

## Running With the Fast Pack

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### Curnow with Sargeson: surviving the war

Not even Glover, I expect, would have had the temerity to say to his friend Curnow what he said to Frank Sargeson around 1945: ‘Remember that you’ll be pre-war – you’ll be completely out of it now – forget you ever put pen to paper.’<sup>1</sup> By the time Sargeson recalls this moment, from the late-career high ground of 1970, happily he has proved Glover wrong. But the latter had a point, and Sargeson makes no secret of how difficult he found the Fifties, struggling to reinvent his project and bring it back to life in a post-war context. The New Zealand that Glover was returning to was undoubtedly a different environment for a writer. There were faces missing around the table, most notably those of Mulgan and Hyde. A new generation was hungry for its share of the action, at the same time as Glover’s home town Christchurch was giving up its pre-war cultural dominance. As I have discussed on other occasions,<sup>2</sup> there was the high-toned shot-in-the-arm that came with Hitler’s refugees, while returning from Britain alongside Glover was the Europhile Charles Brasch with his similarly high-toned ideas about the literary journal that he and Glover were to collaborate on and wrestle over. Among these altered coordinates, Sargeson would endure a painful decade of ‘groping around,’<sup>3</sup> before finally turning the corner in the 1960s with *Memoirs of Peon* (completed in January 1960, but not published until 1965). From there, as Sargeson proudly reminds us, would follow nine more books in as many years,<sup>4</sup> and this prolific late career becomes crucial to the narrative of literary nationalism. Others, though, would not fare nearly so well. Neither Glover himself, nor his confederate, Fairburn, would succeed in adjusting to the post-war regime.

As for Curnow, he didn’t need Glover or anyone else to chivvy him along: staying on the right side of historical developments would always be a signature preoccupation. The latter years of the war had brought two definitive texts, the poems of *Sailing or Drowning* (1943), and *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* (1945), the razor-sharp anthology whose impact Charles Brasch would compare to ‘a hard frost [that] killed off weeds, and promoted sound growth.’<sup>5</sup> In his long introduction Curnow had formalised the distinctive contours of his generation’s nationalism – Alex Calder aptly

calls it *critical* nationalism, an affirmation of ‘local reality’ in which the stress falls, paradoxically, on shock, failure, misperception, alienation and difficulty.<sup>6</sup> As critic and canon-maker, Curnow in future would largely defend this initial position. As a poet, however, he would always be more restless. *Sailing or Drowning* is the summit of his nationalist-era verse, but it signals an almost immediate turn. The important poem ‘At Dead Low Water’ bears the date-line 1944. Already it shows his poetry in a state of flux, which by the end of the decade will be a condition of active struggle, recorded in the difficult and dysphoric volume that is *Poems 1949-57* (1957). At the end of the war, then, Curnow enters a long phase of uncertainty from which he will not emerge decisively until the early 1970s.

Not that you’ll hear this from Curnow himself; there’ll be no wry Sargesonian anecdotes, no admissions about ‘groping around.’ He is reluctant even to accept the significance of fifteen years with no new poems. *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*, the ‘come-back’ volume of 1972, was begun, he tells Peter Simpson, as early as 1961: ‘Totting up titles and dating by decades, it’s all very tidy and commendable, I suppose, but in my case the conclusions drawn from it can be mistaken . . . I think of *Trees, Effigies* as work of the 1960s – contrary to the assumption that it was a decade of “silence” on my part.’<sup>7</sup> The voice that refuses to make this concession is one that we will get to know well in this essay. Curnow is determined always to have been in control. The poetry ‘is all one book,’ he writes,<sup>8</sup> and as if to prove it the 1997 hardback *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997* is organised not chronologically but thematically, so that poems of the early Forties sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the work of his late maturity. But Curnow’s prodigious late career would not be what it is without the mid-career uncertainties out of which it was born. The *oeuvre* is a single body of work, certainly. But like Sargeson’s (and like those other totemic mid-century accomplishments, McCahon’s and Lilburn’s) it’s a corpus that draws strength from the visible break-and-mend between its nationalist foundations and the more difficult work that is eventually built on top of them.

Sargeson, in his ‘second’ career, will prove himself the contemporary of fiction writers a generation younger, writers he is apt to have mentored personally, including the most important of them, Frame and Duggan. But while Sargeson’s work is beginning to blossom in the mid-Sixties, Curnow is still lying low. His ‘second’ career will trail a decade behind, surging back to life with *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* in 1972, so that Curnow’s new ‘contemporaries’ will be poets not one generation younger, but two. The Seventies (and early Eighties) will be the decade of the so-called ‘Young New Zealand Poets’ – the *Freed/Islands* cohort, the generation of Wedde and Manhire. But this will be equally the decade of the reinvigorated Curnow Mk II. Matching his juniors stride for stride – ‘still running with the fast pack’ as he tells an interviewer in 1983<sup>9</sup> – in the Seventies and Eighties, even in the Nineties, he will write what typically are judged to be the finest poems of his career. At this point Curnow enters the realms of modernist mythology: his late apotheosis evokes Stevens, Williams, but perhaps above all Yeats, the poet as a figure

transcending age, who arrives through prodigious endurance at an ultimate grace.

It's a rather different myth to that surrounding Sargeson – while Sargeson is the nurturer, the avuncular mentor, Curnow remains the acerbic individualist – but in its iconic function Curnow's endurance is no less important to the sense of an achieved national literature. The poet's single-mindedness and unremitting rigour are as close as we come to a certain modernist ideal. It's the kind of career that excites talk of 'greatness.' Appropriately, then, it's an *oeuvre* that attracts considerable ceremony. But for a poet of the Forties to 'make it new' in the Seventies is to ask a great deal, and more perhaps than either Curnow or his admirers have fully acknowledged. When Curnow passes through that Seventies time tunnel, elements of hard-wiring from the mid-century travel with him. And to read Curnow II in his late-career context is to find particular features now back-lit more glaringly than they were in the Forties and Fifties. Where the stated ideal is to keep abreast of history, this residual baggage slows Curnow down. And I wonder, too, if the need to finesse the more regressive elements in late Curnow hasn't held back the process of *reading* him. That Curnow, in his last three decades, writes some truly formidable poetry is not in dispute. But once we start to think about the more challenging continuities, we may discover that we need a more subtle language to do justice to Curnow's impact.<sup>10</sup>

To write about the gaps in Sargeson's career is in some ways not too difficult. Where the fiction dries up there are letters, biography, autobiography; the path remains well signposted. With Curnow, however, there is no such help; there are only the poems, and where the poems give out there is silence. In this respect Curnow remains a paradox: by many accounts our finest writer, and without doubt the most influential figure of the mid-Twentieth Century, and yet of all the nationalist writers the one we know least about. Everyone in Curnow's generation, and indeed most of the next generation as well (Baxter, Duggan, Frame, Gee, Pearson and more) has at the very least a biography, if not, as in many cases, letters, journals, an autobiography or three. But in Curnow's case, nothing, at least not yet. As I tidy up this essay, in March 2016, I'm aware that this is not far away from changing. The biography drafted by the late Terry Sturm (which I'm told ran to 800,000 words) is somewhere in the final stages of revision; in the next year or two Curnow will get a 'life.' It's a book that can hardly fail to be a revelation. Not because one expects drama or scandal, but simply because the reading public at large has *no idea* what to expect. For 85 years now people have been reading Curnow with almost no reference to biographical information. This, we can be certain, is exactly as the poet wanted it: 'I do like to think that whatever I'm worth is all there on the printed page,' he remarked in an interview in 1983. 'That's where you'll find the real effort of my life and that's where I'd like to be judged.'<sup>11</sup> In this sense, we're reading in a closing window, where the poems still survive in this oddly unmediated state, and we're safe from importing 'extraneous' information because we simply don't have any. Undoubtedly in future we'll have a clearer idea of how Curnow experienced the Fifties and Sixties. In the meantime, though, we have something else: 'the printed page,' the New Critics' 'text-in-itself.' Accordingly we

(still) have something that may soon become more difficult to appreciate: the experience of poems whose impersonal demeanour extrudes a sense of ‘personality’ which at times feels like their most vivid effect.<sup>12</sup>

### **Romantic interlude**

Despite his insistence on the unity of his work, there is at least one significant break that Curnow wants to put on record. In an oft-quoted statement from *Collected Poems 1943-1973* he inserts a wedge after the ‘anti-myth’ poems of his third book *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939):

Very soon after, I was writing the poems of *Island and Time* and *Sailing or Drowning*. I had to get past the severities, not to say rigidities, of our New Zealand anti-myth: away from questions which present themselves as public and answerable, towards questions which are always private and unanswerable. The geographical anxieties didn’t disappear; but I began to find a personal and poetic use for them, rather than let them use me up.<sup>13</sup>

That this describes – and describes most suggestively – the gradient of Curnow’s ‘first’ career seems inarguable. What’s odd, however, is the timing. *Island and Time* and *Sailing or Drowning*, far from moving beyond the critical anti-myth, are indisputably its apogee. It is characteristic of post-war Curnow to try to minimise the depth and duration of his immersion in literary nationalism, as if his nationalist poems were some kind of grown-up juvenilia. When pressed, he will grudgingly concede that a small handful of poems belong to the foundations of a new national narrative: ‘House and Land,’ ‘The Unhistoric Story,’ ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas,’ ‘The Skeleton of the Great Moa.’ But that roll-call of iconic titles, all of them from the 1940s, makes plain that those volumes of the early war years belong on the earlier, nationalist side of the sea-change that overtakes his practice. As he himself says explicitly of ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas,’ it’s a poem written (in 1943) for a *public* occasion.<sup>14</sup>

Curnow’s publication history from the late 1940s is tricky to reconstruct. Poems appear in more than one volume, and then are later reassigned to different places in selected or collected editions. Following the nationalist (sic) high-water mark of *Sailing or Drowning* (1943) comes the slim chapbook *Jack Without Magic* (1946), containing half a dozen short poems along with the most important single work of the late Forties, ‘At Dead Low Water.’ Then *At Dead Low Water and Sonnets* (1949) reprints the bulk of *Jack Without Magic*, alongside fifteen new fourteeners and eight more recycled from *Sailing or Drowning*. This re-use of poems across the second half of the decade may indicate a poet struggling for fluency and direction. But what also becomes clear as we reassemble the chronology is just how decisively Curnow (as *poet*) turns his back on the nationalist anti-myth. Of all the new work in these two

post-war volumes, only the sonnets paired as ‘Tomb of an Ancestor’ would have felt at home in *Sailing or Drowning*.

Meanwhile, the weightiest poem from this interlude is also the work that illustrates most plainly the abandonment of nationalist strictures. ‘At Dead Low Water’ is a curious text, with a voicing unlike any other Curnow poem. This ‘unlikely’ quality is what makes it so interesting. For while on the one hand the poem anticipates key scenes and figures from much later in his work, it also shows him looking through a half-open side door which after this moment he will nail firmly shut. It’s almost as if, having done his job as a critical nationalist – released from what he rightly calls the project’s ‘severities’ – he allows himself to contemplate a different path entirely. Down this track, however, he will venture no further than this elegant (and more precisely ‘eloquent’) one-off, a poem which will consequently come to stand out as the most *Romantic* work in his oeuvre.

In his first (1945) anthology introduction, which he must have been writing at about the same time (the poem comes with a dateline: *Governor’s Bay, December 1944*), Curnow suggests that if poets attend long enough to the local then eventually ‘more personal and universal impulses may be set at liberty.’<sup>15</sup> This has always struck me as a strange formulation. While it chimes in some measure with the later remark about turning to questions that are ‘private and unanswerable,’ it’s not clear how the *personal* and the *universal* are being fitted together, nor why Curnow would choose to drag the lure of universality across the track of his ostensibly localist argument. ‘At Dead Low Water’ may help explain what he has in mind. It’s a poem, that is, which oscillates between two radically different focal lengths. In the first place we get an almost microscopic close-up of the intimate nooks and crannies of a mud-flat at low tide: ‘Weed and whorl of silt recoiling,’ ‘the shrimp’s forest . . ./ Salt rocky chink, nude silted cleft.’ But we also sheer off into panoramic long-shot (‘The wan harbour sighing on all its beaches’) and lofty, cosmological abstractions: ‘the enormous strides of love / When the Word alone was . . . ,’ ‘the whole terror / of time and patience,’ ‘Mute ages tread the womb.’<sup>16</sup>

This brings us back to the dateline, which inevitably evokes the war. But while an echo of the conflict might be intuited behind the poem’s foreboding calm, the more revealing datum is the locality, the upper end of Lyttelton Harbour. The place-name directs us, not just to a childhood home-place (one of Curnow’s father’s several parishes), but back to the same ‘volcanic crack’ (9) that furnishes the scene for his most scathing poetic treatment of colonial history, *Not in Narrow Seas*. Thus, true to his later formulation (‘The geographical anxieties didn’t disappear . . .’), the poem takes us back to the scene of the crime. But the setting now is subject to a different forensic scrutiny. An abandoned dinghy, ‘tied here and forgotten’ (91), might once have connoted a voyage between hemispheres; now it speaks merely of the distance between childhood and the present. The ‘amazed migrant’ who ‘[w]aves back, and cannot tear his eyes away’ (92) does so here *metaphorically*, homesick not for Britain

but for the plenitude of childhood. Between the private and the universal the middle ground has fallen out: the contingent, historical ground of settlement and its critique. Geography no longer resonates in that *public* register. In this sense, locality is oddly de-localised. It's as if, while history disembarks overhead, the poem takes us under the Romantically ruined jetty and into a half-light of private transformations, an 'opulent' (91) anthropomorphic domain of stinky fecundity and pre-Oedipal sexuality.

The second of the poem's three sections introduces the paternal principle. But Father, as he will prove decades later, in particular in those memorable poems from 'The Game of Tag' in *Early Days Yet* (1997), proves to be the softest thing in the poet's entire world.

The father with the child came down  
First thing one morning . . .

. . . they  
Crossed high-water mark, dry-shod,  
Derelict shells, weed crisped or rotting,

Down to the spongy rim, slowly  
Without fear, stepping hand in hand  
Within an inch of the harmless sea . . . (92)

The father who, stepping, we can also hear *stooping* to hold the small child's hand, domesticates and gentles the seascape, reducing the ocean to a scale measured in inches. The poet's memory reconstructs a fragile stasis, a tremulous pause between birth and the in-rush of Time. Of course, late Curnow poems will return to this zone and reappoint it with the entirely more menacing imagery of Auckland's West Coast in the shadow of encroaching old age. But for now, within the circle of the father's arm, the sea holds its breath just long enough to glimpse a drowned Paradise.

In the long view, as these remarks imply, the furnishings of this tableau are familiar, even iconic. But what *doesn't* sound like Curnow is the heavy-handed rhetoric required to blow this particular and personal landscape up to universal size. Inevitably the tide comes in, and with it comes a wave of complaint –

Morning by morning incorruption  
Puts on corruption . . .

Memory flows where all is tainted,  
Death with life and life with death. (92)

– the surprise of which being, not the inundation of innocence, but the stock Romantic figures to which the voice is moved in response. What is *corruption*, after all, if not the fate that overtakes *incorruption* in a thousand Romantic poems? Surely this is not the way ‘Curnow’ thinks! And yet a similarly vague and second-hand quality recurs wherever the poem seeks to amplify the private experience: ‘All drifts till fire or burial,’ ‘Mute ages tread the womb’ (91), ‘froze / In time’s tormented rock,’ ‘Meaningless but for individual pain’ (93), and so on. There’s a pre-digested *literary* feeling to this language that the Curnow whom we know would never let himself get away with.

*The eloquent rather than the inquisitively precise word*: this is the predilection that Curnow detects in Baxter in the closing paragraph of the 1945 introduction.<sup>17</sup> In retrospect it reads like the first intimation of the distance and ill-feeling that will open up between them. In 1945, though, the comment is not yet entirely critical. It’s more as if Curnow identifies in Baxter an appetite he also apprehends in himself, a road he himself might have taken, but doesn’t . . . except in this one anomalous text from the same year as Baxter’s first volume, *Beyond the Palisade*. Though we can’t feel it later, in 1944 there was still another option for a certain kind of writer, and even potentially for Curnow, steeped as he was in the elevated tones of Auden and Yeats. If the anti-myth and its modernist austerities had done their necessary ground-clearing work, then in this demobbed atmosphere might a more Romantic voice be sustainable? Fleeting, and intuitively, perhaps, Curnow on the evidence of this poem appears to entertain the question.

But in hindsight of course it was never a real option, any more than it was ever an option for Baxter to abandon his high road for Curnow’s low one. Curnow is too much the child of the ‘hard frost’: its precision, its Modernism, its masculinism, its emotional chilliness. The amplification of ‘personal’ experience could only take place in a register that was sceptical and critical; eloquence couldn’t do the work of inquiry, or bardic musicality the work of syntactical grit. As we know, in crucial ways this poem does point forward. The zone between tides will lure Curnow habitually, and the shoreline complete the transition first announced here from (public) threshold of settlement to (private) threshold of sex, knowledge and death. The paternal figure finally will stand revealed, in the gentlest and most open-hearted poems that Curnow will write, not only as protector and instructor but as muse. But the road to those poems will be flinty and difficult. The process won’t resolve itself for another four decades, the first two of which, in particular, read like painfully hard graft.

### **Losing the straight way**

After *Dead Low Water* comes a gap of eight years. The title of the volume that eventually follows, *Poems 1949-57*, acknowledges that gap while it also points to something unusual in Curnow’s *oeuvre*, namely the book’s miscellaneous quality. A typical Curnow project always feels rational and premeditated; he’s a writer who

gives the impression of knowing exactly what he's trying to do. *Poems*, by comparison, feels more like a grab-bag, a retrospective raking together from a period of creative uncertainty. Three of the weightiest poems are occasional: elegies for the poet's father, for Dylan Thomas and for Wallace Stevens. Occasional, too, are the snap-shot poems from the Caribbean, 'Idylls in Colour Film,' presumably derived from Curnow's journey to Britain and the United States in 1949. There's a long and formidably obscure narrative fable, 'Evidences of Recent Flood,' while the Northern Hemisphere trip suggests a context for the love poem, 'When the Hulk of the World,' which appears to commemorate an illicit relationship in London:

Oh then, sweet claustrophobe  
I leave among the lost leaves of a London wood  
(So dark, we missed the middle of our road)  
Can spring condone, redeem  
One treachery of departure . . . (110)

The darkness here is that of Dante's *selva oscura*: 'Midway in the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.' The poet may or may not have strayed off the path domestically; this is no more than speculation. In the poetry itself, though, the evidence is clearer: *Poems 1949-57* is the record of a poet casting about, groping towards a new procedure.

Of course, this in itself might amount to a purposive undertaking, and Curnow being Curnow he attacks it with a will – attacks it, one might say, with due severity, a great deal of it self-directed. If we peel back the over-wrought Dylan Thomas-like imagery ('When the mooncast squid's eye of the downcast<sup>18</sup> ocean / Goggles till it gets me in the beam of its brine . . .' [110]), 'When the Hulk of the World' reveals itself as a conventional excursion in Romantic self-abasement. Marooned on the opposite side of the globe, the hapless subject begs prayers and forgiveness, emptied, but also buoyed up – inflated – by the exposition of his amatory grief: 'I go as a ghost, one flesh I and the wind / That lifts us both so lightly . . .' (110). In 'Jack-in-the-Boat' a wind-up toy embodies a sense of domestic entrapment: 'Children, children, come and look / . . . / At the clockwork man in a cardboard house' (119). Emotionally, creatively, or more likely both, the toy man is 'dying of a broken spring.' 'To Forget Self and All' appears to brood at the same conjunction. Its three stanzas with their top-and-tail refrains, and echoes of the way Curnow often talks about landscape and about nation ('This whimpering second unlicked self my country'), invite reading alongside the 1943 triptych, 'Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet.' But there's also a conscious echo between this poem and 'When the Hulk of the World,' as the speaker wonders whether to 'smooth anxious sheets, / And go like a sober lover, like nobody's ghost?' The *Tempest* imagery of the final stanza ('. . . why sink the whole / Phenomenal enterprise . . . / . . . / The burning brain's nine feathering fathom doused . . .') suggests both the drowning of books and physical self-annihilation, while the

concluding refrain of each stanza is a bitter rehash of Caliban's protest at his slavery (104).

Whatever kind of 'self' is at stake in this complaint – and in the end the text does indeed feel 'private' – there appears to be no way out either *of* that self or *for* that self. In this sense, the pitch of these poems remains fundamentally Romantic. The critical asperity of the anti-myth era is all too evidently still in play, but the poem has nowhere to focus it but inward, and nothing to extract – no revision or discovery. If this kind of performance is to reward the reader, it can only be Romantically, with pathos and intensity. For this reason the most interesting of these self-castigations is the sonnet 'To Introduce the Landscape.' Here we get a glimpse of a different way forward:

To introduce the landscape to the language  
Here on the spot, say that it can't be done  
By kindness or mirrors or by talking slang  
With a coast accent. Sputter your pieces one

By one like wet matches you scrape and drop:  
No self-staled poet can hold a candle to  
The light he stares by. Life is the wrong shop  
For pictures, you say, having all points and no view. (118)

Once more, the poem is bent low with its sub-Prufrockian burden of anomie and self-contempt. Where once it was others (Victorian amateurs, Georgian sentimentalists) who had failed to 'man up,' now it's the poet-figure himself, impotent, played out and self-defiling, who quails before the challenge of the local and 'different.' But there's something else in the last two lines, and in the imagery that follows of pine trees like paint brushes. Here we catch the first intimation of what Curnow will learn from Stevens.

By now it's a truism to say that Curnow, as he emerges from his strictly nationalist phase, will move through a period heavily marked by Dylan Thomas before shifting allegiance from Thomas to Stevens. But the pair work on Curnow in quite different ways. Thomas has an evident effect on Curnow's language, but the encounter is the more superficial of the two. In the *Dead Low Water* volume, and in some of the poems from this one, Curnow's own idiom becomes clagged up with Thomas's: the neologisms, the compound adjectives. Thomas, I think, speaks to Curnow's need to complicate the poetry's surface; for reasons of taste, but perhaps for personal reasons as well (at times it may be as simple as a question of disguise) opacity appears to become a goal in its own right. Clotted, murky imagery, and sometimes near-impenetrable syntax, collude in this immediate post-war period to produce poems that can seem by turns difficult, 'private' or simply obscure. In other ways, though,

Thomas is an odd fit for Curnow, who has little use for his bardic gestures, and none whatsoever for his vitalism or his incipient religiosity. Stevens is an altogether different experience. Here Curnow doesn't borrow a language the way he does from Thomas. And he'll never attain, perhaps never aspire to, the Shelleyan dimension: the colour and ebullience. He derives from Stevens, not a style or a system of imagery, but a vocabulary of thought: what Vincent O'Sullivan has called his 'passionate, even obsessive, epistemology.'<sup>19</sup> Stevens will show him how to take the drama of critical nationalism – the settler subject's failed apprehension of his environment – and re-stage it now as drama of pure perception. The botched encounter with 'something different,' shorn of its contingent history, now takes place in the modernist present as an arm-wrestle with that 'Life' that is 'the wrong shop for pictures.' Here again Curnow finds an apposite target against which to wield his critical severity: a 'self,' perhaps, but not in the Romantic sense; rather, the self as perceptual subject. It's through Stevens, as the master of epistemological scepticism, that Curnow will discover how to channel his critical passions, not into Romantic protest, but into modernist inquiry.

The four-part poem entitled 'A Small Room with Large Windows' was published in the *Listener* in December 1955, just a month after 'To Introduce the Landscape' appeared in the same publication. The two poems address the same landscape and at least some of the same issues, but in other respects the second is a significant advance. Plainly it meant something special to the poet himself. It has the final, climactic spot in the 1957 collection, and then becomes the title poem of his first selected poems, published in Britain in 1962. Subsequently, in one of those subtle reorderings of his *oeuvre* to which Curnow is inclined, he continues to assign it to the 1962 volume, as if didn't belong with the poems of the mid-50s at all. And it's not hard to imagine why: of everything he publishes in this long period of transition, it gives the clearest indication of what a Curnow poem will sound like in his final three decades.

Like 'To Introduce the Landscape,' the poem evokes the inner Auckland harbour as viewed from the poet's new home in Shoal Bay. But something has shifted: there is no self-castigation, the syntax is less distressed, the tonal effects more varied. There is also more of the phenomenal world in evidence than anywhere else in the volume:

Seven ageing pine trees hide  
Their heads in air but, planted on bare knees,  
Supplicate wind and tide. See if you can  
See it (if this is it), half earth, half heaven,  
Half land, half water, what you call a view  
Strung out between the windows and the tree trunks;  
Below sills a world moist with new making . . . (133)

Returning to that favourite littoral zone where all the most important things in Curnow seem to happen, this poem reads also as a companion piece to ‘At Dead Low Water.’ As such, it seems to complete that cycle that I’ve alluded to: from the shore as the scene of the various failed encounters of settlement; to the vatic, Wordsworthian encounter with self in the 1944 poem; to the shore as the scene of that struggle for perceptual and epistemological clarity that will preoccupy his late maturity. It’s seldom, however, in the later Curnow that we experience anything as soft and fecund as ‘a world moist with new making.’ And equally seldom that, through the fretwork of doubt about representation, cognition and transmission, we experience the ‘natural’ world as vividly as in the poem’s justly celebrated conclusion:

A kingfisher’s naked arc alight  
 Upon a dead stick in the mud  
 A scarlet geranium wild on a wet bank  
 A man stepping it out in the near distance  
 With a dog and a bag  
   on a spit of shell  
 On a wire in a mist  
   a gannet impacting  
 Explode a dozen diverse dullnesses  
 Like a burst of accurate fire. (134-35)

A few years ago I made the same shift as Curnow in 1951, from Christchurch to Auckland, and the bulk of this essay has been researched and written from a home on the edge of the Hauraki Gulf. In Auckland, because I like to fish, I have got to know gannets as I never did down South, and every time one crashes into the water beside me it never fails to summon to mind Curnow’s lethal imagery. The clarity, however, is not all that lingers. In 1963, in an important essay in *Landfall*, Karl Stead surveyed Curnow’s work to that date. Influenced, it may be, by the grimness of tone and the prosodic contortion of the kind of work that I’ve been talking about, Stead concluded his admiring account with a wish for the poet’s future development:

Poems can hardly say more or say better than the best of his recent work; but they can say more simply, with fewer of the evidences of human effort. . . .  
 Looking for signs of the future . . . I foresee, if occasions demand poems from him, the possibility of a perfect, bland and lucid surface, an ultimate simplicity  
 . . .<sup>20</sup>

Far in the future, in that handful of poems from the 80s and 90s that deal with memories of his childhood, something of this kind of distillation will finally appear in Curnow’s work: poems that are simpler, more lucid, and less rebarbative than anything else from his seven decades of publishing. But why does it take such a struggle to get there? And why for that matter does it take so long – as Stead half-anticipates – for Curnow to start writing again, especially when this most recent major

poem appears to display a renewed state of confidence, and to show the poet already in command of the essential elements of his mature style? I can't pretend to answer these questions: there are facts we don't have, and they may be quite mundane. What we can detect, however, is the residual tone of critical nationalism and the way that its programmatic harshness lingers even in the ebullience of these images. And I can't escape the sense that what holds Curnow back must be related, at least in part, to the 'severities' of the Thirties and Forties. Roger Horrocks, in a landmark essay, is arrested by the density of the verbal phrase 'impacting.'<sup>21</sup> But I find myself stopped by something more banal: the oddness of the final simile. Who but a writer formed between the wars would liken imagistic dazzle to machinegun fire?

### **'poetic departures worth mentioning'**

At this point we enter radio silence: for the next ten years, from 1962, there will be no new poems to help us track Curnow's thought.<sup>22</sup> One trail we can follow, though, is through the dispute with Baxter and the young writers grouped around him in Wellington (Alistair Campbell, Louis Johnson and W.H. Oliver among them). As Peter Simpson explains, the unpleasantness first surfaced publicly in 1951.<sup>23</sup> This momentous year saw Curnow move to Auckland, the appearance of the second edition of the 1945 Caxton anthology (somewhat delayed: the editorial work had been completed before he went overseas in March 1949), the national writers' conference in Christchurch, and the first appearance of Louis Johnson's *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*. Ironically, Curnow's remarks about Baxter in his expanded introduction appear generous to a fault. But Baxter and his colleagues seem to have heard only the renewed attempt to enlist them in a project of the Caxton's generation's own making; in Curnow's account, that is, Baxter proves 'that we start now from a better vantage'<sup>24</sup> thanks to the work of his own cohort in the Thirties and Forties. Baxter by 1951 was having none of this. His address to the Christchurch conference fends off Curnow's paternalism: the Wellington poets, he says, 'have stepped free from the schizophrenia of the New Zealander who cannot distinguish himself from his grandfather.'<sup>25</sup> In *Poetry Yearbook* Erik Schwimmer joined in, Curnow responded with a scathing review in *Here & Now*, and New Zealand's longest and most bitter literary dispute took on a life of its own. It would rumble on for at least a decade, in the annual instalments of *Poetry Yearbook* and elsewhere. The Wellington writers would protest what they saw as an obsessive nationalism, a parochial historicism and a blindness to 'local realities' that weren't grounded in landscape. Curnow gladly returned serve: the vaunted new 'universality' was spurious; a weakness for Symbolist stylings was laughable; and indulgent editorial standards threatened, it appeared, a regression to the 1920s. *Poetry Yearbook*, according to Curnow, was like a Fifties version of *Kowhai Gold*.<sup>26</sup> In fact Curnow always had the game in hand. *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* allowed him – in an essay so lengthy that Baxter complained that it should have been published as a separate book – to re-state his argument of 1945, and to reaffirm a roster of poets to prove it. When the Wellington faction caught wind of its contents, Baxter, Johnson and Campbell all threatened to

withdraw their work. Unlike Eileen Duggan, who also protested her part in Curnow's narrative and kept her work out permanently, the Wellington trio eventually gave way. The book's publication was held up by three years – infuriating, no doubt, for its editor – but still not enough to prevent its becoming the most effective piece of canon-making in New Zealand literary history.

It strikes many readers, as it did Louis Johnson reviewing *A Small Room with Large Windows* in *Poetry Yearbook*, that Curnow-the-anthologist and Curnow-the-Fifties-poet are no longer pushing the same barrow.<sup>27</sup> There is not much obeisance to the 'local and special' in *Poems 1949-57*; the formalism and abstraction of that volume seem at odds with what is supposed to be Curnow's procrustean nationalism. But I'm not sure this double-voiced behaviour need surprise us. The 'two Curnows' in question are intent on quite different tasks. The Fifties poet is following his nose: he'll use whatever he needs, or *reads*, to keep his poetic practice alive. The critic and anthologist is intent on something quite different, defending an argument about history and the canon that he has built with it. And while that canon is now also a 'tradition' that furnishes the poet with a context and platform, if the poet himself is to grow and move forward he would best leave the defense of it to someone else, even where that means another self. It may not be a conventional division of labour but for Curnow it's a salutary one.

What is more surprising, as well as less edifying, is the sheer fact of the quarrel's intensity. That a new generation should want its share of the action is unexceptional (Glover had predicted as much). And that at this moment it should take the form of a reaction against the *Phoenix* generation's nationalism is historically almost inevitable. But that the country's leading poets should spend a decade tangled up in it, and expend so much energy on *tu quoque* incivilities, remains puzzling. It's not as if the contest rose to any great heights. Baxter as a critic has his moments of intuitive insight – and of the voices arrayed on the Wellington side his is by far the most formidable – but even so he is no match for Curnow in an argument. Curnow's positions are routinely travestied in the Wellingtonians' rhetoric, while he in response seems happy to fan the flames with needling and name-calling. The second of his *Poetry Yearbook* reviews, for example, takes the form of a personal (or rather *mock*-personal) letter to Johnson ('My Dear Louis'), an insinuating gambit that serves no purpose other than to escalate the unpleasantness.<sup>28</sup> After a trenchant review of the Penguin anthology, Baxter seems finally to have lost interest in the quarrel after 1961. Several of the Wellington players left the country (Schwimmer, Charles Doyle, Hubert Witheford), and *Poetry Yearbook* folded in 1964. And yet in the two major essays that he published in the Sixties, Curnow (like one of those mythical World War II combatants discovered in the jungle long after the conflict's end) writes as if he thinks the 'war' is still going on. From a paper delivered in 1968: '[W]e inherit a nation, whether we like it or not – I can't help it if that sounds like claptrap to those of my compatriots who wish they had been born in some country more deserving of their

genius.’<sup>29</sup>

Curnow, of course, has always loved a good put-down, and one of the rewards of the anthology introductions is the sardonic glee with which he deals to his colonial predecessors. ‘Rewards’? A matter of taste, perhaps. But it’s also, in my view, a question of timing, of history. There’s a difference between a young man on the make lampooning his Victorian ancestors, and a middle-aged man, with an edifice to defend, cudgelling his poetic juniors. And it’s not just a difference of tact or good manners. Rather, it’s that somewhere along this trajectory *Curnow has overtaken history*. The poet of ‘The Unhistoric Story’ – or the ‘Not I’ of ‘The Skeleton of the Great Moa’ – is a poet clearing a discursive space in which the uninvented nation might be encouraged to appear. ‘Reality,’ in other words, is a question for the future. He still assumes this voice in the Penguin introduction, as he reaffirms the argument of 1945. But a different voice now gets the last word. This is the voice that writes: ‘Nowhere in the last decade have there been any poetic departures worth mentioning, and New Zealand has not been privileged.’<sup>30</sup> The value of any ‘departure’ depends on where it leads us; who, then, can say what *will have been* ‘worth mentioning’? Only someone reading from the end of history, and this is increasingly where Curnow seems to speak from. Somewhere between the two anthologies his forward-looking stance has been overtaken by a defensive one, and the verbal pugnacity that comes to him so readily will now tend to resonate accordingly.

What does the rhetoric of this bad-tempered interlude tell us about Curnow’s silence as a poet? Not much, perhaps, beyond the impression of a writer generally indisposed. But it does point to issues endemic to Curnow’s poetry that start to become more pressing with his resurgence in the Seventies. His late-career apotheosis is one of the ‘feel good’ stories of our literature. To some readers, though, and I count myself among them, not of all of Curnow’s late work feels sympathetic. Verbal aggression, and an unbending quality – ‘severities,’ ‘rigidities,’ to give them another name – bedevil Curnow’s efforts to keep abreast of the new. And while they’re habits he brings with him from the mind-set of critical nationalism, they’re also something ‘private’ and distinctly his own.

### **‘a furious pace’**

The flowers and clouds  
which always seemed to sweep

the afternoons were merely  
part of the local colour, as also  
were the poets, who worked so hard  
to scribble down their presence,  
who set a a furious pace  
between the sheets  
and wrote their dirty books

to read aloud and grew upset  
when no one listened.

Bill Manhire, 'The Afterlife'

Curnow's re-emergence in 1972 with *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* was anticipated a few months earlier when a selection from the sequence led off the inaugural issue of *Islands*. 1972 was a big year for New Zealand poetry. It brought the death of James K. Baxter and the media spectacle of his tangi. It brought first volumes from David Mitchell and Bill Manhire, and Sam Hunt's third, *From Bottle Creek*; these three, along with Ian Wedde (first book 1971), and Murray Edmond and Alan Brunton (first books 1973), would be the writers whose emergence signalled the new mood of Seventies poetry. Their break-through journal *The Word is Freed* ran its fifth and final issue the same year. But as *Freed* wrapped up, *Islands* was ready to take over. Editor Robin Dudding had been Brasch's successor at *Landfall*, where he had begun to make room for Hunt, Manhire and Wedde. When – in circumstances yet to be fully elucidated<sup>31</sup> – Dudding was sacked by the Caxton Press, he took with him, not just a quantity of manuscript, but the loyalty of most of *Landfall*'s best writers. The result was a coup of startling efficiency. Overnight *Landfall* ceded primacy to *Islands*, and the former *Freed* poets had the country's most authoritative quarterly as their unofficial house journal. But this was not to say they had it all to themselves. For there in the thick of it – headlining *Islands* 1, and admirably reviewed by Wedde in *Islands* 4 – was the sexagenarian Allen Curnow, all set to begin afresh.

What happens, then, when we situate Curnow in his second career as a poet of the Seventies? Two poems in the come-back volume show us the author in the company of the young. In 'An Upper Room' we meet the poet-professor, ensconced in an office which to guess from the view ('Volcanic islets . . . the top of the tide) is probably in the Auckland English Department. He's waiting for his students, he hears them 'growing up the stairs,' like the tread of Auden's 'hungry generations,' and indeed there might even be a *Freed* poet among them (Wedde, Edmond and Brunton were all Curnow's students). A tutorial on 'Lycidas,' however, is underwhelming, and the poem ends sardonically in nonsense rhymes and images from a brutalised nursery: 'Dead bunnies. Blinded teddy bears.' (145) The second poem 'A Hot Time' shares a companion text ('Goosey goosey gander'), but shifts the scene to the students' own turf – to a 'rock party,' as Curnow describes it, quaintly – reimagined as the fiery furnace from the Book of Daniel:

They were doing their thing in the burning fiery furnace,  
you couldn't hear the flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery  
and all kinds of music for the silence of the flames.

. . .

The needle was a diamond paddling in the bloodstream  
issuing from the heart of the silence of the furnace,

streaming where it paddled in the stream that it was,  
homing on the centre never to be punctured.  
All the holy children were dancing on the needle  
doing nothing but their thing in the burning fiery furnace,

Shadrach and Shakeback and Meshach and Sheshach  
and Abednego and gay to bed we go along and upwards  
of a hundred holy children . . . (165)

The tone of these lines isn't easy to gauge. If the motive is satirical, the satire is not ill-natured. And there's fascination, too: the image of the gramophone needle, with the 'holy children' dancing like angels on the head of a pin, is executed with evident flair. But the poet is not about to join in the revelry. In the biblical source text, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are three Judean nobles chosen by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar for induction into Babylonian language and learning (a three-year endeavour, not unlike an undergraduate degree). They are thrown in the fiery furnace, however, for refusing to worship a golden idol:

There was the golden image, balls to the golden image,  
balls to Nebuchadnezzar the king who set it up. (165)

The long-haired young are demonstratively anti-materialist: 'doing nothing but their thing,' they disdain the golden image. Does the poet sympathise? It's hard to say; but if he does, it isn't enough to override his habitual suspicions. The final lines restore him to his professorial office:

Came the holy cold of morning, with all kinds of music  
raking out the furnace, when their thing was done,  
and which child broke silence, squeaking from the ashes . . .

Shadrach or Shakeback or Meshach or Sheshach,  
or gay to bed we go along with Abednego or who?  
growing up the stone stair, issuing from the music,  
sucking on a diamond like an apricot stone, saying

*There I found an old man who wouldn't say his prayers,  
I took him by the sackbut and threw him down the stairs,  
I adore Doctor Logos, but Yeats is so mysterious,  
because he doesn't communicate like Shakespeare does to me.*  
(165-66)

In the cold light of day, at the top of the stone stair, the poet's critical judgement reasserts itself. He won't say his prayers, but then Curnow never does: he's the ultimate refusenik, the last ever to bend his knee, and certainly not to a Romantic enthusiasm that doesn't *work* for meaning, and harbours sloppy ideas about spontaneous communication.

Curnow responds to the new structure of feeling that emerges in the late Sixties like the modernist that he is. To Romantics like Sargeson, and Baxter even more so, the new youth culture offers elements that they can identify with and attempt to absorb or emulate. But Curnow approaches the enthusiasms of the era like someone who knows better than to expect 'departures worth mentioning.' The problem is not so much his Modernism exactly as his conviction that his own variety of Modernism is as far as the project goes. Interviewed in *Islands* in 1973, and asked whether the work of the younger poets has left any impression on his own, the reply is concision itself: 'Certainly not.' Their formal discoveries, he goes on to say, are simply his own generation's discoveries re-hashed:

In these respects, I suppose I did all the catching up I was capable of forty years ago. Then we all began reading Pound, Eliot, Cummings . . . It was a great time of change and innovation in the art of poetry, and even then it had been going on for half a century. When I do pick up one of our young New Zealand poets of the sixties or seventies, it takes me back, as people say.<sup>32</sup>

In fairness to Curnow it's worth pointing out, as Wedde does in his *Islands* review,<sup>33</sup> that earlier respondents had unwisely accused Curnow of trend-following. And it's true that Wedde and other younger writers re-discover many of those classic modernist sources, most importantly Pound. But their Modernism isn't *all* 'back to the future' – that's just the part Curnow thinks he can recognise.<sup>34</sup> There are departures afoot of which he seems to have no inkling, even when the evidence assaults him in the hippie bacchanal of 'A Hot Time.' The music itself is one obvious clue: that is, the role of popular culture in challenging the mandarin habits of a now venerable 'high' Modernism. And this (further) opening-up of poetic idiolect, and erosion of the protocols that protect 'serious' culture from its others, is only one aspect of a more pervasive loosening and warming of culture that *Freed* and then *Islands* are running with.

Warmth. Not the infernal heat of Old Testament melodrama, but something more homely: personable, sexual, domestic. What Curnow can't appreciate – or can't appreciate in its full (i.e. *poetic*) significance – is that his students aren't just rediscovering Pound and Eliot. They are channelling the sexual revolution. They are channelling pop culture and in particular a newly literate rock music exemplified by mid-Sixties Dylan.<sup>35</sup> And they are adjusted to expectations of a more discursive and personal utterance that have been gathering force in poetry since the end of the

Fifties: late Williams, the Confessional poets, the Beats, the New York poets (O'Hara, Koch). The effect will be a Modernism in many ways re-Romanticised, in tune with its unprecedented emphasis on personal relations. All this of course is another story. So too is the moment that follows, where a certain residual masculinism begins to lose its charm. But while it isn't a total fix, it's without doubt a dramatic shift. For it's here in the Romantic heterosexualism of the Seventies that the emotional frigidity of the nationalist mid-century (the 'hard frost') finally begins to let go.

Fairburn would have enjoyed the Seventies; he was always the warmest, most priapic of the Caxton male cohort. It was he who observed disgustedly that Eliot had never written a love poem.<sup>36</sup> But nor could he have said much better of Curnow. There's a single love poem in the *Enemies* (1937), some sonnets in the *Dead Low Water* volume, and as briefly discussed above another lone specimen in *Poems 1949-1957*. After 1957 there's nothing. His attitude is probably best summed up in his weakness for a stanza by Denis Glover (quoted approvingly on at least two occasions):

Love poems if you like. But keep them short.  
It's all *vieux jeu*, unless you're crude and stark.  
She won't, we needn't read them. Sport,  
Tell her you love her, and tell her in the dark.<sup>37</sup>

Actions, that is, speak louder than words: once again Curnow is irreducibly a man of his vintage. On the sexual antics of the Woodstock generation he appears sometimes mildly fascinated (in 'A Hot Time' the nagging question of who is going to bed with whom); but elsewhere in the same book patrician and sarcastic (shades of early Eliot) in the throwaway 6-line 'Agenda':

Enjoy sex and stop breeding. Message to the age  
from the Doctors Kronhausen, on waking. (146)

(Reichian-trained sexologists Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen are best known their 1964 book *The Sexually Responsive Woman*.)

If Curnow has no use for love poems, however, he's not deaf to what can be done with the freeing up of sexual language. In a climate of cyclostyled liberties where poets are allowed to say 'fuck' and 'cunt,' Curnow is in there with the sprightliest of them. But unlike those younger poets who view this freedom of expression in a liberatory light – that is, their language choices embody the principle of sexual freedom itself – Curnow adopts this new liberal decorum, not to talk sexy, but instead to talk mean. The most florid examples occur in what many would say is the finest book of his career, *An Incurable Music* (1979). Inevitably all roads through this topic lead to 'Dichtung und Wahrheit,' Curnow's hair-raising verbal assault on novelist and departmental colleague M.K. Joseph. But to try to make sense of what is happening in that poem, it's useful to approach by way of some less



The murder has already been described as a rape ('the front page yelling rape, / and the cameras in at the fuck' [226]), and now the victim gives his consent. Mac Jackson calls it his 'acknowledgement of complicity . . . and of a terrible rightness in what is taking place;' <sup>41</sup> and it may be this does translate Curnow's intent, since it echoes an earlier thought attributed to Moro, 'the victim's / / yes to the crime' (225). But it also echoes, as Jackson points out, <sup>42</sup> Molly Bloom's famous affirmation at the end of *Ulysses*, her repeated and ecstatic 'Yes' to sex, which only (isn't it fair to say?) the mostly oddly 'pressured' imagination could translate into the affirmation of an endless cycle of ritual violence.

### **'Dichtung und Wahrheit'**

M.K. Joseph (1914-81) was for many years Curnow's colleague in the English Department at Auckland. English-born, to Catholic parents who emigrated to New Zealand in 1924, Joseph completed a graduate degree at Oxford and served in the British Royal Field Artillery before coming back to take a job at Auckland in 1946. A writer of diverse accomplishments, he was a literary scholar, a notable poet (Curnow includes him in his Penguin anthology), the author of a campus novel and of several works of science fiction. But *A Soldier's Tale* (1976), the second of his two war novels, probably deserves to be his best-known work even without the surplus aura conferred by Curnow's loathing of it. The structure is that of an enfolded narrative, somewhat in the manner of Conrad. Its main events are narrated, during a lull in the Allied invasion of France, by a Wessex infantryman, Scourby, to a frame narrator known only as 'Bom' (for bombardier?). Scourby's 'tale' is of his brief and brutal liaison with Belle, an alleged collaborator, whom he finds hiding out in a Normandy farmhouse under threat of summary execution by the Resistance. At the end of their weekend-long tryst Scourby kills Belle himself.

In 'Dichtung und Wahrheit' (the title – 'poetry/fiction and truth' – echoes Goethe's autobiography of his youth) Curnow doesn't name Joseph's novel explicitly, but the reference is unmistakable: 'A man I know wrote a book about a man he knew / and this man, or so he the man I know said, fucked / and murdered a girl to save her from the others . . .' (209) His summary of the plot and structure, and of what he takes to be Joseph's intentions, is notable for its anger, for its travesty of the work's narratological structure, and for the highly-invested way in which it doesn't just paraphrase the novel's conjunction of sex and violence but amplifies and accessorizes it (the poem's most brutal images are Curnow's, not Joseph's). Followers of Lacan (the most widely-known today in English being Slavoj Žižek) talk about something they call *enjoyment*, which translates the French *jouissance* but with overtones of Freudian *Todestriebe*, death drive. Enjoyment, then, is not simple pleasure, but something darker, more ambivalent. Lacanian enjoyment is both repetitive and compulsive, an experience which seems to *enjoy us* as much as we enjoy *it*. In Žižek it reads less like an affect than a *substance*: an emanation of the Real, adhesive and contaminating. <sup>43</sup> Curnow's poem, or so I have always felt when reading it, is steeped

in this unmanageable kind of enjoyment – which is also the best explanation I can offer of my instinctive unwillingness to quote from it at length.

From the poem's first appearance in *An Incurable Music*, commentators have observed that it misreads Joseph's narrative structure, eliding the author ('the man I know') into 'Bom,' the first of the novel's two internal (or 'homodiegetic') narrators.<sup>44</sup> But even if provisionally we ignore the sleight-of-hand and concentrate simply on Curnow's complaint, its cause – the poem's argument – remains oddly out of focus. The presenting issue appears to be the author's (which should be *the narrator's*) condescension: 'Experience like that, he exclaimed, thrown away on a semiliterate . . .' (210) Yes, there may be something of this in the narrator's manner. But even if that tone were *the author's*, could it plausibly account for the poem's vehemence? Does a poet write and publish what James Bertram calls, justifiably, a 'hate poem,' simply because he doesn't like a novel's tone?<sup>45</sup> It is this off-centre, off-target quality that is the poem's most puzzling feature. Almost inevitably, then, one speculates, as Bertram does for instance (to Curnow's immense irritation): 'Did this story . . . strike some old puritanical Anglican nerve . . . ?'<sup>46</sup> or along other lines, as Frank McKay intimates darkly without letting on exactly what he has in mind.<sup>47</sup> And perhaps in the ashes of some drunken faculty party, or the minutes of a long-forgotten staff meeting, there may be an anecdotal 'explanation' for Curnow's extravagant reaction. Perhaps a biography will even reveal it. But I think the more telling interpretation will still be the one half-concealed within the poems themselves.

Let us imagine, just for a moment, Curnow reading the novel's climactic scene. I am not convinced that he is likely to have 'recogni[zed] the threat to his own status as the poet of violence,' as RR (Roger Robinson) has suggested.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, he cannot have failed to apprehend, consciously or otherwise, an intimate correspondence with his own preoccupations. Where Scourby cuts his lover's throat and sluices the blood from the wash-house floor, we find imagery that is intricately woven through Curnow's poetic mythology: from 'the stain of blood' in the waves of Tasman Bay ('Landfall in Unknown Seas'), through the numerous bloodied waters of *An Incurable Music*, all the way to that very late poem 'The Unclosed Door' and its self-consciously primal memory of a Banks Peninsula slaughterhouse ('They're all busy now, the hosing down / will have started').<sup>49</sup> 'All the seas are one sea, / the blood one blood,' he writes, in 'Moro Assassinato' (220). Nevertheless, this complex of images resonates quite differently in different phases of Curnow's long career. 'The stain of blood that writes an island story' (75) speaks directly to those 'public and answerable' questions of the nationalist anti-myth; so too do almost identical images in other poems from the early 1940s: 'The Unhistoric Story,' 'A Victim,' 'The Navigators.' When Curnow turns inward after *Sailing or Drowning*, this blood/water topos persists. But as we shift from the public arena of 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' to a poem as private and enigmatic as 'Spectacular Blossom' (from *Poems 1949-57*) interpreting this imagery becomes far more challenging. When the poet imagines a slaughtered sailor 'paying / Out' his blood 'into our time's wave' (75), the reader

knows at once what the image is driving at. We can recognise what Curnow calls an *answerable* question ('Who was on the beach to discover the discoverers?'<sup>50</sup>). But what about a text in which the poet imagines a pohutukawa tree in blossom as a beautiful woman with her throat cut, ejaculating blood? What kind of question does this (fail to) answer? We recognise the image – we can follow the red thread – and yet, even though the poem is among Curnow's most celebrated, critical reading has been noticeably hesitant to engage with its eroticized sanguinary kernel.<sup>51</sup>

This 'personal pressure,' whatever it is, that vibrates so puzzlingly in 'Spectacular Blossom' operates just as obscurely in 'Dichtung und Wahrheit.' The difference for the reader is that we've seen it before: the same gothic knife-play, the same unwholesome sexual investment. The poem feels excessive – indeed it feels *inaccurate*, inevitably so – because we can't see what it's aiming at. What is legible, however, in this otherwise under-motivated outburst is the approach of some intimate trigger point. It is perhaps the kind of stress that, in Curnow's phrase, can only be 'contained' by a poem.<sup>52</sup> And just as it may be that only a poem can manage the kind of pressures involved, so too as readers we have only the poem with which to approach and make sense of its force. Again, I refer to the lack of biography; but once more I'm not sure what this would change. To me it seems unlikely that Curnow's 'life' will ever supply a background to elucidate the darkest aspects of 'Spectacular Blossom' or 'Dichtung und Wahrheit.' More probable, I think, is that the poems' entanglement of violence and sex will remain what it is: a textual pulsation in which we read only the negative force of something unknown, obscure to the reader, and as likely as not obscure to the person who wrote the poems.

### **'a mind of winter'**

Happily *An Incurable Music* isn't the terminus of Curnow's career. Way back in 1963, in a passage I've quoted once already, Karl Stead voiced something that I believe many readers may have come to in the intervening years: a wish that the poet might get to a place where he could spare himself some of the habitual severities. What Stead 'fores[aw]' – but more strictly, perhaps, *hoped* to see – was 'a perfect, bland and lucid surface, an ultimate simplicity which relinquishes none of the complexities . . .' Any such mellowing would be a very long time in coming, but finally, in the poems of childhood that began to appear in *The Loop in Lone Kauri Road* (1986) and then more concertedly in the previously unpublished sections of *Continuum* (1988) and *Early Days Yet* (1997) something in Curnow appears to relax. Here we find the most candid poems that Curnow wrote (the most 'bland and lucid'), as well as the kindest, the most humanistic. I know I wasn't the only reader to greet these very late poems with relief; to some degree they change the way I feel about Curnow's career.

Does this mean, then, that I've made too much of the less friendly aspects of Curnow's work, and that in particular I've over-weighted that unsettling nexus of sex

and violence? I don't believe so. *An Incurable Music* is a limit case, but the temperament it displays so dramatically is evident right across Curnow's *oeuvre*. A thematics of violence is part of it, from the violence of settlement in the nationalist period, to the endless cruelties large and small that saturate the poems of the Seventies and Eighties.<sup>53</sup> But there's also a performative aspect, a tendency for Curnow's critical reflex to express itself in writing that itself feels like an aggressive, even violent, act. It's there, channelled to cogent effect, in the ground-clearing of the nationalist essays; less well-directed, it stokes the poetry wars of the Fifties, and leads to the unedifying name-calling of the public correspondence that followed 'Dichtung und Wahrheit.' Occasionally it feels self-directed: in the auto-excoriations of some of the poems of the early Fifties. Even an epistemological frustration is enough to provoke it in the first of the 'Lone Kauri Road' poems from *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*.<sup>54</sup>

As we've seen, Curnow prides himself on staying ahead of the historical curve. Throughout he retains his formidable intellect; and his formal powers, if anything, continue to expand. But where Curnow appears to make no obvious advances, with the qualified exception of that handful of very late poems, is in the tonal and emotional range of his work. Curnow's will remain the voice of what Andrew Johnson calls, aptly, 'a mind of winter.'<sup>55</sup> And this, while the younger poets around him are addressing precisely this deficit in the local poetry that they have inherited, personalizing it, warming it up, and yes, sexualizing it, but without the accompanying gore. In this context Curnow stands apart, the old man who won't say his prayers, incorrigible, unrepentant in his pessimism and his anti-Romanticism. His wintry voice is like one of those shaded corners in a mountain valley where the sun never reaches, where the frozen ground hasn't thawed out even in the Seventies.

This historicizing metaphor, however, takes us only so far. The singularity of late Curnow is, yes, that of a product of Thirties framed by the contrast with a structure of feeling two generations removed from his own. But it's here that perhaps we need to think more carefully about that dark, only partially emergent dimension of Curnow's sensibility that I've been trying to address. For if Curnow's is the kind of mind that blossoms in the nationalist 'hard frost' – a mind that embodies its critical imperatives more completely than any other – for all that it isn't *reducible* to those formative conditions. As he himself put it once, a poet isn't just 'a social seismograph, recording bumps.'<sup>56</sup> In my approach, the interest of Curnow's generation is always at least partly of this 'seismographic' kind: I'm inclined to read for context and structure more than for subjective singularity. But Curnow makes me think about the limits of this historicizing reflex. His mind is exemplary, but also extraordinary, not only in its powers, but in its vehemence, its 'severity.'

I sincerely hope not to be misunderstood as intending in this essay to diminish Curnow's work. For me, as an historian of New Zealand writing, he remains the most sustaining single figure in our literature. But I sometimes wonder if, in the rush to

honour his achievement, Curnow's admiring critics have yet looked candidly enough at what makes him so remarkable. His pessimism, his disenchantment, the aggression that is always threatening to break through: these are qualities that make him the voice of our trenchantly 'critical' literary nationalism. But these same qualities come at a cost, and that cost can be measured in the poetry – in the places that it doesn't go, in the range of feeling that it cannot encompass. This is not to argue that Curnow should be nicer, or more optimistic: his vision is what it is. It is simply to insist that we read what's there, in a remarkable body of work that has severe limitations. Given our collective investment in Curnow and his stature as our most accomplished modernist poet, we owe it both to the poems and to our collective self-knowledge to read them with the same degree of fearlessness with which they were written.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Beveridge, 'Conversation with Frank Sargeson (Part II),' *Landfall* 94 (1970), p. 152. I use this remark to introduce Sargeson's post-war career in 'Surviving the War,' *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 31 (2013), pp. 84-106.

<sup>2</sup> 'Surviving the War'; 'Allen Curnow at Joachim Kahn's,' *Landfall* 220 (Nov 2011), pp. 16-30.

<sup>3</sup> Beveridge, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Sargeson, *More Than Enough*; [in] *Sargeson*, Auckland: Penguin, 1977, p. 289.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947*, Wellington: Oxford U P, 1980, p. 391.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Calder, 'Unsettling Settlement: Poetry and Nationalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand,' *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 14 (1998), pp. 169-71.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams, eds., *In the Same Room: Conversations with New Zealand Writers*, Auckland: Auckland U P, 1990, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Allen Curnow, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, ed. Peter Simpson, Auckland: Auckland U P 1987, p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Reid, 'Allen Curnow: Identity in Isolation,' *Listener*, March 12, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> I am not alone in these suspicions about a reluctance to engage with the darker aspects of Curnow's work. Three authors, in particular, have been here before me: Vincent O'Sullivan, "'About My Father's Business," or, Whose Word is it Anyway? A Footnote to Luke 2:49,' *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 15 (1997); Patrick Evans, "'A very emotional person as well": Allen Curnow 1911-2001,' *Landfall* 203 (2002), pp. 9-21; Andrew Johnson, 'Late, Late Curnow: A Mind of Winter,' *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 25 (2007), pp. 46-69.

<sup>11</sup> Reid, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Here, too, see Evans *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 257.

<sup>15</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 45.

- <sup>16</sup> Allen Curnow, *Selected Poems*, Auckland: Penguin, 1982, p. 91. Subsequent references appear in brackets in the text.
- <sup>17</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 73.
- <sup>18</sup> In *Poems 1949-57*, for ‘downcast’ read ‘mobied’. The dialed-back version first appears in *A Small Room with Large Windows: Selected Poems* (1962).
- <sup>19</sup> Vincent O’Sullivan, “‘About My Father’s Business,’ or, Whose Word is it Anyway? A Footnote to Luke 2:49,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 15 (1997), p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> C.K. Stead, ‘Allen Curnow’s Poetry,’ *Landfall* 65 (1963), p. 45.
- <sup>21</sup> Roger Horrocks, ‘The Invention of New Zealand,’ *And* 1 (1983), p. 14.
- <sup>22</sup> A biographical note in *Islands* in 1972 anticipates the appearance of *Trees, Effigies, Objects*, stating: ‘This is the first volume of verse by Allen Curnow since *A Small Room with Large Windows: Selected Poems* (Oxford) was published in 1962. Other than one new poem in that collection [‘An Oppressive Climate, A Populous Neighbourhood’ from 1962] and a verse tribute to Douglas Lilburn in 1965, no new poem, as distinct from dramatic writing, has appeared since the late fifties.’ *Islands* 1 (1972), p. 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Simpson, ‘Ways to the Museyroom: Poetry Anthologies in the Fifties,’ *Landfall* 185 (1993), pp. 97-98.
- <sup>24</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 75.
- <sup>25</sup> James K. Baxter, *Complete Prose*, ed. John Weir, Wellington: Victoria U P, 2015, Vol 1, p. 69.
- <sup>26</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, pp. 107, 198, 200.
- <sup>27</sup> Louis Johnson, ‘The Year the Drought Broke,’ *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook*, 1964, p. 27.
- <sup>28</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, pp. 109-15.
- <sup>29</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 214.
- <sup>30</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 174.
- <sup>31</sup> The fullest account I’ve read is by Peter Simpson, *Fantastica: The World of Leo Bensemann*, Auckland: Auckland U P, 2011, pp. 118-20.
- <sup>32</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 264.
- <sup>33</sup> Ian Wedde, ‘Look Back Harder,’ *Islands* 4 (1973), pp. 205-06.
- <sup>34</sup> As Murray Edmond puts it in retrospect, ‘Curnow’s assertion . . . depended on your point of view.’ ‘Poetics of the Impossible,’ [in] Alan Brunton, Murray Edmond and Michele Leggott, eds., *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960-1975*, Auckland: Auckland UP, 2000, p. 21.
- <sup>35</sup> Edmond, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>36</sup> Denys Trussell, *Fairburn*, Auckland: Auckland U P/Oxford U P, 1984, p. 242.
- <sup>37</sup> Denis Glover, ‘Polonius’ Advice to a Poet,’ quoted in Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, pp. 229, 295.
- <sup>38</sup> Alex Calder, *The Settler’s Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand*, Auckland: Auckland U P, p. 238.
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Simpson makes the Pound connection in an early review, ‘The Stain of Blood that Writes the Human Story,’ *Islands* 27 (1979), p. 548.
- <sup>40</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 265.
- <sup>41</sup> Mac Jackson, ‘Still Reflecting: Curnow’s *Continuum*,’ *Landfall* 171 (1989), p. 360.
- <sup>42</sup> See also O’Sullivan, p. 12.
- <sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 2008.
- <sup>44</sup> Among the earliest, Simpson, ‘The Stain of Blood . . .,’ p. 550; K.K. Ruthven, ‘Joseph’s Tale,’ *Islands* 27 (1979), pp. 524-25.

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- <sup>45</sup> James Bertram, 'Staying upright here,' *Listener*, 12 March 1983, p. 85.
- <sup>46</sup> Bertram, p. 85; Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, pp. 326-29.
- <sup>47</sup> Frank McKay, Correspondence, *Landfall* 150 (1984), p. 255.
- <sup>48</sup> R[oger] R[obinson], *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, Auckland: Oxford UP, 1998, p. 276.
- <sup>49</sup> Allen Curnow, *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1997, p. 5.
- <sup>50</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 231.
- <sup>51</sup> To the best of my knowledge, only one critic has addressed the issue directly; see Evans, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>52</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, p. 264.
- <sup>53</sup> For a compendious catalogue, see Jackson, p. 361.
- <sup>54</sup> O'Sullivan discusses this poem in a similar context, p. 10.
- <sup>55</sup> Andrew Johnson, 'Late, Late Curnow: A Mind of Winter,' *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 25 (2007), pp. 46-69.
- <sup>56</sup> Curnow to Glover, 1944; quoted by Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture, 1932-1945*, Wellington: Victoria UP, 2003, p. 299.