



CYRIL PEARL: ON THE MARGIN (EXCERPT)

published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1970

Quote:

'Stirring a brew of obscurity, banality, and imperception in a solipsistic lubberland is not the way to attract avid readers.'

Introduction:

Cyril Pearl: *On the Margin* (excerpt), and a response from poet Rudi Kraussman, and a further response from poet John Tranter

See the article by John Hawke in this issue of *JPR* that mentions a much younger and much different Cyril Pearl, [here](#).

Paragraph 1 follows:

WHEN HUTCHINSON PUBLISHED Mary Wilson's Selected Poems, they printed 10,000 copies, a huge edition for an unknown, poet, even though she was the wife of a fairly well-known former Prime Minister. They found they had underestimated the demand by 300 per cent.

2:

Poetry seems to be booming in England as in Australia. The "New Statesman," according to its editor, R. H. Crossman, receives

more than 300 unsolicited poems every week, though it publishes only about 100 in a year. The mute inglorious Miltons of Gray's day are no longer mute, though they may not be glorious. But even when they are published, who reads them?

3:

Clement Semmler, writing on Australian poetry of the 1960s in the August issue of *Poetry in Australia* [sic], poses the pertinent question: what is the audience for poetry here? "The poets themselves, their relatives and friends; some academics genuinely interested in Australian writing – where does it go after that?" he asks. "A poem in a well-read journal; a poem in the book pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*; some verse read on radio... But published verse *qua* verse? I wonder..." This, he feels, is the problem for Australian poetry in the 1970s. For whom is it written, and who is going to read it?

4:

At least one Australian publisher doesn't seem to worry over these questions. Angus and Robertson has published two volumes of Australian poetry this year, and has three more in its latest list: *Australian Poetry 1970*, an anthology edited by Rodney Hall, *The Branch of Dodona*, by David Campbell, and *The Makers of the Ark*, by David Rowbotham. The Old Firm apparently agrees with Mr Semmler that "Australia today needs poets and more poets as never before... in some puzzling way he (the poet) is still news, and behind the superficialities, and the politics, and the violence and the skulduggery that is going on about us, there is still a shadowy notion that what he is up to is ancient, honourable and worth keeping going."

5:

I agree with Mr Semmler – whose admiration for what he calls Establishment poets such as Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart and A.D. Hope I share – that many contemporary poets have only themselves to blame if no one reads them. Stirring a brew of obscurity, banality, and imperception in a solipsistic lubberland is not the way to attract avid readers. I derive little emotional, intellectual or aesthetic satisfaction, for example, from this poem by Rudi Krausman in *Poetry Australia*:

6:

the evening,  
stands here  
with the ash  
in the belt

on the table  
i design  
an EVENT

everything  
is more or less  
as it was  
once

7:

With all respect to poet Krausman, I don't care a hoot if it more or less stays that way.

A POET IN REPLY

[Reply by Rudi Krausmann, Thursday 15 October 1970]

8:

SIR, – CYRIL PEARL'S ARTICLE, (*Herald*, October 10) tries to express certain views on contemporary poetry, and to illustrate what he calls "stirring a brew of obscurity, banality and misperception in a sollipsistic lubberland" he quotes a poem of mine printed recently in *Poetry Australia*.

9:

Personally, I don't care at all if Mr. Pearl's emotional, intellectual or aesthetic antennae reach my poetry, but as his attack is directed to contemporary poetry in general it deserves attention.

10:

First of all I will have to go to the trouble of trying to explain the poem to Mr Pearl. When I wrote

11:

the evening  
stands here  
with the ash  
in the belt

12:

I mean the ashes of the day become the ashes of the night. As a reaction to this, a reaction of despair, I wrote

13:

on the table  
I design  
an EVENT

14:

This event drawn on the table is a poor surrogate for life, of course. The capital letters indicate that it is the title of the poem, and I mean that this is the event I get from present-day living. To illustrate this feeling I would like to quote Yukio Mishima, Japan's leading writer, who stated: "I want to touch. fire but there is no fire in our "present society"; and I think on a certain level there is not much difference between Australian or Japanese society.

15:

### The closing lines

everything  
is more or less  
as it was  
once

16:

are perhaps an attempt to find consolation for this state and I am forced to find it, unfortunately, in a philosophical cliché.

17:

I have tried, after Mr Pearl's article, to find banality in the poem, but could only find it in Mr Pearl's mind. I have also tried to find obscurity, but could only notice that Mr Pearl mistakes ambiguity for obscurity. ("Without ambiguity there is no great art," Louis Borges). As far as perception is concerned, I can only say that Mr Pearl must have become imperceptive, at least for present-day living and contemporary poetry.

18:

One point that Mr Pearl could have criticised is the brevity of the poem. I would like to answer him in advance, subjectively. When Hemingway was asked by someone how to write a short story, he said: "Make it as short as possible." I apply the same principle to poetry.

19:

As to Mr Pearl's advice to contemporary poets to become Mary Wilsons in order to gain a wider audience, it is too ridiculous to deserve a reply.

20:

Before I conclude this letter I would like to refer to his admiration for the so-called Establishment poets (corresponding to the views, it seems, of Clement Semmler in his article in the last issue of "Poetry Australia") such as Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart and A. D. Hope. I, too, can appreciate their poetry, particularly their variety of themes, their humanity and their control of language; but my touch-stones are Ezra Pound and Paul Celan. And before Mr Pearl makes any further statements about modern poetry I advise him to read, or reread, these poets. For the rest, I prefer to answer with a poem:

21:

the MARIONETTE  
stands up

its myth  
is unheroic

it wears  
the human eye  
of the earth

with faded hands  
it lifts the tragic web

from the corners  
of the world

the marionette  
sits down

– RUDI KRAUSMANN.  
Scotland Island.

#### IN DEFENCE OF POETRY

[Reply by John Tranter, Tuesday 20 October, 1970]

22:

SIR, – I WAS PLEASED to come across Rudi Krausmann's letter  
October 15 in spirited defence of his poetry.

23:

His criticism of Cyril Pearl's article (*Herald*, October 10) made a number of good points, but left out an important general criticism which I feel should be made. Mr Pearl, in his article, says that he agrees with Mr Clement Semmler (in an article in the latest *Poetry Australia* in thinking that "many contemporary poets have only themselves to blame if no one reads them"). This statement is absurd on two counts.

24:

First, contemporary poets of even the most radical persuasion are read, with keen appreciation, by many thousands of people in Australia, and by millions throughout the world. *Poetry Australia*, the very magazine from which Mr Pearl culled his example of incomprehensible modernity, has the largest circulation of any poetry magazine in the country. *Poetry Magazine*, once the bastion of conservatism, since adopting a policy of modernity has almost doubled its circulation.

25:

Another example is the unprecedented publishing success of the Penguin modern poets series. Mr Pearl should get his facts straight before making such an assumption.

26:

It is only in the last few years, however, that genuinely contemporary poetry has come to be accepted in Australia. Indeed, there is still a widespread antipathy to it among the general public, and this is where I quarrel with the other part of Mr Pearl's assertion. It is not that poets "have only themselves to blame" for this state of affairs; they do have other people to blame and Mr Pearl is high on the list.

27:

For a long time the Australian reading public has been fed an enfeebling diet of uncritical adulation for the "old masters" of local poetry: Slessor, Hope, Fitzgerald, and so on; usually served with a dessert of mixed incomprehension and dislike for the so-called "moderns".

28:

Cyril Pearl's article, Clement Semmler's article and a review by Kenneth Slessor a month or so ago are recent examples. The reverence for the Establishment I can understand, since most of its poets, though generally a little short on originality, are at least honest, technically competent and often creative.

29:

The dislike for such "modernist" poets as Robert Duncan, Creeley, Ashbery and at least a hundred others, is less forgivable. Perhaps the gradual fading of the spirit of inquiry due to increasing years is to blame; perhaps the cause could be found in that bitter antagonism towards anything "new-fangled," which is common among the older generation; or perhaps it is simply that the new poetry is dealing with issues beyond the experience of an older tradition. Whatever the cause, it is to be regretted that Mr Pearl, whose main interests seem to lie in the fields of Victoriana and journalistic trivia, should see fit to pass summary judgment on an art form he apparently knows little about. To have successfully ignored the last fifty years of European and American poetry is quite an accomplishment in itself, but to regard this as sufficient qualification for evaluating modern poetry is surely to carry ignorance into the realm of the ludicrous.

JOHN E. TRANTER.

Camperdown

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