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John Tranter: The Orchestration of Disparities

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John Tranter, acclaimed Australian post-modernist poet (born 1943), deserves ample notice on this side of the planet. Prodigious, protean: in the span of the four books discussed below — *The Floor of Heaven* (1992), *At the Florida* (1993), *Late Night Radio* (1998) and *Different Hands* (also 1998) — Tranter ranges through traditional forms and themes, turns esoteric forms to his own end, and even collaborates with a computer to fashion synthetic prose. In Tranter's work, meaning thrives in the nooks and joints of language.

Imagine being in someone's urban basement for the screening of a film — is it a home movie or an obscure, obsessive theatrical? Is it a documentary, biography, or comedy/drama? It's probably a blend of the three. (Cinema as subject and metaphor figures throughout; see "Those Gods Made Permanent" in *Late Night Radio*, and "North Woods" in *At The Florida*.) And suppose your fellow viewers comment often and out loud on the action, splicing their own sexual and social perspectives into what's happening on screen. How would you describe the evening? Maybe as a kaleidoscope of information, image, and impression, not quite random though not coherent around a leading theme. And yet themes do emerge in the interplay of comment — city versus country, history versus the lived moment, capitalism versus the humane, the fate and fact of art. The overall effect is one of abundant inclusion rendered in a down-to-earth, no-bullshit tone. See, for instance, "Another Country," from *At the Florida*:

Yes, I've been there. Very quaint,
the old fashioned slang, the cardigans-
and the cars: English, heavy,
slow, and dull-coloured.
And have you noticed the snapshots,
all black-and-white? Look,
here's one, a family standing around
on a deserted beach, squinting
into the sun-the place always seems
half depopulated. . .

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These lines encapsulate the thrust of the second part of *At The Florida*, a sequence of eight poems, with three sequences in total. In the first and third, form is a concern. Tranter's energy and intelligence flood the forms (helpful endnotes describe them). There is always the tension of containment, the rush of thought and zealous play that characterizes Part Two spilling into more limited venues, the varied structures of Part One and the *haibun* of Part Three, "haibun" being, per the poet's note, a Japanese combo of short prose followed by haiku, which Tranter inverts and re-invents.

In all of Tranter's work, there's an exhilarating spirit of re-invention, recombination, an orchestration of disparities. Maybe this is born of the act of close observation; when you look closely at anything it dissolves sooner or later into parts more or less rationally related, and then upon further observation it dissolves completely, as in the poem "High School Confidential" (*Late Night Radio*):

TV holds some fascinating specimens, sure thing,

an endless museum that seems stranger and less
human the more we gaze at it through the faint
reflection, glazed on the screen . . .

The auditory analogy is the repetition of a word until its sound loses sense. See "Anyone Home?" in *At The Florida* for an example. Most of the poems in this volume stop short of such extreme dissolution. Especially in *Late Night Radio*, an identifiable nucleus of emotion has been smashed and the poems tellingly record the paths of its components in free verse.

Tranter uses invention in the orchestration of tones. In the haibun "Gasoline," for instance, colloquial speech ("we'll clip and chortle and chew the fat") is juxtaposed with plain song lyric ("now/drum up the suburbs of water/and paint them for me in watercolours"). But re-invention is, perhaps, nowhere so extreme, and so interesting, as in "Different Hands," a series of seven prose-fiction pieces which, per Tranter's forward, "started out strange and worked their way back towards meaning." Each piece began as a computer analysis of "frequency and distribution of letter groups in two prior pieces." The poet worked the composite "dreck" into final versions. For example, "The Howling Twins" marries Ginsburg's "Howl" with a Bobbsey Twins adventure, and "A Room with a View, Spa Bath and Many Extras" joins the E.M. Forster story with suburban Sydney real-estate advertisements. The point of these exercises is not to re-tool plot or to re-imagine character, but to explode cliché, to milk image from pop culture, to blunt the strike of preemptive language, and, not least, to lampoon and parody the self-importance and the rigor mortis of situational speech. It's true in all of Tranter, but here it is especially fitting that you have the sense of active *levels* of intelligence, of a PC running many programs simultaneously.

In *The Floor of Heaven*, the earliest of the books discussed here, Tranter visits the *film-noir* genre and the spirits of David Lynch and Ingmar Bergman. It's another species of invention, a series of dramatic monologues that play out in group-therapy sessions. Indelible images emerge: a long-lost brother brained with a leg of lamb, an addicted infant grinding its gums. The mixture of comedy and pathos is wonderful. The compulsive telling results in multiple nightmares in free verse, and each typically moves forward by way of interruption. In "Stella," for example, a member of the zipper club recounts his failed affair with married Stella (he became a photographer to be close to her). His story is set beside the memories of an art entrepreneur whose own lost love was Estelle, a doomed, drug-addicted painter. Of course, the similar names invite comparisons, one point of which is made by another group member in an off-hand remark about photography: ". . . If ever an art form/Was crippled by its plausibility!" In so much of Tranter, brilliance like this rushes by.

The Australian poet John Tranter has published fourteen books of verse. He edits the free on-line magazine [Jacket](#) and has published widely in US literary magazines, including the *Paris Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Grand Street*, *New American Writing*, *Conjunctions*, *Boulevard*, and *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*. He co-edited the *Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (1991), published in Britain and the US as the *Bloodaxe Book of Modern Australian Poetry*.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

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