ELIZABETH PERKINS

REVIEWS


John Millet is one of Australia’s maverick poets, in the sense that although he belongs to the Poetry Australia stable, so to speak, he does not easily conform in his concept of poetry, his themes or techniques, to anything that is being written by other Australian poets at present. This may explain why Millet was omitted, for example, from *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (1986), although *Blue Dynamite* is his tenth book of poetry, and at least one of his collections, *Tail Arse Charlie* (1982), contains some of the most powerful, most analytical and most imagistically sophisticated of all contemporary Australian verse.

*Blue Dynamite* is another eccentric, in the best sense, contribution to our poetry, exhibiting Millett’s usual accomplished expertise in handling language and rhythm, and an original conception of what a book of poetry can be. It is an impressionistic novella in verse, with seven chapters each comprised of six to thirteen poems, the title section relating the experiences of the businessman, Roger, a youngish executive, in Shanghai. The poems reconstruct a confrontation of Australian commerce in the eighties with the commercial and philosophic ambience of Asia. The life dominated by the All Ordinaries Index, and the other life which tries to follow the necessary virtues of a Bodhisattva, sharing equal psychic space in the book. The reader who has observed smooth-faced young Australian and Asian businessmen coming in and out of a multi-storey multi-national building in a big city, catches immediately something of what Millett is trying to recreate in these poems.

It is a daring conception, equal to that of *Tail Arse Charlie* which rewrote the experiences of a bomber gunner over Europe and his return to rural Australia. *Blue Dynamite*, however, is immediate to the same degree as *Tail Arse Charlie* is retrospective. Millett is taking poetry into a milieu which few of our poets have yet entered so deliberately, and of which none has made such a coherent and complex image. The poem is effortlessly and unselfconsciously cosmopolitan — that is, in so far as art is ever unselfconscious.

Although the first chapter is titled *Bodhisattva*, the book does not overtly emphasize a sense of the presence of a Bodhisattva. It is the concept of the book that suggests the relevance of the six virtues inherent in a Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is a manifestation of the
spirit of eternal Buddha, one who has chosen not the bliss of self-
extinction, which is Nirvana, but active involvement with the daily
suffering of other beings. In order to serve compassionately, the six
virtues needed are generosity, morality, patience, vigour, concentration
and wisdom. *Blue Dynamite* does not systematically treat these virtues,
and it could be said that in fact they are present by their absence from the
poems. The conception of the book, however, removes poetry from any
of the usual meditative levels to the world of business and activism —
activism directed to commercial ends — and it is in this conception that
Millett engages with the principles by which the Bodhisattva lives.

Especially important is the principle of vigour or energy, which has
always been a component of Millett’s poetry, threatening sometimes
perhaps in the earlier *Cunderang* poems to burst the poetry apart. In
*Blue Dynamite* the impact of the commercial world, which disrupts
customary ideas of the poetic, and the dispersive effect of the cosmopol-
itan allusions, tend to hold excessive energy in check:

Greenville knows nothing of Trans Asian Finance Inc
the Jewish money-dealer in New York
Sheik Abdul Mumtaz Begum with oil reserves
and a sinking fund in Eurodollars
that will surely sink Greenville
nor of Mr Wong’s connection with the China Bank
Evan Green saved for his old age with the Commonwealth
Jack’s wife saves Jack’s underpants by ritual stitching
Honeysuckle wins its battle with Andronicus
by twisting roof-guttering into sailor’s knots
Zackery counts days in The Year of The Heart Attack
They do not number 365

The commercial empire spreads its tentacles over the lives of the
Greens as the honeysuckle spreads over the front garden where Andro-
nicus Green is building his yacht. Millett’s poem spreads itself over
rural, suburban and city Australian life, evoking without strain myths
that range from Greg Norman to catching mako sharks off South Head.
The newspaper headlines and the TV cover of world events and celebri-
ties are present in the poem as naturally and as inescapably as they are
present in daily life. The effect is almost as suffocating as it is in real life.

Where Millett succeeds, however, is in writing a powerful and
coherent image of this suffocation, so that the book does finally leave
one with the feeling that one has been given a kind of power over the
encroaching wave of twentieth century finance and technology. Perhaps
this sense of power is illusory and what the book does is give an image in
which one’s justifiable terror is simply contained with some kind of
comfort. The question remains an open one for this reader, just as at the end of the *Come Down Cunderang* poems it was possible to feel that perhaps violence had been condoned as well as confirmed.

The novella contains such a variety of material, an important part of which has not yet been mentioned here, that this sense of the overwhelming variety and imminence of twentieth century civilization is mitigated by other experiences. The ocean surrounding Australia is peopled by board-riders and swimmers, sailors and fishermen, some of whom share the other life of the city, and some poems linger over these moments. Others join the maelstrom of the antennae-haunted cities and suburbs. The close family life of church and local community life is evoked with the same immediacy as the life of the Shanghai businessman and geisha. The poem “Evan Green’s Son”, for example, can be compared with “Eveline’s Lyric”:

The boy next door collected birds
recited their names as coloured poems
  flight detail wing beat
  nest egg shape
  instinct that brought them to town
  finches flycatchers sparrows
  breathless kingfishers
  wild kestrels of love
  passing from darkness to light

“Eveline’s Lyric”, by comparison, takes us to Shanghai. It is not only the milieu and speaking voice that change. The concept of what a poem can do seems to have vaulted over some forty years of Australian poetry:

I am the geisha in your underwear
the punk-rocker on disco floors
Kiri Te Kanawa singing Maria
in West Side Story
the force driving racehorses and Ferraris
a lift gliding to the fiftieth floor
I am the wind’s whisper before storms
the lyric in your arm’s vice
My shoes sing through the streets
My bare feet make music on your carpet.

*Blue Dynamite* is written in the language of its multiple environments, exploiting the jargon of yuppies, trades, economics, environmentalists, surfers, religions and Asian decorum much as Ben Jonson exploited the variousness of the Renaissance world. Overall the book presents several generations of Australian economic history seen through the
lives of men (rather than women) who have taken an apparently active
part in that history or who have been passive participants and victims.
There is a feeling, however, that Australia is not the prime mover of the
economic juggernaut: that its rural or urban or maritime "busyness"
over these generations has been a kind of playing under the paw of an
immensely powerful predator. Yet the poems tend to show the early
busyness, which is often not overtly economic, in a nostalgic recollec-
tion, emphasizing an implied intrinsic value and not greatly concerned
with its helplessness.

The concept and the theme are demonstrably comprehensive and
complex, and embrace something beyond the areas already indicated. In
an evocation of the earliest poetry written about the great southland of
the Pacific, Wentworth's *Australasia* (1823), for example, *Blue Dynam-
ite* sets its poems within the framework of the ocean surrounding
Australia and the spiritual imperialism which is the perhaps illusory gift
of this island-continent status. Millett opens the book with a poem
about a board-rider, "a prophet loose in body and mind/ in touch with
the sea" who, in the next poem is one of those who "precisely at nine
o'clock" sign "the high water mark/ become architects/ planners/
property developers", but who also, in the first poem

listen to winds hollowing
the oldest latitudes in the world
taste dead sailors
slice home on late afternoon glass
switched into circuits of the sun

Each of them has "the sea's religion/ in his blood." Finally, the last
chapter, *The J Curve*, ends with a poem which owes its vocabulary to the
nineteen eighties, but which responds, despite the enormous technical
inventions that it evokes, to the original nineteenth century concept of
Australia as a presence at one with the elemental forces of the earth's
southern hemisphere:

I owned a big rhino
long and fast and clean
Some undersea shift sent her in
or a cyclone, a new island
isobars touching a storm circle
thousands of miles off
a fire-ring boiling the bottom of the world.

*Blue Dynamite* is an impressive attempt to present a comprehen-
sive picture of Australia in the nineteen eighties. What the picture
means must be interpreted by each reader. Lord David Cecil wrote about
the Victorian novelist, Mrs Gaskell, that "The outstanding fact about
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.


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
deply 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 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.