Noel Rowe. *Ethical Investigations: Essays on Australian Literature and Poetics.*
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sales@vagabondpress.net

Ethical Investigations comprises twelve essays written by Noel Rowe between 1986 and 2007, and edited after Noel's death by Bernadette Brennan. It was awarded the 2009 Walter McRae Russell Prize for the best work of literary scholarship on an Australian subject. The collection combines both published and previously unpublished essays. It reflects and documents the work of one of Australia's finest literary critics, bringing together insights and reflections developed over an all too brief scholarly life. When she launched this collection at the University of Sydney in 2009, Elizabeth McMahon spoke eloquently of the gift that it constitutes, not only as an invaluable resource for scholars of Australian literature, but also as an uncompromising reminder of what she called 'the value' of Rowe's critical attention: 'a habit of attention to words, to the world, to the nuance of a moment, that refuses to deflect its gaze from the business of observation, assessment, subtlety and precision.' This collection reminds us that critical work at its best draws us into an ethical relation with the world, a relation that reconstrues our sense of both poetry and terror, of the gaps and the links between artistic responsibility and what Rowe calls the writer's 'duty of learning'.

The essays were written and published separately, not conceived as a volume, but their collection here—and indeed their organization—brings some shared, continuing preoccupations to the fore. In the opening essay '"Will this be your poem or mine?" The give and take of story' (first published in 2007) the delicate frame of Rowe's larger critical project is presented through an examination of poetic conversation, overlap, continuity, and translation. The essay begins with Rosemary Dobson: '"Will this be your poem, or mine?" If this is a dialogic world, it is a world realized in the give and take of imaginative exchange, in that communion of self and other we call analogy.' (15). This nuanced understanding of analogy is expanded as Rowe considers the ethics and aesthetics of representation around the contentious instances of Katharine Susannah Pritchard's *Coonardoo* and Helen Darville/Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. Rowe argues that Pritchard 'is attempting an imaginative engagement with an individual other' (18), which persists, despite the 'ideological offence' of its now compromised representation of race, while Darville's book fails to generate such an engagement at all, in particular in the way its concluding narrative move—the claim that it is now 'too late' to ask Vitaly 'why he did what he did'—works to '[remove] the reader's right to persist with the ethical questions the novel evokes and evades' (25). Within this insistently ethical frame, Rowe reminds us of the location of stories in the world, 'in an economy of exchange, belonging to everybody and nobody' (26), and that 'story, as a work of analogy, likes company' (28). However, these understandings are ultimately grounded in a commitment to aesthetics—'I believe writing is, primarily, not what used to be called a *bonum utile* or useful good, but a *bonum honestum*, a good unto itself' (28)—that demands another kind of textual attentiveness, another level of care.

Rowe's understanding of 'analogy' in this opening essay informs much of the work that follows and provides, in many cases, for its subtlety and its always compelling insights into familiar works and writers. In 'Just Poetry' (2008), he pursues the idea of the capacity of

poetry to address justice, to push our inquiry beyond 'abstract notions of equity and debt, and … the economics of reparation' in relation to Indigenous justice in Australia (177), which leads him to the insight that Judith Wright's poetry provides in this relation a 'poetic of justice and reconciliation [that] is grounded in images, tones, speaking positions that create a relational ethic' (181). The same essay moves to consider Rosemary Dobson, whose poetic is also 'relational' (184), returning us to Dobson's preoccupation with translation and the sharing of story in the opening essay. Here again, the sharpness of the critical insights into the poem works in service of a larger understanding of the work of poetry and its place in our most substantial moral and aesthetic apprehensions. In the discussion of Dobson's 'Over the Frontier', Rowe draws attention to the poem's mystical concern with 'how poetry and art emerge between being and non-being', observing in the face of it that '[p]erhaps uncertainty is important in the quest for justice: the invitatory other, the one who asks for justice, is always beyond what can be given' (185).This sense of company, exchange, and conversation, together with the way the focus on the larger ethical and aesthetic questions posed by particular literary works, events, and considerations, suggests something of the intellectual capaciousness of the collection. They also speak to its more focused concern to provide a theology of Australian literature within the contours of an ethical literary practice. Rowe argues that: 'Literature has not yet really had the chance to dialogue with theology at this level of methodology, to discuss how each embodies, not simply marginal concerns, but marginal meanings' (57), and proposes in the face of this a deconstructive reading of theology's disavowal of its own poetics. This thread draws together essays on a diverse range of texts and writers, to argue that 'theological reason is also a work of poetic imagination' (127), and that theology is itself vulnerable, and 'not immune to the dangers of speech' (97). 'Are There Really Angels in Carlton?' (1993) sets out ample grounds for a project of Australian literary theology, taking on and re-animating the contested religious, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of figures such as Patrick White, Les Murray, Martin Boyd, Helen Garner and Tim Winton. Rowe here refutes what he argues are overly redemptive accounts of theology in, for instance, Patrick White's novels, proposing that we attend instead to '[an] ambivalence which protects the images from becoming idols and forms an alliance between pietas and parody' in White's work, to its 'coincidence of iconographic and iconoclastic impulses' (36). This important reminder takes authority not only from the intellectual precision with which it is presented, but also from the breadth and scope of the framing context that the essay provides; the rich discussion of theology as a concern and practice in some core Australian writers.

Central to this discussion is Rowe's concern to articulate the interdependence of language and theology. He critiques the more conventional Catholic readings of a Catholic poet, such as Francis Webb, producing what he refers to as 'a Vatican reading: they read down from the ideas to the poetry'. The problem with this, Rowe explains, 'is that it assumes that poetic imagination is obedient to theological reason, and forgets that theological reason is also a work of poetic imagination' (127). From here, Rowe returns to Webb's poetry, to its 'refusal of silence, its persistent fidelity to battered words' (102). The 'suffering of language' (105), provides for a more contestatory account of Webb in the second of Rowe's three essays on his work, 'Francis Webb and the Will of the poem'. Here a chiastic logic structures the initial critical premise: 'the way in which belief is an act of imagination, and imagination an act of belief' (106), proposing a complication of identity as a necessary dimension of literary theology. The essay pursues this logic alongside the logic of analogy, or as Rowe puts it: 'the profound analogies to be discovered in religious and poetic processes' (108). The same

chiastic logic informs the discussion of James McAuley, in particular his poetic account of the Fall of Christ: 'What I am suggesting is that the poetry's involvement in this myth of fall also implicates it in the fall of myth' (97), again structuring an analytic of contestation which replaces consolation, 'showing within itself meanings "locked apart" and offering the historical moment, the "But here", nothing more than a "relatedness that cannot touch"' (88), to provide rich new readings of the poetic force of negativity in McAuley's work. These detailed readings of specific poems and individual poets provide much of the richness of this collection, informed as they are by a larger critical self-awareness, an explicitness about the interdependence of critical and poetic discourse, seen in insights like the following: 'this is a warped reading of McAuley's poetry, … or rather, it is a reading of the warp within his poetry' (97) that work always to extend the particular commentary and suggest a larger poetic and critical resonance to the work of reading.

The collection extends these strikingly original readings of paradox, contradiction and complexity to address the work of Vincent Buckley, Vivian Smith, Les Murray, and in a critical *tour de force*, the monstrous theatrics of secrecy and self-revelation in Hal Porter's work and biography. These are all substantial and original readings in terms of their poetics, their ethics and their scholarly depth and precision. In the end, though, it could be argued that the most significant dimension of this collection lies in 'Sacrificing Grace,' the long, wonderful essay on *Dead Europe*, published here for the first time. This essay brings the troubling force of Tsiolkas's immense novel into the ambit of a critical purview that is richly informed by an enviable breadth of reading, in particular of Australian poetry, but also across the diverse and shifting terrain of contemporary critical and aesthetic theory. This reading forces us to attend to the aesthetics of *Dead Europe* as a dimension of its horror, and brings us back to the argument Rowe presents in the opening essay of the collection, the argument about the good—the *bonum honestum*—of writing, and the insight that 'beauty, even if it resists understanding is what brings most writers into and through their dark nights of creativity' (27).

Brigitta Olubas, University of New South Wales