

Notes for Broadsheet Poets 4

Food for thought: illuminating, contradictory, contentious, arguable ideas on the nature of poetry from two great Australian poets to help you work out your own conclusion on your chosen, elusive and complex métier as a poet.

Judith Wright, the well-known Australian poet and conservationist, who was concerned with how to stay human in our times, wrote the following lines in her book of essays, *Because I was Invited* (Oxford University Press):

‘Any good poem is not just an aggregate of statements or a sequential argument or narrative (as prose can be), but an organised totality with its own inner relationships, tight as a drum, wedded to its language as an organism to its skin.....It is not simply an attempt to communicate a piece of knowledge or information, or to make a statement about the poet’s experience. It is itself a piece of experience, gut of a special kind: a piece of experience abstracted, cut off from the world, presented in symbolic form and in terms, not of intellect, but of feeling.’

The problem is ... ‘not everyone, by any means, experiences in terms of feeling. Even those who do, do not always by any means experience it in terms capable of being verbalised.....’

‘A poem makes one important demand: that we be able to surrender ourselves to the kind of experience of which a poem is made.....A poem can only mean to anyone as much as that person is capable of finding in it.’

‘You cannot find “the meaning” of a poem with the same equipment you would use to examine Euclid’s statement about triangles..... It is what the poet has created, not what he has said, that is the poem.’

‘Poetry contains all the possibilities.....Somebody remarked not long ago that inside every poet there is an anti-poet and inside every anti-poet a poet. They keep criticising each other’s themes and styles, but as William Blake remarked: “Without Contraries there cannot be progression.”’

And now the words of another deceased Australian poet of stature (see WS Milne’s essay on him in this issue): A.D. Hope (from his book of essays, *The Cave and The Spring: Essays on Poetry* – Sydney University Press):

‘We have to avoid the intrusion of alien and sterile forms of cheap amusement leading to exhaustion of the heart and mind.’

‘Something noble in the mind of man died with the coming of the novel.’

‘We live in a time of a loss and a limitation of consciousness, of formless babble.’

‘Poetry should aim for the still centre, the unobtrusive ceremony of language.’

‘We regret the loss of the discursive mode, the plain bread of poetry, the art of modulation, proportion, harmony, connection, surprise.’

‘Poetry is a higher organisation of heart and mind.’

‘Poetry is a meaningful sound, a natural ease within a disciplined movement.’

‘Poetry presents us with the metaphysical image of creation, a synoptic view.’

‘Poetry is the natural language of beauty, of intellect and of power, catching the fullness of life.’

‘Poetry is the passion for order and intelligible ideas, the intellectual passion itself, the passion which distinguishes man from the rest of creation.’

‘Poetry breaks measure only to resolve the discord.’

‘Poetry is a counsel of perfection...a difficult and exacting art.’

The gifted contemporary Australian woman poet, M.T.C. Cronin, analyses the tongue’s job, its power and danger and, too, reveals its contradictions in her latest book, *<More or Less Than> 1-100*, Shearsman Books:

‘not just, along the way, vines finding light and its myth,
as myth, invisible, unplants one life for another,
but the unrecognisable fruit they will test with their teeth
for the answer to the tongue’s question.’

‘the tongue, the tongue, steps backwards into a web
respun daily by an appetite that thinks never of holiness
the tongue makes them miniature and blind
the tongue caresses and ruins their splendour
in its own land it speaks the language of stones’

In her collection from Salt, 2003: *beautiful, unfinished*, she offers advice and encouragement in the poem ‘You Can Not Speak’:

You can not speak to one person
with words meant
for many people.

You must look
and recognise reception
before you will be received.

Leaves on branches toss
because the wind blows.

Do not move words
like the wind moves leaves.

The wind has no reason.
You are just as powerful.

In *The Stone Threshold: New and Selected Poems* (Arc, 2003), Andrew Taylor, another Australian who transcends nationality to speak in a universal voice, makes it worthwhile for poets to find the special 'plainsong' in his beautifully achieved poem 'Plainsong':

To find the right words
which dance in the sun like mountains
which ripen this paving into corn
which fill the vault with rain and which sweep
with the bleached bloom of fresh wind
the once barren penitential aisles

until the scuffed knee-crawling marks
the indelible stamp of tears
and the spiralling rings of smoke
burst out of toil
leaping like seeds into spring
looping their telephone fibres through the night
to touch and sway and breed where they touch
light and again light

is to speak with a love of silence on the tongue
a love of the crypt and of the buried heart
beating deep in the altar of pure stone
with love of shouting and storming air
and traceries of eyes and fear
and pumping night fluent in rich glass

is to weave into mountains the sky
and into love the emptiness of weekends
with their broken dentures and far-off cheering crowds
and into cheering the trodden rind of defeat
and into the fire tears

is to build a ladder for angels
knowing no angel exists
unless we sing him into bliss
& no heaven either
except what floats upon the song
and no earth but the heart's own

We are the dream of the cathedral
which makes it real
and our song the hush of its attention
as birds are wakened by the quiet before dawn

