

THOMAS SHAPCOTT HOLD ONTO YOUR CRYSTAL BALLS
(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. You can read the first eight lines of each of the 54 poems included. This piece by Tom Shapcott, co-editor with Rodney Hall of the anthology *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* (147 pp, 1968), was commissioned for this issue of this magazine by John Tranter. The cover of *Poetry Australia* 32 was designed and executed by John Tranter. The first two lines of type are Letraset Optima.

Paragraph 1 follows:

AN OUTRAGEOUS PROPOSAL, to predict a coming decade in poetry, even in Australian poetry, most backyard-domesticated of all breeds. Is it going to help very much to take a lazy easy flip back through the preceding decade? Come on, children, take out your pens and start underlining when teacher directs: Flip flip and here we are back just in 1960, the *Bulletin* settling down into the dust ("Killed by the Packers of Instant Culture, R.I.P.") and all the bright stars of the Stewart Era getting that slightly glazed look — as for the Aboriginalities Page versifiers, who would have believed so many little people would stop writing overnight? In 1960 the big debate was probably between Vin Buckley and Ray Mathew, and the subject: The Academic take-over. At that time, for many of us, Ray Mathew, Sydney's poetic pretty-boy, made delightful impromptu jibes at the Melburnian earnestness, but Buckley was sitting pretty

all the time. As the decade grew, so did the Universities, until by the mid-point Melbourne was firmly in front with its literate, well-read (especially in the Americans) poet-lecturers: Buckley himself, who only really became a poet in the 60s; and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, R. A. Simpson, Evan Jones, Noel Macainsh, Alexander Craig, down to the younger Andrew Taylor and Wilson Blackman. By the mid-60s, we were all pretty aware that Life Was Real, Life Was Earnest, and Diplomas might just possibly be awarded somewhere if we were Worldly enough, especially in a wry ironic way.

2:

If the university poets followed their Lowell, Wilbur, Jarrell, by decade's end the emergent generation – today's Now scene, Man, Baby – took its trip via the Underground and listened to the words of the pop songs as well as the beat and possibly the notes. Juvenile Reaction has set in; we enter the 70s with do-it-yourself magazines, poetry, and poets. Send to Greenwich Village and San Francisco for instruction kits, or else follow the directions on the local duplications.

3:

I am being summary, unkind? As unkind to the new young poets as to the now classified and pigeonholed older ones. But pass me that big glass marble, aunty, and roll on 1970 and all that goes beyond.

4:

Enter the Era of the New Romantics, all wearing Global Village Mary Jane Disposables, as displayed in *Vogue* and the Penguin Pops. Alas, this delightful phase, our first taste of liveliness in many many

years, will be hung up in its own web — the simple fact is that people, even twenty-year olds, are constantly changing, moving, developing. Those who will grow will grow beyond this, inwards, outwards, forwards or ziggy-zag Somewhere. The cynical-exploitive publicity (Underground's very own *Time* machine) will hasten the crisis: one can't be "in" if everyone is in, it's too cramped; and you can't stay "out" long enough if you are reasonably susceptible and alert to what is happening around you. So, back to uniculture. On the way, let us hope something of the freshness, experimentation, willingness to take risks, committedness, will have worked as a genuine unguent on the whole general system. I think it will. Even by the end of 1969 the amount of sheer achievement in many of the younger poets is more than a mere quirk or decoration on the existing plant. The poetry of Michael Dransfield, Richard Tipping, Vicki Viidikas, J. S. Harry, Garrie Hutchinson — all poets just in their 20s — indicate a remarkable infusion of inventiveness that will not go unnoticed by those coming on and developing in the 1970s. So the new decade begins excitingly. But it would be foolish to expect a whole decade of do-it-yourself (instant disposable art, just one step away from Housewives-Itch Art Classes) and youthful banner-raising or barricade-building. Somewhere along the line the Professional Community will re-gather its force and make a grab for the Leadership. This will be done, undoubtedly, by reaching out its great expansive arms and hugging the darling Roaring Boy to its breast as anthology after anthology churns off the presses (I speak as a guilty anthologist, [1] fortunate enough to know I am offering true riches still fresh with untarnished bloom). As the computers gobble, each twitch of freshness, affectation, derivation, deviation,

will be gauged, measured, remarked upon and plotted with scalpel-quickness.

5:

But what afterwards? And how far into the 70s are we then? The glass becomes blurred, the Oculist resorts to another glass, this time with a corkable top. Universal Tertiary Education? Universal Satellite Television? Old, old. Education will have produced its drop-out sub-culture to the point, not of glamor, but of drabness and predictability, oh yawn. Still, Art will be fought over for a few years yet by the Uptight and Dropout factions (“Give it to me, it’s mine” and “Plastic Flowers as the highest form of Art vs Art as the highest form of plastic flowers”).

6:

Beyond that, what? Who in 1960 could predict a youthful romanticism as luxurious as anything in *Angry Penguins* for 1970? By 1965, yes—in fact it was done (See Editorial to the Queensland issue of *Poetry Australia* No. 4, June, 1965); but a decade is too far, and things happen with increasing acceleration. I would think that some of the extremes of the late 1960s, such as concrete poetry in its pure form, will have gone back home to dada, though the lessons of applied concrete will remain and be properly explored. The big division between spoken and written poetry will increase and separate areas will be defined, fenced off, ringed and rocked around, and finally reunited at a later stage, with gains all round thank you very much.

7:

Of the slightly older generation, those in mid-30s / 40s, I would predict for some years yet a continual growth and excitement — even leadership — from the maturity of Bruce Beaver, Rodney Hall, David Malouf, Roger McDonald, Geoffrey Lehmann, Les A. Murray, B. A. Breen, Craig Powell (the list is not inclusive, you make your own), all of whom in their most recent work suggest plateaux, not gulleys. And, it is no doubt chastening to realise, by 1980 they will be well and truly considered the *passé* generation. So, of us all, and you, too.

8:

One thing is sure. No going back. Though possibly a little heritage-hunting will be fashionable by 1980. We live in old houses because they are fun and are liveable, comfortable. In a decade's time, we may find today's outdated literature to be something worth salvaging, savoring. Now, are you ready for a catch? I throw the ball across to you. We are all in this together — you, and I, also.

[1] «Australian Poetry Now», ed. Thomas Shapcott, Sun Books, 1970.



Photo: Tom Shapcott

Thomas Shapcott was born in Ipswich, Queensland, in 1935. He has published 15 collections of poems, as well as eight novels and over 20 libretti. Translations of his work in book form have been published in Hungary, Romania and the Republic of Macedonia. He was Director of the Literature Board of the Australia Council 1983–90; Executive Director of the National Book Council 1991–97; and the inaugural Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide 1997–2005. In 1989 he was awarded an Order of Australia for services to literature and in 2000 he won the Patrick White Award. The Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize was named in his honour. He lives in Melbourne.

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