

## DES PETERSEN

Silvana Gardner, *With Open Eyes*. Queensland Community Press. 64 pp. \$5.95.

This very pleasant selection of poems by Silvana Gardner is divided into two sections: one containing 28 'local' poems, the other containing 26 poems under the heading of 'American distance'. The design of virtually all the poems is, however, the same. In almost every case the poet takes an object, a person or an event, describes it aptly, then draws some general conclusion or rounds off with a generalised comment. Each poem is essentially the working of an observation into a perception. The poem 'Housewife' is a very typical example of this method:

Potatoes sprout  
in moist darkness of the pantry.  
Beige stubby eyes blindly focus  
on any light to filtrate  
through plastic and wood.  
Domestic days will have the housewife  
peel them white on newspaper, bleed  
the offsprings in Herod's care!  
But when the spirit is not at home, the lumps  
are lovingly broken off,  
admired for their tenacity  
and pushed underground. Married  
to the house, true radicals  
always flower unseen.

Handled well, such a method will produce reliable poems. It is, however, prone to repetitiveness when over-used. Silvana Gardner will also have to be wary of using trite or hackneyed expressions such as 'fabled dreams', 'vast loneliness of the desert', 'inside the womb of the plane', 'legendary gold', 'the treacherously calm surface' and 'the Buick gobbles up the miles . . .' I find such lapses in expression to be the weakest aspect of this selection; the method chosen by Silvana requires far more astringency than such expressions allow.

Her best poems are observant, sensitive, compassionate, and very much aware of themselves. 'Cabby' is typical:

Only at certain times of the year  
cab drivers tell me they're misfits.  
Late August begins the stories of leaving  
to follow the call of the true heart.  
Across three suburbs, I'm taken to the Reef  
to watch him slay the white pointer  
for shark teeth, good medicine for many ills.  
We swerve and it's only the sea he loves  
and there are ten thousand planks  
to hammer on the boat marooned  
in his backyard. One day he'll make the skeleton  
float, one day he'll call it Freedom  
and the car speeds to find the tang of brine.

Before the longing settles into Summer,  
another driver trains to be a Samurai  
in the city of a million pitfalls.  
He remembers Buddha sticks with opium specks  
but that's not what he's after.  
It's the Japanese house on the Darling Downs  
with the body-cleansing area underneath.  
Soon he'll clean his body three times a day,  
already he calls it Cheng  
and do I know how cool water soothes a hot brain  
have I seen egg stones open like flowers?

I listen well  
niggled by my own Spring, take the backseat  
to enjoy the ride, a little voice inside my head  
prompting: are you learning? Are you learning?

Ms Gardner's poems abound with impressions and ideas  
and a healthy awareness of life around her. I look forward to  
her next selection.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Three Absences in Australian Writing*.  
Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Monograph No. 7,  
James Cook University, 1983. 44 pp.

This monograph is based on a series of three public lectures delivered by Chris Wallace-Crabbe at James Cook University under the auspices of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies. The aim of the lectures is

. . . to suggest three areas of literary experience, three characteristics of literary practice in which Australian writing seems comparatively lacking; not with a view to blaming or belabouring our writers, although I may hit the key of regret from time to time, but rather to help define further just what kind of creature our literature is, what distinguishing marks it bears. Nor do I propose, like those whom Ronald Conway has dubbed "the Australia watchers," to bound from my observations to large generalizations about Australian life and values, although some of my literary evidence must, in complicated ways, point in such a direction: it is probable that what I have to say does reflect strands of puritanism, pragmatism and conservatism in our mores, but the argument back from books to common life is always a wobbly one, sometimes downright bumptious, and I shall try to abstain from it.

As I shall freely admit, there are also exceptions, sometimes vivid exceptions to the three general cases I am making, but I hope you will admit the broad justice of what I have to say about these three neglected realms: that of romantic love in our fiction, that of fully developed metaphysical views in our poetry, and that of forging radically new forms in prose or verse. The last of these, incidentally, is the one to which I admit the most exceptions.

(Preface)

Wallace-Crabbe argues his case in a lively, entertaining and certainly provocative way, one that's bound to have his readers taking a stand on all kinds of issues. The following is a brief selection of his remarks, to suggest something of the tone and direction of his argument:

When we cast an eye back over our most significant works of fiction we find in the first place remarkably few treatments of passionate or romantic love: think how different Italian or Russian or French fiction is in this respect. Secondly, I suggest, we find peculiar and, some would say, distorted presentations of which Freud called "the interests of the family and sexual life." . . .

What replaces romantic or deeply familial love in Australian fiction, then? Most often, it is what I should like to call eroded persistence, a capacity to stick on, bear up, bustle around and hold things together. And it is a quality most often attributed to the leading female characters rather than to their male counterparts, so often inclined to be feckless or impulsive, even when hard-working as well.

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What I am asserting is that I find remarkably few Australian writers, even among the best, whose work bears witness to a system of metaphysical beliefs which genuinely informs that work. And this is intimately linked with the fact that there are no writers here whose work commands the kind of overwhelmed allegiance to a whole-way of thinking and feeling that we find demanded by the work of Blake or Lawrence or Yeats or Shelley or Beckett or Proust.

Let me hasten to say that this is not in any simple way a disparagement of our writers, though it implies some criticism of the range of kinds of writer that the culture has produced.

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. . . I adhere to the blanket view that our poetry, fiction and drama are generally lacking in formal invention. . .

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There is, of course, an apparent paradox running through these lectures, which Wallace-Crabbe relies on, that in ostensibly describing what *is not*, he will in fact produce a description of what *is*. But is it that simple? I can see many readers, having read through these lectures, and having noted the very many

exceptions to the proposed 'rules', coming to the conclusion that it might have been better from the outset to admit the lacunae inherent in any negative argument, and attempt the infinitely more ambitious task of seeking to describe what Australian Literature is. When he does come to describe directly the qualities of aspects of our literature, and this is often, the author continually runs into problems, and further lacunae emerge, as in the following, for example:

This brings us sharply back to the question of how we read novels. When I sample our novels in the way I am doing here, I am of course begging the question of how far these novels work mimetically, rendering something "real," something known, or typical, or representative of something in Australian life: or else something an Australian author finds significant about life in general, being predisposed to do so by his Australianness. Lurking behind all I've been saying there prowls and snarls the ugly suggestion that what I am finding in Australian novels – or not finding, to be more accurate – represents a broad tendency in our "national life and character" (C.H. Pearson's phrase).

Let me admit two things: first, that I want to keep this suggestion at bay, having no clear idea of how the elaborate verbal constructions of our most sophisticated authors represent what goes on in our sociological lives. And second, a counterview, that despite my disclaimer I secretly believe, as all the rest of you do, that our novelists and short story writers do somehow perceive and catch significant tendencies in Australian life. Most of us would not be here if we did not believe that deep down. So we go on, keeping our guards up but constantly beaten back into simple mimesis.

I must confess I do not find this happily formulated. The first sentence of the second paragraph is quite positive – there is a connection between "what goes on in our sociological lives" and "the elaborate verbal constructions of our most sophisticated authors", if we only knew how it operates. But why does Wallace-Crabbe then portray such a clearly stated belief with so much suspicion? If there are these connections, they should be defined and analysed, not put aside, classified as 'secret beliefs'.

It is to the detriment of this monograph that such theoretical issues are repeatedly put aside, that, in fact, the three major thematic propositions are not argued on the basis of any kind of consistent theoretical outlook.

Notwithstanding this, it is possible to discern here and there the glimmering of a 'hidden curriculum' in Wallace-Crabbe's argument. In the preface, quoted earlier, he speaks of "what kind of creature our literature is, what distinguishing marks it bears." The above quotation mentions "significant tendencies in Australian life." In the touchy atmosphere of current Aust. Lit. Crit. such terms could readily be taken as signals of an underlying values system, in this case a conservative monistic one that tends to operate by demanding acceptance of the "broad justice" of its usually very large claims, claims which by a sort of gentleman's agreement become the received version of Aust. Lit. This is something that I see little point in belabouring here, except to remark that one's own use of language can very quickly be called into question, for everything one utters is fair game for the determined deconstructionist.

If a sense of disappointment is apparent in my foregoing remarks, it is because nowhere in this monograph does Wallace-Crabbe grasp any of the nettles of Aust. Lit. Crit. In a sense, the three lectures give the impression of being blissfully aloof from the wider theoretical issues – the disappointment all the deeper because Chris Wallace-Crabbe is more than adequately placed to deal with them. This monograph will be appreciated for the various apposite remarks its author makes about, for example, R.D. FitzGerald's 'The Face of the Waters' or Furphy's *Such is Life*. But, to my mind, the lack of any consistent application of a theoretical viewpoint or indeed of a consistent methodology, especially a comparative one that such an argument seems to cry out for, unfortunately diminishes the stature of the publication.