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Review essay: Poetry in Australia and the John Leonard Press

Abstract
John Leonard Press (JLP) presented TEXT *its first eight publications for review. This paper explores the context in which poetry is being published in Australia, with some comparative information from the UK, Canada and the US, and locates JLP in that context. In an attempt to account for the economic and practical pressures being faced by poets and by publishers of poetry, it maps the environment, particularly through mass media reports on the sector; offers some suggestions to counter those pressures; and gives a reading of the eight poets' work.*

Julian Croft *Ocean Island* 2006, ISBN 978-0-9775787-3-3, 94pp. AUD$21.95

Claire Gaskin *A Bud* 2006, ISBN 978-0-9775787-0-2, 78pp. AUD$21.95

Aileen Kelly *The Passion Paintings: Poems 1983-2006* 2006, ISBN 978-0-9775787-2-6, 222pp. AUD$24.95

Paul Magee *Cube Root of Book* 2006, ISBN 978-0-9775787-1-9, 78pp. AUD$21.95

Jordie Albiston *Vertigo: A Cantata* 2007, ISBN 978-0-9775787-5-7, 62pp. AUD$23.95

Elizabeth Campbell *Letters to the Tremulous Hand* 2007, ISBN 978-0-9775787-6-4, 76pp. AUD$23.95

LK Holt *Man Wolf Man* 2007, ISBN 978-0-9775787-7-1, 78pp. AUD$23.95

Petra White *The Incoming Tide* 2007, ISBN 978-0-9775787-4-0, 60pp. AUD$23.95

All published by John Leonard Press, Elwood, Victoria, Australia.

On reviewing poetry

It was with trepidation - even anxiety - that I received a package of books published by the still comparatively new John Leonard Press (JLP; established 2006). Trepidation, because the work of reviewing poetry is an unrewarding one. Anxiety, because the stakes are high. A review provides insufficient space to deal closely with *a* poem, let alone a book of poems, or a collection of books of poetry. The 500-1000 words generally allowed don't offer room to do more

than say 'I was taken with how the lyrical pacing …', 'The explorations in language and form were … ', or 'This type of poetry was last seen in the 1960s, when it … ': in other words, 'I liked it', 'I didn't like it', 'It's on form'; 'It's clichéd'. But if you pay insufficient attention, or are either too critical or too fond, all you do is offend people.

To add to the pressure, I have read - binged on - poetry since I was a very small child, but must admit that I have rarely felt passionate about more than two or three individual poems in any one publication. I 'love' poetry, in the abstract. I don't 'love' most poems, to be quite honest. Even among my most admired - say, Gwen Harwood, John Donne, TS Eliot - there is only a handful that I feel absolutely must exist if the world is to continue to function. The rest, I think, are practice: necessary, but not necessarily for public consumption. (Though I realize, of course, that my list of eternal poems will almost certainly differ from yours.)

My anxiety was somewhat allayed because these books come from John Leonard, and if there's a reader of poetry I trust, it'd have to be him. Leonard is, demonstrably, an excessively fine reader. His *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English* is, to my mind, about the best conceived arrangement for a teaching tool - radically rupturing the traditional 'let's start with Chaucer, move up through the ballads to Shakespeare, then on to the Augustans, Romantics and Modernists to the current stuff' shape of the average anthology. His *Contemporary Australian Poetry* was the first Australian anthology I bought on arriving here in 1990, and it still (*i.m.h.o.*) leaves the others for dead. (Over the years, I have found, students keep 'borrowing' it from me; I have to haunt second-hand bookstores to keep a working copy on my shelf.) Now he has turned his hand from the big anthologies and instead has set up his own small press (the dream so many of us have), and selected a choir of poets to bring in, or sing in, the first year's effort.

Leonard's eye hasn't deserted him. All five of the 'younger' poets (those new to book publishing) have been nominated for significant awards:

- Claire Gaskin: shortlisted for the John Bray Poetry Award at the South Australian Festival Awards for Literature;
- Elizabeth Campbell: commended for the 2007 Anne Elder Award for a first book of poetry;
- LK Holt: highly commended in the Mary Gilmore Prize for a first book of poetry 2008;
- Paul Magee: highly commended for the 2006 Anne Elder Award for a first book of poetry; shortlisted for the 2008 South Australian Festival Awards for Literature; highly commended in the Mary Gilmore Prize for a first book of poetry 2008;
- Petra White: shortlisted for the 2007 Premier's Queensland Literary Awards, Arts Queensland Judith Wright Calanthe Award; honourable mention in the Age Poetry Book of the Year 2007; commended for the 2007 Anne Elder Award for a first book of poetry.

(There may be other awards and nominations; these were the ones I could find at publication date.)

This is an extraordinary and (to use the language of these various awards) *highly commendable* result from a year or so of publishing. It is also a remarkably generous act on the part of Leonard to put the press together. I do not here refer his generosity to the poets:[1] while he does support the poets, the critical reception of these publications shows that they are all worth the

candle. No, my point here is that Leonard's investment in the Press is an act of generosity directed towards readers, and towards poetry in Australia.

On the state of poetry in Australia

We know, all of us who are even vaguely interested in the field, that it is very difficult to get a book published here, because poetry in Australia is not as healthy as we might hope: at least, not in commercial terms.[2] Most Australian poets, I'd guess, remember that year in the 1990s when Penguin folded its poetry list, in the process cancelling a number of contracts, on the grounds that poetry didn't sell; and it was not the only major publisher to give up on the form. Most of the majors shifted out of poetry during the 1990s, including Oxford University Press, which one might have expected to be protected from the commercial imperatives. OUP's decision, in fact, initiated a voluble debate in the UK about poetry publishing and the responsibilities of publishers. Paul McCann writes: 'The decision left 35 poets without a publisher and provoked Alan Howarth, the Arts minister, to describe OUP's management as "barbarians". More than 60 MPs signed a motion condemning the decision' (McCann 1999: 12). Not that it changed anything.

In the decade since that fraças, the major publishers have not resiled on their decision. Rosemary Neill describes 'a new study by University of Queensland Press poetry editor, Bronwyn Lea, [that] has uncovered a fall of more than 40 per cent in the number of poetry books being published' (Neill 2007). And the Australian government cultural portal tells the same story:

> Between 1993 and 1996, more than 250 books of poems were published in Australia each year. By 2006, this figure had been reduced to about 100 titles. The reason stated was that the major publishers could not sustain the maximum sales of between 200 to 400 copies. (Australia's Culture Portal 2008)

It is comforting, perhaps, to know that such seismic shifts in our world of words do move people at government level, and do initiate a flurry of words, even though it doesn't change policy. In fact, the public sphere is full of words about poetry and its demise or its vigour, its sloppiness or its rigour; about how poorly it has been treated by the publishing industry, and how energetic are the small presses: or how sensible have been the decisions of the big publishers, and how self-indulgent those of the little ones. And so on. Be that as it may, the fact remains that poetry has not given up. Sixty-plus years ago, in an entirely different context, Auden wrote that though:

> poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its saying where executives
> Would never want to tamper …
> … it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth. (Auden 1945: 48)[3]

It is still a way of happening; it still survives, despite the executives, despite all the economic and institutional pressures. Though it can be hard to spot. Look through the current lists of any major commercial publisher, or step into any book chain store, and the poetry books will be few and far between - if they're present at all.

Public discourse about poetry, though, is very evident, and often accompanied by a fair amount of finger-pointing: *what's gone wrong? who's to blame?* The blame falls on the shoulders of the poets, who are identified as being just not

good enough, or on the broader shoulders of the publishing sector. In 2004 Adrian Caesar reviewed a year's worth of poetry for *Westerly*, and began with a bleak assessment of the environment in which poetry is being published in Australia:

> Once-thriving literary magazines have had their funding cut; poetry is, for the most part, published by small independent presses with limited marketing opportunities; most book-stores do not carry a significant range of contemporary work; many people write poetry, few read it. (Caesar 2004: 43)

Perhaps the shortage of readers can be attributed to the lack of good work; Caesar points out 'how very, very difficult it is to write a really good poem' (2004: 44) and, as evidence, identifies in the work of some of those 2003-2004 publications clumsy, ungrounded and imprecise metaphors, overuse of 'literary' language on the one hand, or banality on the other hand, tortured syntax, 'clumsy rhythmical betrayals or clanking rhymes' (2004: 48) and a 'lack of tonal variation' (2004: 49). He does go on to show some really marvellous work in that same year's production, but nonetheless, it seems, the combination of an unhealthy publishing environment and poets who have perhaps not worked hard enough or long enough or critically enough on their pieces may be said to contribute to the problem.

James Adams, writing for the *Globe and Mail* in 2006, seems to be working over similar ground when he points out that though 'Proclamations of the death of poetry have grown more insistent and numerous over the last 25 years, … this hasn't stopped a lot of people - too many, some would argue - from continuing to write it' (Adams 2006: R3). This came in the context of his reporting on the Canadian Governor-General's very healthy prize for poetry. Adams doesn't push the *too many/not good enough* line, but does identify problems with the field: particularly in the lack of adequate distribution and readership:

> As strong and vital as the writing may be, will tomorrow's winner, let alone the runners-up, enjoy a readership above and beyond what BookNet's Tamblyn calls the "constant low-level demand" of poetry's core dedicated readership? It seems unlikely. (Adams 2006: R3)

To support this, in what seems a sad but instructive note, he finishes his article with a list of the top-selling poetry books in Canada during 2006: two collections by Leonard Cohen, a Maya Angelou, an Al Purdy, and Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*. While I admire and indeed own the five volumes named (thus showing that the Canadian list has carriage beyond that country), the absence of new poetry, eccentric poetry or poetry by strangers is a bit worrying. There are of course many young and distinctive voices in poetry, but they don't seem to be cutting through, beyond the little community of other poets. Are there really too many slim volumes of modern verse?

On poetry wars

Apparently so, according to the mainstream publishers; not at all, according to many poets and other readers of poetry. But of course there is trouble in paradise, and it is not just about how to get your poetry published, how to build an audience or how to be taken seriously, but - in the minds of at least some of the commentators - is an effect of the fractious nature of the Australian poetry community. From the Murray/Tranter poetry wars of the 1970s/1980s to the

present divide between new formalists and language poets, Sydney and Melbourne poets, radical and traditional poets, pastoralist and urban poets, print and new media poets, or pretty well any divide you care to name, this concern emerges in the literature. It does exist, certainly; I have been taken aside by well-meaning poets on more than one occasion and warned that such-and-such a publication or group is not at all well regarded - too amateur, too American, too radical, too something or other - and it would be in my interests to avoid them (thanks, guys!).

John Kinsella, a well-known warrior, writes that poetry in Australia is 'Paranoid, internalised, fragmented, fraught with tensions. Also diverse, adaptable, inventive, pluralistic and outward looking' (Kinsella 2001: 1). And he notes that the blame for the state of poetry has been:

> lumped on the critics' shoulders: the much decried lack of a critical culture in Australia poetry; and the small pond where honest reviewing can't happen, with reviewers either being mates of those they review, or sworn enemies who inflict public humiliation on their victims. (Kinsella 2001: 1)

There is something in this. An Important Poet of my acquaintance refuses to review local poetry on the grounds that it is likely to generate unrest and damage to reputation; another wrote a - shall we say - non-obfuscatory review of several publications, which has not stood him/her in good stead, leading to grumbling and negative reviews of his/her subsequent work.

Behind it all, it seems, is insufficient institutional support for poetry. Pam Brown offers a very bleak prospect, demonstrating the signal lack of interest or concern from those important gatekeepers, the publishers and booksellers:

> Last year, when *Overland* magazine was putting together a special issue on poetry, the major publishers and booksellers were offered generous advertising space in the magazine for a mere $150 fee. The extra revenue would fund supplementary pages for that issue. Every corporate publisher declined; small presses and independent bookshops, on the other hand, contributed willingly.
> Earlier this year, I conducted a telephone survey of every major publisher on whether it was continuing a poetry list: the answer from all was "no".
> Today, it would be easier to buy a book on basic archery, quilting or tyre-changing than poetry. (Brown 2000: 10)

But before we all reach for the arsenic bottle, there is some consolation. One is that the problem is not new: 'Poets, and readers, have been grumbling about the decline of poetry ever since Aristophanes told the Athenians that Euripides just wasn't as good as Aeschylus', writes Rachel Aspden (Astley & Aspden 2006: 24). Another consolation is that the 'problem of poetry' is not a purely local phenomenon. We have seen the Canadian situation above; UK poetry editor Neil Astley writes:

> Poetry is both flourishing and floundering in Britain because it has a split identity. If bookshops ignore their customers, they go out of business. When poetry publishers and reviewers ignore their readership, this is called 'maintaining critical standards'. And they still expect the public to defer to their judgement and accept their offerings, because they know best.

> The producers of poetry aren't in tune with the lovers of poetry. (Astley & Aspden 2006: 54)

And things aren't much better in the United States. We are all in this together.

That being the case, what are poets and readers doing about it? Plenty:

> The withdrawal from poetry publishing by the big houses has led to a rise in the small publisher and the proliferation of the private, collective, or sponsored publication. All of these would have been called vanity publishing in the eighties, but the demystification of publishing by computers and the fetishism of book production the creative plus of being interactive have removed the taint. (Kinsella 2001: 1)

The world of poetry publishing may have shrunk, in commercial terms, but it has radically expanded in actual terms. Malley Charters shows the shifts during the last decade in the US:

> The number of small presses in America has grown enormously in the last three decades, fueled in part by advances in desktop publishing. The 1127 volumes of poetry produced in 1996 were the offerings of a staggering 463 publishers, the majority of them independent and small presses. (Charters 1997: 38)

And though the Australian scene is necessarily much smaller, it too has undergone a sea change. John Leonard is only one - though a very important and widely known one - of the many writers/readers/editors to set up a small, independent press, so that good work can see the light of day.

On the small press

The small press is a beautiful thing. It is integral to publishing in most nations, and particularly well entrenched in the US, which boasts the New York Center for Independent Publishing (NYCIP), an industry group established to support the interests of small presses. According to the NYCIP, a US small press produces runs of up to 5000 books, with fewer than 12 books published per year (NYCIP 2005-2008). In Australia the runs are much smaller - typically fewer than 1000 (Freeth 2007: 7); and the books published per annum run from a couple up to about 40 (Freeth 2007: 3). Australian support for small and independent publishers is far less extensive and less established than the United States enjoys;[4] but it remains a vibrant element of local publishing, and poetry is well represented in the small presses' lists.

In 2006 a support and coordination group was established in Australia, the delightfully named SPUNC (Small Press Underground Networking Community). It houses on its website a research report on the state of small press and independent publishing in Australia that includes a survey of 46 publishers (from about 120 identified by the researchers) and provides a substantial snapshot of the sector. The survey responses give a picture of small press publishing as incredibly under-funded (for the most part, operating on a break-even basis - and that's in a good year), facing serious difficulties over the pragmatics of distribution, promotion and review, and staffed by people who often work as volunteers (and, in some cases, draw on their own funds to keep the press going). Without these presses, and the people who make them happen, the Australian literary landscape would be in a very different state, and

remarkably few new writers would ever make it to print. The SPUNC report is a sobering read, but one I would recommend to anyone interested in the sector. [5]

Small presses are the heart of poetry publishing; but that won't guarantee you a publisher. The John Leonard Press website, like many small presses, carries the discouraging flag: *'The schedule for future books is currently full; submissions are unable to be accepted for now.'* What if you've not been able to break on through to the other side: what if Five Islands Press has rejected your work, and Brandl & Schlesinger doesn't see a market for it, and IP might take it but the subvention payment is beyond your means? One option open to the not-yet-publisher author is self-publishing. Prater reports on self-publishing in 'On the bonfire of the vanity presses' (Prater 2008), where he reminds readers of the bad press this mode of production has received, and yet the remarkably high number of remarkably important authors who have engaged in the practice (like so many human activities: everyone does it, no one wants to admit it). Despite being the point of emergence for many important works - including those by Walt Whitman, Patrick White and William Blake - it is still relegated to the *must-try-harder* bench, to the *not-really-good-enough* bench. He quotes Robert Dessaix as saying:

> "As soon as a self-published book comes into *ABR* or the ABC or wherever, you think to yourself: self-published, why wasn't it good enough for Penguin or Heinemann?" Dessaix's rhetorical question is instructive because it offers evidence for the claim that self-published works are often excluded from mainstream discussion and from the pages of journals and newspapers. (Prater 2008: 5)

Sigh.

A further option, which might avoid the negative aspects of self-publishing given its uncomfortable association with vanity press, is publishing by collective. In Australia, the Braidwood-based Finlay Lloyd fits this model (though to date they have published prose, in the main),[6] and it is not alone. Rona Marech reports on Sixteen Rivers Press, a poetry-centric collective in California, and described their model - one that would be easily transferable to Australian conditions (Marech 2002: 3). Sixteen Rivers is a non-profit collective that runs on the energy of its members, each of whom committed four years to the press along with a small chunk of money to kickstart the operation. Each member is involved in writing, editing, book design, distribution and all; and each member will also have a book published by the collective in that four-year period. It seems a sensible approach, given the immense and lonely task it would be to operate alone, and given the chilly environment for new writers and new work. It also encourages a local sensibility in the production process, bringing together a number of people with shared regional identities and concerns, making work that (usually) will circulate first among their neighbours. In this it obeys a point made by Vineetha Mokkil about contemporary verse:

> Poetry publishing has collapsed in the western world. Very few publishers are interested in poetry. Book stores stock very few copies because of slow sales. Selling poetry seems to be the only industry that hasn't been globalised in our time. (Mokkil 2006)

It probably isn't true that poetry is 'the only industry that hasn't been globalised' when we take into account the luminaries: Canada's five top-selling poets for

instance. But down here where the ordinary folk live, it's a fair point. Most of my own diet, for instance, is Australian. I read a lot of New Zealand poetry, but only because I visit often, make a point of buying new publications and am sent copies by friends and relations. I read a lot of US poetry too, but that is only because the US is the world, and the books are widely distributed. I know little about contemporary Canadian poetry, less about Indian, and almost nothing about Malaysian verse, yet I am confident that poets and poetry readers in each of those places are very familiar with the local scene. Given this sort of context, it seems even more valid to think *small press*, *local press*, *collective press* for poetry; to leave the major publishers to the few radiant stars; and to rely on the electronic domain to throw bridges across the world, bringing poets and poems together in online journals and networks, allowing a kind of globalisation that refuses the neoliberal mode under which we all live.

On the JLP books

The books being produced by JLP are fine examples of Australian publishing. The production values are high, the books are attractive to look at and to hold, the typefaces are well chosen and a good size. And the content, of course, is worth reading. I started this review essay by confessing that I don't have much time for much poetry, but in reading all eight books closely, I experienced a reversal of my usual pattern. Many poems in all eight books were pleasing; some were startling, some moving, some of course fell flat, but on the whole the experience of reading these eight individual collections of 92 pages, 78 pages, 62 pages or however long was of time well spent. Let me scan my notes, in alphabetical order (it is necessary to have some logic of reading, after all), and write briefly about each work.

Jordie Albiston is not one of the new(ish) poets in this selection, but someone I have been reading off and on for some years. Her *Vertigo: a cantata* is scribed in what approximates musical notation, and is the story of a lost love, the process of grieving, a coming to terms. A poet friend registers huge disdain for 'all those poems about my broken heart', and usually I agree. But although broken hearts are the topic of this collection (actually, not a collection; it's a single piece in parts), Albiston's work avoids cliché, sentimentality, and all the other sloppy elements of heartsick verse. We are not, here, drowned annoyingly in someone else's sorrow, but moved rhythmically through moods and moments in a fashion that allows connection without in-your-face misery.

I suspect it is the cantana form, along with Albiston's writing and humour, that prevent it from becoming a drag. In 'Anacrusis', for instance, the poetic persona is running checks of herself in a way that could, without the wry sensibility, be just too damn sad:

> heartbeat head screwed on right way round check
> breathing being bellringing check cooking crying calling
> friend(s) check
> a bit of an appetite hmm ok check

I don't know about you, but it made me laugh. Read it out loud, and listen to the patterns of consonants and verbs, stressed and unstressed syllables: despite the quotidian voice in this part, it is a highly musical book. *Cantata* is, of course, from the Italian *to sing*, and a cantata is a vocal composition. In its early days it was typically for only one or two voices, so Albiston's work returns it to its roots. It is a form for which I have a great fondness. I spent a summer as a child, sitting in a hall while my mother (a splendid contralto) and

the rest of the local choir rehearsed, over and over, a cantata to be performed during the Easter weekend. Even as a child, even hearing it in its early, rough, blocked-out form, I recall the passion, the pattern, the antiphonal quality that speaks of community and of how the suffering of one is the suffering of all. The grandness of the names of the various pieces of Albiston's work insist on its identity as this musical form; and they also act as reminders: not merely of events or mood, but of the tradition of recording things in melody. *Amoroso*, *Appasionata*, *Articulato* and so on: these passionate words that Albiston has used as titles for the various sections were instructions to performers about the feelings they are to present to the audience, and how to address the score; and here they direct readers towards the emotional landscape of the work.

The book is carefully crafted. In the first part, which is carried by a solitary sorrowful voice, the mood pieces are presented on the verso page, while the recto carries the aria that responds to or illuminates the mood. Let me offer an example: from 'Lamento', which starts:

> even my dreams are solitary sojourns
> & often I wake to the widow's run |
> I am nobody's woman | Again! Again!
> ….

and then it ends:

> On the dull obligato of that final line
> ||: *You threw me away too soon!* :||

Note the self-deprecating humour of the *Again! Again!* and the repeat barlines, ||: and :||, of the ending: in musical notation these signal that the singer must go back to the beginning of the section, and go through the passage again; or in this case, again, and again, and again. It is a structured lament, and in the transparency of its structure, I think, implies that our feelings are as much composed or pre-scripted as they are felt. We grieve actually, materially; but we also grieve performatively, and Albiston's work reminds readers that loss and recovery follow a social process that has its roots as much in discourse as in emotion. Recognizing this can instantiate a sort of inevitability that binds together the 'natural' body and all its emotions and passions, and the 'cultured' body with all the overlay of discourse and obligation.

Or that's how it seems to me.

'Lamento' is faced by Aria 13, which is a series of memory-knowledges, laid out in phrases:

> I know how he yearns when he turns on the
> charm how he lifts when he's happy and
> drops when he's not how he wishes for that
> which he has not got how it is transcribed in
> rows on his beautiful brow

Even in this one run of phrases it is possible to hear the patter of beat, the feminine rhymes, and the chiming that carries the reader from one diphthong to the next.

Elizabeth Campbell is one of those named by the JLP website a 'new' or 'younger' poet. I heard her discuss the 'Tremulous hand', and read some of the pieces at an artist talk at my university a couple of years ago, so I feel companionate towards the book, as you do on seeing a friend's child develop from blob to toddler. The book fulfils the promise of those early impressions,

containing intelligent, observant pieces that make me think of one of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's definitions of the form: 'Poetry should still be an insurgent knock on the door of the unknown' (Ferlinghetti 2000). Her many horse poems gesture in this direction, such as these lines:

> Horses are never wrong.
> She sucks the world in through her eyes.
> She is Yes or
> No

In these small lines Campbell conjures up the essential otherness of the horse who, unlike us, lives outside representation and ethics, right or wrong, yes or no.

The Tremulous Hand himself doesn't appear until page 48 (of 64 pages), and comprises a sequence of poems that weaves in and out of sensation, history, concept and story. While for me these were not as well realised as poems in the first section, the poetic person is very present in these pieces - an insistent voice, one that does not become obscured by language and poetic structure but remains in the images, the tone, the accent and the sense.

Julian Croft is a well-established poet and this collection, *Ocean Island*, is well-organized. Its seven thematic sections are variously successful as units, and all contain individual extremely successful poems. I found it better read in bits, dipping in and out; too many in one stretch, and for me it began to feel rather as though I was reading the products of writing exercises. But it's certainly skilful in its use of poetic techniques and linguistic values. 'Muck and money', for instance, is marked by heavy enjambment, requiring the reader literally (okay, metaphorically) to throw the leg over to the next line in its long run-on sentence. There is no period in the whole 52-line poem, just a scattering of commas and an odd colon, which produces a pressing rush through the industrial waste and all its demands, no time to pause and catch your breath, always being hauled over to the next line, the next image, the next task.

It is highly observational work: this is a poet who knows what he's looking at, and how to see. And in 'Making hay' he discusses the point of poetry, of:

> the poet not as seer or prophet
> but the vacuum-cleaner that sucks up
> all the dried-out thoughts of others,
> watches the galahs roost and waits for dawn,
> and that fresh incarnation of who we are
> lit in a new transfiguring light

To my mind, this is the coda of the whole collection - that poetry provides us a way of seeing all the made world as symbol.

I have read a few reviews of this collection, and most point the reader to the truly marvellous 'After a war (any war)' - which I too recommend. For me, though, his awareness of the workplace is the most trenchant aspect that informs this collection, and a whole world is opened up by, for instance, 'Dockyard':

> Mother's sewing room but run by men.
> Filthy with rust and dust, steel fabric is cut
> by flaming scissors; sparks, blobs of hot metal
> glue the gusseted bits, and seams of rivet pins
> run round the paunch of the belted keelson

The factory might resemble a sewing room, but the domestic imagery fades as the poem unfolds, and we see that really, it is a 'rough beast, its hour come round at last'.

Claire Gaskin's *A bud* begins with a rush - literally; with a poem titled 'all the blue rushing through the pinpoint of an iris'. Does it refer to a flower or an eye? It isn't clear; but in any event, it calls up both the passion to be that is the bud of a flower, and the coloured part of the eye, the part that doesn't engage but simply observes. In these few words, then, she sets out the twin acts of a poet: to see; and to be. The title also shows clearly what is to come: highly imagistic lines, highly suggestive images.

The blurb on the back of the book tells us that 'the poems here have been matured from two to twenty years', and certainly they bear the mark of considerable attention, extensive editing. They are pared back to the bone; sometimes a little too far, so that it seems the feeling has been effaced, and only the shadow remains, or something too recondite to pursue. The poem 'Dad', for instance, is a series of headlines, including:

> Non-Euclidean Geometry
> Science is a Sacred Cow
> The Bombing of Darwin
> The Morality Gap
> The Antichrist

All those insistent portentous initial caps convey to us, I guess, the insistent portentous quality of 'Dad', but I did feel a bit cheated. Clearly the man was given to pronouncements - but to what end, in what frame?

Other poems though, also pared back, work very well. An example is 'To autumn', which includes these lines:

> A yellow leaf
> spiraling down
> into the shallow
> evening grief
> Honey on the path
> Every breath a door

I don't know what is going on here either, but I am captivated by the sensations conveyed in a handful of words.

LK Holt's *Man wolf man* is a highly visual, highly intelligent collection. Like many products of young contemporary artists, it shows its erudition (the book requires a full page of notes acknowledging sources, providing definition, attaching itself to Gandhi, Kristeva, Sappho, Goya …). This can be annoying - as though the poet is appropriating someone else's fame, someone else's clarity of thought, rather than relying on her own imagination, observation and technical abilities. However, Holt's work also offers some lovely evocations of traditional poetry and Australian imagery. Read, for example, about 'Two women', who:

> will never seem so strange as in this light's
> benign haunting, alive in a paddock of bones.
> We are the two in the bush not the hand,
> …
> We pass without stopping a little dinosaur of bull skull,
> disowned by a spine corded with roots, rushes;
> his mad teeth sprouting like hearsay from the earth's

> fresh gum. He is Dürer's precisian; sockets for eyes,
> witness to our endurance

A precisian (I had to look it up) is a person who stresses or practices scrupulous adherence to a strict standard, especially of religious observance or morality. Or perhaps it's the skull of a bull, watching to no purpose, watching from death. This is a book that - like many young people's writing - pays a great deal of attention to death: in 'Pompeii' Holt writes:

> To be remembered with you like the lovers
> in Pompeii, petrified in bed as two abandoned spoons.
> One spine curled watchfully around the other:
> what better position for the undying could we choose?

With due respect, I could think of better ways of memorialising my love than being petrified in bed; but I do enjoy the picture these lines convey.

Aileen Kelly is the third of the established poets, with several collections under her belt. But in an acknowledgement that writers are always learning, she thanks John Leonard 'for deftly distinguishing babies from bathwater'. This, *The passion paintings: Poems 1983-2006*, is the longest book by far of the eight, having 222 pages - two to three times as many as the rest. Many of her pieces are as much story as poem, often the stories of a poetic persona with grown children and elderly, dying parents, who is facing the world in a now-aging woman's body, and trying to deal with life. In 'All down darkness' she opens the poem with the brave assertion:

> Darkness rises and I strike it down
> Rises and I strike it
> down

and of course, keeps striking - this is a battle none of us will win.

It confronts and reflects the small moments of an everyday life: nephews and nieces growing into adulthood, graffiti on a train, a spider weaving her web. There are wonderfully mirth-filled lines (read 'My brother's piano', about Freud and his sister), along with poems that commemorate suffering and loss, domestic activity, familial encounters. All these poems seem to me to say 'Pay attention!' The middle section especially is sharp and often bitter, the rhythm tapped out, spat out, as in 'This far':

> Hope is a change of ocean's mind.
> You find a place to head for sideways
> if arm and leg still chord in to the spine:
> a place where water creeps on an alien beach
> the dune-grass peppered with unknown blossoms
> you fall upon and count your cells like sand

I have to admit that read in a run, as it were, rather than the sort of dipping in and out that is my more usual approach to poetry, I find the work tends to pall - too many instances of being shown someone else's memory, someone else's 'remember when?' - poems that are more like practice than an evocation of the new. But for me Kelly gets better as she goes on, and the third and last section is rich, and well worth the time it takes to get there.

Paul Magee works with me at the University of Canberra, so I feel that to avoid any charges of nepotism I should maintain a discreet silence about his *cube root of book*. I'll do so. Though: how's that for a title - *cube root of book*: *cube*: the comforting geometrical arrangement;

root: a burrowing down, stability, a point of origin (and, of course, vernacular for fucking);
cube root: cutting back into the being of the object to uncover its secret self;
of book: that enigmatic, often maligned, sometimes lauded, world-changing and irrelevant secret space of language and story, music and image. The book being what Foucault called 'a minuscule event, a small malleable object' (Foucault 2006: xxxvii).

To perform a cube root on a book: what would that operation reveal? Perhaps, poems by the ancients, the place where we all began, where writing was born. Perhaps, the origins of verse. In this collection, interspersed among the twentieth/twenty-first century poems, one in each of the 11 sections, is a poem by a Latin poet, translated by Magee into a voice that makes it evident that people haven't changed very much, that we still feel, fear, desire, yearn, resent, just as people did 2000 years ago. Listen to this bit, from the *Aeneid*:

> But when Palamedes was struck by the envy of that two-face
> (believe me,
> I know) Ulysses, and sank down from the world above
> I drowned my days out, in broken spirits, in shadows, in grief
> at the destruction of my innocent friend, but raging inside.
> And mad as I was I could not hold it in

How's that for vernacular!

Cube root of book; I should point out that, in mathematical terms, roots are the inverse or opposite of powers. There is a wonderful giving over of power in these poems; the very first piece is a helpless opening of the hands, a shrug of the shoulders:

> But what else is left
> to halt this falling
> unprophesied night?

But the poems are also given to contesting power. See how Magee takes on the previous government, for example, in 'for a prime minister (*Philippic II*)':

> s-bend dweller
> s for suck harder
> I feel you uptight, a succession
> of dying deaths, of days
> when your face falls in
> you do all you can
> to hold up your eyes, your nose, your skin.

It happened, of course, at the 2007 Federal election in Australia. On television screens, at the news of the rout of his party and his own place in politics, I saw the prime minister's face fall in. It was all he could do to hold up his eyes, his nose, his skin. Who can say now that 'poetry makes nothing happen'? (Auden 1945: 48).

And finally to **Petra White** and *The incoming tide*. This is a lovely collection of poems: alive in every line, finely honed, full of close observations. Listen to these lines (from 'Bunda cliffs'):

> The shelved-in sea hived with diagonals,
> verticals, horizontals, slabs of sleek water
> ferrying hazes of air in its crystal,
> vapouring the desert's tongue.

You need to say the lines out loud, feel the words and their patterns of vowel and consonant on your tongue. This is a poet who is not afraid: she uses words like 'diagonals' without turning a hair; she uses 'axolotl', such an awkward term, in a poem that is a paean to sisterhood; and though there is no sense of the sibling relationship through most of the poem, at the end it falls into place:

> … more
> than the ailing tabby, the timorous
> and watchful high-heeled dog, or the rented
> fireprone house, he guards our dangerous
> childhood pledge to never change

And see, in that last phrase: she's not afraid of splitting an infinitive either. Poetic licence.

I am captivated by these poems, by their clanging internal sounds, by their unexpected stories, by their attention to embodiment. Much of it shouldn't work; but it does. The poems to her grandmothers, for instance, evoke worlds, call up relationships, are full of tenderness and rejection. In the poem 'Munich', her grandmother continues to haunt the poetic persona: she has not gone gentle into that good night:

> … she - just-vanished - seems everywhere.
> She didn't entirely want to be remembered,
> no grave, no plaque.
> Her memories, freed from her head,
> swarming in mine, or some of them:

and this continual haunting is perhaps because:

> She died alive, her last words on waking,
> *It's not a dream, is it?*

The lack of a certain space between here and there, self and other, appears and reappears throughout the collection: the being-there/being absent while in the workplace, the synthetic community produced by the electronic bulletin board in 'Southbank' (actually, I think I used to work there; it certainly rings some bells). Then there's the lost and found child in 'Bunda Cliff'; the fact that 'death looks momentary' in 'Kangaroos': nothing is stable, nothing is as it seems, and the walls between here and there are always permeable.

On poetry, surviving

The publishing sector is a dense and tangled one, itself facing enormous pressures brought about by the clash between Gutenberg ways of thinking, neoliberal economic values and contemporary production processes. We cannot expect much support, given that poetry does not, by and large, return profits. But that doesn't mean it's not worth doing. The eight poets discussed above have something to say, and are finding ways to say that. Possibly each will distribute no more than the usual 200-400 copies, but that's not bad: two to four hundred people make a decent crowd.

All eight volumes present very different voices and ways of observing the world: and all those voices seem confident that they are not speaking into a void: that they have or will find a home for their work. It may be, as the anonymous referee of this paper suggested, that the solution for poets is to write as though they do have an audience, regardless of the actual state of

things. Slavoj Zizek identifies the same approach in the political sphere, and describes it as a necessary, and even useful 'fetishistic split: *I know very well* (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of 'pathological' imbalance), *but just the same* (I act as if democracy were possible)' (Zizek 1991: 168). Replace 'democracy' with 'poetry' and we might rephrase this as: '*I know very well* (that poetry has a tiny readership and makes little social impact), *but just the same* (I write as though everyone will read me)'. The value of this attitude is that poets will have a reason to keep writing, despite setbacks and restricted publication options; and that they will write in a way that is capable of crossing the private/public divide: they will make work that is fine and finely wrought, that is something worth reading.

Think back to the problems Adrian Caesar identified in those 2003-2004 publications. It is perfectly reasonable for us to complain about being neglected by the system, but it is the responsibility of individual poets, as well as publishing houses, bookstores and distributors, to keep poetry alive, and not just surviving, but buying a house, raising a family, building a career. This won't happen if poets write only for other poets; if poets rely on tired images, irrelevant topics, inflated diction; if poets fail to think creatively about how to make a place for their work; if they forget that when we write, we write for an audience - and that the audience won't pay attention if they are bored, excluded, lectured or patronised. I detect very few negatives in the eight books here. The confidence of voice; the attempts to find a balance between the recondite magic of the form and the accessibility of the vernacular; the focus on the concrete and material as well as the ephemeral and conceptual: these are promising signs of a poetry that is capable of reaching beyond the miniscule audience of other poets to the wider community.

Endnotes

1. I have been advised that JLP poets make a subvention payment to cover printing costs, and then earn back virtually the full amount of each book sold. They also, of course, receive Leonard's editorial input, and the distribution of their work. This is a very good deal, and a very long way from 'vanity publishing'. return to text

2. Poetry slams are extremely popular, and attract good and steady crowds, so as a performance art it is doing well. A number of electronic outlets exist for poetry, from excellent sites like John Tranter's Jacket (http://jacketmagazine.com/00/home.shtml) to the weird and wonderful in the amateur section, so in that domain too it has a healthy existence. But this paper addresses, and worries about, the conventional form: poetry book publishing. return to text

3. These lines come from Auden's elegy, 'In memory of WB Yeats', stanza 2. return to text

4. Jacket magazine includes a page of links to small presses, nearly all of them in the USA; see http://jacketmagazine.com/00/smallpress.shtml. Funding support exists too, with many small presses receiving Australia Council funding: though not JLP, I'm informed. Claire McCaughey of the Canada Council for the Arts produced an interesting report on national approaches to funding, 'Comparisons of Arts Funding in Selected Countries: Preliminary Findings' (2005), which identifies funding agencies, approaches and investment in a list of nations. The report can be accessed at http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/9C37F2C4-FB69-47C9-8227-EC8C46CAEACF/0/Comparisonsofartsfunding27Oct2005.pdf return to text

5. Also critical to the sector is the Australian Book Group, established in 1992 to provide trade distribution for the books produced by its member clients: small and independent publishers. See http://www.australianbookgroup.com.au/ return to text

6. Their website can be found at http://www.braidwoodbookandprintroom.com/gpage1.html return to text

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