

Charles Spear

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The text of a talk given by Ian Wedde as the launch of Collected Poems (Auckland: Holloway Press, 2007) by Charles Spear, at the Gus Fisher Gallery, Thursday 11 October 2007

Like a lot of readers of poetry in New Zealand, or at least readers my age, I first encountered the small, surprising poems of Charles Spear in Allen Curnow's 1960 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. I don't remember exactly when this was, but it would have been in the first two or three years that I was at university in Auckland, probably around 1966.

Two things were going on for me around then, and to varying degrees these preoccupations were shared by my contemporaries who were writing poetry. One of the preoccupations was in effect a counter-preoccupation, in that in general I was disinterested in New Zealand poetry. The reasons for this were not very sound: there was a certain amount of knee-jerk anti-nationalism involved. A related preoccupation, in this case an engaged rather than counter- preoccupation, was with contemporary American poetry, which I was consuming in large uncritical amounts. This poetry was sometimes deliberately esoteric; more often, though, it encouraged the sound and presence of a personal, usually first person, 'voice'. Its rhythms and forms were also close to spoken language; formal verse structures involving composed rhythms, rhyme schemes or even syllabic forms, were out of the question, though in their place a number of apologia for form continued to appear, as in the somewhat oxymoronic term 'open form'.

The poems of Charles Spear, though, were a problem that lodged in my old brain, by which I don't mean the brain that's the same age as its container, but that reptilian part of the brain that takes care of diurnal and circadian rhythms, the mechanics of consciousness that are regulated by patterns, shapes, repetitions; that links thinking to walking; that links cognition to language, and language to the formal structures and codes of grammar, and the organisational apparatus and systematics of grammar – the

‘loosely coupled’ systems – to memory, and memory to cultural forms that encode its narratives and meanings, and those narratives and meanings to vessels, containers, vehicles and performances – to the various texts of cultural production such as poems that are remembered in whole or in part, as well as in songs that people are surprised to find they can still sing along to, in hairy dog stories, in community fib cycles – what might be called the dial-tones of the old brain.

It’s a very long reach from the highly refined result of a poem to the primitive business of the old brain. And yet it’s this reach, or something like it, something like its combination of implausibility and ‘rightness’, that paradox of something unexplainable making a perfect kind of sense, that sense of critical resistance or scepticism being interesting but futile, that tells us we’ve encountered something that’s not banal.

It was the word ‘dislustered’ from Spear’s poem ‘Memoriter’ that lodged coolly somewhere in my feverish young brain around 1966 – ‘Ovals of opal on dislustered seas’ – and stayed there. So did the poem’s last line, ‘That other arrow veered towards your heart’. Though I wasn’t equipped to explain what had happened, I think I recognised, instinctively as it were, that I’d encountered the real thing, the simultaneously primitive and exquisite paradox that explained why poetry mattered, not just to me but to human culture.

I probably didn’t want to let this realisation get inside the perimeter of my disinterest in New Zealand poetry – but it did, and in there it began to erode the confidence of this disinterest.

For a start, there was nothing in Charles Spear’s poems to which I could attach the disinterest. There was no purchase – nothing for the disinterest to get a purchase on. Like me and most of my contemporaries, the poems seemed oblivious to any kind of identifiable national consciousness. They didn’t live in the geocultural territory where Allen Curnow, Rita Angus, Frank Sargeson, et al were trying to match language to location and history. The world of Spear’s poems resembled, more, a kind of esoteric library in a kind of time warp.

They raised the obvious but problematic issue in respect of ‘New Zealand poetry’ – what makes it ‘New Zealand’? That it’s written here? That its reference is ‘here’? And where is ‘here’ – to what degree is ‘here’ a temporal condition, a condition of consciousness or even of psychology, of emotion and affect, of simple geographical location, of complex cultural location?

Charles Spear’s poems seemed to confound most of the conventional reasons why they should be called ‘New Zealand’ poems. And yet, here they were. In addition, they seemed to break all the rules of late-modernist orthodoxy: they were formally constructed, they eschewed a personal voice, their

language was exquisitely and minutely composed and melodious – ‘Ovals of opals on dislustered seas’ – ‘Birds of boding in a greasy knot’ – and yet, here they were, all the same, exquisitely anachronistic, and at the same time weirdly contemporary.

Along with the poems of RAK Mason, it was the poems of Charles Spear that stuck in the cracks of my mind in the mid 1960s; they kept making snags for the uncritical floods of contemporary poetry that poured in there over the next decade or two.

A few years down the track, in the early 1980s, Harvey McQueen and I were sifting through large volumes of ‘New Zealand poetry’ for the new *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, and grappling as one does in such circumstances with the quotation marks around ‘New Zealand poetry’. What the hell was it? Did it matter?

And there – or ‘here’ – were the ‘dislustered seas’, the ironclads sinking ‘to the rhythms of El Chocolo’, here was ‘the sunken town of brittle amber’, and here, too, was the ‘studiously minor’ muse, ‘attuned to doom’.

The paradox of the post-modern, of course, was that what had seemed anachronistic within the strictures of modernism could suddenly look interesting again – could even look perversely fabulous, elegantly historicist, dandified. Quite a lot of ‘studiously minor’ poetry achieved a certain opportunist prominence; the louche, the deliberately jejeune, the studiously banal, the foppishly ironic.

Charles Spear’s poems, however, though perhaps a little freer of the miasma of anachronism anxiety that had surrounded them in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, weren’t ‘studiously minor’ in this sense. There – or ‘here’ – they just were. They seemed unaffected, somehow, in several senses of the word. Time, taste and literary fashion didn’t seem to have affected them. They were unaffected in the sense of being modest rather than minor, and yet their effects were highly refined, you could almost say they were immodestly crafted. Without seeming to mean to do it, they played the same havoc as they always had with the quotation marks around ‘New Zealand’. Harvey McQueen and I read the beautiful little 1951 collection, *Twopence Coloured*; its scale was unaffected and completely out of proportion to the impact of the poems in it. I read *Twopence Coloured* quite a few times – over and over, in fact. I was baffled to discover that I’d stored some fragments of it for twenty years, I think via Allen Curnow’s 1960 anthology. I remember arguing for the inclusion of a substantial selection of Spear’s poems in the 1985 *Penguin*; I don’t remember Harvey objecting. Why would he? The value of the poems was self-evident, somehow. And it was interesting that what constituted a ‘substantial selection’ of the poems still only came to three pages. It was as though Spear’s poems imposed their own unaffected rigour, their own economy of means and substance. Their critical mass, if you like, is

in inverse proportion to their volume.

It's been interesting to discover subsequently that some of these poems were composed complete in dreams, or from dreams. This seems to argue for the old-brain connection; and yet, of course, it argues even more for the significance of a psychological foreground, the kind of consciousness the Surrealists valued and hoped to tap into.

Charles Spear doesn't have an obviously strong personal presence in his poems; the maker's or fabricator's voice is impersonal in a sense, it's absorbed in and by the style of the language it utters. But this style is also stylish, and you get the sense of a stylish personality behind the dreamlike and sometimes almost abject surfaces of the poems.

I'd always had a mental image of Charles Spear as an erudite, elegant, intellectually sharp and unexpected man; perhaps rather private, possibly an insomniac, a reclusive figure who enjoyed the private benefits of not sleeping, of dreaming alone while awake in some private library or archive of the mind. I'm very happy to learn from the few hints in this lovely book that Charles Spear liked minding his grandchildren, that he was a sociable and generous man – even that his scholarly habits were quirky rather than rigorous. He seems to have been an unpretentious, likeable, engaging man. I'm glad he wrote a few more poems, but also glad he didn't write too many more. What we've got is just right, somehow. Just enough weight in the hand, just enough substance in the mind, just enough reaching back to the old brain.

Finally, I just want to say that there's also something entirely appropriate and well considered about this very fine book. The poems feel right in a small, crafted edition, on good paper, with a charming photograph of the poet tipped in at the front and with Leo Benseman's bookplate towards the back – the latter a Peter Simpson touch, I imagine.

It's good to have Matthew Woods's and Peter Simpson's notes at the back of the book – though, as might be expected, they more often than not have the effect of explaining to the reader, in case they hadn't noticed, that glosses on individual words and references hardly ever unwrap the significance, let alone the 'meaning', of the poem. If anything, such a glossary for Charles Spear's poems heightens their economy, their inscrutability.

The choice of Tony Lane to provide some illustrations is also terrific – apt because Tony's own work, like Spear's poems, is so elegantly crafted, so hard to pin down in some 'here', and so adept at making an interior world of association, at once esoteric and obvious, appear as a kind of gorgeous evidence or trace of imagination.

An afterthought: what is the address of these poems? How do they speak to us? What do they expect of us? I'd have to say that for me it's immensely refreshing to be in the presence of poems that (and here's a list of negatives that collectively constitute a positive) – *do not* demand that I understand them; that do not demand that I sympathise with them; do not demand that I empathise with their author; do not demand that I admire them; do not demand that I admire or even love their author. They, the poems, just are 'here', and what happens after that they don't anticipate or wish for – they're not 'avant la lettre', which is a kind of blessing, really.

So – congratulations to all involved in this publication, my salutations to the shade of the poet Charles Spear, and thank you for the copy of this lovely book which arrived in the mail a few weeks ago and which I've been carrying from room to room around the house ever since.