

Chapter 7. New Poetry II: Neo-Romanticism in the Work of Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas

Whereas Robert Adamson's work reflects a negotiation between poststructuralist and symbolist poetics, the work of New Poets, Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas exemplifies aspects of neo-Romantic poetics. Like the symbolists, they share an experimental attitude toward stylistic innovation and a heightened concern for language, and they adopt the notion of the mantric power of the word to achieve heightened levels of consciousness. They also express views concerning the nature of subjectivity and the divine which reflects the influence of Eastern thinking, in particular Hindu philosophy. Their work conveys a sense both of the individual who 'sings' or proclaims a connection to a greater truth, and a sense of the one who struggles with the sense of duality which arises when that consciousness of a universal principle grows weak. This perception of a connection to the divine means that these poets are not subject to the potentially crippling self-consciousness of poststructuralist neo-avant-garde poetics, the view that one can never stand 'outside' that which one seeks to criticise. Moreover, they feel free at times to adopt a poetic 'voice' to express a greater personal and political awareness than the symbolist poets. Their personal and the political concerns are integral to the poets' concept of the divine, an expression of their openness to a sense of a universal consciousness or divine energy which is all-pervasive.

The following chapter discusses each of these poets' poetics and work in turn, showing how they touch on various sixties' issues and ideas, and emphasising their neo-Romantic sense of language, subjectivity and concept of the divine. My discussion concentrates on Hemensley's long poem sequence, *The Poem of the Clear Eye* (1975), Beaver's two poem sequences, *Letters to Live Poets* (1969) and *Lauds and Complaints* (1974), and selected poetry from Viidikas's collections both from the seventies and the early eighties.

Kris Hemensley, like Tranter, was an active member of the New Poetry movement, participating as essayist, reviewer, organiser of poetry readings, and editor of such magazines as *The Ear in the Wheatfield* and later *Meanjin* and *New Poetry*. By the time Tranter's anthology was published in 1979, Hemensley had already published twenty books.¹ Although he shares some attitudes toward Australian poetry and stylistic innovation with Tranter, there is also much to distinguish the two poets. While Hemensley's work reveals a dissatisfaction with traditional representation and a willingness to experiment with writerly techniques, it does not reflect the attitudes towards subjectivity or the scepticism towards absolutes of the poststructuralists. Rather, Hemensley's work reveals a neo-Romantic view of the human subject and concept of the divine.

Like Tranter, Hemensley has been critical of Australian poetry prior to the New Poetry:

Australian poetry, prior to my generation's participation in it, seems to have been limited to the dramatization of Australian history and biography It's full of rhetorical and heroic gestures. The 'great poems' are all like Lindsay's nudes, recreating Rubens: masses of Anglo-European flesh bouncing around in the Australian bush.²

What Hemensley objects to is not the localisation of poetry, but its generalisation into some mythic 'Australia,' the type of 'traditional' Australia made popular by critics of the fifties. At the same time he believes, like the Jindyworobaks, that 'Australia as a nation has to survive from and by its own particulars.'³ While the Jindyworobaks believed that a change in perception requires a change of language, Hemensley broadens that view, declaring that 'the place I live in is Language.'⁴ This, for Hemensley, requires an even greater self-awareness of Australia's postcoloniality:

¹ Listed at the back of *The New Australian Poetry*: 324.

² Hemensley, 'Interview' with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 54.

³ Hemensley, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 54.

⁴ Hemensley, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 51.

[Australia] must realize (or its poets must) that 'place' is but one (and a local and particular) emphasis. The existence of an English language culture, of Australian society, at this end of the earth, Australia, is solely due to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperialism.⁵

Like the political neo-avant-garde writers, Hemensley believes the poet must take some responsibility for a society in crisis:

Time and space are about to explode, our neighbourhood is desert, dead heart, diabolical diaspora. Well, even if that's the prospect held in the imagination, even if there's still time and point to continuing life, that life should account for itself better than it has.⁶

But the apocalyptic element of his prose and his poetry is balanced by an energetic belief in the value of optimism and vitality, an energy which is reminiscent of Olsonian poetics of kinesis, but also of the enthusiasm of the Australian Vision and Angry Penguins movements. Like the latter, Hemensley sees poetry, and experimentation in poetry, as a vital part of life. He says writing must continue 'not for the hell of it (the pervasive primalist Why Not? ethic of these times), but as part and parcel of the perceived need to renew & rejuvenate & redefine the underpinnings of society & culture in the 20th. [sic] century.'⁷ This leads him to assert not only the ethical value of poetry, but also the spiritual and political implications of writing. Although he does not set himself up as 'moral administrator' or 'high priest,' he does believe in the power of poetry to change people's lives. Like Adamson, he does not advocate a fixed 'truth'; rather, he allows contradictions to exist; in his way of thinking about the modern world, he believes this to be the only honest, free-thinking position to take:

I am the product of...an urban labyrinth, of an unknowable topology, enigmatic. I am a child of Western Civilisation – am the beneficiary of contradictions and paradoxes. I am caught in its incredibly complex perversity. I am a product of systems of exploitation which enable incredible

⁵ Hemensley, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 54-55.

⁶ Hemensley, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 66.

⁷ Hemensley, 'The Experimentalist Paradigm and the Challenging Impulse,' *Going Down Swinging* 5 (1982): 75.

variety.... The world I live in and seek to know is not simple! I hate simplifications, reductions.⁸

Although he adopts the neo-Romantic view of the poet as visionary, in his understanding of textuality Hemensley is also informed by the theories of French poststructuralists. In his essay, ‘...“The Wild Assertion of Vitality”’, he refers to French critic Jean Ricardou’s definition of the text, a definition which has much in common with Barthes’ description of the writerly style: ‘We shall view a modern text as a production which reveals itself; and previous texts as productions which try to conceal their functioning.’⁹ Rather than remaining purely linguistic, however, Hemensley sees the writerly style as an extension of the Romantic/surrealist notion of ‘organic form’: he sees poetry as presenting ‘the “graph of the mind”...the pictorialisation of a language at work – the poem as an in-progress organism, an organism aware as it works of the processes by which it is working, a poem as something discovering itself.’¹⁰ Yet Hemensley rejects the idea that the impetus for writing poetry comes from the Romantic impulse of ‘psychological motivation or personal expression.’¹¹ His idea of the organic nature of the text relies on the operations of textuality which deny the conventional poetic ‘voice.’ He refers to the ideas of one-time *Tel Quel* member, Jean Pierre Faye, who insists ‘on the “communication” component (a “deep meaning” versus “textual”, ie [sic] surface, meaning) of poetry, writing, where crucial meaning...is the product of the puncturing of conventional forms, the broken text.... It is not the authoritarian, directed “communication”....’¹² Like Barthes’ writerly style, this ‘broken text’ subverts the tendency of the reader (and poet) to construct the stable, unified subject as the authorial voice presiding over the poem. Rather, like Adamson,

⁸ Hemensley, ‘Interview,’ *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 52.

⁹ Quoted by Hemensley in ‘...“The Wild Assertion of Vitality”’, *Australian Literary Studies* 8 (1977): 233.

¹⁰ Hemensley, ‘Interview,’ *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 59.

¹¹ Hemensley quoting critic David Antin, in ‘“A Vague All-Exaggerating Twilight of Wonder”, Australia’s New Poetry,’ *Meanjin* 35 (1976): 58.

¹² Hemensley, ‘Interview,’ *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 61.

Hemensley seeks to get the reader 'in' to the poem: he invites an interaction between poet and reader, with the poem becoming an ongoing experiment. By constructing a writerly text which invites multiple interpretations or responses, Hemensley maintains, the lines of communication between writer and reader are 'open': 'An experiment is a yielding up to a process, & any product remains a cross-section of otherwise infinite mutability.'¹³ While Hemensley substitutes the idea of process for traditional 'realist' techniques of representation, his aims go beyond mere linguistic 'play.' Hemensley builds on the symbolist notion that the language of poetry may induce higher levels of consciousness: in his view, the text somehow attains that consciousness. This 'mantric' notion of language implicitly relies on a sense of transcendent meaning, a universal 'Logos.'

The realist position assumes that the creative act consists in the manifestation or realisation of what is already known & held to be. The experimentalist position entails the reverse. What it attained is consciousness whatismore [sic] or realisation & revelation rather than one of reflection & reification.¹⁴

In this regard, Hemensley affirms the neo-Romantic notion of poet as 'seer,' 'visionary' and 'prophet.'

Hemensley's notion of subjectivity relies on the idea of a universal consciousness of which the individual is simply a part. James Tulip has discussed this transcendentalist impulse in Hemensley's work, saying it gives 'the greatest possible ambience for the ego both to assert itself and to transcend itself.'¹⁵ Tulip also suggests that Hemensley only imperfectly reflects this poetic, saying that he is reluctant to 'let go of the sense of his own uniqueness,'¹⁶ and that Hemensley 'suffers from the Pound-Williams-Olson syndrome where the artist and his creative process is in the modern hero/saint figuration.'¹⁷ However, whereas Tulip's

¹³ Hemensley, 'The Experimentalist Paradigm': 74.

¹⁴ Hemensley, 'The Experimentalist Paradigm': 76.

¹⁵ Tulip, 'Towards an Australian Modernism: New Writings of Kris Hemensley,' *Southerly* 37 (1977): 146.

¹⁶ Tulip, 'Towards an Australian Modernism': 144.

¹⁷ Tulip, 'Towards an Australian Modernism': 144.

'hero/saint' figure recalls the Romantic 'Great Poet,' and with it the sense of the uniqueness of the poet, Hemensley, like Olson, undermines the notion of the unified 'subject': the 'voice' or presence of the poet only ever appears in a self-deconstructing capacity, as a reflection of the greater, divine principle. Hemensley's view of subjectivity is the central theme of his long poem, *Poem of the Clear Eye* (1975), and it is through exploring subjectivity that Hemensley raises questions regarding the role of the poet in relation to political as well as spiritual issues.

The opening of *Poem of the Clear Eye*, a sequence whose title reminds us of Aristotle's treatise on the 'soul,' introduces the theme of 'seeing' and 'representation' which runs through the poem. Implicitly, Hemensley regards traditional representation as 'a rather vulgar baring of the breast':

the artist waved his hand over the canvas –
there is spread before my window
the most graceful activities.¹⁸

The desire to reproduce nature is seen to be insufficient; the eye must look with an inner vision which somehow goes beyond the outward signs:

...with eyes momentarily closed
keeping the image & its meaning at hand for the
instant (forever) the instant understanding of that instant... (11)

Hemensley suggests that the 'eye' is not only the physical organ of sight, but also consciousness, the individual 'soul': the 'eye' / 'i' pun is paramount here. Tulip suggests that the 'clear eye' stands for two different ways of seeing: 'The clear eye is...not merely the scientific eye, but the human eye full of candour, sympathy and introspection.'¹⁹ As importantly, Hemensley's 'eye' allows a distinction to be made between the universal 'I' and the individual 'i': the transcendent 'I is the place i

¹⁸ Hemensley, *The Poem of the Clear Eye* (Melbourne: The Paper Castle, 1975): 7. Subsequent page references appear in the text.

¹⁹ Tulip, 'Towards an Australian Modernism': 147.

merely dreams of,' while the lesser 'i / is too much in the pay of chemical,' the physical body (69). The pun suggests that the 'clear eye' stands also for the third eye of Eastern mysticism which has access to the transcendent, the universal 'I' of the Hindu greater 'Self.'²⁰ The individual is contained within the universal consciousness which inhabits past, present and future; this universal Self is also the object of a fierce yearning within the individual: 'my / host is what i seek to know' (69). For the lesser 'i,' consciousness of its status as a function of the greater 'I' means a paradoxical sense of freedom. The possibility of transcending time arises: 'i & I / arm-in-arm like-spirits on pedestrian streets / visiting the commonplace with the unknown forever' (69). The 'I' becomes the means by which the 'i' transcends, experiencing the eternal in a single moment of consciousness:

the unique substance a
moment in hand &
imagination the
song of moment a
song of songs &
songs of songs (90)

The difference between Hemensley's neo-Romantic view and the universalism of a poet such as Wordsworth is that Wordsworth strongly suggests a belief in the uniqueness of the Great Poet who can reveal truth to humanity, whereas Hemensley sees no essential difference between the subjectivity of one 'i' and another. Paradoxically, therefore, although the 'i' is a focus of Hemensley's poem, the result is not ego-based. According to Hemensley, words, and other forms of artistic representation, are barely adequate to express this idea of the divine:

i am shadow to the world. it is
what exists. it is what is essential.
it is its own. no
words or daubs are of it. the picture of

²⁰ Gurumayi Chidvilasananda discusses the different identifications of the individual with the body and with the 'Self' of divine consciousness in *Kindle My Heart* Vol. 1 (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989): 23-24.

the scene is the *picture* of the scene. that is
all i own to. (81)

Yet words are the poet's tools as well as his craft; self is constituted by self-identification in language, as well as silence, the 'absence,' which presupposes it:

i walk & talk
world & book
book & world
half a mind upon
the other half –
absence upon absence (83)

The poet is not like the mystic who seeks to go beyond words; rather, he is driven by the need to express his vision:

give me a pretty picture – a
word for life. a sound.
a colour. a
regiment! a
glossary for the uninitiated –
(("ZAH") bodhisattva – a man
not yet free from all kinds of ideas /
tathagata – it" – "who
does not enter a world of form,
sound, odour, taste, touch and
quality.") (88)

Although, in the end, the poet's sense of the divine is beyond words, the poem nevertheless gives a sense of how awareness of the greater self, the universal 'I,' helps to overcome the struggle for meaning and physical satisfaction which the worldly 'i' experiences.

The 'I' that can see all things is not always apparent to the lesser self, the 'i' who stumbles blindly through experience. Hemensley suggests a number of provisional goals which the lesser self pursues, but which do not offer ultimate satisfaction. The multiple 'voices' within the poem give a sense of these various goals: political idealism exemplified in the French revolution, socialist Utopias and William Lane's experiment in Paraguay (14); the hippie's dream of a 'garden' in the 'wilderness' (15); the '*Hiroshige*,' the Japanese 'way of the good man' (45);

and the drunkard's escape. Yet desire for utopia in social and political terms is shown only to be an illusion, impossible to attain in the everyday world. Only the experience of the transcendent, the goal of the united 'i' and 'I,' is free from the limitations of day-to-day existence. Political idealism, for example, is shown to result in corruption and totalitarianism. Hemensley refers to the case of Stalin to illustrate the point:

killing is not the object
(you understand my meaning)
you *have* to kill but that
is unfortunate. i've
been at death's door life
is indivisible if
you accept electrification &
the defence of the State then
the rest follows you
cant swap & change Joseph
Stalin did it *all* &
more besides... (60)

The lessons of history do not seem to provide the answers either for society or for the poet:

what chance have we of surviving the un
civilisation of the world um the un
veiling of the world's vilest features (its not at all
nice being around during the advance stages of
capitalism...
...such contemplation does nothing for
the poem... (29)

Although poetry is the vehicle for the expression of vision, language itself offers no solutions either; we are inevitably part of the social conditions which shape us ('the society / in which we live you / can't live outside of it,' 57); thus, Hemensley affirms the need for a transcendent vision:

...i mean
to say what poetry should you invest in (self-
government?) which poem ever carried your will
or really investigated it? (21)

The self-referential elements of the poem suggest that Hemensley is interested in giving a broad sample of differing social, political and individual positions, suggesting the multiple subjectivities which go to make up the universal consciousness. With writerly wit, he teases the reader with the incoherence of these multiple voices, deliberately subverting notions of 'narrative' ('ends & beginning really / do seem to be the same / phenomenon,' 27) and traditional poetic conventions:

...shall I spill the beans
tell you who they all are the plot!
the rules of this house! (25)

Although Hemensley maintains the traditional role of poet as 'seer,' through multiplicity and self-referentiality he subverts the notion that the poet's vision is a fixed 'truth.' The poetic 'voice' appealing for authenticity is therefore only ever ironic:

hear me lover / mistress / future reader –
all of it true & happened just as i say it did... (30)

At the same time, this means that he can express doubts regarding the nature of his vision: 'ambitions toward higher stations seem / to be lies & illusions' (29).

Section 3 reveals Hemensley uses the metaphors of music to convey a sense of the rhapsody of rapture. In the extended metaphor, the self is seen to be an instrument 'played' by nature, an expression of the divine principle of cosmic energy:

...there is less distance between
the first star of the night & i than the
orchestra is from where we lie upon the bowl
of the earth supine aboard the earth's
momentum our spines parallel with the spine
of the earth whose geodesic lines make melodies of
our miniscule [sic] activities play us... (43)

In this world, the whole of nature becomes a means by which the self can gain a sense of the transcendent:

...with a language of
the eyes / there is nothing i see cannot serve
me (46)

At the same time, although this experience is constantly available, the persistent sense of the separateness of the self means that doubts arise. This sense of duality leads to the fierce yearning for oneness with the divine:

oh! have done with it! i
only pretend to understand! (ah
for a music of the spheres
to pierce the curtain) (48)

Despite this yearning for transcendence, Hemensley shows how the individual must face the hardships and insecurities of everyday life. The poem sequence depicts a gamut of different 'roles': the drinker with his mates at the pub (9-11); the thinker dreaming of revolution (12-16); the poet reading other poets and visionaries, seeing in the 'Modern Movement in Art – the greatest / democracy that ever there was' (19, 22); the poet-beggar (32); as well as the man rebelling against his conventional life in the suburbs (51-52). Amid all, is the individual 'i' of the poet, struggling to give shape to his vision, to achieve and express a sense of connection with the world. The self-portrait, however, is always ironic:

the poet reclining dead
(to the world) on the field
receiving divine instruction wedded
to the solid creatures of the farm
the ability of this poet in sleeping
whenever the land presents a comfort
able incline the divan is divine the
place to begin a famous life-work! (71)

The poem ends with a reiteration of doubt, the question as to whether the poet's work really offers anything of value in a time of social turmoil and political crisis:

nothing fades but the poem. snarl
away! the war
is all around us. make
shield of paper &
sword of the pen. billow
clichés in soul-destroying

clouds over the enemy
trenches. the dead
are piled almost as high as
the living dead. (126)

Instead of undermining the poet's vision, these doubts suggest that the vision is part of a 'process,' an ongoing experiment with life, an expression of transitory subjectivity which is open to the many fluctuations of universal consciousness.

Another poet whose work reflects neo-Romantic attitudes is Bruce Beaver. Like Hemensley, Beaver sees poetry as a vehicle for a transcendent vision which he wishes to share with his readers. Whereas Hemensley uses stylistic innovation to suggest the multiplicity and diversity of his poetic vision, a sense of the composite of 'voices' which make up the universal 'I,' Beaver has a more traditional attitude towards language, conveying the sense of a need to communicate directly with the reader. This means that he adopts at times a more readerly style, particularly in his early poem sequence, *Letters to Live Poets* (1969).²¹ In this sequence, as well as in the more writerly *Lauds and Complaints* (1974), Beaver expresses a transcendent vision, giving a picture of the individual whose joy it is to share his own awareness of a universal consciousness with the reader; at the same time, his work reflects his sense of the problems attached to living in the world, particularly the role of his poetry in regard to the social and political problems which faced writers during the late sixties and early seventies.

According to Thomas Shapcott, the publication of *Letters to Live Poets* 'was immediately acclaimed a milestone in the development of the "new poetry" ' in Australia.²² In reviewing Tranter's New Poetry anthology in 1979, however, some critics expressed surprise at Beaver's inclusion among the New Poets. After all, he had been publishing well before the advent of the 'generation of '68,' and had already appeared in the Shapcott and Hall anthology, *New Impulses*. One older

²¹ Beaver, *Letters to Live Poets* (Sydney: South Head Press, 1969).

²² Shapcott, 'Change and Consolidation: An Impression of Recent Poetry,' *Span* 4 (1977): 25-26.

poet, John Blight, commenting on the placement of Beaver's work at the beginning of the anthology, suggested that his inclusion 'smack[ed] of expediency':²³ presumably Tranter wished to attract some of the serious critical attention which Beaver commanded in his own right. Another reviewer, Graham Rowlands, objected to Tranter's generalisation that the New Poets exhibited characteristics of modernism, and refused to see Beaver as a 'modernist' writer:

Bruce Beaver is only the *father* of the poets. *He* isn't a Modernist, being only too painfully aware that what runs through his veins isn't ink ²⁴

Here Rowlands implicitly equates modernism with the type of 'play of aesthetic surfaces' which Tranter favours: the implied contrast between 'blood' and 'ink' reflects the apparently unemotional, detached nature of the linguistically self-referential style. While such an equation is a simplification, nevertheless what Rowlands suggests has a point: although *Lauds and Complaints* experiments with a writerly style, in general Beaver has a much more personal attitude towards poetry than Tranter's discussion of the New Poets' innovations would suggest.

One reason why Tranter included Beaver among the New Poets was that Beaver was one of the few older poets in the sixties who was seen to be actively influenced by American poetry.²⁵ Beaver was acquainted with the work of the American New Poets, Frank O'Hara (to whom the *Letters* are 'addressed' posthumously) and John Ashbery,²⁶ and the form of *Letters* was inspired by the older poets Robert Lowell and James K Baxter.²⁷ However, while the American influence is important, it is by no means the extent of Beaver's poetic inheritance: he has also been influenced by European and Australian poets (including Mallarmé,

²³ John Blight, ' "The New Australian Poetry – The Work of Twenty-Four Poets from Australian Poetry's Most Exciting Decade" ', *Image* 3, 4: 47.

²⁴ Rowlands, 'The Wisecrack Manifesto': 75.

²⁵ Tranter remarks that Beaver 'was the first writer in Australia to read Frank O'Hara and get anything out of him' ('Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 37).

²⁶ Mentioned in Beaver's interview with John Beston, *World Literatures Written in English* 14 (1975): 234.

²⁷ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott, *Quadrant* 20.4 (1976): 44.

Rilke and Brennan), as well as English models. Beaver has declared himself an eclectic reader, claiming to devour everything from Chaucer to Schjeldahl 'and beyond,'²⁸ and says that the form of *Letters* is as much indebted to the nineteenth-century poets, Patmore and Thompson, as it is to Lowell. More important in terms of suggesting the dissimilarity between Tranter's and Beaver's poetic is the fact that Beaver adopts a neo-Romantic attitude to the role of the poetry, which he sees as the expression of the poet's transcendent vision.

Beaver believes that the poet's role is to 'gauge' human nature, and that the poet has access to 'all forms of human nature.'²⁹ Beaver suggests that poets can 'portray and interpret human behaviour in a more immediately acceptable way than the psychiatrists or philosophers.'³⁰ Beaver is not elitist, however: like Mallarmé, he believes poetry is an expression of a creativity which everyone can experience: 'I honestly believe all people have got the *poietos* – the "making thing".'³¹ Unlike Mallarmé, however, Beaver shows no hesitancy regarding the nature of this gift: he believes that this 'making thing,' and the impulse for his own writing, is a gift of the divine.

Beaver claims to have these 'very definite, weird mystical ideas about writing',³² he says that in the act of writing he goes into a kind of a trance.³³ Instead of simply the conventional idea of 'inspiration' he says he is visited by what Socrates called a 'daimon,' or 'heavenly guide.'³⁴ He doesn't care whether this is regarded as merely his own ego or super-ego,³⁵ believing that all 'real' poetry stems from such a mystical experience:

²⁸ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 44.

²⁹ Beaver, 'Interviews with Bruce Beaver 1978 and 1987,' with André Dingemans, *Fine Line* 2 (1987): 9.

³⁰ Beaver, 'Interview' with Kraussmann, *Aspect: Art & Literature* 2.2 (1976): 33.

³¹ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 5.

³² Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 7.

³³ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 12.

³⁴ Beaver, 'Interview' with Beston: 235.

³⁵ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 7.

...the real poetry – what I call the real poetry – is written in white heat, great lots of fifty or a hundred lines of verse, as verse, with the whole imagistic, metaphorical, simile forms all built in.³⁶

It is not only in the act of writing that this spiritual side of Beaver's poetic is apparent. He sees it as the driving force of his life, more important to him than his art. 'Three things keep me alive,' he says, '– my faith, my love, and my art, in that order. So it's [poetry's] got a pretty high priority, but it's the faith that keeps me alive, keeps me sane and conscious – what I call conscious.'³⁷ Beaver acknowledges that this faith has been influenced by his study of Hinduism, particularly his reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*.³⁸ The governing principle of the divine in his view is a sense of 'love':

...it's a faith in what used to be called in old Victorian novels 'the Divine Mystery.' I can't find a better word for it, because it *is* a mystery to me. All I know is that it pours down love...I worship that with my uttermost being.³⁹

Beaver's desire to express his sense of the divine is behind his attempt to write *Letters to Live Poets* as a Mallarméan *livre composé*. He gives the background to *Letters* in an interview with Thomas Shapcott, explaining that the genesis for the poem sequence and the process of its writing were deeply rooted in his personal experience of a near fatal illness. 'I thought *Letters* was going to be my last book,' Beaver says:

I had been placed on medication and I thought: 'Well, I've got a couple of months before I turn into a vegetable.' And I wrote feverishly one poem a day for seven weeks; until I had 49 poems.⁴⁰

Beaver addresses the poems to the 'not impossible creative reader,' those 'Live

³⁶ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 8.

³⁷ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 8.

³⁸ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 9.

³⁹ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 8.

⁴⁰ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 44.

Poets' of the title,⁴¹ and the mode of address is conversational. The creativity required of the reader is not in terms of constructing meaning or coherence from the poem as in a writerly text; rather, it is in the reader's emotional response to the record of the spiritual life of the poet.

Beaver sums up the idea of the *livre composé* as an attempt to 'live' the poem or book:

Now the thing was the Mallarméan idea of, not a sequence of poems, but the book that became the spiritual (literally the spiritual, or intellectual) life of the poet.... Mallarmé was a long way from his idea of the poem as a living book, the essence, the life: a kind of spiritual, intellectual, emotional autobiography on the higher plane of the imagination: on an imaginative plane rather than on the narrative story from day to day.⁴²

While he acknowledges the power of language and poetry to express the spiritual dimension of life, and maintains his belief in 'the living word,'⁴³ he does not insist on either the symbolist faith in language to *create* this experience in the mind of the reader or the idea that one can enter a transcendent world of poetry. For Beaver, the insight remains one which he must attempt to *communicate*. His inspiration for writing *Letters* comes from his sense of having missed an opportunity to correspond with the American New Poet, Frank O'Hara, whose work Beaver had only discovered at the time of the other poet's death. Just as he 'received' O'Hara's message posthumously through his poetry, he has the hope that eventually his poetry will 'speak' to others of like mind. The *Letters* therefore embody what he thought would be his dying message to his spiritual brothers and sisters, 'the community / world-wide, of live, mortal poets' (I). In the poems, the poet talks aloud, eulogises, remembers, projects, proclaims and orates; the poetic

⁴¹ From the dust-jacket of the first edition, mentioned in the Shapcott interview and quoted directly in Beate Josephi's essay, 'The Poetry of Bruce Beaver,' *Quadrant* 23.9 (1979): 55.

⁴² Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 46.

⁴³ Beaver, *Letters to Live Poets* (Sydney: South Head Press: 1969), Stanza XXXIV: 64. Subsequent references to this edition, giving only the stanza number, will appear in the text.

‘voice’ is sometimes intensely personal, at other times stridently political. Beaver’s aim is to leave a record for the reader of his own spiritual life, his struggles, fears and doubts, and, above all, his celebration of his sense of connection to the divine.

In *Letters* Beaver portrays the divine as his reason for living, his reason for writing; its fundamental nature, according to Beaver, is ‘love’:

What prompts the urge to live in face of
terminal facts as adamant as basalt
if not a singing creativity,
a kind of love? (XXII)

Like Olson, he has abandoned the inflated sense of the self (‘I was but one among many living things,’ VII). He has discovered a connection to all living and non-living things, like the child whose song he hears:

[new line] She sits cross-legged beneath
the carousel of washing, fluting/and singing two notes, two words:
‘I am, I am’, The mother
admonishes....
But the devas of the air and sky
respond ‘We are, we are’..(X)

His role is to express this vision of the transcendent, but also to express life in all its complexities and inconsistencies: ‘write now and sometimes sing / in complexity of a complex / state of things as they have always / been’ (XIV). The self-referential aspects of the *Letters* are there to remind him of this aim. His advice to himself is at once a poetic and a program for living, the two interdependent; the only thing he desires is a reader willing to share his vision:

Try to attain to that
grade of being
in touch with multifarious life,
jetting the essence of
living experience
into the fallow (if any) womb /
heart/mind of anyone
who wants it. (XIV)

This ‘living experience’ is a balancing act between the demands of the everyday world, and the inner life of the psyche, alternately celebrating life and suffering the

tortures of isolation and a sense of separateness:

The task is to survive the outer
lure of the bonfire's martyr, the inner
holocaust of consciousness. (XV)

Although Beaver believes that poetry is 'the most imaginative type of human speech,'⁴⁴ he is careful to distinguish between the intense subjectivity of his work and mere 'self-expression':

The most obvious thing that appears to people is self-expression, but it's not.
My poetry is an attempt to gauge human nature as roundly as possible – all
forms of human nature. Sometimes I'm a woman....⁴⁵

Beaver's wish to enter into both male and female experiences of subjectivity means that he is attracted to the figure of Tiresias, who was compelled to tell the truth. For Beaver, Tiresias's androgyny represents a more complete 'truth' than other stances:

Myself as melancholy as
Tiresias in two minds
burning to tell you, my poets,
of this fear: his mad indictment.
Hoping to flush it as finally from me
as sillage by a cistern's flow.
I beg you to remember me as truthful. (XIII)

For Beaver, as for Adamson and Hemensley, the 'truth' is not fixed; rather, it is a 'journeying truth' (XX), defined by the individual's yearning for the divine, the desire to be free of the 'inherent schism' (III) to which he sees human beings as subject. It is the seeking for union with the divine which gives vitality to the individual, although we may search for it elsewhere:

It has something to do with truth
seen as that which keeps us
going and coming hopefully,
sometimes in evidence a little
before or behind us.

⁴⁴ Beaver, 'Interview' with Kraussmann: 33.

⁴⁵ Beaver, 'Interviews' with Dingemans: 9.

(Sometimes imagined mistakenly
as embodied in another.) (XX)

In Beaver's view, the experience of the 'truth' requires living in the present, the moment, the now ('Let me sing of our being / here and of our witnessing,' XXI).

His aim is

...to taste
life in air upon the ravaged
face and make of it the true
words of suffering and of love:
the real prayer that takes a life
to utter. (XXX)

Like Hemensley, Beaver suggests that attempts to reify the truth into a program for living, only result in failure, in the falsity of dogma:

Falsity is forever static
in the guise of a path, a road,
even the way itself, but truth
comes and goes almost with us
moving making us less alone. (XX)

Although Beaver believes that one can change one's inner, spiritual life by increasing one's openness to the divine, he also suggests that desire to change things politically only leads to despair. Written during the time of the Vietnam war, the *Letters* records Beaver's response to the political turmoil which he acknowledges may have no power to change things. His poetry may only be like graffiti, a protest barely noticed: 'Writing to you...writes Vietnam like a huge four-letter / word in blood and faeces on the walls / of government' (I). Beaver echoes with ironic bitterness the voice of detached political reporting, depicting the atrocities of war:

The number of infants, among others, blistered
and skinned alive by napalm
has been exaggerated
by both sides we are told
and the gas does not seriously harm;
does not kill but is merely
unbearably nauseating.

Apparently none of this
is happening to us. (I)

Although Beaver is a pacifist, he is not politically naive; he scoffs at the idea that 'offering flowers to enmity, wearing bells around the neck / and mouthing love' is going to change the play of 'the game humanity's been playing for five millennia' (XXVIII). He sees humanity divided against itself, with the enemy believing in the 'war game.' There are no answers: 'I stay / alive to live' (XXVIII). Beaver is aware that his attitude seems negative, but, in the struggle to be honest, to be 'truthful,' he expresses his feelings as they come:

I stay,
see movement when I look about me,
colour everywhere. Why don't I
reflect some therapeutically?
You tell me. (II)

Whereas *Letters to Live Poets* contains a strong sense of the poet's 'voice' and a strongly expressive, readerly style, *Lauds and Complaints*, which Beaver has described as the spirit of the body of *Letters*,⁴⁶ is a more experimental sequence and contains passages which reflect a more writerly style. The poem sequence represents Beaver's attempt to express James Dickey's idea that 'thoughts don't come in sentences, they come in jerks and jumps and spurts and spasms';⁴⁷ at the same time, it also has a strongly referential element. The sequence concerns relationships of love and friendship, memories, and experiences of nature; it contains portraits of people: a young man who commits suicide (I), a Catholic patriarch (II), a young poet friend (XXI); and descriptions of places, the rock pools of Queenscliff (XII), the Bay of Islands where the poet and his wife spent their honeymoon (XIV), the country town of Berrima (XVII), and houses he has lived in (XXI). In general, however, these portraits are not simple representations or descriptions: there are fewer direct references to the first person, the poetic 'voice'

⁴⁶ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 45.

⁴⁷ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 45.

of the poems; rather, the language suggests the interplay of the conscious and unconscious mind, and an awareness of the processes of language and the activity of writing ('I make / this pen / move here / in itself / a kind of / making,' XI). With this self-referentiality, Beaver deliberately blurs the distinction between the inner and outer world of the poem; the poet's day to day life, his creativity, and the artefact or poem which he produces, all linked:

the poem has broken through itself it is the coffee
as yet unmade how real it tastes to sip it is
the most natural thing in the world if I get up
to make the coffee the made poem of coffee
will spill all over the desk...
steaming over the page (VII)

He touches on the idea of poetry as communication ('There is always a message,' III); yet the idea of 'silence,' that which goes beyond words, gains importance:

...at times the word-maker is alone
with his silence and as empty of obvious
meanings as a sandscape of immediate
contours (XX)

Rather than suggesting a poststructuralist view of language, Beaver sees the writerly style as part of an ongoing experiment to find new ways of expressing the transcendent.

The poems refer to the works of Chinese philosophers Wu Cheng-en and Po Chu-I (XIV), the Hindu notions of the veil of Maya (XV), and occult beliefs in the *divas* and 'mana' – the supernatural force which is concentrated in objects. Beaver portrays the poet as a magician, describing his own experience as a boy as 'a poet already / in intent':

a home-made magician's kit of other men's
spells sizzling and bubbling in
my serpentine

mind (III)

He points to the parallel between the poet and the traditional spiritual seeker ('I
come now alone as a primitive celebrant supplicant / psalmist,' XIII), and the
many seekers of both the sacred and the profane:

...Bunyan mapped the Delectable Mountains

Sade explored the mons
veneris Genet the fundament
and halfway between Plato and Aquinas

the consoling poet Boethius
trapped in double dark
averred the innate light (XV)

Throughout all, the innate light, the 'divine mystery' pours down love; this, for
Beaver, is the inspiration, the purpose and the goal of writing. Only this love can
make sense of human struggles, the wars, the hypocrisy, the materialism, the veil of
illusion which imprisons the human spirit. Throughout his poetry, Beaver tries to
capture this spiritual world, a world in which the isolation of the individual is
overcome, and the doubts concerning identity, language, communication and
meaning erased. At times, the poet experiences a sense of oneness with others. He
sees his own task as being echoed by others, the 'zendos' / ashrams' monasteries'
/ inhabitants' and those with

...the specially woken consciousness

of some lovers some poets
some nonconforming saints
even perhaps some criminals... (XV)

He shares with these people

...the awareness
of temporality as

the only long and short
of all we can know now of eternity

the exciting and the boring
pattern of recurrence
threaded with our lives on Maya's loom
nightly unpicked and daily
begun age after age
in a cosmos swarming with unhuman suitors

helps us here within
the law the penitentiary
freely as captives to make the affirmation (XV)

For Beaver this 'affirmation' of life, the neo-Romantic optimism and celebration of human potential, is the poetic message which each generation has to make 'new' for poetry; it is a message which he believes links him to the ancients and the moderns alike: 'The message is always old, "there is nothing new under the sun" except the presentation.'⁴⁸ In this respect, Beaver believes that his work, and most importantly his attitude to art and reality (as he says of *Letters to Live Poets*) 'is not terribly modern in any way at all.'⁴⁹

Alongside Hemensley and Beaver, Vicki Viidikas also fits into the neo-Romantic strand of the New Poetry. Like these poets, Viidikas's understanding of her own role as poet, her attitude to language and the stylistic innovation, and her belief in the transcendent, show a very different emphasis from Tranter's characterisation of the main innovations of the New Poetry. She affirms a concept of the subject as being an expression of a divine principle for which she is indebted to Hindu thinking. She also affirms the mantric power of poetry to induce altered states of consciousness and to reflect an awareness of the meditation experience of the transcendent. In general terms, her work shows a greater degree of traditional representative techniques and the sense of poetic 'voice' than either Beaver or Hemensley, and she often comments quite directly on issues which concerned

⁴⁸ Beaver, 'Interview' with Kraussmann: 30.

⁴⁹ Beaver, 'Interview' with Shapcott: 44.

women of her generation. Viidikas falls into the category of those New Poets who, in Duwell's terms, 'subscribe to what might be described as the "mystical/unconscious" tradition'⁵⁰ of poetic production; significantly, she has not engaged in the same degree of analysis of her poetics as the other New Poets discussed here. For this reason, my understanding of Viidikas's poetic is inferred primarily from her work.

Like Tranter, Viidikas was recognised as early as 1970 with Thomas Shapcott's *Australian Poetry Now* as one of the many talented young poets who had begun writing and publishing in the late sixties. Her work also appeared in Robert Kenny and Colin Talbot's *Applestealers* (1974) and Kate Jennings' *Mother I'm Rooted* (1975). She published in many of the little magazines associated with the New Poetry, such as *Contempa*, *Leatherjacket*, *Mok* and *New Poetry*; she was also associated with the small press, Wild and Woolley, and had a volume published in the University of Queensland Press Paperback Poets series. While Viidikas is only one of two women to be chosen by Tranter to appear in the anthology, there could hardly be a greater contrast between Tranter's self-conscious linguisticism and Viidikas's view of poetry as spontaneous outpouring. She believes her writing comes directly from the unconscious: 'I'm only interested in creating out of the subconscious, on writing on "what I don't know"....'⁵¹ She sees writing as a way of 'confessional therapy' which stems primarily from self-expression. Flexibility of form and technical looseness are features of her style, but her stylistic innovations – her abandonment of rhyme, traditional punctuation, syntax and her mixture of prose and verse forms – are a product of her need to express herself, and motivated by a sense of exploration and desire for personal freedom. She describes her attitude to writing as follows:

⁵⁰ Duwell, 'Introduction,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 10.

⁵¹ Viidikas, 'Statement on Poetics,' *Australian Literary Studies* 8 (1977): 155.

I believe creating (writing poetry in this case) should be, and is, as natural and integrated a process as cooking eggs for breakfast; can see no distinction between a person wishing to express herself on the page, or getting drunk and attempting to communicate verbally in a pub. Each moment, each experience is unique, as therefore each poem is.... If a poem is emotional, subjective, hysterical even, then chances are the form will be scattered over the page as randomly as the emotions which motivate it. I want a poetry of the spirit/of the body/of the emotions.⁵²

This desire for self-expression leads to a strong sense of the poetic 'voice' which does not avoid techniques of traditional representation. Importantly, while Viidikas identifies with the general rebelliousness of her generation, there is little sense of her self-consciously contributing to a 'revolution' in Australian poetry. In fact, unlike many of the male New Poets, she seems almost surprised to have been taken as a serious writer. In her statement of poetics for the 1977 special issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, she wrote:

I never dreamed my torments and inner realities would be of interest and relevance to other people, and any consciousness of myself as a writer has remained small beside the continuing reality of writing as a means of sanity and order and self-expression in my life. I first started writing my problems out on scraps of paper when I was 15 and living away from home, and later found these 'problems' were actually poems. The writing has kept coming since then.⁵³

Viidikas's belief in poetry as 'self-expression' means that her work is the most confessional of the neo-Romantic New Poets. In her early work, much of the subject matter is drawn from the icons of the era of 'sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll,' and she expresses the sixties' generation's dissatisfaction with conventional 'suburban' and capitalistic values. This leads to the spiritual quest for alternative spiritual, particularly Hindu, values, which are increasingly expressed in her later work.

Viidikas's early poetry shows a mixture of personal and political issues: hers is a personal revolution against current values of society, its materialism, its sexism,

⁵² Quoted in *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn, eds (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1986): 2.

⁵³ Viidikas, 'Statement on Poetics': 156

and this becomes her political statement as well. Her interests lie, she says, with the ‘subcultures in Western society.’⁵⁴ She wishes to explore ‘the realities of any individual whose morality is not that of the “norm” or who seeks for truths other than ambition, success, material wealth, etc.’⁵⁵ Yet what Viidikas finds on the fringes of society does not have the power to satisfy her either. Within these subcultures she sees the hypocrisies of the drug smugglers, the vanities of prostitutes; she suffers the self-doubts of the destitute writer; the sixties’ generation’s catchcry of ‘freedom’ becomes a new tool of oppression, as she writes in the short story, ‘Love an Apple’:

‘We all know that marriage is crap, working is crap, having possessions is crap: we’re all artists and deserve to be free...’
Emotional blackmail, legal blackmail, peace-and-love blackmail, the latest guru blackmail.
– ‘Can’t get no satisfaction’ —⁵⁶

Here Viidikas combines a number of the sixties’ generation’s concerns: the neo-avant-garde protest against society’s values, their fascination with the icons of rock’n’roll, ‘The Rolling Stones,’ and a ‘hippie’ interest in Indian spirituality. She is searching, she says, for an ‘intuitive knowledge’ which ‘is fast becoming lost in Western society,’ and she sees the corruption of society’s values as symptomatic of this loss which leads to ‘extreme and aberrated behaviour.’⁵⁷

In *Condition Red*, Viidikas’s first collection, the young people who dream of revolution, of ‘breaking with the establishment’s / destruction,’⁵⁸ tread a fine line between the rejection of old values and the disillusion of the new. They turn away from a soulless suburbia, the ‘sanforised, sanitised sane jungle of houses / numbered labelled stay fresh dog boxes pigpens glutted / economy standards’ (7);

⁵⁴ Viidikas, ‘Statement on Poetics’: 155.

⁵⁵ Viidikas, ‘Statement on Poetics’: 155.

⁵⁶ Viidikas, *Wrappings* (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1974): 19-20.

⁵⁷ Viidikas, ‘Statement on Poetics’: 155-56.

⁵⁸ Viidikas, ‘The Hand,’ *Condition Red: Paperback Poets* 18 (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1973): 7-9. Subsequent quotations of poems in this section are from *Condition Red* unless otherwise cited.

to fill the gap, they seek desperately for some life, a 'pulse between tombstones / of letter boxes sexless nylon negligees milkbars / television [and] paddle-pop children' (7). Viidikas, like the 'flower children' of her generation whom Beaver disparages, idealistically searches for answers to what she perceives to be society's problems. One option, on a personal level, is the Thoreau-inspired hope of 'getting back to nature,' escaping the city which has become oppressive. This is the view taken in the poem, 'The country is the answer':

Not a single person is visible as the landscape flows and
dips...invisible dying...no answer but what is.
I have come a thousand miles to be here.
Peace, they tell me, sending messages from the black city. (26)

In 'Love an Apple,' however, such an option is derided as 'talking to the flowers':⁵⁹ the isolation from the city's activities, the lack of human contact, according to Viidikas, makes one restless, forever wanting something more.

The yearning is also the desire for love, for the freedom to express one's sexuality, 'the heat from the bodies / as they passed through each other':

those hats of desire
staying on in the fiercest wind
the dream
the dream
reaching out for total touch.
('red is the colour,' 14-15)

Yet many of the relationships Viidikas depicts are shallow and self-serving, as in the story, 'The Snowman in the Dutch Masterpiece';⁶⁰ alternatively, they rob one of identity: 'Without you I am myself / With you I am someone else' ('Cars pass and disappear,' 31).

The desire to 'replace the hollowness of things' is described by Viidikas as 'wanting a revolution in spirit,' a sense of the self that is not separated by duality:

⁵⁹ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 20.

⁶⁰ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 8-17.

‘the boundaries of the self / broken down and flooded with joy’ (‘Keeping watch on the heart,’ 19-20). Apart from sex, another way Viidikas suggests of overcoming the sense of the isolated self is through drug use, but this too is shown to be unable to satisfy the longing and only leads to the risks of self-destruction:

They’re playing darts with hypodermics
The fools are recording pain
We’re making weapons from our dreams.
(‘Loaded Hearts,’ 4-5)

Instead of escaping the meaninglessness of suburbia and conventional life, the drug users, along with other inhabitants of the subcultures, become plagued by disease, not only V D, but also a spiritual malaise, ‘some private festering / not always cured by a doctor’ (‘Punishments and Cures,’ 11-13). Drug abuse has led to the deaths of their heroes, idols of the rock music world, whose dreams have been corrupted: Hendrix is playing from hell (‘Loaded Hearts,’ 4); and Joplin is made into an industry, her flesh hired, her heart, her breath sold (‘Something from Janis Joplin,’ 44).

For the woman who needs ‘the illusion that something is total,’ something other than ‘fragments’ (‘The Snowman in the Dutch Masterpiece’),⁶¹ society conspires to trap her into submission:

Your body
has been built for service;
Your shape so formless
it must be harnessed and used for burden;
Your role a fattened mamma
living for the rule of children;
Your love a hideous economy
worked at for fifty years
(‘Discarding Cracked Stones,’ 49-51)

With their various politics and sexual power-games, the revolutionary visionaries and the sexually liberated cannot escape the old discontents. It’s still unsatisfying,

⁶¹ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 8-17.

nothing has changed, as she writes in the prose piece, 'It's natural':

The man in the communist bookshop was a capitalist pig. Personally. And I say I've set up my affections like tin gods to be shot down. Absolutes. Wanting permanence. In and out of the line of vision. Fire. Essences. What more essence is there than your seed? Tomorrow night it could be her. It's natural. (62)

The illusive dreams of love between the sexes, of personal commitment, of political vision, and a sense of belonging and union are reduced to mere 'words, structures' ('It's natural,' 62).

Viidikas's disillusion with such promises, and her desire for a sense of the divine, leads her to explore Indian beliefs in the hope of spiritual renewal, a quest recorded in her 1984 volume, *India Ink*.⁶² Yet her experience in India is ambiguous: her sense of political injustice, particularly in relation to the status of women, is aroused. She finds she must cope with the physical hardship of surviving in an alien culture, the obvious squalor and poverty, the homelessness and sickness, and the contradictions between her admiration for the spiritual life of the Indians and her resentment of Hindu and Islamic attitudes to women. There are also the special hardships faced by the western searcher whose spiritual quest is sometimes confused with sexual exploration and experimentation with drugs. Despite the complexities, her poems suggest that Viidikas discovers in India something which satisfies her restlessness and craving, the experience of bliss and unselfconsciousness through meditation, in which subject and object are united as one, overcoming all boundaries, all divisions, all illusions of the separate, suffering self.

The India which Viidikas depicts is a place full of contradictions; little stone gods are washed and fed and put to bed behind silk curtains while beggars roam the streets starving and suffering from T B.⁶³ Foreigners go there for 'peace,' only to be exploited by hustlers pushing drugs. It is also depicted as a developing

⁶² Viidikas, *India Ink* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984).

⁶³ Viidikas, 'Gopalpur-on-Sea (Orissa),' *India Ink*: 20. All subsequent quotations are from *India Ink* unless otherwise cited.

country: where chai shops, the roadside stalls selling the sweet milky tea, are getting refrigerators: 'at last the big deal' ('Pushkar (Rajasthan),' 33). The enlightenment which Viidikas seeks is shown to be not a fixed event, but a continual process which, as for Hemensley, contains moments of doubt and disillusion. The poetry depicts the individual hovering between two states: the first is the possibility of total immersion and acceptance of the new environment, where the sense of self expands to include a sense of oneness with the divine. This is suggested in the opening poem, 'Cannibal':

Morning. A ming blue sky overhangs the desert. Blue and gold the
colours of Isis at dawn. Up there a world without end, a self
exciting circuit. No hawk wind of desire. No mouse of suffering.
The circuit has no obstacles.... Inside me the morning tastes fresh
as I eat. (9)

The view of subjectivity suggested here is the breaking of boundaries which sexual encounters have been unable to provide. It suggests the limits of conventional notions of the 'self' as being bound to a physical body (in this poem, the self paradoxically *contains* the morning 'inside' itself: the idea of 'self,' is like that of the Hindu Greater 'Self'). The second state is the feeling of alienation, of separateness, in which the individual lacks the awareness of divine connection to all things. In this state, the poet has the sense that to assimilate the rituals and philosophies of another culture is to run the risk of 'losing' one's identity. This is expressed in an earlier poem which describes Viidikas's exposure to Tibetan culture:

You do not fit their rituals with ease
You do not know which rituals to fit
Calmly and sadly
you knot your hair as they do
you wear
a face in imitation of silk

your shoes do not slip
you have forgotten who you are.⁶⁴

Despite sensing the possibilities of spiritual freedom and renewal, at times Viidikas remains conscious of herself as a foreigner, one of those who have 'never produced enough soul food' ('Train Song 1,' 10).

As well as drawing from Indian culture the benefits of the meditative experience, Viidikas appropriates symbolic images of womanhood from Hindu mythology to contemplate her own status as a woman, and also the plight of Indian women. She responds to the figure of Durga Devi, the powerful 'Warrior Goddess Who rides a lion or tiger and carries weapons';⁶⁵ yet, as she prays to the goddess for strength, the lack in herself is confirmed:

Oh penance,
why am I never right
to come to whole love
in this world of flesh and men?

Did You ever have this conflict
of which world to be in...?
('Durga Devi,' 29)

Denied a continuous feeling of transcendence, she looks for metaphors to explain her angst:

Why did Kali Mata⁶⁶ need blood sacrifice? Were we not Her victims
anyway spilling sufferings like so much birdseed before Her feet? Were we
not Her rebels trying to escape our duty to goodness and faith? Would
death be appeased if we put our heads on that crude chopping block?
('Dhakshineswara Temple (Calcutta),' 28)

The insights, when they come, strike at the heart of her spiritual quest; paradoxically, spiritual longing, the desire for oneness with the divine, is itself acknowledged to be a source of discontent: 'Outside a saddhu chants a word for

⁶⁴ Viidikas, 'Family Images,' in *Knabel* (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1978): 31-32.

⁶⁵ Viidikas, Glossary, *India Ink*: 60.

⁶⁶ 'Kali: Goddess of Destruction, Who [sic] dismembers everything ruled by time; offered human sacrifice until this practise [sic] was outlawed in the 19th century. Mata: Mother, or moon, the "measure of time", like a mother's womb determining the potential of each created being.' Viidikas, Glossary, *India Ink*: 61.

“desire”, singing, “free yourself of it” ’ (‘Karwar (Karnataka),’ 53). This is what the Hindu mystics call ‘the delusion of seeking.’⁶⁷

The difficulty experienced by women living in India is another source of anxiety. On the one hand, Viidikas depicts the beauty of the Indian women. She portrays the women dancers as objects of desire: instead of being stereotypically submissive, they are the sexual aggressors, their backs ‘lash the night, their breasts flirt and purr under thin cotton saris’ (‘Harvest Festival,’ 26); but they are also portrayed as victims. In the prose poem, ‘Jaisalmere (Rajasthan),’ the refrain is ‘It should be enough’ (35), despite the fact that the women are bound into thankless menial tasks, weighed down by silver anklets, a token of their dowries, hidden by veils, and sold into marriage at thirteen, ‘ripe for babies’ (35). ‘The worst years,’ writes Viidikas, ‘come later with the husband rarely home, the baby of interest if a son, not a daughter who needs a dowry’ (35). The criticism implicit in Viidikas’s portrayal of the women’s lives becomes more obvious in the final paragraph of this prose poem; there is no idealisation of the Indian experience here, just the solidarity of a feminist sister: ‘It’s enough to be domesticated,’ she says,

If you believe ‘the meek shall inherit the earth,’ God’s image is male, Mother Hen laid a rotten egg, fertility needs a bank account, sheer insanity is caused by menstruation, the blood of the lamb is dirty. (‘Jaisalmere (Rajasthan),’ 35)

The sense of acceptance advocated by Hinduism is here felt to be insufficient; Viidikas has no answer, only anger: ‘Give up thinking your way back to the source – slavery is enough if you tend your brain between your legs’ (35).

Her own experience as a woman in India also proves cause for concern. At times Viidikas portrays the foreign woman’s experience of India in terms of a confusing mystical sexuality, but one which reveals the danger of sexual exploitation. We can see this depicted in one of her early pieces, the story, ‘The

⁶⁷ Muktananda, *The Perfect Relationship*: 42-45.

Silk Trousers.⁶⁸ The character, Helen, is confronted by the lust of an impoverished 'monkey man,' a man who entertains in the streets with dancing monkeys. Helen would like to experience the 'other-ness' of Indian women, to paint her eyes with kohl, sit in rags, have her hair in a plait, a jewel in her nose, and gold bangles on her wrists; but, being white, western and (comparatively) wealthy, she is a target for the monkey man's attentions. It is she who has to cope with being 'other'; doubly so, as western and woman, to the monkey man's gaze. The monkey man works magic on her, she believes, so that despite his impoverished state and scarred flesh she is fascinated and attracted to him; she is made aware of the inadequacy of her own traditions.

She would run before he devoured her. That man retained a power from thousands of years of spiritual birthright – he had tiger and elephant Gods to advise him, and she had culturally nothing. A twisted image of a son of God impaled on a wooden cross, a pale corpse who made her a sinner before she was even born.⁶⁹

Helen rejects the inherent guilt of her own cultural tradition of Christianity, and is seduced by the exoticism of Indian mythology. As the monkey man calls up 'monsters from other karmas to give him power to possess her,' Helen is a willing recipient of his advances. Her desire to smoke 'ganja' with him, to experience an 'alternative reality' of India through drug use, becomes a frightening sexual encounter. The equation is made explicit when at the end of the story the monkey man offers Helen the carved chillum in the shape of a man's penis, through which the marijuana smoke must be sucked:

It was a beautiful stone chillum in the shape of a man's genitals. Each hair and curve and blood vessel was perfectly chiselled. It glistened smoothly in his black hand.⁷⁰

Viidikas's writing in *India Ink* shows yet another difficulty the poet faces: the

⁶⁸ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 115-22.

⁶⁹ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 121.

⁷⁰ Viidikas, *Wrappings*: 121.

contradiction inherent in trying to capture an experience of the transcendent in language. In her poems which attempt to convey mystical experience, language is pared to a minimum, often imitating the Indian mantras of meditation. The poem, 'Konarak,' for example, as well as adopting many Hindi words, seems to strive to transcend language:

Sun / moon
lion / elephant
lotus
chakra
wheel
stone
MAYA
flame/water/space
(‘Konarak (Orissa),’ 11)

Here Viidikas seems to rely on the notion of the mantra as that which conveys or evokes the transcendent experience: Viidikas suggests that words have ‘presence,’ a transcendent meaning which overcomes the problems of translation and acts on the consciousness of the reader, drawing them into a meditative state. However, while the symbols, ‘chakra’ (‘one of the seven wheels of energy in the body’), and ‘Maya’ (‘Illusory reality, imposed by forms around us’),⁷¹ may *suggest* to the reader the poet’s mantric state, for the Western reader they also threaten to stand in for the poet’s experience, denying her poetry its full evocative power, and limiting the experience of the reader. Unless one believes (as the Hindu mystics believe) that words have a transcendent meaning which goes beyond translation, such words do not seem to have the same weight and power of accumulated associations for the reader as words in English. Alternatively, Viidikas’s predicament also perhaps reflects the experience of the mystics who believe that words are insufficient to express the transcendent, and the paradoxical sense that once one’s desires and yearnings are satisfied in the experience of meditation, the

⁷¹ Viidikas, *Glossary, India Ink*: 60-61.

need or urge to express the experience in language evaporates.⁷²

As the above discussion demonstrates, Viidikas, Beaver and Hemensley all reflect in various ways neo-Romantic attitudes towards subjectivity, language and the concept of the divine. In this sense, they constitute an identifiable strand in the New Poetry. While aspects of their poetic overlap with symbolist poetics, in general they adopt a far less sceptical notion regarding belief in the transcendent. Although these poets experiment stylistically, their innovations are not merely a play of language, but rather a freedom they adopt in order to explore new ways of portraying the individual's sense of the divine.

Two poets whose use of radical stylistic experimentation shows a much more political than spiritual emphasis are Jennifer Maiden and John A Scott. Both Maiden and Scott avoid the issues of the transcendent in favour of a view of subjectivity and reality which is radically contingent. They see innovative language as a political tool with which they can address ideas concerning the construction of subjectivity, particularly in relation to gender and politics. This more political use of the writerly style echoes the concerns of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers of the late sixties and seventies. The development of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde poetic in Maiden's and Scott's work of the seventies and eighties, particularly the idea of the need for revolutionary language in questioning ideas of gender and politics, provides the focus of discussion for the following chapter.

⁷² Tranter discusses a similar experience in his early experience of Zen Buddhism; see Tranter, 'Interview' with Jim Davidson: 343-45.

Chapter 8. New Poetry III: Revolutionary Language in the Work of Jennifer Maiden and John A Scott

While Hemensley, Beaver and Viidikas all affirm to some degree neo-Romantic views of subjectivity, language, the concept of the divine and the role of poetry as a vehicle for personal and political expression and spiritual exploration, Jennifer Maiden's and John A Scott's work shows the heightened concern for the processes of language and the idea that innovative language can be a means of social and political change, a view typical of the sixties' poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers. These concerns are demonstrated early in Maiden's work with the long poem 'The Problem of Evil' (1975).¹ Scott has only more recently adopted this stance. Scott's small output of the seventies² reflects the overtly linguistically oriented poetic of the poststructuralists, concerned primarily with the self-contained world of the poem; more recently, however, his work shows a more political and 'human-centred' poetic. While his poetry of the nineteen-eighties does not strictly belong to the New Poetry period, nevertheless, like Viidikas's *India Ink*, it remains relevant in so far as it reflects a development of one of the strands within the diversity of the New Poetry's poetics. The poststructuralist neo-avant-garde aspects of Maiden's and Scott's work are evident in their interest in 'fringe' issues: the destructive aspects of creativity, the body, violence and physical torture, sexuality and perversion, and, in the case of Scott, pornography and insanity. They look particularly at the way language is used in the construction of gender and ideas concerning sexuality, and the way it is manipulated politically in establishing systems of knowledge and power. Implicitly, both poets suggest that language operates to reinforce various unjust discourses which threaten the physical, mental

¹ First printed with the collection *The Problem of Evil* (Sydney: Prism, 1975); reprinted in *Selected Poems* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1990).

² At the time of publication of *The New Australian Poetry*, Scott had only published one volume, *The Barbarous Sideshow*, Gargoyle Poets 16 (Brisbane: Makar Press, 1976).

and emotional security of individuals, and that a way of changing these social structures which oppress people is to gain a greater degree of awareness of the processes of language. Thus, a revolution in language is a necessary preliminary step before social change may be achieved.

Jennifer Maiden is the only woman besides Vicki Viidikas whose place in the New Poetry canon has been secure. Not only did she appear in Tranter's 1979 anthology, she was represented also with other New Poets in the 1977 *Australian Literary Studies* issue devoted to 'new writing,' and Martin Duwell's 1982 group of interviews, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*. She published in magazines such as *New Poetry*, *Makar*, *The Ear in the Wheatfield*, *Free Poetry*, and *Leatherjacket*. At an early age she corresponded with Tranter and New Poet Tim Thorne; and she was asked to write for *Meanjin* when Kris Hemensley was poetry editor there. Her poem 'The Problem of Evil' was originally published as a result of Robert Adamson's encouragement through *Prism Books*; and she published alongside other New Poets in the *Gargoyle Poets* series.

In her work Maiden demonstrates little concern for symbolist and neo-Romantic issues such as the transcendent power of poetry or awareness of the divine. Rather, like Tranter, she has an overtly linguistic approach. Her early poems, particularly 'The Problem of Evil,' reflect a writerly style, adopting innovations such as self-reference, self-signature, experimental syntax and play; the meaning is indeterminate, the form fragmented, the diction innovative, and the reader is invited to participate in constructing the poem's meaning. Whereas Wilding believes that use of the self-referential writerly style represents an abdication of responsibility by the poet,³ for Maiden such a style is a way of avoiding the dangers of 'simplicity' in writing. Like Tranter, she believes that more traditional styles inhibit the reader's response:

³ Wilding, 'Rickeybockey': 31

I see my work as inviting my reader to wander in it and explore without having his way barred by any immediate and dismissible simplicity in the poem's voice. Teasing, intellectual irony, too, has always seemed to me a human new channel toward pensive seduction for what otherwise, in more direct poetry, can be a jealous urge for power over the reader.⁴

However, although Maiden, like Tranter, sees self-referentiality as a way of encouraging the reader in a free play of ideas, Maiden's attempt to liberate the role of the reader has a different emphasis from Tranter's. The object of her abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice,' the abdication of the poet as 'source' of meaning, is not merely in favour of play (although an element of play is involved). Rather than denying the traditional poetic voice in order to reflect the 'decentred' nature of subjectivity, Maiden uses the writerly style to explore issues of identity based on self-definition and self-construction,⁵ both in terms of gender and power. Unlike the experimental approach of the more linguistically oriented poststructuralists, therefore, Maiden's use of writerly techniques has an overtly political dimension, and in this regard her work reflects a continuation of the concerns of the sixties' neo-avant-garde writers, which incorporates aspects of poststructuralist critique.

In fact, Maiden has been critical of the self-contained ethic of the overtly linguistic type of writing advocated by New Poets such as Tranter, Forbes and Johnston, and the extent to which the idea of 'play' is used as a substitute for serious social comment. She says that in Tranter's work 'wit and humour very often equal morality';⁶ by contrast, in her own work she seeks to address important moral and ethical questions. Whereas the neo-Romantic poets rely on a sense of transcendent value to support their political views, however, Maiden eschews any sense of the divine or Absolute. She does not claim to stand outside that which she seeks to criticise, and in this sense she offers only a complicitous critique. Instead

⁴ Maiden, 'Statement on Poetics,' *Australian Literary Studies* 8 (1977): 149.

⁵ Jerome Mazzaro sees this concern as being a central aspect of postmodern poetry (Mazzaro: viii).

⁶ Maiden, 'Interview' with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 125.

of the idea of provisional 'truth' inferred from a sense of the transcendent, and from which ethical conduct may be derived, she believes that values are affirmed purely contingently. Although the values she upholds reflect the values of the Enlightenment – for example, justice, equality and political freedom – she maintains that these values do not exist in abstract isolation, invested in any belief system, law or particular political ideology; rather, they are sustained on the level of the individual. This leads her to conclude that a shift in language, which may either demonstrate or presuppose a shift in the conceptual thinking and perceptions of the individual, is necessary for social change.

While Maiden adopts a critical stance similar to the neo-avant-garde writers, preferring poetry which doesn't 'automatically reinforce...the moral or sexual standards of the time it was written in,'⁷ she does not see this as unique to stylistically adventurous writing: she believes that all good poetry reflects such a stance.⁸ For Maiden, challenging the accepted standards, stereotypes and injustices of the day is at the heart of one's role as a poet. Similarly, although her work reflects some of the stylistic innovations, scepticism towards absolutes and belief in the reality of the imagination found in Stevens' poetry, Maiden does not regard her work as 'modernist': in her view, the term 'modern,' loosely used, is equally applicable to all 'stylistically flexible and adventurous' poetry.⁹ In this regard, Maiden, like Viidikas, is less conscious of participating in a 'revolution' in Australian poetry, than in simply finding new ways of expressing her concerns.

'The Problem of Evil' is one poem which demonstrates the overlap and the differences between Maiden's and Tranter's poetics. In this poem, Maiden uses the writerly style to involve the reader, not merely in the play of language and the

⁷ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 131.

⁸ In fact, the poetry to which she was referring in that statement is Anglo Saxon poetry. The fact that such poetry could exhibit such apparently 'modern' features gives some indication as to how old questions of revolutionary innovation in poetry actually are.

⁹ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 129.

construction of textual meaning, but more importantly to implicate the reader in the formation, maintenance and possible resolution of the inherently violent social and political situations which her poem enacts. It is in this context that her use of writerly innovations must be seen.

Instead of accepting the role of the reader as passive consumer of the poem as art 'product,' which the reader may use simply for pleasure and escape, but which may reinforce the value systems of an unjust society, Maiden advocates poetry which creates a drama which involves the reader. By using the writerly style, Maiden hands over the process of constructing meaning in the poem to the reader, preferring her own 'voice' to remain detached, aloof, indeterminate. Yet the reader is constantly invited to locate some sense of 'voice' or poetic authority in the attempt to establish meaning in the poem; in the end, only the authority of the reader prevails, as, to a large extent, the outcome of the poem is dependent on the choices in the construction of meaning which the reader makes. Thus, Maiden believes, the use of flexible writing techniques and concepts 'allows one to recognize one's own incarnation,'¹⁰ and grant the reader the 'power of ethical choice.'¹¹

Granting the reader the power of ethical choice is the central idea behind Maiden's use of writerly stylistic innovation. Maiden believes, with French philosopher Simone Weil, that art is potentially 'evil' because 'it allows man to "disincarnate" himself, to forget about his own reality at the same time as using it.'¹² This notion of evil, as 'disincarnation,' is played out in 'The Problem of Evil.' By inviting the reader to construct the meaning of the poem, Maiden also teases the reader – potentially, at least – into becoming 'disincarnate,' to view the violence and horror which the poem depicts with intellectual detachment, a

¹⁰ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 130.

¹¹ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 130.

¹² Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 130.

detachment which is initially necessary to unravel the complexity of the poem. Thus, the reader in part 'enacts' the very problem of evil which he or she is invited to consider. Implicit in Maiden's view of writing is Stevens' belief that the world of the imagination is as real as 'day-to-day' reality. Describing 'The Problem of Evil' as a war poem, she says:

I want to see how my mind or my persona in the poem, and my reader, and my characters react in violent situations. So to me the violent situation is entirely real.¹³

For Maiden fiction and reality merge; and while she does not go as far as Hemensley to say that the text achieves consciousness, she does see language as directly influencing the reader's consciousness, and playing out its 'life' in the reader's imagination. The poem is not safe: the reader must be active not only in constructing the meaning, but also in being responsible for that meaning. Consequently, in Maiden's work no one is innocent, neither the poet nor the reader: both are implicated in the moral dilemmas she puts forward.

Maiden gives an indication of her complex understanding of art in terms of the Classical Promethean myth:

The classic Prometheus finally compromises with reality for the sake of reality and the continuation of the imagination. In ethical terms this results in a dangerous – and artistically viable – process where ultimate realities such as death, pain, violence (in the case of Prometheus, torture) must be met through art and justice must be done to them. The 'fire' Prometheus gave to mankind, of course, was the power to believe that one would never die.... Since modern writing, particularly, strives for this illusion of continuity – by meeting violence and trying to survive it – it also involves a great amount of guilt and a mingling of the creative processes with theft, selfishness, irreligion and insanity.¹⁴

Implicitly, for Maiden, in place of a connection to the transcendent is the goal of survival, with its 'illusion of continuity.' At the same time, the indeterminacies of Maiden's writing are all aimed at inviting the reader to confront moral and ethical

¹³ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 125-26.

¹⁴ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 129-30.

issues, and be challenged in their own scale of values so that *justice may be done*.

Central to Maiden's style is her abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice.' When asked to describe her 'voice,' Maiden gave some idea of its complexity, referring it as 'Ambivalent, ambidextrous, ambiguous, androgynous, amorous,' and 'ironic.'¹⁵ Her reference to the Latin prefix 'ambi' (meaning 'on both sides') reflects Maiden's interest in forcing the reader to consider traditional dichotomies such as male and female, good and evil, body and mind, and consciousness and the unconscious. In her view, such dichotomies are part of the inherited conceptual thinking which must be changed, if justice is to be done; her way of upsetting these dichotomies is to blur the distinctions between them. The terms which she uses to describe her 'voice' give some indication of how this blurring is attempted in her work. The term 'ambidextrous' provides the first clue.

Commenting on her poem 'For the Left Hand' Maiden discusses the relationship of left-handedness to the right hemisphere of the brain: this, she says, is the place associated with the body, the 'non-sequential or tactile (and tactical) logic systems. Also magic, violence, creativity...[and] death....'¹⁶ This is contrasted with the systems of order, logic and reason associated with our traditional view of the intellect or mind, the left hemisphere of the brain or 'right hand' forces. The ambidextrous person combines both hemispheres, giving due weight to both. A related paradigm of opposition is the masculine versus feminine (the masculine associated with the left brain, the feminine with the right). Maiden's writing seeks to be 'androgynous,' inhabiting both sexes at once. We can see the difficulty of this intention reflected in the behaviour of the narrator in 'The Problem of Evil,' who can be read as shifting allegiances between male and female power bases throughout the poem. Her poetry also seeks to be 'amorous.' Far from ignoring or underplaying the differences between the sexes, Maiden also seeks to explore

¹⁵ Maiden, 'Statement on Poetics': 149.

¹⁶ Maiden, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 122.

them, and at times celebrate their complementarity. The 'ambiguity' in Maiden's poetry is a technique which she employs for compression and concentration, as well as liberation of a range of possible meanings; while her use of 'irony' gives us warning that language is not stable: apparent positions do not always reflect the poet's attitude. Finally there is the term 'ambivalent.' This suggests that Maiden has no preconceived answers for the problems she presents: the reader must draw his or her own conclusions. She does not privilege the feminine above the masculine, or the radical and subversive above the orthodox and conventional. It is only by exploring the complexity, she suggests, by refusing to allow simplifications and easy answers, that insight may be gained. This is the drama which the reader enacts in reading 'The Problem of Evil': like the narrator, one is confronted with the question of ethical choice and a necessarily ambiguous knowledge of good and evil.

'The Problem of Evil' is at times a difficult and obscure poem, reflecting the complexity of its structure. Although it is most obviously a war poem, its mode of representation is far from being realistic: while the jungle setting and the use of germ warfare echo aspects of Vietnam and the use of Agent Orange, the jungle guerrilla's identification with 'feminine' principles, and the identification of the military power base at H Q with 'masculine' principles, make the poem symbolic as well as referential.

The poem can be divided into three overlapping levels: the self-referential level, in which the poem refers to the processes of its own construction; the narrative level of war, and the story of capture and betrayal; the super-narrative level, which depicts the relationship between 'the woman' and the narrator. This level suggests that the war stands as a metaphor not of a war between the sexes, but also between what the sexes have come to represent: the stereotypical strengths and weakness of male and female. Maiden's discussion of the 'left hand' is useful here: the feminine, associated with the right brain hemisphere, is linked to concepts such as intuition,

imagination, subversion and the body; and the masculine, or left brain, is linked to reason, logic, the intellect and learning, and, traditionally in western discourse, civic and military power. At the same time this super-narrative can also be read as the development of the (male) child, his initial lack of differentiation with the mother and eventual identification with the father.¹⁷ The three levels of the poem intertwine at every stage; and each is built on various polarities.

On the self-referential level the polarities are constructed as the need for meaning, for continuity and logic, on the one hand, and the unstable nature of language, its inherent disruptive force in undermining referential meaning, on the other. In terms of the second and third structural levels, this battle of language becomes a metaphor of the civil war and of the differences between the sexes. The central power base, epitomised by 'H Q,' is associated with the logical and reasonable, but added to this is also physical and military strength. This is representative of male principles: firstly, of order based on violence and coercion; and secondly, of force based on misuse of language. The rebel, subversive forces are the guerrillas whose skirmishes are disordered, who inhabit the jungle rather than the city, and the edges or margins, such as the sea. They are the female, the physically fertile, vulnerable and the oppressed, and they are initially depicted as non-verbal. The poem enacts the exploits of the narrator: at first he is in collusion with 'the woman,' then he is won over to the H Q and M I into acts of treachery, and finally he returns to the rebel side. The narrative levels are constantly overlapping. The poem presents a story of civil betrayal, of betrayal of gender, and also, in psychoanalytic terms, of the child's development from the 'female' semiotic to the 'male' acquisition of language and Law of the Father.

¹⁷ Gig Ryan, in reviewing the poem, sees the narrator as female ('Review of *The Problem of Evil*,' *Luna* 1.3 (1976): 51-52.); however, according to Maiden herself, the poem was written with a male narrator in mind (mentioned in conversation with the poet, 'Generations of '68 Conference,' State Library, 1993). True to her openness to reader participation, however, Maiden says she is happy for the narrator to be read in either way. My reading relies on the view that the narrator is male.

The activity of the reader in following (or untangling) these various levels is encouraged in a number of ways. Each level is sustained by periodic reference to similar images or sets of images: for example, images of violence attached to the helicopters, domestic images relating killing to cooking, and images of fecundity such as the swarm of bees. Recurrent motifs also help to punctuate the poem. The motif of the narrator's gun, his 'mauser,' follows an interesting progression. Its 'twin heart'¹⁸ reflects the narrator's shifting allegiance. At times it doubles as a male sexual organ; at other times it 'rides / ladylike' in the hand (27); still again it is like a child, 'creched' in the narrator's lap (31). Such image clusters form links, sustaining the narrative and super-narrative and self-referential levels. In combination, the different levels allow the reader to consider, and become involved in, issues of violence, survival, suffering and death.

Self-referentially, the opening paragraphs can be read as a message to the reader on how to approach the poem (a technique reminiscent of Adamson's in 'The Rumour' and also Tranter's in *The Alphabet Murders*). The reader is advised to be wary of obvious meanings, 'mistrust / the cool, the slept, the sure alone...' (11). Syntactical and grammatical coherence must be put to one side as 'the engine of all meaning breaks' (11). Reading becomes a creative, ludic act in which the different levels of the poem 'complicate the play' (12). They are 'wheels within wheels' and the advice to the reader is to 'build / the machine yourself' (12). Without worrying about the need to find coherence immediately, the reader must 'trust / the clemency of distances, / and intuit' (13), rely on the imagination and feeling, and disregard the need for sequence and logic. In this regard, the reader is invited to explore his or her feminine (right-brained) side: to trust, to accept uncertainties, and use intuition. One's reading becomes not simply deciphering an elaborate puzzle, but a creative act.

¹⁸ Maiden, 'The Problem of Evil,' in *Selected Poems of Jennifer Maiden* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1990): 29. Subsequent page references will appear in the text.

The reader must also prepare for surprises: elements of the poem, particularly the various characters, may be unpredictable, and warning is given that expectations will be deliberately thwarted. The 'engine all of meaning' which the 'sponsor' (the writer? the reader?) sets in motion might be upset by the apparent autonomy of the poem:

At any time we might defy
the sponsor's plan & scrawl our death
wrong as a scribbled pulse along
the lens that studies us...(13)

So the reading process becomes a play between the known and the unknown or intuited. We inhabit the world of the poem, distanced from the 'normalcy of meaning' (15). 'Is it possible to know this...?' (14) the narrator asks for us. It is impossible for the reader simply to 'know' the poem on the metapoetic level, because each level is interdependent: the narrative level, the story of the war and the differences between the sexes must intrude. The metapoetic level is present only as a way into the poem, and eventually into a consideration of 'the problem of evil.'

The opening lines can also be read in terms of the two narrative levels, setting the context of war and dividing the battle lines between 'male' and 'female' principles. In this reading, the 'advice to the reader' becomes a soldier's brief: now that it is 'war again,' travelling 'incognito' the soldier must be on guard for traitors, 'the cool, the slept, the sure alone,' those who might penetrate his disguise (11). The images strongly suggest the subtext of the gender battle as well. The compound effect of words and lines such as 'appetite,' 'thighs & strokes,' 'bed,' 'velvet,' 'lips,' 'embryo,' and 'threaded...the cells,' reinforces the subtext of sexuality. In the 'war' between the sexes, it is the confident, the suave, that are most dangerous: they command a position of power, being self-sufficient, and therefore are in the best position to exploit the vulnerable: 'they guess lacks' (11).

The intersection of the war narrative and the super-narratives concerning gender

difference is continued throughout the poem: military power, and the values which underpin it, and sexual power conflate at every turn. There are images which suggest both reproduction and confrontation:

the drones that meet
the sea's swarm in the liquid sting (12)

side by side with images which relate only to the simple narrative of war's destruction:

We wander back to it, although
reprisal pulped this city...

In a shop an upturned bicycle
rears, static, through the rubble glass... (12-13)

The progression of a relationship between the sexes, as well as the disillusion war creates, is suggested in such lines as:

At last
we can lie to each other, soft

& gullible with exhaustion. (14)

Linked with 'soft,' the 'lie' suggests both verbal and physical meanings.

The narrator's allegiance to female principles is tested when the focus shifts to the enemy forces at H Q. The distinction between the male and female principles, Maiden suggests, is structured on the acquisition and utilisation of language and logic, and is coupled with the acquisition of (traditionally male) mechanical ability which is seen to be useful in battle. Once captured by H Q, the narrator is shown to have acquired the cunning logic of building the 'machine.' The fact that this machine is not only an actual weapon, but also the weapon of logic, is revealed when the narrator shows his readiness to usurp the power base of the opposing forces, their mathematical logic, their knowledge:

Their calculus (+ totality +)
rubs out their blackboard culture.
At ease, I confront it,

& crouch attentive, whisper
as they do, & insinuate,
quite clerical with power. (18)

The pun, 'rubs out,' equates male 'knowledge' with killing, suggesting that the source of the enemy's power is violence, a violence which gains its strength through the intellect, but which is eventually played out on the body in acts of physical torture and threatened annihilation in germ warfare.

As part of the narrator's betrayal of the female camp in Part Two, the offer to 'give the names' is useless as the powerbrokers at H Q 'don't need to ask the names' (18). They have already acquired language and this is the source of their hold over the narrator. They are after more than information: they desire the coercion and corruption of the narrator, to employ him on their side. At this stage the vestiges of feminine influence remain; the narrator is identified with silence, and (female) timidity:

I'm useless if I speak
to them, but silence
can still be re-employed if I returned....
I test the brink of politesse, explain
'I haven't the guts for active treachery....' (19)

The M I of H Q is an embodiment of Military Intelligence, but as an acronym the name also acts as a symbol for the psychoanalytic 'Law of the Father,' the 'Me,' 'I,' of individual identity, separated from the woman/mother. The M I offers a cigarette in a gesture of male camaraderie:

Predictable at last, the M I offers
his hand-cupped match & roll-your-own to me. (19)

It is by taking the cigarette, the acceptance of the male social code, that the tie to the image of the woman breaks. The memory of her becomes 'arid,' in opposition to the fecund imagery with which the poem began. The moment of corruption (or implication in the masculine) is also a re-birth, as the child-narrator 'pleads / pain-subdued to be "outside, outside"' (20). The entry into the Law of the Father has begun. It is only in sleep, traditionally associated with the unconscious and the

feminine, that unity with the woman is possible:

I drank my drugs for fear
that sleep would seem the woman, show
her laughter a reunion: tactile
as comfort – my illusion built
perfect on its absence, but this dark. (27)

This is the beginning of a process, the acquisition of the enemy's language, which ends in the corruption and betrayal:

Half-absorbing me, they teach
me of my 'conditioning.' The graphs
prove it by recording fears
inadvertent reflex in my heart.
But since I'd learned before to speak
conjunctions with precision; hot
nonlexical agreements; hate
& all asterisks which wink
starrily of Other Place,
so now at last their language serves me:
tailored to me like a home.
My voice explores unhurriedly
their new machine: its own. (21)

The 'conditioning' is related to weakness, to an instinctive 'fear' which is associated with the feminine. The narrator enters the 'Other Place' (ironic, given the usual association of women with the 'Other') away from the woman, the place of language, of logic, reasoning, but also of violence. Just as aridity replaces fecundity in the imagery associated with the narrator's shift in allegiance, so violence becomes a substitute for reproduction. This is not determined biologically: rather than showing masculinity to be a physical fact, it is portrayed as something acquired, a (re)conditioning, which is then 'projected' as an innate quality:

Projecting on the dark, I screen
the normal sex conventions. (24)

The promise of the masculine language becomes at once a gift ('at last their language serves me,' 20) and an exploitation ('My voice...their new machine,' 20).

As if to confirm the shift from feminine to masculine, in the subsequent passage

the narrator is shown to become aware of his own sexuality: the narrator thinks of the woman who 'maybe / defines me once again: a man...' (21). It is in the moment of embracing the masculine language and becoming a tool of its power that the self-recognition of sexuality occurs – though it is displaced somewhat, by being defined hypothetically by the woman:

Amused,
but drunk for sleep, she follows
the smoke-scald of her brain, maybe
defines me once again: a man
whose fingertips were always smudged
by the cinders of the rich –
who bit his fingers, laughed: now who,
bone-taut with plans, can gnaw, aloof,
the weakness at bone-marrow. (22)

Significantly, in the woman's imagined portrait of the narrator, it is his 'weakness' which is depicted and revealed to be transformed. In this ambivalent depiction (ironic self-portrait?), the new, self-aware masculine self gnaws at the former feminine 'weakness' like a dog chewing bone. Yet this seems to deny his own experience, and the wound inflicted by the H Q during capture which resulted in the narrator's own 'suppurated bone' (18). It is only from the new (male) point of view that the feminine is weak.

Having acquired the former enemy's language, the narrator's speech becomes euphemistic; he indulges in meaningless, exchanges with M I: 'The nights are conversational' (22), which suggest detachment from the horror and violence of his predicament. The narrator has been seduced into this way of speaking and talking; abstracting ideas from actions, implicitly reinforcing the separation of the intellect from the body, and, in the process, destroying any moral consciousness.

Involuntarily, my lips
will compound to a smile
& say 'situation ethics'
as he nods Co-operation.
'Works both ways.' (21)

In terms of the problem of evil, the narrator's entry into the logical, 'rational' world of H Q means also that he has become 'disincarnate.' Paradoxically, as he identifies with the male, he also constitutes himself as separate from the ('female') body, and thus from the sense of oneness and solidarity with others which he experienced in the guerrilla camp. Thus, he learns to objectify others and becomes capable of inflicting the torture, re-enacting the injustice to which he himself was subject. The first indication of this disincarnation is given in the scene where the narrator is finally won over to the enemy: he sublimates his own physical pain at the acts of torture performed on him by objectifying it in language, detaching from his suffering by projecting it onto the cushions:

My fingers, now unguarded,
clench, torturing the cushions. (20)

Later, witnessing the torture of the 'boy' (revisiting his own experience) and H Q's experimentation on human life, the narrator is able to remain detached by exploiting his new language:

Trussed by rugs a dead boy sweats
& gobbles for breath in his dream.
We squint against a perspex tube
at feathery intestines in his side
while I think of Rembrandt: 'so
& so like lard...' (22)

He does not allow the boy's pain to affect him; having abandoned his identification with the body, as a consequence he has lost the power to empathise. He has transformed his experience into an intellectual preoccupation with words and definitions. Ironically, the metaphor which springs to the narrator's mind is one drawn from art. The blurred distinctions between blood and paint, human flesh and 'lard,' suggest Maiden's warning of the dangers in seeing art in isolation from human needs. The narrator has perfected the 'art' of 'scientific' observation (the perspex tube), but has lost any sense of ethical conduct. In his case, language functions not only as a tool of self-preservation, but also as a way of evading

responsibility. When confronted by a twinge of guilt regarding the boy, the narrator's ability to rationalise his own inaction becomes apparent; he adopts the sophistry of word games:

my words enforce, anatomize
prolong their flippant safety...
perhaps his safety, too, & so
I justify the wait. (23)

The narrator has become, in the imagined words of the woman, ' "Their myrmidon" ' (23), the enemy's mercenary or hireling. The fact that the narrator imagines the woman's disparaging comment indicates that, throughout his capture, the narrator he is aware of another set of values which he is continuing to betray. His 'treachery' is never allowed to be unselfconscious; he is a knowing accomplice of H Q. The thing which continues to oppress him, keeping him harnessed to the power of the masculine force and suspended in the act of betrayal, is pain:

'their myrmidon...'
but faithful to their testament
of verbiages, pain. (23)

His own physical suffering has been sublimated into language. Paradoxically, while his entry into language has caused a disincarnation which leads to objectification and brutality, the narrator also experiences a renewed sense of his own body akin to the experience of adolescent awakening: but it is an experience governed by self-objectification. Power, violence and sexual pleasure have been conflated. The narrator's weapon doubles as his sexual organ, thus bringing the two narrative levels of war and sexuality into collision:

Ripe-chambered as a hive, & hard
the mauser's barrel snuggles, spins
sweat-tender in my hand until
arousing me... (23)

Maiden is suggesting that violence, like masturbation, can only satisfy by objectification: of others' bodies in torture or killing, or of one's own in self-

gratification.

When the narrator finally returns/escapes to the rebel camp, the divisions between the two camps and their leaders begins to breakdown. The rebels' advance shows them to have military strength, even tactical superiority; and there is a vulnerability attached to the M I which is hinted at in the image of the pack of cards he assembles:

The M I lolls,
alone with me as card by card his fingers
defly reconstruct a pyramid.
Meticulous because unslept, the hands
translate its height to fate, the cards
as perfect as a sacrifice, the trust. (26)

The poem's opening lines are echoed, 'Mistrust / the cool, the slept.' The initial identification of the H Q as the 'enemy' becomes suspect: the comparison between the M I and the rebel forces is no longer allowed to be one of good and evil forces. The woman, with her military advantage, is shown to have adopted some of the characteristics of her opponents. She is 'armed' when the narrator returns:

The woman, summoned, walks from long campaigns
of paper in headquarters at the caves,
& speaks to me as if I'd never gone:
incurious & casual, but armed. (28-29)

Her language in referring to the last battle in which the narrator was wounded recalls the euphemistic 'conversations' of M I at H Q:

'I predicted you'd be here
as soon as an emergency allowed.
I'm glad it took my putsch to let you come
although that confrontation wasn't
...kind...' (29)

The woman has usurped the language of the killers: she is now the 'playful diplomat' (29). This contrasts with the narrator who, wounded, has lost the power of speech. He is unable to warn the rebels that the H Q's forces have begun germ warfare, having 'prepar[ed] for possession by retreat' by 'stitch[ing] thawed plague

into the clay' (26):

I harsh on wordless phlegm to warn
these keepers from their soil. (29)

On the narrative level of the war, the narrator sees the danger to the others, but he himself is not endangered: his 'flesh' has been 'immunized' (27) against the plague. He knows the truth, but he feels powerless to help. The truth is buried beneath the apparently innocuous surface appearance of the earth:

Masked to tread the furrows now, the soldier
rakes peace back in ochre lumps –
rock: reassuring, worn to salt. Our eyes
relax believe the hills again, the sun. (26)

In effect, the narrator and the rebel forces have both been compromised, one by adopting the 'enemy's' language, the other by adopting its violence. Thus, they are both implicated in the injustice which the war perpetuates. Although the narrator has refused to kill, he nevertheless counts as his tally the anonymous hulk on the beach, therefore doing nothing to challenge the M I's expectations. Similarly, the rebel forces have become compromised in their apparent immunity to killing. The woman's encouragement for the narrator to heal quickly is not signalled as a return to lost innocence; rather, she has become manipulative, like H Q, and seeks to 'nurse back [his]credulity of will' (29). This is the problem of evil: the narrator has renounced his 'power of ethical choice,' his ability to discriminate between right and wrong; instead he has given that authority to someone else who makes all the decisions and therefore accepts responsibility. The reader's experience of the poem is like the narrator's experience of war. Can we be reminded of the horrors of war without being implicated in some way? Can we retain a position of safety and moral security and detachment? Or do we simply hand over responsibility for meaning to someone else, the 'author'? The reader is also invited to consider the questions of violence and warfare. How can one avoid corruption and coercion? Is it possible to meet violence without becoming implicated in that violence? or to

view suffering without objectifying suffering? Maiden raises these questions but does not give any easy answers: it is left to the reader to come up with the appropriate response.

Although Maiden does not offer any overt solution to war or violence, she does highlight some conditions which may lead to such circumstances: the separation of the 'masculine' rational and intellectual function from 'female' intuition and identification with the body; the objectification of the suffering of others and one's own suffering; the use of language to rationalise atrocities; and inaction in the face of injustice. By teasing the reader with the poem's complex structure into 'deciphering' the puzzle, Maiden tempts the reader to negotiate some of these dichotomies: either to treat the poem as an elaborate game, or to respond to the ethical dilemma which the poem enacts. Thus, reading this poem the reader is not safe: either we adopt a detached intellectual approach, a kind of moral detachment which potentially serves to reinforce the very injustices which Maiden seeks to criticise, or we allow our reading to be informed by our emotional response to the questions of violence and sexual identity which the poem raises and confront our own power of ethical choice. This is Maiden's version of the 'complicitous critique': it is not only the poet who cannot stand outside the field of her own enquiry, it is the reader also. Maiden suggests that we must change the 'language,' the underlying conceptual systems of our response, including our traditional 'passive' methods of reading, if we are not to become like the narrator, robbed of ethical choice, denied voice, *and* still implicated in the injustices perpetrated by those to whom he has offered his authority.

Like Maiden, John A Scott's main innovations centre around the complexity of notions of subjectivity, and he too employs techniques to encourage the reader's participation in constructing the meaning of his poems; but whereas Maiden explores this in 'The Problem of Evil' mainly through the poem's complex structure, Scott is more concerned with the question of poetic 'voice.' In his

earliest work, Scott employs the writerly style to signal the denial of the traditional authorial position and 'objective' view or reality which this presumably presupposes. In his later work, Scott emphasises the notion of identity as based on self-definition and self-construction, especially in relation to gender and politics. Like Maiden, Scott avoids matters relating to notions of the divine or transcendent: in his world, as in Maiden's, the issues are firmly contingent, personal (although not necessarily biographical) and political. Scott too tends to concentrate on the abject rather than the sublime; like Maiden, his work deals with the consequences of objectification in terms of physical, mental and sexual cruelty. Scott's place in the New Poetry canon is important in the sense that the trajectory of his work shows a shift from the linguistic orientation of Tranter's poststructuralist poetic, to the more politically orientation typical of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde.

Scott's early work shows a number of features, including an emphasis on ambiguity, irony and compression, as well as a writerly self-referentiality and sense of the autonomy of the artwork, 'the self-contained world of the poem.'¹⁹ As Scott mentioned in an interview for *SCRIPSI* magazine:

The things which I have always seen as essential in poetry are ambiguity, intensity, compression, metamorphosis.... [E]ven the poems that have a very simple surface structure – and can be read at that level and work – either deal with a fundamental ambiguity of language or they deal with situations which are intrinsically complex and full of ambiguity, psychological or moral.²⁰

By the early nineteen eighties, the overtly linguistic aspects of this poetic began to assume less importance in his work, though they did not disappear. Scott admits that following the publication of the New Poetry anthology, he became aware of 'the need to humanize...the self-referential poetry, the meta-poetry....'²¹ For Scott, 'humanizing' poetry meant reflecting a concern for emotion, and personal

¹⁹ Scott, 'Interview' with Duwell, *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 104.

²⁰ Scott, 'Interview' with Peter Craven and Michael Heyward, *SCRIPSI* 2.2-3 (1985): 240.

²¹ Scott, 'Interview' with Craven and Heyward: 234.

and political commitment, rather than for the intellectual game-playing and ironic detachment of the linguistically oriented poststructuralist poetic. Nevertheless, Scott's concern for language does not disappear. Rather, he begins to use linguistic innovation in different ways, particularly to expose the construction of identity and interrogate the function of art.

The overt linguisticism of much of Scott's poetry is also inspired by his desire to get away from 'sentimentality,' to find a way to deal with significant issues while avoiding the direct expression of emotion:

I feel I have an Achilles heel of sentimentalism and consequently I always seem to be struggling for some form or device which will peg it back. Generally the poems of my own that I like best are the ones that manage to drag it back so far that it almost disappears.²²

In his effort to overcome this perceived 'sentimentality,' Scott's work employs a similar technique to Eliot's idea of the 'objective correlative': images, events and references within the poem are external to the perceiver but are indicative of that perceiver's state of mind. This distancing effect is often complicated by Scott's construction of multiple points of view, with implied (and disjointed) narratives, which form a fictive pattern that rarely demonstrates a straightforward 'writer-to-reader' tone. Thus, the incidents surrounding the (not always 'present') narrator are portrayed often without comment, and function in such a way as to reflect the inner workings of a psyche, rather than a recognisable 'objective' reality. The construction of the poem's 'meaning' is left up to the reader. It is this type of poetry we see in the poems 'from the "A" cycle' which appear in the collection *Quarrel with Ourselves & Confession*.²³

The poems 'from the "A" cycle' are part of a much larger work which involves

²² Scott, 'Interview,' *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*: 102.

²³ Scott, *The Quarrel with Ourselves* (Clifton Hill, Vic.: Rigmarole Books, 1984).

a number of poems and a novel published at different times.²⁴ In terms of the larger narrative, the perceiving 'I' of the poems is actually a character, the same (initially unnamed) character which later appears in 'The Preface' in *St Clair*; because these poems are a fragment of a much larger work, there is a danger in discussing them in isolation. The notion of the construction of the individual subject can nevertheless be addressed: the poems invite the reader to construct a provisional notion of the identity of the 'narrator,' a method which informs the concept of identity itself.

The four poems, 'A,' 'E,' 'H' and 'O' each contain five sections which incorporate both lyric and prose poems. The complexity and difficulty of these poems result from the tensions between their formal literary aspects and their more psychological elements. The sequence depicts the narrator's loss of and quest for the absent and anonymous woman 'A----,' who is also represented by the iconography of literary inscriptions of women (as Penelope in *The Odyssey*, as Rimbaud's Hortense and Hawthorne's Hester). The quest for her is also an exploration of the limitations of language: her eventual unknowability becomes a metaphor for the ambiguous construction of human identity (the 'Narrative of the self' which is also a 'search for A----, / her language, her location in history,' 'the tense of A---- / or even the gender'²⁵). The narrator's desire for the absent woman structures the poem; at every point sexual identity is intertwined with language. At one stage, this is made graphically explicit; the text itself is metaphorically a penis, erect with desire: 'How the poem fills with blood and will not rest unless it be with her, even now' ('O,' 35).

²⁴ Scott writes that 'Preface' from *St Clair: Three Narratives* (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1986), the novel *Blair* (Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), and Section 2 of *Translation* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan: 1990) form a trilogy, while the 'A' poems and others (appearing as the 'Elegies' of Part 1 of *Translation*) 'may be read as annotations to this trilogy' (note for *Translation*: 5). My discussion only addresses certain aspects of the cycle.

²⁵ Scott, 'O' 2: 36 and 'A' 2 and 1, 21: 20, in *The Quarrel With Ourselves & Confession*. Subsequent page references will appear in the text.

The concentration on the inner state of the narrator, his desire and sense of loss, is balanced by the poems' heavy literary, allusive quality. As Tranter has pointed out,²⁶ like Adamson's 'Seven Odes,' the poems' main intertext is *The Odyssey*; Odysseus's search for Ithaca and Penelope informs some of the events which the narrator describes (this applies particularly to the 'H' section in which there are references to a voyage, navigating, the sirens, as well as oblique allusions to Circe's island and Odysseus's encounter with Tiresias in Hades). However, instead of functioning as an objective correlative for the experience of the narrator (as the more contemporary references in other poems do), the references to *The Odyssey* appear almost gratuitous, an example of literary cleverness, of complexity without consequence. (Scott himself has commented that he does not consider these poems to be particularly successful.²⁷) One reason for *The Odyssey* intertext is perhaps Scott's desire to 'universalise' the situation of separation and loss, overcoming the sense of the 'dissolution' of the narrator's 'voice' by reference to tradition.

On the surface, both the narrator and the absent woman are constituted as events of language rather than coherent identities, palimpsests of their past, defined by their lost relationship ('Each day separation constructed and / the dismantling of separation...under the writing, traces / of an older writing. / Litanies constructed and the dismantling of litanies,' 22). The woman is multiple ('This time her hair is black. / This time her parentage Macedonian,' 23); she embraces both innocence and experience motifs which Scott borrows from Blake;²⁸ and she is also the unknowable, the ever-retreating star ('A-----, my splendid one, lost / in red-shifted light,' 39). The narrator is always self-ironic, filtering his language through others' texts (such as the implied rewriting of Rimbaud in 'H' and the paraphrase of Henri Michaux, 'I am leaving this city. / Search in that "distant country" from /

²⁶ Tranter, 'John Scott: Language Under Water,' *SCRIPSI* 1.3-4 (1982): 95-6.

²⁷ In conversation with the poet, State Library poetry workshop, July, 1991.

²⁸ Scott, 'Interview' with Craven and Heyward: 244.

which one “writes” ,’ 24). The multiple and often unrelated references create a sense of fragmentation and dislocation, a flux of impressions, reflecting the dissolution or decentring of the traditional ‘unified’ subject. However the references to literary inscriptions of women also tend to form an archetypal pattern of the absent ‘Woman’ which in some way defines the man. In psychoanalytic terms this sense of loss is one phase of the process of self-identity: the subject is identified as ‘I am he...who has lost something.’²⁹ It is this lack of unity, rather than a more positive sense of a constructed, provisional subjectivity, which characterises the narrator of these poems. The references to tradition are needed to (re)structure or give meaning and coherence to the decentred, dissolving (bereaved) subject. This portrayal, therefore, displays the transitional view of the subject characteristic of modernism; by negation it serves to restate in part what has been lost: the traditional unified subject, the (lost) source of meaning and authority. Also, just as identity is constructed by absence, writing is the palimpsest of a no longer ‘present’ tradition.

More recently, Scott’s poetry becomes less allusive and self-referential, although the involvement of the reader in constructing the poem’s meaning is still paramount; this later work reflects Scott’s growing interest in personal and political commitment. In the three prose/poem sequences which make up the 1986 volume *St Clair*, Scott is interested in creating narratives which construct various fictional ‘voices’ or points of view. Like the depiction of the narrator in ‘from the “A” cycle,’ this poetry appears at once personal – because, as in a novel, the reader is taken inside the ‘mind’ of the narrator – and impersonal, because these fictional subjects cannot be located in terms of a distinct poetic ‘voice’ belonging to Scott himself.

On a narrative level ‘The Preface’ is concerned with the moral and spiritual

²⁹ Moi: 99.

degradation of the fictional character Carl Brouwer, and his relationship to Finch and Julia; in broader terms, it concerns the question of censorship, the power (and potential danger) of writing, and the responsibility of being a writer. It also, like Maiden's 'The Problem of Evil,' explores the question of the responsibility of the reader. The story centres around Brouwer, a dead man, who through his letters epitomises the worst of the tendencies in men to objectify women; the prose/poem sequence examines the consequences of this objectification in its extreme form. The letters record how Brouwer loses all respect for himself, life, law, and the objects of his obsession: love, sex and women. Finally, he is shown on the border of madness, castrated and alone. The frightening part of his 'journey into hell' is that it is deliberate, calculated and seemingly 'rational.' He follows the Rimbaudian path of the 'disordering of the senses,' and certain aspects of his experience, particularly his dabbling with the occult, have overtones of a Faust-like pact with the devil. This is Scott's attempt to expose what he sees as 'the destructive side of searching for some Romantic ideal,'³⁰ the idea of the rebel whose search for some sense of the transcendent takes him beyond the bounds of normal morality and sanity. The central question which 'The Preface' poses is: 'what can be told?' It presents the unfolding of the enigma presented in the epigraph from Gide: 'Only what prepares it, only what destroys it can be told.'³¹ Preparation and destruction, the processes are known: but the reader must decide, what is 'it'?

The poem begins with Brouwer's death:

Carl dead? An improbable end... 'It' was dead, we knew that; Carl perhaps most of all: these last temptations finished or completed. (5)

The reader is engaged to find answers to the enigma, to pose meanings for 'It.' The narrator, Finch, is set the task to tell only its preparation and destruction. The reader is on a quest, following the *process* of narration to discover 'It.' Is 'It' a

³⁰ Scott, 'Interview' with Craven and Heyward: 236.

³¹ Scott, *St Clair*: 3. Subsequent page references will appear in the text.

devil which possessed the man? or the source of Brouwer's temptations? The reader is invited to *define* those temptations: a quest to find the ultimate high? the ultimate degradation? the ideal woman? his own sexual identity? or castration and destruction? In keeping with Scott's desire for ambiguity, 'psychological or moral,' it is not the identity of 'It' which is important: rather, it is the process of sifting through the various possibilities, and, as in 'The Problem of Evil,' taking on the responsibility for the construction of meaning in the text.

A number of layers of responsibility are apparent. Finch's reading is a violation of the privacy of Brouwer's correspondence to Julia, a violation in which we as readers also participate. By 're-writing' the letters (that is, recording and commenting on them) Finch enacts a similar crime to Brouwer's video of the dead sisters, made as part of a rock'n'roll clip (46). Finch is not only displaying what is essentially private and something of which he has been granted a privileged view, he is taking advantage of people who are no longer around to defend themselves, Carl included. But whereas Brouwer's video is for money, and its purpose is necrophiliac titillation, Finch's purpose is different. Other questions arise: why does Finch show (write/rewrite) these letters to the 'you' of the poem? and what is Scott's purpose in offering them to the reader?

From the beginning, Scott places the reader in a fundamentally uncomfortable position, since to read the poem constitutes a kind of (fictive) crime. It is an invasion of Carl's privacy, a possible complicity with his engagement with pornography and therefore, perhaps, a perpetuation of the conditions from which such pornography arises: injustices to women and children, disregard for life, moral and spiritual degradation and desensitisation. The dilemma for the reader evolves as follows: if we are desensitised to the violence which the poem depicts, then we in some way are forced to recognise the similarity between ourselves and Carl – he too after all might claim that his interest is in the pursuit of art (his videos for the rock industry). The poem is meant to be shocking, meant to be sickening; if it is

not, then we have something to worry about: we can't avoid the implications of our own response. In this sense Scott goes even further than Maiden in implicating the reader in terms of ethical choice.

Scott's exploration of these issues shows his concern with the fringe areas of psychology and morality and develops as a serious enquiry into what can and cannot be said in poetry, in particular about the politics of freedom of speech and the cost of silencing; he is interested in what contemporary poetry can do, what issues it can raise, and in what way what Hassan calls the 'unpresentable' can be addressed.³² Brouwer's letters are potentially so disturbing – he has been involved with the occult, pornography, prostitution, paedophilia, sadistic torture, self-mutilation and multiple murder – that Finch is asked by Carl's one-time lover, Julia, to stand in judgement on whether or not she could bear to read them: in other words, whether they should be 'censored': 'Not what they say, you understand. A "Yes" or a "No" ' (11). Alongside Finch, the reader is forced to judge the permissibility of the subject matter of the fictional letters. The danger Scott faces is that at times the poems seem to go too far. Even a sympathetic critic such as Christopher Pollnitz has admitted to being shocked and sickened by Scott's apparent 'preoccupation with cruelty and...sexual perversion.'³³ For Fay Zwicky there is little excuse for the apparent excesses.³⁴ In Zwicky's view, Scott's strategy of creating a framework of censorship within the prose/poems in order to examine the issue of censorship is not adequate justification for writing about the horrible events of Carl Brouwer's life and loves. She sees little point in this kind of writing. ('What's the point of having a talent for words when your chief preoccupation is to grab the reader by the scruff and shove his face in whatever it is that's making you

³² Hassan, 'Pluralism and Postmodern Perspective': 506.

³³ Christopher Pollnitz, 'John Scott: On Not Resisting These Poems,' *SCRIPSI* 4.2 (1986): 257.

³⁴ Zwicky, 'Cleaver Verses Convey Little Emotion,' *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 12-13 April (1986): 15.

miserable?’³⁵) Yet Scott manages to have it both ways: while Finch shields the sensitivities of one of Carl’s intimate friends, Scott does not afford the reader the same protection, despite the fact that the poem ends with this as a negative possibility:

And perhaps, in one sense, it would have been far easier for all of us, for me to simply say to you as I had simply turned to Julia, saying: ‘No.’ (58)

At the same time, we have to look for the positive terms of the debate: what is gained by allowing our self-protection to slip, to expose ourselves to the sordid subject matter which the sequences deal with? One answer might be in the therapeutic value of expunging repressed forces of the unconscious. This is something which Gary Snyder sees as an essential task of poetry,³⁶ and what Scott appears to be advocating in his discussion of his earlier collection, *The Flooded City*:

There is also the way the poems suggest the *possibility* of something positive by concentrating on what impedes it: the inhibiting aspect of guilt, the destructive side of searching for some Romantic ideal, and notions of withholding, refusal, the need for self-protection – these are all seen as things which if they were avoided, if they could be controlled within the personality, could be emancipatory.³⁷

The question arises: is an exploration of Brouwer’s lack of self-control necessary to Finch’s maintenance of it? Does Scott’s preoccupation with sexual perversion and cruelty perform a similar therapeutic function for the reader? Or is it, as Zwicky suggests, a shirking of responsibility by the poet, an enactment, as she says, of a ‘post-structuralist insistence on the writer’s automatism’?³⁸

Whereas ‘The Preface’ deals primarily with sexuality and its links to violence and power, in ‘St Clair’ Scott is concerned not only with sexual politics but also

³⁵ Zwicky, ‘Clever Verses’: 15.

³⁶ Faas paraphrases Snyder’s view: according to Faas, Snyder acknowledges ‘ “the negative and demonic potential of the Unconscious” and...feels that art (like the “archaic and primitive ritual dramas”) should symbolically act them out and thereby free us from their power’ (*Toward a New American Poetics*: 92).

³⁷ Scott, ‘Interview’ with Craven and Heyward: 236.

³⁸ Zwicky, ‘Clever Verses’: 15.

with state politics. Once again he exposes various unpalatable aspects of our society: exploitative relationships, totalitarian structures in society, dishonesties of self, cruelty, and insanity. Like Maiden in 'The Problem of Evil' he conflates the issues of state and sexual politics to challenge the idea of power and the construction of identity. Just as Maiden forces the reader to become implicated in the allegiance of the narrator to the opposing camps which symbolise different gender positions, in this sequence Scott forces the reader to become implicated in the negative aspects of power, manipulation, lying and torture. Importantly, in the process of trying to give coherence to the poem's narrative, and by identifying with the predicament of the three central characters, the reader is asked to question the values which privilege one version of 'reality' over another.

'St Clair' is structured as a triangle which describes the points of view of Warren, the doctor/administrator of the psychiatric detention centre, Finchley, the surviving original mental patient, and Sheehan, a victim of the hospital's more recent activities as an incarceration centre, a political dissident. Questions of truth and reality, sanity and power, revolve around these three men's experience of the hospital. On the metafictional level, the hospital's attempts to 're-educate' its dissident patients, and the confusion those patients feel because of disorienting drug treatment and the brutality of the authorities, are linked to the reader's experience of incoherence in the poem (which stems in part from the narrative shifts in point of view). The reader/dissident identification merges in the questions which are posed by both doctor and poet: 'Do you understand? / Do things seem clearer now?' (63) and later, 'Has this helped you? / Are you beginning to understand?' (67). Scott invites the reader to question the implication of this overlapping between fictional and metafictional levels: in what way are we as readers like political dissidents? This introduces the notions of truth and power as part of the aesthetics of poetry. We, as readers, 'know' our 'present' – and it is not the one Scott presents in the poem: the England which provides the setting of the

poem is clearly different from the England in our time, since the latter doesn't have such an oppressive society where people are incarcerated for their political beliefs (Salman Rushdie's special case aside). And yet, by exaggerating the circumstances, Scott poses these questions: are we so sure that oppressive censorship isn't rife in our society? where do we draw the line at 'what can be told'? The model for St Clair may be Soviet hospitals, but the ideas of repression and censorship are relevant to the West.

Throughout the poem sequence, graphic pictures of cruelty and deprivation force the reader to consider the question which 'The Preface' also poses: if we find the truth unpalatable, what place does it have in terms of art? It is a fundamental questioning of Keats' famous assertion, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' Section 13, 'On Truth,' exposes the problem:

Are you listening to these words?
Can you ascertain their truth? For instance let me
describe the mill-smoke that squanders its cloud
across St Clair. Things I am allowed to say –
to perpetuate these tableaux of a natural world.
And if I talk of a persistence of winter, grey
storm clouds that dredge beneath a half-risen moon,
is this no longer true? So unspeakable? Or if
I tell you of the crowded lavatories. How people
search for cigarette stubs among the used paper.
How some of the patients eat their own excrement.
I don't want to blacken the picture – this did
not happen everyday. And if you find that this
is true, has this helped you? Do you feel better? (76)

As Pollnitz points out, what Scott describes here has its basis in fact,³⁹ yet does knowing this make the reader feel the poem's 'excesses' are any the more justified? Scott appears to be disturbed by the political inefficacy of poetry: how can the word speak out against injustice and still remain art? Yet his own position remains ambiguous; the questions are given to the political dissident, Sheehan:

³⁹ Pollnitz, 'On Not Resisting...': 262.

What is my belief if it willingly encompasses
a speech infected by guilt and the desire for
punishment? I am tired of truth, and its thank-
lessness. Why is this cell called a 'slit'?
Why is the anus of this man bleeding? Why has
this strait-jacket been soaked in water? (76)

Throughout these poems, by focusing on the interrelated experience of separate individuals, Scott manages to raise issues which have a direct social impact, issues such as privacy, censorship and pornography, insanity and political dissidence, while the ambiguity of his own stance ensures the maximum involvement of the reader: the reader cannot avoid encountering (if not resolving) those ambiguities, and in this way becomes unavoidably implicated in the process of the text's signification. While in Zwicky's terms Scott abdicates from the responsibility of generating meaning, giving this role to the reader, Scott sees his choice of subject matter as encouraging the reader to consider moral and ethical issues. Thus, Scott's work goes beyond the jubilation of ludic play, the literary puzzle with which the reader enjoys engaging (if not ever solving); the issues raised by his narrative are too important for that. While Scott's work has moved from an emphasis on artistic autonomy to a more politically oriented poetry, at the same time, the question of the author's responsibility for and possible implication in the horrors which are depicted means that his critique of society remains somewhat ambiguous. Like Maiden, he hands over responsibility to the reader, forcing the reader to decide whether the poetry is in complicity with the violent and unjust situations which it presents. This is the aim of radical stylistic innovation in Scott's work, as in Maiden's: to place the reader in the position of having to ascertain values contingently in regard to such issues as sexuality and violence. While such a project results in a 'complicitous critique,' with no suggestion of transcendent value, it nevertheless affirms the importance of the awareness of the ways language and art help to construct our ideas of subjectivity and power, thus potentially freeing the reader from inherited assumptions which have led to the

institutionalisation and prolongation of violence and injustice. This is the key aspect of the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde poetics, and it is this element which gives both Maiden's and Scott's poems their dramatic power.

Chapter 9. The Women's Contribution and 'Revolutionary' Innovation

As demonstrated in the foregoing chapters, a number of the New Poets show fundamental differences in their view regarding subjectivity, language, the concept of the divine and the role of the poet, ranging from belief in the notion of a divine reality and the mantric power of the word, to a more contingent, anti-absolutist emphasis. As such, the term 'New Poetry' does not denote either a consistent 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' aesthetic.

Given the range of New Poetry poetics, from the symbolist and neo-Romantic, to the poststructuralist and the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde, the question arises as to why so few women have been regarded as belonging to the New Poetry movement. Most discussions of the New Poetry so far have tended to reinforce the canon of New Poets as reflected in Tranter's anthology: only two women out of a total of twenty-four poets. As Martin Duwell writes: 'The boundaries of this *mainly male group* are usually established as membership of John Tranter's anthology *The New Australian Poetry* (1979).'¹ Although Duwell adds, 'This anthology should not be treated as final...[as] fixing the canon of important authors and poems,'² he nevertheless appears to accept the New Poetry movement as 'a mainly male group.' His own account of the New Poets would include eight other New Poets, among whom only three are women. (Duwell suggests: Richard Tipping, Pi O, Eric Beach and J S Harry, as well as younger poets, Ken Bolton, Stephen Kelen, Gig Ryan and Susan Hampton.) Livio Dobrez too, in his study *Parnassus Mad Ward*, adopts the poets included in Tranter's anthology as the focus of his study. Although he suggests that 'one may well query

¹ Duwell, ' "New Australian Poetry" ': 493 (emphasis added).

² Duwell, ' "New Australian Poetry" ': 493.

the centrality of [the anthology],³ he adds only three poets (Richard Tipping, J S Harry and Robyn Ravlich) to Tranter's grouping of the New Poets. Thomas Shapcott has also commented on the fact that there are 'significant (and regrettable) omissions' in the anthology and would add Richard Tipping, Harry and Rhyll McMaster.⁴ Even if we enlarged the New Poetry canon according to these recommendations, there would still be only seven women poets out of a total of twenty-nine poets: Viidikas, Maiden, Harry, Ryan, Hampton, Ravlich and McMaster. Yet Tranter's, Duwell's, Dobrez's and Shapcott's views of the New Poetry ignore evidence of a much greater involvement of women poets during the New Poetry period than these figures would suggest.

Tranter's initial formulation of the New Poetry as a movement was that it comprised a loose group of poets associated with the poetry readings, the little magazines and small presses during the late sixties and early seventies.⁵ While it is perhaps true that women poets played a less visible role in the poetry readings of the era,⁶ Jennings' anthology *Mother I'm Rooted* gives an indication of the number of Australian women poets writing during the period of the late sixties and early to mid-seventies.⁷ Jennings received over five hundred submissions for the anthology, and printed the work of one hundred and fifty-six women. Of these, many of the women were publishing poetry in the same little magazines and small presses which

³ Dobrez: 36. He also discusses briefly some of the poets from the anthology *Australian Poetry Now*, ed. Shapcott.

⁴ See Shapcott, 'Old Art New Power,' *Australian Book Review*, 18 (1980): 26.

⁵ Tranter, *New Australian Poetry*: xv.

⁶ Poet Pamela Brown records the following account of her first experiences of a Balmain reading in 1972: '[A] Balmain writer got hold of a copy of my first book *Sureblock* and came rushing over to my house to "discover" me. He asked me to read at one of those annual Balmain readings explaining that "all the Balmain lady writers are sitting on their thumbs". I found being at the reading was like being at the zoo. There were exhibitionist male poets climbing trees and shouting and throwing beer cans and punches at one another. And a serious A.B.C. technician recording this apparently important pulse of the culture for national radio.' Interview in *Magic Sam*, 6 (1980, no page numbers given).

⁷ See the introduction of Kate Jennings, *Mother I'm Rooted* (1975; Collingwood, Vic.: Outback Press, 1977). Another important anthology of women's poetry appeared later, *Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Hampton and Llewellyn, eds. This included some poetry written in the late seventies period, but its scope was much broader, including many early Australian women poets as well as contemporary ones.

published the work of the male New Poets. The 'Checklist of New Writing in Australia' published in the special edition of *Australian Literary Studies* in 1977 names several women poets who have had little share of critical discussion of the New Poetry, including Pamela Brown, Kate Jennings, Sylvia Kantarizis, and Carol Novack. Many other women published in little magazines devoted to the New Poetry movement, including *New Poetry* (seen by critics as the mouthpiece of the movement),⁸ *Magic Sam*, *Aspect*, *Makar*, *The Ear in the Wheatfield* and *Contempa*.⁹ The women poets who published in *New Poetry* include Stefanie Bennett, Colleen Burke, joanne burns (sic), Anna Couani, Katherine Gallagher, Jill Hellyer, J S Harry, Antigone Kefala, Chris Mansell, Dorothy Porter, Jennifer Rankin, Robyn Ravlich, Laraine Roche, and Jane Zageris. Of these, Brown, Burns, Couani, Gallagher, Novack and Roche also had work published in issues of *Magic Sam*; work by Bennett, Burns, Couani, Harry, Mansell and Novack appeared in *Aspect*; Bennett, Brown, Burns, Harry, Kefala, Novack, Rankin, and Roche were represented in *Makar*; and Gallagher appeared in *The Ear in the Wheatfield*. If the women poets who published collections in the small presses associated with the New Poetry are included, the list grows, including Lee Cataldi, who published with Wild & Woolley, and Roberta Sykes, who published with Saturday Centre Poets. Older, more recognised women poets (who might be regarded as having a similar status to Bruce Beaver in relation to the New Poets) were also published by the little magazines and small presses; these include, Dorothy Hewett, Rhyll McMaster, Judith Rodriguez and Fay Zwicky. This analysis suggests that a total of twenty-nine women poets, rather than the mere two Tranter's anthology suggests,

⁸ See, for example, Macainsh, 'Australian Poetry – The Tradition of the New,' *Quadrant* 19.2 (1975): 34.

⁹ Tranter has also referred to the following little magazines as belonging to the movement: *Transit*, *Mok*, *The Great Auk*, *Crosscurrents*, *Our Glass*, *Free Poetry*, *Parachute Poems*, and *Your Friendly Fascist*. The *Australian Literary Studies Checklist* gives also *Manic Magazine*, *Tinker*, *Aardvark*, *Cat*, *Flagstones*, *Mindscape*, *Obo*, *Poem*, *Mag*, *Magnet*, *Journal Rhizome*, *Abraxus*, *Timestream*, *The Saturday Club Book of Poetry*, *Outlaw*, *Perry*, *Tabloid Story*, *Artalive*, *Beyond Poetry*, *Etymospheres*, *Heart*, *Rigmarole of the Hours*, *Born To Concrete*, *Fiztrot*, *Fin*, *Dod*, *Riverrun*, and *Three Blind Mice* ('What's New About the New Australian Poetry?' Lecture at Macquarie University, Sydney, 3 Oct. 1985).

could validly been regarded as having participated in the New Poetry movement. Importantly, most of the women poets mentioned here had published one or more collections before Tranter's anthology appeared. Even if the more established poets were not considered as 'New Poets,' it would nevertheless seem that Tranter's anthology, and the studies done by such critics as Dobrez and Duwell, have failed to take into account the full extent of women poets' involvement in the New Poetry movement.¹⁰

When answering the objection why so few women were represented in the New Poetry anthology, Tranter made the following points:

Well, for a start, they had their own huge anthology, Kate Jennings' marvellous *Mother I'm Rooted*. And there were no men in that. Second, I really think that the male chauvinism we suffered under for so long, until about the mid-seventies, prevented many young women poets from writing their best. There was a kind of internalized doubt at work: 'I can't try to write big, adventurous poems; I'm not good enough; I'm only a woman.' Frankly, I looked very hard through a lot of women's poetry for that collection, and I honestly felt there just weren't enough successful women's poems around in the area I was looking at.¹¹

While these comments make clear that there *were* other women poets who could have been counted among the New Poets, Tranter's reasons for not including them can be challenged. The first point, the fact that a collection of women's poetry had already been printed, appears to be an evasion of the question: if *only* men's poetry had been represented in *The New Australian Poetry*, and it was made clear that it was the *men's* poetry that was being represented, the argument would have some

¹⁰ It should be noted that Tranter's anthology was not the only collection published during the New Poetry period which contained significantly more work by men than women. One of the first anthologies of the New Poetry, *Applestealers* (1974), published only three women out of a total of seventeen poets: Robyn Ravlich, Katherine Gallagher and Vicki Viidikas. The neglect of women poets is not restricted to the New Poetry: in more mainstream collections a similar under-representation of women occurred. In *The First Paperback Poets Anthology*, ed. Roger McDonald (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1974) and *Consolidation: The Second Paperback Poets Anthology*, ed. Thomas Shapcott (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1982) a total of only five women were represented compared to thirty-two men: J S Harry, Rhyll McMaster, Vicki Viidikas, Judith Rodriguez, and Jennifer Maiden. In the *Younger Australian Poets* anthology there were six women out of twenty-nine: Marion Alexopoulos, Christine Churches, Susan Hampton, Rhyll McMaster, and Vicki Viidikas.

¹¹ Tranter, 'Australian Poets in Profile: 4,' *Southerly* 41 (1981): 246.

validity. The second point, the fact that young women poets lacked confidence, is one that is difficult to prove or disprove. However, Tranter's objection to the women's poetry he examined for the anthology gives an interesting insight. He says there were no 'big, *adventurous* poems' written by women 'in the area [he] was looking at.' Could it be that Tranter's preference for stylistically radical, writerly poetry served to limit his selection of women for the anthology, thus restricting the number of women who are regarded as being part of the New Poetry group?¹² While an extended study of the women's New Poetry would be needed to judge fully whether this was the case, initial indications are that Tranter's promotion of the writerly style may have played a major part.¹³

A reading of women's poetry of this period indicates that part of the agenda of women's writing of this period was to make clear the gender-specific nature of women's experience, a strategy which often required a sense of the woman's poetic 'voice,' stylistically the kind of traditional poetic 'voice' which the writerly style abandons. Yet, for women poets, the positing of a historically specific,

¹² An alternative view is that Tranter has been guilty of what David Brooks has identified as male editors' tendency to employ different aesthetic criteria when selecting poetry written by men from those used when judging women's poetry. See Brooks, 'Poetry and Sexual Difference,' *Meanjin* 44 (1985): 69-78. A degree of sexism does seem to have played a part. Tranter did not include any section of Jennifer Maiden's 'The Problem Of Evil' in the anthology (which is certainly long and stylistically experimental), despite the inclusion of a number of her less ambitious poems. By contrast, he found room for his own 'Red Movie,' Robert Adamson's 'The Rumour,' Martin Johnston's 'Blood Aquarium,' Ken Taylor's 'At Valentines,' and sections of Kris Hemensley's 'Poem of the Clear Eye.' In terms of other 'big' poems written by women, Tranter might also have looked at Lee Cataldi's 'At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners.'

¹³ At first glance, it would seem that many of the objections raised here in regard to the representation of women New Poets have been addressed in the recent anthology which Tranter coedited with Philip Mead, *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*. This anthology contains many of the women originally associated with the New Poetry movement, including the older poets more well-known poets, Dorothy Hewett, Fay Zwicky, Antigone Kefala, Judith Rodriguez; and younger poets, J S Harry, Jennifer Rankin, Lee Cataldi, Roberta Sykes, Joanne Burns, Rhyll McMaster, Pamela Brown, Anna Couani, Kate Jennings, Dorothy Porter, Gig Ryan and Kate Lilley (these last two have published mostly *after* Tranter's anthology, although their work did appear in *New Poetry* magazine from the late seventies on). However, while the appearance of these woman may initially appear to be an acknowledgment by Tranter of previous neglect of women poets, the fact is that, of a total of eighty-six poets, only twenty-eight are women (less than half the number of men). Also, of these, only eight have *not* been associated with the New Poetry in some way. (Those not associated with publications generally associated with the New Poetry are Rosemary Dobson, Oodgeroo, Gwen Harwood, Jennifer Strauss, Caroline Caddy, Aileen Corpus, Ania Walwicz and Judith Beveridge.) Yet, although Tranter and Mead's re-reading of the 'modern' (which encompasses the moods and themes of high modernism without accompanying stylistic innovation) allows the inclusion of a broad range of poetry written by men, there is no equal attempt to represent earlier 'modern' women poets. Thus, it appears that the editors have redressed one imbalance, while producing another.

gendered subject is far from reflecting or propping up the traditional (White, Western, male) humanist subject which poststructuralist writing seeks to problematise. I would suggest that the exclusion of the woman's 'voice' from Tranter's formulation of the innovations of the New Poetry cannot be disregarded when judging the apparent 'revolutionary' contribution of the writerly style to twentieth-century Australian poetry. This so-called 'revolution' appears to be based on a fundamental and potentially crippling paradox.

The significance Tranter gives to the abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice,' the identifiable linguistic subject of poetry, has been noted in a number of critical discussions. Carter is one of many critics to have drawn attention to the absence of a coherent linguistic subject in Tranter's poetry: 'As signifieds seem to slide beneath signifiers so the self, *any* self which the poetry appears to uphold, is divided and dispersed, found everywhere and nowhere, like "style" itself.'¹⁴ Similarly, Taylor argues that 'Tranter's poetry problematiscises [sic]...the whole question of the subject in poetry – by offering the subject as nothing but a style of being not visible.'¹⁵ Forbes too maintains that Tranter's poetry 'attempts to demolish the type of subject' which the 'public approach' of other Australian poetry 'normally employs,' while coming 'close to abandoning subject for total surface effect.'¹⁶ However, these critics are aware that Tranter is manipulating and undercutting the *traditional* view of the subject, the Cartesian view of consciousness. Moreover, as Dobrez points out, although the subject in Tranter's work is 'rarefied' and 'problematized,' 'its presence is precariously and ambivalently maintained, its faint trace persists.'¹⁷ The precariousness of such a denial can be suggested even more strongly: the denial of the subject, like the denial of

¹⁴ Carter, 'John Tranter: Popular Mysteries,' *SCRIPSI* 2 (1984): 118.

¹⁵ Taylor, 'John Tranter: Absence in Flight,' *Australian Literary Studies* 12 (1986): 465.

¹⁶ Forbes, 'Accelerating Subject': 251.

¹⁷ Dobrez: 154.

Foucault's author, runs the risk of 'transpos[ing] the empirical characteristics of the [subject] into a transcendental anonymity.'¹⁸

Hal Foster has touched on this argument in his description of poststructuralism.

In general terms, according to Foster:

'Poststructuralist' postmodernism...assumes 'the death of man' not only as original creator of unique artifacts but also as the centred subject of representation and of history. This postmodernism...is profoundly anti-humanist: rather than a return to representation, it launches a critique in which representation is shown to be more constitutive of reality than transparent to it....¹⁹

The paradox of this position, according to Foster, lies in the fact that:

To speak of a fragmented subject is to presuppose a prior moment or model in which the subject is whole and complete, not split in relation to desire or decentered in relation to language; such a concept, whether heuristic or historical, is problematic. On the Right this tendency is manifest in a nostalgic insistence on the good strong self, pragmatic, patriarchal, and ideological in the extreme. Yet the left positions on the subject are only somewhat less troublesome. Diagnoses of our culture as regressive, one-dimensional, schizophrenic...often preserve this bourgeois subject, if only in opposition, if only by default.²⁰

Following this idea, one could argue that the writerly style, by continuing to deny the traditional humanist subject, preserves by default that notion of that subject: the poststructuralist position is only ever defined in opposition to the perceived orthodoxy, with no alternative positive term affirmed. The danger with such an oppositional stance is that when other writers *do* seek to affirm an alternative stance, their apparent lack of experimentalism may result in their exclusion from the discourse. This point seems to be illustrated by the fact that Tranter's promotion of the writerly style, while seeking to reflect the dissolution of the traditional subject, may ironically be implicated in the continued dominance of the oppressive, patriarchal tradition which gave rise to that subject. Thus, the

¹⁸ Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in Josue V Harari, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980): 144.

¹⁹ Foster, '(Post)Modern Polemics,' *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 67.

²⁰ Foster, '(Post)Modern Polemics': 77.

abandonment of the traditional poetic 'voice' does not necessarily carry the philosophical weight that Tranter supposes.

For Tranter, the absence of the poetic 'voice' in the writerly style *mimetically* reflects the notion of the 'decentred' subject and the post-Classical view of reality, and therefore, metonymically, the collapse of traditional authority and philosophical certainties characteristic of the broadly modern period. However, as we have seen, the idea of the poetic 'voice' represents different things for a number of other New Poets, none of which consist in promoting the traditional view of the subject. For neo-Romantic poets the 'I' can be posited both as the intersection of a set of relations which express a universal divine, or the more individual personal or political 'voice' of the poet; while for the poststructuralist neo-avant-garde writers, the 'voice' in poetry is continually problematised, used to reflect the radically constituted nature of the subject, a subjectivity based on self-definition and self-construction.²¹ Rather than seeing Tranter's poststructuralist use of the writerly style as inherently superior, as my reading of Capra shows, these different formulations of the subject, the 'decentred' view and the 'centred,' can be seen as different descriptions, reifications or provisional provisions along a continuum of the dynamic process of subjectivity, a process which includes aspects of both autonomy and 'dispersal.' Although the readerly style has traditionally been associated with the humanist view of the subject, therefore, there is no reason to assume that such a style *necessarily* reflects or supports a Classical or Cartesian view of reality and subjectivity.²² As we have seen, both Bruce Beaver and Vicki Viidikas, whose work at times conveys a readerly sense of the poetic 'voice,' are actively involved in destabilising traditional Western views through the integration of Hindu views of subjectivity, reality and the divine into their work.

²¹ Mazzaro: viii.

²² In the case of poets such as Les A Murray, who represents for Tranter an extension of traditionalist views, the poetic voice may well serve to prop up 'traditional' (and for Tranter, objectionable) values and beliefs.

John Forbes makes a similar point when he suggests that the stylistic effacement of the linguistic subject in poetry is not the only way to indicate an alternative to the traditional view of the humanist subject: 'Most poets either accept without question the cultural presuppositions that allow a coherent subject in the poem, *or else rhetorically adopt personal or social myths that create a space for the subject.*'²³ What Forbes' comments imply is that, while desiring to avoid blind acceptance of cultural presuppositions, poets may choose to adopt provisional positions from which to speak as historically specific subjects.²⁴ I would suggest further that the liberty to posit such identifiable subject positions is paramount for many minority groups, including women, for whom a sense of the poetic 'voice' is often a strategic necessity. The adoption of the poetic 'voice' by some contemporary Australian poets therefore can be seen not as necessarily indicative of a 'pre-modern' understanding of subjectivity, but rather may be a deliberate stylistic choice which enables those poets to express their particular (if only ever provisional) positions. With this understanding, the merit of abandoning the poetic 'voice' would seem to be undermined.

Although the challenge to the traditional poetic 'voice,' the fictive construct of the stable human subject transparent to the text, has been a vital strategy in destabilising outmoded traditions, continued valorisation of such a style runs the risk of undermining not only the authority of subject positions oppositional to traditional Western discourse, but also less stylistically innovative poets who may also have challenged traditional views. Among this group could be included a number of the poets discussed earlier: Brennan, whose ideas challenged the traditional view of the rational human subject; Harford, whose work was subversive of the capitalistic and patriarchal tradition; and the Jindyworobaks, who

²³ Forbes, 'Accelerating Subject,' *Meanjin*, 42 (1983): 251 (emphasis added).

²⁴ Dobrez takes this fact into account in his discussion of the 'neo-Romantic' subjectivity of some of the New Poets. See Dobrez, Chapter 4.

contributed to the destabilisation of Eurocentric ideals with their valorisation of Aboriginal culture. Potentially marginalised also in this debate are other contemporary writers to whom the notion of poetic 'authority' does not consist in propping up traditional white, Western, patriarchal authority, but consists in offering alternative views: this group includes not only women poets mentioned above, but also people of colour and indigenous peoples,²⁵ postcolonial, gay and politically dissenting writers, many of whom belong to those very oppressed groups whose causes the sixties' generation set out to champion. For these writers, the poetic 'voice,' the notion of the (however 'constructed' or provisional) biographical or authorial 'I,' is often vital in challenging the presumptions of traditional Western beliefs and allowing them a greater autonomy, freedom and justice.

Thus, while the abandonment of the traditional 'objective' 'voice' of the poet has been useful in so far as it has contributed to problematising the traditional (White, Western male) subject of poetry, the end result of this process – the destabilisation of traditional values and adoption of or experimentation with new values – must not be overlooked. One of the main results of such challenges to traditional orthodoxies has been to validate alternative subject positions, to give voice to marginalised groups, and to provide an intellectual forum within which alternative philosophical and spiritual traditions can be appreciated. To continue to see intrinsic value in a stylistic technique which has helped to subvert ruling orthodoxies without acknowledging one of the principal results of that subversion is to fall unwittingly into the trap of prolonging those orthodoxies by default. Ironically, therefore, to continue to promote the stylistic denial of the authorial subject position simply because the authority of the traditionally dominant subject

²⁵ Roberta Sykes has made the remark that Australian poetry critics tend to prefer poetry which is complicated and that anything people can understand can't be any good. Her question is, where does this leave people (such as Black writers like herself) who have something important to say? (Conversation with the poet, Macquarie University, October 1991.)

position has needed to be challenged may help to keep that dominance intact. Moreover, these observations alert us to the danger of simply attributing value to terms such as 'innovative,' 'experimental' or 'revolutionary' in discussions of twentieth-century poetry. Such terms should not be simply accepted as indexes of value, indications of necessary philosophical sophistication, political and social desirability, or literary worth, but rather should be held accountable to the possible exclusionary tactics which they uphold.

Conclusion

As this thesis has attempted to show, modernist and postmodernist poetics in twentieth-century Australian poetry encompass a wide range of differing attitudes towards subjectivity, reality, language, concepts of 'truth' and of the divine, and the role of the poet and poetry. Aspects of early 'modern' Australian poets' work are revised within the various strands of 'sixties' postmodernism' found in the New Poetry. The general difference between 'modern' and 'postmodern' Australian poetry is the latter's openness to radical stylistic innovation, particularly the writerly style with its abandonment of the poetic 'voice' and traditional features of representation, and the perception of some of the New Poets that radical stylistic innovation is an expression of the central philosophical concerns of twentieth-century thinking and preliminary to social and political change. For those New Poets whose poetic reflects the concerns of the linguistically oriented poststructuralists, the writerly style mimetically reflects twentieth-century changes in understanding of subjectivity and reality. At the same time, however, the more traditional styles of earlier poets, and aspects of the New Poetry, do not necessarily presuppose conventional or 'pre-modern' views. The New Poetry itself does not reflect any one particular poetic or style, and could therefore be broadened to include many women poets who to date have not been recognised as belonging to the movement. In broad terms the New Poetry encompasses a generation of writers, including many women poets, who began writing in the late sixties and early seventies, and who found outlets in the various small magazines, publishing houses and poetry readings of the time. Many of these writers, including the poets discussed in this thesis, have made a significant contribution to twentieth-century Australian poetry.

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