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REVIEW

Thomas Shapcott, *Selected Poems 1956-1988*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1989, 352 pp., $18.95.

This revised volume of Shapcott's verse (the first selection was from 1978) takes account not only of a lifetime of poetry but also of prose poems and lyric passages from his recent *The Search for Galina*. In many ways the volume is like an unannounced retrospective of an artist's complete studio production. It is a long book, unadorned by preface, introduction or apologetics. Even the dates are left unsupplied for the individual poems or content sections. The book therefore presents itself as a single literary work in its own right and here stand both its strength and its weakness. It must be said straight away that the slant has been to reproduce many of the author's historical sketches, nuanced passages from an ideal diary of the Australian colonial past as well as chunks of Hungary, London and Mexico. In contrast Shapcott's concrete poems, stanzas arranged inside a postage stamp size or down the margins of a page or round the edge of an arbitrary ruler, have mostly been set aside.

The result is a collection of intractably varied verse, often in a descriptive and narrative key, in a wide range of formal moulds. At times Shapcott offers himself as a witty improviser, reminding one irreverently of Murial Spark's cultivated diplomat, Freddie Hamilton, in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (who sends triolets and *villanelles* to his closest friends in thankyou letters). Shapcott can turn his material into madrigal, ballad, *canzone* and even, on two occasions, Petrarchan *sestine*, that immensely difficult form where the six ABCDEF end-rhymes have to be shuffled into their thirty-six possible permutations with each other, the same word thus ending six different lines six times, with a coda of three more lines at the end (pp. 118, 145). Having established this kind of poetic mastery, Shapcott is free to make selections from his work that show he can discard it at will. One of the first and most striking components of this freedom is his hybrid choice of semantic fields. Many, perhaps the majority, of the poems, slip in and out of quite contrasted lexical codes. Then again their title is often an enigmatic hint towards the following poem rather than a

summary at the head of its lines. His text refuses to offer a fluid transit to the reader, who is thus, for example invited to a picnic ('The Ghost Cave', p. 94) where a character called 'Miss Angela' is seen cooking at night by a 'riverbend', fingering her *fichu* and having played *Leider öhne Wörte* in the morning.

Shapcott, accountant, poet, novelist and librettist, director of the Literature Board since 1983, is clearly one kind of creature when placed inside his biography and related to his many interviews, open letters and review articles in Australian periodicals. We learn thus that he had an 'immensely miserable childhood', and that he finds it hard to politicize poetry, that he nearly became a composer, that the fictional 'Shabbytown' of his verse is the Ipswich of his youth and that he is trying to create 'a sort of metaphysic' rather than regional poetry. In one of the best *boutades* in his interview with Jim Davidson (*Meanjin*, 1979, pp. 56-68), Shapcott declares that 'cedar and ned Kelly are the only two basic images in Australia that have immediate resonance for people as you say the name.'

And there lies the other, undocumented Shapcott, the one who lies in wait for the general reader in these *Selected Poems*. Without any explanation we are dipped into water, favourite of his four elements, in a massive sweep of aquatic images that progress right through the volume. We are brought up time and time again against the favourite word 'to scratch' (as in 'boys / ... / write their knees with necessary scratches', p. 25). Such verbs of texture and fission ('scratch; scrape; slap; stretch; glaze; groove; rasp; scar') are set in the almost obligatory present tense, in the active mood. Thus they show off a world in which item A colours or affects item B, in the closed system where a little boy's hand is 'sticky' in his father's clutch, the girls are 'oxenfaced' and a peach's skin is 'furzy'.

The writer, indeed, can construct almost as many closed systems as there are units in the collection. The language control is restlessly virtuoso. Since Shapcott can shock or surprise at every twist and turn of a poem, he can also afford to relax for long sequences of memorial history or personal reflection. This makes everything possible in the language which tugs and grates against the control of a title or a thematic. He can deploy assonance at will ('...that shape and shade'; 'plan and planet'; 'to crouch and cuddle'), or suddenly drop the expected definite article: '...mastery / is only means to sight his quarry with', p. 42). He exploits an especially paradoxical elasticity in his treatment of time: 'This is the eighth day of the week' or 'My uncle, urging through the mediocre decades'. He casually shunts an adverb into a normally forbidden word order, as in: '*Ago* you led the wind in a dance'.

Consistently Shapcott forces his reader to absorb resonances well beyond Ned Kelly and cedar wood. In a 1967 article L.J. Clancy suggested that some of Shapcott's 'direct address to his wife and child ...<is> almost embarrassingly personal, as if to read them were a rather ill-mannered act of intrusion'. However, by the time the reader is jumping and back-tacking through the *Selected Poems* of 1989, this sense of an 'act of intrusion' is truly removed. For example, in 'Instructions for Moving' the beloved children are just reduced to the taxonomic phrase 'kids'. These kids have 'junk' to be burned before departure to another address:

> the kids will not ask
> once burned nobody will move back
> for comforters
> broken presents gulp of hot breath
> intoxicates our incinerator stars rockets
> dazzlers spiral
> in quick updraft
> Raff, Medtner, Kilpinin... (p. 277)

In 1973 the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Begin with Walking* stated that Shapcott's '...personal poems tend to be uneven, either too compressed or not compressed enough'. Against this rather inclusive stricture one could argue that Shapcott's manner reserves precisely this right to tug things tight or let them run loose. None of his poems seem to settle down to the average size of them all. His poems simply do not have an average. He has decided to craft them all in different ways, so that no two of them have an identical size or length of line. The poems themselves are like the hands and the knuckles (*knuckle*, another favourite word) that drum restlessly in and out of his writing. These hands have no one length or texture. They are muscular instruments for pulling objects (and therefore blocks of language) into and out of shape:

> My hands, scaly blotched monitors,
> protrude,
> spread into wrists, fingers, restless
> belongings.
> My father's hands were not hairy. Mine
> are lizards, crude
> and bristling. (p. 285)

From the poems we detect that Shapcott is left-handed, that he can cook by the age of fifty, that he wants to learn all the operas of Wagner by heart. We do not learn that he had a twin brother, the colour of his children's hair, the nature of his wife's employment, his bank, his address or his health. The text of *Selected Poems*, therefore, is strikingly free of autobiographical 'intrusion'.

C. Harrison-Ford wrote in 1972 that '...it would seem that Shapcott's development has suffered from a lack of strong poetic debate and critical flurry'. Part of the reason for this must lie in his point-blank refusal to write a travelogue of his life. In the verse which he writes there is no inflation of his own ego. In an off-hand way, mainly self-deprecating, he refers to the writer as

> a middle-aging fool in white
> jeans and last season's sideburns.

His own *Shabbytown* shops suggest an un-romantic litany like 'Give us this day our daily frootloops'. When his own kid sees him up on a bicycle like a novice, he debates whether he can execute 'a slewie' (p. 209). The verse boils down, in this charming sonnet, to whether a grown professional man can apply the front brakes of a pedal cycle and simultaneously swing the back wheel through 180 degrees. That would be child's play. Poet's play is to swing the closing doublet into Elizabethan form:

> 13. It is a race for home. How long can
> this go on?
> 14. The sweat creeps out on his forehead,
> it scatters in the sun.

One of Shapcott's reviewers argued that his poems written in America '...are noticeably crisper and more direct'. Let us compare this yardstick for a moment to the Macedonian poet Bogomil Gjuzel (in Carolyn Kizer's *Carrying Over*, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, 1988, p. 83):

> When I came back
> from discovering America
> unfinished phrases drifted in the wind

samara for commas
and the wind tied my reed flute
into a knot.

My old clothes were returned to me
re-cut in my absence
to fit the image you had of me.

When I put them on
they split at the seams.

This marvellous poem suggests a metaphysics of travel, the shoring up of disparate fragments of memory and regret, particularly the lesson that time and place do not function at the same speed for shriven lovers at two poles. It also proposes, concisely, the problem of all travelling artists: can the sources at home still be tapped after an interval abroad? Who cuts the cloth of our dreams? Can we re-enter old roles after travelling a new terrain? Now in partial answer to such questions we can say that Shapcott's America is not a 'celebratory' refrain (although he has said that 'celebratory' is one of his favourite words). His range of urban icons is a muffled re-working of the cloth he had already cut for himself. He watches people walking collie dogs in Central Park; he sees a tramp in Manhattan, steam rising from the grilles in the sidewalk '...in transparent knuckles'; he sees himself fumbling his key into the door at the Wellington Hotel; he evokes pretzels tasting of car exhaust and floods the loneliest hour of night with his familiar inundation:

Around 4am
there is nothing
more than
water. (p. 131)

The traveller observes a street musician outside the art museum; he recalls going alone to a cinema full of lonely singles and the weather so cold that there are '...people thawing / their shins their noses / feeling to make sure / everything is still there' (p. 135). Years later he writes a comic poem on three classes of traveller at Paris (p. 255), and back in Australia he decants the tight skin and weight of muscatels, custard apples, pears, trellises of vine, mangoes, macadamia (bopple-nut), casuarina, ficus

Benjaminii, acalapha, choko: a grape may be 'a planet surrounded by mists'.

So the pretzels of New York give way handily to the banchsia, bora, bracht, haraucaria, bladey-grass, river-couch, currawong and shandygaff of the poet's home turf. Shapcott's Australian poems develop into a riotous flower-bed of colour and local texture. If those are the flora, here are the fauna: cicadas, spiders, cats, gulls, stag, crab, cormorant and gibbon — plus a fanfare: '..."Leon", shrieks a peacock' (p. 336) in one of those extraordinary moments or arbitrary onomatopoeia that enable the act of poetry at times to focus all the senses into one phrase. Thus the casuarinas '...drop a blanket of nerve-ends on the ground'. The older, more mature poet of the 80s is fascinated by tissues, intersections, pith and fibre, by the '...roseate settling lights in my cavernous room' and the '...pollen from chestnut flowers drifting like moths'. In short, almost without knowing it, the selection operated by *Selected Poems* accidentally proposes Shapcott as an anthologist of all nature:

> You don't paint a sky like this
> you remember it. You don't remember a day
> like this
> you transpose it.
> (from 'Life Taste', VII, p. 304)

Taken together with the eleven dazzling couplets of 'Weeds' (p. 344), this rare moment of meta-poetry appears to complete the cycle from the writer's early 'intrusion' of self through the 'crisp' reportage of America to the slumberous non-'compactness' of recent years. 'Weeds' (one of the most resilient and powerful of all Shapcott's fables) portrays '...the humourless imperialism of lawns', and tells the reader to '...Think of potatoes; don't undervalue fennel'. In glance after glance and asides of bracing inconsequentiality the poet recalls the backyard fences or paddocks, choked or trampled by pumpkins or chokos: '...chokos / (their name declares itself)...'. Weeds tell us the fructification of Nature and weeds act like the poking, probing words of the poet as re-maker of the world:

> Weeds are computer storage banks for new
> uses

they are rainforests in miniature with
unclassified medicines
and resilient keys to the greengrocer
cousins.

Weeds are very detailed in their logics.
After bare earth
weeds reach out with green fingernails
to dig in.

They make a sound like trumpets.
Overture! they are shouting.
And it is true. In their fanfare we
swarm and begin.

Here spliced together and decked out in the vocabulary of music and poetic observation are Shapcott's three occupations serenely fused: here is the composer, the writer and the economist. The images ring so true that we feel the gritty soil under our fingertips after reading them. The weed has become the steadiest flower in the garden, the timpani at the back of the symphony orchestra. It also checks the till and tabulates the progress of vegetables. The poet has arrested nature and plotted a new course for our eyes.