



***Wonky Optics* by Geoff Cochrane. Wellington: VUP (2015), RRP: \$25. Pb, 94pp. ISBN: 9780864739810. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Wonky Optics is Geoff Cochrane's fifteenth collection of poems. He is also the author of two novels, and *Astonished Dice: Collected Short*

Stories (2014). The poems in this collection include short poems and prose poems.

To read Cochrane's poems is also to delight in his listening. The simplicity and authentic observations – mastered through a lifetime of writing – shines more than ever in these new poems. They have become increasingly wise. They help us to clear our heads, to make space for what matters. What matters to Cochrane, we see in the fine poem, "Pibroch," a memorial poem for his brother:

i

My little brother is dying, and I . . .

I wish that it were me;
I feel great reluctance to die, myself.

ii

My little brother is dying and I,
not consciously believing in God or prayer,
say a sort of prayer for him:
*Oh let it be easy and total,
easy and total.*

Wonky Optics is a book of gratuities. Inside these pages is wisdom, hard-earned and growing. To read these poems is to think about the words; the messages the poet is trying to convey. They are exquisite renderings of the paradoxes that encircle us. For instance, in the prose poem "Pilgrims" we are drawn into the plight of a child in a bus who is trapped in his baby-buggy: 'But how are we going to get there?', he wails.

But how are we going to get there? Words that sound as old as the oldest prayer. Words that sound as old as poetry or rhetoric.

The ideals that guide Cochrane's poetry and all his writing, the stars he has steered by, were never bright heralds of the more obvious kinds of ambition. The way he has followed is transparent, and the goals of his poetry is a transparency of word and continuum, of subject and setting-forth, an immediacy and clarity of line – like fine calligraphy. Much of his work resonates with you so that you adapt it easily to our memories in the manner of fine experiences. "Holiday Fun," for example, could be anyone's memory of Christmas festivities, but here Cochrane remembers the dead on Christmas Day:

The massed pipes and drums of yesteryear
have become a skiffle group.

We remember the dead, of course,
and play their favourite tracks,
but the dead no longer turn up,
the dead are a dead loss,
the dreamy dead delay or cancel altogether.

The specifics of Cochrane's poetry concentrate on the emotional life of his present and meditation on the past. These sources cast their light, and shape his way of thinking, over just about every poem. Most of the poems are attempts of some moment that has impinged on his awareness. For Cochrane, the strangest things are the most intimate and the everyday: coffee, a crossword, television, a typewriter, autumn. Poem after poem is an attempt to create or recreate some experience, apprehending both the physical and the spiritual in a convergent, almost indistinguishable way. For instance, "Reading Martin Gilbert" seems to be a simple enough poem, but packs a punch in its last line:

I was born only six years after the war.
a war during which Heinrich Himmler
visited the SS garrison at Auschwitz and,
at the end of a leisurely dinner with his men,
asked to see some prisoners being beaten

Prose poems figure strongly in the book. They are not particularly musical, but rather display a clarity and deliberation which runs counter to the relaxation which a lyric poem usually requires. Their claim to be lyric comes from their intensity and their intellectual control, so that one comes away with the impression that they are somehow prose rhapsodies given poetic form:

There's something wrong with his hand. He becomes aware that there's something wrong with his hand. A lightness, a heaviness, an iffy sort of something. His left hand wants to drag and make a lazy fist.

("Blue Lightning")



“A Latte in a Glass” is another fine prose poem. In the second paragraph, Cochrane is mulling over ‘a project, an endeavour’ which has failed, while having a coffee:

I sit here with my latter and smoke my shapely
fag. I sit here with my latte and smoke the fag I’ve
shaped. And then it occurs to me (as so frequently
before): I could save a lot of money by not drinking
coffee, by ceasing to buy tobacco, by staying at
home and never coming to town; I could save a lot
of money by dying and being dead.

Another inimitable poem is “Circuit Diagrams” – its short statements separated by lines:

Darkness. Windlessness.
And the black cat out there
on the wet black lawn
has something to say and says it.

Reading the stories I wrote
as a somewhat younger man
(and fully expecting to be
embarrassed, disappointed),
I soon decide that I like my younger self.

The book ends with “Addenda” – pithy sayings by a variety of poets, writers and other luminaries. Two I particularly enjoyed are,

What a surprise the weather always is when one is
drunk’
(John Banville)

‘Even when poetry has a meaning, which it usually
has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out’
(AE Housman).

If we find in a poetry collection one line to marvel at, we have been well served. Cochrane has written many such lines in this fine and accomplished collection. We want to be transported and we are. We want to be touched and we are. We want to be dazzled at the freshness of language and insight *and we are*. It is good poetry and prose which has both lightness and density.
