

Adrian Caesar

Anthony Lawrence. *The Darkwood Aquarium*. Ringwood: Penguin. 173 pp.
Stephen J. Williams. *The Ninth Satire*. Pariah. 140 pp.
Gary Catalano. *Selected Poems. 1973–1992*. St. Lucia: UQP. 158 pp.

The Darkwood Aquarium is Anthony Lawrence's third and best book to date. There was promise, and things to enjoy in his first two volumes, but in this substantial collection there is a maturity, an evenness and breadth of achievement that marks a considerable advance upon his earlier work. The book is divided into four sections, the first and last being more thematically varied than the middle two. The opening section has poems that explore the poet's past, his childhood and adolescence, broadens to include several very fine love poems, and then travels further to encompass, amongst other matters, political situations in Belfast and the Middle-East. The middle sections are more unified, one dealing with poems about the sea and fishing, the other devoted to poets and artists that Lawrence admires. The final section is perhaps the darkest, Lawrence dealing here with death, and neurotic illness. These subjects are not only broached from the point of view of the individual, but more subtly investigated to suggest connections between the personal and the social. There are poems about genocide, about the death of animals, about individual and political violence, about disease and madness.

Across this very wide range of material Lawrence deploys a narrative style which combines an easily accessible prosaic syntax with the surprise of metaphor and diction which never strikes one as strained or self-consciously clever. Much in these poems depends on their rhythms, which although "free" in the sense that they are not overtly patterned, nevertheless have a precision and control which gives the poems a movement that always seems appropriate. Lawrence, then, can be passionate and cool by turns, but in many of the poems the strains of a haunting, understated romanticism which is never puerile can be heard. One experiences in the poems a religious sensibility in search of a belief, but most of all I took away from this volume an impression of the richness of life and experience contained in the poems, even when they are at their bleakest. It is a most impressive achievement.

Stephen J. Williams's *The Ninth Satire* is a challenging collection of poetry, fiction and biography, very little of which is satirical — but maybe that's the "post-modern" joke. And with it is introduced the central puzzle of this collection. Williams wants to assert a plurality of voices in the book, and there is no question that he achieves this. But the problem resides in the relationship of the various voices and manners to each other. This is particularly true of the prose. The book opens with a determinedly playful, modern or post-modern air (my uncertainty here stems from my feeling the influence of Beckett on the

prose — was he a proto post-modernist or merely a modernist?) with a number of pieces that are frightfully, self-consciously “clever,” and seem to be about the fragility of identity, the limitations of language, the gaps between perception and articulation. Towards the end of the book, however, we find two documentary-style narratives, one the “journal” of a man dying from AIDS, the other an account of a care-giving team helping a young family in which the father is dying of AIDS. These stories are both scarifying. They are prefaced by Williams’s assertions that questions of “Art” and “Literature” should not intrude upon the publication of such material, and further he contends that the journal of the dying “James” “shows how unnecessary and wasteful ‘good writing’ is.” Quite so. But why then are we subjected to all the arty, good/bad writing at the beginning of the book? It is either redundant, or its purpose is counter-productive, since by introducing the difficulties inherent within the idea of “authenticity” it allows the reader to question the authority of the “documentary” narratives. This is surely a dilution which works against Williams’s ostensible purpose.

My irritation with the non-documentary prose is only rendered greater by Williams’s manifest abilities as a poet. The poems in this volume are superb, and again the less overtly rhetorical they are, the better they are. “Flowers for the Dead” is a fine example: “So, when someone has died, do not take flowers with you. / When it is your turn to write about the dead do not write / About flowers,

or afternoons in the sun, or cycles, or God. / Tell it as it was. Get out your hammer and drive the nail in.” Although I don’t think it works as a whole, there is plenty in this book to recommend it.

In both Lawrence’s and Williams’s work there is a sense of engagement with the stuff of contemporary life; there is a willingness in both to confront the less palatable aspects of passion as well as to seek a sense of praise. Both are writers with their hands dirty. Gary Catalano’s work is a different proposition. The opening poem of his *Selected* sets the tone, one, which, like the portrait on the front cover of the book, I find rather forbidding. The poem begins declaring that the poet will never “understand / that true poetic art / of writing from the heart”; it concludes, “The art, in poetry, / is not, like therapy, / an existential rub: / A poem is not a pub.” Clever enough, I suppose, but I prefer pubs, and the warm, coarse fug of humanity that one breathes on entering. Catalano’s poems are glacial, cerebral and impersonal. They are spare, well crafted, and quiet. They seek “wisdom in stones,” and wish to transcend the hurly-burly. It is clear that they will appeal to some who are temperamentally sympathetic. I am not. There is for me in the book a backward looking preciousness about “art,” an Olympian allegiance despite the assertion that, “it’s still not / fully appreciated / that peasants always make / the best and most modern / artists ...” This may be. Catalano, however, does not sound much like a “peasant” to me.

20.