Preserves and Presences

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Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke (eds)
CULTURAL STUDIES REVIEW: CHARLATANS, 9:2
$29.95pb, 228pp, 1446 8123

Julianne Schultz (ed.)
GRIFFITH REVIEW: WEBS OF POWER, 2004:3
$16.50pb, 268pp, 0 7333 1386 8

Ian Britain (ed.)
MEANJIN: ONLY HUMAN, 63:1
$19.95pb, 236pp, 0025 6293

David Brooks (ed.)
SOUTHERLY: FACE TO FACE, 63.2
$21.95pb, 218pp, 1 920831 04 5

‘THE BEST PRESERVE of our humanity’, Ian Britain writes in his editorial to this edition of Meanjin, remains words. Whatever ‘our humanity’ is, it is protected, kept alive, maintained, conserved — in language. ‘[C]ertainly’, he clarifies, in the ‘honed, considered words of the good … literary artist’, but perhaps even in ‘verbiage’.

An interesting point: what is revealed of humanity in what we consider worthless? The first piece in Meanjin makes the case that — in Britain’s terms — just as literary art is a possibility of humanity, so too is verbiage. In a biographical essay on Orson Welles, Norman MacKenzie suggests that, for Welles, Darwinian ideas sit together with those of Huxley: just as humanity’s progress is possible, so too is its decline. In early short stories, Welles’s view tended towards the negative, though he came to believe that through the advances of science a new, more invulnerable order could be founded. As MacKenzie points out with reference to World War II, the times in which he lived did not support Welles’s hypothesis. Is it this lack of foresight that reveals Welles’s humanity?

Jim Davidson’s essay/memoir reveals that what we consider as ‘humanity’ is exclusive, and historically and culturally particular. Davidson writes about a period in Australia in which the idea of artistic value was being questioned. In his role as the second editor of Meanjin, during the 1970s and early 1980s, Davidson faced numerous challenges: as well as those office politics, there was that question of verbiage. With the ethnic, cultural and sexual ‘revolutions’ had come a plethora of new writers who were ‘demanding to be heard, and needed to be’. But these ‘voices’ were different from the established ones; they didn’t produce the traditional honed, considered words of good literary artists. As Davidson acknowledges, today we expect ‘very different things from the old, confident, unilateralist “quality”’, but at the time these different texts read to some like affronts to good taste. For an
In this edition of Meanjin, there are varied pieces paying tribute to the varied features of ‘The Public Life’ of Clem Christesen, the founding editor. Like other recent issues, the edition is broadly concerned with identity, largely through the forms of biography and memoir, but also including essays and poetry. Whether or not the best is indeed words, language is certainly not the only preserve we use today, and it is a shame that images within the text are kept to a minimum, particularly when there are several mentions throughout of Christesen’s (initial) inclusion of the visual in Meanjin.

In contrast, the use of photographs, paintings and graphics in the Griffith Review is lively and refreshing; yes, some did prod me into thinking about issues of quality, but this seems fitting with a journal that aims to provoke discussion, rather than maintaining a set standard. As this indicates, the Griffith Review is a mixed bag, pitched at a wide, non-specialised audience. Working with words and images, its content embraces a variety of forms: fiction, essays, poetry, autobiography, satire and analysis. This issue is subtitled ‘Webs of Power’, and ‘power’ here is practically synonymous with politics. There are pieces on Australian media, and state and federal politics; board members in Brisbane; the public service; educational background and the notion of privilege in Australia; Murdoch and nepotism; cricket; and a small, finely tuned essay on an art collectors’ collective. Surprisingly, given the diversity of the writers’ work and the broad, inclusive nature of the journal, the edition is consistently engaging: I had expected to skip through a few articles, but found that, if not always wildly original, they were each astute, with a well-considered point of view. The editor, Julianne Schultz, has put together a solid body of work.

The Cultural Studies Review is an interdisciplinary academic journal, showcasing essays, new writing and review essays. Its strength lies in its publication of non-geographically specific articles that are written from within an Australian lineage of cultural studies. Many of the articles in this edition — ‘Charlatans’ — engage with experimental histories, and there is an excellent consideration of the history wars debate by Klaus Neumann. The CSR is consistently innovative and always worth pursuing.

In Australia’s recent past, there have been many events in which language has been used for obfuscation. Words do have power, and they can preserve as well as negate. Hewett’s words here are not finely crafted: just the transcript of a conversation; reading them, rather than seeing words on the page, you hear her voice. Whatever other claims you want to make for it, this remains, I believe, language’s possibility: to make present something of the presence of another.

There were spies in the garden listening to every word that we said, young university students, paid off as informers, under the guise of being translators, which nobody needed. We all spoke English … The whole garden was full of American left-wing writers … and some Australians, like Frank Hardy, John Morrison and Alan Marshall. And this guy sort of hung around in the shrubbery, making a terribly clumsy, pathetic job [of] spying with his tape recorder on everything we said. Of course we were saying the most outrageous things we could think of.

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