmly take their time to unwind. Even the *Earthy* sonnets are really a book-length argument as much as they are 60 individual, 14-line, 10-syllable poems.

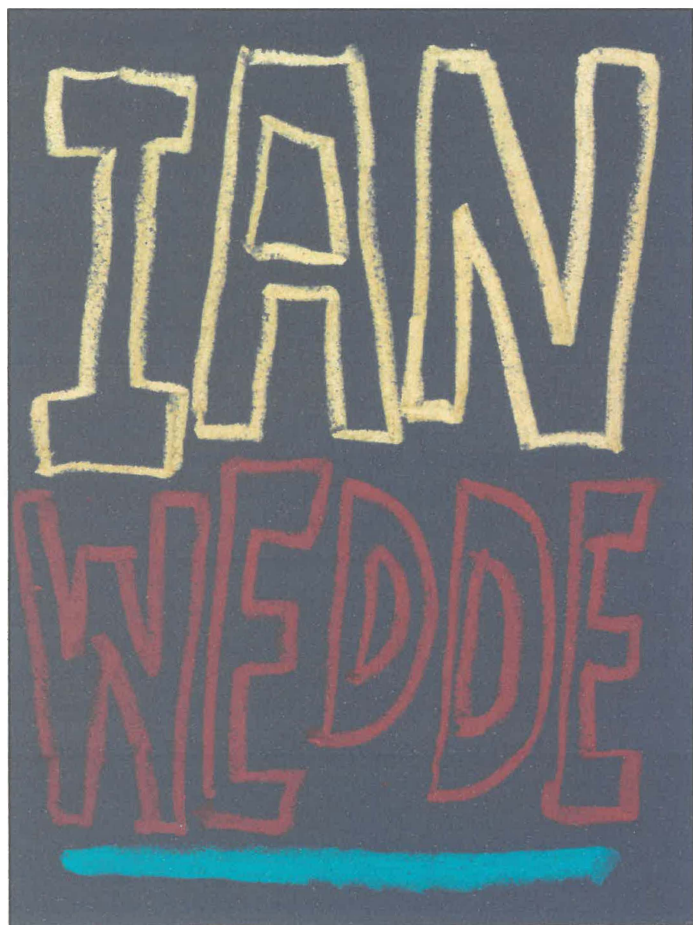
So the question, for Wedde, is working through what Horace would make of the world if he lived something like Wedde's New Zealand life. In *Georgicon* (1984), Wedde uses Virgil in a similar frame, modelled after the georgic poems of agricultural life. Both poets are productive for Wedde through the doubleness of their stance. They lived and worked inside the harshly competitive world of Roman politics, but in their poetry they leverage a distance from that world, the better to observe it. Horace, from his Sabine farm, knows well how the great world up in Rome goes. Wedde, while digging a field drain at the bottom of his garden, making a table from recycled timber, or dishing up a feast of rice and kai moana, remains intent on the specific practice or skill required with a shrewd knowing eye also on the world elsewhere. So, although *The Commonplace Odes* are self-consciously offered as homage to Horace, Horace can be seen as a frequent, ghosting presence throughout the book to hand.


A good example of this would be "Driving Into The Storm: The Art Of Poetry", published in 1984, and dated 14/8/81, the day before the second All Black Test against the Springboks at Athletic Park. In the poem, Wedde recalls donning what became the uniform for protesters in the front line of the bi-weekly protest marches through that long ago winter:

In the back seat
one passenger is taping up his
knuckles....

The back-seat passengers are
checking their helmets and groin
guards

Clearly, the speaker is against the tour. In my favourite piece of Wedde



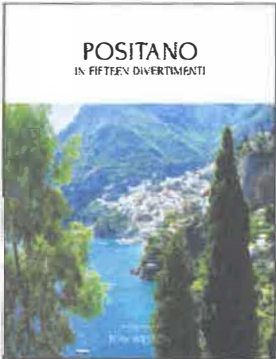


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prose, his preface to *The Shirt Factory*, he recommends reading “short Brecht poems” early in the morning, but here in Wedde’s poem the aim is not a pithily direct statement of political commitment. Rather, the potentially lurid events of the 1981 protests are placed in a much wider context. There’s a memory of music playing throughout, some “semi-classical trash”, “that / trashy muzack” as the poem concludes. The events described begin in panorama, set against a “wide shining blue- / grey body of water / dark smoky mountains”, where the blue water gestures towards the blue of police uniforms the protesters will face. Yet the moment of conflict, with what was then considered to be the harsh use of batons designed to discipline and cower the protesting groups, is withheld from the poem.

Informed readers, by implication, are invited to read the conflict back in, or to play that in their head as an audiovisual while rereading the poem. The landscape, the muzack, the arming protesters, become part of some wider panoply, like envisaging how, say, a baroque painter of history scenes might highlight scenes from Springbok tour conflict zones. So all the elements seem held out in a kind of rueful distance from us. The simple comparison would be to Horace’s ode (1.37) on the defeat of Cleopatra. It’s easier to see that this could be used as a direct burst of Roman triumph than to be certain that Horace himself despises the Egyptian queen. Back to 1981: did the protesters achieve anything? Wedde’s poem is dated a month before the tour ends, so is wily (and beautiful) enough to evade the question.

Wedde’s use of such sources is erudite, always, but not academic in any stuffy sense. His generation (the poets in the recent *Big Smoke* anthology) were inspired by the example of post-WWII American poets to break out of the world of fixed forms and, at the same time, to avoid some of the obvious traps of a resolute nationalism. From poets like Charles Olson, John Ashbery, A R Ammons, Wedde adapts a free-wheeling approach. Most importantly, he wants to get close with his voice to the reader, to engage us in a conversation. The poetic talk can sprawl all over the page, and the poet can seem only just in control of where the line is heading; the poet can also then move in and out of register, high, low, comic, serious. He wants still to be poetic, but with an expansive sense of what the poetic might mean. And the conversation is staged, not just with the famous dead, but with a host of his contemporaries, such as the

sequence of poems to poets, “The Fall In America – Letters From Paradise”, or the tender poem to the late John Dickson from *The Commonplace Odes*. With his poetic peers, Wedde shares a commitment to a paradise that is “earthly anyway, / earthly & difficult & full of doubt.”

The pleasures of the earth are evident in the list of food groups with which I began. In Wedde’s poems, these are designed effectively to taunt the appetites of hungry readers, as you can almost, but not quite, reach through the lines towards these dishes. In the larger scheme of things, it’s the materials of this world Wedde works hardest to make us conscious of. The specifics of whaling, for example, are bought home by the chart of the whale in “Castaly”, showing how ruthlessly and fully a whale would be divided by captain and crew. “Pathway to the Sea” winds its way from digging a “field tile drain” in a puggy hillside backyard, through a denunciation of the restriction of petty local bureaucrats, to a ringing protest against the planned aluminium smelter at the mouth of Otago Harbour. Wedde takes us down to the mud while he winds up to his protests and leaves us with a warning that sounds as true now in our age of eco-crisis as it did in 1975:

living in the
 universe doesn't
 leave you
 any place to chuck
 stuff off
 of.

Well: you can’t blame a poet for global warming. But you can reread his poems, to warn and console.

Mark Houlahan teaches Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and literary theory in the English programme in the school of arts at the University of Waikato.

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