

## THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MODERN AUSTRALIAN POETRY.

TRANTER, John and MEAD, Philip, (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia LTD, 1991, 474 pp., and DUWELL, Martin, (ed.), *John Blight: Selected Poems 1939-1990*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992, 259 pp.

Igor Maver

An anthology is never just a collection of poems based on a random and arbitrary selection of verse, it is also always an act of theory and criticism or, in the words of Robert Frost, "an anthology is the highest form of criticism". Recent critical rereadings of Australian writing in the modern world of changing paradigms, under theoretical headings such as, for example, 'post-colonial', 'deconstructive' and 'feminist', also require a rethinking of the way Australian poetry is read both by Australians and non-Australians.

What has been most important for the development of modern Australian verse from around 1930 until 1990 selected for Tranter's and Mead's anthology? Has it been perhaps the impact of feminism, multicultural writing or postmodern strategies, or the poetic examination of modern vs. antimodern, international vs. local, traditional vs. postmodern? The anthology *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, according to the editors Tranter and Mead, "answers the need for a widely-representative and credible anthology of modern Australian poetry, as seen from the last decade of the twentieth century", with emphasis on enjoyment, for poets clearly do not write poems merely to be classified, studied or analysed, but write them above all to create a pleasurable aesthetic experience in the readers.

The book opens with the poems of Kenneth Slessor, which indeed best exemplify the emergence of 'modern(ist)' poetry in Australia. A poet of a comparatively small output, Slessor nevertheless managed to combine specifically Australian and international poetic influences, and to include in them the elements of the grotesque, the exotic and the literary as well as strong visual effects and sound colourings. Particularly interesting for the reader is the rather longish poem "Five Bells", which deals subtly and suggestively with the universal concept of time, thus growing beyond the sheer Australian context.

The Anglo-Celtic group of Australian authors featured, including among others Kenneth Mackenzie, David Campbell, James McAuley, should be especially noticed for the presentation of some of A.D. Hope's rarely anthologized poems, bearing, for his poetry, an unusual Decadent stamp (e.g. "Flower Poem", "Fafnir", "Imperial Adam"). Also, the formally rather conservative poet James McAuley is represented by his early lyrical pieces in which he still reveals the influence of (German) Expressionist poetic searches ("The Blue Horses"), for "the Blue Horses scream aloud:/ A sudden movement

shakes the crowd/ Stampeded on the hooves of fate." The fine contemporary Australian expatriate poet Peter Porter is well represented in the anthology (for example with his re-working of Byron in the poem "On This Day I Complete My Fourtieth Year"; "Sex and the Over Forties" and six more of his poems), Bruce Dawe and, naturally (!), the editors John Tranter and Philip Mead.

One of the strong points of this anthology is that women poets are not under-represented as has been the case in many other earlier books of Australian verse: Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett, Fay Zwicky, Judith Rodriguez, and the younger generation including Vicki Viidikas, Ania Walwicz and Kate Lilley are there, as well as probably the (internationally) best known Australian woman poet Judith Wright. Wright's intense sense of otherness, discernible in her poetry, leads to an attempt to evade it. To long for the word alone inevitably means to long to escape from language entirely and the whole texture of human knowledge. Taken to such an extreme, such a longing entails a move beyond language into mysticism. Along with the often quoted poems of Wright, for example "Gum-trees Stripping", "At Cooloolool", "Woman to Man", her less known lyrical pieces are to be found in this anthology, too. Contrary to Wright's lyrical strain, Hewett's anthologized verse ("Anniversary", "You Gave Me Hyacinths", "First a Year Ago") demonstrates a firm conviction of the continuities of narrative pattern from mythic to present times. But it would not achieve much of its present significance if she were not aware of the fact that no matter where the pursuit of power is played out, it is by writing the narrative that the reader can have significant access to it.

A special problem occurs when the presence of Aboriginal poets is examined. Namely, we do find in the book some of the already 'established' Aboriginal poets, such as Oodgeroo (formerly known as Kath Walker), Mudrooroo (formerly known as the fiction writer Colin Johnson), Jack Davis, who is better known for his plays, but taking into account all the recent Aboriginal poetic achievements, this volume can still only be considered as a paradigm of the essentially white Australian imagination. Challenging not merely aesthetic categories, Aboriginal texts, unlike most 'mainstream' Australian writing, demand a reading which is also political and ethical, thus becoming for white Australians as well as for Aborigines an occasion of self-discovery. While translations of Aboriginal orature have enormously broadened the awareness of the long-standing poetic traditions in Australia, they are not included in the book, whereby the established canons of (modern) Australian poetry could be greatly challenged. To be sure, Aboriginal poetry is so precious, because it is never 'imperialist' with respect to the settled Australian land, for it never adopts an appropriative attitude to Nature, very much as Judith Wright suggests in the poem "At Cooloolool": "Those dark-skinned people who/ once named Cooloolool/ knew that no land is lost or won/ by wars/ for earth is spirit (...)."

The sign of modernity on the Australian verse scene was the very peculiar appearance of the hoax poet 'Ern Malley' in 1943, concocted by the then young poets Harold Stewart and James McAuley. The Malley 'hoax' poems were first published in Max Harris's avant-garde magazine *Angry Penguins* in mid-1944, and since then they have been reprinted and anthologized in Australia only once (with the exception of an isolated appearance in France), in Tranter's and Mead's anthology, which brings a reprint of some of these modernist and experimental poems that have long been underrated in Australia. The fact remains that it is precisely the 'Ern Malley' poems (e.g.

"Palinode", "Young Prince of Tyre") that show Australian artificial and strenuous strivings after Modernism, which, however, deterred Australian poets from further verse experiments.

After their publication McAuley and Stewart publicly revealed that the 'Ern Malley' poems were deliberate concoctions, not so much in order to humiliate the editor Max Harris, but to show how contrived much of contemporary poetry is, particularly the New Apocalyptic verse in England written in the early forties. The Malley hoax may have killed genuine poetic experimentalism in Australia, but it has still been a focal point for the development of modern(ist) Australian literature and culture, showing the conflicts between the conservatives and the radicals, the ancients and the moderns, the traditionalists and the experimentalists, thus creating and at the same self-destroying Modernism in Australian poetry only to give way to new trends. The editors of the anthology also see the collaborative Malley effort as a place for the expression of contradictory urges of "lyrical alienation and ironic fabrication" characteristic of Modernism.

The roles of gender, race and ethnicity are becoming increasingly crucial in recent anthologies and this book does include many of the so far under-represented contemporary Australian poets: Francis Webb, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Bruce Beaver, Antigone Kefala, Lee Cataldi, Robert Gray, Caroline Caddy, Laurie Duggan, etc. Although it may lack a clearcut point of view, which is why it is sometimes undeservedly exclusive of certain important authors, this selection of modern Australian verse offers a pluralist reading of modern(ist) and postmodernist tendencies in the development of Australian poetry in the second half of the twentieth century.

The book of verse *Selected Poems 1939-1990* by John Blight, published by the University of Queensland Press and edited by Martin Duwell, brings a representative selection of Blight's lyrical pieces, taken from all of his collections of poems, including the two best known ones, the awardwinning *A Beachcomber's Diary* (1963) and *My Beachcombing Days* (1968), as well as his uncollected and later poems. John Blight is the poet of the sea and, more precisely, of the fabulous Queensland coast. He has been that for almost fifty years now and thus should not be lumped together with the more recent group of 'ecological' poets, although the spirit of oneness with nature and human transcendence within it is there in his verse.

John Blight was born in South Australia in 1913 but has spent most of his adult life in Queensland, where he has grown closely attached to its sub-tropical flora and fauna. He can be said to be something of an iconoclast, accepting modernism well ahead of his contemporaries and indulging in boldly innovative verse experimentation, especially in terms of rhythm and themes. This selection demonstrates Blight's remarkable lifetime achievements in poetry, ranging from his widely praised sea sonnets to the 'confessional' strain of his later poems.

A lifetime involvement with the writing and publishing of poetry, the avid reading of English and American poets, has left almost no mark on his poetry, although his first poems show some dependence on English nineteenth century models. Blight's first publication in the *Bulletin* in 1939 is quite different from the mythopoeic narrative (explorer) poetry written by Douglas Stewart, who was the then editor of the *Bulletin* literary pages. Blight's poetry is essentially lyrical. His first verse collections, *The Old Pianist* (1945) and *The Two Suns Met* (1954) set the distinctive Blight style, "the odd,

tangential attack and metaphors that are inclined to escape imprisonment" ("The Dying Spider", p. 27), as the editor has it. It is also true that Blight's poetry does not wish to be smooth-flowing in terms of sheer formal requirements, although the final effect is just that (e.g. in "Totems", p. 35). Even these early lyrics are full of such notions as "sea madness", "fever", "sea brawl", etc., that are to become his central concerns in his fine sea sonnets collected in *A Beachcomber's Diary* and *My Beachcombing Days*.

These lyrics that established his wider reputation are minute descriptions of the creatures of the sea, the shore and the littoral region, the rock pools, mud, mangroves and the human figures of the sea. In them he experiments with form, creating the typical sophisticated verse closures and inverted Petrarchan sonnet forms. Unfortunately, the endings are all too often reduced to simple summarising statements that border on journalistic, documentary observations. Even his much anthologised poem "Death of a Whale" (p. 45) is not exempt from it: after the suggestive description of the magnitude of the "lugubrious death of a whale" it ends somewhat prosaically by saying that "Sorry we are, too, when a child dies; but at the immolation of a race who cries?"

It is no coincidence that the most perceptive early assessment of Blight's verse came from another Queenslander fond of tiny creatures and flowers living in the subtropical landscape, Judith Wright. In her seminal work on contemporary Australian poetry, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, she compares John Blight and Francis Webb, stressing Blight's determination to "a fierce and self-involved independence" and his decision to persist on a rather solitary artistic path. She is right in saying that each individual crab (e.g. "Ghost Crabs", p. 56), rock, surf or sea-gull Blight describes helps to build up a knowledge of the universe, the place of Man in it and human attitude towards the various presences in nature. In his intense observations and contemplations of the sea, Blight is very Baudelairean ("The Sea and Infinity", p. 71) and frequently establishes the romantically isolated stance of the speaker of the poem ("He sat by the sea, and he sighed, 'Infinity. Ah, Infinity!'").

Blight returned to the themes about the sea and its shores in the sonnet form in the collection *Holiday Sea Sonnets* (1985), although his later poetic phase is very untypical of his earlier and widely acclaimed pieces. *Hart* (1975) and *Selected Poems: 1939-1975* (1976) sprang out of his renewed burst of poetic creativity in 1973. These later poems, which brought Blight three major poetry awards, are also handsomely represented in the volume, as well as those published *The New City Poems* (1980). The latter is an impressive volume containing his poetic reflections on the process of growing old, on the contemporary changing world that should be accepted rather than criticised. The themes are now taken from the urban environment and no longer from the Queensland coastal life. For Blight the essential values in life are those of nature and the individual. Technically, he has broken away from the constraints of formalism.

*Selected Poems: 1939-1990* by John Blight is an exhaustive selection of his verse written over fifty years and even the less-instructed reader can get a very good sense of his poetic development, although his real power still lies in the sonnets dedicated to the sea, its life and metaphysical presence for Man. For the one who visited the lush Queensland coastline, Blight does indeed represent "one man like a poet: shoddy/ in morals, quarrelsome, who bucks/ society, and, for his same rebuke,/ is allotted the spaceroom of the beach;/ respected there, given a friendly look/ if they can nail him — sought for his fish—tale speech." ("The Beachcomber", p. 51)