

# Paper Trail

Joy Hooton

Drusilla Modjeska

*Timepieces*

Picador, \$22pb, 229pp, 0 330 36372 7

ACCORDING TO the back cover of *Timepieces*, Drusilla Modjeska's latest collection of essays represents an attempt to follow the 'paper trail' of her own life, after 'nearly thirty years of nosing in other people's archives'. Readers who have enjoyed *Poppy* (1990), *The Orchard* (1994) and *Stravinsky's Lunch* (2000) will find much to intrigue them in Part 1 of this collection, which is largely a series of intimate glimpses into her development as a writer. Like Helen Garner, writing and living for Modjeska are clearly two sides of the same coin, and both enterprises imply struggle, danger and passion. *Poppy* was arguably one of the most exciting books to appear in Australia in the 1990s. Modjeska's descriptions of her efforts to find the right voice or voices for the book's complex mix of biography, autobiography and fiction are especially fascinating. While her first book, *Exiles at Home* (1981), was groundbreaking, the gulf between its well-conducted research and the sophisticated self-conscious memoir that is *Poppy* is immense. How many graduate students must have the same experience of travelling 'on forged papers' in their academic work, of assuming a supposedly disinterested voice that ignores the personal 'terra incognita'.

The debates concerning the relationship between fact and fiction in autobiography have been pursued in international criticism for decades now, culminating, perhaps, in Paul Eakin's study *Touching the World* (1992). Arguing for autobiography's stubborn refusal to be relegated to fiction, notwithstanding all the manifest features of fictionality, Eakin urges that we recognise in life-writing a simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the constraints of the real. It is also true that for many writers and critics, the acknowledgment of a real experience behind autobiography's figurative form is of political importance, given the previous silencing of marginalised voices. It is therefore fascinating to read of a writer's struggle at the coalface of memoir, of mining fiction's seams for reality. Responding to the complaints of some readers that *Poppy's* diaries are not 'true', Modjeska writes eloquently of her writing experience of them as 'one of the most truthful parts of the book', initiating her effortlessly into *Poppy's* consciousness: 'Some part of me detached itself and let the process take precedence. Something grew in me as well as on the page.'

Eakin's work on representations of the self, developing the view that the self is invariably experienced in relation,

rather than, as earlier perceived, as unique and autonomous, has profited from studies of women's life-writing dating from the 1990s. In *Poppy*, of course, the connections of autonomous individuality are supplanted by a relational identity in which the identities of *Poppy* and *Lalage* are separate and yet inextricable from each other. *Timepieces* wastes no time expatiating on this interconnection from a writer's point of view. For Modjeska, it is implicitly an experienced given rather than an issue to be critically debated. Whether she is aware of this or not, Modjeska's sophisticated, self-consciously radical *Poppy* is part of a tradition of women's writing.

She is more uneasy on the subject of genre, disclosing that in writing *Poppy* she never used the word memoir to herself: 'I began writing what I thought would be a biography and came to wish I was brave enough to call it fiction. When the book reached the stage that it had to have a category, I felt trapped and panicky.' She makes it clear that the sense of entrapment relates not to the book's equivocal status but to the 'polarity of true or untrue as if there were just one register of truth'. Although she does not develop the point, she is touching here on one of the most radical aspects of life-writing and its interpretation by postmodernist critics. If early critical writing spent much energy attempting to define the genre of autobiography, the relative positions are now reversed as current debates about the status of life-writing reveal much about genre theory itself. Once dismissed as insufficiently objective, given the narrative implication of the 'I', autobiography was also dismissed as insufficiently subjective, since it was seen as relying too heavily on the constraints of the real to be considered as art. Neither fiction nor history, personal narratives proliferated happily for a long time on the fringes of literature, ignored by literary critics and historians alike. But the resistance to genre by this form of writing is now often taken as a crisis in genre itself. Confounding definition by its doubled nature, autobiography exposes the implicit naturalising function of genre theory. Meanwhile, much of the most interesting critical writing to date has centred on the connection between genre and gender, and has grown from the rediscovery of women's life-writing.

Modjeska's sensitivity to these issues, lightly touched upon though they are, will be of great interest to theorists of

autobiography. But one of the attractions of *Timepieces* is the openness to writerly experience itself. As George Eliot was fond of pointing out, endings are always the most difficult. Modjeska has similarly struggled, but her description of her oblique discovery of the ending of *Poppy* in the essay titled 'Writing *Poppy*' is one of the collection's highlights: 'Sometimes I say I had to write that whole book to find out what I wrote on that last day. Discovery and invention can lie very close to each other.'

Not all the pieces in Part 1 are equal in quality to 'Writing *Poppy*'. Modjeska is at her best when she focuses on a specific work, either her own or another's, or on paintings. Her more general reminiscences are less engaging and less artfully crafted. 'The Australian', for instance, an account of an early infatuation with an older Australian man that later merged with her readiness to leave Britain for 'this strange inverted world', is a relatively light piece. 'Apprentice Piece', which opens the collection, is interesting for the light it throws on her development and on the individuals who influenced her writing. Not surprisingly, Dorothy Green, who is celebrated in a separate story, 'Traveller's Husk', emerges as a major influence. Dorothy's conviction that passion or emotion is as important in writing as intellectual rigour led, of course, to her invariable inclusion of condemnation of Cold War politics in literary essays, to the helpless embarrassment of some journal editors. Modjeska has less interest, in this collection, in wider political issues, but the conjunction of feeling and thinking is similar. Oddly, though, Modjeska seems not to have found the right voice for 'Apprentice Piece'. In a recent essay in *Meanjin*, Helen Garner has described the necessity of waiting for a new persona to crystallise ('the one who suits the story, the material') every time a new work is begun. The voice of 'Apprentice Piece', with its generous tribute to a range of mentors, verges occasionally on the ponderous. One misses, for instance, the self-deprecatory humour and the sharp observations of Garner in *The Feel of Steel*.

But these are minor flaws. In Part 2, where Modjeska writes on the work of Grace Cossington Smith and, most brilliantly, on Clarice Beckett, she comes into her own. The last group of pieces, 'The Englishness Problem', 'Memoir Australia' and 'The Present in Fiction' reveal the reading and reflection that underlie the writing of such books as *The Orchard* and *Stravinsky's Lunch*. If she shares Virginia Woolf's conviction that 'only autobiography is literature', she also shares with the reader her fascination with its philosophical and literary challenges. Above all, she is sensitive to the effects of time, not just to the writerly challenges posed by time in memoir, but to the impact of time on writing and its reception. She would, I think, agree with the American critic Jerome Bruner, who maintains that 'how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive constructions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language'.