Chapter One

To the Florida: The Poetry of John Tranter

John Tranter's first collection of poems appeared as a special issue of *Poetry Australia*, and in the subsequent twenty-three years he has published a further nine volumes of poetry to widespread, if not unanimous, acclaim. Indeed, Tranter has been a controversial figure, although much of the controversy that surrounds him has been generated more by his willingness to act as a spokesman or, on occasion, as a polemicist, for the "Generation of '68" than by his poetry. A number of poets and critics, including some who have been counted among the "new poets," have questioned his authority in assuming these roles, and their questions have added to the conflict.

The general perception of Tranter's "poetic identity" still draws on the work collected in his *Selected Poems* (1982), a volume that, eleven years later, is no longer representative of his poetry. He is commonly regarded as a poet of great technical skill and intelligence, but is often accused of being cold and emotionless, playing indecipherable verbal games. His ten books of poetry represent a richly diverse body of work in which to investigate those charges and to examine the developments that have taken place in his poetics since the publication of *Selected Poems*.

Parallax (1970)

Critical opinion has tended either to dismiss Tranter's early poems or to compare them less than favourably with his later work. In *Meanjin* in 1983, John Forbes's faint praise reflected the majority view: "Tranter's early poems... are very competent. They use a conventional, symbolist approach to imagery with great success" (249). But, he went on, "Tranter's poetry develops" (250). Indeed it does, though it is a shame that his later successes have led his readers to ignore his early poems. His first collection was, and remains, an intriguing and significant book, and holds renewed interest in light of the most recent developments in Tranter's poetry.

Parallax received an enthusiastic welcome from Martin Johnston in *New Poetry*, who said that the poems

> ... make use, often brilliantly, of that dialectic between denotation and connotation which I would claim to be one of the central criteria of good poetry: the interlocking complexes of significance both within and between semantic units (including punctuation, spacing, pauses) which ought to make a poem irreducible to paraphrase... (42)

Johnston concluded, "I have very rarely come across a first volume of poems, from Australia or anywhere else, that has excited me as much as John Tranter's" (43), and it is still possible today to capture something of his excitement.

Kate Lilley has examined the importance of the concept of parallax to much of Tranter's work, noting

> [Parallax] is a word lifted out of sixteenth-century astronomical discourse, and is still current, particularly in the term 'Parallax error,' which describes the effect whereby a change in the position of the viewer is registered, perceptually, as an apparent change in the position of the object viewed. (41)

"The Moment of Waking" can be seen to demonstrate the operation of parallax and also satisfies Johnston's criterion of good poetry:

> She remarks how the style of a whole age
> disappears into your gaze, at the moment
> of waking. How sad you are
> with your red shirt, your features
> reminiscent of marble, your fabulous
> boy-girl face like a sheet of mist
> floating above a lake.
>
> Someone hands me a ticket
> In Berlin a hunchback
> is printing something hideous;
> my passport is bruised with dark blue
> and lilac inks. Morning again,
> another room batters me awake
> you will be haunting the mirror like silver
>
> Now the nights punish me with dreams
> of a harbour in Italy -- you are there
> hung in the sky on broken wings
> as you always have been, dancing,
> preparing to wound me with your
> distant and terrible eyes. (Parallax 25)

The first stanza constructs its own poetic space, unmarked by any reference to an actual or identifiable place. The sudden shift of apparent interest from "She" to "you" prevents "The Moment of Waking" from coming into focus, so that the poem, and not only "your fabulous / boy-girl face," appears "like a sheet of mist." The mistiness intensifies the sombre mood of the first stanza, which is sustained throughout the poem, creating an emotional unity that holds the poem together. This emotional unity suggests a perceiving consciousness that exists outside and prior to the poem.

The unease that pervades the poem arises from a splitting of this consciousness, which is marked by the synonymous use of the first and second person pronouns. The division is announced in the second stanza, after the poem has moved to "Berlin": "Morning again, / another room batters me awake / you will be haunting the mirror like silver." The movement of the observing "me" in "The Moment of Waking" causes a "parallax error" as each stanza

relates a different “moment of waking.” In the third stanza, “the nights punish me with dreams / of a harbour in Italy”; “you” is now “there / hung in the sky on broken wings.” The operation of parallax in the poem, marking as it does the limited and positivist perspective of the observing “me,” contradicts the connotations of the title -- which suggests a return to the real world -- creating a tension the poem never resolves.

Although “The Moment of Waking” appears to be a meditation on the nature of the self, the perceiving consciousness only observes, never explicitly questioning what it sees, even though the atmosphere makes it clear that what it sees is unsettling. The refusal or failure of “me” to examine the observed “you” amounts to a tacit acceptance of the nature of the self. The final stanza, in which “you” prepares to “wound me with your / distant and terrible eyes,” suggests that the perceiving consciousness is engaged in some sort of struggle with itself, but its position as an antecedent to the poem prevents it from resolving this conflict.

In 1990, Livio Dobrez observed of the early poems:

> ... Tranter feels a certain nausea at his own limiting brand of dated modernity, and it worries him, though he can do nothing about it because he does not recognise the nature of the difficulty. In this context one might say that it is ironic that for all his championing of “modernism,” Tranter has to abandon historical Modernism in order to mature as a poet. But he never saw it this way, associating, instead, the claustrophobia of his early subject with “Romanticism” and with the personal note of Australian poetry of the fifties. (*Parnassus Mad Ward* 147)

This “claustrophobia” can also be observed in “Inertial Guidance”:

> If each bright face twitched the needle
> for living’s guidance, I’m lost
> in such a sea of glances.
> Something magnetic in a lock of hair
> confuses each limit of my self. (Parallax 9)

The first stanza might be seen at a stretch as an attempt to question the notion of an autonomous subject, but such a reading proves difficult to sustain across the whole poem. The self here has “limits”, even if they are “confused”, and it seems that these limits do not coincide with those of the poem. The “I” is involuntarily affected by interaction with those around it, but the poem’s consistent use of the first person pronoun suggests an identity independent of those relationships. In “Inertial Guidance,” Tranter still relies on a subjective presence antecedent to the poem, and on the idea of the poem as a window on to external reality:

> Stars map only loss, where vacuum
> lenses out their light.
> On whatever chart, night is not
> printed into the likeness of any face.

> Like a sub I travel blind
> with the tug of the lagging heart to spell
> how far I'm travelling and where
> under the cry of birds and the cold sun.

The poem has to make room for the subject, to form around it rather than to form it, and to relate the experience of that subject. The subject in "Internal Guidance" is merely "lost / in such a sea of glances", not dissolved or dissolving, and so the poem is ultimately a conventional expression of modernist angst, an art full of suffering "under the cry of birds and the cold sun".

In a 1991 interview with Stephen Craft and Helen Loughlin, Tranter maintained

> as a poet I'm a slow learner, a slow developer, and that's something people don't always understand. You look at writers like Francis Webb, or Less Murray [sic], or John Forbes -- they seem to begin writing at the full strength of their talent. I didn't do that -- it took me 10 or 15 years to work out how to write or what to write.... And even going into the 70s I never knew what I was doing. (37-8)

Tranter's view of his early poems is shared by many commentators. John Forbes in 1983 and Livio Dobrez in 1990 consider Tranter's early work as immature or only partially realised because it makes use of conventions that his later poems interrogate and abandon, however, their comments should not condemn these poems to oblivion. As Elizabeth Perkins writes in *Poetry Australia*, "Tranter may feel he has outgrown many of these poems, but Parallax remains a collection requiring close attention" (72), and recent developments in Tranter's poetry suggest that *Parallax* is of more significance than many critics have previously thought.

Red Movie and Other Poems (1972)

Most of Tranter's second volume maintains the interests and concerns of *Parallax*. In 1990 Livio Dobrez claimed that "[t]he murky world of the early poetry... is summed up in 'Conversations,'" a poem from this second collection:

> In a context of cold wit, images of modern violence (grenades, guns) mix with Waste Land disgust in a city which could be Paris or London or Slessor's Sydney, that is to say the Cross. (*Parnassus Mad Ward* 148)

This "cold wit" also combines with "images of modern violence" in "The Orange Spot," a poem that exemplifies the continuity between the two books:

> The old drunk breaks into the midnight café,
> begs a glass of water, reels into the welcome floor.
>
> Later the 'Young Turk'
> bearing a blade of malice in his back.

> Why not lie together? having in common
> a burnt-out bravery, equally sick of pushing out
> the glare of life. *(Red Movie* 3)

Here too Tranter strives to maintain a strict detachment, refusing any sense of emotional involvement in the events that he describes. This appears to be the way Tranter has chosen to try to avoid what he was later to dismiss as the "specific moral and religious overtones" that were dominant in Australian poetry in the 1950s and 1960s (*The New Australian Poetry* xxii). However, the poem continues to rely on a unified subject, and this returns "The Orange Spot" to humanism. Despite the rhetorical "Why not lie together?", "The Orange Spot" does not finally question what it presents: it is the poetic equivalent of a black and white photograph taken by a coldly observant photographer.

A similar strategy may be observed in "Julie," which begins:

> So a witty vindictive inventiveness overtook them all;
> Julie is dead. Her body smoulders,
> releasing a sky full of rain, its own remedy.
>
> Julie smiles, baits her tongue, waits at the end of the hall.
> So a soft burning grows from her comedy;
> red flesh on her shoulders: Julie is dead. That is all. (*Red Movie* 12)

If this poem is designed to resist sentimentality, it works too well, sliding into a detachment that seems callous and gives the first line a self-reflexive irony. Its apparent heartlessness is accentuated by the cadence of the lines, which move slowly, lingering over every detail. Tranter's later work is often described as cold and emotionless, but the grim world depicted in these early poems is arguably the more chilling. The understated rhyme scheme in "Julie," which makes use of both end rhyme and internal rhyme, creates an uneasy tension between elegant form and brutal content. In his *Meanjin* article, John Forbes suggested that the content of Tranter's early poems "is a displacement into expressionism (crisis, angst, alienation in fast cars) of a dissatisfaction with poetic technique" (250). This dissatisfaction with technique intensifies across the early volumes as Tranter struggles to free his poetry from the constraints of a unifying subject.

Responding to a question from Martin Duwell in *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, Tranter said

> My first two books, up until you get to the poem 'Red Movie', are still very concerned about 'I', about 'me'.... It's not really 'confessional' because it's been distorted to such an extent by the demands of the poem itself... 'Red Movie' is moving into an area where the ego is less important. (18)

This movement away from the ego in 'Red Movie' is evident in the poem's use of collage, for which success or failure relies more on the relationships between elements than on a controlling external presence. Nevertheless, "Red Movie" does not completely escape from the subject that haunts Tranter's early poems.

The epigraph signals the direction the poem will explore: "That which can be studied is the pattern of processes which characterise the interaction of personalities in particular recurrent situations or fields which 'include' the observer" (35). This inclusion of "the observer" is evident in "The New Field of Knowledge," the first of the five sections:

> when the new alphabet soup of the earth
> is raised into a flag, the inevitable wind appears
> with its own 'sister to breath'.
> (the streamers appeared, he grew forward,
> as though a new field of knowledge
> drew breath, promised itself
>
> a blue field will always invade you.
> here, you can become a little more
> becoming: the streaming sister,
> enveloped in a flag of brutality, draws a ration
> of sense, bleeds rationality...
>
> a willow's image follows me into the dark
> a delicate cowboy, so blue, his dawn
> sky
> is
> too. (*Red Movie* 37)

In "the new alphabet soup of the earth," the shifting pronouns introduce, dissolve and then reconstitute the subject, revealing its existence as purely textual. The dependence of this new subject on the text is both announced and described in the phrase "here, you can become a little more / becoming," which activates two senses of "becoming." The textual subject can appear, can come into being, and become more attractive, opening possibilities that were denied by the unified subject of previous poems.

In the second section, "Extract from the Ice Diary," the poem reports that:

> an experiment which succeeds, he said,
> wiping the breath from his face
> which had started to congeal
> is no longer an experiment, but has become
> a demonstration of the obvious.
> this said, as he struck out at the images
> gathered on the mountain
> to drench him with the gust of life. (*Red Movie* 39)

The subject seems to threaten to reunify as "his face" starts "to congeal," but the poem implies that this would lead to "a demonstration of the obvious," since this is said as "he" strikes out at the images that would "drench him with the gust of life." This fragment reacts against the Romantic notion of the poem as a vehicle for the expression of the real life adventures of the

poet, or rather, of the unified subject that is the poet's surrogate.

At other points in "Red Movie" a subject does congeal, and this creates a tension as the poem lurches between two modes. The final fragment of "Extract from the Ice Diary" provides an illustration of this uneasy regression:

> listen to me: you're enjoying nothing
> seen from this crisp angle
>
> listen to me: I have been travelling for some time
> aware of the necessity for choice: move!
> if you wish to unravel the sources of your own sorrow
> if you wish to divert the river of absolution
> if you are desperate for a chance
> to break up
>
> choose the song most suited
> to your movements, to your fatal
> and impossible beauty
>
> summer's tattered flag your winding sheet
> fate's tackle and gear
> drops you by the neck
>
> whatever song you bring
> to the country of hope (*Red Movie* 41)

The dissatisfaction that colours *Parallax* and the rest of *Red Movie* is again evident here, but the movement towards a textually constructed subject is arrested as the poem suggests that the solution to the subject's problems is to "choose the song most suited / to your movements." This is one of the points in the poem where, as John Forbes points out in *Meanjin*, "there is still the Romantic theme of the poet being forced to new ways of writing by extremes of experience"(250).

Although "Red Movie" fails to escape from the constrictions of the subject completely, it remains an important work. Earlier in "Extract from the Ice Diary," the poem suggests that "an experiment which has failed is... nothing more promising than a failure" (41): in scientific terms, this is nonsense, since failed experiments provide information, and in poetic terms too, the experiment that is "Red Movie," while it may be a qualified success, is certainly "more promising than a failure." As the final lines of the poem assert, "if you are ready / we can begin" (47).

The Blast Area (1974)

Most of *The Blast Area* develops the modes and techniques of the first sections of its predecessor, however, the reflexive aspect of "The Poem in Love" anticipates Tranter's

development in *The Alphabet Murders*. *The Blast Area* has three sections: “Negatives,” which recalls the metaphor of the poet as a literary photographer; “Cheap Thrills,” which contains perhaps the definitive series of Tranter poems on fast cars; and “The Poem in Love,” a sequence of fifteen sonnets that interrogate the myth of subjective presence on which most of his earlier work depended.

One stylish and assured poem from “Negatives” is “Mark,” which begins:

> Mark finished it himself, choosing midnight
> and a garbage-littered swamp. He scrawled a note
> and stuffed it in a pocket: ‘Like shooting a dog.
> The Vibrations. Someone please try to bring me back.’ (*The Blast Area* 8)

The dispassionate tone segues into brutality as the poem’s determination to avoid sentiment leads into the numbingly succinct: “They pulled him from the mud and dressed him up / and put him underground again.” As the poem goes on to recall Mark before his death, he comes to resemble a caricature of the Romantic attitudes that Tranter is trying to reject:

> He had tapped a private source
> of horror cliches; nightmare rushed out,
> and the gestures that he used in self-defence
> were worn threadbare with too much fingering.
> He wove a plot to save the masses; loners,
> misbegotten, drifting on the edges of Night City.
> All he needed was ‘charisma’.

Tranter is clearly aware of the way in which the poetic model he is still using emerges from Romanticism. Mark’s mental illness, which is made explicit as the poem approaches its end, adds ambiguity to his portrait, since it is not clear if his illness is the cause or a symptom of his Romanticism. In any case, his unbalanced mental state and his Romantic pretensions are inextricably linked, and it is telling that his “plot to save the masses” has led to his own death.

The final stanza seems intent on providing Mark with the “‘charisma’” that he needed to put his plan into effect. In a modified tone -- slightly warmer, but still detached -- the voice recalls:

> Once, years ago, when he was ‘elegant’, he brought us wine;
> we ate well, and drank by candlelight. It seemed that sanity
> was easily bought; one needed only to be young.
> Methedrine, in moderation, kept him on the track.

The lines enact the elegance of the younger Mark even as they reveal that that elegance is artificially induced. The detail has a reflexive significance in that this is not only a poem “about” Mark, it is “Mark,” and its elegance too has been induced, by poetic technique. The final couplet completely and abruptly deflates the poem:

> ‘I’m not interested,’ the doctor said,’in arty
> reminiscences. Find the stupid prick and bring him back.’

The doctor’s remarks seem grotesquely callous against the background of Mark’s suicide, but they locate the final stanza of the poem before Mark’s death and so further emphasise the uselessness of “arty / reminiscences.” The doctor’s sharp words explode the pretensions of the final stanza, and the shock waves collapse the rest of the poem. Just as Mark’s Romanticism leads to his death, the Romanticism of “Mark,” in so much as it relies on the illusion of presence, presents Tranter with a dead end. Like most of the other poems in “Negatives,” “Mark” signals a need for development.

Hints of this development emerge throughout *The Blast Area*, but they are clearest in the sonnet sequence that closes the book. From the beginning, it is clear that this is a different type of poetry:

> There’s no end to this thing, it moves out,
> killing. Difficult to find, yet it lives on
> in plain daylight free of detectives
> avoiding the plastic explosives. Like the
> Gatling gun it clacks around in a windmill comedy
> of noise and portability (you never know
> when you might need to love it again,
> and thus you’ll have to carry it about, won’t you)
>
> or later, in the French café of its choice, quite
> independent of you (and yet you thought of it,
> didn’t you, or gave it life, or
> something similar free of plastic
> mint alcohol, in its own amusement
> to its own delight (*The Blast Area* 29)

In announcing the movement that the poem will go on to describe, the first line signals a shift away from poetic “photography,” with its inescapable, problematic “photographer,” into a new concern with process. As the poem begins to move it begins to leave the subject behind in a way that the previous, “static” work could not. Even “Red Movie,” whose title suggests a rejection of stasis, failed to achieve this momentum, not least because its fragmentary state made it less like a movie than a slide show.

Overtly self-referential and heavy with playful irony, “The Poem in Love” ranges from “the French café of [the poem’s] choice” down “Wiltshire Boulevard,” from “beneath the Arafura Sea” to “N.Y.,” drawing from an eclectic collection of material that includes Coleridge and television as it goes. In *Parnassus Mad Ward*, Livio Dobrez claims that

> even if we take the view that the subject remains more or less intact in the narrative voice which addresses “you”/itself and gives information about “it,” the elusive lover/Poem, there is no question that the subject’s existence is ethereal in the extreme. (155-56)

Indeed, in most of the sequence the only hints of subjective presence are functions of the sometimes chatty, sometimes sarcastic, but always energetic narrative voice.

As the sequence approaches its end, its movement slows. The thirteenth sonnet meditates on "[t]he shoddiness of the work," concluding "there is a great / lack of proper manner in the whole shitty mess" (35). Indeed, the whole of "The Poem in Love" could be appraised in those terms, but only an unsympathetic judgement would stop at that point. The "great / lack of proper manner" calls to mind Frank O'Hara's comments in "Personism: A Manifesto": "I don't believe in god [sic], so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures" (xiii), but "The Poem in Love" does not share O'Hara's ability to dismiss "elaborately sounded structures." Sonnet thirteen is undecided about the sequence's "shoddiness," finding it "charming, dizzy / and at the same time dubious."

The penultimate sonnet finally makes explicit the way poetic form endorses non-poetic discourses such as Romanticism, a connection that has frustrated Tranter's poetry up to now, but the sonnet finds the ramifications of the movement away from a subject-centred poetry disturbing:

> And more repulsive than this absence of decorum
> which may be just a trick like a talking dog
> or a brand new theory of poetics dragged
> unwillingly out of a hat and made to squeak,
> there is a sour taste and a whetted edge
> to the thirsty intellect, as though the Poem
> loathed its very medium and thus the world and the
> big blue sky which we know is good for breathing.
>
> How can we endorse a monster? Christianity is dead
> but something else lives on, and it is our duty
> to believe it. How can we adore a dirty head?
> We do not masturbate. We respect the 'truth' of 'art'
> which is now having its pretty face rubbed in the
> shit of politics like a new theory of a talking pig. (*The Blast Area* 35)

As if in an ironic echo of Yeats's "The Second Coming," the centre of "The Poem in Love" has not held, the mere anarchy that was catalogued in sonnet thirteen has been loosed, and the sequence seems appalled at the rough beast about to be born, asking "How can we endorse a monster?" The sestet reveals why the poem now recoils from what the sequence strived so hard to accomplish. The removal of the centre leads to the disappearance of absolutes, which are exposed as privileged fictions. By placing "'truth'" and "'art'" in single quotation marks, "The Poem in Love" demonstrates an understanding of this process, but it finds that questioning such categories positions it over an abyss. Although it effectively deconstructs a metaphysics based on presence, "The Poem in Love" is horrified by the results and unable to see possibilities for reconstruction.

The final sonnet moves back towards "safer" ground:

> The concept of the abandoned Poem reluctantly
> becomes plausible, and then very interesting.
> Like all bad art it is phoney. Goodbye!
> At night you could hear the language
> burning fiercely, and the heavy traffic
> moving about. Goodbye! Oh, how I loved you!
> Isn't that what it said? And all this
> burnt to a crisp! 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 N.Y.
> and that fizzy noise was like how
> you could hear the Sonnet feasting on itself.
> Goodbye hopeless poems! Kiss me! Kiss me! Goodbye! (*The Blast Area* 36)

After musing on the "concept of the abandoned Poem," the sonnet attempts to dismiss it, claiming "[l]ike all bad art it is phoney." The poem tries to use the two categories sonnet fourteen marks as constructs – truth and art – as absolutes in this dismissal, but the gesture now has to be ironic, conveying an air of desperation as the poem tries to cover up the subsequent reintroduction of the subject with bravado. However, the noise generated by the exclamations that punctuate this sonnet cannot disguise this retreat into absolutes, and the sudden appearance of "I" in the sestet is the culmination of the poem's rearguard action. It might seem unkind to suggest that the "fizzy noise" in line twelve echoes "The Poem in Love" sputtering to a stop, but the sequence's sudden attack of vertigo leaves Tranter with unfinished business.

The Alphabet Murders (1976)

The fear of falling that sparks this panic is confronted again in *The Alphabet Murders*, which moves with much more confidence around the abyss that "The Poem in Love" uncovered. *The Alphabet Murders* is a long poem in twenty-seven sections, the first twenty-six of which begin with the corresponding letter of the alphabet, while the twenty-seventh section, in prose, returns to the letter "a." This ordering principle suggests that the poem is on one level about the possibilities of language, even as the imposition of alphabetical order restates the arbitrariness of language. Each letter marks a fresh point of departure for the poem's various explorations of the territory mapped out by the alphabet. The return to "a" in the final section resists closure, but its implications are ambiguous: on the one hand it suggests that "z," the "end" of the alphabet, need not signal the end of writing because it is always possible to begin again, but on the other it demonstrates that the poem -- like all poems -- is trapped in language and has nowhere else to go. Despite the connotations of its often dark and frequently scatological imagery, *The Alphabet Murders* ultimately resolves these tensions in a way that acknowledges the limits and the inescapability of language as the poem moves and plays within it.

Tranter describes *The Alphabet Murders* in *A Possible Contemporary Poetry* as an

argument with “the entire tradition of literature” (20), and this remark provides a useful starting point for a reading, but it is necessary also to keep in mind John Forbes’s comments in *Meanjin*:

> ... no simple rejection of literary culture can create literature anew, or free the subject of the poem from its own status as myth.... Most poets either accept without question the cultural presuppositions that allow a coherent subject in the poem, or else rhetorically adopt personal or social myths that create a space for the subject.... (251)

The Alphabet Murders manages to avoid the trap that Forbes describes. The poem’s argument with the literary tradition does not involve a “simple rejection of literary culture”: in context, a line such as “No more literature. The dream is done” (28) must be read ironically. *The Alphabet Murders* recognises its own status as literature, and is in part concerned with finding a place in the tradition, as the beginning of section twenty demonstrates:

> These are not restrictions, but equipment
> for use in experiment or exploration
> such as it is well to have in hand
> when leaving main roads for open country, though
> often thrown away in side tracks that lead into
> dead ends. Moreover tradition is not just an impulse
> out of the past; it is a progressive movement
> overtaking the present and helping carry it
> into the future. To step aside from tradition could be
> one way of being left soon in some small corner
> which the present has already deserted.... (*The Alphabet Murders* 42-43)

Identifying the argument in progress is, however, an easier task than determining the conclusion the poem reaches. As David Carter observes in *Scripsi*:

> The poems are often both attractive in their eloquence and forbidding, seeming to advertise but then to withhold, to deny or avoid, significance. But the ‘problem’ of the poetry, or, if you like, its virtue, is not that it is non-referential, nor that it is only and endlessly self-referential, but rather that it is over-referential. (118)

Moments of relative clarity such as the beginning of section twenty are quickly obscured in collisions with more disruptive sections of the poem. The competition between these units parallels the competition between signifiers within the more abstract sections of the poem, enabling *The Alphabet Murders* to resist interpretation by juxtaposing approaches towards meaning with movements away from it.

Another contest arises between the poem’s largely consistent tone and its attempts to dissolve the subject through pronominal ambiguity and pronominal shifts. The ninth section frustrates and parodies the usual relations between subjectivity and the first person pronoun:

> I find myself alone in a room full of dirty poems
> I find the girl naked under dry leaves I find

I have a searching pain in the neck
I am not happy I am full of elephants
I find the pain congratulating itself
I am going to move to Bermuda where
I believe life is innocent and in the pink
I have some of the questions and a bank account
I know how to kill a rabbit and a lobster differently
I know each lives and dies according to its kind
I have a hand full of fingers they're all yours look out
I think constantly on those who were truly stupid
I don't think we've met I'm sorry was that your
I've had enough of "literature" God damn
I have a head full of hypodermics watch it
I'm caught in the throes of a merciless poem
I'm having a ball I said look out
I don't have any answers isn't that what they say?
I'd certainly love to is that all right?
I am always about to make a serious study of the word
I, and it's always just too late goodbye mister president
I'm sorry we never met I could have healed your wounds
I think occasionally on those who were truly damp
I hope you liked the puzzle that I sent
I think, and after all goodbye Superman goodbye (*The Alphabet Murders* 34-35)

The proliferation of "I" subverts any attempt to invest the first person with authority as the heterogeneity of the predicates explodes the subject. However, the disruptive effect of the propositional content here is contradicted by the poem's consistency of tone, which implies a subjectivity that transcends "I." The tone fashions the fragments of the exploded subject into a kind of safety net that allows the sequence to move more confidently over the abyss from which "The Poem in Love" shied away, freeing *The Alphabet Murders* to interrogate the cultural presuppositions that surround art and literature.

Although the tone continually threatens to reconstitute the subject, the conflict between its urge to reform and the disintegrating impulses of the argument frees *The Alphabet Murders* from the constraints normally imposed by a subject by denying that subject any claim to authority. This newfound freedom is of crucial importance to Tranter's later poetry. As Tim Thorne writes in *New Poetry*, "[t]he real value of this work will be in what follows it" (60).

Crying in Early Infancy (1977)

The Alphabet Murders had a liberating effect on Tranter's work as his next book emphatically demonstrates. *Crying in Early Infancy* contains one hundred sonnets, arranged into their published order not by the poet but by Martin Duwell, and it is difficult to think of the collection as anything less than a triumph. Speaking in *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, Tranter said that:

> The poems in *Crying in Early Infancy* were written on and off over a period of about six years. Some were written in 1971, some in 1977, and some in-between. So they span a great length of time and a great range of development in my own work. Tim Thorne said that it was a little disappointing because it didn't progress from my last book. It wasn't intended to. The sonnets were put into that particular book merely because they didn't happen to fit into any of the books I'd brought out up till then. (31)

Tranter's attempt to correct Tim Thorne's expectation of progress clouds the waters somewhat since no matter what their original dates of composition, Tranter released these sonnets together in 1977, and his claim that they appeared when they did "merely because they didn't happen to fit into any of the books I'd brought out up till then" seems disingenuous; he had, after all, published sonnets before. However, he is accurate in saying that the sonnets span "a great range of development in my own work."

At one end of this "range of development" is sonnet forty-seven, "He's older now, and has learnt the need to survive" (32), which is reminiscent of a number of poems from *Red Movie*, and which would not appear out of place in the earlier collection. Its air of detachment is immediately familiar, while the economy of phrase coupled with the cool tone suggests an attempt at objectivity, a return to the "photographic" mode. The way that the sonnet's regular yet unobtrusive rhyme scheme formally counterpoints its sense of unease also echoes Tranter's poetic past.

Sonnet ninety, however, evokes the darker tones and textures of many of the earlier poems, but employs much more disjointed syntax:

> As you get purchase the hate vehicle
> you take another quick look at your sister
> and the whole cataract falls into place
> under the idea of economy at sea
> along the edges of the truck
> your sister is playing around smoking
> with a nudist drinking pot just
> having a real bad time in Jamaica
>
> you know you'll make naked friends
> in the twilight you're not sniffing glue
> between the Principle of Uncertainty
> and the invention of Germ Warfare
> there you will find your dazed sister
> purchase motor conformity. (*Crying in Early Infancy* 52)

This would seem to be one of those sonnets which Andrew Taylor has described as being "unintelligible in terms of a conventional expectation of meaning in poetry" (*Reading Australian Poetry* 160). Unrecoverable elisions disrupt the sense of the lines; "meaning" subordinated to rhythm, which provides the frame that holds the sonnet together. The final

lines mark a kind of formal coherence as "sister" and "purchase" echo the first two lines, creating what David Carter describes in *Scripsi* as "a circle rather than a hierarchy of possible interpretative moorings" (118). Frank O'Hara once wrote that in writing poems, "You just go on your nerve" (xiii), but sonnet ninety seems to just go on its ear.

It epitomises John Forbes's remarks on the whole collection in *Meanjin*:

> In *Crying in Early Infancy* Tranter comes close to abandoning subject for total surface effect. He does this by undermining the subject while the sonnet form works as a grid, or rack, on which this occurs. He does not give up his favourite images; here there are the technical vocabularies, motor cars, 'girls', drugs, anguish, weaponry and foreign places familiar from his earlier poems. But now the symbolic value they had is constantly subverted. Also, the interrogation of History and Culture that fails to hold one's interest in 'Rimbaud and the Pursuit of the Modernist Heresy' here produces empty, embellished frenzies that answer their own questions and self-destruct. (251-52)

The tendency towards "self-destruction" is apparent in the unfamiliar brightness of sonnet thirteen:

> FAMOUS POET JETS HOME TO USA!
> How lucky to live in America, where
> supermarkets stock up heavily on writers!
> Thinking of the famous poets floating home
> to that luxurious and splendid place
> inhabited by living legends like an old movie
> you blush with a sudden flush of Romanticism
> and your false teeth chatter and shake loose!
>
> How it spoils the magic! In America no writers
> have false teeth, they are too beautiful!
> Imagine meeting Duncan in your laundromat –
> in America it happens all the time – you say
> Hi, Robert! – and your teeth fall out!
> And you can't write a poem about that! (*Crying in Early Infancy* 13)

Although the poem's straightforward syntax seems to be moving away from the concern with surfaces that was exhibited by *The Alphabet Murders*, or even a poem such as sonnet ninety, this poem's various exclamations about writers undermine themselves, leaving the text as verbal performance. After the coldness of much of Tranter's earlier poetry, the sense of fun here is something of a revelation, leaping energetically from the page in a display of verbal pyrotechnics. Beneath the frantic humour, however, the sonnet grapples with serious concerns, offering rejoinders both to the critics who accused the 'new poetry' of uncritically embracing American models and to the poets who did just that. The exuberant tone carries the sonnet forwards, and syntactically the poem presents no real interpretive problems, folding irony upon irony and concluding with a sly deconstructive dig at itself, since it has shown that

it is indeed possible to write a poem "about" losing "your teeth" in a laundromat conversation with Robert Duncan.

Sonnets forty-seven, ninety and thirteen between them provide a key to understanding the achievement of *Crying in Early Infancy*. They may be considered as limit texts for the collection, which operates within those limits to reinvent Tranter's poetry through sheer diversity. Although the sonnet form and the signature "John Tranter" inevitably provide the collection with a sign of unity, the reality is shifting and elusive, and foils any attempt to provide the signature with a fixed identity. A literary manifestation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is in operation here: the limits of the collection reveal where "Tranter" is, but that knowledge precludes knowing exactly who "Tranter" is. As the different styles compete with each other for prominence, Tranter's virtuosity prevents any one type of poem from gaining a definite advantage: the authority of the coherent subject in sonnet forty-seven, for example, is subverted by the play between that poem and others such as thirteen and ninety. The poetic freedom made manifest in *Crying in Early Infancy*'s multiplicity of styles is the first fruit of the labours of *The Alphabet Murders*.

Dazed in the Ladies Lounge (1979)

Dazed in the Ladies Lounge opens with "Rimbaud and the Modernist Heresy" (7-18), a long poem with a reasonably straightforward syntax and a clear discursive style, in which the struggle for poetry after Rimbaud echoes *The Alphabet Murders*'s struggle to come to terms with the influence of the literary past. Given Tranter's often-stated fascination with Rimbaud, it is tempting to search the poem for autobiographical clues. Kate Lilley claims in *Australian Literary Studies* that "Tranter's preoccupation with the death of poetry as the silence at the end of the line" resurfaces in the poem, and notes that "the 'heresy' of Tranter's title is not chiefly Rimbaud's inflammatory poetry, but 'giving it up'" (47-48). Indeed, concern for the future of poetry had by 1979 been an element of Tranter's work at least as far back as *Red Movie*, and the reappearance of this concern positions "Rimbaud" in a loose sequence of poems that progresses from "Red Movie" through "The Poem in Love" and *The Alphabet Murders.*

Nevertheless as Andrew Taylor writes in *Reading Australian Poetry*:

> The sequence starts and ends with what seems a firmly locatable subject .... [The] subject constitutes or situates itself as the romantic rebel; but like the historical Rimbaud, and like the poem itself, it refuses to stay fixed. The result is a poem which seems both deeply concentrated and remarkably elusive, the subject again revealing itself as that which has no visible nature of its own with which to authorise such roles as that of romantic rebel. These roles come to it from outside, from culture or from history, and are not an expression of the subject but an impression on it. The subject appears only... in a style of remaining invisible within their multitudinous flux. (168)

Taylor's comments suggest another way in which "Rimbaud and the Modernist Heresy" echoes *The Alphabet Murders*: both poems are "deeply concentrated and remarkably elusive," as their consistency of tone resists their various attempts to fragment the subject.

Radio Traffic" contains twenty-two *trenters*, a thirty line form invented by Tranter complete with a fabricated history because he "felt the sonnet was a bit restrictive and decided to expand it" (*A Possible Contemporary Poetry* 34). This development of the sonnet form extends Tranter's refinement of its different modes in *Crying in Early Infancy*. A number of the poems recall the earlier sonnets: "The Great Artist Reconsiders the Homeric Simile" (54) employs a discursive mode similar to sonnet forty-seven, while "Leavis at the London" (39) makes use of disruptive strategies similar to the more hermetic sonnets like number ninety.

Impressive as "Radio Traffic" is, the poem that stands out from the rest of *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* is "Ode to Col Joye." This bright, breezy poem begins:

> You open your eyes and realise
> it's the morning of a summer's day in Sydney
> and it's going to be -- not a John Betjeman day,
> though you can hear church bells
>   faintly across Annandale,
> and not a John Forbes day, though
> the first thing you notice is your sunshine lotion
> on the dressing table beside a beach towel
> decorated with a crude scene of coconut palms
>   and a jet bomber
> pencilling a faint vapour trail
>   across the Malayan sky (*Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* 57)

The poem embarks on a voyage of discovery that is both comical and critical, searching through a number of contemporary poets for a satisfactory label for the day. From the echoes of John Forbes's "Ode to Tropical Skiing" in the title to the relaxed and playful mood sustained throughout, the poem is in many ways more like Forbes's work than it is like Tranter's own before this, which makes the early rejection of "John Forbes" especially ironic.

Forbes himself has provided a succinct assessment of "Ode to Col Joye" in *Meanjin*, remarking that the poem combines "good humoured criticism of that mirage-like entity, 'The Sydney School', with the only reply worth making -- besides a swift kick -- to the sour polemicists who invented it" (253). The ode uses many of the characteristic elements of "Sydney Poetry," from Bondi Beach to the irreverent tone, although it tellingly resists the temptation to mention the Harbour. The "good humoured criticism" is crucial to the poem's success, preventing the tongue-in-cheek praise of things Sydney from solidifying into banality as the poem blows raspberries in two directions: one at the petty factionalising of the "sour polemicists," and another at the "Sydney poets" who succumbed to the mythologising temptation:

> it's enough
>   to be having a shower
>   in the hot
> blue summer morning in Sydney, an ambience
> that no Melbourne poet will ever appreciate,

and you almost
blame them for that! but 'blame' is very
un-Sydney, so you
smile and finish your shower
having adjusted the warmth of the water
thinking of Bondi Beach
and of the poets you know who will not be
planning to go to Bondi today, after all,
they never do, but
at least one of them will be planning to
write a poem
about not going to Bondi! (*Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* 58)

After romping through a catalogue of poets and providing snappy potted parodies of their various styles and concerns, the poem finally decides:

it's a day for writing something 'fresh'
for *Surfers Paradise*
and that makes it a Col Joye day; that,
and the bright air
glistening with poetry and the desire to please. (*Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* 61)

Both "the bright air" and the poem itself have been "glistening with poetry and the desire to please," but by placing "'fresh'" in single quotation marks the poem maintains its deconstructive momentum by signalling the artificiality of any style, even this one; another joke in and on a poem in which style is repeatedly foregrounded. "Ode to Col Joye" demonstrates a new mode that incorporates the intelligence and scepticism of Tranter's best work with a playfulness as refreshing as "a shower / in the hot / blue summer morning."

While "Rimbaud and the Modernist Heresy" recalls *The Alphabet Murders* and "Radio Traffic" develops the sonnets in *Crying in Early Infancy*, "Ode to Col Joye" is the first sign of a new direction in Tranter's poetry. Its seemingly simple yet actually quite sophisticated style and its new human touch become increasingly prominent in Tranter's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Selected Poems (1982)

Having published six volumes of poetry in the 1970s, Tranter would publish only one collection of new work in the 1980s, *Under Berlin* (1988). His *Selected Poems* interrupted the nine years of silence between *Under Berlin* and *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* in 1982. Describing his reasons for compiling a *Selected Poems*, Tranter told Martin Duwell:

> I got the impression that I'd written a fairly complete body of work by the time I'd got to the end of *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge*. It seems to complete a whole group of things that I'd started out trying to do fifteen years before. In a way I'm still waiting for another kind of poetry to write. (*A Possible Contemporary Poetry* 36)

There is no doubt that Tranter's *Selected Poems* represents "a fairly complete body of work," but it does offer a slightly distorted view of his trajectory, "a particular construction of [his] writing" as Erica Travers observes in *Southerly* (22). It omits many of Tranter's early poems and revises some others. The revisions to one poem in particular, "The Raft," serve to illustrate the "particular construction" of Tranter's poetry that *Selected Poems* provides.

In *Red Movie*, "The Raft" concludes with the lines:

I brought flasks of sharp dry liquor
that stripped layers from your skin
exposing all the young girls that lurked in your breast.
You would soak the pungent light into your flesh

so that the glow of your body would give eloquence
to the night, that now stammers in a neon fit of gloom...
but that was in another country, and now you are always
here, and just out of reach... wherever you are

not being with me is another laceration
you love to give, and shall now bequeath to each night
in my palace of black isolation, when the morning
has cursed my flesh with motion and regret. (*Red Movie* 33-34)

In *Selected Poems*, it is retitled "Waiting for Myself to Appear," and ends:

I brought flasks of sharp dry liquor
that stripped layers from your skin
exposing all the young girls in your breast.
You would soak the light into your flesh

so that the glow of your body would give eloquence
to the night, that now stammers in a neon fit of gloom...
but that was in another country, and now you are always
here, and just out of reach... middle age

growing like a slum around your future.
You are a ghost, watching over my shoulder
as I start to grow old. It is late at night.
I am waiting for myself to appear. (*Selected Poems* 24)

In *A Possible Contemporary Poetry* Tranter described "The Raft" as "a very autobiographical poem. It's not really 'confessional' because it's been distorted by the demands of the poem itself, but "The Raft" is the ultimate ego-based poem" (18). In the *Selected Poems* version the gothic imagery is excised – "my palace of black isolation" disappears – and a new final line echoes the first line of the poem – "Waiting for myself to

appear" – so that it now follows the circular movement of many Tranter poems.

The new final stanza no longer provides the subject with a definite position and substitutes vague anxiety for focused pain as the circuit created by the echoes of the poem's opening pushes a reader back into the text. The revisions move away from a base in the ego towards a more abstract, text-based poetic. Revisions to other poems, and the omission of the vast majority of *Parallax*, work in the same way to ensure that the poetic represented by *Selected Poems* emphasises the more abstract work at the expense of the early, subject-centred poems. Despite appearing two years into the 1980s, the book marked the end of the previous decade for Tranter's poetry, and established him without doubt as an important Poet.

Under Berlin (1988)

Six years elapsed between the definition of his 1970s poetic in *Selected Poems* and the publication of Tranter's next major collection, *Under Berlin*. Speaking with Stephen Craft and Helen Loughlin about the book in *Hermes*, Tranter claimed that:

> I could see that [some of the poems] were easier to read than some of the other poems in the book, and perhaps more welcoming and domestic and easily understandable, so I put them at the front. That way, the average reader browsing through the book in the bookstore might think "Oh this is nice. I'll buy that", and go home with the book. And wind up wading into a bowl of molasses; it gets stickier and stickier the deeper you get. (39)

Tranter gets full marks for cunning. However, Under Berlin not only gets "stickier and stickier," it also becomes more familiar away from the "more welcoming and domestic" poems at the front of the book.

The last poem of any substance in the collection is "Halothane," a work that blazes with an energy that recalls *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* and *Crying in Early Infancy*:

> The angel loves the lake trip stripping off
> you too writhing under the heap of women
> loose now only within their roles,
> their manacles: 'wives'. Embrace me
> hotly it's a childish trick from that
> ink-black cloud a string conducting
> death shocks we have the key to,
> sweeping the grass drenched and happy
> with promises in the academics of passion;
> her touch brings a thrill of hurt
> as much as delirium, pleasure
> and a feast of busy dresses,
> the shopgirls dizzy with
> fever for her. (*Under Berlin* 108)

Tranter's notes say that halothane is "a volatile, sweetish liquid, $Cf_3CHBrCl$, used as an anaesthetic inhalant" (119). The title might be reflexive, in that the poem itself could be thought of as "a volatile, sweetish liquid," but it also echoes Tranter's article in *The American Model* (1982), "Anaesthetics" (99-116). That article promotes the "new" and "experimental" over the "old" and "conservative," arguing that the aesthetic expectations of many critics had not changed to accommodate the shift in poetics that accompanied the "new poetry," a situation that led to "considerable misunderstanding and conflict" (115). In many ways, however, the disruptions and elisions of "Halothane" are more conservative, in terms of Tranter's poetics, than the poems towards the front of *Under Berlin*.

In an enthusiastic review in *Imago*, Phillip Neilsen commented:

> *Under Berlin* contains both the difficult Tranter and the accessible version. The difficult Tranter is abstract, post-modernist and non-referential (or over referential, as David Carter has pointed out).... But there is also the other Tranter, who has always written poems that are more accessible-- poems with an edge of social comment, of satire and humour, and poems that are autobiographical. In *Under Berlin* the balance has shifted towards this more accessible work. (49-50)

Neilsen does not make the point that the "accessible" Tranter of *Under Berlin* represents a substantial departure from earlier "accessible" poems. The differences between Tranter's new "accessible" poems and those of his previous volumes are evident in "North Light," which begins:

> He looks around his son's room: the bed
> unmade, the globe of the world with an
> imaginary voyage plotted in blue ink,
> the clutter of books and plastic toys,
> a life gathering its tackle together and
> pushing forward. He stares at the backyard
> and the thick bushes growing upwards.
> The only movement is the glitter of leaves,
> and the washing his wife hung out,
> before she went to work, flapping
> in its circus. Something you can't see
> holds it all together. What is it? Last
> spring they painted the house: amateurs,
> but doing the job as best they could, then
> they laid bricks in a pattern in the yard –
> what is it, that makes the pattern hold?
> That party where they squabbled, the dinner
> where old friends got drunk and happy... (*Under Berlin* 8)

A reader's first reaction might well be to double-check that this is by Tranter. The unfamiliarity is less a function of the clarity of the lines than of the tone and texture, the gently puzzling mood unlike anything that Tranter had written before.

The poem repeatedly asks what is holding its various patterns together, a question which seems to demand a metaphysical answer, however, one of the possible answers is poetic skill. As the poem describes the bricks laid down in the garden and pieces of household clutter coming together to form family life, these elements are in turn held together by the exercise of poetic technique. Rather than attempting to invest the poem with the qualities of "life," "North Light" offers a subtle reminder that the represented life shares the qualities of the poem.

Christopher Pollnitz's comments in *Scripsi* on a similar poem in the collection, "Backyard," are useful here:

> For all the literary sophistication that underpins its limpid surface, there seems to be no avoidance of an authorizing subject in 'Backyard'. How to write and read poetry may still be a theme, but in the new quiet voice of these poems the falsifying of signification is addressed as theme rather than embedded and enacted in the difficulties of the signifying medium. The tone remains cool in all these poems of the quiet voice. There is no colloquial collaring of a reader, and no Romantic self-exhibitionism either. (262-63)

Poems like "Backyard" and "North Light" seem happy to create the illusion of a "subject", but this figure is a distinctly post-modern one who reveals that he is a construct and is unwilling to authorise anything. The illusion of the perceiving consciousness is held together by the poem, much like the pattern of bricks.

The cool tone of the "quiet voice" is a new development for Tranter. It avoids the sentimentality his early work rejected, but also rejects the brutality of the early poems. "North Light" concludes:

> He sits at the kitchen table, half dressed,
> drinking a glass of orange juice,
> and wonders about the delicate adhesive
> that holds it all together. Once, long ago,
> he'd been divorced: a sad, frightened drunk
> living in a rented room.
> When the washing's dry
> he'll gather it up, in armfuls, and bring it in.
> He turns on some music. The house has a
> northerly aspect; it is full of light.

Although the poem seems to end with an image of some sort of transcendence as the house appears "full of light," the first half of the final sentence undermines the implication by noting the house's "northerly aspect," suggesting among other things that the light is simply a result of attention paid to detail in the design of the house. But there can be no doubt that the human relationships that the poem so delicately examines are given great value -- a value which is emphasised by the flashback to the "sad, frightened drunk" -- and this aspect of "North Light" represents yet another radical departure from Tranter's poetic past.

While poems like "Halothane" continue to develop longstanding preoccupations, the new mode in *Under Berlin* represents nothing less than Tranter's reinvention of himself. The cool rational tone is wedded to a clear style that remains as textually self-aware as his more abstract pieces, but the coolness here is far removed from the cold detachment that once held sway. Tranter has found a way of returning the human to his poems, and his next two volumes take full advantage of his discovery.

The Floor of Heaven (1992) and *At The Florida* (1993)

In 1991 Craft and Loughlin asked Tranter if he could see his work heading in any particular direction, to which he replied:

> Three directions actually, and they're all quite different. There are the long narrative poems, like short stories, halfway between blank verse and free verse. Then there are these "haibun" things -- I started doing them about a year or two ago: short poems which have a 20-line free-verse poem, then a stanza space, and then a prose paragraph, fairly short. Then I'm also working on a group of about two-to-three page free-verse poems that are fairly discursive, have a reasonably coherent syntactical structure but a kind of loose ideational flow to them. (Craft and Loughlin 41)

Tranter has since published two volumes: the long narrative poems appeared in 1992 as *The Floor of Heaven*, and the *haibun* and the free-verse poems a year later, in *At The Florida*.

According to Nina-Marie Petrik, John Ashbery described *The Floor of Heaven* as "a rattling good read" (40), and while Ashbery's assessment may lack a certain sophistication, it is accurate. The four narrative poems move with an often exhilarating pace. Carmel Bird has written that they

> are elegantly linked not only by some of the characters but by images and signatures -- the swish of tyres in the rain, the hint of perfume, the presence of eyes, music, the patterns on cloth. And water, always water and that inevitable murderous darkness deep down. (42)

Indeed, in terms of texture and imagery, *The Floor of Heaven* moves in and out of the darkness that inhabited so much of Tranter's early work. The links that Bird describes also extend away from the poems, such that they weave in and out of other writing as well:

> Somewhere in a far recess of summer
> monks were playing soccer. The thock
> of leather on leather, and their happy cries. (*The Floor of Heaven* 7)

The first part of John Ashbery's "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers" concludes with the couplet: "In a far recess of summer / Monks are playing soccer" (Donald Hall, 188-89). Ashbery's poem is also partly concerned with different constructions and representations of the self. Allusions such as this betoken a self-awareness that belies the

apparent simplicity of the style which drives the narratives.

The poems in *The Floor of Heaven* employ a lucid syntax, making use of alliteration and half-rhymes to provide added momentum:

> 'Max, continue!' shouted the Captain,
> who had returned wet from the rain.
> He waved a damp, half-eaten cigar.
> I noticed his disarray for the first time –
> his tie had come undone and hung loose,
> and the suit that had started out as
> a symbol of his standing in the City now
> spoke of decline -- ash littered the cuffs,
> a large handkerchief ballooned
> from a sleeve, a shirt pocket bled
> with a spreading stain of purple ink.
> 'Max! The knife-edge! The deck of cards! (*The Floor of Heaven* 37-38)

Speaking to Petrik, Tranter remarks that "the first poem in that group of poems, 'Gloria', plays about with the idea of who's narrating what to whom, whom we can believe, which is invented, which isn't, how does the monologue construct the narrative?" (41). Indeed, the narrative in "Gloria" is particularly elusive, sometimes shifting between different names for the same character as with "Karen" and "Marjorie" and "Gloria," and blurring chronological boundaries as well. These shifts and blurrings, and the poem's intertextual self-consciousness undermine the authority of the subject that the stable tone and the lucid style imply. *The Floor of Heaven* might be seen as a development of the new discursive mode that appeared in *Under Berlin*. Here, as in those poems, Tranter allows brief moments of compassion for the characters before the narratives continue on into the darkness.

In both tone and technique, *At The Florida* appears to be the logical successor to *Under Berlin*. Several pieces in its first two sections recall the early, "accessible" *Under Berlin*. Tranter's poetry seems to be mellowing as he ages, though "mellowing" should not imply any loss of rigour. Tranter has developed a stylish and sophisticated discursive mode and is becoming more confident in its employment. However, he has not abandoned his more abstract work, as the final section of *At The Florida* demonstrates.

At The Florida also recalls *Under Berlin* in so much as it too gets "stickier and stickier." The third section of the volume consists of thirty *haibun*. It showcases a number of dazzling verbal surfaces that recall "Radio Traffic" and *Crying In Early Infancy*. In the verse stanza of "Exiles" rhythm and alliteration seem to be the guiding principles:

> Her witchcraft body wallop
> new distraction doting
> on the console flaunting
> Europe shimmer clad for a less
> level-headed niche. The hazy
> network helps you coast

clear of the shoal trail
blazer simpleton worship
dim-witted teenyboppers
outlasting their holidays –
try to fathom the bizarre
outfit the ebony debutante
claps on like armour – uh-oh,
condemn 'ebony', warmth
rollers neatly wending
redefine the model's vanity,
skipping her foyer faith, play
a flirt out of range
with those frauds in
Galien small talk (*At The Florida* 79)

In some ways, Tranter's use of the *haibun* continues the project of the "Generation of '68", in that it appropriates and investigates a poetic tradition other than the British. Tranter discovered the form in Ashbery's *A Wave* (1985), which is particularly apt since the alternate tradition again comes through an American filter.

There is an obvious correspondence between the tone of poems such as "Storm Over Sydney" and "A Marriage" in *At The Florida*, and "Backyard" and "North Light" in *Under Berlin*. These poems reflect surprise at the fleeting, paradoxically potent resonances of otherwise impotent human emotions. The final lines from "A Marriage" reveal something of this:

The sun makes a lovely show among the cumulus,
like a painting trying to tell us a story.
A black car idles on the gravel drive.

There's something he wants to say – the words
are on the tip of his tongue. She gives him
that anxious smile, and squeezes his hand. (*At The Florida* 5)

After the poem provides a brief but sympathetic record of a marriage from wedding day to grandchildren "on the veranda at Resthaven", the last stanza sounds an elegiac note. As the black car idles threateningly "on the gravel drive," suggesting the imminence of death, the man has a message for his wife "on the tip of his tongue." The words remain unsaid, yet still "She gives him / that anxious smile, and squeezes his hand." What is different in these poems relative to Tranter's work up to *Under Berlin* is the way in which such exchanges are treated.

Elsewhere in *At The Florida*, in "Journey", Tranter writes:

... we seem to be rattling out of control along the track
that clatters into the
country, turns into a bend,
and vanishes into
the forest, into the waiting shadows, into the dark. (7)

The image of darkness at the end of life is reminiscent of the end of “Rimbaud and the Modernist Heresy” and a number of other Tranter poems. It suggests that he has not changed his view that human existence is ultimately meaningless. In some of his earlier poems he responds to this perceived meaninglessness violently to debunk what he saw as pointless sentimentality, but now he appears to recognise the power of exchanges such as the smile and the touch that close “The Marriage,” or the father’s exploration of his house and his child’s room in “North Light”, ephemeral as this power may be. Tranter may not be sure what this human contact might mean, but some of his most recent poems no longer feel the need to dissect it from a distance; instead they hold it close, and allow themselves a cautious celebration.

In *Yacker 3* (1989), John Tranter told Candida Baker, “I want to find out how to put all the things I learned over the last twenty years into a poetry that doesn’t appear to be conscious of them” (333). To judge by *At The Florida*, this may be taking his poetry into an area that has some similarities to that explored by his early poems. Although there are substantial differences in tone and imagery, Tranter is once again writing poems about the world, poems that are concerned with people and their feelings.

Tranter’s new poems use an unobtrusive self-consciousness to achieve a clarity that avoids naivety while at the same time, another part of his poetry continues to revel in the ludic possibilities of language, creating new forms to play with and interrogating both representation and the construction of meaning. His less referential modes hold ongoing interest for Tranter, but the new mode developed in *Under Berlin* and refined in *The Floor of Heaven* and *At The Florida* is of increasing importance in his work. As Tranter directs his energies in this new direction, after a long absence we now find that there are people at the Florida.