Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature.
By Dougal McNeill.
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Reviewed by Tony Hughes-d'Aeth.

Dougal McNeill's book *Forms of Freedom* is a study of literary culture and its material determinations on both sides of the Tasman. In his readings of New Zealand and Australian literature, McNeill adopts an overtly Marxist approach, shunning both conventional (new) historicism and the dematerialised politics of identity that form the contemporary critical orthodoxy. The other decisive step the book undertakes is to draw the concept of freedom back from the right, which claims a monopoly over this founding virtue and finds it incarnated in the free market. To dialecticise freedom, McNeill invokes literature's capacity to innovate form. For McNeill form is a fundamental category, one that names the conditions of imaginative and social possibility. The animating question of the book is: "How might literature offer us the experience of imagining freedom?" (p. 11). Against the vulgar stereotype of Marxist criticism as a mill of determinism, McNeill's book shows that true Marxist critique is generative and dialectical. Literature offers "forms of freedom" that are constituted in an experience of imagining. Equally, there is a freedom in McNeill's mode of critique. His criticism enacts freedom at the formal level by keeping the text open: "By freedom, I mean a loosening of constraint, the chance to think *with* a literary text, to dissent from it, to follow its cues …" (p. 19).

The book's essays are divided into two sections. The first section, "Lost Leaders", is historical and looks back at key writers (Harry Holland, Henry Lawson, Eve Langley, Elsie Locke, Dorothy Hewett, Hone Tuwhare) and movements in the Australasian tradition. The second section, "The Communist Horizon", examines contemporary writers and their political significance within the coordinates of freedom that McNeill has introduced. The essays display a welcome critical versatility in McNeill's method. The first essay, "The Burns Example" recovers the particular prominence that the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) had for the left in the antipodean settler colonies. This was a revelation to me because this version of Burns had been occluded by the antiquarian celebration of the poet that prevailed earlier in the nineteenth century and has since reclaimed him again. But for a while, as McNeill shows with a rich layer of examples, "Bobby" Burns was a touchstone of utopian socialism. Indeed: "Robert Burns' 'A Man's a Man for a' That' was ubiquitous in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century labour movements" (p. 33). One of the virtues of this essay, and the book more generally, is McNeill's capacity to read across the Tasman. McNeill reminds those who might have forgotten that the settler polities of Australia and New Zealand were (and are) intimately connected. The next essay, on Eve Langley (1904-1974), also underscores this connection since Langley lived in both countries. The freedom at stake in Langley's case concerns the sexuality at play in her literary works, with their trans heroes and queering of the working-class imaginary: "Langley's texts configure literature as a form of trans hope" (p. 57). McNeill's willingness to think structurally and historically – at the same time – is what allows him to keep bringing out an urgent dimension in each writer. In that sense, the opposite of historicism is not ahistoricism, but urgency.

Another valuable contribution that McNeill's book makes is to graph the writers he considers against a more particular history. Not the empty world-historical time of techno-capitalism, but the particular history of world socialism. This involves the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary moments, and the terrible moments of crisis, such as the crushing of Hungary in

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1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, or the exposure of the monstrous excesses of Stalin and Mao. McNeill's essay on Dorothy Hewett's factory novel *Bobbin Up* (1959) considers it against the upheavals in Australian and world communism at this time. McNeill recovers Hewett's novel, which was seen by the right as crudely political and by the left as mawkishly melodramatic, as a "social reproduction text", drawing on recent theoretical attempts to reconcile class and gendered modes of exploitation. This leads to some sharp insights: "*Bobbin Up* is at its most interesting when it is furthest from the factory floor, a locus of materialist attention, and when its imaginative energies are engaged in questions of birth and labour, living and finding emotional sustenance" (p. 84). Through the figure of the Māori poet and intellectual Honi Tuwhare (1922-2008), McNeill is also able to introduce a 'Māori Marx', a designation that he takes from Simon Barber. McNeill departs, in this essay, from the measured historicism of his earlier essays into a more open admiration: "I am not reading Tuwhare's poetry in order to privilege a political reading, but rather to learn to hear how Tuwhare's late works prime us to respond with pleasure to the music of his political jazz notes, his mihi to freedom, sounds linking his poems in solidarity with Black and African resistance" (p. 104). This modulation in critical tone and ambition was forced onto McNeill by the circumstances of the dialectic. In this case, what he realises is necessary is a new kind of listening.

The Tuwhare essay presages the pivot to the contemporary writers that takes place in the second half of *Forms of Freedom*. These essays have the feel of intelligent review essays of key books by Emily Perkins, Albert Wendt, Amanda Lohrey, Pip Adam, Patricia Grace and Alice Tawhai. What distinguishes these essays from other intelligent commentary on these writers is their location against the "communist horizon". This term, which McNeill takes from the title of Jodi Dean's book, invokes communism as a constitutive limit. It may come as a surprise that with the viral spread of capitalism and its logics (democracy is not necessarily one of them) into every corner of the earth, that a pilloried concept such as communism should be our implacable horizon. But McNeill shows how much more distinctly texts stand up when they are viewed against this limit. In these essays, McNeill shows his debt to the great masters of Marxist criticism, from Lukács and Adorno, to Jameson and Žižek. These essays, on the whole, felt slightly less realised than the historical essays of the first section, but still sparkled with aphoristic acuity and an ability to expose the fault lines.

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