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REVIEW

THE HOLLOW YET INSISTENT SOUND ...


Depending on the direction from which you approach, Ken Bolton either writes the only sort of poetry possible in the latter stages of the twentieth century or, to quote Buzz Kennedy on modern poetry in general in a recent Weekend Australian Review, "pretentious rubbish." For example, Part One of Ode to the Three Stooges begins by quoting a line from Andrew Marvell, then continues with:

o, Ode to the 3 Stooges
you will be a great poem,
(when I write you!)

It would appear safe to consider it written. Arriving at a decision as to whether or not it achieves its prophesied greatness may prove to be more problematic.

In The Penguin New Literary History of Australia, Martin Duwell remarks that "the new poets" or the generation of '68," although roughly bounded in terms of inclusion or otherwise in John Tranter's The New Australian Poetry, should also be seen as having amongst their number "a group of younger writers, including Ken Bolton" (493). The index notwithstanding, this is the only mention that Ken Bolton rates in the entire book. The spectre of Tranter, looming as it does somewhat ironically over this group of poets, offers one immediate point of comparison, as do the poems of John Forbes, since Forbes' and Bolton's poetry seem to have a number of things in common.

One of Tranter's characteristic modes is the deferral of a unified poetic voice, a strategy that works effectively to frustrate any attempt at extracting an authorised Truth from his poetry. Ken Bolton's poems appear
to have a similar end in mind but approach it from a different direction. A rather chatty speaking voice surfaces repeatedly in lines such as these:

I turn the radio
way down: I want to write
a poem

& today I can't
with the radio on

(At Work)

Given the consistency of tone that is maintained throughout the fifteen years represented in the collection, and Bolton's consistent use of the first person, the temptation to construct the figure of "the poet" is hard to resist. However, the poetry soon reaches a point beyond which this insistent foregrounding of the poetic self ceases to reinforce the persona and begins, instead, to undermine it through exaggeration. Any illusion of discovering objective truth crumbles under the weight of this all-pervasive caricature of monstrous subjectivity.

Monstrous though it may be, this subjectivity has its tongue fixed firmly in its cheek. Like some of John Forbes's most energetic work, Bolton's poems sometimes dazzle with their inventive wordplay, sometimes draw groans with their merciless puns, and manage to be irreverent about virtually everything they touch upon. Blazing Shoes pauses only to take a swipe at Robert Frost's ponderous, self-important diction —

Something there is
that does not love an early opener

and something there is that does not love ELECTRICITY SUBSTATIONS

— before going on to define "polymorphic" as "shaped like a parrot." (And it might be argued that one of the greatest achievements in this collection is that "Bad Mood with Wordsworth" manages to live up to its wonderful title with an hysterically funny and bitingly satiric critique of the worst sentimental excesses of English Romanticism.)

In the August 1992 issue of Australian Book Review Simon Patton comments that "tradition pervades [Bolton's] selected poems of
fifteen years, never actually presented on the page, but written against, consistently resisted" (56). It seems, however, that a slightly different process is actually occurring in the poems, a process at once more subtle and more blatant than simple rebellion. Bolton's playful language filters tradition and its devices through the late twentieth century and they re-emerge sporting "Dayglo" corporate trademarks. But just as Wordsworth cannot escape Ken Bolton, neither can Ken Bolton escape Wordsworth. Once a connection between texts has been made the effects resonate in both directions, and Ken Bolton's poems provide, at the very worst, an interesting framework through which to chase such resonances.

So is this poetry pretentious rubbish? Undoubtedly. But perhaps that is the whole point, or some of the point, or perhaps that misses the point completely. As I said before, it all depends on where you're standing. Ken Bolton's Selected Poems 1975-1990 looks pretty good from over here. This poetry is so self-aware that it seems in danger of succumbing to an attack of the jitters. It is inventive and energetic and often funny. You may not have time to ask yourself what, if anything, this poetry means because you will be too busy trying to answer its constant questioning of what you actually mean by poetry. It is not, however, particularly passionate about many things (with the possible exception of the Three Stooges). When the revolution comes, I suspect that Ken Bolton's poetic persona will watch it through the window of a coffee shop. Ken Bolton may very well write against tradition, but tradition also writes against him, and the dialogue between the two is never less than amusing, although the amusement may at first be frustrated by the apparently determined insularity of the poems.

If recent poems like "Lufthansa" seem to show Tranter attempting to reconcile the post-modern condition with the humanist tradition, or perhaps to move beyond post-modernism in search of something else (dare I say permanent or transcendent?), Bolton's poems seem cheerfully to embrace and revel in whatever they find around them. At times they affect a kind of naiveté but they remain alert and sharply critical. There are also quite a lot of them in this book. Whatever your own reaction to them might be, as Tranter himself once wrote in his "Ode to Col Joye,"

the hollow yet insistent sound of a Coke can
rhimg along the gutter
fills you in —

it's a Ken Bolton day!