

hunting and curious leisure rituals — these are some of the pictures in the mosaic created by Gostand's well chosen quotations. The merry and lightly satiric tone of this book is captured in some of the chapter titles: "Beware of the Higher-Sins", "Status on stilts" and "What did you do in the strike, Daddy?"

*Brisbane Expo.sed* creates amusing links between artistic fiction and pop sociology. The book proves that literature belongs to the people and not to academics in neo-Gothic sandstone towers. It panders to the diffident patriotism of Brisbanites and provides a timely souvenir for interstate and overseas Expo visitors. Stephen Cue's cartoon illustrations of daemonic bats, leering canetoads, spaced-out hippies, sleazy pros and fascist cops match the text by combining bemused love with satiric wit.

## ROBERT HANDICOTT

### REVIEW

Gertrude Langer, *Love Transcends Death. Poems for my beloved Karl*. Brisbane, Langer Memorial Committee, 1987. Limited edition of 350 copies. Paper, 32pp. My copy (University of Queensland Bookshop) \$9.95.

Gertrude Langer, O.B.E., Ph.D. (University of Vienna), doyen of the Queensland Arts Council, activist on numerous other arts-related bodies, reigning presence at openings and first nights, and for 28 years chief art critic for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*,<sup>1</sup> was much too cultured and well-read a lady to have ever made claims for herself as a poet. But Tom Shapcott<sup>2</sup> records a private conversation at her home, shortly after the death of her husband Karl (the distinguished architect), in which she confided: 'I have written — have attempted — poetry'. And at her own death, aged 76, in September 1984, a bound, gilt-edged book on her bedside table contained 59 poems and fragments in English and German, nearly all of them written in the fifteen years of her 'complete widowhood'.<sup>3</sup> Editor Desmond MacAulay and members of the Langer Memorial Committee have approached this material with faith and tact to give the world, in effect, Gertrude Langer's 'first book'.

Memorial volumes of verse have a long but chequered history. Often the editor is a relative or close friend of the deceased, and the main concern seems to be to publish everything committed to paper by that

person, in the understandable but mistaken conviction that every line is precious. Many authors would no doubt be embarrassed by their posthumous publications, however affected they might be by the loyalty and zeal of their executors. Gertrude Langer could have no such embarrassment about *Love Transcends Death*. The book contains just 23 poems, very carefully edited and very sensitively arranged. Two German poems in the author's hand are reproduced in facsimile to open and close the selection: all the poems in between are English. The tasteful design and high-quality production of the book befit the contents, and, together with the respect in which Dr Langer was held, they are likely to ensure that the book will be of interest not only to lovers of poetry.

The poems in the book, as the title perhaps too forcibly suggests, are very far from being cathartic outpourings. According to Shapcott, Gertrude Langer's real-life grief when Karl died was 'mid-European, effusive . . . desperate in a way altogether too visible, /theatrical' (3). 'Now there is no one', she would say repeatedly. The fifteen poems in this selection for which the endnote gives a date, however, were all written five to fourteen years later. The *poem* beginning, 'Now there is no-one', which being undated may well be older, certainly does not end on a note of effusive desperation:

I must embrace  
my solitude  
and wait  
until it sings.

This is poetry, then, deeply meditated and revised over time. It is art. It does not rend the heart, but it does not try the patience either. The best poems are luminous with reflection, and the book is suffused with **their glow**. **The poems are short: Dr Langer knew the value of a few deft strokes with brush or pen.** Details occasionally suggest the distillation of Japanese haiku ('The moon is full among the lily-pads'), but there is no hint that these poems were ever exercises in form. The voice is controlled, necessarily self-conscious, but unquestionably genuine. Those who knew the speaker will undoubtedly hear her in these lines.

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote that he had thought to 'describe a state; make a map of sorrow', but that sorrow had turned out to be not a state but a process, and that it needed not a map but a history. Gertrude Langer, writing at a far greater distance from the shock of her loss than Lewis did his, has given us, it seems to me, something very like a map: a map of the moods of bereavement; but a map, rather like the charts of the early navigators, in which the large empty spaces (the decently blank pages) are not wasted paper but part of the truthful witness. Neither in their arrangement in the book, nor, it would appear, in the original order of their composition, do the poems 'work through'

to anything. But the terrain of moods holds our interest. There are blunt outcrops of philosophical conviction:

Since distinction  
between I and thou  
is only illusion  
we always have been  
and always will be  
one  
in the absolute.

(Here the ungrammatical 'I and thou' seems a deliberate allusion to Martin Buber.) The real uplands, however, are those vivid moments when the poet catches in her garden, in the birds that visit it, in the moonlight, in the Mozart she has loved all her life, intimations of Karl's spiritual nearness — as in 'Twelve years after the hour of my beloved's death':

Air heavy with rain  
moon behind clouds  
a hush runs through  
the garden.  
There, suddenly,  
a large black bird  
of night  
wings past my window  
again again again  
and coming closer.  
Then softly wings away.

In lines such as these the widow's solitude *does* sing; and the song persuades the reader, however materialist his own philosophy, that the poet's still confidence in reunion with the loved one runs very deep:

Sometimes I think  
I only have to go down  
to the river  
and you will be there  
waiting for me  
and we shall just walk on  
together —  
your hand —  
I know its touch so well —  
rests on my shoulder.  
Beloved!  
Soon  
I shall call on you

to guide me  
gently  
across the river of time  
to our home.

Karl is always 'my beloved'. This turn of phrase, very familiar from Dr Langer's conversation, seems to echo the *Song of Songs* ('The eyes of my beloved were so soft . . . The hand of my beloved felt so good', she writes). Clearly, her marriage, though childless, had been profoundly happy and complete — spiritually as well as physically. Now, not surprisingly, thoughts of those eyes and that hand recall the hour when the hand turned cold in hers, and she closed the eyes and kissed them for the last time. These things happened at dusk; and this 'once beloved hour', with its now inevitable associations, marks the deepest, loneliest valley on the 'map'. 'Daemmerung II', the last poem in the book (though not in order of composition), ends:

mein Schmerz ist wild  
und meine Arme leer  
*my pain is wild  
and my arms empty.*

One small poem is an affirmation of a different kind:

Man makes his symbols  
then they are  
and he believes in them  
and then they lead him on  
mysteriously.  
Man makes his symbols  
then they are.

Here Gertrude Langer seems to fuse together an observation from her life-long study of art with an understanding of what 'attempting' to write poetry had achieved for her personally. Poetry, it seems likely, had helped to 'lead her on' to the point Lewis describes, where the lifting of sorrow is like the removal of a barrier, so that at times of least mourning one may have something even better than a memory of the departed: 'an instantaneous, unanswerable impression'. But: 'Man makes his symbols / then they are'. Something else seems also to have happened. At some point the sufferer asked what she could 'do' with her solitude. Turning inward, she found she had a subject and impulse for art. With patience, with 'recollection in tranquillity', she might make something of her own. She would let others be the judge of it. 'It was Gertrude Langer's dearest wish,' according to an introductory note in *Love Transcends Death*, 'that her poems for Karl be published, and that they might help others to bear a similar loss.' To Tom Shapcott, perhaps, the critic and

enthusiast had revealed, just once, a deeper but compatible desire: 'To be a poet; yes to be a poet'.

In a sunny corner on the campus of the University of Queensland, near the Alumni Teaching Garden Rain Forest Walk, there is now a bronze of Gertrude Langer beside an unusually ornate park bench. Bronze being what it is, her persistence in memory seems assured. Gertrude Langer, the inscription reads, 'Loved art / Shared that love'. Those who have the pleasure of finding and reading her more fragile memorial, *Love Transcends Death* will agree that, in her modest, late-flowering way, she has taken her place among the ranks of the artists.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For this and other biographical details I am indebted to David Seibert's article, 'Gertrude Langer', published in *Arts National* Volume 2, Issue 2, December 1984. Mr Seibert indicates his own indebtedness to Mrs Pat Clark Ryan, Gertrude Langer's biographer (the biography has yet to appear). Another source was David Bray's article, 'Dear Karl, with love from Gertrude', published in the *Courier-Mail* of Saturday, June 20, 1987. In addition to providing biographical material, this piece reprints nine poems or extracts from *Love Transcends Death*, but says little about them except to reproduce factual information from the introductory note and endnote of the book.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Shapcott, 'Remembering Gertrude Langer', in Manfred Jurgensen and Alan Corkhill (eds.), *The German Presence in Queensland*, Department of German, University of Queensland, 1987. The reminiscences conclude with a poem, 'Elegy for Gertrude Langer.'. Preceding the Shapcott piece is Ian Sinnamon's discussion of the work of Karl Langer, 'Landscape with Classical Figures — A German Influence on Queensland's Architecture', which includes, of some relevance here, a full-page colour photograph captioned, 'Rainforest, Langer House at St. Lucia'.
- <sup>3</sup> Tom Shapcott, 'Elegy for Gertrude Langer'.