

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 *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.