

## D. PETERSEN

## GARGOYLE POETS 7 TO 11

One of the mixed blessings of recent accessibility of publishers to poets is the rise of the so-called popular poets. This occurs as publishers become more willing to take on poets who haven't yet become 'established'. With these rising stars there often emerges the tendency to startle rather than inform, to gesture rather than reveal. Because these poets may feel their position on the rising wave they may also seem fated to try to capture an audience, when they should be consolidating their art. And also, so much going by the name of poetry abounds. We feel bound to side with issues, explicate, locate, classify, identify. Who are the sincere ones, the misguided, the suicidal? Then there's the will to overcome. Systems emerge. The pocket is hooked into the circuit, and we have the literary industry.

But the old principles remain: art, truth, beauty. Order. Out of the group the voices emerge that rise above the others. The movement becomes the few tenacious names. These are the ones who have related to their culture; they have revealed it, shaped it, widened it. So that we may glimpse the roots we are so confidently destroying.

The five slim volumes before me offer their contribution to what is such a wide field that they can only be regarded in terms of a common standard. When the poems are spoken of according to traditional values it means that, even though new poetry must be met on its own ground, it must also hold itself within its field, unless it wants to be thought of as something else.

*LOVES VOYAGES* Kris Hemensley (7)

Essentially observations of the world about, these poems are largely descriptive. Some of the poems such as *Far Out* and *A Second Chance* (5.1 and 5.11) seem to rely on the force of accumulated detail which is selected and presented without overt intrusion by the poet. Unfortunately, this kind of poem, unless supported by a clear motif or purpose, remains an assemblage of the 'bare bones' with the data providing little more than a vague sense of what the poem is about. In *At Santo* Hemensley sets out the data and tries to draw some of the emotional threads together, but the result is inconclusive, almost aimless:

sleeping as if for days  
 sleepless  
 exterior heavy shut  
 interior  
 who knows where

It gives the impression that he has dodged the problem, given up where he could have explored. Something is wanting. The second part of *A Second Chance* is similarly inconclusive.

Hemensley's aesthetic favours movement; a person should be on the move:

ludicrous  
 to stay on the perch  
 scalding the reflection  
 fly

(*A Second Chance* 4)

But the resultant attempt to cast the poems into a voyage framework lacks force, because the individual poems are rather too 'slender' to be of cumulative value. When Hemensley attempts to give direction to the data the result is often either obscurity or banality. It is difficult to see what he would fly from or toward, and why.

In *A Second Chance* (1) he expresses the difficulty of composing "an area of the current time" when "the body tends to reject all but/corresponding angles" - the logic of which holds me in awe. Another poem begins: "Mildura almighty/skies above roads". One wonders where the sky would be if not above the road.

Several poems attempt to relate to the world in a forceful way, but again there is a lack of penetration into the problem. *This Fronting Up* has its own truth, and strikes whereas others tend to shy away. *Poem to Marseille* stands out as an exceptionally clear, honest attempt to order the perceptions into a moving form. There is the sense that the poet really felt about the subject, and doesn't gloss over the ideas in order to sell out to language.

*A WALTZ ON STONES* John Griffin (8)

This is a convincing volume, the poems generally attempting to make sense out of events and experiences. Griffin gives the impression he has a capable mind, and is using it. His poems are in the form of carefully thought out statements, embodying an emotive exploration of these situations. He asserts his ideas, and they stand up to scrutiny; there is a sureness about them, born of insight rather than confidence:

...The view  
of every discoverer speaks  
perspectives tuned or turned  
to origin... (Tench at St. Sebastian)

His poems have a definite direction - they set out to do something and don't stop until they succeed. In this sense they are unified about the motif, and 'arrive', the reader having been led to a particular point:

A hundred miles below the town  
we wait, unsure, and know only  
these certain truths: the river's swell  
will gorge and stink our days;  
the storm to come must come.  
(View of Toledo)

But Griffin shows his ability to modify this kind of ending, so that the poem points the reader onward, although without seeming inconclusive:

The lichen survives; so I  
in this pale morning  
creeping off the sea  
on this cold coast of stone  
must rise, and find  
how fingers cling to granite  
for a home. (The Viking Bride)

He uses this 'pointing' effect with equal success in *Object Matrimony*, *Avocados*, and *First Fleet at the Cape*. What he seems to be doing is establishing a mode, a way of searching. He admits in *A Wind in Reeds* that he weeps "for the hushed reeds, and the lake ahead" and the number of 'explorer poems' that begin the volume align with this attempt to understand by exploring events. Despite the preoccupation with this abstract search Griffin never loses sight of people, humanity. Virtually all of the poems (there are but two exceptions) show an awareness of the need to establish an extraversive contact with the world. It is the insight into man in such poems as *Sturt with Toothache* or *Succession* that

gives a firm sureness to these poems generally.

*MADAM BLACKBOOTS* Stefanie Bennett (9)

The poems of this volume are of uneven quality, though generally showing a perceptive awareness of the place of emotion in poetry. She conveys feelings honestly and with disturbing accuracy. A poem like *Child* shows this ability to convey intense feeling and vigorous awareness:

You must grow and I shrink;  
Despatch this mother-Goose from your side  
-Become a mere spectator. It is hard.  
Already the aloneness haunts our playroom.

But a few poems seem banal and oddly out of place, such as *Almost Love Poem*, and *Self Portrait*:

southbound, i, to  
air, rings of rain  
all about me.  
you, somewhere else. (*Almost Love Poem*)

There is a pervading feeling of torment in many of the poems, and it seems that the poet is trying to weigh up this emotion, to assess its value to her:

I twist with the elegance  
Of a slug on a distressed morning.  
I look like your navel; anyone's.  
(*Ad Unum Omnes*)

Such poems as *Tightrope*, *Woman in the Red*, *Flat Request*, or *Violet Leduc and a Wasting Spring* are inroads into this concern. Although the poems rely on emotion for their strength (successfully, it should be said) they sometimes leave the impression they could be made even stricter in form, more astringent in quality.

*SAINT KILDA MEETS HUGO BALL* Eric Beach (10)

Generally speaking, when a poet admits "Words failed me. Expelled./ Kept trying to say something." (*Donkeyman*), the reader is justifiably suspicious. These poems are assertive in stance, and give the impression they embody a lot of energy, but still are apparently inconclusive:

'I can eat more/white chicken/than you can  
understand'. (*Into Black Into White*)

The inevitable question: 'So what?'

Beach treats of various themes - the establishment (*The Young Man*), drugs (*High Noon*), love (*Ten Tiger Poems*), and the self (*Mirror Writing*), but one is left with the uncomfortable feeling that there is more show than substance, more energy than insight. The poems tend to gesture rather than actually come out and say something:

You can't hold a tiger,  
make love with claws;  
love is the paw  
which doesn't stretch to cut.  
(the hand withholds the hook)

(*Ten Tiger Poems iv*)

In *Mirror Writing* v Beach expresses high hopes for his poetry: he thinks of his poems as "doorways". With startling honesty he sums up his aesthetic: "The pieces have no plans," and leaves the reader with "shadows that grow into the nights." Not enough.

LIVING ALONE WITHOUT A DICTIONARY Carol Novack (11)

The poems of this volume develop an inner intensity in their explorations of various emotions. This emotive intensity controls the form the poems assume, and the more intellectual elements as it were emanate from the emotive centre of the poems. As a result the poems seem to gain their vigour from within. There is a general concern with sex and love, and woman's reactions to them:

hints of bones under bones we are  
 alone as cemeteries built oblivious to form  
 not knowing how to be comfortable  
 under the galaxy of flesh

*(Velikovsky's Dream)*

A preoccupation with suffering or torment is evident as a part of this:

for years she wore her sickness  
 like a black moon round her eyes  
 & would take no gifts

they would send her fresh lips...

*(Offerings)*

In another poem she says that "you try to get out of the fear/by going into it" and there seems to be the feeling she is trapped within the round of art and pain. The answers she seems to find are couched in physical, almost violent terms: "piranha/i've taken your teeth for signs" (*Stances*). Perhaps the strongest point in favour of these poems is the way they gain in stability as the tensions are tackled; they discover order in an inherently chaotic source. Dealing with difficult material that can easily lead to truisms, Novack might try to establish a firmer intellectual basis for her searching.

To conclude the polemic, it must be said that poetry should steer a course around two fatal traps: inflation, of the ego to be precise, and the obvious.