

Fay Zwicky, *The Lyre in the Pawnshop: Essays on Literature and Survival 1974-1984*, University of Western Australia Press, (1986), 297pp.

"Writers writing about other writers reveal more of themselves than they do of

their subjects" (p. 137). Fay Zwicky's confident assertion about Brennan's essays could equally apply to her own. She is a poet and a short story writer as well as a critic, and when she wrote these essays, she was still an academic. She writes mostly about Australian poetry, and since she is a comparatist and an Americanist, its emergence and development are set with (sometimes against) American poetry, particularly her favourite writers, Whitman, Wallace Stevens and W.C. Williams. Apart from four essays on individual writers, her book includes reviews of Australian, American and English collections and anthologies as well as a series of radio talks. There is also an excellent, wholly original reading of *Maurice Guest*, perceptively compared with *Jude the Obscure*, a discussion of autobiographies by Australian writers, a very sensitive and moving commentary on Paul Celan's *Todesfuge*, and an interview with Denise Levertov who, in defence of Pound (and against all evidence to the contrary) asserts that no great writers had Fascist convictions. However, what emerges from Fay Zwicky's variety of interests and the comparisons she draws is her intense concern for the state of Australian letters. Her major preoccupation, as she defines it, is "the genesis and uses of language" (p. 13). More specifically, it is the way language is used in her country, for the theme that runs through her book is the nature of Australian writing and, at a further remove, of Australian society, though some of her comments clearly apply to Western culture generally.

As she moves from the general to the particular, the author is admirably served by her wide erudition; her views are intensely personal, the product at once of a great sensitiveness and a strong, original and independent mind, unencumbered by fashionable theories, qualities which make the reading of this book an exciting and stimulating experience. A major characteristic of this collection is what another reviewer rightly sees as a mixture of passion and intellect, which often reminds one of Fay's own poetry and short fiction, particularly when it is tinged with irony or humour as in "Acceptance". But passion and intellect can create a tension which throws light, not just on Fay Zwicky's personality but on the difficulty of being a writer in Australia.

The cultural features she most deplors are the decline and debasement in language usage as well as the frequent rejection of value-judgements. Yet, however crucial for the future of literature, these are not specifically Australian issues, and the rejection of value-judgements, particularly by some academics, is at least partly due to the influence of French literary theory. Possibly, Fay Zwicky's concern about language and value in Australia is so strong because she feels the decline is occurring before Australia has had time to create a self-assured cultural identity. Her view is that the Australian sense of identity is still poignantly fragile; Australians lack confidence in their own standards and values, and are too keen on being up-to-date. Australian society has not yet reached full maturity, so that self-contempt, a deep private reserve and an underlying fear of human relationships explain the absence of a dimension of feeling in Australian writing. This appears in a discussion of Stow's work which shows a terror of human love and a better understanding of the environment than of man. Similarly, she pinpoints the lack of compassion in Patrick White's autobiography, the need to ridicule and humiliate, and the precluding of pity, which she sees as a sign of the Australian insecurity in an otherwise great writer. With characteristic honesty, Fay Zwicky speaks of her own uncertain identity and

explains that she gained a sense of community from Jewish American writers. They, however, have emerged from a large community which still asserts itself as Jewish, and at one stage they formed a recognizable group even if this is now sometimes questioned. But the Jewish writer in Western Australia can hardly be part of a group and can only use isolation, difference and possible alienation - always major themes in Jewish writing - as a source of art.

If this is the origin of Fay Zwicky's uncertain identity, it may explain her obvious conviction that intellectual rigour (of which her own criticism is a marvellous example) necessarily goes together with order and tradition. But in a world as complex as ours, art is more, I think, than an "ordering of experience" (D.J. Enwright's phrasing, p. 233), as Fay Zwicky herself implicitly acknowledges in her discussion of truth (p. 55). It is possibly this emphasis on tradition that makes her see Australia as "a world without a significant history" (p. 23), a very Naipaulian statement which may also account for the nihilism she traces in some Australian writing. This is not the place to argue that, like other countries, Australia has had its share of significant history, possibly more tragic than heroic (except in wars abroad), or that human history is always significant, as the author herself suggests in the subtitle of her book. Fortunately, her pessimism is saved from Naipaulian despair by her faith in the human spirit, by the compassion and generosity of feeling which, even at her most impatient, never become cold or ambiguous irony as often in Naipaul. I cannot agree, however, that relativism (which need not mean the rejection of all values) and uncertainty express a decline in humanism, for I see them as the expression of a new humanism based, in Fay Zwicky's own words, on seeing "the other's reality as it exists, regardless of one's own interests" (p. 7). Also, there is such a thing as what Milan Kundera called in *The Art of the Novel* "The Wisdom of Uncertainty". One hopes this particular wisdom will further inspire Fay's own lyre.

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