

**White Paper is a Time Machine: Russell Haley 1934 – 2016**

**Obituary**

**Murray Edmond**

*what we lack  
is your continued  
presence*

*'She' for Beth (from On The Fault Line, Hawk Press, 1977)*

Russell Haley's first published work was as a dramatist, with the ABC in Australia broadcasting two radio plays in the mid 1960s. He had arrived in Australia in 1961 with his wife Jean and their infant son, Ian, immigrant English, refugees from growing up during the Second World War in Leeds and from National Service spent in Iraq and from youthful attempts to set up as a writer in London in the late 1950s. A second child, a daughter, Cathy, was born while they were in Australia. The further move, on to New Zealand, as I recall Russell explaining it, came from a chance encounter in Sydney with the New Zealand poet David Mitchell, from whom he learned about New Zealand's open-entry policy to university after the age of 21.

Russell continued as a playwright when he was first in New Zealand. *The All-Night Bicycle Shop* was given a staged reading at Central Theatre, Remuera, in Auckland in 1968, and *The Balloon Factory*, a play that employed random dialogue, shuffled by the audience, was produced at Auckland University. ('The Balloon Factory' is also the title of a delightfully comic poem of Haley's with the memorable opening lines: "Before we presented him with his coronary/the Boss had a last few requests to make"). A short play called *The Glory Box* was published in *Craccum* in 1968 and a longer one-act play, *The Running European*, was staged at the Young Aucklanders in the Arts Festival in 1968 and published in the 1969 *Arts Festival Literary Yearbook*. A wild, absurdist farce of a play, *The Adoration of Za'oud* accompanied the *Freed* poets as part of their equally wild and absurd reading trip from Auckland to

Wellington in 1969 and was subsequently published in *Argot 22*. Through 1968 and 1969 Russell Haley wrote drama reviews for *Craccum*. His last piece of dramatic writing for the live stage was probably the collaboration we shared in 1971, writing together *Progress in the Dark*, a satirical revue about the colonial history of Auckland, for the newly founded Living Theatre Troupe under the leadership of Ken Rea and Sally Rodwell. Haley did continue to write radio plays that were broadcast on Radio New Zealand (NZBC as it was) through the 1980s and into the 1990s.

From 1978 onwards Haley wrote predominantly prose fiction: short stories (*The Sauna Bath Mysteries*, 1978 and *Real Illusions*, 1984) and novels (*The Settlement*, 1986; *Beside Myself*, 1990; *All Done with Mirrors*, 1999; *Tomorrow Tastes Better*, 2001; *The Spaces Between*, 2012; with the posthumous *Moonshine Eggs* to be published in 2017, and a further novel, 'Inside the Black Clock,' in manuscript at the time of his death) and also two sequences of linked short fiction, *The Transfer Station*, 1989, and *A Spider-web Season*, 2000. There was also a critical biography of the painter and friend of the Haleys, Pat Hanly, which came out in 1989. But in the decade from 1968 to 1978, Russell Haley's output was dominated by poetry, with two books, *The Walled Garden* (1972) and *On The Fault Line* (1977). In addition there were perhaps a dozen poems that appeared in small magazines but were not gathered into book publication. It was not a large output and it was quite succinctly confined to a decade of Haley's life; something he took up and then gave up.

However Russell Haley's poetry is significant, especially in terms of its era. Haley was one of the founding contributors to the magazine, *The Word Is Freed*; and he edited the fifth and final issue. And he was one of the 'Young New Zealand Poets' who featured in Arthur Baysting's eponymous 1973 anthology. In his 1974 Listener review, Karl Stead dismissed Haley's presence in the anthology: "Does he qualify as young? As a New Zealander?" Stead went on to attack Haley's writing: "The perennial weakness of Surrealist poetry is seen in Haley's 'Hoardings' . . . the quality of 'hardness' Pound insisted on is lost because there is no struggle between the mind and an intractable reality outside of it." Who knows what Stead thought the inherent virtues of that mysterious, undefined 'hardness' might be; but what is curious is how Stead's critique seems now much more applicable to Pound's poetry, especially the closed universe of *The Cantos*. Kevin Cunningham in *Islands*, also reviewing Baysting's anthology, claimed that Haley "seems to me to strain too hard for effect." Haley's poetry was often surreal: "I enter the Country gate/at the hinged side/my smiles spray before me/like broken parsecs." He was not averse to a high noir-ish Gothic mode: "Cassiah/Cassiah/your gown is rotting/the rose is spilled on the carpeted floor/your hardened breasts are chafed by the pigskin." And his basic mode was comic, droll and black: "Keep the cyanide machine working:/don't lean on the two new boys,/Jesus and Mohammed in the basement:/no more tricks with small-bore washers/or pressured-air hoses up the anus." This combination of the comic with the surreal within a strong genre framework was certainly unusual in New Zealand poetry. It was sometimes accompanied by pyrotechnical page layout, such as the words broken in the

wrong places, the use of capitals and words written lengthwise down the page, as in the poem ‘Solomon Rhattigan and the I Ching’: “defer entia lfigh twith water hoses again/sthe autho ritat ivepe rsonh isspr ayaho/llowv ibrat ingtu bepup hpush . . . “ and so on. In a note on his own poetics in *The Young New Zealand Poets*, Haley wrote that: “White paper is a time machine.” And that was often what it felt like when you hopped inside one of his poems – you were never sure where you might be transported.

Haley’s poetry from the late 1960s and early 1970s stood at the ‘impossibilist’ end of the wide range of experimental work of that time (some of which made an easier fit with the local canon). So, when Alan Brunton, Michele Leggott and myself were editing *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960-1975* (2000), an anthology that aimed to represent that era, we realized the importance of Haley’s unique contribution, with its combination of influences and originalities. There had been an English surrealist movement at the time of Surrealism, but it was distinctly marginal, not part of the received wisdom that emanated to the colonies. New Zealand literature largely eschewed the more European forms of the Modern, plumping for a restrained Anglophile version of Modernism, within which Glover’s comedy, Baxter’s genres and Curnow or Manhire’s strangeness were the acceptable things. It’s possible that Haley’s ‘surrealism’ owed as much to English music hall or the Goons or genres such as science fiction or crime fiction as it did to class-conscious cultural niceties (which were the very things he had fled).

The ‘excesses’ documented above were largely characteristic of Haley’s first book, *The Walled Garden*. In the second, *On the Fault Line*, the poems are distinctly quieter and more reflective. The book centres around the lived experience of a return sojourn in England after a decade and a half in the Antipodes: “What we explore in the present/is double-bladed memory.” Roger Robinson, writing in *Islands* 20, commented that, “all those breathless *avant-garde* gymnastics of Haley’s first book, *The Walled Garden*, were worthwhile, for they have given his poetic voice five years later plenty of dramatic muscle and flexibility . . . . *On the Fault Line* deserves to be presented and read well, for Russell Haley has given us a good subject in challenging terms and a distinctive voice.” But having reached this point, there was not to be any more poetry.

Instead, what followed was an almost 40 year exploration of fiction and a dozen further books. But when one looks there are continuities, just as there were continuities from the early drama into the poetry. The very fine story sequence *The Transfer Station* is like a dramatic monologue, as an ageing male narrator inhabiting a future dystopia that is encapsulated by a vast waste disposal depot on Auckland’s wild west coast (the Transfer Station of the title), which pours garbage in the ocean, describes his encounter with two alienated young girls, Glory and Chantal, and how he tries to come to terms with the way young people, such as these girls, are using the Transfer Station as a place from which to commit suicide. The Sargeson-esque cadence of the opening sentence: “My old man told me once that there used to be nothing except a dirt road out from the city to this coast . . . “ gives way to a dogged, detective-like search for

some truth in the dystopia that New Zealand has become. There is no straining for effect here as sentence after sentence does its work , accurately, efficiently, and yet the whole is built on an horrific vision of a future world set on self-destruct mode. The wonderful, wilder language worlds of poems such as ‘Turtle Time’ and ‘The Balloon Factory’ have tunneled down into what in the dramatic world is called ‘sub-text,’ the unsaid, perhaps the unsayable – or at least the unspeakable.

Russell was a longtime friend. He was also a teacher in the sense of being someone who could tell me “how to put a sentence together.” I often sent him work I had written for his valued response. He did the same, sending me his work for my comment. He saw the world for its absurdity (Beckett was a cherished companion), and when you were with him, he would dance around in that absurdity with wild spontaneous monologues that knew not where they came from nor where they were going, but were achingly hilarious. Haere ra, e hoa.