

JAMES TULIP: THE AUSTRALIAN-AMERICAN CONNEXION  
(in *Poetry Australia* no. 32, 1970)

Introduction:

*Poetry Australia* number 32, 1970, was a special 'Preface to the Seventies' issue focussing on new poetry. This piece by James Tulip, a regular reviewer for *Poetry Australia* and a long-time Contributing Editor of the magazine, was appropriate for the general thrust of the issue.



Photo: James Tulip at the launch at the Courthouse hotel, Newtown, in 1985, of Martin Johnston's book *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap* and Laurie Duggan's *The Great Divide*. Photo by John Tranter.

Paragraph 1 follows:

TO ASK FOR SOME RELATION between Australian and American writing may be to look for something that simply doesn't exist. Granted that American poets in the past fifteen years — Ginsberg, Lowell, Berryman, Dickey, Olson and Bly — have been making the running in English verse, there is still enough of a deep-down lack

of affinity between Australian and American cultures to stop the poets here not so much from understanding the American achievement as from taking it over for their own concerns. Australians still venerate their European past in a much more intimate way than do Americans and Canadians. Americans have had the luck of being disliked by their trans-atlantic counterparts at certain times in history, and this has helped their independence. Australians, it should be remembered, have twice in fifty years gone ten thousand miles to fight in European wars to preserve a sense of identity with their past, and to win the father's blessing. It is something as religious as this which separates Australians from Americans, and there is no use expecting a transformation in feelings and values overnight.

2:

Nor do we admire all the obvious steps we are taking in America's direction. Vietnam, automobiles, skyscrapers, freeways, a democratic style — all are happening to us without our seeming to be able to say "yes" or "no" to them. We are curiously inarticulate at the critical level. And this holds true for poetry too. What body of imaginative interpretation explains to us our place in the scheme of things? Which critic or essayist has let us see ourselves free with respect to the past on which we are so sold? But nobody influences anybody in Australia, and so it is hardly surprising that the American lead in poetry has not been followed by the young and active writers now coming to the front here. They all seem to be so aggressively independent and so seriously distinct one from the others as to ignore such virtues as the overseas community of poetry has to offer.

For what it is worth, my general view of American poetry since 1945 is that somehow it has rediscovered a sense of humour for poetry. When Lowell started laughing at himself ten to fifteen years ago, the hang-up with Eliot etc. and the academic fixation on symbolism etc. disappeared like a bad dream. Poetry became in the U.S. of the 50s and 60s part of a literal world: the character of the poet became more open and palpable, mildly Falstaffian in fact; people could “place” the tone, allusion and emphasis of the new writing; and, above all, the way that American poets were being rewarded by their society, and listened to and respected by the younger generation on the campuses where they were teaching – all this made for a set of conditions and community that has helped the big poets get into orbit. Virtually at every point in this story we can see the absence of any Australian equivalent. And most lacking of all from our poetry is that sense of humour and leisure that underlies the American confidence and subtlety. When did we last laugh on reading a poem? Who is today our C.J. Dennis, our Steele Rudd, our Norman Lindsay? Where is the Pop Art we so badly need in poetry? Do we hear laughter in the universities? in the churches? in the schools? Our best intellectuals still wear Harris tweeds. Obviously, something has got to give. The hang-up is too silly to matter or last. One day we will wake up, like that character in Moliere, and find we’ve been talking “poetry” all our lives. Many of my best friends are poets, and I’m always surprised at how good their conversation is, their phone calls, their talk about poems – and at how little this sort of going-on gets into their own writing.

4:

Until recently I had never understood why Latin poetry mattered. It had always seemed to lack some vital reference, some emotional necessity; it seemed to accept life at a level less than it could be possibly worth living. But, now, people like Horace, Catullus, Martial, Juvenal and Lucretius seem to be just the right thing for what we want to see among our poets: it is a poetry that does not appeal to sanctions beyond a literal and present sense of what is good and what is bad; it is grounded in a sense of the personal authority of the poet. It is the poetry of humour, feeling, and common sense. Robert Lowell has shown us how it can be done in his “imitations”, the assumption being that we build upon the past and don’t simply pluck the future out of the air. Ben Jonson, we recall, was most original when writing paraphrases. Imitation is not the passive and subservient thing we often think, but a sign of the respect which the order that lies in art demands of us.

5:

All of which is a long way round to praising Bruce Beaver’s new book, *Letters to Live Poets* [See endnote 1] It is, I think, the most American work to have come out of Australia. It has grown carefully out of the critical concerns of the 60s, it is one of those books that just had to get itself written, and it will be a turning-point for the style of Australian poetry in the 70s. Perhaps in the comparisons with Lowell and Berryman which will inevitably be made *Letters to Live Poets* will be found less sharp, less selective and less experienced. But also it may be found to be better based in an actual and ordinary experience, allowing more subsequent moves to be made that will be to our benefit. Its kind of humane comedy

makes it seem to belong to poetry more so than to the poet, even though the obvious strength lies in Beaver's discovery of his own self as a strength in his poetry. In the past ten years Bruce Beaver has been carving out his piece of imaginative territory: it has a geographical location, moving from the Bridge down Sydney Harbour and now to Manly where Beaver is amused to accept his own kind of living as being possibly the best that Sydney has to offer. He has, to put it simply, discovered and created a world in which he belongs. Now his next step will doubtless be to show how this is a world in which other people besides himself also belong.

#### ENDNOTE

[1] *Letters to Live Poets*, South Head Press, 1969. 64 pp.; Aust. \$3.50. Overseas \$4.50.

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