What he thought was most important in a film is always what one had not *put* there—it was not dialogue or mime that mattered, but the relationship between face and face; or between face and action; or the relationship between a visual sequence and the noises on the sound-track that accompanied it. By using unknown faces and untried performers he was able to achieve precisely the effects he had in mind, which would be impossible through the intermediary of well-known actors who came into the film with ready-made characteristics and personalities. He has the reputation, of course, of driving his cast (and indeed himself) to exhaustion and beyond when making pictures, and one could see exactly how this relentless pressure would be exerted as the quiet detached voice detailed the method, and the black and silver holder sketched visions in the air. One sardonic journalist asked him if he did not think there was a danger of all his actors being projections of himself if used in this way, and at this young Leterrier jerked forward with a grin to see how this would be taken by the Master: Bresson seemed not to find this amusing and dismissed the subject summarily, but I suspect there may be some truth in it. The lively cut and thrust between experts went on for an hour, and provided one of the most stimulating comments on the cinema that I have ever had the luck to hear. It seemed all the more preposterous that the prize could have gone to *Friendly Persuasion* after hearing what Bresson was trying to do with his medium.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

POETS WITHOUT A TRADITION

DAVID MOODY

POETRY has always a hazardous existence, is rarely held or formed in an adequate organ of words; it is too easily dissipated or clumsily fumbled back beyond the mind's grasping. To be continually a poet, even under the most favourable conditions, requires great power and self-consecration. Today conditions are nowhere very favourable, and least of all in young countries such as Australia and New Zealand. To be a poet anywhere, but there even more, a man needs genius, or the dedication more usually found in saints.

That these countries have not an excessive share of genius, and that their writers are as mortal and divided as all the world, is the evidence

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of two recently published anthologies, one of Australian and the other of New Zealand verse.[1] The intention of the editors in each has been to trace from its beginnings the evolution of a distinctly national idiom, to show the growth of a poetic tradition which is characteristically 'Australian' or 'New Zealand'. In each case they have felt that the poetry of their country began to come of age in the 1930s, with the result that the earlier writers are offered mainly as an historical background to the larger number of poems by living authors. That there should be so many living writers of verse (about forty in the Australian book, and twenty-seven in the New Zealand) persistent and skilful enough to have won recognition even in their own country, shows at least the presence of a vital desire for creativity, a vital desire for poetry.

Unfortunately the desire is not of itself enough. A few have the gift and the discipline to write poems that are whole and satisfying. But most are uninspired, and subject to severe limitations. Indeed it seems possible to speak of a poetic idiom only because of these common limitations. Their source can be felt behind the stated intention of the editors, the search for a distinct national idiom, for a poetic contribution to the foundation of a national culture. These phrases are symptoms of the tangle of obstructing problems. The very fact that a country has attained that degree of self-consciousness where it feels compelled at once to create and to define its 'culture', shows it to be in a state of rich, but raw and confused, vitality: the adolescent ferment of a young society aware both of its own energies and the great achievements of mature societies. Its writers, involved in their situation and partly responsible for it, are likely to set themselves strange and unprofitable problems, to be intensely on the defensive, and when they have not genius, to feel that any significant experience, however untransformed in the imagination, will be poetry when written down in verse.

The quest for a 'national culture' in both Australia and New Zealand is itself the central strange and unprofitable problem. There, in this context, the word 'culture' has a limited sense, with snob overtones. It refers to the arts of poetry, music, painting, drama—the arts which are felt to be the great distinction and dignity of the 'old countries' of Europe, the arts which (it is subtly suggested) only the enlightened intellectual in these philistine countries will appreciate. In fact the arts as such are fairly much alive in Australia and New Zealand: each

1 *An Anthology of New Zealand Verse*. Selected by Robert Chapman and Jonathan Bennett.
A Book of Australian Verse. Selected by Judith Wright (Oxford University Press, London: Cumberlege, 21s. and 15s. respectively.)

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has its National Theatre, its National Orchestra, an excessive number of practising painters and poets, and Australia has a touring Ballet Company. Yet it is true that they do not possess a national culture: there are too few signs of an active national imagination (whatever that might be).

Both countries were settled not much more than a century ago, mainly by people emerging from those lower ranks of English society which have contributed very little to literature or any of the arts. The settlers were obliged to give their undivided energies to the back-breaking and often heart-breaking work of a getting a living hold upon harsh and alien lands. Their immediate mode of imaginative expression was the crude bush ballad, which for all its tendency to melodrama, did image something of the new ways of life. But most of the verse written before 1914 followed dimly after the less enlightened Victorians, or took up the lost causes of Romanticism. Inevitably the result of these attempts to focus the new and quite strange land and life in the glass of Wordsworth or of nineteenth-century England was that no sense at all was made of them. And the transported culture of England became something apart, artificial, and slowly lost any civilizing power it may have exercised. As the people in the new lands worked themselves free of the first crushing labours of colonization, their society began to take the shape of their condition. First there was to be education, so that all should have the opportunity to make good; then there was to be the Welfare State so that there should be security for all. It was to be the secular society of the emancipated working man.

Now that these things have largely been achieved the Australian or New Zealander is able to feel that his country has made itself one to be proud of, and the easy admission that 'culturally' it is inferior to many economically less fortunate countries does little to affect his complacency. In those countries the 'good life', in material terms, is within anybody's reach, and the life of the imagination has no part in it because it has done nothing towards achieving it. In consequence the people grow up without any depth of self-knowledge, and without that deep knowledge of their land which would be love. The Englishman who knows the features and patterns of his country and society through the interpretations of a long tradition of writers can move always in a consciousness of his past and with some awareness of himself and his situation. His life has an extension in the mind and in the spirit, through the transforming power of the imagination. In Australia and New Zealand there has been no such transformation, and daily living has almost no extension in the poetic imagination. The activity in the arts referred to earlier has done little to help. It is a sign of creative energy and the desire to make poetry, but it has rarely risen

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above the level of craft, the practice of the technical skills necessary to the arts. Poetry (paraphrasing Coleridge) as an intuition in the finite mind of the infinite and incarnate I Am, or (to try again) as a comprehension at once of abiding realities and of the actual human condition, is still unknown, uncared for, and almost uncreated. So there is not that shared consciousness of an historical and imaged past, and of a framework of traditions and values and ways of living, which is normally recognized as a culture.

Instead there is an inferior form of culture, the New Zealand or the Australian 'way of life', the sub-culture of the new materialist nation. But this (here using the word 'culture' in the limited sense) is in essence an *anti-culture*, a condition of society which prevents and pillories and poisons the life of the imagination. The prose of obvious commonsense is its appropriate voice, the news, the sports page, the weather forecast. It is indifferent to poetry in any of its forms, and tends to be intolerant of the poet.

The would-be poet is therefore confronted by two related sets of difficulties. Because his country and its life has undergone no metamorphosis in other imaginations, he must achieve in his own imagination the total transformation into poetry of brute and uncomprehended experience. And he must do this against the current of incomprehension, of antipathy, and (worst of all) against the suction of that godless, grubbing, prosaic way of life which is always threatening to drain his creative energies and to drown the clarity of his perceptions.

Only the few who have some touch of genius, or the integrity which involves self-consecration, have avoided the latter set of difficulties, and been free to give themselves to the essential work of transformation. The rest, the majority, are in one way or another trapped in a situation which makes the writing of poetry nearly impossible. The so-called 'traditions of poetry' are in fact records of the similar ways in which potential poets have failed to create poetry.

A very great deal of the writing in the two books (more in the Australian than in the New Zealand) has gone down, unwillingly or not, under the prosaic way of life. The authors have ability to observe, to comment upon, even to satirize the situations and substance of their common experience. If only they had a theme they would be well occupied in writing prose stories or novels. But not even the suggestiveness of verse can make their writing seem other than the prose of prose-thinking countries. Their writing is building up no tradition except that of the sub-culture to which it gives a voice.

The poets, i.e. those who have in fact created poetry, may be the founders of poetic traditions in their own countries, or they may not. It is much too early to begin speculation. Their poetry is too indi-

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vidual, too extra-ordinary, to be claimed simply as 'national' poetry; and because it speaks, not with the voice of the common man, but with the voice of one intensely alive person, it more clearly expresses things that are true of the nation, and perhaps of all men. Moreover these poets have no need of explanation of the sort offered here for the failure of potential poets: where a poem has been created, it exists, and is always more important than anything that could be said about it. The only adequate criticism of the poems (i.e. verses that are poetic) in these books, would have to begin by quoting them in full. (If that could be done I would stop writing here, but the whole of this issue would have to be given to the poetry of Australia and New Zealand. If this is considered it will appear that the proportions in this article of undergrowth-clearing criticism and achievement-measuring criticism are not what they seem.)

There would be the lyrical poems of John Shaw Neilson (Australia), having the simplicity, the strange insight and the beauty of a childlike vision, yet having also a depth of human understanding which gives them the delicate strength as well as the clarity of a crystal. There would be the musically more delightful lyrics of Denis Glover (N.Z.), which can be songs simply or poems of intense compassion. Then there would be some who out of personal suffering have made a passionate strong poetry of the cruelty that can be in men and in life, and of the black loneliness and despair the spirit can be lost in. Christopher Brennan (Australia) and Robin Hyde (N.Z.) struggled for courage and peace, and in their poems affirmed a hope which in their lives they despaired of. R. A. K. Mason (N.Z.) in his poems showed himself tougher, stoical before fate, nobly tender before the sufferings of people. Of these Mary Stanley (N.Z.) speaks most simply and directly, and with such full comprehension of her experience that her poems seem spoken within us, and to state deep things we had always known but never grasped. Finally there would be two inspired poets, J. P. McAuley (Australia) and J. K. Baxter (N.Z.), whose writing at their best is a revelation of ultimate realities seen as in a vision of common things. They excite comparison with Blake and Rilke, and can in a very limited way sustain it, but they have not such genius to unveil mysteries at the heart of man and creation. Yet they are poets in the same tradition of the spirit, and have attempted with honour the same work of so comprehending and transforming their experience that its intrinsic and universal poetry is revealed.

These poets could be beginning the poetic traditions of Australia and New Zealand. But other poets will be just as individual and original, will write poetry which, while equally valid, will seem to have little in common with theirs. A poetic tradition does not take shape in so

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short a time as one century; and it is only when deeply established that it becomes valuable, as source of energy to poetry and as a support to the art of the second-order writers. Yet these countries have poets of such power and promise that they can afford to rejoice in them for the present and to leave to the future the matter of tradition. Ultimately it is the poets who count, not the tradition. These poets, without the soil and support of one, and in spite of the great difficulties, have found how to create poetry—a remarkable achievement which shows that the hope for poetry is not in what has already been written, but in the fine integrity and passion of individual hearts.

For this reason there seems to be more hope for poetry in these two countries than in England. A proper criticism of the verse published in recent English anthologies would have to point out that while there are a very few whose poetry deserves to endure, most writers are merely giving voice to quaint or precious perceptions, or to prosaic living and thinking—i.e. that in their own ways, more refined by tradition though these may be, they too are potential poets failing to create poetry. In England the past has a vitality which will enliven the future for some time to come (and which will continue to be of value also to other English-speaking countries), but there are few signs that anything new or equally vital is being created here. In Australia and New Zealand the writers tend to be less than perfect in their art, but they manifest a deep creative energy which has great promise. There is hope that this promise will be achieved, in the serious concern of many people for the spiritualization of their way of living, and in the complementary and equally serious concern of poets for the creation of poetry. They are not content to live out the past, but are trying, obscurely and faithfully, to create a future in which that deep desire for poetry, which is a form of the desire for eternal truth and beauty, may at last be satisfied.

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