

**‘Some people say my speech is slow’
– remembering John Dickson**

Ian Wedde

When Rose and I arrived in Dunedin in 1971 after some years out of New Zealand we were welcomed with a party in the chilly, wood-smoky garden of a small cottage on the harbour side of the Port Chalmers peninsula. It was a very southern-hospitality kind of welcome, with a barbecue, a big pot of mussels, and lots of people introducing themselves. Ralph Hotere and Cilla McQueen were there, as was Brent Southgate, who had very kindly rented us his stone cottage on the town side of the port. Also present was a tall, skinny man with long hair and an anarchic laugh that repeatedly cut through the sounds of talk and music. He introduced himself as John Dickson in a soft, slow, drawling voice that made a surprising counterpoint to his laughter.

There was a smoky view to Quarantine Island across a night-time shimmer of channel lights on the harbour; the barbecue’s tangy smoke rose up through big old *Macrocarpa*; joints and drams of whiskey went around. It had been a long trip back to New Zealand from London and we were tired and trashed by the time Brent got us in his car to go over to the place we were to stay in. Then the back door of the car was flung open and the thin man with the quiet voice and the big laugh jumped in. Get in touch any time he said, come and visit, it would be good to have a talk. Then he hopped out again. Over the next three years we’d visit regularly in town, have long talks, listen to a lot of music, and after he’d moved out to Warrington we’d soak in the outdoor hot tub he’d installed by the railway line and wave at passing trains.

John died of cancer just over a year ago, on the fourth of February, at his and Jen’s home in Christchurch. After hearing the news I thought about those early memories—they preserved an atmosphere that was as much about conversation and a special kind of *thinking* sociability, as it was about the smoky charm of location. The location was Otago in those early years of our friendship, not the Southland John wrote about often, for example in ‘Plainsong’ from his last book, *Mister Hamilton* (AUP 2016); but many of the poems that are located in that wider south have a critical pastoral quality: place is where stories about life are located, and where thinking about those stories is situated, and the thinking about thinking that goes with that; description as such isn’t the point.

I used to have a place, somewhere called home.
Today, I write
my office facing a concrete wall.
Southland's now nothing but a thinning of words.
Yet how it smoulders still
burning in my soul like swamp fire.

Those lines from 'Plainsong' also have the twang, at once heartfelt and droll, of country music hyperbole; John's bibliophilism (for many years he was the buying-librarian at Otago Polytechnic) and his relish of arcane texts were always mixed with his relish and respect for the stories and encounters of everyday life. His first (remarkable) book, *What happened on the way to Oamaru* (Untold, 1986) includes one of my favourite poems, 'The Empire's Last Drunk', in which the term 'purple patch' has that hint of taunt sometimes found in poems directed critically as much towards the pretensions of the poet himself as those of his literary audience.

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towards whatever sunset
was going to
come
one of us said, Let's go, fellas
let's go
that piss up
soon starts at the beach
and of
the stumble-
down
a steep winding track, of
the slither and
slide through trees
where the air was soft and warm
like a child's skin
of
all that
I clearly recall one purple patch
in which out to sea
an enormous pink bloom of cloud
turned blood red, then dark blue, then a kind

of greenish black, its colours un-
predictably diminishing
until none were left but a few dull shades
soon lost
in the growing darkness

As mentioned already, we listened to lots of music—Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention (a favourite Mothers track was played at John’s wake), Kid Creole and the Coconuts, because they were fun, but mostly jazz. What I can only think to call the emotional precision of John’s favourite jazz musicians is one of the most obvious formal shapers of his poems—his best-loved musicians (among many) included Thelonious Monk and Charlie Rouse, Clifford Brown, and Miles Davis, as in the poem ‘miles davis’ (*Sleeper*, AUP 1998).

a first
almost diffident note
and then the next
in a flurry of jabs
he plays the trumpet
as if to bruise
the sadness
dwelling in his throat

John and I used to talk on the phone about every second week over the last couple of years of his life, when his illness seemed to advance and retreat—and when he and Jen were struggling also with the consequences of the Christchurch earthquake. Invariably he had suggestions for what I would enjoy reading and sometimes for what I might like listening to. I’d benefitted from these amicable suggestions for years and had never repaid the favour. That was because I could never match John’s capacity to read, let alone his appetite for very long books. I should add that his appetite for reading at length was matched by his love of long conversations, including conversations he reported on and decanted into other conversations, for example accounts of talks with his cancer surgeon whose West Coast miner family history he found compelling. This juncture of conversation, reading, congeniality, and a long-view approach to social knowledge and even gossip, may be the best point of entry to John’s poems. It parries (John is a longtime ‘tourist’—his word—of the martial arts) both the deconstructive dichotomy of intention versus text, and the soupy ‘new narrative’ traps of reflexivity.

John’s reported conversations and the immediate ones we had together were often characterised on his part by a kind of transgressive narrative grain—an information surface that slowed and roughed-up the

progress of predictable social and intellectual conventions of the literary canon all too readily defined by varieties of Bourdieuan ‘distinction’. His cheerfully mordant scepticism extended also to the received wisdoms of liberal politics, the daft anxieties of cultural vanguardism, and other discourse zones where conversation can all too often languish under the comfortable weight of tribal conformity. Back in the day of the ‘Young New Zealand Poets’, when most of the poets of our 1960s generation had decided by group osmosis rather than by reading that Robert Frost was old hat, folksy and ‘traditional’, John read the work and discovered its laminations of speech and prosody, and a persistent dark undertone of pessimism and fear. What mattered wasn’t that he found these qualities compelling and even congenial; what mattered was that he’d actually found them by reading the poems most of his peers had passed by on the road uncritically taken. Similarly, when many of us had decided that Allen Curnow stood for provincial nationalism, John parried with his admiration for the bracing formal and intellectual qualities of the work. You will find those subtle laminations and that bracing attention to detail in John’s own poems.

Thanks to John I read A.R. Ammons at length when his *Collected Poems* came out from Norton in 1972, and discovered the kind of loosely unspooling narrative poetics that John himself deployed often as a poet but also as a talker. Thanks to John I rediscovered the substance of Brecht’s poems in the collected Eyre Methuen volume of English translations of 1976, having backed myself into a corner with those who believed Brecht’s poetry to be inferior to the theatre work (it’s not). Goaded into rethinking this judgment I also noticed a persistent substitution of the lyrical with the political in John’s poems.

We both liked the genial, unstoppable extent of John Ashbery’s oeuvre which we found by turns witty and excessive. What made the excess ok for us was that you could just go on reading across and past it: your experience of reading would spill beyond its immediate moment. This liking for excess and spillage also characterised not just how John could on occasions approach writing (for example his long verse-letters), but also how he preferred to approach life. Hearing that I was about to spend a year in Germany, he lent me his copy of the Norton edition of Albrecht Haushofer’s *Moabit Sonnets*, English translations, which was the prompt I needed to visit the Moabit Prison memorial site and read the poems in German once I got to Berlin. Without John’s introduction I wouldn’t have caught the train across the city to the prison site, and I wouldn’t have known to get the German texts. For that matter, after paying my respects to Haushofer at Moabit, I wouldn’t have walked the short distance to the Hamburger Bahnhof museum of contemporary art and spent time with the artist Hanne Darboven’s great installation in which the words *Patriotismus, Nationalismus, Kosmopolitismus, Dekadenz* are repeated over and over—like the nearby Moabit Prison Memorial reducing what she knew to the minimal utterances, the obsessive reductions, the repetitions that anticipate the ghosts of themselves in the silence of the archive. This, too, was a conversation whose extent I couldn’t have known how to measure, let alone predict or set limits to. Unpredictable impact was what I’d come to appreciate and be grateful for in John’s congenial and also critical interventions. Cooking, undertaking, and the comedic aptitudes of cats were among the topics that

might crop up in conversation—or in poems—along with the hopeless venality and cynicism of insurance companies in earthquake-shattered Christchurch where John and Jen lived; and, despite the fact that I'm vegetarian, the best way to butcher and cook a wild pig.

In the weeks before his death, my short list of reading recommendations from John had come to include the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's sequence of nine books under the series title *Homo Sacer*, beginning with (in English) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and proceeding to the ninth and final volume, *The Use of Bodies* (2016). I've yet to make a start, and may never. John found compelling Agamben's distinction between ownership and use, which he explores in the fourth volume, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (2013). The cover of the Stanford University Press translation has on it a picture of Saint Francis feeding birds, which suggests rather strongly that the book's polemic weighting will be in favour of 'use' over 'ownership'.

That John's own cancer-occupied body was the site of a contest along those lines may or may not have explained his desire to read these books; but I suspect that reading as an embodied practice was always a given in my friend's case. He had to 'take it in', as we say of comprehension mediated by reading, or listening, or looking. In any case, speculation aside, the experience of reading John's poems is always, to a greater or lesser extent, one of entering a space of embodiment in which presence or character, language, consciousness and its processes such as thought, seem not to have a border where abjection starts. This embodiment doesn't demand individual property rights over the person's identity and capacities. Rather, we're in the dynamic company of capacities *in use*, an energy that comes from exercising what were once called talents, and from the enjoyment of that exercise or use shared through poems or conversations; or, often, through jokes.

John suggested another addition to the reading list when I said I was looking for long-form contemporary fiction that busted out of the constraining narrative paradigms of 'history'. Try the *Buru Quartet*, an interlinked tetralogy of novels published between 1980 and 1988 by the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer who died in 2001 at the age of 81. I haven't started to read these books yet, either, but what excites me about the prospect of doing so is the circumstance of their getting written. According to John, they were 'written' while Pramoedya, a freedom fighter against, first, the Dutch and next against the repressive Suharto government, was imprisoned in the penal colony on the island of Buru from 1969-79. Over these ten years of extreme hardship, Pramoedya told stories to fellow inmates—writing materials were mostly unavailable—who subsequently collaborated with him to reconstitute his complex oral saga of colonial repression in the early twentieth century, told through the interconnected stories of a Dutch and an Indonesian family. What John found especially compelling about the *Buru Quartet* was that Pramoedya *told stories* as an act of social and political solidarity; and that the quartet was the product of a radical derangement of authorial ownership: the books are products of yarn sessions and a subsequent,

no doubt conversational, collaboration to reconstitute the oral work. Use trumped ownership.

John was his own most scrupulous critic—his manuscripts are heavily edited and rewritten, and he often rejected poems. The ones he published were meticulously crafted and infused with sly references to his reading. His three slim books were published at roughly ten-year intervals. In many ways, he was a poet's poet. But his poems also consistently subverted the exclusivity implied by the term. They did this by pushing a sardonic but compassionate vernacular narrative across the grain of his linguistic and craft finesse; by deploying a consistently recognisable voice, laconic and disenchanting, even aphoristic, but also capable of enjoying and relaxing into 'slow' reflections—the kind that imply the presence of a companion, and a habit of conversation.

For many years I lived in Southland.
In fact, I am from Southland.
Some people say my speech is slow
I say it's deliberate, just.

(‘Plainsong’)

In ‘Doubtful Sound 1’, the first of two unrhymed sonnets in *Mister Hamilton*, a busload of tourists enters the claustrophobic tunnel leading to the splendour of the Manapouri Hydro Machine Room, aware that pressing down above their doubt-filled heads is a three thousand vertical weight of granite rock.

The bus
drove on; we settled down, thirty five humans
balancing awkward beneath our thought.

Most readers will experience a slight jolt when they miss the expected ‘-ly’ after ‘awkward’, which also clips a syllable from a pattern of ten-syllable lines. The effect, though—surely deliberate—is to slow the line’s rhythm, to give ‘awkward’ more weight, and also to stress the assonance or internal rhyme of ‘awkward’ and ‘thought’.

‘John Wayne’ (the name of a rooster) from *What happened on the way to Oamaru* has the laconic edge of Brecht’s late poems of the 1950s, for example the *Buckow Elegies*—but the clipped, elegant three-line verses of John’s poem probably decant music he’s listened to as much as they include Brecht in the conversation. In ‘Piano Time With Monk’ (*Mister Hamilton*), for example, remembering a concert by the Thelonious Monk Quartet with saxophonist Charlie Rouse in Dunedin, John remarks that:

I had no idea of how
to represent simple figures
while displacing them
subtly
with rhythmic values

In ‘Sleeper’ (*Sleeper*, 1998), a poem about death among other things, we read an astonishing image of cyclic de- and re-materialisation that is uttered so easily, with so little drama, that we have to double back and read it again:

Every night, after I close the blinds
the bush splits open the wooden houses
and plank by plank takes them back;
and every morning, the houses are there again
waiting for you to raise the dead.

The uncollected poem ‘A Verse Letter Requesting More Olive Oil’, one of many letters John has written to various friends, recalls at first the long, talky, meditative poems of A.R. Ammons—‘Extremes and Moderations’ or ‘Hibernaculum’ for example. But then we also encounter a satiric bite and indeed anger—a rant—that is an important aspect of John’s purpose in writing poems. The background to the ‘Verse Letter Requesting More Olive Oil’ is John’s agreement to recommend for me obscure writers on the Sublime—which he did, such as the forgettable Ernest Tuveson—in return for a bottle of very good olive oil. The oil, though appreciated when delivered, was hardly emollient, though it may have lubricated the interface between John’s poem’s lovely celebrations of what makes life good, and its bitter denunciation of what wrecks life—this paradoxical axis represented by the image of a slaughtered pig, at once a celebration of hunger and appetite (like Brecht’s ‘To eat of meat joyously’) and a horror.

John’s critical reticence may mean he’s less well known and appreciated than he deserves to be, though the planned assembly and publication of a substantial book of collected and unpublished poems will change this. There are a great many diverse friends and family members, though, who will go on missing that slow speech and the capacious, curious mind that shaped what it had to say.

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