Poetry is an institution that resembles a coral reef. There is a living surface, but the mass of the structure is a lifeless skeleton: yet there is a symbiotic relationship between the living surface and the lifeless mass. Much the best environment for coral polyps is provided by a reef, and a reef that no longer has a living and growing surface soon erodes.

Yet, since there are reefs, there must have been a moment in time when a drifting juvenile polyp attached itself to something and began the reef. The only regional poetry in Australia that has passed beyond the stage of a lonely polyp beginning to build is Australian poetry itself, which is now discernible — barely — as a regional poetry in English.

The analogy may be taken a little further. A healthy reef consists of many kinds of animals and plants beside corals, and a healthy poetry needs editors, reviewers, critics, and scholars. In passing one might observe that Australian poetry has an adequate population of poets: further growth is likely to depend on increases in the other necessary species.

To change the analogy, a regional poetry may be viewed as a semi-closed system. Semi-closed since it is not impervious to outsiders, but they have to adjust. To the insiders, their own ambience will seem the eternal, universal, order of nature. It is still true, of course, that Australians are educated to be outsiders. Almost the entire formal education system of this country makes only sporadic token gestures to the fact that Australia is a large, warm, dry landmass to the south-east of Asia, inhabited by a remarkably affluent and amiable set of people, and that we are now living in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Consequently, each poet has to discover anew that he does not live in Europe (for those who suffer from a contemporary affliction, my use of the pronoun he does not imply that I believe poets have sex. At least, if you ask them, you will find that most don't believe they have it often enough). Poets ought to be able to find out who and what they are without too much effort. The afflictions induced by formal education are much more impeding for the etcetera species.
Let us leave poetry for the moment, and consider a related matter, the regionality of a poem. Now a poem comes into existence at what we might, without much distortion, idealise into a point in space and time. And we will not venture into those abstruse disciplines where regions may be points. Indeed, the regionality of a poem is only slightly correlated with the point at which it came into existence.

Let us approach the matter by positing for any poem an ideal reader. This ideal reader is one who can fully understand and, if necessary, evaluate the poem merely by reading it. He does not have to look in any reference work to construe either the language or the structure of the poem. The set of all such ideal readers will define one region of the poem. We can posit other and perhaps wider regions by positing readers who understand somewhat less of the poem. And so on until we reach a region constituted by those who can do no more than generally understand written English. (Or whatever is the language in which the poem is written.)

It may be, of course, that our first region, the set of ideal readers, is null. There are, in fact, no ideal gases, but it's a useful construct none the less.

As an extremely crude first approximation, we may say that a poem requires three kinds of knowledge in a reader. A knowledge which is gained from direct experience of the world, a knowledge which is gained from books, lectures, film, television, conversation and whatever, and a knowledge gained only from reading poems and talk about poems. A poem does not necessarily require these in equal measure. And often, it doesn't matter greatly whether, say, a reader knows about making love from study or from experience. Sometimes this does matter, though. If the poet wants to say that making love is not quite what the books say it is, the reader needs both kinds of experience.

In general, the kinds of people who comment on poetry have read a great deal. One sometimes has the impression that they have never actually done anything other than read. Such folk are likely to take notice of what a poem says only when it requires knowledge gained by first hand experience. This accounts for the amount of comment about landscape in the discussion of Australian poetry. There isn't much a poet can do with landscape. And Australian poets, except a few ideologues,
do not write much about it. But if a poet happens to mention a paperbark or a cassowary, those things, not being yet common in books, will register largely on the consciousness of the commentator. References to Aphrodite and Hamlet, or a form deriving from Keats, will largely pass unnoticed. The reader who is within the region of the poem understands, but does not notice. A naive North Queensland schoolchild, on the other hand, would take the paperbark and the cassowary for granted, but have to learn about Aphrodite and also why the poem does not move in the sing-song of a nursery rhyme.

So far as we can analyse a poem, each part may belong to different regions. We may be able to say only a late-twentieth century North Queenslander would have direct experience of that, only a marine biologist would have this knowledge, and only someone reasonably familiar with the poetry of Wallace Stevens would not find the poem's movement a bit odd. So far as we can refine our analysis, we will create more regions for the poem to belong to. The intersection of those regions will provide the region to which this particular poem actually belongs. When there are a set of people who have broadly similar experiences, learning, and background in poetics, there will be a clearly defined region.

From my limited observation, Australia is a very diverse place. It is not likely that there will be any such neat and compact regions, although they may emerge at times. The poets represented in John Tranter's recent anthology, together with their admirers and the critics who discuss them favourably, are an example of such a region. From a distance, it seems that the group may already be dispersing.

This kind of regionalism, I think, accounts for the presence of so much polemic in comment on Australian poetry. If only many people could be converted to the one true faith, there would be a clearly established region. But Australians go on in their own amiable way becoming steadily more diverse. If a poet says football, he is likely to be understood as referring to four quite different games by four readers. And if he says soccer and wants the actual experience of the game, at least three of those readers will lack it. Aphrodite is a bit safer. So, to a large extent, poetry in Australia is written for those comparatively few people who know about Aphrodite. The region for most poems written in Australia is constituted by those people who
have studied English (sic) at tertiary level. No doubt there are some poets who posit another ideal audience. Their poetry must seem a bit odd, though, to the disciples of Aphrodite. And poets are cunning folk. They can probably make do with what we might call 70% readers — the ones who understand much in a poem and either let the rest pass by or go and look in the Macquarie dictionary to see what the poem is about. Indeed, it is part of a poet's duty to be, like a good teacher, always extending his readers. So, in the absence of any other well-defined regions than the Aphrodite one, the most useful way of classifying poets in Australia would seem to be in terms of the direction in which they are trying to extend their readers. Not every poet has chosen the American Poetry Review as defining this direction.

We probably don't yet have, and perhaps never will have, any regional poets, but we do have pioneers scattering to the four winds, ambitious polyps setting out to found this or that reef.