

The Poetic *Inaesthetic*: Theorising the Contemporary Beyond Postmodernism

Dr Ali Alizadeh

School of English, Communications and Performance Studies
Monash University

Abstract

Contemporary Australian poetry, as with many other forms of contemporary cultural production, has often been viewed as a postmodern phenomenon. In his influential 2007 essay “Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism”, for example, the poet and critic David McCooney has described the dominant mode of new Australian poetry as a hybrid negotiation of innovation (‘new’) with tradition (‘lyricism’) that deconstructs the oppositional drive of past avant-gardisms. But this perspective, whilst persuasive in discussing the work of a number of dominant poetic voices, appears insufficient in accounting for the complex work of the newer Australian poets whose poems break with thematic, aesthetic, and conceptual tenets of a postmodernist poetic *doxa*. This paper argues that the work of such contemporary poets can be best viewed through the prism of philosopher Alain Badiou’s notion of *inaesthetics*.

Is Postmodernism Dead?

Postmodernism, it seems, has as many lives as a cat. It is, to mix metaphors, an undead vampire that rises from its cultural grave soon after vampire-hunters of various critical persuasions have triumphantly claimed to have put the nails in the movement’s coffin. But is—or should that be *was*?—postmodernism a cultural and philosophical movement, on par with other relevant twentieth century *isms* such as Futurism and Existentialism? And, if so, should it start with capital ‘P’? – or is it a much more mercurial and complex phenomenon?

Howsoever one may define postmodernism—a task which is of some relevance to this paper—it can be observed that since the end of the twentieth century and particularly in the so-called post-9/11 world, many a cultural expert has pronounced postmodernism dead. This may be the result of, among other things, the predominance of postmodernistically-incorrect grand

narratives from Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis¹ to a multitude of religious fundamentalisms and ethnic nationalisms, as well as the rigid binary oppositions regarding global warming and so on in the political sphere.

In a 2006 issue of *Philosophy Now*, for example, the literary scholar Alan Kirby has claimed postmodernism is “dead and buried” due to what he sees as the increasing scarcity of ostensibly postmodernist tropes in today's cultural products.² Such a view has been most publically demonstrated in the 2011-2012 exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum titled ‘Postmodernism: style and subversion 1970-1990’. This title's assumption that postmodernism began to wane in the 1990s has prompted the novelist Edward Docx to write enthusiastically, in an article titled “Postmodernism is dead” in *Prospect* magazine, that the emergence of “specificity, of values and of authenticity” in more recent works of arts—one of Docx's examples being US writer Jonathan Frazen's 2010 novel *Freedom*—signals that “[w]e are entering a new age.”³

Yet despite their rhetorical forcefulness, and upon closer inspection, these perspectives appear rather problematic. Kirby's key assumption that digital interactivity has somehow undermined the tenets of postmodernist aesthetics is, at best, spurious. The internet is, as stated by Ian Hamilton Grant in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (and without any need for me to add emphasis), “the exemplary postmodern object, and arguably even the architect of postmodern culture;”⁴ or, as I myself have written, the internet is “the postmodernist tool *par excellence*.”⁵ As such, all the symptoms of digital technology listed by Kirby as anti-postmodernist are in fact the very features of postmodernity. In his conclusion, Kirby directly addresses his internet-savvy, supposedly *anti*-postmodern reader: “You click, you punch the keys, you are ‘involved’, engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

² Alan Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” *Philosophy Now*, accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond.

³ Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond.”

⁴ Ian Hamilton Grant, “Internet,” in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 2011), 265.

⁵ Ali Alizadeh, “For and against a digital avant-garde,” *Overland Blog*, accessed January 29, 2012, <http://overland.org.au/2011/11/meanland-for-and-against-a-digital-avant-garde>.

the text: the text is superseded.”⁶ Unfortunately for Kirby, anyone familiar with Roland Barthes’s famous, and famously postmodernist, proclamation apropos of the death of the author can see that Kirby’s words are addressed to the very definition of a postmodern reader.

Not unlike Kirby’s wish for an end to postmodernism, Docx’s similar thesis is destabilised by his possible ignorance, or perhaps misinterpretation, of the dynamics of postmodernism. While Docx concedes that “the internet is the most postmodern thing on the planet,” he also believes that the artificiality of the digital milieu has had the “reverse effect” of promoting a “yearning for some kind of offline authenticity.”⁷ Once again, anyone familiar with theories of postmodernity—in this case, with Jean Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality—would recognise that Docx’s “yearning for authenticity” is precisely the intended by-product of subjective alienation caused by online inauthenticity, a yearning which is necessary for maintaining the simulacrum as a realm of unfulfilled and therefore never-ending desire. In other words, such a “yearning for authenticity,” far from threatening the artificiality of the virtual world and ushering in the era of realness, in fact supports and perpetuates the power of postmodernist simulacra.

As such, postmodernist culture appears far from over—and the subtitle of the abovementioned Victoria and Albert exhibition seems like a shrewd, indeed *hyperreal* marketing exercise—and yet it is also my view that postmodernism, while ubiquitous and a given within our contemporary situations, should not necessarily continue to inform our views on arts, society, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Postmodernism is not ‘dead and buried,’ but it should and *can* be opposed and resisted. It is this belief that forms the basis of this paper’s proposal for a movement beyond postmodernist aesthetics towards philosopher Alain Badiou’s call for a view of art as a condition for radical and new Truths and Ideas via his notion of an ‘affirmationist inaesthetics’.

Postmodernist Aesthetics: the Opium of Late Capitalist Masses

Although Badiou’s theory of inaesthetics makes use of the term ‘art’ in referring to the subject of his inquiry, and although my own paper situates itself in the discussion of a clearly artistic scene—that of contemporary Australian poetry—I would like to suggest that we see the words ‘art’ and ‘poetry’ synonymous with ‘aesthetical phenomenon’. Although as a practicing

⁶ Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond.”

⁷ Edward Docx, “Postmodernism is dead,” *Prospect Magazine*, accessed January 29, 2012, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/07/postmodernism-is-dead-va-exhibition-age-of-authenticism>.

artist I have some reservation about the view that almost any social activity or creation can be seen as artistic—I have particular doubts about the current practice of presenting television chefs as iconoclastic auteurs—I grant that any field of perceptual and sensual production and experience can be said to possess an aesthetics not too formally dissimilar to that of a properly artistic medium such as poetry.

I feel, however, that this belief in the aesthetic quality of things other than the arts—or, as Baudrillard would have it, “the aestheticisation of the whole world”⁸—is one of the features of the dominant ideology of our postmodern condition; and it is also one of the key shortcomings of postmodernism for radical Marxist thinkers. Long before the term ‘postmodern’ had been invented and propagated, Walter Benjamin recognised the dangerous—indeed monstrous and fascistic—possibility of a politics aestheticised as a consequence of our “age of mechanical reproduction.”⁹ For more recent and contemporary Marxist thinkers, postmodernism is, in Fredric Jameson’s famous assessment, the cultural logic of late capitalism.

While much has been written over the last thirty to forty years about certain qualities of postmodernist art—most successfully, to my mind, by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal study of contemporary metafictional Anglophone fiction titled *A Poetics of Postmodernism*—my evaluation of postmodernist aesthetics here is more concerned with the fact that, as Jameson has observed, “postmodernism replicates and reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism.”¹⁰ As an example of such collaboration between postmodernist aesthetics and capitalism, one could point at certain works of postmodernist architecture such as the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, which, in Jameson’s assessment, “celebrate their insertion into the heterogeneous fabric of the commercial strip and the motel and fast-food landscape.”¹¹

As an example in visual arts, and as explained by Slavoj Žižek, the “postmodern irony” of paintings by the controversial Russian artist Alexey Belyaev-Guintovt—with their supposedly playful and hybrid “pan-aestheticism” which conflates motifs of Russian nationalism, Orthodox fundamentalism, Communism, and Fascism—perfectly suits and legitimates the views of “the

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2009), 17.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 235.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 2009), 20.

¹¹ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 30.

new Russian capitalist elite which sees itself as ideologically indifferent, ‘apolitical’, caring only about money and success, [which believes that] all ideologies are equal, equally ridiculous, they are useful only to provide spicy aesthetic excitement.”¹² As such, the postmodernist artists’ “playful indifference” towards politics and political causes

conceals the reality of the ruthless exercise of power: what [such artists] stage as aesthetic spectacle is reality for the masses of ordinary people. [The postmodernist artists’] indifference towards ideology is the very form of their complicity with ruling ideology.¹³

Such complicity does not indicate that postmodernism is the *only* aesthetics associated with today’s ruling ideology. It is, in my view, the more progressive and innovative schema of dominant contemporary aesthetic regimes, and it faces, as its identifiable Other, a traditionalist, anti-modernist reaction. Before explicating these aesthetic regimes by drawing on examples from contemporary Australian poetry, I would like to emphasise that the rejection of postmodernism argued for in this paper does not at all issue from a reaction to the undeniably innovative and experimental aspects of this aesthetics, but from a Marxist position that recognises and refutes postmodernism’s radical ‘apolitical’ break with oppositional politics. As Terry Eagleton has argued in much of his oeuvre to date, the problem with postmodernism is not the movement’s vaunted hybridity, reflexivity, indeterminacy, and so on *per se*, but rather its collusion with capitalist hegemony and its more Left-leaning proponents’ inability to articulate and formulate a significant opposition to ruling class ideology:

The radical modernists had tried to dismantle the distinction between art and life. Now [in the postmodern era], it seemed that life had done it for them. But whereas the radical modernists had in mind such things as reading your poetry through megaphones in factory yards, postmodernism has in mind for the most part such things as advertising and public relations. A left-wing subcurrent of it tried to reinvent more dissident ways of integrating culture into social life, but could scarcely compete with the manufacture of political spectacles and reality TV shows. A radical assault on fixed hierarchies of value merged effortlessly with that revolutionary levelling of all values known as the marketplace.¹⁴

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 252.

¹³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 253.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 68.

Marxist critiques of postmodernism are not particularly new—Alex Callinicos’s *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*¹⁵ was first published at the height of Western academia and literati’s infatuation with postmodernity more than twenty years ago—and one may even trace such critiques to Theodore Adorno’s misgivings apropos of Benjamin’s initial readings of Baudelaire, and the former’s concern that the latter’s designation of the poet as an apolitical observer or *flâneur* was distinctly non-dialectical.¹⁶ Nevertheless, I believe that due to the hegemonic prominence and calamitous consequences of, in Eagleton’s words, the “levelling of all values [by] the marketplace,” as highlighted recently by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and its devastating continuation, it is now incumbent upon artists and critics with a commitment to imagine a political, social, and cultural formation beyond capitalism to also imagine an aesthetics beyond postmodernism.

Postmodernism and Reaction in Australian Poetry

There is no question that postmodernism in Australian poetry, beginning with the so-called Generation of ‘68 poets, has indeed entailed an “assault on fixed hierarchies of value,” an assault which has encountered, and continues to encounter, resistance from the representatives of such hierarchies within the Australian poetry scene. But it is also evident that the postmodernists’ dissidence is by and large devoid of a radical, oppositional or, as Badiou would have it, ‘evental’ or ‘affirmationist’ poetics comparable to that of the modernist avant-gardists. I agree with Ann Vickery that “an Australian postmodern paradigm should be viewed as inclusive rather than oppositional;”¹⁷ that is, the postmodernist “assault” should be seen as liberal and democratic and not as a revolutionary or transformative configuration.

To add a level of formal rigour to this discussion, and to further guide it towards Badiou’s notion of an aesthetics (or, more accurately, an *inaesthetics*) which is as fundamentally anti-postmodernist as it is anti-conservative, I would like to use the philosopher’s three schemata of aesthetics—as proposed in

¹⁵ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* [1990] (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Gergo Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 128-129.

¹⁷ Ann Vickery, “Beyond Strictly Verse and Pulp Diction: Approaching a Postmodern Poetics in Australian Writing via Some Language Poetry Shortcuts,” *Salt* 9 (1996): 129.

Handbook of Inaesthetics (1998/2005)¹⁸—in providing an outline of contemporary Australian poetry.

According to Badiou, there exist three dominant regimes of aesthetics according to which the work of art—or a social object, or operation viewed aesthetically—can be thought: the didactic, the classical, and the romantic schemata. The didactic perspective, which begins with Plato’s banishment of poets, views art suspiciously, believing that “art is incapable of truth, or that all truth is external to art,” and therefore evaluates the object in terms of public—primarily educational—effect.¹⁹ The romantic schema, on the other hand, claims that “art *alone* is capable of truth” and that “art is the real body of truth,” and it therefore evaluates the work with regard to its affect, its visionary and “glorious” “brilliance.”²⁰ Positioned in between these two diametrically opposed views, the classical schema proposes that “art is not truth, but it also does not claim to be truth and is therefore innocent.”²¹ This last schema, as inaugurated by Aristotle, is perhaps the dominant regime of aesthetics in Western culture, according to which the work is assessed in terms of its *likeability*—formal beauty, harmonious composition, “likelihood” and “verisimilitude”—and it therefore has a therapeutic, pleasurable function.²²

According to these three modalities, postmodernism can be seen as a romantic aesthetic since “postmodern products—pinned to the notion of the expressive value of the body, for which posture and gesture win over [logical] consistency—are the material form of a pure and simple regression to romanticism.”²³ While it is well beyond the scope of this paper to provide anything like an adequate overview of such romanticism in the work of postmodernist Australian poets, I will briefly note the prevalence of “the expressive value” and “postures and gestures” in the work of perhaps the most emblematic poet associated with the postmodernists of Generation of ‘68, Michael Dransfield (1948-1972).

According to poet and critic John Kinsella, Dransfield’s postmodernity can be seen in his experimental, “façadist” fusion of classical influences with a “deft ‘modern’ language-use, its jargonist turns and youthful zeal;”²⁴ and such

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 1-15.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 2.

²⁰ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 2-3.

²¹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 4.

²² Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 4.

²³ Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 135.

²⁴ John Kinsella, introduction to *Michael Dransfield: A Retrospective*, ed. John Kinsella (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), xi.

“façadism” is clearly a gestural and performative quality, or what Badiou has termed “playful romanticism.”²⁵ As for the expressive quality of such poetics, as Livio Dobrez has written, “the first and most basic quality” distinguishing Dransfield and other new the poets of the 1970s from traditionalists was the postmodernists’ “straightforward capacity to give expression to the emotional facts of a situation.”²⁶

Such qualities can be readily seen in one of Dransfield’s best-known *drug poems*, ‘Fix’, which perfectly illustrates Badiou’s view of postmodernist art as “a suffering and radiant exhibition of the flesh.”²⁷

It is waking in the night,
after the theatres and before the milkman,
alerted by some signal from the golden drug tapeworm
that eats your flesh and drinks your peace;
you reach for the needle and busy yourself
preparing the utopia substance in a blackened
spoon held in candle flame
by now your thumb and finger are leathery
being so often burned this way²⁸

Although Dransfield’s poetics do not display the same levels of irony and self-conscious artificiality as can be found in the work of other Generation of ‘68 poets—most notably in John Tranter’s ‘postmodernist noir’ writing²⁹ and in the work of Pam Brown who has stated “we are postmodern whether we like it or not”³⁰—it serves as perhaps the most vivid representative of postmodern romanticism; an aesthetics which was, and continues to be, the subject of hostility from those contemporary traditionalist Australian poets whom we may classify as champions of, in Badiou’s sense, a classical aesthetics. The antagonism of the latter grouping towards the postmodernists can be seen in, for example, the recently published anthology *Australian Poetry Since 1788* whose editors—claiming that their editorial choices have

²⁵ Badiou, *Polemics*, 137.

²⁶ Livio Dobrez, *Parnassus Mad Ward: Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), 63.

²⁷ Badiou, *Polemics*, 139.

²⁸ Michael Dransfield, “Fix,” in *Michael Dransfield: A Retrospective*, ed. John Kinsella (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 14.

²⁹ Philip Mead, *Networked Language* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), 390.

³⁰ Jenny Digby, *A Woman’s Voice* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), 181.

been made according to “the guiding principle” that “a pleasure-seeking audience is the only audience for poetry”³¹—have, rather pointedly, refused to include Dransfield and Brown.

Yet despite forty years of reactionary antagonism and dismissal, postmodernism has become one of the dominant modes of poetry in Australia as demonstrated by, for example, Tranter’s latest and highly experimental collection receiving the 2011 Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Poetry as well as the 2011 Age Poetry Book of the Year Award, with the judge of the latter prize dubbing the poet “the postmodern master.”³² Postmodernism has had a formative, in some cases deterministic, influence on the younger poets developing during the last two decades. What the poet and critic David McCooey has termed in a 2007 essay a “new lyricism” among younger, more innovative Australian poets is clearly a postmodernist aesthetics in that it is both “bedded within the lyrical expression” and also inclusive of “a kind of metatextuality, in which complex notions of text, identity, and form are integrated and interrogated.”³³

That the postmodernist poets of Generation of ‘68 and their “new lyricist” followers have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to Australian as well as global Anglophone poetry is beyond doubt. The questions and objections raised by the aforementioned Marxist critics—including Badiou, who, as we have seen, views postmodernist aesthetics as a “regression”—concern postmodernism’s inefficacy as a transformative, oppositional aesthetics, and its (perhaps unintended) compliancy and complicity with the dominant values of late capitalism.

While such criticisms can be easily made of the work of postmodernist Australian poets—Dransfield’s unbridled permissive hedonism, for example, can be easily seen as a non-mainstream, countercultural supplement to unbridled, permissive consumerism—my key concern is the current absence of a space for theorising about and indeed practicing a genuinely radical, oppositional and avant-gardist aesthetics in contemporary Australian poetry. That is to say, a space for an aesthetics that is neither primarily gestural and expressive (that is, postmodernist) nor classicist and conservative. In my view, such a void can be addressed by applying Badiou’s fourth modality of aesthetics or affirmationism to the work of those contemporary Australian

³¹ Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray, introduction to *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, eds. Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2011), 1-2.

³² *Johntranter.net*, accessed January 29, 2012, <http://johntranter.net/00/index.html>.

³³ David McCooey, “Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism,” *Poetry International Web*, accessed January 24, 2009, http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=9031.

poets who can be described, in the absence of a better term, as post-postmodernist.

‘Journey of the Dead Man’: An Affirmationist Australian Poem

My drawing on Badiou’s philosophy in articulating an aesthetics beyond postmodernism has been inspired in part by the philosopher’s radical revival of the concepts of being, subject, and truth in the face of the postmodernist occlusion of these themes via his key notion of ‘event’. His proposal for a new aesthetics that ruptures the existing three schemata of thinking about art is premised upon the relation between art and truth, and, for Badiou, the rubrics of this relation are “immanence and singularity.”³⁴ It is according to these categories that Badiou defines his inaeesthetics.

I would like to quote this crucial passage of Badiou’s text in full, as it provides a succinct definition of the fourth or affirmationist aesthetics that I propose using in discussing the work of Australia’s post-postmodernist contemporary poets:

What can we immediately observe? First, that in the romantic [or postmodernist] schema, the relation of truth to art is indeed immanent (art exposes the finite ascent of the Idea), but not singular (because we are dealing with *the* truth and the thinker’s thought is not attuned to something different to what is unveiled in the saying of the poet). Second, that is in [Platonic] didacticism, the relation is certainly singular (only art can exhibit a truth in *the form of semblance*), but not at all immanent, because the position of truth is ultimately extrinsic. And third, that in [conservative] classicism, we are dealing only with the constraint that a truth exercises within the domain of the imaginary in the guise of verisimilitude, of the ‘likely’.³⁵

Badiou’s new proposal, therefore, calls for an aesthetics that “affirms” the simultaneity of a truth being both immanent (that is, intrinsic) and singular (or, unique) to a work of art. In this affirmationist aesthetics, against the claims of didacticists and classicists, the work of art is seen as capable of producing truths, and its truths are, against the views of romantics such as postmodernists, absolutely singular to the work of art and “are given nowhere else than in art.”³⁶ The mention of the word *truth* alone is enough to indicate Badiou’s philosophy as something inherently opposed to postmodernism, a movement

³⁴ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaeesthetics*, 9.

³⁵ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaeesthetics*, 9.

³⁶ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaeesthetics*, 9.

perhaps best known, philosophically, for its rejection of a so-called absolute truth. Nevertheless it may be worth demonstrating, albeit very briefly, how in a postmodernist aesthetics—or, more specifically, in postmodernist Australian poetry—the work of art has an immanent yet non-singular relationship with truth.

In Michael Drandfield's abovementioned poem 'Fix', the experience of drug use as expressed by the poem is—in authentically postmodernist style—entirely textual and has no need for external referents. In other words, even readers with no *real life* experience of drug use can be affected by the poem's pathos via textual strategies such as visceral metaphors—the “tapeworm / that eats your flesh and drinks your peace”—and common bodily allusions, for example “your thumb and finger are leathery.”³⁷ Yet a drug user's joyful suffering or, put more prosaically, substance dependence—which may be seen as a truth of this poem—is not a “truth given nowhere else than in art;” it is a theme from the discourses of medicine and behavioural psychology. While I am not at all discounting the sincerity of the poem's pathos or its effectiveness, I believe that its truth is not singularly artistic.

It is my view that a number of more recent, equally unconventional, and innovative Australian poets have produced poems that are as experimental and original as those of Dransfield and other postmodernists—whose work, in other words, has an immanent relation with its truths—but whose poetry is also devoid of the playful, gestural, and ironic postmodernist aesthetics that result in the expression of non-artistic truths. And I believe Badiou's affirmationist aesthetics provides a most apposite strategy for exploring and theorising the work of these post-postmodernist Australian poets.

As an example of such a poetics, I would like to consider the powerful poem 'Journey of the Dead Man' by 'Generation X' Sydney-based poet Felicity Plunkett.³⁸ I have chosen this poem not only because it offers a perspicuous illustration of what Badiou has described as a “subtractive operation,”³⁹ but also because its author is a key figure in the younger generation of Australian poets who can be identified as post-Generation of '68; Plunkett herself is the editor of the important 2011 anthology of poetry, *Thirty Australian Poets*, for which contributors were chosen from amongst the newer

³⁷ Dransfield, “Fix,” 14.

³⁸ Felicity Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” in *Vanishing Point* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009), 3-7.

³⁹ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 55.

poets – all of whom were born after 1968, the very year associated with the title of the influential postmodernist poetic configuration.

Plunkett's 'Journey of the Dead Man' is in many ways as syntactically experimental, conceptually complex, and textually fragmented as many a postmodernist work—which could be one reason for her exclusion from the aforementioned conservative anthology *Australian Poetry Since 1788*—but, as Badiou may have it, her poem is neither a glorification of “the abjection of the body and sexuality” nor “an expression of a particularity, whether ethnic or egoistic. It is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to all.”⁴⁰

The poem begins with a quotation by Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the nuclear bomb, describing his belief that by helping develop the first nuclear bomb, he had assumed the role of the Hindu god Shiva, “the destroyer of worlds.”⁴¹ The first section of Plunkett's poem is addressed to the United States scientist as he surveys the 1946 Trinity nuclear test:

The world's taste
poisonous behind your teeth.
Shatter all else but hold yourself intact?
Atomic radiance
burst onto your tongue like ridicule.
Obedient in the Jornada del Muerto desert
you take death's name: Shiva
auspicious one.
Bride yourself with destruction
you have made.⁴²

It can be seen that from the very outset of her poem, Plunkett sets out to counter the body or, in Badiou's precise sense, make the body *vanish*. (Interestingly, the title of Plunkett's 2009 debut collection, in which this poem has been printed, is *Vanishing Point*.) While the experience of watching the devastation caused by the bomb is something the scientist tries to contain in his body—“behind his teeth” even though it “bursts onto his tongue”, he still “holds himself intact”—his bodily registration of the event is soon contradicted by the subject's non-physical, mystical “obedience in the ... desert” as his identity disappears in the divine and ineffable name of Shiva.

The poet has therefore presented the reader with her text's thematic territory or situation—which we may describe as a traumatic encounter with the horrific consequences of one's actions, with “destruction / one has made”—

⁴⁰ Badiou, *Polemics*, 143.

⁴¹ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 3.

⁴² Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 3.

while dissolving this very premise and its actual referent, the particular identity of the scientist Oppenheimer and his presence in the Jornada del Muerto desert. Here we encounter, as Badiou would have it, “the first vanishing term,” the name of the Hindu deity Shiva.⁴³

This initial vanishing on its own could amount to no more than religious symbolism or postmodernist intertextuality and cross-cultural collage—a façadism *à la* Dransfield—but immediately, in the subtitle to the poem’s second part, Plunkett cancels this very naming by suspending it with another rupture, this time by substituting Shiva the Hindu god with *shiva* the Jewish “seven-day period of mourning after the funeral of a first-degree relative.”⁴⁴ The poem’s addressee is now a Jewish woman, possibly Oppenheimer’s wife, awaiting sombre *shiva* visitors:

Listen. The first sound will be water
flicked from wrists and palms:
the benediction and ablution
that will carry you to where
they will speak his vanished name,
tongue in Kaddish⁴⁵

Here, by repeating that the scientist’s name has been vanished—and by the end of this section of the poem even the very language of English disappears into (incomprehensible, for many an Anglophone reader) a line of Hebrew prayer—the poet, in Badiou’s terms, “avers the undecidable and sustains the truth.”⁴⁶

What has been made undecidable by Plunkett’s poem, thus far, is the nature of our shocking encounter with the Real of our desires: in the first part of the poem the creative power of scientific discovery and invention (signified by the figure of the in/famous United States physicist) vanishes in the spiritual signifier Shiva, the god of destruction and transformation. In the second part of the poem this signifier itself is cancelled and therefore the horror of nuclear destruction becomes a cause for mourning and a yearning for atonement. But is this the poem’s truth? Is Plunkett arguing that we must resort to religion—in her words, to “drink the consolation”⁴⁷—to take refuge from the calamities of modernity and modern military technology?

⁴³ Badiou, *Conditions*, 55.

⁴⁴ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 3.

⁴⁵ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 4.

⁴⁶ Badiou, *Conditions*, 57.

⁴⁷ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 4.

The main problem with such an interpretation of the poem is not that it is ostensibly simplistic and reductive, but that it does not take into account Badiou's belief that, viewed from the prism of an affirmationist aesthetics, the relation between a poem and truth is singular. The problem, in other words, is precisely my attempt at interpreting the poem—an action which is rejected by Badiou's inaesthetics⁴⁸—by trying to articulate the truth produced by Plunkett's poem in the language of another field (for example, ethics, religion, and morality) and divorcing it from its unique, artistic condition. In a properly affirmationist poem, truth will have artistic consequences that may only be localised artistically, that is, in the body of the work of art.

So it is that in the third part of the poem, Plunkett's argument or, in more succinct Badiouian terms, her "poetic path of thinking," which has already gone from the void of an encounter with the absolute power of annihilation—from the desert where identity vanishes—to solitary bereavement, now goes to what Badiou has described as "the energy of movement."⁴⁹ According to Badiou, such "an unprecedented poetic energy" may "arouse the fiction of a master that would be capable of truth."⁵⁰ And this is precisely what takes place in the middle section of Plunkett's poem: she calls into being the fiction of the vanished scientist's persona, in the form of her own, first person voice:

What have I conceived?
 Into the vast future I watched my hands
 opening, a shattering of suns.
 In truth, I only said two words: 'It worked.'
 My Sanskrit avatar recited nothing,
 breathed Shiva into my skull⁵¹

Plunkett's decision at this point to assume the position of a Badiouian *master*—or should that be *mistress*?—to write in the fictive voice of an historical persona capable of processing the truth of an event, with an "anti-romantic coldness" and an "impersonal rigour" instead of irony or egoistic self-reflexivity, is radically opposed to a postmodernist poetics.⁵² Yet at the precise point where Plunkett's Oppenheimer starts to run the risk of resembling a

⁴⁸ Elie During, "Art," in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, eds A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 86.

⁴⁹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 49.

⁵⁰ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 50.

⁵¹ Plunkett, "Journey of the Dead Man," 5.

⁵² Badiou, *Polemics*, 142, 138.

likely—that is, in Badiou’s terms, a classical and traditional—portrait of a historical person, he tells the reader: “Leave me.”⁵³ The interruption that follows—an evocation of the scientist and his wife’s wedding vows and the Jewish ritual of the breaking of the glass—ensures that the event at the core of the text remains undecidable and therefore singular to the poem.

The insertion of an amorous episode here designates the poet/master as she who can wed “sorrow” (of destruction) with “joy” (of creation):

To remind us we wed sorrow
as we celebrate the heights of joy.
To remind us of the temple’s razing:
our making follows sacrilege.
To show us the shattering of self:
the way love fractures the I-and-thou⁵⁴

I shall resist the temptation of too conclusive a reading by saying that the truth of this poem—produced, as with the truth of any poem, at the level of “the murmur of the indiscernible”⁵⁵—can be named as the purely poetic hypothesis that “the shattering of the self” is the consequence of “the way love fractures.” Plunkett’s presentation of the scientist’s “shattering” conception of the nuclear bomb and a wife’s love for her husband as equivalents amounts to nothing short of an Idea of love as an all-consuming, unfathomably destructive, even demonic force. This can be seen in the lines immediately following the above passage, “the diabolical comes / to feast at [the lovers’] table.”⁵⁶ The poem ends with what can only be described as an apocalyptic presentation of lovemaking, which begins with an invocation of the last letter of the Greek alphabet as it is used in the *Book of Revelation* to denote End Times:

Omega: let there be an end to it.
Death be not proud now I am become you.
Cover me with your furious limbs
and shatter me when our eyes engage.
Remember you are dust,
and onto dust you shall return.⁵⁷

⁵³ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 5.

⁵⁴ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 6.

⁵⁵ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 34.

⁵⁶ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 6.

⁵⁷ Plunkett, “Journey of the Dead Man,” 6-7.

These final lines are an acute demonstration of Badiou's aforementioned view that the poem is "the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to all."⁵⁸ The "you" here is no longer the fictive presence of the nuclear scientist or his wife, but the eternal reader—the unspeakably "furious" and "deathly" lover—to whom the poet has given, in Badiou's terms, "timeless existence."⁵⁹

The production of this truth—that is, the Idea of love being a Thing capable of absolute annihilation—has been operated in a way that is, as indicated by my close reading of the text, entirely situated within and immanent to the poem (at no point does Plunkett's text nor my reading of it demand anything other than a most basic familiarity with the United States scientist Robert Oppenheimer and his biography) and this truth is, at the same time, an entirely *poetic* notion. None of the other Badiouian conditions of truth—such as politics and mathematics—could possibly conceptualise and accommodate such an Idea

Conclusion

In this paper I have been arguing that a dominant schema of aesthetics such as postmodernism is insufficient for theorising about today's more complex aesthetical phenomena such as the poetry of some of Australia's younger, and more sophisticated, post-Generation of '68 writers. My strategy for reading Plunkett's poem as a Badiouian subtractive operation, and my view of the poem as a *truth procedure*, could have been applied to the poetry of a number of other poets of Plunkett's generation such as Claire Potter, Maria Takolander, Louis Armand, Justin Clemens, Kate Fagan, John Mateer, and perhaps even myself—all of whom have been included in *Thirty Australian Poets*, Plunkett's anthology of newer Australian poets—to argue that it is perhaps time for our understanding and discussion of contemporary aesthetics to move beyond postmodernism.

The extent to which my proposed *inaesthetic* turn responds to the Marxian critique of postmodernism is perhaps the topic of another discussion. It can be briefly pointed out, however, that the work of art—or any aesthetical phenomenon, for that matter—seen as a site of immanent and singular truths is clearly not a thing that can be completely reified and commodified. Such an affirmation of an absolutely artistic truth places the work outside the domains of either likeable, pleasurable entertainment fit for the consumers of cultural products in a capitalist society (*à la* the classical schema) or the postmodernist alternative that expresses, replicates, and prolongs—no matter how ironically

⁵⁸ Badiou, *Polemics*, 143.

⁵⁹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 22.

or self-consciously—the superstructure of an exploitative capitalist economics. According to Badiou, the affirmationist work of art “remains rebellious to imperial power, at the same time that it overcomes the duplicity of the funereal and the playful.”⁶⁰

I do not at all claim, as many—mostly conservative—commentators have, that postmodernism is dead, or that anything, including Badiou’s philosophy, is likely to singlehandedly put a stake through its heart.⁶¹ I believe the fate of postmodernism is ultimately tied to the fortunes of late capitalism, the political contingency that necessitated and continues to harbour its conditions. It will be neither the internet, nor religious fundamentalism, nor, come to that, the misgivings of Marxist thinkers that will bring about the demise of this latest manifestation of romanticism. Nothing short of the radical transformation of the politics of our world will result in the eradication of its hegemonic aesthetics; until then, progressive writers, literary theorists, and aestheticians are encouraged to think and practice beyond postmodernism.

⁶⁰ Badiou, *Polemics*, 142-143.

⁶¹ Whilst my deployments and developments of Badiou’s ideas and reading strategies in this paper have been somewhat direct and programmatic due to their applicability to the poem under discussion, it should be pointed out that there exists a number of pertinent critiques of his theory of art—as can be found in, most notably, Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011)—and studies focussed solely on Badiou’s theses would need to take these into consideration.