

## Groups and mavericks

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### Quarantined spaces, groups and a crisis of modernism

Australian poetry after World War II has been strangely isolated from other poetics in English. The usual arguments are that the war, with its massive influx of American troops and the expeditions of Australian soldiers overseas, broke up the intactness of Australian arts in the same way as happened with its economy and society. Similar arguments are made in the context of the Great War, but these are often more enthusiastic than factual. Reaching back further, though Australia is so physically isolated, especially prior to air travel, its post-settlement/invasion poetry has been seen as an extension of primarily European, particularly British–Irish poetics, in essence an ongoing colonial poetry.

I believe, however, that this is untrue. The isolation of Australian poetry and poetics has evolved more from choice than from circumstances, and its quality comes about from very specific relationships between a consciousness of the uniqueness of the Australian landscape, and the enormity of dispossessing Indigenous peoples whose relationship with that land is so specific, varied, and complex. This is not to say such conditions have not existed elsewhere, but Australia has been resistant to (if deeply troubled about) its place in the broader international community.

Even now, in an age of easy air travel and ready communications of diverse kinds, a reiteration of uniqueness and separateness still underlies much Australian writing. It seeks to set itself apart. And even in cases where anthologists try to be inclusive, or connect with other parts of the world, Australia is constantly defined as such a different space that connection must come through the migrant experience, economics, or other material exchange. An example is an anthology I recently co-edited with Alvin Pang, *Over There*, which juxtaposes contemporary Australian and contemporary Singaporean poets while keeping them in their respective country spaces. Pang and I discuss the many connections between the two countries in our introductions, and seek to encourage further interaction, but still wrestle with the geographical and cultural barriers that exist. This is the result not only of the negatives of nationalism, nor a desire for national intactness, but also of the perceptions of Australia as quarantined space. Australia historically and physically has been constructed as separate, and this notion underpins an entire continent's poetics regardless of its sources.

Ouyang Yu constantly challenges the hegemony of this Australia in his poems of 'the Chinese migrant in Australia'. Yu has been exceedingly effective in showing the hypocrisies of the Australian literary establishment (and society at large) in creating a separation between Australians of Anglo-Celtic and European heritages as being historically integrated into the land, and the relationship between, say, Chinese migrants and the Australian land. This connection goes back to before the middle of the 19th century and yet is given a minor place in the canonisation of a defining national literature. This is especially true with poetry. Ouyang Yu is a maverick who speaks out and suffers the consequences of his volubility. His declarations against Australia, his country, are often seen in the light of 'us and them', and he receives such comments as 'If he doesn't like it, why did he come here in the first place?' Why did any of us come here in the first place? Here's an extract from Ouyang Yu's poem, 'Fuck You, Australia', 'a country flowing with gold and fuck-holes' – 'you thought I had wanted to learn your english that called me nimes / that fucked whenever you could anybody especially us'. Having said he is a maverick, it is clear that Ouyang Yu is closely connected with the Chinese community not only in Melbourne where he lives, but in Australia at large. As founding editor of the ground-breaking poetry journal *Otherland*, which publishes poetry in Chinese, primarily written in Australia, and through his extensive translation of English-language Australian literary works into Chinese, Yu delineates a form of group participation that is multi-directional.

Some years ago, I wrote an essay on conflicts between different groups in Australian poetry. This included considerations of publishing biases, and associations with particular anthologies and anthologists, and concluded with the notion that poets are self-serving, defensive and opportunistic. Nothing new in this, and it could apply to any poetry in the world. What is relevant, though, is one of the many responses I received. Deb Comerford, who was writing a thesis on innovative Australian poetry anthologies, decried the fact that I had articulated such friction. She maintained that it was essential for poets to stick together, and that, since they are always in the minority, collaboration, cooperation and community are to be cherished. She said that there were 'lines of gossamer' connecting poets. I agree up to a point. In establishing a poetry discussion list on the internet back in the mid-1990s when these things were not common (poetry etc.), by working collaboratively with many poets around the world, and being a habitual anthologist, I obviously believe in community of poetry. That said, it is easy to ignore the individualist compulsion of the poet, the desire to be a maverick and to break free of groups. Australian poets have a tradition of internal connection, and a suspicion of the international. Its origins are in a crisis of identity, for Australian poetry is actually Indigenous poetry (spoken, sung, written on the body, written in sand, transliterated and written in English or whichever language), and all others writing out of Australia do so with anxiety.

This is the reason that even a basic grand narrative such as 'modernism' skews when applied to Australia. The 20th century has parallel modernisms. In the European

sense, there are two major strands, and no doubt many more. There are the false self-advertising placard-waving versions of Pound and Eliot and their ilk, and then there are the technologists of language. Pound used modernism as a smokescreen to promote his own agendas. He was not a combatant in the Great War; neither was Eliot (which is *not* to suggest that ‘combatant experience’ was the only source of modernist ‘war poetry’). They left the modernity of America, went to the *anciens régimes* and value systems of colonisation, and held their word-placards up, a little like Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg in that favourite clip of Dylan’s. A promotional exercise to become one with the conservatives of their new homelands, their modernism suggested loss and scepticism while always obsequiously planning to belong. On the other hand, the mapping of the destructive powers of modernity in the poetry of Wilfred Owen horrifically goes hand-in-hand with a new freedom of expressiveness about loss; a technology of linguistics eases open the spaces in the poetries of patriotism – from Rupert Brooke back through to the nature places of Wordsworth and Keats, which still contained the pride of place, no matter their own revolutions in language. The thread of modernism through Owen finds extensions in Russian Futurism on the left, and even Italian Futurism with its militarism and praise of war on the right. A class of modernisms, but parallel to the placard versions of Pound and Eliot – the robber barons come out of the new world hungry for what is left of the old. Mina Loy is modernist in the sense that Eliot is not.

In the Australian condition, Kenneth Slessor is seen as the modernist *agent provocateur*. He was of the Eliot and Pound placard-waving kind, and his modernism is a materialist dupe. When he witnessed war firsthand it stopped poetry in him. His silence was modernist, not his poetry writing.<sup>1</sup> The real Australian 20th-century modernists were all poets directly or indirectly associated with the Great War: Leon Gellert, Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford.

The crisis of Australian modernism in poetry is sometimes said to be the Ern Malley hoax, perpetrated by James McAuley and Douglas Stewart. These two soldiers conspired in 1944 to dupe Max Harris and the modernist journal *Angry Penguins* by making a bricolage and pastiche poet spring like a genius from nowhere. Though both McAuley and Stewart are presented as conservative poets seeking to show the stupidity of modernists, both are arguably more innovative and modernist in the Australian sense at least than many of their more apparently radical contemporaries. It is doubly ironic that these mavericks, who formed a conspiratorial group of two, have spawned so many imitators (including myself). These imitators are often instigators, or at least connected

<sup>1</sup> Slessor, one of the greatest Australian poets, is to my mind at his most uniquely ‘modernist’ in his (often considered) ‘lesser’ occasional poems published in *Smith’s Weekly*. His early ‘modernist’ poetry is often lushly imitative and driven by its stylistics. Eliot’s and Pound’s consciousness of a modernist compulsion in literature takes on an aspect of cultural engineering I have always found limiting. Given space, I would explore Eliot, Pound, and Slessor together in the context of Freud’s ‘A level within the ego’ from *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the ‘P’*. I accept that these are inflammatory statements and that many critics see Slessor as a father of Australian modernism.

themselves to groups of other poets. I would say that not a crisis in modernism but rather a definitively postmodern moment is located in the Ern Malley hoax.

A poet such as Francis Webb – anxious both about his Catholicism and his deteriorating mental state, and his search for the quiddities of language and their relationship to historical events, music, myth, horror implicit in even calm events, and a crisis of maintaining composure and control – is not directly connected to the Ern Malley poems, but is certainly congruent with them in affect. Webb was always perceived as a loner, and his mental illness both isolated and differentiated him. We might not impose this on a reading of the poems, but they were conditions imposed on his writing of them. An anecdote: I was talking with one of Webb's supervising doctors about his time in West Ryde Hospital, and he told me that Webb had told him that when he had written the beautiful lyrical poem of new-born life, 'Five Days Old', he had held the child and was tormented by the beauty of the moment and a desire to dash the child against a wall. There is none of this tension in the poem. Or is there? It seems an important question to ask.

### International regionalism

Webb's poetry was appreciated to a point in Australia, but his real recognition came through the English critic Herbert Read, during his sojourn at an Australian university. Read took the word back to Britain. Webb had been a pilot and had served in Canada during World War II. He also spent time in an asylum in England. His internationalism was of a peculiar kind: out there, but locked in. Read's encomium of Webb did not make him a household name in Britain. Few Australian poets have become well known outside Australia. Their regionalism is not only by default, due to the isolation of Australia but, I would argue, is implicit in the regionality of their poems. Judith Wright once said that she wrote poems to be read in Australia. But Australians have also been internationalists; John Tranter, with his writing of Australia through the lens of European and American modernisms, and the abstractions and interests of the New York School of poets, is a prime example. Tranter is a traveller. But then, so is Les Murray, whose interests are so parochial and local, even if his travelling experiences inform a large part of his poetry.

In struggling with what I see as a crisis between the international and the regional in Australian poetry, I have coined a simple term to assist in the consideration of this. The term is 'international regionalism', and it has a distinctly positive angle: the creation of international communication conduits between regional spaces, but with an emphasis on respecting regional integrity. It is about language and cultural preservation in the face of globalism: creating a universal language of resistance on the one hand, but a language of interaction and cooperation on the other. It is a 'liminal' theory. The term 'international regionalism' has been adapted and used in many discourses. The anthology *Landbridge: contemporary Australian poetry* was the first mainstream publication

to make direct reference to it, though I had discussed it in various essays, letters, and on email lists long before that book was released. I originally devised the theory to discuss land rights issues re settler/invader cultures, appropriation, and Indigenous rights in Australia in relation to the rest of the world.

As would be arguable for most national poetics and poetics, one of the dynamics observable in Australian poetry, at least retrospectively, in considering any given period, seems fundamental. It is the dynamic between poets operating primarily as individuals, and those who see themselves as part of some larger group (or to use Philip Mead's term, 'network', in a decontextualised sense) in which they form a nodal point in a conversation.<sup>2</sup> Of course, often a poet is not really conscious of being part of some larger movement, but is lumped in by critics or others after the fact. However, many poets see themselves as literally interconnected and part of broader conversations which they drop in and out of as they choose, or feel impelled. Is there much difference between this collective *modus operandi*, where participants can operate unseen and at vast distances, and, say, the intimacy of the Melbourne clubs in which literary figures such as Henry Kendall and Marcus Clarke drank and chatted over the literary and other issues of their day? Quantitatively, there is, but in spirit, probably not. The technology, which seems so distancing to a previous generation, does not necessarily seem so to a generation engaging vigorously in its usage. This is stating nothing new, but in order to go where we are going, this premise needs to be established.

Australian writers of whatever ethnicity, or however long they have been in Australia, seem prepared to make reference and intertext with not only what has come before in Australian literature, but whatever literary history they have come out of. When a poet such as Ania Walwicz, a migrant from Poland, writes 'about' Poland, or 'about' Australia from the migrant experience, the two locations are intertwined and in constant conversation. In the *tour de force* entitled *Boat* (1989), Walwicz takes seemingly independent prose poems – some of no more than a few pages each, some running to 266 pages – to create a narrative of belonging and exclusion without a clear storyline. The poet works through accumulation of events, observations, experiences and investigations of language that paratactically, rhythmically, and with a dramatic music, creates an illusion

2 The dynamics of contemporary poetics in Australia necessarily take in broader innovative debates, ranging from 'LANGUAGE' poetry through to the 'Cambridge School', and many other collective 'discussions' appertaining to how and why poems are written. Interestingly, the rise of the world-wide web stifled conversations around the LANGUAGE school, rendering it 'post-' after only a short while. Alienation of text was supplanted with linguistic innovation: a generative challenge to the problems of the lyrical self. I wrote in the *Landbridge* anthology I edited in 1997: 'This is not to say that the demographics of poetics haven't changed with the times, because they have. The internet in particular has not only increased the potential of the "amateur" poet to participate as poet in a "public" space, but also the potential to collaborate and interact. The defusing of the "lyrical I" throughout the '70s, '80s and '90s, particularly in American poetry, has reinforced a tendency to a polymorphous "voice". Poets have become conscious of how central they are, as individuals, to the pulse of the language they use. Some reject the need to move away from the "I", and have dug in against linguistically innovative verse such as that of the American Language poets, asserting that the emotive authority of the self is at the core of what constitutes poetry, and that all attempts to move away from this are misguided.'

of an independent language, a kind of creole neither English nor Polish, but with its own terms of reference and even its own speakers. Though intensely ‘personal’, these poems *seem* universal, as if the reader is naturally a speaker of their language. This is the result of an intense ability to measure prosodically the response of the reader in a kind of preordained way, playing on reader expectation in sound and expression. Metonym, metaphor, myth and mimesis are bound together, compelling the reader. In the poems we go on a journey of slippage between languages of the migrant in the ‘new’ linguistic environment that also creates connections akin to Piaget’s relationship of the child and object. This is of course deeply ironised, but in such a divergent way that it works on its own terms:

polish words don't answer they go away goodbye forever then see you again dowidzenia  
 ciao they return little letters typed in my head hidden in drawers put away they return  
 bit by bit ten facet fellow painter jacek malarz pokojowy house painter is going to  
 paint my house renovate looking for right word page mister right word but he doesn't  
 come yet.

Walwicz can be read as a feminist poet and certainly could be ‘collected’ under a rubric of feminist activist verse, but she is also a writer of personal identity within community, an innovator looking for alternative ways of expressing cultural transition, displacement and belonging. She is a maverick – there is no one quite like her. Ironically, probably the closest in sheer flexibility and range of formal innovation in language is Lionel Fogarty, the Murri poet – but her concerns place her within a broader group dynamic. This does not necessarily mean that she interacts with like-minded poets – she may or may not – but that her work can be taken as communicating within a wider community.

Another recent ‘migrant’ poet, John Mateer, who came from South Africa to Western Australia in his youth, does not always create intertexts within poems between the places of his origin and migration, but certainly juxtaposes poems within collections relating to both places, and other places and cultures in the world where he has spent time. He sees this transculturality and internationality as a fact of his poetic condition.

One of the vibrant and deeply intelligent characteristics of Mateer’s verse, even in bleaker moments, is the revitalising nature of words themselves. He comfortably switches between English and languages of location, but this should not necessarily be seen as a celebration of the power of language to redeem; in fact, often in the case of Afrikaans the language carries an ominous weight that is almost invasive – as does English itself. Rather, language can ironise its own terms of production and allow us to see the faults in those who use it, including the poet himself.

Mateer’s verse has been controversial because of what is seen by some as an appropriation of other cultural registers and identities. In a number of poems, Mateer writes through the voices of Indigenous figures, in an effort to empathise with issues of being dispossessed, and to register the resistance to ongoing ‘white’ colonisation. My mention of this is not arbitrary, because in many ways this is the core issue of identity and

nation in Australian poetry. The Jindyworobaks, in their annexing and appropriating of Indigenous culture in order to create a shamanistic connection with the 'primal' Australian land, were overtly appropriative, and, depending on the poet, racist. Mateer is clearly not a Jindyworobak, and an opposition to racism in all its forms around the world informs his poetics. So this would make the line drawn between the two, between the movement and the maverick individual, seem inappropriate. But such a line is necessary in order to understand how readerships are formed for either poetics (poetry of the Jindyworobak movement, for example, its anthologies, and of a maverick such as Mateer in his individual poetry volumes).

In *Kayang and Me*, Kim Scott strongly objects to Mateer's poetic use of Nyoongar language at a reading from one of Mateer's poems when they were both performing at an event in Canada. Scott speaks of the distress he felt at hearing a language that is only just being reconstituted and reclaimed by Nyungar people, being spoken by, as he says, a white South African. There are important issues in this. First, Scott as a Nyungar is in a position to criticise what he sees as an inappropriate usage of a language that has been placed under massive pressure by the machinery of colonisation. On the other hand, his isolating Mateer's South African origins does not take into consideration that Mateer is, both poetically and in terms of self-identity, as much a part of 'Western Australia' as of his birth land. In *Loanwords* Mateer utilises borrowings and usages from a number of languages in order to reconstitute their original implications, while also building in the agency of new meaning in the language in which they are being deployed. This transnationality is the main driver of his work. Mateer meant no disrespect, I believe, but the issues are at the core of contemporary poetics. What is and is not available to the poet in creating a poetic language that carries its own intactness and its own implications for reading?

### 'Attention and scrutiny'

Kevin Gilbert, in his introduction to *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (1988), begins:

Over the last two decades the Aboriginal voice has received quite a remarkable amount of attention and scrutiny in the European Australian world of literature. Many, especially those exercising a critical overview and expecting something different, more exotic perhaps, from a people whose traditional expression was an oral tradition, have not come to terms with this often raw, certainly rugged, and definitely truthful subjective material drawn from the creative impulse. There are a number of difficulties in perception and analysis, the most difficult of these is to attempt rationalisation of hundreds of thousands of years of oral tradition against the last twenty years of limited access to white education and education in the English tongue. [p. xv]

It is arguable that Indigenous Australian poetry in English is at least evident in missionary documents of the mid-19th century, but in essence the rise of Indigenous poetry in

English as a poetic force in Australia traces from the 1950s. Poets such as Jack Davis and Oodgeroo (Kath Walker) were criticised early on for using ‘traditional’ European versification to impart messages specific to Indigenous social, spiritual and political concerns. This use of form actually enhances and strengthens the message of resistance in these poems by juxtaposing the restraint of one tradition against the reiteration of a tradition (or traditions) that have been placed under extreme pressure to sustain continuity. The works of both poets were complex acts of reclaiming and affirmation. Even their more open-form poems, with seemingly linear expression, play with the conventions of English-language syntax.

Davis’s poem ‘One Hundred and Fifty Years’, subheaded ‘Written in protest at the non-inclusion of Aborigines in the celebrations of 150 years of European settlement in Western Australia, 1829–1979’, ironises the state celebrations that delete acknowledgements of Indigeneity. In the poem, the free-verse niceties of evoking place with references to the presence of a lyrical ‘I’ that is ‘encountering’ the surroundings – ‘I walked slowly along the river’, ‘a flock of gulls quarrelled over debris’ – while a picture of obvious distress is building (‘juggernauts of steel and stone’) are countered by the initial usage of a rhyming refrain that seems to parody a British folk chant (‘Please to remember the Fifth of November’, pertaining to Guy Fawkes) and highlights the overlaying of Indigenous resistance with imagery of British military ritual:

So now that the banners have fluttered,  
the eulogies ended and the tattoos have rendered  
the rattle of spears,  
look back and remember the end of December  
and one hundred and fifty years.

This refrain, with its metonymic substitution (of tattoo, both marking of the body and military ritual) allows a segue into an unexpected ferocity of language that will lead to confrontation and accusation of murder, presumably coming out of the massacre at Pinjarra (the so-called Battle of Pinjarra in 1834). The poem shatters the conventions of English-language poetry through using those conventions against themselves. This conscious poetic process will later be heightened by Mudrooroo (his rejection as a legitimate voice for Indigenous culture is beside the point here) and Fogarty. The latter takes the de-hybridising of English-language poetry to its most extreme as a form of resistance.

Of the Murri people, and born at the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland in 1958, Fogarty is a leading spokesman for Indigenous rights in Australia. In resisting the colonising force of English, he has reterritorialised the language of the invaders and made of it a language that speaks for his people. I argue that Fogarty is the greatest living ‘Australian’ poet, forging a poetics that captures the orality of his people’s millennia of song cycles and spirituality, and also engaging with codes and tools of international modernism. Fogarty is at once verbally affronting and celebratory of his identity. A



deeply ‘political’ poet, he is also a singer whose poetry seeks healing and redemption for the many wrongs done to his people. There is a rage in the work, and the death of his brother Daniel Yock, in the back of a police van in 1993, as well as the plight of his people, compels his poetic spirit.

In a significant interview Philip Mead conducted with him in 1994, Fogarty said: ‘Daniel was a Song Man and he used to make songs up from his own dreaming, and he knew a lot of different languages. He was a really special person to my children. A very culturally talented guy, very dedicated to his culture.’ And it is that dedication to his culture that Fogarty carries into a poetry that is cyclical and declarative, deeply metaphoric and metonymic at once. The ‘timelessness’, the dreaming, the conversations between story and land, between the totemic and people, are beyond labelling. A unique poet, he has effectively managed to confront the persistent attacks by imperialist language, and (still) colonial culture/s, on his people’s voice, by preserving its identity, and also creating something entirely new (an extension of what existed before), to fight the invader. He is a liberator, an innovator, and a writer with a purpose as crucial as the existence of his people. Fogarty has de-hybridised his own language by hybridising English with his people’s language. It is a poetry that demands respect. In the poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries, he is as essential and skilled as any.

The consolidation of Indigenous poetry across Australia gives the impression of a unified movement rather than a series of maverick poets. One should be wary, though, of conflating different language-origins and tribal belongings in the construction of a ‘reconciled’ voice. The achievement of an apology to the Stolen Generations, earlier aspirations for a treaty, and the occasional success in land rights battles, do not make for one Indigenous nation. The symbolism of the Aboriginal flag and of committees and councils that meet to help resolve Aboriginal issues internally should not be seen as a totalising process; difference must be respected. The Yamaji poet Charmaine Papertalk-Green writes of Aboriginal issues but with specific reference to her own people (in Western Australia, around Geraldton), but obviously also in the context of Aboriginal/black rights in Australia.

I first came across Papertalk-Green’s forceful poetry in *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* (edited by Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn), and then in other anthologies including Kevin Gilbert’s essential *Inside Black Australia*. Interviewing Papertalk-Green a couple of years ago, I asked her about her early writing – which began at high school – and also about other Indigenous poets she had read. She replied: ‘Kath Walker, Kevin Gilbert, Alf Taylor, Lionel Fogarty and one of my late old nannas, Ethel Clinch. The late Kevin Gilbert gave me a lot of support as a teenager to keep writing and he included some of my poems in his book *Inside Black Australia*.’ The interconnection with Indigenous Australian poets outside her people and community is clear. But what’s as important to Papertalk-Green is the mention of the influence of a poem by her nanna, Ethel Clinch. Though Papertalk-Green has travelled widely around Australia, and worked in cities a long way from home, she remains in her life

and poetry closely connected with where she comes from. She writes her land and her community. The first question I asked her in that interview was about her people. She said:

I belong to the Wajarri-Amangu and Bardimia people of the Murchison area. Wajarri-Amangu on my Mother's side and Bardimia on my Father's side. I was mainly brought up in Mullewa with my mother's people but later in life have gotten to know more of my father's side. The old people used to have very strict laws but most old people have gone now, leaving behind a very different type of culture and environment, which most people need to accept and nurture.<sup>3</sup>

Papertalk-Green is a singer of her place and culture not only in herself, but as an extension of her family and Yamaji country. She also said: 'I mean the proper singing for this country – the Yamaji country. The land must be so sad that it does not hear its people so often now.'

This refers to traditional singing Papertalk-Green says she heard coming from the Mullewa reserve when she was a child. She has never laid claim to be a 'proper singer' in the traditional sense. When poetry is read in full – not just pieces in anthologies – the impression is that this poet is talking about many aspects of life and place, and when the work is taken together, as in her volume *Just Like That* (2007), a singer emerges with the strength of her people and their land. In a different sense, then, she is a 'proper singer'. Papertalk-Green is always willing to take risks – she will criticise herself and her own (if she feels it will help) as well as the colonisers; but in the end, she is trying to sing the community together with a respect for all the other songs out there that are others' to sing.

Papertalk-Green's work with young people tries to rectify the problems she explores in her poetry. She speaks for the living and the lost. She is trying to save the knowledge, and laments the forgetting, the matter-of-factness of death in a materialist world. She laments what has been taken, and also what is being lost through circumstance. In the remarkable title poem, she writes:

A link had been broken I could not mend  
 Knowledge – your knowledge had gone  
 Lost to me forever  
 You had gone – just like that gone  
 Like so many before you.

Knowledge and land and life are inseparable. Together they make the song of family, community, and place; they also make and come out of the song of the poem. The poem is a way of saving the knowledge as well as lamenting its loss. Though we read and know that the loss is forever, the poem also gives hope that a different kind of knowledge can and will remain. It is an affirmation as well as a lament. Papertalk-Green embraces

3 Interview, 2005. See also Charmaine Papertalk-Green, *Just Like That*, Fremantle Press, 2007.

her community and yet writes out of a determined individualism. She is as prepared to critique issues within her own community as in the non-Indigenous communities that interact with or indeed oppress them.

### Non-Indigenous anxieties

With the last two decades of her life dedicated to Indigenous rights, it seems appropriate to draw at least a thin line of connection to Judith Wright, in many ways the definitively 'white' poet. Despite being highly individual, she was used specifically to delineate a national poetry. Wright's poetry has been part of school curricula for three generations now. Her objections to the constant reproduction of an early poem like 'Bullocky', and what she sees as its misrepresentation as part of pioneer nation-building white hegemony, largely constructed by the poet Vincent Buckley (who, as Philip Mead has said, 'lamented her change of direction in *Woman to Man*, away from topics of 'settler' and 'historical' significance'),<sup>4</sup> show the tension between the maverick and her subsumed poetics. Wright was never intensely part of literary cliques. She did connect with other Australian poets, but her life was very much a private one until the mid-1960s when she helped found the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland and became a public activist for conservation causes.

By the 1970s, she had become radically involved in Indigenous rights and land rights causes, including helping found, and sitting, with Nugget Coombs and others, on the committee for a treaty with Aboriginal people. Wright's early support for the poet Oodgeroo (Kath Walker), her deep respect for her friend's poetics, and its interconnection with Oodgeroo's desire for her people to reclaim their land on Stradbroke Island off Queensland, grew into a life commitment to Indigenous causes. Everything Wright wrote was informed by her political commitment, whether it was the Canberra Tent Embassy (1972–), and the interconnection between Kevin Gilbert's role in that long-term protest and his poetry, or reconsidering her writings on her pastoral past, on what she called being members of the pastoral aristocracy. This took place through a reappraisal of her early classic, *The Generations of Men* (1959), now taking into account Indigenous perspectives, as *The Cry for the Dead* (1981).

This is significant because Wright herself claimed that her poetry was totally removed from her politics, or rather, that poetry should have nothing to do with politics. Always suspicious of what she termed 'post-postmodernism' (perceiving John Tranter as the head of that mythical school), Wright was wary of allowing the emotions of a poem to be lost to rhetoric. It is clearly impossible to separate a text from its environment of creation, and also the politics that inform its writing, but Wright resisted this conflation to the end of her life. However, she perceived her last collection, *Phantom Dwelling* (1985), as innovative, and this was as much in the political subtext as in her use of more

4 Philip Mead in private correspondence with the author (August 2008).

open forms and uncharacteristic syntax. Wright is rarely seen as an innovative poet, but I believe she was, as this final book illustrates.

The sequence 'For a Pastoral Family', part II, 'To my generation', could only be described as directly, rhetorically and descriptively political:

If now there are landslides, if our field of reference  
is much eroded, our hands show little blood.  
We enter a plea: Not Guilty.  
For the good of the Old Country,  
the land was taken; the Empire had loyal service.  
Would any convict us?  
Our plea has been endorsed by every appropriate jury.  
The irony is as brutal as the subject matter it is investigating.

Wright always paid credence to her Australian poet-predecessors; whether championing Charles Harpur, introducing the work of Shaw Neilson, or writing the poem 'Brennan' in *The Phantom Dwelling*, she interrogates her relationship with the poetic past. As she says in this last poem,

History's burning garbage  
of myths and searches  
sends up its smoke-wreath  
from the city dump.  
It stings in our eyes too.

Wright had reservations about Brennan's poetry, but the tragic aspects of his condition surely attracted her sympathy. We will see later how Tranter has utilised Brennan as a thread of connection in his poetics, and that of Sydney itself.

In her later poetry, Wright tried to render the sources of much non-Indigenous anxiety in Australian poetry. Whether it is of the early 'settler' kind or that of more recent migrants, this is the inevitable and essential anxiety about the displacement of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Following Hodge and Mishra in *The Dark Side of the Dream* (1990), it could be argued that a characteristic note in Australian discourse has been the 'hebephrenic', which they use to mean the attitude that denies anything is problematic. They suggest the need for an approach to Australian literature that is instead 'paranoid' – believing that the repressed of Australian literature, or its obsessive underlying interest, is not primarily the theme of exile from the 'mother country' of Britain, as Wright once suggested, but the knowledge of what it did to take possession of the land – a subconscious recognition of the oppression of Australia's Indigenous people. If we read a text in a 'paranoid' manner we can detect ways in which it signals this obsession, and so on. I once asked Murray how he felt about 'paranoid readings' of his poems, and he insisted these were irrelevant. However, I have found their idea of paranoid reading, with regard to Australian literature, disturbingly illuminating. A poem such as Murray's 'The Grassfire Stanzas' seems to have absolutely nothing to do

with Indigenous dispossession (though it needs to be said that a consciousness of this has been an obsession of Murray's for his entire working life); nevertheless, one can locate an entire discourse on this issue, for example, in the stanza:

Eruption of darkness from far down under roots  
is the aspect of these cores, on the undulating farmland;  
dense black is withered into web, inside a low singing;  
it is dried and loosened, on the surface; it is made weak.

We are receiving, on the one hand, a literal, if also figurative, description of burning-off. The action of the fire as it moves across the grassed paddock is observed and described, evoking a series of meditations on not only cause and effect, but the mythic, the subconscious, and relationship between observer and place. Even more than this, the maverick becomes part of a broader community which we see defined in an earlier stanza when the poet writes: 'The man imposing spring here swats with his branch, controlling it: / only small things may come to a head, in this settlement pattern.' It does not take a leap of faith to draw a connection between the darkness and the 'dense black is withered into web' of the later stanza, cited first above, and these two earlier lines with their description of 'settlement' order. The rhizomic allusion – in the Deleuze and Guattarian sense – evoked in the first line, 'Eruption of darkness from far down under roots', drawing together the chthonic and the visceral experience in which we are vicariously participating, creates a schematics that surely allows us to read subtextually. One might also add that the word 'singing' has a particular implication in the context of dispossession. Songlines, singing that comes out of law, and narratives of a poetry that pre-existed migrant presence in Australia by tens of thousands of years, are louder than the crackling of the burning grasses and Murray's skilful evocation of them.

Murray is a particularly interesting figure in the context of the maverick versus group construction. Murray is always identified as maverick, with a populist poetics and politics that seek to relate not only to the individual Australian but especially the impoverished and barely-landed rural 'settler' community. His work is not orientated toward, say, Chinese market gardeners, but primarily comes out of depictions of European encounters with 'the bush'. Murray is seen as conservative in politics, though he aspires toward an Australian cultural sovereignty and what he has called a 'vernacular republic'. A fierce nationalist, his predecessors in Australian literature might well be Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, and, strangely, Harpur. Though a highly public figure, Murray has something of Harpur's disconnection from the literary community, despite seeming a literary lion in Australia. Whether editing anthologies, being poetry editor for Angus and Robertson or a spokesman for Australian poetic issues on an international scale, Murray has operated out of his own beliefs and poetics, drawing all to that centre rather than necessarily being inclusive. Perhaps this makes him more of a Lawson than a Paterson.

In his 'debate' with Peter Porter in the early 1970s, over the so-called Boeotian and Athenian, Murray aligned himself with the Boeotian, which he understood as rural and shamanistic, as opposed to the rational, 'scientific' and urban Athenian Porter. This has been extensively explored elsewhere. But it is relevant because, in creating an opposition with Porter, who has lived in London since the 1950s and is often cited as the definitive example of an expatriate Australian writer, Murray is also creating a 'group' or community through apposition. Though it seems that this is a binary difference, Murray is building community through what are tolerable differences of attitude in terms of language and how external material is absorbed into the poem. Murray and Porter have much in common. Porter's use of European art, post-Renaissance ideas, wit, logic, irony, crispness in seeing, and resigned fatalism, offset Murray's lyrical ruralism and its polemical framework. The offsetting makes them complementary.<sup>5</sup>

### Pulped factions and new poetries

On the other hand, the much-cited friction between Murray and Tranter, and Tranter's creation of, or connection to, the so-called Generation of '68, is a different case. 'The Generation of '68' was a term coined by Tom Shapcott, attributed to Tranter (who later used it), and accepted by critics to refer to a group of poets who came to prominence during the Vietnam War, and loosely shared a number of political, social and aesthetic viewpoints.

These poets were anthologised by Tranter in his *The New Australian Poetry* in 1979. There is no doubt that there are distinct differences between the poetry of Murray and the poets collected by Tranter on aesthetic, formal and political levels. It is a mistake, though, to consider that it is Murray versus the new poets, because Murray as a potent figure in Australian poetry has had many imitators and supporters who have 'sided' with him in this apparent binary. This does not mean that there is any validity in the conflict or rivalry of the so-called camps, but rather that *en bloc* differences likely existed. Troubled by this, I wrote an article in the mid-1990s for the *Australian Book Review* entitled 'Pulped Factions': 'One could doubtlessly list groupings of poets with common interests, create some kind of map of the Australian poetry-scape that would indicate directions in contemporary poetic thought and response to the Australian condition.'

<sup>5</sup> Peter Porter is often described as an Australian expatriate living almost in 'cultural' and 'spiritual' exile. Porter is an immensely sophisticated and complex poet who has published poetry over many decades. Living in London from the 1950s to the present day, Porter has recently been visiting native Australia more often. His concerns with European art and music, with issues of high and low culture, with wit and form, have at times obscured his intense considerations of the relationship between his birth home and his adopted home. In a radio-essay for the BBC on the publication of his two-volume *Collected Poems* by OUP in 1999, I said: 'Primarily seen as an urban poet, Porter has also written significantly of European and Australian landscapes. Always in the context of cultural concerns, and epitomised by his consistent use of the garden (before and after the Fall), as a place of artistic and natural interaction – an enclosed Arcadia, the natural world is more present than many critics have allowed.' The binary between Murray and Porter is false in many ways, but will be consistently articulated out of national and aesthetic convenience.

Yet it is usually those poets who manage to lift themselves out of these groupings, or define groupings through attracting imitators, who become those voices best identified with the generative side of the age. They possess a desire to explore language and notions of meaning outside the acceptable. Poets like John Tranter, John Forbes, Gig Ryan, and Robert Adamson, who in many ways exemplify a whole period of poetry, have established their own voices that have made them enduring poets. The same can be said of J. S. Harry, Jennifer Maiden, and John A. Scott. All are inventive, ‘hybridised voices’, conscious of the canon, but desiring to reinvent it.

It is not by chance I group these poets together. They are of the era of factionalism (with Ryan being on the cusp) in Aus Poetry. It would be assumed, to counter this, I would place Les Murray, Geoffrey Lehmann, Rosemary Dobson, Robert Gray, and possibly Kevin Hart on the ‘other side of the fence’ – those poets who apparently represent a more lyrical, meditative (‘religious?’), conservative (‘traditional?’) poetics. In between the two we would have Gwen Harwood. Peter Porter forms a ‘school’ of his own (European, Augustan, and ‘urban-e’), while Dorothy Hewett exists outside all of these, though obviously associated with the new romantic traditions of Adamson and his ‘followers’. The point is, I *do not* think even these contrived groupings are relevant now. One can admire any particular association of poets one desires without having to be an ‘adherent’. There seems to be a need, as part of creating a literary identity, to *create* lines of influence in a nation’s literature.

My piece was part of a broader debate about whether a new generation of poets – which would go on to produce Peter Minter, Kate Fagan, Michael Brennan, Louis Armand, Margie Cronin and Jaya Savige – was actually imprisoned in earlier conflicts and disagreements or whether they were able to start afresh. The new poetry in Australia is much more about individual voices drawn together in loose affiliations, where the anthology is less of a manifesto than an exercise in pluralism. Awareness of Indigenous poetry, ‘migrant’ poetries, and of ‘sub-cultural’ poetries, has gone hand-in-hand with an acceptance of gender equity in publishing. The personal conflicts might be there, but something broader and richer has evolved.

It is recognised that the late 1960s and early 70s saw a revolution in small-press poetry publishing in Australia, working outside long-established publishers such as Angus & Robertson, which mentored an author over a lifetime (although a senior Australian poet recently lamented to me that this was no longer the case in Australian publishing). In fact, small-scale publication has always been part of the Australian publishing scene. Barron Field’s *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (1819) and Michael Massey Robinson’s *Odes* (1826) were clearly ‘small-press’ publications. Though within the focal lines of colonial expression, they were also statements of a form of post-coloniality. We can discern a line from the modernist *Angry Penguins* publications of the 1940s, through to the *Poetry Australia* publications of the 1970s, and even more so the breakaway *New Poetry*, with its strong inclination toward contemporary American innovative poetry largely (but by no means exclusively) arising out of the American Black Mountain

School, New York School, and San Francisco Renaissance. In these internationalism – or rather, perhaps, a bringing-in of poetry from elsewhere in the world – was *de rigueur*.

However, one would be mistaken to see this as a broader internationalism. It was more a consolidation of Australian content through giving it a place within the international poetry spectrum. The split in the Poetry Society that led to the breakaway *New Poetry*, impelled by the lyric poet Robert Adamson, was as much about a consolidation of power within a particular group or community by creating a splinter group or community – subset – as about aesthetics. This is not to say that Adamson and his followers were not innovative in their aesthetics, but that personal relationships and disagreements also played their role. It is impossible to separate personality and ego from any of these collations of poets and poetics we ‘posthumously’ interpret as movements or groups. Opposition makes the strangest bedfellows. More recently, conflicts in Australian poetry have been largely personality-based. Amalgamations of poets with little in common in terms of their poetics, work in opposition to others because of personal animosity. Groups are retrospectively identified when in fact the association between these poets is not as part of a general aesthetic manifesto – they are extremely different poets.

Adamson has spent much of a lifetime writing out of a specific place, his home and life on the Hawkesbury River. In essence he brought into Australia a working knowledge of Black Mountain School poetics. Adamson is a contradiction, in that he is both maverick and an instigator of group-think. His influences, ranging from Hart Crane to Robert Duncan, are broad, and yet he skilfully locates what might be termed the sub-lyrical gesture in every poem he writes, whatever its subject matter. Birds, the river, family, love, poetics, and a wistful, elegiac tone, go hand-in-hand with a mapping of the self that has created a narrative of place unlike any other in Australian, non-Indigenous poetry.

Adamson, with his prison background, was seen as an *enfant terrible* during the 1960s, from his then-base in Balmain confronting, outraging the imagined poetry establishment with a Rimbaud-like assault on niceties and good order. His first book, *Canticles on the Skin*, began a process in which this publisher-poet carved out his own space within Australian letters. Adamson has written,

There are two kinds of poetry in my first books, poems that were drawn from memory, basically descriptions of reality, and poems made up from art and the imagination. Since *Canticles on the Skin* (1970), I have been trying to work out what is real and what is imagined. Writing poems that escape intelligence ‘almost successfully’.

There is an irony in associating Adamson with Rimbaud. Adamson has always been obsessed by the poetry of the second-wave French Symbolist, Mallarmé. On the other hand, a poet often thought of as inspired in some senses by Mallarmé, John Tranter, is actually more empathetic with, and influenced by Rimbaud.

Tranter’s poetry, starting with his second volume *Red Movie* (1973), has displayed the almost tautological combination of surface calm and underlying conceptual torment.



Strongly influenced by John Ashbery and other New York School poets, he has created poems which are sculpted as almost *objets d'art*, which stand up to being looked at, as in a gallery, but undermine cultural, political and artistic givens. Making use of other poets' work, even investigating random word association programs like Babel, before many other poets had even heard of them, sampling the experiments of the Oulipo, while writing into an Australian poetry history, in a metatextual way, Tranter has spawned many would-be imitators but none who have really succeeded in doing so.

To understand fully Tranter's complex intellectual concerns, consider the poem 'Christopher Brennan'. In this sestina, Tranter plays against the restrictions of form by combining both a populist and a serious subject. Brennan is in many ways the Sydney precursor to Tranter. This mixing of high and low cultures was not characteristic of Brennan's verse, other than in maybe a few poems for his mistress, Vi. Brennan's notoriously turbulent private life was counterpointed by the rigour of his scholarly writing as well as by the Symbolist removals of his poetry. Tranter often chooses the commonplace as his subject matter, be it *film noir*, drinking around the pool or elsewhere, flying in a Lufthansa aeroplane, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, high school, literary tropes and figures – but all of these subjects are distanced by an ironic suspicion of what might be constituted as beauty or as 'effable', and thus digestible by the mass culture that his persona is always part of, though standing slightly aside.

'Christopher Brennan' ironises Anglo-Australia's monolingualism while also ironising the affectation of using knowledge for personal gain. In the end, though, this is a poem about the elusive nature of inspiration set against the complexities of relationships and aspiration, yet told with a wry, good-humoured ease that belies its almost tragic implications. This poem, in some ways a drinking song, relies on the knowledge that Brennan essentially died of alcoholism. Characteristically, Tranter creates a literary connection that questions his own authorial position, while satirising Australian scepticism or philistinism toward imagined European effeteness. He is having his cake and eating it too. This is the tautology of a Tranter poem and in part the aesthetics that led him to become group-leader while at the same time inimitable maverick.

To track an evolution of Tranteresque poetics is not difficult. Tranter's path from rural Australia to urban Sydney strangely takes him closer to the trajectory of Murray than, say, a poet like John Forbes, with whom Tranter would later be associated. To unpick the 'rules' of the poetic field that Tranter entered and in many ways helped foster, one need look no further than his own comments. In a special Australian issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), published in 1996, Tranter made the following points about the Generation of '68. Noting that the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s in Australia was 'a milder version of the McCarthy period in the U.S.', he adds: 'No poet in Australia in the late Fifties and early Sixties could get a poem published in any magazine if the editor thought that it might in any way give moral offence to the average person; and there were few outlets of any kind for experimental verse' (p. 89).

Tranter pinpoints the effect of a backlash from the Ern Malley affair as part of this reaction. He particularly notes American culture during the 1960s as having a liberating effect on Australian poetry, while characterising the rebellion against conscription and the Vietnam War as concurrent drives towards counter-cultural activity. Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960) and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962) were influential. Tranter says, 'No other generation of poets in Australia's history had produced such a sheer mass of published writing.' He also observes that older writers such as Hewett, David Campbell and Bruce Beaver went with the new flow and became more experimental. This was the era of the post-World War II baby boomers with an increase in tertiary education. New technologies (for example, the Gestetner) allowed small magazine publications. New venues for readings opened, and drug culture provided its own strange impetus. Vitaly, Tranter explains:

Poetry was not seen as a pastime by the new poets. It was not regarded as a hobby. It was not seen as a pleasant diversion from an academic routine, or a skill to be developed simply for its own sake. It was seen by many poets as an integral part of a wider struggle for freedom and individuality: freedom from conscription (Australia was at war with North Vietnam at the time, and conscription was part of that war), freedom from the censorship of imported books by the federal Customs department, freedom from police harassment, freedom to experiment with drugs, to develop a sexual ethic liberated from authoritarian restraints, and freedom from the handcuffs of rhyme and the critical strictures of the university English departments. [p. 93]

### Possible transgressions

*The New Australian Poetry* was not the only anthology to have a generative effect. *Mother, I'm Rooted*, *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, and later, the *Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse*, were landmarks in the affirmation of a collective notion of women's poetry in Australia.<sup>6</sup> Many poets in these volumes operated out of relative isolation, and may not have seen themselves as part of a group, or even the drives of feminism or the Women's Movement of the times. But the editors' intent was certainly to identify threads of concern that tracked back to 19th-century Australian poetry and possibly beyond. It is characteristic of historical overviews to separate and investigate women's poetry as an entirely distinct entity. This may reinforce the notion that the mainstream of Australian poetry has been male, and only belatedly was there a rise in a conscious female collective poetics. This is patently untrue. A large number of poems to be found in newspapers during the 19th century, as well as in individual collections, were by women.

In Western Australia, for example, the most noteworthy poet writing in the middle of the 19th century and publishing in the *Church of England Magazine*, was Elizabeth

<sup>6</sup> For a brilliant analysis see Ann Vickery, *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* (Salt, 2007)

Deborah Brockman, who wrote of concerns of family, depression, place and spirituality. The connections between such a poet and her counterparts of the 20th and 21st centuries is stronger than is ever made obvious. The Oxford anthology mentioned above is particularly good at drawing subtextual threads between these poets across the eras, but there is still much work to be done.

Dorothy Hewett, whose earliest poetry was written in her home place of Western Australia, was certainly conscious of her isolated position as a woman writer in a predominantly male writing environment. However, this did not stop her creating a mythological and also realistic universe (the relation between these two is at the core of her poetics) which operated both in a maverick or independent sense and also in defiance of the local literary patriarchy. This was achieved by writing 'about' wheatbelt Western Australia, through tracking the stories of her family, often juxtaposed with the half-heard stories of dispossessed Aboriginal people (though it was not until later life that she really articulated her concerns about this), and creating a highly imaginative world of the self, in which all transgressions, gender and sexual, were possible. Hewett was always characterised as a rebel in her personal life, and her poetry reinforces this by allowing a full run of possible transgressions.

Despite this, even long after she had left Western Australia, Hewett saw herself as connected with its writing, and more especially the Western Australian wheatbelt about which she wrote so intensely. She achieved this by being both an imagistic colourist (of birds, seasons, flora and fauna) and a storyteller. Also, her communist politics engendered portrayals of the working class and the 'ordinary', usually set in ballad or other popular stanzaic forms that evoked a deep sympathy across genders and with specific working conditions and places. Examples are 'In Midland Where the Trains Go By' (set in Western Australia) and 'On Moncur Street' (set in Sydney). Hewett's novel *Bobbin Up* (1959), written when she lived in Redfern in Sydney, and felt the tensions (and the joys) of participation in and compliance with the Communist Party ethos, is an empathetic portrayal of working-class women's experiences and conditions. This novel is considered a feminist classic, and much of Hewett's writing for theatre as well as poetry and prose fiction, is concerned about the conditions of women, emotionally and pragmatically.

But still, she wrote on a human canvas, and her concerns were ultimately to do with the individual vis-à-vis this canvas. So she is at once part of a group, in the sense that she writes out of women's and leftist concerns, but is so individuated as to be constantly under scrutiny and attack for being 'self-absorbed' and romantic (in the sense of self-mythologising). Her life in Sydney drew her into the circle of Adamson and the *New Poetry* magazine, and indeed Adamson published Hewett's remarkable *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975), but she nonetheless remained at a tangent to all groups. Adamson is frequently identified as the 'Nim' in Hewett's 'Alice' poems, and is said to function as the *enfant terrible* in these poems' transgressions. The personal subtexts of Hewett's poetry draw in a number of literary and other figures, but always operate within the private mythological universe that she spent a lifetime constructing. This

does not distract from the very public concerns of this private poetry. Hewett always attracted followers and imitators, in both the east and the west. When she lived in the Blue Mountains she was a patron and mentor-figure for the Varuna community; she was present at what were almost weekend 'salons', with poets and general audience coming from far and wide when they knew she would attend.

As long-term poetry editor for the Melbourne *Age* newspaper, Gig Ryan has commented on and fostered many poets, whose work ranges across generations and styles. In conversation, she has enthusiastically endorsed younger innovative poets such as Michael Farrell. Ryan has been associated with *The New Australian Poetry*, though really a generation later. Her connections with other Melbourne poets and particularly Forbes who moved from Sydney to Melbourne have curiously led to her being read through the group dynamic (a double irony, because she has in fact led and played in a number of 'rock' bands). Ryan is distinctively a maverick poet. Her urban concerns draw on bars, drinking, driving cars, money, relations between often unidentified people, set against sharp or sardonic political observations, the mundane usually mixing with 'high cultural' references: history, mythology (especially Greek), eating, and a critique of capitalism. Her poems tend to be short, compacted and elliptical. When longer, they work in sequences using similarly compact and elliptical sections.

What is remarkable about her poems' approach to the so-called unified self is that the 'I' is always distanced, but the reader gets the feeling that this may be a safety measure to protect against a disclosure of intensity in personal feeling. This is more than a ploy; it is an aesthetic statement. Ryan may or may not consider herself a feminist, but this action may be interpreted as a political choice. The persona does not discount the possibility of equitable relationships between men and women, but often doubts this, or at best finds it paradoxical. It is almost as if genders cannot be reconciled. In the poem 'Two Winters', Ryan writes, 'Without him I feel empty and alive / the happy eighteenth-century clocks, the desk skulls.' (from *Pure and Applied*, 1998).

### Against the grain

Beneath the discourse of 'Australian poetry' as defined by prize culture, readings, internet conversations, university networks and general canonical processes, there are many poets in Australia who operate in their own space against the grain. This does not mean that they are not part of broader conversations, but they often function at a tangent to those conversations that they themselves engender. David Brooks is an interesting case. Extensive critical writing on Australian poetry, teaching Australian poetry at Sydney University, and the co-editorship of one of Australia's flagship literary journals, *Southerly*, would seem to place him at the centre of this canonical process. In terms of his poetry, this is not necessarily the case. The poetry operates outside these other discourses in many ways.

In his most recent volume, *The Balcony* (2008), Brooks conveys a sense of strong or vicarious connection which is affected by those who might be watching the persona, who might see him, and whom he in turn is conscious of. Brooks, like Tranter, draws on lines of literary connection by invoking Lawson as Australian literary predecessor. The central symbol and motif of the book is the balcony, which is a place not only of viewing – to see the world outside – but on which you yourself might be viewed – as in the remarkable poem in which a long kiss is watched by outsiders until its absolute intactness outlives them, and they are gone. Or making love near the archbishop's house, but it is not a problem because no-one is looking. Two important references come to mind throughout the subtexts and intertexts of balconies in this book. The most obvious is Baudelaire's 'Le Balcon', especially:

*Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon,  
Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses.  
Que ton sein m'était doux! que ton cœur m'était bon!  
Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses  
Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon.*

The question becomes, how much of one's love does or should become available to the outside world? The balcony is a public and private space in which a two-way mirror is effected, as is the often-public performance of our most intimate relationships. Brooks deals with scrutiny of choice by opening the balcony doors. But do not be fooled. No matter how intimate some of these poems, how strong the sense of the crumpled sheet, you only get as close as the poem and your imagination allow.

A less obvious reference in terms of the balcony subtexts of place is Lawson's poem 'Faces in the Street'. This definitively Sydney poem surely echoes the pain of this public-private exploration. Indeed, Brooks has a poem in this collection that goes by the same title, and though it is socially distant from Lawson's, there is that sense of looking from behind the curtain, and discovering oneself. Lawson writes:

And cause I have to sorrow, in a land so young and fair,  
To see upon those faces stamped the marks of Want and Care;  
I look in vain for traces of the fresh and fair and sweet  
In sallow, sunken faces that are drifting through the street.

In Brooks we read:

Often, in the faces of young women  
I pass in the street  
I see the faces of young women  
I once loved  
or made love with  
years ago,  
and I wonder whether they,

now in their forties or fifties,  
 ever see, in the faces of young people they pass,  
 those of young men or women they once loved in their turn

Brooks positions the persona as one who recognises a commonality not only with other males but women as well. This is particularly characteristic of the challenges to the masculine ‘certainty’ that is investigated throughout the book. In Lawson’s poem, the persona sees distress and wants this overcome in a revolutionary way. Though it may seem less strident, Brooks’s poem, through empathy, demands as much for each generation to understand that those who have come before also contain ‘all of the the ages inside them’.<sup>7</sup>

Another poet who has operated in a similar space but with very different poetics is Dennis Haskell, editor of the literary journal *Westerly*, and an academic who teaches Australian literature. His poetry often deals with domestic and interpersonal matters that do not fit the frequent male posturing of isolated, authorial confidence and distancing. In ‘At Greenwood, a Meditation’, the title, though referring to a Perth suburb, does double duty by suggesting something rural and tranquil. We see the ‘natural’ constantly reiterated, even down to the apparent contradiction of ‘suburban, lupin dressed hills’.

This poem is an urban pastoral, but one in which the two worlds do not fit comfortably together. The poem is about the nature of inspiration. It begins ‘In a humdrum household’ and yet there is something threatening at work – ‘these dark creatures’. The ‘occasional cats jackknife over fences’ – they do not simply step over them. As the poet contemplates, inspiration does not come in a sweetly sonorous traditionally ‘pastoral’ way, but ‘sharply’, broodingly, and startlingly, to extend words used in the poem. This is a poem about a familiar scene suddenly becoming alive with difference – or rather, and this is the true nature of inspiration – the difference that is always there is seen again in a fresh way.

This idea of urban pastoral takes us into the territory of the pastoral in contemporary Australian poetry and its contra-indication in ecological poetry. Coral Hull was genuinely eco-poetical long before the term became part of a trend and a less genuine, largely academic discourse of involvement and apologia for poetic acts that sell themselves as making a difference, but defend their own space of production. Though Hull completed a doctorate in creative writing, she has nothing to do with the academic world. She has consciously set herself outside cultural elites in all their guises, to function as poet-activist. She has been possibly the most maverick non-Indigenous poet to write from Australia. Her concerns for animal rights, vegan ethics, peace and human rights have led her to withdraw her books from print to avoid participation in profit culture and to make them available through her website–journal–foundation, *Thylazine*.

Hull’s poetry, with its slippages between vivid imagery and reportage, takes the reader inside the suffering and marginalisation of both animals and humans, caused by those

<sup>7</sup> *The Balcony* is set in Slovenia and Australia.

who are indifferent, ignorant or exploitative of their condition. She also witnesses mental and physical trauma, and writes out of a need for survival against aggressive agency. The poetry should not be mistaken, though, as defensive, because it is resistant and activist in the most forceful sense. In the affirmation of the oppressed, great beauty is also possible. This is not poetry purely of loss, but is also impelled by celebration and respect of the oppressed. Hull frequently ironises popular culture's vicarious participation in exploitation, or uses it to juxtapose a participant's complicity through irony. We see this very clearly in 'The Zoo Ark':

'Oh my god, they've killed Kenny!  
A tiger urinated after being shouted at.  
Captives choke, plastic straws lodged in their throats.  
Their blue faces now unbarred. Throw things at them.  
The cage is full of cigarette butts, popcorn packets.

Hull at least peripherally connects with a tradition of Australian pastoral that has operated within its own terms of displacement. Hers is a radical pastoral in which surface is engaged with as much as subtext. Like Wright, she makes direct observations, but deploys figurative language to take them out of rhetoric and into the suggestive. You take a Hull poem with you a long time after having read it, and since she writes so much about the problematical nature of the rural world, you are likely, willingly or unwillingly, to bring into comparison with Hull's observations all Australian rural poetry you encounter.

One could create an endless list of poets who touch on broader group categories, forming subsets, or indeed working as 'sets' entire in themselves. However, an overwhelming impression the reader of Australian poetry as a whole receives is that notions of Australia, positive or negative, link most if not all of these poets. One does not have to write about Australia to be aware of it. And even the most maverick poet still groups within this consciousness. This is not to affirm 'nation', or even 'nationality', but to articulate a connectivity that cuts across lines of community, subculture and personal difference. Fogarty certainly works within his community; the already-noted death of his brother Daniel Yock has driven, emotionally and spiritually, his poetic activism, on a deeply personal level, as well as within the political and spiritual knowledge of his own people. And yet his poetry is like no other's.

Poets I have not had the space to consider, who shine as beacons of contradiction in the model I have suggested, include Harry Hooton, Michael Dransfield, Dorothy Porter, David Campbell, A. D. Hope, Beaver, Vivian Smith, Rodney Hall, Thomas Shapcott, Judith Rodriguez, Philip Salom, J. S. Harry, Fay Zwicky, Andrew Taylor, Pam Brown, Alison Croggon, Π.Ο., Geoff Page, Jennifer Maiden and Gwen Harwood. Porter found a significant following among lesbian, bi, gay and queer readers, at least after *The Monkey's Mask* (1994), a lesbian detective verse novel whose sparse, thin poems build narrative suspense as they work toward novelistic resolution. Porter wrote other

verse novels, her last being *El Dorado* (2007). She is a significant figure in this argument because her early books, including *Night Parrot* (1984) and *Driving Too Fast* (1989), attracted a feminist audience, a general poetry and popular readership, which would later branch out into near-iconic status among lesbian-bi-gay-queer communities. This is not to say that there is a firm boundary between these readerships, but to acknowledge the flexibility and sophistication of Porter's voice.

Dransfield's *Drug Poems* (1972) was strongly influential and engendered its own iconicity (though arguably a false one). Dransfield's death, related to drug addiction, made him a definitive figure of poetic counter-culture when in fact his poetics were strongly informed by traditional European poetry and culture, set within the psyche of an Australia awakening to a mass-cultural modernity, that drew from him both sharp satire and neo-Romantic indulgence.

Dransfield was a wide-ranging poet who is under-recognised for his innovative use of the line and frameworks in which images circulate, interconnect and resolve as narrative. In the Courland Penders poems a house serves as a function of Dransfield's propensity to mythologise, with stories working almost as folk tales within the structure. In Dransfield's poetry and letters, and through the biographical work of Patricia Dobrez, *Michael Dransfield's Lives* (1999), we see the importance to Dransfield of friendship and interaction and communication with other poets. Drugs, by necessity of 'scoring', bring their own community, but they also engender their own extreme isolation, as in 'Bum's Rush':

take a last look at the effigy collection  
say farewell to friends you may have made among the graven images  
then walk as a human lemming would  
out across the bay to where the ice is thinnest and let yourself vanish

Dransfield once declared that all his poems were posthumous. How many of these poets wrote or write for posterity, one cannot ultimately tell. But they certainly, in their group-connectivity and maverick individuality, speak outside their own lives and writing. Poets, like all writers, end up in the hands of editors and publishers – maybe if they are lucky enough, or is this an unlucky outcome? Harwood, taking the Héloïse and Abelard story as vehicle for writing companion poems that served as a hoax attack on the *Bulletin* (according to the notes included in her *Collected Poems, 1943–1995*, 2003), played on Buckley's religious imagery to implant her own distortions of the letters of the two medieval figures.

These poems, with their acrostics reading 'So long Bulletin' and 'Fuck all editors', are most often mistaken as mere disguises for an attack on modes of publication and reception, when in fact the effect of the poems, regardless of Harwood's intention, is a struggle between the material and spiritual, the problems of setting up love and denial within aesthetic frameworks, particularly emphasised by the constraints of the acrostic and the sonnet form. It must be remembered that Héloïse and Abelard, after



their separation, communicated by letters, in which she lamented the loss of their physical love, while he, who had been castrated, urged her to transcend this concern and focus on God. A poet cannot take on this story without some import of passion and relationship being read into it. The original medieval letters are allusive; so, one might argue, are Harwood's texts, and the acrostics are perhaps the distraction rather than the purpose. To me, this is where the maverick of Harwood lies, and not in the hoaxing of Walter Lehmann (her pseudonymous *alter ego* for these poems), which fits within a long tradition of group-think.

My model is one of convenience, but I have tried to demonstrate that relationships between poets in Australia are anything but straightforward, and that they by necessity locate themselves within groups and communities, but also inevitably and paradoxically position themselves against these.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This essay has not touched upon the immense paradigm challenges and shifts engendered through maverick engagements between public and private spaces in performance/slam/culture-jamming poetry and poetics. While these are thought of as contemporary phenomena, there is significant work to be done on the history of performance in Australian poetry in relation to traditions of Indigenous song and ritual and storytelling as well as 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' aggregations. My omission of them here does not mean I wish to separate these aspects from a general poetics; it is simply due to selecting certain threads. They are of an equal relevance and entirely interwoven through other aspects of poetic presentation and activity.