

[T]he poet would define the amount of the unknown
awakening in his time in the universal soul....

Poetry...*will be in advance.*

Arthur Rimbaud.

[E]verything in the world exists to end in a book. The qualities required in this work – most certainly genius – frighten me as one of those devoid of them: not to stop there, and granted that the volume requires no signatory, what is it? – the hymn of the connexions between all things, harmony, and joy, entrusted with seeing divinely because the bond, limpid at will, has no expression except in the parallelism of leaves of a book before his glance.

Stephane Mallarmé

[I]t's a faith in what used to be called in old Victorian novels 'the Divine Mystery.' I can't find a better word for it, because it *is* a mystery to me. All I know is that it pours down love...[and] I worship that with my uttermost being.

Bruce Beaver

Introduction

For critics of recent contemporary Australian poetry, the term 'New Poetry' suggests primarily the work of those poets published in John Tranter's 1979 anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*.¹ According to Tranter these twenty-four poets, only two of whom are women, formed a 'loose group'² of writers associated with various poetry readings, little magazines and small presses in Sydney and Melbourne during the late sixties and seventies.³ Although there were many little magazines and small presses associated with the period, and earlier anthologies which had gathered together achievements of the New Poets,⁴ to a significant extent Tranter's anthology has circumscribed for critics the boundaries of the New Poetry group, and those poets published in the anthology have attracted a measure of critical acclaim. Nearly a decade after the anthology, *The New Literary History of Australia* (1988) split its study of contemporary poetry in two in order to devote a section to the New Poets;⁵ more recently Livio Dobrez's study, *Parnassus Mad Ward: Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* (1990), has consolidated the position of the New Poetry as a 'movement' in Australian literature.⁶

¹ *The New Australian Poetry*, ed. John Tranter (St Lucia, Qld.: Makar Press, 1979).

² *The New Australian Poetry*: xvi. Martin Duwell believes them to have formed a 'coherent group' ('The "New Australian Poetry"', *The New Literary History of Australia*, ed. Laurie Hergenhan [Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988]: 493).

³ In his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* Tranter hints that the anthology marks the end of the movement as a period in Australian literary history: xxvi. He had already begun talking about the 'new writing' in the past tense as early as 1977 in the essay, 'Four Notes on the Practice of Revolution,' published in the special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* 8 (1977): 127-135, by which time he had been asked to put together an anthology of the New Poetry's achievements. Some other commentators, however, have seen the movement as extending into the eighties: Livio Dobrez, for example, considers the more recent anthology, *Off the Record*, ed. Pi O (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1985) as having continued to represent the New Poetry, calling it the 'baby of the revolution' (see Dobrez, *Parnassus Mad Ward: Michael Dransfield and The New Australian Poetry* [St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1990]: 37). Duwell, too, sees the movement continuing after the anthology and would add some younger poets to the group (see 'The "New Australian Poetry"': 493). My discussion of the New Poets' work covers the period from the late sixties to the mid-eighties.

⁴ See, for example, *Australian Poetry Now*, ed. Thomas Shapcott (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1970), and *Applestealers*, ed. Robert Kenny and Colin Talbot (Melbourne: Outback Press, 1974).

⁵ Duwell, 'The "New Australian Poetry"': 493-502.

⁶ A number of names have been given to this group of poets, including the 'Generation of '68' (Dobrez) and the 'new poets' (Duwell). I have chosen to capitalise the latter, to fit in with the current tendency to refer to the 'New Poetry' as a movement.

At the time of publication of the anthology, Tranter's introduction was regarded by some critics as a manifesto for the New Poetry.⁷ In it Tranter reiterates an earlier claim that the New Poets had effected a 'revolution' in Australian poetry,⁸ a revolution based on the cry for 'freedom':

freedom from conscription...freedom from censorship and police harassment, freedom to experiment with drugs, to develop a sexual ethic liberated from authoritarian restraints, and freedom from the handcuffs of the university English departments.⁹

According to Tranter, the New Poets' aim had been to 'revitalise a moribund poetic culture'¹⁰ by introducing modernism to Australian poetry for virtually the first time.¹¹ His comments imply that not only the New Poets' work during the late sixties and seventies, but also what might be expected from the development of their work in the eighties, should be understood in terms of modernism: 'a general aim can be seen in the development of [the New Poets'] work...and it can most usefully be seen in terms of the *modernist* movement.'¹² He suggests that the New Poets were influenced more by European and American poetics than by earlier Australian work, and asserts that Australian poetry prior to the New Poetry had been dominated by a 'tradition of conservatism.'¹³ Implicitly, Tranter suggests that Australian poetry prior to the New Poetry had missed out on something vital both

⁷ Reviews of the anthology were numerous, with many critics touching on the modernist argument. See for example, David Carter, 'Ongoing Modernism,' *Helix* 5/6 (1980): 159-61; Peter Goldsworthy, *Ash Magazine* 3 (1980): 32-33; and Graham Rowlands, 'The Wisecrack Manifesto,' *Overland* 79 (1980): 74-76. Duwell believes that to see the introduction to the anthology as a manifesto for the New Poetry is essentially mistaken. (See his introduction to *A Possible Contemporary Poetry* [St Lucia, Qld: Makar Press, 1982]: 14.) However, as Tranter does make general claims on behalf of the other New Poets, I feel that an enquiry of the poetic represented in his introduction and other critical writings is justified.

⁸ See Tranter, 'Four Notes': 127-135.

⁹ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*, xvii.

¹⁰ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxvi.

¹¹ Tranter refers to 'a few false starts,' by which one presumes he means Kenneth Slessor and the Angry Penguins group (*The New Australian Poetry*: xx).

¹² Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xviii (emphasis added). Tranter has had support for the view that the New Poetry can be seen in terms of modernism. See, for example, Martin Harrison, 'A Note on Language: For *The New Australian Poetry*,' *New Poetry* 27.4 (1980): 39-46; and 'A Note on Modernism: For *The New Australian Poetry*,' *New Poetry* 28.2 (1980): 11-20; and Duwell, 'The "New Australian Poetry": 493-502. Carter has described it as a 'delayed modernism' ('Ongoing Modernism': 160).

¹³ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xvii.

stylistically and conceptually in terms of twentieth-century thinking. This lack, according to Tranter, stems from the 'blindness' and 'hostility to the importance of [the modernist] tradition,' which he claims to be part of 'Australia's cultural insularity.'¹⁴ The New Poets, Tranter suggests, not only introduced modernist stylistic innovations, but also adopted an entirely new way of thinking about and writing poetry which sets their work radically apart from earlier and other contemporary Australian poetry.

Some time after the publication of the anthology, Tranter retreated from this overtly critical stance and indicated that his statements concerning modernism both in relation to the New Poetry and in relation to earlier Australian poetry were in some ways an overstatement.¹⁵ Critics such as Andrew Taylor have therefore concluded that there is little point in challenging his views.¹⁶ However, Tranter's discussion touches on an important question in regard to what made the New Poetry 'new' or distinct from other contemporary Australian poetry. In fact, the lack of thorough investigation of the justification for Tranter's claims has allowed a controversy regarding the place of the New Poetry in relation to other contemporary poetry to simmer for more than a decade. A few years following the publication of Tranter's anthology, a 'rival' anthology was published, *The Younger Australian Poets*, edited by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann,¹⁷ a collection which was praised by some reviewers as a counter-reading of significant 'new' poetry produced in Australia during the seventies. It included, apart from the editors themselves, such poets as Les A Murray and Mark O'Connor,¹⁸ and its supporters declared the selection to be more representative of notable recent

¹⁴ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xviii.

¹⁵ Tranter, 'Interview' with Jim Davidson, *Sideways From the Page* (Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1983): 324-45. (Interview first published in *Meanjin* 40 [1981].)

¹⁶ See Taylor, 'John Tranter: Absence in Flight,' *Australian Literary Studies* 12 (1986): 458.

¹⁷ *The Younger Australian Poets*, ed. Gray and Lehmann (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983).

¹⁸ O'Connor was associated with the group known as the 'Canberra Poets,' which included such writers and reviewers as Geoff Page and Alan Gould, who were responsible for much of the hostile criticism which was directed towards Tranter and the New Poets in the late seventies and early eighties.

achievements in Australian poetry than Tranter's anthology. Tranter's claim to newness was portrayed as a self-promotion exercise, rather than anything fundamentally different from mainstream Australian poetry of the time. Moreover, his discussion of modernism in relation to the New Poetry was seen as historically ignorant and inappropriate,¹⁹ and the radical stylistic innovation of the New Poetry was seen as a stratagem to disguise second-rate craftsmanship, not, as Tranter intimated, as an integral part of the expression of a fundamentally different philosophical attitude toward language, reality, subjectivity and the role of poetry. To some extent the controversy surrounding the anthology has been echoed in the nineties with the appearance once more of two rival anthologies, anthologies which this time take the whole of twentieth-century Australian poetry as their subject. Tranter and Phillip Mead coedited *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, an anthology which purports to offer a more progressive and experimental canon of twentieth-century Australian poetry than any previous anthology; while Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann edited *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, an anthology which, in terms of Tranter's critical approach, gives the more conservative, 'traditionalist' view.²⁰ These anthologies suggest that there is still a gap between what is regarded as innovative and experimental in Australian poetry and what is held to be more traditional stylistically and conceptually, a gap which makes an inquiry into the so-called 'modernism' of the New Poetry of continuing relevance.

Interestingly, a similar polarisation has been noted in recent British poetry. In a review of Donald Davie's book, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1985*, T J G Harris gives a summary of important points which could equally apply to the Australian context:

¹⁹ See, for example, Mark O'Connor, 'The Graying of the Underground,' *Overland* 74 (1979): 5-9.

²⁰ *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* ed. Tranter and Philip Mead (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1991); *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gray and Lehmann (Port Melbourne, Vic.: William Heinemann, 1991).

[T]he fact of being 'modernist' is regarded as being in itself an index of value, so that given two artists (writers, painters or sculptors, musicians) one of whom is classified as a 'modernist' (or, in our day, 'post-modernist') and the other of whom is classified as a 'traditionalist,' the modernist is automatically regarded as being more creative, innovative, etc., and his work is regarded as being necessarily more valuable, more important, and more 'relevant' to that circularly defined fiction 'the age.'²¹

Harris's comments here alert us to the necessity of questioning the grounds upon which modernist and postmodernist poetics are used as indexes of value in discussions of twentieth-century Australian poetry. Of particular interest is the question: to what extent ^{does} philosophical originality depend on stylistic innovation and experimentalism for its expression?²² (a claim implicit throughout Tranter's critical writings) It is by investigating these questions that Tranter's claim for the revolutionary aspects of the New Poetry, and the place of the movement in relation to earlier and other contemporary Australian poetry, can best be assessed.

The fundamental issues of modernism which Tranter believes the New Poets to have introduced to Australian poetry include the overturning of traditional Christian and humanist Enlightenment values and beliefs, and an increasing focus on the processes of conceptualisation and the importance of language in shaping our understanding of reality. Tranter is aware that his concept of modernism is broad (reflecting the scope of the Bradbury and McFarlane's study, *Modernism*,²² to which he refers). He also acknowledges that the term 'modernism' has come to be associated primarily with the classical period of 'high' modernism of the twenties (a period often characterised in terms of a mood of uncertainty and pessimism); thus, in effect, he regards the sixties' modernism already as a 'postmodernism.'²³ In conceptual terms, however, Tranter makes little distinction between the two periods and their concerns:

In larger cultural terms, we are still significantly enmeshed in those same

²¹ T J G Harris, 'Donald Davie: Insularity and the Question of Modernism,' *Quadrant* 35 (1991): 45.

²² *Modernism: 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

²³ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xx.

troubled relations between subjectivism, formalism, language, speech, writing, literature and reality that began their most intense and public debate one hundred years ago.²⁴

Yet it remains to be seen whether the New Poets actually were the first to introduce these debates into Australian poetry, or even whether Tranter's own conceptions of the New Poetry's innovations are representative of other New Poets' work and ideas.

When the question of modernism in relation to earlier Australian poetry is examined, it becomes clear that it is the characterisation of modernism in terms of the pessimistic mood of high modernism which has had the greatest impact on discussions of responses to modernism in early and mid-twentieth-century Australian poetry. According to critics of Australian modernism, although Australian poets have in general been resistant to the stylistic innovations associated with European and American modernism, they have nevertheless incorporated many of the conceptual concerns of high modernism into their work. The tendency for these critics to separate modernist stylistic innovation from modernist conceptual concerns has complicated the issue of whether poets before the New Poetry were in fact resistant to modernism. Importantly also, these debates reflect only a narrow range of early modernism. The mood of high modernism, often characterised as 'modern,' rather than 'modernist,' was in essence a reactionary response which registered various poets' alarm at the collapse of traditional values, and their growing despair, both in the efficacy of language to communicate and in the stability and security of the social order of the modern world. This mood contrasts with other strands of modernism, such as the various 'avant-gardes,' which embraced the 'new' with a sense of optimism and progressive thinking reminiscent of Romanticism. These avant-garde movements, which include symbolism and what may be termed 'neo-Romanticism,' can also be shown to have had an impact on early twentieth-century Australian poetry – in conceptual, if not in stylistic,

²⁴ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xx.

terms. If these strands of modernism are included in discussion of early Australian poets' responses to modernism, then Tranter's claim that the New Poets were virtually the first Australian poets to respond to modernist poetics would appear to be undermined.

While the 'modern' tradition has encompassed a wide range of poets, including Slessor, R D FitzGerald, Judith Wright, and even anti-modernist poets such as A D Hope and James McAuley, those who have been generally excluded from these debates, but who might now be regarded as having contributed in more affirming terms to Australian poets' response to modernism, include Christopher Brennan,²⁵ Lesbia Harford, the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks (the Angry Penguins movement, having attracted considerable critical attention, is a notable exception among this group). The avant-garde aspects of these writers can be seen in the way they responded to the challenges of modernism while reaffirming or continuing the optimism typical of Romanticism, especially with regard to the belief in the power of poetry and the poet, either to change society or to evoke new or expanded states of consciousness.

In terms of European modernism, the aims of avant-garde writers during the early part of the century were significantly different from those of the high modernists of the post-First World War period. Instead of a sense of crisis engendered by the 'new' and its disruptions of old certainties, avant-garde writers and artists embraced change. Among the different expressions of the avant-garde, two broad categories may be discerned: the political and the literary avant-garde. Some critics have argued that the political avant-garde, defined as those writers whose

²⁵ While the majority of critics have seen Brennan's work in terms of a late Romanticism, Julian Croft and Fay Zwicky have noted Brennan's 'modern' (as in high modernist) characteristics. See, Croft, 'Responses to Modernism' in Hergenhahn: 413, and Zwicky, 'Gallic Sanction: Kiss of Death. Another Look at Brennan's Reputation,' in *Between Two Worlds: 'Loss of Faith' and late Nineteenth Century Australian Literature*, ed. Axel Clark, John Fletcher and Robin Marsden (Sydney: Wentworth Books, 1979): 98. A R Chisholm has discussed the affinities with Mallarmé's work shown in Brennan's poetry ('Brennan and Mallarmé, *Southerly* 24 [1961]: 2-11); however, no critics have attempted to show how his theoretical views concerning consciousness contribute to progressive modernist thinking.

primary aim was to promote radical social and political revolution, constitute a separate tradition from modernism,²⁶ a view which has some merit. The other category of the avant-garde was less overtly political, more individualist, and more literary and philosophical in emphasis. Many of these 'literary' avant-garde writers were actively seeking new values and ideas to replace discredited traditional views, often exploring notions of the unconscious, or turning to Eastern thinking or to other non-Western or arcane traditions for philosophical and spiritual renewal. Importantly, the thinking of these optimistic modernists shows strong links to the poetics of Romanticism, particularly as these relate to the sense of the power of poetry to change society and to alter consciousness, and the idea of the poet as prophet or visionary whose role it is to offer an alternative to the perceived ills and uncertainties of modern life.

Among the literary avant-garde, two particular strands have been of continuing importance, not only to aspects of early twentieth-century Australian poetry, but also to some of the New Poets of the sixties and seventies: the 'symbolist' strand, exemplified in the poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé and Wallace Stevens; and the 'neo-Romantic' strand, which can be seen in the poetics of such modernists as D H Lawrence, H D and Yeats, and also the mid-century, early 'postmodern' American poets, Charles Olson and others. For Mallarmé, poetry has a power to produce altered states of consciousness, suggesting and evoking an awareness of the (possibly only fictional) divine; Stevens extends Mallarmé's view that the divine is perhaps only ever fictional, while suggesting that it is no more or less fictional than our perceptions of reality. This notion of the possibly fictional nature of the transcendent suggests that although these poets maintain a sense of the elevated role of the poet as visionary typical of Romanticism, they also display a 'modernist'

²⁶ This is the case put forward by Charles Russell in his study, *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud to Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

scepticism towards absolutes.²⁷ The neo-Romantic modernist poets were those poets who showed an openness to alternative traditions and ideas, including the influence of Eastern spiritualities, in the effort to find ways of countering the sense of loss of meaning experienced by the destabilisation of Western traditions. In many respects, they also contributed to the destabilisation of those values. While it is primarily in terms of the optimism shown by the modernist neo-Romantic poets, and their continued validation of the poet's 'vision,' that affinities with the poetics of certain early twentieth-century Australian poets can be seen, it is in terms of the more complex views of language, reality and subjectivity indicative of Mallarmé's, Stevens' and Olson's views, combined with the influence of Eastern spirituality and a renewed sense of the 'divine,' that affinities with symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics can be found in the work of a number the New Poets.

If the more optimistic and progressive views of the political and literary avant-gardes are acknowledged as valid aspects of modernism, then a different understanding of early and mid-twentieth-century Australian poets' reputed 'resistance' to modernism, and therefore a more balanced account of the New Poetry's 'innovations,' becomes possible. What we discover is that poets and groups like Brennan, Harford, the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks have been disregarded in debates about Australian modernism primarily because they do not fit into the prevailing understanding of the 'modern' in terms of the mood and themes of high modernism, affirming instead more optimistic and progressive ideas more typical of the avant-gardes. Moreover, because they rejected the mood of high modernism, the Vision poets and some of the Jindyworobaks have gained a

²⁷ My use of the term 'symbolism' in relation to these poets is not intended to identify their poetics with any one coherent movement within modernism; rather, I use it as a shorthand to suggest some shared features of their poetics which I will discuss. Specifically, my reference to Stevens as continuing the symbolist strand of modernism is intended in the sense that I understand his views to be an extension of the kind sceptical yearning for the divine which I discern in Mallarmé's poetic. Similarly, I do not intend my notion of 'neo-Romanticism' to suggest an actual *revival* of Romantic views by either modernist or early postmodernist poets, but rather a reawakening of the sense of optimism and revolutionary energy typical of the Romantic spirit, coupled with an ongoing concern for notions of human consciousness in relation to the divine.

reputation for being 'anti-modernist,' even though they displayed the kind of energy, enthusiasm and 'vision' typical of the neo-Romanticism of literary avant-garde writers. (In the case of the Vision group, their 'optimism' and 'progressiveness' does not mean that these writers offer much of intellectual value or sophistication; nevertheless, they can be shown to be 'avant-garde' in their own way. This point alerts us to the fact that the labels 'modernist' and 'avant-garde' are not necessarily to be seen as indexes of value.)

The avant-garde aspects of these writers' poetics can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Brennan's view of consciousness suggested in his essay, 'Fact and Idea,' shows the influence of symbolism and aspects of Eastern philosophy; this essay also reflects Brennan's contribution to developments in psychoanalysis, providing a critique of scientific rationalism which actively contributed to the destabilisation of traditional Classical thinking. Harford's poetry shows her progressive socialist and feminist views, as well as her limited attempts at stylistic innovation, thus providing an example of political avant-garde poetics. The various manifestos of the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks show a neo-Romantic endeavour to offer alternatives to traditional Western thinking. The Vision group adapted the ideas of Nietzsche to proclaim the existence of the 'New Man,' the artist-hero who, they believed, represented a new stage in human consciousness. The Jindyworobaks were in sympathy with Aboriginal culture and mythology; their revolutionary suggestion was that an adoption of Aboriginal values would be one way to 'revitalise' consciousness and gain a sense of connection with the Australian land.²⁸

An acknowledgment of these alternatives to the dominant 'modern' tradition in

²⁸ Perhaps one reason for the strong Romantic element in twentieth-century Australian poets' response to modernism can be traced back to what Taylor discerns as Australian poetry's 'Romantic disinheritance,' the absence of a strong Romantic tradition in the nineteenth century (*Reading Australian Poetry* [St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1987], Chapter 4). Whereas Taylor discusses notions of Romanticism in relation to attitudes to nature, however, my emphasis in this discussion is on Romantic attitudes towards subjectivity (discussed also by Dobrez), language, the notion of the divine, and the visionary role of the poet.

early twentieth-century Australian poetry would seem to strengthen the argument that Australian poetry before the New Poetry was not as resistant to the broad conceptual changes associated with modernism as Tranter has suggested. However, the very diversity of the poetics which thus can be labelled 'modern' suggests the limitations of seeing modernism in conceptual terms alone. Importantly, few of these early poets and groups contributed anything of significance in terms of modernist stylistic innovation or concern for language; and some, like the Vision group, were actively opposed to the kind of stylistic experimentation and innovation normally associated with European and American modernism. Even those poets most often associated with modernist innovation, Kenneth Slessor and Frank Wilmot, were cautious when it came to stylistic innovation: Slessor maintained a Vision-influenced sense of the need for beauty and lyricism, and Wilmot was reluctant to forgo rhyme. This resistance to radical stylistic innovation among early and mid-twentieth-century Australian poets was compounded by the anti-modernist conceptual views of poets like Hope and McAuley, who advocated a return to traditional Classical and Christian values respectively. The limited response to stylistic innovation of early and mid-century poets, combined with Hope's and McAuley's anti-modernist conceptual views, no doubt contributed to the New Poets' sense that Australian poetry before the New Poetry had been dominated by a 'tradition of conservatism.' An account of this mid-century conservatism adds support, therefore, for Tranter's claim that the New Poets (stylistically, at least) helped to effect a 'revolution' in Australian poetry. Moreover, if modernism is defined as the necessary combination of modernist conceptual concerns with radical stylistic experimentation and innovation, then Tranter's view that the New Poets were virtually the first to introduce modernism into Australian poetry would seem to have validity. There remain the questions, however, as to whether the New Poets' innovations are best explained in terms of the poetics of modernism, and whether Tranter's own views regarding the New

Poetry are representative of other New Poets' work.

When the New Poets' poetics are considered, it becomes clear that they revise various strands of early modernist poetics, combining radical stylistic innovation with a number of the conceptual concerns first explored by modernist poets. However, there are some important differences in emphasis. Rather than simply being considered as 'modernist,' the New Poetry may best be understood as reflecting the diverse poetics of 'sixties' postmodernism.²⁹ This term has been used in recent critical discussions to refer to the various 'schools' of the American New Poetry of the fifties and sixties, and different expressions of 'new writing' in Europe during the sixties, including the linguistically oriented poststructuralist strand, which Tranter's poetic exemplifies, and the politically radical 'neo-avant-garde.' Sixties' postmodernism also includes a number of poets who, while experimenting with the 'writerly' style typical of modernist texts, reaffirmed the symbolist and neo-Romantic notions of subjectivity, language and the concept of the divine.²⁹

Of particular relevance to Tranter's poetic are Roland Barthes' theories regarding modernist texts, views which stress the idea of play and linguistic self-consciousness, writerly stylistic innovations such as the absence of an authorial or poetic 'voice' and self-referentiality, as well as a scepticism towards absolutes and a rejection of hermeneutic approaches to literature.³⁰ These features, although influenced by the innovations of modernism, are perhaps more typical of 'postmodernist' texts.³¹ For Tranter, such innovations are central to the expression

²⁹ Several critics have commented on the Romantic element of the New Poetry, including Dobrez and Veronica Brady ('Contemporary Australian Poetry,' *Landfall* 137 [1981]: 110-13), and Michael Sharkey, 'The New Poetry in Australia: Two Romances,' *New Literature Review* 8 (1981): 25-35.

³⁰ Barthes discusses Mallarmé as an early proponent of the 'writerly' style. See Barthes' essay, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977; Flamingo ed. 1982): 143. Poststructuralism's critique of metaphysics was well under way by the late sixties, and although it develops out of the structuralist concern for language it is distinct from it. See Jean-Marie Benoist, 'The End of Structuralism,' *Twentieth Century Studies* 3 (1970): 31-54.

³¹ See for example, Ihab Hassan, 'Pluralism and Postmodern Perspective,' *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 504-06.

of the post-Cartesian view of the ‘decentred’ subject, and the post-Einsteinian view of relativity and perception. Unlike the symbolists, for whom the writerly style was one way of conveying a sense of the poet’s ‘vision,’ for Tranter, the writerly style takes on a poststructuralist emphasis which eschews all notions of ‘truth’ and the ‘Absolute,’ or any moral or spiritual project of poetry, proffering instead the notion of ludic ‘play.’ In this sense, Tranter’s poetic represents what some critics have seen as the postmodern solution to the age of anxiety of high modernism, a mood of ‘tolerating the anxiety.’³²

Although Tranter’s poetic is echoed by New Poets like John Forbes and Martin Johnston, other New Poets display poetics more typical of symbolism and neo-Romanticism. While New Poets Robert Adamson and Bruce Beaver show a debt to Mallarmé, some of the New Poets, including Beaver, Kris Hemensley and Vicki Viidikas, extend the kind of poetics of kinesis and concern for stylistic innovation of American New Poet Charles Olson to encompass a neo-Romantic view of subjectivity, language and concept of the divine. While affirming the elevated role of the poet typical of Romanticism, these poets promote a concept of the divine which has an affinity with Eastern thinking. In their view, the divine is, like the Hindu ‘Greater Self,’ a living, vital force, a consciousness which is both immanent, in that it exists in all things including inanimate objects, and seemingly ‘transcendent,’ in that the everyday perceptions of humanity are not always aware of it. These poets suggest that the role of the poet is that of ‘singer’ of this divine reality, and, like the Hindu mystics, they see the limited human individual as an expression of this greater consciousness.

Tranter disparages both symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics for what he regards as their promotion of an exaggeratedly elevated role of the poet, outdated humanist views of subjectivity, and ‘absolutist’ notions regarding language and

³² Alan Wilde, ‘Modernism and the Aesthetic of Crisis, HorizOns of Assent,’ in Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992): 17.

‘truth.’ However, Tranter’s criticism in part reflects a misunderstanding of these poetics. In fact, symbolism and neo-Romanticism reveal a shift away from the humanism typical of English Romanticism to a more ‘constructed’ view of the human subject which reflects a postmodern sensibility. Despite this similarity, however, there are fundamental differences. The two areas of greatest difference are in regard to the question of faith or belief in the ‘divine,’ and the idea of poetic language as ‘mantric,’ as having the power to alter states of consciousness and to enhance one’s sense of reality and sense of the divine, views which, according to Tranter and the poststructuralists, are ‘absolutist’ and therefore no longer tenable. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake simply to regard the symbolist faith in the mantric power of language or the neo-Romantic belief in the divine as ‘absolutist’ and therefore ‘pre-modern.’

Just as Tranter turns to notions of relativity and uncertainty in twentieth-century physics for justification of his ‘anti-absolutist’ views, so the understanding of subjectivity and reality suggested by symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics can be supported by reference to recent debates in physics, particularly those presented by physicist and social theorist, Fritjof Capra. Capra discusses the intersection of aspects of recent physics with views of reality and subjectivity suggested by Eastern mystical traditions, views which in turn reflect similar attitudes towards subjectivity, language and the sense of the divine to those expressed in neo-Romantic poetics. Thus, the more progressive, affirming, so-called ‘Romantic’ elements of the New Poetry can be seen as offering an equally valid engagement with the major twentieth-century debates which Tranter regards as being at the heart of modernist literature: the ‘troubled relations between subjectivism, formalism, language, speech, writing, literature and reality that began their most intense and public debate a hundred years ago.’³³

As well as the poststructuralist, symbolist and neo-Romantic strands of the New

³³ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xx.

Poetry, there is also a strand which seeks to combine the kind of anti-absolutist critique and linguistic self-consciousness of the poststructuralists with the revolutionary aims of the more overtly political neo-avant-garde. Unlike the symbolist and neo-Romantic strands which look for value in the individual's experience, this strand looks for values which are only ever provisionally affirmed, a strategy which some critics have seen as a 'complicitous critique,' a critique which is always implicated in that which it seeks to criticise. This strand of sixties' postmodernism is exemplified in the work of New Poets, Jennifer Maiden and John A Scott, and reflects most closely the type of postmodernism which has come to be associated with debates on postmodernism in the eighties.

A discussion of these various New Poets' work shows that the New Poetry cannot simply be understood in terms of a single modernist or postmodernist poetic. Nor are the New Poets' conceptual concerns entirely new for Australian poetry: in some respects they reflect various preoccupations of earlier Australian poets. Tranter's anti-absolutist stance recalls the sense of uncertainty and relativity of the dominant 'modern' tradition (though conveying a more 'postmodern' sense of tolerance); Adamson, Hemensley, Beaver and Viidikas echo Brennan's interest in the ability of poetry to achieve altered states of consciousness, and the Vision group's interest in the artist/poet as visionary; the influence of Eastern philosophy on the work of Hemensley, Beaver and Viidikas recalls the Jindyworobaks' valorisation of Aboriginal culture; and Maiden's and Scott's concerns regarding subjectivity in relation to gender and politics echo Harford's concerns. These broad areas of overlap between the New Poetry and earlier Australian poetry suggest that the 'newness' of the New Poets is, as Tranter has claimed, primarily in their openness towards stylistic innovation and experimentation, particularly the writerly stylistic innovations which Tranter promotes as the major innovation of the New Poetry.

Since the New Poets represented in Tranter's anthology exhibit a wide range of

attitudes towards subjectivity, language, notions of the divine and the role of the poet, the question arises as to why so few women are counted among the New Poetry group. When the parameters of the groups are considered, it becomes clear that there were many women poets publishing in the same little magazines and small presses as the male New Poets during the New Poetry period. As there is no consistent 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' poetic which underlies the New Poetry, there seems to be little reason why these many women poets should have been disregarded in discussions of the New Poetry. This leads to speculation whether it is in fact Tranter's promotion of writerly stylistic innovations and poststructuralist views, and in particular the abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice,' which has led to an under-representation of women poets in the New Poetry canon, a speculation which tends seriously to undermine Tranter's view that the writerly style represents the 'revolutionary' aspect of the New Poetry.

From my discussion of the New Poets' work, it is clear that writerly stylistic innovation has different significance for different poets, particularly in terms of expressing the complexity and diversity of the New Poets' thinking regarding such concepts as subjectivity, language, the notion of the divine and the role of the poet. Tranter sees the abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice' as expressing the upset of the traditional Cartesian view of the 'unified' subject and so-called 'objective' views of reality by suggesting a fundamentally different view of the 'decentred' or 'split' subject and radically subjective, relativistic sense of reality.³⁴ Hemensley, Beaver, Viidikas and to a degree Adamson, adopt both aspects of an experimental, writerly style, as well as at times a more traditional poetic 'voice'; they portray the individual both as integrated, but suffering a sense of duality between the self and the world, and as 'dispersed,' as expressing the relations

³⁴ David Malouf sees this challenge to 'objective' ways of seeing as the essential difference between more traditional poetry and the New Poetry (particularly as exemplified in the work of Les Murray and Robert Adamson). See Malouf, 'Some Volumes of Selected Poems of the 1970s,' I and II (*Australian Literature Studies* 10 [1982]: 13-21; 300-309).

which exist outside the commonsense notions of the 'self,' the sense which leads to the positing of a universal consciousness. The complication of the poetic 'voice' in the work of Maiden and Scott foregrounds the radically constructed nature of the subject, defining the subject in terms of the intersection of various discourses including gender and politics. Rather than seeing the New Poet's various views of subjectivity as illustrating a fundamental difference between 'absolutist' and 'anti-absolutist' thinking, they can be regarded as different representations, particular reifications or provisional positions along a continuum which includes both autonomy and dispersal. The more traditional styles which convey a sense of the poetic 'voice' may emphasise (a constructed notion of) autonomy and integration, while the more experimental, writerly styles stress a sense of fragmentation and lack of autonomy. In this sense, both styles are equally valid: those texts which convey a 'traditional' sense of the poetic 'voice' do not necessarily uphold the traditional humanist view of the subject; rather, they may be aware of the (only ever) provisional nature of the subject, and the radically constructed sense of individuality. Thus, while the writerly style, in the way Tranter employs it, reflects a stage in the challenge to traditional preconceptions regarding the nature of reality and subjectivity, it is not a prerequisite for expressing a radically alternative view.

Although these findings, if pursued, could help to put into perspective the apparent 'divide' between 'innovative' poetry like the New Poetry and so-called more traditional poetry represented by the Gray and Lehmann anthology, they are particularly relevant in regard to women poets of the period, poets for whom the freedom to express their own poetic 'voice' *as women* was a radical part of their agenda. Tranter's preference for more stylistically experimental poetry seems to have ignored this element of the New Poetry, ostensibly because of its lack of stylistic 'adventurousness' or perhaps because of a perceived lack of philosophical sophistication or literary worth. Ironically, however, by continuing to advocate an abandonment of the poetic 'voice,' and devaluing poetry which displays such a

voice, Tranter may in fact have served to preserve the kind of patriarchal, oppressive values which were among those of the tradition which he set out to revolutionise. At this stage, this idea remains speculative, and would need to be verified by a separate study. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that the writerly style, though a significant innovation for Australian poetry stylistically, is not necessarily an indication of inherent value or philosophical sophistication; furthermore, in the case of its continued promotion by poets such as Tranter to the exclusion of others who have a valid right to be heard, it may even on occasion be politically suspect.

As the above introductory overview suggests, one cannot simply argue that the New Poets introduced modernism to Australian poetry for the first time; rather, it can be seen that a number of poets and groups in early twentieth-century Australian poetry responded to the themes and concepts of modernism, some in an optimistic way, others with a more reactionary, conservative response. In terms of stylistic innovation, however, Tranter's generation were among the first Australian poets to introduce the kinds of radical experimentation normally associated with modernism. These innovations should not be seen necessarily as modernist, however, or regarded as vital to the expression of twentieth-century developments in philosophical thinking and scientific understanding. Rather, they should be seen as particular stylistic choices which reflect different emphases among various strands of sixties' postmodernism, which in turn revive aspects of earlier modern poetics. These strands of sixties' postmodernism which are reflected in the New Poetry, including the influence of symbolist, neo-Romantic and poststructuralist poetics, as well as the more overtly political agenda of the neo-avant-garde, encompass widely variant attitudes towards fundamental issues such as the nature of subjectivity and language, the concept of the divine, and the role of poetry and the poet.

The following chapters will address the issues foreshadowed above. Chapter

One begins with a consideration of the concept of modernism, including not only an account of high modernism, but also of the avant-gardes, showing how these various strands reflect changes in early twentieth-century thinking. Chapter Two suggests an alternative tradition of the 'modern' in early twentieth-century Australian poetry, looking first at Brennan's views of consciousness, then giving an account of Harford's limited stylistic experimentalism and political vision. Chapter Three examines the poetics of the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks. Chapter Four discusses the response of Australian poets to modernist stylistic innovation, showing how its main proponents, Slessor and Wilmot, had a conservative attitude, while its main detractors, Hope and McAuley, were not only stylistically but also conceptually anti-modernist. Chapter Five looks at the New Poets' poetics in terms of sixties' postmodernism, and outlines several strands within the New Poetry, the poststructuralist, the symbolist, the neo-Romantic and the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde. Chapter Six looks at the early poetry of Robert Adamson, particularly 'The Rumour,' showing how Adamson adopts aspects of a poststructuralist writerly emphasis, while responding to aspects of Mallarmé's poetic. Chapter Seven gives readings of the early poetry of Kris Hemensley and Bruce Beaver, and Vicki Viidikas's work from the seventies and early eighties, showing these poets' varied affinities with neo-Romantic poetics. Chapter Eight discusses Jennifer Maiden's 'The Problem of Evil' and aspects of John A Scott's poetry of the early to mid-eighties, showing these poets' use of innovatory language as a means of expressing the constructed nature of subjectivity and a way of implicating the reader in the social institutions they seek to criticise. Chapter Nine examines briefly evidence for the women poets' contribution to the New Poetry and discusses the valorisation of the writerly style, giving evidence for supporting a revised, expanded version of the New Poetry canon.

Chapter 1. Modernist Poetics and Twentieth-Century Australian Poetry

From Norman Lindsay's attacks on Picasso and Satie in *Vision* magazine in the early nineteen-twenties,¹ to the prosecution of Max Harris over the Ern Malley 'obscurity' charge,² to the hounding of Dobell over the Joshua Smith portrait in the forties,³ there seems to be a range of evidence to support the belief that the broad range of Australian literature, art, criticism and public opinion throughout the century has been hostile to what has loosely been termed 'modernism.' The following discussion will attempt to assess whether it is true, as Tranter claimed, that, apart from a few 'false starts,'⁴ it was not until the New Poetry of the late sixties and seventies that the stylistic innovations and conceptual concerns associated with modernism were introduced into Australian poetry; or whether, as other critics have maintained, earlier Australian poets had already exploited modernism's possibilities.⁵

As David Carter has pointed out, 'a subject such as the history of modernism in Australian literature, while it is the history of a practice or practices, is simultaneously – in some senses primarily – the history of a concept or concepts.'⁶ In regard to twentieth-century Australian literature, according to Carter, modernism has variously been considered as 'élitism, escapism, defeatism, formalism, subjectivism, aestheticism, fashionableness, obscurantism, primitivism, decadence, mysticism or fascism.'⁷ A discussion of modernist poetics in relation to Australian poetry, therefore, must take into account the history of the use of the terms

¹ See *Vision* 1.2-3: 2.

² See Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1993), Part III.

³ See Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1981). Haese gives an overview of anti-modernist sentiment in the earlier part of the study: 4-6.

⁴ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xx.

⁵ See, for example, Sharkey's comments in 'Poetry at an impasse,' *The Age Monthly Review* 2.10 (1982): 1, 22-23.

⁶ Carter, 'Modernism and Australian Literature,' *World Literatures Written in English* 24.1 (1984): 159.

⁷ Carter, 'Modernism': 163.

associated with modernism, both with regard to general discussions of European and American modernism, and modernism in Australian literature; in other words, one must be alert to the distinction between the *critical construction* of modernism as well as the ‘modernist’ texts themselves.⁸ Tranter’s discussion of modernism in the introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* enters a long and continuing debate.

According to Tranter, modernism reflects a crisis of traditional beliefs and value systems which began as a major paradigm shift in mid-nineteenth-century Europe:

During the first half of the nineteenth century, a vast change began to make itself felt through every aspect of European society. The old philosophical certainties were giving way, and man’s traditional faith in reason and its acquiescent tool, language, was being eroded. Just as the foreign concept of zero at first shocked mathematicians, then revolutionised their science, the newly-developing concepts of absence, nothingness and relativist values at first unnerved philosophers and writers. The shock waves can be traced in the work of Pascal, Descartes, De Sade and others, and literature turned to the inherent properties of language itself to discover solutions.⁹

As these comments show, for Tranter, scepticism towards absolutes is central to modernist thinking: the ‘concepts of absence, nothingness and relativist values,’ according to Tranter, not only upset traditional Christianity, but also faith in the rationalist humanism of the Enlightenment. In his view the New Poets were virtually the first Australian poets to respond to modernism in these terms:

In the radical way it has altered our perception of ourselves, modernism stands as the most significant revolution in thought since the shift from the middle Ages to the Renaissance; its disruptions are still reverberating through Europe...and – after a few false starts – finally appear to have breached the wall of Anglo-Saxon imperturbability in Australia in the late 1960s.¹⁰

However, this view that the New Poets were the first to incorporate the concepts of modernism into their work can be challenged on a number of counts. Firstly, the emphasis on modernism’s scepticism towards absolutes and sense of relativity and

⁸ Patricia Waugh makes the point that in most articulations of modernism these aspects are conflated. See her introduction to *Postmodernism*: 23.

⁹ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xviii.

¹⁰ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xix-xx.

uncertainty in some ways reflects the concerns of 'high modernism,' which is one aspect of modernism which critics have argued *was* addressed by earlier Australian poets. Secondly, this characterisation of modernism in terms of the concepts of high modernism tends to downplay another important aspect of modernism, an aspect which saw writers and artists looking for alternative values and systems of belief and displaying a sense of neo-Romantic optimism in the face of the radical conceptual changes of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century period. If these more optimistic responses to modernism are included, then Tranter's claim that the New Poets were first to incorporate the conceptual challenges of modernism into their work would seem to be further undermined. The broad understanding of modernism which incorporates not only high modernism, but also other more optimistic aspects of modernism, reflects the varied readings given in numerous critical accounts of modernism. In these terms, modernism is to be regarded as a 'matrix' of different and often fundamentally conflicting poetics.¹¹

The text to which Tranter refers for an extended discussion of modernism is the volume edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: 1890-1930*. This contains a number of essays on European and American modernism which provide a useful background for a consideration of modernism in the Australian context. A reading of this and other studies of modernism suggests that it would be a mistake to argue that, in conceptual terms at least, modernism had little impact on Australian poetry before the New Poetry.

In discussions of modernism, a distinction is often made between the 'modern' and the 'modernist.' For critics such as Graham Hough, the 'modern' is a matter of 'period and historical phase,' while the 'modernist' is 'a matter of art and technique, a peculiar twist of vision.'¹² Some commentators extend the view of the

¹¹ Sanford Schwartz uses this term in his study, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth Century Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).

¹² Graham Hough, 'The Modernist Lyric,' in Bradbury and McFarlane: 314.

‘modern’ to cover an entire epoch, seeing it as distinct from the ‘Ancient’ and ‘Medieval’; Perry Meisel in his study *The Myth of the Modern*, for example, characterises the modern as ‘postmedieval’¹³ and goes so far as to characterise the age of twentieth-century modernism as the third phase of the modern, following the Renaissance and the Romantic.¹⁴ The term ‘modern’ is not always confined to a period of history, however, and it is in the usage of this term in relation to literature that arguments about modernism become particularly slippery. Stephen Spender, for example, makes a distinction in aesthetic terms between the ‘modern’ and the ‘contemporary’ in twentieth-century literature, arguing that ‘the moderns’ were those like Pound who stressed the need to ‘make it new’ and showed contempt for the recent past, whereas ‘contemporary’ poets were those less critically opposed to the values of the day.¹⁵ Many anthologies covering early twentieth-century literature and poetry tend to elide the distinction between ‘modern,’ ‘contemporary’ and ‘modernist.’ The study, *The Modern Age*, discusses ‘modern’ literature as any work from the period from the late nineteenth-century to the nineteen fifties;¹⁶ while James Scully’s anthology, *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, includes poets as diverse as Hopkins, Yeats, Ransome and Lowell.¹⁷ The 1965 edition of *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* includes not only poets ranging from Hopkins to Dylan Thomas, but also younger American poets such as Robert Bly and Sylvia Plath.¹⁸ Clearly, there is no simple consensus.

¹³ Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern A Study in British Literature and Criticism after 1850* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987): 4.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Meisel argues that the ‘crisis of the modern’ constitutes the artist’s sense of the impossibility of being ‘new’: 1-10.

¹⁵ Spender, ‘Moderns and Contemporaries’ in *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1963): 71-78. Spender writes, ‘The modern is acutely conscious of the contemporary scene but he does not accept its values. To the modern it seems that a world of unprecedented phenomena has today cut us off from the life of the poet, and in doing so from traditional consciousness,’ while the ‘contemporary belongs to the modern world, represents it in his work, and accepts the historic forces moving through it, its values of science and progress’ (Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern*: 78, 77).

¹⁶ Boris Ford, ed. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 7 (1961; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1969).

¹⁷ Scully, *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London: Collins, Fontana, 1966).

¹⁸ *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Michael Roberts (1936; rev. ed. Donald Hall [London: Faber and Faber, 1965]).

While the term ‘modern’ used in the above ways includes many different writers and different aesthetic positions, the term ‘modernist’ is usually more restricted; even this term, however, has been widely applied. For many critics of poetry written in English, the exemplary ‘modernists’ were those writing from around 1900 to 1930¹⁹ such as Eliot and Pound. The Bradbury and McFarlane collection is more inclusive, referring not only to poetry written in English, but also French, Italian, Russian and German work. The studies in this volume refer to the canonical poets mentioned above; prototypical ‘modernists’ such as the nineteenth-century French poets Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud; writers associated with various literary and political movements, including Apollinaire and Brecht, the futurists, dadaists and surrealists; a range of early twentieth-century American poets such as William Carlos Williams, e e cummings, Hart Crane and Louis Zukofsky; as well as poets we might now consider as early ‘postmodernists’ such as Charles Olson. Given the range of poetics of those poets who can be regarded as ‘modernist,’ defining Hough’s ‘peculiar twist of vision’ of modernist poetry appears to be an impossible task.

The most influential characterisation of modernism has been that of ‘late’ or ‘high’ modernism, the mood of uncertainty and doubt, of relativity, irony, alienation and often pessimistic despair which resulted from the collapse of traditional values. Discussion of this mood has dominated critical accounts of modernism, and has also had an important bearing on what has become known as the ‘modern’ element of twentieth-century Australian poetry. Rather than accepting such a mood of pessimism as the defining characteristic of modernism, however, this can be seen as merely one strand of a matrix of modernism which

¹⁹ These are the dates given by Bernard Bergonzi (*History of Literature in the English Language*, Vol. 7: ‘The Twentieth Century,’ ed. Bergonzi [London: Sphere Books, 1970]: 17). However, such dates for modernism are fairly arbitrary; Bradbury and McFarlane’s volume covers the period 1890 to 1930, while another recent collection of studies sees the period extending from the late 1880s to the beginning of World War II (see *Modernism Reconsidered*, ed. Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983]: v). These latter dates most accurately reflect a broad view of the modernist period in Australian poetry.

encompasses texts which suggest not only a state of crisis, but also the potential benefit from radical change. Frank Kermode in his essay, 'Modernisms,' sees this complex set of responses as first arising in the literature of the 1890s:

If there is a persistent world-view it is one we should have to call apocalyptic; the modernism of the nineties has a recognisable touch of this, if decadence, hope of renovation, the sense of transition, the sense of an ending or the trembling of the veil, are accepted as its signs. At such times there is a notable urgency in the proclamation of a break with the immediate past, a stimulating sense of crisis, of an historical license for the New.²⁰

As well as the mood of high modernism, other equally important strands of modernism which appear in early twentieth-century poetry include more optimistic responses such as those of the political avant-garde, which embraced the possibility of radical social and political change, and the various literary avant-garde writers, whose 'hope of renovation' led them to search for alternatives to traditional Western thinking and writing. In some cases, sometimes within the one poet's work, these strands overlap; and the different strands have features in common. In general terms, these various writers and movements, both high modernist and avant-garde, were reacting to the many philosophical, scientific and cultural changes of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period, with a profound sense of something new and unprecedented. In conceptual terms, their work reflects the ramifications of the work of Darwin, Marx, Freud and Einstein; the shift in focus from the rural to the great cities; an increasing awareness of technology; the changing role of women; the destabilisation of imperialism; experimentation with new systems of government and social systems; and the growing influence of non-Western, in particular Eastern, literary and philosophical models. These many changes can only briefly be reviewed here.²¹ Because of the importance of high modernism in constructing the notion of the 'modern' in

²⁰ Kermode, 'Modernisms,' in *Innovations: Essays on Art and Ideas*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan: 1968): 67.

²¹ General overviews of the many changes of the period and their impact on literature are numerous: see, for example, Ford, *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Parts I and II.

Australian literary critical discourse, this aspect will be discussed first.

The characterisation of modernism in terms of pessimistic high modernism mainly addresses writing produced after the outbreak of the First World War. This was a period during which poets attempted to reflect various social, philosophical, political and scientific upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century period, while at the same time being overwhelmed by a growing sense of despair and uncertainty. For the high modernist poet, the belief in the power of poetry which had been evident in Romanticism, and in early modernist movements such as symbolism, had been undermined, giving way to a scepticism concerning the communicability of meaning and a growing sense of individual isolation, irrationality and fragmentation. This mood was apparent not only in the work of the stylistically innovatory modernists such as T S Eliot, but also in the work of more traditional poets such as Wilfred Owen. It reflected these writers' profound disappointment in the basic principles of the Enlightenment and the liberal humanist tradition, that of humanity's essential goodness and unlimited potential. The disappointment and disillusion felt by these writers is conveyed in the statement of the German poet Rilke in a letter to a friend after the outbreak of the war:

...that such a confusion, not-knowing-which-way-to-turn, the whole sad man-made complication of this provoked fate, that exactly this incurably bad condition of things was necessary to force out evidence of whole-hearted courage, devotion and bigness.... While we, the arts, the theater, called nothing forth in these very same people, brought nothing to rise and flower, were unable to change anyone. What is our metier but purely and largely and freely to set forth opportunities for change, – did we do this so badly, so half-way, so little convinced and convincing?²²

A similar disappointment was expressed by T E Hulme in his despairing account of the modern 'condition' (also written around 1913 or 1914):

Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be

²² Rilke (June, 1915), quoted by George Rochberg, in 'The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival,' *New Literary History* 3.1 (1971): 75.

got out of him.²³

Apart from the obvious context of the political turmoil of Europe at this time, Hulme's comments also reflect continuing uncertainty arising from various areas of intellectual debate. The reference to man as an 'animal' echoes the impact of debates on Darwinism that had rocked the beliefs of late nineteenth-century thinkers. In a less direct way it also recalls the views of Freud which were influencing intellectual circles of the time, which depicted the base, instinctual drives of the human subject as kept in check by the 'civilising' ego. Despite the fact that both the Darwinian and Freudian models of human subjectivity in some ways were grounded in Enlightenment thinking, each was helping to overturn the accepted Cartesian view of the humanist subject, known to itself through reason. While some early modernists recognised in the exuberant energies of humanity's instinctual drives a sense of freedom and possibility, for the high modernists, informed by the horror of war, such changes in understanding of human origins and psychology helped to compound the sense of instability and insecurity, and resulted in a renewed urge towards the balance and control of Classicism and traditional Western values. In stylistic terms, the freedom of abandoning rigid verse structures was met with a renewal of interest in structuring qualities of 'music,' an adherence to the concrete image instead of abstraction, and reaffirmation of traditional 'classic' literature through complex intertextuality. Thus, the Classicism and anti-Romanticism of modernists such as Hulme, Eliot and Pound can be seen not only as a rejection of the 'sloppy forms' and vague abstractions of late Romanticism, but also a repudiation of the potential violence implicit in earlier strands of modernist writing.

One of the reasons high modernists began to feel the need for the stability of old values was that various scientific discoveries in physics began to unsettle the very faith in humanity's ability to 'know' with authority. In a sense, the period of high

²³ Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism,' in David Lodge, ed. *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (London: Longman, 1972): 94. (The date given is the one suggested by Lodge.)

modernism registered more the uncertainty generated by these conceptual changes in science, rather than a full understanding of them;²⁴ nevertheless, during the high modernist period, important challenges to traditional scientific perceptions and beliefs had begun, challenges which later not only revolutionised scientific thinking, but also expanded the possibilities (and destructive potential) of technology.

Whereas Descartes and Newton had been optimistic of finding an exhaustive description of the physical universe, and held the Enlightenment belief in the progress of scientific knowledge for the good of humanity, during the modernist period both philosophers and scientists increasingly became

eager to expose what Nietzsche called the ‘anthropomorphic error’ – the error of identifying the practical constructs of the intellect with reality itself?²⁵

Nietzsche’s suspicion that ‘the “apparent” world is the only one’²⁶ seemed to have radical confirmation in Einstein’s theories of relativity, which brought the whole idea of ‘objectivity’ under attack. So-called fundamental features of the ‘real’ world, such as space, time, and the speed of light, were shown to be not fundamental, but relative to the observer.²⁷ Philosophers such as Bergson began to argue that reality lay in the immediate flux of sensory appearance, not in the rational order beyond it. As Miklós Szabólszi notes, both the impact of and the desire to accommodate these new ideas inspired some writers and artists to experiment with radically innovative styles, rebelling against the conventional ‘realism’ which was felt to uphold outmoded views of reality and subjectivity:

²⁴ The important discovery in physics of the Uncertainty Principle, for example, did not occur until the late twenties; and even those poets who set out to reflect current scientific thinking in their work in many respects showed pre-Einsteinian thinking. See, for example, Martin A Kayman’s chapter, ‘“The Drama is Wholly Subjective”: Pound and Science’ in *The Modernism of Ezra Pound: The Science of Poetry* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); the importance influence on writers of philosophers Heidegger and Wittgenstein also post-dates this time.

²⁵ Shwartz: 18-19.

²⁶ Nietzsche, ‘Twilight of the Idols,’ in Waugh *Postmodernism*: 109. Nietzsche’s phrase was also quoted by Tranter in the introduction to *New Australian Poetry*: xviii-xix.

²⁷ For an introduction to the way the New Physics upset the classical Newtonian and Cartesian world view, see Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (1982; London: Flamingo, 1983), Section II, ‘The Two Paradigms.’ For a general introduction to the New Physics see Paul Davies and John Gribben, *The Matter Myth: Towards Twentieth-Century Science* (London: Viking, 1991).

[T]he traditional time factor changes and so does conventional space; time and space amalgamate: the world seems to be disjointed, continuity turns into discontinuity. The artist feels compelled to reflect the disjointed world by giving a disconnected, fragmentary, patchy effect to his work. Everything is in motion, accelerating, and the artist manages to keep up the pace for a while, he strives for contemporaneity. Then overcome by dizziness he, too, denies the existence of measurable time and space and wants to reflect an achronic state, mere quantitative rapports, abstract relations.²⁸

During this time the very institution of language itself became problematic as, in the new scientific and philosophical models of reality, conceptual systems were seen to be instrumental constructs overlying an experiential stream which was irreducible to rational formulation and therefore linguistic expression.

The reasons for the doubt and uncertainty of the high modernists came not only from the horror of war, or changes in conceptual understanding in the fields of physics, psychology and philosophy; they also stemmed from the radically changing political scene. As Richard Sheppard writes, the sense of crisis experienced by high modernist poets can to some extent be seen as having its roots in the alarm at the changes of late nineteenth-century Europe and the rise of the modern industrial city. According to Sheppard, the early period of modernism saw 'the supersession of an aristocratic, semi-feudal humanistic and agrarian order by one middle-class, democratic, mechanistic and urban.'²⁹ While this phenomenon encouraged the rise of progressive views such as Marxist-inspired socialism, emancipation movements and feminism, it also led to the competing nationalisms which resulted in war. The conservative response of the high modernists, their nostalgia for the lost authority of Classical culture, can therefore be viewed in part as an identification with the traditional patriarchal class structure which more progressive and disruptive modernist movements threatened.

Other critics have suggested that some of the uncertainties of the period were

²⁸ Szabólszi, 'Avant-Garde, Neo-avant-garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions,' *New Literary History* 3.1 (1971): 55.

²⁹ Sheppard, 'The Crisis of Language,' in Bradbury and McFarlane: 325.

also in part a legacy of imperialism. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin write in *The Empire Writes Back* that many of the innovations of modernism can be seen as a response to a post-colonial world, with its re-evaluation of colonised indigenous cultures:

Modernism and the sudden experimentation with the artistic forms of the dominant bourgeois ideology, such as late nineteenth-century realism, are themselves, in part, products of the discovery of cultures whose aesthetic practices and cultural models were radically disruptive of the prevailing European assumptions. Europeans were forced to realize that their culture was only one amongst a plurality of ways of conceiving of reality and organizing its representations in art and social practice.³⁰

Brought to the attention of European artists were many Eastern literary and philosophical texts, the influence of Black American culture (especially in jazz music) and the literary and artistic traditions of the 'primitive' cultures of Africa and the Pacific. According to Hough, the high modernist artist was the first to inherit a world tradition, a disorienting wealth of knowledge, one who had 'all the myths of the world available to him; which also means he [had] none – none that can impose itself as indubitably his own by simple right of inheritance.'³¹

Although the equation of modernism with the doubts and uncertainties of high modernism is typical of much critical writing on modernism, such a response reflects only one strand of modernism. Importantly, not all writers greeted the many social, political and philosophical changes of the early twentieth-century period with a sense of relativity, uncertainty or despair. While many high modernists eventually sought to regain the lost authority of Western cultural forms (Pound's Classicism and Eliot's late conversion to high Anglicanism, for example), others continued to embrace the breaking down of Western cultural certainties. Instead of experiencing a crisis of authority, various poets either sought new and

³⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989): 156.

³¹ Hough, 'The Modernist Lyric': 316. Clearly Hough here identifies the high modernist with the Western or European artist, rather than the artists of those cultures from whose arts and traditions inspiration was drawn.

hopeful alternatives to discredited Western values through non-Western philosophical and religious traditions, or responded to the collapse of traditional class structures with a sense of opportunity for radical political change. With their more progressive views, these writers are often associated with the term 'avant-garde.' As with the term 'modernist,' however, the term 'avant-garde' has been variously and widely applied.

The distinction between high modernism and what is meant by the term 'avant-garde' is often elided in discussions of modernism. While there were high modernists who advocated 'avant-garde' notions of radical stylistic experimentation and innovation, which were intended to reflect radical changes in conceptual thinking, there were other writers who advocated 'avant-garde' political positions. Thus, there is considerable overlap in the usage of the terms 'modernist' and 'avant-garde.'

Renato Poggioli sees all major stylistically innovative writers of the period as 'avant-garde,' including writers such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Proust, in addition to Rimbaud, Marinetti, Apollinaire and the surrealists.³² Szabólszi argues that the 'late symbolism and neo-classicism' of poets such as Rilke, Pound, Yeats and Valéry can be associated with the 'avant-garde,' but at the same time asserts that these poets' work is 'of a conservative and aristocratic character.'³³ Charles Russell, by contrast, suggests that only those artists closely allied to socially or politically progressive movements were truly 'avant-garde.'³⁴ Russell describes various avant-garde artists and movements, stressing their unconventional, energetic, disruptive qualities: from Rimbaud's 'derangement of all the senses,' futurism's naive embrace of technology, dadaism's determination to destroy all and start afresh, to surrealism's faith in the unconscious and the power of the

³² See Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³³ Szabólszi: 52.

³⁴ Russell's definition carries on the original political connotations of the term. For a review of the historical usage of the term 'avant-garde,' see Szabólszi: 49-50.

imagination. Russell points out that a number of these artists and groups were associated with radical political movements: the futurists supported the Italian involvement in the First World War and later the rise of fascism under Mussolini;³⁵ German dadaists identified with Communism;³⁶ and Mayakovsky and the Russian futurists identified with the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.³⁷ In Russell's view these avant-gardes formed a separate tradition from that of the 'modernists':

Briefly stated, modernist writers...despair of finding in secular, social history a significant ethical, spiritual, or aesthetic dimension. The works of such exemplary modernists as Proust, Pound, Joyce, Woolf, Gide, and Hemingway all deny the possibility of discerning within the flow of modern history anything but the record of meaningless chaos or evident cultural decline. The avant-garde – represented by Rimbaud, Apollinaire, the dadaists, surrealists, and futurists...attempts to sustain a belief in the progressive union of writer and society acting within history....³⁸

Yet, as this passage makes clear, in his discussion of the differences between modernism and the avant-garde, Russell adopts the same limited view as many other critics, equating pessimistic high modernism with modernism itself, thus disregarding earlier, more optimistic modernist writing who also rebelled against traditional values and beliefs: those who we might understand as forming the 'literary' avant-garde.

Alongside the high modernists and the political avant-garde writers were a number of modernist writers whose ideas about social change were less radical than those of the political avant-garde writers, but who nevertheless felt that society was experiencing something radically new in terms of its social, political and scientific outlook, and that artists and writers could reflect and contribute to those changes in new and positive ways. Russell makes the important point that,

³⁵ Russell: 87.

³⁶ Russell lists the demands of the Berlin dada movement during the years of 1918 and 1919 including 'The international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of a radical Communism': 116.

³⁷ Russell: 171. For a further summary of continental avant-gardes, see Szabólszi: 61-63.

³⁸ Russell: 7. (It is interesting to note that Russell, by adding Hemingway to the group of modernists, does not view stylistic innovation as the hallmark of literary modernism.)

unlike the political avant-garde writers who ‘attempt[ed] to imagine and possibly provoke a radical change in society by their work,’³⁹ these other writers sought to ‘articulate an ethical, spiritual, or aesthetic vision perhaps at odds with the current direction of social thought, but in the interests of adding or recapturing a significant dimension to that existing culture.’⁴⁰ Whereas the high modernists suggested a return to traditional values, these other writers insisted on the beneficial aspects of change: in this sense, they constituted a ‘literary avant-garde.’

On the surface, both the political avant-garde and the literary avant-garde can be seen to reflect the kind of ‘modern consciousness,’ which Habermas describes as expanding on the Enlightenment faith in the possibility of progress and the role of art in promoting that advancement. According to Habermas, this consciousness stemmed from a ‘belief, inspired by modern science, in the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment.’⁴¹ This in turn led to a faith in the ‘new’ and the sense of the possibilities of human society, politics and art. However, Habermas’s formulation elides an important difference between the political avant-garde and many writers among the literary avant-garde: whereas the more political revolutionary writers in effect continued the Western tradition of liberal humanism, by contrast, many literary avant-garde writers embraced new faiths and ideas; these writers were in fact involved in actively undermining the Enlightenment valorisation of reason and humanist understanding of subjectivity upon which much political avant-garde thinking was based. Nevertheless, literary avant-garde writers like the symbolists who were influenced by Freud and developments in psychology and psychoanalysis in some respects extended the nineteenth-century scientific urge for a more ‘complete’ view of reality by extending their inquiry to the human mind. (This point, that aspects of

³⁹ Russell: 5.

⁴⁰ Russell: 5.

⁴¹ Habermas, ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project,’ in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983): 4.

avant-garde poetics, including symbolism, were actually embedded in nineteenth-century thinking, will have a bearing on our willingness to acknowledge the 'avant-garde' aspects of the poetics of Australian poets including Lesbia Harford and the Vision group.)

Important among the literary avant-garde strand of modernism were the 'symbolist' writers, Stephane Mallarmé and the American poet Wallace Stevens; as well as English and American poets such as D H Lawrence, Yeats, H D, and the late modernist or early 'postmodernist' poet, Charles Olson. While Mallarmé and Stevens looked to poetry for an expression of human yearning in the face of doubt and uncertainty, the latter poets showed an openness to alternative values and beliefs, reasserting a sense of optimism and vision which recalled aspects of Romanticism. In this sense, the latter poets represent what might be termed the 'neo-Romantic' strand of the literary avant-garde. Lawrence was interested in the changing understanding of human consciousness, seeing in Freud's model of the unconscious a chance of liberating repressed energies in an exciting and constructive way; Yeats and H D maintained a more overt tie to tradition: H D extended aspects of the early symbolist movement in her poetics, drawing also on the myths of ancient Egypt and Classical Greece for her analyses of representations of women; Yeats drew from a number of sources including symbolism, Eastern teachings, spiritualism, the occult, as well as Celtic and druidical traditions. Olson combined a critique of metaphysics with an 'anti-humanist' view of subjectivity in a poetic which stressed the primacy of energy and process. (These ideas, extended to include a view of the subject as an expression of universal consciousness, form the basis of the neo-Romantic poetics of a number of New Poets' work, and for this reason will be returned to later.) As art critic Harold Rosenberg commented in *The Tradition of the New*, the alternatives which the various literary avant-garde writers sought were wide-ranging:

Under the slogan, FOR A NEW ART, FOR A NEW REALITY, the most

ancient superstitions have been exhumed, the most primitive rites re-enacted: the rummage for generative forces has set African demon-masks in the temple of the Muses and introduced the fable of Zen and Hasidism into the dialogue of philosophy.⁴²

In practice, the poetics of these literary avant-garde writers overlapped considerably with high modernism. Both Eliot and Pound early in their careers, for example, were interested in Eastern philosophical and literary traditions, only later advocating more traditional Western views; while Yeats' later work and the work of D H Lawrence are often associated with the mood of high modernism. Importantly, while Pound's interest in Chinese poetry inspired a number of stylistic and linguistic innovations, as Wai-Lim Yip points out, the sense of Eastern spirituality, particularly the sense of the loss of self in relation to an awareness of the divine or 'transcendent,' was less important to his poetic. Yip lists the parallels between Chinese and Pound's poetry, recording shared features including:

(1) nonanalytical and nondiscursive [approach] giving rise to direct and concrete acting-out of things; (2) temporization of space and spatialization of time leading to co-extension of visual events, spatial tensions, pictorial and sculptural qualities; (3) syntactical flexibility and indeterminacy yielding a multiple suggestiveness; (4) non-linear, non-causal or multilinear and synchronic progression; (5) decrease or disruption of connectives to promote strong visuality, concreteness and independence of objects; (6) removal of the speaker (in different degrees and complexities) so as to allow the reader-viewer to participate in completing the aesthetic experience; (7) to view things as they are; [and] (8) the use of montage...to achieve a beauty consisting of overlays....⁴³

What is overt in Chinese poetry, but less apparent in Pound's, suggests Yip, is the sense of 'the diffusion of self into the Undifferentiated Whole, into the million changes of things.'⁴⁴ Thus, for the high modernist Pound, perhaps influenced by Fenollosa's partial reading of Buddhism, as Akiko Miyake suggests, there is little sense of the 'non-existence of the subjective Ego and the subsequent devoidness of

⁴² Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (1962; London: Granada, 1970): 23-24.

⁴³ Wai-Lim Yip, 'Modernism in Cross-Cultural Context,' *Proceedings of the XII Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association* (Munich: Iudiciumverlag, 1988): 381.

⁴⁴ Yip: 381.

the World of Buddhism.’⁴⁵ It is this more spiritual idea of reality and subjectivity, showing affinities with Eastern thinking, which tends to be stressed by a number of literary avant-garde writers and the neo-Romantic poets among the New Poetry group.

Just as important as the neo-Romantic poetic to twentieth-century Australian poetry is the kind of thinking associated with Mallarmé and Wallace Stevens. The symbolist poetic as exemplified in these poets’ work not only shows affinities with the ideas of Christopher Brennan early in the century, but also relates to the poetics of a number of New Poets, including Robert Adamson and Bruce Beaver. For these reasons, this strand of the literary avant-garde will be discussed here.

The term ‘symbolism’ is usually regarded as referring to a poetics of ‘presence,’ which ‘assumes that things of this world take on meaning only insofar as they are infused with “spirit” – the spirit of that God...or in the absence of such a God the human spirit as it projects itself into things.’⁴⁶ In this sense, symbolism is often portrayed as an extension, rather than a radical revision, of aspects of Romanticism. My reading of the symbolist aspects of Mallarmé’s and Stevens’ poetics, however, suggests that all such delineation of ‘spirit’ and ‘things’ is artificial, and that it is not the projection of the ‘self,’ but rather the actual process of perception which ‘creates’ the experience of things, which is important. Moreover, while Harald Mesch suggests that symbolism, like Romanticism, understands ‘the imaginative process as a function...of an absolute I, or of a transsubjective, metaphysical absolute,’⁴⁷ the symbolism which I see at work in Mallarmé’s and Stevens’ poetic suggests that the very term ‘metaphysical’ presents an unwarranted duality between what exists and what we perceive to exist. Only in regard to Mallarmé’s view of the ‘immortal word’ is the notion of the absolute

⁴⁵ Miyake, ‘Contemplation East and West: A Defense of Fenollosa’s Synthetic Language and its Influence on Ezra Pound,’ *Paideuma* 10 (1981): 540.

⁴⁶ Burton Hatlen, ‘Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, and the Poetics of Absence,’ *Sagetrieb* 1.1 (1982): 66. Hatlen notes the influence of Charles Altieri’s *Enlarging the Temple* on his understanding of symbolism.

⁴⁷ Mesch, ‘Meta-Hodos: Charles Olson’s “Science of the Path”,’ *Sagetrieb* 7.2 (1988): 15.

particularly problematic: while the ‘immortal word’ suggests the notion of the ‘Logos,’ it does not suggest a reality removed from everyday perception: rather, the notion of language and the perception of reality are seen to be fundamentally intertwined, in much the same way as they are in aspects of Hindu philosophy.

In his work Mallarmé was responding to a long period of Romanticism in French Poetry which he saw as having given way to ‘orgiastic excesses.’⁴⁸ As a reaction to these excesses Mallarmé suggested a project of reform which emphasised formalist aspects of writing, thus leading him to develop the kind of ‘writerly’ stylistic innovations which Barthes later noted in his work.⁴⁹ Whereas for Barthes, the idea of ‘play’ is central to writerly work, for Mallarmé, linguistic innovation is a means of conveying a sense of the divine, even if that divine can never be truly ‘known’ to exist. In this way, although he was reacting against Romanticism, Mallarmé continued to sustain the idea of the elevated role of the poet as ‘visionary’ and the purpose of poetry to awaken a sense of that vision in the reader. Central to Mallarmé’s project is a belief in the ‘immortal word,’⁵⁰ the ‘Logos,’ which thought may approach, and to which art seeks to give access. Writing, for Mallarmé, becomes a ‘silent flight of abstraction’⁵¹ which retains the trace of this ‘immortal word.’ The attempt to maximise this trace, and thereby to awaken in the reader a sense of the ‘divine,’ leads to an emphasis on form which mimics the kind of abstraction possible in music.

Mallarmé’s desire to recreate in words an experience which has its origin in a sense of the sublime leads him to emphasise form and stylistic innovation. Instead of the individual word, the diction of the poem, being all important, Mallarmé stresses the poetic line, the flow of words, their sensation, rather than their

⁴⁸ Mallarmé, in *Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. by Anthony Hartley (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1965): 161.

⁴⁹ See Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’: 143.

⁵⁰ Mallarmé: 166.

⁵¹ Mallarmé: 201-02.

semantic sense.⁵² Features such as the line, metre and also silences, represented by spaces on the page, are manipulated in an attempt to overcome the limitations of words. The poem is offered to the reader's 'divination,'⁵³ and the idea of the poet's 'voice' is subsumed within a poetic process which involves the reader's experience. This emphasis on process is seen to be a spiritual illumination in which the poet abandons his own position in favour of the mantric power of language:

The pure work implies the elocutory disappearance of the poet who abandons the initiative to words mobilized by the shock of their inequality; they light one another up with mutual reflections like a virtual trail of fire upon precious stones, replacing the breathing perceptible in the old lyrical blast or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase.⁵⁴

For Mallarmé, poetry is not simply *expression*; it becomes an act of *consciousness*, of intersubjectivity between reader and poet, since the poet is able to inspire in the reader a renewed and expanded sense of reality. Poetry, in terms of Mallarmé's poetic, for both writer and reader, is a liberation. The freedoms which this 'new' kind of poetry offer are numerous. The emphasis on free verse makes poetry freely available; everyone, according to Mallarmé, may discover the artist within: 'anyone with his individual execution and hearing can make himself an instrument as soon as he blows, touches, or strikes it with skill; can use it by himself and dedicate it too to the Language.... Each soul is a melody which must be taken up again; and to this end exist the flute and viol of each of us.'⁵⁵ Not only does Mallarmé respect, and hope to inspire, this creativity in everyone, he also sees a broader spiritual connection. In this sense, Mallarmé's attitude to 'Language' echoes that of Hindu thinking.

Beginning with the Vedic hymns, 'language was examined in relation to consciousness – consciousness not constricted even to human consciousness – and

⁵² Mallarmé: 166.

⁵³ Mallarmé: 169.

⁵⁴ Mallarmé: 171.

⁵⁵ Mallarmé: 165.

all aspects of the world and human experience were thought of as illuminated by language.⁵⁶ Moreover, according to the Vedic tradition, the experience of language is also the experience of the divine, since language and the divine are seen as one.⁵⁷ Similarly, for Mallarmé, reading poetry is a spiritual encounter, whereby language communicates the spirit (or experience of consciousness) of one person to another. This is a ‘magic concept of the Work’ about which he writes:

Some symmetry...which, from the position of the lines of verse in the poem is connected to the authenticity of the poem in the volume, flies, beyond the volume, to several who themselves inscribe on spiritual space the enlarged initials of genius, anonymous and perfect as the existence of art.⁵⁸

This ‘genius’ is not the individual Romantic artist; it is a shared, anonymous contract between the writer and reader wherever the language of poetry exists, so long as ‘that very simple thing called a soul...agrees to beat time faithfully to its flight according to an inborn revel or the recitation of some line of verse.’⁵⁹

When Mallarmé proposes the idea of the ‘*livre composé*,’ the living book which records the spiritual life of the poet, it is not intended to be a monument to the individual, a record of a particular poet; rather, through the poem, the poet records the spiritual life of humanity. Such a task, in Mallarmé’s view, is to attempt to create a democracy through poetry; instead of separate poets and poems ‘there might even be only one book – to the world its law.’⁶⁰ In this sense, Mallarmé celebrates the interconnectedness of the individual with all things; the poet’s task is to sing of ‘the sum of the relationships existing in everything.’⁶¹ Thus, although the individual ‘ego’ of the poet is not celebrated, nevertheless the kind of vision

⁵⁶ Harold Coward, ‘The Religious Significant of Language: The Example of the Vedas and the Indian Grammarians,’ *Mosaic* 13.2 (1980): 93.

⁵⁷ As Coward states, ‘In the Vedas, language is directly identified with the divine (Brahman). The *Rgveda* [3.6.1] states that there are as many words as there are manifestations of Brahman. Even in the more recent Hindu scriptures, the Aranyakas and Upanisads, there is a continued equating of speech and Brahman.’ (Coward: 94.)

⁵⁸ Mallarmé: 172.

⁵⁹ Mallarmé: 183.

⁶⁰ Mallarmé: 173.

⁶¹ Mallarmé: 174.

required by the poet is immense; the poet must be committed to establishing new views of human consciousness, language and the role of art. Consequently, he has no guidelines, only an immense task before him:

[E]verything in the world exists to end in a book. The qualities required in this work – most certainly genius – frighten me as one of those devoid of them: not to stop there, and granted that the volume requires no signatory, what is it? – the hymn of the connexions between all things, harmony, and joy, entrusted with seeing divinely because the bond, limpid at will, has no expression except in the parallelism of leaves of a book before his glance.⁶²

At the same time that Mallarmé recognises that the poet's task is of 'seeing divinely,' to sing the 'hymn of the connexions between all things, harmony, and joy,' he also acknowledges a certain scepticism in the reality of such an absolute or divine existence. Nevertheless, he asserts that even if such a belief were shown to be a fiction, the task of attempting to capture a sense of the divine in poetry is the highest aim of the poet:

The whole of my admiration goes to the Great Mage, inconsolate and obstinate seeker after a mystery which he does not know exists and which he will pursue, for ever on that account with the affliction of his lucid despair, for *it would have been the truth*....⁶³

Wallace Stevens adapted some aspects of Mallarmé's visionary poetic, but developed an even more sceptical emphasis. Like Mallarmé, Stevens emphasises the role of the reader, but instead of suggesting an interconnectedness of subjectivity, this elevation of the role of the reader is held to reflect the radically subjective, even 'fictional,' nature of reality: 'To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both.'⁶⁴ Thus reality can never be objective, since 'Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into.'⁶⁵ Whereas for Mallarmé, poetry is a liberation, since

⁶² Mallarmé: 189.

⁶³ This appears as an epigraph to Tranter's poem, 'Rimbaud and the Modernist Heresy' (Tranter, *Selected Poems*: 126).

⁶⁴ Stevens, 'Adagia,' in *Opus Posthumous* (c 1957), edited and introduced by Samuel French Morse (New York: A Knopf, 1980): 175.

⁶⁵ Stevens, 'Adagia': 178.

it opens the mind to a sense of the transcendent beyond the limited human individual, for Stevens poetry is liberating to the extent that it reflects the mind's construction of reality. This becomes both the praxis and the central theme of his work. 'The thing imagined is the imaginer,' he writes. 'The Imagination is the liberty of the mind and hence the liberty of reality.'⁶⁶

Significantly, Stevens is more wary than Mallarmé in using language which suggests transcendence, since he is careful to reject anything which suggests traditional notions of faith and belief. For Stevens concepts such as the 'soul,' as well as distinctions between good and evil, are 'fictions' which are maintained simply because they fulfil the human yearning for the transcendental and help to make life bearable.⁶⁷ Poetry for Stevens is, therefore, not the expression of divine 'truth,' but the expression of 'supreme' (with deliberate self-consciousness) 'fictions.'⁶⁸ While Mallarmé sees the poet as one 'entrusted with seeing divinely,' even if that divinity is shown to be a fiction, Stevens maintains: 'There is nothing in the world greater than reality.'⁶⁹ 'The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and also between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world.'⁷⁰

Stevens seems intuitively to sense the kind of reality suggested by some Buddhist thinking. As Akiko Miyake summarises:

For esoteric Buddhists the universe is...made of fluxes and interrelations.... What we consider facts are nothing but incessant interactions of numerous elements, causes and effects, whose perpetual motion is called *santana* of stream. Man's error and pains are caused when, misled by his desires, he believes in the reality of facts which are merely interacting relations. In the earliest hinayana Buddhism, to detach oneself from the flux and to reduce it to extinction or nirvana was the salvation. Nagarjuna, a Buddhist monk in South

⁶⁶ Stevens, 'Adagia': 178, 179.

⁶⁷ See Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words' in Scully: 128-29.

⁶⁸ Stevens proposes the 'possibility of a supreme fiction, recognised as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment.' Quoted in *Wallace Stevens*, by Lucy Beckett (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974): 1.

⁶⁹ Stevens, 'Adagia': 177.

⁷⁰ Stevens, 'Adagia': 162.

India about the first century, however, started a kind of dialectical criticism of this original Buddhism. Even though the flux of phenomena is unreal, it cannot be annihilated only by seeing it as unreal. If some transcendental reality must exist behind the flux, that reality should be neither the phenomena nor its denial. That inherent reality can be nothing but the dialectical synthesis of existence and non-existence....⁷¹

For Stevens, the 'supreme fiction' is the recognition of simultaneous existence and nonexistence. The 'appearance' of reality cannot be distinguished from 'reality' itself; and to assert a belief in some kind of transcendent reality which denies the experience of apparent reality is to set up an artificial duality. For the poet who is able to celebrate the apparent reality of sensuous existence and the (seemingly) transcendent reality of the 'divine' *as the one reality*, this insight is of paramount importance.

While refusing to describe his poetic in terms of transcendence, Stevens nevertheless affirms the special gifts of the poet: 'Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible to the poet, or, say, the acutest poet.'⁷² Despite Stevens' scepticism regarding the transcendent and 'absolutes,' therefore, he sees poetry as having a life-affirming and celebratory role: 'Poetry increases the feeling for reality,' he suggests; it is a 'renovation of experience,' and its purpose is 'to contribute to man's happiness.'⁷³ Thus, although there are differences between the poetics of the two poets, both Mallarmé and Stevens share the view that poetry adds to humanity's potential, not only in helping to bear the horror and uncertainty of 'modern' life, but also in changing one's consciousness, and ameliorating suffering by offering something worthwhile in its place.

The poetics of poets such as Mallarmé and Stevens and the neo-Romantic modernists, their continued faith in the power of poetry and the 'vision' of the poet

⁷¹ This summary appears in a somewhat different context, but the relevance to Stevens' poetic remains. See Miyake: 533-570.

⁷² Stevens, 'Adagia': 166.

⁷³ Stevens, 'Adagia': 177, 168.

which recalls aspects of Romanticism, suggest that the various expressions of modernism were not confined to the kind of doubt, pessimism and uncertainty associated with high modernism. Thus, modernism can be seen as a broad matrix which includes a range of sometimes fundamentally conflicting poetics, both optimistic and pessimistic. Discussions of early and mid-twentieth-century Australian poets' response to modernism, however, have tended to equate modernism with the moods and themes of high modernism, thus downplaying more optimistic responses. They have also tended to gloss over the question of the centrality of stylistic innovation to the modernist project. The resulting view of modernism as reflecting the moods and themes of high modernism without stylistic innovation provides the dominant construction of the notion of the 'modern' in Australian literary discourse.

Julian Croft, both in his discussion, 'Responses to Modernism,' in *The New Literary History of Australia*,⁷⁴ and in an earlier essay,⁷⁵ is one recent critic to have suggested that modernism can be viewed as containing two separable elements: firstly, stylistic innovation and experimentation; and secondly, a specific mood which conveys Australian poets' response to the various conceptual changes of the modernist period which register a threat to traditional values. If this division is incorporated into a broad definition of modernism, argues Croft, then the idea that earlier Australian poetry was resistant to modernism must be revised. In terms of the mood or themes of modernism, Croft maintains, a definite impact was felt in Australian poetry early on in the century:

[T]he opinion which sees the response in Australia to modernism as delayed is wrong. If one looks only for the *stylistic* features of modernist poetry, then that would appear to be the case.... However, in terms of content, of prevailing *mood*, of the imaginative processing of current ideas in psychology, physics, and politics, our poets took up the challenge....⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Croft, 'Responses': 409-29.

⁷⁵ Croft, 'Poetry of the Nineteen Thirties,' *Westerly* 31.4 (1986): 84-93.

⁷⁶ Croft, 'Poetry': 85 (emphasis added).

Croft's description of the 'mood' or conceptual response to modernism emphasises the characteristics of high modernism, 'concentration on interior states, the depiction of alienated consciousnesses, a concern with the limitations of language, and the total uncertainty in an agnostic age,' which he says were clearly in evidence in Australian poetry in the late 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁷ Although Croft acknowledges that Australian modernism tends in fact to be generally less pessimistic than other expressions of modernism,⁷⁸ the equation of modernism with the moods and themes of high modernism is typical of criticism which discusses the 'modern' element of Australian poetry, a formulation which has included most of the mainstream, canonical figures of twentieth-century poetry. While in a few cases, such as in the work of Kenneth Slessor and Frank Wilmot, a degree of stylistic innovation has been noted, the dominant critical view reinforces this equation.

In 1930 literary historian H M Green stressed the stylistically modern element of Slessor's work as well as the tone of high modernism, emphasising the unemotional craftsmanship and anti-Romanticism of his poetry. Green saw Slessor as having joined the 'intellectualists,' Eliot and Pound:

There is the same determination to avoid anything like Romanticism, the same solution of poetic convention as regards imagery and rhythm, the same preference for idea over emotion, the same sophisticated, drily humorous atmosphere, and the same, one would almost say, deliberate obscurity.⁷⁹

For critics since then, Slessor's modernism has been portrayed predominantly in thematic terms. As Andrew Taylor remarks, for most critics of Slessor's work, modernism is defined in general terms as 'a reaction to the growing chaos of modern life.'⁸⁰ By the late 1950s, the themes which occupied Slessor had become the standard reading of the 'modern' in Australian criticism. A typical view was

⁷⁷ Croft, 'Responses': 411.

⁷⁸ Croft writes that 'much of the [Australian] response to the uncertainty of the early twentieth-century was a celebration of a meaning beyond mere deterministic explanation' ('Responses': 412).

⁷⁹ Green, *An Outline of Australian Literature* (Sydney & Melbourne: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1930): 181.

⁸⁰ Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*: 54. Taylor is one of the few critics whose comments regarding the modern element of Slessor's work attempt to go beyond this notion.

given by J D Pringle in his 1958 study, *Australian Accent*: according to Pringle, Slessor's poetry 'echoed that despair about the tragic destiny of man, alone in a world without faith, which is the dominant theme of all contemporary Western poetry.'⁸¹ Vivian Smith too portrays Slessor's modernism as being dominated by high modernist despair, the aporia of the loss of certainty and faith: 'Slessor was aware from the beginning of the fragility and fragmentation of modern life. For him there were no absolutes and poetry could not be a forum for the expression of moral certitudes or national pieties.'⁸² Smith argues that the essence of Slessor's modernism is that his work gives a 'vivid sense of contemporary images expressed in the present-day idiom of a man living in a godless universe.'⁸³ Judith Wright traces Slessor's preoccupation with time and death, the flux of experience, and the problems of communication back to the influence of Nietzsche, seeing Slessor's work as representative of 'the whole solipsist problem of modern man.'⁸⁴ 'In the end,' argues Wright,

what Slessor tells us is that humanity is chaotically fragmented, isolated, unable to communicate with anything other than itself; (and communication between individuals is equally fragmentary and chaotic, subject to the whim of time and death).⁸⁵

Wright's negative comments are typical of the criticism often aimed at high modernism in Australian literary discourse. As well as promoting the general view of modernism as 'pessimistic' or nihilistic, such criticism has tended to reinforce the reputation of Australian poets and critics of Wright's generation as 'anti-modernist.'⁸⁶

⁸¹ Pringle, *Australian Accent* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958): 139.

⁸² Vivian Smith, 'Poetry,' in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981): 351.

⁸³ Smith, 'Poetry': 351.

⁸⁴ Wright, 'Kenneth Slessor – Romantic and Modern,' in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965; Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966): 147.

⁸⁵ Wright, *Preoccupations*: 156.

⁸⁶ In *Rebels and Precursors*, Richard Haese discusses anti-modernism in regard to J S McDonald: 4; Meldrum: 10; and Albert Tucker: 90-91. For a sample of the type of debate on the negative aspects of modernism in art which was still going on in the fifties, see J P Kenny, 'Is Modern Art Dehumanized?' *Meanjin* 16 (1957): 281-285 and Lloyd Rees, 'Is Modern Art Dehumanized?' *Meanjin* 17 (1958): 89-91.

Whereas discussion of Slessor's work has tended to concentrate on the sense of loss of traditional values in a 'godless world,' criticism of Frank Wilmot's poetry has been more diffuse. A few critics have noted Wilmot's (modest) stylistic innovations and his support for modernist poetry: in 1952 T Inglis Moore wrote that Wilmot 'will be remembered partly for his services as an importer and distributor of modernist forms';⁸⁷ while Harry Heseltine saw Wilmot's 'willingness to entertain ideas and juggle them in a deliberately "anti-poetical" diction' as ranking him 'among the first of the "Moderns"'.⁸⁸ However, more often than not, critics have stressed the modern 'tone' of Wilmot's work. An unsigned review of *Melbourne Odes* in 1935 which referred to Wilmot's preface as a 'Manifesto of Modernism in Australia,' for example, commented on Wilmot's tone as both 'savagely ironical' and exhibiting 'modern flippancy';⁸⁹ and in a tribute to Wilmot after his death in 1942, influential poet and critic Vance Palmer described Wilmot's tone as 'modern, hesitating, sardonic'.⁹⁰ Thus, even in regard to those poets most often associated with modernist stylistic innovation, the dominant view of modernism has been in terms of the moods and themes of high modernism.⁹¹

Many other twentieth-century Australian poets have been described by critics in similar terms. Croft has described Christopher Brennan's 'depiction of the inner state of the alienated psyche' as 'quintessentially modern';⁹² Ken Goodwin traces an attenuated modernism in R D FitzGerald's 'Heemskerck Shoals,' saying that it creates 'the impression of a mind communing with itself rather than with the

⁸⁷ Moore, 'Frank Wilmot as "Fumley Maurice"', *Southerly* 12 (1951): 29.

⁸⁸ Heseltine, introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* (1972; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1979): 45.

⁸⁹ *The Australian Mercury*, Jun. 1935: 90, 92.

⁹⁰ Vance Palmer, 'Frank Wilmot (Fumley Maurice),' *Australian Quarterly* 14.2 (1942): 60. Wright gives a much less sympathetic reading of Wilmot's achievement in her discussion, 'Fumley Maurice: the peril of the common way' (originally delivered to the English Department, University of Queensland, 1969; printed in *Because I was Invited* [Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975]: 107-114). Still, Wright does acknowledge the progressive, even 'avant-garde' aspects of Wilmot's ideas: 114.

⁹¹ The contribution of Slessor and Wilmot to the conservatism of Australian poets' response to modernist stylistic innovations will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁹² Croft, 'Responses': 413.

listener';⁹³ G A Wilkes has seen FitzGerald's 'The Face of the Waters' as a modern philosophy of existence presented in traditional form;⁹⁴ Judith Wright has argued that William Baylebridge exemplifies 'The Modern Problem';⁹⁵ while Vivian Smith has argued that Wright's own work shows a 'self-conscious modernity'⁹⁶ which gives one 'a vivid sense of the chaotic modern world with all its personal, social and historical conflicts.'⁹⁷

This equation of modernism with the moods and themes of high modernism has allowed some intriguing literary conundrums to arise. The extreme case has been put by Heseltine, who has argued that much Australian literature from the late nineteenth century on can be read as 'modern' because of its qualities of 'inwardness,' 'reflexivity' and self-consciousness.⁹⁸ More intriguing is the view which regards the mid-century, anti-modernist poets as 'modern.' A D Hope, for example, describes his own work and the work of the 'university' poets of the fifties, including reputed anti-modernist James McAuley, as inheritors of the mainstream modern tradition, noting particularly the influence of Eliot on the group's 'intellectual quality,' and its 'serious preoccupation with ideas.'⁹⁹ Hope saw these poets' work as stemming 'from the general literary tradition of Europe...Rilke, Hölderlin, Mörike, Mallarmé, Valéry, Baudelaire and Leconte de Lisle, Hopkins, Yeats, Dylan Thomas and W H Auden....'¹⁰⁰ Significantly, Hope's depiction of this international heritage is in contrast to what was considered mainstream Australian poetry at the time: the traditional ballad style which had

⁹³ Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986): 114.

⁹⁴ Wilkes, *Australian Literature: A Conspectus*, Foundations for Australian Literary Studies, Townsville, Monograph 2 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969): 109.

⁹⁵ Wright, 'William Baylebridge and the Modern Problem,' *Southerly* 16 (1955): 139-146.

⁹⁶ Smith, 'Poetry': 397.

⁹⁷ Smith, 'Poetry': 400. A poet to have recently been linked to modernism is Shaw Neilson, whose symbolist work Robert Gray regards as 'modernist.' See Gray, ed., *Shaw Neilson: Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993): 36.

⁹⁸ See Heseltine, 'Australian Image 1: The Literary Heritage,' *Meanjin* 21 (1962): 35-49, and *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* (1972; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1979).

⁹⁹ Hope, *Australian Literature 1950-1962* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963): 6.

¹⁰⁰ Hope, *Australian Literature*: 6.

dominated since the 1890s. In his view, the 'modern' work of the mid-century poets was more internationalist in outlook and academic in flavour. Yet Hope, like Auden, rarely abandons rhyme or traditional, classical verse structures; and, as importantly, like McAuley, he promotes a return to traditional values.¹⁰¹

On the one hand, the apparent inconsistency which allows poets with clearly reactionary, even anti-modernist, sentiments to be seen as 'modern' seems to suggest the inadequacy of seeing modernism in conceptual terms alone; on the other hand, if we accept the idea that modernist ideas and themes can be separated from modernist innovation, we must question critics' tendency to restrict the idea of the modern to the moods and themes of high modernism. Such a tendency tends to disregard a number of other poets who might, in conceptual terms at least, be considered as 'avant-garde.' The argument to extend the notion of the 'modern' in regard to early and mid-century Australian poetry to include poets who exhibit a greater degree of 'neo-Romantic' optimism, and thus support the view that Australian poets before the New Poetry were not as resistant to the concepts of modernism as Tranter believes, will provide the focus for the following two chapters.

¹⁰¹ Chapter 3 will look at the anti-modernist poetics of Hope and McAuley in detail.

Chapter 2. Extending the ‘Modern’ I: Christopher Brennan and Lesbia Harford

As we have seen, the term ‘avant-garde’ is an umbrella term which incorporates many different, often opposing, aspects of modernism which came to the fore in Europe before the First World War and continued in various forms throughout the century. Both individual ‘literary’ avant-garde writers and the more political avant-garde movements displayed a sense of neo-Romantic optimism, regarding the role of the poet as a rebel figure, going against the accepted mores of the day in the hope of providing an alternative to traditional values. In both strands of the avant-garde in European and American poetry, this project was rarely distinct from radical stylistic experimentation. The necessary link between stylistic innovation and radical conceptual views has been stressed by some critics. According to Russell, for example, the avant-garde poet is not only someone who ‘adopts an explicitly critical attitude toward, and asserts its distance from, the dominant values of that culture’ but also, ‘most essentially,’ ‘explores through *aesthetic innovation* the possibilities of creating new art forms and languages which will bring forth new modes of perceiving, expressing, and acting.’¹ However, if we follow Croft’s example in distinguishing between those modernists who responded conceptually to the changes of the modern period and those who incorporated stylistic innovation in their work, then a number of early twentieth-century Australian poets and groups, including Christopher Brennan, Lesbia Harford, the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks, can be considered as ‘avant-garde.’

Until recently, the only group to have been recognised as avant-garde in Australian poetry is the Angry Penguins group of the late thirties and early forties. The writers associated with the *Angry Penguins* magazine, edited by poet Max Harris, were self-conscious importers of European modernist forms and ideas, who

¹ Russell: 4 (emphasis added).

were influenced by a range of modernist movements, writers and artists, including surrealism, as well as 'Mallarmé, Proust, Faulkner, Lautréamont, Kafka, Braque, Miro, Klee, the writings of Croce, Herbert Read...Dylan Thomas and so on.'² When Harris wrote about the group in 1963, he noted the Angry Penguins' affinities with American West Coast writers of the early sixties who were reviving the neo-Romantic optimism of the early avant-gardes:

For these modernists passion, brio, and Romantic obsession are enough: form, organization, and a disciplined concept of literary communication are either irrelevant, haphazard, or secondary.

To a large extent the same kind of thing could be said about the fierce experimentalism of Australia's *Angry Penguins*.³

However, the Angry Penguins were not the first twentieth-century Australian poets to have responded with a similar optimistic energy and neo-Romantic 'vision' to that of the early literary avant-garde writers. Although earlier Australian writers were not as open to the stylistic innovations of modernism as the Angry Penguins group, they did respond to some of the central debates of modernism, some in a self-consciously affirmative or radically progressive way, others with thinking that was well ahead of its time. Among the first of these writers was Christopher Brennan.

In most critical discussions, Christopher Brennan's work has either been regarded as a late Romantic nostalgia for a lost 'Eden,'⁴ or as an early expression of high modernism. According to Julian Croft,

if modernism's subject matter is a depiction of the inner state of the alienated psyche, and, as Edmund Wilson has argued, modernism is also an extension of symbolism, then Brennan's poetry...is quintessentially modern.⁵

Fay Zwicky too remarks that Brennan 'gave us a formula for the disintegrating

² Harris, 'Angry Penguins and After: A Contribution to our Literary History,' *Quadrant* 7.1 (1963): 6.

³ Harris, 'Angry Penguins and After': 6.

⁴ James McAuley suggests Brennan's main concern is a 'lost paradisaical condition of innocence and joy' (*Christopher Brennan* [Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973]: 4). McAuley links Brennan to Romantic aesthetics, particularly Brennan's view of the 'imagination' which owes a debt to Coleridge (see Brennan, *Prose* ed. A R Chisholm and J J Quinn [Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962]: 14).

⁵ Croft, 'Responses': 413.

consciousness at a time when, for most people, God was still in his heaven and all was very nearly right with the world.’⁶ Yet, Zwicky suggests, Brennan’s ‘formula’ was undeveloped: in her opinion, Brennan only had ‘a remote and glancing perception of the fragmentation of modern consciousness.’⁷ James McAuley characterises Brennan’s interests in terms of what he saw as a kind of high modernist despair: ‘Brennan writes of man’s intrinsic longing for the paradisaical condition, and how this “paradisaical instinct” is frustrated in our modern industrial cities of damnation.’⁸ Andrew Taylor, on the other hand, refuses to see Brennan as a modernist; for Taylor, Brennan’s lack of concern for the everyday world is evidence that the poet was in fact a Romantic, advocating a Platonic ‘Ideal.’ Taylor argues:

For Brennan to have become a modernist he would have had to transform his sense of a lost (unattainable) perfection into a concern for chaos and order, his nostalgia for the Absolute into concern for the contingent, his idealist and archaic vocabulary into a precise nomination of ‘things as they are.’⁹

Whereas Croft, Zwicky and McAuley characterise the modern element of Brennan’s work in terms of high modernism, for Taylor, modernism suggests an *acceptance* of uncertainty, a mood which some critics regard as more characteristic of postmodernism.¹⁰ If we take the view that modernism encompasses the neo-Romantic optimism of the literary avant-garde writers, however, then another reading of Brennan’s contribution becomes possible. In so far as Brennan’s ‘nostalgia for the Absolute’ leads not to a return to traditional values, but to a search for alternative values, his thinking *is*, to use Croft’s phrase, ‘quintessentially

⁶ Zwicky, ‘Gallic Sanction’: 98.

⁷ Zwicky, ‘Gallic Sanction’: 92.

⁸ McAuley, *Christopher Brennan*: 16. One wonders if Brennan’s Sydney of the turn of the century actually qualifies for a ‘modern industrial city’: certainly this quotation gives an insight into McAuley’s own sense of alarm.

⁹ Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*: 42-43. For other critical commentaries on Brennan’s work see also G A Wilkes, *New Perspectives on Brennan’s Poetry* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1953); A D Hope, ‘Christopher Brennan: An Interpretation’ in *Native Companions: Essays and Comments on Australian Literature 1936-1966* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974): 140-160.

¹⁰ Wilde: 17.

modern.'

Brennan's modernist thinking can be demonstrated by examining his views of consciousness as they were presented in a paper delivered to a meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1898, a delivery which has been printed in essay form as 'Fact and Idea.'¹¹ As this paper shows, Brennan was interested in recent developments in psychology; he rejected the humanist subject of the Enlightenment, with its valorisation of the rational powers of the mind; and he also rejected the Platonic 'Ideal' with its privileging of the abstract over the physical. His 'nostalgia for the Absolute' promoted an interest in altered states of consciousness which reflects both the 'evolutionary philosophy' of F C S Schiller, and, in a more removed sense, Hindu philosophy. Importantly, Brennan was critical of the mechanistic view of the world of science, with its teleology of rationalism, and rejected particularly the notions of objective 'fact,' 'truth' and 'knowledge.' In this, he foreshadowed the developments in science which were soon to revolutionise twentieth-century thinking, the anti-absolutist stance of the poststructuralists, and developments in psychoanalytic thinking. In relation to art, Brennan dismissed utilitarian notions, and rejected traditional moral or religious bases for poetry, advocating instead a pure aesthetic which he defended against the tag of 'art for art's sake.' Finally, like Mallarmé (with whom he corresponded) and Stevens later in the century, he advocated the elevation of the role of the reader in producing the poem's meaning. Despite the fact, therefore, that his work does not reflect radical stylistic innovation, these elements suggest that Brennan, in conceptual terms at least, may be considered as a literary avant-garde writer.

Brennan's argument in 'Fact and Idea' was both a contribution to scientific thinking of the day and a rebuttal of the emphasis of nineteenth-century thinking on rationalism, positivism and empiricism. In this paper, Brennan criticises scientific

¹¹ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea,' in *Christopher Brennan, Portable Australian Authors Series*, edited and introduced by Terry L Sturm (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. Queensland Press, 1984): 187-96. The date is the one given by Sturm: 452.

method, which he says relies on ‘human procedure,’ and challenges the notion of ‘fact’ as that which can be seen in observable reality. Brennan’s argument fits into a broader movement of reaction against realism and naturalism of which symbolism was a part, and thus can be seen as a valid response to the complexity of modernism. In order that the subtlety of Brennan’s argument in this essay may be fully appreciated, it is necessary to expand on this background.

In the introduction to the anthology *Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism*,¹² Roland Stromberg traces nineteenth-century European thinking from realism and naturalism through to symbolism. Symbolism, argues Stromberg, can be seen as a reaction against the emphasis on science which accompanied the two related earlier movements. Realism, in reaction to the primacy of the imagination in Romanticism, had seen a shift toward science, or ‘scientism’: ‘the view that scientific knowledge is the only valid kind, and can solve all human problems.’¹³ This attitude had led Ernest Renan to announce in ‘The Future of Science (1848-1849)’: ‘The true world which science reveals to us is much superior to the fantastic world created by the imagination.’¹⁴ The belief that ‘truths should be observable, experimentally verifiable, clear, exact, and, in addition, show...the unalterable law governing the universe’¹⁵ was applied not only to inanimate nature but to humanity also. Novelists, dramatists and poets alike were influenced by the belief that ‘man is a creature determined by physical laws and is subject to scientific investigation exactly as material objects and animals are.’¹⁶ Edmund Wilson has argued in his study, *Axel’s Castle*, that symbolism was an effort aimed at recuperating aspects of Romanticism against the influence of these views, in particular the energies of the psyche which had been celebrated by Romantic poets. At the same time, while it is

¹² Roland N Stromberg, *Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968): xi.

¹³ Stromberg: xi.

¹⁴ Quoted in Stromberg: 25.

¹⁵ Stromberg: xi.

¹⁶ Stromberg: xx.

possible to see symbolism as a reaction against realism and naturalism, it must be recognised that the symbolists' interest in psychology and psychoanalysis in some ways complemented the earlier scientific concerns. Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious, for example, was inspired by a desire to take reality more fully into account, including the reality not readily observed. As Stromberg points out, Freud was in fact 'a thoroughly naturalistic scientist who explained the deeper workings of the human psyche in the language of physical forces and laws.... [He] saw himself as standing in the line of Copernicus, Newton, and Darwin, extending their methods to the hitherto mysterious inner world.'¹⁷ This belief in a more comprehensive realism was echoed by later modernist writers: behind the criticisms of realism and naturalism by Proust and Woolf was the suggestion that writers following these traditions ignored 'true reality, that of the interior mind.'¹⁸ In this sense, the symbolists' views were not such a radical break from previous nineteenth-century thinking as they might first appear.

In 'Fact and Idea,' Brennan contributes to this ongoing debate, setting forth his views on human consciousness and scientific procedure. For Brennan, consciousness involves three 'phases': 'primary,' 'Reflection' and 'direct' consciousness. In the first, 'primary' phase of consciousness, the one experienced by the child, 'the subjective aspect has not yet become object';¹⁹ that is, the human subject has not yet distinguished itself as separate from the world around it. In the third phase of consciousness, 'direct' consciousness, the subject is divided and separated from the object. It is the second phase of consciousness which Brennan calls 'the decisive mode':

The phase of consciousness which yields us subject and object as inseparable aspects of the one phenomenon is technically known as Reflection. *Cogitatur* – it is known, it thinks....²⁰

¹⁷ Stromberg: 180.

¹⁸ Stromberg: xvi-xvii.

¹⁹ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 188.

²⁰ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 188.

Here, '*Cogitatur*' is distinguished from *cogito*, the 'I think' of direct consciousness.²¹

In modern psychoanalytic terms, the first phase of consciousness, 'primary,' is what Freud called the 'pre-Oedipal,' and what Lacan has termed the 'Imaginary.' Toril Moi gives an account of this stage in her study, *Sexual/Textual Politics*:

The Imaginary corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child believes itself to be a part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world. In the Imaginary there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence.²²

The third phase of consciousness, 'direct consciousness,' relates to Freud's Oedipal phase, or, in Lacanian terms, entry into the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order is 'the social and signifying order governing culture.'²³ In this phase the subject defines itself as separate from the other and gives up 'the claim to imaginary identity with all other possible positions.'²⁴ Entry into the Symbolic Order involves a repression of desire for the Imaginary which 'splits' the subject, creating the unconscious: 'this means that it is the primary repression of the desire for symbiotic unity with the mother that *creates* the unconscious.'²⁵

By outlining these two phases of consciousness Brennan shows quite advanced thinking; but his theories seem to go even further than Freud's or Lacan's, and to restrict it simply to this level of understanding is to misunderstand his emphasis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud posits death, or Nirvana, as the only way to 'heal' the split subject. For both Freud and Lacan, in this life we have lost forever our sense of unity with the mother and the world. If we restrict Brennan's view of consciousness to this kind of understanding we derive an understanding similar to Andrew Taylor's. Taylor sees Brennan's desire for Eden and 'nostalgia for the

²¹ There are some similarities to be found in Brennan's view of consciousness and that proposed by current psychoanalytic theory. Taylor is one critic who has made this connection, though his emphasis is different from the one I give here. See Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry*: 44-45.

²² Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985): 99.

²³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989): xxii.

²⁴ Moi: 99.

²⁵ Moi: 101.

Absolute' as a desire to overcome the subject/object division, and to reclaim the 'pre-Symbolic' order.²⁶ According to this reading, Brennan's project is doomed, because once having entered the Symbolic the subject has to stay there: 'it has no choice: to remain in the Imaginary is equivalent to becoming psychotic and incapable of living in human society.'²⁷ But in suggesting a third stage of consciousness, that of Reflection, Brennan goes further, positing an achievable state similar to the meditative experience described in Eastern transcendentalism, a state which achieves a 'correspondence between the inner world and the outer world.'²⁸ For Brennan, the subject in Reflection occupies that space which recognises itself as other, but not as separate from the other. While 'direct' consciousness occurs with the acquisition of language, Brennan maintains that Reflection is also involved in a signifying process (which he refers to as 'knowing').²⁹ Since this process is also the basis of 'human procedure,' which Brennan criticises along with the limitations of scientific thought, the complexities of Brennan's view of the 'knowing' process should be touched on here.

For Brennan, humanity's desire to attain knowledge is an indication of a 'longing for stability.'³⁰ The existence of error in scientific procedure, however, suggests that this knowledge can never be absolute; the reason for this is that humanity is part of that which it seeks to understand. In expressing this view, Brennan challenged the prevailing scientific thinking of his time with its optimistic view of progress and faith in an ever more comprehensive view of reality. Brennan attempts to refute the views of the scientists by taking up the issue of 'facts,' a central feature of scientific knowledge in terms of observable reality. He makes a

²⁶ *Reading Australian Poetry*: 44-45.

²⁷ *Moi*: 100.

²⁸ Macainsh, 'Christopher Brennan and "Die Romantik",' *Southerly* 23 (1963): 157.

²⁹ In this sense, Brennan's 'Reflection' is like Kristeva's 'Chora,' whose rhythms and pulsions defy the language of the Symbolic. See Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980): 26.

³⁰ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 189.

distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘Fact’ (a distinction which has led Taylor and others to the view that he is advocating some version of the Platonic ‘Ideal’). According to Brennan, simple ‘facts’ are known in ‘direct’ consciousness, and by discounting the subjective aspect of knowledge such facts are necessarily limited. The apprehension of facts in ‘direct’ consciousness is predicated on an idea of space: ‘knower is here and known is there, distinct and divisible.’³¹ What Brennan considers to be ‘knowledge’ of ‘Fact,’ however, occurs in the stage of Reflection, in which ‘knower and known are united, distinct but indivisible, mutually necessary and inseparable.’³² By insisting on the importance of Reflection, Brennan challenges the primacy of ‘direct consciousness,’ the site of Cartesian reason, as the chief mode of signification. In thus undermining the autonomy of the knowing subject of rationalism, Brennan also undermines the notion of ‘objective’ thought. There is no such thing as objective knowledge, argues Brennan, since ‘Fact,’ rather than ‘facts,’ necessarily includes the subjective component:

The Fact is not the object alone – to make the mere object the fact is already a human process – and contains not merely feeling as awareness, but feeling as emotion; for an emotion is the subjective aspect of the object....³³

For Brennan such a view of knowledge rebuts the privileging by science of observable ‘facts’ over and above the products of the imagination, or the products of other states of consciousness.³⁴ Since scientific discourse ignores the subjective element of knowledge, ‘human procedure,’ which coincides with both scientific method and the process of conceptualisation in ‘direct’ consciousness, is necessarily limited. It is also ‘motivated’ by the intentions and feelings of the observer.³⁵

For Brennan, since an object does not exist independently of a subject, the

³¹ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 187.

³² Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 187.

³³ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 189.

³⁴ As Kristeva points out, ‘Scientific discourse...tends to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component’ (*Desire in Language*: 134).

³⁵ This view foreshadows Schrödinger’s ‘measurement paradox’ which will be referred to in Chapter 5.

knowledge of that object is influenced by the *interests* of the subject; thus ‘man shapes reality for himself....’³⁶ In this way of looking at reality, knowledge can only ever be provisional:

Standpoints – from many such do we deal with the world after our separation of its subjective and objective aspects. Each point of view is arbitrary: it is a strategic position of a certain interest...directing the attention towards its object.³⁷

According to Brennan, our ‘human procedure’ is equivalent to a ‘voluntary modification of the world’ – intellectual, moral and aesthetic – which is ‘equivalent to a recreation.’³⁸ Human procedure reduces knowledge to concepts, and from these concepts proposes laws, with the aim of expressing a ‘knowledge’ of the world. But this reductive approach leads circularly to a desire for the ‘fuller fact,’ something which was denied in the process of reduction:

One procedure – that of the intellect with regard to spatial perception, otherwise material bodies – demands...attention. The bodies are regarded as apart from all human feeling; and their properties are measured by certain standards of space and time – standards absolute only in so far as they are purely arbitrary.

They being converted into concepts, the concepts of their interaction (otherwise laws) are sought, with this aim – to reduce them to a unity: an ideal, is it not?³⁹

Brennan’s conclusion is to reject scientific knowledge as an inadequate model; but he does not propose an alternative ‘Absolute’; rather, he (tentatively) suggests that knowledge can only ever be provisional:

Is it that reality depends on man and his search for it? Or is it that the unreal, the misleading, the erroneous, which we gradually set aside, are the only actual world; that man never comes into touch with the true reality; that he must seek another real – or another error – which will better suit him – his interests?⁴⁰

Interestingly, in terms of advanced, ‘avant-garde’ thinking, Brennan’s ideas

³⁶ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 189.

³⁷ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 190.

³⁸ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 191.

³⁹ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 191.

⁴⁰ Brennan, ‘Fact and Idea’: 189.

concerning error foreshadow Derridean deconstruction theory: his refutation of the possibility of absolute knowledge suggests Derrida's rejection of the 'transcendental signifier,' while the positing of Reflection as the phase of consciousness which unites the oppositional phases of primary and direct consciousness is similar to the Derridean idea of 'displacement.'⁴¹

Like deconstruction theory, Brennan's critique of scientific knowledge amounts to a critique of the metaphysics of the 'ideal' of Platonism. The same criticism which Brennan gives of the notion of 'truth' in science he makes of the limitations of positing a Platonic 'Ideal' of 'Truth': according to Brennan, what is revealed is not some absolute, but 'a mark of [humanity's] need for an Absolute,'⁴² a view which has affinities with Mallarmé's and Stevens' positing of the 'fictional' divine. According to Brennan, the desire for both scientific truth and Platonic 'Truth' is 'the last ineradicable assumption, presumption, or delusion of humanity.'⁴³ Elsewhere, he asserts, 'Truth and good...are not ultimates.'⁴⁴

Brennan's view of consciousness suggests that there is a fundamental paradox in the scientific and the Platonic views of the world, and he sees the intellectual processes which encourage the formulation of these views as the essential human tragedy: the isolation of the perceiving subject from its originary unity with the world. This 'fall' from unity is not to be seen simply in terms of some lapse in the past (although humanity's original fall and loss of Eden may *symbolise* it⁴⁵): it is an essential phase of consciousness as we know it – the 'most decisive' phase, in Brennan's view. The 'Eden' which occupies so much of Brennan's thought, therefore, is not a Golden Age situated in an actual historical past or a Utopian

⁴¹ See Jonathan Culler's discussion of Derrida's ideas in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), Chapter 2.

⁴² Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 193.

⁴³ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 193.

⁴⁴ Brennan, *Prose*: 171.

⁴⁵ This view differs significantly from McAuley's reading which to a large extent portrays Brennan's work in similar terms to Taylor, as a nostalgia for a lost innocence, before the (literal) fall of 'man.'

future: it is a stage of consciousness, a state of mind, a mystical experience or meditation, one that is available to all humanity, but which is usually denied to the mind because of the process of our rational intellectualising. For Brennan one way of achieving this state is through poetry and the contemplation of Beauty. Importantly, Brennan's view of 'Beauty' here is broad, since it depends on the perceiver to recognise it; he acknowledges that the commonplace and even the sordid can be 'beautiful' in art, a view which echoes Baudelaire's poetic.⁴⁶ In this way art becomes a more complete expression of 'knowledge' (though no more 'absolute') than science.

In the development of his view of consciousness, Brennan was influenced both by the thinking of F C S Schiller, who proposed an 'evolutionary pragmatism' which saw 'man' as 'on the way to himself,'⁴⁷ and a mediated influence of Eastern philosophy. According to Axel Clark, Brennan most likely read Schopenhauer,⁴⁸ who in turn was influenced by Vedic and Buddhist traditions,⁴⁹ and James McAuley has noted in passing the influence of Hinduism on *The Burden of Tyre*, Poem XIV.⁵⁰ Though this is insufficient evidence to suggest that Brennan's ideas were directly influenced by the views of Eastern transcendental traditions, there are obvious affinities between what he describes as moving from direct consciousness to Reflection and the yogic idea of penetrating the veil of Maya and the experience of the transcendent in meditation.⁵¹

Like the symbolists, Brennan sought to reproduce a meditative experience in his work; while he did not regard himself as a symbolist,⁵² he would nevertheless have

⁴⁶ Brennan, *Prose*: 171.

⁴⁷ Brennan, *Prose*: 165.

⁴⁸ Axel Clark, *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1980): 99.

⁴⁹ See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Vol II, Fichte to Nietzsche* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963).

⁵⁰ McAuley, *Christopher Brennan*: 34.

⁵¹ For a description of the Hindu meditation tradition see Swami Muktananda's, *Play of Consciousness* (1971; South Fallsberg, N Y: SYDA, 1978) and *Secrets of the Siddhas* (South Fallsberg, N Y: SYDA, 1980).

⁵² Brennan, *Prose*: 169.

agreed with Arthur Symons' idea that an altered state of consciousness can occur through the reader's response to 'beautiful things,'⁵³ 'where thought would be like quivering flame, inseparable from sense, emotion, and imagination.'⁵⁴ For Brennan, this aim stems from Swedenborg's idea of correspondences: the view that 'the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world....'⁵⁵ His definition of 'symbols' gives a similar view:

The symbol is simply that image which...condenses in itself the greatest number of correspondences. It is the meeting-point of many analogies. A symbol...is a summing-up, a synthesis, a rarefaction. It stands not for any one thing that might be rendered in a dozen different ways, but for a whole class of things, for their kinship, of which it is the natural expression artistically.⁵⁶

Symbols, for Brennan, drawn from the natural world, correspond with features of the 'inner' world of Reflection. Poetry, therefore, becomes the 'deliberate use of images taken from the external world for the perfect expression of the inner.'⁵⁷

Crucial to the workings of these symbols is the participation of the reader.

Brennan takes Mallarmé's view that the poet uses symbols which in turn direct and govern the poem, and these are offered to the reader for 'divination.'⁵⁸ But this divination is not simply a matter of deciphering isolated symbols, of finding the 'subject matter' of the poem. According to Brennan 'form and matter are one in the symbol wherein the correspondences are made evident.'⁵⁹ This, he says, achieves the 'irresistible transference of the whole sense to a higher plane.'⁶⁰ If the poem helps the reader attain that higher level of consciousness, then traditional

⁵³ See Symons' introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1908; New York: Haskell House, 1971): 8. Mary Merewether points out that Brennan was dissatisfied with what he perceived to be the 'inadequacies' of Symons' book on symbolism, which he had seen prior to publication in article form ('Brennan and Yeats: An Historical Survey,' *Southerly* 37 [1977]: 389). Nevertheless, his own determination to write extensively on symbolism indicates his affinities with the movement.

⁵⁴ Brennan, 'Fact and Idea': 195.

⁵⁵ Brennan, 'Symbolism in Nineteenth Century Literature' in *Sturm*: 260 (full essay: 256-304).

⁵⁶ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 268.

⁵⁷ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 261.

⁵⁸ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 269.

⁵⁹ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 271.

⁶⁰ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 272.

hermeneutic interpretation becomes irrelevant: Brennan claims, 'it is not the business of art to be moral'⁶¹; rather, art must be a 'transfusion of energy.'⁶² Such a poetic does not suggest, however, that interpretation is impossible, or that it has no value. Following Brennan's model of the relativity of knowledge, we see that in regard to texts which purposely focus numerous levels of correspondence by their use of symbols, the poem is available to an ongoing process of interpretation, rather than a once-and-for-all reading of the 'subject matter.' Just as no knowledge is absolute, the 'truth' or meaning of the poem is not fixed. Although according to Brennan's thinking there can be no 'privileged' reading of works influenced by symbolism, the critic is still able to substitute one erroneous meaning for another. 'We grope in error,' says Brennan; 'that is a plain fact, whether our groping be really in the direction of truth or not.'⁶³

While Brennan responded to ideas which, in retrospect, we can see as forming part of the broad matrix of modernism, it cannot be disputed that his work lacked the radical stylistic innovation of his European counterparts.⁶⁴ The bulk of his poetry rhymes, and where he eschews rhyme it is in favour of blank rather than free verse. Nevertheless, he was aware of the need to overhaul poetic form: 'Poetry is going to become purer, more abstract, more difficult art,' he predicted in a lecture at Sydney University,⁶⁵ a comment which anticipates Pound's call for a 'harder and saner art.'⁶⁶ While the influence of the French symbolists on Brennan's style as well as the more conceptual aspects of his poetic perhaps accounts for his concern for the musicality, as well as the continued regularity, of his verse, nevertheless, a few

⁶¹ Brennan, *Prose*: 168.

⁶² Brennan, *Prose*: 169.

⁶³ Brennan, 'Symbolism': 276.

⁶⁴ McAuley has said that Brennan used language 'in the ways cultivated in the latter part of last century' (*Christopher Brennan*: 8) and notes the influence of the Arthurian theme from Tennyson on Brennan's work: 6.

⁶⁵ Quoted in John K Ewers, *Creative Writing in Australia: A Selective Survey* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1945): 73.

⁶⁶ Pound, 'A Retrospect,' in Lodge: 66.

elements of stylistic experimentation crept in. It is hard to credit it now, but the fact that Brennan did not use capital letters at the beginning of the poetic line caused some resentment among his readers, according to H M Green.⁶⁷ Green also pointed to Brennan's variety of rhythm which he considered to be 'bold and unconventional,' and which led him to describe Brennan as 'an innovator in English rhythm.'⁶⁸ Still, compared to the experiments of European and American modernists, these innovations amount to little. Importantly, while Brennan tolerated obscurity, he could not abide unintelligibility, as he remarked when explaining his preference for Mallarmé over Rimbaud,⁶⁹ a comment which perhaps explains why Brennan had no time for radical stylistic innovation.

As the above discussion demonstrates, Brennan engaged in some of the central debates which occupied modernists such as Mallarmé and Stevens, tackling such concepts as the nature of consciousness and perception, knowledge and truth. In this sense, he can be regarded as a literary avant-garde thinker. Another poet who began writing before the First World War, and whose work and ideas might now be reconsidered as politically 'avant-garde,' was the little-known poet Lesbia Harford. In a modest way, Harford's work was more stylistically experimental than Brennan's, but it is primarily her left-wing political position and her feminism which reflects the avant-garde aspect of her work.

In her introduction to *The Poems of Lesbia Harford* Drusilla Modjeska gives an account of Lesbia Harford's life. Harford was born Lesbia Venner Keogh in 1891, the eldest of four children, becoming Lesbia Harford when she married Pat Harford in 1920. Her father, a financial agent, became bankrupt around 1900; the family, once comfortably middle-class, collapsed when Keogh, an alcoholic, deserted when

⁶⁷ Reported by H M Green, *An Outline of Australian Literature*: 148. Nettie Palmer also comments on Brennan's line beginnings, suggesting readers' unfamiliarity with this 'innovation' (see Nettie Palmer, *Modern Australian Literature* [Melbourne: Lothian, 1924]: 36).

⁶⁸ Green, *An Outline of Australian Literature*: 148, 149.

⁶⁹ Brennan thought Rimbaud's work was 'unintelligible' while Mallarmé's was 'obscure but intelligible': *Prose*: 311.

Harford was about twelve. After a disrupted schooling Harford undertook a law degree at Melbourne University and graduated in 1916. For years she rejected the type of career her education could have afforded.⁷⁰ Instead she found herself committed to political change through socialism, and her ideals led her to work at various menial jobs, initially as a seamstress at a clothing factory and later as a domestic servant. After years of ill health she died in 1927 at the age of thirty-six, leaving a few published poems, a collection of unpublished poems and a novel.⁷¹ Nettie Palmer edited a slim volume of Harford's work and published it in 1941, and H M Green commented on her work in his *History*. Apart from this notice, her work has not so much been neglected as unknown: only through the efforts of dedicated researchers like Modjeska has her poetry now become available.

Although Harford did not write directly about her poetics, a study of her work shows that, standing out among poets writing in Australia before and after the First World War, Harford was a radical thinker, a feminist and a political activist. As a committed socialist, Harford welcomed the changes in class consciousness which allowed the celebration and emancipation of the common worker; she was opposed to war (she fought fiercely against conscription) and was critical of all class divisions and social pretensions; as well as being against the exploitation of the working class she was sympathetic to the plight of women, in both industrial and domestic circumstances; she believed in sexual freedom and she welcomed changes in social behaviour which not only allowed the possibility of expressing homosexuality but also greater autonomy for women.⁷² Harford was almost certainly aware of the modernist movement in the visual arts;⁷³ she was acquainted with the

⁷⁰ She only became articulated to a firm of solicitors in the year of her death.

⁷¹ See also Lesbia Harford, *The Invaluable Mystery* (Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1987).

⁷² According to Modjeska, Harford had several lovers before marrying Pat Harford. Her first affair was apparently with Katie Lush, a philosophy teacher at Melbourne University; their friendship lasted Harford's lifetime. (See Modjeska's introduction *Poems of Lesbia Harford*, ed. Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer [Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1985]: 18-31.)

⁷³ Modjeska writes that, according to Bernard Smith, Harford's husband, Pat Harford, was one of the first people to be aware of modernism in art (Harford, *Poems*: 32-33).

writings of Freud (she quotes him as the epigraph to one of her poems);⁷⁴ and she also favoured an expansion of the contemporary notions of what poetry could do, often introducing militant and daring feminist ideas into her poems. Modjeska has commented that Harford's work fits (uneasily at times) into a tradition of radical Australian poetry, a tradition which includes such figures as Lawson, Le Gay Brereton, Mary Gilmore and Frank Wilmot.⁷⁵ Unlike the democratic tradition of bush balladry (the dominant mode of the day), however, Harford's focus is primarily urban,⁷⁶ and rather than adopting the ballad rhythms and style, Harford introduces a degree of stylistic flexibility into her work.

While Harford's belief in the necessity for social change is echoed in the experimentation of her verse, she rarely totally abandons rhyme or traditional punctuation: her innovations are in rhythm and line length, and a few attempts at free verse. Nevertheless Harford was aware of the need for changing the old forms in language, from the ways of 'old rhyme' to new ways of expressing the changing early twentieth-century society, as well as the necessity of adopting new subjects for poetry. Although Harford experiments with form in some of her poems, most of her verse lacks radical stylistic innovation. One striking feature of Harford's poetry is its personal element, perhaps encouraged by her lack of immediate publication expectations ('I am in no hurry to be read'⁷⁷). In the early poems especially, the implied reader is often a close friend or confidante, and the poems gain a lyric intensity uncommon in Australian published verse at that time. Her poetry tends to

⁷⁴ See 'Lovers Parted': 116 (written 1922).

⁷⁵ Harford, *Poems*: 32. Harford in fact had contact with Wilmot. An issue of the little magazine *Birth* (which Wilmot printed) was devoted to her work in 1921; and in 1926 just before her death Harford wrote to Wilmot regarding the lack of success in publishing her novel. Also, Harford's one-time lover, Guido Baracchi, was a friend of Wilmot's; both were members of the Melbourne Literary Club after 1917; see Macartney, *Furnley Maurice (Frank Wilmot)* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955): 19-20.

⁷⁶ The marrying of the democratic tradition to urban themes is not exactly new for Australian poetry: it appears in some of Henry Lawson's poems, 'Faces in the Street,' for example. What was new for Australian poetry was Harford's almost *exclusively* non-rural focus.

⁷⁷ Letter to Percival Serle, quoted in the introduction to Harford, *Poems*: 7.

deal with daily experience and relationships with various people in her life.⁷⁸ There is a straightforward positing of the poet as a subject defined in a particular historical and social position, rather than either the Romantic or high modernist bardic presence which speaks of a general ‘human condition,’ or the more dispersed sense of the subject characteristic of the modernist writerly style. Arguably, like the later social realist writers of the thirties, Harford’s decision not to opt for radical stylistic experimentation stems from the fact that she had a message to tell – about working life, about being a woman – and wanted that message to be clear. This commitment to socialist and feminist ideas means that her poetry has sometimes a didactic straightforwardness; yet this directness may also be an extension of her idea that poetry is of the people and for the people, just as music is for the people in the poem, ‘Street Music’ (‘Oh the music’s free and the music’s bold / It cannot really be bought and sold’).⁷⁹ As Szabólszi has pointed out, one of the aims of many avant-garde writers was to efface the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms;⁸⁰ in her songs and also in her more ambitious poetry Harford’s preference for relatively simple language reflects her efforts towards such an effacement.

Apart from her use of predominantly traditional styles, another feature which distinguishes Harford from American and European avant-garde artists is that those avant-gardes tended to be group phenomena.⁸¹ Harford was not a member of any literary clique or coterie, produced no manifestos, and certainly did not draw the same attention to her work in the same way as many of her contemporaries in Europe. Politically, however, Harford did demonstrate her radicalness: she was a member of the Victorian Socialist Party, and later, of the left-wing political organi-

⁷⁸ The poem ‘In a Public Library’ (44 [1912]), for example, is written explicitly about her friend Katie Lush; later she writes poems mentioning her husband, Pat Harford.

⁷⁹ Harford, *Poems*: 100 (written 1918).

⁸⁰ Szabólszi: 56.

⁸¹ Russell, xi.

sation, International Workers of the World. Because Harford did not write explicitly for publication, one might be tempted to conclude that she did not see her poetry as contributing actively to the desired goal of social change. However, as Szabólszi suggests, the common basis of avant-garde movements is 'the dissolution of the relationship between the writer or artist and the public';⁸² perhaps Harford, like many European avant-garde writers, was attempting to forge a closer link between art and life than was possible through the pages of literary magazines. The fact that her poems were often lyrics for songs of protest suggests a preferred alternative to traditional avenues of publication: quite possibly these were written for and heard by Harford's fellow workers. If so, this constituted a type of publishing which we might assume had a direct effect: by choosing not to appear *in print* Harford may have been simply choosing her own audience – not the literary world, but those to whom her ideas related more directly.⁸³

Harford's dominant poetic style, that of radical sentiment expressed in fairly traditional forms, is neatly summed up in her poem which concerns her sense of mission as a poet:

My mission in the world
Is to prolong
Rapture by turning it
Into a song.

A song of liberty
Bound by no rule!
No marble meaning's mine
Fixed for a school.

⁸² Szabólszi: 54-55.

⁸³ Without further information about Harford's life this point must remain speculative. An alternative explanation may lie in the kind of publishing environment which existed in Australia at the time she was writing. The *Bulletin* magazine, still the important organ for publishing Australian poetry, persisted in favouring the kind of bush balladry which had been popularised in the 1890s. Even Wilmot, a milder protest poet than Harford, found difficulty in getting published there (Macartney: 14). Another possibility is that Harford, suffering from ill health did not have the energy to pursue publication. Modjeska quotes Harford in a letter to Percival Serle: 'I hope old age will bring me leisure for more sustained effort. A poet should still be good at seventy or eighty' (Harford, *Poems*: 7).

My singing ecstasy
Winged for the flight,
Each will hear differently
And hear aright. (54-55 [1915])

Here Harford refers to the Romantic notions of 'Rapture,' 'liberty' and 'ecstasy' as the central purpose of her poetry. Poetry itself is not an aesthetic art-object but a song, something which speaks directly to her audience. There is to be no fixed reading ('No marble meaning,' 'Each will hear differently') and no slavish adherence to rules or schools. Yet while Harford is experimental in terms of her attitudes to society, reflecting the values of the socialist and feminist avant-garde, she is more timid when it comes to expressing linguistic freedoms.

Like many of the early modernists, Harford touches on the question of language and experimentation in her poetry. The most direct poem to deal with this theme, which also neatly characterises some of the limitations of the poet's experimentation, is the short poem, 'Into old rhyme...'

Into old rhyme
The new words come but shyly.
Here's a brave man
Who sings of commerce dryly.

Swift-gliding cars
Through town and country winging,
Like cigarettes,
Are deemed unfit for singing.

Into old rhyme
New words come tripping slowly.
Hail to the time
When they possess it wholly. (81 [1917])

Harford welcomes modernity, announcing it as providing appropriate subject matter for song, despite the attitudes of conventional society which sees it as 'unfit.' Commerce, speeding cars, cigarettes: these are symbols of the modern era which may provide subject matter for modern poets. But whereas many of the

European avant-garde writers, or the feminist futurist Mina Loy,⁸⁴ boldly embraced the new technologies and changing social habits, contributing to the changes by the radicalness of their work, Harford characterises the changes as embodying, not revolutionary strength and vigour, but the shyness of a young girl, ‘tripping slowly.’ The time when these new forms will be acceptable is not stridently demanded or asserted in the present, but quietly anticipated. In its language the poem does little to promote that new future. In fact, the diction and syntax of the poem, with phrases such as ‘through town and country winging,’ ‘deemed unfit,’ and words such as ‘tripping’ and ‘hail,’ only too readily recall the traditional poetry from which Harford wishes to escape. It is as if Harford wants the daring concept of modernity to be couched in old-fashioned terms so that it may gain respectability. Only the possible pun on ‘tripping’ suggests that Harford is aware of the contradiction here: newness may come not ‘gaily’ but awkwardly, stumbling; like the line introducing ‘cigarettes,’ it is stark and abrupt. For readers in Harford’s time, used to the type of poetry Wilmot described as demanding ‘cohorts, skylarks, waning moons, and laboured classical and fantastic “conceits”, all of them in a glutinous pre-digested condition,’⁸⁵ Harford’s new words and phrases may well have seemed awkward; ironically now it is the old words which appear out of place. Harford’s innovation here is not to reject the old vocabulary totally, but to attempt to harness new diction appropriate to the ‘modern’ world with traditional poetic diction in recognisable verse forms.

Some of Harford’s most experimental verse deals with the complexity and ambiguity of relationships between men and women. Very occasionally her poetry celebrates the male figure, as in the poem ‘He has picked grapes in the sun’ (78 [1917]); more often the poetry is highly critical of men and their attitudes toward

⁸⁴ See *That Kind of Woman* ed. Bronte Adams and Trudi Tate (London: Virago, 1991); Adams and Tate write that Loy ‘was one of the few women to be involved in the Futurism, and the aggressive, polemical style of her “Feminist Manifesto”, written in 1914, bears its hallmarks’: 276 (notes).

⁸⁵ Wilmot, Preface to *Melbourne Odes* (Melbourne & Sydney: Lothian, 1934): 6.

women. In the poem, 'Fatherless,' for example, the speaker declares: 'I have gone free / Of manly excellence / And hold their wisdom / More than half pretence' (70 [c1916-17]). The poem, 'Grotesque,' shows a more disruptive aesthetic at work; here the poet expresses her vision by playing with and defying traditional form:

My
Man
Says
I weigh about four ounces,
Says I must have hollow legs.
And then say I,
'Yes,
I've hollow legs and a hollow soul and body.
There is nothing left of me.
You've burnt me dry.

You
Have
Run
Through all my veins in fever,
Through my soul in fever for
An endless time.
Why,
This small body is like an empty snail shell,
All the living soul of it
Burnt out in lime.' (96 [1918])

The two stanzas mirror each other graphically and rhythmically: in their one word lines to begin, and the positioning of their rhymes, 'I' and 'dry,' 'time' and 'lime.' The man's observation that the woman must have 'hollow legs' is met with an angry response. The speaker extrapolates the commonplace colloquialism of the protective male to bring out its latent grotesque element: she is hollow because she has been 'burnt' dry by him, as a snail is shrivelled by lime. Instead of love's fever being all-consuming, she portrays the man as poisonous or parasitic: he takes over her body, her 'veins' as well as her heart and her 'soul.' This poisoning, or illness, runs 'An endless time,' parodying the traditional idea of 'love for eternity.' Yet the speaker is not simply a victim: the female speaker's strength and possessiveness are suggested in the opening lines, 'My / Man / Says...', challenging such

stereotypes. She turns the man's comment on her fragility into a counter-attack. The vehemence of her response indicates a degree of power and self-knowledge which contradicts the negative associations of the image she presents of herself. However even this vehemence is ambiguous: there is a curious double-voicing of the speaker's anger. Her man's speech is reported and her own is directly quoted: she is not speaking directly to the man, but only reporting their conversation, as if to a sympathetic female listener (or the reader). The retort, therefore, has an edge of bravura in it, as if this is not what she did say, but what she might have said. In this regard, the poem provides the chance for the woman to express those things which the relationship with the man denies her; it is a chance to speak her silence.

Another stylistically experimental effort which implicitly explores the relationship between men and women is the short poem 'A Bad Snap':

He:	That isn't you.	
She:		It's me, in my blue skirt
	And scarlet coat and little golden shoes.	
He:	Not good enough.	
She:		Well, burn it if you choose
	And take myself.	
He:		Yourself like skies and days
	To praise and live in, worship and abuse. (84 [1917])	

Visually the poem is experimental, and the unusual rhyme (a b b c b) shared between the two speakers compounds the sense of disjunction. The apparent awkwardness of the interposing identification tags fits in with the poem's central concern: the problem of recognition. Just as the photograph only imperfectly portrays the female speaker, so does the poem sketch her imperfectly: the outward appearance only, the blue skirt, scarlet coat and golden shoes. Without these she is hollow, nothing. However, the poem reveals more. The repressed violence of the line, 'burn it if you choose / And take myself,' suggests not only the female speaker's gift of love, but the hint of self-sacrifice, of the woman's self-immolation for her man. This concept is taken up in the last line, in which the woman is compared to 'skies and days,' concepts which, although they suggest the blue of the

skirt and the gold of the shoes, again are empty; emptiness to be filled only by the presence of the man, for him 'to praise and live in.' The man's judging, critical gaze which initially meets the photograph and challenges its identity is now transferred to the woman; she only exists as an object for his approval; he gives her life validity, and her identity is only as he chooses to see it. Just as she hands over the photograph, she has handed over herself, given him power over her, to worship or abuse. The fact that it is *he* and not the female speaker who draws attention to the destructive element in his love, however, is interesting. Either it reflects a degree of self-awareness in the man, a self-knowledge which might lead to the eventual redressing of the imbalance of power in the relationship (and the beginnings of a male feminist consciousness?); or it could be simply Harford's speaking *through* the male speaker (putting unlikely words in his mouth), to reveal the usually unspoken contradictions inherent in the men's attitudes towards women. The combination of mimetic realism and the more symbolic language in this poem allows for the possibility of both interpretations.

Apart from her concern for women, Harford's other main area of concern is the question of social justice. Rarely adopting the declamatory public voice of the 'revolutionary' poet, Harford's images are usually confined or restrained, stemming as they do from the experience of day-to-day living as one of the 'workers,' rather than merely idealistic aims. As such, however, they have a power which other more didactic verse fails to achieve. Often she manages to combine her two concerns of socialism and feminism, so that the questions of social justice and women's identity are never far apart.

In the poem, 'A Parlourmaid' (110 [1920]), she attacks both the wealthy class's expectation of the worker and traditional literary inscriptions of woman. The real life inspiration for this poem comes from Harford's experience of having worked as a maid for Lady Fairfax. The desired maid – beautiful, softly spoken, considerate, cultured, delicate – has much in common with the ideal woman of Victorian

literary tradition ('the angel in the house'): she is a Helen in beauty, but sexless, inspiring no passion. Yet unlike the Victorian *lady*, the parlourmaid suffers a double oppression: she is oppressed by both gender and class. She takes the place of the hostess, but has neither the hostess's privileges nor her status:

'...She must know the names of wines
And never taste them –
Must handle fragile cups
And never break them –
Must fill my room with flowers
And never wear them –
Must serve my daughter's secrets
And not share them.' (111 [1920])

The poem is constructed as a dialogue between the employer of domestic servants and a defender of their rights. Here the repetitious syntax, with its catalogue of the desired attributes of a perfect servant, adds a satirical element to the implied portrait of the rich employer, the hostess: in the eyes of the servants' defender, she is pedantic and unreasonable ('you condemn / Your rational self in every word'). The desired servant, like the wife in the poem cited earlier, is an idealised notion: she exists only in fairyland.

Whereas the previous poem is an argument with the exploiters of the working class, more often when Harford writes from within the working class her implied reader is someone with similar aims and ambitions to herself. In the following poem again the issues of feminism and socialism are bound together. Here Harford combines the idea of yearned-for revolution with a celebration of female sexuality:

To look across at Moira gives me pleasure.
She has a red tape measure.

Her dress is black and all the workroom's dreary,
And I am weary.

But that's like blood – like a thin blood stream trickling –
Like a fire quickening.

It's Revolution. Ohé, I take pleasure
In Moira's red tape measure. (100 [1918])

The poem suggests that the speaker is one of the workers taking a break from the weary workroom routine, looking for inspiration by allowing her imagination to run away from her for a moment. The speaker's 'pleasure' comes from a number of sources. Initially it seems to come from the sight of Moira, suggesting a covert desire in the speaker for her work mate. The focus shifts, however, to the girl's red tape measure, and the speaker is drawn into a contemplation of the blood of the workers in the longed-for revolution, and the promised release from the dreary workroom. There is a balance between the sexual and the political here. Anticipation and longing are combined in the speaker's impatience for change, for validation of the workers' suffering, and pleasure in the sight of the other working girl. As well as suggesting the revolution, the red tape also suggests menstrual blood, a sign of the sisterhood and solidarity between the two workers. The 'quickeness' of the blood signifies the possibility of life, the fertility of woman; it also suggests the perceived imminence of death in the revolutionary struggle. The link between these ideas suggests that blood must be shed in order to give life: the bloodshed of revolution, therefore, mimics a female power. The tension in the poem, stemming from the speaker's desire for both revolution and for her work mate, carries some of the unconscious intensity which Freud described as the pleasure principle: the link between sexual desire and death.

As well as her political concerns for women and workers, Harford shows an awareness of the relativity of perceptions and the way people are conditioned to view reality. In the longer poem, 'We climbed that hill...' (90-93 [1917]), Harford portrays a rare vision of untouched nature, not the traditional bush but a beautiful coastline with cliffs and beaches, wildflowers and ocean waves. Rather than offering a Romantic communion with nature, the poem uses landscape as a foil for the examination of the different aesthetic perspectives of the speaker and her companion, reflecting her sense that reality is shaped by one's perceptions. The poem develops as an exchange, as each awakens the other to their own appreciation of

nature:

'They're lovely paddocks. Look at them,' you said.
I turned my head.
What I'd thought gray
Was seen
To be the young beginning of live green
Under a spray
...
'There's colour,' I began
And straightway knew
I saw what you
Saw not, and yet your vision was not mine.
Your eyes were on the line
The sweep and curve of the fields against the sky. (91 [1917])

The focus of the poem is not on nature itself but on the effect which the experience of nature has on the two people. One perceives beauty in colour, the other in form, and through their empathy with one another their individual perspectives become common property:

...I had learned
Some of your alien sense of beauty, line
preferred to colour, distance to the near.
For it was I
Who saw
The lovely curve of the creek. (92)

The speaker of the poem intimates that the one who sees primarily form is interested in notions of the Absolute, while she rejects notions of the Platonic Ideal, preferring instead the contingent, with its necessary diversity and plurality:

You still proclaim the far
Eternal unity of things that are
Like Plato and the mountains. I prefer
Inchoate beauty, for my part aver
Plurality essential, am content
To find a gain in difference, in a while
Admit there's gain in union. (93)

There is an irony implicit in this aesthetic: while Harford advocates an appreciation of immediacy, of the life of the senses, in preference to the more abstract appreciation of her companion, in her politics she disavows the possibility of living in the

moment by her renunciation of the present in favour of the dream of a socialist utopian future.

Although Harford's politics were more radical than her stylistic experimentation, the degree of innovation in her writing, her revolutionary attitude toward patriarchy and capitalist society, the focus of her poetry on women's issues, urban life and her celebration of the working classes, all suggest that Harford can be seen in conceptual terms as a political avant-garde writer. While Brennan's thinking can be seen to extend the concerns of the symbolists, and Harford can be shown to have responded to the challenges to traditional class structure which gained strength during the early decades of the century, the response to the debates of modernism of those poets associated with the *Vision* magazine of the nineteen-twenties and the *Jindyworobak* anthologies of the late thirties and forties were radical in different ways. Whereas Brennan's interest was in a new understanding of consciousness and perceptions of reality, and Harford's interest was in radical feminist and socialist politics, these other writers were interested in promoting a spirit of neo-Romantic optimism, the *Vision* group by elevating the role of the poet/artist, and the *Jindyworobaks* by adopting Aboriginal values and beliefs. In this regard, these groups can be shown to have constituted literary avant-garde movements, a view demonstrated in the following chapter.

Chapter 3. Extending the 'Modern' II: Avant-Garde Movements – the Vision Group and the Jindyworobaks

When the *Vision* magazine was launched in 1923, it entered the exuberant life of Sydney in the twenties, an era which has been colourfully and evocatively described in Peter Kirkpatrick's study *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*.¹ Guiding lights of the short-lived magazine (only four volumes were published) were Norman Lindsay and his son Jack, whose views on aesthetics and contemporary experiments in European art were promulgated in various editorials and essays throughout the magazine.² As Kirkpatrick points out, many writers, artists and notable personalities of the time shared aspects of Vision aesthetics: the sculptor Guy Lynch, his cartoonist brother, Joe, writer Dulcie Deamer and others. Among the poets associated with the group were Hugh McCrae (though, as Judith Wright remarks, McCrae actually 'had little to do with the journal or [its] theorizing'³), Leon Gellert, Jack Lindsay, Kenneth Slessor and Robert FitzGerald. Importantly, the group had an important impact on later poets, and has been blamed for limiting the response of several Australian poets to the stylistic innovations of modernism. Poets affected include not only Slessor and FitzGerald, but also Kenneth Mackenzie and Douglas Stewart; the group's ideas also influenced the anti-modernist sentiment of the influential cultural nationalist writer, P R Stephensen, who in turn has been linked to the Jindyworobaks.

Prevailing opinion regarding the Vision group is that it was either 'pre-modern' or anti-modernist. In Judith Wright's view, the Vision group's criticism of European expressions of modernism in the arts 'was clearly a refusal to understand the principles behind post-war European art' and a 'denial of practically all current

¹ Kirkpatrick, *The Sea Coast of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney's Roaring Twenties* (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1992).

² Jack Lindsay later turned to marxist thinking; his essays published in *Vision* represent his early views only.

³ Wright, *Preoccupations*: 136.

European writing and art’;⁴ Vivian Smith sees the group as displaying a ‘colonial provincial nostalgia for a high European cultural heritage or the longing for the security of hallowed values’;⁵ while Croft dismisses the Lindsays’ views as an example of late nineteenth-century Darwinistic ‘vitalism,’ ‘the aesthetic and biological equivalent of Newtonian classical mechanics.’⁶ However, Croft’s dismissal of the group’s views as basically nineteenth-century (and therefore, implicitly, ‘pre-modern’) appears to disregard the case of those European political avant-garde writers, whose platform, as Habermas suggests, extended aspects of nineteenth-century thinking, but who promoted themselves as offering a radically ‘new’ agenda. Moreover, the Vision writers can be shown to have exhibited a neo-Romantic optimism reminiscent of various literary avant-garde writers. Whereas many European and American avant-garde writers welcomed the unsettling of traditional Western systems and values by embracing alternative traditions, philosophies and political ideologies, the Vision group saw themselves as pushing the Western tradition to new heights in the face of threat, seeing in their status as ‘Australian’ writers and artists a unique opportunity for something ‘new,’ and believing themselves to be on the cutting edge of tradition. In this sense, they can be seen as having formed a kind of literary avant-garde.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the inclusion of the Vision group under the broad umbrella of ‘avant-garde’ is indicative of the limitations of looking at the conceptual aspects of modernism without regard to the question of stylistic innovation, since the group was highly critical of experimental modernist works in a range of different arts. Also, the fact that the group generally can be regarded as ‘anti-modernist,’ and at the same time be seen as constituting a literary avant-garde, appears perverse. On the other hand, if we accept the idea that modernism

⁴ Wright, *Preoccupations*: 137. For another, equally dismissive, account of the *Vision* project see Vincent Buckley’s essay, ‘Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature,’ *Quadrant* 3.2 (1959): 39-51.

⁵ Smith, ‘Poetry’: 349-50. Kirkpatrick sees the group’s inspiration in similar terms: 89.

⁶ Croft, ‘Responses’: 412.

can be understood in conceptual terms independent of stylistic innovation, then the possibility of characterising the group in this way cannot be ignored – though to label as ‘modernist’ or ‘avant-garde’ a group whose ideas are often elitist, racist, poorly expressed and argued, and sometimes downright silly goes against the general tendency to see modernism in terms of philosophical sophistication and intellectual integrity. What this problem does suggest, however, is that terms such as ‘modern,’ ‘modernist’ or ‘avant-garde’ do not necessarily represent an index of value. It also suggests the way in which terms such as ‘modernist’ or ‘avant-garde’ can be manipulated in order to draw critical attention to some texts, at the possible expense of others. In regard to the apparent contradiction in portraying self-proclaimed ‘anti-modernists’ such as the Vision group as ‘modernist,’ a precedent has already been set.

In his discussion of ‘anti-modernist’ writers of the thirties, David Carter makes the point that we must distinguish between those who were regarded as modernist and ‘anti-modernist’ in their own time and those who may now be reconsidered as modernist. He says that in Australian literary discourse in the 1930s and 1940s surrealism was seen as ‘the privileged form of the modern,’⁷ and that this has tended to obscure other modernist or avant-garde elements in Australian writing during this period. In his view, the self-proclaimed ‘anti-modernist,’ left-wing social realist writers of the nineteen thirties, with their manifestos and programs for social change, were also ‘a striking form of left avant-gardism’ which ‘might be considered as a modernism.’⁸ Carter’s reasoning is that the thirties’ social realist writers were not so much *anti-modernist* as *anti-surrealist*, opposing what they saw as the excesses and political ineffectuality of surrealism. In a similar way, one could argue that just as surrealism was the privileged form of the modern in the thirties and forties, so the privileged forms of the modern in the twenties for the

⁷ Carter, ‘Modernism’: 162.

⁸ Carter, ‘Modernism’: 160-161.

Vision group were cubism, primitivism and the pessimistic high modernism. Thus, if Carter's suggestion is accepted, we could see the Vision group, led by reputed arch 'anti-modernist' Norman Lindsay, as forming what John Treg nza in his study of Australia's little magazines described as an '*avant-garde* circle.'⁹

The avant-garde aspects of the group can be seen in a number of respects, particularly in their Nietzschean-derived view of the artist as the new model for humanity. As Szabólszi has pointed out, from the 1880s onwards the term '*avant-garde*,' in addition to its association with left-wing movements, has '*admitted right-wing, anti-liberal, anti-Semitic and nationalistic interpretations.*'¹⁰ A feature common to many avant-garde movements, according to Szabólszi, was that they sought '*to outline the features of the New Man; this New Man is sometimes an utopian, unreal personality, often the artist himself....*'¹¹ Although many political avant-garde groups usually expressed this in terms of a Communist utopian ideal, others were concerned with the New Man as the one to achieve ever higher levels of consciousness. Importantly also, the Vision group showed characteristics which Carter has associated with avant-gardism: they wrote manifestos in the form of editorials for the magazine, and believed themselves to be at the forefront of artistic and social change; and, as Croft has acknowledged, they were at least partially responsible for the earlier incorporation of aspects of Imagism into Australian poetry.¹² Taking these factors into account, and despite the fact that the group's ideas were often superficial, racist, poorly expressed and at times contradictory, there seem to be grounds for considering the group as a kind of right-wing, literary avant-garde.

Douglas Stewart gives an indication of the appeal of the Lindsays' spirit of

⁹ Treg nza, *Australian Little Magazines 1923-1954: Their Role in Forming and Reflecting Literary Trends*. (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964): 12.

¹⁰ Szabólszi: 50.

¹¹ Szabólszi: 57.

¹² Croft, 'Responses': 411.

youthful rebellion and anti-authoritarian attitudes which the *Vision* contributors shared in his recollection of the impact of Norman Lindsay's novel *Redheap* published in 1930:

We hungered for revolution – anything that would help to destroy adult authority and remove from us the icy prospect of having to work for our living. There wasn't anything actually political in *Redheap*, but it proclaimed the freedom of sex, it stood for the wildness and mutinousness of youth.... It was our *Das Kapital*...it was our Unholy Writ; it was a banned book and it was our banner of freedom.¹³

As Stewart's (tongue-in-cheek) comments reveal, despite its reactionary reputation, the writers and artists associated with *Vision* group did not merely advocate a return to traditional values: like the New Poets nearly fifty years later, they called for radical social freedoms. Throughout their writings, they rejected both what they saw as the smugness of English morality exemplified in Matthew Arnold, as well as the coldness of French rationalism;¹⁴ they also criticised current trends in Australian arts and literature which they saw as dominated by a depressing realism. They were against censorship and advocated freedom of expression and the right freely to portray the human body and sexuality in art. They celebrated the emotions rather than the intellect; and their aim was to tap the creative and sexual impulses in 'Man.'¹⁵ Implicitly, like Harford, they sought a closer relation between art and life,¹⁶ and they saw themselves as the promise of the future: 'The old world is dead,' they proclaimed. 'Let it die.'¹⁷ Instead of stylistic innovation, however, their idea of the 'new' was a glorification of youth

¹³ Douglas Stewart, *The Broad Stream* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1975): 125. Lindsay's *Redheap* (London: Faber and Faber) was not published until 1929, some years after the *Vision* magazine; nevertheless, Stewart's comments regarding the novel give a sense of the *Vision* group's influence before that time.

¹⁴ See *Vision* 2: 3.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this discussion I follow the *Vision* editors in their use of the generic forms of 'he' and 'Man' as well as their capitalisation.

¹⁶ Kirkpatrick discusses this aesthetic in relation to Dulcie Deamer, noting that this kind of aestheticism actually can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century views of Walter Pater: 181. As Russell's discussion of the European avant-gardes indicates, however, this kind of melding of life and art was also an important part of a number of continental avant-garde movements.

¹⁷ *Vision* 2: 4.

and vitality; they believed that artists and writers of a 'young' Australia could revitalise the old traditions of Europe. Importantly, neither youth nor vitality was seen to be dependent upon novelty or experimentation; rather, the group emphasised 'spirit' and 'beauty':

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is still as young as the dawn. If then we are to vindicate the possession of Youth, we must do so by responding to all other expressions of Youth, and by rejecting all that is hieroglyphic, or weary and depressed.¹⁸

The 'weary and depressed' mentioned here implicitly suggests the mood of high modernism which they rejected, while the reference to 'hieroglyphic' suggests the stylistic innovations which the group saw as high modernism's expression of confusion and fragmentation. They wanted Australian writers and artists to provide something for the Western cultural tradition which (in their view) the decaying and sterile Europe was unable to do, and their aim was to uplift humanity:

If we wish to express an Australian spirit, let us make that spirit worth expressing by adding to it all the stimulus of sensuous and lyric imagery we can, by creating beauty so that the general consciousness may be further vitalised.¹⁹

It was not merely old ways, but the 'Old World' of Europe itself which they sought to leave behind. They recognised the need to change, and saw themselves as in the forefront of the move toward 'a stronger, profounder future.'²⁰ Instead of following the example of contemporary European or American writers and artists, whose work they felt to be dominated by this pessimistic mood of high modernism, the group promoted a revitalisation, drawing on an eclectic tradition of writers and artists of the past (referring repeatedly to Plato, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, Keats, Rubens and Beethoven, while rejecting Dante, Milton and Shelley). In this sense, like many European literary avant-garde writers, the Vision writers affirmed a sense of neo-Romantic optimism and saw themselves as on the way to becoming

¹⁸ *Vision* 1: 3.

¹⁹ *Vision* 1: 34.

²⁰ *Vision* 2: 4.

the representative figure of a new era in human consciousness, the 'New Man.'

The Vision writers' idea of the New Man was a reworking of the elitist Romantic figure of the artist/hero which they adapted ideas taken from Nietzsche. As Jack Lindsay writes retrospectively of their views:

The uëbermensch...whom Nietzsche saw as the revaluer of all existing values, the man in whom a new centre of living had been born, we interpreted wholly as the hero artist, the bearer of the creative image....²¹

Jack Lindsay believed that humanity was made up of a 'general consciousness' which was left to an artistic elite to 'vitalise':

Man is such a feeble creature, that an infinitesimal number of vitalised minds can stabilise consciousness. The proof of this is that they *have* done so. A handful of poets, artists and musicians – these have been sufficient to define Life on earth, deepen all sensibility, construct the imagery of emotion, without which no emotion exists, and set a myriad vibrations of Spirit in action.²²

The group saw their task as a continuation of the Nietzschean program of transcending Man to become a higher spiritual being; they took to heart Nietzsche's 'repeated and passionate cry, "Man is something that must be surpassed".'²³ They believed in the necessity to revolutionise Man's thinking, emphasising 'self-realisation':

although it is necessary to shake as much as possible Man's sense of his own righteousness, there comes a point where all whose centre of spiritual gravity lies in self-realisation, as opposed to Man's need to tame himself, must cut themselves off from Man and see that they are moved by a different construction of being, that the curve of their spiritual movement passes quite beyond all Man can comprehend – i.e., simple automatic savagery and morality or the automatic repression of savagery – that their destiny is not Man's destiny.²⁴

Some of their writings suggest that the group's idea of the New Man was as a channel for a universal consciousness, or, at least, that art can be a way of heralding a higher state of consciousness. In the Vision group's view, neither

²¹ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*; quoted by Wright in *Preoccupations*: 139.

²² *Vision* 4.3-4: 4.

²³ *Vision* 3.3-4: 3.

²⁴ *Vision* 3: 3.

‘savagery’ nor ‘repression’ – the Vision equivalent to the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilised’ – are enough for the New Man. Thus, they rejected the idea that the New Man could be achieved through the intellect; rather, they advocated a valorisation of the body, of sex and of the emotions. They glorified Nietzsche’s figure of Dionysus, seeing it as the model for human evolutionary development. As Jack Lindsay proclaimed, ‘The old Dionysian truth rules here: blood is spirit: out of this body we must build all higher ones.’²⁵ Part of their aim was to shock the bourgeoisie from their Victorian sense of propriety, seeking to celebrate Man’s sexuality and transcend the rigid social mores that bound him. Their often used symbol of the faun was meant to represent this New Man, sexually alive and free. Ironically, it is their use of such symbols, with their archaic Classical connotations, which has encouraged the view that the Vision group was purely reactionary and old-fashioned.

For Norman Lindsay, the group’s belief that consciousness evolved into ever higher forms was a self-conscious attempt to assimilate and reflect the new discoveries in physics (though his emotive response to Einstein’s ideas and his lack of rational argument mean that his stance is somewhat contradictory). In his essay, ‘Our Real Debt to Einstein,’²⁶ Lindsay gives a theory of the synchronic dissimilarity of Man’s evolutionary states in terms of consciousness existing in four dimensional time-space. He refers to the ‘fourth-dimensional condition of mind,’ suggesting that mind itself is a consciousness which extends beyond the individual, and indeed beyond the limits of time and space, a view not dissimilar to traditions of Eastern mysticism and Jung’s view of the collective unconscious. Lindsay, however, shows a profound lack of understanding of this concept, an ignorance which leads him to very racist conclusions: ‘while Homer, born as a physical reaction some 3,000 years ago, is to-day still far in advance of the normally

²⁵ ‘Australian Poetry and Nationalism,’ *Vision* 1: 33.

²⁶ *Vision* 4: 11-19

developed mind, the Australian Aboriginal, physically alive to-day, is still at a point in Time and Space where the normally developed mind was some millions of years ago....'²⁷ Lindsay seems unaware of the implicit contradiction between the reality of four-dimensional space time and the teleology of evolutionism which is dependent on our limited time-based understanding: in terms of the Einsteinian space-time continuum (an idea which will be explored later) all such notions of progress can only ever be an illusion. Despite the superficiality of his ideas, Lindsay nevertheless shows some grasp of concepts which concerned the symbolists. Like Brennan, Lindsay adopted the view that art, the imagination and the sensual perception of beauty play an essential role in Man's attempts to achieve higher consciousness:

All who have ever dreamed of an *active* condition of life in which Passion is transfigured by Beauty and Beauty vitalised by Passion: all who have desired to catch in sensation an essence of that sensation made eternal; all who have seen the trees and hills of earth glimpsed in the mystery of light as emblems of themselves in a more translucent and rhythmic earth; have reached in that point of mental ascension an element of self which makes unreal the whole preposterous system of moral and social stultification and repression that is Man's civilisation.

This emotion then, which in all Art gives to sensation the definitive Form of Beauty, turns to a condition of mental space which absolutely excludes Man, the animal. In so far as you perceive or create it, you transcend Man.²⁸

This 'condition of mental space' to which the Vision group aspired shows some affinities with Brennan's state of Reflection and the Mallarméan view of the 'connexions between all things.'²⁹ Like Stevens, also, the group affirmed the primacy of the imagination: 'For what imagination creates by its power of defining imagery really exists, and the ability to see beyond the actual thing to its imaginative analogy in a higher condition of sense is vision.'³⁰ And like Brennan, Norman Lindsay acknowledged that it is impossible to possess a complete 'truth':

²⁷ *Vision* 4: 15.

²⁸ *Vision* 3: 3.

²⁹ Mallarmé: 189.

³⁰ *Vision* 1: 3.

it is the pursuit of truth, the activity of ‘groping’ (to use Brennan’s phrase), rather than the finding of it, which characterises the process of ‘mind’: ‘Not to find, but to keep on seeking. Not to remain still, but to keep mind in action.’³¹ Such a relativist position, Lindsay claimed, should not be cause for despair; rather, it is one’s ultimate aim, like Stevens’ ‘supreme fiction’: ‘because on earth we must seek Truth, in order *not* to find it.’³² Thus, while the group’s racism is insupportable, they were nevertheless willing to engage at least to some degree the modernist philosophical challenges of their day.

While the group’s rhetoric and aspects of their conceptual thinking can be considered in terms of the literary avant-garde, there is little evidence to suggest that the group was modernist in terms of style. Art historian Bernard Smith has argued that what the Vision group saw as ‘innovations’ for Australian art were actually techniques and styles borrowed from an earlier age. Smith remarks particularly on the similarities between Norman Lindsay and the aesthetes of the late nineteenth century in England, in particular, Aubrey Beardsley; he also suggests that Lindsay used ‘the Rococo style of the 18th century.’³³ More importantly, it cannot be denied that the group was strongly opposed the kind of modernist stylistic innovations found in European art and literature.

Throughout the four volumes of the magazine, the *Vision* editors attacked a wide range of modernist movements and modernist styles in the arts, from cubism and primitivism in painting and sculpture, Joyce and dada in literature, and Satie in music. None of the *Vision* editors was systematic in their criticisms of European expressions of modernism. For the most part, their views of modernist innovations were superficial, and their criticisms were declamatory rather than astute or well-reasoned. Their distaste for radical stylistic innovations was expressed by an

³¹ *Vision* 4: 19.

³² *Vision* 4: 19.

³³ Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1945; Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979): 168.

emotive rejection of it rather than any clearly argued rebuttal; but their refusal to engage in reasoned debate was a deliberate ploy. They made no apologies for being anti-intellectual or anti-rational; rather, such attitudes were flaunted deliberately. For them, an anti-academic stance was one of the liberating factors of their program. The group's opposition to European modernism was bound up with their scepticism regarding the apparent 'newness' of the modernist innovations. Norman Lindsay, for example, objected to Joyce's 'wilfully bizarre style' in *Ulysses* on the grounds that it was 'no more than the old stale trick of expressing commonplaces in obscure terms in order to give them an air of profundity';³⁴ Picasso's idea of hanging 'a geometrical pattern in gold paint in the last Autumn Salon' and Satie's putting 'typewriters in the orchestra' were dismissed as gestures 'as old as any other form of Egyptianism.'³⁵ The group's main object of attack was 'Primitivism,' which they believed had led to the horror of the First World War, a victory of the 'savage' impulse in Man which had resulted in a display of 'tribal ethics,' and 'the bloodiest and most destructive war this earth has seen.'³⁶ In the aftermath of war, artists, instead of repudiating the destruction, had been overcome by a mood of 'Physical tiredness, jaded nerves and a complex superficiality [which] are the stigmata of Modernism.'³⁷ It was this mood which the Vision group believed accounted for the radical stylistic innovations of modernism, which had led European modernists to exhibit in their art the 'disintegrating condition of mind that is obsessed by physical decay.'³⁸

The group's rejection of the stylistic innovations associated with modernism should not suggest that the styles they advocated were totally traditional, however. Like Pound and the Imagists, the group stressed the importance of the 'concrete

³⁴ 'The Sex Synonym in Art,' *Vision* 1: 25.

³⁵ *Vision* 1: 2. The term 'Egyptianism' is one adopted from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Gods*.

³⁶ *Vision* 1: 27

³⁷ *Vision* 1: 2.

³⁸ *Vision* 1: 3.

image',³⁹ and like Williams and Oppen they rejected obscurity and abstraction. While they criticised modernist innovations as an 'arbitrary distortion of forms,'⁴⁰ at the same time they did not view art as 'mere representation,' stating the belief that the 'mind is not merely a recording instrument.'⁴¹ Unlike Brennan who was able to see beauty even in the sordid, however, the Vision group rejected realism for promoting ugliness:

Wherever the Image is malformed, or related to essentially ugly conditions of actuality, the effect will be always one of depression, which will cause a descending condition of mental energy, and so act as a devitalising influence on life.⁴²

Nevertheless, like many early modernist writers who affirmed a sense of neo-Romantic optimism, their promotion of beauty and the image suggests their belief in art as that 'liberates of the imagination,'⁴³ and 'gives wing to the spirit,'⁴⁴ and it is this feature, coupled with the group's unconventional attitudes towards sexuality and artistic freedom, which suggests that the Vision group can be seen as a kind of literary avant-garde.

So far my discussion of modernism and the avant-garde in early twentieth-century Australian poetry has mentioned Australian versions of a number of European styles or movements (high modernism, symbolism, surrealism and imagism). This follows the critical thinking which characterises modernism in Australia as a *response* to European modernism, a view which has encouraged critics to refer to its 'arrival' in Australia. Croft, for example, compares the response in Australia with that in Brazil, where in 1922 a 'Week of Modern Art' was held, and self-styled modernists celebrated the new trends and incorporated

³⁹ *Vision* 1: 3.

⁴⁰ *Vision* 1: 35.

⁴¹ *Vision* 1: 31.

⁴² 'The Sex Synonym in Art' *Vision* 1: 25.

⁴³ *Vision* 1: 1.

⁴⁴ *Vision* 2: 3. Interestingly, these views are not dissimilar to Pound's view of the effects of the image: 'that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art' (Pound, 'A Retrospect': 59).

European influences into their work: this modernism, Croft writes, 'was nationalist, committed to the future, and full of references to contemporary artistic movements (surrealism, jazz) and to intellectual movements (the changes in physical sciences and in psychology), and of course the stylistic experiments of French writers such as Apollinaire and Cendrars.'⁴⁵ In comparison, Croft notes, the 'arrival' of modernist movements in Australia was generally much later (surrealism in poetry in the mid-1930s, expressionism in drama in the 1960s; the only early appearance being the imagism of the Vision group in the twenties).

By contrast, Carter argues for an alternative, broader definition of modernism in relation to Australian poetry, making the point that 'one cannot speak simply of the *arrival* of modernism in Australia';⁴⁶ 'modes of Australian reactions to the modern,' he argues, '...should be regarded not only as direct reactions to Eliot, Joyce, Picasso – or to Freud – but among the multiple artistic, intellectual and political responses to communist revolution, world war, economic depression and the threat of fascism.'⁴⁷ If Carter's reasoning is expanded, then the 'cultural nationalist' Jindyworobak movement of the thirties and forties can also be seen as 'modern.' Like the Lindsays and the thirties' social realists, the Jindyworobak group of the thirties and forties has been associated with 'anti-modernism,' particularly in contrast to the overt modernism of the group's contemporaries, the Angry Penguins; however, their interest in Aboriginal culture, inspired in part by D H Lawrence, can also be seen as a search for some redeeming image in a world in crisis, akin to literary avant-garde writers' neo-Romantic optimism and interest in Eastern traditions. Like the primitivists who used African art as a source for changes in style, or Pound's interest in Chinese writing, the Jindyworobaks sought through an appreciation of Aboriginal cultural heritage to shift Australians'

⁴⁵ Croft, 'Responses': 410.

⁴⁶ Carter, 'Modernism': 159 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Carter, 'Modernism': 160.

attitudes toward their own literature and environment. Importantly, too, the Jindyworobaks considered what they were offering to be fundamentally 'new.' If the 'modern' element in Australian poetry is seen not merely as the influence of European modern trends, but also more local responses to the varied conditions associated with modernism, then this indigenous Australian movement too can be seen as a kind of literary avant-garde.

The Jindyworobaks began writing in a period which was already far removed from the period of high modernism. By the mid-nineteen thirties a number of English, European and American critics and poets had begun to react against the sense of high modernist despair which they saw as dominating modern poetry.⁴⁸ These poets were responding to feelings of crisis engendered by the long aftermath of war, as well as economic depression and the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. Like the Vision group, what many writers of this period looked for was some growing point, a renewal of the neo-Romantic optimism which had characterised the early phases of modernism, whether it was in terms of the autonomy of the artwork, the possibilities of socialism, a return to traditional religion or classicism, or to further discoveries of the unconscious. For some Australian critics and writers, this growing point was provided in the exploration of their 'Australianness.' Despite the Depression and political uncertainty of the pre-Second World War period, many believed that Australia could artistically (and, for some, politically) find a way through the crises of modernity in a manner which the high modernist writers had seemed unable to do.

One possibility of renewal for Australian writers and artists centred around the discovery of a 'sense of place.' The most radical sentiment in this regard has been termed 'cultural nationalism,' and is often characterised as anti-modernist, jingois-

⁴⁸ For the renewed sense of political commitment among English writers, see Stephen Spender's discussion in *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People: 1933-75* (London: Fontana: 1978). Richard Gray discusses the return to traditional values of American poets of this period in Chapter 3 of *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1990).

tic and parochial. This term is linked chiefly to the ideas of the Vision-influenced publisher and social commentator, P R Stephensen, as well as the poets associated with the annual publication, *Jindyworobak Anthology*,⁴⁹ including Rex Ingamells, the founder of the anthology, and other poets such as Victor Kennedy, Flexmore Hudson, Roland Robinson, Ian Mudie and William Hart-Smith. Adverse criticism of cultural nationalism has tended to obscure the differences between Stephensen and the Jindyworobak poets, and thus the Jindyworobaks have been charged alongside Stephensen with being parochial, insular and anti-modernist. From Stephensen's influential tract, *The Foundations of Culture* (1936), we can see that Stephensen, adopting many of the values of the Vision group,⁵⁰ was anti-high modernist and at times anti-intellectual; his 'sense of place' was primarily an extension of the Vision idea of Australia as a 'young' country, one removed from the ills of Europe with its long history of strife. Unlike the Vision group, however, Stephensen advocated turning away from all European attitudes and styles and cultivating a distinctively Australian art and culture. While Stephensen's ideas influenced the Jindyworobaks, their program was somewhat different. Although the Jindyworobak movement criticised aspects of European modernism, it was not primarily anti-modernist. Like the Vision group, its program for change and the stridency of its calls for something 'new' for Australian poetry reveal certain avant-garde characteristics. Unlike the Vision members, however, the Jindyworobak poets' search for renewal was not based on notions of Australia as a 'young' country, free to invent itself; rather, their 'sense of place' involved a valorisation of Aboriginal culture and a recognition of the unique heritage of Australians because of the indigenous peoples. Whereas Stephensen's response can be seen as a

⁴⁹ Founded in 1938; the anthology's last issue was in 1953.

⁵⁰ Vincent Buckley sees the influence of the *Vision* group on Stephensen's *Kookaburra and Satyrs: 'Utopianism and Vitalism'*: 49.

conservative return to the nationalistic ideals of the 1890s,⁵¹ the Jindyworobak movement was much more forward looking. By its 'discovery' of and attempt to valorise Aboriginal culture, the Jindyworobak movement reflected the shift towards plurality that had seen an increasing valorisation of non-Western cultures (which is not to suggest the Jindyworobaks were not guilty at times of appropriating a spurious 'aboriginality' for their own ends). In order to fully demonstrate the distinctions between Stephensen's and the Jindyworobaks' ideas, a review of Stephensen's anti-modernism will precede my discussion of the Jindyworobaks' poetics.⁵²

In his introduction to the reprint of *The Foundations of Culture*,⁵³ Craig Munro gives an account of Stephensen's background and an outline of the influence his ideas had on Australian thinking. He was a member of the Communist party, a Rhodes scholar (taking philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford), a partner to Jack Lindsay in Fanfrolico Press during the late twenties in London, and publisher (with Mandrake Press) of some works by D H Lawrence. Back in Sydney he set up his own publishing company in 1933 to encourage new, distinctively Australian writing, and joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Munro describes *Foundations* as 'one of the most influential books of the [1930s] decade.'⁵⁴ Like the Vision group, Stephensen reacted against the despairing mood of high

⁵¹ That is not to say he advocated a return to the type of literature of the 1890s; in fact he was critical of the *Bulletin's* continued promotion of the larrikin Australian style as a falsification of the Australian identity (see 'Archibald, Certainly Not!' Stephensen: 66-71).

⁵² Bernard Smith in *Place, Taste and Tradition* has been one of the primary detractors of the Jindyworobak movement. Some critics have linked the Jindyworobak movement with earlier nationalisms: see for example Humphrey McQueen's 'Rex Ingamells and the Quest for Environmental Values,' *Meanjin* 37 (1978): 30; Brian Elliott and R G Howarth in *Jindyworobak Review: 1938-1948* (ed. Rex Ingamells, et al. [Melbourne: Jindyworobak, 1948]): 78, 91. The comments quoted by Kramer regarding 'The Literary News, 1882-3' (*Australian Literary Studies* 7.3 [1976]: 266-67) show that the Jindyworobaks' criticism of non-Australian idioms had been foreshadowed as early as the 1880s. For contemporary critical responses see Harris, 'Dance Little Wombat,' *Meanjin Papers* 2.2 (1943), and the unsigned 'Notes on a Banner Bearer,' *Bulletin* Red Page article, 3 September, 1941, reprinted in *The Jindyworobaks* ed. Brian Elliott (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1979): 259-63; 241-42.

⁵³ Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture*, introduced by Craig Munro (1936; Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

⁵⁴ Stephensen: xxiv.

modernism; at the same time, however, his own writing in part reflects this mood. Whereas in the twenties the *Vision* editors believed that Australia offered a refuge from the ills which had beset modern Europe, Stephensen, writing over a decade later, recorded that the ‘malady’ had appeared on these shores: ‘Into that Abyss, of the Great War and the Great Aftermath, crashed not only ten million and more young human lives, but also the Spirit of Man itself, everywhere on the earth, and even in Sunny Australia.’⁵⁵ Stephensen’s proposal for change was actually a nostalgic yearning for ‘the good old steady-going days and ways of the horse epoch,’⁵⁶ an age which even Norman Lindsay, with his horror of bourgeois morality, would have been loath to praise. Yet, in part, Stephensen carried on the Lindsays’ project, attacking the devitalisation of culture, and the sapping of the strength of the Lindsayan god, ‘Youth.’ Stephensen described Australian youth as the ‘Children of the Abyss’ who knew nothing of ‘pre-war normality’:

[T]he young people brought up in the fixed idea that the earth is a lunatic asylum...they are born in the age of autos, ‘planes, radio; and rumours of wars. Their education, after school days, is partly from technical journals and partly from the bizarre cacophonics of cinema, wireless, and the disgusting stunt press.⁵⁷

In Stephensen’s view, T S Eliot was the prophet of a ‘World Gone Mad,’ where ‘disease, death, hatred and fear, ride the whirlwind of human imagination’;

The old are paralysed by the thought of their own ineptitude in the face of events beyond their experience to control; the young are bewildered and hurt by any attempt they may make to understand the apparent insanities of an earth gone whimpering mad to all appearances – a Waste Land....⁵⁸

He was critical of what he saw as the decadence and ‘ultra-sophistication’ of Huxley and Lawrence, ‘with their codes of intrinsic English despair,’ believing like the *Vision* group that these writers represented ‘a culture in decline.’⁵⁹ As with the

⁵⁵ Stephensen: 93.

⁵⁶ Stephensen: 93.

⁵⁷ Stephensen: 94.

⁵⁸ Stephensen: 92.

⁵⁹ Stephensen: 55-56.

Vision group, Stephensen's criticism of high modernism was polemical rather than well-reasoned: it was inspired more by a nationalistic desire to validate Australian achievements than to appraise critically high modernist work. Because of this, his approach was sometimes contradictory: at the same time as he criticised Eliot and the rest for their 'sophistication,' for example, he praised the Australian poets for the same thing. This double-take occurs as he mocks the Australian academics who by this time, one infers, had begun to appreciate the achievements of high modernist literature:

Our pathetic intelligentsia, particularly the feeble 'university' type, read T.S. Eliot, longing for the 'sophisticated English' culture which they imagine that this Bostonian emigré represents. There is more poetical sophistication in a page of Brennan, of Baylebridge, of McCrae, or of Jack Lindsay, than in a whole volume of Eliot.⁶⁰

Stephensen was not alone in the thirties in his criticism of high modernism. In his single-issue journal, *The Australian Mercury* (1935), Stephensen published an essay by A E Pearse who characterised modernist poetry as obscure and unbalanced, full of 'deliberate nastiness' and 'perplexity masquerading as profundity,'⁶¹ comments which recall Norman Lindsay's comments on Joyce. Pearse describes such poetry as 'vomit[ing] forth before the bewildered reader the disjecta membra of an unassimilated learning.'⁶² In an attack which appears to be aimed in a jumbled way at Eliot's metaphysics, primitivism and surrealism, Pearse declares that, 'The majority of [modernist poets] seem to be engaged with a sort of boyish gusto in using the intellect to dissect and pulverize the emotions, to trace the instincts back to their sub-conscious or sub-human origins.'⁶³

⁶⁰ Stephensen: 111.

⁶¹ Pearse, *The Australian Mercury*, Jun, 1935: 77.

⁶² Pearse: 77.

⁶³ Pearse: 76. Pearse and Stephensen do not represent a unified front in their attitudes on the moral ill effects of modern literature. Pearse is critical, not only of the apparent stylistic unintelligibility of modernism, but also its moral degeneracy; poets, for Pearse, should have instincts of a 'gentleman,' the modernist poets have the instincts of 'yahoos or degenerates': 76. By contrast Stephensen does not adopt the high moral ground; in fact, he refers to the censorship of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as being 'on silly "moral" grounds' (Stephensen: 56).

In the face of the chaos and despair which Stephensen, like Pearse, saw in modern society, Stephensen was insistently optimistic, and his enthusiasm for a positive alternative was able to whip up the emotions of other mid-century Australian writers (including the Jindyworobaks). For Stephensen, Australia offered the potential of a last bastion against a self-destroying Europe;⁶⁴ and he promoted the idea that Australia was a 'young' country, and as such, it could start afresh:

If a resurgence of the Spirit of Life, and thus of Life itself, is possible anywhere on the earth, it may be possible in our Commonwealth, which is young enough, in mind and nerve, to remain uncynical under terrific shocks of fate: it may be possible here, where the physical basis of life is so young and strong, and as yet so comparatively unwearied and undefeated.⁶⁵

At the same time, Stephensen recognised the special heritage of the Australian continent. Especially important to the Jindyworobaks was Stephensen's essay on 'Race and Place' which appeared in *The Australian Mercury* and later became the first section of *Foundations*. In that essay Stephensen wrote:

Race and Place are the two permanent elements in a culture, and Place, I think, is even more important than Race in giving that culture its direction. When Races migrate, taking that culture with them, to a new Place, the culture becomes modified. It is the spirit of a Place which ultimately gives any human culture its distinctiveness.⁶⁶

Whereas the 'spirit of the place' later inspired Stephensen's involvement with the right-wing 'Australia First' movement and subsequent internment during the war,⁶⁷ for the Jindyworobaks it offered a way to overcome high modernist despair, through discovering the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture.

Although the Jindyworobak Club can be seen as a movement, the group cannot strictly be regarded as following agreed aesthetic principles. Of the poets asso-

⁶⁴ Stephensen: 88.

⁶⁵ Stephensen: 93.

⁶⁶ Stephensen: 15.

⁶⁷ W F Mandle, *Going it Alone: Australia's National Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1978): 168.

ciated with the group only Rex Ingamells and Victor Kennedy ever set out to proclaim the values of the group in any programmatic way, chiefly in Ingamells' *Conditional Culture* (1938) and Kennedy's pamphlet, *Flaunted Banners* (1941). Other writers, like William Hart-Smith and Flexmore Hudson who coedited some Jindyworobak publications, distanced themselves at times from Ingamells' and Kennedy's beliefs. Because of this, the sentiments expressed by individual members are not necessarily representative. Nevertheless, a general outline of some significant aspects of the Jindyworobaks' program can be suggested.

Like the Vision group, the Jindyworobaks have a reputation for being anti-modernist. By the time the Jindyworobaks began writing in the late thirties and forties, European modernism had been around at least for three decades, and in a sense, they were already participating in a 'post-modern' period. When William Hart-Smith gave an unsympathetic review of what was seen to be the 'art for art's sake' attitude of the Angry Penguins in the 'Editor's Preface' of the 1944 *Jindyworobak Anthology*,⁶⁸ it was not modernism itself, but this belated incorporation of surrealism into Australian poetry which he attacked. Hart-Smith pointed to the self-contained aesthetic of the surrealists, their belief that 'Whether or not it is good art is all that matters.'⁶⁹ To this, parenthetically, he added, 'Here we must successfully resist a desire to ask, who is to say, who is in a position to say, what is or what is not good art?' One of the problems with the 'art for art' aesthetic, accordingly to Hart-Smith, was its condemnation of sociological 'motives' or utility in art, a view which would seem to preclude the kind of programmatic approach which the Jindyworobaks favoured. Others among the Jindyworobak group were suspicious of surrealism's claim to universality, its unintelligibility and apparent obscurity, and they rejected what they saw as the

⁶⁸ No page numbers given. In his contribution to the *Jindyworobak Review*, Harris describes the formation in Adelaide of a group 'which stressed the poetic values of poetry qua poetry, and not qua environmental values': 75.

⁶⁹ *Jindyworobak Anthology*: 1944 (Adelaide: Jindyworobak Publications, 1944): no page numbers given.

Angry Penguins' importation of the styles of the New Apocalypse poets (a movement which included Dylan Thomas and Henry Treece). They preferred a regional approach to poetry which they believed was the best way to achieve universality. As Victor Kennedy writes:

The most lively 'ism' to-day is Surrealism which, like Cubism and futurism, is based upon a smattering of scientific learning but which lays claim to spiritual universality. Well if it has that no one will suffer. Everyone will suffer however if the writer spreads himself so much across the universe that he becomes blind to the urgencies on his own doorstep. The universal artist is not the man who proceeds from the general to the particular in anything but he who, like Shakespeare, reaches the stars by way of his own humble village.⁷⁰

Despite this criticism, the energies of the unconscious which the surrealists sought to harness seem to have had an effect on some Jindyworobak members' poetics. The influence can be detected in A N Ingamells' description of the new 'receptivity' which it was hoped the Jindyworobak poets would develop: 'Man must vibrate to the inspirational forces emanating from the peaks of consciousness. Thus he will be able to sense, select and combine sounds, colours, forms and movements in a far finer way than any purely technical and intellectual knowledge, however great, would enable him to do.'⁷¹ This appeal to 'peaks of consciousness' recalls not only surrealism and the influence of psychoanalysis, but also the Vision group's sense of 'vision' and Brennan's state of 'Reflection'; in this sense, the Jindyworobak poets, like the Vision group and Brennan, exhibited a neo-Romantic belief in the power of art and desire to promote the non-rational, poetic and creative potential in humanity.

While the Jindyworobaks were wary of surrealism and 'art for art's sake,' they were also critical of the negativity of European high modernism; they emphasised finding a remedy for the ills of modern society, not lamenting their causes. It is in

⁷⁰ Kennedy, *Flaunted Banners* (Adelaide: A Jindyworobak Publication, 1941): 10.

⁷¹ A N Ingamells, quoted by Hope, 'Cultural Corroboree' (*Southerly* 2, 3 [1941]; reprinted in Elliott ed. *The Jindyworobaks*): 250.

their rejection of the attitudes of high modernism that some of their most progressive or 'avant-garde' sentiments are expressed, sentiments which are summarised in Kennedy's pamphlet, *Flaunted Banners*. Written in 1941 it should not be seen as a manifesto for the group, but rather as a defence of their position (which had already attracted some criticism).⁷² The desire to reject the despairing mood of the high modernists was made more urgent by the advent of the Second World War:

While we are fighting the second world war, within a generation of the first, do we imagine for a moment that the great subterranean cross-movements that have erupted [sic] so disastrously are going to be reconfined and remain unappeased? Is it possible to think that the signs of social decay and breakdown so apparent may yet be passed over lightly with our good intention of doing something in the old way after the war?⁷³

Kennedy was critical of the negative, dehumanising elements of the modern world, and by implication, of some forms of modernist art:

On the one hand defeatism and decadence are conveyed in forms that suggest nothing but chaos and disruption. On the other hand a young school flings defiance to the old order in numbers that shriek and rattle and creak with the spirit of the machine world into which the first great war flung a disillusioned youth....⁷⁴

For Kennedy there was the sense that the earlier experiments of modernism simply had not worked. The idealistic beliefs of the political and literary avant-gardes, with their hopes of changing the world as well as literature, had in his view ended in the chaos and disorder of war. The experiments of many of the early modernists were no longer considered as options; they already belonged to the failures of the past:

The old prophets that seemed so important in their little day – the pre-Raphaelites, Impressionists, neo-Impressionists, post-Impressionists, cubists, futurists, vorticists – have all contributed little mites for the mountains of

⁷² Hope's review, 'Cultural Corroboree' gives some indication of the negative response to the movement (*The Jindyworobaks*: 248-52).

⁷³ Kennedy: 11.

⁷⁴ Kennedy: 10.

their pretentiousness and passed on.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, Kennedy acknowledged the importance of the 'modernist' impulse toward perpetual change:

New wine in old bottles simply will not work. This is not peculiar to Australia. All over the twentieth century world the breakdown of old social standards has been reflected in the breakdown of old art forms.⁷⁶

Kennedy believed the only answer to the 'failed' European modernism was to embrace new forms, and in his view the proposals of the Jindyworobaks represented something fundamentally new, both for Australia and for literature in general:

These social conditions are even now throwing up a new technique to cope with new and vastly changing phenomena and unless it is grasped and a *clean break* made with worn out forms and habits of thinking, disintegration, wide-spread misery, and repeated explosions will continue to wreck every sense of order our social philosophies have given us.⁷⁷

In what could have been a slogan for any of the earlier modernist movements Kennedy proclaimed, 'A new vision must evolve a new technique.'⁷⁸ He insisted:

If one accepts the obvious fact that poetry is an ever-growing, ever-evolving function of human life itself one cannot be satisfied with a theory of poetry in a fixed and final form with a fixed and final set of rules and purposes. Poetry, like all literature and all art, has to go on expressing and interpreting life and consequently has to seek out new forms and new rhythms to fit each new set of social circumstances.⁷⁹

The 'new technique' needed to make the 'clean break' with the past, according to Kennedy, was to develop the Jindyworobak philosophy of 'environmental values' which stressed spiritual change through an adoption of values pertaining to Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture, he maintained, 'has revealed possibilities for new approaches but, more than that, it has offered new and untouched material.'⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Kennedy: 10.

⁷⁶ Kennedy: 10.

⁷⁷ Kennedy: 11 (emphasis added).

⁷⁸ Kennedy: 9.

⁷⁹ Kennedy: 12.

⁸⁰ Kennedy: 15-16.

This did not mean rejecting the modern world or adopting exclusively Australian subject matter: Kennedy quotes mid-century Australian poet James Picot's belief that the contemporary world must be reflected in poetry: 'Lenin and Hitler and Einstein and Freud.... International affairs, propaganda, emigration, psychology... these cannot be kept out of poetry.'⁸¹ At the same time, Kennedy did not promote a wholesale rejection of tradition: 'The poet, like the artist, must experiment of course; although the Jindyworobak movement does not go all the way with the youthful banner bearers of modernity in overthrowing all restraint and discipline; not in decrying what has been done in the past.'⁸² Kennedy took pride in defending the all-inclusiveness of the Jindyworobak approach, declaring that the anthologies contained 'purely traditional verse, "new verse" and some of what one critic called "chopped up prose".'⁸³ In the eyes of the Jindyworobaks themselves, the primary feature which made their poetry new and distinctive was the new attitude to nature, and the 'sense of place' inspired by Aboriginal culture. This distinctiveness had been outlined some years earlier by the founder of the Jindyworobak group, Rex Ingamells, in his pamphlet *Conditional Culture* (1938).

Ingamells was responding to an Australian literary environment which, despite the efforts of the Vision group, was still dominated by a rural, 'bush' tradition. While some years previously Frank Wilmot had criticised traditional poetic diction primarily on the grounds that it was outdated,⁸⁴ Ingamells rejected the traditional ballad and lyric forms on aesthetic grounds: that they reflected a *European* perspective which was no longer appropriate for Australian-born writers. For the most part, Ingamells and the other Jindyworobaks maintained, Australian writing was still suffused with a European view of Australia as something alien and ugly, or as

⁸¹ Quoted in Kennedy: 14.

⁸² Kennedy: 10.

⁸³ Kennedy: 11-12.

⁸⁴ In his Preface to *Melbourne Odes* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1934), Wilmot wrote 'The daisy still blossoms in the dell and the dicky-bird sings on the bough, but these innocent symbols cannot suffice if we make an attempt to recreate in literary terms a modern rural scene wherein the milking-machine has displaced the milkmaid.'

something inauthentically Anglicised.⁸⁵ This view of the Australian landscape was what Ingamells described in *Conditional Culture* as ‘a resonant pathetic fallacy,’ in which ‘the unavoidable gum tree and mallee, constituent of endless area of bush and scrub, received, besides the stigmas of monotony, inhospitality and treachery, a darker spiritual aura.’⁸⁶ The language commonly used to describe Australian landscapes, Ingamells argued, reflected an outsider’s view; it was full of terms and poeticisms which better described European nature:

The biggest curse and handicap upon our literature is the incongruous use of metaphors, similes, and adjectives. It is usual to find Australian writers describing the bush with much the same terminology as English writers apply to a countryside of oaks and elms and yews and weeping willows, and of skylarks, cuckoos, and nightingales. We find that dewdrops are spoken of as jewels sparkling on the foliage of gum trees. Jewels? Not amid the stark, contorted, shaggy informality of the Australian bushland.⁸⁷

Ingamells found a model for his new approach to the Australian landscape not in any Australian work, but in D H Lawrence’s 1923 novel, *Kangaroo*. Because of the significance of this text in regard to the group’s aesthetic views, Lawrence’s view of the bush and Ingamell’s response to it here will be discussed briefly here.

What struck Ingamells about Lawrence’s view of the Australian bush was Lawrence’s perception of its *uniqueness*. For Lawrence’s character, the poet Richard Somers, the experience of the Australian outback is disturbing and alien; the indigenous people are reduced to a metaphor of the landscape: they are not a living presence, but a symbol of the ‘weird’ which inspires terror in Somers. This terror, Somers decides, stems from his intuition of the ‘spirit of the bush,’ the ‘spirit of the place,’ which, with its ‘long black arm’ might have reached out and

⁸⁵ This is a charge which could also be aimed at Wilmot’s poetry. Wilmot did make some innovations in Australian poetry, but, apart from in such poems as ‘The Gully’ a ‘sense of place’ in regard to Australian nature was not really apparent in his work. Part of the reason for this may also be due to the fact that his focus was primarily *urban*, whereas for the Jindyworobaks it was *rural*.

⁸⁶ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture* (1938), reprinted in John Barnes ed. *The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents 1856 to 1964* (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969): 245.

⁸⁷ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 251. Dora Birtles also referred to this tendency in her discussion printed in Chapter 3 of *Australian Writers Speak: Literature and Life in Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942): 37.

grabbed him, had it not been ‘biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men.’⁸⁸ The principal effect of Somers’ experience of the *difference* of Australia from Europe (and, in the novel, this stems not only from his response to the landscape but also to the extremities he sees in the postcolonial culture) is a renewed desire for Europe, for ‘home.’ In a passage which reveals some of the complexity of Somer’s response to the European ‘Old World,’ Lawrence writes:

Oh God, to be in Europe, lovely, lovely Europe that he had hated so thoroughly and abused so vehemently, saying it was moribund and stale and finished. The fool was himself. He had got out of temper, and so had called Europe moribund: assuming that he himself, of course, was not moribund, but sprightly and chirpy and too vital...for Europe.⁸⁹

The result of the encounter with an ‘alien’ environment is a new desire for and appreciation of European culture: a *revitalisation*, in fact. It is interesting that Lawrence uses this word, ‘vital,’ as he does, given its connotation in the Vision context (although Somers, himself, relates this to an American sentiment). As with the Vision optimism, at the heart of Lawrence’s sense of crisis, which Richard Somers’ original disenchantment with Europe reflects, is a desire for renewal, the ‘hope for renovation’ which Kermode detected in modernist texts.⁹⁰ It is this possibility of affirmation which Ingamells picked up; in his view, however, Lawrence’s sensitive awareness of the uniqueness of the Australian landscape did not go far enough.

In Ingamells’ eyes, Lawrence had created ‘a superb piece of natural description,’ celebrating ‘the indestructible spirit of the place’;⁹¹ yet it still reflected a *European* perspective, a European sense of distance and alienation, despite the fact that, by using the metaphors of indigeneity, it no longer described the land in

⁸⁸ Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (1923; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971): 19.

⁸⁹ Lawrence: 25.

⁹⁰ Kermode: 67.

⁹¹ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 250.

second-hand European manner. Lawrence, he believed, had

realized that spirit, however intensely, only in a small part: he did not feel at home in the bush, although its power gripped him. There are thousands of Australians today who, if they have not found eloquent tongue, feel, nevertheless, with childlike devotion, the familiar beauty and utter loveliness of the outback environment in many of its moods.⁹²

According to Ingamells, the sense of terror experienced by the character Somers was inappropriate for those people who had been brought up in Australia or who had, like himself, adopted Australia as their home. He believed that Australians should no longer look at the country in which they were born as 'foreign' or 'exotic'; yet there was a problem: since they could not speak with authority from *within* the indigenous culture, how could they speak at all?

For Ingamells the answer was to develop an awareness of 'environmental values' through an 'understanding of Australia's history and traditions, primaeval, colonial, and modern.'⁹³ He had come into contact with Aboriginal ideas such as the Dreamtime during his university days when he discovered the book by Spencer and Gillen on the Central Australian tribe, *The Arunta*.⁹⁴ What attracted him particularly to Aboriginal culture was the attitude toward the Australian landscape which it inspired; white Australians, he believed, did not have (but, by implication, could develop) the Aborigines' ability of 'direct thought-contact with nature.'⁹⁵ Ingamells predicted the 'birth of a new soul' which would mean a 'fundamental break...with the spirit of English culture':⁹⁶

From Aboriginal art and song we must learn much of our new technique; from Aboriginal legend, sublimated through our thought, we must achieve something of a pristine outlook on life.⁹⁷

He recognised the destruction done to Aboriginal culture by white settlement, and

⁹² Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 250.

⁹³ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 249.

⁹⁴ See Brian Elliott's discussion in the introduction to *The Jindyworobaks*: xxiv.

⁹⁵ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 250.

⁹⁶ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 251.

⁹⁷ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 264.

saw the white settlers, and therefore the white artist, as inheritors of the remnants of Aboriginal tradition:

Although [Aboriginal] culture has itself, for the most part, died with the tribes, something of its spirit has been preserved.... [A]n assimilation of much of the spirit of it and the natural identifying of that spirit with many of our own experiences, in cultural expression, is essential to the honest development of Australian culture.... [T]o ensure imaginative truth our writers and painters must become hard-working students of Aboriginal culture, something initially far-removed from the engaging and controlling factors of modern European life.⁹⁸

Critics have confused Ingamell's attitude with a wholesale rejection of European trends, and therefore criticised the Jindyworobaks for being insularly nationalistic and parochial. However the English culture which Ingamells rejected was actually the *filter* of Englishness through which many Australians continued to see their own environment. He was not only reacting against inappropriate diction, but also inappropriate mythologies: he rejected the Vision group's penchant for populating the Australian bush with imported mythical figures,⁹⁹ preferring a more *Australian* mythology inspired by Aboriginal art:

The laws, the customs and the art of the Australian Aboriginals went to make a culture which was closely bound in every way with their environment. In spite of the complexities of their totemic, tribal and intertribal systems, their outlook on life was basically simple, and, in the finest flowerings of their arts of poetry, drama and painting, they showed themselves masters in sublimating with pristine directness and unselfconsciousness the highlights of their primaeval life. Sympathetic students will find in such flowerings intense and universal qualities of tender loveliness, vivid beauty, stirring and noble daring, moving pathos and stark tragedy. Aboriginal art, though primitive, was many-sided, and there seems to have been no limit to the fundamental human qualities which it could express.¹⁰⁰

As these comments show, there is an obvious danger of idealisation (and appropriation) in Ingamell's attitude toward Aboriginal life, as well as the danger of

⁹⁸ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 265-64.

⁹⁹ Ingamells reminded contributors in the Editorial for the 1938 *Jindyworobak Anthology* (Adelaide: Jindyworobak Publications, 1938): the pet aversion of the editor was 'to discover the outback of Australia peopled with elves and fairies.'

¹⁰⁰ Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*: 263.

condescension towards the achievements of Aboriginal culture.

Others among the Jindyworobaks rejected the idea that Aboriginal culture provided the sole inspiration for their work. Some acknowledged that their desire for a new appreciation of the Australian natural environment was essentially a revival of a Romantic impulse. John K Ewers wrote in the *Jindyworobak Review* that the movement was 'an attempt to gather spiritual strength through a direct contact with one's own natural (and national) environment' which, Ewers believed, was 'an essential act of being.'¹⁰¹ The need for such spiritual strength was felt to be a necessary response to the prevailing apocalyptic sense of the world. Flexmore Hudson in an editorial of the 1943 anthology quoted a passage from Van Paasen which reveals the sense of disinheritance from nature for the artist in the modern world:

Half of our misery and weakness derives from the fact that we have broken with the soil and that we have allowed the roots that bound us to the earth to rot. We have become detached from the earth, we have abandoned her. And a man who abandons nature has begun to abandon himself. It is in the moment when we realize the dire consequences of our having lost contact with nature that we must begin to think of returning to her. And not merely in a haphazard or sentimental manner, but wholeheartedly and entirely.¹⁰²

Because he saw this need for roots as 'universal,' Hudson was dismissive of Ingamells' claims in regard to the importance of Aboriginal spirituality to white Australians. In a phrase that recalls the Lindsays' objections to modernism, Hudson called the attitude reflected by Ingamells as 'sheer primitivism' and believed its source to be 'in the shock which all sensitive spirits suffer in misery and in the contemplation of misery'¹⁰³ – in other words, a recoiling at the horrors of twentieth-century living, rather than a validation of an alternative way of viewing nature and reality. Hudson also expressed doubt that the Jindyworobaks could

¹⁰¹ 'The Place of the Jindyworobak Movement in Australian Literature' in *Jindyworobak Review*: 47. Brian Elliott too sees the mystical strain as central to the Jindyworobak approach. See 'Jindyworobaks and Aborigines,' *Australian Literary Studies* 8.1 (1977): 31, 32.

¹⁰² Hudson, 'Editorial,' *Jindyworobak Anthology: 1943*: no page number given.

¹⁰³ Hudson, 'Editorial.'

‘show how the aborigines’ way of life offers a solution of [sic] our problems or even a balm for our hurts.’¹⁰⁴

Roland Robinson, by contrast, actively promoted the so-called ‘primitivist’ view. He, like Ingamells, saw Aboriginal culture as having much of what Western culture had lost:

In their communities, the aborigines are governed by social observances which our supposedly civilized world does not possess. Living with, and being part of Nature, the aborigines have not lost the true inspiring sources of life as we have. They are a sensitive human and artistic people. They are not inhumanly murderous. They do not live herded desperately together in smoke palled slums and industrial areas. Nor do they work out their lives in meaningless and unintelligent labour. The aborigine does not understand the use of atomic energy, neither could he conceive that Man should use such force to indiscriminately slaughter his fellows en masse.

Lastly, in this matter, Christ, Buddha, Tolstoy and Thoreau are but few of many exalted minds who have disclosed to humanity the very ideals and values which, after all, the uncontaminated aborigine reveals in his communal and tribal life today.¹⁰⁵

It could be argued that Ingamell’s, Kennedy’s and Robinson’s attitudes towards Aborigines tended to trivialise Aboriginal culture, by making it simply an obverse of a perceived lack in Western culture. In fact, these Jindyworobak poets were aware of the dangers of patronising, and believed they had avoided this attitude; Kennedy describes the Jindyworobak approach as ‘fresh, vigorous and free of...sentimentalising patronage.... There is no hint of the “noble savage” technique; there is everywhere an honest desire to see objectively if sympathetically.’¹⁰⁶ Yet, as F J Letters pointed out in *A Shaft of Sunlight* (1948), these white poets’ adoption of Aboriginal ideas threatened to obscure adequate debate concerning the injustices done to the Aborigines themselves. Letters maintained that questions of genocide would have to be addressed, and something done to preserve the ‘remnants’ of Aboriginal culture, before the Jindyworobaks

¹⁰⁴ Hudson, ‘A Prophet in His Own Country,’ *Jindyworobak Review*: 87.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Jindyworobak Review*: 97.

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy: 16.

could achieve credibility.¹⁰⁷ With all their enthusiasm for Aboriginal culture, the Jindyworobaks were in danger of neglecting these fundamental issues.

Despite these criticisms, the Jindyworobaks did actively promote something which they regarded as 'new' for Australian poetry. Writers like Ingamells, Kennedy and Robinson self-consciously offered something which they believed to be new and radical for Australian literature; they rejected inappropriate diction and 'European' attitudes towards the Australian environment, and sought to offer a new aesthetic based on what they understood of Aboriginal culture. As such they can validly be seen as a kind of indigenous literary avant-garde.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, although the dominant construction of the 'modern' in Australian literary discourse has been in terms of the pessimistic mood and themes of high modernism, there were a number of twentieth-century poets from Brennan to the Jindyworobaks who responded to various conceptual ideas and social changes of modernism in a more positive, optimistic way than the high modernists. Their sense of neo-Romantic optimism and concern for poetic 'vision' recalls the spirit of the literary avant-garde writers, and thus their work may be acknowledged as part of the 'modern' element of Australian poetry. While these early twentieth-century Australian poets and groups felt the need for poetry to be 'new,' however, they did not opt for the kind of overt literary or linguistic experimentation of many European and American modernist writers, nor did they abandon to any significant degree traditional techniques of referentiality, experiment with syntax or abandon the sense of a poetic 'voice.' Thus, the Jindyworobaks were like the majority of early twentieth-century Australian poets, reluctant to embrace to the kinds of radical stylistic innovations normally associated with modernism. This timidity in regard to stylistic innovation was compounded in the middle of the century in two ways: firstly, by the watered-down

¹⁰⁷ F J Letters, 'The Jindyworobak Theory,' in *In a Shaft of Sunlight* (1948); reprinted in Elliott, *The Jindyworobaks*: 273-77. Letters' own answer of miscegenation is now discredited, but his point about opening up the debate was valid nevertheless.

interpretation of modernist stylistic innovation of those poets who were regarded as advocates of modernism, Kenneth Slessor and Frank Wilmot; and secondly, through the anti-modernist influence of A D Hope and James McAuley, poets who were not only anti-experimental in stylistic terms, but were also against the kinds of revolutionary values and concepts of modernism, and advocated a return to traditional Western values and beliefs. The views of these poets will provide the focus for the following chapter.