

Maree Hawken

## POETRY: PUTTING A STOP TO IT

Robert Gray, ed., *A Spill of Light ... a thrust of shadow*. Youngstreet Poets, 1999, 64 pages \$16.95 ISBN: 0 9577264 0 6

M.T.C. Cronin, *Everything Holy*. Balcones International Press, 1998, 86 pages US\$12.00 ISBN: 1 891811 04 5

Rory Harris, *Waterline*. Five Islands Press, 1999, 76 pages \$12.95 ISBN: 0 86418 613 4

Alex Skovron, *Infinite City*. Five Islands Press, 1999, 103 pages \$13.95 ISBN: 0 86418 576 6

Poetry is born of enthusiasm. Poets are those people who have somehow managed to retain their eagerness for, and interest in, the simplest and most complex aspects of life to the point where, at every opportunity, they are compelled to write about how it amazes, amuses, bewilders, angers or delights them. While the process of writing restricts that enthusiasm to a degree, the most compelling poems are those where the poet applies self-imposed restrictions thus reducing the temptation to explain or expand. By recording their enthusiasm and revealing their discoveries while omitting certain details, poets encourage readers to make those same discoveries in relation to their own lives or experiences.

However, if the words are pared too closely and those that remain are not sufficiently enriched to convey the original message, then the "translation" may become hazy and the poem will appear harsh and inaccessible. So, what stays and what goes? This is the essential art of the poet: the enthusiasm to believe that their observations are important enough to write about and share with others, tempered by the skill, or perhaps the intuition, to know what to leave out, when to stop.

The Youngstreet Poets Anthology 6 *A Spill of Light ... a thrust of shadow* provides an excellent example of the importance of this balance between enthusiasm and control. This is the latest collection of works by a group of poets who meet regularly to share ideas and discuss their craft. These meetings are, no doubt, where much of their enthusiasm is nurtured. They are inspired by the simple and familiar: gardens, elbows, ornamental fish; and also by the complex and indecipherable: loneliness, birth/death/illness; commercialisation. They do not simply accept or ignore what life offers, but seek to capture the indefinable moments for themselves and others. In most instances this is achieved as much by what is left out, as by what is put in.

For Pam Morris economy is the key. In "Beach Print" she sketches an entire beachscape, a mood, an environment, the passage of time, movement, nature, with the words "along the empty beach / the sand

prints / fill with water / soften and are gone." By using "sand," instead of the more expected "foot," she momentarily removes even the unnecessary suggestion of herself from the "empty" beach until the final stanza. Jutta Sieverding is able to encapsulate "Spring Days" and all the carefree vitality of youth, and the apprehension that increases with maturity, into nine short lines about "children ... rolling in clover."

Of course, it is not entirely a question of economy, but also of investing the words used with diffuse meanings. Vince Hatton achieves this expertly in "The Sunlight Touches The Grapes" by simply reversing the familiar word order, for example: "objects collect owners" and "paintings portray spectators." This technique causes the perspectives to expand, multiply, and echo across the mind unhampered by elaboration.

Adjusting the balance between enthusiasm and control influences the shape of a poem and its ability to convey recognisable experiences. M.T.C. Cronin's third publication *Everything Holy* brings together poems which occasionally slide the scale more towards one end than the other. In some instances enthusiasm dominates a poem and a line becomes too expected. Sometimes an explanation is provided when none is needed.

The most engaging poems in this collection are those which explain

themselves the least, such as "the law of water." The language is simple – no need to reach for the dictionary. The poem deals with some of the thoughts that occur to us all but are rarely transferred onto paper, like the difficulty of knowing, describing and relating to something as elusive and powerful as water. "Four Haunting Differences and a Pink Hat" is able to express the indefinable grief of losing a child: the way nothing can be as it was, and "the degree to which one thing/ exceeds another." These poems "pin down" such emotions, ideas and thoughts without diminishing or denying their intensity or resorting to platitudes. Others put the senses to work to give a five-dimensional experience, such as the description of "Rain for Five Minutes at 11 pm." This poem also caters to that inner sense, which has no name, but craves for connections beyond the obvious, something high and transparent and uplifting.

While *Everything Holy* focuses on the enthusiasm of poetry, Rory Harris' *Waterline* is much more an exercise in control. This is immediately evident in the thin, elongated shape of the majority of the pieces, and the familiar subject matter: marriage, children, holidays, gardens. They offer small snippets of images, or one image to each poem. Scenes or ideas are reduced to their simplest form. They suggest a writer who is astounded by all that he sees, the everyday sights, sounds and happenings that we often take for granted, the feel of a child's breath

against the skin, the "pink flush / of cold / on [a mother's] cheeks." He is able to "gather the scene around [him] / like a canvas hung in the sky" for all to see.

However, the majority of poems concern such external observations with little in the way of personal insight or questioning. It seems the enthusiasm has mellowed considerably since *over the outrow* (1982) where poems such as "Ethnic Look for Tamie", "Melbourne" and "eighty-three years & seventy miles" exuded an impatient passion for change, knowledge and understanding. The overall effect of this latest collection is that the reader, like the poet, is kept outside, unable to participate in the experience being described. We can see very well what his eyes see, but not so well what his heart feels or yearns for.

If there could be a perfect combination of enthusiasm and control then of these four volumes of poetry, Alex Skovron's *Infinite City* would be the leading candidate. Each of the one hundred poems takes the form of a "sonnetina" (a poem of ten lines divided into a sestet and a quatrain), a self-imposed restriction which, in the hands of a lesser artist, may have proved at best, overwhelming, at worst, monotonous. However, within the confines and structure of this "city" Alex Skovron has managed to confidently pursue "infinite" combinations in terms of

subject, rhyme, rhythm and tone. Each poem is like a room, distinct but integral. Groups of rooms are assembled into thematic apartment blocks: they are similarly addressed, and one connects to the next, but each is different. The association leads the reader on, like a door-to-door salesman, as does the humour, which is never far from the surface.

The collection examines many facets of life in a more or less chronological order, from family history, to the complexities of modern life. It commences with the beginning of a life and/or a busy day in the city, and finishes with a questioning of what it is all supposed to mean at the end of the same day. The momentum is aided by Skovron's ability to turn a common phrase upon itself to reveal how we take this life, and ourselves, too seriously. *Infinite City* incorporates to a greater degree the wit which was evident in his two previous publications, *The Rearrangement* and *Sleeve Notes*. Sometimes the humour is subtle, sometimes blatant, such as in "Seaside Weekend", where the protagonist, enjoying a seafood dish, declares that "the oyster is [his] world." At other times familiar expressions are utilised to lightly mock, as in "Extended Cadences" which discusses a clever artist who "knows just *exactly* what's in a name / precisely when to recover from a nine-garret cold / for an opening ... [while] all the time wondering /*which* art in heaven."

We are all born of enthusiasm. As we grow, maturity gradually becomes synonymous with control, movement equals achievement and life becomes less enthralling. The question of whether or not the poems in these collections have been able to strike a "magical" balance between enthusiasm and control is, ultimately, less important than recognising their ability to rekindle, and rebalance, these same qualities in the reader. This is the poetry that touches, that traverses the jaded terrain of everyday to ignite a spontaneous personal déjà-vu.

**Lynda McCaffery**

### A FEW MORSELS

McKenzie Wark, *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace: the Light on the Hill in a Postmodern World*. Pluto Press, Sydney, 1999. ISBN: 1 86403 045 3

Politics as a whole becomes just a branch of the media and species of celebrity, and as such has to compete on unfavourable terms with other kinds of media image and story. (221)

*Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace: the Light on the Hill in a Postmodern World*, takes as its focus the shifting

positions of the Australian Labor Party since ca. 1960. McKenzie Wark examines not only the party's policy shifts but he looks at the way the Australian Labor Party's fortunes have been played out—and organized through—the media "vectors" of the same period.

During his lifetime, the author has obviously experienced a shift in his own political philosophy. He says, "I used to be a true believer, and a labour movement leftist, but these days I've lost faith in anything but the practicalities of forming electoral majorities out of a commitment to minimizing what Bob Ellis calls 'avoidable suffering'." (181)

According to Wark, any political force seeking power must acknowledge the connections between celebrity, culture and politics. These he says are "the images through which people formulate what they want, the resources and practices they have for acting on those wants, and the vectors along which the information connecting the former to the latter travels." (327) And it is Wark's contention that political movements must, at least to some extent, manipulate that connection.

Media "vectors" such as the printing press, broadcasting, telephony, and the internet are in a state of flux. Political parties must adjust their tactics accordingly in order to capture the popular imagination of various electorates. And the population must also undergo a struggle either to