

***So Much Light* reviewed by Margaret Bradstock in *Five Bells 15:1, Summer 2007-2008*, pp.58-60.**

Light is central to most of the poems in this collection, both as physical image and as the signifier of spiritual transcendence. The poems were selected by Janet Upcher, who includes an invaluable Afterword explicating the rationale of *So Much Light*. As well as new poems exploring Charlton's awareness of the continuity of all creation, there are poems from his earlier collection, *Luminous Bodies*, celebrating an Aboriginal spirituality and a sense of the enlightenment to be achieved through rapprochement with the physical world of nature. As Upcher puts it:

An awareness of Being, both in the moment and within a continuum, is what gives Charlton's poetry its uniqueness, an original voice, linking many cultures, fusing many religions and speaking to a shared humanity. (p. 73)

For Charlton, this experience is 'of an immanent presence, one ultimate source of light and mystery which surpasses all dogma and doctrine' (p.74).

Technically, his poetry is understated, sharply observant, and subsequently epiphanic, as the momentum of interconnected detail leads to transcendence. So, in *Moments*:

Nothing seems separate:
neither magpie, soil, millipede,
nor eucalypt leaves
that sweep the sky.

In the title poem, *So Much Light*, which occurs late enough in the first sequence to sum up the thematic possibilities:

I long for the ceiling
to yawn,
the roof to break open.
I long to step
from my clothes,
face real weather:
sky, rain
and sun full-on.

.....
I am one with the in-
and exhale of all.
I crouch before things
of which my head
knows nothing
but my heart
senses
to be here.

Waterfront Café is a finely crafted piece on the need for continuity in our existence, reliant to some extent on wordplay with a traditional biblical image:

To rise from the table
is to die a little;
sitting down to eat,
a form of resurrection.

However, as stated, Charlton is not a traditionalist and the poem *Best Spiritual Practice* more empathetically defines his manifesto:

Best spiritual practice is to drop the word Best,

the word Spiritual, the word Practice;

is to re-enter your own garden,

find each flower turned

to the light.

Through everyday things, through the physical, Charlton approaches the spiritual. One of the most significant sequences in this collection is *Transgressive Saints*, which was short-listed for the Broadway Poetry Prize in 2006, and which suggests a fusion of temporal and celestial elements. The nun Hadewijch of Antwerp moves with the rhythm of her days and seasons, and hopes to find true enlightenment:

Trust belongs to a duck,
a farm child, a robust worker.
How can I find real trust?
I will go out again, confront
the place of my greatest fear
and meditate there.

Help me, Mother,
to forsake attachments
which beguile.
I want to flow with sap
of fidelity to all.

Simone Weil at Saint-Marcel d'Ardèche knows that *Truth is conveyed by what's withheld*, but doubts conventional paths to wisdom:

Attend, recite, repeat: stem, stalk, sap.
She picks her way into autumn,
the body's rhythm.

.....
Give up self-questioning, abandon
the search. Relinquish the mind's

The poem *One Light, Many Lamps*, which epitomises this credo through its imagery, might also have been a title poem for the collection:

Caught short
by nightfall
in a forest;
chancing upon fungi,
luminescent.
Intense bluish-
white shards
would in the morning
be as cold as
crockery.

.....
Just so,
the wilderness
sees those
who see it

Each of the fungi is ‘a lamp;/ each lamp/ the embodiment/ of one light.’

In *On the Rim* Charlton says:

all that matters is embodiment,
these envelopes of sense and soul.

.....
Here, the inexhaustible meaning.
It’s not separate from the vision,
from the action.
Not separate
from This.

To go with James Charlton in these lovely poems is to experience a fusion of states of being, a mystical apprehension of immanence and a reappraisal of the wonders of our everyday world.

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Dr Margaret Bradstock has five published collections of poetry, including *The Pomelo Tree* (which won the Wesley Michel Wright Prize), *Coast* (2005) and *How Like the Past* (2009). Other prizes include Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson awards. In 2003 she was Asialink writer-in-residence at Peking University. Margaret is co-editor of *Five Bells* for the Poets Union, Deputy Chair from 2008-9, and has been Honorary Visiting Fellow at the University of NSW for the past 12 years. She has edited 10 books of poetry and prose since 1983.

