

CHERYL FROST

Greg McCart, ed., *Recent Queensland Poetry*. Deception Bay (Qld.): Regulance Publishers, 1975.

The poems in this anthology were written between 1970 and 1975 by poets then resident in Queensland. A belated review can be justified on the ground of the high quality of the verse included, and secondly because the specifically regional nature of the anthology raises a significant theoretical issue.

Although the introduction claims that the poems selected are representative of Queensland verse, the great quantity of ephemeral and often bad verse still published in newspapers, little magazines and private collections all over the state is not, in fact, represented. For this readers can probably be thankful. Several of the twenty-seven poets with works included in *Recent Queensland Poetry* are major Australian writers, while the others either enjoy long-standing though minor reputations, or really deserve the over-used epithet, "promising." The anthology encourages comparison among the works of the poets included, and the reader begins to understand how some of the major reputations were earned.

Judith Wright's five poems are among the finest in the collection. Her basic technique, of looking closely at an object or an experience so as to capture a fresh vision of it in words, is the one most frequently employed also by the other poets. Probably it is a common technique in all modern poetry. However, Judith Wright's poems in the anthology often transcend the object or experience, to grapple with, if not to achieve, a philosophical insight. For instance, in "White Night," a poem partly about wakefulness, she asks:

Where does it all begin?
If evil has a beginning
it may disclose its meaning.

In "Alive," her observation of a microscopic animal leads her to search for the essence of alive-ness, and to conclude that it is, "Form/concentrated, exact . . ." Judith Wright's poems excel those of most other poets in the anthology in the clarity with which they allow such issues to emerge. More importantly, however, the objects she chooses to write about are relevant to her personally, and her treatment of them therefore possesses what might be called "emotional validity." Thus, the long poem, "Habitat," deals mainly with her own house, but introduces feelingly the more general theme of decay, and of affirmation in the face of it:

To live, to work together in intimate peace
is to prove in the dark the quality of the light.

In some of David Rowbotham's poetry, the directly-observed object or experience becomes the basis of a metaphysical quest, often lyrically described. The following stanza was inspired by a tree on a Wickham Terrace lot:

I climb the Stairs and, with
A Jacob's hope to heaven,
Fear while I can see,
One of the brightest given,
The blue in the green of the tree:
So blue to be foliage, flower;
So visitant to behold
That my laddered dreaming-power
Is driven awake and wild,
And I wish to wrestle God . . .

Here the philosophy, or perhaps better, the transcendent meaning, is fairly explicit, though somewhat less so than in the poetry of Judith Wright.

Rhyl McMaster is a stage further removed from overt philosophical statement than is Rowbotham. The point of her best poems is nevertheless easy to grasp. The final stanza of "The Brineshrimp," for instance, has obvious human relevance:

They flesh-colouredly exist—uncomfortable for the most part—
and desperately love and are lump-throated funny
because they're only very small, water-galumpling brineshrimp
and rather untidy—
and they mate and are fruitless.

Other poets represented in *Recent Queensland Poetry* offer freshness of observation and description, and sometimes feeling too, but do not take the trouble to explicate their philosophical meanings. Roger McDonald, in "The Hollow Thesaurus," enunciates what is probably the underlying poetic of this group, by pleading for observation uncluttered by preconception or past experience:

Look, The moon comes up. Behind certain trees are bats
that wrench skyward like black sticks.
Light falls thinly on grass, from moon and open door.
This has not happened before.

Nevertheless, a central emphasis on observation sometimes results in poems in which a transcendent meaning is implied, but irritatingly out of reach. An example is the first of Thomas Shapcott's "Central Park Poems":

She does not speak with him, of course.
Their two collies explore noses. Though it is cold
his skin taunts her between shirt and belt. She
is quilted in wool and skins.
Tonight, in the park
the moon will show down blue as television.

australia/you're young and imbecile inbred in contradiction,
australia/the rack is more severe than you realise,
australia, give VOICE, just ONE squawk of intellect!

Other, usually older, poets make their social comments by shrewd and accurate statements of prevailing realities. Two poems comment in different ways on the futility of war — Noel Macainsh's "Memorials":

"THEIR NAMES SHALL LIVE FOR EVER MORE"

.....

Jones B.J.

Jones C.K.

Jones C.L.

Jones C.M.

Jones D.A.

Jones D.B.

Jones D.C.

Jones D.D.

Jones D.E.

Jones E.L.

.....

..... etc.

and David Lake's "To Horace":

And, come to that, it's never sweet to fall

With metal in your guts:

It smells, and hurts — . . .

The conservation issue receives most frequent attention. It is treated with personal lyricism by Judith Wright in "Oriole, Oriole," and somewhat surreally in Barry G. Shield's "Do My Ghosts Like Mozart?". It is also implied in Kath Walker's bush idyll, "Furry Friend." Certain other social issues receive incidental treatment. For instance, Maureen Freer in "Ad Lib," and Peter Annand in "Women" parody television advertising and male chauvinism respectively.

Probably it is not because of an innate conservatism in poets or in Queenslanders that the contributors to this anthology mostly limit their social protest to grim or ironic comments on the status quo. They seem genuinely to believe that change for the better is impossible, or at least that it will be almost infinitely slow. Other poets concentrate on the very impossibility of solution or escape. This is the theme, for example, of John Manifold's powerful sonnet, "Bikey":

Sure, get your helmet on, and your cuirass,

Young Lance, young Lancelot, young Lot. Your bike

Is snorting at the curbside, full of gas,

Ready to roar. Just so, it's time to hike.

On this Gomorrah spend no more dislike

But leave it to a vaster retribution;

Leave now before the fires of heaven strike
Smuggens and smog, stagnation and pollution.

Best go alone — no popsy on the pillion
To slow you down with tears and lamentation—
Go, drag your anger off! But it's a million
To one, young Lot, that as soon as the sun goes down
You'll come to Sodom ("Good Rexona Town"),
On smog and smug, pollution and stagnation.

Pat Price's "In Custody" and Jennifer McRae's "Clerk-Death Of" also deal tellingly with the impotence of the individual in the face of social imperatives, and the resulting moribundity of ordinary people's lives. This is an unhappy insight, which might well be tested against the reality of life in Queensland.

Regionalism in literature is the main theoretical issue raised by *Recent Queensland Poetry*. Evidence derived from the poetry printed there would lead to the conclusion that regionalism, in other than the technical sense based on residence, is not a very meaningful concept in Queensland literature.

In the first place, geographical location is not an issue in most of the poems. The works of David Rowbotham and Thomas Shapcott, in their conscious use of Brisbane as a setting, are notable exceptions to this. In addition, Graeme Curtis has a poem entitled "Callan Park," and William Scott a lyric in which he celebrates the coming of rain to southwest Queensland. Most of the poems in the anthology, however, could have been written anywhere in Australia, and many are not even necessarily Australian.

Secondly, most of the poets represented in the anthology were based, at the time of writing, in Brisbane or at least in the southern part of the state. Where a regional consciousness exists at all, therefore, it tends to be confined to this area. Thomas Shapcott, for instance, begins his poem, "Brisbane Walking," with a reference to "my city." (Many poems are not urban, however, but deal with nature or the country.) None of the poets appears to write with any consciousness of the whole of Queensland as the background of his work.

Finally, as the editor points out, there is no indication that a regional school of poets has emerged in Queensland. The poems in the anthology, and therefore presumably the poets also, do not express any common political or economic ideology relating to the region. Nor are the poets united by any literary theory. They remain discrete individuals, dealing with their own subjects in their own ways.

The poets represented in *Recent Queensland Poetry* are not, therefore, truly regional writers, but this does not alter the fact that they wrote their poems in Queensland. The high quality of the verse, which should be obvious from the few examples quoted above, at least begins to controvert the low estimation in which Queensland's culture is usually held.