

100
Elegies
for
Modernity

John Leonard



John Leonard was born in the UK towards the end of the Keynesian experiment. Any personal details relevant to the collection may be inferred from the poems.

▣ CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETS

By the same author:

Unlove (poetry)

Modernity (political philosophy)

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For Felicia, 'another person'

Acknowledgements

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I

If real news came one day,
you might wonder at it,
for it would be nothing
new or remarkable, nothing
of dark recommendation.

(Dark news, the truth of which,
in its truth, says all or nothing;
dark truth, truths for those
grown fat on truth,
and truth's own exactions.)

Instead, this news would be
the sort which could not reflect
well or badly on the teller
or its auditors, which did not
require a dark understanding.

Its truth cannot know itself
for truth, is modest and everyday
as unthinking everyday tasks;
it contains nothing that could be
unknown or foreign to us.

To know it is not to find
ancestral traces in the heart
of hearts, or on mystic horizons,
but in everything already known,
in every lying knot of sense.

Like untruth then, it is
urgent, but not convenient,
nothing which speaks doubly,
or belies itself of course,
but speaks plainly what it is.

II

'We are both different,
and the same, from all
other people whatsoever.

'We are different in that
there is nothing in history
to parallel our development:

'no age has been so rich,
no age has been able to do
so much, so many great things;

'nor has any age been aware
of itself as different, aware
of itself as making history.

'We are different in that
the normal rules do not apply
with us, everything is ours,

'everything is at our disposal:
the Earth and all it contains,
along with all the world's peoples.

'But we are nevertheless the same
(if you'll believe the poets):
the hearts in our breasts

'beat in the same rhythm, the wants
we have (again, from the poets),
are those which all desire.

'The world was simply waiting
for us to happen — everything that
has ever obtained is only

'a sign of everything we are,
of everything we have become and
everything we have yet to do.'

III

We are constant in thinking
that what we see,
the whirl of development,
trade, economic growth,
is a guarantee, a sign,
of *human* development —

that although such activity
is destructive, does spoil,
pollute and dispossess as
a rule, not an exception,
in time it will be a better
expression of ourselves.

But what if, instead,
this idea is simply
a product of our having
an economic system
that concentrates activity,
of all kinds, in itself;

that 'ourselves', our truth,
our way of life, may
be nothing more than
capital's way of further
developing capital — its self,
truth and way of life?

IV

'There is one lifeway
we all follow — all
stories, myths, legends,
all happenings relate to it;
it is our birth, our being,
and our every action
is involved with it.

'Everyone who has ever lived,
anything that has ever happened,
has been but a deformed
and imperfect preparation
for the way we live now;
different people are a deformed
and imperfect likeness of us.

'That is why those who differ
from us, oppose us; they
cannot see how their existence
affronts us, how much better
they could be, how in time
they could even resemble us.'

V

Since 1648 (one argument goes) Europeans, wearied with war, have stopped killing one another (apart from a few little imbroglios, scarcely worth mentioning) and have taken up with the modern state and wise government.

In fact so wise was this government that soon Europeans felt the need to show the face of government to less enlightened peoples, those still without government — this for no reward, save a few insignificant resources.

So, in fine, to solve the one region's endemic problem, the remainder of humanity must lend themselves to the cure; a cure that might well be worse than if Europeans had continued the killing game.

VI

Apologists say modernity
is just the way things
are, and should be —
a network of give
and take, a system
of independent units,
comprising no one
greater purpose.

What I see though
is the one mechanism
for increase of production,
for production of desire,
for production of desire
for production, for production
of desire for production
of desire . . .

How this came
about can be debated,
but it is this beast's
peculiarity that whatever
passes into it feeds it, and
it, in turn, feeds everything:
one system, one truth,
one way of life.

VII

There's no need to think
that anything in modernity
answers needs better than
anything in other times.

The best we can say for it,
is that modernity is more
assiduous to allege
needs — but then we need
needs more than anyone
else has ever needed them.

VIII

Our forebears worked harder
than us, but then they worked
at living, not at work.

We work at work, and
then at leisure and then,
and only then, at living.

IX

If you think of spaces
not as areas on a map,
but as areas of experience,
or activity, then you see
that alongside the well-known
colonisation of the foreign,
the dark-skinned and the tropical,
runs a more subtle conquest.

Everything we do, every space
we call our own, or anyone
calls their own, is gathered,
little by little, together;
we need to keep these spaces
to ourselves, for no one purpose,
but that of not having any
such single-minded purpose.

X

What have we lent of ours,
and called it progress?

It was first the strong arm
and the violence of the law.
but violence breeds resistance
and the law was only ours.

Later we lent a certain way
of doing things, a way
of organising time and space,
a way of thinking of being,
of structuring it around
production, so that everything
meets in the one market.

This breeds no resistance,
since only those who have
nothing to lose need resist.
Other reservations are debate
about the details of the one
way of life.

 This temporality
reproduces itself in each
of its subjects, otherwise
we would need to posit
a sheep-like disposition
for most of the world.
Instead modernity's subjects
school themselves — the Japanese
are still Japanese, the Italians
as Italian as ever, but all
are modernity's subjects,
and subject to modernity.

XI

A regular worker earns his wage, the wage being a reward for regularity — for the way his time is now structured into work and leisure.

The regular wage stretches beyond the needs of everyday, to the enjoyment of leisure-time, that time in which he finds himself, with his family, or however. His expenditure on leisure helps to create regular jobs for other regular workers.

Finding himself becomes an occasion for growth: personal and economic.

XII

Women in pre-modern times were largely not equal to the men of their societies, but often had a greater range of ways of life: women's work, women's spaces, which, if not regarded, or not part of the greater life, were at least women's work, women's spaces.

Now all there is is the greater life, and women are economic units within it; women's work is compressed into leisure time, (or unpaid and unregarded), women's spaces are nowhere, and women doubly unequal.

XIII

Those who think the word 'revolution' tainted by Marxist usage might consider that the greatest revolution of our times was an eminently capitalist one.

The Green Revolution transformed the temporality of agriculture across the world — now, for better or worse, (by my vote, worse), most cultivation depends on international enterprise; local agriculture, for local markets, local conditions and local needs is hardly to be found, though a fair bet would be that it is this kind which is most likely to serve the future.

XIV

You could say that
the only place anything
ever happens is at the edge,
the extreme case,
the frontier.

That the pioneer's battle,
against others, against himself
and all the odds, is
the cutting edge,
the truth.

Except that this frontier
is everywhere, in every
high street, at home,
or abroad, every day
advancing.

An older definition
of a circle, its centre
nowhere, its circumference
everywhere, was, by custom,
God.

A newer definition
is not in deference,
but in fact, the frontier,
spirit and actuality,
everywhere.

What happens, though,
when this frontier comes
up against itself, when
pioneering gives way
to entropy?

Shall we have learnt
God's recent trick
of quietism, or will
new crusades to nowhere
begin?

XV

A phone-call in New York,
or Tokyo, and things can
happen anywhere, no matter
how remote.

Can you imagine a call
which influenced New York,
from Tengah, or Rondônia,
or Tokyo?

The fabled global reach
extends in one direction only,
from us to them,
telling them what to do
for us, with never a chance
for reply.

When, you might ask,
will it be that what concerns
us remains where we live,
and nowhere else?

XVI

Modernity rarely gets its hands
dirty, it is rarely us who are
seen to be doing our work.

We lean on others, they in
turn lean on others, and
it is these who are used
to log forests, crop until
the land is dry and bare.
When they flee to the cities
they're accused of improvidence
and prolificity.

It is the
middle-men, our lackeys,
who are most pampered,
because they do our work,
and are most like us.

XVII

Big men everywhere need
tanks and planes and guns,
and dams and roads and growth
and technology, just as once
they needed pigs and yams
and wives and iron tools.

What's unfortunate is what's
required to produce these
symbols of authority,
and that the system that
produces them entails
still more of the same.

XVIII

To sustain growth it's necessary to ensure that growth is so slow as to be almost invisible.

'Sustainable growth', as the term is used, means present growth that can be sustained for our purposes, for the present.

For 'sustainable growth' read 'growth', the same growth we have always had, and will try to hang on to until the very last moment.

XIX

It's hardly surprising that in any business no interest should be given to the costs that don't have to be paid for, or that it should be assumed that these costs are a kind
of natural right.

It's unfortunately true, however, that it's this element which we all rely on and that the unpaid costs of goods and services have to be borne by everyone,
in the long-run.

XX

It seems strange that to keep
things as they are here
it is necessary to make sure
that things are as they never
were elsewhere;

That, so prosperity and good
order can be maintained,
elsewhere order must be
turned on its head, poverty
newly coined.

In truth our order is none,
our prosperity borrowed,
and what we have visited
on ourselves, we now inflict
with interest.

XXI

If keeping things going
is a question of confidence,
there should be no difficulty
about it, since it's clear
it is in no-one's interest
to stop them.

That things do frequently
come to a halt, shows
that no amount of confidence
can keep a stop-start system
going, or fail not to rock
an unseaworthy boat.

Now that all our eggs
are in the one basket,
and more are broken with
every crash, we need
more than confidence — perhaps
we need a purblind hope.

XXII

Owl-eaters have little joy
from their strange tastes;
spot them by their busyness
 (frantic at times)
to gobble up mice.

XXIII

After two recessions, which may have nothing to do with anything anyone has done, or not done, but be the result of the chaotic flow of unregulated global capital, we are now enjoined only to propagate the right kind of growth — one in which investment, not spending, is paramount.

And this when the system we have is designed to create growth by means of consumption for the sake of consumption, in which there is nothing to save for, nothing to invest in, but further growth which then spurs further consumption.

If these considerations seem to be aesthetic, not practical, they may well be; if they sound the same as discourses of self-formation, then no wonder, for this is their origin.

XXIV

For those who are worried
about their living standards,
who are prepared to let them
dictate every kind of expedient,
I would say, 'Things could be
worse — you could yet have
to live with the consequences
of the living standards you
have been eager to maintain'.

XXV

At the heart of anything
we live by or trust,
or trust to govern, lies
the ineluctable core,
the interests of those
whose interests are
material to our society.

All societies have leaders
and those whose stake
is the greatest will be
leaders, but the other
three-quarters, and the rest
of the world, have to live
with the same polity too.

And then, just suppose
that instead of these interests
being our best guide
to what is prudent,
just suppose, just admit
the possibility, that they
might just be wrong.

XXVI

There are two sorts of cargo-cult,
one well-known, the other, less so.

In parts of Melanesia there are,
or have been, cults, based on
the notion that modern technology
was first offered to Melanesians,
and foolishly rejected in favour
of pigs and sweet potatoes.
However, with the performance
of certain rites, and with faith,
ships full of cargo will descend
again, to inaugurate an era
of much plenty and peace.

In parts of the developed world
there are, or have been, beliefs
connected with modern technology.
It is believed, for example, that
the problems caused by technology
can be solved by technology,
that the problems caused by
economic growth can be cured
by further economic growth, and
that, with the performance
of certain rites, the repetition
of certain shibboleths, and,
above all, with faith, an era
of much plenty and peace
will unfailingly ensue.

XXVII

It is obvious that, as
everyone is the same as
their neighbours, and that
everywhere is the same
as everywhere else,
then there should be
a free flow of goods
and information throughout
the world.

But just to be sure
even the closest neighbours
seem to need some
local scheme or other,
a watch-group to keep
one another on the straight
and narrow, and to protect
themselves from their ruthless
friends.

XXVIII

It's good to meet others,
to see what they do,
whether their goods might
be useful to us, and *vice*
versa.

I've never heard, though,
that one should assume
that what others do is
in order to please us
alone,

or that, come what may,
what we offer in return,
is bound to suit them,
and their particular way
of life;

as though we came to trade
and returned with cowries,
assured of riches, when for
us seashells are worthless
things.

XXIX

Why, just because we follow
a regime of bad housekeeping,
must it be assumed everyone
does so, and always has?

Why are our economic rules
held to apply to every
economy? For not everyone
organises work and wealth,
the use of resources and
time, in the same way as us.

It may be that those economies
we know most about were
most like our own; but,
boom and crash, short-lived
prosperity riding on hardship,
and quickly followed by more —
should these be the basis
for our callow theories,
and foolish practices?

XXX

To be made common currency,
passed from hand to clutching hand,
tendered legally and accepted,
is to be noted, not recognised.

Between the original and image
an act of misconstruction has occurred;
the issue of the moment — how
conveniently emblematised away.

The promise held out by this fraud
is to render like for like
(whatever interest the bearer has).
Can its plastic promise stretch
to include what it bears,
the child's trust it has used?

XXXI

The appeal to material conditions and a collective consciousness is persuasive — better than any appeal to the individual or to spiritual problematics.

But are they not really the same thing? The individual *en masse* is the class, material conditions become a spiritual matter.

Ask the Uzbeks (those who haven't got rich) or ask the Tibetans, whether material conditions are not another name for something familiar.

XXXII

'We understand that we may do anything, just as long as what we do does not forestall anyone else's freedom.

'Thus we shall continue to enjoy wealth not of our making, using resources which do not belong to us or ours.

'Those whom our actions dispossess are, of course, free, to take the same course that we have taken.

'All of the dispossessed in fact are as free as us, though not all are willing, and most are not able.

'However, such of them as do not use freedom qualify for alms, and have no reason to feel aggrieved.'

XXXIII

It is a fact that whatever
we do, whether good
or bad, is good.

For anything we do,
allows us to do
something else:

something else and then
something else again,
in endless development.

Thus even to destroy,
to poison and pollute,
is no bad thing,

since to reconstruct
and to clean up creates
jobs and profits.

Such productivity
in gross means genuine
damage perpetrated.

XXXIV

Praise be for recycling:
now superfluties can be
made into more superfluties.

XXXV

When modernity has:

created hungry masses,
to witness its own necessity;
smitten everyone else with madness,
so that progress can be achieved;
maintained unjust peace,
to keep up appearances;
started wars at second hand,
so as not to have *its* sons killed;
created a global market,
in pornography, drugs and crime;
cleared every last forest,
for worthless ranch-lands;
trawled every ocean dry,
so most fish can be wasted . . .

it sighs collectively
at human frailty,
and prepares for legislation,
and peace-giving war.

XXXVI

Accountants? I doubt if any
of them could think up
so much as a decent excuse.

XXXVII

'Isn't it a comfort
that, just as the sun
rises, and birds sing,
the way we live
is altogether natural?

'Dogs eat dogs
(so they say) and
in the end everything
ends in entropy;
so we're all right.

'Isn't it comforting
too, that, just like
weather-systems, or water-flow,
nothing we do can
have predictable results?

'Or that species which
outrun natural systems
die out, that resources
degraded stay degraded
and are gone for good?

'... Perhaps, though, this nature
thing doesn't bear
too much looking into.'

XXXVIII

It's hubristic of us to begin
to meddle with genes.
With other species there are
dangers, of rogue plants
or animals, freaks running
free, disrupting everything
we are breeding for.
With ourselves the danger's
greater: eliminate a single
gene for the supposed
good, and, centuries hence,
a strong and unexpected
disadvantage appears.

Those whom the gods choose
to destroy, they first grant
great powers, and a kind of
wisdom to go with them.

XXXIX

We can never live in harmony
with nature, because we can
never know nature, only our
interpretations of nature;
besides, does nature ever
stay the same to be known?

The wisest course, since
anything we do is apt
to be imprudent, or damaging,
is to ensure an ample margin,
so we always have resources
to fall back on in need.

Imagine a lunatic in a cell —
if bored he will kill himself —
he is given paint every week,
he paints assiduously each day,
yet at the week's end has
half a pot still, and so lives.

XL

We used to fear
that the environment
would no longer support
future development.

Now we must fear
that it may no longer
support human life.

XLI

The spendthrift laughs
when warned 'You'll run
out of money one day'.

And in a way he's right;
banks will continue
to lend to a name,

his borrowing will spur
further economic activity,
money begets money;

and in dire emergencies
there's always theft,
fraud and cooked books . . .

What, though, of the warning
'You'll ruin the banks
with your mad borrowing'?

What then of consumption,
for consumption's sake,
of laundering and graft?

What if the money-system,
not just the money,
dried up, what then?

XLII

We do not in the least
resemble our barbaric ancestors;
any such greedy likeness
is buried deep in the past,
and never exhumed.

The plundering we carry
out, is (like Queen Elizabeth's)
at second and third hand;
nothing that could shame
our rational lives.

When we have run through
our spoils, though, what
bloodthirsty courage will we
find? the sort to shame
even our forebears?

XLIII

Midas' touch turned all
to gold: golden furniture,
golden food and a twenty-two-
carat daughter. He lived
his days in golden *ennui*,
in a golden palace.

Faust sold his soul
for knowledge, knew the ends
of learning, saw the world
and wielded power, yet lived
in fear of his promised
day of reckoning.

Faust's knowledge was
golden, Midas' touch the touch
of truth, and are not both
modern men, who know
everything, own everything, yet
live in bored fear of death?

XLIV

Once John Doe wore
a plain old serge suit,
and shirts of the style
of his father's day.
It was My Lord who
strutted in this season's
peacock fashions.

Now honest Richard Roe
baulks at last year's
suit or shirt, and My Lord
sports 1940s twills:
social truths still, yet
the makers of fashion,
have made it big.

XLV

The most difficult thing
to gain is a just sense
of *our* way of life.

When
truths, like crimes, come home
to roost, they seem harsh,
foreign to us, empty words,
a bane.

It may be that we
might wish to disown them,
the words that were in
our mouths night and day —
but our plausible motives
and reasonable reasons, which
are ours by long domestication,
cannot be shaken off at will.

XLVI

'How would you define
a cultural paradigm,
that was absolutely
unshakeable?'

One in which every
thought, every notion,
even resistance,
was couched in
the self-same language.
Not a rhetoric, built
from common topics,
with an agreed morality —
but a dialectics of self.
Not a regime instilled,
and conned anew,
but something into
which we are born,
and which is born in
us, as the ground
of being.

'Surely such a paradigm
must be for the best,
in the long run, must
represent the securest
guarantee of true
solidarity?'

No, for the dialectics
of being once controverted,
once seen as the nothing
they are, then what help
for a shiftless people,
without resource?

XLVII

Poor Pride, how fallen it is —
once it led the other sins
about, dragged Lechery through
the stews, gorged with Gluttony,
itself always self-possessed.

Now that its vices have left it,
to become domestic and everyday,
Pride, no longer proud, despite
the seisin of every heart,
has set its cap at Reason.

XLVIII

I suspect that it is change
that we cannot deal with,
despite the fact that change
is what we live with, and
what we enjoin in others.

For those changes, followed
through, can only lead
to more change than we
can ever imagine, change
that would affect *us*.

Others will simply endure,
as they have endured
the changes we enforced;
but we, changed from ourselves,
who will we be to cope?

XLIX

If the current state of things, the way what we are is constructed and organised, were to change, would we stay the same good citizens?

Undoubtedly not; for we take the expression of what we are from how we organise ourselves. But then what's so wrong about being different?

L

It is not surprising that those who pay to hear good news get to hear it, or that those who want to see disaster this instant should see it coming.

Expert advice, no matter how well paid, cannot provide certainties — for things are never unique, but always in a complex web of other things (one tug and twenty strands break).

For the same reason the web, once broken, is never knitted up within one lifetime or two.

LI

The problem with definitions
is that they are rarely anything
but tautologies.

'The survival of the fittest',
for example, means the survival
of those who survive.

'The Wisdom of the Market'
means that, as markets go,
the Market is wise.

Thus the old story repeats itself:
good is good, bad is, as always,
unfailingly bad.

This not from any deficit of truth,
but from a very bad choice
of tautologies.

LII

As full-time moralists
we have to say we found
our task irksome and disappointing.
It is indeed the case that
the world is uniquely wicked;

for, try as we might to find
genuine evil, all we saw
was mere lumpishness, apathy,
and a third-rate kind of madness,
with nothing of the divine about it . . .

LIII

The word 'crisis' has a smile in it — not a triumphant one, for although resolutions have been passed, and the Marines are already standing at street-corners, things could still go wrong, further crises entailing the symbolic use of force might yet ensue, before we can report that things are back to normal, order restored, our efforts vindicated.

Later there can be unsmiling news, people dead or dying, long-standing wars, famine and unrest. These are no crises, although we would be happy to send advisers, help train the army, dispatch a fleet of planes — yet these are no crises. These matters are reported to indicate our global concern, our largeness of heart, and to allow us to thank Providence we are not like them . . . See this orphan . . .

Finally a category of news still further from crisis, slots of a few seconds each, a river cleaned up, an endangered animal, The Atmosphere Conference, to show that we are up-to-date, and that even in a world of crises, there is still prime time for items of non-crisis.

LIV

If you don't like what goes on
in the here and now, try
stepping into the grey outside,
where certainties spin away,
and you yourself become
the merest shadow-self.

Be cautious, however, do not
pretend that what you see
there is the same as what
you are used to — for though
claims are made to the outside,
they are rhetorical, not real.

There you can neither speak
nor think, as you were wont;
nothing you bring with you
on your return can remain
unchanged. All that you can
say is that there is an outside.

LV

It is our pleasant delusion that
we act, and stand apart
from our actions, looking
on them with innocent eyes.

Thus we are free, just
so long as we use this
freedom to act in the same
way as if we were not free —

which is preferable, a brigand
and a thief, or a brigand
and a thief who knows himself
as a brigand and a thief?

LVI

It would be a mad fellow
who could stand up and say,
'The way we live is wrong,
what we think is wrong,
and what we do is wrong.'
For who could have told
him this, what school
taught him general strictures?

For how we are is what
we are, we debate, but only
from common premises. Only
the way we are presently
needs a reckless critique,
for what we do now means
that soon our way of life
must end, and leave us nothing.

LVII

The best way to criticise
the way we are now
is not from what we are,
or what we might be,
but from what we have been.

LVIII

We have been so led, these many
years, by our emotions, that only
those which have been our staple,
can now be recognised: desire,
hope and hopeful desire.

One neglected emotion
is fear, apprehension
that what we do, our
daily business, should have
unthinkable consequences.

Another such, next emotion
to fear, which has no real
name in our language,
is horror, like that horror
at witnessing sacrilege.

LIX

The welfare state can never
have welfare as its goal.

For, as it is based wholly
on growth, this means

that all it does is swallowed
up in further growth.

Welfare is the last thing
modernity can ever produce.

LX

I can conceive a future
beyond our present way
of life; I can conceive
also that the invitation
must not be extended
to a certain, well-known
individual.

Yet I cannot think
how this absence will
affect the future, what
the future will look like,
how it will work, and,
especially, how we might
figure ourselves.

LXI

If you seek for rights,
it may be that they are
rights which are rootless,
or take away others'
rights; better to seek
a climate where rights
are backed by custom.

If you seek liberation,
ask what it is you
want to be liberated from.
Could it be that
what we already have
is all the liberation
you have looked for?

To seek traditional rights,
or freedom from present
madness, is not the same
as the desire for rights
and freedoms which never
did, or could, exist.

LXII

It is not as if our purpose
is to live out our secret
purpose — to be more than true
to our unknown, but expected
selves.

For indeed, it may be
that what transpires here, now,
in the streets, is our only
purpose, which, like children's play,
though trivial and to no purpose,
might be impossible to criticise.

The only thing we have to do
is perhaps to ensure that,
whatever it is we do, we can
carry on doing it.

Moreover,
a point of courtesy would be
to take care that others, those
who don't share our concerns,
are never involved with them.

LXIII

Why should we not have
a state where every heart's
desire is exposed,
and, in being brought out,
is answered?

If we did, then would
not every heart's wish
be for peace and justice,
right actions, right thoughts
and freedom?

Is it not rather that this
is what we already have;
are not peace and justice,
trumpeted, freedom and rationalism
proclaimed?

Every heart's wish is
fixed on this or that,
whether right or wrong,
and it is this that is
the problem.

LXIV

We do not need
to liberate desire;
for we already have
an economy of desire.

One, moreover, backed
not by the heart's truth
or healthy instinct,
but by armed force.

Still less do we need
knowledge of desire
as desire, for such desire
is still desire.

Even worse the paradise
promised for the future,
when desire will be forgotten,
though ruling till then.

The secret of all this,
the crimes of twisted desire,
is that there is no secret,
nor any unique desire.

LXV

Advertisement:

'Meditation Week —
discover inner peace,
and find your true
potential.'

LXVI

You may notice that these poems are not normal ones; if I had wanted to write such I should have made sure to introduce myself subtly, to hint at good reasons why my random observations were not simply random — but united by a creative mind.

There would have been much anger, but arguments only to be grasped by a lyric understanding, a sign of the poet's absent consciousness, and the reader's lively sympathy. Another such sign would have been a nice loose form, no sarcasm in tight stanzas.

I should also have taken care to maintain an even, elevated tone, best guarantee of poetry. Instead I have preferred plain statement, and a varied style — whatever means were needful to make a point, whatever emphasis was enough.

Finally it is not important that it is me who sketches these ideas, since all are about, in the air. All that is necessary is that someone should bring them together, follow them through, in a series of various, though not uncogent, poems.

LXVII

If a voice speaks
in a guarded space,
then we may assume
the problematics of voice;

That what is said
is less important than
the fact of speaking,
of what is at stake.

Nothing less perhaps
than the great drama,
the contest of consciousness,
and its inevitable end.

For, victory or defeat,
this is no ordinary speech,
but the great game of being,
in this space, and speaking.

LXVIII

An empty wine glass,
a pile of fallen leaves
and an old moon;

Or again, a few
broken trees, plastic
bags, a woman's coat . . .

A collection of indefinite
articles, forensic evidence,
points to what conclusion?

That there is a custom
of looking beyond things
to the heart of things,

That there is a court
where questions such
as these are contested.

But what its jurisdiction
is, what its rules are,
is not certain.

/ Since we multiply things,
is it things which
should be in question?

LXIX

Cultural diversity usually means
we can go there this autumn,
buy cheap wine, take pictures
of toothless old men and chickens,
and imagine we have seen
a regretted, but passed, part
of ourselves.

Such aesthetics
aside, it is not obvious
that in the long run it is
us who will prevail, despite
our purchasing power and
52mm world view.

Perhaps, though the thought
may be one of chagrin,
the future is all chickens
and primitive dental care.

LXX

Archaeologists used to describe
a new culture on the strength
of a single pot. Then, realising
that anyone can use, and lose,
any pot, and that a pot could be
borrowed, traded, found . . .
or made locally, grew more
circumspect.

The artefact is not the culture;
it is not the things of modernity
that are at fault, or the people,
but the way both are organised
and used.

LXXI

In a culture of statistics
every person counts.

LXXII

Whether what transpires
is figured as a blatant
beast run wild, or
as 'a most unfortunate
episode, for which no-one
is to blame', does not matter.

For we already know that
the age we live in is
no different from any other,
no unique home to humanity,
no platform for liberation,
simply how things are now.

This established, the gods
of spirit and of answered
needs rejected, then all
we have is a bad way
of doing things, husbandry
that could be better.

LXXIII

To enquire whether any
particular practice contradicts
itself is, at first sight,
a profound move. For is
it not that in this schism,
self against self, true belief
against true belief, that
truth will at length emerge?

Yet nothing is, except in
some context, everything
is by pleonasm, contradiction
is the rule. Better to ask
what the effect of what
we do is, rather than
to surmise salvation,
from contradictory truths.

LXXIV

In theory the flip-side
demands an obverse —
but what sort of argument,
to begin only tail-wise?

And 'obverse'? scarcely
the bold, expected answer,
more the reverse of the reverse —
no comfort in obversity.

LXXV

A language everyone can
speak — not, like Esperanto,
learnt or legislated,
but one from the heart,
that all can share since
everyone already knows it.

Such a language could knit up
all broken unities with
a lexicon of needs. On the
other hand, it may be that
this is what we already have,
a forceful, economic discourse.

Perhaps what we need is
more like a *lingua franca*;
broken ends of several languages,
rich only in profanities.
This would be quite enough
for any needs we have.

LXXVI

Everywhere there is choice:
faced with this it's easy
to say there is no true choice.
But this might imply
you knew real choice.

Better to say, the fact
that choice is presented,
is so boasted of, shows
that there's something
fishy going on.

LXXVII

We live with choice,
are overwhelmed with it,
it is the basis of being.

Yet we never chose to
be thus, when was
the question ever posed?

Nor did those people there
ever choose to live like
that, to do such things.

Nor do we govern ourselves
on the basis of anything
we have ever chosen.

(Think how we might be
otherwise, by some kind
of cultural referendum?)

Perhaps, instead of flaunting
choice, we might choose
to look at what we do.

LXXVIII

You could say 'It's about
time we had real economics'.

But where does the notion
of the 'real' come from?

Anything we regard as real
is so by that same virtue,

and nowhere has a real
polity ever not been practised.

What might be good, though,
is economic economics.

LXXIX

There is the zeal to be known
for one's ideas, yet if these are
true, the only credit to be
taken is that of prescience.

If, on the other hand, they're
altogether wrong, and not only
wrong, but dangerously so,
then there is excuse for zeal.

LXXX

(After Heraclitus)

It is necessary to follow
common life, for although
there is no common reason,
people still live, each
with their own wisdom.

LXXXI

It's easy to say that
those who oppose are
eaten up with envy.

Why not say that those
who do not oppose are
fearful of losing caste?

LXXXII

In a time of strife it's
possible to breathe more
easily — not because either
side claims any fealty
(indeed, both are fighting
in the selfsame cause),
but because we have no
right to a quiet life.

LXXXIII

If wilderness is priceless
and a glossy brochure away,
it seems everything else
has its price, and probably
that the price is low.

If wilderness is priceless,
then no-one can live there
or have ever lived there;
certainly no-one can visit,
despite travel-arrangements.

Perhaps wilderness does
not exist, except as a ploy
to separate fragments of land
from the rest and the rest is,
by this, simply up for grabs.

If non-wilderness is so
it is because it is priced, its
value is just so much
per hectare; it is developed,
not used for everyday ends.

Yet wilderness could be everywhere,
since it is us who make it;
we could work it that everywhere
was at once used and everyday,
and priceless wilderness.

LXXXIV

Now that we are beginning
to catalogue flora and fauna,
we are reaching an end
of them.

Now that we know their habits,
habitat and make taxonomies,
they are vanishing from
everywhere.

Knowledge goes hand in hand
with power, to describe is
to subordinate to one's
own ends,

and a very particular antipathy
is apparent, on the part
of beasts and plants, to human
fecklessness.

LXXXV

Things must be given up,
you know that; it should
be plain to anyone.

But which things need
to be given up, is
another, different question.

We cannot list what is
needful, so how can we
list what is useless?

The future will be different,
we will be different people
then, and have different needs.

LXXXVI

The dealer sits and across
his screen flash figures,
images, words: fragments
of lives, of places, of dispossession
and plunder, fragments he neither
understands nor cares about.
Nevertheless, from them he builds
a picture, gains a certain profit.

The critic sits and across
his screen flash figures,
images, words: fragments
of lives, of places, of dispossession
and plunder, fragments he neither
understands nor cares about.
Nevertheless, from them he builds
a picture, describes a certain style.

LXXXVII

As well as being 'post-modern',
we are also 'post-industrial'.

So the shirt I'm wearing
was made in a TV studio,

the car I drive was assembled
in a fast-food joint,

and my stereo materialised
magically from Internet.

As well as 'post-industrial',
we are also 'post-agricultural',

only it's less easy to hide
where bread comes from.

LXXXVIII

In an era of truth
experiments are tautologies,
in an era of truths
experiments are a necessity.

If to each area of hitherto
sacrosanct truth is lent
careful inquiry, matching
findings with findings,

then what plural, separate
truths might not emerge?
Truths to keep everyone
happy, in their own way.

LXXXIX

The sceptic's argument against
Universal Truth is not sceptic:
no one denies that there are
truths, only that there could be
Universal Truth. Indeed a sceptic
admits far more of truth than
ever idealist philosopher.

Nor is the argument a paradox:
it is not a universal truth
that there is no Universal Truth,
merely a Universal Caution.

XC

'How can it be that if you say cultures have no purpose or truth intrinsic, that you can also say that modernity's truth is that of single-minded and reckless economic development?'

Anthropologists describe truth in the cultures they have studied either from what they thought their subjects should be, or do, or from what their subjects told them they were, or did.

All people are equally foolish, all people are equally dangerous; any people's capacity for general harm lies in their culture, not in themselves.

There have been some cultures who managed, laboriously, to concentrate enough time and resources to overcome dispersedness and apathy, to build themselves up to greatness and civilisation. But such cultures collapse within centuries, their greatness being too great a burden, their truth running against the general disposition for lazy ungreatness.

Our age has many truths,
many institutions, many
practices, and what we are
we gauge from a cross-section,
obtained in whatever way.
This is confirmed by
the results of what it
is we do most typically.

Greatness is our particular
bent and the thing we do
best of all. This, perhaps
uniquely, makes us uniquely
dangerous, has allowed us
to expand beyond all bounds,
and involve everyone in
our particular madness.

Not everything in modernity
has, as its truth, development
of this kind, but everything
there is is turned to this
end. Development is
not modernity's truth,
it is, instead, its own
especial curse, its nemesis.

XCI

If reserves were set up, to protect remnants of pre-modern times, as there have been to protect obstinately rare creatures or plants, there would be much interest, obsessive perhaps.

There would be editorial hints of corruption, of gross misuse of funds, colour pictures of bare-breasted nymphs.

The press would cluster about the reserve, gleaning rumour to establish as fact, scrutinising visitors for fame, or signs of difference.

But the sad truth would be that this reserve would contain nothing — not something gone awry, something attempted and botched, but a simple nothing, beyond conceptualising: no stories, no information, no titillation, nothing, repeat, nothing.

XCII

It's hard to do nothing,
strictly speaking, impossible —
yet anything that's done
is taken the wrong way,
and turned aside at once.

Thus wisdom, assuming it is
wisdom, eager to do
great things, is seen
by the feckless as feckless,
or never once considered.

Even those acts of charity,
the stuff of quiet sainthood,
are as little use, as inept,
as any three-lane highway
acts of pointless cruelty.

Perhaps, rather than nothing,
one could do anything,
the more ignominious the better.
But a practice of nothing
at least sharpens the wits.

XCIII

The final enlightenment
to treat your enlightenment
as nothing.

XCIV

To call for a world
of obstinate plurality,
of many, and diverse
polities, flies against
global trends.

Yet

it is perhaps not that
bad a bet. Whenever
great empires crash,
their far-flung trade,
and elaborate markets
decay, or end abruptly,
and such a plural world
ensues.

Historians, reading
always for singularity
and great threads to
follow through, label
these periods 'anarchy',
'The Dark Ages'.

Yet

there is nothing to say
they are not the more
normal state of affairs.

XCV

There are too many of us
for much elbow-room,
and proximity is murderous.

The great forests are gone,
and in place of timber,
there are packing cases.

The oceans have few fish,
and those that are left
are sick and ulcerated.

Who could have thought
to outrun trees and fish,
symbols of abundance?

But with or without such
staples, people live together,
only tradition is irreplaceable.

Tradition, inventor of trees
and fish, peace-maker,
guarantor of life.

Yet latterly traditions
of authenticity were a sign
of imminent dispossession,

And only the modernisers
were authentic, though they
lived in a welter of lies.

To fabricate authenticities
once more, is thus the
most urgent of tasks.

XCVI

Consider well before you wake
the silent dead to people
your dumb-shows.

Being nameless
they cannot resist the cruel
tug across to our time.

As their lives are spectral,
so leave them, if you would
earn their gratitude.

XCVII

In place of need, contentment;
in place of lack, ignorance of lack.

In place of history, wisdom;
in place of the future, the present.

In place of trade, exchanges;
in place of growth, betterment.

In place of activity, quietness;
in place of stress and relaxation, active quietude.

In place of fear, unknowing confidence;
in place of imperatives, knowledges.

In place of truth, traditions;
in place of nature, uses.

In place of population, peoples;
in place of rights, customs.

In place of goals, living;
in place of development, goallessness.

XCVIII

Can you really say you know
where it is you live? Size up
the neighbourhood, it rambles away
street by street into carelessness;
its margins are thickly obelised,
with no care but trimming it becomes
impossibly all of a tidy piece.

Realty, the planter's dream, where
others figure rarely and what
is yours, is yours in all propriety,
though as strange to you, as crabwise
to your thinking, as your own self.

Where you find yourself, much-loathed
home from home, has trees and grass,
but not enough, or not nearly so;
it has neighbours, who howl and drink
and worse, lend you things unasked.

For its part, it is discontent here
shades off into vagueness; its idioms
are too grey, vocables sufficient, but
the language you surprise yourself
speaking is an uncouth, infixing one.

Nor is there any design here for you,
the horizon is flat and treeless,
low ranges, parched and treeless,
though dusty trees spring up
any-wrong-place-where and shouting
birds carol at dawn, unseen
amongst leaves, greener than them.

Where you are, like an unfavourite
child, does not grow on you;
it is contrary, though not of its own.
still, there is likeness enough,
between the here and your nowhere,
for small comfort, so long as you keep
living well for all your study.

XCIX

I wonder could we bear
an impossible history?
Impossible because unwritten,
therefore unknowable:
no further great catalogue
of reigns and achievements.

This history might only
be the history we have,
yet it could be the very
history that we need,
for now or for the future,
beyond future certainties.

Instead of tracing past
rehearsals for present woes,
what about reckoning
the uncounted generations —
those who had no need
to enter into history?

Or reckoning their wise
inactions, their quiet
betterment, their peaceful
trade, their own confidence
in the past and future
generations, still with them?

C

Could you imagine
a growth that you
couldn't see?

I don't mean
a spiritual growth
either, since such growth
is easy to see —
the more spiritual
a people, the more frequent
their wars.

Real growth, though,
of the sort that you
or I might recognise,
not for itself,
its own worst excuse,
but as a by-product
of living aimlessly,
with an intensity
of goallessness akin
to fervour.

*The way we are presently
needs a reckless critique,
for what we do now means
that soon our way of life
must end, and leave us nothing.
(LVI)*

100 Elegies for Modernity is a refreshing and unswerving examination of the foundations of our society. Frank and astringent in style, and sardonic in temper, John Leonard's elegies return to poetry the function of political argument.

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