

Dennis List: An Appreciation

Niel Wright

Dennis List died in Adelaide on 9 November 2007 unexpectedly, though he had battled cancer for a year.

Born in Rotorua in 1946 of a professional family whose name was originally Liszt, Dennis arrived at Victoria University in 1964 and quickly became prominent as a writer and editor. His work from that time can be found in *Argot* from 1964 on, *Experiment* (1965, 1968), *Frogslegs*, *Salient*, *Poetry Broadsheet* (1966, 1967), *NZ University Arts Festival Yearbook* (1966, 1968), *NZ Student News*, *Fragments*, *Strawberry Fields* (1967), *Troubadour* (1969), *Second Coming* (Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2, 1974, Special New Zealand Anthology) and *Poetry New Zealand* (Nos. 1, 2 and 3). Dennis was Bill Manhire's first editor and mentor - in *Argot* 14 (Winter 1965) Dennis List printed Bill Manhire's first published poem, 'Threnody.' Subsequently Dennis List's first book of poems *A Kitset of 26 Poems* appeared in London in 1972 from Amphedasma Press, of which Bill Manhire was one of the publishers. List's second book of poems *Pathways into the Brain* (1973) was one of Caveman Press's bestsellers. His third book of poems *Falling Off Chairs* was published in 1996 by Original Books, Wellington. He featured in *The Young New Zealand Poets* (1973). In 2000 nine of List's poems were printed in the *Alsop Review*, "a very highly regarded online poetry magazine in the US." (see www.alsopreview.com)

Dennis List's poetry is prominently presented in the anthology *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960 - 1975* (Auckland UP, 2000). The commentary on and the selection of his poems in *Big Smoke* show Dennis List for what he was in that period, a star of the new poetry movement.

Any literary movement is a temporary phenomenon, because it requires a good number of people to cohere and cooperate together over a period of time, a state of affairs that may not last five years let alone the ten years from the beginning of Dennis List's publishing history to 1975, the year which *Big Smoke* recognises as the end of the literary movement on which the anthology centres. In his essay in *Big Smoke*, 'Poetics of the Impossible,' Murray Edmond sees a new cultural nationalism becoming installed by 1975 as a new establishment: 'In as much as the new poetry had begun as a revolt of new internationalist tendencies (anti-Viet Nam War, pro-Black Power) against the boring and silent nationalism of the established culture, this new nationalism, at once earnestly reformative and nostalgic, was the beginning of the end for the new poetry.' (*Big Smoke*, p. 30) And Edmond goes on to quote Dennis List as protesting at and holding out against this development: 'I have seen poetry as a medieval walled town, full of people looking for the town hall . . . I would prefer to set up a stall outside the walls, and let the town grow around me.' (Dennis List quoted in *Big Smoke*, p. 31) Dennis List looms just as large at the end of the movement (1975) as he does in its earlier stages (1966) - and throughout.

I was a part-time student at VUW in 1964, but I did not meet Dennis List till early 1965 as I recall. Dennis had a wide circle of literary contacts, but his closest circle from those years and ever since, besides family, included myself and Batch Hales. I wrote the 1973 *Salient* review of *A Kitset of 26 Poems*, the only one known. Many of his literary and technical books carry my imprint as publisher, Original Books, Wellington. Once Dennis settled in Australia we maintained mail/email contact. I have about two reams of our correspondence from 1980 on to his last month of life. We were different personalities but were closely aligned to a surprising extent.

Dennis List had a short story in *Argot* 11 (May-June 1964). By *Argot* 13 (Autumn 1965) he was co-editor of the magazine (with his flatmates, Blair Peach and David Rutherford). Murray Edmond, in his introductory essay in *Big Smoke*, makes clear that *Argot* had a leading and continuing role as a long-running, experimental literary magazine (1962 – 1975) when he describes it as 'one of the most important magazines of the new poetry.' (*Big Smoke*, p.26) Dennis List moved on to edit the 1966 edition of *Frogslegs*, in which he appears not just under his own name but, as he wrote to Michele Leggott, various names, including Shurlu Huba, and in which he

published five pages of ‘The Life History of Shurple,’ a novel for which at the end of his life Dennis List regretted he could not find his extensive notes and drafts.

The biggest literary influence on Dennis List was J.R.R. Tolkien. List’s literary drive was to comic fantasy whether in verse or narrative prose. Here are two short poems of his from *A Kitset of 26 Poems*:

IV

Up one day in the cable car
I passed my alter ego going down.
Should I change cars
and reverse my life?
Too late. The car moved on.

VIII

Bumped into myself
in street the other day.
Well!
Fancy meeting me!
One finds oneself all over the place!
Did someone put a mirror in the street?

After a lifelong search
at last I have found myself.
Surprise!
I look just like me.
But am I writing with my left hand or my right?

After a varied and influential career in New Zealand when he edited and largely wrote the first two *New Zealand Whole Earth Catalogues*, in 1979 Dennis and his family migrated to Australia, where before long he became head of market research for the ABC, operating out of Adelaide. He authored major marketing research guides for the ABC. When Dennis List took redundancy from the ABC in 1998, he became a freelance marketing guru, making several trips to south east Asia

and Africa for the Swedish Aid organisation and published major marketing guides, one translated into Indonesian.

He was also offered and took up a South Australian government scholarship to do a PhD at the University of South Australia, which he completed in 2006, and, with the experience of standing in for his Professor for several years was immediately taken on by Adelaide University and made head of the market research department in their Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Innovation Centre, having already established an international reputation in Futures Studies

Dennis List was formidable, obviously substantial, very intelligent, capable of brilliance, quite independent of conventional expectations. He never took university seriously until he undertook a PhD in his fifties at South Australia. Out of his working career as a very capable hands-on director of market research came practical experience and theoretical insights to impress aid organisers and academics. He took financial remuneration seriously, but lived life with easy nonchalance. He followed his private pursuits and interests with enthusiasm.

Dennis List's major literary effort in the later part of his life went on a dozen novels, six completed. His first novel was published serially in *Salient* in 1968, reprinted in 1996, *The Return of the Triboldies*, (Wellington: Original Books). From 1993 Dennis List worked on a series of novels to be set each in an Australian state and New Zealand, finishing three of them, *Midnight Deli* (1993), *Gone: No Address* (1994), *Cloud of Universal Light* (1999-2006) as well as two other novels, *Dromeworld* (1997), *Lear on Limbo* (1997-2006). For some details and texts of Dennis's writings see his website www.dennislist.net His completed novels are held in safe keeping in New Zealand, and it is hoped that plans to publish them will come to fruition

Dennis List is survived by his wife Katrina, son Morgan, daughters Ursula and Claudia and grandchildren.