

Philip Mead: *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*. Australian Scholarly Publishing (North Melbourne) 2008. 540 pp. ISBN 978-1-74097-197-3. **By Andrew Taylor,** Edith Cowan University.

One afternoon in October 1943 two young men sat down in Victoria Barracks in Melbourne and created a poet. Both went on to become published poets in their own right, but on that day neither of them had published a book. Knowing what the tedium of army life can be like, I can imagine that they thought that what they were planning would be fun, although later they denied this was a motive. Their main aim was to show up the pretentiousness and meaningless nonsense (in their eyes) that a very bright young man from Adelaide, Max Harris, was printing in his new journal, *Angry Penguins*.

To understand the motives of those two young men, one needs some idea of the conservatism of Australian society and its literary culture in the first half of the last century. There were some writers whose work transcended it. Most notably there was the novelist Christina Stead, whose first novels were published in the 1930s, but whose creative life was lived mostly outside Australia. On a more local level, Christopher Brennan, a brilliant scholar and poet, and correspondent with Mallarme, wrote a Symboliste-inspired and Germanicly heroic but doom-laden poetry at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. But after his alcohol-hastened death there were no followers. At about the same time a near-blind farm worker John Shaw Nielson (SP) wrote some of the most delicate, limpid lyrics regarding the relation of the human world to nature that one could imagine. He deserves to be recognised today as one of the great practitioners, anywhere, of what we might now call the poetic articulation of our place in the ecology.

Brennan was a scholar of German literature and Professor at the University of Sydney until his lifestyle led to his (unthinkable by today's standards) dismissal. He knew contemporary European writing intimately, but his formative knowledge of it stopped before the First World War. Nielson knew little of what was happening outside Australia due both to the inaccessibility of books and his poor eyesight.

Still, recent research has indicated that he was no innocent, unlettered genius, flourishing in the waste. My point though is that neither of them was aware, so far as one can tell, of that massive shift of the imaginative ground that we now call Modernism.

And in Australia such ignorance persisted for the next forty years. In poetry there was one exception, Kenneth Slessor, whose path to Modernism's vision of a random and meaningless world that frustrated our hopes for significance and coherence was individual, slow and difficult. By the end of the 1940s Slessor had stopped writing poetry, though he lived on until 1971.

One can only speculate on why Australia did not participate in the Modernism that swept Europe and the USA. After all, Australia was part of the Anglophone world. But Australia's publishing and book distribution was closely tied to Britain's, and not the USA, and this might have been a factor. Furthermore, eighteenth and nineteenth century British writing had largely provided the models and influences for Australia. Another reason might be the Australian nationalism of the decades after Federation in 1901. The fragmented and angst-ridden literature produced in Europe and elsewhere did not coincide with Australia's image of a young country riding triumphant towards a proud nationhood on the sheep's back. Whatever the reasons, with the exception of Slessor there was little manifestation of Modernism in the poetry published in Australia until Max Marris and his friends decided to publish their *Angry Penguins*.

Angry Penguins was a short-lived journal established in Adelaide during the war years when paper was in short supply. Edited by Harris and with support from people in Melbourne – most notably the arts patron and lawyer John Reed and the painter Sydney Nolan, who later became Australia's most internationally recognised artist – it was determinedly avant-garde. Surrealism was welcomed, as was anything that confronted the plodding realism of so much Australian writing – fiction especially – of the time. It was this brash embrace of the *avant garde* that prompted James McAuley and Harold Stewart that fateful afternoon in Victoria Barracks to invent their poet, Ern Malley, and to have his equally fictitious sister send Ern's hand-

ful of 'posthumous' poems to Harris, who eventually published them in a special edition of his magazine in 1944.

The poems were a collage of phrases extracted at random from a small number of books that happened to be lying around, and were deliberately written to be meaningless. However the hoax took a serious turn when the police took action against Harris for publishing obscene material. In 1944, with the war in the Pacific raging, one would have thought there were more dangerous things to defend the Australian people against than a scattering of possibly suggestive – certainly not explicitly sexual – phrases in a journal with almost no circulation. But Harris, at that time a twenty three year old undergraduate at the University of Adelaide, took the stand and after days of detailed and belligerent cross examination was found guilty of publishing obscene material and fined five Pounds, with costs of twenty one Pounds and eleven Shillings awarded against him.

The Ern Malley affair, as it is known today, is central to Philip Mead's recent book, *Networked Language*, in which it is the subject of the largest essay, for several reasons. Mead's aim is explicitly not to write a history of Australian poetry, and if I have dwelt on the Ern Malley story, it is because it tells us a lot about the social and literary network within which Australian poetry developed. Its conservatism, obviously, but along with that an attitude towards sexuality – a fear of promiscuity – that finds expression also in an attitude towards language. As Mead well argues, poetic language challenges conventions, breaks rules, defies expectations, provokes, seduces, and is voracious in its choice of bedfellows. It is, in fact, promiscuous. This is particularly true of the language of Modernism, although the supreme example of such a writer in English is Shakespeare (whose problematic play, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, was one of McAuley's and Stewart's sources.). "What was on trial" significantly for obscenity "... was poetry itself" (110), Mead argues.

And being what it is, such language challenges the reader to make sense of it. During his days in court, Harris manfully defends his decision to publish the poems by an extended attempt at construing them into sense. Mead gives us extensive transcribed court material

not previously published, in which Harris, although acknowledging by now that the hoax material was intended to be meaningless, reads it, against the grain and against his own inclination, for meaning with considerable agility and tenacity. And towards the end of the chapter, Mead himself tackles several more of the Ern Malley poems, sensitively and with considerable erudition reading them in the context of Shakespeare's play. Unlike Harris, though, Mead reads the poems as a liberating and transgressive (sexually promiscuous?) mishmash of associations, echoes and allusions, as an opening up of reading opportunities rather than a fining down to something like a determinate meaning. In fact, Mead argues that the Ern Malley hoax was "the beginning of literary postmodernity in Australia" (88).

Another point Mead discusses at length is the question of hoaxes and fakes. Australia has had its fair share of literary hoaxes, but the underlying point he makes is that in a sense all language is a hoax or, if you prefer, a proxy for something that is not there. This is Derrida's point of course, regarding the deferral of meaning, or *Différance*, though Derrida gets only brief mention in *Networked Language*. By being an imposter (i.e. not the real thing but something masquerading as it) language gives us both the illusion and a measure of control over the non-linguistic world in which we live. By our complicity with it we too are imposters – i.e. we impose on the world, and we adopt a posture towards it. The network that Mead focuses on, then, is not simply the social and historical context within which language acts (though this is certainly not ignored) but rather something like the World Wide Web, virtual rather than real, dynamic and at any point almost evanescent, rather than static or moving with the ponderous pace of history. As Mead writes in his Introduction, "Poetry is networked language in the sense that it is designed to generate meanings through structure and connection. At the same time, because it is made of language, it maintains a kind of non-contiguity with the world... that nevertheless it always refers to and is always constituted in relation to" (4).

Another illusory language is cinema, brief two-dimensional flashes of light that seem to give us something so close to the real world that

we willingly give ourselves to Coleridge's temporary suspension of disbelief in its substantiality. Mead deals with this in an excellent opening chapter on Kenneth Slessor who, for many years, was Sydney's leading movie critic. I have argued elsewhere that Slessor became Australia's first Modernist poet, and certainly one of its finest, even though he stopped writing serious poetry in the mid 1940s. Mead too sees him as Modernist. In the 1920s and '30s, he argues, "cinematism was a response to new forms of experience inaugurated by modernity" and poetry, like the movies, seemed able to rescue moments from the flux of time. Such an impossible hope is central of Slessor's greatest poem, the elegy "Five Bells" (85). But again poetry, being language, is not life – any more than cinema is – no matter how life-like it is. Loss and profound sadness, even a sense of bewilderment, remain the dominant note in Slessor's late poems. It is, in fact, their acknowledgement of the limitations of language and poetry itself that partly accounts for their greatness. Again one thinks of Coleridge, whose lament that he has lost "the shaping spirit of Imagination" paradoxically informs one of the great Romantic poems in English.

In his Introduction Mead claims that "the discourse on poetry in Australia has found it difficult to move beyond a formalist, basically New Critical, paradigm." Also, that the old institution of literary studies in Australia privileged "a certain nationalistic cultural agenda rather than internationally networked and theoretically driven explorations of poetic writing and culture" (10). This was undoubtedly true some decades ago when the Association for the Study of Australian Literature was established in an effort to legitimise the study of Australian literature (including poetry) in universities. Whether it is as true today as Mead seems to imply is questionable. Feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism and more recently ecocriticism have surely rendered the old nationalistic exercise obsolete. The almost obsessive search for an 'Australian identity' that characterised the nineteen seventies and eighties has long ago foundered like Pharaoh's chariots in the ocean of internal diversity that is modern multicultural Australia. John Howard, who as Prime Minister tried to resuscitate the lost art of nationalism (to paraphrase Ezra Pound), was voted

resoundingly out of office and even lost his own seat in Australia's last election. Mead spends little time examining these changes. And there is no mention, surprisingly, of Paul Kane's excellent study of Australian poetry in its relation to Romanticism and its absence. Instead, he has marshalled an impressive range of reference, mostly from outside Australia, in support of his analysis of poetry as networked language.

The question of nationalism comes up, however, in his chapter on one of the perpetrators of the Ern Malley hoax, James McAuley and his long poem *Captain Quiros*, which he describes as McAuley's attempt at national myth-making. This narrative poem about the sixteenth century Portugese navigator is seen by Mead as "an influential but failed attempt at mythopoesis" (25). It was claimed at one stage that Quiros set foot on the East coast of Australia long before Captain Cook, although this has since been effectively disproved. Perhaps McAuley's answer to Kenneth Slessor's *Captain Cook* in the latter's suite "Five Visions of Captain Cook", the navigator Quiros is a kind of spiritual epic voyager whose heroism might constitute something of a founding myth of Australia. But despite its ambition and length, *Captain Quiros* is not McAuley's finest poetry. Few people today would read it with anything other than a sense of duty, and Mead, in his heroic engagement with the poem, makes no great claims for it as a poetic achievement. His interest is in what the poem was trying to do, and how it tried to do it, and the social, historical and poetic contexts or networks, specifically a Voyager tradition in Australian poetry, with which it engaged and still engages. His conclusion is that the Quiros story remains a "marginal but strangely persistent presence in the Australian imaginary" (267).

McAuley's contemporary, Judith Wright, receives a much more positive appraisal. Wright was not only a poet but also a public intellectual, an outspoken advocate of what today we would call rather glibly ecological issues. She was also a clear sighted critic of Australia's white colonial past, in which her own family had been deeply implicated. Mead rightly claims that she is an uncomfortable and unsettling presence, "canonical and radical, mainstream and oppositional,

iconic and alternative", the kind of poet that Australia can only benefit from (269). One of her early books was titled *The Two Fires*, and Wright's oeuvre (which comprises much more than poetry) displays a challenging duality as unsettling as language itself. On a personal note, when I was introduced to her poetry while still a schoolboy, this quality inspired me to try to write poetry myself. She would have been a thorn in the side of the conservative John Howard, who deplored what was called "the black armband school of history", i.e. a history that reminded us that the success of white colonisation came at a massive price paid not only by the continent's original inhabitants but also by its ecology. Mead impressively analyses her career and her writing in terms of her inability to be at home – both personally and linguistically – within Australian culture and history, her unsettling "homelessness" which is "the essential', inescapable condition of modern humanity – metaphysically, linguistically, socially and nationally" (337).

Mead's final two chapters continue this focus on the marginal. I do not mean that Wright is marginal to the story of Australian poetry and social consciousness, but that she dwelt on the margins, on the littoral, on that uncomfortable space where antinomies encounter each other. (The property where she spent her final years was called, significantly, "Edge".) The same can be said of John Tranter, subject of the fifth chapter, and the Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty and the Greek/Australian who goes by the defiantly Greek name π.ο.

The essay on Tranter explores what happens when he uses computer-generated text (Mead describes the process in some detail) as a basis for his own poems. The program, called Break Down, analyses a prior text then spits out nonsense, which Tranter then works on to produce tantalising and ultimately unresolvable narratives. In a nice symmetry, one is reminded of the young Max Harris in that Adelaide law court so long ago, bravely construing into meaning the deliberately 'meaningless' verbiage of the fictive Ern Malley. Of course the results are different, but each in his own way is engaged in what Eliot called "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings." Tranter seems to be mounting a bemusing assault on the lyric I, so much

the target of poetics in the last few decades. Yet contradictorily, by his own admission, his finished narratives are the product of sustained and conscious work, each one passing through maybe a dozen drafts before reaching their incomplete completion. Why are they of any interest to us? Like much of John Ashberry's poetry, and like the paintings of the Armenian-American Abstract Expressionist Arshile Gorky, they "tease us out of thought, as doth Eternity" (to quote Keats.) Meaning, that elusive and seductive object of our desire, is always a step ahead of us, always slipping around the corner and donning a new face before we can grasp it. Because, as Mead rightly says, "it's actually impossible to escape the humanness of language, even in its anonymous, arbitrary enunciations" (392).

That humanness is brought to centre stage in his discussion of the Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty and the Greek-Australian π.ο. Both work at the margins of what Mead calls a bit unquestioningly the main stream of contemporary Australian poetry. Fogarty has forged a distinctive and transgressive English that challenges the assumptions underlying the dominant paradigm of Australian English and its colonialist inheritance. π.ο. does a similar thing by exploring inner-suburban Fitzroy with its immigrant cafes and heteroglossic locales that have largely been ignored in more 'mainstream' Australian poetry. Mead sees the work of these poets as revealing how the language of contemporary Australia with its colonial history is "maintained at... the cost of interdicting... the self- and cultural formation of Aboriginal and migrant Australians" (421). And any other non-mainstream element in Australian culture, for that matter.

Although the poets in *Networked Language* are discussed in chronological order, this book is not a systematic study of Australian poetry, and certainly not a history of it, but six extended essays on aspects of language and culture treated in relation to relevant examples of Australian poetry or poets. They are spacious essays, not hurrying to make their point, sometimes healthily repetitive, with an extraordinarily wide range of reference. They can bear serious re-reading, as Mead's arguments are complex, wide-ranging and erudite. My one complaint is that the book lacks a bibliography. Given

the extraordinary number of works cited, it is almost impossible to track individual works down except by constant cross-referencing in the Index. But that is a minor flaw in what is undoubtedly a landmark contribution to Australian literary studies.