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‘Dougal McNeill, Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature’

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Dougal McNeill, *Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature* (University of Otago Press, 2024), 248pp. Paperback. NZ\$45. ISBN 978-1-9900-4876-0.

In the early 1990s, Hone Tuwhare and I had a memorable chat about Marxism and literature. The eminent Māori poet had recently arrived as our writer-in-residence, and I found him sitting alone but expectantly in the English Department common room, doing his bit to 'make himself available to staff and students'. I wandered over. 'Good to see you young fullas are reading the right books', he said, as I put the copy of *Marxism and Literary Criticism* I was carrying down on the table. And he went on to say how vital the writings of Christopher Caudwell had been to him as a poet and union organiser in the 1940s. Did we still read those books today? I was nonplussed. I had not read any Caudwell, but I knew very well what Terry Eagleton thought of him. In the same book that had caught Hone's attention, Eagleton associates Caudwell with a panoply of 'vulgar Marxist' mistakes: 'raiding literary works for their ideological content and relating this directly to the class struggle or the economy', along with a wistful belief 'in art as projecting an ideal world and stirring men to new values'. The hero of Hone's youth seemed naïve and underpowered as a critic, but who was I to tell *him* that? So how did you come across Caudwell, I asked, dodging the question, and the great raconteur went on to enthrall me with stories about the closely entwined worlds of the Left Book Club and the Railways Workshop at Ōtāhuhu, worlds which, in the hey-day of poststructuralism, no longer spoke to each other in the same language.

'This book is motivated in part by boredom and resentment with the state of literary studies', says Dougal McNeill in his preface to *Forms of Freedom*. The resentment has been exercised through his role as an organiser in the Tertiary Education Union over a decade in which the Humanities have been marginalised and the founding principles of our universities betrayed; the boredom comes from the etiolated nature of much academic Marxist criticism today. Weary of terms like 'cultural capital' and 'the political unconscious', he asks: 'Who cares whether a particular text reinforces hegemony when...it circulates in a world in which literature no longer has the prestige and purpose of ideological justification'. Rather than analyse structures of mediation and subjectivity, McNeill advocates a return to the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility, not lilies and floppy hats, but 'a training in the senses and feeling itself', in which attention to the formal properties of a literary text—'craft, tone, the sentence, the knitting together of narrative units and the thrill of narrative sped up or delayed—is a promise of politics to come, an invitation to freedom'. There's an earnestness that might have come directly from the likes of Christopher Caudwell (who died fighting the fascists in Spain) but there's a 1930s sense of commitment and solidarity here too, of how the will to change can be empowered by the freedom we regularly find in the non-alienated labour of reading.

The book comes in two halves. The first, 'Lost Leaders', opens with a celebration of Australasian working-class culture in the years before Federation, when the poetry of 'Bobbie' Burns—Bobby to distinguish him from the Robbie of Highland popular culture—operated like a Che Guevara poster in trade union halls from Sydney to Sydenham. Mary Gilmore, Harry Holland, and Henry Lawson are the central figures, but the appeal of the chapter to me lies in the density of its reference to a reading community of transnational diasporic Scots labour activists. 'The songs of the Burnsian community', McNeill goes on to argue, 'were negations of the capitalist order that stabilised settler colonies'. Eve Langley found a beacon of

possibility and self-transformation through her fixation on Oscar Wilde—whose name she later took by deed poll, and into whom Steve, the young female farmworker and Antipodean dandy of her two autobiographical novels, eventually metamorphoses. The chapter is a terrific introduction to a non-binary novelist who has been heralded as ‘ripe for discovery’ for decades. I also admired the chapter on Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin Up*, a proto-feminist strike novel, which is here presented in relation to Social Reproduction Theory—a move which succeeds in making both the novel and the theory more interesting than each might have been on its own. Long-time peace activist Elsie Locke surely has a place in any rollcall of honoured socialist forebears, but I was not convinced her writing has enough literary interest for inclusion in this book. Hone Tuwhare, of course, fits the kaupapa perfectly and the chapter on his Māori-Marxist poetics is especially rewarding.

In the second part of the book, McNeill introduces several contemporary figures: Emily Perkins, Amanda Lohrey, Pip Adam, Patricia Grace, and Alice Tawhai. These essays tend to be smaller and review-like, and the majority are threaded together through a common concern with ecological disaster and a ‘refusal of the world as it is’. A longer piece on Albert Wendt seems to belong to a different project, or at least one written in an academic style the book elsewhere forgoes. One can draw on Lukács in a reading of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* but why do so when the result seems only to show that the local concerns of the novel can be restated in Lukács’s abstract terms—as if it were the possibility of this transposition that made the novel interesting. In this style of Marxist reading, Samoan history and culture are relegated to the backstage, while the depredations of capitalism on a traditional society are presented as if they were not evident, but stood in need of critical exposure. Elsewhere in this section of the book, McNeill advocates on behalf of writers who I imagine may be new to readers of this journal. I had not, to my shame, read the Tasmanian writer Amanda Lohrey, but I now know that I need to. Australian and Canadian readers may find themselves making similar discoveries about several possibly less well-known writers from Aotearoa, and I expect they may take comparative interest, too, in the critical moves and the forms of deference a well-informed Pākehā critic displays when discussing Indigenous authors. For me personally, I was glad most of all to be reminded of the unsophisticated decency of Christopher Caudwell and Hone Tuwhare—two old activists who would heartily have embraced these forms of freedom.

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