

**Alan Gould. *The Past Completes Me: Selected Poems 1973-2003*. UQP.**  
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, July 22, 2005, p. 26.

Alan Gould, with ten volumes of poetry and six novels to his name, must be one of Australia's most prolific and dedicated writers, though hardly a household name. He has now published a selection of his poetry, from youthful efforts from his early twenties to the mature reflections of middle age.

Gould's poetry is rarely less than impressive. His most memorable poems are character studies. Especially haunting is the 1996 poem 'I Try to Read His Elsewhere Eyes', with its repetitions of the phrase 'the downcast fellow', whose 'eyes will always fall just short / of human contact'. In contrast, from the 1992 collection *Momentum*, there are the 'Treeloppers', jaunty with sharply observed humour combined with awe at their 'lofty, improvising ballet'.

Gould relishes the difficult discipline of poetry. Even in the 1970s he rarely succumbs to the tyrannical fashion of free verse and, radically, his poems often rhyme. Many variants of intricate forms appear, from ballads to haiku. He understands the power of rhythm and repetition to reinforce mood, especially powerful in 'The Ship in Its Trance' from 1981:

Amid farewells and muslin sleeves,  
a mooring hawser splashes free,  
a bowsprit sleepwalks through its arc.  
The vessel moves and does not move  
amid farewells and muslin sleeves.

Gould's Icelandic heritage is used in his early poems to romantic effect, and, although there is nothing in his biography to suggest that he has ever worked at sea, he shows a preoccupation with the lives of sailors with a command of detail which speaks of personal experience. Time, memory, light, and death are constant themes. The world of work seems to fascinate Gould. He admires sailors and tradesman, dancers and acrobats – anyone whose work requires unusual physical skills. There are love poems, but Gould seems to be happy in love and personal anguish is not part of his repertoire. Sceptical – hope and charity he accepts, 'But faith? No thanks,' he says in 'A Quick Prayer' – he

often debates the deep philosophical questions, but is equally adept at evoking consciousness, as in the clever 'Falling Asleep in the Afternoon': 'You start you start to slip like a cliff,' which uses textual gaps to mimic those momentary lapses.

The early poems are powerful but sometimes jagged and uneven and occasionally overwritten. In the two collections of 1992 and 1996 the work achieves the ideal combination of deftness and concentration, more humorous and at ease with itself than some of the earnest earlier poems. In *Dalliance and Scorn*, from 1999, the humour often tips into facetiousness and sarcasm. In *A Fold in the Light* (2001) he returns to the sea with a sequence of 'Sea pictures', and other poems which seem strangely nostalgic for a man only just into his fifties. Overall, the poems in this collection add up to a kind of emotional and intellectual memoir of a skilful and intelligent poet.