

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### BIOLOGICALLY ACCURATE POETRY

*Reef Poems*. Mark O'Connor. University of Queensland Press, 1976. pp.59. \$4.00 hardback; \$1.95 paperback.

*Reef Poems* raises interesting questions for those who are real readers of poetry and believe literature is still important. Mark O'Connor expresses his gratitude "to the people of the Australian Museum and Joint Universities Stations for fostering my belief in the possibility of biologically accurate poetry." The biological accuracy of the poems is found in lines like these, for example, from *Gannets in air*:

The nether element is open to them as the upper,  
and each when he sees what he hungers for plunges  
hedlong down among thickets and shoal of staghorn,  
dives up to eighty feet deep  
(a fishing trap caught one once ninety feet down),  
then flops back up into sunlight  
and surges aloft.

from *Gannets in air*, p.7

But *Reef Poems* are not simply nature pieces by a poet who has been shown "where and how to look"; they also take on the more difficult job of recording human behaviour.

The possibility of biologically accurate poetry has always, in one sense, been admitted. In another sense, the concept of biologically accurate poetry must remain an open but fascinating problem. In the eighteenth century Dr Johnson's poet Imlac, in the novel *Rasselas*, decreed that it was unnecessary for the poet to number the streaks on the tulip. Mark O'Connor precisely numbers the feet which a gannet's plunge carries it into the sea, and the annual rainfall in inches at Kondallilla Falls.

There are philosophical reasons for the two poetic attitudes, and the three groups of poems in this collection indicate some of these reasons. The first section, *Coelenterate Islands*, comprises poems concerned with the Great Barrier Reef and its inhabitants; the second section, *The Gorilla & I*, comprises poems of protest and is remarkable chiefly for the use of variety of format to shape the meaning of the pieces; the third section, *Three Places*, comprises poems about Melbourne, Kondallilla Falls and Nimbin and deals mainly with the impact of man on his environment.

This slim but attractive volume epitomizes the changes taking place in human responses to social development between the writing of *Rasselas* and the writing of *Reef Poems*. *Rasselas* is not complacent about the value of human society but philosophically accepts the condition of humanity. *Reef Poems* is the work of a young poet whose inspiration

comes as fruitfully from human culture as from biological sciences, but the poems are essentially a rejection of the present condition of human society.

As an aid to understanding what a poet might mean when he strives for a biologically accurate poetry, it may be useful to look back to the eighteenth century poet who remained unaffected by the demands of the Royal Society some hundred years earlier for a more accurate record of nature and natural processes. To extrapolate, to generalize, to synthesize and assess the new in terms of the old were positive virtues in eighteenth century poetics. Surely this had something to do with the eighteenth century confidence that it was well on the way to taking the measure of man and was able to generalize about humanity and nature without falsifying reality. In general the eighteenth century found nothing that could not be handled and assimilated by satire. The ironies of human behaviour were sharply observed and recorded but they had not entered its soul. But as the century came to its close later poets were less assured of social development and their human environment, and they found inspiration in the discoveries of science; and in moments when the human universe threatened to overwhelm, relief came in looking closely at the lesser celandine and in recording that the woodspurge has a cup of three.

Inspiration from scientific method and fact has largely created *Reef Poems*, and the collection suggests that Mark O'Connor was led to study the reef and its inhabitants because his concern for human habitation threatened to overwhelm him. The poet's struggle against this threat is seen most overtly in *The Gorilla & I*, poems whose preoccupation may be suggested by these lines:

Seething over in my mind  
while angry acid eats my guts,  
these are rough verses I designed  
to curse the crew that self-destructs.  
from *Reprieve*, p.33

These poems are the least arresting. Unusual visual forms contribute something to the verses as a whole, but although the poems are more than varieties of malediction on the misuse of science and the cruelty of greed, they are expressions of disgust rather than of concern, and will probably persuade only those who already share the poet's feelings. Two poems based on classical themes, *Pyrrha* and *On seeing Electra*, do hold the attention. They are also related to the poet's concern with man and his environment:

As the winds disperse the myriad lamentations, the landscape,  
emptied of men and their sin, returns, expands,  
with soft renewal like a rising brest asserts  
a world of light, and austere joyfulness

Where things, now means to no man's end, become sheer  
facts, . . .

from *On seeing Electra*, p.45

In the third section, the poem *Melbourne views* expresses the poet's unease when he finds pollution, disease and pornography where Batman and Fawcner declared a village, and

the mark of the beast everywhere, &  
gardens that hang from brick.  
from *Melbourne views*, p.54

But this kind of poetry perhaps does not take us very far. *Kondallilla Falls* is also concerned with man's greed and his pollution of the earth. Mark O'Connor's poetry even here does go further than some protest verse because it cannot escape from the culture that nurtured the creative impulse of the poet. The best creations of man are not abandoned along with his worst destruction. Thus in "The masters", the third part of *Kondallilla Falls*, the magnificence of the universe is evoked in terms of human art:

The inexorable law of entropy . . .  
reduces Evolution's Sistine magnificence  
to a monotonous plague of the hardiest species, . . .  
from *Kondallilla Falls*, p.56

This group of poems, and the book as a whole, end, however, with lines which point towards a temporary respite, an interim measure for regaining strength before returning to the problem that self-destructing humanity has imposed.

Are there such worlds and suns  
under the mushroom?  
HOLD, said the musician,  
I arrest your verbal mind  
for treason to your body.  
Do not try to work it out.  
Do not presume to know.  
Only listen, listen.  
Hear the melody behind these words I sing:  
*Long-time sunshine shine on you, on those a-round you.*  
*Let the pure light within you, guide your way home.*  
Now. Listen, again. Listen.  
The light is not in words, nor in anything  
your cerebellum is trained to process.  
Only listen, lie and listen.  
Watch the trees bow, and the rocks pulsate.  
Never mind my tigers.  
"The first evening" from *What happened at Nimbim*, p.59

Poetry, however, is not created solely by listening. The poet must eventually use words. He cannot give back his experience in silence.

A trained observation underlies the *Reef Poems*, the strongest and most interesting part of the collection. The poems are arresting for the very fact that the poet has not been able to record with scientific detachment, however unemotionally he may have observed. Man's salvation, as much as his damnation, must in the end lie in the fact that his cerebellum has been trained to process what his senses record. Man can take only limited inspiration from the gannet, the tern and the noddy, as limited as those moments of inspiration found by romantic poets in the nightingale and the skylark. The *Reef Poems*, whose central artistry depends upon precise observation, are shaped by a human mind wrestling with human concerns, and they judge and evaluate in human terms:

At resorts and beaches they are first to volunteer  
for any puppet parliament of seabirds,  
proving themselves  
toadies that squawk for contemptuous scraps,  
quick to quieten the invader's conscience  
greedy and careless of their wilder brethren,  
whom they do not even represent,  
being more truly shore-lubbers than sea-birds,  
and appropriately  
not planes but hovering helicopters in flight.  
from *Flight poem*, p.23

In a precise sense of the word "biological", the gulls are not described with biological accuracy, but the poem is a good example of an active cerebellum processing the behaviour of birds and humans. A poetry of simple observation and record is possible, but in the end becomes self-conscious. The strength of Mark O'Connor's poetry lies in its honest adulteration of observation with intellectual commentary.

"Sheer facts" are not an enemy of poetry, and *Reef Poems* make a pleasing contribution to the poetry of fact. Mark O'Connor records the sacred egg-cowries "sliding up miles of slanted reef beneath the moon", the Crown-of-thorns starfish with "small groping legs/busy as spiders", yet rigid as robots", and the crested terns:

Their wings are no hovering spread like a gull's  
but strong, sharp, and curved as a scimitar,  
swept back with trailing points  
where two hyperbolas fuse,  
thin, but so long one  
might say that they  
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from *Flight poem*, p.25

For this poet observation continually evokes the artefacts of human intelligence and imagination. The star-fish, *Acanthaster planci*, evokes the central tradition of western idealism:

You are the very platonic form of spininess  
and your limbs are fifteen spiny spikes  
from an even more spine-covered centre.  
from *On a first encounter*, p.10

To this extent Mark O'Connor's poetry contains a paradox. It is itself a construct against the forces of human destructiveness, but must use human cultural and conceptual products in its own construction. Although he sometimes rejects cultural mythology:

I do not know what origin the natives invented  
for these sacred eggs; but from them one might surely  
devise some pageant a thousand times richer  
than the stale and savage myth of Leda.  
from *Sacred egg-cowries*, p.5

in other poems, like *The beginning*, *The sea-eagles' nest: One Tree Island* and *The discovery*, he makes constructive use of pagan and christian mythology.

Human art and culture evolve slowly compared with the rapid changes effected by technology, and the comparative permanence and stability of art perhaps recommends it to the poet. Two poems, *Coelenterate Islands* and *the herons* express the poet's fear of rapid technological change as against the slow constructive changes of nature. In nature, for example, the death of the coral polyp is the growth of the hollow coral island:

The Wind sings over the coelenterate ded  
the hollow-gutted stone-sheath-dwellers  
the lace-masons, the spicule-shapers

the island-makers.  
from *Coelenterate Islands*, p.1

In *The killer* the verse form makes visible the precise, necessary act of killing performed by the gannet and compares this, silently as it were, with the clumsy indiscriminate murder of political warfare:

The wonder is the bird can make choice  
among such richness of life below,  
but he does, and then  
suddenly plu-  
mmets, never  
failing to  
kill.

from *The Killer*, p.4

Here, as in the lines on the crested terns, the visual form not so much reinforces as acts as an integral part of the poem. "The murderous pilot/hefting his cargo of deth" sees only "the pattern" of ricefields and towns. For man in this position, "seated aloft" the pattern or generality prevents his knowing what he truly does. There are strong arguments to persuade that the generality of the eighteenth century has lost its value as a philosophical stance for our time, and that a poetry that is as accurate as possible is needed. As adjuncts to communication Mark O'Connor uses graphic verse forms and even his interest in spelling reform — here seen only in the use of the letter "e" for all occurrences of the vowel sound in "spred", "ded", "deth" — arises from the desire to encourage definition and order.

As separate pieces *Reef Poems* are uneven in quality, but as a collection the three sections of this book are a valuable addition to contemporary Australian poetry. There is much careful craftsmanship in their construction. If they are not consistently biologically accurate in recording reef life, they are consistently valid as examples of human creativity. His is a paradoxical but honest art.

The epigraph which Mark O'Connor has taken from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke returns us to the original problem that the collection poses for the concerned reader of poetry. Rilke's poem was inspired by a work of art, the headless statue of Apollo — the eyes are lost, but the very perfection of the human artefact scrutinizes the beholder:

. . . . denn da ist keine Stelle,  
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben ändern.

How do these lines, written about a work of art, relate to *Reef Poems*? The torso of Apollo sees the beholder with every lineament of its beauty, behind this beauty lies the culture from which it grew, however imperfectly this culture is now understood. The beauty of the art-form and its matrix culture reproach the beholder. There is only one way, says the poet, to meet this challenge: "You must change your life." The natural world may also be a reproach, and the dimly understood systems of biology and ecology which sustain it. Perhaps *Reef Poems* suggest that here too our only response can be to change ourselves.