THE 'NEW' AUSTRALIAN POETRY:
MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST POETICS
AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUSTRALIAN POETRY

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This thesis discusses the poetics of modernism and postmodernism in twentieth-century Australian poetry. It challenges John Tranter’s view, expressed in The New Australian Poetry, that the ‘New Poets’ of the late sixties and seventies were virtually the first Australian poets to incorporate modernism into their work. It reviews the tendency for critics to separate conceptual concerns from stylistic innovation when discussing the impact of modernism on earlier Australian poetry. It offers an alternative to the dominant reading of the ‘modern’ as reflecting the moods and themes of ‘high modernism,’ to incorporate more progressive elements, including the symbolist and ‘neo-Romantic’ literary avant-gardes and the political avant-garde. This expanded view allows discussion of poetics normally disregarded in discussions of modernism, including Christopher Brennan’s views on consciousness, Lesbia Harford’s feminist and socialist principles, the Vision group’s program of the ‘New Man,’ and the Jindyworobaks’ valorisation of Aboriginal culture. It suggests that the ‘tradition of conservatism’ of Australian poetry seen by Tranter was encouraged by the resistance to stylistic innovation of modernism’s ‘champions,’ Kenneth Slessor and Frank Wilmot, and the anti-modernist attitudes of A D Hope and James McAuley. While the ‘new’ element of the New Poetry is seen primarily as their openness to stylistic innovation, an analysis of New Poetry poetics shows a diversity characteristic of ‘sixties postmodernism.’ This reflects the various influences of poststructuralism, symbolism, neo-Romanticism and the neo-avant-garde, reflecting differing attitudes towards subjectivity, language, the notion of the divine, and the role of poetry. Poets whose work is examined in the light of these poetics include Robert Adamson, Kris Hemensley, Bruce Beaver, Vicki Viidikas, Jennifer Maiden and John A Scott. Given the breadth of the New Poets’ poetics, the question is raised as to why so few women are seen as New Poets, and suggestions are made for a revised New Poetry canon.
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