FIRST, IN RESPONSE TO THE OFTEN-ASKED QUESTION: Why is a British-born Canadian interviewing Australian poets? Three experiences have led to the emergence of this book of interviews. The first relates to my own early childhood. Born and raised in England, I have had a fascination from as long as I can remember with the land that was initially described to me as being “the spot on the globe at which you would arrive, if you could go through the earth and come out at exactly the opposite place, on ‘the other’ side.” Australia was our Antipodes, and vice versa.

I tried to imagine what that so-distant land – mysterious to me – would be like. My long journey had begun. Almost as soon as I was able to, I pored over atlases and began, at about eight years of age, to make my own notebook, boldly titled “Australia.” I copied out and memorized the names of rivers, towns, states; traced the country’s rounded outline; was amazed to learn that English was the “native” tongue spoken by most of its inhabitants. I was intrigued by what, to me, were exotic flora and fauna and by such images as “the desert,” “the bush,” interminable droughts, kangaroos and kookaburras, venomous insects and reptiles. All of which were, indeed, antipodean imaginative nourishment to a young girl growing up in war-time Britain in a county with an average annual rainfall of 44 inches, a landscape that was, for the most part, utterly “tamed” and where the next town, or village, from any point, was seldom more than a few miles away.

My second connection to Australia came about through literature and my own writing, some forty years later. My fascination with Australia had never entirely left me, although, during those intervening decades, no more direct concrete connection had emerged beyond my childhood notebook, the rudimentary introduction that we got in high school to what was still regarded, for the most
part, as an outpost of the former British Empire, and the tantalizing viewing of a number of Australian films.

In fact, the second connection came "out of the blue," one chilly, spring day in 1984 – in Canada, where I had been living for almost twenty years. I received a letter at my home in Toronto, from Clifton Whiten, the editor–owner–publisher of *Poetry Canada Review*. Clif was asking me to write a quarterly column on Australian poetry as part of a series of international contributions by various poets in Canada. Reluctantly, I told him that I knew little of Australia, or its literature. He assured me that this made no difference. He knew that I was a writer; there were plenty of books of Australian literature in Metro Toronto’s Reference Library and at the University of Toronto; I was a poet, ergo, what more did I need to get started? The old fascination had been re-kindled.

Moreover, through my own experience of emigration to Canada in the mid-Sixties and through working for an M.A. in English Literature at the University of Guelph, in the early Seventies, I had become fascinated by the process of emigration and settlement. My thesis, "'Strangers in a Strange Land': Literary Use of Canadian Landscape by Five Genteel Settlers," focused on responses to landscape in the letters, journals and, in some instances, books of five early English emigrants to Canada. I had already begun wondering how closely these emigrants' experiences might parallel those of some early emigrants to Australia.

My third specifically Australian connection emerged gradually. Aware that, like me, most readers of my column might not have an extensive knowledge of the country I was writing about, or of its literature, and keenly aware of the vast geographical distance separating the two countries, I looked for ways in which to make my columns as relevant and immediate as possible. And so, thanks to the year-round Reading Series at Harbourfront in Toronto, I availed myself of every possible opportunity to interview Australian poets who came to read at that venue. When, in 1988, the new editor–owner–publishers of *Poetry Canada Review* decided to discontinue the international columns, I resolved to continue on a freelance basis, interviewing Australian poets whenever, wherever, possible, as time and resources allowed. I had already joined the recently formed American Association of Australian Literary Studies and had interviewed visiting poets at the Association’s conference venues in 1987 and 1988. With some financial assistance from the Cultural Section of Australia’s Ministry of External Affairs, I had also just visited the 1988 Adelaide Festival of the Arts to cover Writers’ Week and to interview more poets in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Connections have continued over the ensuing years.

Although the interviews were not originally undertaken as a series, I gradually realized that a body of work was accreting. I also realized that there had not yet been a book of interviews that took Australian poets as its focus.

In my remarks below I am in no way attempting to categorize these poets, or their work, either definitively or temporarily. Occasionally I refer to certain aspects of a
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poet's work, for instance, as being traditional/experimental/postmodern, etc. But such "classifications" are only meant in relative terms and can, at best, only be provisional. Besides the topics and concerns that are discussed in this Introduction, many more are addressed in the interviews themselves. One viewpoint that I acknowledge strongly with regard to these interviews is their existence within the framework of post-colonial literature/s in the last decades of the twentieth century.

With regard to the interview process itself: in preparation for the interviews, I first read all, or most, of each poet's titles to date. I came freshly to each author's work, wanting to discover the "is-ness" of each poet's voice; what Thomas Shapcott, in our interview, calls each writer's "cadence." In some instances, I had already encountered work by some of these poets, usually in literary magazines/journals or anthologies.

I next did background critical reading: articles, reviews and, in some cases, previous interviews. Each of the drafts for the line of questioning was chiefly compiled in particular response to the individual writer's oeuvre, but each interview also included general questions - these latter questions varied across the range of interviews, but each general question was asked of several authors: eg early childhood experiences and their influence on the poet's development and/or the writer's work habits/the writing process/critical responses to their work. Conversely, each poet was asked some general questions.

My choice of subjects was mostly determined as opportunity arose, usually in conjunction with authors' tours, and keeping in mind my other writing projects. There were other poets whom I would also have liked to interview, but I was working within certain limits: accessibility, time available, schedules.... Most of the interviews were conducted at Harbourfront, in Toronto, during that venue's regular Tuesday night Reading Series, or during the biennial World Poetry Festivals or annual International Festival of Authors. In the US, interviews were conducted within the context of conferences of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies (AAALS: 1987 and 1988). In Australia, two of the interviews were conducted in Adelaide during Writers' Week of the 1988 Adelaide Festival of Arts; a third and fourth (see below) were conducted in Sydney.

I also interviewed several poets, as well as publishers and editors, in Melbourne and Sydney, but most of those interviews were undertaken for purposes of gathering background information for future columns, rather than for use as literary print interviews. In the case of Thomas Shapcott, I interviewed him twice, in Sydney: first, as poet - that interview is published here - and then, two days later, in his capacity as Director of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, so that I could gain wider first-hand knowledge of the context of contemporary Australian literature.

The present volume does not include any Aboriginal poets. This fact is not indicative of oversight or intentional avoidance on my part, but reflects several considerations. During these years, no Aboriginal poets came to Toronto, nor were
any present at AAALS conferences in the US. Rather, the paramount factor that influenced my decision-making with regard to interviewing Aboriginal poets was that, although I had some knowledge of some Aboriginal poets’ work, I did not feel sufficiently knowledgable in respect of their history, culture, or individual work to enable me to do full justice to them and their work.

The charting of the development of Australian women poets and their experience is of significance as, towards the end of the century and the millennium, their voices become stronger, clearer, more self-assured. With regard to the representation of women poets in this collection, their number almost directly reflects their accessibility/availability. One could, and probably should, conclude that women do not – or did not, through the late Eighties and early Nineties – get abroad as often as their male counterparts did, and that their work was not as keenly promoted as that of male poets, whether at home or abroad. Of the venues where I interviewed poets who are represented in this volume, I met one woman poet in Canada: Dobson, at Harbourfront, Toronto; one in the USA: Zwicky, at Penn State University, University Park; one in Australia: Harwood, at Adelaide. I interviewed the fourth, Judith Rodriguez, by correspondence, having met her in person while in Melbourne. I also interviewed and/or had discussions with several other women poets in Australia – in Melbourne and Sydney. Their names appear in the Acknowledgements below.

The four women poets included in this volume each comment on the subject of their gender and their work – on how, for instance, each dealt with difficulties/conflicts that they faced in creating sufficient time and space for their poetic development, given that they were care-givers to their families. Harwood is an exception in this respect. She had no such struggle, because she decided to give her full attention to raising her children until they were grown up. Nevertheless, she was avidly reading and writing during those years, as her schedule and times of solitude permitted.

With regard to women poets in general in Australia today – and, as we know, things are changing far more rapidly, even year by year now, than they did in the previous half-century – there is now a far more balanced representation than, say, twenty, or even ten years ago. Dobson, Rodriguez, Zwicky have all done editorial/anthologizing work that has contributed greatly to increased visibility for the work of women writers. The number of poetry titles by individual women has also increased, as has critical work by and on women’s poetry. Rodriguez and Zwicky have each been actively promoting publication of poetry by women, as well as writing and fostering critical work themselves. As ongoing series editor for Penguin Books Australia, Rodriguez seeks to secure the best position possible for women poets within Australian publishing. Ironically, her comment that she has had “to work hard to find the men whose writing excites me too” echoes the male poet-editors here, who cite the same reason for not including more work by women poets in their anthologies!
In the case of interviews conducted at Harbourfront, I received advance notice of Australian poets who were coming to read, so, in almost all of these instances, I had the advantage of longer time for preparation. With interviews that I conducted at conferences in the US, or while I was in Australia, there was much less time for preparation; consequently, I worked far into each night.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations: hotel press rooms, hotel rooms and – at University Park, Pennsylvania (three interviews) – a hotel dining-room which we used between meals so as not to interfere with hotel staff duties and other guests. (We sat on plump couches at the far end from the entrance to this large room.) Although we could not eliminate the piped-in wallpaper-music in this space during the interviews with Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Fay Zwicky, I did persuade a member of the hotel staff to lower the volume. Nevertheless, the music remains, an idiosyncratic – and occasionally syncopated – accompaniment on tape to those two interviews. For the interview with Philip Martin, on the following day, a hotel staff member turned the music off for the duration of the interview – a much-appreciated gesture.

At the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York (1988), where most of the rooms were locked for the weekend, I had to settle for interviewing Philip Hodgins in an old and shabby lecture room. With its lofty ceiling and high-set, shallow windows, the room’s gaunt greyness matched the leaden sky. My heart sank; this was one of the last places that I would have chosen in which to interview someone suffering from a terminal illness – let alone one who was still so young (not yet 30 years old). In contrast, in Australia, both of my interviews with Thomas Shapcott were conducted in his ample, book-lined office at the Literature Board of the Australia Council. This space was the closest that I came to seeing one of the poets in a semi-private, almost “at-home,” setting. His desktop and table surfaces were piled with a mixture of literary bureaucracy and creative administration; comfortable chairs, plants, and bric-à-brac added to the warmer, more welcoming atmosphere. Shapcott was obviously at ease in these surroundings. This is not to imply that the other poets were not at ease – simply, that each would almost certainly have been more so had the interviews taken place at home, in the familiar environment of the poet’s study, office, kitchen, or living-room.

Two of the interviews included here were conducted by correspondence, each with a poet whom I had earlier met in person: Judith Rodriguez and John Tranter. In 1988, Judith Rodriguez and I spent an evening in conversation over dinner in Melbourne, with a view to doing an interview by correspondence at a later date since I did not yet feel sufficiently familiar with her work. I first met John Tranter when I interviewed him in Toronto (another hotel dining room) in 1985. At that point he was, in fact, my first Australian interviewee and the subject of one of my earliest columns for Poetry Canada Review. I met Tranter again during my 1988 visit to Australia when he and his wife Lyn kindly entertained me to dinner and introduced me to several more writers. Unfortunately, we could not schedule an in-person interview at that time; hence the correspondence interview.
The shorter interviews published here ranged in duration from forty minutes to about an hour. With poets who had an extensive body of work, the interviews usually lasted around ninety to a hundred minutes. In the case of Peter Porter, the interview ran to about two hours, at my request. There was a very large body of poetic work to discuss, as well as the fact of his two countries (he was born in Australia but resident in England since his early twenties) and, therefore, his two "Literatures in English." Fortunately, we each had sufficient time to allow for a fuller interview. In the case of Rodriguez, the completed correspondence interview ran to some thirty (double-spaced) typescript pages; in Tranter’s case, forty-seven typescript pages.

Interviews conducted in the hotel dining-room were, of necessity, among the briefest, out of consideration for others, but also because they took place during a conference; so there were time constraints on the participants. The relative length of any given interview in this volume does not imply, on my part, any judgemental evaluation of – or greater/lesser interest in – any given poet’s work. The longest interviews were edited more than shorter ones, as there was more material from which to select.

Most of the poets interviewed were “established” ones, in terms of length of career and degree of recognition, at the time of our interview. Each of these poets had already published a considerable body of work which, in turn, had received public acclaim and, usually, a number of awards: state/national/international. Some had also received honorary degrees; and some have since been made Members of the Order of Australia. The fourteen established poets were born between 1920 and 1945. The two youngest, Philip Hodgins and Philip Salom, were born in the Fifties. Each poet has since gone on to add to his/her already considerable oeuvre or, in the case of the younger ones, to consolidate earlier promise. Unfortunately, the voices of two of these poets have since been silenced – both in 1995: Gwen Harwood and Philip Hodgins.

Serendipity has been quietly yet insistently working in my favour throughout my twelve-year journey. While there are commonalities to be discovered in these poets and their work – commonalities which I comment on below – these interviews also reveal a wide diversity of outlook, sensibility, experience, subject matter, form, style, and, yes, cadence. They range, for example, from the philosophical “games” of Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s decidedly metropolitan sonnets, through the introspective musings or evocative, haiku-like, “imagist” word-paintings of Robert Gray, to the Wittgenstein-inspired speculations of Gwen Harwood as she drifts, at ease, in her fishing dinghy off the coast of Tasmania.

Contrast these with the solidity of Les Murray’s poems, many of them firmly rooted in the earth of his native Bunyah region; or the springy yet tensile poems of Judith Rodriguez as, in word and visual image, she strives to capture simultaneously the tug of emotions, intensity and vulnerability on the page; or the urbane, cosmopolitan perceptions of Peter Porter’s erudite poetry.

There are more traditional writers, too, who nonetheless venture into new areas, forever journeying towards what Rosemary Dobson describes as “something
that eludes one [...] a doomed but urgent wish to express the inexpressible": Dobson, then; Philip Martin, with his questing forays into the long and distant reaches of the past, across time, continents, civilizations; Geoffrey Lehmann, with his probing observations of character and place, his visiting and re-visiting of the world of some of Australia's earlier settlers outside Sydney.

The more avant-garde writers, John Tranter and Philip Salom, dazzle and intrigue the reader/listener – each with his own postmodern configurations. Each creates complex, multi-layered poetry. Tranter, having figured prominently in the informally – though aptly – named "Generation of '68" poets in Australia (in the late Sixties and through the Seventies), and arguably its leading exponent (though he himself questions/refutes that in the interview, below), has continued over the decades to produce jazzy, aleatoric and prismatic work. Salom, a late-comer to poetry and literature (as were several other poets in this collection), studied first at agricultural college, moved on to genetics, then was drawn in an almost anti-thetical direction which, however, was the genesis of his bravura creations.

We also find the antiphonal voices of David Malouf, Philip Hodgins, Fay Zwicky, and Rodney Hall. Malouf, working in solitude – at times, literally thousands of miles from Australia, in Italy – patiently honing his craft, perfecting his art, emerging with volumes of luminescent poetry, or the sweeping canvases of several novels; Hall, moving adroitly between the genres of novel, poetry, documentation, and the study of ancient Aboriginal songs, or the practice of early music on authentic baroque instruments; Zwicky who, like Malouf, is keenly aware of the interconnectedness of all things, speaks – and writes – of the forces within each person, each family and, at times, each nation: Australian, Jewish, or Jewish-Australian in her own case – forces which can sunder the most primal bonds or, paradoxically, nourish them to fruition; Hodgins, who begins by charting the course of the disease which will lead him, consciously and inexorably, to an early death, but who nonetheless moves beyond that portrayal to a close examination of his rural roots and a haunting portrait of Australian agriculture's storied past, chequered present, uncertain future.

The editing process involved a series of reflective "readings." First, I listened to each tape uninterruptedly to hear it as I would have done had I been an interested observer and not the interviewer. This "active" listening and reflection gave me a better sense of the cadence of each interview. (Only when I came to write this last sentence did I realize that – yes, like a piece of fiction, or a poem – an interview, too, develops its own cadence and rhythm; its own particular idiom.) Next, I transcribed the current interview in full. I then edited it to eliminate false starts, non-sequiturs, repetitions, redundancies. I also "cleaned up" some of the unavoidable catch-phrases that each person inevitably utters in speech, but which can become too repetitive and irritating for the reader when transcribed. If I found places where I felt that something could be more suitably expressed – eg, to clarify
an ambiguity – I pencilled in suggestions for revision. Significant pauses and ellipses were also indicated.

The transcription was then sent to the poet, who in turn edited the interview further, aiming to be as faithful to the original as possible, while rendering it somewhat more polished if needed. Most of the authors made few revisions of this kind – not surprisingly, as each had responded to my questions in a highly articulate, expressive, yet conversational manner. Occasionally the transcriptions went back and forth several times but, in most instances, only one or two editing exchanges were necessary. In a few instances, there was some transposition of text – for example, when a reading showed that an answer given in one place had already been covered adequately elsewhere, or could be more suitably held over to a later section of the interview. There were also a few instances where an interviewee wanted to delete material. Portions of the printed version of the interview with Robert Gray differ in some respects from our in-person interview.

The correspondence interviews with Judith Rodriguez and John Tranter needed little revision. I had corresponded several times with both authors before compiling the questions. They, of course, were able to take ample time to consider the questions carefully and, of course, to revise their responses, if they so wished, before sending them on to me. So, in a sense, they were returned to me already edited.

While I prefer, where possible, the vibrant immediacy of a face-to-face interview, the correspondence interview has its own merits. It can call forth a deliberate, ruminative quality in some responses, a quality that comes from examining a question from several angles and having plenty of time in which to do so. Written responses can also be more discursive in their lines of argument – in this volume, each of the correspondence subjects developed their material in such a manner at times. The written interview also allows the respondent to shape the material, to make of it a crafted thing – a highly appropriate response when we consider that “poet” derives from the Greek word for “maker.” Certainly, it is not always easy to convey excitement, wit, self-mockery, even humour, on the page in what is, after all, an artificial form of conversation. Yet both Rodriguez and Tranter have created delightful, intriguing and, at times, surprisingly playful weavings of language and art to entice the reader further into this two-dimensional process.

The main thrust of the interviews gathered here is to discover the individual writer’s expression through the medium of poetry, and each writer’s view of that expression. At the same time, I also wanted to learn more about creative impulses and sources, about craft, significant influences, frustrations, struggles, satisfactions, joys, as well as the curve/spiral of development. More quotidian matters are also discussed in some interviews: considerations such as work habits/patterns, daily working–writing environment and, in some instances, even the equipment used. In the latter respect, for instance, Malouf’s and Tranter’s responses offer greatly contrasting pictures. It should also be noted that, at the time of the interviews, a
number of these poets held teaching positions; one, Lehmann – a partner in a leading international accounting firm – is also co-author of *Taxation Law Australia*; the others were working mainly as writers, but most were supplementing their income with occasional teaching, reviewing and/or journalism.

At the time each of these interviews was conducted, the subjects had written mainly in the genre of poetry. In some instances, the authors were also writing, or had begun to write, novels, short fiction, and/or nonfiction. While we discussed their poetry for the most part, we also, at times, made reference to their writing in other genres. In addition to this other creative work in fiction and nonfiction, we discussed their critical/anthologizing/editorial work. In the case of David Malouf, the interview covered poetry, fiction and non-fiction in some detail but, since at the time of the interview almost all of his recent work was fiction, the main focus of our discussion was on that genre, especially his novels.

Hitches/glitches? Yes, some. After one of the earlier interviews, I ran the tape and discovered that I had not re-depressed the “Record” button after checking at the top of the interview that everything was recording satisfactorily. Now all that remained on tape were our introductory remarks and our first question and answer! Fortunately, we had done the interview early in a Festival week and so, since the poet was staying in Toronto for the remainder of the Festival, we booked another session. To our joint relief, the poet said that she felt better with the second interview, as she was more at ease by then. Several years later, at the appointed hour for another interview, I sat alone in the press room, question-sheets, tape-recorder and books at hand – and had to come to terms with the fact that the interviewee was not going to show up. Fortunately, this interview also took place during a Festival week; with a good-humoured chuckle or two, we re-scheduled. The poet had forgotten our interview after becoming engrossed in the art at a Toronto gallery – just about the best of reasons!

How can we convey the nature, shape, and purpose of an interview? Certainly the form is only one of many patterns of two-way interchange. Does the interview yield a “portrait” of the subject? If so, can one see it as one in an ongoing series of sketches? With its face-to-face, in-person directness (except in correspondence format), it is certainly more than a “profile.” To what extent can an interview be considered as belonging to the genres of biography?/autobiography? In some ways, it has shades of the epistolary/diary/journal genres; here, of course, the correspondence format comes into its own. But where do we draw the lines between public and private, in both question and response? Who is most responsible for this demarcation: the interviewer, or the interviewee? And what about the blurring of the boundaries between the two realms? These are some of the questions for the interviewer to consider and, later, for others to ponder while
reading the interviews. At the end of this Introduction, I offer my own metaphor for the interview.

I prefaced each interview by saying to the poet that if I brought up a subject that he/she did not wish to pursue or respond to, then we would abandon that topic or line of enquiry. I also made it clear to each poet that, when I sent the interview in written form, he/she was free to delete any material. These assurances, I felt, enabled the subjects to be as frank as they were comfortable with being. There were almost no hesitations - apart from occasional pauses for thought - during the interviews, and there was no evasion of any question/issue.

To the interviews themselves: there are accounts here of how some of the writers became poets; interesting parallels, too. In each case where a specific incident, or person was the catalyst, the memory is still vividly recalled (Gray, Lehmann, Murray, Rodriguez, Shapcott, Tranter). For some of the poets, the catalyst was an inspiring English teacher at school: Lehmann, Murray, Tranter. For Shapcott, it was an ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] radio programme for children, The Argonauts: "a chatty programme [...] with talks on music, painting and particularly on writing; also serials and fun sessions" - with the added incentive of prizes; Shapcott notes: "I got to the very top in that system. The first poem I ever wrote was in 1945; fortunately, it does not survive!" Zwicky has a similar recollection: "I wrote a terrible poem when I was a 10 year-old, a narrative about finding a gold mine [composed in] clod-hopping quatrains...."

A high-school teacher introduced Tranter to nineteenth-century poet Matthew Arnold's long narrative poem "Sohrab and Rustum." Tranter encapsulates: "The narrative is tragic, the tone noble yet doubting and self-aware, and the ending is almost pure Cinemascope. He invented the long rising crane shot before they'd invented the movies!" Despite these auspicious beginnings, Tranter claims, like Shapcott and Zwicky, that his early poems were "awful."

For Lehmann, there was a variation on the English-teacher theme: a school detention! Required to write out "something to do with Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'," he was drawn into the spell of the poem's narrative, and so embarked on the road to a lifelong love of poetry. An English teacher later introduced him to modern poets: a revelation. For some poets, the presence of particularly supportive mentors encouraged them: Hall and Rodriguez each found them within the lively, cultivated circle of John and Kate Manifold.

There is great diversity of literary influences within this group of poets. But one circumstance that nearly all had in common was: a lack of introduction to Australian writers in school - an absence that has only recently begun to be addressed in the education system, and a characteristic that Australia shares with most other post-colonial countries. Several poets cited Penguin anthologies of modern/contemporary, British/European/American poetry, published in the Sixties and Seventies, as being of particular inspiration to them in their late teens/twenties/early thirties. For Shapcott, it was Geoffrey Moore's 1954 anthology, The Penguin
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Book of Modern American Verse, that appealed most significantly. For Harwood, likewise, American and European poets in Penguin anthologies figured prominently: James Dickey, Robert Penn Warren, Eugenio Montale, Vasko Popa [. . .]. Harwood: "I trembled with excitement when a new [anthology] volume came out; I'd keep it to read when the children were asleep, then sit with it. Utter bliss!"


For Gray, influences have come from more esoteric sources: Zen Buddhism, Chinese, Japanese, and Zen poetry, Oriental philosophies; also the German philosopher Martin Heidegger; and, particularly, the work of Australian philosopher John Anderson — "described as the best mind Australia has ever harboured," and in whose ideas Gray traces an affinity with Buddhism. Indeed, Gray claims that Zen psychology "is only acceptable to me as an addition to a philosophy like Anderson's — a rational, naturalistic, critical philosophy." There was also the crucial influence of Gray's parents; at home, "books [...] were referred to in a way that made them seem, really, the highest thing." For Salom, South American writers Borges and García Márquez were key influences. Hall's, influences included William Cowper's eighteenth-century narrative poem, "John Gilpin," Shakespeare, Wilfred Owen (one of the English poets of the First World War) and, singularly, Hymns Ancient and Modern; but perhaps, initially, more than any of these: the Manifolds' circle and, beyond that, the English poet Robert Graves, from whom Hall once got an unsolicited letter about his work — "like [getting] a letter from God!"

Hodgins cites contemporary Australian poets as his chief influence: Robert Gray, Les Murray, Peter Porter — a sure sign of recent changing perspectives within the Australian school system. Rodriguez cites the Manifolds' circle, including the Aboriginal poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal). Rodriguez's influences are less a vertical lineage of literary descent than a lateral, immediate and mutu-ally-inspiring community of other creative Australian women — "connections," both writers and artists: Barbara Giles, Emily Hope, Jennifer Rankin (d. 1979). For Rodriguez and Shapcott, there is the added resonance of their being two writers who are married to each other.

Several interviewees talked of influences from, or complementary interests in, the arts outside their own field. Visual art and music were particularly inspirational, nourishing experiences for a significant number of the poets. Several were initially drawn to visual art as well as to poetry as a possible medium of expression. Gray and Murray finally turned to writing for similar — including practical — reasons. Gray comments: "because of all that stuff that painters have to have [...] It's all too messy"; Murray: "I had no talent for drawing, or painting.
And didn’t even like getting paint on my fingers!” Hall originally wanted to be a painter — a composer, too!

Dobson found, and finds, inspiration in visual art across the centuries; she has frequently written poems on, or about, particular paintings. Martin is often energized by contact with people from other nations. Gray and Porter each gain creative stimulus from viewing visual art and Porter has had fruitful creative collaborations of word and visual image with the noted Australian artist Arthur Boyd. Rodriguez, a practising artist herself in the media of linocuts, prints and woodcuts, has used some of her art to illustrate volumes of her poetry. Salom, likewise, has illustrated some of his own poetry.

Gray sees his love of paintings as his “greatest passion outside books.” Wallace-Crabbe finds release at the end of each writing/working day by drawing, gradually building up a “[visual] vocabulary.” Tranter, good at both drawing and painting at school, later became fascinated with photography and cinema: “In our age, the film-makers are what the novelists were to the Victorian age.” These interests contribute to the visual imagery of his written work. Besides Hall, several other poets have found abiding interest in music: Porter, Harwood, Malouf, and Shapcott; the last three have also worked as librettists. Zwicky — a child prodigy pianist, in contrast — deliberately turned away from music towards literature for compelling personal reasons, on which she expounds in the interview. For Lehmann, “trying to locate a career which would provide stimulation as well as ‘earning a crust,’” led him to enter the legal profession, rather than working as a full-time poet.

The now-legendary literary politics of Australian poetry from the late Sixties through to 1980 are set in broader focus and context here, as various witnesses to those times look back on that effervescent and unprecedented period. From Gray, Murray, Rodriguez, Shapcott and Tranter we learn of that ferment first-hand and from varying perspectives. The course of anthology publication also charts something of the seismic tremors, shock waves and reverberations of that decade. The chief proponents have each put his/her/their stamp(s) on particular volumes. (The anthologies are listed in the headnotes to interviews, below.) A reading of those anthologies yields a comprehensive introduction: we find voices from varying literary factions/groupings and from a greater — though still (in the late Eighties) small — number of women, with the exception of Dobson’s and Zwicky’s work in this field, which focused solely on women poets. Now, in the Nineties, Rodriguez continues further valuable work in that area as Poetry Editor for Penguin Australia.

A recurring theme in some of these interviews is the power of poetry, the power of language. Each poet delights in the myriad incarnations of language. Each has an
indisputable gift for realizing on the page what Malouf - in the character of Digger in *The Great World* - describes as being, perhaps, the essence of poetry:

He was speaking of poetry itself, of the hidden part it played in their lives. . . . How it spoke up. . . for what is deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and unrepeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence [. . .] The major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the very beginning. To find words for that [. . .] Giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own.

Digger also comes to the awareness that poetry captures "what it is that cannot be held on to but nonetheless is not lost." Porter echoes these sentiments: "the poet's purpose is to say well what everybody knows [. . .] Newness, in fact, comes out of the individual struggle with oldness, the unswervable response to what already exists."

So how do different poets regard and use words, language, poetry? Most of these poets speak of poetry as a compressed force; each of them handles it respectfully. Shapcott views words in poetry as "individual time-bombs" and poetry's effect as potentially "subversive." Harwood comments on language's occasional recalctrance: "Sometimes you wrestle [with language]: it's like being in the ring with Bulldog Brewer! You don't know who's going to win, you or the language! I'm bruised; I'm bruised."

Wallace-Crabbe, who often employs the playful images of Trickster, Joker, Puck - "acts of verbal magic" - also notes: "in poetry it may be only by tricks and games of language that you can cheat Truth into disclosing herself." Zwicky believes that poetry has "to come from a pure heart; nobody has a pure heart, but you might aim for it" - another seeker after truth.

Gray aims for vividness, "simplicity, purity, clarity of outline." He adds: "Maybe the best art is romanitic in subject, classical in ideal." For him, poetry "is language that wants to go beyond, say more than, its words. It can't be fully translated out of the silence after itself, where, resonates." Solom sees poems as:

hard objects that are smooth: sort of "soul-objects" - a terrible word! Poems have a definition on the page but operate like the flow of water, of ether, like movements of intuition, connections of association and thought

He explains how these descriptions resemble deconstruction, and then observes: "language is such a delight and a despair."

Hodgins, working with only too painful first-hand knowledge, writes: "'WORDS CAN KILL.'" Indeed, how else are terminal diagnoses conveyed? But words also communicate possibilities of resurrection, continuity. His words outlast his physical presence, on the page and on tape; he still has readers, listeners. His widow and young daughters still remember and talk of him.

From Tranter, an encompassing view:
the best poetry deals with another order of experience altogether. From nursery rhymes to the funeral service, from childhood to the grave, people want to know something of the meaning of life, and specifically the meaning of their own actual life [...] The answer, like the question, is a mystery. Poetry has its being in that area, in the realm of rhyme, of doubles, of puns, metaphor, shape-changing and dreams. I think it was Mallarmé who said that a poet should always leave a little mystery in his work. That’s what readers come to poetry for.

And for Murray: “The fact that poetry was about essences and about presence came as a revelation to me [...] You just get to the essence; the place where the stones and the mountains are as important as the people.’ An ideal calling for a solitary, only child from the bush.”

In the Murray and Porter interviews we get a chance to eavesdrop, as it were, on a follow-up conversation – about a decade after the initial event – to their late-Seventies disputation on the “Athenian-Boeotian” strands in Australian poetry, though the two sides are of necessity heard separately, in interview format, here. Porter and Murray were the chief exponents of the issues: Porter, the so-called “Athenian”: the cosmopolitan, urbane maker of a poetry of the city, of and for the citizenry; a poetry of the mind, of civilizations, of high art; Murray: the earthy Boeotian, the country-born-and-bred craftsman of vernacular diction, rhythms, subject matter; the lower-case republican representative of the people of the small town, the village and the farm (it should be noted that he does not make this claim for himself); one who retains “a remnant of priestly dignity.” Both participants point out, however, that the boundary lines between the camps never were strictly adhered to. Murray believes that critics fanned the flames: “because they’ve been schooled, in this world of politics, to think that all things can and must be couched in scorn and hatred and opposition.” In fact, while acknowledging their differing positions, Murray and Porter also express admiration here for each other’s work. Each is well aware of the value of the other’s vision, and of the contribution that each writer’s voice makes to the fabric of the country’s literature. Murray: “I wouldn’t silence anyone; I’d just let a thousand flowers bloom and see what people like”; Porter: “The fight between town and country tends to be sporadic. None of the troops can be relied upon to wear the colours they’re supposed to wear.”

The possibility of a synthesis of the two strands exists, as does the possibility of further divergences, to explore and give voice to still more new, and contrasting, realities.

One aspect that surprised and delighted me in many of the interviews was the poet’s impromptu, oral “storytelling” capacities. Even though delivered extempore, these stories – many relating incidents from childhood – are fluent narratives, rich in detail, highly evocative in mood, tone, setting. The listener/reader is transported to another world. To give only a few examples: Gray’s vivid,
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sometimes poignant, anecdotes of his immediate family's often tortuous history; Zwicky, at age four: sitting through lengthy classical concerts ("What I remember is the smell of the ladies' coats – black Persian lamb in those days – and the bouquet of violets, a little dome on their lapel. I'd be sniffing"); the "golden radiance" of Harwood's growing years, spent in the strength of "a long chain of independent women" in her family; Lehmann's portrait of his English teacher, Pat Eldershaw, metamorphoses from "A rather fat, red-faced man with small, brown, pig's eyes, which stared out at people in a baleful way," and with a "schoolmasterly fierceness and this strong nasal twang," into "a kind, gentle person" whose interest in modern poetry and literature inspired Lehmann's own nascent enthusiasm.

Although Rodriguez and Tranter also deliver stories, theirs, of course, were executed in the more reflective mode and leisureed pace of written form. Nevertheless, Rodriguez's evocation of "hot muggy summers" in sub-tropical Brisbane works strong magic on the temperate-zone reader: "It steams all morning, and then comes down in torrents in the afternoons, sometimes with spectacular storms [...] There are secret places down by water. Where things grow. And rain on leaves and roofs; so you're in the middle of this great wet beating atmosphere, electric with life." For Tranter, an accident at about age four remains a vivid experience even into middle age: "I must have had a tough skull, because I was on my feet in an instant, wide awake, blood pouring down my face from the lacerations on my scalp, watching in horror as the glow of the red tail-light [of his parents' car] disappeared around a bend in the road – when it's dark in the bush, it's very dark."

Together, the interviews in this volume throw light on Australian literature as a significant entity of post-colonial literature, one voice among the many that have gradually become stronger in post-colonial societies during the last decades of this century. Difference, distinctiveness: upon what bases do we distinguish one group of people – post-colonial, or otherwise – from another? In the beginning, there is always a common territory, a common language and, gradually, a common culture. Over time, there may be a dispersion of some members of the group, or even several dispersions. But always, if a people is to withstand such losses from within and erosion from without, it must remain firmly rooted in its native soil. It will survive only if its culture, likewise, continues to be nourished.

The bases for comparison between different groups of peoples also include the concept of the "Other." Individual, society and culture – each develops partly in relation to other contiguous, impinging entities, whether that Other is of human, animal, elemental, spiritual, or psychological dimensions.
Northrop Frye, writing of Canadians' sense of cultural identity and self-awareness, says: "Canadian sensibility […] is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" This was the conundrum for white Canadian settlers of the nineteenth century and, indeed, for many white settlers in Canada and in other parts of the world during the first half of the twentieth century. Several of the poets in the present volume echo Frye's strain in relation to Australian immigrant experience. Early settlers had to come to terms with the harsh reality of their new environment (see Hall, Murray, Shapcott, Wallace-Crabbe, Zwicky on this subject). The primal encounter of settlers with the "new land" was a critical challenge, one with which successive generations of newcomers grappled, and whereby they "wrote" – with their lives – their own history. As Murray puts it:

When white people first went to Australia, they found that the first thing that could give them any kind of feeling of distinctiveness was the bush, because it was so utterly different from Europe and they slowly, slowly, by a lot of mistakes, came to terms with it. And that struggle was their identity.

Wallace-Crabbe proffers reasons for varying responses to emigration in the lives of early settlers – and in literature – in Australia, the US, and Canada. Australia and Canada each offered harsh environments, where settlers struggled to establish themselves. In Australia, they battled heat, drought, fire, flood; in Canada: sub-zero temperatures, dense wilderness and, yes, fire and, occasionally, flood. Wallace-Crabbe notes that in America, by contrast, many early settlers arrived with purpose and religious conviction and found a land of relative natural bounty. He notes: "[They were] full of wonder. God had made a new start possible [in America]. The apple was, perhaps, back on the tree."

Zwicky has a different view of early settlers in America from Wallace-Crabbe's, but she is talking of the American Midwest, which settlers reached only some considerable time after the first emigrants arrived on the paradisal eastern seaboard. Zwicky's own experiences in the Midwest underscore her comments. It is Illinois that gives her perspective on her homeland from abroad. She sees similar and contrasting aspects between that region and the Australian outback. In the Midwest: the vast space, the snow; perilous, sub-freezing temperatures; in the outback: the desert, the seemingly interminable space. She recalls how, in Western Australia,

the horizon is limitless. You look at a Western Australian's eyes, they just go out, out…these pale-blue eyes stare out into…there's no end to it. Somehow the same bleak limitlessness was in Illinois, too.

While living temporarily in the American Midwest, Zwicky comes to appreciate the rigours of early settler life for outback women in Australia:

I suddenly realized that women who lived there [in Midwest America], in their stoical, modest, undemanding way, were a kind of equivalent of [those at] home [in Australia…] except that in the Northern Hemisphere they had snow; we had desert, instead, but the same character was bred there.
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Zwicky speaks also of the regional differences within any country: for her, specifically, those between Melbourne and Western Australia. Again, she acknowledges the intrinsic character of both “spaces.”

Dislocation/displacement can still engender the struggle for survival/identity, but nowadays, more often than not, the contention is of emotional rather than physical dimensions. For Shapcott, travel abroad was “crucial” to gaining perspective on “home” and self. “[Travel] changed my life, made me see what it was to be Australian.” To look at oneself and one’s culture from the outside, reflected back from the mirroring perspective of the Other, is a way of gaining a stronger, clearer self-identity – whether for individual or nation: This is what we are not. But also – sometimes surprisingly: This is how we two (or more) individuals/groups are similar. Gray and Tranter each gained significant and enriching awareness of other cultures and values while still young, during extended travels and residences in East Asia.

Harwood, who migrated from one state to another but did not go abroad, says: “you can disperse yourself widely […] or you can stay in one place and burn quietly.” For her, poetry was the journey, the fascinating voyage bearing her “from one mind to another.” Shapcott allows that “[Travel’s] not necessary if your mind can make that emotional leap.” But he finds that “being there [abroad] throws what’s not expected – not in the texts – at you: diversity of human beings, the ways different cultures build up their own bigotries as well as their individualities.” A good argument, if one were needed, for studying comparative literature, for turning to literature and the other arts for the same purpose: portrayals of other realities, other ways of being in, and “seeing”/interpreting the world. Judith Rodriguez gives the fullest expression to what we can find when we turn our heads in the direction of another race/people/culture:

Lecturing in Jamaica, travelling in Mexico, and later living for a year with my husband’s family in Colombia made me feel the narrowness of, not just school learning about British-fostered nations, but the daily news coverage. What histories in Hispanic America, starting with Bernal Díaz and Garcilaso de la Vega Inca – and what literatures, and what different scenarios and sensibilities! – like ours, indigenous and migrant; like ours, post-colonial and New World. A revelation.

But she can still appreciate more subtle differences: “the finer shades of, say, living four months in Clinton, Ontario, or visiting cousins in Princeton.”

Margaret Atwood, in Survival, claims that it is from a cultural recording of both individual and collective “lives” that a national identity and cultural history are formed and preserved:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. . . . For the members of a country or a culture, shared
knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive.4

And so the poets of a country respond: to the land, to its inhabitants – human and non-human – and to their interrelatedness with both. To the specifics of their “here”: both physical and psychological.

How do the poets in this volume view their land, “Australia”? Antagonist, or nurturer? Spanish peoples have a useful saying: “That depends on the colour of the lens you’re gazing through.” In the words of these poets, we find multiple refracting lenses, reflecting individual realities. Salom, speaking of himself as a young child, describes the bush as “my first world, my first friend”; compare Harwood: “Along the dusty street lived families who were the world.” And Salom, later: “The bush became both a symbol of aloneness and connection. Sitting around […] makes one meditative, introspective. It puts down a strong layer of mental activity that is there to stay.” For Murray, the bush is a life-long friend, a place to which he returns for sustenance, whether in the mind – and, therefore, also in his poetry – or in his actual return to live there in the mid-Eighties. Tranter recollects how, at age 5, he would be “sitting on the wide veranda that ran around three sides of the house, looking out at three million gum trees, and thinking about how vast and empty the bush was.”5

It is of interest to note that several of these poets either grew up on a farm or had/have close connections to the land: Gray, Hall, Harwood, Hodgins, Lehmann, Murray, Salom, Tranter. Gray speaks of his basic loyalty as always being “to the natural world.” Even Wallace–Crabbe – raised a city boy – feels a magnetic pull towards the bush; Lehmann likewise: “I was very much a city boy, but I did have a mental link with the land. A lot of people don’t have that link now.”

But the present-day “landscapes” of most of these interviewees are multifaceted subjects, comprised mainly of internal/psychological terrains. The poet is just as likely to twirl any number of emotional prisms as to convey a literal topography. In Porter’s work, we see the cosmopolitan/metropolitan/urban city-scape, to which he occasionally adds shades of the English countryside, or hues of estuarine Australia. Salom’s canvases shimmer, conjure, reveal, conceal. Tranter’s often filmic “sets” bewilder, clarify, haunt the reader’s psyche, draw it into the vortex, then tantalizingly spin it out to the rim – of mystery. Wallace–Crabbe carefully, knowingly, crafts mind-games, mindscapes, engaging the reader throughout the teasing process of “psychomachia.”

That Australia has become a “nation” is no longer in question; but, here, several poets caution against the darker side of nationalism – the shadow-side which, they feel, is often related to “naming.” Hall:

The international is […] the way, literally, for the human race to survive […] I’m a Nationalist. But I’m against tub-thumping Nationalism that says: ‘We are unique. We have the following characteristics.’ Naming things in order to possess them…that’s dangerous.

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In contrast, he describes the Aboriginal "naming" of the land as

an exercise of what we tend to call magic, to put a name to the land, like a Creed. They say: 'In the Place of the Tree-Limbs-Rubbing Together' [...] It [the river] was not named in the sense that we name things, tying them down. [...] [Aboriginal] naming is specific, physical.

Wallace-Crabbe is also in favour of organic process: "For me it is much more exciting to be working where the cultural furniture hasn't all been disposed around the room already. You've just got to sit by the fire and burn the twigs and start from there" – an apt metaphor in a country that is still only three or four generations removed from the original settlers who worked the land, and a country in which the very earliest inhabitants lived peacefully and respectfully with the land, paying heed to it as it yielded some of its secrets, slowly, over aeons.

Shapcott states: "It's important for Australian writers to be seen, counted. That's what's made this last twenty-five years very exciting. Naming our landscape, our culture, is still the most important task." But, like Hall and Wallace-Crabbe, he is chary of an imposed agenda: "I unconsciously set about that [naming] in my poems, [not] as set formula, but out of inner excitement, discovery, deeply-felt need."

Murray speaks of literary critics who have tried to influence the direction of Australian culture: "this strong, insistent demand – which came in advance of literature; a demand made by critics – that we should now be urban and sophisticated and so on." The direction was away from the older tradition, in favour of "another kind of culture [...] somewhat of an international copycat culture." In response, Murray explains, "I couldn't see the need myself. I thought that these things will arise organically, rather than being ordered up like a whole new set of furniture." Indeed, each poet here, voicing horror at reckless, fanatical expressions of nationalism, recognizes the benefits of a deeper, more reverend, "naming" – of physical and inner space – a naming that emerges by natural process.

Zwicky is appalled by the extreme effects of nationalism: "Nationalism has been the curse of the twentieth century. I'm disappointed that Australia's having a resurgence of that." She believes that direct expression of Nationalism – naming – has already been "done" sufficiently by earlier generations of poets: "when I was a child [they were] always talking in those sorts of paperbark-and-pepperina terms." She can see no justification for a second wave of blatant nationalism. Any number of examples in the world today – from Ireland and Afghanistan to Rwanda and Bosnia – attest to the validity of her warning against the dangers of nationalist extremism.

In considering the relative tensions, interplay, communications, between one society and another and how these affect their interrelations, cultural or otherwise, Porter offers a caveat, one which readers in the field of comparative literature will appreciate:

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Every society has a powerful sense of its culture. I am always suspicious of anthropology, which attempts to explain the acculturation of the peoples it observes. [Those who are being observed] wear these manners so un-self-consciously that any observation introduces the element of self-consciousness, which nullifies the explanation.

Certainly one way to foster easier relations between two formerly unequal groups is for the erstwhile dominant party to refrain from viewing the other culture as an alien exotic, a specimen to be “studied” by others, at will, to satisfy gratuitous curiosity. Present post-colonial conditions – including heightened awareness of the implications of both positive and negative relations – offer a hitherto, unprecedented opportunity for nurturing cross-cultural understanding. The context and climate within which the relatively new disciplines of cross-cultural studies are situated also provide much-needed stimulus for further investigation and creative exploration. University programmes, conferences, and publications which have post-colonial disciplines and issues as their focus afford useful contexts for debate and fruitful interchange of ideas. There is a growing urge towards sharing our respective cultures – but with neither costive possessiveness of our own culture, nor the wish, need, or intent to subjugate another people or their culture.

A number of the poets in this volume address particular issues and provide assessments of comparative literatures and studies. Porter’s views, for example, on Australian literature – a literature of and in which he is both observer and participant, as he is also of British literature. He comments, for instance, on “provincialism” in Australia literature, which he now sees being gradually replaced by home-grown developments which, in turn, can be integrated with Australia’s “deep-based inheritance of British literature.” He believes that the mingling of these two elements is producing a literary “compost of past writing and achievement which are specifically Australian and not from Europe.” From the interweaving of such indigenous development with British cultural heritage, Porter confidently predicts, “a flowering will come, is coming.”

About British poetry in the late-twentieth century, Porter is not so sanguine. He comments astutely – again, he is situated as both observer and participant. He gives a summary of current “schools”: Oxbridge poets, such as Craig Raine and followers; “Provincial Dandyism” in the work of James Fenton, Peter Reading et al.; some of the younger “provincials” – Sean O’Brien, Peter Didsbury, for example – who, he carefully points out, “are anything but ‘cloth cap’ provincial in tone or outlook. But, while admitting that he finds British poetry, in general, interesting, Porter also speaks at times with rueful tone, believing that, in matters poetical, the British have been “somewhat disheartened” since T.S. Eliot’s departure from the scene. Australian poetry, by contrast, during the same era, has become energized.

Porter observes that British poetry has experienced neither the radical shifts nor the often turbulent, but revitalizing, experimentalist expressions of the latter half of the century. The most vigorous revitalizations have occurred, rather, in former British colonies such as Australia, Canada, and the US. Indeed, Porter goes so far as to say that he sees Auden (d. 1973) as “the last Englishman to assume, without any posturing, that what he did, and the culture that he wrote from,
mattered.” In Porter’s view, Britain in the late-twentieth century is lacking “an expansion of attitude.” Ironically, this is the very characteristic that Britain’s former colonies have of necessity been developing as each newly-emerging, cultural group or nation has sought to define itself, not only in relation to the former “mother country,” but also in relation to its cultural “siblings.” Porter also comments on the way that literature from the former colonies is received in Britain: “It’s still really an Anglo-American pond: what they’re writing, reading, publishing in Britain.” Now, nine years after that interview, there is evidence, finally, that British readers and critics are becoming more aware of, and responsive to, literatures in English other than their own or that of the United States.

Until recently, Australian poets have been far more receptive to literature from abroad than their counterparts in Europe or North America have been towards Australian literature. Shapcott talks of a cross-cultural interchange that had a very stimulating effect – but mostly only one-way: ie, American work being responded to by Australians. Though it was intended to initiate a two-way interchange, his anthology Contemporary American and Australian Poetry (1976) did not sell well in the States; nor did it garner much critical attention there. But, at the time of our interview (1988), he was able to say – with impressive figures to back up his statements – that Australian literature was now being far more widely read abroad, resulting in welcome recognition for Australian writers in all genres. Ironically, it was Geoffrey Moore’s Penguin Book of Modern American Verse that initially inspired Shapcott to write “what were then [for Australia] outrageously experimental poems.”

Tranter (as noted above) also found American poetry a rich source of inspiration, especially poetry by writers of the New York School. In fact, most of the “Generation of ’68” poets were influenced greatly by contemporary American poetry. A decade or so younger than Shapcott, Tranter also came under other significant influences: the more liberal, international cultural climate of the late Sixties: the student political uprisings in Europe, the Vietnam War protests, increased ease of travel – including “the hippie trail” – especially to Southeast Asia. Tranter’s poetry shows numerous influences from diverse non-Australian sources.

For several of the poets, as they were growing up, international, and/or comparative concerns and relative values significantly coloured their daily living, thousands of miles away from what was still regarded as the cultural centre. A number of poets recall having been brought up in accordance with British middle-class values, at home and at school. Rodriguez, growing up in just such an “image,” describes it thus: “the work-ethic, middle-class standards and tastes, with an insularly pro-British slant” – so pro-British that, not until she was thirteen years old, did she realize that she was also of Jewish ancestry. Zwicky, fully cognizant of her German-Jewish roots, had nevertheless to conform to her mother’s “Edwardian England” values: “You only have to look at the old family photographs to see what image my mother wanted us to have: our hair beautifully done,
our prissy little dresses.” Harwood, almost a generation older than Rodriguez and Zwicky, imbibed ardent patriotic attitudes and values at her parents’ knees, and so relates: “I thought of England as the mother-country – as in our school poems: ‘What can I do for you, England, my England?’” Harwood – for whose father England was still “home” – looked upon the Great (First World) War as “a time of national glory [for Australia].”

In the light of post-colonial experience, Australia at this point in world history is – like so many other former colonies – re-making its identity, a process that started several decades ago. Murray sums up Australia’s founding and subsequent development: “Like America before Independence, Australia was an accident, a found object […] Australia was set up as a gulag and finally busted the wire and got out.” In parallel early development, urban-Canadian immigrants and, to some extent, backwoods/bush settlers demonstrated a “garrison mentality”? as effective a restraining device as any wire or fence (compare Zwicky: “It’s the space that would kill me, because, for some people, space is a very liberating thing; for others, it’s a crippler. You can be more confined by space than you can in a prison”). Either way, for both countries, the path of development this century has been away from those earlier constricting cultural bonds with the motherland towards a home-grown, self-defining, self-assured awareness and expression.

Martin’s observations on translation offer a metaphor for post-colonial redressing of past wrongs and possible avoidance of future setbacks: imbalances of position, power, privilege, those potentially dangerous – because culturally life-threatening – inequities of cultural domination of one race by another. For Martin, to “translate” poems involves a two-way process, a “carrying across” from one group to another; a mutual exchange between equals. The two-way process involves both an imaginative and emotional “outreach,” and a “drawing-in.” The result: “drawing lines between cultures […] between hemispheres” is a salutary indication of the benefits that can arise from cross-cultural interchange. That “sending out of the soul” to learn more of other peoples, other civilizations, not in a rapacious way but in a mutually appreciative and respectful manner, is crucial to the ongoing process of fruitful understanding. Porter, too, notes that “a worldwide cultural exchange is going on.”

Murray, speaking of Aboriginal societies and the thorny issues of assimilation and cultural appropriation, says: “Assimilation’s not on; you can’t turn everybody into one kind of a person. But to be able to be at peace with each other and exchange the treasures of the spirit is the most I’d ask for”; and possibly, eventually, the most that any nations, races, cultural groups will ask of one another. Murray underlines the importance and enrichment of creating such links, connections, between peoples: “A culture unshared is sterile.”

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Lewis Hyde has written: “My concern is the gift we long for, the gift that, when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us,” also noting that “Whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept.” A later observation further illumines the spirit in which cross-cultural interchange is best conducted: “Something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn’t be a gift.”

Rodriguez, on the value of relating to other peoples, other cultures, enthuses: “A treasure that I can never value enough is an education by travel in Europe – very hard-working travel – with David Malouf and, at times, with other friends.” She acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of these treasures of travel and culture. But what it all comes down to, finally, for Rodriguez and, by implication, for us also, is the fact that

What’s important is trying to understand how, for each person, there is a daily scope, meetings which grind or refresh the feelings, memories, expectations, rituals, reservations, landscapes of the mind – all excluded from the tiny selection of doings treated as news-glimpses, that’s all – making up the minute, huge real world of people.

Shades of Malouf’s “unique and unrepeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence,” and of Zwicky’s “simple little gestures like cooking a meal, or attending to a child – I know they’re quite old-fashioned – I live by them.” The “daily scope,” “the little sacraments,” as well as the “the simple little gestures,” are the essential matter of humankind, no matter the geographic context, era, culture, or language.

Within the context of post-colonial literatures, Porter’s reference to one of Auden’s aphorisms is particularly apt: “I’m inclined to think Auden was right in one of his little aphorisms. He said that art should be like cheese: Made locally, esteemed everywhere.” But Porter adds a telling rider:

We are all of us – whether we like it or not – second-class Americans, if we don’t happen to be fortunate enough to be first-class ones. So all of us, anywhere that English is spoken, are disenfranchised Americans. It’s not just the language, it’s the American [way of life].

Food for pause – reflection, debate and discussion, in the context of late-twentieth-century, post-colonial and international cultural studies.

These interviews and the poetry of these writers show us how crucial it is to remember that, even as each of us is “subject,” we are – and always will be – “object”; “the Other,” to someone else, to inhabitants of another region, country, culture. Native Canadians, in their traditional visual art, depict the relatedness of all things/beings/states, and of each of these to nature, by drawing or painting interconnecting lines between the elements of their images. In similar manner, these sixteen – indeed, all – poets create links and threads that lead us from one place, one person, out to another/others and back again.

Likewise, connections, continuance and continuity, through generations and across the earth, are spoken of here. Dobson sees “the continuance of poetry,” and of museum artifacts, through the ages. For her, “Museums must speak of the living and the ongoing evidence of humanity, not just the heritage of the past.” Martin, steeped in ancient civilizations and cultures – Scandinavian, European, Mexican.
and American heritage, including museums – also sees their relevance to the present day. A reviewer admires in Martin’s poetry the “still unbroken continuities.” Shapcott sees continuity through art, through human lineage from generation to generation in physical appearance and behavioural characteristics, and through the environment. For him, the horror of rainforest devastation adumbrates our own precarious future, unless we can learn – as Hall and Rodriguez also point out – to respect our planetary home. Shapcott recognizes that the genetic link “carried through [generations] is a string of continuity.” He adds: “That [realization] had a profound effect on my sense of temporality: I am an inheritor; I don’t know my ancestors but I recognize, I claim, them.”

In the ongoing ruck of life and work, study and art, in the intricate interconnectedness of all aspects of human activity and reflection, Hyde reminds us:

The college of imagination which conducts the discourse of art is not confined by time. Just as material gifts establish and maintain the collective in social life, so the gifts of the imagination, as long as they are treated as such, will contribute toward those collectives we call culture and tradition.

If each people can heed well vital messages such as these from Hyde, then they can envisage fruitful possibilities ahead. Hyde quotes Black American poet, Maya Angelou, commenting on the significance of both her known and unknown Black brother- and sister-poets: “It may be enough […] to have said that we survive in exact relationship to our poets.” And Hyde continues with his own telling illustration of the “worth” of culture:

The elders who passed the Sacred Pipe of the Sioux to Black Elk warned him that ‘if the people have no center sic they will perish.’ Just as a circulation of ceremonial gifts among tribal peoples preserves the vitality of the tribe, so the art of any peoples, if it is a true emanation of their spirit, will stand surety for the lives of the citizenry.

In Convergences, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz remarks on the relationship between poet, poem, and reader: “[There is] a mouth that speaks and an ear that catches the spiral murmur of the poem.” Murray, too, suggests that the “spiral” is also a good image for criticism. We can now carry the metaphor further. For the spiral represents well the interview as intermediary: each interview offers interweaving, interlinking trails that, in turn, thread their way among poets, poetry, readers, and critics alike. The spiral – an ancient symbol of creativity – like poem and interview, is boundless in form and effect: a never-ending “gift.”

Finally, these poets – works and interviews – confirm Anaïs Nin’s claim: “What the poet has to say is as fragile as snow but as powerful as the Deluge.”

BARBARA WILLIAMS, Toronto, April 1997

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