Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism

Contemporary Australian poetry, like most Anglophone poetry, is not central to public literary culture. Australian poetry, with its small audiences, reliance on small presses and dwindling governmental and university support, is generally seen as endangered. But why has a thing so culturally marginal also so routinely been described as ‘dangerous’? Why have Australian poets for so long suffered from a bad press? Australian poetry, until perhaps very recently, has often been seen as wracked by factionalism (making it a kind of cultural equivalent of the labour party). The factionalism of the 1970s especially gave Australian poets a reputation of being competitive, internecine and self-interested. Helen Garner had this to say about them in her review of The Oxford Book of Australian Letters: ‘How repulsive it is to read poets excoriating their rivals with the shameless ferocity of their ilk’ (p. 11).

I once had my own brush with the putatively dangerous nature of contemporary Australian poetry. Some years ago I reviewed a poet’s latest book for a newspaper. The review was not altogether favourable, though neither was it damning. Some days later I received an email that was comprised of the following poem:

keep a gun close by you dave
I read your review

don’t be surprised to wake one night
with half a yard of lead pipe
across your throat

you bitch in academic drag
do n’t call us no we’ll
call on you

smiling gentle
i could have told you she’s the moon

bad karma will follow you
all the days
of your
wretched distinction

and i will dwell
in a bard’s house forever
missing not the least
for your long absence.

I was, I have to admit, spooked. A friend, who was a poet and academic, helpfully knew his Australian poetry better than I did. The poem was a quotation. It was by Michael Dransfield (‘Bi-shits revisited’, p.369). The ‘dave’ in question was, apparently, David Malouf, who was then working at the University of Sydney.

The email was disconcerting not just for its content (its articulation), but also for its clever disarticulation. It was a threat, but not a threat. It was a poem, but not a poem. The poem was for me and not for me. How could I respond? After a day I wrote back (with acknowledgement to its author) the following lines from Laurie Duggan’s ‘Translations of Martial’:

Dransfield, who wrote
200 poems each day,
was wiser than his editor
who printed them. (1996, p. 111)

The first email was perhaps a joke, but it was an unsettling one, suggesting the precariousness of both writing and reading poetry professionally. (Happily, the poet and I have been in touch subsequently and are, I believe, on good terms).

If poetry is endangered it can also appear to be dangerous (for its practitioners, for its readers). Indeed, one might speculate a link between those two conditions. ‘Surviving Australian poetry’, then, can be articulated in two ways (as something that survives and that requires surviving). Many poets, John
Forbes and Dransfield among them, have commented on the cost of being a poet in a nation indifferent to poetry. Poetry is a discipline that engenders strong emotions, but it also − as the poetry-quoting emails above suggest − an art form that can deal dangerously with the distinction between reality and unreality, between self and other.

This is as much a strength of poetry as a problematic. It is significant that the poets who were used for our respective ventriloquisms (Dransfield and Duggan) are associated with a period of Australian literary history (the Generation of ’68) when cultural revolution seemed a real possibility, and when dangerous play seemed to offer real payoffs. This moment of potential poetic and cultural revolution was a time when a group of poets (mostly male) aggressively took on what they saw as the limited (and Anglophile) establishment poetry that had allegedly atrophied in the hands of academics and professional poets. These were poets who, according to their historian Livio Dobrez, could ‘say it’ (p. 62). My correspondent and I were less able to say it; more aware of the dangerous condition of thinking that poetry could ‘say’ anything of consequence.

So what was the meaning of that strange email encounter between the reviewer and the poet, figures, in our poetic landscape, who are decidedly interchangeable? Was it the end of the revolutionary times, a reinvigoration of them, or a strange (and disembodied) parody of them? What does it signify with regard to Australian poetry? To begin answering that question, I will briefly consider some developments in Australian poetry in the last ten years.

A decade ago things seemed dire for poetry in Australia. The major players in poetry publishing − Angus & Robertson, Penguin, Heinemann, and Picador − were struggling and were soon to withdraw more or less entirely. In the case of Angus & Robertson, this meant dropping a list that included Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, James McAuley, David Campbell, and Francis Webb (in other words, most of the canonical poets of that generation) as well as Les Murray, David Malouf, John Forbes and Geoff Page. Only the University of Queensland Press remained a vibrant publisher of poetry, but as far as poetry went they became for the most part − rather discreetly − a regional press, publishing Queensland-based writers. While publishers might disappear, poets don’t, and smaller presses (either new or consolidating) filled the publishing vacuum, among them Five Islands Press, Dulcy & Snellgrove, Brandl & Schlesinger, Black Pepper, and more recently Salt Publishing (an Anglo-Australian venture) and Giramondo.

While newspapers have almost abandoned poetry, Cordite, a poetry-dedicated tabloid, was launched in 1997, and literary journals remain strong supporters of contemporary poetry, from established journals such as Southerly, Overland and Meanjin to newer titles like Going Down Swingin’, Uitara, Siglo, and the internationally oriented Heat and Boxkite. The rise of ethnic minority writing has been seen in journals such as Ostrider and non-English publications such as Otherland, the Australian Chinese-language literary journal edited by Ouyang Yu. Among poetry-dedicated journals there are or has been Saltlick New Poetry (now defunct), Papertiger (on CD Rom), Jacket (on line) and Blue Dog.

Many of these publishing houses and journals were founded by poets. The immense energy and productivity of Australia’s poet-publishers and poet-editors suggest that poetry is largely supported by individuals rather than institutions. Ron Pretty − the founder of Five Islands Press, Blue Dog, and the Poetry Australia Foundation − is one of the most active participants in this supportive work. He is also one of a number of poet-publishers who
continue the merging between writer and producer that characterized the Generation of ’68. Others include Robert Adamson (Paper Bark, now also defunct); Kevin Pearson (Black Pepper); John Kinsella (Salt Publishing); Ian Templeman (Molonglo); Ken Bolton (Little Esther); and Michael Brennan (Vagabond). With Kris Hemensley’s Melbourne bookshop, Collected Works, they represent (despite difficulties) an active, independent spirit in Australian poetry publishing and book selling.

The disaster, then, did not happen. The smaller presses live a precarious life, but they publish books in number and quality that show that not only is Australian poetry surviving but also that it is in a kind of golden age (if only in terms of writing and production). This ‘golden age’ is one that has largely gone unnoticed, perhaps because contemporary poetry is in the paradoxical situation of both thriving and merely surviving. With very little capital input, the quality of Australian poetry is booming, despite the continued problems associated with distribution, marketing, reader education and sales.

Whilst booming, poetry remains a minority art form. As Laurie Duggan ironically observes in Mangroves, ‘Most poetry exists as a kind of memorial for its lost self; it inhabits the realm of the cultural artifact ‘poem’ like a tramp in a condemned apartment building’ (p. 143). If the conditions of being a minority art form and existing in a ‘post-poetic age’ suggest a context of exhaustion, the growth of publishing houses and journals mentioned above shows an attempt to invigorate through the targeting of niche markets. But these conditions do not simply apply to the publishing of poetry. They are fundamental to the practice of writing poetry, to the responsibilities of the individual poet. As the American poet Robert Pinsky puts it in ‘The Responsibilities of the Poet’:

First, only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not been made poetry already by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no new use, the art rots. Second, the habits and the visions of the art itself, which we are responsible for keeping alive, can seem to conspire against that act of use or witness. The material or rhetoric that seems already, on the face of it, proper to poetry may have been made poetic already by Baudelaire, or Wordsworth, or Rilke, or Neruda.

Any age, in other words, is potentially post-poetic. If such thinking sounds Bloomian, it is because it is more properly Emersonian, a recognition that poetic power cannot only be found within what is considered proper to poetry; that one must respond to the aggression of ‘tradition’ with an aggression of one’s own. Significantly, contemporary Australian poets recognize this condition without engaging in the factional, generational rhetoric of thirty years ago. Contemporary poetry demonstrates how poetry can renew itself in part by writing against the ‘the habits and visions’ of poetry itself while still seeking effects central to the poetic. As I will explain, this renewal in the Australian context can be seen as a kind of ‘new lyricism’.

Before discussing this alleged ‘new lyricism’, it is worth first noting that some of these reinvigorating responses are not solely expressed in terms of poetic practice (at the level of the lyric poem), but are observable in ‘larger’ practices. These can be associated with publishing practices (such as anthologies), formal innovation (such as verse novels) and orientation (such as ‘worldliness’ over nationalism). These three responses are considered below as strategic responses to poetry’s marginal status and its post-revolutionary (if not post-poetic) condition.

One key publishing practice in the last fifteen years has been the anthology. Even more so than the 1970s, the 1990s was the decade of the Australian poetry anthology. The anthology helps
avoid the risks of poetry publishing by appealing to a larger market, most especially education markets (though sometimes, too, the gift market, as seen in The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems). Oxford University Press in Melbourne dominated with this type of thematic-historical anthology. Others include The Oxford Book of Religious Verse, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse). These anthologies more or less cornered the market, though it is perhaps no surprise that this project has lapsed since the departure from OUP of the publisher-poet Peter Rose (now the editor of Australian Book Review). These anthologies attempted to invest Australian poetry with historical coherence while avoiding the factionalism that marked the anthologies of previous decades (paradigmatically illustrated by the Robert Gray-Geoffrey Lehmann anthologies, The Younger Australian Poets, 1983, and Australian Poetry in the Twentieth-Century, 1991).

A project notably different from that of OUP's was the Paper Bark anthology Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets (2000), edited by Michael Brennan and Peter Minter. While programmatically an introduction to 'new' poets (not all of whom were young), the anthology lacks the oppositional or generational rhetoric of the anthologies of the 1970s (such as Tom Shapcott's Australian Poetry Now, 1970, and John Tranter's The New Australian Poetry, 1979). As the editors write in their introduction, 'the poets gathered here represent what could be termed a recombinant poetics, a leaning towards respectful interactions and hybridizations in method and design, and the application of what is learned to specific cultural and material conditions' (p. 13). The poetry in Calyx is often difficult and shows a strong family resemblance to Language poetry. Its formal and intellectual difficulty, however, repeatedly presents itself as a form of witnessing of both personal and political issues. In retrospect, it is interesting to see how many of the Calyx poets are currently central to contemporary Australian poetry. These include Luke Davies, Kate Fagan, Michael Farrell, MTC Cronin, Kate Lilley, John Mateer, and the volume's editors.

In 2003 there was the simultaneous rise of two series of anthologies that claim to offer the best in each year's publications: UQP's The Best Australian Poetry and Black Inc's The Best Australian Poems. The former is organized like its US counterpart with one poem per poet previously published by a local periodical. The latter series has been less constrained by an editorial template and has shown, in its two issues, a greater openness to its editors' personal styles. Ivor Indyk, the editor of Heat, recently argued in Australian Book Review that such anthologies (though mostly the Black Inc series) represent an exploitative relationship between mainstream publishing and literary journals (which are always financially struggling). Whatever the case, they do represent the latest way in which publishing is even prepared to market poetry to a general readership.

One of the other areas in which mainstream publishing has shown some interest in poetry has been in the field of verse novels, in particular those of Dorothy Porter, whose verse novel The Monkey's Mask (1994) was a massive publishing, as well as critical, success. (Indeed, its success has been the topic of a number of critical interventions, such as that by Lyn McCredden). The Monkey's Mask also showed an unprecedented capacity for 'branding'. It not only ran to numerous editions, but it was also adapted for talking book, radio play, stage play and feature film. In the light of this success it might have seemed that the verse novel could have been the saving of Australian poetry. Such a sentiment was seen in the notably numerous pieces in the mainstream media about Porter's success. The story on the ABC's 7.30 Report, 'Australian Poetry Makes a Comeback', was characteristic in presenting the
resurgence of Australian poetry as ‘largely due to the success of one writer, Dorothy Porter’. Certainly there was an upsurge in the publication of verse novels in Australia. Les Murray’s second (and by far the better of the two), Feral Neptune, appeared in 1998. Jordie Albiston’s ‘documentary’ verse novels, Botany Bay Document (1996) and The Hanging of Jean Lee (1998), showed that Australian history was not only the preserve of local fiction writers. Other verse novels include Philip Hodgins’s Dispossessed (1994), Porter’s What A Piece of Work (1999) and Wild Sunrise (2002), Alan Weare’s mammoth The Nightmarkets (1986) and The Lovemakers (2000 and 2004), Paul Hetherington’s Blood and Old Belief (2003), Geoff Page’s The Scarring (1999) and Drumming on Water (2003), and children’s verse novels by Stephen Herrick (including By the River, 2004) and Margaret Wild (Jinx, 2001). (Christopher Polinitz, in his survey of Australian verse novels, points out that ‘over a third’ of verse novels published are Young Adult works, p. 235).

As Murray’s and Weare’s names remind us, verse novels aren’t new in Australia, but their proliferation in recent years is notable. In particular, they have been presented as a publishing as much as a poetic response to the difficulty inherent in marketing poetry. But verse novels have not in any general way been the redemption of poetry in the public sphere. Rather, verse novels are another example of the heterogeneity of forms that poetry has adopted in the face of a difficult market. In other words, if it is marketing it remains niche marketing.

The third response to the current condition of poetry is less tangible than anthologies and verse novels. It is the ‘worldliness’ of Australian poetry. This is not something that publishers will necessarily recognize, but there is a notable worldliness to contemporary Australian poetry. The old arguments about British or American influence seem passé. As Calyx (and also John Kinsella’s Landbridge of 1999) attempts to illustrate, the contemporary Australian poet is attracted to the ‘recombinant poetic’ that can be found through any number of antecedents not determined by nationality. The poet-critic Martin Harrison notes how Australian literary histories haven’t necessarily caught up with this development. He points out in his recent book of essays on poetry, Who Wants to Create Australia?, that ‘The study of Australian poetry is formed almost entirely according to an underlying genetic mode’ (p. 71), a mode centred on influence, inheritance, derivation, and generationalism. It is an excellent point, and attention to the worldliness of Australian poetry is one way of avoiding the limitations of such a model.

We only need look at the poets’ work: MTC Cronin’s Talking with Neruda’s Questions; John Tranter’s parodic translations of Rilke and his machine poems; Michael Brennan’s complex reworkings of Mallarmé and Rilke; Kate Lilley’s engagement with country music and seventeenth-century English verse in Versary; Peter Steele’s ekphrastic work, Plenty (with its poems about paintings from across the ages); Ian McByde’s poetic history of the Third Reich, Domain; and Judith Beveridge’s ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, which integrates poetry with Buddhist practices and beliefs. The list could go on.

Harrison argues convincingly that key concerns in Australian poetry continue to be self and place (updated as subjectivity, the environment and the senses). This is no doubt true, but keeping the sense of worldliness in mind there could be other, less thematic, elements that could be equally illustrative of current Australian poetry. Two tropes that are not thematic and might not even seem to be about Australian poetry at all come to mind: the uncanny and a form of lyricism that is simultaneously a reinvigoration of the lyric mode and a critique of it. Together these three tropes – worldliness,
the uncanny and lyricism – comprise what I will term, perhaps portentously, 'the new lyricism'. The three tropes are related in unexpected ways, as I hope my four examples (from four recent works) below will show.

As Nicholas Royle writes in his book on the subject, 'The uncanny entails another thinking of beginning: the beginning is already haunted'. The uncanny is also 'a crisis of the proper' (disturbing notions of ownership and proper names) and 'a crisis of the natural' (disturbing understandings of self, human nature and the nature of the world) (p. 1). The uncanny has to do with strangeness, eeriness. But to define it is paradoxical, since it is also about a troubling of definitions. We can find in it the unfamiliarity of the familiar, or in the sense of the familiar in the unfamiliar. As Royle writes, 'It can consist in a sense of homelessness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home'. As Royle and Andrew Bennett point out in their *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, the uncanny takes numerous forms, including repetition (seen in déjà vu and the doppelgänger), odd coincidences or a sense of fatefulness, anthropomorphism, automatism, clausrophobia, telepathy and death (pp. 35-38).

There was something uncanny about the email encounter described at the beginning of this essay. The poem that was sent to me was a double of a poem, a poem in quotation marks (so therefore not simply a poem). It was also an event that made reading a poem seem utterly strange and unfamiliar, despite the fact that I have read poems professionally for many years. It unsettled the idea of the poem’s origin. (Where did it begin? With the author’s intentions or the intentions of the person quoting it?) It also unsettled notions of the proper: it lacked a proper name attached to it (who was the author?) and the idea of what was proper to poetry (how should poetry be used?).

This experience, however disturbing (indeed because it was disturbing), was paradigmatically literary, despite its extra literary occasion. The effect of the uncanny is especially marked when reading Australian poetry, in part because of the conditions that I have been enumerating. As ‘another thinking’ about beginning it resonates with the poet’s need to be loyal to poetry and disloyal to allow it to continue (as in Pinsk’s need). As a crisis of the proper and the natural, it is particularly pertinent to Australian poets, with their continued anxiety about self and place (as in Harrison’s account).

In particular, the worldliness referred to above can be seen as 'something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home'. A prominent use of the uncanny is at work in poems as diverse as Emma Lew, Jordie Albiston, Dorothy Porter, Kate Lilley, Judith Beveridge, Peter Minter, Chris Edwards, and Michael Farrell. Significantly, these are poets attracted to the figure of repetition, especially formal repetition (such as chain structures) in the work of Lew, Beveridge and Albiston, and rhetorical repetition (intertextuality, the cut up technique) in the work of Minter, Farrell and Edwards. (The difference along gender lines here is teasing). Here we will consider two examples. The first is by Emma Lew.

**Sinking Song**

*You, me, money and fear—*  
*the rings of planets through our hands.*  
*We are just strong enough*  
*to make the tides work for us.*  
*We could move in the veins of orchids.*

*In the wonderful phrasing of this evening,*  
*fire runs along us as a man.*  
*All vanished animals weep,*  
*and cities, built merely to fall,*  
*drown in birds.*

*Come, trust the world—it's still night,*  
*and the moon wishes to dissipate,*  
*and earth groans under its weight of mice,*
Like many of Lew’s poems, this relies on the uncanny potential of the non sequitur. It is like a collection of individual lines that magically go together to make a poem. Lew’s tableaux, which often have the air of traditional tales or allegories, are characteristically uncanny. ‘Sinking Song’ is like a love song made strange. The opening line is an acerbic observation of many everyday relationships. But as with the way of love songs, the everyday is not the focus. Rather the emphasis on the cosmic and the minute provides an unsettling context, one that drives towards the apocalyptic. In the final stanza, the old romantic cliché, the moon, appears, but the rhymes and half rhymes add to the sense of strangeness. The injunction (presumably to the lover) to ‘trust the world’ is remarkably unstable, and the final lines sound like a blessing that has become a curse.

The source of the uncanny, here, is largely syntactical, suggesting connections and disjunctions that are intensely unsettling. Our second example, by Michael Brennan, is more thematically engaged with the uncanny.

‘The Other’

He has been drinking
in my father’s coat
slowly filling it with laughter.
There are histories he tells
I am no longer sure I have lived
or simply dreamt stretched in
the long grass of past summers.

Sometimes he murmurs
in the dark, We dream the real.

Rising the other morning
it seemed he stole love from me,
returning its shadow. Little by little
I have surrendered everything
to him. There may be new love

in the morning but first
there must come the night.

Sleep arrives slowly,
carrying the face of a stranger. (p. 18)

‘The Other’, is of course the poet. The uncanny figure of the double is overtly present, especially in the Borgesian notion that we dream reality. (And in a further doubling Borges’s ‘Borges and I’ is quoted in lines 12-14). Dreaming is inherently uncanny, a kind of doubling of the poetic process. As Paul Kane writes of this poem in his review of The Imageless World, ‘the dream processes of compression and condensation, with their attendant qualities of brevity and substitution, are very close to the way this poetry operates, asking us to read between the lines as well as the lines themselves’. There are, then, two doppelgangers here: that of the poet and that of the poem. In both cases the doppelganger is associated with sleep, both of which are associated with death, another profoundly uncanny trope. Sleep is uncanny not only because it is death-like, but also because it unsettles notions of the nature of self (How can I be me when I am asleep if I am unconscious of myself?) Sleep, like death, makes the body unfamiliar, and like death, always carries ‘the face of a stranger’.

From the uncanny we turn to the lyric mode as a form that survives through both reinvigoration and critique. It is notable that even in a work like Calyx the lyric mode continues, often even while it’s being dismantled. Poets such as Kate Fagan and John Kinsella routinely offer uncanny versions of the world that are both lyrical and suspicious of the lyric impulse. In Kinsella’s ‘Graphology’ sequence, for instance, the limits – as well as the attractions – of the lyric mode are constantly highlighted by being presented in terms of other discourses, especially those of the sciences: ‘The blue emollient of winter/says that water will bring down bio-diversity’.

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Lyricism is what we associate most commonly with poetry: musicality; brevity; intensity; the drive to epiphany or insight; and an emphasis on thought, feeling and subjectivity (usually conceived in more or less stable terms). The 'new lyricism' continues the lyrical project by being both faithful and unfaithful to poetry. It is musical and so forth, but generally in a more self-conscious way; it often has a kind of muscularity about it, even a toughness that is bedded within the lyrical expression (that can be seen especially in the work of Anthony Lawrence); there is also an openness to and understanding of what we might in shorthand call 'theory', a kind of metatextuality in which complex notions of text, identity, and form are integrated and interrogated. This can be seen for instance in Kate Fagan's 'Return to a new physics': 'lyric interjects / demanding specific / impatient approval // quick like junk, / memorial about position / and meaning' (p. 25). In this sense the lyric mode itself often makes strange and operates in an uncanny way.

One striking example of this 'new lyricism' is Luke Davies' Totem Poem', the opening page of which reads:

In the yellow time of pollen, in the blue time of lilacs,
in the green that would balance on the wide green world,
air filled with flux, world-in-a-belly
in the blue blue weather, she had written a letter:
You come into my life really fast and I liked it.

When we let go the basket of good-luck birds
the sky erupted open in the hall of its libration;
there was a gap and we entered it gladly.
Indeed the birds
may have broken the sky and we, soaked,
squelched
in the mud of our joy, braided with wet-thighed surrender.
In the yellow time of pollen near the blue time of lilacs

Lyrical energy, plenitude, love poetry, the visionary, extended intensity are all present. The poem also incorporates in a serio-comic way philosophical and religious terms and ideas. The poem as a whole is a kind of cosmogony of love that incorporates aspects of Hinduism, physics, and popular culture. In this respect it is profoundly self-conscious of its lyrical status. As Cameron Woodhead points out in his review of Totem, the poem relies heavily on images of nature and does so (thanks to its originality and lyrical intensity) without being clichéd (p. 4). The work also manages to be jokey without undermining the raison d'être of the lyrical love poem: praise.

Davies in 'Totem Poem' is a 'maximal' poet. My last example is a model of compression and suggests something of the relationship between worldliness and lyricism. It comes from Judith Beveridge's sequence 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree', which recreates Siddhattha's years of wandering before becoming the Buddha:

Egret

The egret hesitates before it steps
towards an insect—it seems to wear
its stillness like a corset. Its neck
a white ceramic towards which
its mirrored knees might genuflect.
Otherwise, celibate—
oh, manicured object—you're some
righteous sect's uncharred lamp wick. (p. 72)

The emphasis here is on clarity, intense observation, though the skilled use of internal half rhymes ('egret', 'insect', 'corset') suggests a mysterious connect-
edness between intense observation and imagination. The lyricism uses paradox to drive it, presenting the natural in terms of the cultural (corset, ceramic, mirror). Paradox is also seen in the bird’s description as ‘Otherworldly’, though the poem does not mystify: the bird is also about to eat an insect. The reference to the lamp wick brings to mind the Buddhist notion of karma (rebirth) traditionally imaged as a flame which passes from lamp to lamp, one flame being able to light countless lamps. But the fact that it is uncharred is interesting, especially with the slightly ironic reference to a righteous sect. The poem both places and displaces the bird as real, as dependent on other things. It also does this in a way that is aware of the antecedents of its lyrical energy.

Australian poetry, then, is a poetry of survival. Those who practice it have to survive the condition of being a poet in a time and place mostly indifferent to poetry and poets. As readers we survive poetry, even poems that can look like threats. But the poetry might also survive us. Contemporary Australian poetry survives by responding, as I’ve suggested, in various material ways to the difficulties of publishing in a limited market. But it also survives through various types of poetic renewal (which I have termed the ‘new lyricism’). Renewal can be formal (such as the recent attraction to the verse novel), but it can also be less obvious. It can be about a deep interaction with the world (and ceasing to care about looking ‘Australian’) and with a profound and local engagement with what appear to be basic categories of literature: the uncanny and the lyric mode.

And so even as Australian poetry appears to be declining, it returns, stranger and tougher than before. As Michael Brennan writes in ‘Ellipses’: ‘He sat up all night crying into his tea. The poem was too vulnerable by half, so he fed it tape-worms, peanut butter and gin’ (p. 15).

WORKS CITED

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