

Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

In terms of quality, poetry is sometimes thought of as the strongest genre in Australian literature, and for the last half-century it has exhibited enormous range and variety, and a level of imaginative intelligence that was not so widespread before reviewing Peter Porter's anthology, *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), for the *Times Literary Supplement* on 3 October 1997. England's leading poetry critic, Robert Potts, declared, «This is possibly the best anthology of modern poetry I have read for consistent pleasure and stimulation», and described it as «a book which could, and should, be read by nearly anyone». Thus the work of the five poets included here is just a sampling of the whole, a few small tasting glasses from a large vineyard.

That Australia should have a strong poetry tradition and a lively current scene is perhaps surprising to an Italian audience, given Australia's image of bush landscape, sunshine and sport. Although sometimes exaggerated, as for example in the *Crocodile Dundee* films, the bush, sunshine and a love for physical activity genuinely are strong features of Australian society. However, Australia is a large and geographically various continent with a very multicultural society, so that an interest in poetic lyric can sit comfortably alongside an interest in the adventures of the Australian cricket team.

Unlike Europe, Australia has a short recorded history — only about 200 years — but it is one of the oldest continents, and Aboriginal oral culture developed over the previous 50.000 years. It is thus an old country but a new nation, with sufficient maturity to feel that it is connected to a large European heritage but without the burden that a long artistic history can put on the shoulders of the contemporary artist. There is no Giotto or Dante against whom Australian artists feel they have to measure themselves. The novelist Kate Grenville has noted, «There's so much about Australia that still hasn't been written about» whereas «in Europe and North America there's sometimes a feeling that everything's been written out» (quoted in Donyale Harrison, «The Wizards of Oz Lit», *Panorama*, December 1999, p. 112). Australia is a developed country and so part of the global village that new technologies and international trade have created. Thus it is part of world-wide cultural movements such as postmodernism, but it can also bring a freshness and distinctiveness to contemporary artistic activity.

Les Murray is Australia's best-known poet internationally, a recent winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, and often bracketed with Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney as a triumvirate of the world's leading poets (at least in English). He is a prolific, sophisticated and complex poet, with a verbal facility that is matched, in the twentieth century, only by W.H. Auden. He has adopted a stance as spokesperson for the traditional world of the Australian bush and the rural poor. However, his poetry is nothing like traditional Australian verse, except in his long lines and long sentences, that seem as expansive as the Australian countryside itself. Murray's language frequently has a baroque complexity but at its best his work has a breathtaking imaginativeness, and a religious equanimity at the heart of immense verbal energy. He is a take-no-prisoners critic of contemporary mores, and an extremely controversial figure. Often idiosyncratic in his opinions, he has also unlimited intellectual courage. In many respects he is an Australian Wordsworth - more at home with landscape than with people, his poetry provides many instances of the egotistical sublime, and he attempts to wed declarations of beliefs to a richness of image and metaphor.

Of similar age to Murray, and also a convert to Catholicism, but different in most other respects is Bruce Dawe. Dawe is renowned for his use of Australian vernacular and his introduction of suburban life into contemporary poetry. He is the most difficult to translate of all Australian poets, and partly because he is a non-traveller, he is little known overseas; within Australia, however, he is far the most frequently studied Australian poet and his books enjoy the largest sales. Colloquial and unpretentious, his verse is often witty, even in its social criticism. A deeply moral poet, his work is shot through with a sense of human decency, and his lyric insistence on the dignity of life's downtrodden is tonally balanced by his satires on those who misuse power.

Like Dawe, Fay Zwicky can be a wickedly funny satirist, but her work is often more immediately personal, including in recent poems that exhibit a degree of nostalgia for her early married life in Indonesia. Her poetry always conveys an impression of an intelligent person in action and she often treats ideas as they emerge from meditations on various relationships. She is a former lecturer in American literature and her poetry sometimes reflects American influences, particularly in long lines and Whitmanesque rhythms. Some of her best-known poems draw on her Jewish background but, to my mind, it is a Jewishness strongly mediated by American culture. Her poems often include narrative elements and, because they tend to be long by the standards of contemporary lyric, they are difficult to anthologise.

Judith Wright's poetry evidenced a profound and distinctive voice from the time it first appeared, in the early 1940s, and she may now be considered a kind of grande dame of Australian poetry, even though she stopped writing verse some years ago. Over time the tone of her verse changed, in accordance with a shift in literary language generally, from the hieratic and philosophical to the more relaxed and colloquial. However, her concerns have not altered — principally nature, the Aborigines and a woman's outlook. Although she has always been, and still is, a strong social activist for the first Australians and the environment, all her poetry, I would argue, is strongly metaphysical. Social statements are made, and she has a deep concern for responsibility and justice — partly due to her coming from a rural land-owning family. However, for Wright ultimate meaning exists in a religious dimension, broadly defined, and the meanings of her poems lie not on their surfaces but in the reverberations of their imagery.

About the last Australian poet included here I can say less, for obvious reasons, but I have been concerned in my work with creating a poetry that is central rather than marginal to people's lives. Thus, I try to wed emotion and intellect, and to portray the discovery of the poetic, even the transcendental, in the ordinary. That said, my poems are deeply concerned with human relationships, and little concerned with landscape. On the whole, this is unusual in Australian literature, in a landscape of such relentless light and of such dimensions that it can dwarf the human.