

Vera Newsom

REVIEW

Pictures From An Exhibition edited by Paul Kavanagh, University of Newcastle.

The poems in this anthology have been chosen from the entries to the 1989 Hunter River Board / Mattara Poetry Prize, the ninth of its kind, and, very possibly, the last. The judges were Judith Rodriguez, Michael Wilding and the editor, Paul Kavanagh.

In its presentation this is the most polished and attractive in the series. The wide-lens photo of an art gallery, looping across the front and back covers and the spine of the book, re-enforces the title and prepares the reader for the visual element that is a strong feature of many poems. One might almost buy the book for its cover! The nature of reality as presented by the senses and examined by an alert mind is prominent in the work of Martin Johnston, John Bennett and Michael Sharkey whose sequence, named after the Moussorsky piano suite, gives its title to the book. Art objects and places play a prominent part in the anthology, and more often than not the place is not Australia. Martin Johnston, Jan Owen, Andrew Taylor and Philip Salom visit Europe, John Bray and Diane Fahey Ancient Greece, Dorothy Porter Ancient Egypt. Juvant Biarujia Java. Sudesh Mishra writes of imprisonment, and Nora Krouk moves the setting of her poem from Russia to Shanghai to Sydney. John Watson writes a eulogy of Marianne Moore and Penelope Nelson writes of "Adventures in New French Feminism".

The book is almost international in character. I found it a relief to read such poems as Alan Gould's "High Cloud Conversation", John Newton's "Narrative" and Munganye's "A God for Man".

John Bennett's prize-winning poem is set at Blackwattle Bay, Sydney. One of the main concerns of this intricate poem is the nature of light: its structure,

"How is everything put together, quartz-work
or quark-work, sutures invisible?"

and its function in art which is largely dependent on how the eye perceives the outer world,

“Cell by cell imagination triggers the retina”.

The play of wit like the play of light is one of the most intriguing features of the poem, and the structure of the sequence is symptomatic. It comprises thirteen Fibonacci sonnets, each consisting of thirteen lines. The traditional octave-sestet arrangement has become a five-lined stanza followed by one of eight lines, to conform to the Fibonacci series: $1+2=3$, $2+3=5$, $3+5=8$, $5+8=13$, and so on. This is a natural sequence. For example, leaves on a twig are often so arranged that each may catch the greatest possible share of light. Considering the writer's subject-matter this is an appropriate device. Certainly it was one that fascinated me, largely because of my ignorance and the need to explore, not only the formal arrangement, but the intricate language play and the scientific references.

I found this detective work enjoyable, though not all readers would. Then it was necessary for me to re-read the text with a better understanding of what was going on in it, and later to read again to savour the word-play as if tasted for the first time. And finally, to ask: does it work as poetry?

The answer is: not entirely. There are brilliant passages “coruscating” in light and wit, and some flatter ones. The mind is engaged, but, apart from curiosity, not always the feelings. This may be because the poet preserves a certain detachment – becomes an eye observing, a mind commenting. Though he is exploring a highly original train of thought, everything seems rather too neatly labled.

Several poets in the anthology present their ideas not only through imagery, but frequently by means of observations and generalizations: “Riverboats know that history's / not simply people. It's made by rivers / and they're not to be trusted.”

This poem, “In the Rhine Valley” by Andrew Taylor, is effective largely because the poet's voice is so engaging.

A sense of personal response to his subject is communicated in Martin Johnston's “In the Refectory of the Ognissanti”:

“You walked into the shaft of light
in the painted background where all the lines met
and it rained uniquely and all day on the poplars.”

Although there is an air of detachment about some of the observations made by the ‘you’ of the poem, the reader travels with the poet through what is a very real scene, “You could pass a drink to Judas”, into an

imaginary one, "Rainwater sinks in and hollows behind your eyes / a workshop where the restorers wash off varnish." The 'you' of the poem is both discerning and modest and very receptive to the aesthetic.

Peter Kirkpatrick opens "The Walk around the Lake" with the statement: "Begin with the transcendental and you'll end in relationships." It's almost a challenge. If you are 'hooked' by the statement, proceed. Otherwise, pass it by. There are several entertaining pieces of observation in the poem, such as the joggers who return "recycled". "They fret about, make sacrifices for the physical."

In a similar fashion, Jill Jones opens "A Construction of Radiance" with a general statement: "The world recedes and reveals the world." As if this were a geometrical proposition. It is proved by moving into, and out of, the world of Turner's paintings at the gallery and back to a heap of rubbish at Circular Quay where the Q.E.D. is stated in the concluding lines:

"and
the world recedes and
reveals the world
again."

She is, of course, drawing attention to the fact that there are many very different "worlds" and different facets of reality.

"Our Conspiracy" is more immediate. The lovers are "disguised" in raincoats. Every detail emphasises the danger of being in love in a world of trivial objects: "bus tickets, dollar coins, cards in plastic." There is the suggestion that a lover's exchange may not be so different from a commercial deal. But outside, though the roads are slippery in the rain, "the wet city gleams".

Munganye's aboriginal poem gives balance to the book. Apparently artless and naive, it shows an understanding of the dilemma of people divorced from the natural world. In "A God for Man", the poet addresses God directly: "Maybe man made you? / Man made you in his image / to make his self feel good!" This is the only explanation he can find for the evil in the world. Then he describes his own experience: "I taste you in my mouth / sweet as wild honey / found in tree."

"This magic is all around me
not blackman magic
or whiteman words
but humming music
in my heart

in singing trees
in currawong calling
Even ants stand still
between these beats of time"

Then, "I drink in air" and "Every thing comes alive again". The joy in the concluding lines is proof that "Man is in God. God is in man."

"Comendance. Comendance.
This way we dance with onegod.
The world. Mirramurra. And me."

"Voices" by Nora Krouk is a series of prose poems that convey the experiences, largely in the form of monologues, of two sisters who suffered imprisonment and other hardships in Russia while their brother prospered in Shanghai. His wife, Eva, in her monologue tells of his feelings of guilt. He "guarded his nightmare... His ulcers are the size of fifty-cent pieces. Small change." The sequence is powerful because of understatement and a deep sense of irony. Geta, visiting her brother in Australia, breaks down for a moment only and admits she could not go on unless she "turned that page". The final lines sum up the situation: " - Glasnost says her brother. The papers today... She is too busy. Grace Bros. in Chatswood is starting a sale."

Martin Langford's work is interesting. Its strength lies in its acrid tone and a rough-hewn quality in the writing. He has something to say, and he feels strongly about it. "Touch" opens with "You cannot just walk up to someone and touch; / touch isn't free; / touch is exchange, it expects."

According to Paul Kavanagh, The winner of the Under Twenty-five section, Gabrielle Daviau, in her poem "In Between the Going - I Came", "opens up a rich other way of reading the anthology". The theme of the poem is "(I love)" and its energy is tremendous, spasmodic, rhythmical, excessive, each sense impression sharply etched. There is humour, too, and awareness in her sense of the obsessive nature of the emotion;

"Sun maggottin the three brass eyelets of your boots (I love)
my dog my man my river myself
my coming my return my love my madness
never framed but glass undered, you, you there water running"

and so on, without a fullstop in the whole poem. Daviau's talent is highly individual and promising.

Pictures from an Exhibition makes fascinating reading. Many of the poems appear to have been chosen for their lively wit and sense of

language. The tone of some is coolly intellectual, less attractive when it becomes a trifle pretentious. The more impassioned utterance of Munganye and Daviau helps to restore the balance of this varied and interesting anthology.

In his introduction to *Lines from the Horizon*, an earlier book in the series, Chris Pollnitz refers to Paul Kavanagh as “the onelie begetter and mentor”. They are both to be thanked for their lasting involvement in the Prize and the contribution they and the eighteen judges have made to contemporary Australian poetry.