

JOHN TRANTER'S OEUVRE : AN APPRAISAL

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Born in 1943, John Tranter is the leading Australian poet of his generation. He has published 15 collections of verse including *Selected Poems* in 1982, *The Floor of Heaven* in 1992, *At The Florida* in 1993, *Heart Print* 2001, *Studio Moon* in 2003. He is also the editor of free Internet magazine *Jacket*. The poetry of other Australian poets after a certain phase of time becomes stagnant but Tranter's poetry is still developing. His poetry possesses certain characteristics which distinguish it from much recent Australian Poetry. Most Australian poets either accept without question the cultural presuppositions or else rhetorically adopt personal or social myths that create a space for the subject. Either way the poetry produced makes no formal demands on the reader, it works often to provide a pleasing effect, in a given set of stylistic references while avoiding simplicity and rhetoric. To quote John Forbes: Tranter's imagery and concerns remain social and not private, and the tension between this and his attempts to demolish the types of subject which such a public approach normally employs, gives his poems an edge of social comment.¹ John Tranter first penned down his thoughts when he was in the last year at high school. The poem was published in the school magazine, a rather dreamy landscape poem, in free verse. But his first official edition of poems was published in 1970 titled *Parallax*. Since then Tranter has been creating ripples in the ocean of Australian poetry by his innovative and energetic style of writing. "His poetry of the past years stands as testimony to a kind of survival - of its own continual self-renewal, of the perils of 'talking falsely' of desire and its consequences."² He is a poet par excellence. One of the most remarkable things of Tranter as a poet is that he has been growing not only in his stature but also in his mind and art ever since he started his poetic career. He is still making experiments both in content and style. However, the very growth of Tranter as a poet seems to have passed through three distinct phases.

The first phase beginning with the publication of *Parallax* in 1970 lasted for hardly a decade that is till the publication of *Crying in Early Infancy* (1977). Tranter's initial works reflect his outlook where he felt himself to be a part of a generation of young Australian poets - who were all trying to do new things say during late 60's and early 70's.

This group of young poets later known as 'Generation 68' reflects their conscious rebelliousness against the values of previous generations. The poetic scene in 60's was a bit conservative. But with progression of year and probably during the last decades the stirrings could be felt. There was the Vietnam War and also the influence of rock and roll, drugs etc. could be perceived in the society and gradually the things were shifting and taking a turn. It is here, that Tranter's poetry projects the change, it is a part of the movement in progress and a positive movement which aims towards openness and internationalism:

But as Tranter progresses through years with his emotions and thoughts in his new collections, we observe an organising pattern behind his poems. In fact, the poem in the collection *Crying in Early Infancy*: 100 sonnets seems to mimic and echo each other. Tranter has very subtly and comprehensively summarised his thoughts in 14 lines. In No. 20 has very beautifully juxtaposed images of life and book:

**This book's a catalogue of dreams
just like my life in which
every day has a beginning,
a middle, and an end**

***Crying in Early Infancy*, p. 17)**

The unique characteristic quality of this phase of poems is the interfusion of experience and experimentation in terms of thought and theme.

In the first phase Tranter presents himself as an intellectual (by the enviable range of references that he uses in his poems) and also one notices the developing city culture theme that becomes a prominent aspect in his second phase. Tranter, in first phase tries to assemble the momentary and the scattered themes around him into different modes of poetry be it lyric or sonnet. He sets trends in poetry with his versatility and prolificity. As a matter of fact he wrote mainly of things he knew from his personal experiences which were full of anguish and all that stuff. On personal grounds, Tranter had dark sides to his vision because many people died when he was 19-20, say his father, his grand uncle and therefore the poems have a dark tone to them.

With the coming of 80's Tranter's poetry takes a welcome digression and according to Andrew

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Johnston "It's the beginning of a shift in Tranter's poetry, from mocking the gestures of the putative conservatism mainstream to mocking its own gestures; from scorn to irony, from Modernism, one might nervously suggest to post modernism." ³

Taking a subjective stance, one may suggest that the second phase of Tranter's poetry reflects all his diverse moods and emotion which are aptly presented in extended forms in different collections.

The tone of these poems in the second collection are quite again quite, steadier, easier and less fraught than the ones' in the previous collection. There are poems which are sober and reflective as well. To cite:

**...Something you can't see
holds it all together. What is it? Last
spring they painted the house amateurs,
North Light', UB, p. 8)**

As Tranter, advances in his poems he acquires more freedom in his writings and puts aside belief and disbelief and gives himself completely to the developing moment of the poem. Tranter's collection *The Floor of Heaven* projects yet another dimension of his poetic skill where Tranter treats the theme of 'city culture' in a lengthy sequence of four parts which may aptly be titled 'verse novellas'. Tranter here depicts narrative styles in an excellent manner and we have poems which are highly visual, cut from scene to scene and image after image to produce a cinematic effect. In the first phase and probably with the beginning of second phase, Tranter projects himself as a cerebral contemporary poet and then with a surprising and exhilarating change of direction he puts common experiences in emotions and verse which have a peculiar harmony, sweetness and are yet harsh, cruel and candid reflecting the modern scenario:

**The sun drafted out from behind a cloud
and a warm light spilled across the park.
(Gloria', TFOH, p. 25)**

Though Tranter has been called an experimenter with verse but this becomes more valid during this phase. In *At the Florida* depict, not only his fondness for narrative so explicitly noticed in *The Floor of Heaven* but he takes another formal departure in verse, mixes poetry and prose in a group of hybrid "haibun" based on 17th century Japanese form of writing. Tranter though noticed the form in John Ashbery's 1985 collection of poems yet he doesn't copy it as such. He reconstructs and reinvents it, with a 20 line stanza of free verse followed by a passage of prose.

In the second phase we decipher that his themes are versatile, his style elegant and innovative and the depth in his poems is unfathomable. His voice seems to become more vocal and his poetry sweeps the whole world by its bold diction and by its sublimity. As a poet, he searches for new avenues and is to a larger extent is successful in portraying them in his poems.

The poetic graph of Tranter seems to be moving up and up during the recent years. Though he is now knee deep into e-editing and stuff related to it yet the collections prove his prominence and authenticity in contemporary Australian poetry scene.

His recent collections namely *Late Night Radio*, *Ultra*, *Heart Print* etc. are an extended versions of his II phase where Tranter's works conspicuously and meticulously observed reveal his impressions of everyday life and references to humanity in cars, parks, restaurants bars. These impressions which he pens down are of our everyday world and, hence, his poems automatically become a reflection of our day to day life. Tranter's collection are a result of few accumulated years and specially the one like *Studio Moon* which has poems written during the last 15 years are in the mode of a homage, conversation or to be precise a kind of dialogue with certain poets from the New York School with whom Tranter admits he was fascinated a lot. Tranter flits from poem to poem making them more energetic, explicit and readable; varies his pattern and style from sonnet to discursive prose and focuses sharply on the contemporary scene shifting the paradigms from political to religious and from public to personal.

The future direction of Tranter's poetry hints at the genius with which he will continue to express and jot, to discover and to invent, to experience and to experiment poetry in the modern scenario; trying to dig it out from very nook and corner. It can be asserted that Tranter is going to assume Internationalism in a wider context. His endeavor is not only to create poetry, but to preserve and transmit good poetry by making it an accessible and affordable art for common man is worth mentioning. Tranter's poetry touches our heart and mind alike because it generates from our inside and outside world. We relate directly to it because we can feel it and what we see he presents in verse. He leaves a little mystery in his poems and that is because his poems deal with deep issues which can and must be explained only in verse. But to sum up - Tranter with his depth of emotions, passions and dedications has created a rich legacy of fine poetry.

References:

1. Forbes, John, "Selected poems - A Review", *Meanjin Magazine*, 1983, p. 3.
2. Johnston, Andrew, "Surviving Desire: The Poetry of John Tranter - A Review". *Landfall* 187, Autumn 1994.
3. *Ibid.*