ELIZABETH PERKINS

REVIEWS

John Millett, *Blue Dynamite: a narrative. Poetry Australia* Number 106, 1986. South Head Press, Berrima, NSW. 100 pp. Annual Subscription $27.00.

John Millet is one of Australia's maverick poets, in the sense that although he belongs to the *Poetry Australia* stable, so to speak, he does not easily conform in his concept of poetry, his themes or techniques, to anything that is being written by other Australian poets at present. This may explain why Millet was omitted, for example, from *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (1986), although *Blue Dynamite* is his tenth book of poetry, and at least one of his collections, *Tail Arse Charlie* (1982), contains some of the most powerful, most analytical and most imagistically sophisticated of all contemporary Australian verse.

Blue Dynamite is another eccentric, in the best sense, contribution to our poetry, exhibiting Millett's usual accomplished expertise in handling language and rhythm, and an original conception of what a book of poetry can be. It is an impressionistic novella in verse, with seven chapters each comprised of six to thirteen poems, the title section relating the experiences of the businessman, Roger, a youngish executive, in Shanghai. The poems reconstruct a confrontation of Australian commerce in the eighties with the commercial and philosophic ambience of Asia. The life dominated by the All Ordinaries Index, and the other life which tries to follow the necessary virtues of a Bodhisattva, sharing equal psychic space in the book. The reader who has observed smooth-faced young Australian and Asian businessmen coming in and out of a multi-storey multi-national building in a big city, catches immediately something of what Millett is trying to recreate in these poems.

It is a daring conception, equal to that of *Tail Arse Charlie* which rewrote the experiences of a bomber gunner over Europe and his return to rural Australia. *Blue Dynamite*, however, is immediate to the same degree as *Tail Arse Charlie* is retrospective. Millett is taking poetry into a milieu which few of our poets have yet entered so deliberately, and of which none has made such a coherent and complex image. The poem is effortlessly and unselfconsciously cosmopolitan — that is, in so far as art is ever unselfconscious.

Although the first chapter is titled *Bodhisattva*, the book does not overtly emphasize a sense of the presence of a Bodhisattva. It is the concept of the book that suggests the relevance of the six virtues inherent in a Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is a manifestation of the

spirit of eternal Buddha, one who has chosen not the bliss of self-extinction, which is Nirvana, but active involvement with the daily suffering of other beings. In order to serve compassionately, the six virtues needed are generosity, morality, patience, vigour, concentration and wisdom. *Blue Dynamite* does not systematically treat these virtues, and it could be said that in fact they are present by their absence from the poems. The conception of the book, however, removes poetry from any of the usual meditative levels to the world of business and activism — activism directed to commercial ends — and it is in this conception that Millett engages with the principles by which the Bodhisattva lives.

Especially important is the principle of vigour or energy, which has always been a component of Millett's poetry, threatening sometimes perhaps in the earlier *Cunderang* poems to burst the poetry apart. In *Blue Dynamite* the impact of the commercial world, which disrupts customary ideas of the poetic, and the dispersive effect of the cosmopolitan allusions, tend to hold excessive energy in check:

> Greenville knows nothing of Trans Asian Finance Inc
> the Jewish money-dealer in New York
> Sheik Abdul Mumtaz Begum with oil reserves
> and a sinking fund in Eurodollars
> that will surely sink Greenville
> nor of Mr Wong's connection with the China Bank
>
> Evan Green saved for his old age with the Commonwealth
> Jack's wife saves Jack's underpants by ritual stitching
> Honeysuckle wins its battle with Andronicus
> by twisting roof-guttering into sailor's knots
> Zackery counts days in The Year of The Heart Attack
> They do not number 365

The commercial empire spreads its tentacles over the lives of the Greens as the honeysuckle spreads over the front garden where Andronicus Green is building his yacht. Millett's poem spreads itself over rural, surburban and city Australian life, evoking without strain myths that range from Greg Norman to catching mako sharks off South Head. The newspaper headlines and the TV cover of world events and celebrities are present in the poem as naturally and as inescapably as they are present in daily life. The effect is almost as suffocating as it is in real life.

Where Millett succeeds, however, is in writing a powerful and coherent image of this suffocation, so that the book does finally leave one with the feeling that one has been given a kind of power over the encroaching wave of twentieth century finance and technology. Perhaps this sense of power is illusory and what the book does is give an image in which one's justifiable terror is simply contained with some kind of

comfort. The question remains an open one for this reader, just as at the end of the *Come Down Cunderang* poems it was possible to feel that perhaps violence had been condoned as well as confirmed.

The novella contains such a variety of material, an important part of which has not yet been mentioned here, that this sense of the overwhelming variety and imminence of twentieth century civilization is mitigated by other experiences. The ocean surrounding Australia is peopled by board-riders and swimmers, sailors and fishermen, some of whom share the other life of the city, and some poems linger over these moments. Others join the maelstrom of the antennae-haunted cities and suburbs. The close family life of church and local community life is evoked with the same immediacy as the life of the Shanghai business man and geisha. The poem "Evan Green's Son", for example, can be compared with "Eveline's Lyric":

> The boy next door collected birds
> recited their names as coloured poems
> flight detail wing beat
> nest egg shape
> instinct that brought them to town
> finches flycatchers sparrows
> breathless kingfishers
> wild kestrels of love
> passing from darkness to light

"Eveline's Lyric", by comparison, takes us to Shanghai. It is not only the milieu and speaking voice that change. The concept of what a poem can do seems to have vaulted over some forty years of Australian poetry:

> I am the geisha in your underwear
> the punk-rocker on disco floors
> Kiri Te Kanawa singing Maria
> in West Side Story
> the force driving racehorses and Ferraris
> a lift gliding to the fiftieth floor
>
> I am the wind's whisper before storms
> the lyric in your arm's vice
>
> My shoes sing through the streets
> My bare feet make music on your carpet.

Blue Dynamite is written in the language of its multiple environments, exploiting the jargon of yuppies, trades, economics, environmentalists, surfers, religions and Asian decorum much as Ben Jonson exploited the variousness of the Renaissance world. Overall the book presents several generations of Australian economic history seen through the

lives of men (rather than women) who have taken an apparently active part in that history or who have been passive participants and victims. There is a feeling, however, that Australia is not the prime mover of the economic juggernaut: that its rural or urban or maritime "busyness" over these generations has been a kind of playing under the paw of an immensely powerful predator. Yet the poems tend to show the early busyness, which is often not overtly economic, in a nostalgic recollection, emphasizing an implied intrinsic value and not greatly concerned with its helplessness.

The concept and the theme are demonstrably comprehensive and complex, and embrace something beyond the areas already indicated. In an evocation of the earliest poetry written about the great southland of the Pacific, Wentworth's *Australasia* (1823), for example, *Blue Dynamite* sets its poems within the framework of the ocean surrounding Australia and the spiritual imperialism which is the perhaps illusory gift of this island-continent status. Millett opens the book with a poem about a board-rider, "a prophet loose in body and mind/ in touch with the sea" who, in the next poem is one of those who "precisely at nine o'clock" sign "the high water mark/ become architects/ planners/ property developers", but who also, in the first poem

> listen to winds hollowing
> the oldest latitudes in the world
> taste dead sailors
> slice home on late afternoon glass
> switched into circuits of the sun

Each of them has "the sea's religion/ in his blood." Finally, the last chapter, *The J Curve*, ends with a poem which owes its vocabulary to the nineteen eighties, but which responds, despite the enormous technical inventions that it evokes, to the original nineteenth century concept of Australia as a presence at one with the elemental forces of the earth's southern hemisphere:

> I owned a big rhino
> long and fast and clean
> Some undersea shift sent her in
> or a cyclone, a new island
> isobars touching a storm circle
> thousands of miles off
> a fire-ring boiling the bottom of the world.

Blue Dynamite is an impressive attempt to present a comprehensive picture of Australia in the nineteen eighties. What the picture means must be interpreted by each reader. Lord David Cecil wrote about the Victorian novelist, Mrs Gaskell, that "The outstanding fact about

Mrs Gaskell is her femininity", but he was of course referring to Mrs Gaskell's work. Some readers might feel that the outstanding fact about Millett's work is its masculinity. From the seductive Asian pin-up on the cover to the owner of the long, fast rhino, *Blue Dynamite* is also a masculine book. This does not invalidate its statement or its vision, but very possibly it limits them. Yet in other ways, as has been indicated, Millett's book goes beyond conventional limits of Australian poetry, and it might well find readers outside the usual group who buy books of poetry.

R.A.Simpson, *Words for a Journey: Poems 1970-1985*. Melbourne University Press, 1986. 62pp. Hardback $15.00.

Since 1969 Simpson, a Senior Lecturer in Art at a Melbourne Institute of Technology, has been the Poetry Editor of the Melbourne *Age*, a position from which he has offered encouragement and guidance to many Australian poets. Apart from the length of a poem, a matter in which some latitude is nevertheless allowed, poems published in newspapers require some ease of accessibility, since they are unlikely in that context to receive more than one, often cursory, reading. This does not mean that they should be simplistic or superficial, for their presence in a daily paper is partly to counteract the general tendency towards superficiality which dominates even the best newspapers, no matter how much thoughtful, researched journalism is found on some pages.

Simpson's own poetry is accessible to any reader prepared to give it close attention, but it is arresting poetry rather than comfortably engaging. The poems range over many of the areas that would interest a newspaper reader but, even in dealing with easily recognised subjects, they often have the power to jolt the sensibility in a way that few newspaper articles do. This is seen, for example, in "Daydreaming":

> This has been a bad week
> for guinea-pigs in our house
> because our kids have killed two
> accidentally of course.
>
> I think of that catastrophe
> together with Pakistan
> while falling asleep in my chair
> until I see the body of a child being pushed
> flatly like a letter under my door.

Many of Simpson's poems are structured just as the poet's mind structured its warning of a responsibility delivered like a letter. The point comes home, not always in the final line, but in a succinct phrase

or image occurring at any stage of the poem. That time-honoured topic, the problem of why one should write, is given a new inexorable answer in the poem "Falling Asleep", where the poet dreams that a hand appeared:

> and then a finger printed this
> deeply in fine sand
> *I write because I must*
>
> It almost put the full stop there

Many poems involve some kind of dream or vision state. This distinguishes Simpson's poetic art from the other visual art that he practises, the latter seeming perhaps more concrete and practical. The image of concreteness is aptly used in the interesting piece, "Contemporary Theatre", which tries to express in words and images the surrealist mode of some contemporary drama:

> Humour cracks open
> The concrete splits in a footpath
> and out come giggles
> faster than weeds

As "the curtain clouds down" the poet sees "the concrete clearly returning." Apart from the first image of humour as something which not only cracks open itself and that to which it is applied, but also the social context in which it is found (an image that would delight a literary theorist) the poem contains a brilliant but untranslatable image of some aspects of contemporary theatre.

Simpson's poetry uses this mixture of image and abstraction in dealing with many topics. The process gives distance but no coldness or reserve to personal poems, and brings immediacy to more speculative subjects, like that of contemporary theatre, or what a sheep might feel the first time it is shorn.

The collection is dedicated to Peter Mathers, who first came to Australian attention as the author of the novel *Trap*, whose eponymous part-Aboriginal hero has been described as a charismatic embodiment of anarchy. Several poems here are concerned with Aboriginal themes, but the relationship of Simpson's poetic technique to Mathers' Trap lies also in the slightly anarchic tendency of a poem's juxtaposition of image and abstraction: it is akin to but not identical with the visual anarchy of surrealist painting.

It is easy to see why Simpson's poetry has already appeared in seven earlier collections, most of which are reproduced in in *Words for a Journey*. They are poems to which one can often return, leaving a fresh little shock on each reading, never posturing, and even when apparently light, never superficial.