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*Contemporary Australian Poetry*,  
Martin Langford, Judith Beveridge, Judy  
Johnson, David Musgrave, Eds.  
Sydney: Puncher & Wattmann, 2016.  
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In the wake of Brexit and the rise of Donald Trumpism (with the underlining racisms and sexism) Education has turned out to be the new *Class* divide i.e. a clash of the *Ignorant* versus the *Enlightened*. Seems, the Educated fear being ruled by the *Ignorant & Know-Nothings*, and the *Less-Educated* fear (as has always been the case) being governed, by the arrogance of intellectual snobs who know next to little-or-nothing of their lives and experiences. It seems (according to the pundits) that people in Britain and the USA are increasingly being shaped (and Voting) according to *how long* they spent at school. (Sending all the commentators back to their proletarian textbooks presumably). The ancient Greeks knew that for Democracy to work properly, you had to let the *Have-Nots* get their claws into the *Haves* every now and then. But with the creeping rise of Corporations, Globalisation, the closing down of local industries in preference to world markets etc. this is becoming less and less possible or likely. It isn't so surprising when you realise that Economists (from Hayek to Friedman) are all of a piece; seriously believing that Democracy itself is the cause of our "economic ills" producing *inflation* (no less) at the expense of free-market economics. This new cultural divide is nowhere more obvious however than in the current anthology. The Editors proudly headline the title of their Editorial (on the first page) with the words "A Luminous Field" (with their haloes, presumably) unashamedly parading the "new paradigms" of Australian poetry. This *Elitist* attitude permeates a lot of Australian anthologies, albeit not as blatantly as this one. It would be instructive to do a statistical breakdown of who and how and how many of those poets in those anthologies (especially pre-1980s) were similarly Degreed.

Education is not the same as knowledge, and nor is it the same as knowing. What the Educated are good at, is *Ordering* all their footnotes, and sounding like they know what they are saying, while the untutored masses are likely to believe Anything. This is not a new divide. Plato<sup>7</sup> in the *Republic* wanted society to be run by Philosophers, Scientists, *and* the Educated. And as we know, that kind of thing can only lead to the dropping of the Atomic bomb on a city. (Every last one of those Scientists was holding a Degree). Education in today's climate is a prerequisite of power, and a marker of privilege, even if they pretend that it isn't.

Of the 239 poets in this anthology 79% of them *have* a University degree. 21% don't. That's a huge gap, in anyone's language. 3 of the 4 editors are all accredited Degree holders (from what i can gather), so it's not surprising that the selection reflects their own image. As Frank Guan<sup>8</sup> put it "professional poets are entirely trained and largely employed within the university system, producing work primarily for each other while a very small contingent of outside enthusiasts looks on". It therefore begs the question what do the Editors actually mean by the word "Contemporary". It sounds like it might mean "those currently around", but as i think i will show, it's just a guise for the new elite and gate-keepers of our culture & poetry.

Of the 188 poets in the anthology *with* Degrees, 41% are Women. *I guess* that's good. Or rather better than *before*. Or is it? Of the 21% of poets who *don't* have a Degree, turns out 38% of them are Women also i.e. virtually the same ratio i.e. no change -- whichever population they belong to. Education doesn't seem to have improved their representation %-wise, despite the equal number of women to men on the Editorial.

The anthology tries to give the impression that all the poets selected are somehow equal. To do this they resorts to showcasing the poets according to "surnames" *alphabetically*. There is no reason for the alphabet to be taken as the ordering-principle of the anthology, excepting that it is consistent with the authoritarian militarization of language demanded by the Academy and a precondition of a Degree i.e. everything in its place, starting with a capital letter and ending in a full stop, making sure you close off the brackets, and all your footnotes are numbered sequentially, etc. etc. When anyone picks me up about how to spell "its" properly i usually tell them they're *not* listening. And in truth they don't (and don't want to) either. They want to just "(( look ))" at poetry instead. They think it a private affair somehow borne of idle contemplation. Anything that has to pass via the wax in the ears is considered untrustworthy in truth. The medium is the message, to be sure. The "eyes" represent individual experience, while the "ears" a collective one.

The "sheer number of voices clamouring to be heard" (as the Editors describe it) reeks of Elitism. Being unnerved by "a crowded and less sign-posted scene" gave them a licence they said, to respond to a new canon-creation *modus operandum*. They emphasised that "This is not a trivial question" i.e. the number of competing authors. "How does one prepare a class to access such a large cohort". (*Cohort* is typical of the language they use to demean the "other" -- ditto words like *clamouring*, and *crowd*, etc.). So what is their solution; "When the only texts are the poems themselves" as they say? They *strangely* advocate a strategy of "stick to the tried and true" (as they put it) i.e. act as tho "most of the [other] poetry doesn't exist" -- please note that this isn't even good scholarship!!!! When the only thing is the *text itself*, then it is precisely the time to roll up the sleeves and get down to work, surely. Are they saying they need a higher authority to help them "think" thru the poems? Strange scholarship indeed.

Right from the get-go they acknowledge that many changes had occurred in the poetry scene during the period 1990 to 2016 (the period covered by the anthology) and that those changes "occurred off the page", this at a time when many of the publishing houses stopped publishing poetry. One would then assume, that the Editors would go searching for all those other outlets, e.g. radio, TV, internet, pubs, cafes, festivals, small magazines etc. But they don't or didn't! (As an aside, it is interesting how magazines like *Overland*,

*Southerly*<sup>14</sup>, *Meanjin*, etc. have couched themselves as “small magazines” even tho they have budgets traditionally in the 1000s -- in effect usurping the category of “*small magazine*” for themselves with a view to funding (at the expense of small magazines whose budgets are always in 100s, and in the red – they are NEVER included in the various debates about funding, or for that matter considered as source material for anthologies – Why?) This strategy was most obvious during the early 70s to the late 90s. But that’s another story.

The Editors say that “poems do not only engage with poetics and ideas, they also interact with the world beyond them”, only there is *no evidence* that they went looking for them elsewhere. The condition of entry into the anthology was that you had to have at least one *book* of poetry published. What of the poetry of Mez? Or Jayne Fenton Keane? There is very little evidence of *sound poetry* being considered – where is Amanda Stewart? Or conceptual poetry, process poetry, found poetry, or for that matter *performance poetry*. (Or its baby, *spoken word*!) Where are the founders of those movements? (Arguably the largest movement in Australian poetry since the *Jindyworobaks*). Where is Billy Marshall-Stoneking, Eric Beach, Neil Murray, Jeltje, Peter Murphy, Jenny Boulton, Myron Lysenko, ... don’t get me started!!!

This “different” mode of “presentation” i.e. via verbal, oral, looser poetic structures, emotional enjambments, or other traditionally established modes of delivery such as rap, song, blues, folk, rock, sonnets, lyrics, -- every one of them a feature of “utterance”, is suppressed. A poetry borne of Education may not *per se* exhibit obvious stylistic differences but it does set a limit to the range of available tones and acceptable attitudes, and cultural determined forms employed, and employable. Should Archie Roach have been included in this anthology? It must be obvious to any outsider that this extreme proximity to the Academy (and its associated use of honours, grants, perks, and privileges) is hardly good for the art of poetry *per se*. So, what are we to do with the likes of a Bob Dylan now -- call him an aberration because his poetry is *so* un-poetry, or unpoetic? Should this anthology have seriously considered Paul Kelly, or for that matter Michael Leunig? “It’s useless to pretend that rap music isn’t poetry” Frank Guan sez in *Class Dismissed*<sup>1</sup> and i agree. A lot of poetry (including the poetry of the ancients) was composed to an accompaniment of music – allowing the verses to blend in with verbal and nonverbal elements. Admitting Bob Dylan into the Hall of Laureates broadens the base of what can (and should be) considered “poetry”. But why do we have to wait for the Nobel committee to tell us that? This has never been a problem for a lot of us including Robert Adamson who championed Dylan for years, but it is and has been a problem for the Academy of letters *per se*. Dick Higgins of “Something Else” press coined the term “intermedia poetry”, to describe the poetries that fall within the gaps of various other art forms e.g.: poetry & cinema, poetry & theatre, poetry & painting, poetry & happenings, poetry & sculpture, poetry & cartoons, etc. There are *not many* “visual” poems (in the broad sense of the word) in this anthology either, and Toby Fitch whose poetry books literally explode with visual devices is in this anthology “straightjacketed” into the conveyor-belt of linguistic militarization. This is a common ploy of co-option i.e. by all means represent the poet but only use those pieces that mirror the selector’s notion of what a poem is i.e. Upright! none of this slouching, exploding, or whizzing around. The last bastion of militarization in society of course is in the alphabet, as is

the last bastion of racism. (Heaven help anyone, who chooses another “swerve” or squiggle for a name for example). To organize the anthology any other way *other than alphabetically* is to make the intentions of the Editorial clearer, thru the creative-act of sequencing – but No, they took the lazy option of feigning objectivity, like good obedient school children.

The Editors say that “what passes for avant-gardism has become the established mode” – such elitist arrogance i find breathtaking. What *avant-gardism*???? Avant-gardism isn’t something that stands still! Where is the poetry of Chris Mann? The poetry of Alex Selenitsch? The omission of Pete Spence’s poetry is positively criminal. And what of the shorthand poetry of thalia? Dadaist poetry of Jas H. Duke? The rhythms, sounds, and patios<sup>13</sup> of Maxine Beneba Clarke? Or the asemic poetry of Tim Gaze? I find it strange, that in an era of computer screens, that the poetics of *concrete poetry* that gave and gives a semantic, and visual dimension to the screen, is denied a place in our history. The poetics of visual poetry predates the computer screen, and is the ideal poetic for it, yet is deemed *in-admissible* to this “Contemporary” anthology. The incredible thing here is that the Editors probably have no idea what i’m talking about, or if they do would not grant it a legitimate place as poetry.

The “poetry wars” of the 70s and 80s weren’t just about gender, or sexual preference, gay, or black issue of representation, they were also about the struggle to break the virtual monopoly of staid forms of poetics & representation! *Visual poetry* challenges “the linear authority of the line”<sup>9</sup> — its militarization. The visual poetry anthology *Missing Forms* (published in the 80s) is virtually never mentioned or footnoted. And what of *Off The Record* by Penguin Books or the various *performance poetry* magazine, tapes, CDs, DVDs??? ditto – no show your Worship! *In-admissible* in the “Contemporary”. Instead of *celebrating* the “unstable lenses of competing poetics and claims” (as they put it) they try to dumb it down.

I confess, that there are a few acknowledged “performance poets” represented in this anthology, but what of Billy Marshall-Stoneking, who pioneered poetry on the stage and screen? Or Nigel Roberts (who actually did a magazine called *Off The Page*). Or the poetry, sounds, and music of Jeltje and Sjaak de Jong? Or the sexual textualities of ACR? And what of Anna Fern -- poetry in Australia acts like Kurt Schwitters never existed! To my horror, one of the poets selected (who i’ve never heard of) got a Degree (or was that a PhD?) in *Performance Poetry*!!! Well, i guess *he* had no trouble getting admitted into the Temple, aye!? And whatever happened to Richard Tipping’s contribution in visual and semantic presentations? Don’t they like their poems by the seashore, or on street-poles?

The answer to this *unwieldly proliferation* of forms, is given further on in the Editorial, namely “Academic conversation partly depends on having a manageable number of subjects” – oh yes, they want their “subjects” alright; gay, blue<sup>12</sup>, black, red, ethnic, and most of all “manageable”, and spare the odd-mode of transmission also! They feel very comfortable with developing “cults of personality” – it helps on the creative-writing circuit. And they certainly want their hierarchy of geniuses, which they modestly *signal* to the *cognoscenti* by way of the number of // // // // // pages allocated to each one. But far be it for me to make such exaggerated claims, let me quote<sup>11</sup> “... we think the number of people now [since 1970] capable of the sustained production of highly accomplished work is something like thirty or more”. What an

astonishing admission! They select 239 poets, but only really think 30 of them are any good i.e. only 12%. How on earth can these Editors keep a straight face! Since the Editors included themselves in this anthology are we to presume they are of the elite 30, or 12%??? If so then (erring on the side of modesty) the % of good poets (excluding the Editors) in this anthology drops to about 10%. Let's call a spade a spade here, the real effect of this anthology is to support and establish reputations in the Academy, by way of a credited (peer-reviewed???) textbooks of poetry or poetics etc.?

Pierre Bourdieu<sup>3</sup> (the sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher), says *power* is culturally and symbolically re-legitimised through an interplay of “agency and structure” while constantly re-inventing itself. Power becomes posited in people (read, the *Degreed* here) in the form of lasting dispositions, trained capacities, and structured propensities, to ensure one thinks, feels and acts in a certain way or ways<sup>4</sup>. This new kind of *Capital* (as he calls it) extends beyond notions of material assets (as normally understood) and is posited in the social, cultural and symbolic interplay of everyday life. It is central to this “societal power struggle”, cos it “provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy”. (“Taste” being the essential ingredient of this cultural-poetic-Capital). This shift from material to cultural and symbolic forms of capital (he sez) is in essence “what hides the causes of inequality”, and it is progressively inscribed and reinforced in people’s minds<sup>5</sup> through ‘cultural products’ such as Anthologies like this. The cumulative effect of all this is an *unconscious* acceptance of the *status quo*, and one’s sense of one’s place in it. This is the real meaning of the “poetry wars” of the 70s and 80s, not some kind of brawl over “personalities”, exemplified in that universal Australian quip that poetry in Australia is a “blood sport”. Poetics is a serious battleground – and for a lot of us it’s not a game, or something to rigmarole away the hours! What is at stake here is the very fabric of society, and how it feels and thinks and does. Yes, this is “not trivial”, cos it goes to the very heart of what a poem is, and the narrow aperture thru which these Editors view it all.

So what is their point here *exactly*, regarding the demise of publishing houses, for poetry? The Editorial is unambiguously explicit on this point – it is (they say) the disruption to the “economy of poetic value”. (The word *economy* is instructive here). That aside tho, it seems the *down side* of this downturn in publishing by the big-deal Houses, is that it no longer affords them “continuity”, since the Elitism of those establishments had “the virtue of constructing a narrative that the reader could follow” – presumably they don’t take too kindly to cultural interventions from unauthorized sources. As Jacques Ellul once put it “Continuity is a human right” and they are *damn well* going to insist on having it, *and* on their terms. They want their “narratives” spoon feed to them by big deal publishing Houses, or else put on some kind of a drip.

But, *Ob* how they bath in (quote) the “the number of university-linked writers often working in vibrant post-graduate communities” who (let me assure you) have nothing but self-congratulatory meaningful titters, cultivated & polite clapping, and feigned looks of interest to offer. What excites them (i find so often) is *so* trite, its embarrassing. At these readings, it often feels like they don’t know what a good headspace looks like, or a real linguistic semantic event. They only attend (presumably) to support each other (in their

meaningfulness's) (with their large subterranean streaks of unsaid boredoms in toe) – but i digress!

There is another interesting point that should be highlighted, and that is the presumption that verges on the very notion of *terra nullius*. The Editors say post-modernism's "groundlessness" was *found* in Australia, in its *culture* and *geography*. Is this some kind of perverse neo-Colonialism? Are they claiming that they found a "groundlessness" in Australia's geography and culture, still???? Modernism and Post modernism has *never* been groundless – it's a *Romantic* falsity. Those Modernist-*groundlings* (that we might agree on) have always been *grounded*. In fact, it can be argued that the stutterings of *avant gardists* are an exploration into the abstract dialect-ing(s) of poetry. In this regard it is a pleasure to see Javant Biarujia represented, albeit in a straightjacket also (pity!). It's no accident that the ethno-centric "borrowings" of Modernism have had (traditionally) racist and Colonialist components to them<sup>11</sup>.

The Editors say (at the end of their Editorial) that "the idea of managing a readership with the right set of criteria becomes absurd" which sound like a kind of "wisdom" -- while they bolt down the canon and send it out to all those Degreed poets in their respective Creative Writing courses, to foster the new Dawn & Dogma. With so many slant-capped " / " practitioners included in this anthology one wonders how it would be possible to have an *objective* peer-review assessment of anything in the future? I give you, *not* the thumbs-Up, *or* the thumbs-down, but the / finger!

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> take my word for it.

<sup>2</sup> trust me!

<sup>3</sup> you should already know who that is!

<sup>4</sup> ditto

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1986)

<sup>6</sup> in his *Politics*

<sup>7</sup> look it up yourself

<sup>8</sup> don't be stupid go back to the story!

<sup>9</sup> you should *know* who said that!

<sup>10</sup> it's just a footnote unrelated to anything

<sup>11</sup> not going to tell you!

<sup>12</sup> this colour is an adjunct metaphor for the spectrum of "others"

<sup>13</sup> at Catherine de Phalle's insistence.

<sup>14</sup> hope they don't notice i included them in the list too.