Chapter 4. 'A Tradition of Conservatism':
Mid-Century Responses to Modernism

While a number of early to mid-century Australian poets can be shown to have engaged in some of the central debates of modernism, few can be said to have advocated the kind of radical stylistic experimentation and innovation characteristic of European and American modernism. This lack of radical stylistic innovation and experimentation has been noted by numerous critics, and tends to support Tranter's view that Australian poetry before the New Poetry period had been dominated by a 'tradition of conservatism.'[1] Martin Harrison has described the work of Australian poets before the New Poetry, noting in their poetry:

> The certainty of persona-voice, the clarity of ostensive reference, the sup-
> pression of metaphor and image-reference in the central thought, [and] the
> resolution of that thought in conclusiveness....[2]

Alexander Craig, in his introduction to the *Twelve Poets* anthology in 1971, also pointed to a 'general conservatism or lack of experiment in Australian poetry' which he saw as being 'accompanied by a discursive, over-explanatory dullness in many poems.'[3]

Harrison's and Craig's views are supported by other critics. According to Julian Croft, neither Slessor, nor Wilmot – the two poets most often associated with modernist innovations – responded to the new stylistic directions for poetry in the twenties.[4] While suggesting that Bertram Higgins' poem, '"Mordecaius" Overture' (1933) as Australia's first 'modernist' poem,[5] Croft argues that it was not until the late thirties and early forties, with Slessor's 'Five Bells' and R D FitzGerald's poems 'The Hidden Bole,' 'Essay on Memory' and 'The Face on the Waters' that

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[1] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xvii.

[2] Harrison, 'A Note on Modernism': 41.

[3] Craig, *Twelve Poets* (Milton, Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1971): 1. See also Malouf, 'Some Volumes of Selected Poetry.'

[4] Croft, 'Responses': 414.

[5] Croft, 'Responses': 415. Craig too mentions Higgins as a modernist: 2.

the stylistic aspect of literary modernism really achieved its impact.[6] Thomas Shapcott believes the work of Ronald McCuaig and Ray Matthew displays the influence of e e cummings and Gertrude Stein, and that James McAuley's 'Under Aldebran' shows traces of a flirtation with modernism.[7] Ken Goodwin holds that John Blight 'has always been a poetic iconoclast, accepting international modernism before his contemporaries,' and sees the influence of myth and surrealism in some later poems by David Campbell, such as 'The Branch of Dordona' and 'Rock Carving.'[8] In general, however, there are no arguments which seriously suggest that there had been an incorporation of the radical stylistic disruptions of modernism into Australian poetry before the New Poetry period. In the case of those poets who have been singled out as vaguely experimental, the hallmarks of much modernist stylistic innovation – free verse, non-rhyme, adventurous diction, disrupted syntax and abandonment of traditional poetic 'voice' – were rarely used. Slessor, for example, often employed half-rhyme, or elaborate sound-patterning to compensate from his branching away from rhyme; the greater part of Wilmot's poetry is rhymed or in blank verse; and only one of FitzGerald's poems, 'The Face of the Waters' (1944), is in free verse.[9] Until the Angry Penguins in the nineteen forties, techniques such as verbal collage and surrealistic imagery were virtually unknown. Even the rogue poet Harry Hooton, who, Sasha Soldatow argues, attempted a one-person revolution in the forties and fifties, kept mostly to rhyme (although he experimented with line length), and used archaic diction and syntactic inversions as well as the rhetoric of biblical language.[10] In such a context, A D Hope's announcement that free verse was dead seems to have been unnecessary: in terms

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[6] See Croft, 'Poetry': 84-93.

[7] In Dutton, *The Literature of Australia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976): 131.

[8] Goodwin: 148, 150.

[9] There is one other notable exception to traditional form in earlier Australian poetry: a poem by Harley Matthews, 'Two Brothers,' about the First World War, which was not published until the late nineteen-thirties, and was recently resurrected from obscurity by Gray and Lehmann in *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*.

[10] Hooton, *Poet of the 21st Century: Harry Hooton, Collected Poems*, ed. Sasha Soldatow (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990).

of Australian poetry it was hardly ever alive.[11] Yet, although general opinion suggests that it was the anti-modernism of A D Hope and the Ern Malley hoax of James McAuley and Harold Stewart in the forties which helped to restrict Australian poets' freedom to experiment stylistically,[12] some responsibility must also lie with the stylistically conservative poetics of modernism's champions in Australian poetry, Slessor and Wilmot. Their so-called advocacy of modernist innovations was rather half-hearted, and may ironically have contributed to the ongoing stylistic conservatism of mid-century Australian poets.

In September of 1931, Slessor gave a paper, 'Experiments in Modern English Poetry,' to a meeting of the Australian English Association. It was reported and generously quoted in an October issue of the University of Sydney magazine, *The Union Recorder*.[13] In that paper, Slessor gave a clear account of what he considered to be the virtues, and also the defects, of stylistic innovation in modernist poetry. In his discussion, Slessor was more enthusiastic about the work of the relatively traditional poet Wilfred Owen than he was about the self-proclaimed modernists; in fact, Slessor was critical of the highly experimental modernist writers such as James Joyce, e e cummings and, to a lesser degree, Gertrude Stein.

In broad terms, Slessor showed sympathy with the aims of the modernist poets in that he advocated a striving for the 'new' in poetry; however, he made it clear that the aim to be 'new' should be the aim of *all* poetry, not just modernist poetry: 'The traditions of the present are the experiments of the past,' he declared; 'to rest on them is to deny a future.'[14] Interestingly, the implication is that Slessor considered the radical experiments of modernism as already belonging to the past; his views, therefore, to some extent may represent what he saw to be a way for-

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[11] Hope, 'Free Verse: A Post-Mortem,' *The Cave and the Spring: Essays on Poetry* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965): 38-50.

[12] This is the view taken by Craig in *Twelve Poets*: 4-5.

[13] Slessor, 'Experiments in Modern English Poetry,' *The Union Recorder*, 1 Oct. 1931: 263-265.

[14] Slessor: 263.

ward, beyond the radical styles of modernism. Slessor had an ambivalent response to the experimentation of the modernist poets, a response which reflects the continuing influence of the neo-Romantic optimism of the Vision group on his poetic. Like the Vision writers, Slessor believed that poetry should reflect 'beauty'; but whereas the Vision group advocated searching for 'definitive Form,'[15] for Slessor it could be a 'lawless beauty,'[16] a beauty which admitted certain freedoms. His ambivalence is revealed in his discussion of the 'moderns':

> In what I propose to quote from the work of modern writers, no doubt there is much that is unmusical and graceless. For the fruit of some of these experiments, I feel a violent distaste. None the less, I welcome them more readily than the harvests of stagnation; I would prefer my feelings to be outraged by Mr E. E. Cummings, rather than have my intellect candied into stupor by Mr Edward Shanks. I regard the silliest, the vulgarest, the crudest of the moderns as of more value than the literary Shintoists who cumber up anthologies with their trancelike worshipping of ancestors.[17]

As these comments make clear, Slessor believed in the benefit of experimentation as part of the project continually to renew poetry. Unlike the Vision group, Slessor recognised the value of experiment *for its own sake*: the results may be distasteful, vulgar, outrageous, crude and even silly, but this is infinitely preferable, in Slessor's view, to a stagnant tradition. His later comments reveal the aspect in which Slessor moves toward his own particular variation of limited stylistic innovation. For Slessor, free verse had to be weighed against the sound patterning which traditional metre and rhyme afforded. The implied aesthetic against which Slessor judged the work of the 'moderns' was one of grace and music, which owes something to the symbolist tradition. Slessor's recognition of these qualities in poetry helps to explain why he adopted Wilfred Owen as a model, admiring especially Owen's experimentation in sound, assonance and rhymed consonants.[18]

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[15] *Vision* 3: 3.

[16] Slessor: 265.

[17] Slessor: 263. Slessor's semi-abusive and racist reference to 'Shintoists' also echoes the Lindsays.

[18] Slessor praises Owen's poem, 'Strange Meeting,' for example, for its 'grave and sombre music' which he says 'is perfectly fitted to the poem': 264.

Like Brennan, the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks, Slessor was interested in art's relation to consciousness: the connection he perceived between poetry and different levels of human awareness. This is apparent in his discussion of poetics: 'Poetry's concern with rhythm is its employment as a sort of hypnotic agent which will urge the mind to vibrate at a deeper level of consciousness than that of the superficial world.'[19] This, he said, was the aim of his poem 'Fixed Ideas,' a poem which exhibits several characteristically modernist features – free verse, adventurous diction drawn from technology and dealing with contemporary issues, a lack of identifiable poetic 'voice' and disruptive syntax. It is a poem which, initially, seems to be far from the Vision group's aesthetic:

> Ranks of electroplated cubes, dwindling to glitters,
> Like the other pasture, the trigonometry of marble,
> Death's candy-bed. Stone caked on stone,
> Dry pyramids and racks of iron balls.
> Life is observed, a precipitate of pellets,
> Or grammarians freeze it into spar.
> Their rhomboids, as for instance, the finest crystal
> Fixing a snowfall under glass. Gods are laid out
> In alabaster, with horny cartilage
> And zinc ribs; or systems of ecstasy
> Baked into bricks. There is a gallery of sculpture,
> Bleached bones of heroes, Gorgon masks of bushrangers,
> But the quarries are of more use than this.
> Filled with the rolling of huge granite dice,
> Ideas of judgements; vivisection, the Baptist church,
> Good men and bad men, polygamy, birth-control....
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> Frail tinkling rush
> Water-hair streaming
> Twinkles of
> minnikin
> Pinnacles
> Particles
> Prickles and glitters
> Cloudy with bristles
> River of thought
> Swimming the pebbles

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[19] Slessor: 263.

Foam out of air –
Undo, loosen your bubbles!

Despite initial appearances, the Vision group's distaste of 'ugly' subject matter is in fact partly enacted in the structure of the poem, with its dramatic contrast between the first and second verse paragraphs. Slessor compared these two stanzas, remarking: '[T]he idea is fundamentally a contrast between the solidity and stiffness of rigid opinion, and the fluidity of the real stream of thought which besieges the human brain.'[20] Significantly, for Slessor the adventurous and somewhat awkward 'modernist' first stanza is used to represent the 'solidity and stiffness of rigid opinion,' while the more lyrical second stanza (in which the diction is more reminiscent of Brennan's or Hugh McCrae's poetry than of the 'moderns' to whom Slessor refers) is seen to represent a stream of consciousness: the state of mind that can be achieved through the beauty, sound and rhythm of poetry. (Somewhat ironically given this reading, this poem, which had been ignored by earlier anthologists, was resurrected by Tranter and Mead for their anthology of 'modern' Australian poetry in 1991.)

One aspect of modernist aesthetics with which Slessor wholeheartedly agreed was the emphasis on the importance of the concrete image: 'The whole structure of English poetry...rests on the use of the image, the choice of the concrete where the abstract would be less racking to the creator.'[21] This emphasis was perhaps as much indebted to the influence of the Vision group as to Pound. Whereas Pound and other American modernists sought originality at all costs, Slessor stressed the need for sincerity, defending the expression by poets of so-called 'eternal truths' even if they happen to be cliché.[22]

In fact, Slessor went so far as to suggest that the radical revolutionary aspects of modernism were not the only, or even the *preferred,* way of revitalising a tradi-

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[20] Slessor: 263.

[21] Slessor: 263.

[22] Slessor says it depends on the sincerity of the poet whether clichéd language is acceptable or not: 263.

tion – even among the 'modern' poets themselves. Revitalisation, he claimed, is best done by working within a tradition and changing it subtly:

> I do not wish it to be thought that the traditional forms, the inherited orthodoxies, are to be scorned by modern writers. Movement in poetry is to be achieved by a gradual building process, a subtle variation of modes and patterns already canonized. *There can be no sudden explosion of revolt*, such as is attempted by the incendiaries under the domination of Cummings and Gertrude Stein. Even T. S. Eliot obtains his most powerful poetry by a simple inflection or variation of the standardized pentameter.[23]

Slessor's last comment is later echoed by A D Hope as support for his criticism of free verse styles.[24] Like Hope, Slessor viewed the experiments of cummings, Joyce and Stein as adding little to English poetry, calling cummings' work 'pitiful nonsense.' Concerning Joyce and Stein, he wrote, 'A specialist in mental derangements could spend an absorbing six months in a diagnosis of cases in modern art and literature displaying the same tragic symptoms as those publicly exhibited by Gertrude Stein and James Joyce.'[25] Slessor was also critical of Joyce's neologisms, calling them 'childish inventions.' As to Stein's constant repetition, however, he was not totally condemnatory; he was willing to see that such experimentation with language may lead poetry to areas of awareness not touched on by more traditional styles:

> The reiteration of a word or phrase over several pages has an odd effect on the mind; done cunningly, it is possible that this process might so scour and scarify a familiar word of its encrusted associations that the reader would suddenly see the naked word in its true significance for the first time.[26]

Although the above comment suggests that Slessor was aware of the power of language to shape perceptions, the phrase '*true* significance' nevertheless alerts us to the fact that Slessor maintained a pre-Saussurean view of language: like the symbolists, he believed that language has a mantric power suggesting that meaning

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[23] Slessor: 263 (emphasis added).
[24] Hope, *Cave*: 48-49.
[25] Slessor: 264.
[26] Slessor: 264.

is 'present' in the word.

As the preceding discussion suggests, Slessor was hesitant fully to endorse modernist stylistic innovation and he remained committed to ideas of poetic 'beauty' as the principal feature of his poetic. His interest in modernist experimentation was only to the extent that it could be reconciled with more traditional views, and he saw poetry primarily as a harbour of beauty amid the chaos and uncertainty of modern existence. At the end of his speech he quoted approvingly 'two recent semi-definitions of poetry,' which, he believed, showed that modernist innovation existed on a continuum with traditional poetry and did *not* necessitate a radical break:

> One is by Humbert Wolfe, an enterprising defender of orthodoxy, who says: 'Poetry is to the rest of literature what the violet light is the spectrum. It is the last and loveliest colour, and points to something invisible beyond itself. The rest of literature points to poetry.' The other is by Edith Sitwell, an equally adventurous champion of modernism, who says: 'Poetry...is the result not of reason, nor of intellect. It is the flower of magic, not of logic.' Here, at least, in an admission of poetry's lawless beauty, orthodoxy and experiment meet.[27]

In this way Slessor affirmed the neo-Romantic optimistic belief in the power of poetry to take the reader and the poet to new levels of awareness as well as showing tolerance for a degree of stylistic innovation. For Slessor although such power might be achieved through experimentation, as in the case of Stein, it is not dependent on it. It is in this sense that Slessor's conservative response to modernist experimentation may have helped lay the grounds for the even more conservative and anti-experimental attitudes of the forties.

Apart from Slessor, Frank Wilmot was one of few Australian poets writing before the Second World War to have been influenced by the work of overseas modernist poetics, including the Imagist movement, the work of the Sitwells,

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[27] Slessor: 265.

Pound, Eliot, Marianne Moore and e e cummings.[28] As early as 1922 with the volume of essays *Romance*,[29] Wilmot was 'vigorously defending Carl Sandburg's use of free verse and noting the "adventuresomeness" of the young Oxford poets.'[30] Yet Wilmot never fully adopted the kind of stylistic innovation he defended in the American and English poets, and most of his poetry employs traditional forms.

In the late thirties, Wilmot gave a number of lectures on 'Modern Poetry' at Melbourne University. These lectures show Wilmot's sympathy with the aims of American modernist poets; given the lateness of the defence of modernism in terms of his own writing career, however, Wilmot can perhaps best be viewed more as an apologist for the already ageing tradition of modernist innovation, rather than one of its proponents.[31] Nevertheless, Wilmot's admiration for the stylistic innovations of modernism is indisputable, as the following comments reveal:

> The ideas behind Modernism in poetry are revolutionary in the widest sense. Its aim is to give the whole force of poetry an entirely new direction. As to what ideas are suitable for poetic treatment, or what words are to be used to express those ideas, and regarding the literary form that those words take, the 'modernists' assume a new stand. They do not strive to express ideas, they want to create new ones; they do not strive to express emotion, they want to find out what men are feeling and with the help of the typographer and a dextrous [sic] use of the alphabet and all the printer's symbols to give those feelings a definite shape.... 'Modernist poetry is not a minor branch of human endeavour, but a complete and separate form of energy.'[32]

The modernism which Wilmot praises here is not the mood of high modernism which some critics have detected in his own work, but a more optimistic response: experimentation with form and subject matter in order to 'create' something 'new.'

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[28] Wilmot refers to Pound and the Imagists, as well as Eliot's 'Prufrock' and the work of e e cummings, in the essay 'Modern Poetry' (1936; unpublished ms., Mitchell Library, Sydney: 4). Vivian Smith records that Moore wrote to him concerning one of his poems ('Poetry': 312).

[29] Wilmot, *Romance* (Melbourne: Sydney J Endacott, 1922).

[30] Croft, 'Responses': 413. See Wilmot's chapter, 'National Poetry,' *Romance*: 21-26.

[31] The time of the lectures ('Modern Poetry' was written in 1936) was long after the publication of Wilmot's first collection of poetry, *The Eyes of Vigilance*, published shortly after the First World War.

[32] Wilmot, 'Modern Poetry, III': 8.

Wilmot also saw the modernists as creating poetry which encompasses the subject matter of the contemporary world:

> [The Americans] attack the whole system of traditional poetic practice and aim at inventing an entirely new method that does not merely record experience but creates it. This involves the use of all kinds of unexpected *material* added to all kinds of unconventional practices.... It shows that these poets are trying to give poetry a vital relation to life as they know it. Aeroplanes, zeppelins, poison gas, sixteen-inch guns, steam shovels, Seagrave and his Golden Arrow doing 231 mile an hour, iron and concrete buildings and pneumatic rivettes are all here....[33]

While Wilmot saw the modernist enterprise as the driving force of poetry written in English of his time, his comments also reveal how little the stylistic aspects of modernism had been adopted by Australian poets of his generation:

> These American endeavours are exerting their influence on verse now written in England. The old barrel-organ rhythms are being broken up, stanza structure is loosening and a freer spirit is abroad. But the way has not yet reached this country. We still cling to the old stanzas, the old rhymes and rhythms. Our editors decide whether poetry is good or bad by ~~ticking~~ tapping the feet off on their fingers.[34]

As the above passage suggests, Wilmot regarded modernism as something which could be 'imported' from American writing. Yet his understanding of the innovations of modernism is somewhat limited. Considering his criticism of the Australian habit of clinging 'to the old stanzas, the old rhymes and rhythms,' it is strange to find that the one 'modernist' poem which he goes on to quote contains just these traditional elements. Malcolm Cowley's poem, 'Those of Lucifer,' is rhymed, in iambic pentameter and in sonnet form; almost the only innovation in the poem is a line break in the seventh line, a minor graphic experimentation:

> Out of an empty sky the dust of hours –
> A word is spoken and a folk obeyed.
> An island uttered incandescent towers
> like frozen simultaneous hymns to trade.

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[33] Wilmot, 'Modern Poetry, IV': 4.

[34] Wilmot, 'Modern Poetry, IV': 4. 'Ticking' is under erasure in manuscript.

Here is their lonely multitude of powers,
thrones, virtues, archangelic cavalcade,
they rise
        proclaiming sea and sky are ours
and yours, O man, the shadow of our shade.

Or did a poet crazed with dignity
rear them upon an island to prolong
his furious contempt for sky and sea

To what emaciated hands belong
these index fingers of infinity,

O towers of intolerable song.

Given Wilmot's view that this poem is 'modernist,' it is not surprising that the bulk of his own work shows little in the way of radical technical innovation.

Apart from the weakness of the example Wilmot uses to champion modernist innovation, his advocacy of free verse is also somewhat compromised; significantly, he did not regard the abandonment of rhyme to be an essential aspect of free verse. Wilmot uses French rather than English models when discussing 'free verse,' and makes a distinction between '*vers libre*' and '*vers libéré*.' *Vers libre*, according to Wilmot, is 'verse composed of lines of no uniform length, *rhymed* or unrhymed,' whereas *vers libéré* 'takes no rhymes and is like cadenced prose cut into short lengths.'[35] Clearly, for Wilmot, introducing stylistic flexibility into poetry was not simply a matter of abandoning rhyme: in fact he believed himself to be practising *vers libre* or 'free verse' in most of his later (rhyming) poetry. Although Wilmot's support for modernist innovations was limited, he did seek to introduce some minor innovations into his work, including the use of colloquial diction and speech rhythms, and a shift from a rural to an urban perspective in his subject matter. He also sought to dispel what he saw as the elitist tendency of symbolist-influenced poetry, criticising the separation of high and low art (a view comically presented in the poem 'On a Grey-haired Old Lady Knitting At An Orchestral

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[35] Wilmot, 'Modern Poetry, III': 1 (emphasis added).

Concert In The Melbourne Town Hall. Prices, Two and One Plus Tax'). Rather than seeing these innovations as modernist, however, they could equally be regarded as extending the social democratic tradition to which Wilmot, like Harford, has been linked. At any rate, Wilmot's continued use of rhyme, like Slessor's insistence on musicality, may well have contributed to the sense of the 'tradition of conservatism' which Tranter and the other New Poets detected in Australian poetry before the sixties.[36]

Tranter's criticism of Australian poetry before the New Poetry was not restricted to its lack of stylistic innovation. He believed earlier Australian poetry to have been not only stylistically, but also conceptually backward and conservative. Particularly, he believed that earlier poets had confused their roles as poets with 'the duties of priest, psychotherapist and moral administrator.'[37] While it is true that few Australian poets before the sixties incorporated radical stylistic innovations into their work, and even those earlier poets known for their sympathy with experimentation were rather conservative, the foregoing discussion makes clear that not all early to mid-century Australian poets were guilty of the kind of conservative values which Tranter's comment suggests. Tranter's view of the sententiousness and moralism of Australian poetry before the New Poetry seems to have been inspired mainly by the poetics of mid-century anti-modernist poets like A D Hope and James McAuley, and older contemporary poets such as Vincent Buckley,[38] whose reputations were established in the conservative fifties. Yet neither Hope nor McAuley saw the poet's role as 'priest' or 'psychotherapist'; McAuley in particular was against what he saw as the 'Magian heresy,' the neo-Romantic tendency for modern poets to see themselves as prophet, seer or visionary. Ironically, as we will see, this kind of belief in the poet's role was more

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[36] Significantly, Tranter saw the abandonment of the 'handcuffs of rhyme' to be one of the principal 'modernist' innovations of the New Poetry: *New Australian Poetry*, xvii.

[37] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxv.

[38] For example, see Tranter's comments on Buckley's poem, 'Golden Builders' (*The New Australian Poetry*: xxi-xxii).

typical of the New Poets themselves than of the conservative mid-century poets.

While Slessor and Wilmot probably contributed to the conservative attitude towards stylistic experimentation of mid-century Australian poets, the two poets most often associated with outright anti-modernist attitudes are A D Hope and James McAuley. McAuley's Ern Malley hoax in particular, conducted with fellow-poet Harold Stewart, has been often condemned for its influence in inhibiting experiment in later Australian poetry.[39] Beginning to publish in the middle part of the century Hope and McAuley, like the Jindyworobaks, were already writing well past the stage of the high modernist period of the twenties. During the decades from the thirties to the fifties, Australian society witnessed a series of social changes that outstripped earlier uncertainties in their challenge to traditional values: the rise of fascism and totalitarianism in Europe (both left and right), rampant nationalism, the Second World War, the holocaust, the threat of nuclear destruction and the beginning of the Cold War. McAuley described the contemporary political scene as 'contending nationalisms of the modern world thresh[ing] about in a nihilistic darkness, armed with the weapons of total destruction, mouthing debased slogans and imbecile passwords.'[40] Clearly the 'crisis' element of modern life had escalated rather than diminished since the time of the high modernists. In response to these uncertainties, both Hope and McAuley advocated a return to tradition, responses which in part registered the failure of the optimistic hopes of the literary avant-garde, and at the same time reflected, especially in the case of McAuley, a fierce resistance to high modernist despair. Unlike the majority of literary avant-garde writers, their solutions were fundamentally reactionary: Hope advocated a return to the values of Classicism and a doomed attempt to renew the contracts of Enlightened humanism; McAuley advocated a return to a kind of human-centred Christianity. Their objections to the radical disruptions to

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[39] For a full account of the hoax, including McAuley's defence, see the introduction to *The Poems of Ern Malley*, Max Harris and Joanna Murray-Smith, eds (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

[40] McAuley, *The End of Modernity* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959).

poetic form of modernism, like Stephensen's and Pearse's, were on the grounds that it was symptomatic of society's broader ills. The conservatism of their philosophical beliefs and their anti-experimentalism has given these poets their reputation for anti-modernism. In this, they represent perhaps the most obvious examples of the 'tradition of conservatism' – conceptually and stylistically – which Tranter believes to have dominated Australian poetry before the New Poetry.

On the surface, Hope's and McAuley's poetics have certain affinities: both poets have been regarded as 'neo-classical'; both rejected social realism and 'activist' poetry, which they claimed to be associated with totalitarian propaganda; and both criticised the surrealist poetry of the Angry Penguins, the cultural nationalist poetry of the Jindyworobaks, and stylistically innovative poetry. However, there are also fundamental differences between the two poets: Hope rejected radical stylistic innovation primarily on aesthetic grounds, believing that technical looseness indicated a loss of poetic greatness, and a threat to the great achievements and culture of Western civilisation; McAuley's objections, by contrast, were made primarily on moral grounds, stemming from his belief that, by neglecting traditional religion, 'modern' poetry had forsaken the possibility of producing great art. The two poets' shared reputation for being 'counter revolutionaries' in their opposition to modernism[41] has tended to obscure these important differences in their poetics.

When Hope advocated a 'middle way' for poetry, eschewing the didacticism of 'activist' poetry on the one hand, and the extreme 'art for art's sake' platform on the other, his views on poetry expressed his fears regarding the mid-century political situation: poetry should be human, intelligent, and reasoned, and not under the sway of irrational urges. Although the main object of his attack was surrealism, Hope might have added also nationalism, fascism and blind faith in socialism. Hope's views were essentially humanist: he desired a return to the great forms of

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[41] See Pringle, 'Poetry: the Counter Revolution,' Chapter 7 in *Australian Accent.*

Classical and English poetry, and, like Norman Lindsay, saw himself as an inheritor of the great European tradition which was in decline. Unlike the Vision group, who sustained a neo-Romantic optimism in their belief in the evolution of human destiny, however, Hope saw European high culture as retreating to the shores of Australia, a defensive view which meant that he did not offer any new platform to fight the ills he perceived in modern society: rather, he advocated a return to previously held values. His faith was in the Western tradition which had up till the twentieth century, he believed, brought prosperity, democracy, scientific advancement, and a civilised – and civilising – art. In other words, against enormous evidence of its failure, he advocated a renewed faith in the benefits of liberal thinking and the promises of the Enlightenment.

For Hope, poetry as a craft reflected the civilising force of the mind, and it was on this basis that he rejected the kind of stylistic disruptions associated with modernism. Although he was not against experiment as such, he maintained that experiment was to be reserved for those of rare and great talent who were equal to their task: such an 'adventurous' talent, in his view, 'proposes to itself new and sometimes perilous experiments and discoveries. But it proposes no more than it can plan and imagine.'[42] The kind of experiments he had in mind were very different from those of the radical stylistic innovators. He believed that the images of fragmentation and dissolution expressed by the 'eroded minds' of modernists, their sense of sterility and aridity, were not an inevitability, but due to neglect. In describing Western literary trends, he opposed such terms as madness, sickness, incoherence, folly, and evil, to 'well-bred, elegant, sincere and adept,' 'proportion, harmony, [and] connection,'[43] values which he considered to be inherent in the English literary tradition (especially in its eighteenth-century, neo-classical phase). In Hope's view the neglect of these values constituted the fundamental problem of

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[42] Hope, *Cave*: 37.
[43] Hope, *Cave*: 5, 7.

modernist literature, and the basis of what he perceived to be its failure.

What Hope regretted most in the direction modern literature had taken was the loss of the great poetic forms, a view which gives some hint of his ambivalent response to the poetics of Romanticism. He was against modernist experimentation since he believed it downgraded poetry's 'architectonic skills,' skills which were essential to the 'dance of language' which he saw as the essence of poetry.[44] The result, for Hope, was a 'limitation of consciousness,' the lack of 'truth,' 'charm,' and 'nobility' in modern culture:

> Just as a certain nobility of mind was lost with the passing of epic from the living forms, just as real magnanimity was lost with tragedy, so one by one the attitudes of mind and heart, which made the use and being of the other great forms, died out as they ceased to be practised. A loss and a limitation of consciousness followed, so that men, whether readers or poets, were unable any longer to understand what they had lost, or indeed what was meant by a 'form' at all.[45]

Hope's reference to the 'loss and...limitation of consciousness' echoes the symbolist and neo-Romantic sense of the function of art to enlarge human consciousness. But, unlike the literary avant-garde writers, Hope did not seek for 'new' ways of expressing this aim. Whereas Brennan, the Vision group and the Jindyworobaks saw themselves as promoting areas of new expansiveness, Hope's interest was in conserving old gains.[46]

Hope believed that all necessary elements for the poet were available in the Western poetic tradition. '[I]t is the nature and function of art,' he wrote, echoing the traditional premises of English poetry from Spenser to Arnold, 'to tell us the truth about the world in which we live: to inform us, and by informing to instruct and delight.'[47] In spite of the fact that he believed that much of what was usually

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[44] Hope, *Cave*: 7.

[45] Hope, *Cave*: 4.

[46] In this his views are not so different from those recently expressed by Shapcott. See Shapcott's 'literary biography,' *Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoirs* (Brookvale, NSW: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

[47] Hope, *Cave*: 33.

said about inspiration should be treated as mere eccentricity or superstition,[48] at times he came close to the Socratic view of poetic creativity, describing the poet's task as 'what his demon drives him to do';[49] even more explicitly, he declared: 'the writer should be…chosen by something in him which he can neither foresee nor predict, something whose nature he can only discover in the process of writing it.'[50] In this, Hope seems to have recognised unconscious drives, and at one point even acknowledges having experienced a form of automatic writing: 'I have sometimes found it useful to pretend that the poem was writing itself and I was merely there in the part of midwife, though of course I know better.'[51] However, Hope remained sceptical of the claims of Romanticism, particularly Shelley's formulation of the poet as the 'unacknowledged legislator,' his objections being primarily on the grounds that most poets don't *know* enough to speak with authority.[52] Hope believed:

> The quality of real genius is shown in this: that having planned and proposed adventures far beyond ordinary powers and talents, it tends to find that what it imagined and proposed merely serves to free the heart from home influences and habits, its plans serve merely as a prelude to something beyond any possible anticipation – so much so that this has often been described as a divine intervention or inspiration: the descent of divine energy into the human agent.[53]

Hope's belief was not in the reality of a divine influence, but in the condition which has the appearance of it. Despite the fact that he believed that in poetry 'the mind emerges into a higher level of experience,'[54] poetry remained for Hope 'a secular occupation' which has little to do with any actual experience of the divine: 'The communion of man with God belongs to another realm in which art is irrelevant

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[48] See, for example Hope's discussion of Schiller's and Blake's beliefs concerning poetic inspiration in 'The Sincerity of Poetry,' *Cave*: 73.

[49] Hope, *Cave*: 30.

[50] Hope, *Cave*: 32.

[51] Hope, *Cave*: 73.

[52] See 'Poetry, Prayer, and Trade,' in Hope, *Cave*: 92.

[53] Hope, *Cave*: 37.

[54] Hope, *Cave*: 36.

and disruptive.'[55] In his view, 'People read poetry to be entertained, to cultivate their sensibilities, to elevate or sharpen their feelings, to extend, reassure or confirm their emotions.'[56] Greatness in poetry, according to Hope, can only be due to the talent of the individual poet; the 'true poet' is

> a man who has continually before him a vision of the world as a whole, who has as his interest a sense of the past, the present, and the future as one process, a man continually obsessed with the passion for a synoptic view....[57]

Unlike McAuley, Hope fundamentally opposes the adoption of Christian belief as a basis for poetry. Hope believed that there had been an evolution of the arts from the primitive to the fine arts,[58] and that Christian thinking leads only to a lower form of artistic enterprise. In his view, Christian inspired art, like other kinds of 'activism,' serves a 'lower order of creation...promoting its ends, political change, education, culture, Christian morals, or Soviet morale.'[59] In this sense Hope came close to advocating an 'art for art's sake' approach. Like Brennan, Hope was sceptical of utilitarian notions of art, and advocated a policy of moderation and detachment, emphasising the primary importance of aesthetic response: '[G]reat art,' he wrote, 'can have every possible kind of social, moral or intellectual purpose, or it can have none at all.'[60] He believed that an aesthetic position was 'higher' than an overtly ideological one, and he felt that his theory of detachment in poetry (influenced by Eliot's theory of impersonality in art) placed him beyond ideological questioning. Interestingly, like Tranter years later, Hope also believed that poetry goes beyond 'mere' communication: 'The ideas and feelings of a poem...create a point of view to be considered for its own sake and not as a communication of what the poet thinks about things.'[61] The measure of a

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[55] Hope, *Cave*: 94.

[56] Hope, *Cave*: 92.

[57] Hope, *Cave*: 96. The ellipses have altered the emphasis of Hope's original statement somewhat, but I believe this still represents his view.

[58] Hope, *Cave*: 35.

[59] Hope, *Cave*: 36.

[60] Hope, *Cave*: 31.

[61] Hope, *Cave*: 71-72.

poet's greatness, he declared, 'is in a sense the measure of his detachment from merely personal communication, and the measure of his detachment is the measure of the sincerity of his work.'[62] The fact that the poet's views could be sexist, racist, elitist and cruel, as Hope's sometimes were,[63] was deemed to be less important than this elevated aesthetic.

Hope's aim was to promote poetry, to maintain its relevance to human experience, and in effect to preserve what he saw as its greatness. The fundamental difference between his view and that of the literary avant-garde writers was that, whereas the literary avant-garde writers believed that stylistic innovation expressed new values, Hope believed that the only way to preserve poetry's greatness was to conserve old forms and old values. In this he epitomises a certain aspect of anti-modernism of mid-century Australian poetry. James McAuley's anti-modernist views have a somewhat different emphasis.

Although he was a Christian poet, McAuley, like Hope, emphasised the human dimension of poetry. He too believed in a 'synoptic' view, arguing that 'Poetry is the most adequate expression of [a] unified vision of life.'[64] Whereas for many of the literary avant-garde writers, poetry expressed a sense of the divine and heightened states of consciousness, according to McAuley, the 'unified vision of life' is determinedly secular:

> the object of artistic experience is twofold: first the delight offered by the artifact in itself by virtue of its pleasing appearance; and second, in the case of what we call great or significant works of art, the beauty, not of the Divine Being, but of human being. It is our essential selves that such works bring us an experience of.[65]

McAuley agreed with Hope in principle as to the disjunction between the human

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[62] Hope, *Cave*: 72.

[63] Hope's cruelty in reviewing is well known, especially his criticism of poet Norma Davis. His racism (which was shared by many other commentators at the time) can be seen in his reviews of the Jindyworobak poets.

[64] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 132.

[65] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 16.

and the divine (there is an 'infinite distance that separates divine things from human things'),[66] but his humanism was nevertheless influenced by traditional Christianity. This allowed for a very different emphasis in his view of art and the role the poet.

McAuley admired the positive aspects of the Western tradition, and he did not regret out of hand the advances of modernity (which he defined in broad sociological terms); he saw the negative aspects balanced by the good:

> The break-up of old forms released new potentialities: we have had immense advances in the experimental sciences as well as scientism; liberal and humane social tendencies as well as liberalist humanism; and the possibility remains of the eventual incorporation of these gains in a richer and more complex and flexible traditional order than any so far envisaged.[67]

But whereas Hope still had faith in the potential of liberal thinking, McAuley, by contrast, re-evaluated the legacy of Western liberal humanism. He saw the humanist tendency as having contributed to the climate of uncertainty and spiritual anomie of modern thinking. This was his major objection to modernity, the loss of a spiritual tradition:

> The world of industrial progress is a world of disinherited beings, cut off from the deepest sources of human satisfaction, restless and jangled, driven by unstilled cravings through a course of life without meaning or direction.[68]

With the loss of spirituality, McAuley believed, 'This world's goods – power, wealth, human affection, pleasure, science, art – become the objects of an inordinate passion.'[69] According to McAuley, the belief in the human without an associated belief in the divine, the legacy of liberal humanism, results in a weakness in the human spirit, and consequently leads to a powerlessness to overcome the ills of modern society. McAuley agreed with C Day Lewis's remark that 'our civilisation is disintegrating for lack of a core of faith or philosophy strong enough

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[66] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 158.

[67] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 13.

[68] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 25.

[69] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 38.

to hold it together.'[70] McAuley desired to take a stronger, more positive stand than the one offered by the humanists:

> Suburban and academic humanists may imagine that all this sacrilege and blood and darkness which has been loosed on the world can be tidied up, talked away, or stabilized into an undogmatic practical atheism of a cosy English kind or a matey Australian kind. They think that the human race will settle down to living by bread alone, covered perhaps with a smear of sentiment.[71]

Whereas the literary avant-garde writers sought new visions to sustain poetry and belief, McAuley's attitude was a response to the perceived failure of such hopes, and the view that openness to alternative spiritual traditions had contributed to the problem. He believed that the growing tendency toward pluralism and relativism which the seeking of the literary avant-garde writers exemplified was one of the root causes of society's ills:

> Compared with a society based on spiritual principles, ours has increasingly become unprincipled, or rather, it takes the refusal of all ordinating principles as its sole principle. In measure as the sense of traditional order fades, the community becomes confused and distracted by competing interests acknowledging no common rule. Communication breaks down because men have no common language in which to deal with fundamental realities.[72]

Instead of turning to explore alternative religions and cultural influences, therefore, McAuley desired a new integration of art and the spiritual life along the lines of traditional Christian thinking. In this, McAuley's Eurocentrism was profound. He was intolerant of all non-Western forms of belief, and, like the Vision group, saw them as bordering on barbarism. He criticised Eastern traditions for their supposed quietism, which he believed promoted a form of totalitarian thinking, and in his criticisms emphasised only the most extreme forms of non-Western beliefs: 'human sacrifice, cannibalism, sacred prostitution, the plight of outcasts in Hindu society,

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[70] Lewis's comments were made in relation to Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming,' (quoted by McAuley in *End of Modernity*: 32).

[71] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 33.

[72] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 6.

cruel punishments like crucifixion and flaying.'[73] He was intolerant also of socialism, seeing the rise of Marxist-inspired regimes as 'the emergence of... totalitarian pseudo-religions.'[74] For McAuley, any form of totalitarianism or perceived violations of humanity were intolerable; in his view it was not a revolution of Western thinking but a renewal of its basic premises which could best avoid these injustices.

While McAuley advocated a special role for Christian thinking in poetry, he abhorred the notion that the poet can take the place of priest or prophet, and in this sense his position was also profoundly against the view of the poet suggested by symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics. Unlike Hope, whose principal objection to modernist forms was the disruption of aesthetic form, McAuley was most critical of the 'Magian heresy' which he saw in modernist texts, and which he believed to be a legacy of Romanticism. McAuley described this 'heresy' as the belief in poet as 'hierophant, prophet, seer, shaman or magus,' with poetry seen as 'magic, gnosis, paraclectic inspiration, prophecy, revelation, even divine creation,'[75] a tendency which he described as the 'inmost pulse of poetic modernity'[76]

> It was hoped that the poetic word would be the Logos of a new dispensation, the informing spirit of a new age in which the truths and powers and values which had once been the property of religion would be restored and thereby the world transformed.[77]

McAuley believed that this impulse had arisen as a reaction against what he termed 'nineteenth-century notions of what constituted reality and utility.'[78] In the end, he believed, it was merely a symptom of the loss of a spiritual tradition:

> Meaning to conquer the Absolute, they instead opened up new regions of subjectivity. Aspiring through music to voice the inexpressible silence, they

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[73] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 11.

[74] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 7.

[75] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 148.

[76] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 157. His definition of modernity is in the sense of its being a broad historical period which includes Romanticism and modernism.

[77] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 148.

[78] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 148.

developed new subtleties and sonorities of verse. Trying to frame verbal spells which would be acts of new creation, they explored the obscure evocations of feeling and association which verbal images provide. Failing to replace the lost heritage of spiritual tradition, they expressed their sense of discord and estrangement in heart-piercing poetry.[79]

This passage gives a clear indication of McAuley's rejection of the claims of the symbolist and neo-Romantic poets, including the belief in the mantric power of the word to induce altered states of consciousness and a sense of the divine, and the view that poetic language, not religion or philosophy, can express the highest 'truth.'

When McAuley criticised the disruptive styles of modernism, his objections were secondary to this broader view. Without a fixed sense of an Absolute, in McAuley's view, the aims of the literary avant-garde writers led inevitably to high modernist despair. As poets are 'emancipated from allegiance to any higher principle,' McAuley wrote:

> what [they] do with their freedom is to place themselves at the service of the tendencies set loose by the disruption of the culture, from the 'noble' ideas offered by aristocratic rationalism as a substitute for spiritual doctrine all the way down to the most sinister nihilism and irrationality. Their constant tendency is downwards, towards negation and sterility.[80]

Modern literature, according to McAuley, had 'lost the light of metaphysical and theological truth and rational philosophy.'[81] In doing so, it had left itself 'wide open to the disintegrating influence of irrationalism' which he saw epitomised in surrealism, and which in his view reduced art 'to purely inward and senseless subjectivity.'[82] This, he claimed, was the thrust of his objection to the Angry Penguins' direction for poetry, and the inspiration for the Ern Malley parodies. It was not simply the unintelligibility of surrealism to which he objected, but the view of poetry for which he believed it stood: the fag-end of a 'Magian heresy' and a poetry without adequate spiritual values.

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[79] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 158.

[80] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 6.

[81] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 28.

[82] McAuley, *End of Modernity*: 157.

McAuley's conservative beliefs are inextricable from his conservative views regarding style. Instead of the stylistic disruptions of modernism, he advocated clarity, representation, and an identifiable poetic 'voice.' In his view, there was a profound 'kinship' between a perennial tradition of metaphysical thought and a perennial poetry which has no need of radical stylistic innovation.[83] In the perennial tradition of poetry, he claimed,

> there is continuity...it does not break down into mere fashion and mannerism. Its themes and images are in a high degree universal, because they are found in reality rather than ingeniously contrived. It is proportion to the nature of man, body and soul. It knows the art of combining intellectual vigour of conception with the ability to speak home to the unlearned. It does not mistake surface complication for subtlety and depth. Indeed it knows the truth (which is a truth both of art and of life) that a certain simplicity of means, candour of expression, formal regularity, and absence of individual caprice are not merely consistent with the utmost depth, complexity and inner life but are even the necessary condition thereof.[84]

McAuley's aim in poetry was to express this 'truth,' and, because to him the truth was unproblematic (that is, traditional Christian belief), the stylistic experiments of symbolism, high modernism and surrealism were not only unnecessary, but were also in complicity with what he saw as the fundamental problems of modernity.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, Slessor's and Wilmot's limited advocacy of modernist stylistic innovation, along with McAuley's and Hope's scepticism towards modernist innovations and advocacy of traditional forms and beliefs, all contributed to the sense of a 'tradition of conservatism' in Australian poetry before the New Poetry. While Hope and McAuley objected to modernist innovations, their conservative views can be seen as a reaction against high modernist despair. These conservative values were only compounded by the kind of poetry published in the fifties, the decade before the appearance of the New Poetry.

By the nineteen-fifties, the belief in the power of poetry exhibited by Brennan, the Vision group, the Jindyworobaks and the Angry Penguins, had been supplanted

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[83] McAuley, *End of Modernity*. 136.

[84] McAuley, *End of Modernity*. 137.

by a sense of irony and concern for technique. For Australian poets of the fifties discussed in Chris Wallace-Crabbe's essay, 'The Habit of Irony?,' there was little in the way of experimentation or risk-taking in style and almost no attempts at free verse. Instead, as inheritors of the high modernist strand of 'modern' Australian poetry, the work of these 'university poets' (who included Wallace-Crabbe himself, as well as Vincent Buckley) exhibited the styles favoured by the English 'practical criticism' of I A Richards and William Empson and the American New Criticism, the legitimised academic arms of modernism. Wallace-Crabbe describes the features of their work as compression, ambiguity, paradox, and the 'metaphysical' metaphor, combined with 'neatness, wit, formal control and detachment,' 'flexible, civilized tone,' 'honest indecision and self-protective irony.'[85] Importantly, these features were seen to be in keeping with the complex world of the Cold War. '[O]ur society,' wrote Wallace-Crabbe in 1961:

> presents its spiritual, political and moral values in a state of extreme confusion; that nobody can speak of the future in simple terms of optimism (nor simply of pessimism).... And if man's vision of the world is confused, it seems proper – though sad – that the best poetry should reflect this confusion....[86]

This group of poets, coming hard on the heels of Hope and McAuley, no doubt contributed to Tranter's sense of Australian poets' high seriousness and moralism.[87]

Although Hope, McAuley and the 'university poets' of the fifties exemplify what Tranter saw as the 'tradition of conservatism' of Australian poetry before the New Poetry, theirs was not the only response. A different strand of mid-century poets who continued a more optimistic line, but who were nevertheless stylistically conservative, were among those published by Douglas Stewart in his long editorship of *The Bulletin*. Many of these, including Stewart himself, David

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[85] Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'The Habit of Irony?' *Meanjin* 20 (1961): 166.

[86] Wallace-Crabbe, 'Habit': 170.

[87] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxii.

Campbell and Judith Wright, drew on aspects of Vision poetics, combining an interest in the concrete image and an avoidance of abstraction, while at the same time advocating a new sense of place and appreciation of the Australian natural environment which showed affinities with the poetics of the Jindyworobaks.[88] While these poets' emphasis on nature and the environment has been seen by critics as an escape from the despairs associated with 'modern' life, it can also be viewed as a continuing expression of the kind of neo-Romantic optimism characteristic of early literary avant-garde writers, a search for some vital 'growing point' for the poet. Because of the lack of radical stylistic innovations of these poets, however, they have not seriously been regarded as 'modernist.' Moreover, since the focus of their work was often on nature and the rural environment, it has only too readily been coupled with the other main strand of Australian poetry, the type of poetry which for Tranter was epitomised in the work of Henry Lawson and continued the 'typically Australian' bush ballad tradition. The perceived connection of these mid-century poets' work to this mainstream 'Australian' poetic tradition was made even more overt by critical discussions of Australian literature which began in the fifties.

In the nineteen-fifties, Australian literature began to undergo a kind of critical mythologising, which attempted to portray Australian poetry in terms of a unique Australian 'identity,' and establish the notion that Australian literature was a worthy tradition in its own right, distinct from English literature. This mythologising, undertaken by such writers as A A Phillips, Vance Palmer and Russell Ward,[89] evoked the achievements of the bush ballad tradition and the values of the eighteen-nineties as the defining characteristics of Australian

[88] See Shapcott's discussion, 'Douglas Stewart and Poetry in the *Bulletin*, 1940 to 1960' in *Biting the Bullet*: 58-68.

[89] See Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Melbourne Univ. Press, 1954); A A Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture* (1958; Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1966) and 'Australian Image 2: The Literary Heritage Re-assessed,' *Meanjin* 21 (1962): 172-98; Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (1958; Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964).

literature, thus promoting the view that Australian writers in general had refused to confront the conceptual concerns which had preoccupied European and American writers throughout the early part of the twentieth century. Quite possibly, it was this beginning of Australian literary studies, with its fictionalising of an Australian 'tradition,' which helped to encourage Tranter and the other New Poets in their view that Australian poetry before the New Poetry was dominated by a 'tradition of conservatism.' Along with the stylistic conservatism of earlier poets and the conservative values of mid-century poets, it may have played a part in encouraging the young poets to look to American poetry for what Tranter calls 'a real and vigorous alternative to the world of Henry Lawson and A D Hope.'[90]

In general terms, Tranter's view that Australian poets before the New Poetry were conceptually conservative and resistant to the ideas of modernism is a simplification which ignores the avant-garde qualities and neo-Romantic optimism of earlier Australian poets. Nevertheless, in terms of *style* his views do seem just: few earlier Australian poets experimented with free verse styles, and those who did retained a sense of lyricism which relied either on traditional metre or traditional rhyme and sound patterning. In this sense, Hope's comments when he took over from H M Green in writing the history of Australian poetry in 1963 seem strangely misdirected. Hope argued that, for Australian poets, the radical stylistic trends of modernism were well in the past:

> Present-day Australian poets write as individuals and express an individual vision and outlook. What they have in common is a return to traditional forms and techniques of verse and a retreat from experimental methods, free verse, surrealist logomania, fragmentary imagism, dislocated syntax and symbolist allusiveness.[91]

Ironically, as Vivian Smith has pointed out,[92] these were the very stylistic features which were soon to come once again into prominence in the work of the New

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[90] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xvii.

[91] Hope, *Australian Literature*: 3-4.

[92] Smith, 'Poetry': 416.

Poets in the late sixties and seventies when the stylistic innovations of modernism

finally, as Tranter remarks, 'broached the wall of Anglo-Saxon imperturbability.[93]

[93] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xx.

Chapter 5. New Poetry Poetics: 'Sixties' Postmodernism'

For John Tranter, the fact that Australian poets before the New Poetry were reluctant to adopt linguistic experimentation is sufficient evidence to suggest that they were resistant to modernism, and therefore to make the claim that the New Poets were responsible for effecting a 'revolution' in Australian poetry. In Tranter's view, modernist conceptual concerns and stylistic innovations are inseparable, the latter being a 'necessary' expression of the former. Central to his understanding is what Frederic Jameson refers to as the 'crisis of representation' of modernism. According to Jameson, this crisis entailed the rejection of the 'essentially realistic epistemology' of traditional representation, an epistemology

> which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it – projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself.[1]

According to Tranter, this crisis necessitates an increasing emphasis on language, and consequent valorisation of stylistic innovation and experimentation; it is this element which he sees as the major 'modernist' innovation of the New Poetry. However, although many of the New Poets abandoned traditional rhyme and metre, adopted a graphic approach to words on the page, and disregarded the sense of the identifiable poetic 'voice' and techniques of traditional representation, it remains to be seen whether the New Poets' poetics are best seen in terms of 'modernism.'

One impetus for Tranter's characterisation of the innovations of the New Poets in terms of modernism may have been the example set by discussions of the American New Poetry of the fifties and early sixties. As Tranter records, many of the New Poets were directly influenced by two American poetry anthologies, *The*

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[1] Jameson, 'Foreword' to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, by Jean-François Lyotard, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984): viii.

New American Poetry (1962), edited by Donald Allen, and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962).[2] These were seen as an important part of the 'ready-made revolution' which Tranter says the young Australian poets imported from the United States.[3] Allen, in his introduction to the anthology, mentions the importance of modernist poets such as Pound and William Carlos Williams to the American poets. He describes the various poets who appear in the anthology as being the 'avant-garde, the true continuers of the *modern movement* in American poetry.'[4] Yet the American New Poetry encompassed many different poets and groups, including those from the 'New York school' and San Francisco, as well as the Black Mountain group and the Beats, groups which represent a diversity of poetics which is also reflected among the Australian New Poets.

While some critics have supported Tranter's discussion of the New Poetry in regard to modernism, others have questioned the appropriateness of the term to describe the New Poetry. Martin Harrison and Martin Duwell both maintain that the main innovations of the New Poetry can be traced back to the innovations of modernism,[5] but even these sympathetic critics are aware that it is only a broad view of modernism which can incorporate the diversity of the work of the different New Poets. Duwell suggests that the New Poetry

> is not a development within modernism itself but a return to original modernist sources. The central imperative is Pound's 'make it new' although the very vagueness of this injunction enables the poetry of the new poets to be...bewilderingly varied.[6]

Harrison too notes the diversity of the New Poets' poetics, but nevertheless sees a consistent 'modernist' aesthetic underlying Tranter's choice of poems for the New

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[2] Donald Hall, ed., *Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1962).

[3] Tranter, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 26.

[4] Allen, Preface to *The New American Poetry*: xi (emphasis added).

[5] By contrast, Dobrez's study, *Parnassus Mad Ward*, maps a broader view of the New Poetry, implicitly relating the New Poetry to 'postmodern' rather than modernist poetics.

[6] Duwell, ' "New Australian Poetry" ': 494.

Poetry anthology. He sees the 'modern' element in Tranter's selection of the New

Poets' work particularly in the concentrated concern for language in many of the

poems; Harrison suggests that Tranter has looked 'quite narrowly for poems which

capture that trait of much of the most adventurous of modern writing – its linguis-

ticism, its conscious homing in on language as a medium or assemblage of codes.'[7]

This self-conscious linguisticism, however, is only one aspect of what Tranter sees

as 'modernist.'

Tranter describes the main characteristics of modernist texts as

> 'self-signature' – the work validates its own technical innovations – and self-
> reference, where the 'method' is reflected consciously in the 'medium';
> emphasis on individualist values against an agreed social value, fragmentation
> against synthesis and harmony, kinetic energy against the status quo, and an
> intention to disrupt the canons of the art form and the preconceptions of the
> consumer. Hence modernism tends to be on the side of experiment rather
> than conservatism. Its body of tradition is always conditional, as it depends
> on flux, enquiry, social change and growth rather than stasis, traditional
> values, social stability and consolidation.[8]

A number of different elements can be detected here, elements which reflect not so

much the concerns of the early modernists as a combination of modernist poetics

and the diverse poetics of the sixties' period. The reference to 'self-signature' and

'self-reference' indicate the formalist stylistic features of the autonomous art-work

first explored by the symbolists, and later adopted by the poststructuralists of the

sixties; the reference to fragmentation and kinesis suggests not only the early

avant-gardes, but also Olson's poetic of kinesis; and the challenge to conservative

values reflects not only the revolutionary optimism of the early avant-gardes, but

also the specific social and political rebellion of the sixties' youth generation.

Although the innovations of the New Poets reflect the openness to stylistic

experimentation typical of the early European and American modernists, therefore,

given the different social and political context of the sixties and seventies when the

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[7] Harrison, 'A Note on Modernism': 41.

[8] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xix.

New Poets were beginning to write, their poetics are perhaps better seen as part of a broader 'postmodern' movement which encompassed not only Australian poets, but also writers and artists in the United States and Europe from the late fifties on. Importantly, this 'sixties' postmodernism,' as it has been called by recent critics, reveals a range of differing and sometimes conflicting attitudes towards subjectivity, language, the notion of the divine and the role of the poet.

Andreas Huyssen is one critic to have characterised the writing of the sixties' period as an early 'postmodernism.' Although his account deals with writing in the United States, the view he gives suggests many similarities with the Australian experience:

> First, the postmodernism of the 1960s was characterized by a temporal imagination which displayed a powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict, an imagination reminiscent of earlier continental avant-garde movements such as Dada and surrealism rather than of high modernism. Thus the revival of Marcel Duchamp as godfather of 1960s postmodernism is no historical accident. And yet, the historical constellation in which the postmodernism of the 1960s played itself out (from the Bay of Pigs and the civil rights movement to the campus revolts, the anti-war movement and the counter-culture) makes this avant-garde specifically American, even where its vocabulary of aesthetic forms and techniques was not radically new?

For Huyssen, sixties' postmodernism was specific to the United States, particularly as he defines it against European, in particular French and German, concepts of modernism and postmodernism.[10] Nevertheless, the application to the Australian experience is not hard to determine. Tranter's review of the modernist inheritance

[9] Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986): 191.

[10] Huyssen's discussion of the sixties' avant-garde presents a different emphasis from the one I suggest here. His discussion concerns the sixties' avant-garde ideas of bringing art into closer relation to life; he argues that an avant-garde was impossible in the United States before the sixties because of the absence of a tradition of high culture, which only the institutionalisation of modernism itself provided. This argument is contested by Walter Kalaidjian who seeks to resurrect forgotten traditions of the avant-garde in the United States. (See Kalaidjian, 'Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-gardes in Postmodern Culture,' *American Literary History* 3 [1991]: 319-36.) Although Huyssen's account of the reasons for the appearance of a sixties avant-garde in the United States is different from mine, the similarities between the American and the Australian avant-garde gestures of the sixties cannot be overlooked.

of the New Poets specifically mentions Duchamp and dada,[11] and his liturgy of the New Poets' demands echo those of the counter-culture suggested above.[12]

Miklós Szabólsci too has outlined the social and political concerns of the sixties' generation which include the 20th Party Congress, the crisis of Cuba, the war in Vietnam, the Black question, and the increasing importance of the technological revolution including the advance of cybernetics and space travel.[13] Other influences on this generation were the increase in awareness of environmental issues, the influence of gay liberation and the women's movement, the youth culture's openness to drugs and sexual freedoms, as well as the influence of popular culture, including various types of music from jazz, through folk, to rock'n'roll, and a renewed openness to the alternative spiritual traditions of non-Western and indigenous cultures. A common thread running through the work of many writers of the sixties' period was the belief that change meant a new opportunity for justice and freedom. For these writers, earlier strands of modernism had lost their radical political edge, and as a way of regaining a sense of radical revolutionary potential, some of the sixties' writers revived gestures and techniques of the early avant-gardes in an attempt to effect both social and political revolution. These 'neo-avant-garde' writers began publishing manifestos, repeating 'anti-art' claims, and exploring technology for expanding the possibilities of composition;[14] stylistically they revived many of the radical experiments of the early avant-gardes, abandoning notions of 'traditional' taste and traditional techniques of representation and expression. According to Richard Gilman, this involved turning away from 'high' culture, and valorising 'outcast objects,' 'trash,' pornography, eroticism and violence.[15] There was also a new emphasis on inter-art activities, as well as interest

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[11] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xix.

[12] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xvii.

[13] Szabólsci: 64-65.

[14] See Szabólsci: 65-69.

[15] Gilman, 'Art, Culture and Conservatism,' *Partisan Review* 39 (1972): 394-95.

in the body and in performance. Importantly, although many of the new writers were interested in stylistic innovation and self-consciousness in regard to the act of writing, sharing the belief in what American New Poet Robert Creeley calls 'a process of writing that made both the thing said & the way of saying it an integral event,'[16] this kind of stylistic innovation tended to represent widely varying things for different poets. The wide variety of sixties' postmodernist poetics is reflected in the diversity of the Australian New Poets' work.

The poetic Tranter emphasises in his discussions of the New Poetry reflects a mixture of influences from the sixties, including poststructuralist theory and the neo-avant-garde's rhetoric of revolution. Importantly, in terms of an understanding of the variety of New Poetry poetics, his views conflict in a fundamental way with the symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics characteristic of a number of other New Poets. In Tranter's terms, neo-Romantic poetics in particular suggest a 'premodern' sensibility. However, symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics can be defended against Tranter's objections on the very grounds which Tranter himself relies for justification of his views: developments in twentieth-century physics. Moreover, these strands of the New Poetry can be shown to accommodate a political and personal awareness which some critics have regarded as absent from poststructuralist poetics. A third important aspect of the New Poetry was that influenced by both poststructuralist and the more political concerns of the neo-avant-garde, what may be termed the 'poststructuralist neo-avant-garde' strand. Importantly, whereas the poststructuralist and the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde elements of the New Poetry emphasise the primacy of radical stylistic innovation, this is of less importance to the neo-Romantic New Poets whose work sometimes exhibits more traditional styles and a sense of the poetic 'voice.'

In terms of emphasis on language and stylistic innovation, the poststructuralist

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[16] Quoted by Kevin Power in 'Post Modernist Poetics: Four Views,' *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 2 (1981): 52.

theory reflected in Tranter's poetic echoes aspects of early modernist, particularly symbolist, poetics; however, both Tranter and the poststructuralists display a much greater scepticism than Mallarmé or Stevens, particularly in regard to the view of language as 'mantric' or the idea that poetry may function as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. Like the poststructuralists, Tranter emphasises the way in which language constructs our notions of subjectivity and reality, and is sceptical towards the traditional notion of the 'Logos,' ideas which derive from an understanding of Saussurean linguistics. Following Saussure, the poststructuralists maintain that language is a system of differences rather than the embodiment of meaning; thus, the importance lies not in the word itself, but the signifying process. This entails rejecting the traditional notion of 'Logos' and the idea of the 'mantric' power of the word, the view that meaning is in some way 'present' in the word. It also leads to an elevation of the role of the reader above that of the author, the one traditionally regarded as 'source' or oracle. This elevation of the role of the reader, according to Roland Barthes, is central to modernist texts such as the work of Mallarmé. Yet Barthes' emphasis differs significantly from Mallarmé's.

Barthes makes a distinction between the pre-modernist 'classic' or 'readerly' 'work,' which assumes that writing can be a transparent vehicle of meaning from author to reader, and the modernist or 'writerly' 'text,' which, he suggests, implicitly recognises that language is a system of differences, and that the author is no longer the 'source' of meaning. According to Barthes, in writerly texts the idea of a coherent author, including the poetic 'voice,' is denied by the complexity of language, the breaking of traditional syntactic rules, and the defiance of such features as logic, continuity and representation: 'the [modernist] Text is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, and so on).'[17]

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[17] Barthes, 'From Work to Text' in *Image, Music, Text*: 157. A useful discussion of the distinction between the *readerly* and the *classic* or *writerly* text appears in Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), Chapter 6: 237-283.

Thus, it is the reader's engagement with the language of the text which produces signification, resulting in a plurality of possible meanings:

> a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focussed and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader...[is] that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.[18]

In this view, unlike in Mallarmé's the elevation of the role of the reader means that the view of the poet as specially gifted and of poetry as expressing a unique poetic 'vision' are abandoned.

Tranter extends Barthes' thinking to argue that even in traditional, non-innovatory works the sense of the poet's 'voice' is only ever an illusion, a function of language; the 'writer-to-reader' tone of much conventional poetry, he maintains, is an 'artificial construct':

> The artificiality grows out of the contradiction between the fact that the writer is creating an object, or 'art-object,' on the one hand, and pretending to talk to somebody on the other. It's one of the contradictions involved in communication. Martin Johnston said that if you want to communicate use the telephone.[19]

For Tranter, as for Barthes, textual disruption and the abandonment of the poetic 'voice' acts to foreground this illusion, the aim being to open up the reader's experience to a free play of ideas. Instead of the poem conveying 'information' or 'meaning' to the reader, reading becomes a kind of play in which the reader inter-acts with the poem. This idea can be seen in Tranter's choice of epigraph for his poem, 'Red Movie':

> That which can be studied is the pattern of processes which characterise the interaction of personalities in particular recurrent situations or fields which include the observer.[20]

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[18] Barthes, 'Death of the Author': 148.

[19] Tranter, 'Interviews' with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 25.

[20] From Harry S Sullivan, in *Tensions That Cause War*, quoted by Tranter, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982): 30.

Both reality and the text become 'fields' with which the subjectivity of the reader interacts. When the poetic 'voice' is abandoned, the reader is led into 'play' with the text and the poem becomes a site of interaction of the processes of language, not a 'communication' from writer to reader. Instead of the traditional hermeneutic approach to poetry, therefore, this free play of ideas invites what Derrida refers to as 'the joyful Nietzschean affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs which has no truth, no origin, no nostalgic guilt, and is proffered for active interpretation.'[21] In Tranter's view, the radical stylistic innovation of modernist texts not only elevates the experience of the reader above the 'authority' of the author, it also reflects a post-humanist understanding of subjectivity: this view is no longer the 'unified' Cartesian subject known to itself through reason, but the 'decentred' subject which Foucault describes. The individual is acknowledged to be not an essence, but rather radically 'decentred' 'in relation to laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical discourse.[22]

While the writerly stylistic innovations noted by the poststructuralists describe aspects of modernist texts, their playful anti-absolutist stance is more characteristic of accounts of postmodernism. Ihab Hassan describes the emphasis as 'postmodern "indetermanences" (indeterminacy lodged in immanence),'[23] and lists a number of features of postmodern texts which are particularly applicable to Tranter's own work, including indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, self-less-ness, depth-less-ness, the unpresentable, the unrepresentable, irony, hybridization,

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[21] Derrida, *L'Ecriture et la différence*, quoted in Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983): 247.

[22] *The Archeology of Knowledge*, cited by Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*: 29.

[23] Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective': 504.

carnivalization, performance, participation, constructionism and immanence.[24] The

kind of carnivalization and irony found in Tranter's work relates particularly to his

rejection of traditional hermeneutics and the high seriousness of what he regards as

traditional poetic styles (a theme most comprehensively explored in the comic

parodies of *The Alphabet Murders*).

Tranter's emphasis on play and wit represents a deliberate attempt to subvert

what he sees as the emphasis given in university English departments to the

humanist aesthetics of Matthew Arnold and F R Leavis, especially the optimism

and moralism of such criticism.[25] At 'The American Model' conference in 1979,[26]

Tranter presented a discussion of what he sees as the main failings of Leavisite

criticism and the humanist view, both of which he sees as continuing the

discredited project of the Enlightenment:

> Most of our critics are employed by our universities, and our universities
> were modelled directly on a nineteenth-century view of what English educa-
> tional institutions should be: a force for moral and ethical enlightenment,
> based on a mixed doctrine of common sense, Christianity and Victorian
> optimistic humanism.... That bracing optimism long ago disappeared into the
> bottomless pit of the twentieth century, to be replaced by an anguished un-
> certainty. In the face of a general lack of firmly-agreed social and moral
> values in the teaching of English, many academics today feel – naturally
> enough – both useless and threatened. Poetry is thus often seen as forming a
> rather complicated but well-meaning religious text; the academic often sees
> his job as the explication of these cryptic utterances, for the purpose of
> strengthening and ennobling the otherwise meaningless condition of modern
> alienated man.[27]

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[24] In fact, Hassan sees some disjunction between postmodernist and poststructuralist views; Hassan acknowledges that some postmodern texts seek to recover the ' "deep" romantic ego, which remains under dire suspicion in post-structuralist circles as a "totalizing principle"' ('Pluralism and Postmodern Perspective': 505). As we will see, Hassan sees postmodernism itself as part of a broader cultural shift which includes the validation of transcendentalist ideas.

[25] Tranter is not alone in this criticism. The debt of Australian University English Departments to the ideas of F R Leavis has been provocatively described in John Docker's book *In A Critical Condition* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1984).

[26] Text of Tranter's speech at the conference was published in essay form: 'Anaesthetics: Some Notes on the New Australian Poetry,' in Joan Kirkby ed., *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982): 99-116.

[27] Tranter, 'Anaesthetics': 111-112.

Tranter here rejects the equivalent of the mood of high modernism as it translates into criticism, the 'anguished uncertainty' in the face of the collapse of traditional values. In this, Tranter does not dispute that this mood is reflective of our cultural condition,[28] rather he rejects the idea that it is something to be wilfully fought against (either in art or criticism) for the good of art and humanity. His view is that such a mood is to be accepted as a part of contemporary life, the inevitable condition of our cultural epoch. This view foreshadows what critics have seen as the mood of 'tolerance' regarding the anxiety experienced by the high modernists, a mood seen as characteristic of postmodernism in the eighties.[29]

Although many of the New Poets represented in Tranter's anthology adopt aspects of the writerly style, few actually promote the kind of poststructuralist anti-absolutism and scepticism characteristic of Tranter's poetic. Among the many poets in the New Poetry anthology, only Martin Johnston and John Forbes seem to have fully adopted the poststructuralist scepticism towards absolutes and rejection of traditional hermeneutics.

Both Johnston and Forbes share Tranter's anti-aesthetic, anti-utilitarian views regarding the role of poetry. In a discussion with Tranter for *Makar* magazine Johnston likened poetry to a game of chess, 'a beautiful but useless game':

> I tend to think of poetry, I must admit, substantially in terms of beautiful but useless objects. I'm not clear exactly what poetry is meant to *do*. A game of chess is an intensely dynamic, intensely kinetic object within a static set of parameters, a fixed set of rules. The same I think, in a much more complicated way, applies to the way language works in poetry....[30]

Prompted by Tranter, Johnston rejects the traditional idea that poetry gives 'a profound insight into the human condition'; he maintains that poetry is essentially self-referential words on a page, 'rather mystifying perhaps, rather baffling, even rather

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[28] For example, in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, Tranter and Mead refer to the 'modern landscapes of discontinuity and doubt': xxviii.

[29] Wilde: 17.

[30] Johnston, 'Interview' with Tranter, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Duwell: 152.

pointless.'[31] According to Tranter, Johnston's poetry reflects a play of 'aesthetic surfaces' rather than a concern for traditional aesthetics. He praises Johnston's poem, 'The Blood Aquarium,' for demonstrating 'a value unencumbered by moralism, ego or social utilitarianism.'[32]

John Forbes' poetry too resists a traditional hermeneutic approach. Tranter remarks of Forbes' poem, 'T V': 'Whatever else John Forbes may have intended his poem to do, it is at least certain that he is not concerned with persuading the reader to accept his view of human destiny; ethics, morality, religion and mythology are distinctly absent from the writer's concerns.'[33] The focus of Forbes' poetry is the idea of language as a system which is constituent of our views of reality and subjectivity. Forbes criticises traditional representational poetry for its unquestioning acceptance of language as 'given,' arguing that the only way the poet can achieve 'energy' in a poem is by acknowledging the arbitrariness of the signifying aspects of language:

> Constructed images of the self just can't provide any energy. You can only get energy by refusing to pretend that these images have any validity beyond the fact that you've constructed them.[34]

Interestingly, Forbes sees this as opposing the 'idealist' view of human subjectivity, which he believes to be incompatible with the awareness of the functions of language; he admits to a desire for a more 'idealist' view, but resists it, in the name of intellectual honesty:

> I'm tugged in the opposite direction, but I know it's bullshit – that is the idealist approach to human nature as an absolute which in turn gives rise to the idea of language as something we just pick up and use rather than something which structures us.[35]

Forbes' criticism of the 'idealist' approach is directed at other elements of the New

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[31] Johnston, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 152, 156.

[32] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxiv.

[33] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxi.

[34] Forbes, 'Interview' with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 79-80.

[35] Forbes, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 80.

Poetry which are indebted to symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics, which for Forbes, as for Tranter, presuppose an unsophisticated, 'pre-modernist' view. Nevertheless, symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics have had an important influence on other New Poets, and represent significant strands of sixties' postmodernism.

According to the editors of the revised anthology of the American New Poetry published in the early eighties, the American New Poetry of the fifties and sixties encompassed a wide range of poetic styles and attitudes:

> These writers permit themselves a new formal and syntactic flexibility – an idiosyncratic, or 'idiosyntactic,' flexibility. There is the resilient and advantageous syntax, the exploration of language as a system, the rhythms of ritual, of high chant, the body of a language arched in ecstasy, the quiet bluntness. More importantly, in the larger stylistic terms, they reflect a different disposition of self, a new attitude toward the elements of mind, nature, and society – and indeed the inherited assumptions of modern man. Their writing is marked by an acceptance of the primordial, of spiritual and sexual necessities, of myth, the latest understandings of science, chance and change, wit and dream. Some might even be called preliterate, prerational, premodern, if it is true that the attitudes and commitments of modernism helplessly produced the Bomb....[36]

While some American New Poets were influenced by sixties' poststructuralism, exploring 'language as system,' others reflected an interest in traditional ritual and mantric notions of language inspired by symbolist poetics, while others showed a renewed interest in alternative spiritualities typical of neo-Romanticism. These symbolist and neo-Romantic elements of sixties' postmodernism were widely noted and promoted by a number of influential critics of the period.

In 1972 Leslie Fiedler contrasted the period of the sixties with that of high modernism, declaring that: 'The Age of T. S. Eliot...was the age of a literature essentially self-aware, a literature dedicated, in avowed intent, to analysis, rationality, anti-Romantic dialectic – and consequently aimed at eventual respectability, gentility, even, at last, academicism.'[37] By contrast, Fiedler notes the

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[36] Donald Allen and George F Butterick, *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited* (New York Grove Press, 1982): 12.

[37] Fiedler, 'Cross The Border – Close the Gap,' in Waugh, *Postmodernism*: 32.

new sensibility of the sixties and early seventies:

> We have...entered quite another time, apocalyptic, antirational, blatantly Romantic and sentimental; an age dedicated to joyous misology and prophetic irresponsibility; one, at any rate, distrustful of self-protective irony and too great self-awareness.[38]

Another critic to have noted the symbolist and neo-Romantic elements of the American sixties' postmodernists was Susan Sontag, who to some extent bridged the gap between the kind of linguistic experimentalism associated with the French poststructuralists (Sontag later edited and introduced a translation of Barthes' essays) and a more Romantic-inspired sentiment. Like the poststructuralists, Sontag saw that much contemporary art was 'motivated by a flight from interpretation': 'To avoid interpretation, art may become parody. Or it may become abstract. Or it may become ["merely"] decorative. Or it may become non-art.'[39] She also expressed an impatience with the academicisation of poetry: she regarded the American New Poets as having turned away from 'content' *'in the old sense,'* revealing their 'impatience with what made modern poetry prey to the zeal of interpreters.'[40] At the same time, Sontag advocated a new sense for poetry; in her view, the interest in the conceptual aspects of language must be balanced by an awareness of the senses: she suggested that the role of the reader and critic is 'to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.... In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.'[41] As well as advocating this poetics of the body, she stressed the special *power* of poetry: declaring that the sixties' poets attempted, like Mallarmé, to 'put silence into poems and to reinstate the *magic* of the word.'[42] In her view, the American New Poets revived traditional impulses of symbolism and Romanticism, particularly as they attempted to express

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[38] Fiedler: 33.

[39] Sontag, 'Against Interpretation,' in Waugh, *Postmodernism*: 53.

[40] Sontag: 53 (emphasis added).

[41] Sontag: 55.

[42] Sontag: 53 (Sontag's emphasis).

the mantric and prophetic qualities of poetry in their work.

For Ihab Hassan, the symbolist and neo-Romantic aspects of sixties' postmodernism was not simply a matter of style or attitude to language or the role of poetry; they formed part of a much broader cultural shift which incorporated also earlier literary avant-garde movements. These, according to Hassan, form part of 'a vast, revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling/resettling codes, canons, procedures, beliefs.'[43] In his essay, 'The New Gnosticism: Speculations on an Aspect of the Postmodern mind,' Hassan portrays the very notion of postmodernity as reflecting this mixture of aspects of Romanticism, Eastern mystical traditions, technology and the New Physics, explorations of the occult, studies of myth and contemporary literature into an expansive account of a possible contemporary poetry which also allows room for a new spirituality.[44] While a number of American New Poets, including Robert Duncan and John Ashbery, were influenced by French symbolist poetics, Hassan's ideas are most obviously relevant to the kind of neo-Romantic poetic exemplified in the work of New Poets like Gary Snyder who self-consciously adopted aspects of Eastern thinking (in Snyder's case, Zen Buddhism). In another sense, however, the neo-Romantic belief in an alternative concept of the divine extends the kind of thinking apparent in the anti-metaphysical, anti-humanist poetic of Charles Olson.

Of all the American New Poets, Olson has the most direct link to the earlier modernists, having visited Ezra Pound and corresponded with William Carlos Williams.[45] Like Mallarmé and Stevens, Olson is interested in stylistic innovation for the way in which it helps to suggest a new understanding of reality. Although, like Stevens, he resists the language of transcendence, in some respects his view of

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[43] Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (n. p.: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987): 7, quoted by Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989): 18.

[44] Hassan, from *Paracriticisms*, excerpt reprinted in Waugh, *Postmodernism*: 72.

[45] John Osborne and Bruce Woodcock regard Olson as having presided of the 'rebirth' of modernism in the United States in the fifties. See their 'Bunting, Olson and the Modernist Inheritance,' *Bete Noir* 5 (1988): 127.

reality and subjectivity bears affinities with Eastern thinking. More importantly, a number of New Poets have adopted similar poetics, while affirming a belief in the divine. In effect, these poets combine Mallarmé's notion of the poet as visionary (without the sceptical proviso that such a vision of the transcendent may only be a fiction, the notion of fiction and reality, after Stevens, having broken down), with Olson's emphasis on process. They see the divine, and the relationship of the human to the divine, as fundamentally dynamic: the basis of both language and consciousness. Because of the importance of Olson's emphasis on process to a number of Australian New Poets, his views will be discussed here.

In a manifesto, 'Projective Verse,' written in 1950,[46] Olson broadens Mallarmé's and Stevens' elevation of the role of the reader into the concept of 'field' as a new paradigm for poetry, and also as a paradigm of subjectivity. Olson believes that words are as solidly real as objects in reality, and that the aim is to create tension between these objects by concentrating on the processes of perception, movement and relationships between them, rather than offering static descriptions as in traditional representation. As Kevin Power remarks, for both Olson and for another American New Poet, Gary Snyder,

> The poet's role is to function as a nexus of energy, prehending the energies of the world about him. The laying down of the words, the phrasing, flow from the rhythms & cadences of the poet's own body. Breath acquires a new significance. It serves as a measure of our involvement in the world outside, registering both physical effort & the graph of our emotions. Etymologically breath also relates to soul & spirit. Snyder refers to 'inspiration' as a taking in of the world & to 'expiration' as the returning of one's presence to the world.[47]

For Olson, the emotions, the body and the poetic word are all linked ('the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE').[48] This is the poetry of 'kinesis' ('A poem is energy transferred from where the poetic got it...by way of the poem itself

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[46] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse,' in Scully: 271-282. Importantly this essay also appeared in full in the original *American New Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960): 386-397.
[47] Power: 53.
[48] Olson: 275.

to...the reader');[49] the poem becomes a 'field' of activity, in which meaning is generated by an interaction of the reader with the words on the page in what becomes an 'open' poem.[50] While the concept of the poem as field overlaps considerably with Tranter's view, especially in Olson's reference to 'play' ('is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?'),[51] Olson's concept can be extended to include a radical view of subjectivity which Tranter would dismiss as Romantic essentialism, but which actually bears a greater affinity with aspects of Eastern transcendentalism.

Like the high modernists, Olson rejects Romantic lyricism, but he also criticises the excessive claims of high modernism. In his essay, Olson disparages the position of the high modernists who opposed the 'subjectivism' of Romanticism with the 'objectivism' of hard-edged detachment; as an alternative to this view, Olson suggests the need for 'objectism,' a view of reality and subjectivity which reduces not only the poet, but the whole of humanity in the scale of things:

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature...and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.[52]

Olson believes that it is the poet's awareness of objects which gives the poet 'projective size':

> It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl [sic], he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share [sic].[53]

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[49] Olson: 272.

[50] Olson: 276.

[51] Olson: 275.

[52] Olson: 280.

[53] Olson: 281.

This is the paradox which attends Olson's poetic. The poet does not sing of the poet's 'self,' but only the 'being,' the relationships and processes and objects which define him; this is the experience to be conveyed by the text and hopefully replicated for the reader. While Olson seeks to get away English Romanticism's celebration of the heightened subjectivity of the poet, in some respects his poetic reflects a strain of American Romanticism which goes back to Whitman and the mid-nineteenth-century Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau. Through the Transcendentalists' reading of Hinduism in particular, a different notion of the subject's relationship to the sublime had been suggested, one which recognised the paradoxical loss of individual ego at the same time as the individual experiences a sense of transcendent or universal subjectivity.[54] Thus, the individual subject, like language, is also a 'field' for the intersection of processes, including the divine, a view which echoes in part Krishna's teaching to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.[55] In Olson's terms, it is this aspect of the poet which 'sings,' not the individual ego. Thus, humanity may be seen to participate in a 'larger force' of nature,[56] which is not transcendent, but immanent; not metaphysical, but physical. Although Olson, like Stevens, avoids language which suggests transcendence, it is not far from his view to the view of a number of neo-Romantic New Poets, such as Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas, who, as we will see, respond to Hindu concepts of subjectivity and the divine. These poets affirm a belief in a universal consciousness, which the poet may apprehend by learning to listen not only to an inner voice, but to the 'voice' of everything which surrounds him or her, an awareness which in turn is expressed by the poet, or replicated in poetry for the experience of the reader. In this respect language itself is linked to direct

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[54] For the similarities between Hindu thinking and Transcendentalism see Satya S Pachori, 'Vedantism and Transcendentalism: A Study in Affinities,' *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974): 87-96.

[55] *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 13. This idea is expanded on in the *Jnaneshwari*, XIII, 1114-20, which is quoted in Swami Muktananda's *The Perfect Relationship*, trans. Swami Chidvilasananda (New York: SYDA, 1980): 116-17.

[56] Olson: 281.

apprehension of the divine.

Both symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics represent, from Tranter's and Forbes' points of view, 'pre-modern' notions of subjectivity, language and reality. Tranter and Forbes share a poststructuralist view, seeing the symbolists' assertion of the mantric power of the word as an unacceptable 'nostalgia for presence,'[57] since it sustains the idea of the 'Logos,' the transcendent sign which in turn suggests an inescapable metaphysics of divine 'presence.' Whereas Mallarmé sees the poet as one entrusted with seeing divinely, to sing of the connection of all things, Tranter is sceptical of such apparent 'absolutes,' or any other reification of philosophical and moral ideals and dogma. While for Mallarmé, the writerly style provides a way to overcome the limitations of language and to enhance poetry's ability to unite the consciousness of poet and reader in the 'immortal word,' for Tranter, such innovations are primarily employed to free the reader from inherited notions of the 'Absolute' and 'truth.' And whereas Stevens' sees the primary role of the poetry as life-affirming, to increase one's sense of reality, by offering the sense of the 'supreme' fiction, by contrast, Tranter insists that in no sense is the artwork redemptive; rather, like the poststructuralists, he regards the writerly text as feeding off its own self-reflexivity, seeking the 'jubilation which results from the invention of new rules of the game.'[58]

From the poststructuralist point of view, the neo-Romantic belief goes further even than Mallarmé's in implying a 'nostalgia for presence,' a ('premodern') attempt to reclaim lost notions of essentialism and poetic authority, and a desire to re-establish a meta-narrative of universal consciousness.[59] For Tranter, the seemingly 'transcendental' elements of such a poetic suggest notions of the

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[57] This is a phrase used by Lyotard in 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?,' in Waugh, *Postmodernism*: 123

[58] Lyotard, 'Answering the Question': 123.

[59] It is Lyotard which sees the 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' as central to postmodernism (*The Postmodern Condition*: xxiv).

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essential humanist 'self' of traditional Romanticism, as well as a return to concepts

such as absolute 'truth' and 'Authority' typical of Classical thinking. In such

poetry, according to Tranter,

> it's fairly clear that the poet is often seen as a special agent of the Greek
> gods and because of that has powers and abilities that the ordinary mortal
> cannot understand or must understand as though listening to an oracle.... It
> means that the poet says 'The details of my mundane life are not important,
> but my soul is more interesting than your soul because I'm a poet.[60]

As Dobrez points out, however, Tranter's comments here border on a parody of

traditional Romanticism: 'the oversimplified notion of Romanticism's supposed

assertion of subjectivity,' a type of 'ego-tripping.'[61] In fact, Tranter's criticisms

are more applicable to traditional Romanticism,[62] or the kind of high modernism

which would portray the poet as an all-important bard, than to symbolist or neo-

Romantic poetics. His criticisms echo what American New Poet Charles Bernstein

also objects to in traditional Romantic poetics, features which, Bernstein argues

retrospectively, the 'modernist' aspects of the American New Poets overcame:

> After the Second War, there is a more conscious rejection of lingering
> positivist and Romantic orientations toward, respectively, master systems and
> the poetic Spirit or Imagination as transcendent. The meaning of the modernist
> textual practice has been interpreted in ways that contrast with some of its
> original interpretations: toward the incommensurability of different discourse
> systems, against the idea of poetry as an imperializing or world-synthesizing
> agency (of the zeitgeist), not only because these ideas tend to impart to the
> Poet a superhistorical or superhuman perspective but also because they
> diminish the partiality, and therefore particularity, of any poetic practice. Thus,
> the emphasis in the New American Poetry and after on the particularity, the
> detail rather than the overview, form understood as eccentric rather than
> systematic, process more than system, or if system then system that undermines
> any hegemonic role for itself.[63]

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[60] Tranter, interview with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 19.

[61] Dobrez: 96.

[62] This characterisation is typical of the Wordsworthian idea of the 'Great Poet.' A somewhat different emphasis is initially given (though later repudiated) by Coleridge with his view of the imagination as 'the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,' a view which has something in common with the neo-Romantic notion of subjectivity.

[63] Charles Bernstein, 'The Second War and Postmodern Memory,' *Postmodern Culture* 1.2 (1991): paragraph 13.

However, neither Mallarmé nor the neo-Romantic poets, though interested in the divine, are guilty of the kind of totalizing which Bernstein sees in Romanticism: like Stevens, these poets implicitly regard distinctions between 'immanent' and 'transcendent' as artificial, as indicative of the kind of discredited dualistic thinking typical of Platonism. Moreover, instead of being elitist, they assert that poetry is basically democratic, available to all. These poets suggest that there is not only one truth, or one pathway to truth or spiritual enlightenment, but as many truths and as many paths as there are people and poets. The relativity of knowledge and truth which such poetics suggest in fact overlap considerably with the view of reality suggested by Tranter, particularly in regard to his understanding of developments in twentieth-century scientific thinking.

Tranter, like many high modernists and American New Poets, has appealed to discoveries in twentieth-century physics for justification of the radical stylistic innovations of modernist texts, as well as for his views on subjectivity and perceptions of reality.[64] The relevance of the New Physics to Tranter's poetic can be seen particularly in his choice of epigraphs for his collection *Parallax*, one of which is taken from Einstein's *Relativity*:

> It requires the idea of the field as the representative of reality, in combination with the general principle of relativity, to show the true kernel of Descartes' idea; there exists no space empty of field.[65]

Altering the Cartesian idea of the subject, Einstein suggests that the human subject is not separate and able to 'know' objectively, but is part of a dynamic which includes both 'objective' and 'subjective' principles (a view not unlike Brennan's).

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[64] A number of New Poets self-consciously refer to or have been connected with discoveries in the New Physics. See Olson's comments of Heisenberg's critique of metaphysics in *Human Universe and Other Essays*, referred to in Mesch: 11; Duncan's comments in 'Towards an Open Universe,' *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (Evergreen ed.; New York: Grove Press, 1979): 214, discussed by Steven Carter in 'Robert Duncan and Erwin Schrödinger: Esthetics of the Wave Function,' *Studies in the Humanities* 17.1 (1990): 36-48; and David Shapiro on John Ashbery, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979): 23-24.

[65] Tranter, *Parallax and Other Poems* (Sydney: South Head Press, 1970).

This view of subjectivity and reality leads to what Tranter records as one of the 'tenets of modernism': that 'the mental landscape can be displayed as being more variable, complex and humanly meaningful than the external, because it includes the "real world" as one of its many attributes.'[66] For Tranter, in order to convey this awareness, poetry must become self-reflexive, or self-referential: the 'art-object' of the poem is not static, but dynamic, kinetic and seemingly self-aware. Implicitly, stylistic innovations such as the abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice' are regarded as essential to the expression of this radically subjective view of reality, a way to displace 'the secure perspective of a stable vantage point from outside (Romantic vision or Enlightenment transcendental ego as pure reason)'[67] in favour of a more radically unknowable and uncertain principle. While a number of New Poets reflect a similar concept of the dynamic and unknowable nature of reality, the conclusions they draw are fundamentally different from Tranter's, particularly in regard to the positing of a universal consciousness of which the individual is seen an expression. Nevertheless, these neo-Romantic views, and certain aspects of symbolist thinking, can be shown to reflect some of the complexities of thinking of debates in twentieth-century physics.[68] In particular, the writing of physicist and social theorist Fritjof Capra gives ground for supporting the neo-Romantic view of the divine or 'transcendent,' while suggesting that the term 'transcendent' is itself misleading and inappropriate.

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[66] Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*: xxiii (the comment is made in relation to Rae Desmond Jones' poem, 'The Front Window').

[67] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992): 11.

[68] Tranter himself has drawn attention to the similarity between Zen Buddhist thinking and post-Einsteinian physics ('Interview' with Jim Davidson: 344) and says that this type of thinking has been influential on his own work; either this represents an inconsistency in his poetic, or his views are much less anti-absolutist than his anti-aesthetic, anti-hermeneutic and anti-Romantic comments would suggest. A conversation with the poet during the Francis Webb Commemorative Conference held at the Australian Catholic University (20 Nov., 1993) suggests that this latter may be the case. When asked about his reticence concerning spiritual matters, Tranter at first replied that he was reluctant, like Picasso, to be his own connoisseur (replying to a question from the floor); later he admitted that he considered 'those things' to be part of his poetry, and (mock seriously?) suggested that his reticence to discuss these elements in his work stems from his Scottish background (private conversation).

In *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and later in *The Turning Point* (1982), Capra discusses the collapse of the Cartesian and Newtonian world view in favour of one dominated by relativity, the uncertainty principle and insights drawn from the study of subatomic physics. The new world is one in which particles are not discrete objects or isolated entities, but 'condensations of a continuous field which is present through space';[69] where a vacuum 'contains an unlimited number of particles which come into being and vanish without end,'[70] and where the only fundamental feature of a particle is that it 'consists of all other particles.'[71] It is also the world where the traditional view of cause and effect is replaced by the concept of non-local connections.[72] Several features of this New Physics show parallels to the self-referentiality associated with Tranter's understanding of modernism, and the kind of experience of poetry advocated by the symbolists. Just as the reader of the writerly text is engaged in constructing the 'meaning' of the poem, so the scientific observer recognises that 'What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.'[73] Gone is the idea of the world 'sitting out there,' an objective 'reality' independent of the observer. Instead, the idea of participation, rather than observation, arises. In the New Physics, the idea is not only that the act of observation may shape our perceptions of reality, but also that the human mind and act of observation may have a profound effect on the outcome of experiments, irrespective of our commonsense notions of time. This latter point is demonstrated

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[69] Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (1975; rev. ed. London: Flamingo, 1983): 246.

[70] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 246.

[71] This is the model of the hadron particle of S-matrix theory; Capra adds a word of warning: 'It must not be imagined, however, that each hadron contains all the others in a classical, static sense. Rather than "containing" one another, hadrons "involve" one another in the dynamic and probabilistic sense of S-matrix theory, each hadron being a potential "bound state" of all sets of particles which may interact with one another to form the hadron under consideration.'

[72] See Capra's discussion of the famous E P R experiment in 'The New Physics Revisited: Afterword to the Second Edition,' *The Tao of Physics*: 341-354 and Chapter 3, 'The New Physics' in *The Turning Point*. Interestingly, the findings of the E P R experiment of the existence of non-local connections support Carl Jung's notion of synchronicity. Jung, who kept abreast of developments in physics, was possibly aware of the direction of thought in this area. (See C J Jung, *Synchronicity* [1955; ARK Paperbacks, 1991]).

[73] Heisenberg, quoted by Capra in *The Tao of Physics*: 152.

in the idea known as the 'measurement paradox' developed by physicist Erwin Schrödinger, in which the decisions made by the observer *even after the event* are seen to have an effect on the outcome of that event.[74] In a similar way, the writerly text foregrounds the fact that it is the *reader* (the observer) who influences the outcome of reading the poem (the 'experiment').[75]

While twentieth-century thinking has slowly come to terms with these radical challenges to traditional ways of perceiving reality and human subjectivity, Capra shows that many of these ideas overlap considerably with views suggested in various traditional Eastern philosophies, which in turn echo the kind of understanding of reality and subjectivity suggested by symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics. Capra describes how the behaviour of subatomic particles in accelerator chambers has provided new insights into the time-space continuum of relativity, giving a view of reality which finds a parallel with mystical experience as described by various schools of Eastern mysticism, and which arguably reflects the type of experience which poets such as Mallarmé, Brennan, Stevens and the neo-Romantic poets try to generate through their work. Surveying Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese thought, Taoism and Zen, Capra traces various affinities between these traditional philosophical views of reality and those supported by the New Physics. While Capra's critics have suggested that such an approach represents an artificial 'connection between physics and a grab bag of Eastern religions,'[76] and others have been eager to note the coincidence of 'quantum mysticism' with traditions within Western mystical philosophy,[77] nevertheless, Capra's discussion highlights a

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[74] The paradox, which concerns the decision to measure either the wave- or the particle-like properties of an electron, is succinctly outlined by Davies and Gribben in, *The Matter Myth*: 209-210.

[75] The similarity between quantum ideas and recent literary is discussed by André Brink in 'Transgressions: a Quantum Approach to Literary Deconstruction,' *Journal of Literary Studies* 1.3 (1985): 10-26.

[76] Robert P Crease and Charles C Mann, 'Physics for Mystics,' *The Sciences*, Jul.-Aug. 1987: 53; quoted by Mel Seesholtz in 'When the Quarks Come Marching Home, Again,' *Mosaic* 21.2-3 (1988): 180.

[77] Seesholtz notes that Henry Pierce Stapp, in 'The Copenhagen Interpretation' (*American Journal of Physics* 40 (1972) 1098-116), has linked quantum physics to the thinking of William James, Russell, Whitehead, Heisenberg, Bohr, Wittgenstein and von Neumann (Seesholtz: 191 [note]).

number of shared features between modern physicists and various Eastern philosophies. Like Olson, physicists and mystics of various Eastern traditions see the universe as fundamentally dynamic: change is 'the *primary* aspect of nature.'[78] For Capra, the similarities go much further. In his view, the New Physicists have also begun to recognise the fundamental interrelatedness of all things; at the same time they acknowledge the limitations of language in describing this reality:

> In the Eastern view…as in the view of modern physics, everything in the universe is connected to everything else and no part of it is fundamental. The properties of any part are determined, not by some fundamental law, but by the properties of all the other parts. Both physicists and mystics realise the resulting impossibility of fully explaining any phenomenon….[79]

Like the mystics who maintain that the transcendent cannot be expressed in language, scientists, Capra insists, can no longer hope to express absolute knowledge – a view foreshadowed by Brennan. Instead, they acknowledge the provisionality of their constructs: 'physicists construct a sequence of partial and approximate theories.'[80]

The limitations of language and conceptualisation in scientific inquiry arise particularly because of the way traditional language use tends to sustain our linear notions of time and our instinctive sense of cause and effect: in the relativistic space-time continuum all such apparent certainties have to be disregarded.[81] Capra describes, for example, how according to mathematical field theory certain events in the subatomic chamber can be described equally as a positron moving forwards in time or an electron moving backwards in time.[82] Physicists have had to accept that the human awareness of movement through time is in fact a function of the

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[78] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 313.

[79] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 321. Although Capra's generalisation here runs the risk of eliding the differences between the various Eastern philosophies, he supports his view by a more detailed reading of various Eastern texts.

[80] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 318.

[81] See Capra's discussion of the before and after life of a photon-emitting electron (Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 204).

[82] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 202.

human consciousness, rather than any 'true' description of reality. In space-time, there is no such sense:

> In space-time, everything which for each of us constitutes the past, the present, and the future is given en bloc.... Each observer, as his time passes, discovers, so to speak, new slices of space-time which appear to him as successive aspects of the material world, though in reality the ensemble of events constituting space-time exist prior to his knowledge of them.[83]

The similarity of relativistic space-time to traditional meditation experience, according to Capra, cannot be overlooked:

> The space-time of relativistic physics is a...timeless space of a higher dimension. All events in it are interconnected, but the connections are not causal.... Similarly, the Eastern mystics assert that in transcending time, they also transcend the world of cause and effect.[84]

This is similar to the type of experience which Mallarmé, Stevens, Brennan and the neo-Romantic poets try to achieve through their writing, a heightened awareness of reality or 'vision.' As Capra suggests, physicists have had to come to terms with the experience of the 'transcendent' which mystics and poets have been able to sense intuitively; but whereas physicists have learned to accept the limitations of their scientific language in describing this reality, and mystics have sought to 'free the human mind from words and explanations,'[85] poets have traditionally sought to capture their insights in words and, at times, to evoke the sense of this 'transcendental' reality in their work. It should be clear by now that the description of the mystical apprehension of the world as 'transcendental' is in fact a misnomer: the world where subject overcomes object, and where the limitations of time and space are overcome, is no longer something 'above' or 'beyond' the everyday world: it *is* the everyday world, the world of immanence rather than transcendence, just as Stevens insisted. It is our commonsense notions of causality and separateness, along with our prejudicial tendency to dismiss traditional notions of

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[83] Louis De Broglie, quoted in Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 205.

[84] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 206.

[85] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*: 322.

spirituality as requiring outdated absolutist thinking, which must be abandoned. What this suggests is that the whole notion of 'transcendentalism' must be reconceptualised and revalorised in relation to these new ways of seeing the world.

For Capra the coincidence of ideas in contemporary physics and Eastern mysticism has an important bearing on humanity's sense of living in the world, a sense of personal and political commitment which is also reflected in a number of the neo-Romantic poets' work. Capra is among many current thinkers who criticise the separation between 'the development of intellectual power, scientific knowledge, and technological skills, on the one hand, and of wisdom, spirituality, and ethics on the other.'[86] Like Jung, he points to a middle way of viewing the human subject which stresses an integration of these two aspects of human development, a view which coincides with formulations of the 'systems' view of living things in recent discussions of biophysics. The systems view recognises how each part of a system has characteristics of autonomy and at the same time a necessary interconnectedness with larger processes. Rather than the Cartesian view of the autonomous human subject or the modernist/poststructuralist view of the decentred or 'split' subject, therefore, the systems view suggests a more holistic view of humanity:

> Living systems are organized in such a way that they form multi-leveled structures, each level consisting of subsystems which are wholes in regard to their parts, and parts with respect to the larger wholes. Thus molecules combine to form organelles, which in turn combine to form cells. The cells form tissues and organs, which themselves form larger systems, like the digestive system or the nervous system. These, finally, combine to form the living woman or man.... People form families, tribes, societies, nations. All these entities – from molecules to human beings, and on to social systems – can be regarded as wholes in the sense of being integrated structures, and also as parts of larger wholes at high levels of complexity. In fact...parts and wholes in an absolute sense do not exist at all.[87]

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[86] Capra, *The Turning Point*: 25.

[87] Capra, *The Turning Point*: 27.

Capra suggests that there is a 'dynamic balance' between autonomy and integration, and we can extend this argument to provide a critique not only of the 'autonomous' Cartesian subject, and the assertive 'will to knowledge' and exploitative behaviour which this view of humanity has supported, but also of the 'decentred' subject which for some writers has led to a disabling sense of relativity and therefore futility, the kind of anxiety seen in both high modernism and the solipsistic 'toleration of anxiety' of postmodernist writing. Both views of the subject can be regarded as aspects of a continuum, different representations of what amounts to the same thing. This notion of the subject, which implicitly recognises its 'constructed' nature, is reflective of the kind of emphasis regarding subjectivity typical of postmodern poetry.[88]

The systems view of the subject can be extended to an understanding of what constitutes the mind itself, and it is this aspect of the debate which reflects the greatest area of difference between poststructuralist and neo-Romantic views of reality, subjectivity and the notion of the 'divine.' At the heart of Capra's view of 'mind' is an attack on the Cartesian distinction between mind and matter:

> From the systems point of view, life is not a substance or a force, and mind is not an entity interacting with matter. Both life and mind are manifestations of the same set of systemic properties, a set of processes that represent the dynamics of self-organization.... The description of mind as a pattern of organization, or a set of dynamic relationships, is related to the description of matter in modern physics. Mind and matter no longer appear to belong to two fundamentally separate categories, as Descartes believed, but can be seen to represent merely different aspects of the same universal process.[89]

Such a view of mind, like Olson's view of the human subject, is profoundly anti-humanist, since it suggests that qualities of 'mind,' which have been traditionally associated with human beings, may also be attributed to systems such as the environment, of which humanity is merely a part. It also suggests the possibility of

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[88] See Jerome Mazzaro, *Postmodern American Poetry* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980): viii
[89] Capra, *The Turning Point*: 315.

larger, self-aware systems such as a universal consciousness. Combining Capra's understanding of systems with neo-Romantic poetics, the 'divine' may be seen as a 'play of consciousness,'[90] the composite of larger and smaller dynamic systems of which the individual forms a part, which mystics sense through meditation, and which the poet attempts to convey or replicate in poetry. This view affirms the idea of the poet as having a special visionary gift, but does not see the individual subjectivity of the poet as in some way unique or superior to others.'

Whereas the early poets such as Mallarmé, Brennan and Stevens seek to replicate the experience of the so-called transcendent in the mind of their readers, Capra's discussions also suggest a pragmatic extension of the systems view which has its application in terms of practical political engagement and personal commitment, ideas which seem to bear out the kind of emphasis to be found in aspects of the neo-Romantic New Poets' work. As Capra points out, the view of humanity's place in larger self-organising systems has a bearing on our under-standing of human issues on a wide range of fronts, from questions of ecology in such areas as the use of natural resources and pollution, to physical and mental health problems, to the wisdom of such ideas as progressive 'standards of living,' economic growth and increasing population. Capra regards many of our current problems in these areas as a legacy of the Cartesian view:

> If we separate mental phenomena from the larger systems in which they are immanent and confine them to human individuals, we will see the environ-ment as mindless and will tend to exploit it. Our attitudes will be very different when we realize that the environment is not only alive but also mindful, like ourselves.[91]

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[90] This is the view of the divine suggested by Swami Muktananda and which provides the title for his account of the lives and teachings of the Siddha yogis, *Play of Consciousness*.

[91] Capra, *The Turning Point*: 316. To a large extent, Capra's views validate the direction of Jung's thought in his positing of the 'collective unconscious.' As Capra remarks of Jung's theory: 'Jung's concept of the collective unconscious…implies a link between the individual and humanity as a whole – in fact, in some sense, between the individual and the entire cosmos – that cannot be understood within a mechanistic framework but is very consistent with the systems view of mind.' Capra also believes that Jung's theory of archetypes as 'collectively present dynamic patterns' is similar to the concepts used by physicists in their description of subatomic phenomena (*The Turning Point*: 399).

Thus, the view which sees subjectivity as an expression of a greater 'play of consciousness' is potentially not only able to reflect the spiritual 'vision' of the poet, but also a greater degree of personal and political awareness.

Although symbolist and neo-Romantic alike see radical stylistic innovation as an important tool in expressing their sense of this new reality, Capra's views also give justification for the use of more traditional styles, particularly writing which conveys a sense of the poetic 'voice' such as that found in the work of early twentieth-century Australian 'modern' poets and other poets contemporary to the New Poets whose work has been disparaged by Tranter and others as 'traditionalist.' Because the human subject can be seen in terms of a process of dynamics within other self-organising systems, it can be regarded as being both the 'autonomous' subject implied by the poetic 'voice' and the 'decentred' subject suggested by stylistically innovatory modernist texts; these two states are no longer seen as radically or essentially different, but rather are viewed as reflecting aspects of a continuum which are dependent on the way we choose to view or discuss the subject; they are, in effect, particular reifications or provisional positions along the continuum. Thus, while the writerly style mimetically reflects the decentred subject, the sense of the poetic 'voice' in less innovatory texts is no less valid, since such a 'voice' does not preclude conveying an awareness of the radically *constituted* nature of the human subject.[92] This view has a bearing on how we are to view the decision by some New Poets to adopt a sense of the poetic 'voice': principally, their recourse to this 'traditional' technique does not mean that they are reflecting

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[92] While in my view, the writerly and reader styles are equally valid. Robert de Beaugrande gives a plausible reason why writerly texts may attract attention and be held in higher esteem than more straightforward readerly texts; de Beaugrande uses a model of the multiple possible outcomes of quantum reality to relate the complexity of the artistic text, to the reader's pleasure. De Beaugrande suggests that 'An art work is judged "great" to the degree that continued experiences cannot exhaust the possibilities for perceiving it; the art work is judged "trite" or "mediocre" if this potential is quickly exhausted.' (De Beaugrande, 'Quantum Aspects of Artistic Perception,' *Poetics* 17 [1988]: 319.) The aim of writerly techniques to provide ongoing and multiple interpretations of texts certainly seems to result in such complexity. My intention here, however, is not to judge 'greatness' among the New Poets' work, but merely to suggest the diversity of the New Poets' poetics.

a traditional, humanist view of the subject.

While Tranter disparages the symbolist and neo-Romantic elements of the New Poetry, his anthology includes a number of poets who fit into these categories including Robert Adamson, Bruce Beaver, Kris Hemensley and Vicki Viidikas. As the above discussion suggests, these poets' neo-Romanticism does not merely represent a 'premodern' sensibility, but rather makes a contribution to the ongoing twentieth-century debates regarding reality, subjectivity, language and the nature of the divine. In this sense, these strands can be regarded as valid 'postmodern' responses which have enabled a number of sixties' writers to explore personal, political and spiritual aspects of their writing.

The full range of the New Poetry reflects not only the influence of poststructuralist, symbolist and neo-Romantic poetics, but also what might be termed the 'poststructuralist neo-avant-garde' strand of sixties' postmodernism, a development of the early sixties' neo-avant-garde which sought to take into account aspects of poststructuralist critique. The poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers sought to accommodate the linguistic self-consciousness and critique of absolutes generated by poststructuralist theory, while retaining a sense of radical political activism, and it is this strand of sixties' postmodernism which arguably has developed into the kind of 'postmodernism' most identifiable with the eighties. Unlike the neo-Romantic poets whose work in part validates the use of more traditional styles, particularly the sense of the poet's personal 'vision' or 'voice,' the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde poets insist on the idea of revolutionary language as a prerequisite for social change; and whereas neo-Romantic poets look to inner experience of the 'transcendent' for a sense of value, the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers offer only ever a sense of provisional value, a 'bootstrapping' approach which has led critics to see this aspect of postmodernism as offering a 'complicitous critique.'

Like the modernist political avant-garde writers before them, the early sixties'

neo-avant-garde writers maintained a belief in enlightened humanism through dialectical materialism, the valorisation of reason and the teleology of socialism. For these groups political ideology and artistic praxis were expressions of the one revolutionary aim, the overthrow of Western capitalism and the institution of socialism. Although this neo-avant-garde strand had an impact on the Australian New Poetry, as the rhetoric of 'revolution' surrounding the New Poetry suggests, by the time the majority of Australian New Poets were writing in the early seventies there was already a move towards revisionism among this group. The failure of the continental bids for revolution in 1968 created a sense of disillusion which was basically a reaction against the teleology of socialist revolution. While in the early stages the young writers and artists had felt the novelty and energy of avant-garde gestures, after a time these came to be recognised not as 'new' and politically potent, but merely as pastiche, parody and appropriation which were unlikely to effect radical social or political change. The danger seemed to be that the neo-avant-garde's achievements would, like the products of the earlier avant-gardes, merely become commodities for financial speculation or academic discussion.[93] Eventually, even belief in constant revolution, the notion of 'avant-garde' itself, became undermined, increasingly aware of its own derivativeness as well as its incapacitation. As Lyotard writes: 'Today we can presume that this "breaking" is, rather, a manner of forgetting or repressing the past. That's to say of repeating it.'[94]

By the seventies, critics had begun to note the contradictory elements of the rhetoric of the 'new.' While some, like Gilman, continued to affirm the neo-avant-garde writers' aestheticisation of art and abandonment of notions of utility and responsibility,[95] other critics began to question the validity or grounds of this

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[93] Szabólsci: 64. This view has recently been reiterated by Walter Kalaidjian regarding the more recent postmodern 'neo-avant-garde' poets, the 'Language' group. See Kalaidjian: 320.

[94] Lyotard, 'A Response to Philippe Lacour-Labarthe,' *ICA Documents 4: Postmodernism*: 6.

[95] Gilman, 'Art, Culture and Conservatism,' *Partisan Review* 39.3 (1972): 394.

perceived autonomy. As Stefan Morawski points out, neo-avant-garde phrases such as ' "art as life" or "art as idea", or still more confusedly, "the art of life" or the "art of ideas",'[96] actually masked an appeal to Romanticism, which the poststructuralists wished to reject. In Morawski's view, the antagonistic stance of the neo-avant-garde writers reflected a fundamental paradox, as he points out in his discussion of 'conceptual' art and 'happenings':

> Here is the last possible gesture of digging out from the old aesthetic citadel, undermining it. Conceptual art, like happenings, fails of this purpose. Hoping to expose and supersede the quandary and helplessness of the artist in advanced societies, the reification of art as a consumption product, they only move to the borders. The 'anti-art' rebellion fails because it is still undertaken by the rules of the citadel. There is as yet no propaedeutic [preliminary], constructive notion with which to start really afresh, at some remove from the practice which has both nourished and circumscribed artists in the past.[97]

For Morawski, the neo-avant-garde writers' desire to break down old forms was compromised by the lack of new values to substitute in their place. The result was 'a dialectical and ambiguous combination of affirmation and protest.'[98]

While for the linguistically oriented poststructuralists like Barthes and Derrida the perceived crisis of values was not a problem, since it afforded an opportunity for 'play,' others among the poststructuralists sought to retain the radical political edge to their writing, while incorporating aspects of poststructuralist critique. Among these more overtly political writers were those who had once belonged to the radical French *Tel Quel* magazine, including Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, and, in the early period, Jean-Pierre Faye; the context of their work, as George Alexander points out, was

circumscribed by the investigations in philosophy by Michel Foucault and

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[96] Morawski, 'Challenge and Paradox of the Recent Avant-Garde,' *Arts in Society* 12 (1975): 228. To these one could add Gilman's portrayal of the avant-garde's anti-aesthetic, in which literature is seen as a 'modality of imagination,' with a 'simple and irreplaceable task of invention, invention in the order of possibility, invention that makes life known to itself' (Gilman: 391, 395).

[97] Morawski: 227-28.

[98] Morawski: 229.

Jacques Derrida, in the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the semiology of Roland Barthes, the ethnology of Lévi-Strauss, the structural linguistics of Jakobson and Emile Benveniste and the phonology of Ivan Fonagay.[99]

In the sixties, the *Tel Quel* group had been overtly politically aligned with the Left, reflecting first a Marxist-Leninist influence; after 1968, it began to reflect an increasing Maoist influence.[100]

An essential difference between these writers and other neo-avant-garde writers was that for the *Tel Quel* group the longed-for revolution was seen to be dependent on linguistic self-consciousness: their motto was 'the prerequisite of revolution is a revolution of the language.'[101] Their critique of language, which included the poststructuralist rejection of the transcendental signified or 'Logos,' began to unsettle a whole range of essentialisms and teleologies, not only the 'unified' humanist subject of the Enlightenment but also eventually the idea of the teleology of socialist political thinking. They extended the linguistic self-consciousness of modernism to incorporate a concern for the way language (all kinds of language – the language of subjectivity, of reason, of law, of history and politics) is constituent of social conditions. They believed the only way to avoid sanctioning oppressive establishment institutions is to challenge these semiotic codes, that 'by dismantling the codes that have encrusted around us, and reconstructing from their component parts new codes, we get a foothold outside the epistemic enclosure, and see new pictures of the world.'[102] They argued that the abandonment of traditional philosophical certainties such as the notion of the 'unified' subject allows a deconstruction of many of the injustices propped up by Western institutions: whereas the humanist subject of Enlightenment was held to be transhistorical and universal, promoting the teleological progression of humanity

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[99] George Alexander, 'The Group *Tel Quel*,' *Working Papers in Sex, Science and Culture* 11.2 (1976): 5.
[100] Alexander, 'The Group *Tel Quel*': 4-5.
[101] Quoted by Szabólsci: 69.
[102] Alexander, 'The Group *Tel Quel*': 9.

through rational principles and the benefits of technology, these writers argued that this concept of the subject actually masks injustices such as racism (institutionalised in imperialism and colonialism), sexism and class exploitation. They believed that the poststructuralist scepticism of totalising theories of knowledge, therefore, including the notion of an essential 'self,' is a positive step in avoiding the institutionalisation of such forms of injustice. With this more positive response, they saw in the collapse of traditional Western systems of thought, as Patricia Waugh suggests,

> a *proliferation* of value which, far from destroying our powers of self-determination, offers them new forms and contexts: new possibilities for creatively shaping or inhabiting our human environment and of renegotiating the boundaries of identity in ways which, without necessitating total abandonment of Enlightenment thought, may release us from the hidden tyrannies of universalising modes and their invisible exclusionary tactics.[103]

Merely to be politically activist, in the view of these writers, was insufficient. Implicitly, they were critical of others who

> carr[ied] on as though all the resources were still at hand, as though language need only be approached with determination and large ideas about mankind in order for it to yield up literature. As though will can do the work of imagination.[104]

Other writers who were unselfconscious regarding language were held to have inherited outmoded views of the 'utility' and responsibility of literature, 'as though [art] were nothing but (aestheticized) statements in the political or moral or social order.'[105]

The group's aim became the foregrounding of the processes of signification itself, a step considered necessary in order to unravel the systems of knowledge and power which had compounded the century's many injustices. Consequently, radical stylistic innovation and experimentation were held to be a primary

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[103] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*. 8.

[104] Gilman: 395.

[105] Gilman: 392.

necessity. As Szabólsci (somewhat exaggeratedly) notes, they believed that

> to make revolutionary activity possible, the prevailing ideology, i.e.
> conventional 'discours,' has to be abolished. The more profound, the more
> resolute, the more radical the innovations that a writer introduces into his
> language and design, the greater the service he does to the revolutionary
> cause....[106]

These writers were committed to radical stylistic innovation, seeing its importance not only in terms of the idea of the poststructuralist jouissance of 'play,' but also in terms of its ability to change society for the better. Thus, this sixties' mixture of poststructuralism and neo-avant-garde political awareness saw linguistic awareness as of primary importance, seeing language itself as implicated not only in the construction of subjectivity in terms of gender and civil identity, but also as constituent of various oppressive institutions which make an individual 'subject' to power relations among individuals and the community.

While the project of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers sought to undermine the legitimising languages of oppressive social institutions in order to free the individual, at the same time there remained the inevitable question of what values to put in place of those which were to be overthrown. Theorists such as Derrida described the inevitability of endless deferrals of meaning, and therefore of value, which attend successive discursive formations over time; yet this very recognition suggests that it is impossible simply to replace old structures without falling into the same degree of error as prior systems – just as it is impossible to find a position from outside the system from which to criticise the system. What the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers began to advocate, therefore, was a sense of provisionality, a flexibility based on an awareness of the radically dynamic nature of social systems and structures of knowledge. Nevertheless, the criticisms made by Morawski generally of the neo-avant-garde can be held to apply also to this poststructuralist wing. While ostensibly rejecting the idea of the meta-

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[106] Szabólsci: 69.

narrative, their aim of perpetual revolution has an implicit teleology of social progress which seems inescapably to be implicated in the kind of programmatic and optimistic poetics which they criticise in neo-Romantic poetics. Thus, theirs is, to paraphrase Linda Hutcheon's comments regarding the postmodern, only ever a 'complicitous critique,' a critique which cannot hope to stand outside the field of its own enquiry.[107]

In general terms, the Australian New Poets reflect the various aspects of sixties' postmodernism mentioned above: the self-conscious linguisticism of the post-structuralists is characteristic of Tranter's own poetic, and can also be seen in the poetics of Martin Johnston and John Forbes; the symbolist strand is exemplified in the work of Robert Adamson, which continues Mallarmé's and Stevens' exploration of and challenge to traditional notions of subjectivity and ideas such as 'truth,' the 'Absolute' and the divine; the neo-Romantic strand is shown in the work of Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas, poets who reflect an Eastern-influenced view of the role of the poet as visionary and prophet, and an understanding of the human subject as a part of the 'divine'; and finally, the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde strand is exemplified in the work of Jennifer Maiden and John A Scott, poets who combine a critique of objective 'truth' and sense of the importance of stylistic innovation and concern for language, with a radical political agenda typical of the neo-avant-garde. Importantly, these various poets reflect the fundamental differences of the various strands of sixties' postmodernism in regard to their views concerning such concepts as subjectivity, the nature of language, political praxis, the concept of the divine, and the role of the poet and poetry. While most of these poets reflect a willingness to experiment with the writerly style, they do not all share the kind of attitudes suggested by Tranter in his valorisation of the writerly style. In general terms, poets such as

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[107] Hutcheon suggests, '[T]he postmodern we know has to acknowledge its own complicity with the very values upon which it seeks to comment' (*The Politics of Postmodernism*: 10).

Adamson, Hemensley, Beaver and Viidikas seek to recuperate a sense of the poetic 'voice' which does not resort to the traditional concept of the humanist subject; a concept of the divine which is not subject to discredited reification of belief associated with traditional religion, or the dualistic thinking associated with metaphysics; and a sense of energy, enthusiasm and optimism for life which expresses itself both in personal and political, as well as spiritual, terms. By contrast, Maiden and Scott demonstrate a politically motivated view of subjectivity as radically constructed, a view which echoes the views of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde. The following chapters discuss the work of Adamson, Beaver, Hemensley, Viidikas, Maiden and Scott in turn, in the light of these varied poetics of sixties' postmodernism.

Chapter 6. New Poetry I: Symbolist Poetics and the Work of Robert Adamson

Robert Adamson contributed to the New Poetry movement in a number of ways, through his poetry, his participation in poetry readings in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, and in his role as editor and publisher of *New Poetry* magazine and the *Prism Books* series. In terms of poetics, his work reflects a combination of a poststructuralist concern for the play of 'aesthetic surfaces' with the symbolist idea of the power of poetry to heighten awareness and achieve new levels of consciousness. One of the chief areas of interest in his early work is the examination of the 'Logos,' the Mallarméan idea that language is somehow 'present,' and that poetry has the mantric power to link the consciousness of poet and reader through time. While his recent comments indicate that he is moving closer to a neo-Romantic belief in the divine, he still treats the idea of the Logos with the symbolists' sceptical yearning, the desire for a 'truth' which he acknowledges may only ever be a fiction. This yearning and belief in the power of poetry informs the linguistic self-consciousness of Adamson's early work.

Like Mallarmé, Adamson believes that the poet is one 'entrusted with seeing divinely,' even if that which is seen is ultimately a fiction. From early on, as he remarks retrospectively in a recent essay, Adamson believed in the power of poetry: 'I knew poetry somehow transcended language and somehow mysteriously changed *things*.'[1] This power for Adamson presupposes a particular understanding of 'reality,' 'time' and the poetic imagination which relies on notions of a mystical spirituality. He speaks of experiencing a sense of a 'splintered' or 'fractured reality' when writing poems about his mother gave him a feeling of somehow transcending time:

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[1] Adamson, 'The Shadow of Doubt and "Derivations" in Australian Poetry,' *Meanjin* 49 (1990): 541.

It wasn't so much an inspired thing but I did feel an urgency. It was as if I would lose poems each minute I wasn't writing. I had never consciously thought about my family in my writing and after writing down a line about my mother – 'I looked at my mother again after four years / I guess you'll die soon I said' – I started to recall and actually got back to the time of the poem. Most of the poems I feel were written back there, around the ages of six to twelve. I mean I was there physiologically, in the instant they occurred. And yet, there I was at Elizabeth Bay, with my IBM typewriter: half Huckleberry Finn, half Doctor Who.[2]

Adamson is unapologetic for the apparent irrationality of this stance; he insists that 'what is the past, the present and the future all exists *now*.'[3] He is not interested in provable truths, or received ideas: 'I'm prepared to cross any border or boundary,' he says, 'whether it be emotional, poetry, or intellectual.'[4] Like Brennan and Stevens, Adamson believes in provisional truth, while resisting the language of transcendence: he believes, he says, in 'the truth *I* know.'[5] Importantly, this means that Adamson, like Stevens, makes no distinction between what happens in 'reality' and what happens in 'the imagination.' Discussing his 'Grail Poems' with Tranter he says:

[T]he events happening in the 'Grail Poems' have never happened in 'real life.' They happened in my imagination. What is that if it isn't 'real life'? And, even without the semantics, what makes you think the event depicted, the monologues spoken, weren't happening around me at the time of composition?[6]

From the defensiveness of Adamson's tone, it is clear that he is having a hard time persuading Tranter of his views. The gap between the two poets has not been narrowed with time. Recently, when Adamson expressed the possibility of a less sceptical faith in the divine, the shadow of Tranter's disapproval hovered over his

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[2] Adamson, 'Interview' with Tranter, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Duwell: 136.

[3] Adamson, 'Robert Adamson and the Persistence of Mallarmé: An Interview' with Michael Sharkey, *Southerly*, 45: 314. He qualifies this statement by adding 'the present and the future have to go through *now*, anyway,' which seems to back away from the certainty of the former remark. But Adamson is not systematic in his beliefs, and ideas which he embraces with enthusiasm indicate his openness to new kinds of thought, rather than dogmatic assertions.

[4] Adamson, 'Interview' with Martin Smith, *Campaign* 24 (1977): 10.

[5] Adamson, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 133.

[6] Adamson, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 135.

discussion:

> The long run, where the experiments and blending of derivations in my poetry will come together in a process that may evolve into a poetry where a new spirituality would be possible. Where a belief in poetry might support a faith in Belief itself.
> Whenever I write or say something similar to that last sentence, I can hear John Tranter groan....[7]

Among his early poems, Adamson's poem sequence, 'Seven Odes to Themselves' illustrates the overlap between Adamson's poetic and Tranter's, while the long poem, 'The Rumour,' demonstrates the differences. These poems appeared in the collection, *The Rumour* (1971), and both show writerly techniques such as self-referentiality, the absence of an identifiable poetic 'voice,' inter-textuality, and a sense of play. Yet, unlike Tranter's, Adamson's use of writerly techniques is not merely aimed at foregrounding the act of writing, and subverting the notion that the author 'speaks' *through* the poem; his aim in getting the reader *in* to the poem, involved in the process of signification, is to achieve a link of consciousness between writer and reader as he believes Mallarmé to have done. While Tranter sees the use of the writerly style as elevating the role of the reader and a downplaying of the author as 'source,' Adamson recognises that the poet in some ways orchestrates the reader's experience. In fact, instead of 'freeing' the reader's experience, Adamson suggests that such reader-directed poetry has its authoritarian aspect. His exchange with Nigel Roberts and Michael Sharkey on this subject reveals the complexity of his view of Mallarmé's use of the writerly style:

> RA: We're back to Mallarmé's relationship with the reader!
> MS: Yes, as in his tomb poems: the reader's in there too.
> RA: Yes, that's what they are like; every poem's an abyss. There's no front, no middle, there's no end: they're black holes in poetry. What frightens me is that there's an element of fascism in it, because Mallarmé is deliberately orchestrating whoever is reading it.
> NR: To make, to do something is a fascist act, then? That's what he's saying?

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[7] Adamson, 'Shadow': 540.

RA: No, making this, knowing in his mind this is a trick, and if anyone gets involved in it there's no end to it. He's created an artifactual thing.
NR: What if someone says 'Bullshit,' rejects an artifact he's made?
RA: They haven't been sucked into it, haven't gone deep enough.[8]

Thus, instead of abandoning the traditional elevated role of the poet, Adamson sees the writerly style as suggesting a greater claim on the poet's powers than is apparent in the writing of more traditional, readerly poetry. It is the examination of the poet's and poetry's powers which form the focus of his early work. While in his later poetry Adamson explores more biographical and personally expressive styles, most successfully in his recent prize-winning collection *The Clean Dark*,[9] his early work shows his toying with the poststructuralist idea of poetry as a 'play of aesthetic surfaces' and being influenced by symbolist poetics. The aspects of symbolism which he affirms include not only the idea of language as 'mantric,' as having an ability to alter states of consciousness and perhaps even to link the reader and poet through time in a mystical, fourth-dimensional world of language, but also the necessity to believe in the idea of subjectivity as open to the expression of divine consciousness, even if that idea is not 'truth' but only a symptom of desire, the 'fictional divine.'

Michael Wilding is one critic to have stressed the overtly poststructuralist linguistic orientation of Adamson's early work. According to Wilding, the collection, *The Rumour*, represents Adamson's 'formalist' period. The concern of the poems, Wilding says, 'was poetry itself; poetry, and the writing of poetry, were now foregrounded as the subject.'[10] Wilding is critical of this emphasis in Adamson's writing, a criticism which amounts to a critique of the more linguistically oriented aspects of poststructuralism. He refers to the 'central evasion' of the poems' self-referentialism, 'the avoidance of the subject, of the human,'[11] and

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[8] Adamson, 'Persistence of Mallarmé': 317.

[9] Adamson, *The Clean Dark* (Sydney, NSW: Paper Bark Press, 1989).

[10] Michael Wilding, ' "My name is Rickeybockey": The Poetry of Robert Adamson and the Spirit of Henry Kendall,' *Southerly* 46 (1986): 29.

[11] Wilding, 'Rickeybockey': 29

maintains that such writing 'doesn't say very much, other than express a dehumanization, disintegration and decadence.'[12] Rather than expressing what amounts to a high modernist or postmodern anxiety, however, Adamson, like the literary avant-garde writers, is attempting to offer something positive as an alternative. By constructing the self-contained artefact of the poem, Adamson hopes to enshrine values which the poet sees as absent from other discourse, particularly, the link between poetry and one's inner spirit. Admittedly, in much of Adamson's early work such concerns are overshadowed by linguistic playfulness and self-consciousness: the poem sequence, 'Seven Odes to Themselves,' for example, although it addresses questions relating to the nature of art, seems to have little to offer beyond a sense of fun, with its parodical intertextuality with *The Odyssey*. The title poem, 'The Rumour,' by contrast, is more ambitious. In this poem, Adamson self-consciously attempts to create something meaningful on a grand scale.[13] These two poems help to illustrate Adamson's at times uneasy negotiation between the view of poetry as a play of aesthetic surfaces, and his serious questioning of the nature of poetry and ultimately celebration of poetry's spiritual power.

In both 'Seven Odes to Themselves' and 'The Rumour' Adamson works with the conventions of the writerly style, playing with the notion of the poetic 'voice,' foregrounding the process of writing and poetic technique, and subverting the idea of closure. Dennis Haskell has described 'Seven Odes to Themselves' as 'a brilliantly mocking "Odyssey minor".'[14] The poem is a game of 'aesthetic sur-faces,' which, if one pursues the 'Odyssey' metaphor, becomes a mini-saga of the poet as classical hero. The poet/hero is eventually overshadowed in his quest by the gallant heroes who accompany him: his poems. Instead of the traditional poetic

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[12] Wilding, 'Rickeybockey': 31.

[13] Adamson, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 134.

[14] Haskell, 'Getting Further Away: The Poetry of Robert Adamson,' *Southerly* 1 (1978): 65. Haskell gives a thorough reading of the poem's self-referentiality.

'voice' of the poet/hero, the voice of the poem is given over to the soldiers of Odysseus's travels, the 'odes' themselves. Thus, just as the poem subverts the heroic archetype of Odysseus by focusing on the crew, the notion of the poet as 'source' is subverted in favour of the importance of the words on the page, and the reader's struggle to make coherence of the poem. In terms of the metaphor, the long voyage home to Ithaca becomes a record of the poet's struggle to create his poetry, and it is the process rather than the goal which is stressed ('our man / behind the helm, strives now for continuum alone'[15]). There is no rest, no Penelope, just as the end of writing is writing itself. On another level, the Homeric myth itself is the 'continuum,' being repeatedly taken up by generations of writers. In this way Adamson hints at the symbolist idea which he explores further in 'The Rumour': that the language of poetry has the power to transcend time, making a link of consciousness between poet and reader.

Various events of the Odyssey epic are reinterpreted metapoetically in 'Seven Odes to Themselves' both as moments within the poem and as stages in the act of writing. Given the hopelessness that Odysseus's soldiers feel in being unable to find their way home, and the lack of purpose after the heroic acts of the Trojan war, their energy has become destructive. Their actions stand as a metaphor for the odes' acts of violence against the reader, as the reader struggles to find meaning:

> Odes, moving seven times
>
> towards no resolution: alive
> for their own sake; turning now from this to
> that, cutting their readers down
>
> without excuses. (2: 3-7)

Odysseus's problems with the soldiers' morale, especially when they come to the island of Circe with her alluring maidens, is suggested in the third section with the

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[15] Adamson, 'Seven Odes to Themselves,' section 1, line 5 (1: 5), in *Selected Poems 1970-1989* (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1990): 37. Subsequent references to the poem, giving section and line numbers, will appear in the text.

soldiers 'deserting the ranks / at night' (3: 20). They find new purpose away from the authoritarian rule of their Captain, just as the words on the page rebel against the meanings laid down by the poet:

> Those paper hearts puffed-up with sex
> that never burst apart; the women, happy, flinging
> their clothes...
>
> & escape by sea, deserting the ranks
> at night. It is the words again, moving into lists
> away from any kind of sense.
>
> Until this we have been stiffs, the tides
> rolling us anywhere: the ode forms itself from our
> beautiful incoherence (3: 17-25)

But the soldiers/odes have a price to pay for their disobedience. The events of *The Odyssey* are conflated: the soldiers enter the land of the lotus eaters. It is a period of fulfilment, but it is also a period of stasis, of lack of inspiration in the process of writing: 'Drunk with exclamation' they 'lost...direction a while' (4: 1, 8).

Adamson rewrites the encounter with the sirens: at first, like Odysseus, the soldiers are deaf to their calling:

> We were becalmed; praise meant nothing
> over & over nothing, nothing. (6: 3-4)

But instead of allowing Odysseus, or the poet, the sole opportunity of hearing the sirens' song, the soldiers/odes refuse to be tied down to the strictures of literary indebtedness: the siren becomes *their* muse and they are filled with inspiration: 'Then speech came, suddenly the whole crew singing.... Great subject matter!' (6: 5, 9). The view of writing as inspired 'speech' and 'song' is suggested with self-conscious irony: the poems have not really written themselves, just as the soldiers are not really in command; equally, the poet/Odysseus still has a measure of control. The latter is shown in the final, self-deconstructing joke of the poem: annoyed that the soldiers/odes have defied their proper destiny and enjoyed the sirens' song, which he alone should have been privileged (and strong enough) to

hear, Odysseus/the poet ends the journey/the poem, and therefore has the last laugh.

This poem sequence demonstrates Adamson's engagement with the kind of writerly poetic which Tranter sees in the work of Forbes and Johnston, the 'play of aesthetic surfaces.' Apart from the humorous, comic-like qualities, Adamson's use of intertextuality seems to question the nature of art. The question of authorship is raised: what is 'The Odyssey'? a poem written by some mythical Homer? the various re-readings and rewritings undertaken by various people down the centuries? or, as in Stevens' phrase, 'the life that is lived in the scene that it composes,' the reader's response to it? The parodic elements of the poem sequence seem to demythologise the status of the Greek epic; yet, Adamson's poem comes alive only by exploiting the original's action, adventure, sex and violence. As well as using it as a vehicle for a showpiece of writerly cleverness and wit, therefore, Adamson participates in the survival of the original poem as a piece of living cultural property. He seems to be suggesting that one way of keeping art alive is for it to be reworked by successive generations. By contrast, a way of killing the poem is to force it to remain inert, encased in the static meaning of an 'art-object.' Interaction and 'process' are the keys, according to Adamson: the poet's interaction with existing texts, as well as the reader's engagement in constructing the meaning of the poem.

Despite being an entertaining and clever poem and raising certain issues regarding the nature of art, 'Seven Odes To Themselves' nevertheless belongs to a very literary world. In this sense, it could be argued, as Wilding suggests, that it is in complicity with the aesthetics of the cold war, in that it is devoid of social and political comment.[16] In 'The Rumour,' however, Adamson has a different purpose. Although, like the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers, he asserts the belief

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[16] Wilding, 'Rickeybockey': 31.

that an understanding of the power and role of language is preliminary to any kind of social change. Rather than directly looking at social or political issues, in this poem Adamson concentrates on the mystical power of poetry; particularly, his view of the 'Logos,' Mallarmé's 'immortal word,' is treated at times with scepticism. Though, on the one hand, Adamson seems to assert that poetry can somehow transcend time and limitations of consciousness, it also seems to have the status of myth or half-truth, rather than an absolute, in his work.

In 'The Rumour,' although he appears to have ignored important political upheavals during the height of the New Poetry period, Adamson was also struggling to discover what poetry can offer to the world in a time of crisis. He saw a parallel between the contemporary political situation and the one Mallarmé faced:

> Mallarmé was living in a middle-class bourgeois society that was declining, decaying – maybe a similar sort of thing to what was happening in the late 1960s, early 70s here.[17]

He was attracted by Mallarmé's grand claims for poetry, particularly the idea that poetry in a sense created a world of its own:

> I was using French Symbolists as a starting-point, to do something contemporary. It *was* important to us at that time to establish, as you say, another world in poetry. I was ignoring millions of political questions that were very important to everyone I lived with and who surrounded me.[18]

Instead of adopting overt political statement, like the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers he believed in the necessity of changing the underlying structures of society's thinking before any political action becomes possible: 'I thought a whole new structure of thinking would be much more effective in poetry than poetry having to do with the individual's statement towards the thing.'[19] Implicitly, in the poem Adamson was searching for the answer to the question: what particular

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[17] Adamson, 'Persistence of Mallarmé': 308.

[18] Adamson, 'Persistence of Mallarmé': 311.

[19] Adamson, 'Persistence of Mallarmé': 311.

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qualities do poetry and the poet have to offer a society in crisis?

Adamson's way of dealing with this was to construct 'The Rumour' as a kind of Mallarméan *livre composé*, in which the poem records the spiritual life of the poet:

> Well, you could say *The Rumour* was autobiographical, in the sense that it was my interior life, the life running parallel to the outer life that I was leading at the time. It was an immediate kind of progress report from 'the dark scenes of the goldmine.' You know, what was happening psychically, lyrically and in truth. And here, for once, I will qualify that word for you – *the truth I know*, the blood of me. The Cosmos.[20]

This is the idea of the provisional 'truth' which Adamson promotes; he uses a quotation from Stevens as an epigraph to 'The Rumour' to stress this view: '*In the long run the truth does not matter.*'

What the poet desires of the poem, the 'new structure of thinking,' is freedom, which also means a freedom from the limitations of fixed 'truth.' He desires the freedom to experiment, to sing with his own voice, and also to transcend the feeling of separation of the self from all that exists: to unlock the 'Once forbidden doors...so that an abyss swallows / Boundaries.'[21] This also requires 'a breaking away / From convention' (2, 2: 31-32):

> ...freedom comes
> in having no vast plan
> to conform to... (3, 1: 3-5)

What matters to Adamson is not so much 'truth' or 'meaning,' but process, the process of reading and engaging with the thoughts and feelings of those who have gone before. In 'The Rumour' Adamson sees himself as entering the world of poetry and language, in which his text becomes part of the many existing texts, including the Book of Revelation, the Letters of St Augustine, and poems by Marvell, Coleridge, Shelley, Stevens, Pound, Hart Crane, John Ashbery and Robert Duncan. This intertextuality is one of many writerly devices by which Adamson

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[20] Adamson, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 133.

[21] Adamson, 'The Rumour,' part 1, section 2, lines 14-16 (1, 2: 14-16), in *Selected Poems*: 37. All subsequent references, giving part, section and line numbers, will appear in the text.

seeks to get the reader 'in' to the poem.

Instead of narrative or linear logic Adamson, like Mallarmé and Olson, emphasises the music and rhapsody of words, the 'Open Song' which transcends the individual text, taking both reader and poet into the world of poets and poetry:

> outward from myth the language goes
> Rhapsodic impulsive
> Hand aflame (1, 1: 58)

For Adamson, poetry transcends time, forming a link, 'poet to / poet' (3, 3: 28-29). His multiple references to Duncan recall Duncan's idea of poetry, which in turn has been influenced by Baudelaire:

> *L'idée poetique*, the idea of a poetry,
> that rises from the movement, from the
> outswirling curves and imaginary figures
> round this ship, this fate, this sure thing,
>
> *est l'hypothese d'une être vaste, immense,*
>
> *compliqué, mais eurythmique.*[22]

For Duncan, as Kevin Power explains,

> the unique contribution of poetry to man is its reenactment of the invisible
> order of the Cosmos. The poem is an autonomous life-form, part of the
> ongoing evolution of forms. It's not a mimesis of life, it has life. He defines the
> poem as the mode whereby we become conscious of 'things as potential for
> making the universe real...celebrating or evoking...what is.' The poet, living
> within this 'shells of murmurings,' hears the meanings & invisible order that
> surround him as potentials.[23]

Adamson's idea of 'rumour' seems to equate to Duncan's 'murmurings,' although Adamson's object, rather than creating a new world or struggling 'to make life actual,'[24] seems to be participation in an already existing shared world of language.

Through poetry, Adamson attempts to link his mind, his poetic, to those of the

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[22] Robert Duncan, 'After a Passage in Baudelaire,' *Roots and Branches* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1970): 78.

[23] Power: 54.

[24] Power: 54.

poets gone before. In this way, he helps to keep their vision alive, while he develops his own. He enters 'the academy / of the past' (4, 1: 22-23), entering a tradition of poetic borrowings, so that all texts become like one long poem, Mallarmé's 'one book – to the world its law.'[25] Adamson borrows from Ashbery who, in his poem 'The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers,' borrows from Marvell; and, just as surely, as the epigraph to Ashbery's poem (drawn from Pasternak) reminds us, Adamson's writing will enter the 'academy of the future' (4, 1: 16).[26]

The rhapsodic, musicality of Adamson's poem is punctuated by self-referential phrases which help the reader begin to derive shape and meaning. Adamson acknowledges that in 'The Rumour' the 'sequence [is] cut / and shuffled' like a deck of cards ('Synoptic: The Open Song': 20-21). The self-referentiality gives hints not only as to the process of the poem, but also regarding the respective roles of both poet and reader. Implicitly, the reader is asked to judge the experiment: 'my freedom a crumpled page / measured by the reader's eye' (3, 1: 26-27); while the poet is both 'thief' and 'singer' (Synoptic: 27), borrowing from other writings, and learning his art from poets who have gone before, but in the end creating his own song:

> There's been no
> other preparation than
> devices being handed down through poetry. (3, 4: 15-18)

Adamson's style allows for a sense both of the poet/creator of the poem and of the poet as self-conscious viewer of his own act of creation. This is suggested throughout the poem in the various shifts from the first person pronoun, 'I,' to the third, 'he'; the reader gets a sense of the poet somehow detached from himself,

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[25] Mallarmé: 173.

[26] The epigraph reads: 'He was spoilt from childhood by the future, which he mastered rather early and apparently without great difficulty.' 'The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers,' John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (London: Paladin, 1987): 12.

watching, a companion to the reader. The poem is both something recorded as it is written, 'his hand aflame' (Synoptic: 4), and something being produced in the act of reading. It records its own inspiration, the 'outpourings that break from / his being' (Synoptic: 13-14), and gives advice which could apply equally to both poet and reader, who combine in the one act of 'producing' the poem: 'see the force, take focus' (Synoptic: 26). Above all, it is a *livre composé*, the interior life of the poet, 'a song that's ravaging his / mind' (Synoptic: 3-4). By describing the process and experience of the poem, in which writer and reader share in the poem's creation, Adamson suggests that the poet and reader in some way share in one another's consciousness.

Like Brennan, Adamson uses a number of resonant symbols which recur throughout the poem, some drawn from religion and literature, some developed within the poem itself. The poem's process becomes the reader's engagement with these, an engagement which the poet desires to be inexhaustible. The central recurring image or symbol is the figure of 'Rumour,' its basis being the religious importance of the 'Word.' Adamson challenges the distinction between the 'Word,' the 'Logos,' in which religious authority is bound, and 'words,' the tools of trade of the poet, which make no claim to transcendent meaning. The poet has taken up the challenge offered by the author of Revelation: 'If any man shall add unto / These things God shall add unto / Him the plagues....'[27] One of these biblical 'plagues' is the figure of 'Rumour.' By wanting to 'add' to the divine text, the poet is 'plagued' by an insatiable desire to write and an awesome responsibility, with no sense of certainty of the value of his enterprise. Instead of 'truth,' the poet indulges in 'Rumour,' the 'mere presence of words' (1, 1: 37), the aesthetic surfaces which do not depend on a sense of absolute 'presence' for their authority. Thus, 'Rumour' is both the biblical figure, and the kind of half-truth that gets

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[27] 'The Book of Revelation,' Chapter 22, verse 18.

perpetuated and changed with repeated retelling. For Adamson, this half-truth is not only an unavoidable necessity, it is also the basis upon which he engages with the spiritual world of poetry: his aim is self-consciously to imitate the great writers whom he believes to be connected to this spiritual world, and by imitation transform into art, as one of the original epigraphs to the poem makes clear.[28]

Although in Adamson's view the poet makes no claim to absolute truth, he acknowledges that the unleashing of words has power, not only for the poet, but also for humanity. Adamson suggests that John the Divine's account of the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation has its relevance to the current political turmoil of the Vietnam war:

> the first man to hear
> Angels Sounding was John
> the Divine as they told of descending on
> Stars and Man's incorporate doubt
>
> Was cast as the third Angel
> Named its star *Wormwood* and language branched
> Away dividing itself
> From God from the Sounding sphinxing Word
> *Wormwood comes*
>
> as a word in our time
> Of war and speech buffets our Governors with its
> Judean Rites of obedience
> Of America.   (1, 1: 1-13)

The biblical picture of the apocalypse suggest the horrors of modern war; this is the bitterness of 'Wormwood,' the star of the third angel, which complements the destruction heralded by the first two angels in John's vision:

> The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up. And the second angel sounded,

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[28] This epigraph is deleted in *Selected Poems: 1970-1989*. It reads, 'In children it is not the imitation that pleases us, but our perception of it. In later life, the pejorative aspect of imitation discloses its inherent unpleasantness. To give pleasure an imitation must have been studied as an imitation and then it pleases us as art.' (Adamson, *The Rumour*, Prism Poets Series 3 [Sydney: New Poetry, 1971]: 25.)

> and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and
> the third part of the sea became blood; and the third part of the creatures
> which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships
> were destroyed. And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star
> from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the
> rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called
> Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many
> men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.[29]

Adamson's point in referring to Revelation is not that John was literally a prophet of modern warfare, but rather that his words have been given new relevance by the course of history. In this sense the 'words' handed down from John are not like the biblical 'Word,' the absolute embodiment of a divine spirit; rather, they are like a rumour weaving its way through the ages, gathering meaning and significance as it goes. The poet deliberately catches himself in this web of words, and is self-critical both of the act of writing and of the efficacy of words in the face of injustice and horror:

> He farms Rumour's form in the academy
> Of the past: where I'm forced to bend, thrown up
> Against the bones of my poetry. (4, 1: 22-24)

Like 'wormwood,' 'words' have their bitter aspect. They can express both humanity's darker side, and the life which is without inspiration, without poetry, without a sense of the spirit:

> When men fall their
>   darkness is revealed
>
> O bitterness proceeds
> Through our landscape in thick winds that pass
> Through individual zones
> Through Gates where nothing sings or proceeds (1, 1: 64-69)

This bitterness also reflects the desire for truth, without an accompanying belief in the divine itself. The poet is like Mallarmé's great sage, dreaming of what 'would have been the truth':

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[29] 'The Book of Revelation,' Chapter 8, verses 7-11.

> Where I struggle from myth
> having
> No shape for my muse. (1, 1: 40-42)

In the face of a world at war, a world in pain, the writer feels helpless and ineffectual, unable to justify his talent:

> And from an endless text surrounding me
> The Seraphic Outrider
> Draws his question 'All this and you offer
> Me virtuous rhetoric?...' (1, 1: 78-81)

But words are such that they can encompass contradictions:

> The bitterness is my two worlds at ends
> Muse and Her Destroyer. (1, 1: 86-87)

Writing becomes a symbol of life in an almost Taoist sense, signifying both creation and destruction, language and its absences, meaning and loss of meaning together. The poet's engagement with inspiration is both an affirmation of the power of words as well as an acknowledgment of their destructive potential.

Adamson expresses doubt concerning the value and meaning of life as well as of words and writing: 'Words afflict us' (4, 1: 29). Writing offers hurdles which are not easy to overcome; the act of putting 'the truth I know' into words often eludes the poet:

> Rumour in her skin
> drives what I have known from the verse
> before its done. (3, 1: 16-18)

The poet's freedom is only 'a slanted truth' (3, 2: 21). The result is a crisis of belief in the poet's task:

> He draws with his hand aflame
> eclectic visions and writes
> solemnly from no reason
> who needs his spooky
> rhetoric?
> ...he's
> fed up
>
> with his freedom a crumpled page (3, 4:19-28)

He questions the Romantic conception of the inspired poet, and yet acknowledges

the poet's compulsion to write (' "I write because / I have to" ,' 4, 2: 11-12) which

grips him like a fever:

> ...he's
> fed up
>
> with his freedom a crumpled page
> and now thrills with a prospect
> of unleashing
> something raw his metaphysical toys
> tick over imagining a 'vision' (3, 4: 26-32)

Within this struggle, the poet is not alone: the 'endless text surrounding' him is

also the texts of other poets who have struggled to bring their powers alive. Yet,

despite the many words that have gone before, the poet feels trapped into the art of

writing, experiencing the overwhelming desire for an unattainable goal, 'the phrase

/ of "great beauty" ' (3, 4: 34).

In the end, the poem is only a promise: if it works, it works; it communicates to

its readers, it gets them 'in' to the poem. The poem aims to provide more than the

old Testament God gave to Moses when he handed down the regulations for

living, the 'commandments' in which the 'truth' was reified: 'my freedom a need

that follows / brighter than the tree on fire' ('Coda: Everybody Gathered in

Objection': 25-33). For Adamson, reification of the 'truth' is inadequate: only by

continually changing, sifting through the laws and dogma, the structures which

bind us, and rejecting what is no longer helpful, can one hope to become free of the

conditions that lead to war:

> To ride the Open Song.
> So the ideas slanted against war
> struggle free....
> ('Coda: Everybody Gathered in Objection': 25-28)

In 'The Rumour,' the writerly self-consciousness of Adamson's technique is sub-

sumed within this struggle to engage the spiritual dimension of writing. Adamson

uses writerly techniques, not as an end in themselves to create the self-contained world of the poem, but to allow the reader to share in the vast, spiritual world of poetry.

While Adamson's work displays aspects of both poststructuralist and symbolist poetics, and suggests a movement towards a more affirmative belief in the transcendent, a number of other New Poets show similar concerns. In general, however, poets such as Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas display a more definite sense of belief in the transcendent than Adamson does in his early work, and, at times, a more overtly personal vision and sense of the individual poetic 'voice.' This 'neo-Romantic' emphasis in the work of these poets will be addressed in the following chapter.