

Rodney Hall: ATTITUDES TO TRADITION in Contemporary  
Australian Poetry  
(in *Poetry Australia* no. 32, 1970)

Introduction:

*Poetry Australia* number 32, 1970, was a special 'Preface to the Seventies' issue focussing on new poetry, compiled and edited by John Tranter, then 26. The poems included in *Journal of Poetics Research* contain only the first eight lines of each of the 54 poems included. THIS PIECE by Rodney Hall, then poetry editor of *The Australian* newspaper and co-editor with Tom Shapcott of the anthology *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* (147 pp, 1968), was commissioned for this issue of this magazine by me, John Tranter.

Paragraph 1:

WE ARE FACED WITH A SOCIETY based on expendability — disposables and plastics have taken over. Even buildings are no longer designed for permanence. In its own way this world of ephemera is quite refreshing and attractive. Anyway, whether we like it or not, that's what we're stuck with. It is not surprising, then, to find young writers regarding their work as purely temporary. Many of the poems being published in Australia at the moment do invite comparison with pre-fabricated buildings, in that the units of structure are often common property, the poem being put together from pre-formed phrases with no further view than to communicate a message right now. This technique was foreshadowed by Bruce Dawe with such lines as

2:

Beep, beep. WALK, DON'T WALK, TURN  
LEFT. NO PARKING. WAIT HERE. NO  
BREATHING EXCEPT BY ORDER. BEWARE OF  
this, watch out for that. My God (beep)

the congestion here just gets (beep)  
worse every day, now what the (beep beep) does  
that idiot think he's doing (beep beep and beep).

3:

It may also be seen in some of the witty titles he gives his poems:  
“And a Good Friday was had by All” and “Condolences of the  
Season”, also in the use of clichés as part of a poem’s structure.

4:

It is to be expected that where the objective of a poem is a  
message of the moment, the concept of a tradition is almost entirely  
ignored. Even where the writer is concerned with tradition, this is  
unlikely to be a homogeneous inheritance of forms, disciplines and  
decorum of diction – more commonly it is a random sampling of  
many traditions, most of which (we must assume) are  
misunderstood.

5:

At this point I must make it clear that I approve of this mixture  
of influences. I even approve of some of the misunderstandings,  
because these so largely arise from the imposition of the English  
language and its immense inheritance of social individuality; this is  
especially extreme when the foreign traditions reach us in  
translation. I must add to this montage of traditions, that much of  
the irreverence in recent poetry can be traced to such Pop sources

as The Goon Show, and that these are given too little critical attention.

6:

The price paid for rejecting a continuing dominant tradition is quite high. For example, two valuable benefits are fast becoming unavailable: the craft-article and security of direction. The beginner today is faced with the alternative of self-reliance or expression-paralysis, if he cannot accept that the poetry of the past supplies dependable standards. What happens is that this polyglot compound of traditions has become a storehouse of re-usable items, rather than a corpus of “given” practice upon which subtle changes may be rung – with some chance of being recognized.

7:

The uncomfortable aspect of this approach (of respecting only what is still relevant) is that the individual has nothing outside himself that, as a beginner, he can turn to. Beginners need rules and definite aims; and generally thrive on tradition. Having none, they start by turning to individual poets and imitate them, which is far less satisfactory in that a tradition is at least impersonal. In the context of our present cult of individual originality (which I approve of) other individuals make the most dangerous models, and real freedom of expression is reduced.

8:

Of course, it is no use wishing things were otherwise than they are. And one of the offshoots of this self-reliance has been the decline of assertive poetry (thank God) and the rise (thank God) of questioning poetry. The consequent reduction of homilies and pieties has been as refreshing as the accompanying rise of honest

admissions of bafflement, failure and impotence. Self-reliance has tended to favour individual humanism in place of social or religious ideologies. Its less attractive side has been a decline into self-indulgence, very common in the work of the slightly talented.

9:

As to the prospect before us — I have nothing to say concerning the future, which doesn't exist (and, if international idiocy goes on thriving, may never exist). But, as we launch into the seventies, there seem to me to be a lot of talented young writers currently bombarding editors with their manuscripts. The two who interest me most, on present showing, are Michael Dransfield and Geoff Page. I am by no means claiming that they are the best of the new generation, my choice is totally subjective. Perhaps I have a special liking for their work because both of them manage to combine this free montage of traditional sources with a real concern for craft. The poem as a beautifully made vehicle for communication is an unfashionable concept, but one which I personally hold to be valuable — the more so as it becomes increasingly anomalous in a world of mini-plastic-prefabricated-instant disposables.

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*Guest Editor: Professor Leonie Kramer*

*The next number of Poetry Australia will be an anthology of New South Wales poetry and will celebrate the Cook Bi-Centenary.*

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