

New Romanticism in the 'Generation of '68'

A study of the poetry of Michael Dransfield, Robert Adamson, Vicki Viidikas and Martin

Johnston

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Introduction

The Romantic head begins with the hands cupped
under the chin the little fingers resting on the nose
& the thumbs curling up the jaw line towards the ears.

(John Forbes *The Romantic Head*
"Four Heads and How Do Them"
The New Australian Poetry 263)

This thesis focuses on aesthetic shifts in Australian poetry that occurred in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies. In particular the use of romantic tropes in a selection of poems that belong to the 'Generation of '68.' The poets in this movement were part of the sixties counter-culture and drew their influences from modern schools of American poetry rather than English pastoral. However, it can be argued that some poets that were part of The Generation of '68 were also influenced by more romantic styles of poetry.

Poetry in Australia has always contended with its antipodean status in the Western canon. The cultural influence of Britain and America has historically dominated the trends and developments of Australia's national arts. For this reason influences from external sources have often been a defining factor in the development of post-colonial Australian poetry. Australia's regional separation, however, also allows a certain expressive individuality that has arguably become a tradition despite itself. In the twentieth century, although major innovations in artistic expression began in Europe and America, these shifts have also occurred locally, albeit sometimes years later and with much resistance. During the sixties and seventies, Western democratic societies underwent a cultural shift that is popularly called the counter-cultural revolution. Part of this change was the rise of various innovations across the arts. In Australian poetry this culminated in the early careers of a group of young poets now known as the Generation of '68. Their experimental style of poetry is often considered the beginning of contemporary poetry in Australia and is also attributed to the beginning of postmodern poetics. I will argue, however, that many members of this group were nonetheless engaging in a poetic which remained closely linked to romanticism and my thesis will analyse a selection of the work of some Generation of '68 poets who continued to engage with romantic tropes.

The Generation of '68 took advantage of the technological innovations of the time, including easier and cheaper printing devices as well as the introduction of government arts funding and the relaxation of censorship laws, to create a counter-cultural poetry movement

that quickly came to challenge the dominant national and modern poetries of the preceding years. Members of the Generation of '68 have often been criticised for a poetic practice that is exclusive and even elitist, as is characteristic of avant-garde artists more generally. Other critics have also noted the underrepresentation of female poets, not to mention other subaltern groups (including Indigenous poets) quite active at the time; however, the Generation of '68, at least in some sense, encapsulate the imagined progressive ethos of this era.

The 68-ers were not the only dissenting and experimental poets of the time, but as Frank McCooey writes in The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature, the Generation of '68 were the most vocal (158) and their poetry contained 'revolutionary rhetoric and commitment to alternative forms' (160). He goes on to describe a split within the group that divides it between adherents of two competing theories of poetic praxis, 'between late-Romantic modernism and early forms of postmodernism' (160-161). John Forbes and John Tranter are often connected to postmodernity, whereas Michael Dransfield and Robert Adamson could be considered late-Romantics. This contradiction and tension is also present in the work of other poets within the Generation of '68 including Vicki Viidikas and Martin Johnston, who, it could be argued, err on the romantic side. This is due to their poetry tending towards melancholic and self-reflective modes where the individual poet engages in personal reflection on the self in the world, contrary to their 'postmodern' peers that tend to distance the poetic voice, whether through irony or mediation.

In 1979, John Tranter canonised the Generation of '68 with his anthology The New Australian Poetry (NAP). Although there are a few predecessors, including New Impulses in Australian Poetry (1968), Australian Poetry Now (1970) and Applestealers (1974), NAP is regarded as the definitive collection of the Generation of '68. In its introduction, Tranter claims that the movement rejected Australian poetry's obsession with nationalist identity and pastoral musings and the obtuse modernism of the preceding decades. Factors influencing this change include social and cultural contexts, but also the influence of new poetry coming from America (poets ranging from William Carlos Williams and Robert Duncan to Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats). Yet the influence of English romantics such as William Blake and Percy Shelley, and Europeans such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Stephane Mallarme or even the German romantics are also noted as important to the movement's style. In his introduction to NAP, Tranter connects the movement to the more contemporary international poetries and does not mention any

Australian influences at all. He does, however, draw a distinction between two poetic styles, romantic and postmodern, criticising the legacy of formal Romanticism:

Romanticism, with its emphasis on an organic order in the natural world, on the primacy of the individual 'soul' of the poet, and on humanist man, was the first serious attack on Neo-Classicism, but in accepting the basic premises of rationalism in all areas but the emotional, it stands as a prototypical but clearly inadequate response to contemporary experience. (Tranter xxiv)

These criticisms are congruous with criticism directed towards Australian poetry's romantic inheritances in the following decades. The more 'neo'-romantic aspects of the Generation of '68 are often passed over by critics because they are considered anachronistic. Romanticism was seen as something of a failure due to its preoccupation with the self and archaic images. As a result, much of the finer details of 'new romantic' poetics within the Generation of '68 have not been given full attention. My thesis argues that, due to the legacy of Dransfield and the enduring career of Adamson (presently occupying the chair in poetry at the University of Technology Sydney), this more romantic strain within the Generation of '68 deserves critical revision. Although many of the poets in NAP have elements of what I will define as 'new romanticism' in their work, I have selected notable further examples in Vicki Viidikas and Martin Johnston. Of course, many more poets in NAP could also be included: Tim Thorne's "High Country" is based on the major work of the German Romantic poet Friedrich Holderlin and outside of the Generation of '68, contemporary poets like Robert Gray often use romantic tropes in their work. But the poets I have selected have a poetic style that is at once new and experimental while still being considered more romantic than any of their peers. That is not to say that they are exclusively romantic in all their poetry, however, the work of Dransfield, Adamson, Viidikas and Johnston provide clear examples of what I will refer to as new romanticism, which I define as a recursion to the tropes and motifs of romantic poetry, but treated with a 'new' sensibility. My study revolves around these poets' poems in NAP, but also expands to their individual collections where necessary.

In viewing the poetry of the Generation of '68 in terms of 'new romanticism,' I am not proclaiming a sustained critical and theoretical sub-movement within the group. Rather, I wish to suggest a pronounced use of romantic tropes and motifs by these particular poets. This new form of romanticism has four major themes. Firstly, the romantic use of an internal subjectivity that shifts its gaze between the poet, reader and poem. This is a concern with the self in the world expressed through the 'subject-object' poem, which will be discussed in chapter one. In chapter two, the combination of subjectivity and metapoetics to create a

poetry of identity will be analysed and then, in chapter three, I will detail how the romantic imagery of these poets could be considered ‘visionary impressionism.’ These three themes form a dialectic of romantic tropes that allow for close readings of the poems. Perhaps somewhat romantic in itself, my intention in using close reading as a methodology is to engage more with the text than the poets, even though much of the poetry is concerned with the idea of ‘the poet’.

A major source for this thesis is the book Parnassus Mad Ward, by Livio Dobrez. Although it has its detractors (Andrew Burke was scathing in his review in Westerly vol. 36/2 in 1991), Dobrez’s in-depth analysis of Michael Dransfield and the Generation of ’68’s poetics is a mainstay in many articles regarding the movement. His approach is a post-structural and existential reading of the poetry that also encapsulates contextual details. I have paid particular attention to his concepts of a recurring neo-romanticism (new romanticism), free subjectivity and visionary impressionism. Dobrez interweaves the poetries of different poets in order to establish a common thread between them and thus gives a sense of an art movement.

Like Dobrez, I have taken Dransfield as a major example in my study. The overtly romantic themes of his early work make him the obvious starting point for any discussion on romanticism in the Generation of ’68. Although his collected works, edited by Rodney Hall, contains a wealth of material, much of his later work arguably lacks the vigour and profundity of his initial publications (as Dransfield died at twenty-four his work did not undergo the same evolutions that the other poets’ work inevitably has). In a New Poetry article, Dorothy Hewett suggests that like Adamson, Dransfield’s style would have moved further away from romanticism as he matured (5). Instead, the poetry of Dransfield feeds into and feeds off the romanticism posthumously attributed to his life. In my study, I am looking closely at many of his major anthologized poems: the Courland Penders poems; “That which we call a rose” and “Parnassus Mad Ward.” These works have been the focus of much criticism, but their romantic tropes have rarely been the sole focus. Instead much contemporary criticism is concerned with more postmodern concepts based on hermeneutics and the dichotomy of rural and urban space (for example, Vrasidas Karalis’s 2005 article “The City as Topos and Habitus of Modernity in the Poetry of Michael Dransfield” in Literature and Aesthetics). Yet Dransfield’s poetic is undoubtedly a romantic one, aesthetically as well as stylistically, and frequently he addresses these both directly and indirectly through references in his work.

The poetry of Robert Adamson is my second focus. In terms of quantity (and arguably quality) of verse, Adamson outstrips Dransfield by far. But where Dransfield's unbridled expression of the self creates a volatile but endearing poetic, Adamson's is closely guarded. This thesis focuses on his early work, which is very much involved with the establishment of a creative identity and muses on concepts of the poet and concerns with poetic creation. Angus Nichols describes Adamson as an 'explicit romantic,' explaining that much of his early work involves an attempt to create himself through a poetic myth with a 'willingness to embrace the sensibilities of modernism and postmodernism' (108). In this way, Adamson continues the English romantic tradition, yet after almost a century of modernity, transforms it into a new iteration of romantic expression. This expression deploys the various stylistic innovations of modernism while still being opposed to technologically driven 'modern' life. Adamson's poem, "The Rumour" draws on a wealth of references and influences: classical, romantic and modern, to derive a mythological poetic origin that is simultaneously represented and analysed within the verse. The romantic melancholy of "The Harbour Braces Itself," will also be read as an example of visionary impressionism.

One of only two female poets included in NAP, Vicki Viidikas has had very little criticism written about her work and most of it has focused on her gender or, like Dransfield and Adamson, her drug use. Although high romanticism is not obvious in Viidikas's work, her interest in Indian culture, mythology and mysticism, as well as her reliance on internal and personal experience, are evident romantic tropes. Psychedelic imagery and depictions of counter-cultural life take root in Viidakas's poetry and suggest a form of new romanticism. In her three main poetic works Condition Red, Knabel and India Ink, her exploration of the self delves into the deepest parts of her psyche. She describes dark visions of the 'Other' and an ever present conflict between herself and her lover, as well as epiphany and revelation.

Lastly, I will include the work of Martin Johnston. Johnston's work is unabashedly intellectual and is wrought with eclectic references and esoteric knowledge. His poetry is often laced with irony directed towards himself, poetry or his peers and could be considered closer to the work of Forbes than Dransfield. In his intense immersion in other cultures, however, and intertextual links to obscure poets, he engages in romantic posturing through a metapoetics, as in "Gradus Ad Parnassum," and exhibits in his poetry a flowing wave of hallucination, achieving an unassailable visionary impressionism in "The Blood Aquarium." After Johnston's death in 1990, the critic Mark Roberts reviewed his work in Island no. 58 1994. Although, Roberts tries to distance Johnston from the Generation of '68, the strength

and wit of the poet is amongst the best of his time. Johnston's position within any new romantic poetry is perhaps just as uncomfortable as it is within the Generation of '68, however, I will argue that his work is dependent on similar stylistic aesthetics as Dransfield, Adamson and Viidikas.

It is important to note, that the poets I have selected are from the Sydney wing of the Generation of '68 and were closely associated in the years that the poetry being examined was written. Although their commonality is not a coincidence, the influence the poets had on each other is not examined in this study. Instead, I will argue the importance romantic tropes play in their work through offering close readings of their poems. By re-examining the work of these poets almost fifty years after their introduction to Australian poetry, I highlight an aspect of their work not only individually, but also as a group that has not been focused upon in great detail and which speaks to me as a contemporary young poet and reader of their work.

Chapter 1 – New Romanticism

The lips are ripe but pressed together as the eyes
are closed or narrowed, gazing in the direction of
the little fingers. The face as a whole exists to gesture.

(John Forbes *The Romantic Head*
“Four Heads and How Do Them”
The New Australian Poetry 263)

New romanticism requires definition and to define it ‘romanticism’ must briefly be discussed. The romantic movement refers to the English and European poetic movements and traditions popular and mostly culminating in the nineteenth century. In America, romanticism is also associated with the transcendentalist movement. However, romanticism and being romantic is not limited to the poetry of that time and is a word that can describe a range of poetic styles throughout literary history. For the purpose of this study, I use romantic theory from the literary critics Harold Bloom and Northrop Frye as the basis of my understanding of the term. Although there have been many revisions of romanticism since the nineteenth century, Bloom takes the last word in 1971; ‘Romanticism stems from the enchantment of the marvellous’ (3) where ‘the divination for and by poets... is literally intended by the consciousness that has been raised to apocalyptic pitch’ (8). It is a form of poetry that tries to combine the intellect of conscious modern man with the shamanistic and mystical qualities of the sub-conscious, an aspect that Bloom finds inventive and positive, but also recessive with an inevitable negativity. Romanticism is made up of dialectics, often polemical, with the goal of achieving a synthesis, thus creating a ‘subject-object.’ There is also an internalisation of the subject. According to Bloom: ‘The [romantic] quest is to widen consciousness as well as intensify it, but the quest is shadowed by a spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self’ (16). In essence, romanticism is the combination of naturalist perceptions of the world and the rational mind of scientific man and the tension between these opposites often culminates in a crisis of theory.

New romanticism in the Generation of ’68 is a revival of this perennial concern within a movement that wanted to ignore the established poetry scene and make a new kind of poetry. Part of the experimental aspect of this poetry was a desire to explore the world and human subjectivity with the same combination of modern intellect and the imaginative qualities of the subconscious as the nineteenth century romantics once did. Of course, the context of the times the Generation of ’68 were writing in also played a role. At the end of

the 1960s Western society experienced a cultural shift culminating in various counter-cultural revolutions. Bloom reacts to the counter-culture and the 60s describing its similarity to the historical period of English romanticism:

What is around us, currently, presents itself as a radical newness, a kind of consciousness in which ways of apprehension and of feeling seem utterly different from what preceded them ... But the aura of a younger generation's difference from its parents has not been this garish for several generations, and what looks like a really worsening world suggests to many that a time of troubles, heralding the breakup of an age is at hand. A cheap apocalyptic intensity is in the air, and its electronic magnification appears to have overwhelmed taste, and not in music alone.
(339)

Although he denies the value of the new 'romantic' material subsequently produced by this situation, he does draw parallels between it and traditional romanticism. The subjective inwardness, imaginative mind expansion, sexual liberation and drug use of high romantic poetry corresponds with the sixties counter-culture to make the new generation 'the heirs of Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde' (340). Yet, for Bloom the new generation can only achieve a status of imitation. This is a reaction shared by most academic inquiry into the new poetries of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, typified by the 'new romantic' type of poetry published in small press publications and read at university poetry readings. Regardless of its reception, a revival of romantic concerns did occur during this era and poets in Australia undoubtedly contributed.

Frye describes romantic poetry as 'emphasis...not on what we have called sense, but on the constructive power of the mind, where reality is brought into being by experience' (11). In the sixties and seventies, a kind of new romanticism takes this a step further and goes within the mind itself. In 1972, James Tulip observed in Southerly a, '... change in Australia's young writers in the late 1960s from the old moral and philosophic formalism to what is in effect a new romanticism' (176). Livio Dobrez expands on this:

It also represents a Romantic stance, yet another of the many Romanticisms since the late eighteenth century, in this case a contemporary Romanticism, without large gestures – or with undermined gestures – contained, fragmented, the Romanticism in an existential cage...
(96)

What is clear from these two quotes is that the emerging poets of the late sixties were abandoning the formalism and externalism of earlier and contemporary 'modernist' poets, such as Les Murray, engaging in poetics that recalled the poetry of the romantic period. Dobrez also mentions that there have been many romanticisms since the eighteenth century and Paul Kane, in his book Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity, argues that in

the Australian context there has never been a romantic poetic movement (17). That is not to say that English Romanticism has never influenced Australian poetry. Rather that romanticism never became fully established within Australia's national poetry and therefore, Australian poets (unlike European and American poets), do not progress past romanticism because they have no truly romantic forebears in their poetic tradition. Kane later details how this lack of a formal romantic tradition causes a recurring 'Romantic Belatedness,' a recursion to romanticism by each generation of poets: 'First, it entails a repression of one's actual poetic origins...; second, in so doing, it splits the poet into poet-as-person and the poet-as-poet' (45). He gives Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, and Christopher Brennan as examples. The Generation of '68 were reinventing themselves and Australian poetry through their work and in the process there was a resurgence of romanticism. The tropes of an inwardly focused subject and the use of mythological themes did not, in the work of the poets I have chosen, necessarily preclude a desire to make poetry 'new.' As a result, much of these poets' work raises the idea of the poet to something approaching the divine and draws heavily on tropes from English romanticism.

During the sixties, this recurring romanticism in Australian poetry combined with the influence of new kinds of poetry coming from America, such as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Robert Duncan. This new poetic was based more on rhythm, free verse and immediate expression. The Generation of '68's unrestrained style prompted Dobrez's to declare: 'The sixty-eighters *can say it*' (62). Indeed it is often claimed that sometimes the Generation of '68's poems lack the measured and sustained attention necessary for the production of 'good' poetry. As Alan Afterman claims of Dransfield, 'There is no question that his work is attractive... on the other hand, many of his poems lack actual depth; they slip away like rain pelting against a window' (478). But this brash and unmeasured style is essential to the new poetry's tone. In Parnassus Mad Ward, Dobrez stresses how it is the function of a free subjectivity, working differently for each poet that binds the group as a movement (199). I define subjectivity as a deconstructionist term that refers to the position or point-of-view that a poem has at any one time. For example, the subjectivity of a poem may be fixed on the poet's self in the poem or directed out to the reader. Conversely subjectivity may be deflected to the world or onto the poem itself. This subjectivity is steeped in romantic positionings of the poet, turning subject into object, as Bloom would say, and the shifting nature of this subjectivity is an integral part of the Generation of '68's aesthetic.

New Romanticism in “The hermit of the green light” and the Courland Penders poems by Michael Dransfield

An example of a poem I would classify as new romantic is Dransfield’s “The hermit of the green light” which was published in The New Australian Poetry. “The hermit of green light” uses natural imagery and the folk myth of the green man as a conceit for a very romantic view of the poet as a lonesome creature searching for light in a dark world:

only the wind and a river know the way to his
hut in the woods, and sometimes only the wind.
the moon, who is his lady, calls him
from the orchard, her light
releasing dim scents of heavy fruit
fallen, concealing the earth. the wind,
a white visitor, knows him through shutters,
through a torn shirt he wears.
he has no love now, has scraps of song
to hum in odd corners of night. besides the moon
he tends broken birds, the forest victims.
cats tumble about him; there are books, the sound
of the river. it is almost enough, this imperfect
silence: often it is enough.
(57)

Reference to the wind, the river, an orchard and the personification of the moon all point to a natural world charged with spiritual significance. Dobrez posits that Dransfield uses a subjectivity throughout his poetic that has an unrestricted movement of the pronoun ‘I’(97) and that he ‘simply *grows into* [Dobrez’s emphasis] his own subjectivity, which is transparent all along’ (199). In this poem, the poet/hermit is an easy metaphor and his image, ‘through a torn shirt he wears./ he has no love, has scraps of song’ could almost be the ailing John Keats himself. Dransfield revels in the realm of squalor and magic and with a conclusive turn present in many of his poems: ‘often it is enough,’ he submits his character to this perpetual place disconnected from the society.

A recurring place in Dransfield's work is his arcadian homeland 'Courland Penders.' A mythical country manor derived from both his parent's family names and described as his 'heartland' in Rodney Hall's introduction to Dransfield's collected poems (xix). These poems weave a mythology of an ancestral and rural heritage in decay that is laced with personal iconography. In "Courland Penders: Going Home," the poem is introduced by a lengthy description of the grounds and the house before entering its interior: 'The hall is hung with portraits, hunting scenes,/ minor Nativities and forgotten Madonnas' (NAP 62). A description continued in another poem "Birthday Ballad, Courland Penders" from the second stanza:

The pictures are rainbow chasms
you become lost in the intricate
dimensions of colour you find it
a mirror you are retuned and not

walls to be read as pages
with their illustration windows wine
a cobweb chandelier the ghostly
pacing through a tiptoe of evenings;

being expands, poetry, the
opiate of solitaires
a larger house is needed for illusions
distracted lost you wander late

(Collected Poems 51)

The fictional house contains images that contemplate the self 'lost in the intricate/ dimensions of colour.' The Courland Penders poems are mostly descriptive and without the self-reflexive lyric 'I' of his regular poems. Yet this only occurs because Courland Penders is like a dream place or an other-world that only exists in the mind. Here abstract concepts are personified: 'time truth philosophy and love/ resembling players' and the influence of literary figures have a physicality: 'a needle spelling XANADU/ in pinprick visions down your arm' (52) – a reference to the oriental pleasure palace of Kubla Khan in Coleridge's

laudanum induced visionary poem combined with Dransfield's own hypodermic drug use. Finally, in this subconscious place an apocalyptic moment is reached: 'captured by years you break and soon/ not death but madness calls you home' (53). Courland Penders is a subject-object internal to the poet's mind. It is a sanctuary where he can explore his mind. Through this he creates a sense of self as a poet or genius, but within this, he must also contend with the shadow of genius, insanity. By creating an inner sanctum with poetry where the poet is the solitary ruler of an inherited estate, Dransfield enacts romantic motifs of the rustic natural world, while the human world is in a state of decay: spider webs and dust figure prominently in his imagery. There is also a delving into romantic culture and European tradition. "Tapestry at Courland Penders" describes an idyllic renaissance garden of roses, chattering birds, chess pieces and Tudor 'lutations' (Collected Poems 40). A poet and his lover wander through the scene: 'finding infinite a shade of amaranthus, the colours of Romanticism'. Here the notion of Dransfield's romantic posturing is directly expressed:

and the romanticisms of colours, a mythology
of dreamers.
It fades, old
metaphor, the dream a tapestry the tapestry a dream
(40-41)

Dransfield is creating a visionary experience: 'romanticisms of colours,' that is abstracted and consumed in the mystical realm of dreams. Disconnected from allusions to the contemporary world, illuminations occur amongst decay and nature is ambivalent, yet within the poet's mind. In his search for self the poet turns inwards, only to create an external world of symbolic objects and romantic imagery.

Free Subjectivity in "The Rumour" by Robert Adamson

If Dransfield lets his poetic self *grow into* his subjectivity, then Robert Adamson's early work is a process of ambiguity. Dobrez finds that:

what the Adamson subject desires, in keeping with the ambivalence of
wanting/not wanting to know the truth about itself, is to be-nature as one is
God or the work of art ... Here, within what operates not merely as one

element of the totality but as everything and nothing, a *void*, obliterated by totality and at the same time, *the totality itself*.
(173)

This is a polemic position; the poet in the poem is a mask for Adamson, simultaneously exposing and hiding himself, an ambivalent subject that becomes an ambivalent object. Therefore as soon as something is created it is revealed as a misconception, as nothing.

In the epic poem 'The Rumour', Adamson creates a manifesto of poetic intent, imitating influences while simultaneously describing them and contemplating the very nature of poetic endeavour. As John Tranter writes:

In "The Rumour", Robert Adamson created an ambitious and important work. The key to its achievement – and its inherent flaw – is the tension created by his desire to give the poem an autonomy based on its claims of literature, and his contrasting need to justify his role as a poet in Romantic terms (xxiv)

'*Synoptic an Opening*' and '*The Rumour: Part I*' begin with biblical overtones: 'A sequence, as objects alight with his touch/ all round grow/ a song that's ravaging his mind' (NAP 85) describing the poet as god at genesis. The poem connects inspiration to scenes from the book of Revelations, with John hearing the prophecy of angels used as a metaphor for poetic creation. The language is grandiose and mythical, with stars, sphinxes, cherubs, but also gothic: 'The hand aflame an encyclical to turn mental things/ In their graves restoring' (87). Symbolism is also employed: 'Cherub *Rumour* becomes the Muse/ Her words surrounding me/ Ezekiel's mandala/ *their appearance/ and their/ Work it were/ A wheel in the middle of a wheel*' (87-88). The meaning is obscured because the imagery moves between abstractions quickly, for example:

Deeply bereaved Rumour forges
A retributive Lore that places the Open Song as
The force gathered into
Her ordering Core
 my hand aflame drawn by
 her currents
(89)

The process of writing is dealt with as a mythological or even mystical process; 'Rumour' is the newly formed or forming concept about to be expressed, a seeming first murmur of the

poem. It is brought on by ‘Her ordering Core,’ but who is being referred to is uncertain. Earlier a double goddess is described in ‘Muse and Her Destroyer,’ a dichotomy between creation and destruction that represents the uncertainty of a poem’s worth at the very beginning of the writing process. Here the poet must choose to proceed or abandon the project. By ‘*The Rumour: Part Two*’, the work has come into existence – ‘She works on me/ seems lain down before the verse begins/and problems of structure/ fly-up sharp feathers’ – and this is examined two stanzas later: ‘The feathers do not become/ metaphoric they come as those old trans-/mutations of the landscape’ (90). From there the Muse metamorphoses into Christabel, the maiden of Coleridge’s poem with the same title, where Christabel when praying in the woods meets Geraldine, a girl who had been kidnapped by bandits. The girl, after spending the night with Christabel, enamours her father and the poem ends. This evolution brings a Romantic intertextuality to the piece while continuing the metaphor of ‘Muse and her Destroyer’. The intertextuality and poetic self-reflexion is maintained in section two of the third part:

These poets on poetry
continue to infest the barrel of his
preamble locked in
rough non-conformity he works
the verse into rumour
my freedom expanding
as he writes as an American
without extemporizing with
those intricate

evasions going about his
 life listing a few things
 he just happens to like
 (Robert Duncan, I'll make a pact ...
 (93)

The subjectivity of these verses constantly shifts. By changing from the third person, then the first and then back to the third before addressing directly the American poet Robert Duncan, Adamson moves the focus of the reader. Through these shifts the poet becomes a

multiple person. There is the poet writing the poem and the poet in the poem, both of which are inside the text. The subjective position is stretched further when an actual time and place of writing are noted: 'Sydney Monday 24/5/64,' before a direct address to the audience: '(this is the point/ where whoever's reading this/ is forced into deciding/ whether these lines are/ turning to poetry)' (93). The result is a sequence that leaves the reader uncertain of the function of the verse, but at the same time the verse is explained: '(I'm trying/ to let everything fall away).'

The third and fourth sections inject more poetic influences, again Duncan and Coleridge but also Shelley, Carroll and Ginsberg, the latter of whom is imitated:

so that after the mantra
flows the true tongue\
O juvenes, O filu, O Stevens!
the rumour's a-tangle false
catalogues and old Ginsberg
tumbling through
the East here at twenty
past 3 am Sydney

This culminates in a breakdown of verse structure, as if 'Rumour has him in her course/ and the phrase of 'great beauty'/ trips him up again' (96) and the lines become short:

it can't come
from this
sad improvisation
my two-fisted
education
& the poetry
scares
the tone
if his voice
ruptures
a soft membranous
core

where my
first dialectic
may have
grown
it can't come from
anger
 there's
Her spirit now
thrown up
against the bone's
walls

so what to make of that
(97)

When this moment of doubt occurs, the poem loses its form, yet in doing so captures the poetic self. 'so what to make of that' challenges the reader to criticise this breakdown, another shift of subjectivity. It is as though Adamson is communicating solely with himself at times. The poem exists for the poet, as much as for the reader and it reveals the inadequacies of the poet to the poet as well as the reader. Part of this doubt is the burden Adamson feels from the poets who have come before him. But the weight of these poets is also a source of strength. In *'The Rumour Part Four'*, Adamson's admiration for John Ashbery is expressed:

Sheltered in his prospect of Marvellous flowers.
His metaphysics reckon with
Ashbery's line, The Academy of the future
Is opening its doors.
 Ash. The Ash of March: its
 timber used for supporting
 the Kings thigh and for

the shafts of weapons.
(98)

Yet, though Ashbery's 'Academy of the future... does/ Not surpass the mystery of Rimbaud,' at least his figure provides a prototype for new poets: '1 new poets are faceless/ 2 the figure of Ashbery contradicts this.' After this, again uncertainty halts the poem with the return of feathers that 'fly-up sharp pain against my face'. In part two, the feathers are connected to freedom, in this case the new freedoms of verse in contemporary poetry, but here they vex the poet with its lack of rules.

Ending this sprawling poem with '*Coda: Everything Gathered In Objection*,' the tension between the act of writing, the uncertainty of the poet and his sense of identity with his canon is not resolved; nor does the description of a dialectic as it happens cease: 'Always/ As from the start, well hewn lines bursting/ apart...' (101). Then:

the new mode.
To ride the Open Song.
So the ideas slanted against war
struggle free; the lyric
obstructed by sexual fury breaks forth, leaps
insatiable. A distinctive cacophony
sounds drowning All in radiant waves, over
the objections sounding
as the poem flashes
brighter than the tree on fire, than
the proposition of Law,
flames against the carbon Child,
signing rapturously of the malignant
Stamp, of particular anguish.
(101)

As the poem is written, it overcomes the doubts and blocks of the poet in an act of 'sexual fury,' remembering the female motif of the Muse and Christabel. But although the poem 'flashes faster than the tree on fire,' the 'malignant/ Stamp, of particular anguish' is the overwhelming 'sound' of the poem. Inevitably, the poet's attempt to represent the writing process within poetry means that it cannot escape its own failings, because this is the subject of the piece itself. The word 'objections' has an interesting connotation here, though it could

mean the outcry and dissatisfaction the poem may cause, there is also the sense that now that it is finished the poem as subject has transformed to the poem as object. Tulip describes “The Rumour” as ‘a long essay on how a poet may come to deal with Truth... a deep uncertainty must always be there that the vision may not be true’ (191) and a manifesto for new romanticism as ‘of Song taking him out of himself with wit learning, spiritual insight and humour...’ (102). By using complicated language in his poetry, constantly changing subjective position, exploring the works of others as well as the creative process, Adamson constructs a view of the poet as a new romantic dwelling in a realm within poetry itself and grappling with issues of poetic identity. The poetics, at the same time, engage a kind of metapoetry. This is when the act and concerns of poetic creation are directly referred to within a poem. The importance of this trope will be discussed in the next chapter. In “The Rumour” the subjectivity of the poem shifts from the poet, the audience and poetry freely in order to assess the role each has on poetic creation. This concern is dealt with romantically, fusing the discerning gaze of the intellectual mind with the rich imagery of mythology and the subconscious.

The subject of the poem is an expression of the mind. The romantic dialectic between rational thought and emotional experience culminates as an inward gaze at the self. This allows a posturing where, although the self can be presented, represented and expressed in a way that at once forces itself upon the reader with total confidence, is also uncertain, self-conscious or critical. In the next chapter how this position in new romantic poetics produced a greater focus on the poet’s ability to express themselves in poetry about poetry is discussed.

Chapter 2 – Metapoetics and the exploration of self

The nose while beautiful is like the neck, ignored,
being merely a prop for the brow that is usually
well developed & creased in thought – consider the lines

‘The unwrinkled sea beneath him crawls’ locating the centre
of the Romantic head above the hairline & between the ears;
so the artist must see shapes the normal eye is blind to.

(John Forbes *The Romantic Head*
“Four Heads and How Do Them”
The New Australian Poetry 263)

This chapter examines poems that are explicitly metapoetical. That is poetry that directly expresses ideas and concerns about poetry, glorifying the importance of poetry and the relationship the poet has with their poetry. The tendency towards metapoems and romanticism by members of the Generation of '68 stems from the desire to be engaged with poetry that is meaningful and new (something explored in the previous chapter). But where free subjectivity shifts the gaze of a poem between the poet, the reader and the poem metapoetics engages the poet in a dialogue between themselves and poetry. In doing this, they place a supreme importance and value onto the art of poetry and at the same time justify themselves as poets. However, through close-reading of these poems, this act reveals just how uncertain they are about the nature of poetry and their abilities as writers.

Anthologists of the Generation of '68 describe the group as new wave of Australian poetry. In Australian Poetry Now, Thomas Shapcott claims that, ‘by the end of the 1960s a new generation of poets would emerge, inheritors of post-war affluence and admass Techniculture, and that they would assert themselves with a zeal and recklessness missing from their predecessors....’ (ix). He goes on to describe how:

Each of the poets included here seems to me to be a genuine himself:
individual, unique, treasurable, sometimes groping, staggering, fooling
himself and us or perhaps not us, but sometimes striding clear ahead and
dragging us with him, and always being the One enough to address all or
any of us, that we might learn, and be enlarged’
(xvii)

The ‘New Poetry’ is supposed to be assertive and coercive and the poet’s identity is paramount. Yet a recurring theme in The Generation of '68’s poetry is the uncertainty the poets feel. By rejecting the old constructions of Australian poetry, they also undermined any claim to being part of a poetic tradition and therefore had to prove their value in poetry. In

the introduction to Applestealers, Robert Kenny writes: ‘back in 1968 when the poets chose to ignore the Australian literary scene: what happened [was] not as a reaction to the situation... but in profound *ignorance* of it’ (25). If the Generation of ’68 were setting themselves apart from what had come before in Australian poetry, they would have to develop a different poetic identity, a personal mythology in their poetry. Inevitably, a major part of the search for poetic identity involved the contemplation in poetry about poetry. This metapoetry occurs frequently in Adamson’s “The Rumour,” through the motif of unveiling the mechanisms of a poem within the poem or expressing the turmoil the poet faces when their poetry is read. Interestingly, the romantic conception of the poet is arguably a substitute for the poet themselves. Therefore, when the poet presents themselves in their work, they can explore their perceived inadequacies. But because this is only a representation in poetry, their actual self is still distant and safe from scrutiny.

“Chopin Ballad” by Michael Dransfield: Metapoetry and the ‘obvious victim’

“Chopin Ballad” is a metapoetic poem because it describes the act of writing and reading poetry. It begins:

Upon the yellow lattice of parchment
lines of lettering are inscribed. If
you have attained the wisdom, you might
translate dactyls into
jeremiads. In place of the elaborate
black script, you will see
extraordinary hallucinations...
(NAP 60)

Using the metaphor of transforming the actual text into imagery: ‘Where stood a ‘T’/ a gas-lantern,’ the power of poetry is described in bombastic and romantic terms: ‘the games/ replace your realities and plunder your senses.’ The poet and reader are drawn into the poem ‘until your actual being/ is less than a metaphysical reflection...’ and it is here that the concerns of poetic identity are described: ‘For you will perish in melancholy/ if you look beyond the gilt subtleties of the pavilion/ toward the minute infinity of judgment;’

Dransfield knows that his romantic view of poetry is a conceit that layers meaning over reality, but, even still, he relies on it for protection from 'judgement'. The poem ends:

And so
you sketch and detail
with a quill of crystal
illuminations in an intimate hagiography,
and your imagination preys most on
the obvious victim.

The victim can be no one other than the self for all writing is solipsistic. In this poem, Dransfield uses metapoetics to simultaneously describe an ecstatic conception of poetry, both being read and written, but also muses on the idea of being a poet. Once past the symbolic use of language, the self is revealed in 'the minute infinity of judgment.' In this instance he is making a martyr out of his poetic self. His victimhood and the exposing of himself through the act of imagination, however, results in a celebration of poetry.

The metapoetic Parnassus poems by Michael Dransfield and Martin Johnston

In Dransfield's poem "Parnassus Mad Ward," the poet visits a female friend in an asylum. The Mountain of Parnassus in Greek mythology was a favoured place of the muses, so immediately the metapoetic is expressed through a mythological conceit. The Muses are the givers of inspiration and the poem begins: 'First day she hid in bed/ under the covers. Then tried to climb up the wall' (NAP 54): poetic inspiration, at first illusive is then overwhelming. After that, she tells a parable where a Christ/poet figure shows how there is beauty even in an ugly thing (55). In the next section, Dransfield reveals an aspect of his poetic. Although, as I am stressing, the self and subjectivity is inward in this reading, the next few lines show how the 'Other' is also central to many of Dransfield's poems and he addresses this metapoetically: 'she was picking flowers. "I like pansies," she said,/ "my friends. They have faces." Pressed one between the pages.' Dransfield presses the faces of his friends into his poems like flowers between the pages of a book, preserving them, as Dobrez found:

... for all its stress on solitude, Dransfield's poetry operates in a social context, or at least does so much of the time... Dransfield is curious about

otherness, it excites him because it *is* Other ... The point needs no labouring. One only has to count the *names* listed in so many poems... (386-387)

The poem ends with contemplation. After discussing Heinrich Heine, a German Romantic poet and critic from the nineteenth century:

wondering within myself how if poets become mad
there continues to be such colour and how
if gods shall have been discredited forgotten
there still can be innocents there still can be love.
(NAP 55)

The internal nature of the thought is emphasised – ‘within myself’ – and the position of poet as creator or god, is an uncertain one. For if they are mad, discredited or forgotten then how can their poetry be trusted? This insecurity about poetry and the poet himself is a theme within Dransfield’s reflections of the self. The search for identity is an effort to create a personal poetic that does not identify with past poetic tradition. Instead, Dransfield’s poems address sustained romantic concerns and draw almost exclusively from the art of poetry itself. As a result, poetry becomes a primary topic within his work and becomes inseparable to his sense of self and its projection.

The Generation of ’68 drew their influences from many different poetic traditions, rarely Australian. In his own Parnassian poem, Martin Johnston relates his creative process and influences that are exceptionally diverse. “Gradus Ad Parnassum” refers to a dictionary and textbook in the teaching of Greek and Latin and this poem moves through many considerations on how poetry should be written as well as lofty references to the writing of major poets. The poem sneers at contemporary poetics, while actively engaging in them and uses eclectic references to extol an authority that would assumedly far surpass that of the average reader. It begins by placing the poet in the position of reading:

Over a tabasco sandwich, with black coffee
and a number of cigarettes (‘one of my breakfasts’)
I’ve been rereading a poem about *The Shipwreck*

of the Heart, or some such – the title isn't important,
only, of course, the Image ...

Then,

... This he wrote immediately before indulging
in the uncharacteristic excess of suicide;
The poem, perhaps because of this, is peculiarly flabby...
(The Sea-Cucumber 5)

Immediately, it is the poet rereading the poem who controls the text. He impresses an unreliability: 'the title isn't important' and then even kills its author with 'the uncharacteristic excess of suicide.' In doing this, Johnston asserts control over the poem and its subject matter. Later he writes,

Of course he never had a chance to revise it.
So, having nothing better to do at the moment, and in accordance
with my (borrowed) idea that we're all one writer
and ought, in any case, to do one another justice,
I thought I might have a go at it...
(5)

Johnston reveals part of his poetic: for him, text is not fixed to authorial ownership, but a fluid thing that can be borrowed and worked with. He moves on to considerations of style: 'One way of approaching it would be what I'd call the Arnoldian... the extended thalassic metaphor,/ the tang of myth, the vague yearning (perhaps *tristesse*/ is more or less the word) after something or other indefinable.' Here the influence of Greek and classical themes are apparent, 'thalassic' refers to a region in Northern Greece and then to Giorgos Sefaris, a great Greek poet. Next, French symbolist poets are considered followed by 'surrealist – black comedy, kitsch, *fantastically* rich/ imagery – the sort of thing David Campbell does so well' (6) an example being:

whores, and sailors gaping on this picturesque waterfront
as this bloody great red, pulsating thing comes in

beating past the headlands, with Joe the little cabin boy
sticking his head out of the aorta to be sick...

(6)

Yet after this eclectic gathering of sources the poet still feels that his authority is not established: 'And the critics seem to think/ that's all passé. Dr Tiptoes/ wouldn't take it seriously. You can't win.' For all his erudite posturing, he fails to impress his audience and critics. Even in the poem, the poet is plagued with concern about the reception of his poetry. Next, the poem comments on contemporary poetry:

Or, again, the nebulously cosmic: a giant uvula
suddenly becoming discernible on the skyline –
shades of Fenrir at Ragnarok –
teeth poking through the clouds, a crunching sound,
end, but *end*, of poem. But I've done very similar things
myself, earlier on. I don't want to end up in self-parody,
I know too many critics. And I've been a little unkind
myself, perhaps, on occasion. It would hardly be politic.

(7)

Johnson uses melodramatic metaphors of the Norse apocalypse to send up the 'new poetry's' self-reflective mode: 'I don't want to end up in self-parody,' as well as the poetry 'war' between those poets and the more established ones. His criticism of contemporary poetry continues in the next stanza; the influence of American poets on his peers and himself is sent up in the following questions: 'But their thing about the quotidian, and the earth,/ and the immanence of the tremendous in just about everything – / what kind of immanence is left for something tremendous?' and 'What has that to do with the grass? Tenochtitlan? Cotton Mather/ or your friend and fellow-poet who happened to drop in?' Here the grandiose nature of romantic poetry is signified as something that takes away from things that are actually grand, a trope that also over glorifies mundane life where a friend might simply 'drop in.' The poetic process is returned to with irony in the last stanza:

..... and one is left, it seems to me, with the techniques and words ...

I'm not sure that it's much of a poem
but it'll have to do. I'm thirsty to start with
and the pubs have opened, and besides I think deep down I'm hoping
that someone will try to pinch *my* poems and much good
may it do them...

the explanation of each poem
precisely the poem itself...

(8)

Although this is quintessentially a postmodern moment – the poem is being sent up even as it is finishing: ‘the explanation of each poem/ precisely the poet itself’ and reveals its own structure – what is really at stake is Johnston’s poetic identity. He brushes aside all the previous lavish expositions about influences and techniques, seeing them as trivial and preferring, rather, to escape to the pub. Yet, in hoping that someone will steal his poetry, like he is stealing ‘*The Shipwreck of the Heart*,’ there is a desire for acceptance into the canon of poets. He has a romantic view that great poets are something more than normal people. Johnston’s esoteric references attempt to prove that he is a great poet, well-read and hard to understand. Coupled with a sardonic metapoetic that criticises his approach, his exposure of his imagined poetic self in “*Gradus Ad Parnassum*” is simultaneously masked. While somewhat hidden, a romantic metapoetic is arguably struck in this piece. The poet goes within himself, through his influences and musings on style, to find, in poetry a poetic identity.

“Four Poems on a Theme” by Vicki Viidikas: a metapoem of the self

Exposure of the self through poetry is absolute in the poems of Vicki Viidikas. Viidikas’s self is always in relation to other people: ‘Viidikas’ “I” is everything, but also nothing: everything because it loves, nothing because in loving it has no life except in the Other’ (Dobrez 129). This dichotomy between the self and other is a search for identity played out in poetry.

“Four Poems on a Theme” is addressed solely towards a lover/Other. Viidikas draws the reader into a void made up of objects and motifs taken from foreign cultures or primitivism, as well as the subconscious and dreams. The dialogue dwells in this mytho-

poetic realm and concerns itself with the romantic view of the poem as an object. If the Other of the poem is not an estranged lover, but the 'Poem' and poetry, then the piece about separation and the sense of loss becomes the anxiety behind poetic production and its subsequent reception by audiences. The piece metapoetically grapples with the writerly concern of a text failing to communicate the poet's exact meaning or feeling once read by an audience. The first section of the piece, "*Inside Of Paradise*" begins:

We are coming and going. At last you have arrived...

...You are alone inside the tower, respected, working. And elm knocks on the window. I come in wearing blood, a cloak edged from outside. How many times must I walk this threshold? You swivel saying, I have lost paradise, I thought I was done.

(NAP 64)

The arrival of the Other, like Adamson and Dransfield's Muse, is a metaphorical coming of poetic inspiration. It is separate and superior to the world in a 'tower.' Elm trees are often attributed to femininity and as it knocks the poet enters 'wearing blood, a cloak edged from outside.' Here is a gender based dichotomy between poem and poet, a masculinity that views a removed world and then a femininity that comes from it. The Other tells her she has fallen from grace, whereas she thought that they had finished the poem: 'I thought I was done.' This is the uncertainty over when a poem is actually finished. The poem's shadowy figure making commands of the poet alludes to the poet's concern that she has not properly written the poem.

The next paragraph continues this and describes bringing offerings of images and ideas to the Other. Feelings of doubt in abilities are expressed: '... sometimes I don't know what to tell you. Act, I think, I never know where to begin' and the poet feels alienated with herself in the tower of the poem: 'I am a stranger in your drawing room, want to take you outside.' The urge to finish the creation, to 'take outside,' persists, even though there is a threat that a malevolent audience will somehow claim her efforts: 'You have a history to reject as I recreate idols. Voodoo men own my laughter, they have a claim on me like you.' There is a tension between the force of what already is, namely established poetry (dominated by men) and what the poet is creating: 'The shaman is out to get you, make you jangle inside of Paradise,' here the Other is a victim to the world's attempt to attack the poet,

to stop her from writing. Paradise, is therefore, the point before the poem is actually made. It is the place where what is to become external is still inside the poet. Before a poem is formed through writing, it exists first in perfection within the writer. The poem is still exclusively the poet's.

'*A Trunkful of Structures*' interprets the literary canon and the construction of structure in poetry. Taking place in a library, the dominance of men in literature is satirised: 'Great Lives, Great Men and Great Words confront me' (65). The use of capitalisation creates a sarcastic tone, but what follows is metapoetic:

I am rummaging among the shelves searching for a word. You're nowhere in sight.
And I'm looking for something. Not perfection or great lies. Not complicated
gestures. Something to replace your strained eye. You're out of control. And books
are leaning posts...

Even though poetic tradition is male orientated with big ideas and 'complicated gestures,' the poet is searching for a guide, a way to control her poetry. The metaphor is continued in a later paragraph where the poem as lover is shown to build bridges over her life and to 'Love us away from structures, the closest thing to being free...' but 'It's not true. You have dragged your ghosts with you.' The blank verse structures championed by Viidikas and the other Generation of '68 poets were an attempt to break away and create a new poetic, yet the legacy of tradition remains to disrupt expression and the creation of the poem. The poet needs a form of poetry from some pre-existing model. Her inability to find this structure for her poem means that inevitably the Other, as poem, is unsatisfied with her poetic abilities and it can never be as perfect as envisaged at its initial conception: 'So you feel let down. Having my own trunk and sagging bed with a cat for a hot waterbottle. You've gone off... Leaving me to mine. Each of us squeezed breathless.' Though the poet has tried her best to form the poem, employing the structures of poetic tradition, as well as new poetics, the poem leaves her to be read in a flawed state.

What follows is jealousy and a sense of exposure. In '*It's Natural*', the Other is with another woman; the Other as poem is being read: 'Nothing more violent than turning the eye in like a knife' (66). The nervousness experienced when this occurs is expressed as a sexual betrayal: 'I imagine what her bed is like. You dropping into her like a well, forever lost, bottomless. Another territory.' The anxiety of the self being exposed in poetry and being

misunderstood is mixed up with an ironic statement: 'I'm saying there's more to life than love. Eh? Yeah, Words, Structures.' Exposure through poetry is continued: 'And I say I've set up my affections like tin gods to be shot down. Absolutes. Wanting permanence. In and out of the line of vision.' The poet creates herself using poetry, 'Words and Structures,' presenting herself as a malleable 'tin god,' that is then attacked in the hope of achieving a completeness and lasting impression that permeates within and may even transcend the poem. It is the desire to obtain a permanent sense of self.

In '*Going Down With No Permanence*,' these thoughts and the anxiety of readership continue. But now there is a sense of acceptance or, at least, a moving forward. Even if exposure and vulnerability are still a concern: 'My shoes are off and I'm walking barefoot.' The polyamorous nature of the Poem: 'You waft into my room bringing delicious words, eyes, every other love you're still attached to, claim' refers to the countless interpretations a poem can have. Now the poem takes over the poet and moves between her and others. The poet must confront herself:

Yes I understand. Incredible egotist! that one cracked heart is your own, gyrating in its uncertainty. Adoration. Adulation. Your heart seeks to reflect itself. Narcissus in the bath. How many loves do you want? Are you never full, leaky bucket?

Viidikas knows that she is creating herself in a poem and is aware of the self-indulgence, but her motive for writing poetry is the attempt to capture a self. But the self is intemporal and changing. Poetry can only contain an expression of a self that was. For this reason, a poem is an adulterous lover, even though it attempts to represent the self, it is its own entity and is given different meaning when read by another person.

Viidikas uses the inward looking and personal trope of a new romantic poetic in order to create a poetic identity, thus a sense of self in life. Her Other creates a dialectic that explores herself in relation to poetry. This poetic relies less on literary allusions and references to achieve recognition. Instead, her poetic identity is developed through myth, embracing the symbols of other cultures, most notably Hindu, or images harkening to romantic motifs. Because a sense of self for the poet is being a poet, considerations of poetry also becomes part of this exploration. The result is a tendency towards metapoetics in framing themselves and their work and the subject of the poem becomes an object within the poem.

Metapoetics in the poems of the Generation of '68 are not limited to the more new romantic poets. Awareness within the poem is a reflexivity common to modern and especially postmodern poetic styles. By creating a 'new poetry,' the '68-ers asserted their own poetic identity. In this case the desire to discuss poetry and the poetic act in poetry is accompanied by a personal subjectivity and it may be another iteration of Kane's 'Romantic Belatedness,' where poetic origin is created through a personal myth and this gives a radical duality (45). In these poems, the poet's self is explored through metapoetics and is created because the poets are not drawing from a poetic traditional that they feel they are descended from or belong to, but one of their own creation. Part of the need to analyse poetry within poetry arises from the group's unanimous ambition that their poetry is 'new.' As a product of this not only do they develop a new poetic, but make a new sense of the self as poet in poetry. Here the self as poet is a romantic construction where images of the mind move through poems with surrealist ease while still drawing on the gravitas of meaning that romantic and symbolic poetry relies on.

Chapter 3 – Visionary Impressionism

This is achieved at the top of the cranium where the skull
opens to the air, zooms & merges with its own aurora.
Here the diurnal round passes through. In this way

(John Forbes *The Romantic Head*
“Four Heads and How Do Them”
The New Australian Poetry 263)

Visionary impressionism is the imagery of the mind’s eye. This kind of imagery differs from the mytho-poetic images used by previous generations of Australian poets because there is a stylistic change in its depiction. The effect of flowing subjectivity in poems, as discussed previously, on the imagery used by the Generation of ’68 was a departure from styles influenced by modernism. The psychedelic art popular at the time is a major factor of this trait. In this chapter, first the centrality of drug use and its effects on much of the poetry written in a romantic style by the Generation of ’68 will be shown. Lastly, I will describe through close reading how this imagery can be viewed as visionary impressionism.

Of course, imagery used by the more romantic poets of the Generation of ’68 is by no means uniform, yet they arguably share a tendency towards projecting internal thoughts as exterior landscapes and these dreams act as a conduit between the subconscious and conscious. In dream poems images move freely between the void, the sublime, the banal real world or a real world charged with symbolic resonance. The flow of this imagery relates to the ease of subjective shifts as discussed in chapter one, but also to a mytho-poetic and symbolic approach to poetry. Livio Dobrez calls this style ‘visionary impression’, but is uneasy in applying that term to anyone other than Michael Dransfield (336-337). However, if the idea of the ‘visionary’ poetic holds some weight with poets who use romantic tropes in their poetry, so too, does the idea of an *impression*-ary image.

This kind of poetry is not singular to the Generation of ’68 and has its origins not just in romantic and symbolist poetry, but also modernist schools like surrealism and abstraction. It is also important to consider that some of the ‘traditional’ Australian poetry which the group was reacting against also employs these techniques. Yet what makes the ‘new poetry’ different, originates partly from their manifesto to make it ‘new,’ but also from a phenomenon that is often applied to cultural movements of the sixties. That is the popularity

of psychotropic drugs and its expression through psychedelic art. LSD especially changed the tone of visionary imagery making it more impressionistic. As Dobrez describes:

That is to say, it is an impressionism which is *synthetic* rather than, like that of Monet and his followers, *analytic*. Or more precisely, it is *primarily* [all emphasis in text] synthetic where the other is primarily analytic, since to a degree the two cannot be separated. This means the impressionism of the subject, or of LSD, rather than that of the object, or the camera.

(22)

Whereas poets in the first half of the twentieth century expressed images like photographs and films, the 'new poetry' is fuelled by the psychedelic experience of acid.

Lysergic acid diethylamide's popularity during the late 60s and early 70s influenced artists of all disciplines. The hallucinatory experience of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs is not necessarily like the presentation of visions and seeing things that are not there, but rather an extra-sensory experience where shapes and patterns in or on objects shift and grow. This is coupled with a sense of euphoria, enlightenment and knowing, that for many is akin to a religious experience. During the 60s, the writer Aldous Huxley and the psychologist Timothy Leary attempted an objective explanation of hallucinogens. In The Doors of Perception, Huxley describes his experience:

The change which took place in that world was in no sense revolutionary. Half an hour after swallowing the drug I became aware of a slow dance of golden lights. A little later there were sumptuous red surfaces swelling and expanding from bright nodes of energy that vibrated with a continuously changing, patterned life. At another time the closing of my eyes revealed a complex of grey structures, within which pale blueish spheres kept emerging into intense solidity and, having emerged, would slide noiselessly upwards, out of sight. But at no time were there faces or forms of men or animals. I saw no landscapes, no enormous spaces, no magical growth and metamorphosis of buildings, nothing remotely like a drama or parable.

(14)

Extra-sensual euphoria and closed eye hallucinations that continuously change are typical to LSD trips, which is by no means a visionary epiphany. Yet acid consciousness does attract a kind of religious fanaticism:

If you are serious about your religion, if you really wish to commit yourself to the spiritual quest, you must learn how to use psychochemicals. Drugs are the religion of the twenty-first century. Pursuing the religious life today without using psychedelic drugs is like astronomy with the naked eye because that's how they did it in the first century A.D., and besides, telescopes are unnatural.

(Leary 38)

The enthusiasm and righteousness of Leary filters through the counter-culture movement even to members of the Generation of '68. Understanding consciousness in this way allows the world to be perceived as though through a superior kind of lens: one better than the naked eye or as Dobrez suggests, a camera. In their poetry, the experience of LSD or at least the influence of psychedelic art is conveyed through visionary impressionism. These are moments of intensity in the poems where 'consciousness that has been raised to apocalyptic pitch' (Bloom 8) presents reality that is more like a dream. In this state images tumble between each other, transforming and flowing through the subjective structure of the poem. For example, when Adamson describes the turning mandala in "The Rumour" or Viidikas sees the gaze of the audience as 'Voodoo men' ("Four Poems on a Theme" 64).

Drug Poems: "I do this i do that" by Michael Dransfield and "Gold topped mushrooms" by Vicki Viidikas

The importance of such hallucinatory drugs (and drugs in general) is directly referred to by Dransfield. Obviously Dransfield's book Drug Poems is worth mentioning here, but in a later work Memoirs of a Velvet Urinal, a short poem "I do this i do that" (a reference to Frank O'Hara's collection of conversational and socially observant poems) captures his ideas on the relationship between poetry and drugs:

okay. A new poem without weather
self incidence or the wind or sun.

mushrooms grow best, this kind, where
cowshit lies under conifers. gather
at any time of day. when cut
should be some blue visible. otherwise
don't eat them. chop fine

cook up into small soup.
eat two days running, then leave off
for a week. smoke instead.

without the eyes all i am
writing is recipes
(Collected Poems 63-64)

Dransfield sends up the self-referential nature of his work, punning on the word 'eyes,' giving the phrase the double meaning of vision, as well as the pronoun for the self. If the 'I' is taken out of the poem, then drug poems become just an instructional account for drug taking. In this revelation, ironic as it may be, the association with drug use and poetry is apparent. The bland descriptions, 'where/ cowshit lies under conifers', and the instructional tone is devoid of the rich imagery and language synonymous to his poetry. Taking drugs is essential to the writing of poetry, but poetry too is essential for the taking of drugs. Both Dransfield's self and the effect of drug use are obliquely removed from this poem.

In "Gold topped mushrooms", Viidikas treats the same kind of hallucinogenic drug in a way that personifies and mysticises the fungi:

Vigorously nudging bright nipple faces,
their pure white chests thrown out, flaunting,
openly they push gold to their tips.

Assured of their power pushing after the rain
from the earth's cold face, her poor strength
pumping them out

The mushrooms erupt gold roofs to the sky,
flash pagodas, crisp caps, bubbling on strong stalks,
their skirts flared out

Flicking on gold bulbs, light of the days or
moons' pale silver, they burst through
lids of energy, blue visions in their veins
(Condition Red 27)

Images of mushrooms as nipples and gold roofed pagodas morph into different symbolic objects. From a nipple, growing in the moist soil of the earth, the image transforms into

tiered golden towers. The fluidity of this visionary impression imitates the hallucinatory experience. A promise delivered in the last line: ‘lids of energy, blue visions in their veins.’ This poem acts as a romantic ode to magic mushrooms. As a drug poem there is an imitation in the experience of being on the drug. Because the effect is a sense of wonder and hallucination, the imagery likewise is visionary and sublime creating a poetic that is amorphous, experiential and psychedelic.

Visionary Impressions in “The Harbour Braces Itself” by Robert Adamson

Visionary impressionism is not limited to describing the experience of hallucinogenic drug use. The flowing imagery and sublime tone can also be used to describe an experience of heightened consciousness. Robert Adamson’s poem, “The Harbour Braces Itself” details a state of epiphany mixed with a melancholic daze:

1

It is early, the harbour braces itself
like cold skin expecting a breeze – I have been here
standing on a barge since before dawn
for no reason. The new sun washes over lights
left burning

2

The moon is halfway up the sky,
although is rapidly growing fainter in steady rising
sun . . . Had I not been here watching it fade
I would never find such a pale & thin rim.
A boat sails out of my eye.

(NAP 80)

The poet ‘standing on a barge,’ at first seems passive. Conversely, the barge is floating on the harbour and traveling through time. Images of the harbour, the morning sun and the moon have actions like: ‘washes over’, ‘halfway up’ and ‘steady rising’ and show a scene made up of slow moving bodies that float fluidly over the landscape. The last line of the second stanza is a surrealist image: ‘A boat sails out of my eye.’ Such a play on words

transforms the description of a harbour at morning into an ethereal plane of heavenly bodies that is unreal and laced with symbols. The poet is in a trance caused by this peaceful scene which is broken in the final stanza:

3

A breeze is hugging the water,
without warning this happened, the surface is choppy.
I have lost my sense of time.
Clouds have come over the sky without
raining.

The poet has gone into his mind while contemplating the scene. In this subconscious realm, images become clear and meaningful, but also slightly whimsical. When the vision is broken: 'without warning this happened, the surface is choppy,' the poet is brought back into the world: 'I have lost my sense of time' and the vision loses its clarity: 'Clouds have come over the sky without/ raining.' The heightened experience or moment ends and what is attained during it is somewhat lost. "The Harbour Braves Itself" is a poem about personal reflection turning into a euphoric episode. In a sense the poet has travelled to a higher realm of existence whose physical bodies are more fluid and drifting. It is like being in a dream state or vision that is then impressed upon the reader.

"The Blood Aquarium" by Martin Johnston: Visionary impressionism and consciousness at the apocalyptic pitch

The landscape of the mind's imagination is evoked in Martin Johnston's "The Blood Aquarium." In this place, visions are presented in succession. The poet's subconscious mind is a chaotic tumble of things like Chinese Taoism, the mountains of Greece and ancient flying lizards. This *magnum opus* of orphic proportion is a visionary journey where the poet tears down scenes as quickly as he makes them. The poem pivots on the ability of its reader to allow the images to flow, like the convulsive shifts of shapes and colours in close-eye hallucinations. The trope of the painter is often used throughout this poem and it begins with a reference to the painter Pan Apolek from a short story by Russian author Isaac Babel:

1

Pan Apolek's scarf whirls the horizon inwards,
he brittle and void inside its tightening belt.
The wet sky's writhing flings scurf among the branches,
mist banners over churned soil.
The blind man's fingers
caress an accordion like a skull.
Palette and paint flow into the mountain,
the mountain flows through the painter.
Toppling from high cliffs, he falls
into himself, and is eaten:
a starting point.

(NAP 109)

The first section is the beginning of an inward journey. The painter's scarf draws us 'inwards,' the sky is 'writhing' and the painted mountain can 'flow.' The movement of these verbs is fluid, like thoughts, as the painter 'falls/into himself.' Once inside the artist's mind many visionary impressions are made like: 'Sandalwood night smokes through liquid pines' (110), 'small galaxies drifting flat against the eyes,' 'stars are serrated bright heavy teeth/ the skin can be broken can be cracked' and 'Sentences coil out of a flux of blindworms.' Again verbs like 'through' and 'drifting' create a sense of shifting between images that '*coil* out of the *flux*.' The images move into one another and are fantastic, surrealist and are elicited the imagination. The painting trope is elicited again in part five through the work of Australian painter Sidney Nolan: 'Nolan once tipped up a Riverina landscape/ to see if it would drip to the warehouse floor' (111). A landscape painting is seen as fluid, as if the paint has not dried and can still be moved around the canvass. This is how all the scenes occur in "The Blood Aquarium," objects are malleable and constantly transform: 'and Evariste Galois bursts in the cold red dawn/ and becomes an inkblot.' The idea of 'flux' is also central:

7

Flux is a nounless language. Thinking 'it moons',
'it saffrons', words caper down the nerves
to burst in aureoles at the fingertips.
Lights out and the room swims.

Angler fish, Roman candle,
immortal crepuscular verb.
(112)

The realm of the poem has no subject, is 'nounless.' The act of creation is words that 'burst' out of fingertips and onto the typewriter. A sense of fluidity is continued when 'the room swims' and at this moment the reader is quite close to the poet's actual reality – the room as he writes – but then taken back into vision. Part eight begins: 'the track there veers through the fir cones.' The poem continues teeming with mystical imagery: 'Past Santorini and Krakatoa the whiskered hermits/ paddle by, sulphurous, on mushrooms./ The observer gobbles down blood and ink,/ stone, scarlet stone...' (113), but also describes modern scenes: 'Hunted carrion bird, backyard abortionist,/ scalpelling liquid drippings from the brain,/ sculpting/ the stasis of the photographed sonata.' While there are mountain landscapes where 'fog skeins the frosted grass/ and the archaeologists are scrambling up the cliff face' (116), there is also mundanity: 'I tend to wake up late, and sometimes people/ throw peaches or grapefruit through the window./ When the pubs close/ swollen faces pass like leprous asteroids' (166-117). Yet these 'real' scenes still abound with hallucinatory imagery and people's faces become asteroids. The poem's subject exists only within the poet's mind, as though it is a dream of everything he knows. He is creating this experience, but also destroys it:

17

the mountain crumbles
keeping still is the mountain a peaceful place
among trees it is a place of
peace
a tree place among trees
a place of terror
no-one
becomes a mountain
almost
(117)

The duality of this part takes physical form in the unusual line structure, but also in the imagery. 'the mountain crumbles' followed immediately by 'keeping still is the mountain,' shows the polarity and uncertainty of objects in the mind and this causes it be a place of peace and of terror. It is seemingly paradoxical, yet paradox is what gives it its subjectivity: 'no-one/ becomes a mountain' is symbolic, but also absurd and is further nullified by the uncertainty of the final word: 'almost.' The poet is pushing his visions to the limit of their senses as shown in a section of part twenty-one:

press them into the clay as the wheel whirls faster,
until all the figures coalesce
at the consistency of a cooked eye;
that is what is known as the science of optics.
Roll them into a ball, turn round in a circle
looking at the horizon. I become quite dizzy
with turning, looking for just the slightest indentation
in the sky's perfect hemisphere.
(119)

Everything combines as clay. The experience is so intense the poet is drawn into the spinning of the pottery wheel. He spins around and the world blurs together into one 'perfect hemisphere.' But, like Adamson at the harbour, the trance and vision are broken by a return to the real world: 'The boys are waiting round the corner; time to shut down for the day' (120). Indeed as the poem draws to a close the movement between reality and the landscapes of the mind becomes more frequent: 'My curtain has stepped aside./ In the street are the throb of trucks, children running.' Until in the final part:

23
The statues in the Parthenon used to be painted.
Painter and painting move
from jewelled ikons to sketches in wash and pen.
Brushing myself in
I try, still not to tear the paper;

eating oneself is unseemly
and all these words have teeth like hungry rivers.
(121)

Referring to painting again, the decay of art over time shows its impermanence. The fluid movement continues: 'Painter and painting *move* ... to sketches in wash and pen' and yet the poet wants to join these decaying relics. Overall, the vision of "The Blood Aquarium" is apocalyptic, the poet falls into the void of the mind which is huge, unwieldy and all-consuming. In ending with: 'eating oneself is unseemly/ and all these words have teeth like hungry rivers,' there is a sense that this inward directed view is not only a place where both the poet and meaning get lost, but also, that there is a sense of guilt in its production. This poem is erudite and esoteric. The vast tracks of quickly moving sublime images are difficult to follow, especially with their basis in obscure knowledge. In an interview with John Tranter, Johnston resists the idea of creating notes for his more obscure allusions conceding, 'The references do, I think, tend to overwhelm the poem' (Duwell 155) continuing later, 'As I'm less interested than a lot of people in the explicitly communicative function of poetry, that doesn't affect me too much' (156). "The Blood Aquarium" then is not about communicating ideas to the reader, rather it is an expedition into the mind, creating landscapes and making references to things that encapsulates the mental experience and the subconscious. This endeavour is a visionary impression of the self and is bound together by symbolism, surrealism and an underlying romantic mytho-poetic approach to poetry. The poem as subject-object means that it is more important to represent the vision and synthesise it than to analyse it and the creation is more important than the meaning. It is about exploring the mind rather than presenting its product as a poem.

Exploration of the mind, visions and the self are connected to the modes of thought that the LSD culture introduced to artists and young people during the 60s and 70s. It changes the mystical aspect of poetry, from the modernist techniques of representation as a photograph, to a synthetic delving into the subconscious mind through a visionary impressionism. Visionary impressionism's tropes of surrealist imagery, the mytho-poetics of romantic poetry and free subjectivity move between considerations of the self and the visionary experience. A romantic stance allows the poets to engage with a poetic of visions, hallucinations and fantastically vivid imagery that is consumed with the exploration of the

self. Often the poets rely on the use of dream states to simulate this kind of projection and subsequently romantic tropes are central to the work.

Conclusion

the dissolution the quivering chin & supported jaw seemed
to fear, as the head longed for, takes place. The head, at
last one with the world, dissolves. The artist changes genre.

(John Forbes *The Romantic Head*
"Four Heads and How Do Them"
The New Australian Poetry 263)

Part of the essential appeal of the poems I have analysed in this thesis is the, albeit naïve, sincerity that underlies them. To a degree, each of the poets defend this obvious romantic sensitivity: Dransfield through brute force, Adamson through a shifting and uncertain gaze, Viidikas with her total exposure of self to 'other' and Johnston by deprecation, irony and obscure references. In actuality, revelling in the self through romanticism defends the sentimental ideas being expressed. Romanticism is guarded because this kind of expression is derived from the deeply personal aspects of each poet's psyche: it is exposing. Romanticism's inward gaze shifts the subjectivity of a poem from the poet-on-the-world to the poet-in-the-world. In this state, the very nature of poetry is interconnected with the nature of being and thus any reflection on the self is a reflection on poetry too. The poem as subject-object becomes tantamount and metapoetics become a prevalent stylistic motif. By exploring the self, the poets also enact a representation of the poet as a visionary or shaman, accessing the subconscious. The Generation of '68 poets I have referred to in this thesis arguably outstrip previous generations of romantics, in part due to the influence of new psychedelic drugs. Drugs and the religious experience they are perceived to inspire make the mytho-poetic inclinations of romanticism into a mental state that is linked to poetry with symbolic and surrealist imagery, so that drugs and poetry are interminably linked. All of this posturing gives the poet a heroic stance; the poet is blessed with an insight that is imparted through poetry. These poets describe themselves in poetry creating a glorified and romantic picture of the poet. Such personal reflections may expose the poet in the poems, but also protect them from reality, something which is common to preceding romanticisms in poetry.

Michael Dransfield's poems dwell in locations within his mind. The free expression and mental state this affords means that his poetry can draw on a wealth of literary and mythological sources to explain very personal experiences and feelings. It engages the reader in a fantasy that is also an admission of inner concerns. The very act of writing poetry is drawn back to reveal a void of meaninglessness, that can only be filled by writing more

poetry. Dransfield does not hold back from intimate and personal feeling in his poems, yet through his overt romanticism, these reflections are always seen through a filter of conceit and allusion.

The early poetry of Robert Adamson is in a similar vein to that of Dransfield. But when he exposes his inner self in poetry, he protects himself by shifting his subjectivity and gaze away from himself. In “The Rumour” this is done through a myriad of complicated forays into mytho-poetry and discussions on stylistics and in “The Harbour Braces Itself,” the mind is reeling from a euphoric state inside – yet outside of – itself. It allows him to create images of himself as a poet before denying them as fancies. In doing this he is both involved and removed from himself in the poems and therefore able to negotiate volatile personal expression without truly exposing the ‘real’ Robert Adamson. This is done through the creation of a poet within poems and therefore a romantic poetry that can transcend reality and encapsulate a whole spectrum of metaphors and motifs. Inevitably this kind of poetry never reaches the ‘true’ expression the poet may be wishing to achieve. Instead it represents a romantic viewing of reality.

On the surface Vicki Viidikas’s poetic is often an expression of self in relation to an ‘Other’. By constructing such a dialogue she exposes feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in relation to a shadowy characteristically male figure. However, in “Four poems on a theme” this dialectic is not so much directed towards a literal love/Other, but towards an embodiment of poetry itself. This is an engagement with the romantic motif of the heroic-poet and a journey of self-discovery through poetry. By searching for meaning through the conceit of sexual betrayal, Viidikas is actually exploring the metaphysics behind the creation of self-expression and the subsequent transformation this expression undertakes when read by an audience. She applies the same kinds of techniques and imagery as other new romantic poets, albeit less derived from romanticism and more from the myths and mysticism of the occult and Eastern religions. Likewise, in “Gold topped mushrooms,” the hallucinatory effects of the drug combine with the visionary poetics of romanticism to transform them into pagodas. The poem is a visionary impression of the world. It is within reality but not bound to a realistic representation.

Of all the new romantic poets, Martin Johnston is the most critical of the romantic legacy. Even within his poetry, he ironizes himself as much as his peers. Johnston’s romanticism stems from his obsession with referencing esoteric poets and themes, which becomes an expression of his self. He engages in deep metaphysical stylistics and delves deeply into himself in “The Blood Aquarium,” yet avoids being too personal by surrounding

his poetic self with allusions and intertextualities. It is a journey through the imaginative mind that takes full advantage of surrealist techniques and the free subjectivity of vision and hallucination.

New romanticism gathers the experimentation, enthusiasm and freedom of the Generation of '68 and combines it with the self-reflective, stylistically open and fantasy driven tropes of romanticism. In my thesis I'm suggesting that the poets I have discussed were attracted to this form of poetry because they were searching for a sense of self through poetry. As a result they arguably enacted another period of the 'Belated Romanticism' that Kane describes in Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity. Combined with the revelatory vocabulary of psychedelic drugs, they describe 'visionary experience' in the non-subjective, flowing and transformative experience of acid-consciousness. The poetry is self-inclusive and raises the importance of poetry to a level that is exclusive and supposedly inaccessible to the unenlightened. In this, new romanticism follows the traditions of previous romantic movements that combine the utopian optimism of bohemia and the exclusivity of avant-gardism. For the Generation of '68, the time was right to take advantage of the cultural and social shifts of the time and usurp the established Australian poetry scene. Yet, in doing so, the poets created a dilemma between severing all ties to previous traditions and trying to create an identity as poets. Some poets embraced romanticism as a form of justifying themselves as poets, weaving themselves into their poetries and through their individuality make something 'new.' However, by using romanticism as the dialectic basis of their poetry they return to a poetic practice seemingly recurring throughout the history of poetry.

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