



Book review: a spell, a charm by John Leonard

AUTHOR(S)

Cassandra Atherton

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Cassandra Atherton reviews *A Spell, A Charm* by John Leonard

John Leonard, *A Spell, A Charm*. Melbourne: Hybrid publishers, 2014. ISBN 978-1-925-000-57-3

Cassandra Atherton

John Leonard's *A Spell, A Charm* is a wonderland of meditative reflections on natural habitats, juxtaposed with stark ruminations on ecological crisis. In this, his fifth collection of poetry, the world has never seemed more intimately connected. Leonard reminds us that globalisation draws us together; that the eco-system encompasses more than just our personal location.

Divided into four sections, the first – “The Hope and Trust of the Times” – and the last – “Change Beyond Change” – provide a clever call and response on questions concerning the ethical relationship of human beings to the environment. Grounded in a tradition of American Romanticism and Transcendentalism there is a vivid emphasis not only on the individual, but specifically on the rich inspiration that can be found in nature. In this way, Leonard illustrates that the closer humans are to nature, the greater the possibility for spiritual awakening. Indeed, in the second quatrain of “Becoming Myself”, the narrator is in a state of becoming:

If I look out across the valley

I seem nearer to the mountain,

Am closer at the trees to hand

A thrum, woven back into the web. (20)

The narrator's perspective changes in relationship to the valley, mountain and trees. It is only when he/she is “woven back into the web” and part of nature again, that harmony is restored in the melodic “thrum”. Similarly, in “A Dream”, the “jewel” in the Avalonian island is the anonymous “bird calls”:

At the furthest edge of the world,

Across a spanless ocean, is a low island

Wreathed in mist,
And on this island,
Beyond the beach and the grass dunes,
Thick scrub jewelled with water droplets,
And from the scrub a bird calls
Piercingly, itself unseen. (31)

Indeed, there are ecstatic, almost sublime moments where Leonard as observer is in awe of nature's non-artificiality. In "Black-Cockatoos in Autumn" there is "a thrill in the stomach" when the black cockatoos call and the word "piercing" is repeated throughout the book to describe the purest of sensations.

Most importantly, nature's ability to invoke spiritual values is prevalent most obviously in these first and final sections of the book. Indeed, Leonard's appeal to the seasons in the first section is all encompassing. Seasons, specifically spring and autumn, are referenced in more than seven poems and suggest transitory and cyclical moments in the seasonal year. The second stanza of "Moments" is reminiscent of Japanese haiku in its reverence for the changing of the seasons:

Think of moments, the seasons' round,
The staggering holiness of every
Day's happenings, their grace
And aptness; golden, sunlit wings –
Moments' pure certainty,
Aching wholeness. (4)

In this way, days and seasons are holy and yet, in a darkly Romantic turn, the passing of time – which encompasses the dying of the day and the changing of season – signals a lost opportunity if it isn't appreciated. Furthermore, the uncanny in "There is Always Another Spider" is reminiscent of Frost's "dimpled spider" in his sonnet, "Design". In Leonard's poem, humanity is similarly unprotected from the spider's bite and renewal is emphasised in the repetition of "It's the smaller ones that are always new":

You can reach the end of the larger ones:

Huntsmen, white-tipped, Red-backed

(One bit me once, but not hard),

And I saw a Funnelweb, walking

Through the garage on a rainy night ...

It's the smaller ones that are always new. (23)

The familiarity in the narrator's "spider watching" is undercut by the defamiliarising newness of "the smaller ones". This theme of strangeness and familiarity is perhaps a call to see nature through new eyes; a warning not to take the small thing for granted. Indeed, in "Finding a Place" the strange is welcome: "facts—the smell of a breeze—/Are no less strange, but now/Welcome, in this place of all" (15).

The dark underbelly of abuse in the moral and ethical relationship of human beings to the environment is emphasised in the final section of the book and stunningly prefigured in the first section's "Nature":

And think of yourself: lame movements,

Dark thoughts and moods, of yours

And of the time, of the time's desires,

Of the tumour—cells which refuse

To change, to die and be renewed—

You and yours are nature too. (12)

In this stanza, the reader is reminded that humanity is a part of nature: "For nature, read where you are".

The second section – "Satires and Grotesques" – provides an important opportunity to discuss those things that lack "groundedness" and the third section "Sadness is no longer Sad" – reinstates this balance with an appeal to the arts; however, they read almost as a second book enclosed within the first. There is something Kunderan about the lightness and weight of these

two sections but they are overshadowed by the wonder of nature and nightmare concerning the depletion of the world's natural sources, predominant in the first and final sections of the book.

Indeed, in the fourth and final section, "Change Beyond Change", death is foregrounded. There is a bleaker outlook that only offers the possibility of change, if, indeed, it isn't too late. In this way, the long sequence "Forgetting and Remembering" provides a spot of hope:

Breath quiet,

Time stills

To become one,

On the ironbark slopes

If we have held

Close the time

And the growth

And changed with change

We will not be lost.

(85)

The suggestion in this poem is that if we refuse to change and continue in our ways, there is nothing but death for both nature and humanity. This is foregrounded in the final and most devastating of Leonard's poems, "The End of Renewal":

... this will end for us,

Renewal will no longer be ours

As before, we no longer witnesses.

The story that has been written

Will close, with no-one to know

It is a stirring conclusion to the book and one that ends with an impending crisis that may be only be averted with change.

There is an incredibly interesting emphasis on language, perception and translation in this book. In “Languages”, “there’s the weather’s language, / And that of the seasons, which / I know imperfectly” and “my own language, most irksome ... ” (10-11). Leonard would benefit from considering this in the form of his poems. It is disappointing that each line of every poem begins with a capital letter and there is no appeal to a different kind of language or poetical form to speak about these ecological crises. Indeed, there is little difference in the poetical form of any of the sections. In addition to this, the book would be further enriched with a greater appeal to ecology. In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton sets out a seeming paradox: “to have a properly ecological view, we must relinquish the idea of nature once and for all”. Leonard would benefit from scaling back the appeal to nature to focus on ecological crisis.

A Spell, A Charm comprises a whirlwind of poems concerned with environmental ethics and the importance of time. The initial focus on seasonal moments and piercing bird calls is expertly juxtaposed with warnings about global warming and what Leonard, himself, has identifies as “global ecological overreach”. The poems in this book remind us what it really means to live in the world: “time makes no mistakes”.

Cassandra Atherton is a poet and scholar. Her most recent books of poetry are *Trace* with artist Phil Day (Finlay Lloyd, 2015) and *Exhumed* (forthcoming from Grand Parade Poets). She is currently a Harvard Visiting Scholar in English.

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