

DIRECTIONS IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

A. D. HOPE

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN
LITERARY STUDIES

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I

DIRECTIONS IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

THE PAST

To see the future one has to study the past.

In these three lectures I make no pretence of saying anything very original. Most of my own ideas about Australian poetry have already been published — either in my own writing or that of other people. But I do propose to approach the subject from a different point of view.

In 1965 my friend, the poet Judith Wright, published a book with the title *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. It was an extremely interesting attempt to explore what sorts of interest were dominant in the work of our most eminent Australian poets up to the sixties of this century. The book explores the poetry from within and incidentally she gives *me* the rounds of the poetic kitchen in a very perceptive way. Another twenty years have now gone by and there have been great changes in poetry and poets in that time, but I am not concerned merely to bring Judith Wright's account up to date. My purpose is rather different, I want to look at the preoccupations of Australian poets from the outside, to ask the question: What were the external pressures and convictions that led to the preoccupations described by Judith Wright? What were the things that the poets took for granted, of which they were often quite unaware, and which they might well have questioned or repudiated? In trying to answer such questions I shall not be content to deal only with the outstanding poets, who were the subject of Judith's enquiry, but often with the mass of minor verse which each generation in every country constantly throws up and which are forgotten in the same generation. A poet of genius may be a less sure guide to the moulding forces at work than his less original contemporaries. The others show more clearly the general trend.

Lastly Judith Wright's investigation took the form of a critical appraisal and that appraisal was based on her personal scale of values in matters of poetry. My own approach if I can manage it will be simply to observe the forces at work in each generation and an evaluation of whether they were forces for good or ill — I may not succeed in this because I tend to hold strong views about some of them.

In this first lecture I hope to follow the trends in poetry that marked the first hundred years of settlement, that is from 1788 to the nineties of the last century. In the second lecture I hope to do the same thing for the generation of poets who made their mark in the first half of this century, roughly my generation and that which immediately followed it. In the third lecture I shall take a view of what seems to me to be the trends of the younger poets of today and to hazard a guess or two as to the shape of things to come. In this I shall undoubtedly be wrong but it may be worthwhile to try.

With these introductory remarks, let us now turn to the conditions affecting poetry at the beginning.

The first settlers in this country, whether convicts, officials or free settlers, were of course Englishmen and women born in the later eighteenth century and for the most part sharing the literary conventions and outlook of the eighteenth century. Because the first outstanding poet born in this country, Charles Harpur (1813-1868) shows in his published poetry the unmistakable influence of the new romantic movement, Australian poetry is usually treated as though it began as a branch of that movement. This, I think, is less than true. In 1788 when the settlement at Sydney Cove began, the young Wordsworth who was to launch the Romantic school of poetry with *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 was still writing heroic couplets in the eighteenth century manner.

Far from my dearest Friend, 'tis mine to rove
Through bare grey dale, highwood and pastoral cove
Where Derwent rests, and listens to the roar
That stuns the tremulous cliffs of high Lodore;
Where peace to Grasmere's lonely island leads
To willowy hedgerows, and to emerald meads.

It took another twenty-five years or so for the new style to prevail in England. In New South Wales, the dominant eighteenth century style lasted even longer. It is not surprising that when William Charles Wentworth on a visit to England in 1823 entered for the Chancellor's medal for a poem on the set subject *Australasia*, he should have written in Augustan poetic diction and in heroic couplets. It was a style as obligatory as the set subject itself. But Wentworth was a mature poet and had written a good deal of verse, all in the same style before he left Australia including the notorious 'pipe-roll' on Colonel George Molle. 'Pipe-rolls' or 'pipes' were poetic lampoons and satires on contemporary persons or events which were dropped anonymously in some public place to be picked up and circulated. They were often very scurrilous and it is interesting that scarcely literate convicts and 'gentlemen' like Wentworth wrote in the same eighteenth century style. Indeed when the new romantic and Victorian poets had established their styles, Augustan verse continued to be used as the proper medium for political satire. Henry Kendall's effective political satires on 'The Temple of Infamy' and 'The Gaggling Bill' take us back to Pope and Dryden. His lines on Henry Parkes illustrates this:

Here is the man who on an evil date
Was pitchforked hither through the devil's gate —
Who crouched for years outside the social pale
Nor showed his hoof nor advertised his tail —
Whose cunning seized upon the earliest chance
When men were fooled by blatant utterance —
Who crept to power in his peculiar mode
And stuck at nothing on the nasty road —

But Kendall also selected this style for his prize poem 'The Sydney International Exhibition' as late as 1879 and for his splendid biblical narrative poem, 'King Saul at Gilboa' (1869). In short, the Augustan sunset was longer and later in the Colony than in England.

The triumph of the Victorian poets means that one can detect even in better poets like Gordon and Kendall and Harpur, echoes of Tennyson and Browning, Arnold and Swin-

burne, all through the nineteenth century. In the serious poetry of the time what strikes one today is something that was characteristic then and for long after: the absence of any original impulse, any native initiative in the writers either in style or method. It is still largely true today that Australian poets have been and are content to follow literary fashions originating in Europe or America, a point to which I shall return in subsequent lectures. Here is W.C. Wentworth in a prophetic mood forecasting the future development of Australian poetry in 1823. He is addressing the Muse:

Still, gracious power, some kindling soul inspire,
To wake to life my country's unknown lyre

...

And grant that yet an Austral Milton's song
Pactolus-like flow deep and high along;
An Austral Shakespeare rise, whose living page
To nature true, may charm in every age; —
And that an Austral Pindar daring soar,
Were not the Theban eagle reached before.

Fifty-six years later, Kendall in his Sydney International Exhibition poem is still waiting for it to happen.

Soon, soon, the music of the southern lyre
Shall start and blossom with a speech like fire
Soon, soon shall flower and flow in flame divine
Thy songs Apollo and Euterpe, thine.

This is an older and a common view, Australian poetry when it develops will follow the pattern of the classic and the English predecessors. A later assumption more characteristic of this century is that Australia will develop along completely different lines from those laid down in the past. Neither assumption, as we shall see, has been realised or seems likely to be.

But if the actual expectations of Wentworth and Kendall were not matched by the performance, they were probably right in one thing. No antipodean Milton made his appearance but equally no poet of comparable stature showed up either. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of an original genius of the first order on the whole body of a coun-

try's literature. It forms a focus round which that body finds an order, a direction and a developing canon. That did not happen in the first hundred years of Australian writing.

In 1888 to mark the centenary, a young Englishman, Douglas Sladen brought out three anthologies of Australian poetry for English readers. Sladen had spent a few years in Australia and returned to England enthusiastic about the country and determined to promote it. He was a poet himself — not a very good one and not a very good judge of other people's verse. He aimed at giving a representative picture of the poetry of Australia and New Zealand and he achieved his aim. One result of his enthusiasm, and his lack of critical judgement was that he did succeed in giving an accurate cover of the whole range and direction of colonial verse. The picture is not very impressive and Oscar Wilde, who reviewed the third and most comprehensive of Sladen's offerings was able to make delightful fun of it. He was not unfair in asserting that apart from two or three poets such as Harpur, Kendall and Gordon:

On the whole Australian poets are extremely dull and prosaic. There seems to be no sirens in the New World. . . . However, Mr Sladen has shown great energy in the compilation of this bulky volume which, although it does not contain much that is of any artistic value, has a certain historical interest especially for those who care to study the conditions of intellectual life in the colonies of a great empire.

One matter of historical interest that immediately becomes clear is that all the poets — and there were a great many of them — over two hundred volumes of Australian verse were on record at the time — all these poets had an obsession with acclimatism of the English language in use among English poets and in terms of English taste, to the Australian scene. The influence of Wordsworth is particularly evident. Titles such as 'A Bush Idyll', 'The Wind in the She-Oak', 'Beneath the Wattle Boughs', 'While the Billy Boils', 'A Storm in the Mountains', 'The Hut on the Flat', 'Station Hunting on the Warrego', 'A Bush Study', 'The Black Warigal Horse', 'The Blue Lake, Mt Gambier', 'Bell Birds', 'The Stock Driver's Ride', 'Lost in the Mallee', 'Out West in Queensland', 'The

Bush', 'To a Black Gin', show the trend. The last-named by the way illustrates the usual nineteenth century tendency to make fun of the aboriginal hangers-on around white settlements.

The Wordsworthian bent for descriptive poetry of Nature is evident enough but the poets had a real problem of fitting the accepted romantic vocabulary of Victorian taste to a rough and pioneering society and scenery so unlike that of Europe and plants and animals with such odd or grotesque names that they sounded faintly ridiculous in verse. Oscar Wilde's review brings this out:

It is interesting to read about poets who lie under the shadow of a gum tree, gather wattle-blossoms and budda-wong and sarsparilla for their loves and wander through the glades of Mount Baw-Baw listening to the careless raptures of the Mopoke.

Or as I put the same point once, could Harpur, a contemporary of Keats, have written an ode to a Mopoke at the level of the latter's Ode to a Nightingale, without getting himself laughed at.

Nowadays we have conquered this problem. Australian place-names and descriptive terms for trees, plants and animals no longer seem grotesque or even odd in poetry. We write for fellow-Australians for whom they are current coin and we have largely sloughed off the rich literary diction which English poetry had acquired by the end of the Victorian period.

What made it harder for the earlier poets was that they had largely accepted Victorian attitudes to the Augustan modes and styles, attitudes which could lead Matthew Arnold to deny that Pope and Dryden, for example, were not poets at all but 'masters of our prose, not of our poetry'. Arnold's other distinction between satire, humorous poetry and occasional verse that lacked 'high seriousness', cut the poets of Australia off, from the one way out of their problem. Because they aimed too high, their literary language often seemed incongruous with their subjects.

The problem was compounded by their head-on assault on the Australian scene, a largely unvoiced and perhaps unconscious conviction that unless a poem had a clear Australian setting it was not genuinely Australian poetry but something rather second-hand, academic or imitative. This not only led critics to ignore or deprecate some of the finest work of Harpur, Kendall and Gordon but limited the scope of lesser talents by cutting them off from the great intellectual themes for which there was not much scope in a raw pioneering society.

One of the virtues of Douglas Sladen's anthologies is that it ignores Arnold's distinction of high seriousness in true poetry from light or humorous verse. A good part of his first book, *Australian Ballads and Rhymes*, includes verses on the humours of Australian life. Apart from the objectionable tendency to make fun of aborigines to which even Kendall descended at times, there are poems like Patchett Martin's 'My Cousin from Pall Mall', a satirical parody on that most classic of Australian themes: taking a rise out of the supercilious Pommy, or Brunton Stephens's 'My Other Chinese Cook', much in the style of the American frontier poet Bret Harte:

We had fixed a day to sack him and agreed to moot the point
When my lad should bring our usual regale of cindered joint
But instead of cindered joint we saw and smelt, my wife and I,
Such a lovely, such a beautiful, oh! such a rabbit pie.

This sort of poetry, as you can see, hardly lays claim to 'high seriousness'. It is in fact the sort of amusing verse turned out all through the nineteenth century for recitation. The famous 'Bulletin Reciter' of 1901 was representative of it. The convict ballads and the anonymous bush ballads of an earlier day, towards the end of the century, led to literary imitations and extensions by well known authors. Brunton Stephens, a public servant and journalist, was one of them. Banjo Paterson, author of the famous 'Man from Snowy River' another, T.E. Spencer's 'How McDougall Topped the Score', a popular recitation piece in its day, was the work of a building contractor. Adam Lindsay Gordon's popular racing rhymes such as 'How We Beat the Favourite' were earlier balladry in the same tradition. In the same way contributed music-hall ballads like the well-known 'Botany Bay' built on previous genuine convict ballads.

There was in fact another and quite separate poetic tradition in Australia during the first hundred years. It was unpretentious and for the most part entirely popular and anonymous. Like the more pretentious 'literary' poetry of the time it was based on imitation of existing models: English and Irish popular balladry adapted to Australian conditions. 'The Banks of the Condamine', for example, in which a shearer's young wife proposes to dress as a man and follow her husband round the western shearing sheds, has been shown to be based on a similar English street ballad in which a soldier's sweetheart enlists as a man and follows her love to the wars in Europe.

The thing about these poems was that having no claim at the time to be serious poetry they avoided 'poetic' language and were written in the ordinary plain colloquial Australian English of the day and set firmly in recognisable scenes and among familiar characters of Australian life. It has long been my contention that it was this school of poets who acclimatised *poetry* in Australia, gave it a recognisable native idiom and prepared the way for unself-conscious use of that idiom in more serious poetry in the following century. Kendall writing about a bullock-driver in his 'Bill the Bullock-Driver' feels he has to be self-consciously humorous and apologetic about his subject. Judith Wright in her 'Bullocky', a couple of generations later, can write a serious and beautiful lyric based on an actual old half-crazy bullocky in her own New England countryside. The poem is too well-known to need to be quoted.

As I once pointed out there is something of a mystery about the level of achievement represented in Douglas Sladen's three anthologies of 1888. Oscar Wilde's estimate was not unfair:

What strikes one on reading over Mr Sladen's collection, is the depressing provinciality of mood and manner in almost every writer. Page follows page, and we find nothing but echoes without music, reflections without beauty, second-rate magazine verses, arid third-rate verse for Colonial newspapers . . . on the whole we have artless Nature in her most irritating form.

It is, as I say, when one has made allowance for Oscar Wilde's rather toplofty and precious position in the Esthetic Movement of the period, not at all unfair.

But the problem is why this should have been so. Australia had by 1888 emerged to a large extent from the condition of a frontier civilisation, as the Americans would call it, that she had inevitably passed through earlier. As I wrote on this subject in 1977, the verse not only justifies Oscar Wilde's strictures. It is not only for the most part, provincial and mediocre, it is also strangely archaic and out-of-date. It seems to belong to a totally different world from the witty, urbane and brilliant literary and artistic life of England and Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. And yet the Australia of 1888 looks in retrospect so much more in the mainstream of ideas and practice than its poetry would suggest. The critical standard and intellectual outlook of its journals, such as *The Melbourne Review* were by no means provincial. In music Nellie Melba and Amy Sherwin had achieved international standing in opera, and in the orchestral concerts organised for the Melbourne International Exhibition. Painters like Julian Ashton, Charles Condor, Sydney Long, Arthur Streeton, George Lambert, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin had established a flourishing school of Australian painting that was fully in touch with the rest of the world. Why was poetry alone so out of touch and parochial?

I am not happy with any of the answers I then suggested. I offer it to some of you here today as a tough but very rewarding subject for a future Ph.D. thesis.

II

DIRECTIONS IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

THE PRESENT

Some of you may object to my taking as the Present the period from 1900 to, let us say, 1960 or so. To the younger ones here that is all the Past. What I am talking about, however, is mainly my own generation and although I was born in 1907 I am still alive — at least nobody has been unkind enough to tell me I am not — so, as far as I am concerned, I am talking about the present. Unlike the last lecture when I was talking about events I had not lived through, and people I had never met, I intend in this talk to take a more personal view of what I think have been main influences on Australian poets in my time.

As a boy I was much addicted to poetry and from about the age of eight I wrote it as well as read it, and I imitated what I read. But my models were the English poets and nineteenth century American poets like Longfellow, Lowell and Whittier. My father's library contained no Australian poets and they were not included in any school curriculum of the various public and private schools I attended. When I reached the University it was the same there. Australian literature was not regarded as a respectable subject of study. Even when I became a university lecturer in English in 1945, my professor allowed only an occasional Australian novel on the course and when I and others of his staff pressed him, said he did not consider Australian writing to be up to the standard that was required for a university subject. "How would you like to see a child of yours," he once asked me, "graduate with a B.A. (Aust. Lit.)?" His predecessor, an Englishman, when asked why Australian Literature was not taught among his courses, simply answered, "*Is there any?*"

The battle for recognition of local writers was a long and stubborn one and it is a thing that I pride myself on, that I had a hand in forcing the issue. When I was appointed to a chair of English in 1950 I made it clear that as soon as I was able I would start a full course in Australian literature, and soon afterwards I did. It was taught by an Australian poet, T. Inglis Moore, and

proved very popular. The Canberra University College, however, was a branch of Melbourne University and, until we were absorbed in the Australian National University, Melbourne steadfastly refused to recognise the course. It seems surprising today, when the subject is recognised by every tertiary institution in the country, to reflect that the subject only then began to be respectable. Whether respectability is a very important quality of literature is arguable — I am inclined to think not — but there is no doubt that the recognition of their work by the universities and the establishment of a chair in Australian literature at the University of Sydney — largely due to the devoted efforts of Mr Colin Roderick, later professor of English at this University — this and the help to writers through funds provided through the Commonwealth Literary Fund, and later by the Australia Council, gave them a new stamp of recognition and of professionalism to the position of poet in the community. This has been carried further since the Second World War, by the fact that their work is now recognised abroad by the founding of courses on Australian writing in European, North American and Asian universities in rapidly increasing numbers.

The new dignity and standing of our poets, which was at a low ebb in my youth, was matched by the emergence of what was a new breed of poets who had escaped the parochialism that marked most of their nineteenth century predecessors, each of them thoroughly individual, speaking with a new assurance in their craftsmanship and confidence in themselves. I might at this point mention what some of the most important of them contributed to this renaissance, for that is what it really amounted to.

The change I should say began at the end of the last century, before I was born, in the persons of two remarkable poets, Christopher Brennan and Shaw Neilson. Neither perhaps was a major poet and their output in each case was small, but each in his way was a forerunner of a change of direction in the course of our poetry.

Brennan may be said to have brought Australian poetry back into the main stream of the European tradition from which it had become curiously divorced at the end of the century in

which it showed practically no awareness of the movements like symbolism then bringing new life to the tradition. Brennan denied being a Symbolist, but his homage to Mallarme is unmistakable in his practice and in the sonnet on the death of Mallarme at Valvins in France in the autumn of 1898:

Red autumn in Valvins around thy bed
was watchful flame or yet thy spirit induced
might vanish away in magic gold diffused
and Kingdom o'er the dreaming forest shed.
What god now claims thee priest, O chosen head,
Most humble here that wast, for that thou knew'st
thro' what waste might thy lucid gaze was used
to spell our glory in blazoned ether spread?
Silence alone, that o'er the lonely song
impends old night, or, known to thee and near,
long autumn afternoon o'er stirless leaves
suspended fulgent haze, the smouldering throng
staying its rapt assumption-pyre to hear
what strains the Faun's enamoured leisure weaves.

I think that is about as far as one can get from the easy colloquial Australian diction the poets were looking for, and I don't think that it is a particularly good poem. Its clumsy and involved syntax and its preference for an over-literary, indeed a pedantically literary vocabulary, represent Brennan's worst faults, the faults that prevented him from being a poet of the first rank. But if one pays careful attention to what Brennan is saying, rather than to the way he says it, the whole comprehension of the classical European tradition is implicit in it. Brennan's library, which I had the pleasure of seeing after his death — indeed I was lucky enough to own part of it — showed his deep acquaintance with more than half a dozen languages. His prose shows his grasp of the philosophy and intellectual climate of the nineteenth century. His poetry has serious flaws but it is on a level totally above anything written in this country before.

When I was a young man in the twenties and thirties he remained a great influence on the young poets of the day. He had no successors — indeed he was impossible to imitate and that was a good thing too. But we read him, we talked about

him and above all he sent us back to a wider acquaintance with the poetry of Germany, of France, Italy and Spain, and the Greek and Roman classics. He helped us to rediscover our heritage and to realise something never appearing in Australian poetry at all, a sense of the metaphysical element in it. Shaw Neilson's contribution was quite different. His poetry was as lucid as Brennan's was involved. He had practically no education and very little contact with the European tradition. But though a small farmer and labouring all his life and knowing and liking the bush ballad strain, he turned his back completely on what had become the Australian tradition, writing in a pure original lyrical vein that seemed to owe nothing to anyone else. It is this original voice that had been mainly lacking in the poetry of the earlier generations.

As I have said, one of the curious things about the Australian tradition is that it never seems to originate anything. All its movements and theories and almost all its practice in poetry is borrowed from elsewhere. Neilson is the first example I can think of, of an Australian voice that owes nothing to any influence from abroad. In the next generation of poets after Neilson it is perhaps not surprising that they show a confidence and inventiveness and an enterprise in finding new directions that contrast with the tendency to follow beaten paths in the previous century. Our poetry, I have always felt, came of age in the first fifty years of the twentieth century.

One thing that helped in this process was the spread of higher education. In my university days only a fraction of one per cent of our population went to a university and the great majority left school about fourteen. Today that has gone forever. More than half of us now have a secondary education and a high proportion take some form of tertiary education. This has had a curious result. Very few Australian poets before 1930 had a university education and fewer still earned their living in universities. Partly as a result of the universities recognising our literature and partly of the larger proportion of people attending universities, a majority of our poets now actually *work* in universities and as this is the case also in England, America and Canada and among the poets who write in English in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As a result our

poets now feel that they belong to a larger world community and have a real part in the growth of the great tradition, instead of simply being swept along with it. Not all of this outcome, I think, is good but that is a point I am keeping for my third lecture where I look at its effect on the youngest generation.

Among the poets of what I have chosen to call *my* generation, though because of the individuality of each it belongs to them all, there are several who have acted as a focus round which new directions or the abandonment of old assumptions have tended to gather.

One of these is Kenneth Slessor. Australia at first was all bush, with a few small settlements clinging precariously to the ports and dominated by the countryside. But as it grew, the bush, the countryside, the small country towns, the out-back and the still unconquered and unassimilated Never-Never of the north and the interior tended to grow more sharply apart. The *real* Australia, as it appeared in our poetry, was always in country life or in pioneering ventures.

It was of course one of these general ideas which are true enough at the start, but harden later into romantic absurdities. The pioneering view of life on the land still presents the scene of a hardy stockman on a horse. Not a single Australian poet continuing the old tradition, as many of them, has mentioned that the countryside is now thoroughly motorised. Even boundary riders, if they still exist, do their thing on motor-bikes or four-wheel drives. Now Slessor began the break away from this outdated supposition. He was a journalist, a Sydney man, a thoroughgoing townee, gastronome and frequenter of the Journalists Club where I first met him, but he was also a poet of rare distinction and command of language, who brought the life of our large cities into poetry, not as something half-alien, spurious or second rate, but as the way half the population of the country actually lives. How he accomplished this is hard to say for his poems set in the Sydney scene are comparatively few. But I would say that he does it by being a city man who takes the city for granted.

I cannot resist telling a story about his poem 'Last Trams', to show how quickly a poem may lose its overtones for readers.

Slessor, the tired journalist, having put his newspaper to bed, has caught a late night tram through a rather slummy part of Sydney with streets lined with run-down terrace houses. He thinks of their wretched inhabitants

... those terraces
Filled with dumb presences,
Lobbed over mattresses,
Lusts and repentances,
Ardours and solaces.
Passions and hatreds
And love in brass bedsteads . . .

A few years ago I undertook to read some students' essays and found they had all totally misunderstood the poem. It wasn't entirely their fault. In the intervening thirty or forty years since the poem was written, these slum areas round Paddington had become fashionable, filled with artists and trendy rich folk, who bought up terrace houses at considerable cost and refurbished them in style. What my poor students thought the tram passenger was seeing in glimpses through lighted windows or half-drawn blinds were glimpses, not of misery, drunkenness and sordid passions, but of the enviable lives of the rich — probably just as drunk, but drunk in style.

Still, following Slessor's path, poets of force and imagination like Vincent Buckley were a generation later able to put an end to the myth that the real Australian was a sun-burned stockman and the city dwellers were merely, as I once put it to my regret in a poem, "second-hand Europeans clinging timidly to the edge of an alien continent".

Here I must mention the Jindyworobak poets — mainly South Australian, and their conviction that everything in our cultural life was tainted and artificial, second-hand and sterile attempts to graft European civilisation on a continent where it would not 'take'. Our only chance of having a genuine Australian culture, they held, was to go back to the experience of the aborigines. It was to illustrate this thesis that Rex Ingamells wrote his long historical epic of Australia from its earliest days: *The Great South Land* (1950).

I had not published a book of poems at the time but for some years I had been engaged in reviewing the work of my colleagues and contemporaries and I am afraid I made a good deal of rather vulgar fun of the Jindyworobaks. It is true that they tended to push their theory to absurd limits and that they were not good enough poets to give independent life to the theory by poetry that would lend it conviction. But what I overlooked was that in one sense they were right. The conviction that only poetry can provide to theory was indeed provided by one of their youngest members, Roland Robinson, but it came after the movement had largely faded away. Robinson, a young Englishman with not much formal education, but a natural poet, went to the Aboriginal communities to try to see the land through their eyes. What he achieved has now become more or less a commonplace and one accepted by poets and novelists alike as part of their ordinary experience.

But what I had further overlooked was that here was the first instance, however crude, of a home-made theory of poetry, something not borrowed from theories and movements generated in America and Europe. Alas, it was also the last. Literary techniques and literary movements were flooding in wave after wave, and taken up by the younger poets of whom I shall speak in the next lecture.

The idea of looking for another basis than the traditional one for estimating the standing of Australian writing seems to have been much in the air in the twenty-five years from 1940 to 1965. A Professor Robinson of the University of Queensland wrote a history of Australian literature in two volumes; at the end of the first volume the author had only reached the arrival of Captain Cook on our shores. This fits in with Ingamell's epic which is quite a readable poem but not I think often read nowadays.

Another short epic poem, James McAuley's *Captain Quiros*, an account partly modelled on Camoens *Os Lusíadas*, approaches the idea from a different point of view. Here Australia is seen not as a return to an Aboriginal culture but as the still unrealised fulfilment of Quiros's vision of the undiscovered Great South Land, the 'Australia of the Holy Spirit',

where regenerated man would achieve the perfect Christian Society. McAuley had recently joined the Catholic Church. *Captain Quiros* is a magnificent poem, and probably the greatest achievement in the form of a sustained narrative poem produced in our time in Australia, but neither of these apocalyptic views of our culture seem quite satisfactory. The solution to the problem of the relation of the poets to the country which had eluded them for a century and a half comes, I think, in another poem of McAuley's unregenerate youth, *Envoi*.

There the blue green gums are a fringe of remote disorder
And the brown sheep poke at my dreams along the hillsides
And there in the soil, in the season, in the shifting airs
Comes the faint sterility that disheartens and derides.
Where once was a sea in a salty sunken desert,
A futile heart within a fair periphery;
The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them,
The men are independent but you could not call them free.
And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,
I know its contractions, waste, and sprawling indolence;
They are in me and its triumphs are my own
Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence.

That was the secret, the moment when the poets could say

“I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body.”

It was the moment when they could say that it was inside them, a country of the heart instead of something outside them that they had been trying to come to terms with.

As I said once when estimating the importance of Judith Wright in the period of those middle years: she was, if not the first, perhaps the most outstanding of a generation of Australian poets who had learned to take the country they lived in for granted instead, as poets had been doing from the beginning, trying self-consciously to *be Australian*, to aim *at* it instead of speaking *from* it.

In Judith Wright, in fact, the Wordsworthian conviction of the seminal effect of natural scenery becomes transformed into something warmer and more homely, the feeling that a poet becomes not a commentator or a detached organ of praise (or

blame), but an instrument through which everything speaks — a view I have always held myself, though I have rarely written about the specifically Australian setting. Here are the opening lines of her *The Wattle Tree*:

The tree knows four truths —
earth, water, air, and the fire of the sun.
The tree holds four truths in one
Root, limb and leaf enfold
out of the seed and these rejoice
till the tree dreams it has a voice
to join four truths in one great word of gold.
— Oh that I knew that word!
I should cry loud, louder than any bird
O let me live forever, I would cry.
For that word makes immortal what would wordless die;
and perfectly, and passionately
welds love and time into the seed,
till tree renews itself and is forever tree.
... ..
Now from the world's four elements I make
My immortality

In my time it has been a rare pleasure to know such a galaxy of splendid poets each so different, so individual, yet bound to one another by a feeling of common interest and a fellowship of practice, as James McAuley, Judith Wright, Vincent Buckley, Francis Webb, Rosemary Dobson, David Campbell, Robert Fitzgerald, Douglas Stewart, Gwen Harwood — to name only a few of them. Those who look back I think will see this generation as a period of rare flowering and displaying a unity which it is still too early for us to see.

III

DIRECTIONS IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

PAST INTO FUTURE

The roll-call of poets with which I ended my last lecture represents no movement but it does indicate a direction. That direction I would suggest could be called the orthodox development of the tradition of English poetry modified by the spirit of a new age. All of us were experimenters in one way or another but because they were private experiments to modify traditional forms to meet our individual tastes and curiosities, they form no school and set out to demonstrate no common theory of poetry. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that the outstanding poets of my generation were not much concerned with theory at all. Of course we often talked about it, since we were overwhelmed with theories of the most diverse and contradictory kinds. But on the whole we kept a middle path between them and built on what we had learned from the past, something in our bones which did not need to be discussed and argued over before we could set pen to paper.

I am tempted to break off here as I think of pen and paper as the essential means to the craft work of poetry. There are poets, I am told, who can compose a poem on that mechanical contraption the typewriter. I can't type but I have always held that only mechanical poetry can emerge from a machine. Still I recall that in Canada in 1957, I met a group of young poets who composed straight on to tapes and played it back to themselves using it instead of drafts on paper. Then they once more played it back to themselves and made another tape. Only when they were satisfied with the result, would they write it down. This, at first sight looks like a rather trendy reverse of the usual process. But I reflected that poetry as far as we can tell, is as old as man himself and writing in those million or more years is a very recent invention. The most ancient poetry was orally composed and recited. It never appeared on paper or in print at all. The wit of man may be able to devise infinitely more subtle means of recording than the objectionable typewriter. The new word-processing machines which are almost silent enable one to bypass the scribbles, corrections and erasures which writing

a poem with a pen almost always involves. And who knows but it is already whispered in the corridors of power — that a computer can be programmed to write a passable poem. Indeed I would not be surprised to learn that a good deal of what is offered as poetry in our literary magazines has been produced in precisely this way. It is possible that poets of the next age will simply feed data, rhythm patterns and image selectors into their computers, add a few random factors and sit back to wait for the feed-out and its surprises. Originality guaranteed!

You see I am already beginning to look into the future of our poetry, if only at a somewhat facetious level.

I now propose to look more seriously into the clouded crystal ball. Whatever I predict, I am bound to be wrong, of course. The possibilities are infinite and the new personalities and the new social pressures still over the horizon are beyond imagination. But if one looks at what is going on at the present moment it might at least be possible to project what the present tendencies might lead to.

I begin with a comparatively simple shift of emphasis: nationality. Up to my own generation all the poets of standing had names that suggested that they or their parents were of British origin and this was very much the case of the population as a whole. The small Chinese, German and Italian communities who settled here in the nineteenth century were not as a rule people of literary interests or literary culture. The comparative isolation of Australia at that time made it unlikely that we would have been subject to the influences of other cultures than that of Great Britain. As a result of the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism in Italy and Spain and Portugal, of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, and the movement of displaced persons after and during the Second World War, Australia now has an emigre population of large proportions, most of whom are educated and professional people. This is augmented by the entrance of many of the children of previous Greek, Italian and other migrants into the professional class. As a result there are many of the younger poets at this time who write with the literary tradition of other nations behind them and obvious in their poetry. Some of them write

in English, others in their native language and some of them in both. Here is a list of poets in Melbourne alone, all recognised practitioners: Refaelle Scappatura (Italian) who writes in Italian but is fluent in English; Mariano Corena, who writes in both languages; Walter Adamson (who writes verse in English, prose in German); E.M. Lewin, who writes in Yiddish from a Polish and German-Jewish background; Miss Ania Walwicz (Polish, writing only in English); Mrs Lobat Varra, an Iranian woman who writes in Persian and in English; T.T.O. — a pseudonym for Peter Oustimides, a very wild Greek poet who writes partly in English, partly in various forms of Gobbledygook; but chiefly a Greek poet of considerable standing. Dimitris Tsaloumas, who writes in Greek, has as his background the remarkable group of Modern Greek poets, like Seferis whom in some ways he resembles. I have just heard him read in Canberra. These modern Greek poets have had (in translation of course) a remarkably strong influence on many of our younger poets practising today. This Melbourne list could be paralleled in most of our capital cities. To the Greek influence I could add a very well known woman of my acquaintance, Antigone Kefala. To the Polish brigade my friend Peter Skryznecki whose verse has all the suffering of the great poetic tradition of Poland behind it.

These are only pointers to one side of a growing influence. It has another side: the increasing penetration of Australian poets into the literatures and the cultures of other nations. A young poet like Kevin Hart is deeply versed in the poetry of the South American Luis Borges. My contemporary Harold Stewart, no longer young of course, though he writes in English, has lived many years in Japan and his poetry is a total reflection of Japanese culture. Randolph Stow both in his novels and in his poetry is deeply influenced by the philosophy of Chinese Taoism.

I think it would be safe to predict that the next two or three generations in the poetry of Australia will be suffused more and more by a wide range of traditions that so far have only faintly touched it, and never directly. It is quite possible that the influence of oriental cultures could become predominant or at least strongly pervasive.

While we are on this subject, let me mention another shift of emphasis among the younger poets of today. Their affinities seem to me to lie much more with the poets of the United States and Canada than with those of present-day England. This is not merely because poets of marked individuality and standing have been missing in English poetry since the deaths of Yeats and Auden, but because of a conscious change of direction towards that mainly followed by North American poets. This is well-illustrated by the issue of an anthology edited by Thomas Shapcott a few years ago where the younger contemporary Australian and American poets appear side by side. The North American influence is obvious.

You notice that I am still talking of the influence on Australian poets of movements imported from abroad. I still detect no evidence that we are about to produce something of our own, something *sui generis* and originating here. But perhaps I am looking in the wrong direction expecting that something like Symbolism, Imagism or Surrealism which have come to our shores like successive tidal waves, will be generated in our local waters and sweep outwards. Reflection on the last fifty years suggests that while the movements I have mentioned did in fact arrive like waves, they broke and receded again leaving little trace like Surrealism, taken up enthusiastically for a time, promoted by a very able and amusing entrepreneur, Max Harris of South Australia, and practically finished off in a few months by the equally able and amusing Ern Malley Hoax. Two young friends of mine, James McAuley and Harold Stewart while in the Army during the last war invented a trendy poet called Ern Malley, wrote his entire poetical works in a single idle afternoon at Victorian Barracks in Melbourne, killed the poet off and had his sister write to Max Harris's journal. Malley was hailed as a great genius! The trap was baited by a good deal of theoretical claptrap which together with the alleged poems took in critics abroad as well as in Australia, before the real authors blew the gaff and set the world laughing. Not much has been heard of Surrealism since then. Imagism attracted a brief interest in the twenties; Social Realism, the attempt to provide a specific literary theory for Stalin's version of communism, had a similar brief flicker of life among mainly (Melbourne) intellectuals in the same

period. On the whole these and later theoretical movements have not effectively changed the face of Australian poetry and for the first three mentioned I think this has been a good thing for they were all versions of the pure-poetry delusion that flourished in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries and which narrowed the scope of poetic practice unnecessarily. The attempt to distil the pure essence of poetry by excluding in turn, narrative, connected thought, explicit description and finally, in the case of Surrealism, conscious construction, was based on a false analogy. I have always held that there is not and cannot be a single thing called 'poetry', but there are many poetries each with its own principles and ingredients, and that there are probably many more yet to be discovered. Looking at the production of the younger poets over the past thirty years or so I feel that they have preserved a healthy and fruitful pluralism and while they are extremely experimental, they have not tended to shut themselves into one line as did their predecessors of the experimental generation in which I grew up. As for a native theory of poetry, I think this pragmatic approach may well have held back its emergence though I am sure it will come. Inspection of other 'colonial' literatures, particularly those of North American heirs of English, and Central and South American heirs of Spanish and Portuguese, suggest there comes a time, usually sooner if the daughter country achieves early political independence, when the new country's literature reverses the direction of literary influence and begins to exert an influence on the ideas and practices of the poets of the homeland. This usually occurs when a major poet of great originality appears in the ex-colonial society. This has not happened here, but in the ferment of new poetry of today, I believe the stage is set. All we need now is the appearance of an obvious master. There is no recipe for producing a genius in any of the arts. They must make themselves. When they do we will know what the new poetry will look like.

Somebody in a moment is going to ask me to come clean and ask me to name the poets I would think possible leaders into the future, most likely to set its tone and its direction. I hesitate to attempt this. Even representatives of the lunatic fringe who are always with us could achieve it. A few years ago there was a craze for something called concrete poetry. It consisted of

various geometrical patterns of words or letters on a page. It was purely visual, mostly meaningless, or at most nonsensical. One would have said it had nothing to do with poetry. Yet what might an original genius not have made of it? One reflects that one of the great poetic traditions of the world, Classic Chinese poetry, partly depends on its visual effects. The words to which it goes may vary from region to region and from age to age. The one thing that does not change is the exquisite calligraphy.

Another example. I have had a life-long aversion to free verse. Some years ago I prophesied that this flabby child of bad prose, devoid of music and the dance of language that used to be the specific mark of poetry, had come to the end of its very slender resources. It could be buried and forgotten. Well, I could not have been more wrong. It is now the dominant poetic form. In the poetry magazines and books of verse issuing in all the English-speaking countries it is rare to meet a poem in metre and rhyme and rarer still to meet a good one. The old art seems in danger of being lost. Yet a poet like Bruce Dawe, for example, can bring it to life on a most unlikely subject: To my Typewriter.

Be my Offsider, quick to make a point
on my behalf, to bark in metal at the least
suspicion of a movement from the shadows . . .
Whatever you are aimed at shoot to kill.
In this half-world of dubious acts and purposes
there's only room for two: the quick and the dead.
Be body-guard against the back-street boys.
Those cheats and con men who frequent my skull . . .

How does he achieve this tautness and sense of directive and directed movement out of the usual unmeaning shuffle? A close look at his rhythmic structure of the lines just quoted reveals two things: the rove-over lines carrying the non-metrical rhythms of actual colloquial speech produce the illusion of free verse but underneath this effect is a basic iambic-pentameter rhythm broken here and there to prevent it dominating the prose rhythms. Bruce Dawe is a master of taut and yet infinitely varied rhythmic effects which are always relevant to and reinforcing the *sense* of what he is saying.

This, in various forms seems to me to be characteristic of most of the more competent and exciting of the younger poets today. They have all been influenced by so-called free verse. They have all begun by practising it, as even I did when I was caught up in the fashionable styles of the twenties and thirties. They have all become dissatisfied with its mere prose rhythms and its illusion of verse produced by chopping up prose into arbitrary lines! But they have not gone back to the traditional forms of regular poetry, as I once predicted they would. Instead they have moved forward to something much more adventurous and interesting: the exploration of the resources of the language towards the invention of new poetic forms not yet dreamed of. I myself have always predicted that there were new poetics not yet discovered and I sense in these younger poets a sure instinct for something still emerging which I shall probably not live to see. My friend Mark O'Connor who is one of them argues that the basic rhythms of the language are changing and demand new rhythmic structures than dominated the poetry of the past. This has happened many times in the history of the language and is almost certainly true of today. I agree with part of Mark O'Connor's thesis though I am not as sure as he is that the basic iambic-trochaic rhythms of the immediate past are now out-dated and unsuitable for the modern Muse.

Here is an excerpt from one of his most recent and most brilliant poems from the collection: *The Fiesta of Men*, a poem entitled 'Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens':

First came creepers for the walls and trunks;
a smother of scented beauty, gay allemandas,
scented Rangoon creeper, jasmines,
convolvulus, tecomanthe, bougainvilleas
petrea's lilac statement, climbing cactus (night
blooming, scented, large), jade vine, clitoria (a perfect
replica of the thing in china-blue) great grandillo
The melon-passion fruit on breaking vines
A crop to lure me back —

You see, we have almost got back to the effect of regular metre. The basic rhythm is that of a horse walking. But we are *not* going back to metre, we are moving forward to a new rhythmical pattern based on a shift of the modern speech-rhythms away from the basic iambic-trochaic patterns of yesterday.

Perhaps the most original and inventive, the most daring adventurer in vocabulary of all the younger poets is Les Murray. Here is a specimen from his novel in verse *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*:

Honeyed dust and bush lemon are the perfumes they breathe walking
Hungry on the west-climbing road. Stars reign above the trees;
the galaxy is canted over east, to the rows of horizon there.
Ahead there is a fire, and vehicles parked about:
The fire's name is Chiack. Men are assembled, moving round it.
Come and have a drink yous! Now they are to be punished
for the funeral, for enterprise. *You drink rum? Get it into yer.*
Can you dance? Or do you only jerk and wobble,
jiggy-jiggy with a twitch, like a brown dog shitting wing-nuts?
er not quite that way. We could learn it off your kids though
Can you sing a song? Or do you trip and bridge
with a dummy in your earhole, clicking with your fingers?
he's knocking the rock Tell us more about that dog —
but the men grieve sourly, injured in their music.

Did any of you recognise our old friend, the formal sonnet of fourteen lines, divided just as formally into octave and sestet? Murray, perhaps just to show his dexterity and amazing versatility, has composed this long narrative poem entirely as a sequence of sonnets. Quite plainly a revolution has taken place in the forms and rhythms of the language, as well as in the conventions of its poetic forms.

In particular where the extract from Bruce Dawe is still attached to a disguised iambic-pentameter, Les Murray has abandoned any metrical scheme whatever — though he has a masterly command of metrical forms when it suits his purpose. But he has not simply relapsed into free verse. The element of repetition is there especially if the spoken passages are delivered with an Australian countryman's intonations. The new element replacing the device of metre appears to consist of repeated cadence or variations on a cadence rhythm.

This device can take many forms and is a very flexible instrument. Some of our younger poets are very dexterous in its use, and adopt a personal form of it which gives the effect of an individual tone of voice. Here is an example taken from Anne Lloyd's long poem retelling an aboriginal legend, *Kunapipi*. It concerns the mythical Wauwalak sisters:

In the dry season when food is rich and the people reaping
last year's dancing, in the camp the old men chant of animals,
Wauwalak both walking north on to Muruwul,
the coffee tree with star-spun fungus, past
the rounding breasts of apricot, carmine fruited, fluted fig.
Fish spawn collect in the dancing. From the fire
a greenbacked turtleshell spits vituperatively. The soft
traced crocodile, sandripple, the red-backed crane:
each known totem joins in its sprung sand-trading.

Sometimes the method is reinforced by a foreign literary tradition. Hebrew poetry relied for its structure largely on the device of reiterated cadences repeating paralleled rhythms. Fay Zwicky combines the two traditions in her 'Kaddish', the requiem for her father:

 "It was impossible for
Him to be rude, rough, abrupt." Shy virgin bearing gifts to the proud
 first and
Only born wife, black virgin mother. Night must have come terrible to
 such a
Kingdom. All lampless creatures sighing in their beds, stones
 wailing as the
Mated flew apart in sorrow. Near, apart, fluttered, fell apart as
 feathered
Hopes trembled to earth shaken from the boughs of heaven. By day
 the heart
Was silent, shook in its box of bone, alone fathered three black
 dancing imps.

Whether my surmise will be fulfilled, it is still too early to say. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a tentative movement which in due course will emerge as a new prosody. Whether it will accommodate itself to the traditional prosody or be a hostile rival it is also still not possible to predict. For myself I shall be

content if it displaces the sham versification known as free verse which is neither verse nor free and which has become the dominant form in the world today.