

JOHN THOMPSON, THE POET AS BROADCASTER

PETER KIRKPATRICK

University of Sydney

Literary programs on radio—and on television for that matter—are faced with the age-old Aristotelian problem of having not only to instruct but to delight. As such, they are a microcosm of the wider problem that besets public broadcasting which, historically, has been required to strike a programming balance between what is seen, in high aesthetic terms, as the ‘best’ in culture and the tax-payer funded expectation that it will also provide entertainment to a broad audience.

In *The Unseen Voice*, her study of the first two decades of Australian radio, Lesley Johnson has noted that the advent of wireless

placed in jeopardy traditional hierarchies of cultural taste; it undermined their apparent naturalness. The highbrow versus lowbrow debate was a popular mode of exploring and playing with this problem and the tensions it created. At the same time it provided the opportunity for distinctions of taste to be vigorously re-drawn. (131)

Of the newly formed national broadcaster, Johnson writes: ‘The ABC throughout the 1930s remained unclear whether it was in the business of capturing audiences: for the most part it could not resolve its commitment to culture with its obligations, as a medium of mass communication, to the radio audience’ (150).ⁱ Such irresolution between low and high opened up a space for the burgeoning ‘middlebrow’ in ABC programming.

Emerging from this context, John Thompson (1907-1968) remains the outstanding literary broadcaster in Australia. The early days of radio seemed to herald a new age for the spoken word—especially poetry—and Thompson was ideally positioned to shape its reception by a mixed ABC audience who, in phrenological terms, represented a range of ‘brows’. This essay re-evaluates Thompson’s poetry through his experience of the medium he served, and his changing sense of the radiophonic possibilities of verse.

In doing so it also closely follows Thompson’s career as a radio producer, in particular of *Quality Street*, which he created and which became the ABC’s flagship poetry program, lasting a remarkable twenty-seven years, from 1946 until 1973 (Inglis 160). Given that there have been conflicts from the ABC’s inception between its twin roles as public educator and publicly-funded entertainer, the longevity of *Quality Street* suggests that Thompson managed to strike a workable balance within the broad spectrum of the middlebrow.

Catching the ABC Disease

The elder son of a well-to-do dentist, Thompson was educated in the manner of his class at Melbourne Grammar School and Melbourne University.ⁱⁱ As a young man he was closely involved with the clique of painters who espoused the tonalist theories of Max Meldrum. 'I do believe that he had genius', Thompson later said ('Max Meldrum' 40), and he became great friends with Colin Colahan, one of Meldrum's chief disciples.

While there is no direct evidence that Thompson applied Meldrum's tonalism to his literary practice, it is likely that the budding poet picked up some things through his early friendships with 'the Old Man' and his circle. Meldrum's rationalist rejection of artistic subjectivity in favour of an objective 'science of seeing' (Kinnane 21) has some echo in Thompson's mature poetry; for example, in its emphasis on metonymic detail over structuring metaphors. He later described his writing process as 'conscious and protracted' rather than spontaneous, and viewed organic form in terms of reason and economy rather than romantic holism:

I've always felt that it is incumbent on a writer to be as clear and as brief as he can. All too often the apparent substance of a poem disappears when one eliminates everything obscure and inessential and the writer is left frustrated. Above all, a poem must have unity, not merely technical unity but an emotional unity and an inward proportion which, in a work of any complexity, are seldom reached in the early stages. ('John Thompson' 175)

Little else is recorded about Thompson's early life in Melbourne. After a year of doing unspecified 'publicity work', he left for England in 1931, intending to make his name as a writer while supported by an allowance from his family. No-one was interested in his fiction but, through Geoffrey Keynes, he wangled an introduction to Methuen, who in 1935 published his first collection of poems, *Three Dawns Ago*. Some of these conventional Georgian lyrics date from the mid 1920s, and in its emphasis on the vicissitudes of love it remains very much a young man's book. Through Colin Colahan, then living in London, he met Patricia Cole, an Australian working for the Left Book Club. The couple married in 1938 and became active in the Popular Front.

In 1939, fearing the onset of war in Europe, the Thompsons returned to Australia and settled in Perth, where John was employed by the ABC as an announcer. Shortly afterwards, both he and Patricia joined the Communist Party. Their flirtation with communism would barely outlast the War, but their allegiance to the ABC was a different matter. As Patricia Thompson described it in her memoir, *Accidental Chords*:

One way or another the ABC was very decent to John. In return, or in gratitude, he contracted a bad case of the ABC disease which used to attack those whose work was directly related to the production of programmes. For such employees, and there used to be many of them, the ABC was far more than a job of work; it was an emotive issue, a way of life, a hobby, an ideal... Their wives often—usually—became emotionally involved. Some of their children, when they grew up, went to work for the ABC, sometimes in the same departments as their fathers before them. (163)

John enlisted in late 1942 and, after an unsuccessful stint as a radar operator in Sydney, was transferred to army education in Melbourne, where his radio skills were put to good use in troop broadcasts (*Accidental Chords* 194).

In 2000 I talked to Peter Thompson for the entry on his father I was writing for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Peter told me that John's army experience represented his first real encounter with the Australian working class, and it had a profound effect on him, consolidating his recent communist conversion. This was reflected in the political tone of many of the pieces in his next collection, *Sesame and Other Poems* (1944), which culminates in an autobiographical sequence, 'The Traveller', where discovery of the local landscape awakens commitment to the wider human struggle. Though marred by some melodramatic devices (it opens 'Comfort me! Did I die this afternoon?'), there's a sinewy physicality in passages such as:

... But it is active joy
Pushing through scrub, to feel the bush no ghost –
an angular presence, elbowy, lean as famine,
dry-rasping, hot with prickles... (n.p.)

... This hard archaic magic
makes man akin to everything free alert
humped horned hardy or patient among grey stones
and obdurate leafage. My pining drops from me
like an old mannerism. It vanishes
in this wise wilderness... (n.p.)

The same impressionism, more relaxed when the poet himself is no longer the central focus, informs a longer poetic sequence written at about this time, 'Transcontinental'. Here the romantic 'I' becomes an egalitarian 'we':

Ours is a troop-train, packed with lean wry lads
Who play cards, yarn, smoke, or observe the stringent
Forest, or watch for timbergetters' huts
And covetable farms, folded in Peace.
Ah peace! Peacefully the gesticulation
Of banksia and blackboy, the casualness
Of long-armed gums, the austerity of rocks,
Are gauzed by darkness, while above us widens
The big night's open top. Now bobbing lamps
And man-shadows discuss us when we halt,
Then send us further—and our speed becomes
Phantasied with the spread of unseen crops,
Map-ghosted by the creeks, roads, mileages,
Towards Burracoppin and past Wickepin,
And the oblivion of kind sleep lifts
Our animal heaps of arms legs heads hats boots
And haversacks and greatcoats, floating them onward
Across the night's hard passage till the sky
Grows pink above Coolgardie's soil of gold. (*I Hate and I Love* 44-45)

In an interview with Hazel de Berg late in his life, Thompson described 'Transcontinental' as 'possibly, I think, the best constructed poem I've written' (139), and certainly the less regulated line, playing against long sentences full of aggregative details, breaks new ground. When giving an account of his poetry in *Southerly* in 1948—not long after 'Transcontinental' was written—he remarked, 'I love to feel the trusty iambus beating away under the surface of a poem, however many anapaests and falling feet and feminine endings may have been woven into that surface'. The voice, too, becomes objective, even impersonal—more that of a narrator. The documentary qualities of this poem show that Thompson's poetic ear was becoming attuned to radio; as he himself said in *Southerly*, '[“Transcontinental”] has importance for me because it was my first poem specifically intended to be read aloud, in other words, to be broadcast. Most of what I have written since has been done with one eye on the microphone' (176).

In August 1945 Thompson returned to the ABC as a war correspondent, covering the Japanese surrender at Rabaul and the Indonesian insurgency against the returning Dutch (*Accidental Chords* 192-96). By then Patricia, with young Peter, had relocated to Sydney, and when John came back from South-East Asia he began his career in radio features, becoming senior feature writer and producer. As is apparent from his later writings on broadcasting, at the time he saw radio as a means to make good literature more popular, and *Quality Street* signalled the beginning of that mission.

Rude Locality

Up until the advent of *Quality Street*, poetry on the ABC was largely restricted to special talks, or else used as fillers, often for other programmes.ⁱⁱⁱ Humorist Alexander Macdonald worked in the Continuity Department in the 1930s, and in his autobiography recalled the kind of verse favoured by his fellow scriptwriter, John Wheeler, 'a *manqué* poet who still believed in Tennyson and wrote verses in praise of English waterfalls and vernal woods':

His chief contributions... were at first of a rather ruminative style and presented in the late programmes when such musical works as Edward German's '*Nell Gwynn Dances*' and Ketelby's '*Bells across the Meadow*' [sic] were introduced by whisps of poetry of the 'A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot', nature.

For then, as now, the A.B.C. never failed to cater for its homesick English listeners, including remittance men, out-of-work actors and retired plumbers from Wapping Old Stairs and elsewhere. (180-81)

The situation on commercial radio was hardly better. Radio plays and serials were popular from the 1930s, with the rise of light variety formats during the War, including quiz shows (Griffin-Foley 206-33). Poetry was mostly relegated to programmes for children—and for women, if Kylie Tennant's *Ride on Stranger* (1943) is anything to go by. In that novel remittance man Bleeby Peverill becomes a heartthrob to 'old maids and stout women with their bunions up on a sofa cushion' with his *Roses Are Blooming* program at a fictional 2RQ:^{iv}

This session... was made up of gentle lyrics and little scraps of sentiment, ditties about life's eventide and the dear eyes of a girl with golden hair. It made Bleeby Peverill so sick that he was considering retiring to a monastery. In the meantime he framed emotional monologues to a background of music. (126)

In naming his new weekly half-hour program *Quality Street*, Thompson may have intended to distinguish it from this kind of sentimental mélange, though the title's derivation from J.M. Barrie's 1901 comedy equally attests to the ABC's nostalgic Anglophilia. *Quality Street* made its debut on 2BL in Sydney on Sunday evening 17 June 1946, and was 'conducted by Peter Finch', already a much-in-demand radio actor. By the second program Thompson's name was announced alongside Finch's: 'Prepared by John Thompson and conducted by PETER FINCH!' (emphasis in original, as elsewhere in quotations from the Thompson papers). The first show tried to define the meaning of 'quality' as it applied to the programmed items:

COMPERE: Quality Street is a street of many mansions, each perfect in a different style.
When we hear music in Quality Street it is often popular and occasionally strange and rare.
When a famous aria brings the local people to the windows it is sung by a Tenor of Quality.

T.T.: 'THY TINY HAND IS FROZEN' (BJORLING [sic])

COMPERE: In Quality Street who/m [corrected] should we expect to find if not John Gielgud? Who/m [corrected], if not Edith Evans. Never were two voices more capable of giving life to the perfumed pages of 'the Importance of Being Ernest' [sic]. (Thompson papers)

('T.T.' presumably stands for 'turntable' as records were used, tape being as yet unavailable.) In this first program, an extract from Oscar Wilde was followed by a Beethoven bagatelle, and Peter Finch asked his brand-new audience: 'Let us choose—well, what would you like us to choose? Is there some melody so delightful that no one can help appreciating it? Do you think perhaps "Für Elise" [sic] would meet the situation? With Schnabel sitting at the keyboard?' (17 August 1946). The rhetorical questions are a means of interpellating the listener into the shared ideological position of those who know and appreciate 'quality'. In a later program the listener is asked 'Do you remember Othello's words, when questioned by the duke and senators?' (29 December 1946). For the vast majority of people the answer would be a resounding 'No!'—which is reason enough for Thompson to immediately jog their memories with a recorded performance.

Despite this emphasis on the elusive charms of 'quality', in the first and subsequent programs the tone is decidedly middle-of-the-road. 'Für Elise' was followed by an extract from one of Winston Churchill's speeches, which was in turn followed by Paul Robeson singing *The Little Black Boy* and Henri Duparc's setting of Baudelaire's 'Invitation to the Voyage'. Literary offerings increased as the series proceeded, with programs taking up particular themes such as France, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, the USA, Russia, 'The Other Germany', Scandinavia, Spain, England, and a generic 'Asia'. A program of 'music and poetry by artists of twenty or

under' was followed by one featuring the work of elderly musicians and poets; 'a rustic program' was followed by one on the city, and so on.

Peter Finch had theatrical commitments that meant he ceased to 'conduct' the show on or shortly after 20 April 1947 (some programs are missing from the Thompson papers). After a brief hiatus *Quality Street* returned on 6 July 1947, this time presented by John Wiltshire,^v who asked his audience:

Why 'Quality Street'? Simply because, when you come with us along this avenue, this thirty minutes byway of radio-time, you forget the hurly-burly, we hope: you forget the characterless places, all the shoddy regions of the mind. 'Quality Street'—where all doors swing at a gentle touch, though they lock themselves tight against a blow, a kick, or a shove; where all windows stand open, though they snap like traps of steel when a dishonest eye tries to penetrate them—it is a kind of heaven, this street of original things, a Petticoat Lane of perfection. You will see nothing, overhear nothing, rub against nothing here which is not among the best of its kind. (Thompson papers)

Despite its highbrow claim to offer the best, the reference to Petticoat Lane gives away the eclectic, middlebrow nature of *Quality Street's* offerings.

The first usage of middlebrow cited by the *OED* is an amused comment from *Punch* in 1925: 'The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the "middlebrow". It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.' As such, it built upon Director-General Sir John Reith's vision of radio as a technology for social unification and moral improvement (see, for instance, Avery). Thus, in 1942, Virginia Woolf could ridicule the Beeb as the "Betwixt and Between Company" for cultivating a middlebrow taste that disrupted the "blood brotherhood" that otherwise existed between highbrows, like herself, and lowbrows (118). From his years in Britain, Thompson knew this style of broadcasting very well, and it's captured in the high moral tone as well as the mixed content of the early *Quality Street* programs.

For American scholar Joan Shelley Rubin, however, middlebrow is associated with the attempt to adapt 'genteel' US culture to the effects of consumerism in the period between the two World Wars. Unlike the UK, America had no monopoly public broadcaster, and Rubin's account of early literary programs on American radio highlights the problem in 'selling' literature to a mass audience, caught between the style of the 'extended classroom' and the 'conversation in the living room' (Rubin 328, though passim). Rubin offers several examples of the difficulties in successfully incorporating literary content into popular commercial radio entertainment. For instance, in the 1930s the NBC network's *Swift Hour*—named after the sponsor, a prominent meat packer – offered 'an hour of melody, drama (or anecdote) and song' (283) and was for a time presented by the retired Yale professor William Lyons Phelps, who provided fireside literary chats and short book and theatre reviews. Despite Phelps's inclusive blend of ivy-league and avuncularity, the show's main attraction was the musical direction of Sigmund Romberg, composer of the 1920s stage hits *The Student Prince* and *The Desert Song*. Literary content was squeezed into a popular music format.

Thompson was well aware of these problems, and the miscellany style of the early *Quality Street* was one answer to them. But he also came to realise that ‘literature’ and radio, as distinct cultural formations, were actually inimical to each other. In an important essay on ‘Broadcasting and Australian Literature’ in the 1966 collection *Literary Australia*, he suggested that radio’s main role was as handmaiden to the written word, acting as an ‘intermediary’ in its promotion, and thus as a form of journalism (90). As expressions of higher journalism, radio features might become lesser art forms in their own right, but were doomed to subsidiary status by the ephemeral nature of wireless, and by the demands of the spoken word for clear, thinly textured communication.

Thus Thompson noted of Francis Webb’s verse play *The Ghost of the Cock* that it was ‘too thickly textured for radio’ (105); and yet adaptation had its own problems: ‘As a general rule a good deal of subtlety is lost by adaptation. Bad works may be improved, but great works are nearly always shortened and reduced’ (91). Nevertheless, in the 1930s, ‘at a time when I still thought radio a rather degraded device’, Thompson was impressed by a heavily edited BBC production of *King Lear* ‘which for me still remains the definitive performance of that strange and almost unearthly work’ (91). Comparing Douglas Stewart’s *The Fire on the Snow* with Louis MacNeice’s *The Dark Tower*, he noted that: ‘we may well come to the conclusion that Douglas Stewart’s play is the better literature as such, but that Louis MacNeice’s play is the better radio. One suspects that there may even be a kind of inherent dichotomy between good radio and really good literature...’ (103-104).

By the 1950s *Quality Street* started to move away from the miscellany format and came to offer surveys of the work of selected authors. Clement Semmler noted that it became ‘the highlight of the ABC’s Sunday night radio throughout the 1940s and 1950s.... [and] brought new dimensions to the understanding and appreciation of literature with broadcasts that surveyed the contemporary writing scene in poetry and prose’ (118). Mungo MacCallum, who worked alongside Thompson as a feature-writer, had a different take on it. He recalled that *Quality Street* ‘soon attracted hacks as bees to the honeypot’:

It was an easy few pounds. Themes disappeared and many scripts came straight from Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* or from a riffle through Shakespeare. I called it Rude Locality by Rue de Qualité out of Quality Street, because rude in the sense of rough it so often was. One actor who frequently appeared in it submitted a script and when this was rejected complained, ‘But I spent a whole morning on research!’ (184-185)

Clearly the quality of *Quality Street* could vary. It should be noted, though, that Thompson ‘came and went as writer’ for the program after its early days (Inglis 164), and had taken on greater radiophonic challenges.

Written upon the Air

Ken Inglis, in his history of the ABC, noted that the arrival of tape recorders after 1950 allowed Thompson to branch out into other, multi-layered kinds of features beyond the ‘modest’ means available to him in *Quality Street*, which had been

produced with just ‘a narrator, a reader, and discs’ (165). In 1951 Thompson went on a six-month exchange to London to work with Laurence Gilliam at the well-funded Features Department of the BBC (‘Feature Writer’ 7), and was strongly influenced by them. By this time the BBC had become what Roy Strong has called ‘a central part of consensus culture’ in the UK, reflecting the nation’s wider post-War political consensus: ‘The commitment was firmly to the middle ground with a distaste for extremes, perhaps summed up as a combination of native neo-Romanticism with neutered modernism’ (642).

On his return Thompson became well-known for his radio documentaries on literary and historical figures such as Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae, Ben Chifley, Billy Hughes and Nellie Melba, as well as those mystery men Alf Conlon and Ern Malley. Thompson’s technique was to interview a range of people who knew the subject, and then edit their comments into a radiophonic ‘portrait’, anchored with an introduction and linking commentary by himself. Radio National will still, occasionally over summer, replay one of these features, where Thompson’s rich upper-class baritone, with its faintly impeded r’s, eddies like aromatic pipe smoke between the other voices.

Thompson also made programs with the famous bushman Bill Harney, and wrote and produced documentaries on his own travels in Australia, South Africa, India and the Pacific Islands. He edited some of his radio portraits into three books: *On Lips of Living Men* (1962), *Alf Conlon: A Memorial by Some of His Friends* (1963), and *Five to Remember* (1965). When Clement Semmler became Assistant General Manager for Programmes in 1960 (Inglis 201), he commissioned Thompson to present television interviews with writers, including Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright and Ian Mudie (Semmler 125). The filming of some of these—such as that with Wright—was modelled on the abrasive, close-up style of John Freeman’s *Face to Face* series for the BBC,^{vi} though Thompson was a polite interviewer and never twisted the psychological screws that Freeman did.

What of Thompson’s own poetry during this period? Back in 1948 he had written:

The microphone calls for writing of an open texture, simple in structure, bold in imagery, with an over-all unity in terms of the speed at which an attentive listener can take things in. For two hundred years or more most English poetry was written only to be printed, but in Australia at least we have had the tradition of ballads being spoken around campfires. Radio, in a more sophisticated epoch, should build on that tradition and lift it to a higher level. (‘John Thompson’ 176)

Poems from Thompson’s last collections, *Thirty Poems* (1954) and *I Hate and I Love* (1964), such as ‘Industrial Rhapsody’, ‘The Conqueror’ and ‘Sydney Scherzo’ seem written for broadcasting, often using onomatopoeic devices. The following passage from ‘Industrial Rhapsody’, which celebrates Newcastle, begins with metonymic objects and builds into series of heroic metaphors:

Consider for a while some simple thing
Of iron or steel—a buckle, rake, or hinge—
And in your fancy let the living mills
Rise round it in the ingot hurtling down

Towards the rollers, say, in a vast shed
 Where sunray strikes like moonray through the dust
 And through the steam, and where, from cabins high,
 Newcastle men, grown one with their machines
 Like horsemen with their horses,
 Will guide this ingot with gigantic arms
 (like Davids turned Goliaths) and will make it
 A slender rod, as easily as portly
 Confectioners make strings of sugar-paste. (*I Hate and I Love* 56-57)

Note how Thompson announces the shift into a higher tone by the poetic inversion 'from cabins high'. 'Sydney Scherzo' is in a very different key, and in a much freer rhythm, the loose hexameter held together by assonantal effects and occasional alliteration:

We, an unabashed people.
 Yarning, gibing, protesting about what's right or wrong with us,
 All the loud crowded day, in the windy gold and the blue;
 Hurrying or sauntering workwards at all sorts of times in the morning,
 With rattle of myriad heels like the noise of a creek;
 Leaning from windowed eyries hundreds of feet above water,
 Or far away down in a garden, collapsed on a spongy lawn;
 Trapped in a shoppers' jostle of bags and intolerant elbows,
 Or hemmed by irascible cars where bullocks were wont to plod;
 Making and buying and selling, handing out tickets and dockets –
 We rebel against the great city, we cavil and chafe at the clamor,
 The crush, the heat, the struggle, but still say 'Yes' with our hearts.
 (*I Hate and I Love* 65)

Throughout this time Thompson still had a hand in *Quality Street*. Barbara Jefferis, reviewing *I Hate and I Love* on the program shortly after it appeared, remarked on Thompson's long association with *Quality Street*, and observed that it was 'conceived with the dual purpose of letting the voices of Australian poets be heard and of bringing to poetry lovers the delights of spoken English poetry of all ages' ('Poetry of John Thompson'). Very evidently, the latter 'purpose' predated the former. Nevertheless, surviving scripts from the late 1950s and early 1960s demonstrate that Thompson's own *Quality Street* programs had become a showcase for Australian poets, and that MacCallum's joke about 'Rude Locality' was not entirely fair. For instance, to correspond with the publication of collections of their verse in the early 1960s, Thompson gave *Quality Street* over to programs on the long dead Christopher Brennan and the very much alive Ronald McCuaig. These offered a judicious selection of readings from each poet's work in the context of a useful critical survey.

Thompson's last major work for radio, written and produced in 1966, was 'Out West It's Worse', a dramatic 'poem for voices' on the effects of the recent drought:

THE SPEAKER: ...Complacent eyes, in comfortable cars
 Which purr and sizzle over western roads,
 Pursuing a mirage of water, find
 No water when that faithless silver fades.

On either side, mile upon mile upon mile,
The trees are withering, the grasses gone,
And even the weeds shrivelled. How small and few
The flocks and herds that wait by dusty yards
For handouts, some so weak that if they ran
They'd fall and never rise.

Stop. Stop the car.
Open the door. Stand at the roadside. Listen.
There's not a tractor throbbing, not a plough
Breaking the brown grey black or reddish ground
Which undulates towards the roofs and tanks
Of silent farms... (4-5)

The text juxtaposes a touristic view of the landscape with a local perspective, inviting listeners—as here—to imagine themselves into this place and to experience its uncanny desolation:

THE SPEAKER: ... No air so eerie
As that which breeds and broods round a home
Abandoned, shutters locked and blinds all drawn,
Or doors left swinging, windows curtainless,
Rooms open to the rats and bats and birds.
Cooee! Is there nobody here?
ECHO: Nobody here.
THE SPEAKER: What's wrong? Have you all gone away?
ECHO: All gone away.
THE SPEAKER: Answer me, someone. Have you no answer?
ECHO: No answer. (5)

Though such a device seems a little ingenuous today, 'Out West It's Worse' is also a surprisingly early plea for environmental restraints in farming:

THE SPEAKER: ...But we with the plough and harrow, the saw, the axe
Of the husbandman, we with our weapons of fear
Where there was little to fear, our arks like Noah's
Bulging with alien animals hard of hoof
And harsh of mouth, all of us hungry and rough,
Rushed at the land like ravishers. In little more
Than one long lifetime so much forest was felled
Or was burned over and over, and so many acres
We cropped or stocked so rabidly [sic], then washed raw
By sweeping storms, that venerable streams were choked
With sand or silt; and soon, in a dry season,
Hot winds lifted the dust from desolate paddocks
And blew it into the oceans. Skies were red
With dust or black with smoke, and summer rain
Splattered the startled cities with mud like blood. (11)

'Out West It's Worse' was evidently a success for, as one of Thompson's obituaries recorded, 'he was planning a similar series based on Asia and the Pacific' (Farwell 135) when he died in 1968.

It seems curious, then, that, despite a successful career as a writer and producer of the spoken word, in his 'Broadcasting and Australian Literature' essay Thompson could claim that: 'By and large, existing literature tends to be vulgarised by radio, which is, however, a convenient populariser and may well have done more good than harm. One hopes so, but there is no proof'. No doubt he was thinking of *Quality Street* and its likely impact. He added, however: 'There is, on the contrary, the inescapable and rather dismaying fact that the broadcasting of poetry seems to have done nothing to revive its popularity' (92). What did he think he was doing with his own radio verse? Was it only print, and the complex reflexivity of the page, that made poetry 'poetic'?

If Thompson's position at the ABC gave him considerable cultural authority as a literary arbiter, the medium of broadcasting also meant that his reputation was largely written upon the air. And yet, in his day, he was a power in the land. It was Thompson, for example, who conceived *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* (1958), lobbied Sir Allen Lane to publish it, and then co-edited it with Guy Howarth and Kenneth Slessor (Patricia Thompson, 'A Memory' 38). Slessor recalled that:

Our basic aims were only two.

The first was to make a selection of Australian poetry chosen by only *one* standard, that of pure poetry, and unaffected by considerations of history and national sentiment.

The second was to make this collection as accessible as possible to as many readers as possible. (181)

These aims are an echo of the problems of literary broadcasting, caught between the metaphysical demands of high art and those of broad accessibility. It was a dichotomy that Slessor, as a literary journalist, could well understand. As a result, *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* excludes populist bush ballads and jolting modernist experimentation in order to steer a lyrical middle course through the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with Mary Gilmore and ending with Vivian Smith. Slessor was unsure whether the editors had achieved their first aim, 'but there can be no dispute', he wrote, 'about the editors' success in achieving their second ambition', the book selling 100,000 copies by 1961 (182).

It's possible to argue that through his position at the ABC Thompson had a significant role in the construction of a 'middlebrow' poetic culture in this country after the Second World War. 'Middlebrow' is a label, often dismissive, usually applied only to fiction or books of popular philosophy. It's rarely used for poetry, and I wonder why not. The kind of poetry that Thompson favoured—seemingly in spite of himself at times—was the kind of poetry that usually read well on radio, which made him a purveyor of what might be called 'middlebrow verse'. In saying this I don't mean to dismiss Thompson's considerable achievement in creating a space for poetry on the airwaves. Indeed it's hard to imagine what other literary directions the ABC might have taken in those years. In aesthetic terms, Thompson may not have been a modernist—or not a 'high' modernist, at least—but he was a moderniser, and understood how a new medium might best be used to promote an older one.

Thompson was aware of the paradoxical nature of the ABC's charter as a purveyor of high culture to a largely imaginary mass audience. Certainly he successfully exploited these tensions, with the long-running *Quality Street*, and his radio features exploring

the relationship between word and sound, poetry and documentary. It's therefore worth acknowledging Thompson's role in helping to consolidate a moderate middleground for Australian poetry after the Second World War: to borrow Strong's description of public culture in Britain at this time, a poetry combining 'native neo-Romanticism with neutered modernism'. Not that it has to be read in quite such negative terms, and not that Thompson was acting alone. At the very least, Douglas Stewart at the *Bulletin*, and the annual *Australian Poetry* anthologies published by Angus and Robertson also had roles to play in the 'neutering' process. So too the Jindyworobaks with their neo-Romantic nativism. But, on the airwaves, Thompson was the authoritative patrician voice of a style of broadly accessible 'public' verse, which was canonised in the Penguin anthology, and against which 'the Generation of '68'—the year of Thompson's death—so violently reacted.

I would like to acknowledge the excellent research assistance of Karen Attard in the writing of this article.

WORKS CITED

- Avery, Todd. 'Arnold Over Britain? John Reith and Broadcasting Morality'. *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
- Cumming, Robert. 'Poetry Sessions'. *ABC Weekly* 27 November 1948: 2.
- Farwell, George. 'A Man of Quality: John Thompson'. *Meanjin* 28 (1969): 132-35.
- 'Feature Writer Exchange with B.B.C.' *ABC Weekly* 10 March 1951: 7.
- Griffin-Foley, Bridget. *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio*. University of New South Wales: UNSW Press, 2009.
- Inglis, K.S., with Jan Brazier. *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-1983*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1983.
- Jeffris, Barbara. 'Poetry of John Thompson' (*Quality Street* transcript). Thompson papers. Mitchell Library MS 1943, box 4.
- Johnson, Lesley. *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio*. London, Routledge, 1988.
- Kinnane, Garry. *Colin Colahan: A Portrait*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- Kirkpatrick, Peter. 'Thompson, John Joseph Meagher'. *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol. 16. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2002: 383-84.
- MacCallum, Mungo. *Plankton's Luck: A Life in Retrospect*. Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1986.
- Macdonald, Alexander. *The Ukulele Player Under the Red Lamp*. Cremorne: Angus and Robertson, 1972.
- Semmler, Clemment. *The ABC – Aunt Sally and Sacred Cow*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981.
- Stern, Werner. 'Verse Session'. *ABC Weekly* 4 October 1947: 29.
- Tennant, Kylie. *Ride on Stranger*. 1943. Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1994.
- Thompson, John. 'Broadcasting and Australian Literature'. *Literary Australia*. Ed. Clemment Semmler. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1966: 89-116.
- . *I Hate and I Love: Poems*. Melbourne: Cheshire, 1964.
- . 'John Thompson (1907-68)' (transcript of 1966 interview with Hazel de Berg).

- Self-Portraits*. Ed. David Foster. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1991: 134-41.
- . ‘John Thompson’. *Southerly* 9.3 (1948): 172-77.
- . ‘Max Meldrum’. *On Lips of Living Men*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1962.
- . Early *Quality Street* manuscripts. Thompson papers. Mitchell Library MS 1943, box 2.
- . ‘“Out West It’s Worse” manuscript. Thompson papers. Mitchell Library MS 1943, box 3.
- . *Sesame and Other Poems*. Sydney: Currawong Publishing Company, 1944.
- Thompson, Patricia. *Accidental Chords*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1988.
- Thompson, Patricia. ‘A Memory of the First Penguin Anthology’. *The Australian Author* October 1974: 38-39.
- Thompson, Peter. Personal interview. 9 June 2000.
- Slessor, Kenneth. ‘2. The Penguin Book’. *Bread and Wine: Selected Prose*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970.
- Strong, Roy. ‘Consensus Arts’. *The Spirit of Britain: A Narrative History of the Arts*. London: Pimlico, 2000.
- Woolf, Virginia. ‘Middlebrow’. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth Press, 1942.

ⁱ Drawing upon the work of Raymond Williams, Johnson suggests that ‘The difference between the ABC and the BBC was a matter of the extent to which a state institution could draw on and speak on behalf of a social group (or groups) whose cultural understandings were represented as general to the society (or symbolizing the “best self” of that society)’ (154). In other words, lacking not only the monopoly position of the early BBC but also its ‘pre-existing cultural hegemony’ (Williams in Johnson 153), from its very beginning the ABC struggled to establish, or to create for itself, a convincing cultural authority.

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise attributed, Thompson’s biographical details are taken from my entry on him in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clement Semmler observed with irritation in 1981 that ‘In the ABC the broadcasting of literature in its various aspects has, over the years, fallen among different program departments’, including Talks, Special Projects and children’s and schools’ broadcasts (114-15). He notes R.A. Broinowski’s *Original Verse* of the 1940s and fifties as one of the ‘better known’ poetry programmes, ‘which ran for twelve years and to which many leading Australian poets contributed’ (119). Yet in 1947 an angry North Sydney listener was complaining to the *ABC Weekly* that ‘Not only is it being cut, but it is transferred to all sorts of times, as though it were a twopenny chattel’ (Stern 29). Other correspondents in the late 1940s also complained of a dearth of poetry broadcasts on the ABC: ‘Midst the bunk and junk of the commercials; while 2BL’s air space is periodically swallowed by Parliament; while every sport and craze is amply catered for; and while well-meaning old gents babble away through the microphones ostensibly dishing out culture (I always think what a fine thing is mushroom culture), I, and other poetical Twists, come asking for more – poetry sessions’ (Cumming 2).

^{iv} On women’s programs in the 1930s, see Johnson chapter 3, 100-12.

^v Wiltshire was soon replaced as compere by Paul Maclay (*ABC Weekly* 11 October 1947, 18).

^{vi} This was suggested to me by Peter Thompson.