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REVIEW

ELEGANCE, MYTH AND EMPATHY: POEMS BY MARGARET DIESENDORF, ALISON CROGGAN AND FIONA PERRY

Margaret Diesendorf, *Holding the Golden Apple*, Phoenix, 1991; Alison Croggan, *This is the Stone*, and Fiona Perry, *Pharaohs Returning*, Penguin, 1991.

These collections are notable in a year that has seen some especially fine anthologies of poetry, not least because all three poets show a remarkable sense of rhythm, shape and harmony in their writing. The poems in these collections are elegant but strong and resilient, passionate but with underlying wit and whimsy, and although each poet uses myth at times, the poetry belongs to a real world and a reality of experience.

Margaret Diesendorf, who came to Australia in 1939, has contributed immeasurably to Australian poetry, not only through her own work, which is considerable, although she restricts herself to a few, carefully selected volumes, but also through her editorial work for *Poetry Australia*, translations of poetry from and into English, workshops with less experienced poets, and a generous support of other writers and literary journals. *Holding the Golden Apple* is an attractive collection in another well-designed book from Phoenix Publications. These love poems are introduced by Jacques Delaruelle, who distinguishes between the erroneous and ill-informed notion of love poetry as "grandiloquent staging of bogus sentiment" or a violation of a "precious commodity which has to be locked in the heart," and Diesendorf's celebration of "the power entrusted to lovers by nature for the realisation of its plans, and the power entrusted to her chimera by the artist for the realisation of her work."

Diesendorf's love of people, of art and of nature begins in the material world of created flesh and fibre and artefact, but its strength comes from her ability to see this love also as a spiritual or metaphysical force. The poems in *Holding the Golden Apple* evoke the world of Greek and Roman myth, but like the Renaissance poet, she sees in this world the

same transcendent love and passion that she celebrates through Christian mythology in collections like *Light* and the many poems she has published in journals in Australia and Europe.

The preoccupation with both worlds does appear here in the lovely poem "When we hold each other," which exemplifies Diesendorf's skill in blending the spiritual and the sensuous. It begins:

> When we hold each other
> (when two are as one)
> between/within
> blossoms *eternity,*
> like the Holy Child
> from the Father's lap
> with the dove in its breast,
> the wingbeat still echoing
> though winds be still.

One of the most unusual poems is "it survives" in the section called *Pervigilium Veneris* (The Nightwatch of Venus). It refers to the excavation of some sacred artefact of an earlier culture, which, if wrongly handled will disintegrate, but if respected, "Love will enter the glass dome/ of the museum artefact." On the surface the poem suggests that the fate of the exposed spear, god or boomerang cannot be good, because it is dragged into "the stark light of day" by "some mattock,/ axe or mechanical grabber." But the fear that at best it will moulder under a glass dome is laid by the intervention of the Love that true conservationists have for the sacred relics they preserve.

Diesendorf moves easily between contemporary images like these, and skilful, whimsical pieces modelled on Petrarchan love sonnets, like "taken from me." A thirteen-lined, trimeter, unrhymed quasi-sonnet, this poem, even to the change of emphasis in the second part, irresistibly recalls Petrarch's sonnets through its imagery and tone. It is a perfect example of the way contemporaneity and tradition strengthen the present:

> When you are taken from me
> by people or circumstance
> I show serious withdrawal
> symptoms. An addict could not
> fare worse. I writhe in body

pain. I agonise. Must have
some part of you, be it voice
sight or at least the report
of a friend. Denied such grace
I plead content with any
placebo, just something to
make me forget. Nothing helps.
You're my only remedy.

Many of the poems are self-regarding, since love of another is impossible unless one loves what one has to offer, but a wry humour supplies the necessary distance between self and poem: "my feet ache with the need of loving you./ I have a dancer's feet,/ narrow, arched & spirited:/ they urge .../ to trample you/ with pony hooves./ There's more tenderness/ in my feet/ than in the hands/ of a hundred wives." This abridgment unfortunately spoils the impression of the poem's dance down the printed page.

Diesendorf's poetry will never date, and if that implies that it does not qualify for the doubtful accolade of standing "at the cutting edge" of contemporary verse, it nevertheless qualifies it to stand at that point, as learned critics used to say some decades back, where the growth of the social mind shows itself. Her work is dedicated to making infinite connections between past and present and within the past and present, and to illuminating vast expanses of human experience that many readers have forgotten or have never known. It would require an essay to comment on the temporal resonances and private and social implications of "after the storm":

lo! of the quantum love of my life nothing's left —
save these empty frames ...

i ripped the paintings that had seduced me from the
silver, the gold, &

returned them posthaste to the false, creative man.
betrayed! betrayed with

rump done rare! & where is the passion that sparked theme,
colour, form, urgent

voice & silences, the fervent questioning of
the whole? the blithe bond

between two 'called' simultaneously: i stand &
face the bare brick wall,

the empty frames ... (my tantalising share in that picture
gallery).

is it time to join the 'dead poets' society?

Hardly, one would reply, certainly not on the evidence of this volume, brimful with life, love and living.

Alison Croggan and Fiona Perry are younger Australian poets whose first collections have been happily placed in this shared volume by editor Judith Rodriguez. Their work is complementary, one to the other, with a shared feeling for the dramatic and a command over a variety of forms and rhythms. Croggan and Perry move effortlessly from personal expressions of femininity and motherhood to a natural empathy with people and places. These may be real, as with Croggan's poems on Emily Brontë and the Victorian murderer and rapist Raymond Edmunds, or Perry's poems on Marie Taglioni, the dancer who introduced on pointes to ballet, and Aurelia Plath, speaking after her daughter's first suicide attempt. Both poets, however, behind old myths and semi-myths, perceive the reality that has a meaning for the present. There is a wisdom in this poetry that suggests the poets have only begun their contribution to Australian art and culture. Perhaps one of the most refreshing and appealing qualities of their work is its mature sympathy, a sense that the poems were written not so much to relieve the poet's distress as to comfort others by finding a meaning in, or perhaps simply by admitting the non-meaning of suffering. These are the last lines of Croggan's poem "Lindy":

the icons of her dreams scattered in the desert
slowly they gathered them dog's tooth torn cloth
and labelled them with the ardour of converts:

she reassembled her voices in the silence
the crow sat in her larynx telling the same truth always
the oracle broke and bled the people turned away, debating
fashioning another legend

The poem, with technical delicacy, ends with no full-stop, strengthening the meaning.

Perry's collection includes two poems on the deaths of young boys, one who died by suicide, the other who died of burns after a bike accident. The opening and closing lines of "A Note from your Dead Boy" show how a sense of the dramatic, used without sense of self, is perhaps the supreme exercise of empathy. We recognise this, for example, in Dylan Thomas' poem on the death of his father, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night." Perry's lines have the same effect:

In a backyard shadowed
by a hill he set out in the car
a swift journey.

Daylight faded
T.V. next door was the last voice
He wound it out.

Winding up seventeen years
with a short length of hose
he shoved ahead of everyone....

Did he know
what it would take
to pull him out
out of the gas chamber, out of the tin coffin
out of life and leave you to a slow death?

Home and laughing, your dead boy.

These examples do not convey the sense of life that the collections also share. Croggan's "Single Mother's Rap" bursts with an indefatigable energy, and Perry's "The Relic" gives a perfectly credible voice to the Sydney Opera House, even though the voice ends, in reference

to the architect Utzon, "I am the bones of an exile's heart/ lost as a fan and reticent." Perry's *Pharaohs Returning* is, nevertheless, tuned to a minor key of loss, nostalgia, death and decay, but because these are expressed through other voices, the final effect, paradoxically, is of the past preserved. Although embalmment is evoked by the Pharaoh poems, Perry's art is not to embalm but to revitalise and give life and significance to the past.

Croggan's work shares a rich sensuousness with Perry's, but even her darkest poems resolve themselves with a firm major chord: they do not presume to answer questions but they are not afraid to affirm a reality. The last lines of "Small things" point to a commitment:

> when bulldozers break their houses
> they squat on the edge of valleys
> with nowhere to go.
> the world is too mean for trust
> but generous enough for murder.
> it's getting worse. I worry
> for the small things.

The final words of "Raymond Edmunds" are spoken by a Fellow Prisoner:

> When he comes in, I give him an hour.
> I'm curious, see? Then I nip along
> and peek through the slit in his door
> to see how he's going. And he's sitting there,
> the whole cell tidy, his blanket folded
> on the shelf by his window, every little thing
> arranged and put away. He knows
> he's going to be there for a long time.
> Others come in, they spend long hours
> staring at nothing. Not Edmunds.
> I didn't want to talk. He looked at home,
> like he'd been preparing himself for twenty years.

Making a connection, creating some form of understanding where before there is only fear and hate of the unknown, and doing so in words and shapes that compel us to attend to them, this seems to be among the most important achievements of these young poets.