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five bells and the Poets Union Inc. regret that they cannot pay contributors for their work.
Morning is Wave Heavy

Morning is wave heavy with regret
there is no point in early showers
only the precipitation of tears
will stand for something other
than sadness
or loss

last night the peculiar dream
of watching an oil tanker
beach its huge bulk in a storm
back broken in two places
leaking black crude
shore line lost to wind and rain
half awake until lunch time
the day will not float
and afternoon is full of shoals
salvage teams are all out
attending other emergencies
there's no shelter in the suburbs
and we carry the ruins
toward evening
and the late sharp reef of hours
there is a cycle to this
but little purpose
the past repeating itself

in the nightmare of allegory
and the long slow suppuration
and shipwreck of all of our selves.

Jeffrey Guess

Two Developments in Contemporary Australian Poetry

David McCooey

CONTEMPORARY Australian poetry, like other Anglophone poetries, is routinely seen as under-valued and under-represented in public culture. The most obvious index of this is anxiety over sales of poetry collections. Peter Rose, for instance, in his introduction to The Best Australian Poems 2007 argues that 'Sales of individual poetry collections in Australia are worryingly low, regardless of how many prizes or good reviews they garner, or how often the authors are anthologised' (p.xii). As he points out himself, this sentiment echoes that of his predecessor, Dorothy Porter, who wrote in The Best Australian Poems 2006 that 'The real tragedy of Australian poetry is not how few good poets there are, but how few books of poetry are bought and read' (p.xi). Both claims are equally conventional and accurate with regard to their field. Another related truism of the field is articulated by Peter Porter in his introduction to The Best Australian Poetry 2005 when he argues that 'It seems that poetry is doomed to never become a spectator sport, but always a practitioner's' (p.xvii).

These editors (all of whom are noted poets) make clear that contemporary poetry's marginal place in public culture is not necessarily a reflection of its literary quality. Indeed, some commentators have claimed that Australian poetry is, in terms of production if not consumption, currently undergoing something of a 'golden age.' And while the market for poetry has largely collapsed, one can certainly find evidence of dynamism in the sector. The rise of independent presses publishing major and emerging poets in high-quality books continues unabated, as illustrated by the existence of presses such as Giramondo, soi 3, and John Leonard Press. The two annual anthologies published by major publishers — UQP's The Best Australian Poetry and Black Inc's The Best Australian Poems — are now in their sixth year. Non-print outlets are also notably present. These include long-standing outlets, such as ABC Radio National's PoeticA program, and newer ones, such as the Red Room Company's online Red Room Radio. Organisational support for poetry, from the Poets Union, the Melbourne Poets' Union, and the Australian Poetry Centre, is at a new high, with such organisations administering various journals, events, prizes, and chapbook publications. The rise of new and lucrative prizes in recent years — such as the ABR poetry prize (worth $4,000) and the David Harold Tribe Award (worth $11,000) — is also a notable feature of the current poetic landscape.

These material developments are undoubtedly a sign of a certain type of virility. But they are also a sign of poetry's continued marginality, as articulated by Rose, Porter, and Porter, in mainstream public culture. Prizes and poetry organisations, laudable though they clearly are, imply a structure of 'support' for an inherently
The 'extra-lyrical' mode

As mentioned, 'extra-lyrical' poetry refers here to a type of poetry that does not easily fit into one of the traditional classes of poetry: lyric, narrative, and dramatic. While 'extra-lyrical' poetry, as its designation suggests, does not fit the usual parameters of lyric poetry, neither is it clearly narrative or dramatic verse in the conventional senses. The lyrical mode is what we most commonly associate with contemporary 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). Poetry that employs an extra-lyrical mode, while retaining certain features of the lyric mode such as intensity, musicality, and an attention to matters relating to subjectivity, also takes on non-lyric elements, such as large-forms, quasi-narratives, and revisionism.

In this respect the 'extra-lyrical' mode is related to what I have termed elsewhere 'the new lyricism' (Mccooey, 2005). This latter term refers to three notable elements in contemporary Australian poetry: a pronounced sense of worldliness; an intense interest in the uncanny (in which the interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar produces unsettling effects); and a form of lyrical expression that simultaneously reinvigorates and critiques the lyric mode. This third element links the 'new lyricism' with the 'extra-lyrical' mode. Both modes continue the lyrical project by being both faithful and unfaithful to lyric poetry: they are musical and so forth, but generally in a more self conscious way; they are often suspicious of purely lyrical expression; and they are also open 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. These elements can be seen characteristically, for instance, in the poetry of John Kinsella.

The two modes differ in the degree to which they relate to narrative and dramatic verse, and the employment of large forms. What I am terming the 'extra-lyrical' mode is usually found in large works that are eccentric, formally or otherwise. One of the major developments of recent Australian poetry has been the upsurge of such 'eccentric' works. These works are usually book-length, ambitious, and self-conscious moves away from the lyric mode. Such works include: ITO's 24 Hours (1996); Alanearne's The Lovemakers (2000/2004); Justin Clemen's The Mundiodi (2004); Luke Davies'Totem (2004); MTCCronin's MoreorLess Than: 1-100> (2004) and Our Life is a Box/Prayers Without a God (2007); Ian Mcarthy's Domain (2004); Philip Salom's The Well Mouth (2005); Chris Wallace-Crabbe's The Universe Looks Down (2005); John Watson's Montale: ABiographical Anthology (2006); Jordie Albiston's Vertigo (2007); JS Harry's NotFinding Wittgenstein (2007); John Kinsella's Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful (2008) and Divine Comedy (2008); and Ouyang Yu's The Kingsbury Tales (2008). Such works are not verse novels but large, idiosyncratic works that undermine the distinctions between lyric and narrative poetry, poetic and non-poetic thinking. They are stylistically and formally adventurous, and are concerned with metaphysical issues or 'large themes.'

While works such as NotFinding Wittgenstein, The Lovemakers, and The Universe Looks Down have narrative elements, they resist the conventional expectations of narrative by being more concerned with the momentary and the episodic, rather than large-scale narrative coherence, and with engaging in themes that are only marginally related to any narrative impetus the works may have. In other works, the narrative frames are largely present to enable serio-comic discussions of wider concerns. For Wallace-Crabbe these concerns are metaphysical; for Harry they are philosophical; and forearne they are sociological.

Harry's Not Finding Wittgenstein shows its extra-lyrical quality by being comprised of discontinuous narratives that allow a wide range of philosophical, ethical, and political concerns to be addressed. These discontinuous narratives centre on 'Peter Henry Lepus' (Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit), and his search for meaning in the various contexts Harry places him: conversing with Bertrand
Looking for the grass
    growing sweetly round the graves
in a forgotten churchyard, in Russia,
in April nineteen ninety-one,
Peter comes to a dilapidated
human work of stone — crammed
with disintegrating ancient books,
one-of-a-kind manuscripts,
and crumbling first editions. (p.42)

The description of a church as a 'human work of stone' is an example of
how Peter's rabbit-perspective allows a large-scale use of defamiliarisation,
something that is usually employed in the service of shock. The shock of poetic
defamiliarisation is conventionally aesthetic: a renewal of our ways of seeing the
world. In Harry's work, however, such shock is related not just to aesthetics, but
also to ethics. In this instance, the ethics of justice and ownership are of concern.
The books in the church, along with a 'million or so' artworks, represent the Nazis'
stolen treasures, which were subsequently appropriated by the Russians. What
appears to be the ghost of a Russian art historian states that 'Most of the people/
these artefacts belonged to/ were murdered, in the ways of the human race/ that
are most vile,' adding that it is 'our duty' to return them (p.44). Peter's response to
the historian's comments is comically inapposite. Comparing the artefacts with
grass and trees he decides that the latter are resources for any animal that can
use them. Nevertheless, he decides that 'A million things — whether edible/ or
not — seem too many/ for one bearded rabbit to store in its burrow/ or even
for a colony with a warren to hold' (p.45). The weight of human history, crimes,
and war become even more pronounced themes in the second half of Not Finding
Wittgenstein in which the Iraq War becomes the focus of ethical enquiry.

The large-scale digressive quality found in Not Finding Wittgenstein is shared
The Lovemakers is a prolix yet diffuse work. For all the work's similarity with the
Victorian novel (its size, its digressiveness, its concern with the way we live now),
it has far less interest in individual heroes and clear narrative lines. It works by
accretion and intersection. The stories in The Lovemakers are as much about milieus
as individuals. There are stories about Canberra, a school reunion, a Sydney party,
drug running, the business world, and the professional sporting world. Weare isn't so much interested in the opportunities that multiple narrative perspectives
offer (in the way that the modernists were), as with giving a sense of multiplicity
and the complex networks that make up generations, society and selfhood. In
this sense his employment of an extra-lyrical mode is related to an interest in
representing intersubjective complexities not usually dealt with in lyric poetry.

As this announcement makes clear, Yu operates through the re-telling of
narratives, whether these are from official history, conversations with taxi drivers,
or snippets of overheard conversations. As John Kinsella argues in his introduction
to the work, this process allows for a

new space for the telling of rejected and minimised experience on public
records, in constructions of nation and race. In re-telling a tale already
told (and accepted as 'real' — amusing, dismissive, quaint, repellent, or any
other offensive appellations) a reclamation takes place.' (p.10)

This reclamation is a product of Yu's use of an extra-lyrical mode, one which
encapsulates prose fiction as much as other Chinese and Australian poetry.
Where Weare and Yu are interested in the sociological, and Harry is
interested in the philosophical, Wallace-Crabbe, in The Universe Looks Down,
is more generally interested in the metaphysical. A type of postmodern quest,
The controlling consciousness of the poem, the 'scribe' Milena, begins by worrying over the 'root of consciousness' as she makes her first mark on a 'snowblank sheet of paper' that turns out not to be a tabula rasa (p.7), a notable opening gesture for a work so concerned with the impurity of poetic (lyrical) expression.

In contrast to these three works, many of the other 'eccentric' works listed earlier are less concerned even with a vestigial narrative, advertsing instead to a continued link with lyrical writing, either through being made up of lyrics (as in Kinsella's and Cronin's works), or because the intense lyrical moment is extended across large-scale works. We see this latter characteristic in Luke Davies' postmodern love poem, Totem Poem, which begins:

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 lilac weather, she had written a letter:
You came 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 libation;
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
there was a gap in things. And here we are.
The sparrows flew away so fast a camera could not catch them.
The monkey swung between our arms and said I am, hooyay,
the monkey of all events, the great gibbon of convergences. (p.1)

Lyrical energy, plenitude, love poetry, the visionary, and extended intensity are all present. The poem also incorporates in a serio-comic way philosophical and religious terms and ideas, consistent with the 'extra-lyrical' designation. Indeed, 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. It incorporates in a seriocomic way philosophical and religious terms and ideas that make it emblematic of the kind of worldliness, range, and ambition found in other 'eccentric' works of Australian poetry of the last five years.

Not all of the works I've referred to as 'eccentric' take this lush, maximalist path, but all of them are attracted to poetic risk. In part this risk can be seen in the eccentric use of revisionism. Works such as Kinsella's Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful and Divine Comedy illustrate a powerful extra-lyrical eccentricity through programmatic revisionism. In the first example, Kinsella revises the terms and findings of Edmund Burke's study into the sublime and beautiful. In the second he offers 'distractions' on Dante's Divine Comedy. Similarly, Justin Clemens's The Mundial uses Pope's The Dunciad as a model by which, in this case, to satirise the contemporary world.

War Poets
Even since before the beginning of the Iraq War in March 2003, Australian poets have written poems on the politics and ethics of that conflict. One notable example of this is the Poets Union's 'Poems about War' project in which poems by Australian poets were handed to the then Prime Minister, John Howard, in March 2003, just before the US-led campaign began. In the same month Salt Publishing launched their 100 Poets Against the War (a project begun by the online journal nthposition), which appeared as both an e-book and a physical book. The anthology (produced in a week) includes poetry by poets from numerous nations, including Australia. Such productions illustrate two things common to most writing on this subject: a sense of urgency, and a reassertion of poets' roles as active citizens.

The AustLit database lists 120 works under the subject 'Iraq War (2003). Most of these items are poems and collections of poems, including works by Bruce Dawe, Susan Hawthorne, Pam Brown, Tim Thorne, Adrian Caesar, and Barry Hill. The 'Iraq War' poems of these poets are, unsurprisingly, diverse in style and approach. Bruce Dawe's poems, for instance, often take a coalition perspective that implies good will at a soldier's level, if not a governmental one. The soldier in Umm Qaisr, for instance, ends his meditation on the 'welcome' that the coalition forces received with the assertion that 'we did not come to torture, maim, or kill/, but to give new hope to those who felt forsaken' (p.134).

Tim Thorne, on the other hand, is overtly satirical in his representation of American interests in his Mesopotamian Suite. In the third section of the sequence, Two Purty Gals from West Virginia, his satire becomes assertively comic, as seen in the apostrophe to Lynndie England, the former US Army reservist who was one of several military personnel convicted by courts-martial in relation to the torture and abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad during the occupation of Iraq:

Lynndie, we can forgive
the pointing finger, the leash, the cheeky grin,
but not the spelling of your name.
You were only following orders.
They weren't even Americans.
But what were your parents thinking? (p.186)
cheeky grin are all, of course, elements of the shocking photographic evidence of the abuse that was occurring in Abu Ghraib at the time, as disseminated by the global media, one of a number of references to media imagery of the war in Thorne's sequence.

Such reliance on media-disseminated imagery is, not surprisingly, the basis of much poetry about the war. As Bridie McCarthy argues in her essay on Australian poetry concerning the Gulf War and the Iraq War, the relationship between the status of the war in Iraq and its representation is one of the main concerns of Australian poets. As McCarthy writes:

"The reciprocal relationship between politics and poetry is an intriguing one, especially in this case. The cognitive and literary allure of the spectacles of the Western occupation of Iraq is obvious. What is much more poignant is the Australian poetic response to these situations - where war is understood discursively as a struggle for supremacy within the realm of representation. Following this hypothesis — that Western interference in the Middle East has occurred on both physical and virtual terrain — much contemporary Australian poetry consciously unearths this agenda; detailing it in lines of sophisticated critique. (pp.118-19)"

McCarthy's discussion relies on a Baudrillardian framework in which the war is an example of 'simulacra' or 'simulation' (Jean Baudrillard's terms for the collapse of the distinction between reality and its representations).

Three recent collections stand out as evidence of both an upsurge of poetry in the wake of the Iraq War and a desire to critique the simulated nature of that war: Jennifer Maiden's Friendly Fire (2005); Robert Adamson's The Goldfinches of Baghdad (2006); and JS Harry's Not Finding Wittgenstein (2007). Maiden is especially concerned with the relationship between reality and its representation. The work's key sequence is 'George Jeffreys' in which characters from Maiden's novel Play with Knives discover the world after 9/11. Jeffreys, 'a Probation Officer turned Human Rights investigator,' moves from Afghanistan to the White House in an episodic work that anatomises George W Bush and his 'War on Terror.' The sequence ends, tellingly, in Baghdad, where Jeffreys has a profoundly ironic conversation with Saddam Hussein concerning the war dead.

Maiden deftly combines the lyric mode with satire, verse essay, diary, and occasional verse (and in this sense she is representative of what I termed earlier the 'new lyricism' in Australian poetry: a revised, theoretically engaged, self-reflexive engagement with the lyric mode). As McCarthy points out, Maiden is 'Historically committed to a political poetics' and therefore 'makes it her prerogative to editorialise within her poetry, achieving an elegiac journalism'.

(p.130). One might be tempted to call her poetry 'citizen poetry' (analogous to the 'citizen journalism' of engaged non-professionals), were it not for the fact that Maiden is a professional poet. Nevertheless, her poetry in Friendly Fire is clearly 'participatory' in a way analogous to citizen journalism: analysing, debating, and disseminating information central to the public good. And as she suggests in Intimate Geography ('Operation Iraqi Freedom'), such interventions are not only part of a global discussion, but also may have real risks for the self:

"Gunter Grass called this a 'wanted war' and perhaps that desire accounts for the oddness of feeling: the animal impossibility of communication. In a damp concrete corner of the market, one's self-sense crouches close, alert for friendly fire. (p.92)"

Over half of Harry's Not Finding Wittgenstein is set in Iraq during the war. The setting for her philosophising rabbit is significant. When Peter asks 'What is "The World"?' (p.137) we might ask ourselves how such questions sound in such a context. This discomfort is no doubt part of the point, and there are various ways of understanding such a disjunction. Peter Rabbit's search occurs in a country with a vast cultural history, something illustrated by Peter thinking about beginning his Rabbit History of Philosophers with the pre-Socratic philosophers who were apparently influenced by Persian thinkers. As Peter's question about 'The World' also shows, philosophy is the discourse in which the relationship between reality and its representations are tested. As in Friendly Fire, the representation (especially the media representation) of the war is a major interest of the work. And the context also allows for oblique vignettes of the broader political situation. For instance, when Peter meets a Persian cat (one of the work's many such jokes), we learn that the cat's owner, a scientist who worked for the Iraqi army, has disappeared and may now be 'a prisoner on Nauru' (p.181) (that is, detained at one of the sites of the Australian government's so-called 'Pacific Solution' for political asylum seekers from 2001-7). War-torn Iraq, then, is a strangely apposite site for Harry's considerations.

Robert Adamson is more overtly lyrical than either Maiden or Harry, but the poems of The Goldfinches of Baghdad show that lyricism and political engagement are not mutually exclusive things. In the last of a sequence of poems concerning an unnamed Orphic poet and 'Eurydice,' Adamson links the mythical to the actual in Thinking of Eurydice at Midnight, with the observation that 'The unrelieved/ President's on the radio again,/ laying waste to the world'(p.32). The collection's eponymous poem, with its echoes of WB Yeats's Sailing to Byzantium, is both ancient and of our times:
These finches are kept in gold cages or boxes covered in wire mesh; they are used by falcon trainers as lures, and rich patriarchs choose these living ornaments to sing to them on their deathbeds. Their song is pure and melodious. A goldfinch with a slashed throat was the subject of a masterpiece painted in the sixteenth century on the back of a highly polished mother-of-pearl shell—it burns tonight in Baghdad, along with the living, caged birds. Flesh and feathers, hands and wings. Sirens wail, but the tongues of poets and the beaks of goldfinches burn. Those who cannot speak burn along with the articulate—creatures oblivious to prayer burn along with those who lament to their god. Falcons on their silver chains, the children of the falcon trainer, smother in the smoke of burning feathers and human flesh. We sing or die, singing death as our songs feed the flames.

The poem explicitly evokes Iraq’s cultural heritage not only to illustrate the barbarism of the war, but also to link the nature of cultural destruction with large-scale death. The concluding lines are enigmatic. Who does the pronoun refer to? Those of ‘us’ causing the death and destruction? If so, the reference to ‘our songs’ that ‘feed the flames’ strongly implies a culpability among poets, unable to stop the destruction of Baghdad.

These are major works by major Australian poets, and each re-imagines poetry as a form of public speech. In response to the Howard years these poets became attuned to the urgency of our times without rejecting the claims of their art, finding a compelling poetic language with which to comment on the post 9/11 world (especially the war in Iraq) which neither gives up the power of lyrical (or extra-lyrical) expression nor betrays the realities of those suffering. None of these three poets is merely programmatic in their politics. Instead, they offer evidence of Maiden’s claim in _Friendly Fire_ that ‘Any writer is a private revolution’ (p.31), a term that may be quite appropriate for the ‘ambiguous vitality’ of the Australian poetry scene generally.

Works Cited