

**‘LANDED POEM UPWARDS’: MARTYN SANDERSON (1938 - 2009)**

**Murray Edmond**

Martyn Sanderson burst onto the New Zealand poetry scene with eleven poems in Louis Johnson's 1964 *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, the issue which contained allegedly 'obscene' poems from Baxter and Richard Packer. Two of Sanderson's poems were also embroiled in the obscenity controversy. The *Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand* was first published in 1945 and was succeeded by the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* in 1951. Both these publications were part of that institutionalisation of cultural nationalism which began to occur during, but mostly happened after, the Second World War - the National Film Unit (1941), the New Zealand Literary Fund (1946), the National Library Service (1947), the National Orchestra (1947), the New Zealand Ballet Company (1953), the first of a number of New Zealand Opera Companies in 1954, and the sequence of poetry anthologies, Curnow's 1945 and 1951 Caxton anthologies and Chapman and Bennett's 1956 Oxford, and finally Curnow's 1960 Penguin. It was all coming together, or so it seems in W.H. Oliver's complacent retrospective account: 'the breakthrough came with the end of the Second World War . . . . These crowded years transformed a colonial society into an independent one . . .' (Oliver, 539). Sanderson managed to jump on the very end of Oliver's independence train because the 1964 *Poetry Yearbook* was Johnson's last. That was that, an era was over - and what was to come next? ( see Edmond).

In 1964 Sanderson not only published his eleven poems but he also co-founded, with fellow poet Peter Bland, actor Tim Elliott, and entrepreneur Harry Seresin, Downstage Theatre in Wellington, the most enduring and variegatedly interesting and engaged of New Zealand's establishment theatres. Theatre and drama and film were to be where Sanderson's life and work were largely spent: he quit Downstage in 1966 (it had become too conservative for him) to travel to Australia (where, later in the 1970s, he made an experimental film); then returned

to New Zealand to join up with Blerta (Bruno Lawrence Electronic Revelation and Travelling Apparition) and Geoff Murphy and the Acme Sausage Company film-makers; won a television drama acting award for his portrayal of pioneer aviator Richard Pearse; played Len Demler in the film *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*; directed the feature film *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*; and at the time of his sudden death he was working as an actor with the students from Toi Whakaari (the National Dance and Drama School) and members of the Wellington African community. Sanderson's theatre and film activities represented what came next, after the independence train of cultural nationalism went off to a quiet siding to rust away its last years. So, poetry, as such, was not finally his work. Within poetry he remained an occasional presence, surprised by the fact he was a presence, and, from this position, prepared to tease those who took their role in poetry too pompously: 'Some of the poems, for instance, were written in defiance of good taste. And would be surprised now to find themselves arranged so tastefully' (Sanderson, 9). This quotation comes from *Like smoke in a wheelbarrow*, a sort of collected poems (117pp. 81 poems), which marked Sanderson's return to publishing poetry in 2006. As far as I can judge almost all these poems were written between the early 1960s and 1980, with probably only the last three poems post-dating 1980. *Like Smoke in a Wheelbarrow* is a modest collection and also a snapshot of those two decades. But there are poetic aspects of Sanderson's work that deserve attention.

An early poem from the 1960s, 'Whisp,' reminds one of Creeley's awareness of the act of saying in the saying ('I heard words/and words full//of holes' (Creeley, 96)):

'there and here it is  
like a bird behind glass I see it  
and fly against nothing,  
there - where those people picnic,  
just over there,  
through there,  
do you see?

Can you hear my words  
as I say them?

(Sanderson, 'Whisp,' 19).

In his 'Introduction' to the 1964 *Yearbook* Johnson described Sanderson as being 'on the Creeley side of Charles Doyle' (Johnson, 29). Generally Sanderson's impasse with the saying of saying is not sustained with Creeley's here-and-now intensity. Sanderson tends to slide towards imagery or summarising conclusions, but still such hyper-awareness as in the lines quoted above can be found lurking throughout his poetry.

If Creeley's poems can be little theatres of meeting, contrariwise they can be said to lack drama because of their introversion. Sanderson's poetry more naturally inhabits the dramatic, often in a playful and intentionally frivolous way:

She: It's as bad as Beckett.

He: It certainly isn't as *good* as Beckett.

(Sanderson, 'Situations vacant,' 105).

The role of theatre in the poetry is sometimes unresolved, but with the poem 'Film' (Sanderson, 91 - 92) Sanderson succeeds in allowing the loosely strung-together form of a film script treatment to behave as a poem. The dramatic problem of the mystery of an anonymous corpse finally veers towards allegory as the corpse assists with his own disposal and all that is left is a film crew on a lonely beach sweeping the sand back to a natural finish. In a prefatory note to *Wheelbarrow*, Sanderson acknowledges the role of theatre in his work - 'Maybe's it's an actor's way to glimpse reality' - and this accounts for a persistent teasing playfulness in the writing: 'I know you know that I'm not who I appear to be' (Sanderson, 9).

Sanderson's playfulness and sense of the absurd share something, at times, with the work of Dennis List. The poem 'punctuation: mark' (Sanderson, 46) plays with language as it is designed on the page and 'Um' (48) and 'Wordsplay' (49) confront the absurdity of the act of writing itself. Whelan the Wrecker could be a character from a List poem, and 'Man alone' (55) is a list poem, (in the other sense of the word) presented as a series of stage instructions, the first and last of which is 'write this little history.' Sanderson's poems are at their best in this meta-territory. When the work veers towards social commentary or personal angst, it struggles. He is better at playing the Court Jester than the Prophet.

The series of articles Sanderson wrote for *Act* magazine in 1967 and his poem in *Act* magazine in 1967 (see Sanderson, 61) about Yoko Ono's 1964 'Cut Piece' performance demonstrate his awareness of the state of international experimental performance at that time. Sanderson's poem 'Party Games' (Sanderson, 40) has resemblances to the instructional writing in Ono's book *Grapefruit* (1964). During his brief but significant time at Downstage he performed Beckett's *From an Abandoned Work* at lunchtime in the Downstage auditorium, which doubled as a restaurant, as if he was a dosser who had wandered in from the street. Patrons may well have never known they had witnessed a piece of theatre. At Downstage's 30th birthday celebrations in 1994, Sanderson was the only one of the founders present, and in the public question-and-answer session, Kay Roberts said to him: "Martyn, you rather frightened us, because you said you wanted to put the performance on, then burn down the building afterwards."

Perhaps the tricks and jokes and games of the poetry largely remain at that level and do not reach the coherence of a method, which a more consistent and persistent working at poetry might have achieved. But Sanderson's restless intelligence and his sense of the entertainment value of art's performance (that it surprise you, that it delight you) is always present. Alan Brunton directed Martyn in Jack Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination*; the combo of this trio, Brunton, Sanderson, and Hibberd, two actor poets and a poetic dramatist of the antipodean dialect, all existential males dancing in language, seems to propose a classic comedy line-up – the idea of such a line-up bringing to life Hibberd's protagonist Monk O'Neill, that isolate comedian of emptiness in his outback nowhere, feels exactly right. Sanderson had a sense that language is your comedy partner - one you dare not turn your back on lest that partner biff you on the nut or boot you in the butt. An early small poem, from the *Yearbook* sampling, displays the writer and the writing in a partnership of acrobatic entanglement:

Meeting

A leaf of paper turned  
in the wind,  
landed poem upwards.

The writer leaned for it

from a high window,  
landed face downwards.  
(Johnson, 93).

Martyn Sanderson was a comedian poet and poet comedian whose death leaves New Zealand without an eccentric original.

## Works Cited

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