

AUSTRALIAN POETRY 1997

A Diagnosis



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How healthy is Australian poetry at the moment? What's the diagnosis? What's the prognosis? Poets and reviewers (all too often the same people) are frequently asked such questions by those who wish poetry well but haven't actually read any lately. The poet or reviewer imagines himself or herself as a kind of medico tapping kneecaps and taking the blood pressure. For poets there is naturally the temptation either to boast or whinge. Australian poetry has never been healthier, we say. (I'm writing, aren't I?). Australian poetry is totally marginalized (I didn't get my grant and my current book has just been knocked back for the second time). The real truth (which postmodernists warn us not to look for anyway) is more difficult to establish.

Firstly it must be recognized that art forms in general, and literary genres in particular, go through periods of varying achievement—and of greater and lesser public acceptance. The death of the novel has often been predicted but has clearly yet to happen. Verse drama on the other hand is extinct, or virtually so. The essay, which was king in the eighteenth century, is clearly down on its luck (unless one reads *The New Yorker* or considers the ubiquitous newspaper columnist an essayist). Some of these forms may never be revived; others perhaps are just going through a “bad patch”. Where, then, does poetry rate in such a context? Australian poetry, in particular?

To get a better idea of the health of Australian poetry in 1997, one needs to go back to the late 1960s. For twenty years or so from this point there was considerable aesthetic (and sometimes personal) conflict between those who favoured a more conservative, more local poetry going back for its inspiration to poets such as Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright and others who looked towards New York school poets such as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery as more interesting exemplars. The latter were also more than a little aware of how problematic language had become since Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, whereas the “conservative” considered language to be a reasonably effective instrument for sharing their understanding of the “real world” with their readers.

The gap between these two kinds of modern poetry (both distinct

from the bush ballads of popular taste) was often disconcerting to readers. Some, more than a little dissatisfied with what they saw as the complacency and insularity of their own culture, tended to enthuse over the local variant of the New York school and regard anything else as “moralism with gum trees”. Others looked at these postmodern artifacts and thought that poetry had lost touch with its roots completely and become a coterie game from which they, through lack of *savoir faire*, were excluded.

Despite such puzzlement the output of poetry in Australia rapidly increased during the late 1960s and the early 70s (largely under the influence of expanded tertiary education and of the political pressure of the Vietnam war). The readership for this new poetic flood was much harder to quantify. Print runs were usually short and remaindering, often within months of publication, brutal. The cynical speculated that more people were writing poetry than were reading it—and if one takes away the effect of school and university curricula there was probably some truth in this, especially as far as local poetry was concerned.

Even at this distance, however, the problem of the keen and disinterested reader of poetry remains. As probably the cheapest and most democratic artform, poetry has always had an interesting disproportion of practitioners to consumers. Indeed some practitioners have shown an extraordinary reluctance to familiarize themselves with the tradition to which they, even if only unconsciously, aspire to belong—and to investigate what their contemporaries are doing. Among those, by contrast, who took their poetry seriously enough to research the tradition (or at least those parts of it germane to their own work), the divisions which had been acute in the 70s diminished in the late 80s and early 90s. This was partly a case of deciding to “grow old gracefully” together and partly a realization that the binary of “conservative/postmodern” was not as clear as either side had originally thought. The obscurity of John Forbes and Les Murray at their most linguistically demanding was pretty much the same, even if their aspirations and intentions were very different. The visual immediacy of Robert Adamson’s poetry about the Hawkesbury and Robert Gray’s about Coffs Harbour were also comparable, though neither perhaps was keen to admit it publicly. These convergent tendencies and various peace-making overtures did not, however, make contemporary Australian poetry a homogeneous mass. There was still plenty of difference but the fissures ran along individual lines more than between factions. And, predictably, members of what were previously factions fell out or diverged on both aesthetic and personal grounds.

What then, in such a context, is the health of Australian poetry in 1997? Before going any further we should consider a few “unpoetic” facts.

According to the Austlit database there were 118 collections of poetry published in 1995 (the last year for which statistics are currently available). The print run for a collection varies from as low as 400 to up to 1000. Books that are set on HSC courses (such as Bruce Dawe's *Sometimes Gladness*) are obvious exceptions to this—as was Dorothy Porter's 1994 bestselling verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask*—but 700 remains a typical run. Of these four or five hundred might sell in the first six months, with the rest remaindered or pulped. Anthologies of course do a lot better and are perhaps a true sign of popular demand for Australian poetry—as long as it can be conveniently packaged and “interpreted” for the demand. To economic rationalists this poetry business might all sound like small beer but when one considers that the print run of a first Australian novel is normally only 1000 to 1500 and a local literary best-seller is 5000 or so, the poetry figures are not unimpressive.

Mention should be made at this point too of the Australia Council's Literature Fund (previously the Literature Board) which has financially underwritten the publication of poetry for more than twenty years. Well over 90% of non-self-published Australian poetry books (excluding *Selecteds* or *Collecteds*) have been subsidised by the Literature Fund; and this has no doubt had a good deal to do with the impressive number of Australian poetry collections published each year. There have been really only four or five consistent publishers of Australian poetry and in the past year or so several of the best-known of these (e.g. Angus & Robertson and University of Queensland Press) have indicated an end to, or suspension of their activities. Although a number of publishers have relished the “prestige” of publishing poetry (but have often been unconcerned with distributing it) all publishers would be depressingly unlikely to publish it regularly without a substantial measure of government assistance. That the board's support for the publication of poetry (if not so much for its writing) has remained constant for more than two decades while its membership has changed several times over is perhaps another indication that the perceived importance of poetry to the community may well exceed its actual sales. It's a little like the Australian “wilderness”. People like to have it there even if they don't get around to visiting it very often.

Of the seventy or so books which have come out this year I'd like to examine four which I think suggest that the body of Australian poetry as a whole is in good shape, even if the occasional finger or toe might be experiencing a touch of arthritis or repetitive strain injury. To make things fair I'll look at books by two men and two women. The first of these is *Penelope's Knees* by Joanne Burns. Although not as widely known as she should be, Joanne Burns is one of Australia's most substantial (and cut-

ting) satirists. The barbs of poets like Bruce Dawe and performers such as Barry Humphries are better known but none is more stinging than those loosed by Burns. No one has a sharper eye for (and a clearer knowledge of) New Age pretensions and absurdities.

Burns also has a distinctly female angle on most things which cannot be reduced to the term “feminist”—though they (and most others) will surely approve her satire of the “sex show palace” bouncers in her poem “carnal knowledge”. “outside the sex show palace, / a dreary tenement teased out / of its sullenness by the flash of / candy neon come-ons, / a carload of steroid boofs / leap out and race up / the stairs to bundy on / for the friday night long hot / shift, the A team in their / identikit satin bomber jackets / renaissance men each at least / a spruiker bouncer, perfect in this age / of multi-skilling...” Later before settling down to work they “head for the cappuccino sop, walking as if they need a piss / but don’t know it... in window of the zorro café / they sit snug as chubby / babies in high chairs, / the cappuccino kids, sucking up / the froth rising high above / the rims of their cups like detergent / foam in a blocked drain”.

In addition to such direct hits there has always been a slightly surreal element in Burns’ work. Perhaps this was what Patrick White meant when he wrote that Burns is “plugged into the collective madness of our times”. This is a feature, in varying ways, of the last three sequences of the book, “sleepwalking”, “fiddlesticks” and the title poem, “penelope’s knees”. “sleepwalking” is a disturbingly convincing realization of the subconscious where a narrator, who seems to be dead herself, remembers the last months and illness of an aunt whose death preceded hers. For resolute materialists this will make uncomfortable reading. “penelope’s knees” is something of a triumph too though not, in most ways, surreal. If Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a modernist adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey* then Burns’ poem is the postmodernist adaptation. Rather than Dublin, Burns’ heroine, Penelope, takes a walk which could be traced on a Sydney directory from Paddington down as far east as Rose Bay, then west as far as the Botanic Gardens then home past the Art Gallery and left up Oxford Street. Admittedly there are flashbacks to moments in south India and a very Catholic girlhood but essentially this is a diurnal round analogous to Leopold Bloom’s. Like him, Penelope too has her cross to bear, namely a pair of weak knees—which are, as with Tennyson’s returned adventurer, not sufficient to deter her from further exploits. There is a nice feminist point here with Penelope rather than Odysseus being the voyager but Penelope’s circuit does seem rather tighter and the distinct feeling of relaxation she has when she gets home to her Paddington flat is unmistakably feminine. “Penelope settles down in front of the / tv evening news, clips her toenails onto the week’s

program lift out, / clint eastwood's on the cover, and unscrews the mentholatum, anoints / her knees then lounges back waiting for them to purr".

Another prominent female poet at the moment, and showing a very different side of our poetic health, is Judith Beveridge. Beveridge's first collection, *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, made a clean sweep of the major Australian poetry prizes in 1988 and was a genuinely popular book among many different sorts of readers. In *Accidental Grace*, her long-awaited second book, Beveridge has shown a sharpening, or narrowing, of focus. Of all the options held open in *The Domesticity of Giraffes* the poet has chosen, for the moment at least, to head down the path of the shamanistic, the magical, an emphasis which, as I said earlier, goes back to the idea of poetry as spells that can actually make things happen. The dominant influences here are American poets such as Galway Kinnell and W.S. Merwin, poets who in turn were influenced by the "applied surrealism" of writers like Neruda and Lorca who, as well as being deeply metaphorical, put considerable importance on the rhetorical aspect of poetry.

But there is no sense of "mere" rhetoric, however, in Beveridge's work. In her poems there is always something happening in every line. Many poets are content to build rather plainly to a summarising metaphorical climax. Beveridge's poetry, on the other hand, gives the impression of highly worked embroidery. She tends to tie down the rhetorical impulse with finely observed (or imagined) detail, often exotic in nature and far removed in time and place from the suburban situation of most of her readers. The experiences of Marco Polo and Hannibal, the thoughts of elephants or the religious transcendence of the Indian poor are more often the centre of Beveridge's most ambitious poems than the suburban felicities which she also handles very well.

Indeed, some of the book's most moving poems are often where these two areas come together. In "My Father Singing" and "The Grandfather's Love Song" Beveridge takes the fairly ordinary situations of a daughter grieving for her dead father (and the childhood he enriched) and a grandfather relishing the clarity and innocence of his granddaughter and transforms them with her particular blend of incantation and metaphorical detail. ("What is he singing, my father, / while the spider seals its fly / into a cradle of floss and a bee / into the torn heart of a flower?")

While some readers of Beveridge's wide-ranging first book may miss a few ingredients that have been lost in the tighter focus of her second, most, I believe, will be more than impressed by the force of her metaphors, the texture of her language and the density of her detail. *Accidental Grace* is clearly a book that has been worth the waiting. Its nine

years' loving attention is evident on every page. What other Australian poet, for example, writes as sinuously as Beveridge does in "How to Love Pythons"? "...Here, you'll sleep / amongst a brotherhood / of vowels / and worship the sun, / an aloe branch // and the wind / when it swindles / the night / of its sighs".

A third book which is indicative of our poetic health is, unfortunately, by a poet who died from leukaemia at the age of thirty six not long before its release. Philip Hodgins published seven books in less than ten years, all of them written under the impress of his disease. His first book, *Blood and Bone*, addressed the subject of his imminent death unflinchingly and comprehensively with a truthfulness that shirked nothing and a poetic skill completely adequate to his material. Nine years later, in the last half of his last book, *Things Happen*, there is still the same combination of courage and art. In poems such as "Prognosis", "Haematopoietics", "The Last Few Days and Nights" and "Cytotoxic Rigor" Hodgins directly confronts the literal pain of his disease and treatment without any false heroics. In musing on a persistently unsuccessful poem in "The Sick Poem" he says with obvious irony: "If this were something big, / say life or death, / there might be some insights / to be had from each stage, / like the hard wisdom / suffering is supposed to give you / but doesn't really".

The laconic, dry, unillusioned and relentlessly honest tone of those lines is also very much a feature of the other main area of his poetry—life on the land as it really is, unromanticised but deeply appreciated. Hodgins' pastoral poems originated from his childhood on a small farm at Katandra West in Victoria—and were augmented by his move to the outskirts of Maryborough in Victoria in the last few years of his life. Though clearly part of a tradition which includes Judith Wright's poems of New England, Les Murray's about Bunyah and David Campbell's on the Monaro, Hodgins' poems are very much *sui generis*. The laconicism which can be found to some extent in all these poets in Hodgins is taken to an extreme. "Beyond all arguments", says Hodgins, "there is the land itself, / drying out and cracking at the end of summer / like a vast badly-made ceramic, uneven and powdery / losing its topsoil and its insect-bodied grass seeds / to the wind's dusty perfumes..."

The last phrase is typical. After all the hardness and dryness there is still something to savour even if only incidentally. Not to be missed though, among all this talk of impressionism is Hodgins' feeling for narrative, for the bush yarn, the tall tale. This goes back to early poems like "The Big Goanna" in his second book, *Animal Warmth*, and is represented here by poems such as "The Snake in the Department Store" and "The Exploding Snake". Hodgins was certainly a poet who knew how to enter-

tain as well as to move. His all-too-brief career was a notable sign of vitality in our poetry, particularly in the rural part of it so often derided by inner-city postmodernists. His departure is a severe blow but the expected appearance of his *Collected Poems* from Angus and Robertson this year will be some compensation.

A similar paradox in regard to our poetic health is seen in the fourth of these books, Les Murray's *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, finished not long before a recent illness which almost killed him. Indeed, one of its best poems deals with a health problem, his own long and successful wrestle with clinical depression.

Despite its incredibly defensive title there can be no doubt that *Redneck* is, overall, one of Murray's best books. Many will quarrel, as Murray almost gleefully anticipates, with the ideology of its more "political" poems but few if any will be unmoved by the handful of confessional poems that recur through the book.

These are decidedly personal and all the more moving for it. Several go back to the poet's memory of being tormented at school and the repressive effect this had on his emotional confidence; other's deal with members of his own family (his wife, Valerie; his son Alexander and the death of his father, Cecil). A convenient check-list of these would have to include the following (all of which, I suspect, are likely to become Murray classics, along with poems like "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow", "Equanimity" or "The Future"): "Corniche", "Burning Want", "It Allows a Portrait in Line Scan at Fifteen" and "The Last Hellos". Some other poems such as "Tympan Alley" and "The Year of Kiln Portraits" (both addressed to his wife, Valerie) are lighter in tone but no less impressive in their way.

Unlike many other poets (some of them famous) whose 'personal' poems are unrelieved self-laceration Murray's nearly always have an element of humour that somehow makes their vulnerable elements even more affecting. In 'The Last Hellos', Murray's account of his aged father's death from a brain tumour, the poet remembers: 'Two last days in the hospital: / his long forearms were still / red mahogany. His hands / gripped steel frame. *I'm dyin.* // On the second day: / *You're bustin to talk / but I'm too busy dyin.*'

Similarly in "It Allows a Portrait in Line Scan at Fifteen", which deals with his son Alexander's slow and, as yet, incomplete emergence from autism, Murray works very easily into the texture of the poem a considerable variety of jokes which are not aimed at his son but serve to describe, and perhaps deal with, the objective situation, the "It" which autism constitutes. This is virtually humour as therapy. "When he ran away constantly it was to the greengrocers to worship stacked fruit. ... / Giggling,√

he climbed all over the dim Freudian psychiatrist who told us how autism results from ‘refrigerator’ parents”.

In addition to this there is the highly successful “health” poem, “Corniche”, where Murray addresses his depression head-on and more or less writes his way through it. One stanza is enough to give the tone. “It was the victim-sickness. Adrenalin howling in my head, / the black dog was my brain. Come to drown me in my breath / was energy’s black hole, depression, compère of the predawn show / when, returned from a pee, you stew and welter in your death”.

Admittedly there are a few poems in *Redneck* which do lack such immediate impact. Poems such as “Each Morning Once More Seamless” and “Water Gardening in an Old Farm Dam” are in some ways perhaps too demanding for their own good. Murray here seems to be rejoicing, somewhat solitarily, in both the extraordinary power of his own intellect and his facility for metaphor—and thus tends to risk losing his audience a little as he does so.

As well as the personal and the “combative” poems, however, there are also many “one-off” poems which defy category. “Australian Love Poem” memorably demonstrates how complex this overused word can be and how slow we should be in rushing to judge its stranger shapes. “The Rollover”, by contrast, is a classic satire-by-inversion of the banks’ impact on rural Australia. It starts out with the following startling reversal and then goes gleefully on from there: “Some of us primary producers, us farmers and authors / are going round to watch them evict a banker”.

In a year which has seen important and powerful new books from poets as diverse as Alan Gould, P O, Eric Beach, Dorothy Porter and John Foulcher it is difficult to choose any four as symptomatic of our poetic wellbeing. When one thinks, however, of the keen satirical eye of Joanne Burns, the deliciously surreal rhetoric of Judith Beveridge, the poignant mixture of courage and art in Philip Hodgins and the unique imagination and facility of Les Murray it is clear that poetry is very much a part of our literature where interesting and indispensable things are happening. Ignore it at your peril.

Books discussed in this article:

JOANNE BURNS, *Penelope’s Knees*. University of Queensland Press, \$18.95

JUDITH BEVERIDGE, *Accidental Grace*. University of Queensland Press, \$18.95

PHILIP HODGINS, *Things Happen*, Angus and Robertson, \$16.95

LES MURRAY, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*. Carcanet, £7.95