

MIKE O'FERRALL

CLEARING THE MIRROR SLIGHTLY
FROM YOUR OWN FAVOURED SELF-IMAGE

Martin Duwell, ed. *A Possible Contemporary Poetry: interviews with thirteen poets from the New Australian Poetry*. St Lucia: Makar Press, 1982. \$8.95 paper, \$15.95 cased. 160 pp.

This collection of interviews is presented as a companion volume to John Tranter's anthology, *The New Australian Poetry* (Makar Press, 1979). In his short introduction, Martin Duwell, as editor and interviewer, offers the suggestion that the publication is in the nature of an interim report providing an insight into some of the "major poets" of the "New Australian Poetry". Six of the fifteen interviews have already appeared in previous issues of Makar (Rae Desmond Jones, John Tranter, Hemmensley, Krausmann). The other poets interviewed are Ken Taylor, Roberts, Forbes, Duggan, Scott, Maiden, Adamson, Wearne and Martin Johnston. Duwell's control of the interviews' directions is low-key, allowing the poets to discuss freely the sources and visions of their own work. His intention is primarily to make the poets familiar to the audience. There is consequently no intention of presenting rounded portraits. Duwell also suggests that this book is "a start in a critical formulation of the New Australian Poetry". Since interviews (published more than broadcast) do tend to 'respectablise' the poet, one must take Duwell at his word. On the other hand, Duggan in his interview has other opinions commenting that "attitudes towards the permanency and unchanging nature of kinds of poetry are just the English Departments' way of comprehending history". Indeed, the value of this book lies not so much in the insight given by the poets' elucidation of their works, inspirations and so on, but in the autobiographical anecdotes provided. Tranter's interview covering the small magazine scene, the "generation of 68" and the influence of "the American Poetry Revolution", offers more telling insights than his second interview commenting on his own work. The book is full of the flavour of an historic period, the search for re-birth

machine-gun fire. These nightly treks to the shelter were proving too much for H.H.R., so Olga moved a divan bed for her into the hallway with its head under the staircase. Olga slept on a sofa in the drawing-room.

H.H.R. was now so thin that she wrote to her friend Mary Kernot in Australia, "I hardly know my own body when I see it". At that time she weighed seven stone two pounds. The Battle of Britain was won by October, but after a lull the bombing started again, and Olga found herself nursing H.H.R. through one illness after another under the constant threat of air raids. They were no longer able to use the car, and H.H.R. began to be nervous when Olga went into the town to forage for food. Olga acquired an auto-bike which ran on very little petrol, on which she chugged the three miles or so to the town.

It was cold riding in the winter, and Olga equipped herself with breeches, long leather coat, leather cap and goggles, much to the amusement of the Canadian troops, masses of whom were then in the town. Whenever she met the files of men marching through the street the front group would shout out "Whoopee", which would be taken up all along the line as she passed. Olga enjoyed these encounters, and took it all in good part.

But Olga was not well herself, and by October 1944 she was obliged to call in the doctor, who told her that she should make arrangements to go into hospital as soon as possible, since they needed to investigate the nature of the internal growths she had which were causing so much haemorrhage. Olga did not know what to do since H.H.R. could not be left. Before anything could be done about herself, H.H.R. was taken suddenly ill, and the doctor immediately ordered an ambulance to take her for an emergency operation.

Olga went with her, and waited till the operation was over. The surgeon told her that H.H.R.'s cancer was too advanced for it to be removed. He had performed a colostomy operation. When asked, he told Olga that she might last for six months or five years, but he did not think it would be so long.

Olga then decided that H.H.R. should be nursed by herself at home. At first the matron was doubtful whether Olga could

need to more rigorously de-mystify the confusion between “the contemporary” and the “alternative”. Or to put it another way, to simplify the problems that arise when finding a book on the library shelf titled “Contemporary Australian Poets”, published in 1950.

Today’s fashion *is* tomorrow’s history (if it doesn’t fade totally into obscurity). One hopes the concern for the “contemporary” does not develop as did the obsession with painterly “flatness” promoted in America. As Tom Wolfe pointedly remarked in *The Painted Word*, lying on the floor to see the “flatness” is nothing more than the King’s New Clothes. Fortunately some of the poets interviewed in this book are beginning, to quote Forbes, to “clear the mirror slightly from their own favoured self-image”.

Depending on whether you already own Tranter’s 1979 anthology, the reader can do one of several things: buy Duwell’s book to keep it company on the shelf, don’t buy either of them but get your library to order them, worry about your grey hairs and being ‘contemporary’, become a historian, or if you are really worried about being CONtemporary go out and buy one of the Clash’s records for the same price. If however you want to be avant-garde then it looks as if South American writers are going to be the next big thing. You’ve just got time to enrol in a quick course in Spanish and, depending on your time, Portuguese as well.