

Introduction

In 1968 Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott released *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* “to clarify the accomplishments of Australian poetry in breaking fresh ground during the past decade” (1). Given the stated aims of the anthology and the year of its publication, it is perhaps ironic that of the twenty-two poets collected in *New Impulses*, only Bruce Beaver would be included as a member of the “Generation of ’68” in John Tranter’s 1979 anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*. While intent on describing how the *New Impulses* poets differ from the “established” poets of the time, Hall and Shapcott neither claim nor demonstrate a radical break from the past. Instead, they acknowledge the debts the *New Impulses* poets owe to previous generations and politely set about positioning these “younger poets” within that tradition:

... we believe this collection amply demonstrates that the younger poets are not mere foothills to the Established Peaks (many of whom have continued writing to the present time), but form a new and distinctive range of their own, some of the peaks of which will come to be recognised as important landmarks. (1)

This “new and distinctive range” included such poets as Vincent Buckley, Bruce Dawe, Gwen Harwood, Geoffrey Lehmann, Les A. Murray, Andrew Taylor, Kath Walker, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Francis Webb as well as Beaver and the editors.

Yet even as Hall and Shapcott were quietly pencilling in their additions to the map of Australian poetry, the terrain was changing. Hindsight infuses their introduction with unintentional irony:

In a sense, it takes a new generation to transform the old into an Establishment. We are now in a position to see what, of current work, has already taken root and begun to be regarded as the standard idiom. And this is the work we have attempted to define by our selection. (1)

In 1968 Hall and Shapcott do not see that the *New Impulses* poets are already being transformed “into an Establishment” by “a new generation”. Only two years later, Shapcott introduced *Australian Poetry Now* by observing that

... young poets are rejecting and rediscovering, making loud claims for themselves and their ideas. Their presence already troubles the weekend calm of the established journals (who give them a pat of apparent recognition which they hope will keep them in order), and, in the area of their own activities they spawn innumerable broadsheets, ‘underground’ pamphlets, mini-mags collated with love, hope, energy and amateur duplicators. (ix)

In fact, quite a lot of what was being rejected in 1970 was epitomised by the poets who had featured in *New Impulses*, although *Australian Poetry Now* included older, more established writers alongside the younger, experimental ones. The new generation was turning away from the Australian tradition to overseas models, in particular to America, and finding new inspirations, influences and materials from which to build their poetry. *Australian Poetry Now*

documented the new emphases and developments of the post-*New Impulses* poets, but it did not speak of any new “school” or “movement”. Instead, Shapcott allowed himself cautious excitement about what the new work might signify for Australian poetry, commenting that

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that Australian poetry is witnessing a genuine break-through into entirely new territory. An editor must be cautious about making predictions of future glories (the wished-for revolutions heralded by Ray Mathew, Christopher Koch and Vivian Smith never did turn out quite as the editors of an earlier Australian anthology prophesied). The presence of such an abundance of active and gifted younger writers as this volume presents (and they by no means exhaust the numbers) does, however, constitute something rather more than mere straws in the wind. (xii)

The easy plurality of *Australian Poetry Now* was soon to disappear in the early 1970s, as different factions began to fight one another for attention, funding and publication in ways which on occasions were so vicious Don Anderson was led to comment in 1982, “poetry, throughout the 1970s, ran the danger of being the closest thing we had to a bloodsport” (481).

In 1974 Colin Talbot published a number of the post-*New Impulses* poets in *Applestealers*. Talbot began his preface by claiming that

This book is a collection of some of the poetry written in Australia during the past seven years. It has been named new poetry which can stand as some sort of definition, although this book is not being touted as ‘definitive’, nor as an anthology. (12)

The suspicion of authority that is evident in Talbot’s unconsciously ironic reluctance to think of *Applestealers* as an anthology provides a hint of one aspect of this poetry, but his suggestion that “new poetry... can stand as some sort of definition” of the post-*New Impulses* work is not particularly useful. In any case, Hall and Shapcott had already used the phrase “new poetry” to describe the work of the *New Impulses* poets.

Then, in 1979, John Tranter released *The New Australian Poetry*. In contrast to Colin Talbot’s editorial timidity, Tranter began by proclaiming:

This anthology contains the work of twenty-four poets, mainly young writers who first came to prominence in the closing years of the 1960s -- the ‘Generation of ’68’ (xv).

After the enthusiastic pluralism of *Australian Poetry Now* and the cautious self-effacement of *Applestealers*, *The New Australian Poetry* explicitly sets out to define the “new poetry” that emerged after *New Impulses*. However, the respectful tones that Hall and Shapcott adopted in 1968 contrast sharply with Tranter’s announcement of the “Generation of ’68.” Tranter described a poetry that showed no interest in inheriting a place in the existing poetic tradition, and claimed instead that

... a large part of the energies of these [new] writers went towards overthrowing what they saw as the tradition of conservatism that had dominated poetry in this country for many years. Many of them believed -- to put it very crudely -- that this tradition had at

least three major faults. It was largely defined from enfeebled English models; it was too closely aligned with the reactionary establishment that has dragged us into the shame of the Vietnam War; and it was built upon a mid-Victorian understanding of poetry's role that had been convincingly demolished in Europe and the Americas decades before. (xvii)

As a background to this talk of revolution, Tranter sketches in some of the particular social and historical conditions of the late 1960s, noting that demographics and technology played a part in creating the environment out of which the "Generation of '68" emerged.

Tranter attempts to impose a type of poetic coherence on the "Generation of '68" by claiming that the poets shared links to "modernism," declaring "[t]he bulk of the poems in this collection are set consciously against a background of ideas drawn from this area" (xx). To some extent his argument confuses the issue, since a poetry set consciously against a background of ideas drawn from modernism in fact conforms to a widely-accepted formulation of post-modernity, suggesting that much of the work of the "Generation of '68" may be more post-modern than modern. In fairness to Tranter, it is likely that this formulation is more easily recognised in 1993 than it was in 1979. In 1981 Tranter told Jim Davidson, "One thing that must be said about the polemical arguments about Modernism in the anthology is that they're not to be taken too seriously" (429), and the arguments now are indeed more illuminating as polemics directed at the conservative elements in the Australian literary establishment than as a theoretical formulation of "Generation of '68" poetry. Another problem with Tranter's definition is the suggestion that the twenty-four poets collected in the book are the "Generation of '68." While the poets Tranter includes do share a commitment to poetic innovation, it is imperative to keep in mind Martin Duwell's 1988 warning that *The New Australian Poetry* "should not be treated as final, ...fixing the canon of important authors and poems" (493).

Despite the troubles with Tranter's efforts to apply the term as a kind of definition of the poets in his anthology, the "Generation of '68" tag emerges from his introduction with something approaching mythic force. 1968 was a year of upheaval and conflict, with resistance to the Vietnam War growing stronger, student riots in Paris, riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago, the sex, drugs and rock and roll of the "Summer of Love," the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and numerous other international events and shifts in attitudes that all have potent resonances for Tranter's project of painting the "Generation of '68" as a revolutionary movement. In Australia, the La Mama poetry readings and workshops began in Melbourne, while there and in Sydney and Adelaide a number of the little magazines that the "new poets" published to provide outlets for their work first appeared. The international upheaval represented by 1968 inevitably colours Australian poetry when the "Generation of '68" tag is used.

In 1990 Peter Kirkpatrick began his review of John Tranter's *Under Berlin* and John Forbes's *The Stunned Mullet* by commenting:

Both these books have been around long enough to acquire substantial reputations, and both are canonical within one kind of orthodoxy in contemporary Australian poetry -- which is probably partly a reason for the prestige they've enjoyed. This

orthodoxy might be called -- for want of a better word -- the post-modernist. (189)

The post-modernist “orthodoxy” of which Kirkpatrick speaks is a direct result of the poetic revolution of the “Generation of ’68.” My thesis will examine the poetics of two exemplary members of the “Generation of ’68,” analysing their poetry diachronically in an attempt to identify a post-modern Australian poetic and to trace any developments that may or may not occur within it. Given his importance to the “new poetry,” the work of John Tranter must obviously be included in any such study. To provide a point of comparison, my thesis will also engage with the poetry of John Forbes.

In 1983, Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann claimed in the introduction to *The Younger Australian Poets* that:

The most prominent figures of the ‘generation of ’68’ have been John Tranter, Robert Adamson, Michael Dransfield (co-opted posthumously) and John Forbes. (11)

Gray and Lehmann are antipathetic to the “Generation of ’68,” but their assessment of the major figures within the “new poetry” is accurate enough. I have turned to Forbes’s poetry in preference to Adamson’s or Dransfield’s because I believe his work to be more post-modern than that of the other two poets. His post-modernity displays a number of similarities to much of Tranter’s work, offering the chance to throw any differences or divergences that might be discovered in their respective poetics into sharp relief.