Distant voices

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DISTANT VOICES
A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree
Doctor of Creative Arts
from
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by

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Without John Ashbery’s lifetime of poetry this work would have no clear focus and no anchor; along with every other reader of poetry I owe him thanks for the invigorating literary nutrition his subtle and productive career has provided for us all. And I owe special thanks to Mr Ashbery for permitting me to eviscerate his poem ‘Clepsydra’, to cobble together and attach to the remains an assortment of body parts, and then to regalvanise it as my poem ‘The Anaglyph’, which begins this thesis.

John Hawke supervised this project calmly through its many twists and turns. His close knowledge of the areas I wished to work in is much broader than mine, and I greatly appreciate his tactful and generous support and encouragement throughout.

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None of this thesis could have been written without the background of my fifty-year career as a writer, and none of that would have been possible without the constant support and encouragement of my wife Lyn Tranter.

I am also grateful for the practical support provided over many of those years by the Literature Board of the Australia Council.
ABSTRACT

‘Distant Voices’ consists of two parts: a collection of poems and a thirty-thousand word exegesis.

The poems are presented in three groups.

In Vocoder four long poems explore, in different ways, the idea of displacing the authorial ego with a kind of writing at one or two removes, through the process of translation, ventriloquy, mask or disguise. Speaking French presents 101 deliberate mistranslations of some of Rimbaud’s ‘Illuminations’ and poems by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine. At the Movies is a group of narrative, discursive and reflective poems that speak about various movies and their cultural settings.

The exegesis is also presented in three parts. In it the poet John Tranter is discussed in the third person.

Part 1: About the Poems discusses the means of production and some of the theoretical implications of the poems presented in this thesis, partly in the context of Tranter’s earlier work, as the poems develop, extend and criticise some of Tranter’s earlier literary strategies.

Part 2: Prior projects discusses Tranter’s forty-year career as a writer, editor, publisher, radio producer, critic and anthologist, relating these changing roles to the writing in his twenty-odd books and his other projects, and attempting to trace a developing strand of experimental practice that finds its apotheosis in the process of translation, ventriloquy, mask or disguise underlying the thesis poems.

Part 3: Dream-Work looks at the three poets who have most influenced his work: Arthur Rimbaud, the Australian hoax poet ‘Ern Malley’, and the contemporary US poet John Ashbery, and also at the tripartite structure qualifying much of Tranter’s writing. Poetry is seen to occupy a liminal position in the Venn diagram where three fields overlap: dream theory, movie creation and criticism, and literary creation and criticism.
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Epigraph

We know that all literature is a form of disguise, a mask, a fable, a mystery: and behind the mask is the author.

— Leon Edel