

**Elizabeth Perkins**

**TRANSLATING THE NEXT  
SENTENCE: LANGUAGE AS  
THEME IN SOME POETRY OF  
MANFRED JURGENSEN**

Manfred Jurgensen has been writing poetry in English since 1961 when, at the age of twenty-one he migrated as a student to Melbourne from his native Flensburg in north-western Germany. In 1985, *Waiting for Cancer*, his sixth collection of poems in English, was published by the Queensland Community Press. Since 1968 when he joined the German Department at the University of Queensland where he is now Professor of German, Jurgensen has encouraged poetry in Brisbane and taken an active part in writing, reading and publishing poetry, drama and prose. In a real sense, Brisbane has become home, just as Melbourne, and particularly the Carlton environs of Melbourne University, became his home in his student years. Jurgensen, however, is also a regional poet in Germany, and much of his sensitive work centres on the north-west state of Schleswig-Holstein which borders Denmark. Again, Switzerland is the home of some of his finest poems in English and German, for his post-graduate work was done there under the Goethe scholar, Emil Staiger. What we find in Jurgensen's poetry, to an extent unique in Australian writers, is a poet who is consciously native and domiciled and yet also migrant and exiled. Jurgensen is unusual also among contemporary poets writing in German, for although there are many who write in several languages or who, like Enzensberger, translate their own work, there are fewer living as naturalized citizens in a different country who continue to write in both languages and to identify with the social realities of both countries. The Austrian writer, Erich Fried, some twenty years Jurgensen's senior, has lived in England since 1938, but the greater part of his work is written in German. It may be said of Jurgensen, as it is of Fried, that he is a political poet because he thinks and lives politically. But Fried is actively involved and identified with the German and Austrian intelligentsia in their opposition to growing political and social intolerance in those countries, and Jurgensen is not an activist in any country in quite the same sense. Yet when Stuart Hood, Fried's translator, finds Fried's poetry remarkable because "it

expresses a spectrum of feeling in which there is no dividing-line between the political and the personal", one realizes that this is almost wholly the case with Jurgensen's. The dividing-line disappears completely in Jurgensen's forthcoming novel, *A Difficult Love*, which correlates the narrator's search for personal commitment in love with his growing understanding of his relationship with Australia, and which is set in Brisbane in May 1985, during the Electrical Trade Union confrontation with the Queensland Government.

It has been said that a perpetual state of willed exile is desirable for any person of strong and mature feeling, and it is this state, rather than the more aggressive, immature state of perpetual alienation, that we find in the work of some of the greatest poets. Another more poignant way of expressing exile is seen in those who may or may not be writers but who experience life as a search for a lost former state of blessedness, commonly called the search for a lost Eden. This is not what we find in Jurgensen's poetry. Jurgensen's poetry does not look back but reaches forward to something that is still faintly visioned and still a long way from realization. This vision or hope is neither political nor religious, but has much to do with the eventual reconciliation of humankind, not necessarily with some externalized Power or Being, but with itself. For Jurgensen, the way towards this reconciliation of humanity with itself is through language.

Many people who are driven to write are caught in the very real and baffling paradox which some, like Samuel Beckett, turn into creative irony, that they believe, ultimately, only in silence. And yet they are driven to speak. For Jurgensen, however, language is the only key to reality. By language he means all kinds of signs and voices that exist in and between human nature, external nature and objects. Not only is the phrase, signs and voices, the title of his first book of poems in English, but the phrase and the separate words occur in many forms in his German and English poems. He believes that signs and voices have mystical significance and, if faithfully emitted and accurately and perceptively translated, they are for him the key to every confusion and barrier that separate not only one human being from another, but one part of human nature from its other parts. For in Jurgensen's vision there is no part of human nature that is base or corrupt if it is permitted to express itself in its proper language.

In Jurgensen's poetry, tragedy, bitter irony and occasionally ironic comedy are the result of misuse of language and deliberate or inadvertent misinterpretation of signs and language. Because life, that is, the act of living, is seen as the act of speaking and signing oneself by the multitude of signs available, daily living is a process of translating our needs and our truth into language for others to read, and of translating the words and signs that they send out to us. For a poet, a

poem is the most perfect form of speech and the most successful translation of what needs to be said. Jurgensen is one of those poets who see their poems as acts of love. Silence means negation and denial of communication and is the absolute form of rejection of another person, or of life itself. The most embittered poem is therefore necessarily a denial of rejection, and is an act of love in defiance of whatever bitterness the poem expresses.

With sincerity, the poet's note to *The Skin Trade*, a sequence of harsh and bitter poems written over seven days in December 1982 and published in 1983, announces that "these are poems of love, written in and out of love". The ultimate rejection of the love-affair commemorated in *The Skin Trade* would have been silence. The poetry commits the events of the affair to memory in the form of poetry which, as fiction, is not subject to the transience and decay of a real relationship.

Silence has its place in life and in poetry as a form of signalling and silence has its own voices. In poetry silence consists in what is deliberately omitted or in what omits itself by refusing to allow the poet to say it. Silence may also be created as a psychological state in the poet and the reader by the physiological use of the sensuous quality of words. It is tempting to illustrate this point, which is well known, with one of the more graceful and gentle of Jurgensen's poems, like the German *neleh im park* from the collection *Innere Sicherheit* (1979), or the much anthologized "you do not write" from *Signs and Voices* (1973). Both poems commemorate a relationship which ends in silence. In doing this, they express with great beauty a faith that was won from that love.

It is more useful, however, to take less comfortable poems to illustrate the way in which the destructive or negative silence of so-called reality can become the creative silence of a poem. "Wohnen", from *Innere Sicherheit*, expresses a sense of no residence and hence the sense of no existence, which is the negative pole of the tension needed to maintain one in a state of willed exile:

unter mir stimmen  
gardinen  
vergilbte sätze  
selbstzitate  
es ist niemand  
zu hause

(Below me curtains attune yellowed sentences, self-quotations: there is no one at home.)

Curtains, waving in a breeze or still, closed or open, surreptitiously parted and so on, are one of the clearest signals our houses transmit to outsiders. The metaphor of speech, which subsumes the

curtains, is integral to Jurgensen's poetry, and self-quotation is a consistent image of helplessness which is seen in its most extreme form in the inability to communicate. Here the exhaustion that arises from prolonged failure to communicate with people and places is conveyed in the image of yellowed paper or faded ink. As an example in English of this physiological creation of a psychological state, we can take the final poem, "on time", from Jurgensen's latest collection, *Waiting for Cancer*:

some commute  
between home and work  
others between  
wives and mistresses  
we bought a season-  
ticket of departures  
nothing is  
as punctual  
as absence

The minimal rhyme in "wohnung" and the absence of rhyme in "on time" are significant, because Jurgensen believes in the reconciliatory and cohesive energies of rhymes, so that these poems act out their statements by avoiding the strong rhymes that are more typical of his poetry. Contradiction between the titles "wohnung" (dwelling or home) and "on time", and the themes of the respective poems is another form of absence of harmony or lack of reconciliation which denotes a negative form of silence, even while the sensuous qualities of the language of both poems evoke the pleasing silence which is the echo of a sigh.

Silence also enters Jurgensen's poems in their brevity, which implies speech only within the context of a longer period of silence. At present, Jurgensen's poems are typically short, although their grouping in sequences indicates the willingness to make a longer statement. Silence has importance in the theme and structure of Jurgensen's poetry, but there is no indication that as a poet he is seeking silence, or any still point of the turning world. For him, literally, the world and the word are synonymous.

Jurgensen believes that not only poets write themselves in their work but that we are all writing ourselves in our daily signs and voices. The difference between those who, outside daily obligations, write poetry or use language creatively, and those who do not, is only a difference in the extent to which each is interested in language. Those who do not write in language nevertheless write themselves in any of the activities they pursue for the pure pleasure of creativity. Jurgensen would argue therefore, that the "ich" or "I" — usually written "i"

—that appears in his work is not the autobiographical “I” but a created self. It is similar to the “I” that potters represent in their work or gardeners represent in their gardens. In the case of writers who use verifiable names, places, events and dates in their work, the argument that the speaking “I” is not the writer’s self may sometimes appear disingenuous. Yet much critical theory is written on this matter, and most readers are ready, because they understand the psychanalytic and psycholinguistic problems involved — or if they do not understand them are aware that they exist — to exercise a willing suspension of disbelief on the matter. As far as it affects Jurgensen’s poetry, it is a matter that I wish to take up elsewhere. What is interesting at present is pursuing the metaphor of language, speech, writing and signs, and the theme of language in Jurgensen’s first collection in German, *Stationen* (Stopping-places), and his latest English collection, *Waiting for Cancer*.

Jurgensen’s belief in the reality of language as transcending all other forms of existence, while it has a basic psychological truth, is also fundamentally spiritual and metaphysical. The sociolinguistic dimensions of language, which are those that concern our daily life, have much less certitude and can be relied upon far less than the psychological and spiritual dimensions of language, and it is in the social sphere that language is first corrupted and distorted. In the late twentieth century we have begun to realize that one of the simplest ways to corrupt language is to turn names, acts and objects into concepts, because concepts have a plastic existence and can be narrowed, expanded and pushed into unlimited shapes. As Theodor Adorno argued against Heidegger in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), the desire to conceptualize begins as a laudable search for the essence of things, but ends by asserting the primacy of the concept over the thing, with no possibility of ever defining the concept except by tautological description. A great deal of poetry is written on this basis, with the again laudable desire to reach the essence, Platonic or not, of some experience or thing.

Jurgensen’s poetry rarely deals directly in concept and only in ironic contexts deals in generalities. Concentration on the apparently personal “I” also precludes the use of generalization, although when written as “i” it signals that it is, to the best of its ability, emptied of egotism. Reservations as to how far the “i” can be emptied before it becomes a concept will be put aside for the moment. What can be said now is that the personal, speaking “i” takes responsibility for its own subjectivity and can regard this subjectivity as another object of interest or concern.

The poems in *Stationen* were written while the poet was travel-

ling in Asia and Europe and writing his doctoral thesis at the University of Zurich, and the poems reflect various stages or stopping-places of experience. All are concerned with some aspect of language, and express both hope and fear in the power of language for good and evil — in Jurgensen's terms, in its power to unite or to sever humankind with or from itself. In every poem real, sensuous objects and experiences are used as images and metaphors for abstract ideas and states of mind. The collection is almost overwhelming in its richness of sensation and emotion. Intellectual pressure, transmitted through what is basically expressionist technique, is intense. Because all statements are made through images, the poems are never arguments, although they take firm stands on what are often highly controversial matters like politics, eroticism and religion. Yet this vitality and sensuousness co-exist with the poems' struggle against despair and loss of faith in language, a loss which would mean loss of faith in life itself.

Since the *Stationen* poems are not at present generally available to readers, we shall have to forgo an extensive discussion of them, but something of their character and quality, although nothing of their range, may be demonstrated by referring to two of the shorter poems which represent extremes of near despair about language and quiet confidence in its integrity.

"Leda" is the first of two Zurich poems, and here the Leda of the title represents the false beauty of language abused by commerce and materialism. The image is that of the brilliant advertising illuminations along one of the fashionable streets in Zurich:

In der Bahnhofstrasse  
Wird eine Hexe verbrannt.  
Sie glüht in geliehenen Farben  
Auf dem Neonscheiterhaufen.  
Den meisten Gaffern,  
Doch nur wenig Gläubigen  
Sind ihre vernarbten, noch unbezahlten  
Züge bekannt. Sie kreischt im Flammenmeer.  
Kantonsspital. Notoperation.  
Unsere Worte tragen nicht.

(In the Bahnhofstrasse a witch is being burnt. She glows in borrowed colours on the witch's stake of neon lights. By most of the bystanders her scarred, still unpaid-for (unredeemed) features are recognised, but only by a few of the faithful. She screams in the sea of flames. Canton Hospital. Emergency operation. Our words do not carry.)

The truth-telling element of language, which has an erotic witchcraft to enchant the intellect and aesthetic sensibility, is seen as *eine Hexe*, a witch, who is burning on the *Neonscheiterhaufen* or the

witch's stake made by the neon lights lining the Bahnhofstrasse. The garish, unnatural colours in which the distorted language is inscribed, are seen as the shrieks of the tortured language. The majority of bystanders recognize well enough her scared or unredeemed features, but only a few of those who truly believe in language recognize her. (The concept of things unpaid for, unredeemed or unatoned is important in the *Stationen* poems.) It is this minority of true believers, with whom the poet identifies himself and his readers in the adjective *unsere*, who call for an emergency operation. But it is too late. Our words do not carry, the language cannot be saved.

The poem exists to contradict this hopelessness, which is expressed both with horror and with a certain pleasing whimsy. The cadences of the lines, the repetition of the "n" sounds, which occur more frequently than any other consonant sound and culminate in the final *nicht*, conduce towards the negative emotion. Yet the compression of all meaning into so few lines, the "poemness" or tightness of the poem, asserts itself against this negativism. Compression must result in force and energy, whether these are good or bad in context, and where there is energy there can be no vacuum of hopelessness.

The "Requiem", dedicated to Alexander Xaver Gwerder, is a poem specifically of its time, and a contribution to many poems written over the graves of young poets. Gwerder was a gifted Swiss poet who, in 1952, committed suicide at the the age of twenty-nine, partly in revulsion against compulsory military training. It is a deceptively simple tribute of three quatrains, with regular rhyme and a firmly regular falling trochaic metre. The verse form, imaging simplicity and control, declares that neither the dead poet's decision and the values that led him to it, nor the present poet's identification with these, involve anything that is wasteful, extravagant, weak or indulgent. Only the falling rhythm itself, which gives an unstressed syllable at the end of each line, makes any concession of pathos to this discipline. Two important lines in the last stanza change from falling to rising rhythm:

Aus den Gräbern tönt Geläute,  
Glocken in den Stein geschlagen,  
Unser täglich Wort gibt heute  
Daten, die am Leben tragen.  
Durch den Nebel schimmern Zahlen,  
Die das Abendrot umgrenzen,  
Schweigsam harrend, dass die fahlen  
Zifferblätter wieder glanzten.  
Die Schrift erfüllen in der Nacht  
Blinde Seher auserlesen,

Was sie in Dunkelheit vollbracht,  
Wähnt der Morgen nie gewesen.

(From the graves sound the ringing of bells, bells hewn into the stone. Our daily word today gives dates, which carry into life. Through the mist the figures gleam, marking off the red glow of sunset, silently waiting until the pale dials of figures glitter again. Blind chosen Seers who accomplish writing in the night, what they achieved in darkness, the morning will believe never to have been.)

The dominant images in the first two stanzas are the dates of Gwerder's life which are conflated with the chimes of the bell, so that the engraved dates are heard as bells throbbing in the stone. The simple ingredients of cemetery, grave-stone, inscription, bell, sunset and fog are wholly objective, but also image the way both young poets perceived the threat to the cultural and spiritual values of their generations. In the last stanza the night becomes the cultural epoch in which prophetic writers accomplish their work, although what they achieved will not be believed by those who only know the morning. The poem is written to keep alive those things that men like Gwerder accomplish in adverse times. Although in "Leda" the word *tragen* (bear or carry) is used negatively to assert that language cannot carry forward, here it is used affirmatively. "Requiem" is important in the collection. Gwerder's grave is one stopping-place at which the poet's vitality and faith might well be at low ebb; but the signs on the grave-stone and the voices of the bells carry a message of faith in language that the poet could not believe when he stood in the Bahnhofstrasse.

*Waiting for Cancer*, which followed the intense emotion of *The Skin Trade*, was an attempt to distance the poet from the kind of feeling that gave the earlier collection its unique passion. *Waiting for Cancer* was originally titled *Object-Lesson*, after the first of its ten sequences, and when circumstances necessitated a change of title, Jurgensen chose one with private connotations not quite as bleak as they might appear. The title poem comprises four short lines emphasizing the central importance of signs:

my fear stays indignant  
trying to read the sign,  
is my growth malignant  
or is my life benign?

At this point, some seventeen years after the *Stationen* poems, this collection suggests that the poet approaches signs with fear born partly from a sense ("indignant") that the intervening years have brought injury and cause for anger. There is a more aggressive concern in *Waiting for Cancer*, as if anguish now is less intense only

because it is underlain with less hope. Faith in language is undiminished, but there is a cold irony apparent in many rhymes and in the apportioning of adjectives, so that the phrases sometimes become disturbing oxymorons, like that of "malignant growth", which in normal medical use is a bitter irony. In this context the adjective "benign" loses its salutary, favourable connotation, and takes on its clinical association of "mild" — a mitigating rather than a positive force. Too much weight should not be given to this quatrain as determining a bleak overall mood for the collection, since it is one of the *xenia* or satiric epigrams which characteristically involve some criticism of their own attitudes.

The first section, *object-lesson*, might be read as an attempt to see objects steadily and see them whole, and to do so without denying the inescapable subjectivity of observation. Jurgensen's poetry, which is dominated by the subjective "i", is paradoxically quite free of egotism. But although it deals almost wholly with sensuous realities, it does not show that imaginative identification with the external world which Richard Woodhouse described when he related that his friend, the poet Keats, "affirmed that he can conceive of a billiard-ball, that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness, volubility and the rapidity of its motion." Jurgensen's "lamp," in the first poem of that name, has the same aesthetic dimensions and significance as the light-bulb-eye-sun that burns at the top of Picasso's *Guernica* painting:

under the imitation sky  
it hangs, the captured gallowed eye —  
disconnected, it is kneeling  
in awe of the enlightened blade  
that will cut it from the ceiling  
to cast once more prometheus' shade. . . .

This lamp is invested with the poet's apprehension of being destined to submit to some form of execution in order to earn enlightenment for himself and others:

the ancient demigod returns  
as his own executioner;  
he reads about his fate and learns  
the science that makes life appear,  
and why it is that some must die  
to smuggle light into the eye.

Certainly the pictures in *object-lesson* represent iconography not photography. As icons, the objects are given meaning by the observer's hope and fear and faith. Occasionally the element of faith seems to be imposed on the object, rather than emerge from it as the

observer focuses his concentration. "Carpet" has some witty implications, but the statement which ends the poem is too large, as the carpet becomes "object-lesson to relate/the meaning of our essence". What the poem itself has done most economically, is summarize our essence, or at least certain essential characteristics of humanity, but it is not easy to see that it has demonstrated anything about the *meaning* of that essence.

This elusive meaning is really what the collection is searching for, and although it does not, I think, find a meaning, the poetry does help to convince us that a meaning may possibly exist. For Jurgensen, the capacity of language to exist beyond manipulation is proof that it must have its own meaning, and that this meaning might eventually bring us to a knowledge of our own meaning. The poem, "communion", finds that there are "native and foreign tongues" in all things, waiting for their self-release, which is brought about when the thing is "named". But the miracle of speech that allows a person or thing to reveal itself must be a self-naming. A name imposed from without merely conceptualizes a person or thing and gives the namer possession of it. David Malouf drives home this idea very clearly in describing his childhood exploration of his environment in *12 Edmonstone Street*:

Set loose in a world of *things*, we are struck at first by their terrible otherness. It drives us to fury. For a time, while we are all mouth, we try to swallow them, then to smash them to smithereens — little hunters on the track of the ungraspable. Till we perceive at last that in naming and handling things we have power over them.

It is unfortunate that this process of naming has been referred to so frequently of late by writers, psychologists and linguists that it may suffer the fate Adorno predicted, in which the concept of naming gains primacy over what each individual act of naming really involves. Naming has become a jargon word of authenticity denoting, *ipso facto*, an authenticity of experience.

A real poem, not a poem that is merely, in Jurgensen's terms, another poem quoting itself, must be one of the acts of language that fight against conceptualizing. *Waiting for Cancer*, as a collection, seems aware of this problem of meaning which must reveal itself, and from the collection there emerges a belief that if enough poems quietly exist as acts of self-naming, something about life's mystery may reveal itself to the patient reader. In the poem, "object-lesson", the speaker suggests that this was his experience when he read the work of Lolo Houbein, the writer to whom the poem is dedicated. Inherent in Jurgensen's poetry as a whole is the belief that the poem uses the poet

to search out some truth, not the other way about. Similarly, it is often said that a poem uses the reader to discover what the reader believes in. Although some very reputable critics have not objected to the idea, a poem is not a Rorschach test, neither should it leave diligent readers with the feeling that they have brought off a *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* by finding in it a coherent meaning.

“Object-lesson” is probably not an entirely successful poem because it does seem to require the *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* approach. There are too many missing connections between statements. But as it stands it does demonstrate how a writer’s work can fill the reader “with new-found patience and respect/ for all the meanings that define/ themselves. . .” It could be said that the poem is also a demonstration of Negative Capability, of allowing oneself to be in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. The problem lies in the last lines where the speaker has jumped from the experience of receptive reading to the matter of craftsmanlike composition of a work of art:

the beauty of a measured rule,  
the splendour of its craftsmanship,  
the use of a discovered tool,  
the missing word within my grip — .

One thinks of Browning’s “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp,/ Or what’s a heaven for?” At this point we come a little closer to the elusive meaning that the collection is searching for. The poet tries hard to practise Negative Capability, as one must when waiting in difficult circumstances, but the poems are not entirely his creatures and have their own statements or self-naming. The poet is searching for philosophic calm, but there are impatience and passion in the poetry.

Some of this impatience is expressed in the doubt that the poems reflect about the intrinsic good-will of those who are “makers”. The last stanza of “the table”, contrary to received ideas about craftsmen, states:

the makers refuse  
the truth of a thing  
familiar in use,  
alien to being.

The bad faith of makers of language is seriously indicted in the epigrammatic “inquisitors’ dialogue”, which summarizes the “Leda” poem of the *Stationen* collection:

‘who’s the young witch  
burning at the stake?’  
‘it is language  
suffering its make.’

“Making” and “language” are nevertheless almost, but not wholly, synonymous in Jurgensen’s vision. The need for acceptance is conveyed in a line describing “a migrant begging for a rhyme”, and the sense of self-entrapment in lines like these in the poem “no one”:

the captive blows  
his anxious bars  
and calls it home.  
all prisoners  
beg for a name.

Language, however, is seen also to unmake things and to deliver wounds, which again can be healed by words, although scars also are words and words may be seen as the scars of other kinds of experiences. These ideas are compressed very tightly into the poem “virgil to dante”, dedicated to the poet Vincent Buckley. Poets suffer the contradictory moods of the poems within this impatient collection, for in “dualism” they are brides, refuting Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to proclaim the purity of the senses, and in “poets” they are garbage collectors:

stop and go, never arriving.  
their tongues balance the world’s garbage  
as if it were man’s heritage.

In the poem “queensland”, apparently so subtle that a reviewing poet translated its irony as affirmation, which it is in a perverse sense only, poets in this environment are seen to “search for absent rhymes”. In “queen street mall” there is the same difficulty in finding reconciliation or harmony through language: “the home of language remains out of reach”, “signatures beg for lost petitions”, and only the laughter of children is spelt in the air.

Yet in the face of such ambivalence about language and its power, the poems are acts of love in the sense embodied in the fine poem called “make love to me with words. . .”, which is a sense similar to that discussed by another poet, David Brooks, in *Westerly* (September 1985). These acts of love, however, are rather in the nature of desperate gestures of love made in circumstances which the poet finds difficult, threatening and inimical. The poetry of *Stationen* is that of a young man whose anguish is partly attributable to a lively hope maintained against bewilderment in a world of large dimensions. In *Waiting for Cancer*, the world has narrowed and uncertainty has grown with diminution of experience. Nevertheless one cannot overlook the signs of hope, friendship and amused irony which offer some unambiguous rhyming in the collection, and which are especially clear in some of the *outrider*, *outback* and *dedication* poems.

Individually each image in Jurgensen’s poems justifies itself, as do all the metaphors using the concepts of words, language and

speech that comprise the encompassing metaphor of the collection. There is dramatic interaction between these metaphors, as there is between individual poems, and aesthetically and intellectually the interaction is more valuable than a reconciliation of contradictions. Another kind of dramatic interaction occurs between the poems commemorating aboriginal themes, those concerned with writers, and in particular, migrant writers, those concerned with Australian migrants, those concerned with women, and those concerned with Germany.

To readers sensitive to the real, rather than the obvious and material political forces of Australia in the mid eighties, the meeting ground of these concerns is obvious. Whatever one's race, gender, birth-place or generation, the dynamics of social life are involved in strong feelings of guilt, injustice and responsibility. The oppression of Australian Aborigines and migrants has its equation in the oppression of women, and in the oppression of races in Nazi Germany, and in the oppression of Jurgensen's generation by the generation of Hitler. It is unnecessary to labour the point to show how any sensitive person may be subject to complex pressures of guilt, injustice and responsibility with respect to one or more of these concerns. The "i" of Jurgensen's poems moves from an amused sense of injustice in the neatly pointed "letter to geoffrey blainey" and "migrants all", to a sense of almost annihilating guilt in "german youth" and "to the survivors of auschwitz". At the same time the "i" both accuses and shares the guilt of the white settlers of Australia. The fluid and dynamic movement between these poems, and inherent in most, ensures that no one poem adopts the denunciatory tone of propaganda. Just as the *Stationen* poems asserted a stubborn hope in the scarred features of language, so *Waiting for Cancer* more desperately asserts a belief in language "after Auschwitz". The poem "dictionary", which refers to Adorno's challenge that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, sums up for the poet the present stopping-place of language. It should be noted that the poem is dedicated to the German feminist writer, Karin Struck:

freedom bears accents like the scar  
of a life-saving operation. it speaks  
the many languages they are,  
the one captive humanity whose voice seeks  
the meaning borne and known by all.

Inadequate as this present discussion is, it may indicate how the issues and aesthetic questions that arise in *Waiting for Cancer* are proof that poetry may challenge the deepest private lives of those who write and read, at the same time as it challenges the social environment and our commitment to it. The collection also shows that

language, when allowed the greatest possible freedom, has some power to carry us beyond our limited present selves. In an earlier poem in the collection *Innere Sicherheit*, the poet recalls how, as a school-boy, he found a “small happiness in the dictionary”, and half ruefully he remembers how he perpetually made the same mistake of answering the master’s question: ‘wer übersetzt den nächsten satz?’ Although the consequences of attempting to speak and of making errors in what we say may be painful, it is always poets who, in Jurgensen’s phrase, translate the next sentence for the rest of us.

**Peter Lugg**

## **THE ANATOMY OF CREATIVE FORCES**

Once the book is set aside  
the inner resonances remain,  
scalding through neuron and brain.  
It makes new life from our own,  
and faster than we realise  
are breathing Conrad’s humid archipelago  
or leaning at the bar in Joyce’s Dublin,  
being Bloom. Self is abandoned,  
we step into the hero’s brogues.

We start affairs with quotes from Browning,  
walking streets more watercolour than reality.  
Farewelling love, we borrow from Tsvetaeva —  
sad conversation, polite rain falling.  
At times we outwit the writer,  
creating new feelings, fresh sorrows.  
Or so we think, until that mood  
glares from long-forgotten pages;  
silvery Catullus, or Tolstoy’s perfect music.