

# broadsheet

*new new zealand poetry*

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All submissions will be returned. Thank you.

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*I would ask that my words should travel the straight line  
From point to point and take their proper place,  
Lodge in the heart if that is where intended,  
Or slit the pelt and penetrate to bone.  
But I ask they be not soft, for face to face  
Is how both love and hurt must be contended.  
I do not ask to win; but, ill or good,  
I want to be understood.*

– from a radio talk by Louis Johnson, 1964  
(Turnbull MS-Papers- 0435-36)

## Preface

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Louis Johnson's death in November 1988.

I first came across Louis's name in *The Life of James K. Baxter* by Frank McKay. I was 19 and a student at the time. Inside the book was a neat photo of Louis on a grass lawn leisurely reclining with Baxter. The two looked close. As Louis was a friend of Baxter's I was immediately drawn to his work. Johnson's work on closer inspection was quite different from Baxter's. Johnson opted for prose-like sentences and journalist-style reportage of the events of the day, namely urban-life, domestic or public, and usually with a dark, irreverent, or apocalyptic streak to his poems. Often this sharp satirical edge gave bite to his work, particularly in his sequence, *True Confessions of the Last Cannibal*. This satirical and urban element was an influence on my own writing, and I liked his honest stand on issues directly affecting our private and public lives.

Later, I wrote on Louis's poetry (and work as an editor) for my MA thesis at the University of Otago. Lawrence Jones, my supervisor, had a sympathetic interest in Johnson's work. This response to Johnson was something I have noted in the literary community since his death. Louis was much admired as a poet and editor here, and many of our past and current writers were given their starts in Johnson's *Poetry Yearbooks* and the later *Antipodes New Writing*, or were encouraged to continue with their writing through his support.

So, for this second issue of *broadsheet*, I'd like to remember once more the contribution Johnson has made to our literature. His name of course lives on through the Creative NZ Louis Johnson Writers' Bursary that is awarded each year to up-and-coming authors of quality and distinction, and his name is mentioned as inspiring current publications like *Poetry NZ*, edited by Alistair Paterson in Auckland.

I'd like to thank those who I solicited for work relating to Johnson, in particular his friends who sent in poems in memory of Louis. Niel Wright also has contributed a fine piece on Johnson's poetry and was very happy for its inclusion here.

Thanks also to the Johnson family, particularly Cecilia Johnson who provided me with access to the Johnson papers in the Turnbull (where I selected a number of Louis's unpublished and uncollected poems for use here), and to Louis's daughter Miranda for her contribution to this issue.

Mark Pirie, *Wellington, November 2008*

**THE VISIT**

*i.m. Louis Johnson*

Twenty years gone  
and you turn up  
with your torn  
shoe flapping  
and that perpetual fag. Is  
it difficult being dead?  
Rilke said it was  
but then he'd access  
to some otherness  
I know nothing of. (By  
the way you're not  
alone. Being old  
I'm noticing more  
ghosts around  
than traffic wardens  
or local yobs.) *It's*  
*fear*, you once said,  
*that holds us back*  
*from that everlasting party*  
*our time on earth*  
*deserves*. You were  
your own experiment,  
laying yourself on the line,  
listing daily failures  
and dark joys of the heart.  
What I admired  
was that moral stance  
and blatant gift  
of the gab. And now  
you're looking lost. Cheer up!

Those you love  
still live at the bay  
where your hidden  
glass of whisky glows  
between early Auden  
and late Yeats.

**MANUAL**

from *the first 20*

III

Notice the statue's hands    how caringly  
he tucked and folded chisel into marble  
to free those moulded fingers from the rock  
that would have locked them    still and undiscovered  
in solid dark    like prehistoric bones

had not his own hands risen and in patience  
spoken to stone by touch and by their probing  
subtle persuasion    coaxed those perfect fingers  
out of their sheaths    and for surrounding rock  
substituted charged air and    vision    and history

from *Holding the Darkness, the second 20*

XI

So there they fly again  
there they come and go  
faces at the winter window  
pressing hands on the pane  
in a battering of snow

Glass frosts with breathless breath  
shudders    in soundless wail  
thoughts fade    histories pale  
back these have come through death  
through me    in snow and hail

**HOW TO CONDUCT  
A RELATIONSHIP**

The right hand is usual  
take it easy

It's like a conversation in a play  
you must repeat in grammatical sentences  
with allusions betraying your wit and education  
but not too much opinion

Your scriptwriter is in the audience  
He's rehearsed all this with you  
– or someone else –  
before.

Timing is crucial  
and tone of voice.  
Ahem

Remember to look in the right direction  
turn on the right toe  
If you forget your lines or miss a cue  
you're done.

**A G R E E K   T R A N S A C T I O N**

We were promised that there would be  
no clouds in July. The breezes would moderate  
the heat. The sea would be as blue  
as heaven, but deeper. The wine would taste  
of pine and spice and summer herbs.  
The women would smile and the men  
would chop up eggs, cucumbers and tomatoes,  
and invite you to be their guest.

Instead it rained for a whole day.  
The sea turned a sallow-grey, like putty.  
Then the sun was so hot it set fire to the hills,  
the wine stripped the enamel off our teeth,  
the women turned out to have better things  
to do and the men plundered us.

Otherwise it must have lived up  
to its best reputation, for our smiles  
are glued across our albums. They crease  
every photograph as the colours fade  
and we wait patiently for the Greeks  
to pay up and come to us in their turn  
so we can show them what green  
actually looks like, what a real mountain is,  
how you can lie for hours on a beach  
without buying a ticket and what a great time  
you can have in paradise  
while being eaten alive by sandflies.

**TE MATA PEAK**

Why they should call such places Lovers' Leap –  
As though it's lovers who must always fall –  
Leads me to think that there are powers who keep  
Unfitting dark rewards for those who feel

A more exotic pleasure stems from heights  
Than those of us who, walking on the flat,  
Dare not invent escapes, but set our sights  
On narrow orbits, chained to the one street.

Yet I've known lovers who have dared to smile,  
Owning their lot a joyful cross to suffer,  
Who, standing here exposed upon this tall  
And jagged tooth in the jaw of a dead crater

Could yet resist the impulse to take wing.  
Love – though it feeds on air – is yet no bird;  
Only mad ecstasy or hurt will fling  
Its load of care into that headlong void.

And so I honour, more than myth or gossip  
Those strong of head and heart who mark this spot  
As a fine place for kissing, on this tussock  
Can toss their picnic-paper, and depart.

## MAN ALONE

There was no-one at all I knew in the pub tonight.  
The small man at the table was getting impatient  
That I did not launch the conversations he wanted  
To stifle his own hesitancy. The girl of midnight hair  
By the jukebox, began to expire of simple want,  
Aware at last I would make no move, though interest  
Might have raised an instant's predatory head  
As the tongue of the serpent flickered above the vermouth.

I sat without want: a stone in the current of time  
That wears away what's solid, brings to flux  
All that seems so well made. The clock  
Talked quietly of loss, its long, electric finger  
Twitching like a Giacometti penis  
That moved to a meeting-point that never arrived:  
Nothing made concrete from all of that patience and need.  
At last I came back to my room. You were not here.

You were not here, nor on the long, lonely bed  
Where I remember you, only a while ago –  
Though hours, days, years ... I cannot really tell –  
Beached on a long and shuddering cry, your tan  
Consuming thighs threshing the minutes to harvest.  
It was then I knew what I'd been holding away –  
The fathomed fact of being alone – as alone  
As a child in the dark or a man in the soul of himself.

This is the hour at which anyone can so easily  
Turn on the radio, turn up the unlit gas.  
Breathe deeply of eternity. But to choose  
Dark when the faintest glimmer of light will stir,  
Is like hoping to drink the sea when there's no thirst.

On the bare wall, like an ikon of memory, your face  
Glow in the ghost of a smile that encourages.  
The locked-out world rolls over towards morning.

## **INTIMACY**

It need not even be as much  
as sharing the same bed: the flames  
of your hair at distance alight my heart.

And driving the car from this point  
to wherever, you will place your hand  
over mine, just to catch the current  
that can flow between fingertips.

To share words or a table; to laugh  
together; explore the surge and plunge  
that responds to the same music.

Things that are simple, stable, endless;  
that have continued forever and yet  
appear to occur here as for the first time.

I know for myself I dare not ask too much,  
and that it's enough to know how I breathe  
and live in the air of the same world.

## LAZY MAN'S LOAD

Your language this morning I thought excessive for the tender hour of the day it was. Emerging from the big room you refuse to call “lounge” (that being vulgar), with the trayful of remnants of last night’s supper, you tripped on a mat, and dropped a cup, which broke, inducing a ripe and colourful flow of profanity: then, laughing, acknowledged: “My own damn fault – it was a lazy-man’s load – too much aboard.”

The melody of it lingers. It was so like the rest of our lives. While you are quick to anger, the blaze lasts briefly: the laugh that follows, restores. You can laugh at yourself. We can laugh together. And, damn it, what’s a cup? Or, for that matter, most of the breaks we suffer. Only last night, over supper, you said, as we mended another fissure, “What I like is the way we patch up a quarrel – making love.”

And this morning, after you’ve gone, I repeat to myself, “A lazy man’s load,” knowing that it’s my own fault – most of the drops and breakages I’ve caused, from trying to carry too much – that a little more care and attention to detail might save. The laugh restores. And in this light, I see I am one of those who will wear their hearts on their sleeves and go ridiculous as it might seem, patrolling the streets with banners that proclaim: “Make love – not war.”

*2/6/70*

## ON CAPITALISM

Anything that one really wants to do  
must be done slowly. Luckily  
the clock is running down  
and the pulse hesitant.

Karl, addressing his brothers –  
Chico, Harpo, Groucho – put them  
to sleep, his footnotes much too long  
for their sense of rhythm.

Besides, they were doing too well  
from the law of gravity that kept  
falling into their pockets and jingling  
like decadent guilders.

Ah, rose of the world! Thou art sick  
and as Freud said of manure; spend it  
where you will it buys no health  
for a single petal.

That's where we're at, then. So take  
your time across the intersection:  
nature's a traffic cop – observe  
its censorious hand commanding stop.

28.4.80

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*Notes:* p. 11 (from a radio talk, 1964) *Turnbull MS-Papers 0435-36*; pp. 12-14 from  
*Turnbull MS-Papers 8095-017*; p. 15 from *Turnbull MS-Papers 8095-031*.

*Miranda Johnson*

**J E T**

A shoal of leaves scuttled  
the path in front of me –

the branches of my hurry  
home heaved and bent

the late afternoon's  
cold glass across my cheek.

High up, a jet was still  
in the sky

its underbelly  
glissed the membrane  
of the storm

and tore a stretch  
to where I stood.

A sag of sky,  
tree and turf  
curled away from me –

unearthed  
I felt my zenith narrow.

I saw the plan – the fretwork  
lights, the strum of cars –

as a surgeon works out where  
to cut and fold and hem

and so the explanation –

how he got inside  
and out again –  
is later finger-traced

by the body's owner  
and her lover.

**THOMAS HARDY**

I notice how finches bend delicate  
dandelion stalks to get at the seeds.

I notice how the cat sniffs the air  
before she ventures outside.

I notice the oak sheds more & more leaves  
& the patterns into which the wind whirls them.

I notice the sun  
rises later each morning.

I know that soon the sun will reverse track.  
I know that one day I will not be here to see that happen.

But let it be known,  
here was another man who noticed things.

## RETURN

Great advance for a Gill. These cumbersome uniforms work. Exhilaration mingles with apprehension as Findolphin and I exchange thumbs up. The first time our species has left the water. The star-sparkles are brighter and appear closer here above the safety zone. Cautiously, slowly we flip to the wall of earth-weed that merges into the sand. Difficult to cut, stems are tougher than we anticipated. The gigantic growth overhead is beyond our reach. Voice tells us time to start our return.

### Legend

has it that our ancestors once lived on this shore & bred our gills to farm the sea. Radical theologians reject this. Our elegance has no need for such superstition, outmoded like original sin. But it remains, a satisfying myth.

What's this? A strange menacing creature – looks like a seal with legs like a lobster two fewer, baring teeth as it circles us. We fumble backwards towards the foam. Suddenly it lunges. Its claws pierce Findolphin's suit. The life-support water flows out. I hesitate. Should I assist him or get our specimens back. I seek advice. Assist him they say. But a glance shows me he is beyond aid the animal tearing at his apparel & – horror – his flesh. His look of anguish I'll never forget. Obviously a type

of land-shark. As more of the monster's  
kind burst out of the undergrowth I retreat.  
I do not think we will ever survive in that  
environment. My report is not well-received.  
They build an obelisk on the outer side of  
the reef to us but they make it clear I should  
have died a martyr. For my cowardice they  
condemn me. I now extract sea-snake venom.

## **F L E S H I S S I T E A N D W O R D**

*April Fools' Day 2008*

After the storm the apricot abutilon  
stands bedraggled between the roses,  
Remember Me & Jude the Obscure.

Though consolation is  
not wanted, it is desired

Moments of great happiness  
contain an undercurrent of regret

The condition, human, is as always

Progress can be made  
treating god as metaphor  
poetry as number

## **HISTORY, FOR YOU**

He wanted to study Greek when he was older  
because a four-year-old saw on a Pitt Street  
corner the gold helmets of firemen dazzle and turn  
and the hoses couple like huge eels (so much

later too he would hear they were called that,  
the hoses, the female fitting the male: sex  
as stories will tell you while cities flare.)  
And another day, another year, he read

of myths, and the Greeks flashing helmets you would  
swear borrowed that afternoon, how could Trojans  
stand a chance against such glamour? Firemen  
have since downgraded to leather headgear, the boy

grown to a scholar came to dislike those bleeding  
heroes, calling in gods to take unfair  
advantage. Yet Helen's hair he could imagine  
folding its golden swathe beneath such a helmet,

standing on the ramparts soon enough to be charred,  
and that decent man Hector outsmarted by a thug  
who brought in his Patches to do the loser, proper.  
He stands from his desk when the sirens occasionally

startle the suburban quiet, he closes his eyes  
to see them, the warriors glinting in the flames,  
the Horse neighing deception, the golden trollop  
not wanting to leave. But best of all, still Pitt Street.



'Under bare Ben Bulben's head'  
close by an 'ancient cross'  
the dead of course  
protect the dead  
& as the poet might have said

who's the worse for that?

**WINTERS OF DISCONTENT**

The first leaf glows with a tinge  
of red the moment  
she takes her cases out  
from under her bed

As she folds and refolds  
her clothes, packs her warmest jerseys  
the grass stops growing, the flowers wilt  
In the dying light Demeter watches her go

Winter moves from grey  
to black and back to grey  
She sleeps all day, gets up for dinner  
watches telly, weeps and sleeps again

I am wintering too  
Sometimes I feel that the winter  
will never leave me, that I am the winter  
vacationing with her in Hades

The cut itself doesn't hurt at all  
as it wells up and flows away  
drop by drop, the pain lessens  
We do not hate ourselves, we are in control

Every frosty morning Demeter wakes with the dawn  
wraps her scarf tight around her throat  
and hunts for sharp spears of new green in the earth  
The day will come

## BURNING WITH JOAN OF ARC

The yellow sand is hot under my palm  
Despite my shorts and tee shirt  
and slatherings of sunscreen  
I can feel the sun  
scorching my skin

Joan is stretched out beside me  
sun hat over her face  
bikinied body idolatrous  
worshipping the sun

'More sunscreen?' I ask  
'I've already burned,' she says  
'I was burning with the words  
given by God  
I burned for my people  
burned in battle  
I was burned when betrayed by my king  
burned with shame when they made me a witch  
and you know of course  
about the English flames'

'So yes,' she says  
'I'd love some more sunscreen'

**SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER  
ABOUT LOU**

1. that you wrote a poem which opens: “The face between the thighs looks up.”
2. that there were lots of lilies at your funeral and your coffin was driven away in a big white car.
3. that you came from Feilding.
4. that you said you tried to teach Baxter “that women can also be people.”
5. that in later life you had a mane of silvery-grey hair, a face mapped with wrinkles and the laugh of a small boy behind the bike-shed about to tell the dirtiest story in the world.
6. that you were the 1988 Katherine Mansfield Fellow at Menton.
7. that you were once a newshound for the *Southern Cross* and the *Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune*, also a policeman.
8. that Curnow didn’t rate you and Baxter did.
9. that you were a generous friend to other poets, a devoted father, and threw great parties.
10. that you wore blue suits.

**WEALTHY WILLIE**

As conservative as a good axe  
polished with many a thousand scars,  
bright with use, not promise,  
Willie, unwillingly wealthy,  
erstwhile wanderer,  
pondered.  
Pondered on Gujarat and Grafton,  
Mombasa and Montparnasse,  
Ruatoki and Remuera,  
Bush and the bush,  
Blair and what's fair,  
globalisation and the good  
bright blade of one man  
's well handled  
axe.

Willie hefted such thoughts,  
ground them, milled them  
and mulled them over,  
sorted tools from weapons,  
shavings from chips,  
sparks flying from  
the sharpening.

Willie's wealth lay not  
in choice but in circumstance,  
Willie considered. And,  
having pondered, now  
he wondered,  
wondered whether  
it was time to stop  
wandering, pondering, wondering,  
and do something about it.

**MY BROTHER**

*You carried worlds and*  
words of people *inside that head.*

*Now people stumble, and fall*  
in ... and ... out *of your thoughts,*

*as time rolls like a dice*  
into this prison *of fading dreams.*

*In your memory bank*  
you find nightmares *caught, and lost in no man's land,*  
*in lonely space.*  
What you see *you alone can see,*

*an angry urgency*  
drives you down *one way streets*  
*that has no exit ...*  
in the search of a key *to escape*

*from this ...*  
through a maze of *familiar strangers.*

*Your smile*  
when I say goodbye *is soft and sweet as a child.*

**P L E A S E   B E   P A T I E N T**

Just a minute  
(That's all it takes) -

Hold on a bit  
(Don't drop that word) -

A slip of the tongue  
(Between her lips) -

The fall of an apple -  
The pulse of a piston -

Hold on, hold on -  
Now, just

A minute, that's  
All I ask -

Ah, thanks for that -  
It was enough.

**THE GIFT**

The gift is gone ; that long I cherished ;  
    On crazy pavements as I walked.  
From want of use such talents perished.

    The gift is gone ; that long I cherished.  
By constant exercise so nourished ;  
    How potently insouciance worked.

The gift is gone ; that long I cherished ;  
    On crazy pavements as I walked.

**NOVEMBER WEATHER**

*For Dennis List, who died 9 November 2007*

I having lost my task and friend ;  
    Life of content engage.  
In wind remains the final frond ;  
    I having lost my task and friend.

As blasts do stalk of each leaf rend  
    With demoniac gorge ;  
I having lost my task and friend ;  
    Life of content engage.

## LACRIMA MUSAE

When Kate Roche died by suicide ;  
I could have died too -: Dennis said.

Your grief, friend then I shared ; and share ;  
Memorialised on a harbour bridge :  
The city's backbone : skyhigh ridge  
Ascendant from the farthest shore.

Now forty livelong years thereafter  
So lifespan years eke out ; abridge ;  
Perhaps with goodwill, even with laughter  
In death rejoins he ; who so loved her.

## **A READING (IN PART) OF THE POETRY OF LOUIS JOHNSON**

Over the years, I would have read all of Louis Johnson's books of poetry and a great deal of his verse in magazines. But I have recorded my specific comments on only a few of his books, how few I am somewhat surprised.

Partial as this coverage is, nevertheless I believe I have made a sufficient number of worthwhile points about Louis Johnson to justify an essay. Again, I am surprised how enthusiastic my tone is on the subject.

That is what I said, and I am not going to change my words now because they were so generous when I wrote. Perhaps I was responding in kind to the generosity of Louis's hospitality. Perhaps I am an observant critic saying it like it is.

### ***Two Poems***

*Two Poems* (Pegasus Press) dates from 1955. It is the oldest text of Louis's that I have a copy of. It is certainly back in the time when Louis's youthful manner of self-presentation was a bit gauche. *Stanza and Scene* (1946) is still within cooe. This is Louis Johnson still the novice, still a little ill at ease in his editorial robes. The pamphlet consists of two pieces. The first, 'News of Molly Bloom', is James Joyce derivative in subject and language. It is not a line that Louis followed further that I note. The other, 'The Passionate Man and the Casual Man', is a playlet, a bit Audenesque, Eliotesque. It is not so much that it is not a success, for it has a measure of success, but rather that it is so tersely adroit in comment and turn of phrase. Louis actually has a considerable knack for this sort of gnomic dialogue. He does the dialogue well; perhaps the Audenesque drama is merely too limited a model. I don't believe Louis has attempted drama on any other occasion.

I read this book when it first appeared in 1956 and was pleasantly impressed. I've read it again several times since, though I do not

seem to have put down any lengthy notes on it. Louis sent me an autographed copy in 1987 (after I mentioned I had made hand copies of three of his early books, otherwise not obtainable).

The book is an offprint of material intended for *Poetry Yearbook* Volume No. 5 but excluded to cut down on pages.

‘News of Molly Bloom’ is an experiment, even an exercise in Joyceana. The *Ulysses* material is lightly dashed with word play a la *Finnegans Wake*. Louis shows that he can do this thing deftly and knowledgeably. It is a piece that demonstrates his skill in getting an act together. He has mastered the manner, got his material together, worked up his text to a convincing level of accomplishment, so that he seems neither precious nor awkward, but looks confident and successful. It is a paradigm how Louis puts together a poem or group of poems on a given topic, in a given style. A great power of assimilation and orchestration is evidenced, not just at the level of genre and detail, but also of insight. The poem will stand up to precise analysis and confirms Louis’s professionalism.

‘The Passionate Man and the Casual Man’ is a radio play, brief, non-naturalistic, owing something no doubt to Yeats and to Auden. But it is a successful merging of the two different manners into something not readily duplicated. There is also a suggestion in the movement of the dialogue of *Everyman* to my ears. A good model, a good reprise, if it was actually involved. Louis in a letter to me speaks deprecatingly of this book, but as usual he underrates himself colossally. This piece is the only play I have ever come across of his. As a verse play it succeeds admirably, better than all of Baxter’s; name another Aotearoa verse play that goes as well. I don’t know where Louis got this sort of talent from. Maria Dronke and Anton Vogt were the readers with Louis in a stage performance. I can believe their speeches (presumably Anton Vogt was the casual man) were tailored for them. Louis is thorough in mastering his mode and preparing his treatment. I can only imagine he pulls it off through sheer application to what is in order.

But the additional merit of the play is twofold. It is in verse that really works. It is rhymed, neat, full of character and sense. It is some of the best verse technically I have seen from Louis's hand. Nobody else round here has written dramatic verse for the voice so well. The three speakers are admirably differentiated both in character and in manner. Partly this may have arisen from an eye to the actors involved. But – and this is the second point – the play is organised as contrasting attitudes. These Louis understands and documents well. So what we have is a very able piece of work in the verse play mode.

I have always been taken by this piece; regret that Louis had not written other plays and that this flair of rhyme making has not been demonstrated further to good effect.

By 1955 Louis was a mature writer, clearly at the height of his powers. These pieces are showcases of virtuosity, but real substance can be seen in both of them. I don't find any technical deficiency.

### ***New Worlds for Old***

*New Worlds for Old* (from Johnson's Capricorn Press) was published in 1957. It is in many ways the book that represents the quintessential Louis Johnson in my eyes; it gives a gallery of character studies. I must admit on longer view I perceive that Louis designs each of his books to have its own purpose and methodology. I realise now, partly from his own remarks, that his books are intended as unities with their own personality all round. I must therefore now suspect that what in the past I have taken as the essential Louis Johnson is only one of many different images. I will reread further with this in mind.

*New Worlds for Old* makes some of the social comment that is also present in *Winter Apples* (Mallinson Rendel, 1984), both books appearing at a time when a Labour Government was about to return to office.

The poem 'The Other Woman', with its talk of being 'castrate' and 'suddenly aged', enters a little on to the territory of my own poetry.

*New Worlds for Old* is predominantly in rhyme, often rather inaudible, but structurally systematic. Perhaps Louis is at times led into awkwardness or ineptness. Some of the poems at the end become trivial and occasional. But the collection still seems to me thorough-going and successful enough, if it fails perhaps to attempt the heights of poetic literature at any stage. Perhaps to the reader such a book as this is under-rated simply because it makes its intention (here a comprehensive social portrait) too clear to be fully achieved. Against the objective Louis sets himself, his performance is a little too casual. Louis is not over-extended, but he is over-ambitious in the overt design of the book. A single book cannot do so much. I have always supposed therefore that Louis's oeuvre was rather dedicated to the same task. But as I say, that may not really be so.

### ***Bread and a Pension***

*Bread and a Pension* (Pegasus Press, 1964) was Johnson's first solo book of poems to follow *New Worlds for Old* seven years later.

In many ways it continues the mode of *New Worlds for Old*: a series of objectively presented pictures that only towards the end appears overtly autobiographical.

The book is almost consistently in rhymed verse; the odd unrhymed poem is the exception. The rhymed verse is typical of Johnson at this time. The lines and stanzas are run on from one to the next and the rhyme is often so approximate as to be inaudible.

The book shows a structure that is typically Johnson. There are four sections, each an independent collection of poems around a general interest. In fact the poems are selected on the same principle of associated topics that Wordsworth used in his collected editions. I noticed that Louis had many similar collections of his poems arranged apparently on topics in manuscript in his study. Presumably he put a book together for publication partly by drawing on these collections.

In *Bread and a Pension* the second and fourth sections are very obvious gatherings of poems with common features or interests.

Louis's persistence in shaping books on these lines suggests that in fact his opus is intended to be a large set of sections on different subject matters.

Louis may have hoped in 1964 that *Bread and a Pension* would clinch his reputation. Perhaps it did; but he was not to issue another collection of any size in this country for 18 years.

*Bread and a Pension* very much shows the objective artist, after 20 years of practice, progressively shedding the mask of objectivity and revealing and accepting some bitter truths and disillusionment about his writing career and (less openly) about his marriage at that time.

I suspect Johnson's finest and most moving poetry was written in the second half of the 1960s and possibly still remains uncollected.

If Wordsworth accounts for Johnson's idea of poem arrangement, Shelley must have provided a model for Johnson's language, in such matters as the preference for long sentences, which run over line after line, and the general liveliness of the surface rhetoric and imagery. Louis's debt to Wordsworth and Shelley may have been scantily noted; but it does suggest the high seriousness and high standards that sustain his verse in truth.

All Louis's verse has the characteristic of being written in sententiae. By this I mean that he builds a poem up by a series of remarks each a line or two or three long. These sententiae are not narrative or novelistic or dramatic or even satiric in intent. Rather they are journalistic. They sound objective, oracular, portentous, in a word sententious. In a land where journalists have habitually written verse with journalistic verve, Johnson has lifted journalistic utterances to art.

The sententiae that Louis offers actually are remarkably interesting and attractive. His comments are acute and his wording is often arresting. A poem consists of a series of sententiae organised on some focus. Usually the poem adds up to a dramatic viewpoint, often with satiric implications, notwithstanding that it is neither

dramatic nor satiric in form. (In turn these poems are collected into sections on similar topics and into books composed of such sections.)

A sententia itself, with Louis in purporting to give an objective report of a reality which has been viewed with judgement and finality, more often enough introduces some sort of ideatic tension between the phrases of the sententia and not infrequently some sort of aural word play.

The whole heart and strength of Louis's poetry lies in the ideatic tension within the sententia. He has an imagination that is positively Shelleyan in his ability to ring changes on ideas. He is unmatched in the scale and consistency of this performance, which he has kept up for 40 years through an estimated 3,000 poems.

Similarly the aural element in Louis's verse is often quite outstanding. His rhyming is only occasionally audible and powerful. Usually he rhymes to no structural end; so when he gave up rhyming the change in his verse was negligible to me. Instead, Louis uses a wide range of sound tricks to gain euphony within the sententiae.

Louis's poetry is a matter of giving the sententiae tension between the ideas and euphony between the words. He is very artful and acute-minded. His shortcoming is that he sets his sententiae together in a verse framework that is too casual and inelegant. Indeed because the central focus of his poetry is the sententiae, the larger metrical units are essentially perfunctory, hence the inaudible rhyming. The sententiae following one another seem monotonous and even toned in their consistent execution. Louis's verse is never boring, quite the reverse; but it has a surface sameness that really tends to obscure the brilliance of the sententiae, for which in fact Louis must be read.

But the reader as he or she makes the sententiae his or her focus, just as certainly as the writer did before him or her, thereby destroys the reality of the rhymed verse form. This is why Louis's rhyming is largely insignificant. Where it exists it is merely a scaffolding, keeping the page together in a series of masses, through which the sententiae actually wander at liberty.

However, within a poem all the sententiae hold together. As if in a magnetic field they all point in the same direction, all convey the same viewpoint. This consistent viewpoint is actually supported by the monotony of the surface verse. Louis uses his casual but regular verse rhythms (whether strict or open in form) to avoid at the level of the stanza those startling effects which would in fact distract the reader's attention from the sententiae and disrupt the consistent impression which they convey.

At its best Louis's verse impresses and even mesmerises the reader because the tone of the sententiae (their sententiousness) and the invariance of the viewpoint actually strike like an oracle, implying truth, profundity, mystery, even though, and in fact even more so because the poem is readily perceived as a fiction. A poem by Johnson is often an obvious lie that has all the weight, dignity, moment, conviction of certainty.

Of course, the lie that poses as the truth depends for its impact on the reader on the cultural conditioning. What the reader finds extraneous also bores. Inside the local culture of Aotearoa Louis's poetry finds its greatest response, because it has the maximum correspondence with the local conditioning.

This is why the books Louis published in Australia in places strike me as misdirected more drastically than is ever the case in those published at home, particularly in the ones discussed here: *Two Poems*, *New Worlds for Old*, *Bread and a Pension*, *Coming and Going* and *True Confessions of the Last Cannibal*.

### **Coming and Going**

*Coming and Going* (Mallinson Rendel, 1982) is the book Louis published after his return to Aotearoa in 1980. Reading it again now, I find the volume attractive, consistent in standard and technique. Louis eschews rhyme outwardly, but there is considerable finesse in euphonic effects. Louis manages to make each piece individual by carefully working up the subject matter. In various points of craftsmanship he comes close to my own artistic ideals in his own way.

## ***True Confessions of the Last Cannibal***

In the mid-'80s, I gave Louis a copy of my book on Ruth Gilbert, and in return he sent me the manuscript of his book, *True Confessions of the Last Cannibal*, published in 1986 by Antipodes Press.

The manuscript had been working papers. Various cancelled sheets are included in my text. I am glad to have these documents.

I rapidly read the book through, but meant to do a more thorough analysis and critique.

For now I simply note that the book is something of a personal testament. It is not so obviously so and not so solely so as Baxter's *Jerusalem Sonnets/Autumn Testament*. Louis is not able to present the same measure of drama and rhetoric as Baxter. Louis covers his topic adequately, but in comparison with Baxter he divides the focus of his book. I draw this comparison not because I think Baxter superior or Johnson inferior, but because they were colleagues for many years so that the differences between them need to be noted. Johnson's point is more complex, varied and diffuse. I consider he is more interesting and honest than Baxter, but at book length, his effect is less clear-cut.

Louis told me that this book was a final statement in poetry for the time being.

The other matter that I comment on now is the verse form, which thoroughly dispenses with rhyme.

The base of the verse form is the sentence. Like Shakespeare, Middleton, Milton, Wordsworth, just to name obvious examples, Johnson is concerned to produce interesting and novel sentences. This objective characteristically leads poets to write in blank verse in English. So Johnson does here.

F W N Wright, Wellington

(*Editor's Note:* Niel Wright's essay is an edited and abridged version of a monograph pamphlet published by Cultural and Political Booklets, Te Aro, Wellington, 1997.)

## Notes on Contributors

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**RICHARD BERENGARTEN** is an international poet who lives in Cambridge, England. His poems in this issue were first published under his previous name, Richard Burns, in the ESAW mini-books (Nos. 10 & 19), both available from PO Box 42, Paekakariki (\$5.00 each).

**MARILYN DUCKWORTH** is an internationally published Wellington novelist and poet.

**KEVIN IRELAND** is an Auckland poet and fiction writer. Cape Catley recently published his new poetry book, *How to Survive the Morning*.

**LOUIS JOHNSON**, one of New Zealand's widely admired editors and poets, died in November 1988. His *Selected Poems*, edited by Terry Sturm, appeared from Victoria University Press in 2000.

**MIRANDA JOHNSON** holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and is now a research fellow at the University of Michigan. Her poems have been published in journals such as *JAAM* and *Sport*.

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**ALISTAIR PATERSON** is an editor, novelist, critic and poet. His latest book is the long poem *Africa* (Puriri Press, 2008).

**HELEN RICKERBY** is a Wellington poet and publisher (Seraph Press). Her second collection, *My Iron Spine*, was published by HeadworX in 2008.

**HARRY RICKETTS** is a Wellington academic, editor, poet and biographer. Latest collection is *Your Secret Life* (HeadworX).

**MARTYN SANDERSON** is an actor and writer. His poems were first published in the controversial 1964 *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, edited by Louis Johnson, which was also the last volume published in the series.

**PETER SHADBOLT** is a Wellington poet. The poem included is written for his brother, the late novelist Maurice Shadbolt.

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