Jas H. Duke and the Chronicle of Avant-Garde Poetics

A.J. CARRUTHERS
Australian Studies Centre
Shanghai University of International Business and Economics

> The poet does not equate a word with a meaning; he establishes the functions or powers of words. But when we look at the symbols of a poem as verbal *signs*, the poem appears in a different context altogether, and so do its narrative and meaning. Descriptively, a poem is not primarily a work of art, but primarily a *verbal* structure or set of representative words, to be classed with other verbal structures like books on gardening.
>
> —Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Jeltje Fanoy's poem 'After Jas H. Duke,' published in a 2017 issue of *Postcolonial Text*, begins quietly. 'Switching off the reading lamp / my glasses / folded away' our reading takes off just as the muted environ of the speaker pulls back from her scene of reading. What has been read we don't know, but we do know that Fanoy has been listening; 'I hear I've left the radio on, / I'm about to enter the dark and cold / of the hallway,' and from here, a revenant voice arrives on the scene; 'there's a voice, still, in this digital age / transmitting across / a freezing night sky.' The radio 'is digital already' and the presenter is 'really him.' Time and technology are figured in the poem as the ghost of a voice, but the poem ends well, too well, perhaps. Surprisingly, the intimations of a radio, a technology with a protracted history in the (post-) digital age, an age of both deep embedding in and exhaustion from the digital, end not with gripe and grudge or disenchantment, but perhaps rather oddly, with happiness; 'all this makes me very happy.'

See these words on a page, or *hear* them? And whose voice? Remembering the poem began 'Switching off the reading lamp' we can note what's occluded here in the nocturnal passage of the poem. For the oddness of the poem is precisely in that nothing by way of context is given. Silent reading gives way to listening; this gives satisfaction, some kind of levelling of desire. But for Jeltje, the reading that has occurred is the reading of what comes after (Duke's) life—the time of listening, of the ghost in the radiophonic voice—has to have moved towards a peripherality. Being after Duke means being digital, and being caught in the moment of thinking about something that has not yet finished. Peripherality: the work resists closure, tests ends, but does it stand the test of time?

What stands the 'test of time' is more than memory and will raise questions of literary history, histories of literary theory, and questions of canon formation that have been pertinent to discussions from the New Critics to Frank Kermode. If we are to take the attitude that an avant-garde poet (or text) consigns themselves (or itself) to oblivion, an assumption that, of course, has no grounding in the course of the early twentieth century with what sometimes gets called the 'historic' or 'historical' avant-gardes—a misnomer, I think—then we may adopt tactics used by many who study these works, the action of *recuperating* lost works. The 'recuperative' critic then becomes a kind of canonmaker in reverse. Often these kinds of tactics get called decentring moves: one is doing the job of decentring, and so the result is the construction of a kind of alternative centre. In my discussion of Duke here, I am not attempting to place him in an

alternative avant-garde canon so much as touch on the historical aspects of his relation with the poetics of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, and his horizontal relation with a generation of likeminded experimental poets, like Jeltje Fanoy and others.

In the context of Australian poetry, rather than the notion of an external occupation by avant-gardism or reading it simply as invasive, Duke can be read against a different vocabulary in which those external modes are seen as an exchange of influences and poetic inflections. There is a fairly complex intrication of transnational elements in Jas H. Duke's poetics. Transnational at the magnification of region and hereness, though, for Duke's work is often timely, aware of social location, and engages in trenchant cultural critique, triggering a poetics of contradiction—reading the inside against the outside, and vice versa.

His political and social contexts include the impact of the Whitlam era, pre- and post-dismissal, and the Bicentennial celebrations marking his late career. But it is precisely how Duke's work develops a poetics around assumptions of receivedness, derivation and 'distancing' that remain chief questions. I want to ask also: What historical frames would we deploy for such an investigation? What constitutes an Australian avant-garde? Is it part of an international avant-garde tradition? Can it exist, and if so, in what form—as a second wave or 'neo'-avant-gardism? Is there a 'maturation' of these second-waves, aftershocks? Did an Australian 'neo'-vanguard, like other neo-vanguards, extend original aims or create something 'new,' become something distinct from the historical avant-gardes? As John Kinsella has suggested, might it be that the apparent 'newness' of an avant-gardism in the Australian context will contain embedded notions of a blank slate or *terra nullius* upon which a new poetics can be applied (*Spatial Relations* 42-43)?

Historical work on forms of avant-gardism in Australian poetics therefore must take into account the kinds of works whose textual dynamics test notions of nation and nationhood. It must attend to the crossings of region and hemisphere, offensive *and* defensive moves—vanguard and rearguard—reassessing the notion of an 'Australian' advanced guard using the back door of region-to-globe referential frameworks.

The texts can—should be—closely read: in the cultural and material poetics of Duke we see a vanguardist sensibility manifest in attention to the letter, radical lettristic experimentation in support of a searing, scathing, and occasionally sarcastic politics. The disjunctive, dissonant, even *dysprosodic* character of Duke's work can be taken in light of an emergent Australian vanguardism both interested in and suspicious of the historical avant-gardes and politically directive if not immersive and driven by material desire. The very specific Australian poetics-history of avant-gardism I take to be peculiar and peculiarly complex: I take an historical approach to claims of avant-gardism in relation to an 'Australian' (cognisant of nation, and anti-nationalist) genesis. If the poetry of Duke can be taken to be exemplary 'neo'-works, for the most part we have an experimental poetics independent from, or finding itself up against Eurocentric or Euro-American vanguardisms.

Both until and after his death in 1992, most of Duke's oeuvre has been supported by Collective Effort press, based in Melbourne. There was a veritable explosion of small press activity in the 1970s. Publications like *925* and *Born to Concrete*, which appeared in 1975, drove this scene along anarchist and workerist lines. Philip Edmonds notes that these publications 'worked against bookshop sales,' putting a politics of refusal into practice, refusal to become mainstream. Edmonds recalls Duke saying that 'the *Age* never reviewed him, or magazines he was associated with, because his publications were stapled.' Thus, refusal with intent: 'The

freewheeling nature of the decade was a moment in which small publications could experimentally resist commodification' (50). In the midst of this flourishing of oppositional and radical work Duke's genre-bending novel *Destiny Wood* was published in 1976 by the now defunct Whole Australian Catalogue Publications.[1] One of Duke's biggest Dadaist presentations is the posthumous 1996 limited edition artist's book/poem *Dada Kampfen um Leben und Tod (Dada Fight for Life and Death),* published by Wayzgoose Press (Katoomba), printed in colour on a long single sheet of 24 pages folded concertina-style. Catherine Cradwick has noted that 'The unexpected separation of lines of text produces a jarring, compelling dissonance,' the work coming together as a 'fiercely energetic chronicle of Dadaism' (499). Such a disjunctive, dissonant chronicle places the poem as history or counter-history of the movement and its aesthetics/poetics, while participating in these; of this kind of poem more below.

Like several experimental poets including, albeit much later, Amanda Stewart, Duke spent time in Europe and the USA in the 1960s before moving back in the 1970s, and saw his work as part of an international, and historical avant-garde tradition. Yet there is a sense of locality to these claims. Transforming dismissals of 'derivation' and 'receivedness' into deeper analyses of the transnational and international contexts can reveal an Australian-specific nexus around which a complex series of negotiations, influences and even outright rejections fuelled strenuous and entrenched responses to the historical avant-gardes. Though Duke has been influenced by the originary avant-garde, his poetic practice is not reducible to these forebears. Rather than settling for senses of 'receivedness' or 'derivative,' a term like neo-avant-garde can account for the transnationality of experimental practices, a sense of its once remove not as a loss but rather as a way of reworking practices or using those practices to get somewhere else entirely. It also lends the term a certain historicity that is sometimes lost in the diachronicity of accounts of the originary avant-gardes.

We also begin to see more transcultural narratives emerge, produced by a generation of experimental writers who began writing and publishing in the late seventies and early eighties. Poets like ΠO, Thalia and Walwicz, three figures of this period alongside Duke, who developed a poetics that incorporated multiple kinds of vernacular. The way vernaculars collided with English caused new grammars, it caused them in the sense that the grammatical structures of their own languages (Greek, Polish) came to be superposed into or onto their uses of English. Duke had new motives to be enthused. In the Preface to *Poems of Life & Death*, ΠO would recall Duke's comments upon his return to Australia in 1973, 'I came back to Australia with my psyche in ruins. I found Australia more interesting than when I left, it had been rescued from Menzies by the migrants' (24). Duke's return coincides with the beginning of the Whitlam government, and partook in a resistant poetics. Some of the blurb comments on the back cover of Duke's *Poems of War and Peace* frame the work in messianic terms: 'a real poet'—Henri Chopin; 'one of the pioneers of experimental writing in Australia'—Anna Couani; 'Someone!, give this poet a computer. He's a genius!'—Nigel Roberts; 'the human voice played like a saxophone'—Nicholas Zurbrugg; 'a real blabbermouth'—thalia; 'one of new Australian poetry's Saving Graces'—Kris Hemensley, and so on.

If Duke is one of new Australian poetry's Saving Graces, there is critical work to be done to further salvage worth, or critical possibility. But above the question of worth I want to explore *how* Duke developed his poetics and from what sources and historical currents he drew in order to do so. In the readings that follow I examine the global contexts of Australian poetry and attendant questions like that of generational awareness, through Duke's neo-vanguardism. How does Duke respond to Dadaism, Cubism, Concrete Poetry, Suprematism, Surrealism and

Expressionism? What is a neo-vanguardist tendency? How does it manifest? In the form of 'genealogy,' 'invasion,' or 'derivation' from without? What are these three (and others), quite different figurations of poetic influence?
From here the task then becomes to understand how these narratives work in his poetics. In describing these cultural productions, the implicit claim is that Duke imagines another history of Australian poetry: emergent from its own material sites and locales; a history of inventive language in close conversation with concepts and impasses of what passes as originary or original, but one in which there is no readily identifiable genealogy for an 'Australian' poem. What Duke tends to do in his poetry is examine, imitate or critique genealogies, occasionally with reference to cultural assumptions of Australianness but primarily with attention to literary history itself.

The 'Churches Era': Avant-Garde Genealogies

To Nicholas Zurbrugg in 1991 Duke wrote 'I also have troubles with "avant-garde." If we have to have military analogies I feel that I'm more in the Quartermaster Corps than the Light Cavalry. I don't think I've done anything that couldn't have been done by a switched-on poet of 1890 if not 1590 . . . I don't like the term, don't think of myself as "avant-garde," but regard myself as an imitator of the best models of the past' (*poems of life & death*, 302-3). In other musings on histories of vanguards in modernism, Duke would claim the European avant-garde was structured like a church. Under the great army of Modernism, they were 'small groups of true believers, generally led by some sort of Messiah figure . . . who constructed a canon of acceptable works ('Sounds,' 7). Group thinking was second nature and spurned mentalities of inclusion and exclusion. They 'welcomed in right-minded colleagues and collaborators, produced bibles and prayer books for new recruits, denounced false prophets, and excommunicated spies and traitors' (7).

Duke's abridged story of the avant-garde as he tells it in this piece shows some fascination with its demagoguery as well as a disdain for its piousness. But what is Duke's complaint? For sound poetry in particular, the regulatory bodies of the canonising authorities narrowed the frames of reference rather than opened them up: 'Although sound poetry should be able to leap the boundaries of national languages anthologists insist on inserting French sound poets into French language anthologies, Germans into German books, and Americans into books dealing with America' (7). One of the opening sound texts by Walter Abish, 'Auctioning Australia,' in the North American sound poetry anthology *Text-Sound Texts* (1980) contains the line 'Are Australian authors as arrogant as American authors?' (29), in which one hears 'Australia' come to indicate a kind of negativity or absence. One can see Duke's point in the fact that the anthology can include the German expatriate Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven but not Kurt Schwitters, though both derive their sounded poetics from the clashing sonorities of German with English and fit, historically, and in their poetics, very well together. Such boundaries, linguistic and national, are of course convenient ways of navigating and managing scale, as with Charles Amirkhanian's 1975 Vinyl LP, *10+2: 12 American Text Sound Pieces*.

Yet it is the internationalism of Duke's interests that is most compelling here. Duke's exuberance for the avant-garde is marked with suspicion, occasionally sarcasm, inmixed with a sense that the modernist avant-garde would always be derivative in the Australian context, and manifest thereafter through sarcastic criticality. The first of those poems that reworks the avant-garde is 'BLACK SQUARES' which begins with a cut-up of Malevich's theoretical writings, and ends with an endnote as follows:

> This is a performance piece made up of selections from the theoretical writings of the Russian painter Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) founder of the SUPREMATIST MOVEMENT and painter of BLACK SQUARE, BLACK CROSS, WHITE ON WHITE and similar works. It should be chanted in a religious manner, a reverent prayer to the Gods of Art, both ingratiating and self-confident, the pharisee in partnership with the true believer. The word 'feeling' should be dragged out as 'feeeeeeeling.' 'I have transformed myself . . . etc' should be said with as much passion as you can muster. This work shows just what you can do with your old art manifestoes. (*Poems of War and Peace* 116)

In such citational performance pieces the self-confidence of the performer is overt, manufactured, an artifice; feeling is mediated, or meditated-upon with full knowledge of the messianic aspect of doing Malevich this late in the twentieth century, some of the grammars and punctuation in the sentences are undone, but Duke has also left many of the quotations verbatim from Malevich. What is intriguing here is how Suprematism—a pre-minimalist, avant-garde tendency in which geometric grammars, often simply rendered, became phenomena for the 'primacy of pure feeling'—transferred to the body of the poem, results not in the presentation of shape, but as a potential event. Suprematism's emphasis on feeling as predicated on, or emergent from the vectors of geometric grammar, for Malevich a painterly grammar, makes the semiotics of this cut-up less a transferral of one form to another than a commentary on form, a theoretical poem which exposes the potential of experimental labour, showing 'just what you can do with your old art manifestoes.'

Just what you could do with such concepts and materials provided the basis for other poems which in a similar vein encrypt commentary on avant-garde modernist history and theory by incorporating both citational elements and disruptive formal geometries in the body of the poem. For instance, in 'A HISTORY OF EXPRESSIONIST POETRY (1910–1920)' the poem is divided into two columns, or 'axes':

The new integer	came to shift
he above all	and
brotherhood the great	in
would be very	work
sort of frivolous	was
yet time and	generalities
brilliance of his	in
struck the right	others
all yesterday morning	to studying
for a moment	concepts
became his partner	rooted
specialised in the	resurrection
forgotten dramatist and	appealing
[. . .]	
well it's impossible	started
some undefined barrier	fraternisation
and the minor poets	join
theoretician of literary	our
paid them little	a star
anthologies for which	paradise
first of these	the new integer above all
inclusion of some	the would be very brotherhood the great
the poet who	a sort of frivolous time yet brilliance
whose dreamy and	of his struck the right

and his generation all yesterday
place in the so important

(114)

The geometry of the poem, divided along a single axis down the middle of the page, brings the 'new integer' into focus, before casting us back into a poetics of distortion or disjunction. We can see how, visually, the fragments come together, or don't quite add up. The forgotten or excluded poets provide us with an incomplete history, so too, if such a history is incomplete, and if this poem is to serve as a history most of it is lost in the break of the line. But the content itself is revealed by a small note appended to the bottom of the page telling us it was written 'after reading the book "EXPRESSIONISM" by John Willett.' Duke used various sections of the 1972 book without trying to build a narrative logic (something Duke would attempt in other cut-ups). In a prefatory note to *Poems of War and Peace*, Duke writes that upon his return to Australia he 'discovered the Expressionist Movement, and decided I'd been an Australian and an Expressionist all the time' (iv).[2] To write a *history* of expressionist poetry in this manner leads us to a certain kind of poem Duke called poems of 'Daily Life,' historical-cum-citational 'narrative' poems which are speechy and talkish but also factual, in the manner of reportage. Here the source text rent in twain begets an axis both aiding and disrupting the eye and ear of reading.

Several of Duke's poems tend to become bodies of record, that is, they read as lineated historical accounts that revisit or rethink certain events. Perhaps the most subtle of these poems is 'ALEKHINE AND JUNGE AT PRAGUE' a poem in which a famous 1942, Nazi-sponsored game of chess between Alexander Alekhine and Klaus Junge is incorporated into the poem. The poem begins 'In the year 1942 / there was a chess tournament in Prague' (117) and ends with the list of moves:

22 Q-R7+, K-B3 (would K-Q3 draw?)
23 B-Q2, KR-QB1
24 P-K4, Q-N6
25 R-R1, P-N5
26 R-R6+, K-N4
27 R-R5+ K-B3
28 Q-B5+, K-Q2
29 R-R7+, RESIGNS

(121)

Duke's interest in chess as a tactical and procedural game shines through in this poem. In meandering, Reznikoff-like prosaic lineations, the historical report that comes before this final 'proof' contextualises the game to wartime geopolitical contexts; the German fronts, Stalingrad, the wartime lives of both players. The intrigue continues until the last line which asks us to decide the match: 'the Czech spectators thought the right man won / do you think that they were right?' (120). From this Duke wants to throw uncertain light on the historical event, exposing the indeterminacy of interpretation through citational collage but putting it on the reader to make a fuller historical assessment.

Such techniques continue. In a series of poems titled 'The Nottingham Incident' which take materials from *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain. Volume 9, The East*

Midlands (1984), Duke uses a simple procedure of shuffling the words in order of length. The intact version reads:

THE NOTTINGHAM INCIDENT *ONE*

In August 1852
the Great Northern Railway
ran its first train into Nottingham
over the tracks of the Ambergate from Grantham
the Midland Railway
did not want the Great Northern in Nottingham
as soon as the Great Northern engine had uncoupled
and ran onto the turntable
it was surrounded by Midland engines
which overpowered it
and pushed it into a disused shed
Midland men locked the doors
and tore up the tracks outside
the Great Northern
did not recover their engine
for seven months

(17)

The opening poem reads as many of Duke's poems do, with the odd tonality of lineated historical prose, the straightforward recounting of an event. But then several permutations are made on this original poem. In the third permutational versioning Duke we get:

THE NOTTINGHAM INCIDENT *THREE*

a in of
in as as it
by it it up the ran
its the the the did not the the
had and ran
the was and men the and the the
did not for 1852 into over from want soon
onto into shed tore Great
first train Great Great which doors
Great their seven
August tracks engine pushed locked tracks engine
months Railway Midland Railway Midland
engines disused Midland outside recover Northern
Grantham Northern Northern
Northern Ambergate uncoupled turntable Nottingham
Nottingham surrounded overpowered

(18)

The resulting disjunction here takes us away from the recounting of *an Event* in narrative and brings us into the field of language as material, the 'Nottingham' incident becoming an incident in the reorganisation and of language: pronouns and prepositions cling to the top, while the poem's nouns and larger adjectives collect at the bottom. In what will now seem to be a characteristic citational gesture in Duke, another historical, and for that matter archival poem, 'THE WONDERS OF SCIENCE' incorporates first-person commentary among quoted parts, moving from English to American infrastructure:

> Quick! said the boss
> find me 'Heat Shocked *Bacillus subtilus* As An Indicator of Virus
> Disinfection'
> by G. H. Toenniessen and J. D. Johnston
> Journal of the American Water Works Association
> September 1970
> I dived into the archives
> I found it
> It had already been scribbled on by another critic
> superimportant words had been underlined
> like *suggested, increasing the residual free chlorine, low turbidity,*
> *monitoring, codiform index, would result in unmeasurably low*
> *coliform numbers, viruses, surveillance is at present imprac-*
> *tible, chlorine analysis alone is not satisfactory, 3mg/L free*
> *chlorine, ultraviolet, difference, importance of obtaining more*
> *knowledge on the chlorine resistance of viruses, S.N.O.R.T.*
> he'd missed out on *followed sporulation and exosporium lysis*
>
> (87)

Mixing both citational elements and narrative commentary on those elements, Duke plays the part of a researcher, or 'critic' whose scientific labour has public worth: 'finding out how the patient died.' Filtered through the marginalia of another critic who has underlined aspects of the source-text Duke's persona has been charged to find, Duke employs multiple layers of artifice here. Historical or critical inquiry finds analogy in the *forensics* of the material text (one can imagine the allegory similarly deployed in 'THE NOTTINGHAM INCIDENT,' where an originary event has been transformed or revisited by subsequent inquiry). What I am trying to argue here is that Duke is interested in the once- or twice-remove of inquiry in general, and linguistic inquiry in particular.

Duke Contra Australia

We know Duke's practice in these poems is quite clearly *post*: to test the history of avant-garde practices is to make some sense of them, or to send them up, sarcastically, wryly, or to make further 'advances' from root forms. In a very immediate sense, all these tones and approaches must have something to do with the remove Duke felt not only as an avant-gardist outside Europe but as *neo*, as a second wave vanguardist writing in a literary context both hostile to and ecstatic about his Dadaist interventions. These neo-avant-garde poems in a sense have a clear place and a clear-enough intent, poems that complicate the historical event, poems that function as historical inquiry. Though they do so complexly, we know from what tradition they come and to what histories they speak.

Following this, inquiry comes to take on further significance in another kind of poem Duke tended to write. Here I want to more closely examine poems of Duke's that attempt to take on senses of Australia and Australianness, sometimes literally, on multiple global vectors. In these poems—and there are many: about Australian working conditions, national involvement in international affairs, systems of governance—it is much less clear how they fit into the European avant-garde tradition. Take, for instance, a poem like 'Scratchticket':

SCCCCCCRRRRRatchticket
SccccccccRRRRRatchticket
Scccccccrrrrrr AAAAAtchticket
Scccccrrrrraaaaa TCHticket
Scccccrrrrraaaaatch TiiiiiiCKET
SCRATCHTICKET
SCRATCHTICKET
SCRAAAAATCHTICKET
SCRATCHTICKETSCRATCHTICKETSCRATCHTICKETSCRATCHTICKET
SCRATCHTICKET
SC—RATCH—TICK—ET
SCR—ATCH—TICK—ET
SCR—ATCH—TICKET
Scr—atch—TICKET
Scratch—ticket
Scratchticket
SCRATCHTICKET
Sc ——— RATCH ——— TICKET
Sc ————ATCH ——— TICKET
SCR ——————— ATCH ——————————— TICKET
SCR ——————— ATCH ——————————— TICK ————— ET

[Dedicated to our Minister of Arts, Mr. 'Jim'* Kennan, who gave us scratchtickets for trains, trams, and buses, but has now left such things behind him and is now directing our 'arts led' recovery: Jas]

(221)

Led by sound, the poem works at the extremes of both visuality and audiation. But there is more to it: this *notational* sensibility depends, in other words, on more than syntactic disruption. Just as intriguing as the 'poem proper' is the note at the bottom of the page to Jim (James Harley) Kennan, which indicates a certain sarcasm about public policy and the careers of those responsible for it. The sound poem is thus more than just sound; it is rather more a political-conceptual poem. Interest in domestic policy as a source for poetic concepts is supplemented by an interest in the poetic constitution of nationhood. His poem 'Whitman Sings Again' most strikingly brings questions of modernity, modernism, USAmerican cultural power and derivation into the force field of an Australian postmodernity:

> A song of myself
> yet another song of myself
> lurching in the tramtracks of Walt Whitman
> the great self-contradictor
> and friend of the exclamation mark
> with a transistorised, twice-tested, videophonic, biodegradable,

barbaric yawp
a song of myself

I'm not one of the roughs
I'm not one of the smooths either
I don't love everything
even if I had a Brooklyn Ferry and an endlessly rocking cradle I
wouldn't love them
I'm in Australia
Australia I don't love you
Australia you don't love me

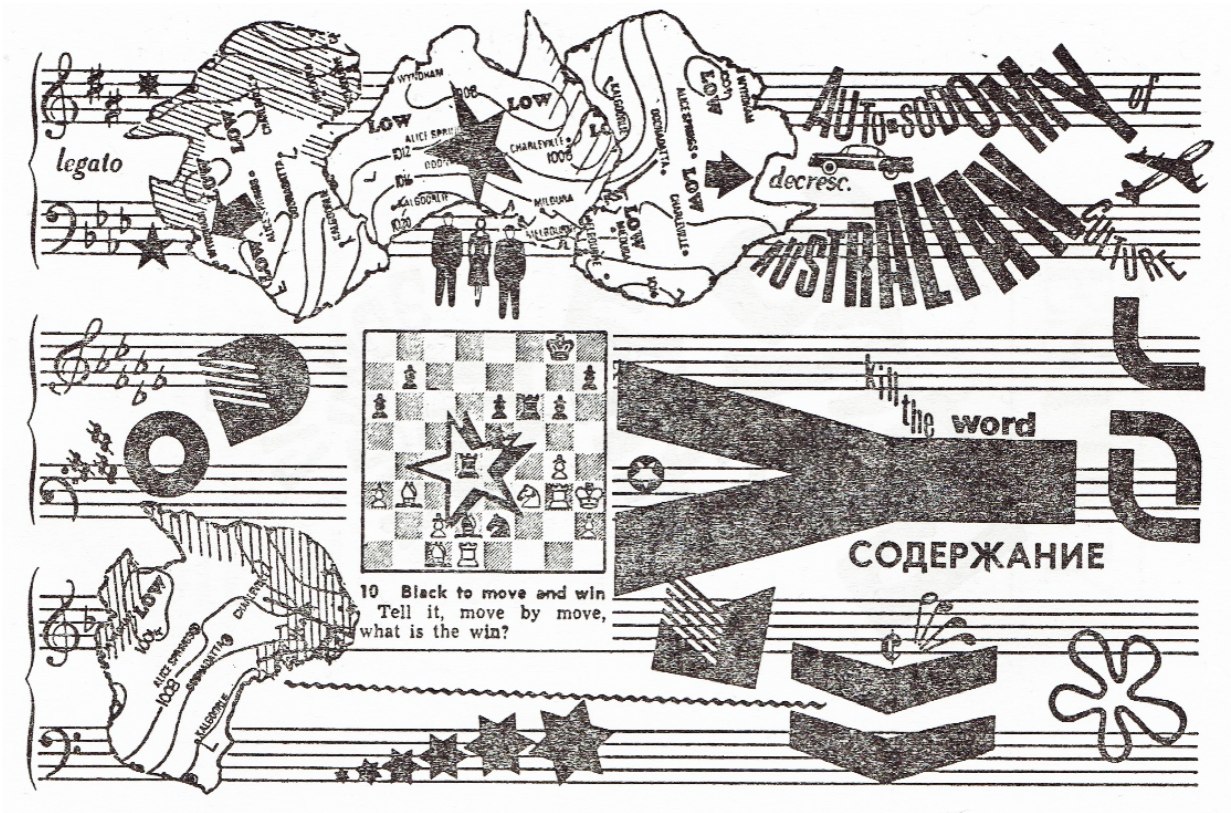
(25)

Comparison can be made here with Ania Walwicz's 1981 poem 'AUSTRALIA' which begins 'You big ugly,' or indeed Ouyang Yu's 'Fuck you, Australia' (1995), both poems taking aim at Standard English and, through the lens of the migrant experience of patriotism and racism, the contradictions of Statehood, its link to cultural violence, its role in the racialised marking of subjects, and its often false claims to totality. Such dynamics are there in 'GOING HOME LATE AT NIGHT,' one of several anti-racist/anti-bigotry poems Duke had written, where he writes '*Look at that cunt over there! / he looks like a fucking Egyptian!!!'* / and I felt angry for a moment / but when I thought about it / I'd rather be called a *cunt* / or a *fucking Egyptian* / than an *Australian*' (92), or in poems like 'INVASION' (*poems of life & death* 194–96) and 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY AUSTRALIA,' where the theme of nation is taken up using more explicit terms. In the latter he sarcastically takes note of the upcoming 1988 Bicentenary by mocking cultures of settlement and calling attention to genocide:

This seems a time of significant moments
important anniversaries are approaching
150 of Victoria
200 years of Australia
we're told it's our birthday
and we must celebrate
well I suggest you celebrate
in a genuine early Australian manner
[. . .]
take no notice
of the people who live on the land
If they object too much
kill them
that's the genuine early Australian way to celebrate
have a happy birthday

(29)

We might compare this poem with a collage piece Duke made using a musical score as the main register for its visual elements:



(197)

The chessboard is a common vanguardist visual and procedural aid to writing across the traditions, harking back to John Cage and Marcel Duchamp's matches, or even Fernando Aguiar, in puzzle-board works like 'Palauras Cruzades—Problema No. 01'[3] and several works by Karl Young including 'defiant lethargy' and 'Dolomite Chorus.'[4] There are other figures in Duke's score. In place of neumes to mark pitch, two visual elements seem to make a claim for a more 'Australiographic,' and more procedural score: Australian maps show weather isobars, and a chess board is frozen in time before a winning move. The way the maps of the Australian land mass are scored here shows a notational poetics critically aware of global, and temporal positioning; follow a procedure, follow a score for the purposes of cultural critique. The superposed maps run along the score like so many dissonances sounding the contradictions of culture, contradictions that come up to a crescendo in the poem 'An Answer To Those Who Say You Can't Write Poetry In A Cultural Backwater Like Australia' interrogating the idea of a 'national poet' through Henrik Ibsen, who

> . . . became an assistant in a chemist's shop
> in a small town
> a place of no importance
> but for all that
> his ideas went round the world
> with the speed of thought
> and made people think about things
> that they might not have thought about otherwise

(191)

Duke then goes on to recount an appearance of Ibsen at a cafe in what was then Kristiania (now Oslo), given by an English tourist Richard Le Gallieniene:

> One person said to Le Gallieniene
> 'Do you know who that was?
> That was IBSEN!
> OUR GREAT NATIONAL POET!'
>
> Could this happen here?
>
> (192)

Conflating international literary celebrity and readership with local and national renown, Duke is left wondering, in a surprisingly positivistic light, whether similar cultural elevation might happen in Australia. The smaller font of 'Could this happen here?' as rendered above is a kind of timid aside in that the typeface suggests both cringe and defiance (an answer, a rejoinder), a tension apparent in the event/instructions for these two sound poems, taking off from the legacy of the Fluxus instruction-score, particularly those pioneered by Yoko Ono, whom Duke met, in *Grapefruit* (1964):

> MANNING CLARK
> A famous historian. Try to sound like some long-legged wading bird. *CLARK* and *SQUAWK* aren't very different really.
>
> NED NASAL
> Australians are often sneered at for talking thru their noses. Make this into a virtue. Keep your mouth shut and let all the sound come out your nose. Volume will be low so you will probably need amplification. Don't open your mouth.
>
> (129–30)

Hazel Smith and Roger Dean have read Duke's performance of the sound poem 'Stalin,' in which the performer repeats the word Stalin until they fall down exhausted, as one of variation, vocal control and contortion, relinquishing of control: 'Sounding like a train gathering speed, he propelled himself behind his own voice to the point where he could no longer control how fast, or in what direction, he was going' (139). The result of these 'idiosyncratic' aspects is a sense of the 'half-joking, half-serious' (138) in the two above soundworks as well. To harness 'everyday' Australian speechmaking habits to 'avant-garde effect,' bringing national-linguistic peculiarity and locality to the sphere of vanguardist sound-making—itself bringing with it a set of a mandated performance styles—is to site the very possibilities of an experimental aesthetic in what an outsider would notice, with a sneer, *as* Australian linguistic oddity. From Ned Kelly to Manning Clark, Duke's working class drawl would here cover several Australian tonalities. But to get there you have to step back, audially, from the accustomed sounds. That is, these poems are something of a listening-in to the Australian sound from outside, from other hemispheres and global locales. From Duke's neo-avant-garde, yet still reflexive experiments to his poems about Australia, the result is, so it seems, more confident and imperative than locally-effacing; work through the difficulty of experimental poetry in a 'cultural backwater' like Australia, but only place a (literal) accent on the 'cringeworthy' tonalities of Australian English if one is to redeem them.

Old and New Contradictions

Rather than an imagined 'fixed' vernacularity, the above poem shows that Duke's treatment of vernacular artifice pays close attention to contradictory social markers—class, race, gender, nation, culture—and because of this, no one vocality comes through in Duke's work. No singular 'voice' is apparent because Duke brings us back to the social construction of voice. It may be that such radical resistance to the singularity of 'voice' is one of the forgotten elements left behind, or left out of a working critical vocabulary of Australian poetics. In the larger schema of understanding Australian experimental poetics, these contradictions have consequences for certain critical stopgaps that have not yet been surmounted.

Take Philip Mead in the opening passages of his book *Networked Language* where, so he claims, a certain critical 'lag' makes it hard to move into more difficult and 'formally innovative' works (2–3). The implications for this are vast for a poet like Duke, and my wager is that the closer study of experimental poetics, especially those 'difficult limit-cases,' studied on their own terms and with attention to 'linguistic range' and the transnational contexts of the avant-garde, can reveal the 'ways forward' Mead seeks. Ways forward out of just those discussions about meaning and lyric, or lyric sociality. In some ways a bold extension of Mead's principal claims, Michael Farrell's *Writing Australian Unsettlement* takes the term 'unsettlement' into the field of poetics. Tracing a longer material and textual history of modes of 'poetic invention,' the subjects of Farrell's case studies are not all considered of 'general importance.' Some are virtually unknown, like Jong Ah Sing's unorthodox diary/hybrid-genre work *The Case* (1867?–1872), with its unusual battery of marks: typography, punctuation, use of majuscule lettering. Other texts, like Ned Kelly's *Jerilderie Letter* (1879), are well-known, but have not been looked at from this perspective, meaning a *poetics* perspective. Indeed the key word (and practice) for Farrell is just that, poetics: 'Many of the texts in this book have been written about by contemporary scholars, but for the most part not by those whose main interest is poetics, nor in what Australia's heritage of poetics might be' (2).

These questions amplify the odd disjunction between poetry and poetics, as well as between practice and criticism that feels peculiarly Australian. As both an experimental poet and a poetics-based critic, Farrell in some ways solves some contradictions that have been well documented. Martin Harrison, in *Who Wants to Create Australia?* (2007) is willing to assert that there is 'no idyllic, permanently unchanging relationship between poet and critic' (22), and goes on to say:

> The paradox, the sheer oddity, of the relation between poetry and criticism in our time is intense. The contemporary critic's work looks confident, so well referenced, so sophisticated in relation to the major philosophical questions of its time; the poet's looks home made, handcrafted, often small and mute. Yet so many of the critical or philosophical themes sketched into a resumé of post-structuralism's key themes are part of a poetics. As such these ideas respond not just to an abstract idea of writing . . . they are to do with writing, with composing language in written form, with mark-making. (*Who Wants to Create Australia* 23)

Therein lies the chief paradox, I think, of Australian poetics criticism. But I cannot help thinking—and with some preliminary exploration of Duke already behind us here—that it might just be the wrong *kind* of poetry that gets submitted to critical examination. How much can be said, in terms of poetics and in terms of criticism, about a nice, homely, handcrafted line, when the whole gamut of poststructuralist theory beckons something else, something in form, trace, performance, that makes the most of *mark-making*? I'm not making a claim for the

'worth' of experimentality here, simply that, as Harrison's point presses, such work is better situated for the contemporary critic's theoretical armature.

The quite logical argument that then arises is this: there is no better-suited poetry for material poetics and poetics-inflected criticism now than that of avant-garde Australian poetry since Duke. The reasons are various: the focus on *mark-making*, for one, and in Duke connections between trace/mark and ethicopolitical questions, between markmaking and the historical, the sociocultural. Criticism, that is to say, is better off, more generously kitted out, with experimental poetry. All that work that plays with the segmenting of words, lexical drift, splintering and scattering of mark, trace and syllable. And when the benefits for *writerly* writing are made apparent, and the work relevant, we need then to talk about questions of distribution. Are poetics researchers *accessing* these works? Could it simply be that Australian poetry criticism has been looking at the wrong poets? Or, is the poetry itself at fault; can we then say that it just doesn't live up to 'sophisticated' critical acumen? Or have we once again landed back in the all-too-familiar territory of problems with canonicity?

The Blind Spot of Vanguardism

In a 1996 volume *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Paul Kane identified the strains of negativity and a supposed 'absence' of romanticism that had determined to a large degree the historical shape of Anglophone Australian poetry. Kane lists his concern with a 'narrower frame' that is a limited, traditional and 'indeed canonical grouping' of poets (Harpur, Kendall, Brennan, Slessor, Hope, Malley, Wright, Harwood, Murray): thus the 'implicit—now explicit—argument is that these few poets are among the strongest and most interesting of Australian poets, and that something of general importance can be learned from a study of them' (2). The argument is that this grouping of poets is straightforward: they are the 'strongest' and 'most interesting.' They can be said to have 'general importance' to the canonical genealogy, a genealogy Kane insists through his various readings of these poets and their poetry *is* the embodiment of Australian poetry, and that their presence is telltale of a certain absence, that absence being romanticism.

But what if we have altogether missed another blind spot? The study of contemporary Australian experimental poetry and poetics might find a strong alternative to this narrative. Perhaps another absence entirely determines much of the debates around and aesthetics of Australian poetry: *the absence of an avant-garde.* For John Hawke, the closest alignment to this would be the *presence* of Symbolism. However, if we are to speak of negativity, and if this really is the case, such an absence of an avant-garde in this modern constellation winds up—via a double negation—to be a kind of enlivening presence. Another if: if poets like Duke, in a similar manner to Kane's model of negativity, are any kind of neglected blind spot in Australian poetry, a sociotextual, critical understanding of these centripetal notions of canonmaking might reconsider what is important in this configuration not to withhold all judgement, but rather to challenge the aesthetic, textual and *poetics*-based assumptions of what might be called 'interesting' in what we understand to be a convention, a corpus, or a canon.

The question of the great canonical grouping's absent Romanticism, I mean to say, might then extend equally strongly to that of the avant-garde. Brennan, of course, is the most obvious example of the potential of this dynamic. Romantic negativity, like avant-garde negativity, here will play the role of the oppositional force, a radical negation that lies dormant in convention itself, with regard to its apparently unbreakable edifice. So we see how Kane's highly 'representative' sensibility persists, but under pressure from *poetics*, being 'central' does not

amount to 'good' or 'interesting.' The danger is when what is 'of interest' to theories of poetics shifts, slips. Thus readjusted, the critical lens turns to reassessment and revision.

To claim credibility to these alternatives, despite the problems that won't go away any time soon like the issue of the *neo*, and of derivation, there is no doubt that Australian poetry in the late twentieth century has been under pressure from a 'something else': Australian avant-garde poetics. To be historically precise, such a poetics evolves from a reworking of the modernist avant-garde to the continuation of contemporary experimental poetics after the 1980s and well into the new century. More historically precise because now, I argue, there is an equally strong case to be made for a dialectic of *modern and contemporary*, as much as modern-romantic. Twenty years on, Kane's story is not the only story to be told; Kane's category of 'general importance,' in the face of the strongest alternative histories and genealogies in the Australian avant-garde, seems to have evolved in our times to a tension between modernity and contemporaneity. What Mead and Harrison identify as critical impasses in Australian literary history and poetics-inflected criticism might lead to the *retroactive resignifying* of neglected works outside the constellation of general importance via a literary revisionism, a reconsideration of Australia's poetic languages of invention. Under such models, assigning cultural and literary-critical importance to contemporary Australian experimentation will work in tandem with fuller texturing of the transnational in Australian poetry. By texturing I mean those cross-linguistic, material and form elements that come into play through literary experimentation. To really take up Mead's challenge to 'cut the lag' and match a critical discourse with the difficult, dissonant or dysprosodic Australian poem, critics may begin to balance the linguistic and formal analyses of experimental poetics with the sociohistorical and cultural breadth of cultural inquiry, becoming attentive to works which have sought an *emancipation of disjunction*.

Emancipation? From what convention, what stricture? The work of Duke puts us back to the most fundamental questions. What was, or what is, the Australian neo-avant-garde? What was it, is it opposing? How closed, how open was it, is it? We know at least that it is transcultural and transnational, an experimentality that has looked globally outwards, remapping hemispheric bearings of the avant-garde in ways that unsettle Euro- and Euro-American frameworks of influence and transmission. But without a proper concept of transmission, or, for that matter, *transnationality* within histories of global avant-gardism, it is easy to dismiss antipodal experimental writing as derivative. Such an approach fatally *dehistoricises* experimental poetry, as if to suggest that only works perched on the scales of a convention or tradition (including the avant-garde tradition) are to be considered historical. At worst, this leads to discourses around inventive poetics that attribute all acts of experiment solely to USAmerican influences like Language Writing and Conceptual Writing. Rather than claiming an avant-garde as simply an 'opposition' to the received, to the conventions-that-be, we might first acknowledge these bodies of work, and from there begin to see how, in lieu of critical poetics, the blind spot that is vanguardism not only reveals its face, but the multifaceted contradictions arising from its appearance.

In these ways we might begin to grasp or glimpse the shape of an Australian avant-garde. Still, these are but glimpses: rereading Duke can reveal Australian experimental poetics late century as a kind of negativity, a blind spot at the core of the Australian poetry. Under better light we will be able to read these works as part of a larger, and transnational avant-garde poetics, or, in the case of Duke, to locate both the sarcastic refusal of, or and enthusiastic engagement with, avant-garde poetics. In Duke we find a sustained poetic thinking, and inquiry of meaningmaking and poeticity that merits further work. The real question will be whether in

adjusting the critical lens, in becoming critically attentive to languages of invention in Australian poetry, these literary-historical moves, shifting experimental practices from periphery to centre, will be of consequence to literary theory.

NOTES

[1] Michael Denholm's excellent two-volume resource, *Small Press Publishing in Australia: The Early 1970s*, notes their publications, among them the 628-page anthology *Pie* (I examined a copy owned by the scholar Sam Moginie), edited by Paul Smith and Mal Morgan, and printed in telephone book format. It claims to be 'the biggest collection of poetry ever assembled in this country' (*Small Press Publishing* 48).

[2] Duke also did translations of 'inventive writers' around the Expressionist tradition including Yvan Goll, Alfred Lichtenstein, Hans (or Jean) Arp, August Stramm, Helmut Heissenbüttel and Kurt Schwitters (*Poems of War and Peace* 163–81).

[3] For a reprint of this work see the chapter on 'Portuguese Visual Poetry' in Harry Polkinhorn ed. 'Visual Poetry: An International Anthology,' *Visible Language* 27.4 (1993): 447.

[4] For reprints of these works see *The Last Vispo Anthology: Visual Poetry 1998–2008* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012): 264–65.

WORKS CITED

Amirkhanian, Charles ed. *10+2: 12 American Text Sound Pieces*. Berkeley: 1750 Arch Records, 1975. Vinyl LP.

Bürger, Peter. 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde.' *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 695–715. Print.

Cradwick, Catherine. 'From Dodo to Dada: The Wayzgoose Press and the Art of Survival.' In Bartkowiak, Heinz Stefan. *Bartkowiak's Forum Book Art (Yearbook)*. Hamburg: H.S. Bartkowiak, 2004–2005. 490–500. Print.

Denholm, Michael. *Small Press Publishing in Australia:The Early 1970s*. North Sydney: Second Back Row, 1979. Print.

---. *Small Press Publishing in Australia:The Late 1970s to the Mid to Late 1980s, Volume II*. Footscray: Footprint, 1991. Print.

Duke, Jas H. *Dada Kampfen Um Leben Und Tod*. Katoomba: Wayzgoose Press, 1996. Print.

---. *Destiny Wood*. Melbourne: Whole Australian Catalogue, 1978. Print.

---. *poems of life & death*. Melbourne: Collective Effort, 2003. Print.

---. *Poems of War and Peace*. Melbourne: Collective Effort, 1989. Print.

---. 'Sounds, sound poetry, and sound/text compositions.' *NMA 10 Magazine* (1992): 7–12. Print.

Edmonds, Philip. *Tilting at Windmills: The Literary Magazine in Australia, 1968–2012*. Adelaide: U of Adelaide P, 2015. Print.

Fanoy, Jeltje. 'After Jas H. Duke (poem).' *Postcolonial Text* 12.2 (2017): n.p. http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/2240/2073 Web.

Farrell, Michael. *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention, 1796–1945*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.

Foster, Hal. 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?' *October* 70 (Autumn 1994): 5–32. Print.

Greenaway, Lisa and Steve Grimwade, eds. *Going Down Swinging 13* (1993). Clifton Hill: Going Down Swinging, 1993. Print.

Harrison, Martin. *Who Wants to Create Australia?* Broadway: Halstead Press, 2007. Print.

Hooton, Harry. *Poet of the 21st Century: Collected Poems*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1990. Print.

Kane, Paul. *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.

Kinsella, John. *Spatial Relations Volume Two: Essays Reviews, Commentaries, and Chorography*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. Print.

Kostelanetz, Richard. *Text-Sound Texts*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980. Print.

Mead, Philip. *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008. Print.

Miller, Tyrus. 'Avant-Garde and Theory: A Misunderstood Relation.' *Poetics Today* 20.4 (Winter 1999): 549–79. Print.

Quartermain, Peter. *Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde.* Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2013. Print.

Reed, Brian. *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013. Print.

Smith, Hazel and Roger Dean. *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Print.