

## INTERVIEW BY JOHN TRANTER\*

*Your first book Shadowmass was published in 1971; the next collection of your poems, The Sea-Cucumber, was published in 1978. There's quite a gap there between books, particularly in terms of the frequency with which poets of our generation in Australia tend to publish books. How do you see your first book now, in terms of what you are doing at the moment?*

To quite a surprising extent I think the differences are mainly ones of technique. I was working with pretty blunt instruments at the time, instruments that I hadn't yet properly learned how to handle. So I'd now dismiss all but a handful of the poems there; not, I think, because I've radically changed direction, it's simply that I wasn't then capable of doing a good craftsmanlike job. There are six poems from *Shadowmass* which I've perhaps rather dishonestly put into *The Sea-Cucumber*; I'd now I think kick out three of those six. Which doesn't leave terribly much. I don't think my ideas of what I want to do with poetry have changed much since I was eighteen or so. I wasn't then, and I'm not now, interested in...well,

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in...well, committed poetry, or poetry of explicit statement, or particularly in communication. I was, and am, interested in making things, objects constructed out of words. I tend to think in terms of sculptural or architectonic analogies for poetry if I have to think analogically about it, rather than, say, musical or pictorial ones; or even any sort of logical model. Perhaps I'd better rephrase that slightly. Words necessarily communicate something; that's what they're for, or rather that's what they are. Words have a denotative-cum-prescriptive component; an example is the word "Gentlemen" on a toilet door, which is there to get the reader of that word to do something or to refrain from doing something. Words on the page can be placed there to evoke some specific reaction in the reader. A poem, I think, if it's any good, is a much more complicated and dynamic object in itself; it's a much more "tense" object. Elsewhere I think you've brought me to task for my obsession with chess; as you say, "a beautiful but useless game". I tend to think of poetry, I must admit, substantially in terms of beautiful but useless objects. I'm not clear exactly what poetry is meant to *do*. A game of chess is an intensely dynamic, intensely kinetic object within a static set of parameters, a fixed set of rules. The same I think, in a much more complicated way, applies to the way language works in poetry; or in literature generally, but in poetry particularly.

*I would think, though, that most people who read poetry would think that the very best kind of poem that they could read would give them something like a profound insight into the human condition, or an insight into their own fate. It seems that your kind of poetry rather excludes that possibility.*

I think perhaps it does so far as my own practice is concerned. This is not to rule out Dante or Marvell or Milton or Homer. I don't write that sort of thing myself. Also, I think one should perhaps not confuse the emotion-feeling complex that is evoked by a poem in a particular reader with whatever the poet may have intended to convey in the first place. I wouldn't for a moment expect that they're necessarily the same; in fact it seems to me rather an extraordinary metaphysical proposition to suggest that they are.

*On the other hand, though, a writer can construct a bit of writing with the aim in mind of evoking in the reader a special kind of response, and hope to get that response 80 per cent of the time. And I think a lot of poems are written for that purpose: to evoke in the reader a specific emotional response.*

I don't find that in principle a terribly interesting approach to writing. I think of that sort of thing as the function of, ah, telegrams, shall we say, rather than of poems.

*Do you feel at all uneasy about the fact that you have said that you're writing out of an understanding of what poetry can and should do that was formulated by an eighteen-year old boy, namely you, at the age of eighteen?*

It is obviously worrying, but I simply haven't seen any need to change my view of what, for me, poetry is; that is, my poetry, my practice. If it's not self-contradictory, after what I've said, to say that it seems to work for me...well, it does. It certainly doesn't for everyone, by any means. My own poetry certainly doesn't work for everyone [...]

*You seem to see the basic elements of a poem as consisting of words. The contrasting view of poetry sees the basic elements of a poem as sentences...*

Perhaps I've expressed myself too simplistically, because the final object has to be, naturally, a very complex semiological object [...] I wouldn't, I think, scale quite the sublime arrogance of James Joyce's proposition that as it took him seventeen years to write *Finnegans Wake*, it should take the reader seventeen years to read it. (Which indeed it certainly has in my case; I still haven't finished it.) But reverting to the poem as object; no, I'm really quite satisfied for it just to be there. Rather mystifying perhaps, rather baffling, even rather pointless...it should be clear by now that that's how I tend to see poetry in any case. Of course, there is also the proposition that to add notes to a poem is a confession of failure, the failure of the poem as poem. As I'm less interested than a lot of people in the explicitly communicative function of poetry, that doesn't affect me too much. In this context it's perhaps worth noting something that I haven't actually thought about very much before, but eclectic though I may be, there are some genres of poetry that I have virtually never tried at all. I've written very little love poetry, for instance, much as I like it in other people; in writers like Wyatt, for instance, because there the direct communication of an emotion seems to me to get in the way of the function of the kind of poem that I want to write. It's doing something which is for me illegitimate. For Wyatt, fine; and it could probably be plausibly argued that Wyatt writes in some sense a higher type of poetry than I do because of this. Wyatt's Wyatt, and I'm me.

*You've come back to Australia recently from a few years overseas, mainly in*

*Greece. Do you ever feel that you'll become an 'Australian poet' in the sense that you'll write about specifically Australian things like meat pies and football?*

Offhand, I doubt it. Meat pies and football aren't actually things that are all that central to my life anyway. But I do believe that one writes most about what one was brought up with, and I was brought up on a rather curious mixture of things Greek and things international expatriate...the world of the diaspora of rather *déclassé* intellectuals from all over the place.

*Do you ever feel at home in Greece?*

Oh yes. Yes, I found that again when I was back there this time. I feel at least as much at home in Greece as I do in Australia. My Australia, unlike that, of, say, Les Murray, or even Laurie Duggan, has very little to do with place, and a great deal to do with people. When I came back, I didn't think I was coming back to Australia, I thought I was coming back to a hundred or so people, who might just as well have been anywhere else — very Australian though a great many of them are. I lack — and I greatly regret this — much of a sense of the Australian landscape. My landscapes are I'd say very definitely Greek ones when they aren't just constructed or noumenal. The "real" landscapes in my poetry are Greek. I lack any true feel for Australian culture one way or the other. I simply don't have the basis from which to operate as an Australian poet. I lack the equipment. It would probably be a nice set of equipment to have, but I imagine it's far too late to acquire it now. I work sometimes I think from and within a particular Australian culture — subculture, if you like — even a particular Sydney subculture. Not maybe in the way that what I might call the Balmain short story writers and poets do; mine's not quite that. But then again perhaps that's not terribly Australian anyway; it may be a kind of...drifting, urban, quasi-intellectual sort of culture that you get in any place and time. [...]

*How do you feel you relate to the group of writers you associated with around the late 1960s? People like Bob Adamson, Les Murray?*

Hardly at all. I think myself that it was entirely fortuitous, an accident of microgeography, and of cultural proximity, perhaps. Though I do think, as a matter of fact, that although in some ways Les and I operate from completely opposed poles, there's quite a bit in common between us —

which sounds presumptuous, given Les's...shall we say, eminence. But in terms of verbal texture and colour, rather than in terms of what either of us is after in poetry, there are points in common. I think I have virtually nothing in common with Adamson.

*The interesting thing about the comparison between you and Les Murray is that you both notably write about landscape; Les a landscape of gum trees, you a landscape of olive trees.*

Yes, well Les once told me that the island of Hydra in Greece is my Bunyah. If it is...if one has a Bunyah, the damn thing keeps shaping one's poetry...

*That's been the case too with Adamson, in the Hawkesbury poems.*

I suppose it has, and perhaps I do have that in common with Adamson; although, apart from the mere fact of their existence, I don't think that my Hydra, or Les's Bunyah, are all that much like Bob's Hawkesbury. A lot of Australian poets seem to operate very strongly through landscape. Vincent Buckley does, with a particular landscape, and above all David Campbell...John Blight is another, and Francis Webb of course, with his enormous great desolate landscapes — his poems virtually *are* landscapes. It's maybe one reason why I like Webb so much.

*It's odd when you consider that the Australian landscape is remarkably unvaried compared to that of the Mediterranean, and Europe in general.*

Which may mean that it constitutes a convenient vacuum into which you can stuff all sorts of things of your own, or that — looking at it the other way around — it may have some tremendous primal or archetypal resonance. Hope seems to believe that, or at least he used to. The Greek landscape is absolutely clotted with specificity, which is what I've been trying to get across in my more recent and ambitious stuff from Greece. Yes, it's stark and clear, and so on, but it is all very precise objects, objects that are very much inescapably there; objects the — I hate this sort of terminology — objects the “thereness” of which constitutes a good deal of their meaning. I think it's much harder to read things into a Greek or more generally a European landscape, than it is into an Australian one, because there's just so much there already.