CONVERSATIONS

THE AUSTRALIAN RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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It is Herman Melville (as Joseph Jones reminds us in his 1976 study of American-Australian literary relations *Radical Cousins*) who speaks of "that Great America on the other side of the sphere, Australia". And it is again Melville who comes to mind when I think of another adventurer, Thomas Shapcott, whose anthology *Contemporary American and Australian Poetry* in the mid-1970s boldly presented a comparison in modern terms of the two cultures in the area of poetry. I think of Melville here, since Shapcott's book, regrettably, has proven to be a Moby Dick, a great white beast of a book which has sunk somewhere in mid-Pacific with the harpoons of a horde of little Ahabs, the reviewers, in its flanks. But failures do not necessarily tell the whole story; indeed, they often point to the source of real energy and challenge. And this is how I see it.

Shapcott's enterprise was itself Melvillean. Imaginative, somewhat possessed, and sailing out from the safety of the known waters and calm harbours of Australian culture, it mounted a challenge with that oceanic and elusive phenomenon of our times – modern American poetry. Fortunately Shapcott, like Ishmael, survived (he not only lives to tell the tale but as the present Director of the Literature Board of the Australia Council has gone on to such glories as Herman Melville, or Ishmael for that matter, never knew.) In retrospect, his anthology now seems like the first experiences in the America's Cup. The same impulse was there in both activities, of Australia measuring itself against America – a point that has some relevance to New Zealand at this time in 1986.

To round off my mixing of metaphors, I note how the Newport America's Cup saga ended. Australia won. Indeed, I was reminded of this when I saw on the cover of the latest issue of *American Poetry Review* a full page photo of the Australian poet Les Murray. Star billing! The America's Cup of poetry is ours! The quest for greatness satisfied, the desire for comparison recognised – Murray as Ahab and Moby Dick. But enough of these games, my subject is serious.

The point I wish to make is the simple one that since the mid 1960s Australian writers, and especially the poets, have increasigly turned away from England and Europe to American models for inspiration, challenge and competition. A large number of American writers in the past twenty years in visiting Australia and New Zealand as guests at conferences or as writers-in-residence have firmed up the relationship between this family of "radical cousins". And now that an increasing number of writers from this part of the world have begun, in their turn, to visit the United States and find acceptance there, the time has come to review the nature of this exchange between cultures, and point to certain of the issues that have emerged from this experience.

There is, to begin with, a certain irony in Les Murray's receiving star treatment in *The American Poetry Review*. Australian poetry, especially since the time of "the generation of '68," has divided, roughly, into two camps – Murray and the rest. The younger poets such as John Tranter, John Forbes, Robert Adamson and Kris Hemensley have been experimental, internationalist, cosmopolitan and in matters of poetry pro-American. The Grove Press anthology *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald Allen in 1959, was the Bible of this generation; and the similar Australian magazine *New Poetry* (which Professor Terry Sturm of Auckland University helped at one time to edit) was the clearing house in the early 1970s of the most advanced and daring writing in the Australian tradition of verse. Now, some fifteen years later, the scene has changed. The figure of Les Murray – the great proponent of an Australian vernacular republic who has at times vehemently resisted the American influence – stands there in American eyes as the one to be looked at in the Australian scene with respect and admiration.

But then, too, America has changed, and the politics of literary taste and influence may simply be following the general paradox of cultural change. I do not mean to suggest that Les Murray is the Ronald Reagan of contemporary poetry in the English-speaking world. He might – or might not – be pleased by the comparison. But the change in poetry as in politics of the past fifteen to twenty years has been sufficiently clear as to allow us to stand back and see the close relationship between Australian and American poetry since 1965 (at least from the Australian vantage point) in fuller perspective. Dr Joan Kirkby's collection of essays *The American Model*, which appeared in 1982, brought this matter of Australian-American literary relations into sharp focus, but in a way that now needs further study. There is, in 1986, a more relaxed attitude among Australian writers towards American influence. The dust has settled a little, a cooling-off process is taking place, the storm in the Pacific is dying down.

Writing on this matter in the early 1970s I felt impelled to stress the deep resistance in Australian culture to things American. The remains of the Menzies era with its anglophile and late-empire emphases was then falling away before the turbulence of the Vietnam War, student riots and the Beatles generation. Yet there remained a certain psychological and cultural conservatism which poetry in Australia at the time was experiencing as an impasse. Writers such as A.D. Hope, James McAuley and Vincent Buckley could not make, in the 1960s, a transition out of the humanist rationalism into which they had been born and bred. The style of the new American poetry – as in the Black Mountain or New York schools – seemed to them to be a total loss of the traditional role and meaning and music of poetry. When the 'generation of '68' embraced this new American mode so wholeheartedly, it led to a complete breakdown between the generations. A polarisation of those interested in meaning and those interested in form (in at least the minimalisation of form) took place from which Australian poetry is now emerging; and only a few poets have survived the transition. American pressure has forced a sharp cleaving of the ways upon modern Australian writing. Yet that notwithstanding the process has been an invigorating one, and it says something for Australian culture generally that it has the capacity, even the desire, to be influenced in this way and emerge independent and healthy – and in certain senses still young.

Within this context I would briefly like to mention the impact which the "life studies" genre of Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Sexton had on Australian poets. Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) was in Australian terms the classic modern text of the 1960s. It was picked up first in academic and educational circles but its long-term influence was felt most by the older generation of poets such as Hope, McAuley, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson and David Campbell who in their own ways found it a point of release from their own traditional strengths. All of these poets from the late 1960s onwards began to write in a more personal manner, foregrounding their own experiences, feelings and commitments. Their achievement in this regard has been one of the high points (still largely unrecognised) in modern Australian poetry. McAuley's breaking down of his intense ideologically conservative stance into the personal poetry of *Surprises of the Sun* (1969) has attracted attention but in a way that has limited the significance of what this new personal element has meant for the Australian scene. Rather, then, than look at McAuley's self-contained performance I would like here to mention the more problematic case of David Campbell whose change after 1968 from being Australia's "pastoral lyricist" into a presence appropriate to the 1970s may now be seen as a remarkable effort on his part to move with the times and advance the centre of Australian poetics in ways that held the new and the old in creative tension. I will point here only to his one political poem "My Lai", not for its political point (Campbell was never a radical voice) but for its psychological structure and sliding persona. Campbell, in trying to act out the feelings and experience of a Vietnamese peasant watching his family and village being destroyed, in fact was acting out his own self-transformation as an Australian person and poet. Ironically, when Campbell begins this poem with the words "I was milking the cow ..." he creates a possible and fascinating mis-reading of his own poem. His own life had been so intensely rural in its imaging of the Australian landscape that I for one, after many years of reading the poem, have felt drawn to the voice of the speaker being Campbell himself and not that of the farmer in Vietnam. The strengths of this poem – such as they are – are not its obvious dramatising effects so much as those meditational moments where Campbell's reflections on Vietnamese dying are subtly made to include himself. It is not clear as to who the "I" figure in the poem is:

Like an old man's thoughts at evening,
Blood is sticky. I have lived too long.

and

The cow is dead that I lie under,
Bodies bloat in the sun.
Who would have thought that they would lie
So heavily upon my heart?

The language belongs to a western world of feeling and gesture, over-clarified no doubt in a cartoon-like version of the pathos it is creating; and when, sardonically, Campbell speaks as an American, he speaks with that strange mixture of admiration and condescension which the Anglo-Australian tradition once used for things American. But it is the uncertainty and ambiguity of who is saying words such as *"Somehow this happened / Here and in my head"* that charts the way Campbell is moving from

an old colonial and patrician-like stance into the new world of the American international hegemony which the Vietnam War, in spite of an apparent defeat, ushered into the 1970s and thereafter.

Campbell acted out the tension of recognising a new Australia through confronting his resistance to things American. Other writers did not have his strong commitment to the past. Bruce Beaver, for one, in *Letters to Live Poets* (1969) embraced the "personism" of Frank O'Hara and created a sprawling, relaxed and colloquial Australian equivalent. There were few of O'Hara's cosmopolitan pressures and cultural depths to support Beaver in this role. Yet Beaver and Campbell offered the younger poets who were emerging as "the generation of '68" something of a model or way of releasing themselves from the old Australian intellectual humanism of post World War II poetry and culture.

The change, however, when it came was intense and severe. The deferral of modernism in Australian writing (the Ern Malley hoax of the 1940s is one focus of resistance) meant that when change came in the late 1960s, and under the American influence particularly of the New York school of poets, it came as a leap into post-modernism, aggressively anti-intellectual, anti-humanist and anti-religious. The result of so much displacement in traditional values, or even expectations, as to the nature of poetry in the past fifteen to twenty years is that it has taken this long amount of time for the new poetry to find an audience for itself and communicate with the public.

John Tranter's *Selected Poems* (1983) is a case in point. It has seemed to many readers to be a poetry without meaning, without motive, without effect. It is a surface of words without apparent beginning or ending, filling itself with referencing, as one critic has put it, to "technical vocabularies, motor cars, 'girls', drugs, anguish and foreign places". It has been called "nervous movie-foyer chat", and is a poetry of statement, locating itself in American terms somewhere between the iconoclastic gestures of Ted Berrigan and the blanched meditations of a John Ashbery. Tranter's poetry, as David Carter has said, "represents the modern-day Wanderer as Tourist, dis-located but appropriative as "he" travels through History and Culture, a sort of self-consuming consumer, finding perhaps that the only alternative to jet-lag is to keep moving, to stay airborne." Or, as Carter goes on to list the elements of a Tranter poem: "fast cars and flash (or desperate) living, B-grade movies, B-grade love affairs, bars, drugs, the forties and the fifties, McCarthyism, revolution, war (war movies), weapons, aeroplanes, travel (Bali, South America, Europe) ... and Poetry".

Given these comments we are surprised to find that Tranter has emerged in the 1980s as a humorist, and, just possibly, as a humanist. His recent travels in the United States have given him a sense of perspective (and a sense of literary place) for his writing. It is as if he looks back on the 1970s as a period that had to be lived through in all its intellectual and imaginative nihilism, a period where the only reality for a poet to pursue was the reality of poetry itself.

John Forbes, Tranter's Sydney colleague and intellectual peer, asks this question of (and for) Tranter's work:

> *But how do you write knowing that the poem can never escape from Literature and at the same time, not wanting merely to demonstrate the obvious?*

Forbes sees some of Tranter's long poems "The Alphabet Murders" and "Rimbaud and the Pursuit of the Modernist Heresy" as "circling around this problem":

> In them Tranter is like the coyote chasing the roadrunner, using a great deal of energy and cunning, but never catching him. And while the roadrunner can paint a tunnel on the cliff face and disappear into it, the pursuing coyote just smacks up against the painted stone .... In these poems ... the subject discusses its own demise without really achieving it.

Forbes quotes the following lines from Tranter's "The Poem in Love":

> *And where is that poem*
> *We loved so heedlessly and hoped for so much from?*
> *(Doesn't that whip your tragic sentiment to foam?)*
> *I drank a Pepsi like they do in NY*
> *and that fizzy noise was like how*
> *you could hear the Sonnet feasting on itself*
> *Goodbye hopeless poems! Kiss me! Kiss me! Goodbye.*

Forbes does not enjoy as much Tranter's later poems and the way, as he sees it, they "slow down [and] definite images in a cultural landscape are allowed to form: the poems become a commentary on the process of dissolution and the subject remains a sardonic but recognisable 'tone of voice'." "Cultural irony", Forbes concludes, "is not as interesting as Tranter's main achievement in those poems that draw their energy from a resistance to the inevitability of culture and its decelerations into meaning. Exit the poem, pursued by the Froth Machine".

A full critique of Tranter and "the generation of '68" – of his "Anaesthetics" as he wittily put it in the title of his 1979 Macquarie University paper on *The American Model* – is only now emerging as possible. The generation of post-modernist readers which is growing up around the Melbourne journals and periodicals such as *Scripsi, Meanjin and The Age Monthly Review* has yet to discover him and his fellow poets as the creative – or at least the lyrical – voice of their own critical endeavours, their discourse. And alongside the challenge of Tranter's work would be an assessment of the now defunct Sydney magazine *New Poetry* and its chameleon and charismatic (to some) poet-editor Robert Adamson; and the vitalist-internationalist voice of Kris Hemensley whose work has recently appeared in a collected form in *Ear in the Wheatfield.*

The critical uncertainty as to how to read these poets does not extend, however, to the more central figure in the contemporary Australian literary scene of David Malouf. He, too, has been an alert reader of American poetry, and in certain respects has been open to its influence. When he returned from several years in England in 1968, he was ready to write in a style somewhere in between Phillip Larkin and Robert Lowell, as indeed his first book of poems *Bicycle* (1970) shows. But his further reading in American poetry at the time, and his response to the Donald Hall Penguin anthology on *Contemporary American Poetry* – with its emhasis on a new subjectivity and deep image in writers such as Robert Bly, James Wright and Galway Kinnell – marked a change in Malouf's career. As it happened, it took him partly away from

poetry towards prose. Indeed the phenomenon of Australian poets becoming prose writers is one of the general features of the 1970s. Roger McDonald and Rodney Hall (and to a lesser extent Tom Shapcott himself) have moved into novel-writing fully. Malouf's transition is interesting to watch. In one sense, and as we see in his novel *Johnno* (1975), the "life studies" Lowell influence was obvious to the point of being oppressive. We might suggest that the American model in this regard was forcing the collapse of the Australian personal poem so that a prose presentation was the outcome. I feel this can be said generally of the self-dramatising tendencies of this generation of Australian writers. There were not enough resources of ego or traditional strengths in the Australian voice to sustain the pressure in (and as) verse of the Lowell, Berryman and Plath models of self-projection. The Australian style needed to diffuse this effect, and spread it out through a less harshly concentrated medium. Malouf had this characteristic Australian move to make.

The success of his central text of the 1970s *An Imaginary Life* (1978) was clearly stimulated by the visit to Australia of the American poet Robert Duncan in 1977. It was an experience, or encounter, of two very different talents and temperaments. The metaphysical romantic homoeroticism of Duncan pushed Malouf in a direction where, using the persona or mask of the Roman poet Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, he was to write one of the most sustained and dramatic love poems (in the form of a prose poem) of our time. I do not think of Duncan as the cause of Malouf's achievement. But there is no doubt that this American poet's visit triggered off an explosion of talent in the Australian writer of an extremely rare order and degree.

Now the sense that American cultures, or individual writers within it, can communicate at such depth with "cousinly" cultures elsewhere, profoundly altering the beliefs and feelings of others not so much through influence as through example, is the final note I wish to emphasize in this paper. I am thinking, here, in particular of Australian women writers, and of how in the forthcoming Penguin anthology this relation of Australian to American poetry will be seen. Sue Hampton and Kate Llewellyn, the editors, have been amongst the keenest of all readers of American verse, Sue Hampton discovering O'Hara at a key point in her career. But the important issue is the different way in which women poets have received and absorbed the American influence.

Fay Zwicky offers the strongest illustration of this point. Her longish poem "Kaddish" had a clear model in Ginsberg. Yet it is quite different. Ginsberg builds upon his Jewishness as the ground of his utterance. Zwicky discovers her Australian Jewishness through her poem. It was a bold poem for Fay Zwicky to write. And her boldness has carried her further in recent years to question many of the stereotypes and fixed points of the Australian psyche. "Why is love not revealed in our literature?" she asks in a *Quadrant* essay of May 1983. "Is it that we have no language for the feelings? Or are the feelings themselves absent?" Zwicky throws down this challenge to the Australian poetic tradition, "Speeches and Silences" is the title Zwicky gives to her essay.

> *These "Speeches and Silences" refer, then, to those antiphonal mechanisms for distancing a speaker from his hearer, used either knowingly or otherwise in a culture whose norm is emotional*

repression, and in which the suppression of spontaneity is enforced by paying lip-service to the doctrine of 'objectivity'. This is not a favourable breeding ground for the language of nurture, creativity or celebration without which love withers. Poems or fictions so fatally distanced become mere utterances hollow to the core, without a credible speaker or listener. The gambits and devices of intimacy may be present but truth is not.

It is to Walt Whitman that Zwicky turns for a resolution of this issue of the Australian's "withheld self". Shapcott recognises the problem, too, of "the peculiarly Australian tightness [in poetry], the elbows-drawn-in thinness of our particular speech". Hopefully, Shapcott detects a convergence between the opposed positions of a Les Murray and a John Tranter, the sprawl of the one and the repressed humour of the other having possibilities of "mateship" somewhere in the future. But the taunt that lies in Fay Zwicky's questions remains. Her sense that women writers are closer to the truths of Whitman (and Lawrence) suggests the present growing edge of the Australian situation in culture and poetry.