

Philip Mead, *Networked Language: Culture & History in Australian Poetry* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008).

Philip Mead's masterly study *Networked Language: Culture & History in Australian Poetry* has a title whose two parts seem at first to be at variance with one another. 'Networked language' speaks to the digital present, perhaps to a post-scriptal time. 'Culture & history in Australian poetry' appears daringly old-fashioned in its implicit belief that knowledge of that culture and history can be elicited from interpretations of poetry that has been written in Australia. In his Introduction, Mead establishes how the two parts fit together. The six very long linked essays that constitute the book are 'the result of an equal fascination with poetic language and with the networks of culture and history within which it lives'.

The emphasis is unrepentantly humanist and resolutely contextual. Thus poetry (however much a minority taste now) is 'always a meaningful human response to the time and place of its creation'. Furthermore, 'it has an after-life in subsequent and changing cultural contexts that we read typically as the history of poetic texts'. In lamentation that critical writing about Australian poetry lags behind the 'formal inventiveness and linguistic range of historical and contemporary poetry production', Mead offers 'experiments in the theory and practice of a kind of contextual reading'. The result is the 'thickest' literary historical reading of Australian poetry that there has yet been. At times Mead's critical language makes this enterprise appear modest and dry: 'a small, fragmentary contribution to a ... largely unwritten project, the sociolinguistic history of language art in Australia (theoretical and applied)'. But in fact, *Networked Language* is a bravura performance – bold, witty, its deep learning lightly worn.

Apart from the modishness of the title, the opening chapter called 'Ut Cinema Poesis' looks like a rehearsal of old business – Kenneth Slessor and the belated advent of poetic modernism in Australia. But Mead soon leads us elsewhere. He notes that although histories of Australian film overlook him altogether, Slessor was the leading film critic between the wars. Mead explores what he calls 'cinematism', that is, 'the networks that connect poetry and cinema'. Brilliant readings of poems follow (as in every subsequent chapter), here, in the reillumination of 'Five Bells' in terms of its filmic techniques. He manages to similarly work the poems in subsequent chapters. In the broader social history that *Networked Language* also constructs, we are given many fascinating moments on which to reflect. For instance, what would the outcome have been if Slessor's collaboration with Norman Lindsay on a film treatment of the latter's banned novel *Redheap* had been completed?

From Slessor, Mead moves to 'Poetry and the Police', to the Ern Malley hoax once more, to this yet unexhausted story which Mead calls 'the originary moment of Australian literary modernism'. After speculating on the motives of the hoaxers – Harold Stewart and James McAuley and 'the desperately therapeutic work of producing pseudo-authentic poetry' – Mead closely scrutinises the trial of the poems' hapless publisher, Max Harris. He concludes that the prosecution attempted no less

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than the 'conversion of poetic language from ambivalent, allusive and multi-registered, to straightforwardly construable as indecent and obscene'. Mead's judgment of the Malley oeuvre is subtle and balanced, at odds with the usual extremes of judgment: 'trashy, disconcerting, precious, fake, elusive, transforming poems, a little world of new combinations of words, that continue to exert a strong resistance to the norms of poetic conformity'.

In Chapter Three, 'Constitutional Poetics', McAuley is back again as the author of the long narrative poem 'Captain Quiros' which Mead judges to be an influential but failed attempt at 'mythopoesis'. In another dashing effort, Mead begins with Cardinal Moran's attempt in 1899 to claim (falsely) that the Portuguese navigator de Quiros had discovered the east coast of Australia in 1606, thus seeking to replace the English, secular, Enlightenment story of Cook with a European, spiritual, Catholic one. Mead leads the reader on through a brilliant survey of the tradition of Voyager poems in Australia, to New Guinean leader Michael Somare's McAuley Memorial Lecture of 1996, to the incongruous statue of de Quiros recently erected in Canberra. Returning to the poetry, Mead incisively detects how an 'apocalyptic strain was always threatening the rage for order in McAuley's neo-classically cool poetry'.

The second half of the book shows insight and is revisionist but the hectic momentum of the first part slackens. The fourth chapter, 'Homelessness', examines Judith Wright's poetic preference for a position on the edge of affairs. Wright's stance is contrasted with the ambiguities of her ecological activism over many decades. On one hand her work is marginalised in intellectual histories of Australia and on the other some critics assume her public activities diminish her later poetry (McAuley sardonically dubs her Dame Nature). However, Mead is more interested in investigating Wright's sense of crisis in war-time and in the post-war period when nuclear destruction seemed possible. He retries and rereads lesser known poems; he traces the dialectic in her work 'of outside and inside, where the outside represents freedom and the geographical ... and the inside is imprisoning and socially conventional'. Generous to earlier critics, Mead has nonetheless repositioned Wright in the landscape of Australian verse.

Wit bubbles up frequently in *Networked Language*, as the title of the fifth chapter demonstrates: 'It's poetry Jim, but not as we know it!' Mead focuses on John Tranter's 'Different Hands' and examines how 'digital poetry ... works with an idea of the translatory, combinatory and permutatory possibilities of language'. In particular, he considers the application of computers and computer programmes 'in refiguring experimentation in poetic language'. It is a tribute to Mead's skills of advocacy that he almost persuades us that this game is worth the candle. In the final chapter, 'Unsettling language', he is again an advocate, this time for authors (and linguistic groups) that he believes to have been sidelined in the construction of Australian literary history. He chooses to concentrate upon the Aboriginal Australian poet Lionel Fogarty for his 'poetics of resistance' and the Greek Australian poet ΠΟ for 'minorising a major language'.

Praising the 'heteroglot UnAustralia that they imagined, Mead concludes with a trenchant restatement of the politics of what he had earlier called 'the sociolinguistic history of language' in Australia. He declares that 'any (critical) talking cure for the linguistic disorders that the Australian settlement suffers from might begin by

listening to such poetic language' (that of Fogarty and P.O.). Mead's demand encapsulates the spirit of the book. *Networked Language* grandly enlarges our vision of poetry and its social and historical filiations in Australia. The author's critical project persistently unsettles received wisdom, admirations gone stale, complacency about what poetry in Australia has been, is, and might be.

Peter Pierce