

DREAMS AND REALITY—AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN TRANTER

Followed by a Bibliographic Essay

Patrick Allington

John Tranter is one of Australia's most accomplished poets. His most recent book, *Urban Myths*, collects highlights from *Parallax* (1970) to *Studio Moon* (2003), and also includes previously uncollected poems and new work. *Urban Myths* won the 2006 CJ Dennis Prize for Poetry in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. John Tranter edited the controversial anthology *The New Australian Poetry* in 1979, and is the co-editor with Philip Mead of *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (1993). He is the founding editor of the groundbreaking online poetry magazine *Jacket*, which he produces from his home in Sydney.

What made you choose the title Urban Myths?

That was suggested to me by my wife, actually. I'd written a poem called 'Five Modern Myths', which is quite a popular poem, and I think that might have been in her mind. And, also, in the book *The Floor of Heaven* I have a number of long narrative poems, each of which contain some re-worked yarns that I'd heard when I was young and believed were true and then later realised weren't true—they were urban myths. I think it's a very intriguing area of research and discovery because urban myths are not constrained by any decorum, really. They can be as outrageous or as bizarre as you like and they don't seem to have an author, either, they just grow out of their community. So they're very strange things.

And in a sense I thought the word 'urban' was fair enough because I came to an urban environment from the bush, where I grew up, and I've always preferred to live in the city. And I think poems are like dreams, and dreams are like myths, in that they have some kind of archetypal structure and energy to them, even though we mightn't really know exactly how they work but we understand they have an importance of their own. So that's partly why I called it that—and it seemed like a nice title.

I detect a theme in your poetry that imagination, guess-work, half-knowledge, contribute to our forming of how we understand ourselves and our world. In that sense, urban myths, on a small scale, are all around us and we're living them.

I think it's quite fair enough to deduce that from the book. I guess poetry, like all art at its best, can help us understand the way we live from day to day ... I've always wondered what actual function poetry had. I can write poetry so I do—but *why* would anyone do it? What value does it have to

society in the end? It seems if you analyse society and art and literature enough you come to understand that poetry is a kind of decoration at the edge of life. But I think it's actually more than that. Again, it comes back to this idea I have that the meaning of poems is a bit like the meaning of dreams. When you have an important dream it seems very intensely meaningful, although it's very hard to explain that to anyone who hasn't had the dream, and I think the meaning of poems are a bit like that. They're quite intense and meaningful and hard to explicate what the meaning is. And yet the meaning must have something to do with the way we live from day to day and what our lives mean. It's very hard to say what a human life means in the end, in the same way it is hard to explain what a poem means, and I think they operate on something like the same kind of level.

There's often a melancholic and resigned tone—but still hopefulness—in your poetry.

Well, yes, I'm aware of the fact that there are a lot of dichotomies in my writing. I'm very cynical at times in my poetry, which is partly the laconic mode that Australians use a lot but it's also there partly as a kind of balance to the sentimentality that I think I have a lot of but that I try to suppress because I think it's a bit gushy. So I'm aware of these two things also in balance in my work, or I hope they're balanced, and that's true of idealism on the one hand and negative despairing thoughts on the other. On the one hand we all have to die which is horrible but on the other hand we're all alive, which is wonderful.

That desire to stamp down on the sentimentality is quite overt at times ...

I think a lot of readers might not like it because they get carried away with an idea that is wonderful and then there's this deflating thing at the end and they might be disappointed at being treated like that, perhaps.

I think I like it for that precise reason—because the best idea is still just one idea.

Yes, that's true. I think partly that comes from my upbringing in the Australian bush where you were taught not to be too gushy about anything. Again, it's that laconic mode that Australians have a lot of. Whether that's good or bad I don't know but that's just the way it is. Because it's a particularly Australian thing I would think that most of my audience would understand it fairly easily.

*Has collecting and choosing older material to include in *Urban Myths* caused you to assess—or re-assess—your earlier work?*

No, I tend not to worry much about it. I was a different person when I wrote each of my books. You change and develop all the time. I've re-written some of the poems in *Urban Myths* to some extent. I've just improved them a little bit where I felt they hadn't been written well enough for what they were trying to do at the time—but basically I've left them more or less alone. ... In a sense that's true

and not quite true. My first book [*Parallax*] was sixty-four pages long and out of that I've included only about seven pages of poems so I've actually dropped eighty per cent of what I was doing in that book because I don't think it was very good. And I think every writer does that: as you move along you tend to try and do better and you look at your next book as being better than the last book.

I've always felt that I've been a fairly slow learner as a poet, too. Why that is I don't know but I think there's so much to learn that it takes a while to get on top of everything. I don't think my early work was terribly good. It was interesting but it wasn't very good. And, yet, it interests me that over the last year I've run into quite a few people who say how much they liked an early book of mine, *Crying In Early Infancy*, which is a book I had a lot of fun writing but I thought in the decade after I'd written it that it was probably a bit light and a bit fluffy and a bit glib and mightn't last all that long in people's minds. But readers, particularly poets who've read it, seem to like it a lot more than I expected they would. So I'm still learning about things like that.

Some of your poems make use of the Breakdown computer programme, which breaks down text and regenerates it in a new form. What's your motivation for this type of writing practice? Is it for fun? Or to challenge yourself to venture beyond your prevailing 'voice'?

Both those things, actually. I mean, I found it interesting that this computer programme could produce things that were so strange and interesting to look at as a first draft. And I like playing with machinery. So that was part of it, it was just an enjoyable thing to do. But I've been thinking about how often I do things like that in my writing and it seems to me it's something I do right from the very earliest days, I tend to take the work by another writer and de-form it in some way. And I've done that all my life, actually. I can remember in 1963 writing a version of A.D. Hope's poem, 'Australia', which for some reason I disliked very much at the time, I can't remember why because there's nothing wrong with it much as a poem, it's an interesting poem. But I took the end rhyme that he used and wrote a poem of my own using the same end words or perhaps the same rhyme as he'd used and arguing exactly the opposite of what he had argued in the poem. I don't think it's a very good poem of mine in the end but I've done that ever since, really. I've often borrowed the end words of other writer's poems and written my own poems to fill in the lines, or borrowed a rhyme scheme or borrowed a work and processed it through a computer and got another first draft. I there are two aspects of that that might help explain why I do it. One is, as you suggest, that it's a way of getting away from your own tone of voice, it's a way of getting an original first draft that you could never have imagined doing yourself in the first place and that's refreshing. I tend to want to escape from the rut of rhetoric that you get into once you've written for a fair while.

Which is interesting because young writers are forever being told 'you haven't quite found your voice.'

You haven't found your voice. But when you do find it you have to escape from it. That's what I think. When you've found your voice you've just found a mode you can use for the rest of your life and that's not very interesting.

In Urban Myths, there's a series of new poems in which you play with the work of the hoax poet, Ern Malley. Could you tell me something of your enduring interest in the Malley saga?

Yes, I wrote a poem that was a version of an Ern Malley poem which I published in *Transit* magazine in 1968, and I remember talking to Robert Adamson about Malley in those early days. Adamson and I agreed that he was one of the major Australian poets. He was very important in a way. Again, it's that deflating thing. We thought Malley was interesting because it was a bit of a joke and yet it was very good, at times. Good poetry in between the bad bits. And that's very complex. And then Malley was an interesting figure historically. He survived longer than his creators have survived in the minds of readers, at least. I'm sure James McAuley was a better poet than Malley but in some ways Malley was a better poet than McAuley because he let himself go and do things that McAuley would never allow himself to do. So that's interesting to look at from a psychological perspective. It's a kind of effect where a ventriloquist can say things through his dummy that he wouldn't dare to say himself. In other words, when you step into a role you can say things that you really mean, protected by the fact that everybody knows it's not really you, it's just your role. And in a sense that has to do with a lot of my other writing, as well. When I take the work of other writers I can do things as though I'm them and not really myself. So it's a way of displacing the reader's view of you onto another thing that's not really quite you. And, again, 'The Malley Variations' are a combination of my own interest in Ern Malley, which I've had all my life, and the interest I have in computer degeneration, reconstruction of texts. So I was able to put both those interests together at the same time and get Ern to do things to other writers that I felt like doing myself from time to time. It's a kind of cynical motivation at work in a lot of that stuff, I think, as though I'm using Ern Malley to deflate the pretensions of these other writers. That's fun.

In the context of Ern Malley, I was interested to read that you created a hoax magazine, Free Grass, in 1968. Could you tell me something of your motivation for this at the time; and of the reaction; and on how you now look back on the exercise.

It was 1968. I remember thinking that much of the poetry in the little 'underground' magazines of the time was very easy to write; that is, it was lacking in technical skill or challenge. I've always thought that what makes poetry different from prose was the form; that's mainly what matters. Perhaps I had a thought like this: 'I could write the whole contents of one of those little magazines in

an afternoon!’, and so I did, much as the Malley hoaxers did. I typed my made-up poems directly onto silk-screen stencils — it’s very difficult and messy to correct a mistake so there’s little scope for revision, and that makes it exciting — and I printed the five stencils out on a Gestetner duplicating machine the next day.

The Malley hoaxers had a destructive aim; mine (I like to hope) was more gentle and parodic. There’s some force that takes you over when you’re writing a parody, and you have to resist the desire to be cruel to your victims. James McAuley and Harold Stewart, the Malley hoaxers (and their friends like A.D. Hope), really wanted to see the cocky younger editor and poet Max Harris skewered, and their wishes came true. I think they regretted the extent of the resultant damage. I’ve seen poets infected by the Martial and Juvenal rabies germ sink their fangs into their contemporaries in the guise of re-writing the epigrams of a respected classic poet; sometimes it brings out the worst in a writer. I hope I avoided that.

And unlike the Malley hoaxers, I didn’t have any particular poet or editor in mind as a target for my parodies, rather a group of tendencies or contemporary styles of poetry. Half of Rimbaud’s work consists of pointed parodies of the poets of his time, and I think I had this in mind too. Looking back on the exercise, it seems fairly harmless. And I don’t think anyone took that much notice. At least, I don’t think my mockery converted any of the crazy hippies into rigid formalists. Something I realised a lot later is that everyone does the best they can.

Your early work was very much a challenge to the conservatism of existing Australian poetry. Your introduction to The New Australian Poetry anthology (1979) now reads to me like a quite mild and measured piece of writing.

At the time it was seen as being quite strange and energetic and people disliked it a lot. It was first actually delivered as a paper at a Macquarie University conference in 1979 called ‘The American Model.’ It was published in the magazine *New Poetry* soon after that and people who read it and disliked it were quite aggressive about it. I mean, there were things wrong with it: the scholarship was a little sloppy here and there and I think I over-explained things too much. But I was writing for a general readership in a sense. There’s a good response to that anthology by Martin Harrison. He reads the anthology as something that was very much needed at the time and he thinks it’s a good thing that it happened. So it was interesting to get that response from him. And I think when you look at that period of writing—say 1965 to 1975—it really was a period where the world of writing was divided between older writers and younger writers in a way much more so than had happened before or after that in Australia. There was a comparable wave of new poetry written in the 40s actually which is quite interesting to look at. Debut books by Judith Wright and Francis Webb and a whole lot of other writers. But with that particular wave of young writers there wasn’t a feeling that they were fighting against an old guard, as it were, they just each produced a book and everyone said,

'Isn't that nice,' and they produced another book I sometimes worry which generation of writers younger writers are going to oppose these days, because the older generation are all experimentalists and let you do whatever you like.

Would you characterise yourself as a dissenter—then and/or now? What motivates you to write poetry now?

Young people these days ... they simply cannot be aware how dull and authoritarian and repressive Australian society was in the 1950s and 1960s. In the permissive present, it's impossible to feel or understand how awful it was then. Just to wear your hair a bit long was a statement: young Michael Dransfield was badly bashed in a street in King's Cross one evening just because of his long hair, bashed by ordinary Australian blokes whose parents would have approved of what they did: of course you bashed long-hairs, hippies and poofters, they're asking for it. I knew a woman whose father was persecuted by the police for years because he read banned books and was a communist. When I returned from the UK in 1967 I found that the customs service had confiscated and destroyed two paperback books I had sent ahead with my belongings in an old trunk. They were harmless works of literature, as far as I can recall. So being a poet, smoking dope, protesting against the draft and the Vietnam War, reading intellectual books, listening to loud rude rock music, engaging in sex before marriage—all of these things, we were made to feel, were foul and anti-social criminal acts. Of course you dissented. Unless you were Les Murray, who went along with the conservative pro-war, anti-hippie, antifeminist rhetoric—it was good for his career, at that time, being James McAuley's protégé at *Quadrant*, a magazine funded by the CIA for many years. But most younger poets dissented.

So a general feeling of dissent energised much of the poetry and music and art of the late sixties. What motivates me to write poetry now, when all the noise and smoke of battle has faded away? Well, it's a mystery. John Forbes talked about his role as a poet, in an oblique way, in his great poem 'Monkey's Pride', like this: '... I'll be employed on a rowing boat / mounted in a park, / the one the avenues lead to / because society has elected me / to decorate / its falling apart / with a useless panache / & I will, / despite my vocation / to become a labour-saving device, opening / cans by remote control / in the kitchen of your heart / bottling the vegetables / you grow in your own backyard.' Somewhere between the bottling machine and the useless panache lies the task of the poet.

In some ways the greatest mystery in the history of poetry is the fact that Rimbaud gave up poetry when he was nineteen. In some ways the fact that I continue to write poetry, when I know quite well that the practice is useless, is a mystery rather like that. Not nearly as important as that, but in the same domain, and reversed.

You mentioned Les Murray. If possible, can you disconnect the politics, the history, from your assessment of him as a poet?

Oh yes, I don't think the two are at all related. His actual poetry doesn't have anything to do with politics. Occasionally, he uses his poetry to make comments that are rather peculiar and strongly political but that's just the use to which you put the instrument. The actual poetry itself doesn't have much to do with politics. It's hard to talk about Les Murray as a poet. I think he's a bit overrated as a poet in Australia and elsewhere. But I don't think that really matters, a lot of writers are overrated while they're alive and things get sorted out after they die. He doesn't seem as interested in formal aspects of poetry as I think people sometimes believe he is. I used to read all of his books when they came out and the last one I actually read through cover to cover was his *The Vernacular Republic*, which was a selected poems. It came out in 1976, and I reviewed it for the *Australian*. I said in that review that he seems to have always known what he wanted to do as a writer even from when he was a very young poet. I said it would be interesting to see where he develops from here, and I actually feel he hasn't changed much in the last thirty years. Each book of his that comes out seems to me to be a bit more of the same sort of thing, which is okay but not very interesting for a fellow writer. I think there are two kinds of poets: those who are interesting for the average reader to read and those who are interesting for other poets to read. And I don't find many poets who say, 'Les Murray's a wonderful writer, he's done this wonderful new thing I can't understand and I'm excited to read it.' Quite the opposite. Poets tend to say, 'Oh, Les has done another book.' So he's not the sort of writer I look to for interesting new ways of writing or new ways of viewing what poetry can do. I think he worked out when he was very young what poetry could do for him and that's good enough and on he went from there.

Reading Urban Myths, there's a real sense to me of your poetry being somehow 'quintessentially' Australian. What do you think of that notion?

I don't seek to appear to be 'Australian', though I grew up on a farm and can drive tractors and shoot a shotgun and all that stuff. Unlike some poets, I don't have anything invested in that kind of role-playing. When I was young I couldn't wait to grow up and leave the bush and go to the big city where people didn't gossip about you and the intersections had traffic lights. Three decades ago David Malouf told me that however internationalist I wished to be—and I was mouthing off about the need to escape parochialism at that time—I would always have an Australian tone of voice, an Australian accent, an Australian way of looking at things. He's right. I think it has something to do with the Laconic Mode, which is an oblique way of thinking and speaking that Australians naturally employ. I've been to New York twenty times, but I still call Australia home.

In contrast, Jacket is a most international of magazines.

With *Jacket*, I just try to publish the best and most varied and most interesting poetry I can find, and because *Jacket* appears (only) on the Internet and because the Internet has such a vast global reach, and because ninety-five per cent of the interesting poetry in the world is not Australian, *Jacket* reflects that and has very little Australian material, proportionately. It's not intentional; that's the way the world of poetry in English today happens to be. Of course if *Jacket* was ever afflicted with a Literature Board grant, I would be forced to change that, and make fifty per cent of the material Australian. Heaven forbid!

Jacket is coming up to ten years. Most literary magazines don't come close to making it that far.

That's right. A lot of them only last one or two issues. My magazine *Transit* only lasted two issues. Some go on too long: *Poetry Australia* and *New Poetry* both outlived their lifespan a little bit but that's okay. And *Scripsi* really lasted ten years and died too ... so it might be a good idea to close down at ten.

I think a lot of literary magazines, in print at least, start out with a particular constituency, mainly younger poets who want to present their view to the world as being different from that of older poets. I mean, if you don't have ideas that you think are completely different and important then you might as well just publish in the older magazines anyway. But if you want to start a new magazine it's because you've got a new idea or philosophy or a new movement you want to promote and those movements tend not to last more than a decade anyway. But I never really had a polemical purpose for *Jacket*. I didn't have a particular mission that I felt the magazine had to fulfil. In a sense it was just a compendium of anything I could find out there that was interesting to read and that I wanted to put in a magazine. It may last longer because of that.

The other thing about Jacket is that it's free, which is terrific—but you must be exhausted.

Yeah, I work too hard. I keep thinking I've got to stop. I don't know why I don't; I will one day. I don't get anything out of it...although I do get a lot out of it, really, it's very rewarding in all sorts of ways and it's a terrific thing to be able to do but I made it free in the early days partly because I just didn't know how to charge for it on the Net. And also I thought the Net works because things are free. And that's still the case. *Slate* magazine tried that: they were free for a few years and then they started charging. Everyone just went away and they had to make it free again. And that's Bill Gates. If he has to make it free, it has to be free. And I actually thought of having some little ads for publishers and poetry bookshops and so about four years ago I wrote to a lot of people and said, 'Would you like to put an ad in Jacket?' and I didn't ever get a single reply.

One of the really appealing things about Jacket is the range of poets covered, and the depth in which they are covered. I've noticed this particularly with the quite frequent 'in memoriam' features, such as the recent feature on the American poet Robert Creeley.

Critics have sometimes implied that it is a bit gloomy, *Jacket's* featuring so many major elder poets as they drop off the perch, one by one ... a kind of literary death-watch beetle gnawing away in the wainscoting as the grandfather clock ticks in the shadowy corner. But it is a way of taking the opportunity of the light from that brief and final supernova glow of fame, a chance to make people aware of some great writers and read about them while their name is still in the news. It is also a chance for poets and critics to say how and why the recently-dead have mattered to them.

As it happened, I had planned the Creeley feature a year or so before he died unexpectedly, as I did with Kenneth Koch, whose illness was more apparent and more threatening. Creeley died just as I was in Philadelphia preparing to give a reading. I was impressed by how many of the people in the audience were deeply affected by the loss: mainly much younger people. We turned the first half of my reading into a memorial reading for Creeley, which felt like the right thing to do.

I should say that I don't feel the impact of his writing as strongly as younger American poets seem to; I had my own very various influences over many decades and for me Creeley was a peripheral influence, though of course he was a major poet. But for younger American poets, beleaguered and out of place in their materialistic mass society, he spoke clearly—in a very American tone of voice—for a personal and complete dedication to the poetic life, and even though he spent his life mainly as an academic teacher, he was never conservative in a dull scholarly sense. He represented a radical, alternative academia, and a very personal kind of scholasticism. After being thrown out of Harvard he went on to Black Mountain College, a radical left-leaning arts-oriented college, in the 1950s, and spent much of his later life teaching at SUNY Buffalo, also—for some decades—a somewhat intellectually adventurous place.

We spoke earlier about your use of the Brekdown computer programme in some of your work. As another example of new technology being used by poets, I was interested by the Flarf material that appeared in Jacket 30 and 31. Could you comment on the Flarf movement: what it is, why it is important, and why you chose to give it space in Jacket.

Oh, I don't know how important it will turn out to be, but it does seem fun, and it aligns with a lot of my own poetic practice, experimenting with all kinds of 'unpoetic' raw material and trying to make poetry out of it. Flarf (and I'm speaking loosely here) begins with a mass of random raw material gathered from the millions of texts available from a Google search of the Internet, then mashes it up. Well, people are talking about Flarf, I thought, so let's see some of it. And the main perpetrator, Gary Sullivan, is a nice guy, and once made some complimentary remarks about a cartoon of mine ('Dan

Dactyl and the Mad Jungle Doctor’), so I felt kindly-disposed toward his project. The Flarf pieces in *Jacket* 30 and 31 were talked about in various blogs. That’s good.

Mainstream publishers and mainstream booksellers seem to be in reasonably hasty retreat from poetry. Does that make the Net an important part of the future of poetry?

Yes, the problem with poetry is distribution. You can write poems, you can print them, you can make a magazine up without too much expense but to get them into New York or London is impossibly expensive. The Internet does that for nothing for you so you get immediate world-wide free distribution with the Net. And that solves the main problem that poetry’s always had. That’s always the nexus where you fall down with a print magazine but you don’t have that problem. In fact you have the opposite on the Net: you have an audience out there that wants to find things that you have to offer and they’ll come to you rather than you having to find them. I think I mentioned in an article about the Net, in the first issue I published an interview I’d done with the British poet, Roy Fisher. And I got a letter from a fellow thanking me for publishing it. He said ‘I’m a great fan of Roy Fisher’s and it’s hard to find work on him up here at Nome, Alaska.’

There’s a simplicity and an ease of use to Jacket, whereas many websites, and online journals and magazines of various kinds, are extremely awkward to navigate.

Yes, that’s true, and I think it’s partly that it’s not hard to work out how to publish on the Net. You don’t need to go to school and learn how to do it, so people who have no skill or ability in that field of magazine production and design find themselves in the position of being able to produce a magazine. But they produce magazines that don’t work very well, whereas I’ve had a lifetime of involvement in print and publishing and typesetting and graphic design. So just by accident I happen to have all of the various skills you need to put together a well-designed magazine. And I was very aware right from the very start that *Jacket* had to be easy to use and easy to navigate. It’s difficult enough to get a handle on the Internet, to use it easily and well, that you really have to go more than half way in that direction if you’re a producer of magazines and make it easier for the readers to handle it.

In a sense, the rules of online publishing are different but they’re not that different.

They’re not that different. In fact, people in the early days of the Internet were saying, ‘Oh, it’s wonderful, we can do poems that move on the page, and that glow, and that disappear.’ Well, you can do that, and some of them are extremely interesting, particularly using Flash technology. There’s a poem called ‘the dreamlife of letters’ by Brian Kim Stefans that’s a wonderful example of letters and words that move about on the screen, it’s just beautiful to look at. But that’s distracting in a sense to me. I really see *Jacket* as an easy way of distributing a well-designed magazine and I’m not

interested about the fact that it's on the Net or it's electronic or you can do this or that with the lettering.

Some of those things—text on a screen that explodes and turns into a flower, and so on—are just a different art form anyway?

It is a different art form. It has nothing to do with what poetry does. And often they're very simplistic things that they do. I can remember seeing a page in an old *Playboy* or *Esquire* magazine in the late 50s, that consisted of some jokey little word games. And one was the word 'balloon' with the two Os lifting off from the line a bit as though they were balloons. And I thought, 'Oh, that's cute,' and you think about it for one minute and then it's gone out of your mind, you never think about it again. And often a lot of these word games don't do any more than that.

One interesting complexity with writing on the Internet is the fact that anybody can post their work. Whatever the advantages of this, creatively there can be an element of quality control absent.

Well, that's where I'm lucky again in that I've been an editor all my life. ... There used to be an advertisement, 'It's the fish that John West reject that makes John West the best.' If you let everything in, no one wants to read what you're doing, in the end. There are places on the Net where anyone can get themselves published so it's not that I'm preventing people from getting into print. If they want to get into print they can do it all themselves just as I did with *Jacket* or my own homepage. But for the sake of my readers I want them only to find interesting material in *Jacket*. A lot of writers just don't think enough about what they're writing to be able to edit themselves.

Many new poets/writers still feeling their way, finding their voice, find the idea of an editor, and the process of editing, quite mysterious. Could you explain something of what it means to be a poetry editor?

I've been an editor for so long that it's become like walking; I really can't explain how I do it. I've copy-edited a giant tome called *Grasses for Sheep in Australia*; I've edited radio plays and poetry magazines and distance educational material and books on Southeast Asian sociology. I was browsing through the weekend papers the other day when I picked up a misspelling: 'we were plum set against it' instead of 'plumb set'; 'plumb' is from the Latin for the metal lead; a plumb-line (a piece of lead on a string) is what builders use to get an accurate vertical. Perhaps it was just a typo. I revise a lot when I'm writing prose or poetry, and it's the revision that turns a moth-eaten sow's ear into the gleaming silk purses I'm known for. (Just joking.) To me, editing is just another person kindly providing an extra layer of revision. It's important that books should be edited for the press, so the typesetting and syntax and spelling are all clean, and it's probably a good idea that poems should be edited to improve them, though that hardly ever happens.

That's one kind of editing: close editing, going over a text word by word and suggesting improvements. It's perhaps the kind of thing a musician might do in a Master Class.

Then there's the work I have done compiling poetry anthologies, which is a quite different kind of editing. In that situation you can't do much to improve what's on offer. You just select the good bits and throw out the bad. And of course you want to balance the overall shape of the thing, and counter-balance one kind of poetry with another, and perhaps throw in a prose-poem for contrast, and place an angry poem next to a peaceful poem, and perhaps contrast a supportive, questioning tone of voice with a judgmental, aggressive tone of voice, and so on. Like writing poetry itself, you have to have a natural talent for it—as a potential musician needs to have been born with perfect pitch and the ability to carry a tune—and then you also need years of study and training, as a painter or a pianist or a surgeon does. But when I look at a poem it feels like an instinct at work, not a process of careful intellection: I know straight away how the poem works, and what's good and what's not so good about it. To put it another way, I once showed John Forbes a poem I'd been working on for a day or two, and was rather pleased with. He glanced at it briefly and handed it back, with the comment 'The last line's fucked, mate.' Which it was: I deleted it.

**Twists and Turns: a bibliographic essay to accompanying 'Dreams and Reality—an
Interview with John Tranter.'**

Patrick Allington

This essay is principally a bibliographical essay, designed to accompany the interview I conducted with John Tranter in late 2006, published in *Etchings 2* and posted in extended form on the Ilura Press website. One of the fascinations of listening to John Tranter—and of reading his poetry and skimming his Internet journal, *Jacket*—is the expansive range of writers he cites. This essay supplies a list of relevant references, incorporating poetry, politics, people and publishers—and including Tranter's own work. The annotated references and links that appear below follow the order in which they arise in the extended online interview—with accompanying commentary, and frequent diversions and asides.

But this essay has a secondary function. The list of sources is annotated, expanded and commented on as homage to a certain type of reading. Alberto Manguel once wrote, 'In the days when I was an avid reader of comic books, the line that thrilled me most, because it promised to reveal something that had been taking place beyond the more obvious bits of the plot, was, "Meanwhile, in another part of the forest..."—usually inked in capital letters in the top left-hand corner of the box. To me (who, like any devoted reader, wished for an infinite story) this line promised something close to that infinity: the possibility of knowing what had happened on that other fork of the road, the one not taken, the one less in evidence, the mysteries and equally important path that led to another part of the adventurous forest.' (See 'Meanwhile, in Another Part of the Forest', in *Into the looking-glass wood—essays on books, reading and the world* (Harcourt, 2000). I suggest that Manguel's reflection serves as a fine explanation of one of the joys of reading: the pleasure of following your nose. Reading often leads to more reading which leads to more reading which leads to more reading: the task grows bigger, never smaller, by the day because every writer has their own thoughts and style but also their own lifetime of reading influences. This type of reading, with its twists and turns, can be idiosyncratic, tangent-driven and diversionary. It is unsympathetic to the proposition that there is an essential canon that supplies a mandatory bedrock of knowledge and art. John Tranter, then, is a poet worth reading for the intrinsic qualities of his poems, but also for the links with other writers and thinkers he has read, absorbed and been influenced by, whether positively or negatively.

Urban Myths: 210 Poems (2006) is published in Australia by the University of Queensland Press <http://www.uqp.up.edu/au/> and in the UK & US by Salt Publishing <http://www.saltpublishing.com>. At the Salt Publishing website, check out the better than average

blog, 'Salt Office Life.' Essential news from Salt includes this: 'For some bizarre reason, Nick Nolte keeps turning up in my dreams, to ask how business is going.' There must be something about Nick Nolte. His stony-faced protest against film director and Elia Kazan's honorary Lifetime Achievement Academy Award in 1999 pops into my mind at the oddest times. In 1952 Kazan, also a theatre director and novelist, appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), in order to name eight fellow members of the Group Theater who, with Kazan, had been members of the American Communist Party in the 1930s. For a brief description of the Kazan Oscars controversy, see <http://members.aol.com/wiererdox/film1/index.htm>. Kazan explains himself, or at least explains his dilemma, in his autobiography *A Life* (Knopf, 1988), a tense but erudite recounting of a creative and controversial life. Kazan wrote in his 1952 diary, 'I know I've done something wrong. Still convinced I would have done something worse if I'd done the opposite.'

Urban Myths (and *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge*, Island Press, 1979) includes the poem, 'The Un-American Woman', which includes the line 'Are you now or have you ever been a woman?', a parody of the HUAC's standard question, 'Are you now or have you ever been a communist?' John Tranter's comments on this poem are in the notes to *Urban Myths* on his homepage: <http://johntranter.com>. This comprehensive homepage is a model of organisation and content. While some readers might recoil at the idea of notes accompanying poems, in the *Urban Myth* notes Tranter offers all manner of extra content, including bibliographic details, poems by other poets (including Arthur Rimbaud, Matthew Arnold, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Charles Baudelaire and Robert Creeley), contextual asides, background and explanation (the title 'Mary Jane' is not a marijuana reference), stories, photographs, links, and film posters. One example: *Urban Myths* opens with a poem called 'After Hölderlin', which was originally published in *Borrowed Voices* (Shoestring Press, UK, 2002). 'After Hölderlin' is a version of a poem called 'When I Was a Boy' by the German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). On his homepage, Tranter provides the original German poem and a plain English translation. Although an optional and unessential extra, Hölderlin's poem allows Tranter's variation to resonate in an entirely different way. For a reasonably accessible literary biography of Friedrich Hölderlin, see David Constantine's *Hölderlin* (Clarendon Press, 1988). Constantine, evidently a fan, writes that, 'Hölderlin's biography, his figurative life, may be better known than his poems. There have been novels, plays, and films about him; and some bold and readable literary criticism has brought him frequently into the foreground of cultural and political debate. That is all to the good—poets don't belong in museums—but better still would be more passage from such knowledge to a knowledge and love of the poems. ... in people to whom he is congenial Hölderlin inspires, almost immediately, an extraordinary allegiance.'

John Tranter's controversial edited volume *The New Australian Poetry* (Makar Press, 1979) is out of print. His co-edited collection with Phillip Mead, *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, first published in 1991, remains in print. For details see <<http://www.penguin.com.au>>.

John Tranter's poem 'Five Modern Myths' appeared in *Studio Moon* (Salt Publishing, 2003) and is collected in *Urban Myths*. *Studio Moon* contains poems from two previous Tranter books, *At The Florida* (University of Queensland Press, 1993) and *Borrowed Voices* (Shoestring Press, UK, 2002), along with twenty-eight uncollected poems. Shoestring Press is at <http://www.shoestringpress.co.uk>. On his homepage, Tranter confirms that the myths in the poem are inventions, as you might expect from a poem which begins, "The Guarani Indians of Paraguay / like to keep a small cork loose in their dishwashers, / to "introduce a spirit of lightness and unpredictability / into what is otherwise a repetitive activity, / and one tedious and unpleasant to contemplate / by the gods of the forest."

John Tranter's book *The Floor of Heaven* was first published by Angus & Robertson (HarperCollins) in 1992. The A&R edition is now out of print but Arc Publications in the UK reprinted the book in 2000 (see <http://www.arcpublications.co.uk>). The blurb states, 'A bikie's moll, a real-estate shark, a Vietnam veteran who can't forget, an Australian artist fighting drugs and despair in New York.... In four interlinked tales, these vividly-drawn characters and their friends, lovers and enemies re-invent themselves as they search for love against a background of passion, ambition, risk, betrayal and death.' It is not to be confused with the novel *The Floor of Heaven* by Australian writer James McQueen (Penguin, 1986): 'A former football star with the Victorian league, Jack Byrne (jnr.) is used to the nickname "Byrne the bastard." But only when his mother panics at the prospect of her own death does Jack learn the true circumstances of his birth. Jack is suddenly "a different kind of bastard, a special kind of bastard." And, unbeknown to him, this is not the family's only secret ...'

John Tranter's first book, *Parallax and other poems*, was published as a special edition of *Poetry Australia* (number 34, 1970, not 1968 as the book wrongly states). John Tranter's early writing, including an online version of the full text of *Parallax*, is collected on a site hosted by the University of Sydney Library (<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/tranter/index.html> or via John Tranter's homepage).

John Tranter's book *Crying in Early Infancy* (Makar Press, 1977) is out of print. However, Salt Publishing re-issued it in 2003, published together with *Red Movie* (originally 1972) and *Dazed in the Ladies Lounge* (originally 1979), as *Trio*. See <http://www.saltpublishing.com>. The whole of *Red Movie* is also available online on John Tranter's homepage. On his homepage, John Tranter also discusses his use of the Brekdown computer programme, designed by US programmer Neil J. Rubenking, in an essay called 'Mr Rubenking's "Brekdown."' This essay was initially published in *Meanjin* in 1991, and online in both *Postmodern Culture* and *Jacket*. See <http://johntranter.com/prose/brekdown.php>.

A.D. Hope's poem, 'Australia' was written in 1939. It can be read in *Collected Poems, 1930-1965* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1966). A.D. Hope (1907-2000) is one of Australia's best known poets. The AustLit website states, 'Hope's exploration of erotic themes, his affinity with eighteenth century verse and his dismissal of modern poetry hindered the appreciation of his poetry in the latter decades of the twentieth century. But, despite being considered old-fashioned by some critics and sexist by others, Hope's poetry continues to be anthologised and studied world-wide.' Hope finished his working life at the Australian National University, where he had the distinction of having an office in a building named after him. The AustLit website is self-described as, 'a non-profit collaboration between eleven Australian Universities and the National Library of Australia providing authoritative information on hundreds of thousands of creative and critical Australian literature works relating to more than 75,000 Australian authors and literary organisations.' See www.AustLit.edu.au but note that this comprehensive resource requires a subscription to be fully accessible.

Transit magazine, edited by John Tranter, existed for two issues in 1968-69. Ern Malley's poems, in fact the creation of James McAuley and Harold Stewart, were published by Max Harris in the Autumn 1944 issue of *Angry Penguins*. Issue 17 of *Jacket* (<http://jacketmagazine.com/17/index.shtml>), a special hoax issue, reproduces the poems and covers the Ern Malley saga in depth. It also includes an extract of Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair*. This fine account was first published by the University of Queensland Press in 1993 and was re-issued by Vintage (Random House) in 2003. See <http://www.randomhouse.com.au>. Michael Heyward is the publisher at Text Publishing, an Australian independent publishing success story (see <http://www.textpublishing.com.au>). Ern Malley's poetry is also represented in John Tranter & Phillip Mead, *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (Penguin).

The Australian poet and publisher Robert Adamson (b.1943) has published fifteen volumes of poetry as well as a much-lauded autobiography, *Inside Out* (Text, 2004), fishing columns and much more. His 1989 collection of poems, *The Clean Dark*, was a multiple award winner and his *The Goldfinches of Baghdad* (Flood, 2006) won the poetry section of *The Age* book of the year awards 2007. His collection, [*Mulberry Leaves: New and Selected Poems 1970-2001*](#) (published by Paper Bark Press), is in print. Douglas Barbour's thoughtful review of *Mulberry Leaves* and *Inside Out* is in *Jacket 23* (<http://jacketmagazine.com/23/index.shtml>). Robert Adamson was one of the poets featured in John Tranter's controversial 1979 volume, *The New Australian Poetry*. His website is <http://www.robertadamson.com>.

A reproduction of John Tranter's 1968 hoax magazine, *Free Grass*, can be found at the University of Sydney library's site of Tranter's early writing: <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/tranter/>.

In interviews, John Tranter has frequently cited Arthur Rimbaud as a key influence. Samples and snippets of Rimbaud's oeuvre are present in Tranter's poems (for examples, see the notes on Tranter's homepage). In *Urban Myths*, the section of new poems collectively called 'Speech to Text' use Rimbaud as their basis. Rimbaud's poems were read in French into speech recognition software trained to recognise English speech. The results were then extensively re-worked. See Tranter's full explanation at <http://johntranter.com/notes/=add/speech2.html>. Also of interest, both for its subject and for what Tranter himself says about his relationship with Rimbaud, is Tranter's review essay of Charles Nicholl's *Somebody Else—Arthur Rimbaud in Africa, 1880-91* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1997). Nicholl's book, winner of the Hawthornden Prize, is a biographical history of Rimbaud's life after he abandoned poetry. Principally a biographer, Nicholl has also written a better than average travelogue, *Borderlines—A Journey in Thailand and Burma*, a copy of which happens to sit on my bookshelf: 'We breakfasted on scrambled eggs and coffee at the Noi. She usually ate soup and rice for breakfast, she said, but now she was on holiday she would eat like the *farang*, who were always on holiday. She poked at one of the crusty white rolls that Guy was so proud of. They served rolls like that at the hotel where she worked: she called them "dog's head bread."'"

New Poetry was a periodical published by the Poetry Society of Australia from 1971 to 1981. John Tranter's 'Notes on some recent Australian Poetry' appeared in Number 1, Volume 22, 1974. *New Poetry* superseded *Poetry Magazine* (1961 - 1971), which superseded *Prism* (1954 - 1961). *New Poetry* was edited by Cheryl Adamson (poet, editor and publisher) and then by Robert Adamson (see above). Apart from publishing a wide range of Australian and international poets, the history of *New Poetry*, and the mixed critical response to it, offers insights into the debate the direction of Australian poetry in 1970s.

The Australian poet Martin Harrison (b.1949) wrote an extended, thoughtful and penetrating response to John Tranter's edited *The New Australian Poetry* in *New Poetry*, Volume 28, No 2 and No 4, both 1980 ('A Note on Modernism: for *The New Australian Poetry*').

Judith Wright (1915-2000) is one of Australia's best known writers. The AustLit website states that after her 1946 debut book of poetry, *The Moving Image*, 'A diverse range of publications followed, including novels, short stories, criticism and anthologies. But her most significant work is found in her twenty odd volumes of poetry.' Judith Wright's *Collected Poems* (HarperCollins) is in print. It includes work from 1942 to 1985, and includes her last three volumes of poetry. Her memoir, *Half a Lifetime*—i.e., the first half—is also in print (Text Publishing). It begins, 'Autobiography is not what I want to write. It forces the writer into far too much introversion or to arrogance. To begin with, in Australia, who am I? None of my genes is indigenous. How did I get here, and why? The place to find clues is not in the present, it is in the past: a shallow past, as all immigrants to Australia know,

and all of us are immigrants. The history of our arrival holds a history beyond itself. It begins in another hemisphere.’

An excellent summary of the troubled life of Australian poet Francis Webb (1925-1973) can be found at the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* website (<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au>). There, H.P. Heseltine writes, ‘Questions about the relation between the condition psychiatrists described as schizophrenia, the sources of artistic creativity, and the nature of religious experience permeated Webb’s entire output.’ Francis Webb’s books, including his *Collected Works* (Angus & Robertson, 1969), are now out of print. In *God’s Fool—the life and poetry of Francis Webb* (Angus & Robertson, 1991) Michael Griffith writes, ‘Francis Webb presents the curious anomaly of a poet who has received the highest praise internationally and from the widest range of Australian poets and critics but whose work has not been consistently in print and has been treated only in a summary way by historians of literature. ... Webb makes us see things in and around us that we might not otherwise wish to see.’ See also Robert Adamson’s *Inside Out* (Text, 2004) for a sad and funny meeting he had with Webb at the Callan Park Psychiatric Hospital.

Michael Dransfield. (1948–73) was an active member of the anti-Vietnam war movement and of Sydney’s 1960s counter-culture. He published three books of poetry in his short lifetime. Poet and novelist Rodney Hall edited Dransfield’s *Collected Poems* in 1987 (University of Queensland Press), now out of print. Patricia Dobrez’s biography, *Michael Dransfield’s Lives: a Sixties Biography* was published by Miegunyah Press (Melbourne University Press) in 1995. This is now also out of print.

Les Murray is one of Australia’s best known poets. His *Collected Poems* (Black Inc) is in print, as is his highly recommended *Fredy Neptune* (Black Inc). John Tranter’s review of Murray’s *The Vernacular Republic—Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1977) was published in the *Weekend Australian* on 29 January 1977. It is available at John Tranter’s homepage (<http://johntranter.com/reviewer/1977-murray.php>): ‘His talent is clear and abundant. He has long been recognised as a master of the art of potent rhetoric and memorable images. ... His gift is not of the type that goes through sudden changes and developments; his talents and concerns are essentially much as they were eleven years ago. Above all, the image that emerges is that of a steady poet, one who came to the craft of verse properly armed with skill and already rather set in his ways.’ Les Murray’s review essay, ‘More Wow than Flutter: Australian Poets on Record and Tape’, is reproduced in *The Peasant Mandarin: prose pieces* (UQP, 1978). In it, Murray says of Tranter, ‘I have a great liking for the man, and a total conviction of his dedication and sincerity of purpose. But the work resists me. It seems a poetry of pure diaspora, beyond any illusion of acceptance by a wide audience. It lacks any sense of being done for a community beyond the narrow circles of literary folk.’

James McAuley (1917-1976) is discussed above as one of the Ern Malley hoaxers. A poet and public intellectual, he was founding editor of *Quadrant* magazine from 1956. It later emerged that *Quadrant* received funding from the CIA. Les Murray's 'James McAuley—a personal appreciation', first at obituary, is in *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997): 'Of all the scholar-poets, he was the most incisive and provocative theorist.' There have been several biographies of McAuley, including Peter Coleman's *The heart of James McAuley: life and work of the Australian poet* (Wildcat Press, 1980). More recently, Cassandra Pybus wrote *The Devil and James McAuley* (University of Queensland Press, revised edition 2001), a creative and controversial biography that interprets McAuley's anti-communism in the context of his inner turmoil, his conversion to Catholicism, and his sexuality. In effect, the book aims to be a cultural history of anti-communism, and Pybus discusses *Quadrant's* CIA links in depth. Peter Coleman's scathing review of *The Devil and James McAuley* was published in the *Weekend Australian* in July 1999 but see the longer version published in Peter Craven's *Best Australian Essays 1999* (Bookman, 1999), along with Robert Manne's worried review ('a peculiar book, at once genuinely perceptive and strangely blind'). James McAuley's *Collected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1971, 1994) is out of print.

The poem 'Monkey's Pride,' written by Australian poet John Forbes (1950-1998), is in *The Stunned Mullet and other poems* (Hale and Iremonger, 1988) and in *Collected Poems, 1970-1998* (Brandl and Schlesinger, 2001). A selection of Forbes's work was included in John Tranter's 1979 volume, *The New Australian Poetry. Jacket 3* (<http://jacketmagazine.com/03/index.shtml>) contains a John Forbes feature, including Gig Ryan's eulogy and John Tranter's poem 'God on a Bicycle' (also included in *Urban Myths*). *Jacket 20* includes a detailed introduction to John Forbes's poetry by the Adelaide poet, Ken Bolton (see <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/bolt-forb.html> or *Thylazine* magazine). John Forbes's *Collected Poems* (2004, Brandl and Schlesinger) is in print (see <http://www.brandl.com.au/>).

David Malouf is one of Australia's most celebrated writers. In *The Making of the Australian Consciousness* (Boyer Lectures, ABC, Sydney, 1988), he argued that, 'What each of us takes on, at whatever point we enter it, is the *whole* of what happened here, since it is the whole of our history that has created what now surrounds and sustains us. We cannot disassociate ourselves from the past by saying we were not present. It is present in us. And we must resist the attractive notion that the past is, as they say, another country. It is not. It is this country before the necessities of a changing world changed it.'

Scripsi (1981 - 1994) was one of Australia's finest literary journals. The founding editors were Peter Craven and Michael Heyward, the latter mentioned earlier as the author of *The Ern Malley Affair* and publisher at Text. Neither parochial nor isolationist but still clearly Australian, *Scripsi* blended choice local and international writing. According to the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, the title

came from Pontius Pilot's statement, 'Quod scripsi, scripsi,' which translates as, 'What I have written, I have written.' John Tranter's begins his poem 'Opus Dei'—from *At the Florida*, (UQP, 1993) and collected in *Urban Myths*—with 'What I have scribbled I have scribbled, and thus / heal and bless, a spooky penicillin quelling a hubbub / of bad blood, thinks the country clergyman.' See Tranter's notes on 'Opus Dei' on his homepage.

Slate magazine can be viewed at www.slate.com. *Slate* began publishing in June 1996. Founding editor Michael Kinsley writes, 'Microsoft ... had no particular interest in starting a magazine. But, like many companies in those early days, it was flinging anything it could find at the Internet to see what might stick.' See Kinsley's article, 'My History of Slate', at <http://www.slate.com/id/2143232/>. Microsoft sold *Slate* to the Washington Post Co. in 2005. The 2007-era *Slate* is a busy, unexceptional and only occasionally interesting source of online news, comment and review.

The acclaimed US writer and academic, Robert Creeley (1926 - 2005), published more than sixty books of poetry, prose, and interviews. *Jacket 31* includes a feature on Creeley, edited by Michael Kelleher, and which includes links to Creeley material in several other *Jacket* issues. The University of California Press (<http://www.ucpress.edu/>) have recently published Creeley's *On Earth—Last Poems and an Essay* and *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975-2005*, and re-issued *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945-1975*.

The US poet, playwright and academic, Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) , was a member of the 'New York School' of poetry. His gigantic *Collected Poems* was published by Knopf (Random House) in 2005. It contains all of the poems of his ten collections. *Jacket 15* includes a Kenneth Koch feature.

Flarf poetry is featured in *Jacket 30* and *31* (don't miss Tarzan's poem called 'Tarzan Workshop'). Gary Sullivan's introduction in *Jacket 30* gives the essential background. Gary Sullivan blogs with aplomb at <http://garysullivan.blogspot.com/>. A decent commentary of Flarf is provided by Jordan Davis's 2004 essay in *Village Voice*, 'O, You Cosh-Boned Posers!' (online at <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0434.essay.56171.1.html>).

The cartoon 'Dan Dactyl and the Mad Jungle Doctor', story by John Tranter and art by Frank Robbins, is online at John Tranter's homepage: <http://johntranter.com/cartoons/dan1/01a.html>.

The collected works of UK poet Roy Fisher, *The Long and the Short of it: poems 1955-2005*, is available from Bloodaxe Books (<http://www.bloodaxebooks.com>). *Jacket 1* features John Tranter's long interview with Roy Fisher. *Jacket 1* was published in 1997 but the interview dates to 1989.

Brian Kim Stefan's poem 'the dreamlife of letters'—and a great deal more—can be found at <http://www.arras.net/>.