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**Challenging Discourses**  
**in**  
**Allen Curnow's oeuvre**

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in English  
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## ABSTRACT

Allen Curnow has been publishing poetry for more than six decades. His critical writings span about half a century, and as an anthologist he influenced the post-World War II generation of New Zealand poets and readers. Less well known today is his early verse, often published under the pseudonym Julian, his social satire, published under the *nom de guerre* Whim Wham, and his drama.

In this thesis I read examples from Curnow's oeuvre from a dialogic perspective. The Bakhtin school's dialogism allows a reading that differs from earlier appraisals of Curnow's work in that it highlights the conflicts of ideologies which reside in the texts. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque, also used in this study, allows for a new interpretation of the function of subversion in what many have viewed as a relatively conventional poet's work. Previous readings have tended to employ traditional critical theories and are predominantly historical. They also largely omit what I believe to be important sections of Curnow's oeuvre: the Julian poems, works by Whim Wham and the plays.

In Chapter One I outline the theoretical context of dialogism and the carnivalesque in which I have placed this study. Chapter Two looks at Curnow's juvenilia and examples from the verse he published as Julian, much of which has remained unexplored. In Chapter Three I discuss Curnow's poetry collections that he published during the 1930s, and Chapter Four looks at his poetry published between 1941 and 1962. In Chapter Five I examine examples from Curnow's more recent poetry, published since 1972. Chapter Six discusses Curnow's social satire, the Whim Wham verse, and represents the first critical study of these works. Chapter Seven deals with Curnow's published plays, which have also mostly escaped critical appraisal, and have been performed only rarely on stage. In Chapter Eight I provide a dialogic reading of Curnow's own literary critical writings. I conclude my study with three appendices: an index to Curnow's contributions to the 1930s periodical *Tomorrow*, a checklist to Whim Wham, and an index to Whim Wham's contributions to the *New Zealand Listener*.

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## INTRODUCTION

*By the way, I had none of these ideas while I was writing the poem, I was too busy writing it.*

– Allen Curnow (1990)

## I

Allen Curnow is accepted today as one of the great, if not the greatest, New Zealand poets.<sup>1</sup> He was born Thomas Allen Munro Curnow in 1911 in Timaru, South Canterbury, the son of an Anglican vicar.<sup>2</sup> He worked as a cadet reporter for the Christchurch *Sun* while attending Canterbury University College part-time in 1929 and 1930, before deciding to enter the Anglican ministry on a scholarship for three years at the College of St John the Evangelist, at Meadowbank in Auckland. This included two years' full-time university study at Auckland University College, where Curnow published his first poems in *Kiwi*, the university magazine, edited at the time by James Bertram. In 1932-33 his poems appeared in *Phoenix* alongside such New Zealand writers as Bertram, Charles Brasch, D'Arcy Cresswell, A.R.D. Fairburn, Robin Hyde, and R.A.K. Mason. Curnow rejected the Church as a vocation in 1934, eventually returning to Christchurch where he became a reporter on *The Press* in 1935. However, he soon changed positions to that of cable (foreign news) sub-editor, where he remained till 1948, after which he spent a year on the *News Chronicle*, in London.

In 1950 Curnow visited the United States on a Carnegie grant, before joining the Auckland University College's Department of English as a lecturer in 1951, becoming associate-professor in 1967. He was awarded the university's Doctor of Literature degree in 1966 for six papers of literary criticism: "The Future of New Zealand; New Zealand Literature," "Modern Australian Poetry," "Dance of the Seasons," "The Expatriate," "A Time

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Simpson, for example, commenced a 1986 analysis: "Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter are by general consensus the two most important figures in New Zealand poetry, both as poets and critics" ("The Trick of Standing Upright": Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter" 369). A decade earlier, Theresa Graham introduced her bibliography of Curnow's works: "Allen Curnow is unquestionably a, if not 'the', major New Zealand poet" (1976: introd., n. pag.).

<sup>2</sup> Biographical details of Curnow in this section are drawn largely from Alan Roddick's 1980 critical study of the poet (*Allen Curnow* 59-60).

for Sowing," and *Coal Flat* (1964).<sup>3</sup> The University of Canterbury conferred an honorary Doctor of Letters degree on Curnow in 1975, and he retired from the University of Auckland in 1976.

## II

Curnow is primarily renowned as a poet and literary critic. He published his first collection of poems in September 1933 through the Auckland University College Students' Association Press. *Valley of Decision* is largely a collection of the poems Curnow published in *Kiwi*, *Phoenix* and *Art in New Zealand*, and the volume's title, from the *Old Testament* book of *Joel* (3:14), captures the divinity student's crisis of faith prior to his leaving the theological college. His second publication in 1935, *Poetry and Language*, is significant for two reasons: it is his earliest piece of critical writing, and it saw the beginning of Curnow's long association with Denis Glover and the Caxton Press. Curnow teamed up in the same year with Glover and A.R.D. Fairburn to publish *Another Argo: Three Poems from the Caxton Club Press*, and has not ceased publishing new poetry or collected editions of previously published work in the more than sixty years since.<sup>4</sup>

After returning to Christchurch in 1935 and publishing *Poetry and Language*, Curnow also began writing reviews for *The Press* and elsewhere, soon establishing himself as a literary critic whose influence is still felt. Curnow's Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* confirmed his reputation in 1945 as this country's pre-eminent literary writer and, despite intense controversy in two decades following its publication, that essay remains seminal to the study of New Zealand poetry. Charles Doyle wrote in 1966, "Curnow has provided us with our only criticism so far at the creatively conceptual (as opposed to the analytical) level" (*Small Prophets and Quick Returns* 7). While post-structuralist criticism has

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<sup>3</sup> "Checklist of Theses on New Zealand Literature: Supplement No. 1," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 12 (1994): 163. All six papers are included in Curnow's collection of critical writings, *Look Back Harder*.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after I had finished this study, Allen Curnow published *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1997), which includes a dozen new poems under the heading "The Game of Tag (1989-1997)." These additional poems are not discussed in my study, although I have included the book in my "Works Consulted"; a review of the book by Vincent O'Sullivan and a general article on Curnow by Gordon McLauchlan are also listed there.

more recently moved conceptual boundaries forward, Peter Simpson accurately gauges Curnow's continuing importance in the field:

Curnow's criticism remains a continuing point of reference in the literary microcosm in relation to which all new arrivals inevitably locate themselves in the process of differentially defining their own critical positions. (*Look Back Harder* xxii)

Curnow is less well known for his writings in other genres. He wrote a couple of short pieces of prose fiction, not discussed in this study, during the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Curnow is known to have written six plays between the mid-1940s and late 1960s, five of which were performed or broadcast, although one of these is inexplicably dropped from his 1972 collection *Four Plays*. Any critical attention the plays receive in the future will more probably be because of their authorship rather than for their own, somewhat limited, merits; nonetheless, they remain a significant contribution to Curnow's oeuvre, and in this study amply repay the effort of a close examination.

Curnow wrote poetry and light verse in the 1930s which he published in a number of periodicals such as *Tomorrow*. The best of these juvenilia,<sup>6</sup> written in many cases under the pseudonym of Julian, were incorporated into the poetry sequences Curnow published during the 1930s, sometimes after heavy editing or considerable reworking. Yet, with one exception – *Collected Poems 1933-1973* (1974) – all editions of Curnow's collected or selected poems begin with his collections published after 1940. This present study, however, joins an apparently recent trend by critics to revisit Curnow's hitherto marginalised early verse and poetry, and to examine aspects of the development of the poet, as well as his processes of poetic composition available through later versions of his early verse.

One large section of Curnow's oeuvre that has been virtually ignored by all critics and even by Curnow himself is his social satire. For about thirty years from the late 1930s, Curnow published satiric verses in various newspapers on a weekly basis, and for four years during World War II in the *New Zealand Listener*, all under the *nom de plume* of Whim

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix I for references to "A Bad Liver" and "Day of Wrath. A Tale."

<sup>6</sup> I use the term "juvenilia" without prejudice, although mindful that Curnow referred to it as a "disarming subtitle" (*Collected Poems 1933-1973* xii).

Wham. Five collections of these Whim Wham verses were also published between 1940 and 1967. Yet, apart from a few passing references, only two serious but brief commentaries of Whim Wham's verse have been published. The chapter on Whim Wham in this thesis is the first detailed examination of Curnow's social satire as part of his oeuvre.

### III

Allen Curnow has been discussed by virtually every New Zealand literary critic at least in passing, and in many cases at great length. Criticism of Curnow may be divided into three categories: numerous general studies of Curnow's poetry and critical thought ranging from the excellent to the indifferent, many reviews and discussions of Curnow's individual collections, again varying in quality, and a few excellent published interviews with Curnow. The more significant of these are listed by John Thomson in his bibliographical entry on Curnow in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991:651-52), with a brief critique indicating the general tenor of each. While most have played at least some part in shaping my ideas, in this present study I found several to be particularly influential. I found Peter Simpson's introduction to Curnow's 1987 *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984* to be one of the most lucid accounts of Curnow's *Weltbild*, and which assisted me to clarify my own arguments in Chapter Eight. Stephen Hamilton's 1996 University of Auckland PhD thesis, "New Zealand English Language Periodicals of Literary Interest Active 1920s-1960s," proved invaluable for its detailed research and commentary, particularly of the Julian poetry published by Curnow in *Tomorrow*, and forms a bibliographical backdrop to Chapter Two. Ian Wedde's review of *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* and MacDonald Jackson's "Conversation with Allen Curnow," both published in 1973, remain the only serious attempts to discuss Whim Wham's contribution to Curnow's oeuvre. Although the social satirist is not the central topic of discussion in either case, the two excerpts provide useful reference points for my dialogic reading of Whim Wham's verses in Chapter Six.

My thesis differs from previous critical studies because I posit Allen Curnow as a subversive writer. This can be shown to be the case in the four main genres of his output, namely poetry, satiric verse, drama and critical writings. A reading of Curnow's work from a

late twentieth-century point of view suggests that a distinct strain of subversion exists in his oeuvre. However, it is probably not surprising that Curnow's subversiveness has not been the focus of previous critical attention, given that Curnow created for himself a dominant role within New Zealand literary circles half a century ago and fought hard for several decades to defend and maintain his critical presence. Furthermore, his critics were obviously working from within the same critical, political and social climate, irrespective of how they regarded his stance. However, when Leigh Davis – among others – who co-edited the four-issue magazine *And* (1983-85), eventually moved beyond traditional critical boundaries in the 1980s and applied post-modern criteria to Curnow's poetry, his approach, naturally, also challenged the work of previous critics.

In order to locate subversion within Curnow's work, I have applied approaches from the Bakhtin school, which allows a reading of subversion which is not based on binary oppositions. According to Bakhtin's dialogic model, in order to oppose something, one must also construct that which one wishes to oppose, that is, the opposed and the opposing reside simultaneously in the text. With the help of Bakhtinian theory, those constructions can be read concurrently. Curnow's social satiric verse is most obviously produced in opposition to a received view. However, the dialogic model enables the processes of subversion to be discovered in Curnow's poetry, drama and critical writings also. Bakhtin used dialogism to examine the medieval European phenomenon of carnival, formulating its literary application, the carnivalesque, in which hierarchies are inverted and established orders subverted as part of ongoing textual challenges. Elements of the carnivalesque may be read particularly in Curnow's recent poetry.

#### IV

In this thesis I apply a dialogic reading to specific examples from all areas of Curnow's work, except a couple of prose pieces he wrote in the 1930s which I found to be too incidental to be worth detailed discussion.

Chapter I details how the Bakhtin school's approach differs from traditional critical approaches, which are based on Cartesian dualism. The dialogic model posits a reading in

which an author/speaker constructs the society he or she opposes in the process of challenging it, and where both reside simultaneously in the text.

Chapter Two begins my dialogic reading of Curnow's oeuvre with an examination of Curnow's juvenilia from the 1930s. The bulk of this early verse appeared in the periodical *Tomorrow*, much of it in the name of Julian. Appendix I may be read as an adjunct to this chapter, and provides an amended index of Curnow's contributions to *Tomorrow*.

Curnow's poetry is discussed over three separate chapters because of the poet's prodigious output during more than half a century. Chapter Three covers the poetry Curnow published as separate collections during the 1930s. Some items are later versions of previously published verse either discussed in, or from the period already covered by, Chapter Two. Chapter Four examines Curnow's poetry published between 1941 and 1962, the so-called commencement of Curnow's "silent decade." Chapter Five covers poetry published by Curnow from 1972.<sup>7</sup> A carnivalesque reading is shown to be particularly fruitful in Curnow's recent poetry.

The satirical verse Curnow wrote as Whim Wham is discussed in Chapter Six although, for convenience, examples are drawn from the five published collections rather than from the weekly periodical and newspaper appearances of the verses. Little criticism of Whim Wham exists, and Appendix II provides a checklist of references that have been made to the satirist. Appendix III is an index to Whim Wham's regular contributions to the *New Zealand Listener* between 1942 and 1945.

Chapter Seven discusses Curnow in his role as theatre and radio playwright and examines the plays he collected and published as *Four Plays* in 1972. A dialogic reading explains in part why Curnow has not been as successful in that genre as in others.

This thesis concludes in Chapter Eight with an examination of Curnow's critical writings. Curnow's span as a literary thinker and intellectual is almost as long as his career as a poet, and his influence has been almost as significant. However, my dialogic reading

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<sup>7</sup> If further justification for my divisions is required, Curnow himself provided it to Peter Simpson: ". . . [P]airs are divisible, and it takes the third to restore some sort of unity – it's the first odd number – it's not for nothing that three was an ancient marriage number. Besides all this, I like triple arrangements as I like writing some poems in tercets. Because they work so well" (*Landfall* 43.3 (1990): 298).

suggests that when Curnow ceased subverting what he perceived as the literary hegemony, and instead began defending his established position, his influence as a critic began to decline.

This thesis offers a new reading, based on the Bakhtin school's theories, of Curnow as subversive writer during a career spanning more than half of the twentieth century. Although the model inevitably challenges some traditional interpretations of Curnow's oeuvre, in one significant respect at least this study confirms the consensual view that Allen Curnow ranks among New Zealand's greatest writers.

CHAPTER ONE  
ASPECTS OF DIALOGISM

If . . . [young New Zealand poets] are themselves to write poems that transcend time and place, they must achieve a correct vision of their own time and place.

– Allen Curnow (1963)

I

Traditional criticism of Allen Curnow's poetry, satire, plays and critical writings is based on a philosophy which is inherently dualistic. That philosophy has dominated Western thought since the time of René Descartes and has remained unchallenged for 300 years. It is consequently not surprising, given that post-structuralism represents the first real challenge to Descartes and has not yet been universally accepted, to find that most readings of Curnow's work implicitly reflect dualism.

Descartes' dualism circles around what has now come to be known as the logic of identity (Descombes 75). As has been extensively argued during the past 20-odd years, this logic of identity posits subjects who are autonomous, fixed and essential.<sup>1</sup> For literary criticism this means that texts were believed to be products written by an author who existed as a discrete entity, in isolation from all other humans at least as far as his or her thought processes and authorship were concerned. Works by authors who were seen as subversive authors' works were read as texts which opposed, for example, a body of thought, an ideology, or a society, but the existence and characteristics of which were not challenged. In other words, however much critics who were philosophically dualistic differed in other respects, they continued to read subversion as a binary process.

Curnow himself wrote out of a tradition that was inherently dualistic. In discussions of his or others' writings, he frequently makes claims which are overtly dualistic. In his introductory essay to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, Curnow constructed a poetic theory which was to challenge a previous generation of "Georgian" poets while simultaneously provoking a future generation. In dualistic terms he wrote, for example:

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to extensively argued texts by, among others, Culler, Descombes, Easthope, and Solomon.

The idea that we are confronted by a natural time, a natural order, to which our presence in these islands is accidental, irrelevant; that we are interlopers on an indifferent or hostile scene; that idea, or misgiving, occurs so variously and so often, and in the work of New Zealand poets otherwise so different, that it suggests some common problem of the imagination. (*Look Back Harder* 71)

Not surprisingly, Curnow has been read out of the same tradition, idealistically, as an autonomous author. W.B. Yeats, whose poetry and ideas had a key influence on Curnow, wrote in the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus":

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,  
The sentimentalist himself; while art  
Is but a vision of reality. (ll.46-48)

Peter Simpson used Yeats' quotation as an epigraph in his introduction to Curnow's collected critical writings, *Look Back Harder*, and observes:

In crude summary, art for Curnow (as for Yeats, a key mentor and point of reference) is primarily "a vision of reality" (with emphasis on both terms), and the *centre* of reality (while its circumference is unlimited) is, as Northrop Frye put it, "wherever one happens to be" – the "necessarily more or less circumscribed area of experience" within immediate reach of the artist's mind and senses . . . . (xii)

Curnow's world view is essentialist, holding that irrespective of the way the world is described, objects in it have fixed essences. Essentialism maintains that without these certain properties, objects could not exist or be what they are (*A Dictionary of Philosophy* 112). Curnow's poetry and criticism explicitly emphasise a belief in "the reality prior to the poems," as Peter Simpson notes in his introduction to *Look Back Harder* (xx). Accordingly, Curnow's "notion of the 'real' as existing prior to and outside language" eventually placed him in contention with modernist and postmodernist writers and critics (*Look Back Harder* xxii).

In this thesis I read subversion in Curnow's oeuvre not as a product of two dualistically competing ideologies, but as a product of dialogism. The dialogic model allows for a reading that locates meaning within the process of language itself. Rather than identifying an authoritative voice, for example, through which an essential meaning may be sought, dialogic criticism focuses instead on the political activity of language through which

all humans struggle to construct a sense of themselves and through which meaning is generated. Curnow's writing engaged dialogically with other voices, and in so doing came into existence as subversive. Thus, Curnow's subversive voice opposes, but also owes its existence to, other voices. Rather than positing a dualistic model, I argue that Curnow's writing *produces* that other voice at the same time as it produces its own oppositional voice. Curnow's writing is not the product of a clash between an essential self, and a fixed, essential thing "out there" – that is, anything external to the perceiving self, or everything which excludes the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" – which dualist criticism purports. Instead, his writing is a material product of the process of constructing an other voice, and one of his own with which to oppose the other. Both voices reside within the text.

## II

### DIALOGISM

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas can be traced back to his early immersion in the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, but he was not to embrace the Marburg philosophy nor Kantianism wholeheartedly.<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin begins by accepting that there is an "unbridgeable" gap between mind and world. Much of his life's work in dialogism focuses upon that gap. He neither dismisses the world in favour of only the mind, as did Hermann Cohen, leading exponent of the Marburg School (in a move which is firmly based on idealism). Nor does he consign Kant's *Ding-an-sich* (thing-in-itself) concept to the realm of the eternally unknowable (also an idealism). Bakhtin's theory is materialist, in that language becomes "matter." For Bakhtin, the very capacity to have knowledge is based upon a process of dialogue; and, by definition, dialogue requires the existence of an other.

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin's education and philosophical background is well documented in K.Clark's and M.Holquist's 1994 seminal biography *Mikhail Bakhtin*. As a result of the critical acclaim that the translation of *Rabelais and His World* received in the West in 1968, other works by Bakhtin – dating from his earliest of 1919 – were "discovered" and progressively translated. Ironically, only then did he become generally known throughout the USSR too. In a 1990 reappraisal, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, G.S.Morson and C.Emerson challenge Clark's and Holquist's contention that Bakhtin used the names of his friends V.N. Vološinov and P.N. Medvedev as *noms de plume* to avoid Stalin's censorship and enable his work to be published (101-119). In my study, quotations from the trio are attributed to their individual authors in accordance with publishers' details, but general discussion of theory is accorded collectively to Bakhtin or the Bakhtin school.

V.N. Vološinov – who, along with P.N. Medvedev, was a principal member of the Bakhtin school – argued in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* that "the organising centre of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside – in the social milieu surrounding the individual being" (93). This apparent denial of the subject is based on the Bakhtin school's belief that we can never see or know ourselves. Even to look at ourselves in a mirror is to look out from the mind, across a spatial gap at an object located in the outside world. We can see and know only of the other; only through the other's point of view can we gain some measure of apperception. Apperception is self-consciousness, the mind's perception of itself as a conscious agent. According to the Bakhtin school, lack of knowledge about the self includes our birth and death, and our physical presence at a given moment:

My temporal and spatial boundaries are not given for me, but the other is entirely given. I enter into the spatial world, but the other has always resided in it. (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 147)

Everything that pertains to the individual's concept of self, beginning with gender and name, enters the consciousness through others, in their emotional and value-assigning tonality:

I live in a world of others' words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others' words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or in other semiotic materials). (*Speech Genres* 143)

To speak is not merely to employ a means of making oneself an object for another, but also for oneself. Bakhtin's paradigm of self and other hinges on language itself. He writes:

There are no "neutral" words and forms – words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 293)

Bakhtin's dialogism by definition requires that at all times there must be an other in order that subjects gain a sense of selfhood. Michael Holquist's definition of the differences between three general theories, while somewhat oversimplified, is useful. He argues that the Western humanist tradition posited a close bond between the sense I have of myself as a unique being and the being of my language – "*I own meaning.*" He defines the deconstructionist view in opposite terms – "*No one owns meaning.*" He argues for a third conception of language, dialogism: "*We own meaning . . . or . . . if we do not own it, we may at least rent meaning*" (Holquist, 163-4, emphasizes his). Dialogism focuses on the dynamic interaction between self and other, with the word as the ground of contention, the point of struggle, and the material product of that struggle.

The dialogic subject is neither an autonomous locus of meaning and identity, nor is it a passive receptacle for meaning and identity. The subject is not even a hapless victim of colonisation by a hegemonic ideology belonging to others: there always remains the privilege of psychosis or death. The subject gains a conception of its self through its perception of an other, through a shared reality produced by dialogic interaction. Language constructs experience. It produces a speaker's (or writer's) experience of the other – and through the other, of the self.

The word "interlocutor" is increasingly used in conjunction with dialogism to describe the person being addressed. In addition to literary characters, this may also include the reader. An interlocutor is "one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion" (SOED). Traditional terms such as auditor ("a hearer, listener; one of an audience") suggest a passive response to the speaker, while a dialogue requires an *active* addressee. Bakhtin defines passive response as that which has no effect whatever on the utterance. Examples of this are rare: even an ancient ritualistic prayer is dialogic. The prayer would originally have been uttered to provoke a response among votaries, and may still trigger reactive utterances many centuries later. More importantly, it is produced for a concept of a god or gods, which are thus simultaneously produced in the prayer, even if only as notional others (as, for example, can be seen in Curnow's play *The Axe*). The speaker's need for an interlocutor is crucial to dialogism. The interlocutor need not be physically present, and may

even be notional. It is this concept that prompted Holquist to insist on the plural *we* who rent the meaning of language. In an interview Bakhtin explains:

[O]ne cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*.  
(*Speech Genres* 7)

Bakhtin is aware that his approach is contrary to the received Romantic notion of language and speech:

[In Romantic texts] language is regarded from the speaker's standpoint as if there were only *one* speaker who does not have any *necessary* relation to *other* participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively. (*Speech Genres* 67)

In other words, Curnow's poetry (to appropriate Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky's texts) has been read as provocative with the understanding that in opposing, he set himself apart, in an exclusive and dualistic way, from the exclusive and essential "social" voice. However, Bakhtin contends that terms such as "listener" and "understander," when used merely as partners of the "speaker," are fictions "which produce a completely distorted idea of the complex and multifaceted process of active speech communication."

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its executive, and so on. . . . Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. (*Speech Genres* 68)

Bakhtin allows for a "responsive understanding with a delayed reaction, since what is heard and actively understood will eventually find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener" (*Speech Genres* 69). Bakhtin also casts the speaker in the role of respondent. No speaker, Bakhtin suggests, is the first speaker "who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe." Thus any utterance becomes a link in a complex network of utterances. Bakhtin argues that when we speak, we appropriate words which are

components of a dynamic, ever-shifting pool of words – language. Thus, no word has a fixed meaning, and any attempt to apply a rigid meaning to a word, (and Bakhtin uses the concept of a dictionary to illustrate his point), undermines the fact that each word is also shifting, constantly appropriated by speakers who imbue it with ever-new meanings and use it in ever-new contexts. Therefore, according to Bakhtin, a word exists for a speaker in three ways. First, it is a neutral (dictionary) word in the language which belongs to nobody and whose meaning, according to Holquist, no one owns. Secondly, the word exists as an *other's* word, belonging to another person and filled with echoes of the other's utterance. Thirdly, the word exists for a speaker as his or her own word, used in particular contexts, and appropriated by the speaker during a particular ideological struggle. From this, Bakhtin concludes that:

. . . all our utterances (including creative works), [are] filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness", varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (*Speech Genres* 89)

The meaning of words does not issue directly from the language system but is rather an echo of another's word, ideologically and politically endowed by the contexts in which it has been uttered.

### III

#### POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Vološinov argued in his seminal work *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* that consciousness results from discourse, not the idealist reverse notion, that language emerges because we are conscious beings:

Idealism and psychologism alike overlook the fact that understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material that sign bears upon sign, that *consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs*. (*Marxism* 11, his emphasis)

However, language can be comprehended only linguistically. Understanding becomes a semiotic response to a sign.

Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction. (Vološinov, *Marxism* 11)

In this study of Curnow's poetry, satire, drama and critical writings, I use the term "ideology" to mean the ways in which New Zealand's dominant economic and social forces establish and maintain that dominance. In the ideological process of the hegemony, which according to Vološinov occurs only through language, the dominant social powers attempt to naturalise their supremacy, coercing others to accept as natural and inevitable, and therefore legitimate and binding, that which serves the hegemony.

Curnow illustrated an awareness of the process of the hegemony, and simultaneously attempted to undermine it, in 1943 when he wrote in "Landfall in Unknown Seas":

Between you and the South an older enmity  
Lodged in the searching mind, that would not tolerate  
So huge a hegemony of ignorance.

In contemporary philosophy, hegemony is frequently used in its Marxist sense, denoting the ascendancy and maintenance of a class in economic, social, political and ideological spheres.<sup>3</sup> More generally, however, the term describes the maintenance of social and political dominance by a particular group without the use, or direct threat, of physical force.

Although Vološinov was a Marxist by dint of the era and location in which he was writing, he argued for a less class-conscious, more personal linguistic model than is normally associated with the Marxist credo. He stated that a word "can carry out ideological functions of *any* kind – scientific, aesthetic, ethical, religious" but that the "reality of the word" resides between speakers (*Marxism* 14). At the same time, consciousness can only emerge as a product of social interaction, "*accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions . . . .* [Consciousness] is ideological through and through, determined not by individual, organismic (biological or physiological) factors, but by factors of a purely sociological character" (*Marxism* 9<sup>1</sup>, his emphasis).

In a more Marxist vein, in *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, Vološinov maintains that

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci.

all human utterance is an ideological construct (88). Conflicts occur when discourses representing differing ideologies clash, or when a discrepancy develops between official (those pertaining to the hegemony) and unofficial ideologies – hence his formulation that the "[s]ign becomes an arena of the class struggle" (*Marxism* 23). However, what is at stake in Curnow's work is a clash between ideologies rather than a Marxist struggle between classes.

All utterance assumes a listener and is constructed with that listener in mind.

Every utterance *is the product of the interaction between speakers* and the product of the broader context of the whole complex *social situation* in which the utterance emerges. (Vološinov, *Freudianism* 79)

All speech and thought is directed at an other, oriented toward a potential listener. A person has no internal sovereign territory as suggested by the Romantics in their essential model (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 287). All dialogic utterance is a product of an interaction with another, whether that other is notional or actual. The utterance is the process by which speakers come into conscious being, by which they produce themselves in relation to others and their others in relation to themselves. Consequently, there is no finite, distinct, definable other or self outside the text or the utterance. All utterance is a response to other voices, although this does not necessarily happen consciously. Because dialogic subjects are products of utterance, they can never fully know themselves, or take control of language. However, sometimes speakers speak in such a way which suggests that they are attempting to dominate a discourse to the extent that they preclude any response from another. Dialogic speech always allows for the other's response, and Bakhtin terms speech that does not "monologic." Rather, it "denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities" (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 292). In monologic speech, no response is expected that could change the world of the speaker's consciousness; such speech is "finalized and deaf" to the other's response, and "pretends to be the *ultimate word*" (*Dostoevsky* 293; his italics). Bakhtin does not explore this avenue to any great extent, and his main use of the term is confined to his discussion of the way other critics have monologized Dostoevsky's oeuvre in the past. He spends an entire book showing that Dostoevsky's work exceeds the narrow interpretation to which idealist, "monologic" readings have confined it. In other words, previous (to Bakhtin) critics have been locked into a

Romantic *Weltbild* and have consequently failed to recognise the main merit in Dostoevsky's work, its dialogism.

Similarly, Curnow's work has been explored in the past by critics who have read it monologically. Where subversive aspects of his writing have been observed, the struggle has been posited as a dualistic conflict. In my reading, Curnow's work begs for a Bakhtinian reading; such a dialogic reading shows Curnow's work not to be a simple dualistic attack on society: rather it can be read as containing not only Curnow's oppositional stance, but indeed the very society which he criticises. Curnow unwittingly takes for granted certain aspects of the society which he intends to oppose, thus constructing that society in ways which today may seem less acceptable or even odd. (An example of this is Curnow's condescending attitude in parts of his play *the Overseas Expert*, discussed in Chapter Seven.) In constructing himself in opposition to a particular point of society, Curnow constructs other points in that society as unquestionable; what is salient is that those points in his writing are *constructions* by Curnow, and not fixed essentials which he dualistically rebels against. Consequently, the points which Curnow opposes in society as well as Curnow's opposition to it, reside in his poems, satire, plays and critical writings and not in a realm beyond or above the text. Curnow's implicit and unwitting construction of society as he attempts to oppose it means that he remains in opposition but simultaneously dependent on it.

Although Bakhtin posits a model in which all human experience and interaction is dialogic, he does allow for a definition of monologism. Bakhtin claims critics have read Dostoevsky monologically, but he also maintains that such readings are limited, and more importantly, that there is an alternative – a dialogic reading which suggests more about Dostoevsky than the monologic reading. Monologism then is a misnomer, in a sense, because all speech, all utterance is inherently dialogic.

Although Bakhtin did not clearly state the connection between dialogism/monologism and centrifugal/centripetal forces, I find a comparison of the pairs useful to my reading of Curnow's work. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin described unitary or centripetal language as "a system of linguistic norms. But these norms do not constitute an abstract imperative" (270). He defines the norms as forces struggling to "unite and centralize verbal-

ideological thought" and attempting to create a "stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language" (271).

We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life. Thus a unitary language gives expression to forces working towards concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical [sic] and cultural centralization. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 271)

True monologism is akin to death, since "every word is directed towards an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (280). We consider a language from antiquity to be dead if the utterance no longer seeks and challenges possible response; although still decipherable, Latin for example, has become fixed or monological. In dialogic speech utterances, however, the centrifugal forces of language struggle against the possibility of response. Centripetal processes in discourse attempt to fix – monologize – language in an attempt to achieve or preserve particular speakers' or groups' ideological dominance. Curnow's poetry, satire, drama and critical writings may be read as the battlefield in which centripetal forces clash with centrifugal forces of subversion. Bakhtin observes the clash between centripetal (or by implication, monologic) and centrifugal (or dialogic) forces within a single speaker's utterance:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272)

#### IV

#### THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* was translated into English and published in the West in 1968, bringing world-wide recognition to the author who was by then an elderly and largely unknown lecturer in a provincial Russian university. The work began in 1934 as a series of studies, which Bakhtin combined and presented as a doctoral dissertation to the

Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, first in 1940 and again in 1947. However, Bakhtin was charged by conservative members of the examining committee with the heresy of "formalism" and in 1951 was awarded a lower degree.<sup>4</sup>

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin examines language in Rabelais' *Gargantua* that had been either ignored or repressed during the Renaissance period. He categorises Rabelais' language as either carnival, a concept he uses in terms of social things, or grotesque realism, a term referring to literature. *Rabelais and His World* discusses how the social and the literary interact (Clark and Holquist 299). Bakhtin equated the official and the unofficial within the Renaissance social system with high and low culture and focused on laughter as the marker of the distinction between both categories:

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval and ecclesiastical and feudal culture. (*Rabelais* 4)

He identified written and oral parodies, various forms of Billingsgate, curses, and oaths, and – most importantly – open-air ritual spectacles during market days and carnival, as three forms of humour that most threatened the dominant ideologies of the ordering classes in Rabelais' renaissance works (*Rabelais* 5). During the Renaissance, carnival played a central role in the life of all classes, yet it was one of the few areas that the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church did not reach. However, carnival "must not be confused with mere holiday play," as Clark and Holquist observe:

Carnival is a gap in the fabric of society. And since the dominant ideology seeks to author the social order as a unified text, fixed, complete, and forever, carnival is a threat. (301)

The threats to hegemony extended far beyond carnival proper. Parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, "with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals", agricultural feasts such as those during the grape harvest, and civil and social ceremonies with clowns and fools, mimicked serious rituals.

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<sup>4</sup> See the prologue to the 1984 Indiana University Press edition of *Rabelais and His World* (xiii-xxiii) for Michael Holquist's account of the presentation of Bakhtin's thesis. A substantial companion essay to *Rabelais and His World* is Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." It was written in about 1937-38 but not published till 1975, and is one of the four essays to make up the English translation, *The Dialogic Imagination* (84-258).

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition . . . were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. (*Rabelais* 5)

Bakhtin maintained that carnival belonged to the borderline between art and life. "In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (*Rabelais* 7). It "does not know footlights" because there is no distinction between actors and spectators.

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.

While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. (*Rabelais* 7)

Clowns and fools, characteristic of the medieval culture of humour, represented a certain form of life, simultaneously real and ideal, and on the borderline between life and art.

Bakhtin draws a distinction between feasts which were related to time, "either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness" and official ecclesiastic, feudal or state feasts, which "did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life" (9). The latter sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it, by formalising and relegating to the past changes and moments of crisis:

Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. (*Rabelais* 9)

In contrast to the official feast, carnival represented liberation:

[C]arnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order: it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (*Rabelais* 10)

Carnival laughter itself is a festive laughter and not an individual reaction to an isolated "comic" event (11). It is directed at everyone who participates in the carnival. Bakhtin defines it as ambivalent: triumphant but at the same time mocking and deriding – as well as inclusive. In an observation that can be used to account for some of the success of Curnow's weekly satiric newspaper verse under the pseudonym Whim Wham, Bakhtin observes that a satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, and thus what appears comic becomes a private reaction. However, people's ambivalent laughter expresses the point of view of the whole world and those who laugh also belong to it. In Whim Wham's case, the satirist and the bulk of his newspaper readership laughed together, and at themselves as much as at the world.

Bakhtin observes that parodies, written originally in Latin in the Middle Ages, brought the echoes of carnival laughter into the walls of monasteries, universities, and schools but required a certain degree of learning, and thus excluded the general population. However, secular parodies and travesties, performed outside the monastery walls and in the language of the marketplace, tended to prevail and led to the medieval comic plays which are accessible to the general population when performed even today. The latter plays present the droll aspects of the feudal system and of feudal heroics. Similarly, Curnow took his subverting laughter into Auckland's "marketplace" with his satiric *Huckster* poems of 1957 and 1958, and threatened the authority of the city fathers, as I discuss in Chapter Six.

According to Bakhtin, the "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (15) which could be observed during a carnival was achieved by use of the familiar speech of the marketplace. This speech involved a special genre of Billingsgate, complete with abusive language, profanities, oaths, and insulting words and expressions. While mocking and insulting the deity of the prevalent cult, the abuses were ambivalent; while humiliating and mortifying, they were reviving and renewing. Bakhtin argues that it was "this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse." The language lost its "practical direction and acquired an intrinsic, universal character and depth" (16-17). He claims that profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter but, when excluded from the sphere

of official speech, acquired the nature of laughter and became subversive.

I do not claim in my study that Curnow was a writer of carnivalesque literature: no evidence of the carnivalesque exists in Curnow's drama, or critical writings, and only some recent poetry benefits from a carnivalesque reading. There are, unmistakably, elements of the carnivalesque to be found in Whim Wham's satiric verse and, as an extension of the dialogic model, they help to explain how that genre was able to challenge and subvert authoritative discourse.

## CHAPTER TWO

CURNOW AND JULIAN IN *TOMORROW*

When will this voice be heard?  
 It is the voice of a bird  
 awake before the light.  
 – Allen Curnow (1935)

## I

During the 1930s Allen Curnow published a considerable amount of verse, much of it pseudonymously, which till recently has been marginalized. Curnow later ignored it, and its significance has been glossed over for half a century by literary critics and historians. Prior to the 1990s, critics and students of Curnow's poetry generally glanced at his three earliest published collections – *Valley of Decision: Poems* (1933), *Three Poems* (1935), and *Enemies: Poems 1934-36* (1937) – before settling down to detailed study of the work of the "maturing" poet, commencing either with *Not in Narrow Seas: Poems with Prose* (1939) or with the later *Island and Time* (1941). Even Curnow's social and political satire that appeared weekly in several major New Zealand newspapers for several decades over the pseudonym Whim Wham<sup>1</sup> has been virtually forgotten. However, the mid-1990s may in future be looked back upon as the commencement of a literary revision of Curnow's work and significance. For example, in June 1996 Stephen Hamilton presented a PhD thesis to the University of Auckland on "New Zealand English Language Periodicals of Literary Interest Active 1920s-1960s," which includes the most detailed references to Curnow's early poems and light verse yet undertaken. Hamilton's research into the periodicals is likely to remain seminal to the study of Curnow, at least until a comprehensive and specific historical and bibliographical study of Curnow's entire output is published. Later in 1996, at the Third Biennial Conference of the Association of New Zealand Literature, "Curnow, Caxton, and the Canon," in Dunedin, several of this country's leading literary academics, including Professors Vincent O'Sullivan and Terry Sturm, drew specific attention in their addresses to links

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<sup>1</sup> Whim Wham is as often written Whim-Wham by critics and publishers. See Note One to Chapter Six.

between Curnow's early published work over the pseudonym Julian and his later poetry.<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, in 1994 my initial proposal for this study suggested including the hitherto marginalized satirical verse of Whim Wham alongside Curnow's "high culture" poetry.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Curnow's serious poetry, drama, and literary criticism, study of his early work, some of which appears under his real name in subsequent publications, is considerably complicated by his use of several *noms de plume*. Apart from Whim Wham, which I discuss separately in Chapter Six, the other pseudonyms Curnow employed were Julian, Amen and Philo (unless scholarship reveals still further literary skeletons lurking in Curnow's nominal closet). Several items have also appeared under his initials, A.C.

A second complication is that much of Curnow's early work cannot be categorised as merely superficial, although critics tend to distinguish his earliest "immature" efforts, and especially the light verse he wrote over pseudonyms, from his later "serious" poetry. Distinctions of this kind become problematic when, as Hamilton convincingly illustrates in an appendix to his thesis, some of the former evolved or were incorporated into the latter. Curnow himself, as will be seen, is ambivalent in regard to such distinctions.

Finally, as I have already noted, no inclusive and detailed bibliographical record has yet been made of Curnow's entire output; only a general picture exists, sometimes based on anecdotes, about the extent and significance of these hitherto disguised and submerged texts.<sup>4</sup> Their "invisibility" has been continually reinforced throughout the second half of this century. Terry Sturm (1966:124) accurately noted thirty years ago in regard to the poets of the Depression years that Curnow had salvaged none of his poems from the 1930s for his later publications. A decade after Sturm's commentary, Curnow reissued 1930s poems in a collected works, but only those from his first four publications of "serious" poetry, and even

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<sup>2</sup> Proceedings from this conference are expected to be published in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, issue 15.

<sup>3</sup> Wystan Curnow defines and argues the term in his 1973 essay "High Culture in a Small Province."

<sup>4</sup> This is not to dismiss value and significance of the bibliographical work that has been published to date. In particular I am indebted to Theresa Graham (1976), John Weir and Barbara Lyon (1977), Peter Simpson (1986), and Stephen Hamilton (1996) for the assistance of their research.

then only after making major textual changes in some cases. However, W.S. Broughton, for example, called *Collected Poems 1933-1973* "the complete canon of Allen Curnow's work, excepting only the 'Whim Wham' occasional verses" (*NZ Listener* 12 Jul. 1975: 48). This is to ignore completely Curnow's light verse although, as will be seen in Chapter Six, the description of Whim Wham's work is accurate because it was all Curnow's reaction to news occasions. Even in the 1980s, the popular notion that we had all that there was to have, or at least was worth having, was prevalent: Broughton wrote in a review of Curnow's 1982

*Selected Poems* collection:

For most of us access to those earliest poems can only be had through the 1973 *Collected Poems*, and there, the author's note suggests, Curnow had undertaken some revision of that earliest work. (*Landfall* 147:363)

Context argues that Broughton's reference to Curnow's "earliest poems" is still only to those contained in the poet's three or four earliest collections and not to the dozens that appeared only in 1930s periodicals, and whose existence had generally been overlooked. Before discussing how a Bakhtinian reading of a sample of Curnow's hitherto marginalized verse and poetry may provide new insights, I highlight some issues in the next section arising from these early texts. Following the example set by Hamilton, I have included in an appendix a detailed index of Curnow's contributions to *Tomorrow* (an independent New Zealand literary, political and social periodical which ran from 1934 to 1940).

## II

Hamilton's thesis provides an excellent comprehensive and detailed survey of Curnow's contributions to periodicals, partly because it traces the development of some of the poems. Hamilton notes Curnow's "subsequent tendency to dis-own his very early work" (81) and observes that "it is perhaps correct to follow the poet's own lead and not place too much emphasis on the work published in *Phoenix* and elsewhere during the early thirties" (82). Part of Curnow's "own lead" that Hamilton refers to is Curnow's decision to pick 1940 as the starting date for his 1990 publication *Selected Poems 1940-1989*, which "effectively denies the existence of much of the early poetry, including work from the first four volumes"

(Hamilton 82).<sup>5</sup> Hamilton also draws attention to Curnow's introduction to *Collected Poems 1933-1973* in which the poet "noted that all the poems published in *Valley of Decision* were written between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and all were revised (sometimes so completely as to produce 'new' poems) for inclusion in the later volume" (81). Implicit in Hamilton's observations is the literary theoretical stance – still common today – that privileges authors' control over their work; thus, perhaps unconsciously, Hamilton conforms to Curnow's attitudes by later terming work from *Island and Time* (1941) onwards as the "second phase of his output" (151). However, Hamilton demonstrates that he is aware of the contradiction in such distinctions by quoting from Curnow's preface:

there are too many connections between my earliest and my latest poems to justify such a separation; they must stand together, for better or for worse. (*Collected Poems 1933-1973*, xii)

Hamilton further notes that the ordering of Curnow's 1989 *Selected Poems 1940-1989* and even his comments in the preface affirm Curnow's belief in the "interconnectedness of the early and late work" (82). Irrespective of how one interprets Curnow's attitude towards his juvenilia, contemporary critical approaches will, almost certainly, increasingly demand that his entire output be subjected to detailed scrutiny, notwithstanding earlier winnowing exercises by the poet himself.

One of the most compelling arguments for delving into Curnow's very early work, particularly that published under the name of Julian, is that some of the items evolved or were incorporated into the *Not in Narrow Seas* collection. As Sturm noted at the 1996 "Curnow, Caxton, and the Canon" conference address, "Allen Curnow and *Tomorrow*," these are the only examples in print of Curnow's poems in the process of development. Hamilton observes that "they thus allow a rare if partial insight into Curnow's process of composition" (151), and he provides us with a seminal database for future scholarship by attaching a thirty-page appendix to his thesis which compares the five instalments in *Tomorrow* with the 1939 version of *Not in Narrow Seas*. Thus, after sixty years, scholars are gaining better

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<sup>5</sup> In a paper presented at the 1996 "Cumow, Caxton and the Cannon" conference, I argued a case for considering the 1939 *Not in Narrow Seas* volume as the beginnings of the mature poet's work rather than the 1941 *Island and Time* volume. I revisit those issues in Chapter Three.

access to the mother lode of early poetic expression from (as O'Sullivan put it in the keynote address to the same 1996 conference) "the troubled and recent divinity student" and from which critics have hitherto examined only a handful of nuggets.

In 1962 J.J. Herd produced a complete author, title and subject index to the periodical *Tomorrow*. Herd notes in the preface that "references from pseudonyms and initials have been made only if the approval of the author has been given" which would have in some cases been difficult if not impossible for her to obtain, twenty years after publication had ceased. Nevertheless, indexing Curnow's contributions would have posed little problem, and Herd omits only one item out of forty-three contributions that Curnow is believed to have made (Hamilton 147; see also Appendix I to this thesis for a detailed list).

According to Hamilton (147n177) and O'Sullivan (1996), Curnow took the pseudonym Julian from the Roman emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus, the Apostate (C.E. 331-363), who was brought up a Christian, but on accession to the throne in 361 converted to paganism and proclaimed the free toleration of all religions.<sup>6</sup> The *nom de plume* Amen appears only once in *Tomorrow*, apparently the only time Curnow used it. Yet, when Amen's "The Rubbish Heap" was reprinted in 1937 in *Verses Alive number two*, the second of two selections of verses taken from the periodical *Tomorrow*, it was again attributed to Amen. Herd apparently either did not establish, or could not verify, the connection between Amen and Curnow, and omits both the poem and the pseudonym from her index.

Herd independently indexed the contributions that Curnow wrote to *Tomorrow* under his initials A.C. However, she does cross-reference the entries by Allen Curnow and by Julian through her entries for the poems "Rats In The Bilge" and "The Potter's Field." As Hamilton details, Curnow effectively annulled the anonymity of his pseudonym Julian by switching from his real name to the *nom de plume* between these two poems, and by parenthetically subtitling the former "Unfinished" and prefacing the latter with a note of instruction: "To be read as continuation of Rats In The Bilge. . . ." Hamilton concludes:

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<sup>6</sup> Curnow, the son of an Anglican vicar, abandoned his own calling to religious orders in 1934 after two years of theological training at the College of St John the Evangelist, Auckland (Roddick 59-60).

In the light of *Tomorrow's* poor record in the area of proof reading, the variation could just as easily be due to a lack [of] consultation with the editor responsible for the poem (probably Denis Glover). . . . 'Julian' had been Curnow's preferred signature for all but two of his more than two score contributions to *Tomorrow* up to mid-1937. (151)

Those two poems joined three others which appeared under Curnow's real name in *Tomorrow* at irregular intervals during the following fifteen months ("Variations on a Theme," "Predestination" and "A Loyal Show") to form the bulk of the *Not in Narrow Seas* sequence which was published in 1939. Distinctions between Curnow's so-called "serious" poetry and his pseudonymous verse are thus rendered less relevant in discussions of his poetry; the antecedents and poetic environment of a major publication, *Not in Narrow Seas*, have been established and would contribute usefully to some aspects of future Curnovian research and literary criticism. Hamilton's criticism, for example, already contributes to the collapse of the distinction:

A reading of Curnow's *serious poetry* [my emphasis] in *Tomorrow* traces a major development in his work from the personal and religious themes treated in *Valley of Decision* to a concern with the wider issues of social and national identity which found their first coherent expression in *Not in Narrow Seas*. (149)

A further collapsing of distinctions between the personae of Allen Curnow and his *noms de plume* occurred in the two issues of *Verse Alive*. H. Winston Rhodes and Denis Glover selected poetry from volume one (July 1934 to October 1935) of *Tomorrow* for the 1936 issue of *Verse Alive*, and from some of volume two (up till the end of 1936) for the 1937 *Verse Alive number two*. Eight of Curnow's poems were included in the first issue, all of which had previously appeared in *Tomorrow* over the Julian pseudonym. Three poems ("Daily Office," "Experience" and "The Usurper") appear in *Verse Alive* again attributed to Julian, but the editors published the five others under Curnow's real name ("Monody," Part III of "Aspect of Monism," "Absolute Idealism," "Restraint" and "The New Betrayal"). Similarly, the untitled poem "Pull the blind on the country scene" which appeared in *Tomorrow* over the initials A.C. appeared in *Verse Alive number two* over Curnow's full name, thus formalising

that link with the poet, but "The Rubbish Heap" appears in both publications attributed to Amen. However, the editors change authorship from Julian to Curnow for the remainder: "Apocalyptic" and three parts of *Tomorrow's* six-part "Wicked Words" which appear together as "Honour," "Faith" and "Heaven, Hell and Pleasure." Apart from several minor typographical changes, no alterations were made to the poems for their re-publication in the two *Verse Alive* books.

The poem "Apocalyptic" which appeared in *Tomorrow* on 29 January 1936 and was republished in *Verse Alive* bears no resemblance to the poem of the same title from the 1933 *Valley of Decision* collection. Conversely, "Restraint" and "Aspect of Monism" which were published in *Tomorrow* in March and April 1935, appeared in the same year in the *Three Poems* collection. The only significant change to either poem was the pluralization of the word "Aspect" for the collection (and again in the 1974 *Collected Poems 1933 - 1973*), although it remained singular the following year when Part III only was reprinted in *Verse Alive*. As has already been noted, these two poems are further instances of Julian's work from *Tomorrow* being publicly re-attributed to Curnow; in the case of "Restraint" and "Aspect of Monism," they form part of a trio that has long been accepted without question as early contributions to the canon of serious Curnovian poetry.

Possibly the most persuasive example of the benefits to be derived from examining Curnow's early and pseudonymous poetry lies with the 1939 collection *Not in Narrow Seas*; in the last few years that publication has become more widely recognized as the final version of which we also have exceptional access to an earlier draft. As Hamilton observes,

While not unique, this is certainly by far the most notable instance of Curnow publishing what amounts to a working draft of his poetry in the periodical press. The workshop nature of these instalments of *Not in Narrow Seas* give [sic] the reader a unique opportunity to witness to some extent the process of rewriting undertaken by Allen Curnow. (835)

Briefly, and in order of their appearance in *Tomorrow*, the Prelude and the first three parts of "Rats in the Bilge" become Parts 1 to 4 of *Not in Narrow Seas*; the seven parts of "The Potter's Field" become or are drafted into Parts 5 to 11 of the final sequence; "Variations on a

Theme" becomes the "Epilogue" to the final version; "Predestination" becomes Part 12; and "A Loyal Show" becomes the first half of Part 10 of the eventual *Not in Narrow Seas*. However, it is not my intention to further explore changes that occurred between drafts, except as they affect dialogic readings of the *Not in Narrow Seas* sequence (examined in the next chapter).

### III

Under his own name, Allen Curnow first published in *Tomorrow* on 19 September 1934 on page three of the eleventh issue, with a sentimental "Lunar Prospect" whose romantic-pastoral echoes and clichés give little indication of the considerable poetic control Curnow was later to develop. Buried at the foot of page six of the same issue, Julian also makes a first appearance with half a dozen lines of verse, "Daily Office." This second piece may be considered a deceptively gentle portent of the hard-hitting newspaper verse satirist Whim Wham who would later reign supreme for several decades. I would argue that "Daily Office" is already a much finer piece of poetry than "Lunar Prospect." Further, implicit in my argument in this and the succeeding three chapters on Curnow's poetry is my belief that there was developing in Curnow a tension between the rebellious satirist and the conservative traditionalist. I believe the synthesis of that tension – a combining but never a cancelling out – is what makes so much of Curnow's work great New Zealand poetry. "Daily Office" is a brief, but stinging sortie against Protestant hegemony:

Lord, save Thy people, sang the Vicar:  
I saw one altar-candle flicker.  
The flat flame wink'd, the parson whined,  
and on that instant I divined,  
full-faced between the candle-sconces,  
old Mammon mouthing the responses.

Here we begin with an apparently neutral report of the Vicar – his status privileged by the use of the capital "V" – singing an invocation to the Lord. While the exchange may superficially appear to be a dialogue between the Lord and His subjects, in Bakhtinian terms it is, in fact, monologic. The Vicar invokes the Lord's benevolence on behalf of the congregation; the

congregation's "response" is neither directed towards the Vicar, nor is it a reply or answer to the Lord (who has, after all, not directly asked a question). The congregation's reaction is a further stylized invocation, also directed to the Lord. Bakhtin would argue that this liturgical ritual is a closed or monologic address that provokes no dynamic response outside the parameters of its traditional stylization. However, the poem disrupts that convention, first by demoting the Vicar to a whining parson, and then by ensconcing Mammon on the altar facing the congregation.

The speaker perceives Mammon, the personification of covetousness, wealth and miserliness, mouthing the liturgical responses from a central position on the altar facing the congregation. Responses are replies or answers said or sung back to the priest. Mammon operates in two ways. He "mouths" to us the correct replies to the Lord, which subverts their validity or at least threatens their moral stability; secondly, we can read him as literally responding to the priest's invocation. Whose people, then, are we, and who is going to save us? Unlike the Curnow poem "Lunar Prospect" which takes us no further than a passive appreciation of yet another pretty picture of the moon, "Daily Office" attacks the ecclesiastic tenets of a hegemonic force within society. Irrespective of the degree to which, if at all, the reader agrees with the speaker's sentiments, the poem provokes tension between conflicting ideologies.

Julian repeats the short, striking approach two issues of *Tomorrow* later with the brief "Parable":

This world of ours is very like  
a slot-machine, I think:  
you slip a soul into the slot  
and out comes food and drink.

Despite its brevity, the verse displays a number of characteristics that Curnow was to exploit in the coming half century: for example, the first person narratorial voice which has often been but should not necessarily be confused with Curnow's own; the conspiratorial and inclusive second, usually singular, personal pronoun address instead of an unspecified "one"; and the slightly aloof and intellectualized observations on human endeavour. In a similar way to the previous Julian verse, the material and spiritual world

views clash, as one might expect from a poet who a year previously had published the *Valley of Decision* collection. In his opening address to the 1996 "Curnow, Caxton and the Canon" conference, O'Sullivan observed that the title ". . . as accurately might have been *Valley of Indecision*, the young theological student both affirming and teetering, Christ vindicated, and yet. . . ." These indecisions haunt the early Julian poems, such as "The New Betrayal",

Why do we utter such deceit?  
The rain is not the tender beat  
of angel hands at human doors,  
as I was taught, as I was told  
when I was not yet ten years old[.]

which oozes with disillusionment, or "Complaint" which expresses frustration: "When will this voice be heard?" The link back to *Valley of Decision* and its author is strengthened with the appearance of "Renunciation (II)" in *Tomorrow*. The body-soul dichotomy which the earlier Curnow poem "Renunciation" had expressed is taken up in the second Julian one, but in far more subtle fashion. The reader cannot be sure whether "the many prisoners of this land" in "Renunciation (II)" refer to New Zealand's "land of settlers" or whether the poet has more universal notions in mind. Either way, and in either poem, the narrator is attempting publicly to renounce a philosophy of spiritual idealism. This becomes more apparent, perhaps, with the return of the staccato Julian verse "Absolute Idealism" which expresses surprisingly postmodernist notions of reality for a 1935 poem:

Not in six days but in an instant  
on the first opening of child eyes  
the earth is made, and after that the sea,  
winds fill the morning and mountains rise.

This blatant confrontation with the Biblical explanation of creation provides a simple, but not simplistic, personalized alternative. It remains, however, idealist and has not progressed to the non-essential notion of a continual construction of reality one might reasonably expect to find in postmodernist writing.

These poems should not be read as suggesting that Curnow was intent merely on attacking God or Christianity: in "Factory Weight" he pits "the manufacturers' printed authority" of capitalism against God and suggests that in the "best possible worlds" the two

sides could rival each other via advertising posters. Yet at this stage Julian more often revisits his feelings of disillusionment with ideals, and the sense of loss he experiences by no longer believing in them, than tests or attacks the institutions that foster such beliefs. In "Restraint," which was reprinted the same year in *Three Poems*, Julian concludes in a tone almost of lament:

Never look long on a flower—  
 a moment, at the most—  
 for fear your heart walk desolate  
 in a cold land lost.

"Aspect of Monism" is a departure from the poems so far discussed, including even "Restraint," because of its extensive development of argument. It dwells upon concerns similar to many, perhaps most, other Curnow poems of this period – exploration of the speaker's theological and philosophical attitudes – but the greater depth of treatment identified it as a logical candidate for re-issue, in part and in full, under Curnow's name (*Verse Alive*, *Three Poems*, and the later 1974 collection). The doctrine of monism denies a duality of matter and mind. In specifically theological terms, it denies a Good and Evil Principle in favour of one Supreme Being. These were precisely the concerns of Julian who begins, "This was untrue, that there is division / between body and mind" before expanding the argument, with examples, into a type of holism. As we saw in the earlier four-line "Absolute Idealism" poem, this larger poem posits a mental idealism; for example,

In the dawning eye only has the sun its being,  
 waking to dawn in a man's body, burning  
 as ultimate knowledge looked fairly in the face;  
 and where lastly is the act of seeing?

Julian's invitation, "So with me you must come into certain places," may in retrospect be interpreted almost as an invitation to readers to join him on a journey of more than half a century. The conclusion of "Aspect of Monism" has a curiously postmodernist ring to it,

then it may be life will look on life,  
 eye into eye and see no difference,  
 but earth, love, death, lost in a single span.

Curnow wrote in 1990 in the preface to *Selected Poems 1940 - 1989*,

The poems may or may not, as the reader pleases, seem to describe a kind of circle joining age and youth, a loop in the road.

(xi)

The commencement date of that loop should, I believe, be extended back beyond 1940 to Curnow's earliest writing. The concluding lines to "Aspect" quoted above echo in dozens of later poems, just one random example of which comes from "Moro Assassinato":

All the seas are one sea,  
the blood one blood  
and the hands one hand.

In his 1996 conference address, O'Sullivan alluded to Curnow's early poetry as "the slow but steady move . . . towards what now strikes one as a strong socialist directive," although he noted that "this is a verse far less programmatic than that of his contemporaries who are also engaged with politics." He also finds Curnow less optimistic, which results in what he describes as the "prevailing tone until nationalism takes his attention" as in the "Yeatsian quatrain" Julian wrote called "Experience":

As a man sits quiet in his prison  
Who once would pace the stones and rage,  
So voices fail that would cry out on  
The smooth agony of this age.

I observed a brief attack on capitalism previously in "Factory Weight." Other Julian poems such as "The Usurper," the part of "Wicked Words" dealing with industry, and the quite depressing "Flotsam" all touch upon socialist concerns. "Work and Prayer" was one of only two poems from *Tomorrow* that Curnow was to import into the 1937 *Enemies* collection (the other being "Orbit"). He changed the name of "Work and Prayer" to "Chief End," made a minor word change to the first stanza, but omitted the entire third stanza which makes up the second half of the original. The dropped stanza is a repetition that adds little to the socialist sentiments of the two first stanzas, and I believe the poem's impact is improved by its absence.

## IV

As Hamilton (151) has remarked, Curnow preferred the Julian signature under all but two of his more than two score contributions before the anonymity of the pseudonym was annulled with the link between "Rats In The Bilge" and "The Potter's Field." These two poems and the three others from *Tomorrow* that were eventually incorporated into the reworked *Not in Narrow Seas* collection of 1939 will be discussed more fully in the next chapter in their final form. From this point midway through 1937 till his final publication in the periodical in September 1938, there were only three other contributions by Julian in *Tomorrow*, but a dozen under Curnow's real name. Most of the contributions in either case were a continuation of the themes and styles already discussed. However, in "Hot Air Force" which appeared just a year prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, Julian wrote a scathing attack on an air force display, headed by the following epigraph:

LINES on reading an account of the New Zealand Royal Air Force Display at Rongotai Aerodrome, Wellington; and being impressed neither with the need for instructing the young men of the Dominion in the art of military flying, nor with their proficiency in that art[.]

Given, on the one hand, that the anonymity of Curnow's *nom de plume* Julian had been prejudiced more than a year previously, and on the other, that within New Zealand public opinion was being prepared for a possible European war, this poem adopts a surprisingly anti-military stance. Although my purpose is not to conduct biographical research into the poet, I note in passing that little has been written about Curnow's personal views on New Zealand's subsequent involvement in the Second World War, about whether the 28-year-old may have been a conscientious objector, medically unsuitable, or had any other reason for not undertaking military service in 1939. In his critical study of Curnow, Roddick merely says: "Curnow's own isolation was no doubt intensified by the Second World War, which took so many of his contemporaries overseas . . ." (Roddick 21). That aside, "Hot Air Force" was the first of a number of poems which reflect, if not necessarily anti-military sentiments, certainly intellectually independent views on the general subject of war. The epigraph to "Hot Air Force" specifically questions the need for military pilot training of New Zealanders, but the poem is ideologically more subdued and merely mocks. Dogfights between two air force

bases are regarded as pointless, particularly because the aircraft are outdated and the shooting is poor:

The N.Z.R.A.F. careering  
 Above the music and the cheering,  
 Shooting itself to smithereens  
 Inside its obsolete machines.

Or would they scatheless homeward fly  
 To Wigram and to Rongotai  
 (A victory each beyond disputing)  
 Delivered by their own bad shooting?

Captured in this poem is a quiet and oblique attack on the "cheering" public who, while not directly identified, are the audience and surely the real target of the (probably martial) music and the overhead demonstration of aerial manoeuvres. The public are also a prime target for Julian, who must know he stands little chance of changing the attitudes of the military with occasional verses in a provocative periodical. Hence, public opinion in a symbolic sense has become a challenge to be ideologically conquered, with Curnow contending, from behind his *nom de plume*, with the might of the country's war machine. History recalls that the hegemonic military establishment of half a century ago easily won that particular ideological battle for public approval; but, also, Curnow's poetry, and his satire (as discussed in Chapter Six), show that Curnow's independent poetic voice may have been subdued but was never conquered.

In August 1938 Curnow published under his own name in *Tomorrow* "The Sword and the Bomb" in "imitation of W.B. Yeats who, well past his seventieth year, has lately referred in a poem to the fear of air bombardment." The poem indicates a shift in approach: it cannot be viewed as a direct attack by the poet on the military institution because it is ostensibly a poem about another poet. The references, for example, to Maeve and Cuchulain (and Sato, below), and the sophisticated imagery, remove the poem from the comprehension of an audience untutored in what Curnow elsewhere calls Yeats' "Irish mythology, his Irish politics and history" (*Look Back Harder* 21), while at the same time those effects increase the poem's metaphorical possibilities:

Whoever conjured with the tight-strung wind  
 And fought with heroes in the volleying rain,  
 Hangs Sato's blade above the mantelshelf,  
 Sweetens to tragedy with powerful rhyme  
 The formless horror of the modern wars.

Thus the ideological attack on the notion of war is no less than in the previous poem discussed, but Curnow has now yoked his opposition to that of a literary figure generally accepted by the establishment and has embedded his own sentiments into those of Yeats.

Curnow's final contribution to *Tomorrow* was "Defence Policy," published on 28 September 1938 over the name of Julian. This is among the most surreal of Curnow's poems and can be read as the high point Curnow reached while experimenting in a number of creative styles during the "crucially important workshop" years – as Hamilton (147) puts it – of the 1930s. In contrast to the short stabbing satiric verses we have seen, which were to develop into Whim Wham's satires, or to the delicately-honed hieratic efforts which required some demotic modification to give them more general appeal, "Defence Policy" deliberately rebels against artistic and logical restraints. Surrealist innovations populate the poem, including violated syntax, the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images, apparently dreamlike or hallucinatory sequences, and free association. With just a few isolated exceptions, Curnow was not to exploit to any great extent the possibilities of this style of poetry again until the 1970s. "Defence Policy" is perhaps an under-rated poem because it is not readily accessible; rather, it is poetically and intellectually challenging. It targets Christianity as in "how lovely to defend / the Cross from cruel Jesus," warfare as in "protect the delicate bullet / from the aggressive breast," and the war economy as in "the squareroot of a cigarette / swims home and pays the chirping debt." However, it does not develop an argument, other than in the consistency of its convoluted and inverted gibes. Yet the stark, capitalized and incomplete words of the central section carry the power to shock and disrupt:

DEMIC

DEMAEC

DEMOC

NOW FACES INTERNAT

DISAST IS CONFRONT

LADIES & GENTLEMEN

As cable page (foreign news) sub-editor on the Christchurch daily newspaper *The Press* at this time, Curnow would have spent hours each day exploiting the size, shape, brevity, and visual and mental impact of words, often in upper case as depicted above, when writing news story headlines.

As Hamilton (83) details, during 1932 and 1933 Curnow also published six poems in *Phoenix*, three of which – "The Spirit Shall Return," "Arcady," and "Apocalyptic" – appeared in the 1933 *Valley of Decision* collection. "The Spirit Shall Return" and "Apocalyptic" were later included in *Collected Poems 1933 - 1973*. "Apocalyptic" is completely different from the poem of the same name that appeared in *Tomorrow* in 1935 and was reprinted in 1936 in *Verse Alive*. As well as articles in various publications, Curnow also contributed poetry during the 1930s to, among others, *Kiwi* and *Canterbury College Review* some of which were re-published in the *Valley of Decision* collection.

## V

We may conclude that, apart from detailed and inclusive biographical and bibliographical studies of Curnow and his work during the 1930s which yet remain to be written and published, the significance of Curnow's hitherto marginalized poetry has also to be determined fully. My research suggests that "some crisis of change from faith to scepticism" (*Valley of Decision xii*) informed a considerable proportion of Curnow's early work, as indicated by the philosophical and religious themes that dominate the early works. However, I contend that a subversive poet was also developing, who was first to question established ideologies from within the borders of their discourses, before gradually shifting his poetic voice to the margins of official discourse. In the next chapter I shall again examine this process, but by discussing Curnow's poems of the 1930s that were accepted into the official canon of literature.

CHAPTER THREE  
EARLY POETRY 1933-39

If on the street a rhythmic speech is heard  
Ears prick, heads turn towards the foreign clown  
Whose musical greeting's like a waking bird:  
They fear great Pan will bankrupt half the town.  
– Allen Curnow (1949)

An examination of Allen Curnow's poetry from the 1930s, including verse he published under the *noms de plume* Julian, Amen, A.C., and Whim Wham, demonstrates Curnow's ability to shift the location of his poetic voice. This chapter first argues that his earliest work tends to be critical of some aspects of society, but from within the official discourse of the hegemony. However, in his poetry from the mid-1930s, Curnow moves his narrative voice to the margins of official discourse, using such devices as irony to test hegemonic dominance. Finally, late in that decade Curnow positioned his poetic voice in opposition to official discourse. From that stage his poetry shows a mocking of hegemony from the outside.

I

The first line of "Sea Changes," the opening poem of Curnow's first published collection, *Valley of Decision* (1933), tells us that strange times had taken hold of the speaker.<sup>1</sup> Those "strange times" of Curnow's early writing days in the thirties did not initially manifest themselves with much sense of optimism or belief in the future. The collection's title poem "Valley of Decision" suggests you can only ever "discover / truth out of bleary experience." Hence,

hour upon hour heap up your days;  
designs, desires and proper thought  
fall impotent on vacant ways  
where sense snaps off and runs distraught.

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<sup>1</sup> The original 1933 publication, *Valley of Decision*, contained twenty-two poems. Curnow dropped three for the 1974 publication and revised the remaining nineteen.

Indeed, in the poem "At the Brink" any

possibility of rebirth appears to be ruled out:

for perfect things must needs be dead  
or live alone in perfect praise,  
and one bright day is but the seal  
of countless deaths of countless days.

Instead of rebirth there remains only

hard hope of an enduring light  
in an eternal transience

with the "eternal transience" replacing notions of cyclic death and rebirth. Despite the state of mind of "the troubled and recent divinity student" (O'Sullivan 1996), a dialogic reading of these very early poems informs us that Curnow continued to speak from *within* the boundaries of theological orthodox Christian discourse. The poems from the first collection generally speak with an official seriousness rather than from a position of confrontation or opposition to that official point of view.

The sonnet "Behold Now Behemoth" retells a short section from the *Book of Job* (40:15-24) in which a voice from inside a whirlwind describes the power of God. This description is part of a series detailing the wonderful works of God and His knowledge, wisdom and goodness, in order to prove that humans can trust God even when they cannot always understand the reason for His actions. (A poem in Curnow's 1979 poetry sequence *An Incurrible Music*, draws its title line "Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?" from the *Job* chapter immediately following this one about Behemoth.) Job's faith had been tested and his responses debated in earlier parts of the book. The arguments contained in this part of *Job* are a training in faith. The conclusion appears to be that some troubles are insoluble mysteries. Yet God has revealed Himself as so good, so wise, so powerful, and such a loving Father, that we can trust our souls to Him in perfect peace, faith and love. Since I do not believe this early poem has been previously discussed, I quote it at length in its original version:

See the wide-footed, pendant-bellied beast  
 called Behemoth, burst loose the river weeds  
 in cloudy mud-mist down the stream; he feeds  
 grunting, suck-sucking Jordan with his feast  
 of grass; slow swings his low eyes to the east,  
 blinks as the sun strikes, turns away; he needs  
 no such clean light, shafting the trodden reeds;  
 logs it in water-holes till day has ceased.

Drowse and be comfortable; lie, Behemoth  
 under the cross-stick shadow, trembling veil  
 heat-vibrant, quick in the slant-broken stems.  
 So has He made you; bone and sinew both  
 of iron, that His image man may quail  
 at sight of you, and clutch His garment's hems.

"Behold Now Behemoth" is a poetic retelling of the biblical excerpt, and it fails to offer new insights or to question traditional assumptions about humans' relationship to God. The poem echoes the Yeatsian "rough beast" which "slouches towards Bethlehem" in "The Second Coming."<sup>2</sup> Curnow's description of Behemoth emphasises the grotesque look of the creature, in contrast to the Biblical story which focuses on Behemoth's strength. For example, in Curnow's poem Behemoth is wide-footed and pendant-bellied, while in the Bible "his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly" (*Job* 40:16). Literature has a long tradition of exaggerating physical characteristics, in some cases to emphasise strength and virility, in others to engender hate and fear. Curnow has changed the emphasis, but not for the purpose of subverting or questioning traditional authoritative interpretation. This creature "burst loose" as a tyrannical but supreme creation of God's, and we still "quail" at the sight of him.

The poem is rich in other details that encourage a Bakhtinian reading about subversion. In his seminal text on subversion,<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin suggests that literary images of

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<sup>2</sup> In an introductory essay to Curnow's collected critical writings, Peter Simpson notes that Curnow privileged Yeats as "a key mentor and point of reference" (*Look Back Harder* xii).

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 281.

eating, drinking and swallowing often provide potent sites of struggle and conquest. Humans taste the world, introduce it into their bodies and make it part of themselves as a means of conquering it. Such imagery, we already know, is central to the Christian ceremony of the Eucharist, especially in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. When the ritual of the Eucharist is performed, votaries overcome death and achieve eternal life. Curnow's poem "Behold Now Behemoth" draws more attention than does the Bible to the manner in which the creature eats and drinks. We become alert to the Bakhtinian possibility that the beast is making the world part of himself:

[He] burst loose the river weeds  
in cloudy mud-mist down the stream; he feeds  
grunting, suck-sucking Jordan with his feast  
of grass[.]

A Bakhtinian reading suggests that Behemoth has actively made the world his victorious, triumphant meal. The beast can even draw the River Jordan, lifeblood of Palestine, up into his mouth. He is not afraid. He has defeated the world by eating it. The limits between beast and world are erased, to the beast's advantage. But we are unable to exploit further the possibilities inherent in such a subversive reading. For example, with reference to the Eucharist, we don't know whether the beast has overcome death, or merely cheated it in an attempt to avoid death. Rather than positing alternatives, Curnow retreats to an official conclusion. The final line of the sonnet tells us we have little choice but to "clutch His garment's hem," probably in allusion to the sick who touched Jesus's hem, hoping He would effect a cure:

And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood  
twelve years, came behind *him*, and touched the hem of his  
garment:  
For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.  
(*Matthew* 9:20-21)

And [they] besought him that they might only touch the hem of his  
garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.  
(*Matthew* 14:36)

This allusion to Jesus and a reference to the cross four lines earlier are the only attempts by

the poet to manipulate us into reacting to the creature or to God differently. Those attempts carry the argument beyond *Job's* Old Testament philosophical parameters, but still offer an alternative that is hegemonically Christian. In 1974, Curnow went further by simultaneously offering a subtle resistance to a Christian reading; he changed the upper case pronouns for God to lower case:

So has he made you; bone and sinew both  
of iron, that his image man may quail  
at sight of you, and clutch his garment's hems.

The change here technically introduces an ambiguity: who is "he"? At the same time, however, it brings the poem into line with both the Authorized Version of the Bible (1611) – of which Curnow would presumably have been thinking in 1933 – and with the New English Bible translation (1970); both use lower case pronouns for God, although the King James version italicises *him*.

The Behemoth poem reinforces rather than dispels or questions any sense of fear or awe we may entertain. No clearly defined sense of opposition is expressed to hegemonic liturgical notions of human frailty in comparison to God's might. Only the smallest attempt is made to turn the traditional Christian view of the world upside down in a bid for freedom or new possibilities, and then only in the 1974 revision of the poem through the use of three lower case pronouns for God. A dialogic reading is useful because it enables us more accurately to locate Curnow's poetic voice on the near – perhaps "safe" – side of any debate over hegemonic discourse, in this case traditional theology. He has selected a character from within traditional Christian discourse. His poem invites a different, but not an oppositional, reading of Christian, hegemonic values.

## II

Perhaps the title of Curnow's 1937 collection, *Enemies*, should be sufficient by itself to alert us to the possibilities of struggle. The collection has traditionally been appreciated for its exhibition of dominant moods which, according to Roddick (7), "range from disillusionment" to "startlingly-honest hatred." Curnow was still two years away from envisioning his "two islands not in narrow seas"; hence *Enemies* could be described as embodying the

inevitable "conflict of spirit," to borrow his own description of Mason's poetry of the 1920s (*Look Back Harder* 154), before he finally discovered his leitmotif. The suggestion of opposition is overt in the title of *Enemies*, although where Curnow locates his poetic voice is not yet apparent. In this section I examine aspects of several poems from the *Enemies* collection to illustrate how Curnow begins to challenge hegemonic colonial and bourgeois attitudes. His use of irony suggests a stance close to or on the boundaries of official discourse.

The changing location of the speaking voice is heralded innocuously enough part way through the first poem of the collection, "New Zealand City" (quoted here from the 1974 *Collected Poems*):

Land of new hopes  
with a thousand years'  
despair, of children  
with senile faces,  
this land, these islands:  
the shadow of Europe  
falls, over the fallen  
walls of an empire:  
the planet called Asia  
spins visibly  
from here, small city,  
to the naked eye  
some worlds away  
in the northern sky . . .

Examination of the light verse Curnow was publishing from late 1934 onwards in *Tomorrow*, particularly under the Julian pseudonym discussed in the previous chapter, indicates that in the period leading up to the publication of *Enemies*, Curnow gradually broadened his preoccupation with spirituality to include also social and political issues. The period also coincides with the start of his fifteen-year journalistic career, first as a reporter and then as foreign news sub-editor in Christchurch with *The Press*. Curnow accurately gauged New Zealand's future changing relationships with England, Europe, North America and Asia, although he wrote *Enemies* several years before the fall of Singapore and the Second World

War, and more than half a century before New Zealand's active move to integrate itself into Asia. The line "this land, these islands" encapsulates what we understand to be Curnow's concerns, but in the context of Bakhtinian theories, Curnow sits on the margins of official European colonial ideology. Ironically, however, the line "this land, these islands" did not appear in the original poem, and that leitmotif was already popular among New Zealand writers during the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> The 1937 version of the above citation reads by comparison:

This is the land of new hopes  
joined with a thousand years' despair,  
of children with senile faces.

The shadow of Europe falls  
encompassing the east  
and the wrinkled edge of empire  
embraces these islands.

Old and crooked Asia  
is an evil glance in the north.

Both versions of the poem challenge the then generally held view that Great Britain was benevolent towards New Zealand and that there were mutual responsibilities. However, in the 1937 version, New Zealand is located on the "wrinkled edge of empire"; in 1974, with the benefit of hindsight, Curnow locates New Zealand as being "over the fallen / walls of an empire." This poem was not the first in which Curnow stood outside official discourses of colonisation; nor was Curnow the first or only New Zealand poet of the 1930s to challenge the idea of British benevolence and implicit authority. Curnow can be located well within "a common line of development" (to use his own words from elsewhere). According to Broughton (1968), although A.R.D. Fairburn did not publish *Dominion* till March 1938 (the year after Curnow's *Enemies*), he completed the poem sequence by late 1935 or early 1936, and offered it to Denis Glover at the Caxton Press in mid 1936 (206-7). Based on these known dates, and the amount of extant correspondence from the period between Fairburn

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Charles Brasch's seminal poem "In These Islands"; A.R.D. Fairburn's *Dominion* (including islands in "Imperial" and land in "Elements"); M.H. Holcroft's *The Deepening Stream* essays, from the later *Discovered Isles* trilogy, which opens with "An Island Home."

and others regarding the emerging poem, it is reasonable to speculate that Curnow was well aware of *Dominion* long before it was published. In a study of *Dominion*, John C. Ross does not specifically link the poem with any of Curnow's, but he concludes that one of *Dominion's* importances is that it

gives dynamic expression to many of the ideas and forces relevant to life in New Zealand. It helped to lay down the terms of discussion. And the syntheses made by M.H. Holcroft . . . and by Allen Curnow . . . are in this sense descendants of *Dominion*. (79)

Furthermore, Fairburn's *Dominion* and Curnow's *Enemies* contain remarkable similarities in tone and even in imagery to parts.<sup>5</sup> A decade later, Curnow drew specific attention to "the ability of New Zealand verse to draw strength from within itself," although he avoids expressing his own debt to his contemporaries such as Fairburn. Nor does he state that Baxter's work is indebted specifically to his own. Curnow was reviewing Baxter's *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* in the context of "something like a common line of development" between Baxter and Baxter's "elders":

There can be no doubt that "The Track", a poem with the movement and brightness of running water, has sources in Mr A.R.D. Fairburn's *Dominion* and "The Cave"; that in "Winter Morning" and "Let Time Be Still" something is inherited from Mr R.A.K. Mason. Poetry aside, there is corroboration of the thought about New Zealand pursued by Mr M.H. Holcroft in *The Waiting Hills* and elsewhere. . . . (*Look Back Harder* 100).

At the conclusion of the poem "New Zealand City" a stanza of six lines is presented, which Curnow foregrounded (with italics) for the 1974 publication:

*Serf to them all  
for pleasure or pain;  
betrayed to the world's  
garret and gutter,  
sold for the export  
price of butter.*

In this we may perceive the genesis of the political and social verse satirist Whim Wham

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<sup>5</sup> Curnow's review of *Dominion*, when the book appeared, is "Rata Blossom or Reality? New Zealand and a Significant Contribution," *Tomorrow* 4:14 (11 May 1938), 438-39, reprinted in *Look Back Harder*, ed. Peter Simpson, 10-12.

whose stinging wit was largely absent from Curnow's early work. A subtle shift in agency occurs between the 1937 and 1974 versions of this stanza: while the later rendition suggests that responsibility for the colony's trade and commerce may lie with a local agent ("*sold for the export / price of butter*"), the earlier publication subtly suggests that responsibility lies with the buyer ("*bought at the export / price of butter*"). However, in neither case does the stanza represent the discourse of a London-based colonial master or a Wellington-based "dog-at-heel, obsequious" (as he puts it several poems later) butter seller, but of those whose voices were not generally privileged: distant and increasingly marginalized New Zealand immigrant workers.

This satiric stanza is subversive in its audacity: "*Serf to them all*" can either refer to all imperialistic oppressors or to other countries and periods of history. The betrayal of immigrant workers is not only by the British colonial masters, but also by their lackeys, the local governors. And they in turn, along with the rest of the immigrants, are serfs to the world's highest and lowest – "garret and gutter" – as they betray and buy/sell New Zealand for the price of export butter. Curnow expresses almost palpable outrage at New Zealanders being valued as an exportable commodity in this final stanza.

In *The Ensphering Mind*, James Wieland's examination of the poetry of Curnow and five other poets from the British Commonwealth, the author remarks: "Constant in Curnow's poetry is the need for his country continually to be reassessing her relationships with the outside world" (27). A Bakhtinian reading would take Wieland's claim to its (dia)logical conclusion: that the "need" is in fact an imperative if a sense of national identity is to be established. Significantly, Wieland terms the *Enemies* poems "satires" and labels Curnow's attitude in "New Zealand City" "scorn," which

settles on the compelling sense of futility which pervades his city. New Zealand is the spawn of London: her economy, politics, and media he sees as a mimicry of the parent, to whom the local 'potentates cringe.' (27)

In 1947 Curnow made a rare admission about his own poetry of the 1930s in a review of a volume of contemporary Australian poetry:

This scolding tone occurs in all the poems here in which a significant general statement is attempted; the poem becomes a public speech. (Some of us were youthfully given this way a decade ago in New Zealand, but this is adult immaturity.). (*Look Back Harder* 88)

If my use of two versions of "New Zealand City," forty years apart, to argue a case is questionable, I call upon Curnow himself in defence. In an "Author's Note" to the *Collected Poems 1933-1973* publication, he described – indeed, in near-dialogic terms – how "some poems carry between or under their lines their own instructions for revision" which the poet must read as well as "he" [sic] can:

If he doesn't revise, he is in effect concealing something from the reader; some part of his own better understanding. (xii)

Comparison of the resistance the poet portrays to colonial ideology in ostensibly the same collection of poems, but one of which underwent revision forty years later, indicates that in this respect at least Curnow's attitudes have generally hardened but not shifted.

Another less well known poem in *Enemies* is the short "Chief End" which originally appeared in *Tomorrow* as "Work And Prayer" over the signature of Julian.<sup>6</sup> The second half of the original Julian verse was dropped completely when it changed title (and authorial name) to become an *Enemies* poem, but thereafter it remained unchanged between its 1937 and 1974 appearances:

Drag a star down to the office table –  
what sort of light is that to work by?  
Rising wind will confuse important papers  
not contributing to efficiency.

Get up at daybreak, seek bed at dusk?  
So little time there would be for pleasure.  
We shall save money and buy a car  
and cultivate a right use of leisure.

A sense of anger may be detected in this poem, whose later title ("Chief End") echoes the first response to the Westminster Abbey Reformed and Presbyterian Churches' Shorter Catechism: "The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." The

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<sup>6</sup> Julian, "Work And Prayer," *Tomorrow* II:27 (22 July 1936), 22-23.

theological training Curnow had received at the College of St John the Evangelist, at Meadowbank in Auckland, in preparation for a career in the Anglican Church suggests that his reference to the catechism was not coincidental. The poem's earlier "Work And Prayer" title hints even more strongly at a Protestant work ethic, with attendant Puritan attitudes to pleasure and leisure. Efficient work habits at the office, plus sober and healthy personal habits, would leave "so little time" for pleasure, that the speaker might just as well succumb to the ideology, save his money, "buy a car and cultivate a *right* use of leisure," (my emphasis), thus contributing to a continuation of capitalism. Alternatively, in contrast to the natural rhythms of dawn and dusk, suggested by the parallels of "drag a star" and "get up at daybreak," the capitalistic world may be seen to sacrifice the natural order to efficient work and the "right" kind of leisure consumption. "Chief End" anticipates qualms almost identical to those expressed by the poet two years later, in the fourth stanza of "Poem 1" of *Not in Narrow Seas*, about the material and the spiritual:

The Minister believes  
 The price is sufficient to cover  
 Labour costs and something over  
 For a radio, perhaps a car.

We saw earlier in "Behold Now Behemoth" that Curnow generally – if at times, uneasily – accepted hegemonic discourse and wrote within its boundaries. However, "Chief End," along with others in the *Enemies* collection, indicates a deliberate shift to the margins of hegemonic discourse. I discussed earlier how by Bakhtin's definition, self cannot exist in a vacuum. In his earliest work, Curnow's poetic voice was incorporated into official discourse which pretended to be monologic because it suppressed competition. *Enemies'* poems differ from Curnow's earlier ones because they acknowledge the existence of these competitors. Irony, particularly, allows the narrator to resist the monologic forces implicit in prevailing official discourses and attitudes. "Chief End's" narrator – although not a particularly personalised subject – speaks of "a" right use of leisure, which immediately emphasises the binary opposition of wrong from right and challenges through irony a monologic notion of rightness. Readers must now acknowledge the possibility of *several* "right" uses of leisure.

Elsewhere in the *Enemies* collection, Curnow achieves the same effect by siding so deliberately with officialdom that his voice becomes satiric, even sarcastic. Several of the *Enemies* poems could reflect an affinity with R.A.K. Mason's title poem "The Beggar"; indeed, Curnow was later to single out the 1924 collection *The Beggar* in his introduction to Mason's *Collected Poems* when acknowledging Mason as New Zealand's "first wholly original, unmistakably gifted poet" (9). With some similarity to Mason, therefore, Curnow ("I and my kind") in the collection's title poem "Enemies" speaks in the voice of bourgeois respectability when spitting out:

Detestable gutter child, if you knew  
how we hate you ....

The irony in the poem "Slum" also verges on sarcasm:

...we are safe until the day  
our weapons show obvious decay

and we see this again when the speaker pronounces a verdict on the motives of bourgeois charity:

Almsgiving knows no pity;  
charity collected in the city  
is self-defence of deep hate  
bribing the enemy from the gate.

As Christ taught we feed our enemies  
fearing the unblunted enmities.

It cannot be presumed that the "we" who speak are necessarily Christian. Indeed, the ideology of Christian orthodoxy is specifically questioned for its expediency. However, the poem "Slum" (entitled "Quasi-Slum" in the 1937 collection) also contains nothing to convince us that its speaker (or speakers) cannot be Christian, perhaps indulging in an exercise in self-criticism. A dialogic reading suggests that Curnow deliberately locates the speaking voice liminally. The voice challenges official ideology but still from a position located somewhere on the margins of, or not distant from, hegemonic discourse.

## III

I believe the 1939 collection *Not in Narrow Seas* celebrates Curnow's literary "coming-of-age," although others have reserved that accolade for a collection or two later. For example, MacDonald Jackson says of the "Landfall in Unknown Seas" poem from the 1943 collection *Sailing or Drowning*, "No previous poet had exhibited such mastery over words" (*Oxford History* 384). Without disputing Jackson's claim, I argue that a dialogic reading of the 1939 collection suggests that in *Not in Narrow Seas*, Curnow chooses to locate his poetic voice in opposition to hegemony and to challenge official discourse. A brief look at some poems from this sequence will illustrate this.

The *Not in Narrow Seas* prose and poetry sequence first appeared as five instalments in *Tomorrow* between June 1937 and August 1938, four over Curnow's signature and one over his Julian pseudonym. Hamilton observes that the *Tomorrow* version is "by far the most notable instance of Curnow publishing what amounts to a working draft of his poetry . . . [which gives] the reader a unique opportunity to witness to some extent the process of rewriting . . ." (835). The 1939 publication differs from Curnow's previously published collections of poetry in its use of introductory prose epigraphs as what I believe are integral elements of each poem; indeed, Curnow subtitled the 1939 collection "poems with prose." However, only the second of the five earlier instalments in *Tomorrow* included prose. That instalment, "The Potter's Field," appeared with introductory prose passages to each of its six sections. Therefore, the appearance of prose epigraphs to introduce the dozen or so sections in the 1939 version of "Not in Narrow Seas" cannot be considered a later addition, but rather a refinement, what Hamilton terms "the workshop nature," of the earlier instalments. Thereafter, the poet "altered almost nothing" for the 1974 publication of "Not in Narrow Seas": "It has its own accent," Curnow decided (*Collected Poems 1933-1973* xiii).

"Statement," the first poem in the 1939 publication *Not in Narrow Seas*, is preceded by an epigraph clearly identified as an excerpt from J.C. Beaglehole's 1936 historical survey of New Zealand:

Towards midday, on December 13th in the year 1642 – the year of English revolution, of the death of Galileo, and the birth of Newton – the eyes of a sailor, straining over the waters of the Pacific, saw about sixty miles to the eastward 'a great land uplifted high' . . .

and so on (13). Subsequently, generations of readers have accepted Beaglehole's work without question, with Alan Roddick, for example, calling it "the first 'modern' history of the country" (9). For its time it was considered radical, and the brief references Curnow has made to Beaglehole over many years suggest that Curnow probably saw him as his mentor in subversion.<sup>7</sup> Curnow opens his *Not in Narrow Seas* publication with an introduction comprising four excerpts from Beaglehole. I suggest that Curnow deliberately presents them as examples of the official discourse, especially as they are clearly sourced to "J.C.BEAGLEHOLE – *New Zealand: A Short History* (1936)." Beaglehole's texts present Curnow with the "loopholes" in official ideology, through which he then challenges the received, hegemonic constructions of New Zealand colonial history. As Hamilton notes, *Not in Narrow Seas* was written and published in response to the approaching centenary celebrations, and my reading of the collection suggests that Curnow deliberately set about to reinforce revisionist interpretations.

As a result of Curnow's treatment of Beaglehole, introductory prose paragraphs to the remaining *Not in Narrow Seas* poems also read like received historical commentaries, and many readers assume they are, although, to the best of my knowledge, Curnow wrote all except the attributed one himself. Curnow mimics the official discourse of social commentaries in order to write his own anti-history or, in other words, his unhistoric story. Each prose paragraph appropriates colonial and particularly ecclesiastical ideological concerns by imitating official discourse, although the relationship between prose and verse shifts from poem to poem. Sometimes the epigraph is an "official" version which the poem then subverts, while at other times the poem acts more as a gloss on the attached prose, virtually identical in perspective. The epigraph to "Poem 5," for example, may probably be read on its most obvious level (although, as discussed in Chapter One, the Bakhtin school would argue that all language is ideologically loaded and thus implicitly represents struggle). In others, irony provides us with obvious loopholes with which to identify Curnow's double-voicedness (as illustrated by my emphases in these examples):

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the index to *Look Back Harder* for references to Beaglehole in Curnow's critical writing.

*Apparently* there was a chance here for a clean break

("Poem 4")

*Shrewdly*, [the Church] acquires property

("Poem 6")

. . . making the country fit for *civilized* people to live in

("Poem 7").

Throughout the collection, Curnow is at his most distant from official discourse when he uses ambiguity and mockery. If we read "Poem 3" in terms of Bakhtin's distinction between monologism and dialogism, it becomes ironic. We are first told in the prose paragraph,

For many months they had been at sea. It was a pilgrimage under the blessing of the Church of England, more definitely religious in its professions, perhaps, than any since the Mayflower.

The "blessing of the Church of England" suggests an attempt to establish a monologic voice, one that does not seek response but would like to be considered the "final word." Yet in the poem the colonists "praised God with bad hymns" and their liturgy is picked up by the wind, which "howled the joke to the high Alps." Certainly the Church of England never saw its blessing as a joke and to this day probably sees little humour in it. As Bakhtin observes in his treatise on Rabelais, humour – laughter – is one of the most devastatingly subversive weapons with which to challenge official seriousness. The speaker in this poem presents the "prayer for establishing truth and virtue" as a joke, and turns the "quavering" voices into the howl of the wind. In the poem there are no mountain echoes of response to the hymn (nor two years later in *Island and Time's* "The Unhistoric Story" where a "vast ocean laughter / echoed unheard"). Rather, in "Poem 3" the response comes from later generations – perhaps today's readers of poetry – and it is in terms of the ambiguity of the "joke." The prayer reads:

'We shall not blacken this land O Lord,  
Thou hast given us without sword;  
Our weaponu and our lust lie at home  
And in peace for peace we are come.'

Indeed, the poem's irony becomes still greater when read today, as Maoridom undergoes a renaissance and fights to redress colonial misdemeanours, real or imagined.

"Poem 4" at first glance appears the very antithesis of a subversive attack on the establishment. "Only the best . . . of the English tradition," the introductory prose paragraph tells us, has been chosen for export to the colony of New Zealand. This includes "the liturgy of the Church of England" which Bakhtin would claim attempts to suppress competing ideologies by speaking monologically. Curnow tells us that "immigrants of picked stock" were chosen, that is, the poem suggests that only the "elect" came to New Zealand. In their "chance for a clean break" or, as he repeats elsewhere, their "escape," the immigrants,

Left behind the known germ and poison  
Breeding and soaking in decrepit soils.

Curnow speaks optimistically of New Zealand. His immigrants build a new Jerusalem:

That is at unity in itself,  
Built with liturgy and adequate capital  
Dwelling of the elect, the selected immigrants.

The mocking tone of that final stanza of Curnow's had, incidentally, an almost prophetic sequel. In the late 1960s at Jerusalem, on the Whanganui River, Baxter acted out the subversion implicit in "Poem 4" by living in a commune with disenchanting youngsters, practising Roman Catholicism, and embracing aspects of Maoritanga.

The prose paragraph to "Poem 6" actually specifies that the "new social order" was about controlling discourse. It states, "the Church is chiefly concerned with re-establishing and conserving an order in which she has learnt to flourish" rather than the "Gospel seeking to find realisation in the building of a new social order" as we might naively imagine. Thus the Church's actions subvert the Gospel, and this poem, in turn, is an attempt to subvert the Church; hence the Bakhtin school's earlier war cry that language is the site of ideological struggle. "Poem 6" also contains in its final lines another subtle Curnovian challenge, this time to the way death had been taken for granted. The bitterly outspoken concluding two lines follow six that are to be taken ironically:

A faith worthy of empire; ere the four  
 Earliest migrant vessels put to sea  
 The wise company granted God permission  
 To work His passage to the colony.

Guaranteed seed in a prepared soil –  
 What land would not give the approved return?  
 Here's no renewal of the world's youth,  
 But age-soured infancy, a darkened dawn.

Curnow is distinguishing between the possibility of cyclic renewal, and the previous hegemonic recycling of the old. "Poem 7" also highlights a rebirth that fails to contribute anything new. Instead, the dawn merely offers a "tamed" or dominated version of the old. He writes:

Waking next morning, moving curtain, she  
 Sees front plot fenced, path in place;  
 The cloud, the mountain-terror tamed now  
 Framed to taste for parlour chimneypiece.

Throughout these and other poems in the collection, the old order attempts to silence dialogue. "Do not speak of hatred of the flag," thunders "Poem 9" in what Curnow terms its "imperial message." This is a discourse attempting to be monologic. It does not invite debate:

It is a sinful wind that does not love  
 The flag that bears God's cross.  
 Eighty years ago this flag was brought  
 To struggle upon this pole to-day  
 Over a million heads microcosm  
 Of the nation which colonised these islands;  
 A greatness not to be straitened,  
 Not by wind and ocean beaten off.

In this poem, which takes the form of an exchange between teacher and pupil, we are told that "the pupil [is] apparently convinced by Authority." In what Curnow later called "the Utopia-building sentiment of the colonists" (*Look Back Harder* 149), a monologic future is painted, comprising "bungalows in rows smartly painted" and "educated citizens" returning home from work to make "four at bridge." When a competing group threatens the bourgeoisie, it is quickly controlled and suppressed:

One of the poorer suburbs, the colony  
 Of those who heard the wind, the enemy:  
 Such refuse heaps make disposal a problem  
 But the contractors it is said are doing well.

However, this is a poem in which Curnow unequivocally attacks. He clearly informs us in the epigraph of his ideological interpretation that the pupil "is still somewhat corrupted by the wind. The wind, it will be observed, has the last word." This remark, though, does suggest a lack of confidence in the poem itself as "message."

Curnow clearly indicates in the prose paragraph to "Poem 10" that maintenance of the hegemonic status quo results in stagnation, a death-in-life. He writes in the epigraph, "There is reproduction, but not resurrection" and in the poem he talks of "Reproduction, reproduction . . . Never resurrection." Curnow acknowledges that the urge to suppress unknown, competing voices is strong, perhaps because of the danger and uncertainty that such challenges threaten. Hence, he concludes the poem by ironically conceding that the overriding motivation of the settlers is "Restoring reason, the known scene and shape." The poem uses extensive theatrical imagery: the "play" being performed and "danced" on this "stage" in this "theatre" is an "old play that catches / Nobody's conscience."<sup>8</sup> In other words, it has become boring, stagnant. The metaphor continues with a "costumed secondhand" performance, but missing is the dangerous, potentially subversive character of an open-ended, carnivalesque performance:

Never resurrection  
 Of entombed pity, only discernible  
 Vanity of the practised trick.

If we read the poem in terms of dialogism, hegemony tries to maintain the monologic voice. This destroys the possibility of renewal, that is, resurrection. The "old play" has become routine.

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<sup>8</sup> Those final lines echo the concluding words to a soliloquy by Hamlet: "The play's the thing, / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (*Hamlet* II.2:606-7).

## IV

Bakhtin's model of dialogism allows us to identify sites of struggle in Curnow's poetry of the 1930s, and particularly the clash of ideologies as Curnovian speakers attempt to construct a sense of self-identity both through, and in opposition to, others. A dialogical analysis enables us accurately to identify and locate Curnow's poetic voice as it struggles with the discourses of hegemony. And the analysis suggests that about half a century ago Curnow became a subversive poet. The next chapter examines dialogism in Curnow's poetry during what might be described as his middle years as a poet: *Island and Time* (1941), *Sailing and Drowning* (1943), *Jack Without Magic* (1946), *At Dead Low Water* (1949), *Poems 1949-1957* (1957), and the select compilation of these, *A Small Room with Large Windows* (1962).

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE MIDDLE YEARS: POETRY FROM 1941 TO 1962

One of the functions of artists in a community is to provide a healthy and permanent element of rebellion; not to become a species of civil servant.  
 – James K. Baxter (1951)

Terming the period 1941 to 1962 Allen Curnow's "middle years" may be seen as imposing an arbitrary structure on his entire output for the convenience of this study. Nevertheless, other critics have found similar structures useful, and while their specific categories have varied depending upon their critical concerns, those have also tended to be tripartite. As discussed in Chapter Two, Hamilton refers to work from 1941 onwards as "the second phase of [Curnow's] output" (151) while noting that Curnow's own 1990 publication *Selected Poems 1940-1989* "effectively denies the existence of much of the early poetry" (82). Curnow's *Selected Poems* (1982) includes only one earlier collection, *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939), which was, I argued in the previous chapter, a landmark publication in the maturing poet's positioning of his speaking voice. Professor Peter Simpson imposes a three-phase structure on Curnow's poetry in his introduction to Curnow's collected critical writings, but with slightly different results. Simpson claims Curnow's first "personal lyric" phase encompasses *Valley of Decision* (1933) and *Three Poems* (1935). The second "New Zealand as theme" phase spans *Enemies* (1937) to *Island and Time* (1941). The third phase Simpson identifies, "marked by a return to 'more personal and universal themes', begins with *Jack Without Magic* (1946) and continues in later volumes" (*Look Back Harder* xiv).

My choice of 1962 to close this chapter is influenced by an apparent "hiatus" in Curnow's poetic career, which ended with *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects: A Sequence of Poems* (1972). In his Massey University undergraduate Study Guide, "New Zealand Literature," Dr William Broughton categorises Curnow's first period as the poetry "up to and including 'Tomb of an Ancestor' [which] can reasonably be said to be primarily concerned with our understanding of our location in time and place". Curnow's second period, according to Broughton, is from 1949 to 1962 (up to the "hiatus"), followed by a third period

of poetry written since 1972 (Broughton 1994:30-32). Curnow's 1962 publication *A Small Room with Large Windows: Selected Poems* comprises a selection of poems from all five volumes since *Island and Time* (1941).<sup>1</sup> I believe Curnow's decision to represent the period 1941 to 1962 with a select volume of poetry is indicative of his realisation that a chapter of his poetic career was drawing to a close; other literary concerns dominated his attention for a decade after. For example, in Chapter Seven I discuss the theatre and radio drama with which Curnow was heavily involved during the 1960s, while in Chapter Eight I examine the protracted literary critical battle that Curnow was waging at that time. Hence, my determination of the "middle years" of 1941 to 1962 conforms to aspects of the patterns critics have imposed on Curnow's poetry over the years.

I

Curnow's 1941 volume of poetry *Island and Time* is prefaced by an extract from D'Arcy Cresswell's *Present Without Leave*<sup>2</sup> in which Cresswell observes that New Zealand colonists'

present condition depends on the state of peoples a great distance off, and their communication with these. As yet they have no future of their own; and when at length one confronts them, they shall awaken to find where they lie, and what realm it was they so rudely and rashly disturbed.  
(Cresswell, 6)

As we have seen, the dialogic model suggests that apperception is never possible in isolation, and consequently the new colony must always depend upon an other to assist in the construction and maintenance of its identity. Cresswell remains ambiguous about his definition of "their present condition," but whether through economic, social or spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> *A Small Room with Large Windows* (1962) does not claim in its contents pages to draw upon *Jack Without Magic* (1946). Nevertheless, seven poems from it appear in the 1962 selection, six having in the interim been included in *At Dead Low Water* (1949). However, one poem, "To D.G. Overseas," is incorrectly sourced in *A Small Room with Large Windows* as having come from *At Dead Low Water*: it previously appeared in *Jack Without Magic*.

<sup>2</sup> Simpson notes in an explanatory endnote in *Look Back Harder* that Curnow quotes Cresswell's passage, or parts of it, six times in various critical pieces he wrote between 1941 and 1964 (31).

means, a colony develops a distinctive identity through the process of overthrowing, outgrowing or at least modifying its colonial antecedents. Hence, a future does not "confront" the colony, but rather a colony constructs its own future. From a 1990s perspective, we may observe that the "realm . . . so rudely and rashly disturbed" must now also contend with a cultural renaissance by the subjugated indigenous Maori population, with concerns by environmentalists either at 150 years of damage to the islands or with future sustainability, and with a desire by many to link the country's economic future with Australia and Asia rather than with Europe or North America.

The "imperial message" of *Not in Narrow Seas*' "Poem IX" has altered to a specific "Vogel and Seddon howling from an empty coast" in "The Unhistoric Story." The two former premiers attempt to invoke the monologic powers of an old order but "A vast ocean laughter / Echoe[s] unheard" in a delightful carnivalesque. Nevertheless, in this poem it is time rather than human endeavour that re-orders the "old elements." Indeed, time assumes agency in most of the poems of *Island and Time* – not surprisingly, given the title of the collection and the thematic concern for time and place generally present in Curnow's poetry. In "St Thomas's Ruins" even "traveller God" becomes an itinerant in the young colony and, by implication, He represents a figure against whom time and nature pit their patient strengths. A footnote to the poem in the original edition explains that Bishop Selwyn built the "small imitation-Gothic church . . . in his desire for a place of worship recalling the churches of England." Not only does Bishop Selwyn seek to impose a church of English on to the antipodean landscape of St. Helier's Bay Road, Auckland, but the building must recall an architectural style which is in itself a nineteenth century Gothic revival. Hence, the Bishop's machinations of colonisation include an attempt to provide the land with a European medieval past that usurps and supplants any native heritage or past. However, colonial conditions differ from those in Europe:

But ocean weather sucked the ill-mixed mortar  
 In as many years as the Norman's nave  
 Had centuries falling; sand, faith's deserter,  
 Made paste for rain to grind his groove.

The nave (from Latin *navis*, "ship") is the place in the church where the people are saved,

while the Normans were the Scandinavian race who conquered Normandy during the 10th century and, as Normans/French, conquered England in 1066, bringing with them a spate of church building. Yet against this transposed heritage, the seed of a cabbage-palm eventually "transfixes the toy ruin" of an intended permanent stone church in an image of death and birth, not of renewal. The bishop's faith is "outgunned" by nature, and the seed which is planted during the storm refers back to the fecundity of the land.

*Ubi episcopus, ibi ecclesia.* The storm  
 Outgunned in grace the Bishop's praying,  
 Blew to his knees the seed of this cabbage-palm  
 Whose tufted rood transfixes the toy ruin.

The rood is the large crucifix on the screen above the entrance separating the nave from the chancel, or sacred area in the east end of the church. Symbolically the rood is the Tree of Death and represents suffering.

"House and Land," traditionally considered one of Curnow's most powerful poems from the period if not from his entire output, provides us with sites of struggle that invite a dialogic interpretation. The poem also contains a wealth of images that have parallels in Bakhtin's description of the carnival in literature, yet the poem also reverses the processes of the carnival. In the first stanza we are served notice that "old Miss Wilson" remains on the land "since the old man's been dead." The land is the site of the original homestead which should have left a legacy of hope and anticipation, but there is no sense of vigorous life, continuation, or renewal in the poem. An old spinster is all that remains, and we learn from the cowman that "she's all of eighty." The cowman intends "leaving here next winter" because it is "too bloody quiet."

Old Miss Wilson no longer lives in a fertile present with its dynamic possibilities. She yokes her present to a past that she attempts to fix or monologize. Her present is dominated and captured by pictures on the wall – including "the baronet uncle, mother's side" – through which she dialogically constructs herself. Hence, she already subverts attempts at a fixed or monologic present because she has interlocutors; they just happen to be voices from the past. Old Miss Wilson's interaction with the historian does not involve a renewing celebration but is instead a ritualistic attempt to capture the past by "taking tea from a silver

pot." Significantly, she talks to a historian and thus, by implication, she is attempting to fix a past. When her conversation attempts to posit a present, she yokes that with the past also:

People in the *colonies*, she said,  
 Can't quite understand . . .  
 Why, from Waiau to the mountains  
 It was all father's land.

In the 1941 publication of this poem, *colonies* was not italicised which suggests that Curnow later decided to foreground the word's ironical overtones: old Miss Wilson's snobbish pride is now highlighted, but in juxtaposition to an increasingly pejorative connotation of the word. In *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945* and in the revised edition *1923-1950*, both of which Curnow edited, he chose to omit the stanza completely for reasons that are not apparent. It reappeared in *A Small Room with Large Windows* (1962) and in publications thereafter, and with the word *colonies* italicised.<sup>3</sup>

Two events in the poem could have been depicted as attempts to break free from the "gloom" of the moribund house. After finishing milking, the cowman goes drinking with the rabbitier. Given the limited details in the scenario, the communal action by the cowman of drinking with his mate, possibly in a local pub, may be seen to contrast with old Miss Wilson's tea ceremony with the historian, which has similarities to a wake. Implicitly, her tea ceremony is performed as a sacrament in memory of her vanished past. Yet, the cowman and the rabbitier drinking may also be seen as ultimately ritualistic and non-vitalising as old Miss Wilson's effort. Compare briefly the cowman's and old Miss Wilson's drinking with another reference elsewhere in the collection. In "Quick One in Summer," Curnow again alludes to drinking, but with a quite different effect, when he writes:

Here they come who lean and laugh  
 Tranced by a dirty glass[.]

Although the word "lean" usually suggests temporary arrangements and associations, Curnow's use of the verb in the simple present tense lends a habitual character to the proceedings, especially when yoked by alliteration to "laugh," in Bakhtin's opinion that

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<sup>3</sup> I do not agree with Louis Johnson's verdict that the restoration is "unfortunate" because it "makes coarsely explicit something which was only hinted at when the stanza was dropped" (*NZ Poetry Yearbook* 1964: 27).

quintessential tool of subversion. This couplet, indeed the whole poem, in contrast to "House and Land," is set in the present. It is happening now and will continue to happen now. It is alive, even if the verb "trance" does lend the occasion a sense of suspense or unreal ecstasy.

The other strong image in "House and Land" that suggests a possible attempt to break free relates largely to the second stanza of the poem, in which the farm dog,

. . . trailed his chain  
 From the privy as far as the fowlhouse  
 And back to the privy again,  
 Feeling the stagnant afternoon  
 Quicken with the smell of rain.

The dog, subjugated farm worker, is chained between the fowlhouse and the latrine, and cannot escape. C.K. Stead (1973:58) wonders whether he may have been "no more than a scenic prop." The dog has no access to the poultry which could represent food, but is tethered within tempting distance. It is unlikely that he occupies the role of guard because domestic fowls have no natural enemies in New Zealand except dogs themselves. Latrines could in some literary contexts be representations of the carnivalesque bodily lower regions of humans but stripped of the compensating positive and renewing aspects of sexuality, procreation and childbirth. However, exploiting such an association would achieve little in this poem, and at best the privy becomes merely a private place generally withdrawn from public sight. Nevertheless, something of the unwholesomeness of the "stagnant afternoon" does attach itself to the privy, if only because Curnow draws our attention to it by mentioning it in successive lines, although the "stagnant afternoon" is more particularly in anticipation of rain. That link turns on the word "quicken" which injects into the entire poem its only really positive movement. "Quicken" carries a surprising range of definitions, including restoring or giving life, restoring vigour, kindling, hastening, accelerating, receiving life, becoming living, reviving, coming into a state comparable to life, and – in pregnancy – the foetus showing signs of life. Additionally, the effect is rhythmic as well as semantic in these lines. In the context of "House and Land," "quicken" could be read as nature extending beyond the pending rain. However, such a breakthrough does not occur. Instead, the afternoon's

collapse in the final stanza is celebrated by the anticipated rain, while the tethered dog, representative of the imposed colonial order and "looking lost and lame," has little option but to creep into his barrel shelter.

As observed in previous poems, Curnow has again reverted to a philosophy privileging the ultimate victory of nature over human endeavour with his almost pantheistic celebration of life in contrast to the "great gloom" of the stagnant settlers. The historian writes approvingly that "the spirit of exile . . . is strong in the people still" oblivious to the irony that he

Stands in a land of settlers  
With never a soul at home.

Old Miss Wilson, the cowman and the dog all appear to succumb, in differing ways, to the implosive tendencies of monologism. In Bakhtinian terms, Curnow's concluding line, "With never a soul at home," suggests to me that without a dialogic struggle, perhaps there can be no dynamic, living and growing, challenging future.

## II

Curnow's 1943 poetry collection *Sailing or Drowning* remains central to biographical and historical scholarship of Curnow and his poetry. One poem from the volume, "Landfall in Unknown Seas," was commissioned by J.C. Beaglehole to commemorate the "300th Anniversary of the Discovery of New Zealand by Abel Tasman, 13 December, 1642".<sup>4</sup>

*Sailing or Drowning* gains further significance because it was published just after New Zealand embarked on its second century of self-defined nationhood, based on the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the ideological positioning of a fifty-year-

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<sup>4</sup> Beaglehole also commissioned New Zealand composer Douglas Lilburn to write music to commemorate the event. Curnow's poem was read against Lilburn's music on or about 13 December 1942, and a recording later released: *Landfall in Unknown Seas*, Alex Lindsay String Orchestra, cond. Alex Lindsay. Kiwi LD-2. Reference to this is made by Curnow in a later poem *Music for Words*, which is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> The treaty was signed initially by a gathering of Maori tribal chiefs at Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands, on 6 February 1840, and later by other chiefs throughout the country. The treaty, in its Maori and English language versions – which, incidentally, differ – was between the Maori people and Captain William Hobson, R.N., who added New Zealand to the dominions of Her Britannic Majesty. The treaty merely ceded sovereignty of the country to Queen Victoria in return for her protection over the indigenous people and their perpetual rights to their ancestral lands, forests, fisheries, and so on.

old poem such as "Landfall in Unknown Seas" remains politically significant exactly because it can still be profitably read as a commentary on, and a dialogical challenge to, the country's hegemonic construction of identity.

In "Landfall in Unknown Seas" Curnow talks of a colonising sea-empire's intolerance of "so huge a hegemony of ignorance" that it was driven to explore the unknown down under, backed up, of course, by its particular dogs of war<sup>6</sup> in case the unknown objected to being explored. The "nameless waters of the world" were conquered in the "Name of God." That is to say, the process of naming dispels ignorance, and tames and structures the new reality in the lexicology and ideology of Abel Tasman's *Zeitbild*, but also with echoes of the first verses of *Genesis*:

. . . There was the seascape  
Crammed with coast, surprising  
As new lands will, the sailor  
Moving on the face of the waters,  
Watching the earth take shape  
Round the unearthly summits, brighter  
Than its emerging colour.

It is only through the act of perception by the explorers that the earth takes shape, as if creation of "new lands" were only possible by a Christian God under the watchful eye of Christian explorers, or an *Old Testament* creating Jehovah. Curnow picks this theme up again in 1949, in the aptly-titled poem "Genesis," the first part of "Four Descriptions and a Picture" from the *At Dead Low Water* collection. There Curnow talks of the "unborn sun" in the "original waters." In the later poem the explorers "came / To the Garden, giving each beast and tree a name." Curnow also makes oblique reference to Murderer's Bay (now called Golden Bay), when he says that on "the third / Day pain was made, we saw that it was good."

Yet "Landfall in Unknown Seas" subtly acknowledges conflicting viewpoints by being

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The document, especially in its Maori language version, is privileged today as the founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand statehood and has recently been the focus of mounting legal action. Rather than the Treaty, however, organised settlements of the New Zealand Company may have been more strongly commemorated in the 1940 centennial.

<sup>6</sup> Curnow's "Cannon, the dogs of bronze and iron barking" echoes Shakespeare's "Cry 'Havoc' and let slip the dogs of war" from *Julius Caesar* (III:1).

quietly but powerfully relevant, not only to 1642 upon which it ostensibly reflects, but also to the 1942 anniversary, and even to the present:

Always to islanders danger  
Is what comes over the sea[.]

If "islanders" refers to the original Maori inhabitants of New Zealand, then the earliest European explorers, whalers and sealers first represented a danger that many believe immigration continues to represent. If, however, all New Zealanders may be termed islanders, then we have all been dangers to these islands at one time because we were all – including the Maori – immigrants once. As well as commemorating the three-hundredth anniversary of European discovery of New Zealand, these lines from "Landfall in Unknown Seas" were published – even written, it seems<sup>7</sup> – after Japan's December 1941 entry into the Second World War. If Curnow identified everyone either born or permanently living in New Zealand as an islander, then by Abel Tasman's anniversary in December 1942 the Japanese threat to all countries of the Pacific during the time of the poem's composition lends "Landfall in Unknown Seas" a brutally topical relevance, in addition to its more obvious function as historical and social commentary. While A.J. Gurr does not directly link the poem to the Second World War, he draws attention to the need by New Zealanders for a "re-created vision":

A landfall ending in motiveless murders, with as one result the landfall's tercentenary following hard on the heels of only the centenary of the actual founding of New Zealand as a nation. Curnow's poem sets out to re-create for the imagination the circumstances of the incident, and to fit this re-created vision to the circumstances and the needs of New Zealanders in the present time. (127)

Even in 1997 as New Zealand society debates whether to replace its fleet of ageing naval frigates at considerable financial cost, in anticipation of unknown invaders who might be massing dark forces over the horizon of the twenty-first century, Curnow's poem speaks of

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<sup>7</sup> In his conversation with MacDonald Jackson, Curnow recalls: "John Beaglehole wrote to me early in 1942 to tell me that the Internal Affairs Department was planning a special book to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the first European voyage, and would I write a poem for this occasion. . . . I used a good deal of the nine months I had to meditate this poem . . . ("Conversation" 148).

the same danger to islanders, and perhaps of the same need for a vision.<sup>8</sup>

As in the earlier "The Unhistoric Story" and "A Victim," there is an almost naïve sense of stunned surprise in "Landfall in Unknown Seas" at the brutality of the encounter between European and Maori cultures:

Over the yellow sands and the clear  
Shallows, the dull filament  
Flickers, the blood of strangers:  
Death discovered the Sailor  
O in a flash in a flat calm,  
A clash of boats in the bay  
And the day marred with murder.  
The dead required no further  
Warning to keep their distance;  
The rest, noting the failure,  
Pushed on with a reconnaissance  
To the north; and sailed away.

The narrator carefully avoids apportioning blame or even specifying who murdered whom, and interpretation remains open to the ideological and cultural orientation of the reader. In the third and final part of the poem, we are ironically assured that today there are "no murderers mooring in our Golden Bay" which again leaves open the question of blame and toys ambiguously with the locus of Curnow's pronouns "us" and "our." In an echo of R.L.Stevenson's *Requiem*, the sailor is now home from the sea at the commencement of the poem's third part, but it seems that New Zealand's islands rather than Europe may have become that home. Curnow attacks the "self-important celebration" (of 1942) that "congratulates itself" rather than "reach[ing] / a future down for us from the high shelf of spiritual daring." This official State-inspired celebration would commemorate nationhood three centuries after the land's *discovery* – notwithstanding perhaps a thousand years of Maori habitation – and after more than a century of European colonisation. Instead, voices in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Curnow's, focused "the half-light of a diffident glory" on the

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<sup>8</sup> If we wonder why politicians and military planners no longer invoke the wisdom of our writers in support of national causes, Curnow reminded us back in 1940 when he wrote in "Prophets of Their Time," "Once, it was said, the prophets were stoned. In a more polite age they are simply not read" (*Look Back Harder* 19).

sailor. In Curnow's celebration, the sailor is not frozen into a timeless statue of heroic herosm; rather Curnow represents him in a perpetual carnival of sacrificial death:

The Sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying  
 Out into our time's wave  
 The stain of blood that writes an island story.

And if we extend the metaphor of rebirth (or lack of it) further, Curnow concludes the *Sailing or Drowning* collection with a poem ostensibly about "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch" – part three of "Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet." It concludes:

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,  
 Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

"Child" encapsulates the idea of rebirth and continuation – the sense of a positive, continuing future that was absent from a considerable amount of Curnow's early poetry. The "marvellous year" Curnow speaks of predicts a future of cyclic temporal orientation, with its deliberate beginning-middle-end, or birth-death-rebirth characteristics. Juxtaposed to this is the future child, not merely born, but born into a specifically "marvellous" year.<sup>9</sup> Among the definitions for "marvellous," the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary identifies the supernatural or the extravagantly improbable. That "year" predicates on a "trick" which includes in its definitions the artifice of illusion or deception of appearance, the intention to surprise or amuse, and a mischievous or capricious act. Curnow's conclusion follows the "interesting failure" of the great moa to adapt to these islands.<sup>10</sup> A Bakhtinian interpretation might therefore suggest that the "trick of standing upright here" may not be a painful one of adaptation or survival, but of simply playfully acting, and laughing at our puny human plight and efforts.

Curnow writes an almost anti-fairy story poem in the 1949 collection *At Dead Low*

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<sup>9</sup> *Annus Mirabilis* is a stock Latin phrase which refers to the year of wonders, 1666, memorable for the great fire of London and the successes of English arms over the Dutch. Dryden wrote a poem with this title, in which he described both these events (Brewer).

<sup>10</sup> Since the moa was not an introduced species, Curnow presumably implies adaptation to change in these islands.

*Water* with the poem "She Sits with Her Two Children." Through the mirrored reflexivity of the landscape, "beasts" conjure up images of the grotesque, but they deceive with "heart's trick sword and cloak." Her "foretold" prince will "strike blind her mirror with a kiss," presumably denying her the ability to see mediated versions of herself:

She waits for the armed angel, bird or breath  
descending, out of the mirror leaning, death.

Following the dialogic theory that apperception is impossible in isolation, to be denied response is to be denied the necessary spatio-temporal location or orientation with which to construct consciousness of our existence. Hence, even to develop consciousness of our own existence is a political struggle with the word of the other (whom we are also simultaneously assisting to construct) and an ongoing tug-of-war through language for ideological dominance. There is a perceptive acknowledgement of this process of on-going self-construction in Curnow's "Self-Portrait" which appeared in *Jack Without Magic* (1946) and again in *At Dead Low Water* (1949). The four-year-old in the picture is an image, an other to the self who looks at the photograph. Hence, the process is one of "regard not self-regard," and Curnow concludes the sonnet by talking about a third person "he." The spatial gap between self and other, typical of a mirrored reflection of one's image, is extended to include a temporal gap in the self-portrait. Curnow's repetition of the word "cast" underscores the distance that must be bridged between self and other:

Semblance of my own eyes my eyes discern  
Casting on mine as I cast back on these[.]

Of all Curnow's poems of the first half-century, one largely unremarked sonnet, "Music for Words," from the *At Dead Low Water* volume and dedicated to New Zealand classical composer Douglas Lilburn, is the most striking example of the ideological subterfuge in the style of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Not coincidentally, this sonnet captures exactly those elements of joyous and spontaneous expression: music, singing, dancing, rhythmic speech and even the great god Pan which one anticipates in a street carnival. The poem begins with apparently typical dry Curnovian cynicism:

No ancient singing dancing infancy  
 Made luminous, made wise our island earth;  
 No tongue is suddenly sweet, no foot steps free,  
 The sneer at natural joy will pass for mirth.

A half-century on, one could attack the apparent Eurocentrism of the opening proposition, especially for its disregard of the ability of the *tangata whenua* (indigenous people) to "make wise" these islands' earth. Today, cultural recollection, such as the "ancient singing dancing," is assisting Maori to overcome feelings of marginalization and alienation resulting from more than a hundred and fifty years of European colonisation, and is helping them reconstruct (or perhaps construct) an identity and "make wise" their homeland. Therefore, a contemporary reading of the poem's opening premise might suggest that not *even* the ancient singing dancing of the *tangata whenua* could sustain the onslaught and "sneers" of colonial ideological domination.

The second quatrain explores reactions to, and effects of, musical gaiety:

If on the street a rhythmic speech is heard  
 Ears prick, heads turn towards the foreign clown  
 Whose musical greeting's like a waking bird:  
 They fear great Pan will bankrupt half the town.

The stanza pivots on "the foreign clown" whose rhythmic speech is sufficiently different to turn the heads of passers-by. The first two lines capture with some degree of sympathy the almost xenophobic suspicion with which some New Zealanders have come to regard others who speak (or behave) out of what they deem the "ordinary." The second half of the stanza, however, is far less forgiving of this attitude. The "foreign clown" is cleared of sinister motives by being compared with a "waking bird" – suggesting some connection with "The Waking Bird Refutes" from *Jack Without Magic*, in which the "world will not end." The bird's musical greeting tends to be joyous, positive and cordial, in contrast to the almost palpable cold hostility of public reaction to it. A waking bird's greeting heralds dawn and the symbolic possibilities associated with the birth of a new day: hope, life continuing its eternal cycle, and the unfettered joy of nature. According to the last line of the second stanza, the fear that lurks behind the suspicion is that of Pan, the voluptuous and sensual deity whose nature is lustful, symbolising the spermatic principle of the world. Immediately, Curnow captures the

central tenor of carnivalized literature. The singing-dancing-musical greeting may be read as a threat to the hegemonic society which, if allowed to progress unchecked, could threaten the established order – and is expressed as elegantly in a few poetic lines as in tomes of Bakhtinian prose theory.

What remains are two triplets of narrative reaction and response:

A whip for these dead heels to make them dance!  
Once I had nothing better to suggest,  
As if blood could be got out of the dry bones:

But since you sang my words I count on most  
Music, and a heroic eloquence  
To remake man out of this chattering dust.

The "you" of the antepenultimate line refers to the composer Lilburn who wrote the suite to accompany Curnow's "Landfall in Unknown Seas." What Bakhtin argues throughout many hundred of pages is summarised by Curnow in a sonnet: music and laughter are among the most potent of weapons against hegemonic discourse. Especially when combined with heroic eloquence, music may effectively invert the established order and provide opportunities for new or previously suppressed voices or discourses to be heard. In two other sonnets from *At Dead Low Water* that follow, Curnow pursues the power of music but without exploring the carnivalized impact of "Music for Words." Curnow identifies in "Lili Kraus Playing at Christchurch" elements that typically preoccupy writers of carnivalized literature:

...the sound  
Made flesh to dance and die; a music blown  
To unburn Troy on the sea-deafened ground.

However, he does little to exploit the possibilities of carnivalesque literature as he did in "Music for Words." In "A Sonata of Schubert" the focus is even further removed and now concentrates on the hands that play a piano rather than on the effects of music on human behaviour itself. Whereas in "Music for Words" listeners were tempted to participate as dancers in a carnival that could threaten the social order, Curnow loses that sense of human agency across the span of the three sonnets. By the third poem, listeners become mere

subjects caught between the pianist's hands "and the heaven's contempt" with little freedom to "play" their own songs.

If Curnow's conscious preoccupations at this time were with "geographical anxieties" (*Collected Poems* xiii) as Jackaman (1980) discusses, then unconsciously what might be called the "life force" was indomitable in Curnow's *Weltbild*. Even when a letter ("sheet," literally a "winding sheet" or shroud) reaches him in London informing Curnow of his father's death back in New Zealand, Curnow's elegy "resonates with an energy and verbal vitality" (Jackaman 64) that is brimming with the potentials of life and rebirth at the same time as the son laments the father's death:

Spring in his death abounds among the lily islands,  
 There to bathe him for the grave antipodean snows  
 Fall floodlong, rivermouths all in bloom, and those  
 Fragile church timbers quiver  
 By the bourne of his burial where robed he goes  
 No journey at all. One sheet's enough to cover  
 My end of the world and his, and the same silence.

Jackaman observes the confrontation between the opposite hemispheres – spring in New Zealand and autumn in London – but notes that "though death has occurred among the 'grave antipodean snows,' a new year is being baptised by the meltwaters surging into a world full of growing energies, quivering with power" (63-4).<sup>11</sup> In keeping with Christian elegiac conventions, "Elegy on my Father" contains the traditional lyric reversal in the closing consolation with the realisation "that death in this world is the entry to a higher life" (Abrams 46-7). However, the overall tone of the lament provides a much more earth-bound impression:

The ends of the earth are folded in his grave  
 In sound of the Pacific and the hills he tramped singing[.]

Jackaman interprets these lines to mean that "whichever end of the earth you inhabit, when the world ends, it'll all be the same" (64). In addition, I read into Curnow's lines the suggestion that the living and

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<sup>11</sup> Associate Professor John Needham has suggested to me that while the word "grave" is not followed by a comma, it may also be read as a noun, which would challenge Jackaman's interpretation, "grave antipodean snows."

the dead become part of the same whole cyclic process and that the "false maps" of arbitrary division into seasons, hemispheres and states of existence are "dimmed."

Two other poems from this period which appear in Curnow's *Poems 1949-57* collection, "Jack-in-the-Boat" and "Spectacular Blossom," illustrate the poet's apparent ambivalence towards the future. The former poem denies the children's belief in the reality of their toy boatman by means of repetitious "*He's not true, really*" disclaimers that conclude each of the four stanzas. Jack is crying in the opening stanza, while in the second stanza the children are told – possibly to their confusion – that "once he was new like you" (but "*he's not true, really,*" now). By stanza three the children learn his "colours leak away" and finally that "he's dying of a broken spring." Yet the children are given no assistance to "construct" Jack as having a valid past, even imaginatively because in every stanza Jack's own reality has a "crack in the corner of the middle" of it. Ultimately, a monological discourse is imposed upon the children, with their own versions of reality and future suppressed and negated by the "adult" retort: "*He's not true, really.*"

"Spectacular Blossom" depicts the fruits of a particular summer as victims, made all the more poignant by the beauty of the pohutukawa tree blossoms and the violence of the sacrifice. The imagery graphically presages some later poetry by Curnow, particularly the 1979 *An Incurable Music* sequence. Read in isolation, "Spectacular Blossom" presents violent death that is itself divorced of purpose. Only through a contextual placement beyond the narrow boundaries of the poem's sweltering summer can that sacrifice gain continuity. The narration is more concerned with the process by which the "single actress" dies than with the consequences or significance of that death. Indeed, "slaughterman December's" sacrificial execution becomes a focus for the consideration of beauty:

*Can anyone choose  
And call it beauty?—The victims  
Are always beautiful.*

The discussion doesn't extend, however, to examining why the bloom is a victim or what the death represents.

Curnow's poem "He Cracked a Word" is representative of the poet's concern during this period with essentialism: is there an authority that transcends our words? This notion

was completely lost on a reviewer of *Poems 1949-57*. In *Landfall* (181), A.W. Stockwell says of "He Cracked a Word":

The poet sorts-through (sic) a store of words, scrutinizing, analysing and accumulating . . . . The *essential meanings* remain dumb, derisive and lifeless . . . . [emphasis mine]

His overall verdict on the volume was, "Of course Mr Curnow is determined that his readers will work for their pleasure" (183). Were we to read "He Cracked a Word" in carnivalesque terms, "the sillinesses of song and wagging wisdom" would be privileged as powerful means with which to invert established order and to allow marginalized and suppressed voices within society to be heard. Instead, Curnow prefers those attempts to be "derided" – mocked and ridiculed, and the "half-witted cameras" find meanings that Curnow suggests don't exist (in opposition to Stockwell's apparent disappointment). Yet it is not a person but a "camera" – that is, the medium – that mediates, and transforms in the process of mediation, constructing the "huge meteorites in mouseland." Ultimately, the past ("memories") and the future ("wishes"), which can exist only in the symbolic domain of language, assume less significance than the beginnings of a joyful present, "a faint but unmistakable pricking of the thumbs." That portent of evil is derived from the Second Witch's anticipation of the approaching Macbeth in *Macbeth* (IV,1):

*By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes[.]*<sup>12</sup>

This line of reasoning suggests to me that a present, without the hope of a future, or the burden of and responsibility for a past – both of which can only be constructed/reconstructed through language – is not the "beginning of . . . joy" but the beginning of evil.

Alan Roddick introduces his 1980 profile of Curnow and his poetry with an anecdote regarding a *New Zealand Listener* reader who sent a letter of complaint to the editor about the poem "A Small Room with Large Windows" when it made its first appearance in that magazine in the mid-1950s. "A Small Room with Large Windows," is the title poem of the

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<sup>12</sup> Some zoologists, incidentally, claim that it is our ability to manipulate our thumbs so proficiently in concert with the opposing fingers, our industry, and our ability to produce *dynamic* speech communication, the "cracked word," that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom – an ideological estrangement of humans from nature.

1962 collection of the same name,<sup>13</sup> although the poem had also been published five years previously in the collection *Poems 1949-57*. I think the debate about the ability of scarlet geraniums to grow wild on wet banks, which so provoked the *Listener* correspondent "Geranium," is a delightful irrelevancy and Curnow thought so too. Roddick reproduced in full Curnow's response, which commences, "Your correspondent 'Geranium' has the right idea," and concludes, "There is something restful about this kind of argument . . ." (Roddick 3). Curnow's sense of humour conceals the quite frightening prospects, in the poem, of hegemonic groups within society attempting "to normalize personality." A Wagnerian "twilight of the gods" (*Götterdämmerung*) is rumoured throughout "A Small Room with Large Windows." Curnow recognises the significant role education of children plays within society. "Prudence if not propriety forbids" a thorough and complete exposure and understanding ("the whole three hundred and sixty degrees") and therefore "aids" are employed,

Like the Bible, or no Bible, free swimming tuition,  
Art, sex, no sex and so on. Not to direct  
So much as to normalise personality . . . .

These hegemonic control mechanisms direct society's thinking, and particularly that of its school children. Through the displacement activities of sports, and the essentialism of moral precepts, philosophies and ethical stances, they are channelled into sanctioned modes of behaviour. Curnow's ironic conclusion is that this control is an interim measure while judgement is being prepared, which finds

. . . the present course correct beyond a doubt,  
There being two points precisely, one in, one out.

This poem seems to have returned to Curnow's original conundrum of identity creation. A "word" both in its linguistically performative Biblical sense of bringing into existence, and its post-modernist sense of constructing a significance through a system of signs, is given on

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<sup>13</sup> MacDonald Jackson claimed in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (1969) that "A Small Room with Large Windows" (1962) was the finest volume of poems by a New Zealander" (82).

both arrival and departure.<sup>14</sup> In human terms that is birth and death, while in Bakhtinian terms that is self and other. In between is

A passage of proud verse, rightly construed.  
An unerring pen to edit the ensuing silences . . . .

Precisely who "construes" (interprets or deduces) and "edits" (publishes, gives to the world, sets in order), Curnow does not stipulate, but the "unerring" (not diverging from a standard or aim) pen is nevertheless driven in support of some ideology. Only through the poem's satire is tolerance allowed in this poem for opposing views, for example, when a "bad bitching squall . . . infects" the land with the rumour of a *Götterdämmerung*.

### III

Observations Curnow made in 1990 during an interview published in *Landfall* with Peter Simpson support my focus on language, particularly in the last two poems discussed, "He Cracked a Word" and "A Small Room with Large Windows." Curnow expressed surprise that poems from this period should have agreed so well with his very late ones:

I mean poems which touch on the frightening but fascinating question, whether the words we use really refer to a world or any reality beyond our language, and whether – as somebody or other said – language speaks only itself[.] (311)

Simpson asked Curnow whether he was aware of, or had read, the Swiss linguist and semiotician de Saussure. Curnow replied:

Oh, I'm speaking of a few poems written nearly 40 years ago – long before anyone like me could have heard of Saussure, let alone any of the later French deconstructionists and epistemologists. Poems like 'A Leaf' or 'He Cracked a Word' or 'To Introduce the Language' are entirely naive philosophically – I'm not so innocent now as I was then, and I *think* I can see some connection between that scepticism about language and the religious scepticism that took me away from the Church in the 30s. . . .

My examination in this chapter of Curnow's poetry illustrates that his work from this period

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest that Curnow is a post-modernist poet; indeed, in an interview with Peter Simpson (1990) he states, ". . . I'm no born-again structuralist or post-structuralist . . ." (303) and later says that at the time these poems were written he had not heard of the Swiss linguist de Saussure or any of the later French deconstructionists (311).

was not "naive philosophically" as he suggests, but I am not implying that Curnow was being deliberately over-modest in his later interview. I believe Curnow was, possibly unconsciously, responding to the same philosophical and literary *Zeitgeist* that was to give rise to the later literary movements that we trace back to the middle of this century. In his interview with Simpson, Curnow affirms as much with reference to the book *Real Presences* by George Steiner:

I suppose his personal beliefs concern me less than those coincidences between his book and some poems of mine – it could have been someone else's book, it just happened to be his. These tensions, these anxieties about word and world, they're to do with modernity everywhere– (312)

Curnow's recognition of the "tensions" everywhere belies his supposition that there was anything coincidental about two writers of the period both dealing with them. In the next chapter I will examine where Curnow has taken those tensions in his poetry since 1972 – or, alternatively, where those tensions took Curnow and his poetry.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## CURNOW'S POETRY FROM 1972

Memory is always something, but if memory were ever good enough – even of a moment ago! – would we want poetry?

– Allen Curnow (1972)

Allen Curnow's 1962 volume of poetry *A Small Room with Large Windows* was subtitled *Selected Poems* and drew, as I discussed in the last chapter, upon previously published poetry dating back to 1941. Only one new poem, "An Oppressive Climate, a Populous Neighbourhood," appeared in the 1962 volume – a relatively unremarked final poem in the collection. Hence, with the exception of that one poem, the hiatus that occurred in Curnow's poetic career commenced rather earlier than is suggested by the decade between 1962 and the appearance in 1972 of his next collection, *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*. He was heavily involved in teaching at the University of Auckland, and Chapter Seven will show that during the decade Curnow was also occupied with radio and theatre. As will be seen in Chapter Eight, Curnow was also heavily involved in the 1950s and during the early 1960s in a protracted struggle with a younger generation of poets, anthologists and critics for literary critical dominance within New Zealand. I will explore more fully Peter Simpson's significant claim in his introduction to Curnow's collected critical writings that Curnow "was called in his criticism to defend ground from which in his poetry he had departed for pastures new" (*Look Back Harder* xix). Meanwhile, Curnow himself provides evidence in a prefatory "Note" to *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* (1972), that he was writing poetry during at least some of that period, when he states:

If I say these poems were *written* in the spring and summer of 1971-2, I mean that is when they were finished and found the order in which they now appear. (n. pag.)

This suggests to me that Curnow dialogically anticipated the future word and defended himself against possible insinuations that his poetic career may have stalled during the previous decade.

I observed in the final section of the previous chapter that a subtle shift in emphasis had occurred in Curnow's poetry leading up to 1962: while Curnow the critic still vehemently argued for a reality behind the poem, Curnow the poet had become concerned with the tension between that reality and the processes of its construction and presentation in language. In this chapter I look at Curnow's poetry from 1972 to the present. In the previous three chapters I have generally applied the Bakhtin school's model of dialogism to Curnow's poetry as a means of evaluating Curnow's struggle with, and subversion of hegemonic discourse. In this chapter dialogic considerations of Curnow's poetry are supplemented, where applicable, with Bakhtin's model of carnivalesque literature. I do not suggest that Curnow's poetry should be termed carnivalesque – after all, no such body of literature exists as a separate genre – but I find the model is a valuable addendum to dialogism, and usefully explains how aspects of some contemporary Curnovian poetry perform as subversive discourse.

## I

The 1972 collection *Trees Effigies Moving Objects*<sup>1</sup> contains two poems, the first and the seventeenth, entitled "Lone Kauri Road." The opening poem "Lone Kauri Road" contains many references to body parts, scatological phrases, and human biological processes, all typical hallmarks of the carnivalesque according to Bakhtin. This increase in Curnow's poetry of what Bakhtin termed the "lower bodily stratum" provokes and challenges elevated and so-called "correct" poetic standards. The opening "Lone Kauri Road" poem is about "looking," the words "eye," "eyeball," "cornea," and "bloodshot cornea" are used. Curnow also refers to hand, voice, brow, nose, face, feet and fingers. Bodily functions mentioned are sweat, snoring and taste, while there is a metaphorical use of "leak," a hound snores, and there is mention of "bitchcraft" and "shitbags." Taken together, this vocabulary

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the original 1972 publication *Trees Effigies Moving Objects* does not contain commas after *Trees* or *Effigies* as does the sequence when it appears in later selections. Since Curnow chose to insert the commas and consistently employ them in the sequence title thereafter, I have followed his lead except when specifically referring to the original publication's title. The dustcover to the original volume subtitled the collection *A sequence of 18 poems*, while on the title page it was subtitled *A Sequence of Poems*.

contrasts markedly with the general tenor of Curnow's language in previous collections.

The opening of the initial poem is of sunset, which may symbolise either complete termination or merely the close of a particular cycle, with renewal always residing as an implicit possibility. But that positive sense is partly overridden as Curnow concludes by looking "down the dulling valley, westward? / [where] everything was backing away." West, again, is where the sun sets, and in Western culture can carry either positive or negative connotations depending upon context. Insufficient use is made of the seaward scene – "looking sooted red, a bloodshot cornea" – to suggest the bloody sacrifice, death or violence that was to appear in many of Curnow's later poems (and, indeed, had appeared in a number of his earlier ones.) Rather, this poem tends to dwell exactly on the premise that imagery and concrete realities – either within the text or beyond at some "prior" reality – cannot be pinned down: "everything was backing away."

The second poem<sup>2</sup> of the collection, "Friendship Heights," introduces italicised nursery rhyme discourse, which functions as a counterpoint to the frequently elevated discourse of poetry, often formal, associated with high culture and occasionally archaic. While the first poem focused on "looking" as a mode of perception, this one concentrates on "remembering," and concludes with a stanza of nursery rhyme language. Within New Zealand's predominant European society of earlier this century, nursery rhymes formed a significant part of most people's early recollections. Additionally, nursery rhymes, or their equivalents in other cultures, traditionally contribute to the social orientation of children, passed down from generation to generation as allegories for cultural mores and taboos. Nursery rhymes are an important vehicle for collective and transgenerational memory, contributing to a mediated and learned orientation by individuals within the parameters of their particular communities. The political and ideological positioning of Curnow's narratorial voice in "Friendship Heights" is dependent upon the speaker's re-construction of an apparently pre-intellectual past. It is not that the children's rhymes are less mediating, but rather that the children are closer to a state of *tabula rasa* when they begin to develop a

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<sup>2</sup> In the original publication, *Trees Effigies Moving Objects*, Curnow spelt out in italics the number of each of the eighteen poems above each title. In later versions of the sequence he adopted Roman numerals, again either above or before each poem's title.

concept of self through other, in this case the fantasy and fiction of gruesome imagery. Curnow's are "mock" nursery rhymes and are hence subversive: "and the bunnies are dead, / the green runs red, / see how they run."

Curnow further exploits these rhymes in the third poem of the collection, "An Upper Room," which deals with "talking" as a mode of apperception. The contrast between childhood and adulthood is deliberately foregrounded by juxtaposing italicised rhyme (*Goosey goosey gander / Whither do you wander?* and leaving unspoken the response "Up stairs, down stairs, in my lady's chamber" part) with scenes and moments recalled from an Auckland University tutorial group. Imposing is the authoritative voice of official discourse:

We speak only  
to each other but as if a third were present,  
the thing we say.

The "thing," here, appears not to exist outside the bounds of language. However, as language is a given which we begin acquiring in infancy in order to construct our consciousness, then language is at once a means of opposing the other in order to establish independence, and the medium through which all our perceptions are mediated – and later validated.

"Our book is open" suggests the possibility of personal re-construction and also refers literally to the process of the tutorial and its concomitant journey of literary discovery. Natural, cyclic and spiritual renewal is also within the narrator's ideological comprehension: "volcanic islets" (Waiheke and Rangitoto Islands, among others), "the tide" (Waitemata tidal harbour), and "*Him that walk'd the waves*" (Milton's "Lycidas" l.173). Yet self-construction also includes boundaries, conditions and impositions, which hint at attempts to establish a fixed sense of identity:

. . . Keep clear of the margins.  
*Here* my line starts and it finishes *here*,  
No later than the light lasts.

This poem concludes with "Dead bunnies. Blinded teddy bears." They are no longer italicised and have therefore ceased to be nursery rhyme recollections. Instead they have been incorporated into the axiological system of the adults in the tutorial room.

Despite Curnow's protestations to Peter Simpson that "I'm no born-again structuralist or post-structuralist" (*Landfall* 1990:303), this poetry suggests that his awareness of some of the processes of human perception of the world, especially through the mediation of language, is acute. In the sixth poem, "Names are News," even the events of nature become human events through the politics of naming. One of the first approaches humans adopt to conquer fear is to name it, thus removing it from the realm of the unknown. Unspeakable events provoke anxiety, but humans can begin to subjugate that anxiety even, where necessary, by constructing a fictional account of events. Something of the procedure may be observed in "Names are News." The northern rata becomes lexicalized as "Metrosideros robusta," a Latinate category drawn from a "dead" and consequently monologic language code, in an attempt to add authority to the "reality" of (or "truth" about) that tree. The poem itself is an intensely dialogic struggle between the speaker and perhaps a notional self that can be read to represent the protagonist's anxieties. A connection is drawn between those anxieties, always political, and the pathology of sexual repression:

Seed vessels fly  
 forty thousand feet high  
 jetting towards a dark  
 destination up, up!  
 Funny how the sexual jets  
 grumbling aloft resemble  
 cymes, dark scarlet.

Finally in "Names are News" the narrator anxiously confronts what he presents as the fictions of human dignity and pride:

And the living brother by the rigour  
 of a description *stood*  
*erect*, and the Court covered its  
 embarrassment, and ours, by the  
 rigour that was its only  
 rigour, of a description.

In this case the "rigour" is probably not just harshness, severity and strictness, but possibly the enforcement of law (SOED) which would reside behind the just and blind scales of justice within the court. "Embarrassment," too, is frequently the outward manifestation of a conflict

or struggle between competing ideologies within given power structures, or from without against a dominant structure, and frequently results in an acknowledgement of one's subordination. Its various definitions suggest perplexity, confusion, hesitation and restraint (SOED). In this section of the poem, events are "mediated" by the *New Zealand Herald* newspaper, whose description becomes the perception with which we are officially provided of the Court's reaction. Further, the newspaper also provides us with the officially sanctioned way in which we are expected or even required to react publicly to the events.<sup>3</sup>

Curnow exploits the competitive spirit of children's rhymes in many other poems from this collection, but perhaps never more savagely or subversively than in "A Framed Photograph," the tenth poem of the sequence. It is set in Washington DC, presumably written while Curnow was in the United States for a period during the early 1960s. Distinctions between fact and fiction are challenged, partly through the use of italicised foregrounding which elsewhere in this collection is reserved for nursery rhymes. Diminutives of names are stressed – Jackie, Jack and Bobbie – and President John F. Kennedy is yoked to the nursery rhyme character Little Jack Horner:

Jackie was hanging pictures in the White House.  
*I figured he could use the experience*, Jack hornered,  
*when he starts in legal practice*, naming Bobby  
 for Attorney-General.

The First Lady's role in the White House is domesticated and presented as irrelevant concern with cosmetic showiness, while Kennedy is directly quoted as "figuring" out ways to further the interests of the dynasty to which he belonged. The second stanza pushes into the realms of violence and abhorrence:

Act one, scene one,  
 of the bloody melodrama, Everyone listened  
 while everyone read his poems. *BANG! BANG!*  
 and we cried all the way to My Lai.

Echoes of children's victorious "*bang, bang, you're dead*" cries carry over into the fourth line, which is eerily reminiscent of the "little piggies" rhyme, in which the fifth "*cried 'wee, wee' all*

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Broughton has noted the irony here if we consider the verse satirist Whim Wham (Chapter Six) as subversive contributor to the *New Zealand Herald*.

*the way home.*" Kennedy's Camelot presidential administration (1961-63), his assassination in Dallas, Texas (22 November 1963), and the later My Lai massacre by a group of American soldiers in Vietnam (16 March 1968) are successfully linked through nursery rhymes. While it is not helpful to describe the impact of nursery rhymes as pre-intellectual, their use does have the effect of clouding the logic of cause and effect. In much the same way as pictures are connotatively rich but denotatively poor, Curnow's use of nursery rhyme paints a "word picture" that connotatively leaps beyond the bounds of officially constructed history and received doctrine. The poem is even titled "a photograph."

Poem twelve, "Magnificat," is far more restrained in the approach it takes to questioning official power structures.<sup>4</sup> The effigy of Mary, which overlooks the North Island west coast town of Paraparaumu (like a small-scale version of Rio de Janeiro's statue, Christ the Redeemer), prompts a series of questions, although answers to these seem generally beside the point. Instead, there is a rapidly shifting focus between myth and image which continually tests the validity of each. The triviality and frivolity of some observations – for instance, Mary's halo has twelve electric light bulbs, her nose is eighteen inches long, her frame comprises two-by-four inch timbers, she has a maintenance hatch in the back of her head, and so on – subvert any temptation to make the icon itself a holy object. What is at stake here seems to be the fact that providing material and technical details about the physical object destroys the "spiritual" aspects, highlights the fragility of faith issues, and raises the question about the sign-signifier relationship. So the sight of the effigy provokes a culminating question, so "where is the world?" (also the opening words to the third poem of the sequence). What happens to human experience when you destroy the assumption that icon and meaning are separated?

The increasing desperation Curnow expresses in the seventeenth poem, "Lone Kauri Road" (whose title is the same as the opening poem), suggests the impossibility of arresting a scene that is perpetually going out of existence, where even shadows proceed into the

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<sup>4</sup> The title is taken from the hymn of the Virgin (*Luke* 1:46-55) beginning "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*), used as part of the daily service of the Church since the beginning of the sixth century, and at Evening Prayer in the Church of England for over 800 years (Brewer).

past. Even memory is unreliable, as Cumow explained in his prefatory "Note" to the volume:

Memory is always something, but if memory were ever good  
 enough – even of a moment ago! – would we want poetry?  
 . . . [M]emory is a thing of the present, a thing of the future  
 too, if that is not already taken care of. (*Trees Effigies*  
*Moving Objects* n. pag.)

Dialogically, the latter "Lone Kauri Road" poem may be read as an attack upon our scientific certainties of interpretation:

A tui clucked, shat, whistled thrice.  
 My gaze was directed where the branch had been.

Curnow rebels with surrealist flights of description:

. . . the  
 sun fell out of its frame, the time of the day  
 hung round at a loose end, lopsided

The effect is to subvert logical and conventional modes of perception and estimation. By concluding the poem at a point that is not located clearly in either time or place, but instead "where the shadow had been," the effect is similar to a cinematic "fade out" effect in which we and the poem become separated.

As a result of the approach in "Lone Kauri Road," the final and eighteenth poem of the collection, "Any Time Now," is doubly effective for its playful language and apparent disdain of serious subjects. The narrator eschews nursery rhymes and, unlike many earlier poems in the collection, there is no use of scatology, italics, historical references, or overtly provocative subject matter. Rather, the poem subverts and inverts all the logical paths of rational understanding ("the ground opening at my feet," "the ground broke," "the ground blinked" and "the ground closed over the sky") in favour of a frivolity at least as serious in intent as any of Curnow's earlier poetry.

One of the obvious challenges to a carnivalesque reading of *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* lies in the poem title "Lone Kauri Road." A "lone" kauri cannot regenerate, which is in contrast to an important element of carnivalesque literature, according to Bakhtin, which is the cyclic and renewing purpose of subversive literature. Curnow, however, mentions later in the first poem "the nosed cones of the young kauri," which seemingly refers to other,

younger, kauri trees. Elsewhere, the sixteenth poem, "There is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods," makes reference to the orgasmic exploding "green grenade" of a spent cone, which resolves that particular contradiction about regeneration and the carnivalesque quite adequately.

## II

In *An Abominable Temper* (1973) Curnow's opening poem "To the Reader" may be read as a preface to all the poetry he was – and perhaps still is yet – to write, as well as to the eight other poems contained in that collection. The directness of the address in "To the Reader" compels us to read the poem as the voice of the poet Curnow speaking directly to his readers. The poem challenges readers and particularly those who, by 1973, had been following Curnow through forty years of writing and publication. "To the Reader" appears a direct put-down. We are told that the narrator burgled from our house "a precious little": apart from our "skinny wallet" and our "ten-dollar watch," he took "pearls / of more pearliness than price. / You missed them, did you?" Our precious valuables (values) and riches appear now cheapened and gaudy, yet the loss of such triviality is still construed as remaining important to us. It is an indictment on our set of values/valuables, which are trivial in light of the poet's pearls of wisdom. The poem commences:

Look for my fingerprints.  
 Good luck to you. I wore  
 no gloves when I burgled  
 your house and made off with  
 as much as I could carry,

Curnow implicitly invites the reader to search for traces and evidence of authorship. Poet-burglar Allen Curnow has metaphorically taken from us our time and attention – both of which the study of Curnow's poetry demands in abundance. Curnow, more than most other New Zealand poets or literary critics, could be indicted of attempting to tamper with readers' intellectual beliefs and attitudes, as well as with their emotions and spirituality. Readers who passively seek quick and easy "responses" from their superficial readings of Curnow are likely to receive back from their "other" (Curnow), the notion that their selves are "a little the

worse / for wear." Yet Curnow admits to being "shitscared you'd wake and catch me," conceding that "all losses are loss" but "life itself [is] the most trifling." Such an admission, and the mention of restitution, suggest not unmitigated arrogance on the part of this poet-burglar, but an uneasy sense that the reader may be an unwilling victim. It seems Curnow feels compelled to commit his "crimes," but not without at least some sense of responsibility for the changes wrought upon now fully-warned readers.

It seems to me, given this explicit warning from Curnow in the first poem of *An Abominable Temper*, that the challenge facing the poet was to find an appropriate response that we readers would take seriously when the tables were eventually turned upon Curnow. I believe it is reasonable to accept that, in Curnow's own phrase, there was "a reality prior to the poem" (*Look Back Harder* 172) which caused him to respond to the subverting taunt of "an unfortunate young lady who, after attending six public readings by thirty poets, asked, does anyone care?" Furthermore, even allowing for the contemporary theoretical view that Curnow at least partly constructs the realities prior to his poems, such an occasion remains ideologically feasible and thus even a fictive "unfortunate young lady" represents a dialogically valid voice within society. (Personally, though, I like to believe the occasion happened just as Curnow's poem describes it.)

Poets less at ease with the dialogic struggle to construct their identities – those more intent, perhaps, on achieving better recognition by the literary establishment – might have been tempted either to ignore or to dismiss the woman's attack. However, Curnow's response, the poem "To an Unfortunate Young Lady," implicitly recognises the validity of the woman's subversive action against established power structures, secondly accepts his own dominant position within this particular literary *milieu* and, thirdly, acknowledges the tenuous nature of poets' claims to privilege. Curnow begins the poem by apparently agreeing with the woman and sets out to "make an example of poetry." The first of a pair of paradoxes ("It is possible, even for poets, / to live without it,") joins with the woman's attack upon poets, although the paradoxes can also be read as ironic. The first is qualified by the telling comment: "so many do." The word "so" can function either as conjunction, weakly suggesting consequence, or it can act as an intensive, serving to reinforce with irony the

great number of poets who *do* live without poetry. The second paradox ("and to live with it, most of the time / [is] impossible"), linked to the first, suggests exactly the irreconcilable tension poets must often capture if they are to struggle successfully with the politics of language. This struggle for meaning and truth, Bakhtin argues, sometimes takes place in as little as a single word.

In this particular defence of poesy, Curnow presents three scenarios to his interlocutor:

Isn't it the mumble  
of something loose behind,  
or a fumble  
in the back seat of the mind?  
Or an innumerable company  
of the heavenly host crying  
rhubarb rhubarb rhubarb rhubarb  
with *obbligato* innumerable other  
syllables in several languages,  
some dead?

The first two examples are the "mumble" and "fumble" which are deliberately vague, yet connotatively powerful enough to conjure up images in readers' minds. However, their power to convince is largely carried by their emotional and pictorial appeal and not through intellectually reasoned argument. Mumbling carries some suggestion of guilt, a desire to avoid speaking the truth, or embarrassment. "Fumbling in the back seat" of a car was a common New Zealand euphemism earlier this century for initial and slightly illicit sexual experimentation by courting couples. The rhyming words (mumble and fumble) connotatively rebel against "polite" and "efficient" standards of action and behaviour. At a further remove, but simultaneously, these two examples from Curnow's poetry provide for the "unfortunate young lady" an example of poetry by *being* poetic – at the very least verse, anyway, because they rhyme – rather than by initially talking *about* poetry. Later, the poem can be subjected to critical scrutiny and be shown to constitute an intellectually tenable argument. However, the initial dialogic response from Curnow to his critic's outburst against poetry was – delightfully – to create more poetry.

The third scenario Curnow presents to his interlocutor provokes a comparison with stereotypical high-culture poetry, with its references to the macrocosmic "innumerable company," members of which comprise the "heavenly host," and whose action is to "cry" out their message. Is the narrator agreeing through his parody that established poetic discourse contains an "obligato" – a part essential for completeness of composition – which might just as well be meaningless burble or perhaps mere phatic communication? The charge against poets of using "dead languages" is even more serious because the commonly and erroneously held belief, that poetry must be difficult to access, questions whether poetry should enter into a dialogue with its readers. Dead languages have become "fixed" or monologic and no longer provide ground for ideological struggle. Hence the process of dynamic construction of self through other ceases, and with that the (poetic) consciousness of self ultimately risks death.

Alternatively, Curnow is perhaps suggesting through his parody that for some readers and listeners the rhubarb-filled vacuum, complete with an "obligato," represents more than phatic "carrier waves" produced to keep communication open. His "one man's rhubarb is another man's / artichoke" becomes the diverse and non-essentialist reason for poetry's continued existence and importance. Ultimately, he wishes upon the "unfortunate young lady" what only she herself can use or make significance of: "Rhubarb to you . . . every glorious carefree day and night of your life." The statement is a respectful salutation and acknowledgement of her ideological position, but also a gauntlet thrown at her feet.

In another poem from *An Abominable Temper*, Curnow exploits images of life and death. "A Refusal To Read Poems Of James K. Baxter At A Performance To Honour His Memory In Cranmer Square, Christchurch" may be initially taken as an autobiographical justification:

Jim, you won't mind, will you,  
if I don't come to your party?  
One death is enough, I won't kill you  
over again, ritually [.]

The occasion was apparently a sincere attempt in March 1973 by a group within the

community to honour the memory of Baxter, who had died the previous year. It seems to me that Curnow recognised the community's subtle moves to re-construct the often outspoken and frequently disturbing poet into a persona acceptable to hegemonic groups within that community – and perhaps also shift the parameters of hegemonic authority further away from Curnow towards Baxter. Curnow subverts what I read to be virtually a process of Baxter's canonization, the event of honouring Baxter, by terming it a "party," to which he has been invited to "ritually" perform a second death upon the dead poet. According to my reading, Baxter's first (biological) death has already entailed rebirth, although Curnow appears uncertain of either Baxter's or his own resulting status:

I would hardly know under which hat or which crown  
to salute you now—  
bays, or myrtles, or thorns,  
or which of them best adorns  
that grave ambiguous brow.

The Christchurch performance does not entail the ritualistic enactment of birth, life and death of a poet king, which in the carnival world involves cyclic rebirth as natural consequence. Rather the proposed "performance to honour [the] memory" discounts the possibility that Baxter has already been reborn and is alive.

Winged words need no crutch,  
and I've none for you.

The speaker concludes that to continue to re-birth a poet not dead (at least in terms of his poetry) would be to kill him, to focus on his physical death to the detriment of his continued poetic life. In light of the literary rivalry that existed between Curnow and Baxter during the 1950s and 1960s, discussed in Chapter eight, Curnow's attitude is surprisingly benevolent, although it was probably misinterpreted at the time by those who knew about their earlier debates on poetry.

The link between the poem and a carnival event may appear tenuous. Yet, exactly because strains of a carnival may occasionally be heard in the distance, as it were, of Curnow's contemporary poetry, a Bakhtinian reading of Curnow's poetry adds another

dimension to earlier critical appraisals of his work. Bakhtin considered the existence of "footlights" – the separation of actors from spectators (*Rabelais* 7) – sufficient to destroy carnival. We may speculate how Curnow might have reacted had the New Zealand literary establishment actively participated in a ritualistic celebration of Baxter's birth, life, death, and rebirth. Undoubtedly, as Bernstein (114) has argued, some form of "footlights" is already implicit in the carnival and in its literary representation. Notwithstanding, Curnow tests the stability of the Christchurch footlights by admitting the privileged position of Baxter's votaries but only in order to subvert our confidence in their role as spectator-judges. To apply Bernstein's comments to Curnow, the Christchurch affair became a performance rather than a carnival because "instead of an affirmative celebration, there [was] a dialogue of frustrated latecomers, imitating models whose naive confidence they [could] never get quite right" (115). Curnow calls the event a "performance" in the title of his poem, but himself refuses to perform. Yet, paradoxically, Curnow's dialogue with Baxter in the poem becomes a celebration in its own right, and includes the poem's readers too, because we join with Curnow and Baxter in frustrating the taming, domesticating and monologizing of the dead poet by the hegemonic spectator-judges. Baxter is reborn in this poem despite the fact that the performance referred to was designed merely to integrate him monologically into dominant power structures.

### III

Examination of Curnow's use of colours hints at the possibility of carnivalesque features in his poetry. Within Curnow's "Moro Assassinato" poem, itself a nine-part sequence within the poet's larger *An Incurable Music* (1979) sequence, the red colour of blood dominates. Burman entitled his seminal discussion of "Moro Assassinato" the "culminating sacrifice" in *Landfall*, and the poem, about the kidnapping and killing of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by Red Brigade guerrillas in 1978, may initially appear more as an orgy of death than a carnival celebrating rebirth. Yet there remain numerous elements of the latter. Burman writes:

Blood generates life: red becomes green after the sacrifice and is, in Dylan Thomas' words, 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flower'. This recognition of the metamorphosis of red into green marks a pivotal moment in Curnow's understanding of the past, and his own country. In his more lyrical passages the most unexpected objects become green, and it is pertinent to observe the frequent occurrence of the adjective 'green' in his poems: at a quick count, it occurs 25 times against blue (16), yellow (14), white (10), and thus down to single occurrences (in all 19 colours). This unusual proportion of 'green' is interesting, as are the strange conjunctions with nouns 'green music', 'green innocence', 'green grenade' and 'green myth'. (26)

According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, green generally connotes youth, freshness and spring, while in ecclesiastical use (seldom far below the surface of Curnow's poetry) green symbolises faith, gladness, immortality, and the resurrection of the just. For the Greeks it symbolised victory. Following on from Burman, one can construct red and green not as opposites but as consequences or continuations. Burman does not suggest the cyclic nature of either the two colours or of the metamorphosis he refers to, and he stops at the unilinear "red becomes green after the sacrifice" observation. However, he links Curnow's poetry to the notion that "green derives from red, life from blood or a new society from sacrifice" (26). As I discussed in Chapter One, for Bakhtin the carnival

possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality. Thus even in our time those genres that have a connection, however remote, with the traditions of the serio-comical preserve in them the carnivalistic leaven (ferment), and this sharply distinguishes them from the medium of other genres. These genres always bear a special stamp by which we can recognize them. The sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world. (*Dostoevsky* 107)

Bakhtin identifies several characteristics of carnivalized literature which can be observed in Curnow's *An Incurable Music* sequence and particularly in the "Moro Assassinato" poems. The first of Bakhtin's observations is the "understanding, evaluating and shaping [of] reality" in the "living *present*" (his italics). Rather than presenting literary subjects in the absolute past of myth and legend, or with epic or tragic distance, carnivalesque literature tends to

bring those subjects into a "zone of immediate and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries." The subjects "act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present" (*Dostoevsky* 108). As Burman notes, "distant allusions to Italian history" – political assassinations in the Duomo of the Medici exactly five centuries previously – are "knocked into the present . . . [and] charged with a new reality" (31):

[Curnow's] empathetic understanding of Moro's predicament and the minds of terrorists seem to have sharpened his gifts and drawn them into a confrontation with violent present-day reality. (Burman 35)

In "Moro Assassinato" this may be seen to occur on two levels. The 1478 Medici assassination of "In the Duomo" earlier in *An Incorrigible Music* is linked to the present by providing the context for the Moro assassination. At the same time the 1978 assassination in Italy is linked to our own time for today's reader in New Zealand through the overarching context of the entire book.

In a discussion in *Pilgrims*, Jackaman observes that in the poem "In the Duomo" there is an emphasis on the kinship of subjects which resides

in the world of the poem irrespective of time and place. Imaginative continuity, freeing itself from the more pedestrian and logical temporal and geographical continuities, is guaranteed in the verbal artifice by significant details which echo and re-echo through the verse fabric . . . . (Jackaman 65-66)

Jackaman later describes the continuity as

not merely a parallelism or even convergence of themes, but genuine fusion, union as the multiple strands become one: so each line refers simultaneously to New Zealand *and* Italy, here *and* there, then *and* now. (Jackaman 66; his italics)

Curnow indicates his intentions in the first of the "Moro Assassinato" group of poems by commencing:

All the seas are one sea,  
the blood one blood  
and the hands one hand.

Temporal and spatial dimensions are collapsed ("ever is always today" and "here and not here"), as is society's perception ("the eyes are all one eye"), and its consciousness ("the

tales are all one tale"). A series of one or two-liner "playlets" flash before us with examples referring to time and space as varied as the Tasman, Pacific and Adriatic seas, Paratohi rock and the bell-tower of San Giorgio, tourists in Florence and an angler who trolls past the Gesuati church. Then a play about the "lengthening anguish" of Eleonora, la Signora Moro, dominates and draws all the other scenes into its ideological boundaries: "Ever remains today, / and the hands one hand." If the nine individual parts that comprise the larger "Moro Assassinato" poem can be read as an attempt at understanding, evaluating and shaping reality in the living present, then the same principle holds equally true for the other eight poems (the third, "In the Duomo," itself comprising five poem parts) which go to make up *An Incurrible Music*. In differing ways the poems exploit specific qualities and intensities of emotional and sensuous awareness, melding humanity and history into the "here and now" of perception.

Another characteristic of the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin says is inseparable from the previous one discussed, is that in carnivalized literature, literary images are consciously liberated from legend and rely instead "on experience and free invention" (*Dostoevsky* 108). Curnow may be seen to handle this notion of liberation differently from Bakhtin in "Dichtung und Wahrheit,"<sup>5</sup> where he attempts to liberate the characters of a novel from their fictive world which is still in the process of evolving into legend. The poem appears to refer to the novel *A Soldier's Tale*, which was written by fellow Auckland University English literature lecturer M.K. Joseph, and was later filmed. Curnow constructs a series of scenes within scenes: the poem's "man I know" (Joseph). "wrote a book" (a novel) "about a man he knew" (a character in that novel) who murdered a French civilian woman during the Allied liberation of France from Nazi occupation late in World War II. Critics have lambasted Curnow for being an extreme anti-sentimentalist who possibly underestimates the subtlety of a novel that attempts to salvage a love story from the potentially sordid realms of war-time romanticising. James Bertram, for example, wonders whether Joseph's novel struck

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<sup>5</sup> Creation (or composition) and truth. It is also the title of Goethe's multi-volume autobiography, written c.1809-1831.

some old puritanical Anglican nerve in Curnow, so that he wrote his comment in a moment of shocked indignation? That seems about the only excuse for lines which, as they stand, show such a surprising mixture of inaccuracy as to what actually happened in the novel, inability to appreciate wartime pressures on the serving soldier, and complete misreading of a very subtle and sophisticated mode of fictional presentation. (*Listener* 85)

In contrast, I prefer to read Curnow's savage travesty as a hard-edged attempt to subvert Joseph's (and society's) re-construction of the war as something other than meaningless, random and inevitable slaughter. Curnow reorients the plot by paraphrasing the "story," but in "street" language, vulgar discourse which itself perhaps challenges "high culture" poetry. At the same time, Curnow's use of language satirises the novel and underlines his attack on moral interpretations of the story:

. . . [The man] fucked  
and murdered a girl to save her from others  
who would have fucked and murdered this girl  
much more painfully and without finer feelings[.]

Curnow's poem becomes at once an attack upon Joseph and his novel, and Curnow dispenses in advance with any lingering romantic notions readers might entertain that poetry is polite and elevated. Thus Curnow presents a challenge to the ethos that there is a moral high ground to be gained out of even the abysmal machinations of war, and constructs a threat to society's legend-constructing process in which literature plays an essential, if not *the* essential role.

Elsewhere, and more conventionally in terms of Bakhtin's theoretical model, Curnow comes closer to liberating literary images from legend, relying instead on experience and free invention in his handling of the assassination of Moro. I argue that the Red Brigade terrorists were "literary" constructs.<sup>6</sup> The Red Brigade's exploits were fuelled by and occurred in reaction to news media (and the public's) interest; without the dialogic self-other dynamic in which the competing discourses eagerly participated, the conflict and social damage (as it

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<sup>6</sup> I would also include here their close German counterparts, the Baader-Meinhoff gang, and other urban guerrilla movements of the period such as the Japanese Red Army faction, and notably North American groups the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, and Patti Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army.

was ideologically constructed) could not have occurred. Today, a generation later, the normal social process of ideological revisionism of those turbulent years continues, and that process of historical reconstruction is also to some small degree a response to the influence of works such as Curnow's "Moro Assassinato."

Curnow draws upon chronological and historical "facts," upon his own recollections of Italy during the period concerned, upon seven posthumously-published letters Moro wrote while a captive, and upon numerous newspaper accounts and interviews. Curnow then "liberates" Moro, the guerrillas and others from the officially-sanctioned constraints of recorded history and constructs factualism so that we readers may share the players' contrasting experiences.<sup>7</sup> In terms of dialogism, Curnow is not denying any ideologically official verdict on the events surrounding Moro's kidnapping and subsequent death, and in general he remains sympathetically loyal to the received version of events. Yet, his poetic record fragments the simple focused view by allowing defecting ideologies the possibility of having their discourses heard. Given that, inevitably, Curnow imposes his own ethical hegemony on the characters in his scenario, the players are free to invent their selves in dialogic response to each other rather than having to remain closed monologic caricatures set permanently in official history and denied the opportunity of response. The response that speakers in "Moro Assassinato" evoke from others is not entirely predictable and their words become a continuing struggle for appropriation of meaning, and thus truth. Ideological positioning of protagonists and antagonists is dynamic and speakers change their viewpoints dramatically throughout the nine poems. Hence, the dialogue remains open and no finalising period is imposed. According to Bakhtin, "the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings . . ." (*Dostoevsky* 165; Bakhtin's italics).

A third Bakhtinian characteristic of carnivalesque literature is "the deliberate multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature" of the genre. Bakhtin expects to find in such works,

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<sup>7</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to revisit debates over whether a poetic representation of an event is any more fictive than the official records. Post-modernist theories, however, generally speaking posit all language as fiction.

a multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic; they make wide use of inserted genres – letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations; in some of them we observe a mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons . . . are introduced, and various authorial masks make their appearance. (*Dostoevsky* 108)

With the obvious exception of the comic, Curnow employs in his *An Incurable Music* sequence all of the characteristics described above. That is not to say that Curnow does not exhibit a dry wit or an ironic turn of phrase on occasion to provoke an academic chuckle, but any such response is more likely to be in appreciation of Curnow's superb wordcraft. Intellectually-pitched wit it may be, but comic it is not. (Curnow was to restrict use of the comic almost entirely to his Whim Wham satiric verse, as will be shown in the next chapter.) Meanwhile, the *An Incurable Music* sequence balances the low tones of, for example, "Dichtung und Wahrheit" or the blunt perversity of a poem like "An Urban Guerrilla" with the historic spread of the breath-taking sacrificial poem "Bring Your Own Victim," or with the quiet, deceptively gentle beauty of the final, title poem. In *An Incurable Music* Curnow does all that Bakhtin would ask of carnivalized literature, except the comic element. In "The Letters" he reworks excerpts from Moro's posthumously published letters. After an introductory third-person stanza, the poem slips into the first person speech of Moro – in English poetic discourse, of course – halting and stumbling towards the painful inevitability of his fate. It is not relevant to my discussion how accurately (or inaccurately) Curnow translates and quotes from Moro's original letters.<sup>8</sup> Dialogically, the significance is that Curnow's discourse too, which includes his context interpreting those letters, now joins the chorus of voices and competes to liberate the biological referent Moro from the clutches of any one monological discourse or ideology. In this respect, what Bakhtin does not appear to have taken into account when developing his model is that the process of carnivalizing events through literature *itself* contributes to the way the past is reviewed by later societies. Curnow's use of experience and free invention when developing a Moro persona is a part

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<sup>8</sup> In a prefatory note to *An Incurable Music* (1979), Curnow attributes the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper of 13 September 1978 as his source for Moro's seven letters.

(albeit, a very small part) of the history and legend-making process itself, rather than an act that merely liberates the character from legend.

A poem earlier, in "The Prison of the People," there is a shock of recognition as we hear the guerrillas speak in first person plural. The anticipated "self and other" construct of society versus the outlaws is inverted. As readers we are forced, at least to a degree, to identify with what received, historical and one-sided accounts have judged the "villains." The official state apparatus is posited as other. That is not to say that the guerrillas are convincing. Indeed, Curnow's voices display an understanding of their circumstances in all probability well beyond the capability of the original *Brigate Rosse* members, if only because Curnow writes with the benefit of hindsight. In "The Prison of the People" the guerrilla narrators exhibit an advanced degree of perception when they say of Moro with respect to the Government:

He knew us better than they, adduced Palestinian  
precedent, humane principle, the party interest,  
all that shit. What did he, or we, expect?

Yet Curnow's subversion of the official and historical accounts is not designed to glorify the guerrillas at the expense of established authority. The narrative voice, purportedly speaking for and as the guerrillas, is less certain of its own position than it would admit. The guerrillas speak in the first person plural, apparently monologically. One person could be speaking on behalf of the others, although Curnow's use of the plural suggests that a committee may be speaking, but less than unanimously. The household consists of half a dozen comrades "at a guess," plus a few more "coming and going." For the narrator or narrators to be uncertain of even their numerical strength during the zenith of their revolutionary confrontation with the Italian state casts suspicion on the veracity of everything they say, and on their memories of events at that time, in addition to showing their lack of organisation. The recollections are in the past tense, hence the events of the "people's prison" are already being remembered and reconstructed. The tension in the prison is high, and when the speaker asks, "how long / would it take to squeeze the brain / till the fuses blew?" the brain can refer to any or all of the Italian authorities, the captive Moro, and the guerrillas themselves. When the speakers confess, "[n]ot that we gave it a thought," we may suspect that this is a more honest self-

appraisal: that they were far less in control of anyone's destiny, Moro's or their own, at the time than they would later like to admit. Their lack of control is borne out by the emotional, lower bodily response they exhibit to events:

wasn't the State on the block  
and the front page yelling rape,  
and the cameras in at the fuck  
and the dirtied pants scared off  
the arses of the Bourses(.)

Moro, the "supremely important person," is described as kept "for killing when the time came," which tacitly acknowledges that his fate has already been decided prior to, and while events were unfolding. But again, it can be argued that this may be another example of the speakers reconstructing events in the light of outcomes – or of Curnow making an order out of the chaos of the time. Certainly, it illustrates Curnow's use of a heteroglossia of voices and various authorial masks to orchestrate a carnival of dissent and subversion of the established political order.

#### IV

Curnow's *You Will Know When You Get There* sequence of poems of 1979-1981 can be read as pondering the illuminating instants and momentarily definitive gestures of experience in a world of fortuity, although these instants are typically burdened with disillusionment, meditateness, or moral implication. Following Bakhtin, I argue that, axiomatically, *all* language is embedded with moral implications, although meditation and disillusionment are the preserve of few authors. Certainly, Curnow considers the fortuitous nature of existence in the poem sequence. The opening poem, "A Reliable Service," commences with the line "The world can end at any time / it likes, say, 10.50 am / of a bright winter Saturday." A sense of disillusionment pervades, culminating in the poem's concluding statement, "That / will be all, I suppose." Between is a fifteen-minute ferry trip on the Fullers' ferry *Bay Bell* across a Bay of Islands inlet, from Paihia to Russell, where the place to have lunch is discovered to be closed.

A central concern to both the disillusionment spelt out in this poem, and to the entire

*You Will Know When You Get There* sequence, is the degree to which the "world" of the poem collocates with the word "reliable" in the poem's title. The poem opens with the unsettling prospect that "the world can end any time / it likes." A "malice of your mind" taints the innocence of a carnivalesque material bodily awareness of the world in "A Touch of the Hand." There is an "eyeful," an "arm," and wind tosses "your hair, otherwise your free hand / wouldn't brush it from your eyes"; we see other people's "backs" and "their faces, the ages, the sexes, the ways / they are dressed": yet the malice of the mind "withholds" the assurance of even one "smile of recognition" which would otherwise pave the way for a carnival of subversive laughter to follow. As in other examples discussed above, Curnow often exploits effects which we can discuss in terms of carnivalesque characteristics in his contemporary poetry, but stops short each time before laughter.

In "The Weather in Tohunga Crescent" death and renewal are considered, but not in a carnivalesque manner. The poem concludes by giving precedence to death, but in a manner that suggests resignation by Curnow to forces outside his control. No attempt is made to challenge whether "an / 'intimate question' for the asking" actually requires asking, especially in light of the agency exhibited earlier when the speaker's finger hovers over the switch which controls "the 'life support system' of the / whole damned visible material / world." In contrast, the poem "You Get What You Pay For" cynically posits individual control, but only under the capitalistic terms the title suggests. The "rich eccentric" manages to "ingest" his cake and have it too, but the speaker seems to blame, at least partly, his advancing age for his inability to control events:

you too pushing seventy  
wishing the weather were here  
to stay the morning's moment  
free  
knowing that it is not.

In notes to *You Will Know When You Get There* (6), Curnow acknowledges having "helped myself to detail" from Dick Scott's account of F.J.Rayner when writing the poem "A Fellow Being," but admits that "the historian is not answerable for the poet's conceptions." The poem explores aspects of F.J.Rayner's life in New Zealand while dispensing with the

biographer's dependence upon historical verification. In the ten-part poem's final section, Curnow intrudes as first person narrator to position both his narratorial self and F.J. Rayner dialogically:

your life-cycle and mine  
 humming the hymn of it's finished  
 to the tune of it's just begun  
 fifty years 'later'. . . .

Curnow admits that

. . . the year

I remember is the first I visited  
 the sun-drowning clifftop and  
 you died the two facts being  
 unconnected except I've come

where the paths cross the two of us  
 on a collusion course . . . .

Curnow's poem fragments what we normally accept as the biographer's assertive, authoritative views. Curnow is prepared to explore the location of his narratorial self, not only in relation to Rayner, but also in terms of potential influence. He posits an alternative and therefore potentially subversive view to the received version of history. Curnow does not parody his historical source and his notes illustrate that he refers to the source text with deference. He does not tear down the established order as represented by Rayner – or by Scott's reading of Rayner – in a mocking and subversive inversion of values. Instead, Curnow allows Dr Rayner to be judged quietly by history, as his life and deeds are examined in the light of contemporary standards. However, the apparently quiet narrative tone also serves to emphasise Curnow's immense contempt and highly judgmental view of Rayner's ecological vandalism and mercantile rapacity. Perhaps the most serious indictment against Rayner is the "few million board-feet" of timber he milled out of forests near Karekare, west of Auckland, over seven years, before selling the mill to the government. The poem does not outwardly attack Rayner's financial successes but, with scathingly sarcastic undertones, mentions in Part VIII the

'lots of detractors the usual lot  
of men who make good financially  
or any other way' so Eliot R.

Curnow's poem was written in the late 1970s or very early 1980s but increases in relevance in the late 1990s as contemporary New Zealand society increasingly reviews its past, particularly with regard to conservation and ecological issues. The actions of men like Rayner in felling native timber on large tracts of land are no longer acceptable and Curnow's poem both anticipates and reinforces the changing attitudes.

In the concluding section, when the narrator attempts to develop a direct and personal relationship with the long-dead Rayner, the felled kauri trees, *Agathis australis*, become the central metaphor for Rayner, for the "robber" timber industry of New Zealand's colonial past, and for rebirth and the future. In this last aspect, the poem parallels a carnivalization parody of Rayner's life. Despite the "shiploads" of "elephant-limbed conifers" that were "toppled and rolled" by Rayner, there is the sound of rebirth as the narrator sleeps in the valley:

...on my roof the bursting  
  
cone wakes me like hail the soul  
flies this way and that in the thinning  
dawn dark where the paths cross and the  
young trees know only how to grow.

The seeds and young growing trees of that final stanza usher in with the dawn the rebirth and regrowth of the forest and perhaps hark back to the earlier part IV of the poem in which "the dad god" kicked the kids around:

all this blood'n spunk sloshed like  
she been blocked by these guys  
they reckon was gods  
and she's preg again . . . .

The travesty – "block" is gang idiom for a gang rape – results in a birth, but also in revenge. While it is the "mum god" who "gets mad" at the way he treats the kids and perhaps also at being "blocked by these guys / they reckon was gods", it is another "god guy" (a son, presumably) who eventually "cuts the dad god's balls off":



celebration rather than an elegy on Wall, who married Curnow's paternal aunt; however, I contend that the poem is not a celebration. Curnow tells us that the ninety-five year old man is "facing me across his table," and we are given a description of a dinner conversation and details that surround it.

The carnivalesque images underpinning this poem centre most significantly on the dinner scene, and particularly the drinking of red wine. In the Christian tradition wine is associated with the "blood" of the Eucharist and the isolated individual is consequently re-affirmed as a part of the whole Church. In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the officiating priest, when consecrating the altar wine during the Anglican service of Holy Communion, recites:

Likewise after supper he took the Cup; and, when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of this; for this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins: Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me. (240)

According to a guide to Christian symbolism by Herbert Whone, wine also has the capacity to disorientate the mechanism of the physical body and relax restrictions of the empirical ego, thus reaching "a more real part of the human being" (175). In the poem the old man's ability to lift "the glass of red / wine to an untremulous / lip, and set it down / with a steady hand" suggests, however, that Wall is not physically incapacitated by the alcohol, nor by his advanced age. Following the dinner party's ritualistic communion of wine, Wall remarks "that he once possessed the whole / of the *Comédie Humaine* / in a Paris edition. Couldn't / remember now what became of it." *La Comédie Humaine* was written by Honoré de Balzac, who completed 91 out of a planned 137 separate interconnected novels and stories between 1827 and 1847, giving a comprehensive fictional representation of late 18th and early 19th century French society. Despite the English translation of the collection's title, the works are not comedies in the contemporary sense, but the title does evoke images of people living, working and playing in a distant and foreign – hence exotic – context. Arnold Wall dispenses with the novels in almost the same breath, but it is not clear whether this is as a result of alcohol, aged-related forgetfulness, or symbolic dismissal of *La Comédie Humaine* as an

attempt to capture and fix the human condition. The meal motif is grotesquely sustained, however, in the guise of gangrene:

Between him and his death's  
left foot the gangrene was  
no secret, already in the door  
and pressing hard, in a white fold freshly  
dressed for dinner.

The poem continues with its attack on death with, for example, ironic recollections of mountaineering feats ("one icy toehold / after another"), and there is only one unambiguously serious acknowledgement of impending death by Wall: "I have been here long enough." However, despite the alcohol's relaxing of social restrictions, the grotesqueries of stalking death are not permitted to establish themselves.

Twice  
the mortifying foot, from under the table  
published his pang, the grimace no sooner  
read than cancelled, very civilly.

Ultimately, the poem becomes a triumph for civility over the admission of pain, the inevitability of advancing death and the natural processes of degeneration. K.O. Arvidson compliments Curnow for the "cultivated stability of the level of discourse" the poem draws upon (*JNZL* 1:36). The text proposes a stubborn rearguard reaction and resistance to one man's death; it does not actively embrace the cyclic processes of death and renewal, but perhaps subverts them.

"A Passion for Travel" represents a carnival of laughter, imagery and subversion in the personal and internal world of a proofreader who fashions a reality according to the copy he is correcting. In Bakhtinian fashion, he commands a battlefield of competing, struggling and conflicting words, all in dialogue and resonating with potential meanings.

A word replaces a word. Discrepant  
signs, absurd similitudes  
touch one another, couple promiscuously.

The proofreader comes to the word "erotic" which should read "exotic" so he "cancels the literal r and writes an x." However, in terms of possible readings, the proofreader's

amendment comes too late: the correction does not expunge the earlier "erotic" possibilities which now reside alongside those actualised by the so-called "correct" version.

He's exercised, minding his exes and ars.  
If Eros laughs, as the other philosopher  
says, and if either word's a world  
'offering plentiful material for humour',

that's not in copy.

That other world has now become a possibility and "after dark, / that's when the fun starts . . ." says Curnow, presumably in his mind. This Eros, like Cupid, has little to do with the classical ideal of uniting discordant elements of the universe or with higher sympathy or love which binds humankind together; the proofreader's Eros is purely sexual:

The tall German  
blonde wading beside, pudenda awash,  
exquisitely shocked by a man's hands

doing so much so quickly,  
*Calamari!* Those 'crystalline'  
aeolian shallows lap the anemone  
which puckers the bikini, her delicacy.

In his own wickedly humorous fashion, Curnow takes the fantasies out of his proofreader's mind and presents them, with deliberately poetic ambiguity, as possibilities his readers can no longer expunge. "*Calamari!*", which Curnow italicizes, is perhaps another voice, maybe of a streetcaller at a market selling seafood, thus adding atmosphere to the picture painted by the proofreader. Equally, it may refer to the seafood and to the woman, thus lexicalized as an appetizing delicacy to be consumed. In the final stanza the proofreader must substitute for the climax towards which his thoughts are thrusting him:

Short of an exceptional moment, if only  
just! In his make-do world a word  
replaces a white vapour, the sky  
heightens by a stroke of the pen.

However, the ambiguous climactic possibilities now permanently reside alongside other meanings. We retrospectively re-construct the poem, with our suspicions of sexual innuendo confirmed.

"Dialogue with Four Rocks" is not necessarily dialogic by definition. A dialogue can be conducted between two fixed and monologic speakers. However, in this poem the rocks indeed become interlocutors to the speaker who must construct his utterances in response to, and in anticipation of, the rocks' reactions. In a Bakhtinian reading, they assume the role of notional others to his self. The speaker says of the first rock, in part I of the poem – a reef uncovered from beneath sand by winter seas – that "the thing 'demands an answer'." That Curnow chose to impose quotation marks on that part of the sentence personifying the rocks suggests that he was aware he was asking his readers to suspend disbelief towards talking rocks. The question (rather than the answer) demanded of the reef is "I know you do you know me?" Dialogically, the question is axiomatic: self can only ever partially know the other, and achieves apperception only through the other. This continuing constructive process is highlighted a few lines later with "nothing's either / covered or uncovered for ever." The speaker concludes part II of the poem to the second rock with, "I think the rock / thinks and my thought is what it thinks." Again dialogically, this is generally consistent if the rock is taken as a notional other. The narrator is constructing it as an other, but both the self and the notional other are constructed in and by language alone. The fourth and concluding part of the poem contains a final stanza particularly pertinent to the theme of the book *Continuum* (1988), in which *You Will Know When You Get There* appeared six years later. We may read the fourth part of "Dialogue with four Rocks" as a literal metaphor of death, but also as an expression of fortuitousness. This is especially so in light of the earlier poem dealing with the killer, and killed in the "Moro Assassinato" sequence within *An Incurable Music*.

The notion of dialogic others continues in "An Excellent Memory," recalling an event that occurred on or about "8 November 1974, just about / midnight, give or take a few minutes." Cartography gives Polynesians "a there for a here." Yet only "with the help of an atlas" are they dialogically provided with "a face of their own." Read dialogically, Curnow is suggesting that the face they have is therefore one with which they have been provided; it is, in fact, "a puzzled mirror / for a puzzling globe" which is trying to construct itself through its attempts at analysis and identification.

Curnow himself, in "The Ocean is a Jam Jar," attempts to find an identity through the

other. When Curnow reports that an admirer called Rua describes Curnow as a "haapuka," a large and fierce gamefish, he suggests instead, "affecting modesty / comically flattered" that he is only a "kahawai," a smaller (but nevertheless impressive) fish. Rua, "perfect at this game," now figures Curnow as "perhaps a *maomao*," a much smaller but still valuable fish. The poem's concluding stanza talks of a "stuffed rainbow trout" on a wall, dead, fixed or monologic, and "a jam jar full of tadpoles," tiny, embryonic forms which have yet to develop and which are confined to an artificial environment.

Poems in *You Will Know When You Get There* seem to suggest that death is the only solution to the poet's quest for meaning, but are ambiguous. The ironic optimism of the ending of "Impromptu in a Low Key," for example, remains inconclusive. Even though the "speaker" is a stranger in Italy where the poem is ostensibly set, and thus unable to give directions, a distinctly separate narratorial voice provides some direction:

You heard what the  
man said, keep right on you  
can't miss it.

The central experience is the frustration of a "paradisaal" quest.

In "Organo ad Libitum" Curnow uses techniques strikingly like cinematic cuts which dissolve from one "scene" to another to give what is almost a docu-drama. The "you" of the poem attends its own funeral. The narratorial voice, the apparent bearer of consciousness in the poem, is the confined corpse. Literature, fantasy and fact blend to convey the unreality of what is perhaps the ultimate reality: "everyone present is / wide awake nobody's dreaming / least of all you." Paradoxes of identity posit the "you" as poet, speaker, subject and reader.

The concluding poem in the 1982 sequence is the title poem "You Will Know When You Get There." Taken literally, the poem chronicles a trip down to the beach late in the day. We must wait three-quarters of the poem to learn that it is a man, a mussel-picker, whom we accompany inexorably down to the water's edge. The lateness of the day also expresses time running out and looming darkness, metaphorical and literal. The sea of death is approached by the man (and, because of Curnow's technique, by us) through a landscape increasingly irradiated with light, which serves to contrast the life and death metaphor. "You Will Know When You Get There" encapsulates and focuses Curnow's themes which he

devoted half a century to exploring: the literal and figurative implications of time and place, particularly in relation to islands and sea. The mussel-picker's "arrangement with the tide" can be read as a delightfully ironic challenge by Curnow to common sense that is both self-deluding and self-mocking. The natural world has apparently entered into a negotiation with the man, the concluding agreement being that "the ocean [is] to be shallowed three point seven metres, / one hour's light to be left." However, this challenge to the immutability of nature can also be a delusion in which the "arrangement" is merely an accommodation of the inevitable.

Had "You Will Know When You Get There" been the final poem in the final collection published by Curnow, it would have been an appropriate swan song to the poet's half-century career. As Peter Simpson noted in *The Press* (reprinted on the dustcover of *You Will Know When You Get There*), "Curnow has finally (with Sargeson dead) outlived and outstripped all his peers and fellows. Like the kauri about which he writes so brilliantly he is a 'lofty / massive / massive! tree'. . . ." Nevertheless, Curnow had not finished yet.

## V

*The Loop in Lone Kauri Road* (1986) contains ten poems that exploit the suggestion, obviously implicit in the word "loop," of a road ending up back at the beginning. The first poem, "A Raised Voice," reinforces this notion by exploiting childhood memories: Curnow, a child in the poem, looks up at his father, an Anglican priest, who towers above him from a pulpit during a church service. With almost cinematic technique, the scene refocusses on the pulpit itself, which is made of either kahikatea or kauri timber. As early as 1945 Curnow wrote:

The revenges of Nature in our own time, erosion, exhaustion of the land,  
give fresh substance to Reeves's lament for the destroyed rain-forests,  
though axe and fire were less partial agents than he supposed, writing: 'Ah,  
bitter price to pay! For Man's dominion – beauty swept away!' (*Look Back  
Harder* 49)

In 1986 the bitterness of this legacy had not lessened for Curnow and he spits out: "the rape of the northern / bush left plenty for pulpits and pews," thus reinforcing his earlier judgement of Dr Rayner's actions. "Moules à la Marinière" is carnivalesque in its exploitation of visceral

and sexual imagery; it returns to a scene Curnow discussed in the last poetry volume – mussel-picking – but with different results. Peter Alcock, among others, has already noted that the poem "relates directly to the title and concluding poem of the previous book" and that the mussel-picker is operating "'at dead low water' (the 1949 title)" (*JNZL* 5: 32). Alcock observes an absence of "fatality" in the new book, which I put down, in part, to a lack by Curnow of delusions about human agency – "You're innocent. The sea does the rest." The mussel-gathering process is described in terms of a gigantic sexual climax in the natural world, of which "you" (the reader) becomes an integral, but not altogether significant, part. This possibility is not altogether inconsistent with Trevor James' suggestion of the influence of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* on the poem through Curnow's use of the phrase". . . 'cleft for me'" in the first stanza of "Moules à la Marinière." The Rev. Dr James admits his point is a minor matter, but that

it is a clear and slightly parodistic echo of the very familiar hymn that begins 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me.' I also contend that the echo reflects Curnow's interest in 'theodicy' . . . . ("The Hook of Being")

Theodicy attempts to justify the ways of God to men by solving the problem that evil presents to the theist. How does one reconcile the fact that a perfect and omnipotent Being must have created "the best of all possible worlds" (as Leibniz puts it in *Theodicy*), when this is belied by the visible facts of this world and traditional beliefs about the next, which include eternal damnation for some? While James' critical purposes differ from those of my present discussion, my observations nevertheless have much in common with his. After examining a number of other religious and biblical "echoes" in *The Loop in Lone Kauri Road*, James concludes that "such allusions and echoes show that in Curnow's work the boundaries between things theological and things literary barely exist." I concur with James that the "discourses and tropes that come from each are all grist to his purposes." James decides that "the conflicts between opposing discourses are part of that purpose." Reading dialogically, I would take his statement to mean that the conflict between opposing discourses is the site of ideological struggle.

Curnow seldom strays far from human physicality in the imagery he employs in this collection's poems. For example, in "On the Road to Erewhon" the physical landscape is

described either in human physical terms or through human reaction to it. The poem's nine stanzas, in turn, employ: teeth, mouths, underfoot, heads, head and mouths, physical faces, legs, brain and feet, and heads and blood. The next poem in the book, "Blind Man's Holiday" returns directly to scenes which Curnow himself describes in the poem as "*shockingly indelicate*," although the poet's control of language is far from indelicate. Curnow piles a variety of images up, in almost kaleidoscopic fashion, but throughout the three-part poem he remains consciously self-reflexive:

*The picture in the mind revives, our poet  
noticed, and so do I.*

Curnow concludes the volume with the title poem "The Loop in Lone Kauri Road" which, together with the others, expresses in James' words, "Curnow's consistent and appalled fascination with the irreducibility of experience" (*JCL* 70).

## CHAPTER SIX

## WHIM WHAM AND SOCIAL SATIRE

*No Goose's Bridle is really complete and ready  
For use, without a WHIM WHAM on it to hold it steady.  
– Whim Wham (1959)*

John Thomson identifies Curnow as a "poet and editor" in his *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, but acknowledges later in the text that Curnow was also "an accomplished verse satirist [who] published under the pseudonym of Whim Wham" (651).<sup>1</sup> For many New Zealanders who were adults between World War Two and the 1960s, Curnow's verse under that pseudonym was the only acquaintance they made with any of his work – on which possibility Curnow commented to MacDonald Jackson in 1973: "I can comfort myself by thinking that" ("Conversation" 148). In 1996 Curnow told Steve Braunias in *Metro*, "I was conscious that I might never be known as anything else other than the author of these damned verses" (79). As Kendrick Smithyman observes in his study of New Zealand poetry with respect to poets in general,

because his means of communication is poetry, the writer has already sizeably limited his potential audience. Poetry is not a popular art and there is no point in pretending that it is. (*A Way of Saying* 29)

Among New Zealand poets, Curnow must qualify as unusual, if not unique, in his ability to reach out to a large audience, even if he needed the defence and distance of an alias or virtual *nom de guerre* (*The Best of Whim Wham* 9). Many readers, who may almost certainly have branded Curnow's serious work as philosophically and intellectually inaccessible, welcomed the satiric verses that appeared weekly in several New Zealand newspapers during three decades. I can vouch from recent personal conversations that some who recall with pleasure reading the weekly verses of Whim Wham still do not connect the satirist with

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<sup>1</sup> As already observed in Note One to Chapter Two, Whim Wham is as often written Whim-Wham by critics and publishers. For example, the publisher of *The Best of Whim Wham* (Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1959) omits the hyphen on the front of the dustcover, inserts it on the title page, and employs both possibilities in blurb on the back of the dustcover.

the poet Allen Curnow. This chapter and Appendix II will illustrate that, to date, only passing mention is made of Curnow's satiric verse and no study has been made of the possible influence that this considerable portion of his oeuvre may have had on New Zealand readers.

Appraising Whim Wham in terms of Bakhtinian dialogism, we can suggest that the repercussions of Curnow's work were significant. In his study of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin argued, in effect, that all previous works influence later works:

When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. . . . The word enters his context with another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. (*Dostoevsky* 202)

As with Curnow's early and other pseudonymous work, only a small amount of bibliographical research into Whim Wham has so far been undertaken, and what exists is scattered and incomplete.<sup>2</sup> While my chapter commences with a brief overview for clarification, it does not purport to redress this problem completely.

## I

Whim Wham published satiric verses weekly in three newspapers: *The Press*, Christchurch, on which he worked as a journalist for fifteen years, and later in Invercargill's *Southland Times* and in Auckland's *New Zealand Herald*. From January 1942 to December 1945, however, the verses also appeared in the *New Zealand Listener*. The *Listener* was a more significant outlet for Whim Wham's voice: unlike newspapers, the weekly magazine had a national circulation and was – in the words of one recent commentator,<sup>3</sup> – in those days "a gentle intellectual exercise." Furthermore, as a national broadcasting service mouthpiece, the magazine represented – or at least did not challenge – the hegemonic views and attitudes of the New Zealand Government, especially during those years of the Second World War. Hence, from a Bakhtinian perspective, the appearance of social satire in that

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Appendices II and III.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Haden. "An invaluable aid to getting it right." *The Dominion* 21 Jun. 1997: 20.

magazine best illustrates the possibilities of ideological struggle within the text. The first appearance by Whim Wham in the *New Zealand Listener* was for the verse "I Saw U Saw" in 1942.<sup>4</sup> A misprint in Weir and Lyon's 1977 select bibliography of New Zealand poetry (176) suggests that Whim Wham's first appearance was for "Local Success" in 1941, but in fact that verse appeared late the following year. Weir and Lyon's entry on Curnow contains a useful – although incomplete and, in a few cases, inaccurate<sup>5</sup> – 12-page listing of Curnow's poetry and verse by alphabetical title, but the compilers caution that their bibliography does not include newspaper items. They note, however, that "an unpublished list of articles and reviews by and about Curnow in the Christchurch *Press* is held by Dr T.L. Sturm . . ." (170).<sup>6</sup>

The first collected volume of Whim Wham verses was *A Present for Hitler and Other Verses*, published in 1940 and comprising forty-eight items<sup>7</sup> that had previously appeared weekly in *The Press*. The first eleven verses in the collection stand alone, and thereafter the remaining verses fall under the headings of "Himself," "Public Life," "Farms & Gardens," "Domestic Bliss" and "The March of Time." *A Present for Hitler* was followed in 1942 by *Whim-Wham: Verses 1941-42*, and consisted of forty-two pieces that had appeared during the previous two years in both *The Press* and in the *New Zealand Listener*. The verses were divided into four sections entitled "Enemy Positions," "Playtime," "Home Front" and "Public Works." This publication was followed by *Whim-Wham: 1943*, which comprised a collection of a further forty-six verses that had appeared in *The Press* and the *Listener*. These were divided into sections headed "God Defend New Zealand," "Bad Boys," "Global Department" and "Hedge-Clippings." Sixteen years passed before the next collection of satiric verses was published. According to a note in the 1959 publication, Whim Wham featured regularly in

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<sup>4</sup> *New Zealand Listener* (136) 30 January 1942:4.

<sup>5</sup> One misprint which until as recently as 1997 had greater impact than the others on our understanding of Curnow is discussed in Section III of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Terry Sturm, of Auckland University, confirmed in a telephone conversation with me that he still holds an uncollated list of contributions by and about Curnow, which appeared in *The Press*. These include verses by Whim Wham, which appeared regularly from the late 1930s on the leader page of Saturday editions.

<sup>7</sup> In notes appended to Serial 7 of her 1976 bibliography of Curnow, Theresa Graham incorrectly states that *A Present for Hitler and Other Verses* contained forty-seven verses.

Saturday editions of *The Press* for more than twenty years and, from 1951, in Auckland's *New Zealand Herald*, and less regularly over the years in Invercargill's *Southland Times*. From more than five hundred new pieces written during the 1950s, Curnow selected seventy-four in 1959 for *The Best of Whim Wham*.<sup>8</sup> The collection was not broken up into sections. Finally, in 1967 *Whim Wham Land* was published, bringing together 127 verses from those published weekly during the previous 15 years in *The Press* and the *New Zealand Herald*, and occasionally in the *Southland Times*. They appear under the following sections: "Whim Wham Land Takes Pride In Its Traditions," "It Compares Favourably With OVERSEAS," "It Gives Everybody A FAIR GO," "It Has So Much To Offer THE TOURIST," "It Is CREATIVE Too," "It Is Entirely Surrounded By SPACE," "It Is Highly EDUCATIONAL," "It Is Blessed With An Efficient ADMINISTRATION," "But Its Heart Is In SPORT All The Same" and "It Doesn't DRINK, It Consumes Alcohol."

This chapter picks up chronologically from Chapter Two which dealt with Curnow's earliest verse, and this chapter runs contiguously to Chapter Four which examined Curnow's serious poetry, (commencing with the 1941 publication of *Island and Time*). Professor Vincent O'Sullivan drew attention, in his 1996 Association of New Zealand Literature conference keynote address, to a divergence in Curnow's concerns that occurred at the end of the 1930s. O'Sullivan cited the dustcover blurb of *Island and Time*, which declares:

These are the poems of a New Zealander native &  
untravelled, convinced now that the need is for legend  
rather than "realism."

Hence, while Chapter Four examines serious poetry composed by Curnow the legend maker, whose attention was turning to nationalism, this chapter focuses on the "realist" thread of the 1930s; "and so" – as O'Sullivan neatly put it in his conference address – "that gradual hiving off of social commentary, political response, into the pages of Whim Wham."

This divergence has been observed by other commentators, typically McCormick ("Survey" 117), who argues that Curnow's *Not in Narrow Seas* approach, while "still satiric

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<sup>8</sup> Both Graham (1976) and I count seventy-four because the two-part "Canterbury Tales" is listed in the contents as one entry. However, in the later *Whim Wham Land*, that particular verse is listed in the contents and reprinted as two separate items; I treat it as two items in my count for that later publication.

(or, more accurately, critical)," was being modified. Thereafter, in McCormick's view, Curnow had "discovered his *métier* and finally discarded satire." Yet to claim that is to ignore the significance, or even the existence of Whim Wham in any serious discussion of the poet's work, let alone of any satiric elements imbedded in his serious poetry. McCormick's attitude prevailed; as late as 1984 Michele Leggott argued that earlier poets

kept their play segregated, marked off as 'light verse'; once, Allen Curnow had an alter ego named Whim Wham who wrote weekly topical satire. . . . (154-55)

In a supporting endnote, she observes that

Curnow is mildly schizophrenic about Whim Wham. On the one hand he refuses the identification and opportunities to comment on it. On the other hand, four of the Whim Wham books are listed among his poetry collections in James Vinson, ed., *Contemporary Poets*, 3rd ed. (London/New York: St. James' Press/St. Martin's Press, 1980). (163n3)

Leggott's comment about schizophrenia echoes James Bertram's remarks of a year previously when he said in his *New Zealand Listener* review of *Selected Poems* (1982):

Curnow never lost the ability to write resounding comprehensive lines the common reader could easily identify with; but over the years the useful role of no-nonsense commentator on the passing scene was increasingly delegated (without authorial acknowledgement) to that banjo-bard of the newspaper columns, Whim Wham. Curnow has gone to extreme lengths to avoid the identification, but I'm not sure this kind of literary schizophrenia isn't a bit risky: T.S. Eliot found no difficulty in being at once the author of *The Waste Land* and Old Possum. ("Staying upright here" 84)

Elsewhere, in notes accompanying a biographical entry on Curnow, Theresa Graham draws attention to "the poet's reluctant statements on Whim Wham, referring to the persona as 'a different self'" (item 62). I believe Leggott, above, overstates her case because, as the 1973 conversation published in *Islands* between the poet and MacDonald P. Jackson – to which Graham is here referring – clearly illustrates, Curnow was prepared to talk about Whim Wham when asked:

I suppose we have to talk about Whim Wham. I try to suppress this as well as I can. ("Conversation" 147)

Leggott's other example of Curnow's "mildly schizophrenic" actions – the Whim Wham books listed among his poetry collections – is invalid and irrelevant because the four Whim Wham publications she cites as being included in *Contemporary Poets* were listed by the collection's editor, James Vinson. Unless Leggott were able to substantiate Curnow's deliberate and active cooperation in the compilation of Vinson's book, its reference to four Whim Wham publications is no more the direct responsibility of Curnow than is, for example, the listing of five Whim Wham publications in Thomson's bibliography mentioned earlier.

Leggott's claim that Curnow refuses identification with Whim Wham is untenable. Curnow has never denied his authorship of Whim Wham verse, has published five collections of it during a twenty-seven year span even if pseudonymously, has produced Whim Wham verse weekly for approaching half a century, and has spoken frankly of Whim Wham in at least one published interview. Hence, while there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Curnow deliberately maintained a distance from the Whim Wham persona, he cannot be said to have refused the identification altogether, as Leggott implies.

In his interview with Jackson, Curnow said that

Whim Wham, by the very nature of the work is obviously going to be a great part of the time ephemeral, trifling, roughly versified, because this kind of thing has to be done to a deadline. ("Conversation" 147)

Later in the same interview he reiterates his qualification by calling Whim Wham "a kind of verse which of its nature is ephemeral" (148). I interpret Curnow's description of Whim Wham verse as "ephemeral" to be, in effect, a distinction by him between low and high culture literatures. He dismisses the satiric verse on the basis of its ephemeral or transitory nature, specifically because each weekly verse had to be churned out to meet the demands of newspaper deadlines.<sup>9</sup> Further, Curnow worked as a newspaper reporter and sub-editor for about fifteen years from 1935 and would probably have subscribed to the generally held journalistic attitude that anything published in a daily newspaper was by definition

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<sup>9</sup> Dr Broughton, who studied at Auckland University in the early 1960s, recollected to me being aware that Allen Curnow was not to be disturbed on Thursdays because that was his "Whim Wham day."

temporary.<sup>10</sup> It would appear that five book collections published between 1940 and 1967, totalling 336 items, have not been seen by Curnow as negating or offsetting that state of impermanence he would, I believe, have associated with publishing in newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

Assuming that Curnow applied a similar attitude towards Whim Wham's verses, it is not surprising that he undertook no significant editing of the collected verses, in marked contrast to his serious poetry which he often edited and reworked for later collections.

Yet Curnow could not argue that the Whim Wham verse was any less valuable a component of his overall oeuvre than anything else he wrote, even if he does relegate it to a position of "low" literature. For one thing, as a journalist Curnow was fully acquainted with the parameters of newspaper publication and the demands they would impose on Whim Wham; yet he still worked diligently to produce weekly verses "pretty regularly" – as Jackson puts it – from the mid 1930s into the 1970s. His given reason for beginning, in 1937, is readily understandable.

I started it because my wage was so poor that I needed a little more, and I kept it going. I suppose it's been habit-forming. . . . (Jackson, "Conversation" 147)

I do not believe Curnow continued Whim Wham because it was merely "habit-forming" as he flippantly supposed, but rather because he found that it provided him with an important alternative outlet to his serious poetry. Jackson questioned whether the "constant exercise in the sheer mechanics of versifying" might have helped Curnow's other poetry, and Curnow politely acquiesced: "It might have but it is not a thing I have ever thought of." A later elaboration is hardly more illuminating, but suggests that Curnow rather enjoyed the opportunity to disparage Whim Wham, especially in a literary journal:

[A]t least one is practising versification in one form or another even if changes in versification arise from sheer boredom – to avoid getting into a rut. (148)

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<sup>10</sup> Until recent health regulations banned the practice, fast food outlets in New Zealand traditionally wrapped takeaway snacks in newspapers to keep them warm; hence the newsroom maxim that today's front page lead story is merely tomorrow's fish and chips wrapping.

<sup>11</sup> I base these generalisations on my own experience as a reporter and sub-editor on several New Zealand daily newspapers since 1971.

However, I believe Curnow does suggest a genuine reason why Whim Wham was important enough to him to be worth the many years of perseverance, when he tells Jackson, ". . . and it has seemed one way at least in which opinions can be expressed" (147). I consider Curnow's serious poems to be just as "political" in nature as his overtly social and political Whim Wham satirical verses. However, his serious poetry and his Whim Wham verses were each designed for, and aimed at, different New Zealand audiences. Further, I believe that Curnow, again drawing on his journalistic instincts, wryly recognized that his serious work received far less immediate public exposure than did his ephemeral verses, via the mass circulation media. Satiric verses, like cartoons and daily news, deal with specific current events, whereas poetry tends to deal more with the general human condition, refracted through specific events, but touching on the abstractions of human existence. The solution, obviously, was to continue on with both, but using separate personae. Jackson picks up on some of these points:

It does seem to me that the work of Whim Wham adds up to our richest expression of a comic satiric view of New Zealand, that it's a worthy complement to *A Small Room with Large Windows*. . . . It's interesting also that Glover and Fairburn devoted a lot of energy to satirical verses, though you've more obviously divided yourself into two poetic personalities as it were. I think it would be too easy to minimize the importance of Whim Wham. . . .  
("Conversation" 147-48)

Curnow reluctantly accepted Jackson's comments before gently putting them aside. However, in response to another statement by Jackson, he expressed perhaps the clearest assessment of Whim Wham he has made on record:

If anybody did say to me, yes, but think of the serious, the more durable, more lasting monuments of lyric poetry you might be building if you didn't tire yourself out with this Whim Wham nonsense, I would be inclined to answer by saying, I don't know . . . it's a different self. I mean the serious, as we call it, poetry is a different area of oneself altogether and Whim Wham is really a kind of persona. It's neither me, nor not me – he's a sort of minor mask. The Whim Wham character makes its own particular demands. One has, as it were, to act the part of Whim Wham – one is the thing for the time being while it's being written. . . . ("Conversation" 148)

Curnow suggests, in contrast, that when writing serious poetry, "[o]ne is working one's way towards the poem," eventually "find[ing] out what it was one meant to write." But, says Curnow, the "Whim Wham verse is another thing; perhaps just hard work" (148).

## II

Curnow's own attitude towards Whim Wham therefore appears not to be as clear cut as Leggott suggests. Revisionist criticism of Curnow's work will inevitably reassess the significance of his marginalized work – including Whim Wham – irrespective of what earlier critics such as Leggott have claimed, or of Curnow's own few published comments on Whim Wham. Thus far, apart from Jackson's and Leggott's evaluations discussed above, most critics have made only oblique or superficial references to Whim Wham. An early example is this anonymous and trivial book review of *Whim-Wham: 1943* in the *New Zealand Listener* of 14 January 1944:

Whim-Wham's verses have all appeared in the *Christchurch Press*, and/or *The New Zealand Listener*. They are all bright, but not all light, if lightness suggests lack of purpose. They are in fact as purposeful as, say Low's or Minhinnick's cartoons, and like those sometimes hit and sometimes miss. But they don't miss often, and most of our readers will be glad to have them selected and arranged by the author himself and admirably printed.(14)

Such is its superficiality that I have therefore not attempted to track down the, possibly numerous, newspaper and popular magazine reviews of Whim Wham's five collections of verse.

An early and positive appraisal of Whim Wham came from James K. Baxter in a 28 April 1950 *New Zealand Listener* review of a collection of satiric poems by Sagittarius [Olga Katzin] to the left-wing English weekly *The New Statesman and Nation* between 1945 and 1948. Baxter writes:

Good writers of occasional verse on political topics are few and far between. We may without discredit to either compare Sagittarius with Whim-Wham. . . . Both writers have the capacity to make verse seem artless and spontaneous, which must have been hammered out laboriously from the cold metal. And both excel in the near-parody. But Sagittarius possesses what Whim-Wham lacks – a direction in politics. (13)

A dialogic reading of Whim Wham's verse suggests that his work is just as "political" as Sagittarius's – indeed, that all language is political in the sense that it can never be ideologically neutral. Nevertheless, Baxter accurately implies that Whim Wham never adopted a fixed ideological position for himself on the political spectrum, in contrast to the "intelligent Leftism," for example, which Baxter attributes to Sagittarius.

In 1973 Ian Wedde made what I believe to be the most credible attempt by any critic so far to put the Janus-like faces of Curnow – poet and verse satirist – into perspective. In a review of the 1972 poetry collection *Trees Effigies Moving Objects*, Curnow's first collection in a decade, Wedde refutes

the untruth in the publicity which attended the publication of these poems: the 'long wait' has been filled with weekly satires by Whim Wham. (*Islands* 205)

Wedde titles Curnow a "*pasticheur*" and argues that pastiche "can be a serious and useful means" despite the fact that "the reviewers [may] regard it as a flippant and occasional end."

It strikes me that in these poems Curnow and Whim Wham have become one person. I put this thought down with some embarrassment, since I suspect there will be 'poetry lovers' who disapprove of such a union. I don't see why they should. It doesn't seem to me to devalue Curnow any more than it gilds Whim Wham. In fact these poems embody a more *natural* and telling concord of public and private concerns than any Curnow has written to date. (205)

Public disapproval, which Wedde suspects his yoking of Curnow's poetry with Whim Wham's verse may provoke, is frequently used as an excuse to rerun traditional debates over high-brow and low-brow literature. Unfortunately those debates can distract attention from the effect decades of writing his satiric verse had on the poet. Further, the debates generally avoid questioning whether Whim Wham's verse was in itself a serious endeavour, as Wedde posits in his discussion of pastiche. Finally, despite more than two decades elapsing since Wedde's tantalising hint of "concord of public and private concerns" with respect to Curnow and Whim Wham, New Zealand poetry criticism is the poorer for the subject of Whim Wham remaining virtually unexplored.

In recent years, references to Whim Wham by critics examining Curnow's serious poetry

have tended to be marginal and uncomplimentary. Rob Jackaman comments – with some justification, admittedly – in regard to the poem "It is Too Late" from *Island and Time* and republished in Curnow's 1974 *Collected Poems*, :

As readers we must be prepared (not even grimacing at the Whim-Whamishness of the rhyme) to find ourselves "Walking weary / By the Waimakariri." (*Pilgrim* 62)

However, some commentators have sought to discover a more positive influence by Whim Wham on Curnow's serious writing although, as with Jackaman's case, with regard to Whim Wham's technical aspects. Edward Burman, in his study "The Culminating Sacrifice: An Interpretation of Allen Curnow's 'Moro Assassinato,'" claims the poem "Lampoon" has

the technical virtuosity of Whim Wham. The 'lampooning' derives from Curnow's virtuoso use of metre and rhythm rather than content. (*Landfall* 32)

Burman's 1983 observation, however, is obviously derived from Jackson's 1973

"Conversation with Allen Curnow" during which Jackson said to Curnow:

Well, I admire Whim Wham's technical virtuosity – I mean you've used an extraordinary variety of metres and stanza patterns. Has the constant exercise in the sheer mechanics of versifying helped your other poetry? ("Conversation" 147)

It is thus axiomatic, and Curnow has said as much in response to Jackson's probings, that the sheer exercise of producing Whim Wham verse so regularly for so many years had impact on Curnow's craftsmanship as a serious poet. What critics have not done so far is to evaluate the literary merits of Whim Wham verse itself. Before examining in detail a selection of verses, I shall digress in the next section to look at a poem by Curnow that was for about two decades the subject of mistaken identity.

### III

Curnow included the poem "Jack-in-the-Boat" in his collection *Poems 1949-57* (1957:15). It was generally thought since about 1977 that "Jack-in-the-Boat" was Curnow's only poem to have originated as a Whim Wham verse (unlike a number of Julian ones, discussed in Chapter Two, which were later published as poems by Curnow). However, this

now appears not to be the case. "Jack-in-the-Boat" appeared over Curnow's name four years prior to the 1957 collection, in the *New Zealand Listener* of 17 April 1953 (11). Yet, the entry for "Jack-in-the-Boat" in Weir and Lyon's 1977 *New Zealand Poetry: A Select Bibliography 1920-1972* alphabetized listing of Curnow's poems contains two misprints (176). The poem is erroneously marked with an asterisk to indicate that it had been published in the *New Zealand Listener* by Curnow under his pseudonym Whim Wham. The same entry also incorrectly dates the poem as appearing in the *Listener* in the year 1943, instead of 1953, thus reinforcing the error because Whim Wham is well-known to have published regularly in the *Listener* between January 1942 and December 1945. As with the overwhelming majority of genuine Whim Wham verses (but far fewer Curnow poems by this time), "Jack-in-the-Boat" is preceded by an epigraph and hence has the foregrounded style of a typical Whim Wham newspaper satire. Only three poems in *Poems 1949-57* are printed there for the first time. In the collection's acknowledgements (5), Curnow sources the other poems to a variety of publications including the *New Zealand Listener*, and also *The Press* in which Whim Wham had also been appearing weekly since the 1930s. Consequently, it was generally assumed that "Jack-in-the Boat" paralleled some of the 1930s Julian poems, which evolved into the "Not in Narrow Seas" sequence of 1939. Establishing that "Jack-in-the-Boat" was not previously a Whim Wham verse<sup>12</sup> actually assists us in highlighting an important difference between Curnow's poems and his Whim Wham verses. Unlike the poem "Jack-in-the-Boat," which displays a timeless or universal quality common to much "good" poetry, the verses of Whim Wham are, typically, transparent comic or satiric social or political commentaries upon isolated events; they are specific to the week they were published, and they tend not to translate well into a quite different age. However, one of their values is in the themes they collectively present. In the following section I examine a selection from the five published collections of Whim Wham verse with particular interest in the attitudes that Whim Wham promotes.

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Professor Terry Sturm and Associate-Professor Peter Simpson, both of the University of Auckland, for their assistance. Professor Sturm confirmed in a telephone conversation of 18 June 1997 that he was unable to find any reference to "Jack-in-the-Boat" by Whim Wham in his unpublished list of work by or about Curnow in *The Press*. Professor Simpson confirmed in a telephone conversation of 20 June 1997 that no research had uncovered evidence to suggest any Curnow poem had originally been published by Whim Wham, and he attributed the confusion over "Jack-in-the-Boat" to the 1977 misprint.

## IV

In Chapter Two I looked at some poems Curnow published under the name of Julian in *Tomorrow* late in 1938, which were decidedly anti-militaristic in sentiment and critical of New Zealand's preparations for the approaching Second World War. Those poems were consistent with the general tone of *Tomorrow*, which from its earliest issues in 1935 had emerged as "a major outlet for radical political discussion" (Hamilton 731). *Tomorrow* ceased publication on 29 May 1940 after its printer and its editor were both warned that the periodical risked contravening the Government's emergency legislation on subversion. Editor-publisher Kennaway Henderson said on 17 June 1940 in a notice to subscribers that under the legislation "almost any critical writing might be regarded as subversive. . . . [I]n effect, we have been suppressed under legislation passed by the first New Zealand Labour Government. New Zealand has now no independent, critical journal".<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the dissident tone of the more extreme Julian poems, the tone adopted by Whim Wham in the 1940 book *A Present for Hitler and Other Verses*, a collection of verses published previously in Christchurch's *The Press*, gives a quite different impression. The first poem, from which the title of the book is derived, "A Present for Hitler," commemorates Hitler's birthday with an apparently superficial five-stanza verse. Each stanza begins with the refrain "Hitler was born" and then proceeds to mock the German war lord. The poem reveals early on Curnow had a realistic estimation of the nature of the Nazi regime, as the third stanza illustrates:

Hitler was born  
 Beneath the Planet Mars;  
 His Birthday Cake befits a Hero too,  
 Mixed with the Blood of Democrat and Jew  
 And spiced with broken Pacts and ruthless Coups;  
 And chocolate Armoured Cars  
 His Plate adorn.

*(Present for Hitler 6-7)*

In other stanzas he asks, "What shall we give him now? / Rumania or the Polish Corridor" and concludes "There's half of Russia still to give away / And Lots of Little Nations to betray."

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in J.J. Herd (1963), no pagination.

Whim Wham's "we" are the Allied nations involved in the Second World War while "him" is Hitler. The "Little Nations," probably refers to Czechoslovakia, which Britain and France betrayed by failing to honour the mutual defence treaties after Czechoslovakia was attacked and conquered by Nazi Germany. Whim Wham served notice early in this collection that he was not going to be a mere mouthpiece for New Zealand's officially sanctioned views on the European war. His poem "Improperganda" alerted readers to the machinations of officialdom:

". . . A special lies detector department staffed by  
economists, historians, and students of international affairs  
to combat propaganda. . . ." – Proposed new organisation  
reported by cable from South Africa. (*Present for Hitler* 18)

The three stanzas following that epigraph paint an ironic picture of the distortions of truth required to counter enemy propaganda:

. . . whenever They said They hadn't  
My Job was to say They had  
.....  
From Well-informed Quarters we quoted  
The incontrovertible Facts:  
If They said that This was the Reason  
We said that the Reason was That  
.....  
They shattered the Truth a Thousand Times  
And we put it together again

Curnow was foreign news sub-editor in Christchurch on *The Press* during this period and was more aware than the average citizen of the processes and implications of censorship and propaganda. Even before the war New Zealand had exercised strict censorship regulations banning, for example, publications such as D.H.Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The Whim Wham verse "Queer Censorship" can therefore be read as both a direct attack on Fascist attempts to impose censorship on literature, and an attempt by Whim Wham to link any notion of suppressing literature with Fascist ideology. Bakhtin, I am certain, would have been delighted in Whim Wham's opening:

The Works of Rabelais, I understand,  
 Some People think should properly be banned,  
 Regarding them as not exactly nice,  
 A sort of literary guide to Vice[.]

(*Present for Hitler 22*)

*Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's seminal study on the subversive world of the carnival and its literary application, the carnivalesque, argues that the humorous, earthy and grotesque signify the symbolic destruction of authority and official culture. The very humour that makes up the satiric verse "Queer Censorship" is itself a direct attack on Mussolini's regime. Simultaneously, the verse is an attack on literary censorship of any form, and as such may be construed to apply equally to New Zealand as to Italy.

If proof were needed that Curnow had in mind a link between censorship in Italy and in New Zealand, a later poem "For the Young" would provide it. Whim Wham prefaces the poem with the extract:

Mr F.A.Snell said there was a great deal of literature available in the universities and from booksellers which young people should not read till they were about 30 and had experience of the world. . . . They should not be poisoned at the start. – Press Association Report of Auckland Education Board Meeting. (*Present for Hitler 42-43*)

Whim Wham's fourth and final stanza is sarcastic in its blunt response:

What Perils lurk in Liberty,  
 In speaking, writing, reading free!  
 Observe the Plight of Hitler's Reich  
 Where People read just what they like  
 (Provided what they like to read  
 Does Not offend the Nazi Creed).  
 Knowledge, avaunt! Freedom, farewell!  
 Heil, Mr Snell!

Whim Wham was exercising as much independence of attitude and expression as had Julian with the anti-militaristic poems previously discussed. However, Whim Wham's use of satire

is a more effective weapon in deriding its subject than were some of Julian's attempts to command the moral high ground. Additionally, Whim Wham's approach is politically more effective because it evokes contempt and scorn for censorship by trying to link such attitudes in the public mind to fascism.

One of Whim Wham's enduring strengths was his ability to identify and highlight comic aspects in the mundane and everyday events, which are then used as weapons of derision. Hence in a country just beginning to feel the pinch of war rationing, and aware of the need to conserve resources, he used the following news item as epigraph to "Funeral March":

Funeral directors on the West Coast have been requested by the Oil Fuel Advisory Committee to increase the travelling speed of funerals to 20 miles an hour, explaining that the consumption of petrol at low speed is considerably greater than at a moderate speed. (*Present for Hitler* 40)

What follows is a delightful four-stanza confessional lyric that mocks the dignity and sombreness of the funeral cortège; and in doing so, it obliquely points a mocking finger at the petty edicts of committees and their officials who attempt to control and order us:

No lingering Obsequies for me,  
                     No sober Funeral Pace;  
 Let Parsons drive like Lunatics,  
                     Let Friends with Bearers race,  
 Such Antics, if they save our Fuel,  
                     Are surely no Disgrace!

Instead of Marble, for my Tomb  
                     A Petrol Pump shall rise,  
 Inscribed: "Oh passing Motorist,  
                     Beneath this Bowser lies  
 A Man who, even after Death  
                     Conserved your Fuel Supplies!"

The distinction between satire and comedy is a sharp one only at its extremes (Abrams 167), although "For the Young" and "Funeral March" are effective examples of the differing uses of those literary arts. The organizing principle in both cases, however, is to ridicule the subject.

Whim Wham's "War with Tears," dated "April, 1939," is a return to the sentiments of Julian's anti-martial poems but without Julian's strident whining. The difference lies in the slightly more resigned, perhaps realistic, acceptance of the inevitability of the approaching European war. Yet it remains a surprisingly satirical poem to have been published in 1940, even given that it was written a year earlier:

If roaring Aeroplanes their Bombs release  
They do it in the Cause of Peace,  
And all our Violence  
Is Self-Defence.

Historians of some future, wiser Age,  
Shortening our Anguish to a Page,  
Will know we killed our Friends  
For worthy Ends.

*(Present for Hitler 86-87)*

In contrast, the verses in *Whim-Wham 1941-42* adopt a slightly harder line towards the European war and its Axis warlords. The first twelve poems are all topical commentaries on different aspects of the war. They appear under the section heading, "Enemy Positions," and, as the title ambiguously hints, adopt a number of viewpoints. Some are directly anti-German, for example "Tears for Todt" (8) or against both Germany and Italy, for example "Hit Song for Muss." (10). The former attacks Hitler for shedding "crocodile tears" at the funeral of his Nazi transport chief, while the latter parodies Hitler's message to Mussolini on the third anniversary of the Axis alliance – the so-called "pact of steel." Both of these satiric poems adopt orthodox and correct stances in terms of the hegemonic discourse of our government on a war footing with the subjects of the verses. Even Dr Joseph Goebbels himself, Hitler's brilliant propaganda chief, could not have written more effective anti-enemy verse for popular dissemination. Both poems are grounded on factual evidence which gives the resultant satire a cloak of authenticity and authority. Both poems use what were, no doubt, carefully staged and media-rehearsed Nazi publicity events as the subjects of their satiric derision. Consequently, both poems can be seen to exhibit a Bakhtinian use of laughter. In his study of the medieval carnival, Bakhtin said that laughter

. . . overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. . . . [Laughter] was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself.  
(*Rabelais* 90-91).

Half a century later, and knowing how the Second World War would eventually conclude, we may have trouble sympathising with the emotions of fear and uncertainty that lie behind the bold, defiant laughter in Whim Wham's poems. He wrote these at a time when Allied military forces had yet to reach their nadir and enemy forces were boasting their invincibility. In Bakhtinian terms, Whim Wham was providing his public with expressions of victory over fear and his verse consequently had far greater significance than his comments today would suggest.

Yet again, however, Whim Wham proves elusive to categorisation because other verses in the same section of the book are not nearly as patriotic; a poem like "Supplying the Answer" (*Whim-Wham 1941-1942* 9-10), for example, surprises in its ability to evade this country's wartime censorship. It begins:

When Things go wrong on vital Fronts,  
                   There's Little to be gained by Whining;  
 But all the Same, it's sad to find  
                   Some Commentators still inclining  
 To give the Clouds of ill Success  
                   An imitation Silver Lining.

In the next two stanzas he elaborates that when the enemy advanced, our expert commentators reassured us that "their [the enemy's] Supply Lines must / Have suffered dangerous Extension." Similarly, when we withdraw, we are assured that "Our Problems of Supply grow less; The shorter Line, the handy Base, / Give certain Promise of Success."

Whim Wham concludes,

Such Logic cannot be upset,  
                   Whatever Else may fail or fall;  
 But if we follow it too far  
                   The Consolation will be small  
 To know our Problems of Supply  
                   Have disappeared for Good and All!

This poem was one of few that were not preceded by a prose epigraph of a specific news event. Hence, it gives the impression of a deliberate and direct attack by its author on official war commentators. However, the final stanza quoted above suggests to me that Whim Wham is simultaneously presenting a case for a realistic assessment of events. Bearing in mind that these verses were written during the early part of the Second World War when the Axis powers seemed to be sweeping towards victory, imitation silver linings and reassuring but false logic ran the risk of rebounding on the New Zealand public. As we have seen, Whim Wham's preferred solution was defiant mockery; reassurance based on deliberately false interpretations was, I believe Whim Wham felt strongly, likely to lead to small consolation .

The remainder of the verses in the *Whim-Wham 1941-1942* collection cover the gamut of ordinary concerns in New Zealand daily life. One deals with an industrial dispute in which Bluff oyster-boats did not put to sea, while another discussed 600 acres of culinary mustard to be grown in Canterbury. According to the epigraph heading another verse, lost time resulting from colds and influenza represented an output of 3500 tanks, 1000 bombers and 1,000,000 rifles. When the Minister of Supply announces that "Simplification of clothing is being undertaken in New Zealand, and progress has already been made," Whim Wham responds in "Right Dress" (28):

Ah, then my simplified Array  
                   Would set a Standard hard to beat –  
 One Garment, in the Roman Way,  
                   No Socks, and Sandals on my feet:

And when the Weather's mild or hot  
                   I would not hesitate at all  
 To go as simply clad – Why not? –  
                   As Adam did before the Fall!

Attacks by Whim Wham on the efforts of government to meet the demands of a war economy are, in fact, double-voiced. He readily punctures the inflated importance of officialdom, especially where he finds it illogical or misconceived. At the same time "Right Dress" mocks the war that makes such restrictions necessary. In the face of wartime

economic strictures, Whim Wham's laughter would have made the average newspaper reader's ordinary life a little more bearable.

Curnow's third collection of weekly satiric verses, *Whim-Wham 1943*, follows the same pattern as the previous two books. However, there is an identifiable buoyancy of tone in the verses especially when Whim Wham writes of the Second World War; victory for the Allied forces is now merely a matter of time. One verse called "Buoyancy" (28) discusses the favourable effect on the stock markets of Italy's surrender. "More to Come" (9) commences with the epigraph:

*Post-war* populations of 5,000,000 for New Zealand and 20,000,000 for Australia will be essential if the security of the two countries is to be maintained in the face of the rising racial feeling in the Pacific.  
(My italics)

Whim Wham attributes this claim to a book recently published in London, *China, the Far East, and the Future*.<sup>14</sup> Both the book's author and Whim Wham are by 1943 looking beyond the present European and Pacific theatres of war in anticipation of new political orders and realities. Of course – as by now we are coming to expect – Whim Wham's application of the excerpt challenges hegemonic attitudes: he argues that "The Population of a State / Is not its Armour against Fate." Instead, he posits an alternative attitude towards five million New Zealanders that sounds positively quaint given the political ideology that has dominated this country in the last decade:

I'm thinking less of Trade or War  
Than that we may produce that Way  
Some Hundreds more to understand  
Themselves, their Neighbours, and their Land.

Whim Wham's contribution to public morale in this volume would have been as effective as in the two previous publications. His verse "Going Wrong" (*Whim-Wham 1943* 22-23) shrewdly undermines the veracity of a speech by Hitler simply by challenging the reason for it:

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<sup>14</sup> I have had the population statistics here cited by Whim Wham quoted to me on numerous occasions as unassailable tenets of faith by school teachers, business people, military professionals and politicians, but this is the first occasion I have come upon them in written form. Whim Wham fails to cite the author, publisher or year of publication and so far I have been unable to track down the book.

"I am confident that the German home front is behind me –  
and the man at your head is not a man to go abroad like the  
Kaiser if things go wrong . . ." – Hitler, speaking at Munich.

If Things go wrong?  
    Why, Adolf, here's a change  
    Disquieting Change  
In your familiar song!

Why "if" at all  
    If Victory is sure?  
    If quite secure,  
Why contemplate a Fall?

In the following three stanzas Whim Wham sardonically agrees with Hitler before concluding, both on behalf of, and in assurance to, those who have suffered because of the Fuehrer, that Hitler will not take flight:

Because there are  
    So Many who await  
    Your final fate:  
They'll see you don't get far!

As in the two previous verse collections, Whim Wham of 1943 was still prepared to challenge authority, especially when he felt that officialdom was missing the point or being short-sighted. Such was the case in "Current Fiction" (*Whim-Wham 1943 18*) in which the epigraph cites a New York news cable recommending repulping *Mein Kampf* and other Nazi works for reprinting books the Nazis had destroyed in occupied countries. Whim Wham had in previous years condemned calls for censorship, and illogical emotional responses to events. In this verse he marshals an argument that attacks both censorship and emotionalism:

A pretty Thought, of course, for Those  
    Whose Minds are set on Retribution,  
But One that cooler Heads would shrink  
    From putting into Execution.  
How many tedious Books have been  
    Sought eagerly and read with Zest,  
Merely because well-meaning Fools  
    Proposed that they should be suppressed!

Despite being "roughly versified," work such as "Current Fiction" challenges the notion put about by even Curnow himself that Whim Wham's verse is "a great part of the time ephemeral [and] trifling" ("Conversation" 147). Indeed, I suggest that Curnow is deliberately being falsely modest in his judgement. The stanza above directly attacks the mob rule mentality which seeks "retribution," and privileges instead considered logic by "cooler Heads." Whim Wham's is a quieter, soothing voice rebutting hysterical voices shrilly intent upon whipping up emotions of hatred. Though he credits them with being "well-meaning," they remain "fools" who are unable to calculate the reverse-psychology responses their proposed actions might provoke. Whim Wham follows with an astute reading of German public response to *Mein Kampf* which, as a principle, is applicable to any community:

Mein Kampf, the Fuehrer's Masterpiece,  
Is not so great that One is led  
To think its Readers won him Power –  
He used his Power to get it read.

Whim Wham was quick to point out hypocrisy when he believed he had discovered it. Such a case is found in the opening poem to the collection, ironically under the section "God Defend New Zealand," and titled "Telling the World" (*Whim-Wham 1943*). In the epigraph, a member of the Legislative Council is said to have claimed that

New Zealand's world leadership in social legislation was due largely to the quality of the people of the Dominion, where the proportion of British-born was higher than in any other part of the Empire. That position should not be jeopardised by the admission of aliens with different ideologies. . . . (7)

We know that by 1943, Nazi propagandists had been broadcasting their views on racial superiority to the world for well over a decade, and that so-called "Aryan" dominance over other races was one of the Nazis' war objectives against which Western democracies were ranged. Consequently, Whim Wham is not sure whether to "weep" or "laugh" when public figures state "A Case for What is little Less / Than racial Exclusiveness." In this thesis I suggest, based on Bakhtin's model of dialogism, that an ideological struggle lies at the heart of all "dialogue," irrespective of whether it is writ small, as in a personal conversation, or large, as in constructions of national identity. Whim Wham seems acutely aware of the

importance of dialogue to nation's health and growth when he asks in "Telling the World,"

But could our sympathies not be  
                   A Shade more deep, our Views more wide?  
 Must Imports cease, from Overseas,  
 Of "different Ideologies"?

Following on from this, he concludes with a stanza that makes pertinent reading half a century later, during a decade when New Zealand has again been debating the issue of immigration:

I see, a Hundred Years from now,  
                   A tiny and a backward Nation  
 Telling the World precisely how  
                   It leads in Social Legislation,  
 Barbed Wire and Signboards all about,  
 With "God's Own Country – Please Keep Out"!

Ironically, it would never have occurred to Whim Wham that in about half that period of time parliamentary legislation would proceed systematically to dismantle much of the nation's social welfare infrastructure, a move spearheaded initially by the political party that originally constructed it.

Behind the Whim Wham verses of the three Second World War collections lies a voice calling for simple common sense, however irritating, complicated or tragic the situation. The verses call for rational responses rather than emotional reactions; they also prick the bubbles of individual self-importance, and mock all-consuming, trivial concerns. During a lengthy period of national emergency, Whim Wham's wartime verses are a triumph of commonsense (in itself an ideology, of course) and ironic humour, and should be seen as an important ingredient in maintaining healthy, democratic morale (according to today's hegemony).

## V

Sixteen years passed before the next collection of Whim Wham verses was published. During this post-war period, Whim Wham was still appearing regularly on the leader page of *The Press*, Christchurch, and also in the *New Zealand Herald*, Auckland, less regularly in Invercargill's *Southland Times*, and no longer in the *New Zealand Listener*.



Because thy rage against me, and thy tumult, is come up into mine ears;  
therefore will I put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will  
turn thee back by the way by which thou camest. (Isaiah 37:29)

Put together, Whim Wham's use of a "bridle" to lead a "goose" by the "nose" may be exploiting metaphor beyond reasonable limits, and Whim Wham senses this. Therefore, in "You May As Well Know," Whim Wham reassures readers of the harmlessness and best of intentions of this "whimsy" with an aside, spoken with obvious tongue in cheek:

(Sir, you dear old Goose, you KNOW I'd never  
Trifle with your confiding Affections in any Way  
whatsoever. . . .)

(*The Best of Whim Wham* 9)<sup>15</sup>

I have argued in the previous section of this chapter that Whim Wham was certainly offering his readers – if not frequently leading them towards – alternative perspectives on the interpretations of wartime New Zealand and the European conflict. In the nature of Bakhtinian dialogism, his voice was contending with official discourse and, I have argued, attempting to introduce a measure of rationality to emotional edict: he was replacing monologic closure with dialogic possibilities. In this later collection of verses there is less direct confrontation and more gentle mockery. The sarcastic and often angry young man had been replaced by an ironic, more mature commentator on life and politics in New Zealand. Thus, in "Beerometer Rising" when a Government Member of Parliament pontificates that "New Zealand women were wearing seven pairs of nylon stockings a year compared with three and a half pairs previously" (*The Best of Whim Wham* 13-14), Whim Wham observes that,

There's Something weirdly, not to say mystically  
Abstract about the statistically  
Constructed Barometers of national Prosperity. . . .

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<sup>15</sup> In *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Eric Partridge also defines "Whim-Wham for a goose's bridle or for ducks to perch on" as an evasive "put-off" in answer to an inquisitive "What are you doing?" He also cites "Whim" and "Whim-Wham" as 18th Century expressions for the "female pudend," which may account for the vulgar "Whim, wham, thank you ma'am" and "Wham, bang, thank you ma'am" sayings (in New Zealand at least) earlier this century for rapid and rather impersonal coitus.

In contrast to the younger Whim Wham, this older one merely chides and mocks, more inconsequentially than ineffectually:

Half a Pair

Of Nylons may not mean Much to you Jokers out there,  
 But are you aware  
 That Statistical Woman can wear 0.007 p.c. of 1pr hose:  
 Half a Leg, Half a Leg onwards, Prosperity grows.

The embedded social satire which had always been a hallmark of Whim Wham's verse was becoming more difficult to discern. "Alcoholic Daisy" picks up on a news item relating how breeders serve their cows beer to put sparkles in their eyes at showtime. The ensuing verse is a delightful comedy about a "Fallen Cow" who is "Doomed . . . to the Drink" (*The Best of Whim Wham* 22-23) but the verse is merely comical rather than satirical.

Just a few times in this collection Whim Wham appears to breathe a little of his earlier fire, and it is perhaps not surprising that it is again on the subject of censorship. The verse "The Decent Thing" comments on an advisory committee set up by the Government "to consider any proposal to prohibit the importation or sale of obscene documents (books, etc.) within the meaning of the Indecent Publications Act, 1910 . . ." (*The Best of Whim Wham* 26). Curnow was one of a number of Auckland University academics who opposed the establishment of a tribunal to review indecent publications in the legislation of 1962-63. Therefore, the chiding represents more than a half-hearted reflex. Dialogically, Whim Wham pitches his voice within the boundaries of official discourse, but satirically:

Half-baked Censorship is ended.  
 Literary Talent wins;  
 And the True from the Pretended,  
 THEY can pick, though like as Pins:  
 We'll know When to be offended.  
 What are Virtues, Which are Sins,  
 Snugly screened behind the Cordon  
 Consisting of Mr Burdon, Miss Wilson and Professor Gordon.

One consistent theme of disquiet that pervades this 1959 collection is Whim Wham's concern about warfare, some aspects of scientific progress, and about the emergent atomic age. The epigraph to "First Hatch Your Sputnik" (32-33) states that the Russians intend

attempting to re-enact the creation of life aboard a satellite. Whim Wham considers "That laboratory Products are redundant. / The naturally-occurring Substance more / Than meets our Needs." In his final stanza he gently probes the more pertinent question of what would happen if things went wrong in the experiment. Elsewhere, the epigraph to "Adam and Eve and Up-We-Go" (23-24) cites a scientist at a London science conference claiming that by the year 1999 humans will be undertaking rocket trips to the moon and back. In this poem, published (in this collection of verses) only eight years before Neil Armstrong took his first tentative step on the surface of the moon, Whim Wham says,

Take Rockets to  
 And from the Moon?  
 . . . . .  
 – I laugh (Ha! Ha!)  
 At Human Skill,  
 Because (Ho! Ho!)  
 I'm sure it will.

Whim Wham uses ironic laughter to mock human endeavour. For example, in "Time is for Travelling" (29-30) he again takes up the subject of space travel, this time describing how rockets will be required to descend backwards, using a rocket motor to decelerate the ship. In this matter he, and the scientific source he cites, proved to be quite correct. Whim Wham's mockery is not aimed at humans' unwavering belief in their ability to achieve scientific and engineering feats, but in their lack of ability to appreciate the consequences of those feats.

"Got a Match?" (30-31) is a considerably more satiric piece of verse, which begins by citing Washington financial experts who claim that a "brush-fire" war would boost the American economy in a few months:

A miniature Holocaust (no More!)  
 Not one that's fought atomically.  
 Small Nations only need apply –  
 No Great Powers clashing head-on –  
 A pocket Inferno will get us by,  
 The poor man's Armageddon.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dr Broughton informs me that in the 1960s, the word "holocaust" was applied chiefly to the idea

The poem continues with increasing sarcasm to subvert the expediency of United States foreign policy, concluding that since "we've got the bomb, and so have they . . . none of us dares to drop it." Thus Whim Wham early captured the spirit and implications of the military policy or "mutually assured destruction" – commonly known by its acronym MAD – which fuelled the Cold War for a generation.

In "Bargain Basement" (28-29) Whim Wham begins with two epigraphs, the first of which cites an Auckland University professor who claims that within a decade the North Island of New Zealand would be using atomic power; in the second, a professor from Wellington's Victoria University says that attracting overseas atomic experts would be difficult because of high demand for them elsewhere, coupled with New Zealand's lower salaries. The effect of placing the two quotations together, citing university physics professors from different universities and with differing views, sets up an expectation of clash before Whim Wham has uttered a word (although his choice of those particular quotations is itself a political statement). Whim Wham's verse takes the form of a six-stanza comic job advertisement, whose significance rests in not taking the suggestion of using atomic power in New Zealand particularly seriously. It is a self-deprecating scoffing at the entire proposal and its use of laughter makes it an effective subversive challenge.

"A Bomb of One's Own" (44-45) introduces scientific advancement in the form of the hydrogen bomb which is so safe, according to the poem, that "the reassuring scientist / can estimate precisely / the dreadful blast, the lethal mist" so that we can "lie easy in [our] beds." Yet Whim Wham was not convinced, if his epigraph to "After the Fall-Out" (69-70) is any indication. This cites British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan assuring the House of Commons that the increasing concentration of radioactive strontium 90 fallout from atmospheric thermo-nuclear bomb tests was likely to remain below danger level. In this, at times quite beautiful, verse, Whim Wham utilises a gentle but incessant poetic form to echo the quiet, insidious menace of radioactive fallout:

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of nuclear armageddon; its application to the genocide of the Jews in Germany became commonplace later.

Drifts softly down, with Time to spare,  
 Drifts down invisibly, drifts down  
 On river-source, on Field and Town –  
 It's in your Glass, it's on your Plate ,  
 .....  
 The Fall-out falls on field and Town,  
 Harmless or not, whether you care  
 To think of it or not, it's THERE.  
 On Bloom and Bud, on Ground and Grain  
 It droppeth – as the gentle Rain?

That final line, which echoes Portia's famous *Merchant of Venice* speech, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd; / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven" (IV:1), lends to Whim Wham's verse a quiet authority that elevates it from mere anti-bomb rhetoric. The verse becomes a plea on behalf of humankind for rationality in the nuclear age; it is one of Whim Wham's most impressive attacks upon the insane political machinations of the Twentieth Century.

The third-to-last and penultimate verses of the seventy-four collected in *The Best of Whim Wham* again return to Whim Wham's concern with the threat of war. "Nothing in Particular" (77-78) is based on the United States Army's response of "no special significance" when asked why anti-aircraft batteries were being sent to defensive positions at strategic factories, big cities, and Air Force centres. Each of the six stanzas details a scenario of increasing conflict, to which the official military response is that it is of "no Special Significance." The verse "One Worry Less" (79) commences with an epigraph citing a news item which claims that nuclear weapons are practically impossible to explode accidentally. In a verse dripping with sarcasm, Whim Wham expressed relief to learn of the bombs' safety, but wryly concludes,

The Problem being, how to circumvent  
 Not the Bombs that can't go off by Accident  
 (That's All very fine!)  
 But the Bombs that CAN go off by Design.

## VI

Of the one hundred and seventy-seven verses published in 1967 in *Whim Wham Land*, thirty-three were drawn from the 1959 *The Best of Whim Wham* collection. A two-part verse, "Canterbury Tales," was listed in the contents page of the earlier book as one item, but as two separate items in the later collection. The title of the earlier "See Our Cities" was modified to "What, No Cities?" but otherwise remained unchanged. One earlier verse "No Wonders, No Dollars" (*The Best of Whim Wham* 74-75) is of particular interest because a later verse "There's Always A Reason" (*Whim Wham Land* 59-60) revisits the issue of tourism. However, the latter handles the subject differently, although aspects are obviously derivative. The epigraph to the 1959 verse states:

The tourist industry in New Zealand was alarmed at the deplorable state of tourist attractions in Rotorua, said Mr I.A. Mitchell, a Dunedin travel agent. . . . Americans who visited Rotorua complained that they had been "taken for a ride." They found the attractions dirty and run-down and the Maori guides uninterested. (*The Best of Whim Wham* 74)

The epigraph to the 1967 verse, in effect repeats:

Rotorua, classed by the Government as a leading New Zealand attraction, was the most squalid place in the country, said the president of the Travel Agents' Association of New Zealand, Mr G.L. Barker. . . . "All Rotorua has is a mud pool." As a place it was dirty and bedraggled. . . . "There is much more to see in a similar trip from Auckland to Rotorua." – News Item. (*Whim Wham Land* 59)

In the former poem, *Whim Wham* satirises the (American) tourist, "Who thinks the Whole of God's Creation / Exists but for his Delectation." He (sic) expects mountains to be snow-clad, fish to be hooked on demand, gardens to bloom irrespective of season . . . but as for the Thermal Region, "That Shantytown! That sulphurous Air! / Why, we should warn him! – cry, Beware!" *Whim Wham* concludes by sarcastically proposing a "business approach":

Let's sweeten our volcanic Vents  
With scientific Condiments,  
And keep the adjacent Geysers humming  
With up-to-date American Plumbing.

That Whim Wham should feel compelled to revisit the issue eight years later suggests that it irked him; that it should trouble him sufficiently to provoke a rewrite of the earlier verse rather than merely reprinting it indicates the depth of his feelings. His poetic touch in the later poem is lighter, more subtle:

That Southern Air is pure,  
                                 Not sulphurously scented  
 Like That at Rotorua  
 .....  
 That thermal Shantytown,  
                                 'Bedraggled' and unkempt!

This time round, the sarcasm is largely replaced by pride, idealism by realism, and he concludes:

A squalid place, you say?  
                                 That's where the Attraction lies –  
 More Human, in that Way,  
                                 Than lofty Snows and Skies.  
 And need I (Sir!) repeat,  
                                 There's Something in the Blood  
 That's drawn by Natural Heat,  
                                 And not averse to Mud?

A prefatory "'Note in Collusion' between the Author and his Publishers" states that "in *Whim Wham Land* the same old crops, weeds and blights flourish perennially. . . . The Author . . . claims that his 'concern is with permanent values, not the trivial accidents of public life.'" Hence, the verses that have been carried forward from the 1959 collection to the 1967 publication generally are less time-specific; while not necessarily applicable to New Zealand in the 1990s, their humour and satire is in most cases easily comprehensible. Those not carried forward to 1967 include verses based on media reports of topical issues or statements by political dignitaries of the day. Naturally, additions to *Whim Wham Land* include a large number of newspaper verses dealing with issues and personalities specific to the 1960s. While Whim Wham's earlier concern with atomic war no longer appear in *Whim Wham Land*, the ten verses in the section "It Is Entirely Surrounded by SPACE" suggest that space travel was a continuing preoccupation. "Very New Moon" reacts to Sir Walter

Nash's comment on a successful Russian moon shot, ". . . I don't know exactly what the purpose is, but still it shows what can be done" (*Whim Wham Land* 95-96). Whim Wham concludes with logic that echoes New Zealand mountaineer-hero Sir Edmund Hillary: "And Why? / Simply to show what can be done."<sup>17</sup> "Lunar Exposure" (96-97) delights superficially in the fact that "The Moon's Behind has now been photographed." "Moonlight on the Ruins" (97-98) is a more telling piece that responds to Tom Skinner, president at that time of the New Zealand Federation of Labour who, in the epigraph, is reported as asking, "What would be gained if man conquered the moon but allowed the earth to be destroyed?" This echoes Jesus in the Gospel speech: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (*Mark* 9:36). In marked contrast to the Julian poet of the 1930s who railed against the shackles that capitalism had imposed upon workers, Whim Wham of the 1960s is cynically pessimistic about what New Zealand's combined unions chief would do, "If Man, having finally succeeded / In wrecking Earth, abandoned It / And made the cheerless Moon his Base." Having announced no faith in the idealism of unionism except through the dynamics of satire, Whim Wham sees nothing but costly failure in any attempted conquest of space, with his concluding reference to the World War One Gallipoli campaign fiasco:

Who really cares about the Moon?  
                   The Earth is Where we All belong.  
 Whoever gets There, late or soon,  
                   Need not ask ME to make a Song –  
 What Lunar Lakes or Parallels  
 Will be my Grand-child's Dardanelles?

(*Whim Wham Land* 97-98)

"Adam and Eve and Up-We-Go" (98-99) was reprinted from the 1959 *The Best of Whim Wham*, and in this 1967 collection toys with the concept of piloted moon travel a mere two years before it became a reality. New equipment at Western Australia's Carnarvon tracking station "would mean greater safety for manned moon flights," according to the epigraph to

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<sup>17</sup> As patriotic New Zealanders happily relate, when New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to conquer Mt Everest, was asked why he was driven to scale the world's highest peak, he reportedly responded, "Because it was there." In fact, the origin of the remark is British mountaineer George Leigh Mallory (1886-1924), who, when asked why he wanted to climb Mt Everest, responded, "Because it is there" (*Bloomsbury Dictionary of Quotations*).

"Plan Your Trip Now" (99), while "Feels Good, Looks Pretty" (100) discusses the comments of astronauts orbiting earth. Whim Wham wonders, "After all this Expense, wouldn't it be a Pity / If all we gained was the Notion that it's REAL PRETTY / Out there?" "Venus" (101-2) is a delightful satire on the Venus of antiquity – the goddess, her statues and stories, the procreative divinity, and the subject of artists' and poets' dreams – all reduced by science to our solar planet: "Dust, Sand, cosmic Smog, Heat that no Life could bear / That's All that's there." "How Many Whens Make Where?" (102-3) speculates on Russian claims that superior life in outer space is beaming radio waves to earth. With common sense and commensurate ease, Whim Wham calmly calculates from known distances and the speed of light that

Between the first exploratory Beam or Beep  
And the answering Wave from the Deep  
THEY aren't THERE and WE're  
Not going to be HERE.

"Time is for Travelling" (103-4) is another verse to be imported from the 1959 collection and discusses the use of ships descending backwards, using their rockets to decelerate. Finally, Whim Wham concludes this section by bringing space back to New Zealand with "The Stars in their Orreries" (104-5). This deals with a Canterbury application for a licence to import a planetarium from America. An orrery, incidentally, according to Whim Wham is "the prototype / Of the Planetarium, a comical / Sort of cosmic Clock" which, he feels, we "might do worse" than to import.

While *Whim Wham Land* may be concerned with recording "permanent values," this final collection demonstrates little zeal to change events or modify any of those values. Unlike the three early Whim Wham collections – written by a satirist newly emerged from the Julian chrysalis and published during the first uncertain years of World War Two – the final two collections, and particularly *Whim Wham Land*, are no longer angry. The verses are the product of a more patient, cynical and realistic observer who takes shots almost for fun rather than out of a sense of burning conviction. One of the unremarked values of Whim Wham's verses is that they keenly capture one commentator's version of the community's concerns and preoccupations at their time of writing. One cluster of verses I selected from *The Best of*

*Whim Wham* illustrated the *Zeitgeist* of 1950s New Zealand grappling with the realities and implications of first-generation atomic weaponry. By the 1960s, that fear had turned to guarded optimism, as evidenced by an entire section *Whim Wham* devoted to space technology. Whether or not *Whim Wham*'s verses closely reflect society's uncertainties, or whether they betray *Whim Wham*'s personal misgivings – and it must also be acknowledged that all *Whim Wham*'s collections were of verses previously published – within just two years of *Whim Wham Land* appearing, lunar landings by humans had become a reality with Armstrong and Aldrin's historic landing on 21 July 1969. By the 1970s such issues as *Whim Wham* dealt with in his section on space had ceased to be topical. Perhaps it was partly with this in mind that Curnow told Jackson, "*Whim Wham*, by the very nature of the work is obviously going to be a great part of the time ephemeral [and] trifling" ("Conversation" 147).

## VII

Despite my argument earlier in this chapter that from the 1959 collection onward *Whim Wham* became more mellow and failed to employ his youthful satiric sting, there are exceptions. One of these is captured in the verse "The Culture of Cities" (*The Best of Whim Wham* 66-67) and refers to a public altercation between a lecturer in English at Auckland University College, Mr Allen Curnow, and a university college and city council member, Mr D.M. Robinson. Previously, on 24 May 1957 Curnow had given a public reading at the Auckland City Art Gallery of a poem he had written and published in pamphlet form, entitled *The Hucksters and the University* and subtitled *or Out of Site, Out of Mind, or Up Queen Street Without A Paddle!* This raised the ire particularly of Robinson who, at a meeting of the university college council on 10 June 1957, claimed the poem was a scurrilous attack on members of both the city council and the university college council. According to a *New Zealand Herald* news story the following day, Robinson said:

I feel that, coming from a teacher in this university, this poem does not display the balance and the broad, liberal outlook which I think should be the hallmark of a university-trained man. It indicates a narrowness and a bitterness which are distasteful to me.

He called for the council and members individually to dissociate themselves from the words

and sentiments expressed in the poem. When his attention was drawn to a resolution in the minutes concerning academic freedom, Robinson claimed it was a matter of slander:

It's the language. The language is intemperate. It's slanderous. If that comes within the orbit of freedom of expression, then we should have another look at that resolution.

According to the backcover blurb by the publisher, R.W. Lowry, on a later pamphlet, *Mr Huckster of 1958*, *The Press* of 15 June 1957 reported that *The Hucksters and the University* poem,

. . . brings back, in biting gusts, the 17th century art of writing polemical broadsheets strong enough to make your hair curl. It attacks the Auckland City Council's decision on the site of the university . . . courageous venture into local politics . . . public interest in Mr Curnow's plea and his method has been shown by the demand for the broadsheet; the first edition of 1000 copies sold out in a fortnight. . . .

The poem is in the mould of Whim Wham's weekly verses; it comprises nine stanzas of eight lines each, with rhyme and meter not permitted to interfere too extensively with the racy content. The poem attacks the council as "rotten at the heart" with such charges as, "For your greasy ha'pennyworth of Rates / You'd pull your Churches down." It then compares city councillors' promises with their actions, which are likened to an "Athenian Style" poison cup:

For a greasy ha'pennyworth of Rates  
                   They mixed their Poison black.  
 They smuggled it up to Princes Street  
                   And sneaked it in at the Back.  
 Cumberland carried the Mixture in -  
                   'Twas to save sick Learning's Life!  
 Robinson stood with a Bowl for the Blood,  
                   And Surgeon Robb with a Knife.

Numerous other councillors' names are invoked as part of the plot to "Get yer University outa our Yard . . . We don't care Where, if it's outa our 'Air, / And outa our Customers' Sight!" The title page of the pamphlet defines "Huckster" in a footnote as "A retail dealer in small wares; a petty trader; (fig.) person of mean, haggling, mercenary character." Little wonder then that Robinson (years later to become Sir Dove-Meyer Robinson and mayor of Auckland) took umbrage at the publication.

In the sequel pamphlet, *Mr Huckster of 1958*, Curnow takes delight in leading his attack with a poke at his old adversary: "Robinson mumbled his Old Cracked Magic / As the Huckster's Draught was poured." Other city councillors are mentioned by name, but the poem concentrates its vitriol on John Carpenter:

Coal-yard Carpenter, John o' Newmarket,  
 Carpenter, Pride of the Team.  
 A CANCER was what you called it, John.  
 We'll think of that Word again.  
 Was it Cancer, the Knowledge YOU found at the College?  
 It wasn't, for better Men.

If That's what you find in the City's Heart,  
 Then what of the City's Brains?  
 There are Clots at the Head, if the Truth were said,  
 And Bile, not Blood in the Veins.

And Curnow concludes with a blast stronger and more personal than anything Whim Wham ever attempted:

Ill must the City of Learning fare,  
 That no brave Destiny shapes –  
 That Fools have betrayed, their Counsel swayed  
 By the Craft of huckstering Apes.

Whim Wham's 1959 collection *The Best of Whim Wham* includes a verse in response to Robinson's reaction to the public reading of the initial Huckster pamphlet. It begins with an epigraph:

The Auckland City Council will be asked to instruct its library committee to draw up conditions for the lease of the Art Gallery "to prevent the gallery being used to disseminate libellous, treasonable or blasphemous material in the name of culture or education" . . . a satirical poem, "The Hucksters and the University," by Mr Allen Curnow, was condemned by Mr D.M.Robinson. The poem had been read in the Art Gallery. – News item.

Whim Wham is "horrified to hear / That such Things might be, Sir." He calls upon "Sir" to keep the culture undefiled and the native woodnotes tamed:

Shut them out, permit them not  
 To desecrate the Shrine, Sir.  
 Poems, Lectures – screen the Lot,  
 Censor every Line, Sir!

Having banished reckless bards to Christchurch for treasonable words, Whim wham pleads:

Genuine Culture only, please,  
 Need apply to Us, Sir,  
 Free from Life (that dread Disease),  
 Ideal, innocu-ous, Sir!

Curnow has avoided commenting on the influence his experiences as Whim Wham, and as Julian during his formative years working with the *Tomorrow* periodical, had on his life as a serious poet. However, Whim Wham had demonstrated an aversion to censorship from the late 1930s on, and even in the earliest years of World War Two was prepared to speak publicly against it, as in the satiric verse "Improperganda" (*A Present for Hitler* 18). Later verses such as "Supplying the Answer" (*Whim-Wham 1941-1942* 9-10) and "Current Fiction" (*Whim-Wham 1943* 18) revisit in differing aspects of censorship. It is not unreasonable to argue, then, that the two "Huckster" poetic pamphlets owe their existence, particularly because of their style and content, more to their Whim Wham heritage than to the Curnow branch of the family. The inclusion of "The Culture of Cities" in *The Best of Whim Wham* comes as no surprise, and in *Whim Wham Land*; "A Very Impartial Non-Opinion" (42-43) Whim Wham reacts to the banning of a television film by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation.

Finally, I yet hope, while surfing the World Wide Web, to stumble upon a verse contribution to the current debate about internet censorship – signed of course by Whim Wham in virtual reality.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
CURNOW THE PLAYWRIGHT

It is possible to think that we live by fictions which we tell ourselves about ourselves, by a kind of magic. For most people, or enough people at a time, they are true . . . . Since we are always short of knowledge, and have to speak or act without enough of it, we have to make do with our fictions.  
– Allen Curnow (1972)

I

Curnow has written six plays, four of which – *The Axe* (1948), *The Overseas Expert* (1962), *The Duke's Miracle* (1967), and *Resident of Nowhere* (1969) – were published or republished in *Four Plays* (1972). *Dr Pom*, an early play of uncertain date, was never staged or published; hence, critics have not commented on the play and Curnow makes no mention of it.<sup>1</sup> *Moon Section* (1959) was staged but not published, and must therefore remain for the time being, in Curnow's own description, "a submerged link" between *The Axe* (1948) and *The Overseas Expert* (1962), because he chose not to include it in his 1972 collection. *Moon Section* is a tragic play and it was produced for the 1959 Auckland Festival. Curnow tells us that it was damned by Auckland press notices (*Four Plays* 14), but *Moon Section* was given a professional tour of the North Island by the Community Arts Service Theatre. In terms of my thesis that Curnow was a subversive writer, his evaluation of *Moon Section* in his preface to *Four Plays* (15) illustrates the play's ambivalent reception:

The real trouble with *Moon Section* . . . was that I had bundled too much naturalistic stuff . . . too untidily on to the stage. Some real *theatre* must have come across through the clutter: people who were moved found it difficult to say why, and no wonder, when the author had mixed such a draught of the romantic, the "absurd", and the tragic . . . .

Whatever was wrong, it had nothing to do with the rusty bucket of

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Roddick (1980:38), for example, merely states: "Two relatively early plays, *Dr Pom* and *Moon Section*, remain unpublished."

night-soil which an outraged Festival committeeman tried to order off the stage after the first night. Nor with a girl's remark, when she fancies she may be pregnant, that her period was "often late". The mere mention of this appalled a Festival tea-party lady, so that the producer's wife was provoked to inquire, "Don't you have them in New Zealand?"

Curnow's comments reflect a picture of New Zealand in the 1950s that was conservative and homogeneous in tastes and attitudes. Howard McNaughton writes that *Moon Section* "achieved notoriety for what was seen as sordid naturalistic detail, and was not revived" (*Oxford History* 299). The "sordid" details would not have endeared Curnow's play to conservative audiences; but more significantly, the play's "naturalistic" detail may have been at odds with changing fashions at that time in stage drama. The English language version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, had been published in 1954 and performed in 1955, ushering in, according to the *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, a "non-realist mode of presentation" (Ford 114). That play was hailed as "in some ways the most influential play" of the period (Ford 102), and despite being only "one prominent landmark in a whole theatrical landscape" (115), *Waiting for Godot* does indicate a general shift in thematic concerns. Just how far Curnow picked up on overseas dramatic trends as he developed *Moon Section's* principal character Thomas Judd remains beyond the scope of this discussion because he chose not to publish the play. However, Curnow provides some clues when he describes Judd's role as that of "a half-crazed recluse, left landless in a derelict farmstead, and friendless but for his daughter and a woman doctor" (*Four Plays* 15). Yet of the play as a whole, Curnow writes: "The harshly pessimistic light (or gloom) in which *Moon Section* tried to represent New Zealand, evidently went too far" (15). Curnow's proclaimed emphasis on "representing" New Zealand may have contributed more to the play's demise, despite his protestations that it had nothing to do with night-soil buckets or to the woman's comments about pregnancy or menstruation.

Irrespective of speculation about whether *Moon Section* was too "real" for New Zealanders or perhaps too satiric, it remains a play that apparently shook audiences. Curnow writes that "none of us – author, audience, or critics – was at home in a situation atypical of the stage in New Zealand: an entirely new play offered to the public on

professional terms." He concludes: "It seemed that notice was being served, that nothing like this must ever again contaminate an Auckland stage" (14). In a 1972 review of *Four Plays* for the *Listener*, James Bertram wrote that he regretted the absence of *Moon Section* from the compilation because "with a verse style responsive to Christopher Fry and Dylan Thomas, and a technique of self-exposure of the protagonist looking forward to Pinter, [*Moon Section*] is Curnow's most original play."

In a review of the Community Arts Service's Wellington performance of *Moon Section*, the critic "A.S.F." writes that the central problem dealt with in the play is "the same problem with which much New Zealand writing is concerned" (7). Many of the play's characters "seem to represent the common reaction to the isolation and loss of identity which these islands impose." A.S.F.'s verdict is that in *Moon Section* Curnow "has caused his audiences, however reluctantly, to think and to feel." This reaction suggests that the play challenges assumptions, attitudes or beliefs of the period at least to some extent.

In a review for *Landfall*, Sarah Campion called *Moon Section* "the first considerable New Zealand play written about the country, its people, and their attitudes, by a New Zealander: and, whether they like it or not, for New Zealanders" (270). She claimed, however, that *Moon Section* contains "no true dialogue, though on the surface there appears to be plenty". Instead, most of the characters are "always . . . speaking to themselves, and for themselves, even when they appear to be addressing other people." She concludes:

Is New Zealand life a series of vexed monologues? Yes, of course, here as everywhere else. Are New Zealanders more troubled by this fact than some other people? It seems that Mr Curnow would have it so. Characteristically, he makes the very strong suggestion: and leaves it hanging as a question mark over the heads of his audience. (270)

Inevitably, Campion's review attaches her own and the social concerns of provincial New Zealand in the late 1950s to the play. In the programme accompanying the CAS Theatre production of the play, Curnow notes that both *The Axe* and *Moon Section* "have something to do with what happens to people when they are cut off, out of step – adrift, as it were – from

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*NZ Listener* 5 Jun. 1972: 48. Not 1970, as stated in Theresa Graham's 1976 bibliography at serial 59i.

tradition and history." His brief description suggests that a fierce dialogic struggle is indeed taking place in *Moon Section*. However, instead of a struggle by ideological voices to dominate each other, as we have frequently seen in Curnow's poetry and satire, the struggle appears to be against the consequences of dialogic abandonment by others. If others cannot or will not assist in the individual's construction of a sense of selfhood, one ends up in a state akin to death.

Curnow chose not to publish – let alone revise and republish – *Moon Section* as he did the four other plays, and I therefore do not examine the text of the play. I can only speculate, following the comments of Campion and of Curnow, whether the character's monologues are really dialogic – providing subtle sites of ideological struggle between competing social voices – or whether they are indeed monologic – abandoned, hermetic and fearful of extinction. However, the critics' reviews reinforce Curnow's programme note in suggesting a consistency of approach between *Moon Section* and Curnow's other drama. Of the four plays that Curnow did publish, the first pair – *The Axe* (1948) and *The Overseas Expert* (1962) – were written for the stage although *The Overseas Expert* was later adapted for, and performed on radio. However, the other two plays – *The Duke's Miracle* (1967) and *Resident of Nowhere* (1969) – were both written especially for radio. In this discussion, the adaptations referred to are from the collected *Four Plays*, and owe their 1972 forms largely to Curnow's original versions. Nevertheless, they incorporate revisions Curnow made in conjunction with producers, particularly in the case of *The Axe*, whose 1949 edition preface details expansion of the play from two to three acts. In this study no attempt is made to examine differences between the various editions of the plays.

## II

### THE AXE

Curnow wrote in the preface to the 1949 version of *The Axe* that the subject of the play was "a tragedy of situations, encounter and conflict between the modern West and the Stone Age" in which the protagonists are "two religions, two religion-based orders of society" (7). In my Bakhtinian reading of the play, Curnow uses two competing Polynesian tribes on a

remote Pacific island as the social background with which to explore the arrival in 1824 of a new and arrogant ideology: Christianity. Prior to its introduction, religion in *The Axe* had been a near-monologic exercise in the hegemonic domination of competing voices. The two tribal groups struggled for political supremacy on the island of Mangaia: Curnow describes one group as the current "dominant tribes" and the other as the Ngativara – "a defeated and distressed tribe" (*Four Plays* 26). Behind both political groupings stood the single voice of a common island religion based on Mangaia gods. To the islanders, the arrival of Christianity is described by the second chorus as "a speech unheard before" which anticipates the turmoil that a new voice will throw the previously stable monologic religious structure of the island. In fact, the voice had been heard a generation previously:

TUPIA: Once before this, this god rose out of the sea. –

Two strangers came crying, clambering to the beach,  
Proclaiming a new god.

HEMA: And the rest of the story. –

We chucked them back into the sea, didn't we? (*Four Plays* 29)

The passage brings to mind a couplet from Curnow's 1943 *Sailing or Drowning* poem, "Landfall in Unknown Seas":

Always to islanders danger  
Is what comes over the sea[.]

Apparently, the islanders were able to dominate the contending Christian discourse the first time they came into contact with it and no trace of it remains as a dialogic other, except in the story passed on orally by Tupia and Hema. However, in the nature of dialogism the contending word, once spoken, remains as an other, irrespective of how submerged it becomes. Tupia's and Hema's ability to recall that an alternative deity had previously risen out of the sea testifies to the existence of an other within their consciousness, however liminal. Tumu, a priest of the defeated Ngativara tribe, warns Tupia, a chief of the dominant tribe, of the dangers of this second Christian visit to the island:

We too are not uninterested  
In the return of the white bird, the god with wings.  
Be careful what you do. (*Four Plays* 32)

The "white bird, the god with wings" refers to the sailing ship that brought the Christian

missionaries to the island and Tumu's use of the word "return" acknowledges the significance of the previous visit of a ship. A contest between competing religious ideologies ensues, made clear again by Tumu, who cautions against welcoming the new god to the islands:

You do not know what you are welcoming.  
 If I were you I would not open my arms too wide.  
 The gods of Mangaia gave you the government  
 Over this island. You have no mandate  
 Except from the gods. (*Four Plays* 33)

In an ominous concluding speech to the opening scene of Act I, Tumu warns the dominant chiefs who welcome in the new Christian god: "Power changes hands and is lost as it is won. / O your tide is full now, and the ebb is coming" (33). For the Ngativara who have fairly recently been subjugated, an obvious parallel exists between their own political defeat, and the approaching ideological struggle between the original island gods and the new Christian god. While, as already noted, Tupia and Hema of the dominant tribe are aware that the Christian god had risen "out of the sea" once previously, it is the defeated Ngativara who recognise the dialogic threat this new voice poses to the existing order on Mangaia.

Davida, the Christian missionary from Tahiti, posits a monologic ideology in introducing the Lord god Jehovah to the islanders. When asked who this god is, he responds:

There is no other. He made the earth, the sea,  
 All men, all things, here and beyond the sea  
 Farther than you ever dreamed: the sun and moon,  
 Everything that exists: and he alone existed  
 Before anything was made. (*Four Plays* 31)

Naturally, he is challenged by Numangatini, high chief of the dominating tribes, who evokes the existence of a prior Mangaia god:

There was another  
 Who came up from beneath, and shaped this land,  
 Seizing it with his hands. (31)

Numangatini's defence is already a rearguard action against the overwhelming force of the new order. Numangatini attempts to maintain at least a dialogic prior existence for his Mangaia gods with his hesitant "there was another" response in the face of Davida's

monologic proclamation "there *is* no other." Numangatini's use of the past tense suggests that he is already losing the ideological struggle with Davida. Davida attempts total domination over the possibility of a competing ideology with his retort, "That is all a lie. / You are all deceived by lies." Davida attempts throughout *The Axe* to reinforce the monologic nature of Christian discourse. Images of the previous gods, which are made out of wood, are burnt. Davida assures Numangatini that burning these "impostors" pleases God:

Yes. God is pleased.  
 He is a jealous god, Numangatini.  
 Remember his law:  
 Thou shalt have none other gods but me. (*Four Plays* 42)

Christianity, however, has not only dominated Mangaia's island religion, but also the social order that supported it. In submitting to the new god, the chief Numangatini also relinquishes some of his previous political power which derived from association with the near-monologic religion:

Once I could speak for many. I was the voice  
 Of all this island people. Now they call me  
 King, but priest no longer. (*Four Plays* 43)

The institutions of state and religion are thus separated.

In *The Axe* the Chorus sometimes speaks independently of the play's characters and sometimes in dialogue with them. When the Chorus announces that Jesus has been established – as a new god – under the protection of the king, Tumu asks the chorus what the next move will be:

CHORUS: There is not enough room.  
 This will not end when the excitement is over,  
 Singing out the old, singing in the new.  
 TUMU: The old is the true. This new is all lies.  
 CHORUS: Gods are not given to amicable compromise,  
 Least of all this one, jealous cunning Jehovah,  
 Emperor of countless islands,  
 Admiral of invincible fleets. (*Four Plays* 52)

The Chorus clearly predicts the pending dialogic struggle between competing ideologies. A simple denial by Tumu is no longer sufficient to counter the increasingly entrenched forces of

Christian discourse. The Chorus's second statement echoes the Bakhtinian notion of centripetal monologic tendencies at work within a successful hegemonic institution. Compromise is a last resort as the discourse attempts to achieve a monologue.

According to the dialogic model, voices that are dominated or subdued are as significant as hegemonic ones because, despite being marginal, they are an other necessary to the ruling group. In *The Axe* an earlier unsuccessful visit by missionaries has become a marginalized event but one which has not been entirely forgotten. Christian discourse never had an opportunity to establish itself as a viable other to the hegemonic island religion except as myth. Yet Tupia, a chief, tells Hema, a young man,

The King remembers. You were a child when it happened.  
Once before this, this god rose out of the sea. –  
Two strangers came crying, clambering to the beach,  
Proclaiming a new god. (*Four Plays* 29)

Hence, the dialogic possibility of an alternative god to their own exists for the islanders despite the earlier missionaries being "chucked . . . back into the sea."

Mangaia's defeated and distressed Ngativara tribe have become subdued voices on the island since losing some form of political and possibly military contest prior to 1824, when the play commences. However, they remain full participants in the dialogic construction of identity by the dominant tribes. The Ngativara are an active other who validate the dominant tribes' superior position. Tupia and Hema, of the dominant tribes, term Ngativara priest Tumu's comments "the rattle of stones in a dry stream" and likewise call Ngativara high priest Tereavai "that leafless tree" (32), suggesting his impotency and lack of spiritual vitality. In dialogic terms the discourse of the defeated tribe is losing the struggle for ideological supremacy, but on religious rather than on political grounds. In Act Three of the play, the Ngativara put up credible military resistance against the dominant tribe, and while they are eventually beaten, during the battle they are seen by the onlookers Davida and his newly converted Christians as a genuine threat. This is not so much the case with the old island religion, whose temple and idols are burnt with little resistance from its votaries. Indeed, even the blind old Ngativara priest Tereavai recalls a prophecy foreseeing that missionaries

would conquer, occupy and rule the island (39). While he believed it to be "a prophecy, / Never to come true in our time", Ngativara nevertheless is already constructing Christianity as the eventual dominant religion.

The dialogic model allows us to construct themes in *The Axe* as a social laboratory in which Curnow drops a vigorous alien ideology into a relatively stable environment. In the next play I discuss, an interloper represents only one of a number of dialogic struggles that are taking place.

### III

#### THE OVERSEAS EXPERT

Curnow's second published play, *The Overseas Expert*, completed and performed in 1962, concentrates largely on three voices that compete for dominance. Bill Soper, a fifty-eight year old Auckland businessman typifies the *nouveaux riches*; he has worked his way to wealth but retains the uneducated, socially gauche, and naive attitudes and mannerisms of his working class origins. Nevertheless, his wealth gives him social status in the community, particularly in a post-colonial era of emerging nationhood and middle class, and he is developing political clout as an Auckland city councillor. Thirty-nine year old Englishman abroad Sir George Mandragora, conversely, represents the privileged British upper classes. The baronetcy of this "overseas expert," if genuine, has been inherited, suggesting breeding, "old money" and property, and an aura of stability and permanence unattainable in an emerging nation.

Against these two are contrasted Soper's twenty-seven year old son Bob, a university arts graduate, who now teaches in a provincial Northland town. George also claims a university education. He tells Bob, whom he met while in Northland, that he read Oriental history and languages at Cambridge University. George's claim to a higher education is significant within the play as a vehicle for exposing his fraudulent activities. An important struggle in the play occurs between the uneducated but wealthy, self-made, sauce-manufacturing father, and his university-educated teacher son. As well as representing the

stereotypical father-son "generation gap," Bill and Bob stand for examples of a working class father who has managed to buy his children a middle class upbringing but who himself has little access to it, or appreciation of its subtleties. Throughout, Curnow attempts to convey gauche aspects of Bill's character through clichéd working class attitudes, speech rhythms and even pronunciation devices:

You're busy, son. – E-gyptian Commies, Wogs, Reds,  
Afros and Asians. – We're listening to Sir George. –  
Why'd we let them get away with it at Su-ez, George?  
Look at them now. Know what I reckon?  
We should've wiped the whole lot out when we had the chance.

(*Four Plays* 124)

In *The Overseas Expert* the two women characters, Mona Soper and her daughter Gillian, are dominated by the social institutions within which they live. Fifty-one year old Mona is locked into her role as wife and mother, and although nineteen year old Gillian displays some liberal attitudes (she has a pre-marital affair with George) she too is learning her mother's housewifely role.

The kitchen is Mona's domain which she defends from incursions – "Don't you dare come into the kitchen, either of you" (98) – except sometimes from Gillian:

If Sir George will excuse us,  
Gilly and I must – you see, it's the girl's day off – (*Four Plays* 109)

Her role divisions are quite strict. When George offers to help in the kitchen, Mona is flattered not by the offer but by the attention:

Oh, Sir George, that *is* kind, but really – !  
Gilly's going to help me, aren't you, dear?  
And you men are going to relax and have your drinks. (*Four Plays* 109)

In her role as nurturer, Mona attempts to ensure everyone else's good health and happiness.

She fusses over her son Bob when he doesn't eat breakfast:

MONA: Don't you want your coffee, dear?  
BOB: Oh, thanks, Mum. I forgot all about it.  
MONA: And you've hardly eaten a thing for breakfast.  
Aren't you feeling well? (*Four Plays* 136)

Then she attempts to patch up differences between her husband and her son:

MONA: Bob, dear, – I know it was an accident last night.  
But your father's very upset. Couldn't you just – ?

BOB: You want me to make it up.

MONA: I don't want you to do anything you don't want.  
But for my sake, dear.

BOB: I know, Mum.  
I'm to go and insult Dad by putting him in the right,  
When I'd rather leave him where he is, in the wrong,  
And respect him for it.

MONA: Oh I do wish you got on better. (*Four Plays* 136-7)

When the pressure of business affects her husband, Mona reassures him, but Curnow (condescendingly, by today's standards) introduces her comment with the stage direction, "*her maternal anxious self*":

Oh, I know, dear, but you mustn't *worry*, –  
We can still be happy. (*Four Plays* 148)

When father and son confront each other, Mona tries to manipulate them into behaving. She uses – we infer from several clues in the play – her most common defence:

Oh, Dad, please!  
My head simply won't stand it.

followed shortly after by:

Bill! Bob! Oh, my head. I can't stand this.  
[*She goes out.*]

but not before she has exhibited perhaps her only attempt at rebellion against her husband Bill.

MONA [*defiant, to Bob*]:  
Sir George is flying to Australia tomorrow night.  
There! I won't be told to shut up.  
Now there's nothing to argue about. (*Four Plays* 150)

Ironically, while Mona is one of the most compliant and submissive – albeit talkative – characters in the play, her one act of defiance against her husband is the catalyst to George's eventual exposure. Bob acts on his mother's surprise announcement that George is leaving for Australia in the morning by contacting George's former associate who is now in jail.

Daughter Gillian is expected to learn the supportive wifely role of her mother, particularly in terms of food and the kitchen. During the play's opening scene she displays an ignorant rebellious spirit; for example, she does not know whether her brother has a bachelor's or a master's degree and resents any advice he proffers, insisting instead, "I'll run my own life" (*Four Plays* 95). However, we learn shortly after, during an exchange between brother and sister, that both are attempting, in differing ways, to appropriate some control over their lives although Gillian's position is more naive:

GILLIAN: You're an intellectual snob.  
 BOB: Right. And you're a social one. Right?  
 GILLIAN: That makes us both a bit old-fashioned.  
 BOB: Snobs don't get old-fashioned.  
       Snobbery is the Land of Perpetual Youth.  
 GILLIAN: Who bothers any more, how anybody makes his money?  
       It's not how, but how much . . . But there *are* limits.  
(*Four Plays* 99)

However, Gillian exhibits streaks of a post-World War II "baby boomer" independence still generally unacceptable to her mother's generation, such as already having lost her "innocence" to someone other than George "at Taupo last holidays" (170). Her covert affair with George culminates in an illicit night together at a motel, between scenes in Act Two, instead of staying with Sir Henry and Lady Morton as her parents presumed. When confronted, Gillian attempts to construct herself as a predator and tries to dominate past events:

George, do you remember that morning on the ski-slope,  
 Pure white, pure gold, the sunrise and the snow,  
 Didn't it glitter like true-as-true? – I wasn't.  
 I was playing the same game we've all been playing.  
 Last night in the motel, I was playing Lady Mandragora.  
 That wasn't a sweet little trusting girl in your arms, George.  
 It was a calculating man-eating little snob,  
 With her mind's eye full of ancestral halls and carriage sweeps  
 And butlers, and Rolls Royces rolling to Royal Ascot. –  
 I wonder what you saw. (*Four Plays* 170)

However, George quickly strikes back and devastates Gillian's one attempt to consolidate a

dominant position in the conversation. He destroys the significance of what she has proposed by refusing to discuss it, and then marginalizes her role in their love affair by objectifying her as merely a trivial, curious object – just one of many:

Do you know,  
I remember very little, except – oh yes,  
That fascinating little mole you've got, on the left breast.  
I've never seen one quite like it. (*Four Plays* 170)

Having failed in her one attempt at establishing herself as a dominant voice in the proceedings, Gillian joins her mother for the few minutes that remain till the end of the play. The remaining struggle is between the three dominant male positions with Gillian and Mona providing nurturing support for each other at the play's conclusion:

GILLIAN [*running to Mona*]: Oh, Mummy, – Mummy.  
MONA: There. There.  
GILLIAN [*sobbing*]: He'll never come back. (*Four Plays* 171)

Gillian's final, ambiguous statement may be seen as a definitive statement of fact, as her emotional reaction to unrequited love, or perhaps more as a question to her mother.

Whichever interpretation, Gillian's voice belongs to a subdued discourse shared by the two women.

A dialogic reading of *The Overseas Expert* enables us to examine an ideological struggle between generations in the lower middle-class social setting of post-Second World War Auckland. The differences between that play and Curnow's next, five years later, could not be more extreme. *The Duke's Miracle* is based on a Victorian dramatic monologue, and is set in Italy during the Renaissance. Most of the cast are aristocratic, and the story is about the murder of a duchess. Yet the dialogic model is equally applicable.

I briefly discussed in the previous chapter on social satire that while comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, satire attempts to diminish a subject outside the literary work itself by ridiculing it "and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn" (Abrams 167). Among the devices available to satirists, Abrams particularly mentions irony. I would suggest that *The Overseas Expert* stands apart from the other three plays examined in detail in this chapter because it attempts to be a contemporary comedy of manners that fails because of its use of satire.

Whim Wham's success as a social satirist relied heavily on irony – and, sometimes, crude sarcasm – to attack specific people, institutions and decisions. Essential to the humour, however, was the shared knowledge that Whim Wham was speaking on behalf of his readers. He became their champion as – week in, week out, for several decades – he sniped from the margins particularly at the discourse of the dominant and the hegemonic.

Curnow may have intended *The Overseas Expert* to function as a comedy of manners in the fashion of the brilliant French dramatist Molière (1622-1673), relying on sparkling wit and dialogue – with occasional violations of social conventions in contrast – as it followed the relations and intrigues of its characters. A hint of what went wrong comes in Curnow's recollection in his "Preface" to *Four Plays*:

When I came [. . .] to write *The Overseas Expert*, I was far too busy keeping my head, and my temper, while writing in anger . . . . (9)

Instead of writing a comedy, Curnow employed many of the skills and devices he had perfected over many years as a social satirist. Consequently, *The Overseas Expert* is not a comedy because it is too heavily ironic to merely amuse the audience, but at the same time the play tends to alienate because there is no obvious "champion" with whom to identify, and to direct the satire and challenge the world on behalf of its audience. The play's failure to succeed also lies, I believe, in the intellectual arrogance of the playwright's "position" *vis-à-vis* that of his characters'. Precisely the same arrogance delighted readers when Whim Wham "tilted at windmills" on their behalf; it falls flat in *The Overseas Expert* when, from a distance, Curnow tries to manipulate his characters for didactic reasons.

#### IV

#### THE DUKE'S MIRACLE

Curnow bases *The Duke's Miracle* (1967) on Robert Browning's dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess*. However, as Curnow makes clear in the preface to *Four Plays*, the play "is not a dramatisation of Browning's" poem but is instead "superimposed on the poem; the poem is treated neither as a scenario nor synopsis for the play, but as a sketch which might be developed" (17). Consequently, Curnow adds dimensions to his play which one might

speculate upon while reading the poem, and which are feasible extrapolations, but about which Browning provides no textual evidence. In terms of the dialogic thesis of this discussion, therefore, it comes as no surprise to observe that interlocutors from the original poem play a more obvious role than they do in a dramatic monologue, and an addition by Curnow to the familiar story is that of a further hegemonic voice. The play's alchemist, who supplies the duke with a substance with which to kill the duchess, represents the powers of magic and supernatural communications. Curnow notes in the preface (*Four Plays* 19) that both the duke and the alchemist would have "at least *half* believed in" those powers (Curnow's emphasis) and that "the tussle between [the duke's] own powers and the alchemist is no pushover for the Duke" thus reinforcing the notion that the alchemist is meant to represent another potent hegemonic institution within that community.

In the play, the envoy is a member of the same hegemonic institution as the duke. There are important differences between them, however, such as the envoy's lower social station and particularly his much younger age; yet the envoy generally represents the same values and operates within the same discourse as does the duke.

Unlike Browning's dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess*, Curnow's play *The Duke's Miracle* allows us direct access to the speech of interlocutors rather than forcing readers to hear them through the speech of a single speaker. Curnow's change in title reflects the shift from first-person monologue, but maintains the focus on the duke's activities. Curnow promotes the envoy, who is an obvious interlocutor in Browning's poem, but also the less obvious interlocutor, the duchess, through whose speech Browning's duke still constructs himself. Curnow gives both interlocutors significant speaking parts. Nonetheless, their ideological struggles with the duke are dialogically unsuccessful, as is that of the alchemist.

Although the envoy is representative of the same hegemonic institution to which the duke belongs, by virtue of his title he obviously serves a different role in it. His own interests are best served by successfully mediating between his master, a count, and the duke over the marriage of the count's young daughter to the elderly duke. Having settled details regarding an alliance between the two families, the envoy accompanies the duke who wishes to escape festivities in the main hall and seek refuge in his private Long Gallery. From the

duke's opening speech, it is clear he dominates the conversation. While the duke offers the envoy the chance to refuse to accompany him, the duke's attitude and desires are transparent and the envoy has no alternative but to comply. At the same time, the duke flatters the envoy, but twists even this around by contradicting him:

ENVOY: I am happy indeed to have been the instrument –  
 To have played my own small part in this alliance  
 Of my master's family with your great Dukedom.  
 DUKE: You say *small*? The word is not applicable.

(*Four Plays* 177-8)

Although the duke constantly asks if it is the envoy's pleasure to accompany him away from the festivities taking place downstairs, in fact it is the duke's pleasure that the envoy knows he is expected to fulfil. In the private Long Gallery, the duke toys with the envoy and makes clear that rank permits indulgence: "I have the habit of quibbling, – and the privilege" (182). Having drawn back the curtain to reveal the portrait of his last duchess, the duke then attempts control of the envoy's reactions:

May praise her to her face, pay her the rarest compliments  
 You can think of, it makes no difference to me,  
 Or to her. – Yes, praise her, by all means.  
 Have you nothing to say to her? (*Four Plays* 184)

Irrespective of the beauty of the portraiture, the envoy has little choice but to respond in superlatives. His later reactions strongly suggest that he is genuinely and profoundly impressed by the art of the painter, although his willingness to communicate these impressions to the duke nevertheless suggests a degree of expediency. Above all else it remains in the envoy's best interests to maintain the dynamic of the relationship that already exists between himself and the duke. At the conclusion of the play the two prepare to rejoin the duke's waiting guests below. Before drawing the curtain to cover the duchess's portrait, the duke gives a long concluding speech about the duchess, the gallery and himself (207-8). It contains questions that are rhetorical and only the duke's final one genuinely seeks a response: "Then you will be leaving?" However, even this question from the envoy's social superior contains the expectation of an affirmative replay, which it indeed elicits: "Indeed I must, my lord."

Contemporary critical readings of the dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* challenge traditional interpretations by locating the duchess as a dynamic interlocutor who remains an indispensable other in the duke's process of apperception and construction of identity – despite her death. By converting the poem into a play, Curnow side-stepped – possibly even deliberately – those issues which post-structuralist literary criticism was only beginning to confront theoretically when he completed the play in 1967. Curnow exploits flashbacks and hence is able to locate a speaking duchess in her own present of about forty years previously. While it is not the focus of the present discussion, it should nevertheless be noted that dialogically the duchess of *The Duke's Miracle* still remains an active interlocutor in the duke's process of self-construction as he discusses her portrait four decades later.

The first of the flashbacks is of the monk-painter, Fra Pandolf, trying to construct the duchess:

It's an image I want. I want the Three in One, the Holy Trinity of the Graces, – Castitas, the holy chastity; then the divine beauty, Pulchritudo; and last, the flesh, the voluptuous one, Voluptas herself. (*Four Plays* 185)

He attempts to "capture" the image before him of the posing duchess by mediating her likeness through his Christian and personal ideologies. The three graces he has in mind are not those of classical mythology, the handmaidens of Venus. Rather, they conform to views of the fifteenth-century Florentine humanist philosophers, who, according to *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, saw them as three phases of love:

*beauty* arousing *desire*, leading to *fulfilment*; alternatively as the personification of Chastity, Beauty and Love, perhaps with the inscription 'Castitas, Pulchritudo, Amor.' (Hall 303),

However, Fra Pandolf reinterprets the third grace – love – in the decidedly less spiritual and more carnal manner of earthly pleasure and physical enjoyment. Hence his painting is an attempt to appropriate the likeness of the duchess for his own enjoyment and also to promote his reputation as a painter. He in turn is dominated by the duke who lays claim to the work: "We shall have – I shall have – a masterpiece" (189). From a feminist perspective, the word

"masterpiece" suggests a marginalization of the duchess; her likeness from the perspective of a male gaze is "captured" on canvas, and then that mediation of her is privileged as the showpiece of the master. His control over the duchess's ability to communicate visually with the world – particularly with any other man – is reinforced in the closure to the first flashback: "This image marries me / To that smile, for as long as men have eyes to see" (189).

The duke also controls others' ability to communicate with the duchess. In another flashback, a fat young poet in the duke's household named Giovanni is seen by the duchess in an orchard "stuffing himself with cherries" (194). Soon after, he presents the duchess, who is now accompanied by the duke, with a branch from the top of a tree of "the ripest and the biggest" cherries he could find. We had learnt just previously from the duke in a comment to the envoy that "in *her* language / Sapphires were heavenly, so were fresh ripe cherries" (192). She describes a gift the duke gives to her as "a heavenly blue sapphire . . . this heavenly stone . . . oh it's heavenly" (191). Now she exclaims: "Look, my lord, / Did you ever see such cherries? – They're heavenly" (195). The duke knows he cannot control the duchess's reactions and is powerless to prevent her from privileging the gift of ripe cherries as highly as the gift of a cut sapphire. He banishes Giovanni with the ominous threat: "There goes one, from whose impertinence / My Duchess won't suffer again" (195) and we can only surmise how extreme the punishment is to be. For the duke the choice becomes clear: Fra Pandolf has provided him with a painting that is "the perfection of her age. The beauty she achieved / Finally and for ever" (197). He explains to the envoy:

Wasn't that the simple choice? . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Between herself and the image of herself  
 That *I commanded* – never mind who did the daubing –  
*I commanded*. Both couldn't exist together.  
 There was a murder to be done. By one – of the other.  
 Her life, or the image of her life – *one* had to die  
 And images don't die. (*Four Plays* 197-8)

It becomes apparent from the duke's statement that he saw their relationship as a life-and-death struggle for dominance. He could command her image – for example, at whom she could smile – but he could not control his wife while she lived.

Curnow expands upon Browning's lines "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" by introducing into his version the mechanics of the duchess's demise. This involves an alchemist whom the duke surreptitiously brings to Ferrara from Florence to supply a fatal draught. In the longest flashback of the play, the sequence opens with Fra Lorenzo, a middle-aged chaplain to the duke, whose purpose in Curnow's play is to deliver a note to the duchess from the duke. Because he is a significant puppet at the conclusion of the flashback scene, the chaplain requires careful introduction to the play's audience. It is also through the chaplain that we are prepared for the arrival of a stranger in a dark, hooded gown.

The alchemist possesses considerable ideological clout within his society because of his skills in alchemy and, as the duke sees it, "a bit of black magic on the side" (201). This becomes the first verbal joust between the two and the alchemist attempts to regain dominance by responding: "Do you mock my science?" In his preface to the collection of four plays, Curnow notes that the tussle between the two "is no pushover for the Duke" (19). Despite Curnow's observation, in the play the duke appears to be merely toying with the man and exhibits little fear of him; the duke nevertheless has specific use for him and sees no purpose in unnecessary antagonism. Instead, he extends a little flattery:

Wait! – There is one branch of your art  
 In which you are said to possess supreme mastery –  
 That is your reputation, in Florence.

Unwisely, the alchemist does not perceive the subtlety of his relationship with the duke and still attempts to promote his own position:

Florence does not know me, nor Ferrara.  
 The mastery I possess is of the mysteries  
 Of ancient Egypt. Thebes and Memphis know me,  
 I am Hermes the Thrice-great.

In his contest for ideological supremacy, he over-exposes himself and the astute duke is now convinced that the alchemist's ideological power is supported only by superstition, pagan mythology and mystery. The duke commences a slow, deceptively gentle, series of questions, but laced with veiled sarcasm, to confirm his dominance and to elicit necessary information:

Pure Tuscan peasant, by your accent.  
 With your permission, Hermes, a few questions.

The alchemist has already lost the initiative in the struggle, although he takes some minutes to comprehend the danger he is in: he is alone, has travelled blindfolded from Florence to an unknown place and without speaking to anyone on route, and is confronted by an increasingly belligerent and intransigent lord whose identity he does not know. When the alchemist does comprehend that he had lost the contest for ideological supremacy, he realises also how much physical danger he is in – Curnow stagenotes: [*He is afraid.*] – and he begins to prattle.

What follows is a series of questions to the alchemist as the duke gradually builds up a picture about the operation and effect of the poison which the alchemist has brought and which the duke plans to administer to his duchess. The alchemist attempts a couple of times to regain the initiative by appealing to other ideological powers, but the duke's is greater. For example:

DUKE:            Now, let me see the quick creature itself, –  
                       Pour it out – here's a glass.

ALCHEMIST:    I can't do that.  
                       It is sealed.

DUKE:            Break the seal!

ALCHEMIST:    I am not permitted.  
                       See – there is writing on it.

DUKE:            Not if I permit you.  
                       Do you know my power?

ALCHEMIST:    I know it is great,  
                       But there is a greater –

DUKE:            There's none here but mine.

.....

Mine is more dangerous too. (*Four Plays* 202-3)

The purpose of a dialogic struggle is to dominate the other's word with one's own; as Bakhtin argues, complete suppression of the other – which results in monologism – is a driving force but one which remains elusive. The struggle for ideological supremacy between the alchemist and the duke unusually turns into a literal contest, resulting in the complete suppression – death – of the alchemist. Ironically, the alchemist's ultimate recourse as he is

first dragged from the duke's presence, and then as he is killed, is to Christian ideology rather than to the mysterious ancient powers of which he has claimed to be in control. He instinctively calls out: "Mother of God, save me – ! . . . Mother of God!" (204).

However, the life-and-death struggle for dominance between the two remains consistently dialogic because the alchemist's words uttered soon before his death come true after his death. The alchemist recites the writing on the bottle,

Death in Life to him who breaks me.  
Life in Death to her that takes me,  
Whoever lives for love, first dies, –  
My comfort comes at the sunrise. (*Four Plays* 203)

The alchemist's words are the discourse of an ideological other which the duke is unable to expunge even though he can eliminate the speaker of the words. He responds:

Something about this I –  
Death in life – to me, if I break it?  
Life in Death – to her? – at the sunrise?  
[*Actually shaken, quickly from fear to fury.*] (*Four Plays* 204)

The duke's furious reaction is to turn upon the alchemist,

Magic – treachery, more like – or both!  
You should have had more sense, my Hermes.  
This seals your death. (*Four Plays* 204)

to which the alchemist's terrified response – "It wasn't I, it was a power!" – is not incorrect in that his belief structure is simply an ideological discourse which has been politically privileged in some sections of Florentine society. Indeed, the ideological "power" is recognized even more widely or the alchemist would not have been brought to Ferrara.

This brings us to the final section of this long flashback, in which the duke's chaplain Fra Lorenzo hurriedly returns to the duke thinking he has heard noises; what he has actually heard is the alchemist's "*death-scream, quickly smothered*" (*Four Plays* 204). The alchemist's final desperate appeal, as we saw, to Christian ideology rather than to his previous, mysterious powers has successfully brought a high-ranking member of that hegemonic institution, but too late and quite ineffectually. Fra Lorenzo immediately accepts the duke's explanation that the noise was "the wind – what else?" and obsequiously

elaborates upon the duke's explanation before begging the duke's pardon for the intrusion and seeking permission to depart. However, the duke instructs the chaplain that at sunrise Fra Lorenzo is to break the seal on the poison bottle and administer it to the duchess – "there's a medicine here. You will give it to her" (205-6). Whether the duke intends to deflect any potential ill-effects from breaking the seal on the bottle away from himself and towards Fra Lorenzo is not apparent, although his eagerness to have the chaplain perform the task would suggest so. Nevertheless, the alchemist's discourse remains an influence on the duke even forty years later.

This notion of the influence of the spoken word on individuals many years was again explored by Curnow two years later when he wrote his sixth play.

## V

### RESIDENT OF NOWHERE

Curnow's last play, *Resident of Nowhere* (1969), centres largely on a character who does not represent hegemonic voices in the world he enters. James Busby, British Resident in New Zealand between 1833 and 1840, is seen in youth and in old age, and in both he is a marginalized character. Particularly during the earlier period of his life, Busby provides a useful observation point from which to examine the hegemonic institutions of the day.

Busby travels to New Zealand's Bay of Islands as King William's official British Resident:

It is His Majesty the King, you understand,  
Whose gracious message to the people of New Zealand  
I have the honour to bear. (*Four Plays* 218)

As ambassador he is conveyed aboard a Royal Navy vessel and his first surprise at not representing the dominant force in the region comes when he is accorded only a seven-gun salute:

It was my impression, – do not mistake me.  
As His Majesty's Resident in New Zealand –  
Would it not be expected, by those on shore?  
Not for myself, personally, but –  
You consider *seven* sufficient, for the occasion? (*Four Plays* 218)

The naval captain who escorts Busby ashore gives warning of the politics of the new land,

You won't go short of kings to receive you here,  
Every man jack of 'em's a king,  
And God for the missionaries . . . (*Four Plays* 220),

suggesting that old world institutions might not necessarily have the same authority and status in this Pacific country.

In the play, the three hegemonic voices that compete in the Bay of Islands in the 1830s belong to the British, the missionaries, and to the Maori. While Busby himself commands little power as His Majesty's Resident, the Royal Navy backs up the word of the British Governor in Sydney with ships' guns. Forty years later, when Busby recalls his failures, he tells his wife Agnes: "They sent Hobson, they gave him the guns . . ." (231). Later, when Busby attempts to set up an independent Confederation of United Maori Tribes of New Zealand, the pakeha grog-sellers and traders predict trouble among the natives – "There'll be guns fired in anger before he's [Busby's] done" – but are reassured that order will eventually prevail – "Well the Navy's here, thank Christ for that" and "Thank God for the Navy" (233).

Missionaries in *Resident of Nowhere* represent a European hegemonic voice, but they wield their power with caution in early New Zealand. Missionary brothers Henry and William Williams are aware their discourse may not necessarily be recognised by the Maori:

HENRY:           Busby, many years ago I came to them [the Maori]  
                          In the name of Almighty God. – Look out the window.  
                          What do you see? What do you think?

BUSBY:           I? – Does the Scripture not say,  
                          This is the Lord's work and it is marvellous in our eyes?

HENRY:           Cabbages, roses, English apple trees,  
                          The house of God, the houses of his ministers –  
                          In *our* eyes yes, it is marvellous,  
                          The bounty of God. – But in *their* eyes, Busby?

(*Four Plays* 222-3)

The missionaries are also slightly ambivalent about the credibility of their moral authority over the Maori. Henry and his wife Mary look after a Mission girl, Huia, who is pregnant for perhaps the fourth or fifth time, in each case to unknown men. On previous occasions the

babies were suffocated at birth but this time Mary has given Huia a petticoat.

HENRY: Oh, it's more than you think.  
 Sometimes, not always, a gift will win them over  
 To bear the child, and let it live. –  
 But that's not all. There is the will of God.  
 May He not choose in his merciful Providence  
 To call home the soul that we, in our blind compassion,  
 Would bind to the rack of its infected flesh?  
 May not *infanticide* be a part of His mercies?  
(Four Plays 228)

Busby naively assumes that Henry Williams refers to post-lapsarian original sin when he speaks of infected flesh, but Williams is far more practical and earthly: "I speak of the infection of syphilis"(229). Williams is aware that the credibility of his Christian discourse depends to an extent upon the material benefits it bestows upon the Maori. Therefore, he builds into his Christian philosophies the possibility that his failure to prevent the death of yet another new-born child may be part of God's mercy.

The native Maori are the third hegemonic force in *Resident of Nowhere* against whose voices the missionaries and the British struggle. Henry Williams makes clear to Busby that his official welcome by the Maori on the beach should not necessarily be interpreted as acquiescence to British authority:

BUSBY: Ah, then my arrival  
 Has been marked – am I to understand you? –  
 As an extraordinary occasion?  
 HENRY: Marked? oh yes.  
 How extraordinary – that's not easy to say.  
 On the beach, that is where it all begins.  
 We always begin with a tremendous performance.  
 We may mean a great deal, or very little,  
 And the meaning may be more, or less, than you think,  
 – Or something altogether different. (Four Plays 222)

Again, near the end of Busby's tenure, he is shot at allegedly by a Maori chief Rete, or Rete's people, and he wants Rete and his accomplices executed. However, Henry Williams is aware that such a course of action would involve a clash between the navy and the Maori, probably endangering his mission:

You know what this means?

You'll have the whole pack of hell-hounds at the Bay

Yelling for blood and the guns of the Navy – (*Four Plays* 241)

Instead, he proposes a response that involves the three hegemonies without threatening any one of them:

Better leave this to the Mission, Busby.

We'll sift it, we'll get the chiefs together,

With yourself and Captain Lambert while his ship's here. (*Four Plays* 241)

Busby's wife Agnes is a dominated voice within *Resident of Nowhere* and from the commencement of the play is at the beck and call of her husband. According to prefatory stage directions, Busby is in his seventieth year, is hard of hearing, and said to have "prematurely aged," although the way he behaves in the opening suggests a cantankerous old man with early symptoms of senile dementia. His wife soothes and reassures him, but does not exploit these situations to her own advantage. She humours his irritability and bad-tempered outbursts apparently for the sake of peace without threatening his dominant role in their relationship and many of her comments are merely phatic:

There! There! (215)

Hush, now. (217)

What's gone is gone, James. (231)

There! There! Let's be thankful. (232)

There! There! (243)

(echoing the nurturing murmurs of Mona at the conclusion of *The Overseas Expert*.) Agnes is portrayed as a young woman in one flashback to 1835, pregnant and "near her time" (240) but even here speaks only once: "James! don't leave me – " (241). Agnes remains a dominated character in two ways. As Busby's wife, both during the 1830s when he was British Resident in New Zealand and in 1871 as caregiver to the embittered old man back in England, she remains an adjunct to the central patriarchal fortunes of her husband. As a female character within Curnow's play she is again marginal to the dramatic action and patriarchal power plays that occur around her.

James Busby is central character of *Resident of Nowhere* yet is constantly dominated by events and discourses that tame and subdue him. The realisation of his own

lack of importance strikes him as he lies dying – although we have not yet been told that his death is imminent – when he tells his wife:

I'm a man reading about himself in an old book  
Picked up on a stall, by an author nobody ever heard of,  
As if I'd been a Resident – of nowhere. (*Four Plays* 231)

The irony of Busby's life which escapes him is that he certainly was somewhere – Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands – but that in terms of importance, influence or power he – British Resident – was a nobody. He is the author of his own life whom nobody has ever heard of, picking through his past without critically examining that life.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## TIME AND PLACE: LITERARY CRITICISM

Did anyone ever listen to a prophet? Once, it was said, the prophets were stoned. In a more polite age they are simply not read.

– Allen Curnow (1940)

## I

*Look Back Harder*, a collection of most of Allen Curnow's critical prose published between 1935 and 1984, is seminal to the study both of Curnow's poetry and of the development of New Zealand poetry this century. The collection also includes an introduction by editor Peter Simpson, who imposes a useful schema on six decades of Curnow's critical writing.<sup>1</sup> As literary critic and anthologist, Curnow attempted to establish a direction for the New Zealand poetic canon earlier this century that even today influences the way we read his and other New Zealand poetry. Simpson's observation of a decade ago is equally valid today:

Curnow's criticism remains a continuing point of reference in the literary microcosm in relation to which all new arrivals inevitably locate themselves in the process of differentially defining their own critical positions. (*Look Back Harder* xxii)

Curnow's approach is encapsulated perhaps most lucidly in his introduction to the 1945 Caxton poetry anthology *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* (reprinted in *Look Back Harder* 42-73), and his influence provoked what Elizabeth Caffin (*Oxford History* 404) oversimplifies as "primarily a generational conflict" in the 1950s between Curnow and the older, established "Auckland" poets, and Baxter and his "Wellington Group" of poets.<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention to revisit in detail that critical debate, which simmered on through the 1960s and

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<sup>1</sup> As Peter Simpson explains in his introduction to *Look Back Harder*, the book contains most of the criticism Curnow published, "the remainder . . . being too slight or too merely topical to justify reprinting" (x). For convenience, all page references in this chapter are to *Look Back Harder* rather than to originals except where specifically stated. For a complete list, see Peter Simpson, "A Checklist of Allen Curnow's Critical Prose" in *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 4 (1986): 48-55.

<sup>2</sup> For Baxter's position, see particularly his 1951 lecture, "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry," in *James K. Baxter as Critic: A Selection from his Literary Criticism*, ed. Frank McKay, Auckland: Heinemann (1978) 1-12.

perhaps up to and including the 1970 publication of Curnow's "Distraction and Definition: Centripetal Directions in New Zealand Poetry" (*Look Back Harder* 213-29), except as it impinges on a dialogic reading of Curnow's critical prose. *Look Back Harder* illustrates that while still in his early twenties, Curnow had strong opinions and was determined by the mid-1930s to exert his influence on poetry. In this chapter I examine how a dialogic reading of Curnow's literary criticism reinforces the notion of Curnow as a subversive writer, and also informs dialogic readings of his other work.

## II

Simpson observes that *Poetry and Language* is Curnow's "sole 'manifesto' and only separately published critical work" (xiv). The book coincides with what Simpson categorises as Curnow's earliest phase of writing which, according to Simpson, preceded his shift to New Zealand as theme. Hence the book's concerns are general and non-local, with only "one reference connect[ing] *Poetry and Language* with its country of origin." The book is useful because it informs dialogic readings of Curnow's later poetry and criticism and explains in terms of ideological struggle the generational conflict of the 1950s and 1960s. Simpson summarises:

The key distinction [in *Poetry and Language*] is between language which is 'living' and that which is 'dead' or 'quasi-dead'. 'Living' language is '*spoken* by living people'; 'dead' languages belong to the past; 'quasi-dead' refers to moribund areas of the living language such as used in journalism, politics, religion, and in poetry fixed in the idioms and diction of the past. (xiv)

Bakhtin would have had little difficulty with Curnow's distinction between living and dead languages, but might have balked at the use and application of the term "quasi-dead." Curnow defines as "quasi-dead" examples of "specially 'poetical'" writing, among others, which "communicate experience [but] from the past to the present." Bakhtin would term "genres" such as journalism, politics and religion as the language of "professional stratification . . . and even the very language of the writer (the poet or novelist) can be taken as a professional jargon on a par with professional jargons" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 289).

According to Bakhtin, these discourses attempt to be "monologic." Rather than attempting to fix the language in the past, as Curnow apparently conceives such speech genres as doing, they simply attempt to *fix* language: "Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 293). Curnow astutely recognizes that poetry is not immune to the processes of becoming fixed. He writes:

Poetry must have its feet on the familiar earth of plain speech. It must move in the orderly manner of accepted written language – a "reasonably literary language." "Written English," however, inevitably lags behind changing standards and customs of speech. Thus from time to time, from place to place, it tends to lose its living quality. (*Look Back Harder* 3)

In this respect particularly, Curnow and his 1930s contemporaries who published through the Caxton Press and contributed to such magazines as *Tomorrow* differed in poetic style from the "Georgians," (*Look Back Harder* 5) whose privileged literary position in society the younger poets were attempting to usurp. *Look Back Harder* reads as the manifesto of a younger generation of poets rebelling against the hegemony of the editor of *Kowhai Gold* (1930) and the generation of *New Zealand Best Poems* (1932-43) as Simpson points out in *Look Back Harder* (xv). History later repeated itself. Elsewhere in his introduction, Simpson wryly notes that this "struggle for poetry" had "a curious (if inverted) resemblance" to the later debate of the 1950s and 1960s, in which Curnow was "cast by his opponents in the role of the defender of a dated 'New Zealandism'" (xviii-xix). In both instances – that is, in the 1930s, and in the 1950s and 1960s – a younger generation of poets struggled against the poetic voice of an older generation. As Curnow said,

Poetry, to be effective as "a thing made in language to please and stimulate the mind," can only be written in a "living" language. (2)

Curnow suggested the importance of "living" language, but without adequately defining the concept or fully appreciating, either then or a generation later, the ramifications of language in terms of representing hegemonic ideology. He correctly identified in many of his critical pieces that the New Zealand poetry written by those he alludes to as "the Georgians" (5) had become fixed or, to use Bakhtin's term, monologic. Curnow posited an alternative to Georgian language and, along with other members of his poetic milieu, wrote poetry and

verse which we can read today for its dialogic qualities. A generation later, however, Curnow's poetic voice was challenged by the contending voices of a younger generation, whose discourse struggled with Curnow's for the right to become the hegemonic "living" language. Simpson argues that Curnow's poetic voice had by this stage developed and progressed. The literary debate, however, possibly "impeded or diverted" a similar development in Curnow's critical prose: "He was called in his criticism to defend ground from which in his poetry he had departed for pastures new" (xix). *Poetry and Language* posited a non-localised anatomy of poetry but, according to Simpson's schema, by the late 1930s Curnow had turned to New Zealand as the predominant theme in both his poetry and his critical concerns.

### III

In 1937 Curnow wrote "Poets in New Zealand: Problems of Writing and Criticism" for *The Press*, Christchurch, with whom he had commenced a career as a reporter. Curnow's main claim in the piece is that poetry "requires for its fulfilment two things – a writer and a reader" (*Look Back Harder* 7). He then develops a case for the necessity of poets to decide whether they are writing for an English or a New Zealand audience. Just as Bakhtin argued the impossibility of speech in a vacuum – the inability of a speaker not to have an audience, even if the interlocutor is a notional one – so too does Curnow:

People who talk at large about "self-expression" in the arts are inclined to think of expression as beginning and ending with the self. Expression, of the self or anything else, must always be "to" someone else. That is absolutely true of language, which exists primarily as a means of communication among human beings. (8)

Curnow's argument, as far as it proceeds, comes close to Bakhtin's. However, to investigate the extent to which Curnow's critical writing echoes Bakhtin's, we need first to focus on the "interlocutor." According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* an interlocutor is "one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion," as opposed to terms such as auditor – "a hearer, listener; one of an audience" – which suggest a passive response to the speaker. In Bakhtin's terms, if communication is to occur, an *active* addressee is required. To say

Curnow anticipated Bakhtin's later popularity would be going too far. However, there are points in his critical writing which allow us to read his work in dialogic terms. It would appear from his argument that he senses the interdependency of speaker and interlocutor as he gropes towards a conclusion:

The language is the sole link between the poet and his reader. This means that the poet (and the critic no less) must know accurately the whole significance of words and images to the people for whom he writes. (9)

To "know the whole significance" the poet must also listen to his interlocutor; in other words, a dialogue must be established between New Zealand poets and New Zealand audiences. On this basis "Poets in New Zealand" is a significant document because it constitutes a direct attack on the traditionally privileged audience of New Zealand poetry, English readers who, in Curnow's critical strategy, ought to be moved to the margins of the discursive process in favour of a local audience.

Such an attack was Curnow's review of A.R.D. Fairburn's *Dominion*. In an earlier chapter I noted that although Curnow's 1937 *Enemies* poetry collection appeared before A.R.D. Fairburn's 1938 *Dominion* collection, in fact Fairburn completed his long "Dominion" poem sequence in late 1935 or early 1936, and by mid 1936 offered it to Denis Glover of the Caxton Press.<sup>3</sup> Because of the closeness of Fairburn and Curnow, who were distant cousins and who both published in such periodicals as *Tomorrow*, it is reasonable to assume that they were acquainted with each other's poetry and literary concerns throughout this period. Hence, it is not surprising that Curnow (under the initials A.C.) reviewed *Dominion* in *Tomorrow* (11 May 1938, 4:14, 438-9). The title of Curnow's review, "Rata Blossom or Reality? New Zealand and a Significant Contribution" lays down a challenge to the previous generation of poets and anthologists. However, the opening sentence suggests that a "battle" – as Simpson puts it (xv) – in the continuing struggle has already been won:

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<sup>3</sup> See John Clark Ross's Victoria University MA thesis, "A Study of the Poem 'Dominion' by A.R.D. Fairburn" (1962), and W.S. Broughton's Auckland University PhD thesis, "W. D'Arcy Cresswell, A.R.D. Fairburn, R.A.K. Mason: an Examination of Certain Aspects of their Lives and Works" (1968).

To those who are watching anxiously the struggle for poetry in New Zealand – rata blossoms v. reality, spooju v. style – it will be very gratifying to find that Mr Fairburn has got in first. (*Look Back Harder* 10)

If proof were still required that the target of Curnow's critical attacks during the previous few years was the Georgian<sup>4</sup> poets and anthologists, Curnow now unambiguously supplies that proof:

The inevitable publication of *Maoriland, An Epic of the South*, by T.L. Fern Grot, has not yet occurred: when that masterpiece is printed in *Art in New Zealand*, Mr Fairburn's *Dominion* will bear witness against it. (10)

Curnow concludes the review with a further gibe at the literary establishment, this time at *Art in New Zealand* (1928-46) which he describes as "the watery quarterly" (12).

Elsewhere in the 1938 review, Curnow serves notice of another critical tenet that was to endure. He says of *Dominion* that "Fairburn has seen visions . . ." (10). Much later, in his 1963 Auckland University lecture "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition" (*Look Back Harder* 191-208) Curnow provided a further explanation: "Art (in Yeats' words) 'is but a vision of reality.' But that means seeing real things, not any kind of literary *mescaline*" (201). In his introduction to *Look Back Harder*, Simpson identifies Yeats as "a key mentor and point of reference" (xii) to Curnow, and sources Yeats' poem from which Curnow drew the quotation:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,  
The sentimentalist himself; while art  
Is but a vision of reality. ('Ego Dominus Tuus' ll.46-48)<sup>5</sup>

What Simpson identifies as Curnow's "emphasis on the reality prior to the poems" (xx) results in "the necessary relation of art to 'reality,' 'experience,' 'truth'" (xiii). In other words,

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<sup>4</sup> In his monograph *A.R.D. Fairburn* (1968), W.S. Broughton glosses the term "Georgianism" as follows: "First used in 1912 as a term of simple description, it had become by about 1930 a term of abuse. The term describes the romantic poetry that flourished between 1910 and 1930 (spanning the reign of King George V). It was mainly lyrical, often celebrating "beauty" and Nature, often nostalgic, sometimes sentimental and trivial, but sometimes with an undertone of pessimism and despair." (32)

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats' "Ego Dominus Tuus" ("I am your Lord") is from *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919).

Curnow differs theoretically from the dialogic model – not to mention contemporary post-modernist ones – by positing a reality (or truth, or significance) that exists prior to the processes of language. Therefore, while Curnow may have railed against the Romantic, lyrical sentimentality of his Georgian poetic predecessors in his 1938 review of Fairburn's *Dominion*, philosophically Curnow remained located in Romantic idealist territory, which is perfectly expected given the time in which he was writing. However, the fact that Curnow the man believed in transcendental reality need not deter us today from reading his poetry and critical writing in terms of a dialogic struggle.

In "Prophets of Their Time: Some Modern Poets," which Curnow published in *The Press* in 1940 (reprinted in *Look Back Harder* 13-19), Curnow advances the premise that "poetry is an essential attribute of prophecy" (14). He says that prophecy is not "a telescope for looking at the future" (15) but, following Dean Kirkpatrick's commentary on *Old Testament* prophets, is the recording and interpreting of lessons from the past for "the warning and encouragement of the present and the future" (14). While Curnow claims that there have been "many unprophetic poets . . . there is no such thing as an unpoetic prophet" (15). Hence, we may assume that Curnow expects us to read his poetry from the viewpoint that,

[i]t springs from the irresistible compulsion of the poet to speak with larger inspiration, addressing himself as teacher and philosopher to the individual, the nation, and the race. (*Look Back Harder* 15)

Five years later, in his introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, Curnow was to repeat the assertion that "the New Zealand poet is unlikely to escape wholly the character of prophet to his people" (49). In no place is this more evident than in Curnow's own verse between 1939 and 1943. The elitist, almost solipsistic, approach in "Prophets of Their Time," builds upon Curnow's earlier discussion about the abilities of some poets to see visions. However, despite Curnow's claims, his statements elsewhere allow for a dialogic reading. He says that the intention in modern poetry remains "to establish contact with the times so that the message may be understood: a prophetic intention" (17). Curnow notes of some poets he discusses: "[t]he simple fact is that they are in tune with their time, in step with the march of events" (18). In these instances, Curnow retreats from his previous certainty – such as the borrowed phrase "speaking with authority" (15) – by admitting that poets must

necessarily enter into some sort of dialogue with their audience. These loopholes, as I conceive them, undermine the essentialism of Curnow's proclaimed stance. They suggest that while he posited in his critical prose ideals for poets – and, by implication, ideals for his own poetry – the processes he proposed differed little from the actual practices of his poetic precursors.

The 1943 essay "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry," published in the Australian journal *Meanjin Papers*, is the first of three critical pieces Curnow wrote for overseas audiences. Its significance for a dialogic reading of Curnow's work is of interest: Curnow was patently constructing an identity for New Zealand poetry that was designed for the consumption of Australian readers and critics. Indeed, the essay largely deals with identity. Of the poets represented in *Kowhai Gold*, the 1930 anthology of contemporary New Zealand verse, Curnow maintains that "only two – Fairburn and R.A.K. Mason – had, or were to have, something to say to their own generation" (*Look Back Harder* 34). Thus by implication he questions the ability of all but two of the fifty-six poets<sup>6</sup> represented in that anthology to speak in what he earlier defined as a "living" language. Curnow distinguishes the two as poets whose discourses (in dialogic terms) represent a divergence from the others who speak in the increasingly monologic discourse of a fixed, romantic past. Simpson comments:

Mason and Fairburn had, as it were, cleared the ground of a factitious 'New Zealandism,' making space for a renovated, non-habituated poetic. By 1943 Curnow felt able positively 'to place New Zealand at the centre' of both his poetry and criticism. (xvi)

Simpson supports his view with an excerpt from Curnow's "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry":

Though the local reference is absent from much of the best work of [Mason and Fairburn], I am convinced that the impulse towards a formed myth of place and people is the chief energizing principle among those of their generation. (*Look Back Harder* 38)

An imperative for Curnow is what he describes in relation to another New Zealand poet as

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<sup>6</sup> In his introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* (reprinted in *Look Back Harder* 42-75), Curnow refers to publisher J.M. Dent's blurb which, according to Curnow, speaks of fifty-seven poets represented in *Kowhai Gold* (42), although the contents of the anthology correctly contains the work of only fifty-six. P.W. Robertson's poem "Invocation" is listed and appears accordingly on page 154, but has been erroneously duplicated on pages 168 and 169, the final poem in the book, thus accounting for the "fifty-seventh" poet.

the "affirmation of our growing experience of identity in place and time" (39). In terms of the dialogic model we can yoke this impulse of Curnow's with the process of utterance. In Curnow's essay, *New Zealand poetry*, with which by 1943 Curnow inextricably identified himself, becomes a site for ideological struggle. Curnow contends with the older generation of poets and their anthologists for responsive understanding from an Australian audience whom he attempts to persuade. While the Australian readers are ostensibly his audience, his interlocutors – those, in Bakhtinian terms, with whom he struggles for dominance of discourse – are also the prior voices and present representatives of the New Zealand Georgian poetic hegemony. Curnow writes:

A child might be left alone in the house. For a time he might play and behave as if the protective presence of adults had not been withdrawn. Sooner or late he would know himself alone, run crying about the house or to a neighbour. In some such figure I see the New Zealand poet to-day. (39)

The metaphor relates to the speaker's need for an "other" in dialogism, through whom he or she constructs a sense of identity and without whom he or she cannot gain a sense of selfhood. This suggests that while Curnow was developing (according to Simpson's schema) his second poetic and critical period in which "New Zealand as theme was foregrounded" (xiv), he inevitably required dialogic others through whom to construct and reinforce this emerging sense of identity. The early colonial New Zealand poets had not initially attempted to construct a separate poetic identity from their English tradition, although Curnow notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, people "began to be homesick *for* New Zealand, instead of 'Home' – sick *in* New Zealand" (33). Further, according to Curnow, the generation of Georgian poets represented by, or typical of, *Kowhai Gold* differed little in mood and manner, although he concedes that they did "exhibit the emergence of verse in answer to a need, human and genuine." From the vantage-point of the 1990s I could spend considerable space examining some of Curnow's specific claims concerning his immediate poetic predecessors. However, those issues are less germane to my discussion than is the significance of Curnow's desire to lump the Georgians in with earlier colonial poets as part of an explanatory "preamble to a discussion of our poetry to-day" (34). Curnow was

appropriating critical discourse on the nature of poetry, and his dialogic other in "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry" was as much the Georgian poet as it was the Australian readership of the essay. Hence the sense of aloneness Curnow consequently speaks of is something of a misnomer:

Now growing aware that we are alone on islands, we search our history and our earth more humbly than the early versifiers, and with deeper intention than the peddlers of *Kowhai Gold*. (39)

I would suggest that the aloneness was a self-induced condition brought about by the poets of Curnow's literary milieu themselves as part of a dialogic process in which they chose to construct themselves in opposition to the Georgians. That that search for "identity in time and place" may have been part of, or may merely have echoed, a larger New Zealand *Zeitgeist* is not pertinent. Curnow was struggling in opposition to poetic ideologies and through that process was succeeding in constructing a distinct Curnovian identity. Near the conclusion of "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry" Curnow observes that,

the coming larger and swifter contacts with Europe and America may therefore leave us (paradoxically?) freer to write and read our own verse. (41)

Curnow's observation is valid in dialogic terms, although he need not have worried whether such contacts would create a paradox. Only through total domination of one's own discourse by an oppositional one, or through the complete loss of a responsive other, does one gradually lose that freedom. Conversely, as Curnow's own poetry was to illustrate during the next half century, vigorous struggle with opposing discourses – the continuing construction of a self through others – can lead to a robust sense of selfhood.

In 1945 Curnow's literary critical ponderings of the previous two decades culminated in what remains to this day one of the pre-eminent discussions on New Zealand poetry – in Simpson's words a "climax of a decade of preliminary critical prospecting" (xvi). The "Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*" is a lengthy treatise that gained further exposure when the 1945 volume of New Zealand poetry was republished in 1951. In a brief "Note on the Second Edition" (*Look Back Harder* 73-75) Curnow details that with the exception of a few instances, no other change or revision was made to the original volume:

however, he added forty new poems by seven more poets in a separate selection within the 1951 edition. What is significant to this discussion is not Curnow's selection of poetry, but rather the ideological basis for that selection, which is largely encapsulated in his introductory essay. Curnow acknowledges his debt to E.H. McCormick's centennial survey volume *Letters and Art in New Zealand*<sup>7</sup> as well as to M.H. Holcroft's two books *The Deepening Stream* (1940) and *The Waiting Hills* (1943)<sup>8</sup> for critical models based on historical-social content of poetry. Curnow expresses sympathy for their views (as he interprets them) that "social content" was lacking in poetry written after the 1890s and did not reappear till the 1930s. In Curnow's view the 1920s witnessed the gradual re-emergence of the social content in the poetry of Mason, Cresswell, and Fairburn. Later, "maturer, more exacting criticism in New Zealand" (43) became the major literary force in the fifteen years leading up to the 1945 collection and Curnow's seminal introductory essay. Among the poets Curnow identifies as joining in the "rebirth in New Zealand writing in the early thirties" (62) are Glover, Hyde and Eileen Duggan, but Curnow refrains from drawing attention to his own poetry. Against this movement Curnow dialogically juxtaposes the "trivial if sincere" verse as anthologised in Pope's 1930 *Kowhai Gold*<sup>9</sup> much of which he later classifies as "fanciful, simply bad verse" (44).

However, Curnow believed that the socio-historical critical model he gleaned particularly from McCormick contained elements as limiting as those that could be found in the Georgian verse he so obviously disdained.

Lack of any vital relation to experience, a fanciful aimlessness, were only too apparent in most of the pages of *Kowhai Gold*; but it would have been no virtue in the newer writers if they had narrowed their ideas of experience, or confined their aims, to whatever is meant by 'social content'. (45)

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<sup>7</sup> New Zealand centennial surveys No. 10. Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940. McCormick reviewed and updated the literary sections for his 1959 edition.

<sup>8</sup> Together with *Encircling Seas* (1946) these were republished in 1950 as *Discovered Isles: A Trilogy*.

<sup>9</sup> Curnow failed to even mention Quentin Pope, who selected and edited the anthology and, instead, referred to the publisher: "J.M. Dent did not help us in 1930 by publishing *Kowhai Gold*, represented in a blurb as the 'poetic achievement' of fifty-seven New Zealanders in the twelve years following the Great War" (*Look Back Harder* 42).

Curnow had difficulty with that model because either a poet's work could not be related to the pre-formed social-historical pattern, or the poet produced poetic texts that conflicted with the critic's views. Curnow thus concluded that "criticism must work from within the text" and he acknowledged his indebtedness to Holcroft whose "social philosophy admits certain poets as irreducible realities in New Zealand life" (45).

Curnow's attraction to "irreducible realities" suggests a conscious desire in him for a literary philosophy for New Zealand based on essentialism. In his introduction to *Look Back Harder*, Simpson draws attention to Curnow's "emphasis on the reality prior to the poems" (xx). However, I would argue that in practice Curnow was – presumably unconsciously – working his way tentatively beyond essentialism to the dynamics of language that produce the so-called realities. He writes in his 1945 introduction: "The real question was not what they were to write *about*, but whom they were to write *for*" (45, his emphases). This illustrates an awareness of the importance of the interlocutor for a poet, even if Curnow could not be expected to be aware specifically of dialogism in 1945.

A further fifteen years on, this time in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Curnow was again to allude to dialogic processes, and in similar terms:

Whether open or implicit, it is this vital discovery of self in country and country in self, which gives the best New Zealand verse its character, and such claim as it has to stand as a distinct addition to the range of modern poetry in English. (*Look Back Harder* 136)

Curnow's quest for identity, which underpins much of his entire output of writing, is here stated in terms that beg a dialogic reading: "self in country and country in self." It is not a circular argument. He places the identity of New Zealand verse in contrast – that is, as "other" – to modern English poetry by requiring it to stand as a *distinct* addition. Hence the essentialist discourse that Curnow employs in his critical prose is, I believe, of less significance than is the gradual realisation by Curnow that (in dialogic terms) apperception is possible only if, in Charles Brasch's words, "distance looks our way."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Curnow used Brasch's quatorzain "In These Islands" unchanged in both editions of *A Book of New Zealand Verse*. In possibly its original appearance, in *Tomorrow* (September 13, 1939, V.23: 727), the eighth line commenced "And enter us . . ." instead of "Entering us . . ." but in all other respects the poem has remained unaltered. Brasch published it, untitled, as the second of his three-

## IV

According to the schema Simpson proposes in his introduction to *Look Back Harder*, both the poetry and critical prose Curnow wrote and published between about 1945 and 1950 represents the beginning of an expansion of Curnow's *Weltbild*. As Simpson explains, "the phase of explicit nationalism in poetry gave way in the later 1940s to 'more personal and universal themes'" and simultaneously "some expansion of the subject matter of Curnow's criticism is discernible beyond the previously almost exclusive concern with New Zealand poetry" (xvii). *Look Back Harder* chronicles Curnow's significant critical prose achievements during the period: a review of Australian poetry (1947), a sketch on Fairburn (1947), a review of the Caxton poets Brasch, Baxter and Hart-Smith (1947), a review of Baxter's *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* (1948), and a review of a century of Canterbury painting (1950). In terms of the dialogic principle that underpins my examination of Curnow's work, his comments about Baxter assume particular significance.

In the 1948 review "Three Caxton Poets: Brasch, Baxter, Hart-Smith" which Curnow published in *The Press*, Curnow said of the 22-year-old Baxter that he reads "like the true descendant of many poets, not only of the English tradition but contemporaries both English and New Zealand" (95). Curnow was commenting on Baxter's second volume of poetry which he reviewed extensively in *Landfall* several months later: "James K. Baxter: *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness*" (reprinted in *Look Back Harder* 98-100). Curnow reiterates and expands the sentiments he had expressed earlier in *The Press*:

Mr Baxter writes like the true descendant of many poets; in this he has been equalled among New Zealanders only by R.A.K. Mason. If these poems are full of echoes, they are not the echoes of mimicry but the true, if altered, accents of other voices, inherited by right of a natural eloquence. Mr Baxter is, in fact, the most original of New Zealand poets now living. . . . (98)

Curnow's high estimation of Mason's poetry has already been noted, and by positing the young Baxter as Mason's only equal, Curnow was bestowing a rare accolade. Indeed, Curnow's final sentence quoted above amounts virtually to the official anointment of a

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part "The Islands" in *Disputed Ground*, Poems 1939-45 (Christchurch: Caxton 1948, 13) and – according to Roddick – claimed it to be the "first real poem" he had written (*Collected Poems*, Alan Roddick ed., Auckland: Oxford UP, 1984, xii). The poem stands as a valuable adjunct to much of Curnow's poetry and opinions of the period.

successor to "'the Curnow generation' of poets"<sup>11</sup> of the 1930s and 1940s who supplanted the previous generation of New Zealand Georgian poets. However, a dialogic reading of this literary bequest can provide an interpretation which is less flattering to Curnow, but which, at the same time, proposes an explanation for Baxter's later rejection of the appointment of "successor" to the Curnow generation of poets.

The "true, if altered, accents of other voices" that Curnow speaks of refer to the antecedents of Baxter's poetry: themes, poetic styles and ideologies which, in Curnow's view, Baxter has necessarily "inherited." Had Baxter harked back instead to, for example, Georgian models of poetry as exemplified in Curnow's *bête noire* – *Kowhai Gold* – Curnow would almost certainly have savaged the young poet in much the same way as he had annihilated many of the modern Australian poets in a review of the previous year. Part of the dialogic process of suppressing opposing discourses is to contend with perceived and anticipated future responses. By attempting to construct a future poetic, as Curnow attempts through Baxter, Curnow must necessarily struggle with the possibility of future opposition. He writes of Baxter that

it is a temptation to look forward to a change in which steadiness and intensity may be reconciled. . . . [T]he shadow of a potential achievement is heavy on these poems. (98)

Simpson, in his introduction to Curnow's critical prose, has already identified the significance of this review on Baxter's volume of poetry:

Curnow posited the idea of "a common line of development" among New Zealand poets of his own generation, Baxter's immediate elders. (xiii)

Curnow argued that "certain conceptions of his country haunt the background of Mr Baxter's poetry" and elected the young poet to take the "shared achievement . . . towards a consummation" (100). Hence, Baxter is constructed by Curnow not only as a protégé in his own right, but as the *natural* successor whose present and future poetry will validate the generation of Caxton poets which preceded him. To add higher authority to the ceremony of investiture, as it were, Curnow invokes many of his own literary luminaries in this essay:

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<sup>11</sup> Curnow citing Erik Schwimmer, *Look Back Harder* 107.

[R]ecognitions . . . may be fetched up . . . [of] images caught from Dylan Thomas or Edith Sitwell, a line with a melancholy roll that might be Arnold, a Byronic cadence and a phrase from Yeats. [A] poem with the movement and brightness of running water has sources in Mr A.R.D. Fairburn's *Dominion* [while in others] something is inherited from Mr R.A.K. Mason. Poetry aside, there is corroboration of the thought about New Zealand pursued by Mr M.H. Holcroft in *The Waiting Hills* and elsewhere. (98, 100)

Simpson writes that there was an expansion of subject matter in Curnow's criticism from 1945.

A substantial change of emphasis can be dated more confidently from the publication in 1951 of a second edition of the Caxton anthology, an event which coincided with some changes in [Curnow's] personal circumstances – a first trip abroad, a switch in occupations from journalism to university teaching, and a move from Christchurch to Auckland. (xvii)

In making these personal changes, Curnow's "Note on the Second Edition" of the anthology indicates that he still felt his faith in Baxter to be well founded:

If the example of one young poet be demanded, to show that we start now from a better vantage, I would point to Mr Baxter. His second "Letter to Noel Ginn" is a poem of many echoes, yet his own accent is pervasive. Without pondering intimations of greatness or the highest originality, we may recognize this as a fine poem, in its long structure as well as its firmly-wrought stanza. (75)

Baxter had published his *Beyond the Palisade* (1944) and *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* (1948) volumes of poetry both through Caxton in Christchurch, which was indubitably the fountain-head of Curnow's generation of poets. Baxter now turned to Christchurch's Pegasus Press to publish his 1952 volume of poetry, whose title, *Poems Unpleasant*, appears perhaps too coincidental. He published it in collaboration with Louis Johnson, an emerging poet of his own younger generation who may have been the principal instigator of the book, and Anton Vogt, a lesser known poet of Curnow's generation.<sup>12</sup> Johnson was editor of an annual

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<sup>12</sup> In "Publishing, Patronage, Literary Magazines" in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (543-600), Dennis McEldowney briefly refers to Anton Vogt as a "clearly anomalous name . . . an iconoclast and modernist . . ." (564). Vogt, who was three years younger than Curnow, had one short poem, "Essay in Criticism," included in the first edition of *A Book of New Zealand Verse* but has seldom ever rated mention since.

publication, the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* (1951-64) which was central to a reaction against the Caxton poets' critical position. Simpson writes:

A younger generation of poets and critics, mostly in Wellington and Auckland, had begun to question and challenge the practice and theory of their elders, and of Curnow in particular as the most articulate and influential spokesman of his generation. (xvii)

Baxter's lecture "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry"<sup>13</sup> served notice that a new generation was attempting to challenge what they perceived to be monologic attempts by Curnow and his generation of poets to dominate literary discourse.<sup>14</sup>

## V

According to Simpson, Curnow now entered a period of twenty years in which Curnow "was called in his criticism to defend ground from which in his poetry he had departed for pastures new" (xix). Simpson dates what we could therefore term the "defensive period," from his publication in 1951 in *Here & Now* of his review of the first volume of Louis Johnson's *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* (*Look Back Harder* 105-108). This is followed up with "The *Poetry Yearbook*: a Letter to Louis Johnson" which he published in 1953, again in *Here & Now* (*Look Back Harder* 109-115). The most significant critical pieces Curnow wrote during this period are his 1960 "Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*" (133-181), and his 1963 "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition" (191-208). The period apparently concludes with Curnow's 1970 "Distraction and Definition: Centripetal Directions in New Zealand Poetry" (213-229). Simpson describes the 1963 and 1970 pieces, which were subsequently published from lectures, as "essentially restatements by Curnow of his established position" (xxi). Simpson identifies Curnow's theoretical position as an "insistence on referentiality" (xxii) following

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<sup>13</sup> "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry" (1951), "The Fire and the Anvil" (1955), and "Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand" (1967) are contained in *James K. Baxter as Critic*.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Simpson's essay "'The Trick of Standing Upright': Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter" (*World Literature Written in English* 26.2 [1986]: 369-378) is possibly the best commentary published to date on the literary and critical relationship between "the two most important figures in New Zealand poetry, both as poets and critics."

Yeats' "vision of reality" and locates this as Curnow's source of conflict with the generation of poets and critics who followed him:

It is his notion of the 'real' as existing prior to and outside language which has become the main bone of contention among writers of modernist or postmodernist affiliation. For some writers (such as C.K. Stead) Curnow's critical position is identified with the 'modern' in contradistinction to 'modernism'; for others (such as Roger Horrocks and Leigh Davis), Curnow's position is seen as 'modernist' in contradistinction to 'postmodernist'. (xxii)

Curnow's 1951 review of the initial *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* focuses on Erik Schwimmer's introductory commentary, and what is of interest in this discussion is not the commentary itself but Curnow's reaction to it. Curnow begins his review positively and appears genuine in his acknowledgement of editor Louis Johnson's efforts. However, when discussing the individual poets, Baxter is no longer singled out for lavish praise as might have been expected just three years after the eloquent promotion he had been previously given by Curnow. Curnow's disappointment in Baxter is betrayed at one point by his use of the word "alas" (106) and he lumps Baxter in with others whose "problem might be called, 'invention in search of a subject' . . ." (105-6). Curnow appears hurt by the actions of the younger poets; they had apparently rejected the subject that "what Mr Schwimmer flatters me by calling 'the Curnow generation' of poets" had spent several decades cultivating:

I do not think that 'national myth' is a happy description of what they [i.e. Curnow *et al*] did. 'A lonely island-desert, discovered by navigators and developed by baffled explorers' (Mr Schwimmer's notion of the 'myth' we are supposed to have made) is by no means an adequate or accurate description taken up in poems like Mr Brasch's 'Forerunners', Mr Fairburn's *Dominion*, or my own 'The Unhistoric Story'. (107)

According to Curnow "arguments, opinions, attitudes concerning the country and its history" were developed in the poems of his generation, but "nothing so ambitious as 'national myth' – simply the way we read our history" (107-8). Curnow's final comment is telling: his generation of poets were not attempting to develop a "myth" – if anything Curnow's continued emphasis on the "real," and even another gibe in this 1951 essay at the 1930 *Kowhai Gold*, suggests that his generation of poets believed they were demythologising history through their poetry. However, what is not evident in Curnow's phrase "simply the way we read our

history," is the recognition and acceptance that the next generation of poets might have been attempting exactly the same process, but from a later perspective. As Simpson has argued, Curnow's poetry had paradoxically progressed even while his critical prose entrenched. In terms of dialogism, this suggests that Curnow's ideological position was becoming monological as he hunkered down against the voices of change. He sees his word as permanent, in contrast to the voices of those whom he previously opposed (the Georgians) and those who now oppose his voice ("neo-Georgians?" he asks at one point):

There does seem to be a danger that verse in New Zealand may step back into an unreal condition, reflecting merely some prevalent fashion or supposed propriety in matter or style. There was an anthology called *Kowhai Gold*, from the spirit of which a great deal of the present *Yearbook* is not so remote as the accidents of style might suggest. (107)

However, the fact that Curnow's poetry had not entrenched suggests that it is not necessarily helpful to confuse Curnow the poet with Curnow the literary critic. My Chapter Four would indicate that his eminence as a poet during this period was never under serious threat: *At Dead Low Water* (1949), *Poems 1949-1957* (1947), and *A Small Room with Large Windows* (1962) testify that he was at the challenging edge of poetic discourse in this country. His authority as an anthologist and literary critic was, however, most certainly under contention.

## VI

Curnow's resistance to change stiffened in 1953 with his review of Johnson's second (1952) volume, "The *Poetry Yearbook*: a Letter to Louis Johnson" (*Look Back Harder* 109-115), in which he subtly betrays some acceptance of opposing discourse. In the review Curnow talks of "some young men in Wellington" (115) which is ostensibly an acknowledgement of, in particular, Baxter's discourse. At the 1951 Canterbury University College New Zealand Writers' Conference, Baxter gave a talk entitled "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry" (*Baxter as Critic* 1-12) in which he identified a group of younger poets as "the Wellington group" (9).<sup>15</sup> Thus the juxtaposition developed along generational as well as

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<sup>15</sup> Caffin writes: "Often known as the 'Wellington group', they included W.H.Oliver, Alistair Campbell, Louis Johnson, and Hubert Witheford, as well as Baxter himself" (*Oxford History* 403).

parochial lines: Curnow had previously lived, studied and worked (as had many of his contemporary writers) in Christchurch and Auckland, and in 1951 shifted permanently to take up a permanent position as lecturer in Auckland University College's English Department. Meanwhile, in 1948 Baxter had moved to Wellington where he became associated with a generally younger generation of writers and increasingly outspoken literary critics. With such "battle lines" of identity drawn and acknowledged by both sides, it was dialogically inevitable that a prolonged struggle for control of discourse would ensue, as Curnow's 1953 attack illustrates:

A young man in Wellington, with Rimbaud in his pocket and Speights under his belt, may or may not know just where he stands – which side of those never-to-be-quite determined frontiers of our island selves. The subject itself may, or may not interest, some other young man whose passionate interest in something else becomes a poem to remember. (*Look Back Harder* 115)

Curnow feared that "easy and indiscriminating publication" of poetry would "make a sorry mess of [poetry's] audience, and that is a serious matter" (109,110). He attacks W.H. Oliver's "In a World of Ice," for example, because it uses myth "not so much to enlarge our vision of reality, as to invent a pretty thing which we may care to look at instead" (110). He uses this Yeatsian yardstick to measure Baxter also: "Formal and verbal facility is his danger; and a worse danger is that such gifts may be perverted to a disguise for some radical failure of conception or construction." Curnow complains that among Baxter's and others' poems, are many

which bear a load of land and seascape stuff which they either carry towards no particular destination, or else dump down exactly where they were picked up, with some sad and questioning gesture. (111)

Curnow's disappointment in the poet who, several years previously, had appeared to be his chosen successor is almost palpable:

I take this time over Mr Baxter because he is far and away the most gifted of our younger generation of poets; even at his worst, you might say it was a poet writing badly, not a bad poet. (You might say so, but it wouldn't affect the result.) (*Look Back Harder* 111)

Later in 1953, Curnow wrote another critical essay in which, while still stalking the same

quarry, he resorts to older, more familiar literary hunting methods; consequently he is more successful. The piece, "M.H.Holcroft: *Dance of the Seasons*" (*Look Back Harder* 116-125), reviews Holcroft's latest book. As Curnow explains, the publication follows on from Holcroft's three earlier essay-volumes, republished in 1950 by Caxton as *Discovered Isles: A Trilogy*. Curnow had previously acknowledged his debt particularly to the first of these – *The Deepening Stream* – and his indebtedness is implicitly reiterated at length in this latest review. However, Curnow does not simply lavish obsequious praise upon Holcroft or *Dance of the Seasons*: the review is, instead, a fine example of Curnow's ability to promote his favourite interests and personal attitudes, while simultaneously blasting his opponents and their views. An example of a recurrent interest is the discussion of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell's poetry, which for a decade Curnow had missed hardly an opportunity to promote.<sup>16</sup> Through Holcroft, Curnow is able to return to some of his poetic touchstones, particularly Fairburn and Brasch; more pertinently, Curnow uses Holcroft's latest book and earlier *The Deepening Stream* to revisit some of his own critical points of view. The reality prior to the poems is never far from Curnow's mind throughout his examination of Holcroft's work:

He [Holcroft] seems, in this *Dance of the Seasons*, to have considered insufficiently what his subject is: or, which is I think more likely, to have been drawn away from his true subject in experience, his own youth on the land. . . . (117)

Curnow's overall verdict of the writer is that Holcroft's

critiques of *New Zealand* remain the valuable part of his work. . . . It is here that he makes those statements about nature and imagination which (without being *discoveries*, such things never are) served and may serve again as *working tools* for the writer and critic in New Zealand. . . . (122-3)

Meanwhile, Curnow also exploits the opportunity in the review to rebut his critical detractors. He notes of Holcroft's material that "it was criticism with a point of view, a scarce enough commodity at any time" (116) but, aside from that half-hearted and rather arrogant gibe, he saves his serious criticism till near the conclusion of the review, included in a

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<sup>16</sup> See William Broughton's paper "Curnow's Anthologies and the Strange Case of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell," delivered to the Association of New Zealand Literature's 1996 "Curnow, Caxton and the Canon" conference. Issue 15 of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* is to be devoted to proceedings from that conference.

substantial explanatory footnote. Curnow begins by invoking Brasch with a few quoted lines of poetry to buttress his argument that "there might be found a rugged way through the dilemmas of a trans-oceanic provincialism: a real transaction upon that plane of reality" (123). He follows this quotation with another, from Baxter. Curnow's respect for Baxter's poetry would appear, on the surface at least, to have remained undiminished despite the literary conflict that was developing between the generational groups. Praise of Baxter's work leaves the door open for possible ideological reconciliation between the two main literary protagonists. At the same time, however, it would not be overly cynical to suggest that Curnow was too shrewd a critic and too perceptive a poet to underestimate the influence of Baxter in those same roles. Dialogically, by appropriating the word of Baxter to support and further his own argument, Curnow is also attempting to neutralise the perceived ideological resistance. Curnow then confronts what he constructs as an opposing ideology with the most candour he had exhibited to date:

A new generation of young writers has appeared, which knows little or nothing of that inward-turning of the New Zealander's mind which accompanied and followed the depression of the thirties. Possibly this generation does realize what it owes to the efforts (ungainly as some of them were) of native writing taking its earlier *independent* steps. They are as apt as any young generation to feel, and to oppose, the pressure of the example of their immediate elders. (124)

Curnow is not prepared to entertain the possibility of a cyclic generational rebellion among writers, which would have posited a parallel between the rejection by the 1930s and early 1940s poets of the previous Georgian ones, and the increasing resistance in the 1950s by the post-war poets to *their* immediate predecessors. To have done so would have been to concede the non-essential basis for his generation's literary critical *Weltbild*, and not least for Curnow's own literature and critical prose. An admission of the cyclic nature of generational opposition and of the arbitrariness of Curnow's literary viewpoint would therefore have represented a dialogic surrender: the dominance over literary discourse, and the power to define and interpret would have been greatly diminished. Hence, while Curnow could afford to develop poetically, his authority as a critic required him to become increasingly intransigent (or monologic). He concluded the 1953 review with what amounts to an appeal to the judgement of yet unborn generations:

It may very well be that not this, but some future generation of young writers, under stricter pressures, may turn to those earlier essays of Mr Holcroft and feel glad of this 'forefarer's footmark' as old as the nineteen-thirties and forties. They may be critical, they may be amused by this or that earnestness or naiveté; but they should be grateful. (125)

While the Baxter generation of writers had at this time still to develop to literary maturity, they no doubt scoffed at Curnow's last remark. However, half a century later, as a post colonial angst threatens some Pakeha writers, and as some Maori activists would replace the term "New Zealander" with "Maori" and "tauiwi" (foreigner),<sup>17</sup> Holcroft's earlier essays regain a certain poignancy. So too does Curnow's footnote a few lines before the end of his Holcroft review, in which he borrows from his own introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45* (*Look Back Harder* 53) when he talks of the tension between the New Zealander "and the land his body inhabits but his spirit has not won" (124n1).

## VII

Curnow's "Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*" (reprinted in *Look Back Harder* 133-181) was one of three critical pieces I stated earlier had been written for overseas audiences (the other two being for Australian readers.) Curnow wrote this introduction, as well as selecting the poems and making notes, for the English publisher Penguin Books, although in 1966 Blackwood & Janet Paul (Auckland) published a New Zealand edition under licence from Penguin. If, indeed, Curnow required any further proof of his literary authority, this second major commission as anthologist provided him with it; he was already an eminent poet, a playwright, a leading newspaper verse satirist, a university lecturer in literature, and an eminent literary critic. Now he had been chosen by a British publisher to select and interpret New Zealand poetry for an English audience.

In the extensive introduction to the Penguin anthology, Curnow adopted a literary "elder-statesman" type of approach to poetry in New Zealand that was entirely commensurate with his construction of himself as an authority on the subject. His opening

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<sup>17</sup> For example New Zealand Labour Party Member of Parliament Tariana Turia in her maiden speech to Parliament on 26 February 1997.

paragraph talks of the country's verse as being a "series of adventures, in search of reality," adding "[w]hatever is true vision belongs, here, uniquely to the islands of New Zealand" (133). Once again, the *essential* ingredient for poetry is a reality prior to the poem. Hence, Curnow's model for the development of New Zealand poetry, and by implication his projections, remain unchanged. He restates his model for New Zealand poetry in a variety of ways, such as "individual vision, national consciousness, and the poetic tradition" (170), but avoids acknowledging that it remains only a model and, as such, is an arbitrary definition of poetry. A dialogic reading suggests that in the struggle for ideological dominance, this process is an attempt by Curnow to fix the poetic tradition by cancelling out the possibility of opposition.

One particular feature of Curnow's anthology is original, however. The publication begins with nine pages of Maori poetry, translated into English by Roger Oppenheim. Following the introduction, Curnow includes "A Note on New Zealand Verse and the Maori Tradition," although only the second of its three parts are reprinted in *Look Back Harder*. The omitted parts are a two-page pronunciation guide and a two-page bibliographical discussion about the Maori poetry. The part that is reproduced, entitled "Pakeha Bards and Maori Scholars," discusses the early colonists' collection and translations of Maori myth and poetry. One of Curnow's more valuable contributions and overlooked achievements as a critic and anthologist of New Zealand poetry, therefore, is this introduction of Maori poetry to the canon. He writes:

The first poems in this book are from the Maori tradition, which is rooted in the antiquity of New Zealand and its ocean neighbourhood. . . . Distinct as they are . . . the Maori poems nevertheless represent a significant part of our commonly diffused consciousness of ourselves as New Zealanders. I think readers of both races will recognize the propriety of including them, for the first time, in a New Zealand anthology. (*Look Back Harder* 136)

Following the dialogic model, this introduction of Maori poetry is indicative of Curnow's apperception during this period. On the one hand he still defined himself in opposition to the Georgian poets by continuing to conduct skirmishes against the likes of that "lamentable anthology, *Kowhai Gold*":

A sickly second-growth of verse, in which imported insipidities were mixed with puerilities of local origin, testified during the twenties and thirties to those *extreme* confusions of taste which have made New Zealand the hard homeland it is for poets – stultifying the weaker, and driving the stronger into isolation. (167)

Looking ahead, on the other hand, Curnow posited his own generation's contribution as fundamental to anything that followed.

New Zealand poets of a new generation, after the second World War, found they had predecessors worth following or quarrelling with. (169)

Curnow's proposition illustrates dialogism in practice, although Curnow would not have viewed his fellow poets in terms of that theoretical model. In eclipsing Baxter's preeminence with Smithyman's – Smithyman now becomes "the most interesting and original of the younger New Zealand poets" – Curnow appears to feel threatened by anything that does not conform to his own ideological viewpoint. Baxter's poetry "displays odd minglings of a *modern New Zealand vision*, complex and ambiguous, and a throwback to the make-believe art of earlier generations" (171). The emphasis in that last quotation is mine to illustrate Curnow's unchanged axiological position against which he rates all poets:

[Baxter] has not the temperament for grubbing at the roots of meaning, like Smithyman; nor has he always that instinct for a reality prior to the poem which protects Fairburn or Brasch or Glover from losing their subject in rhetoric. (172)

Maori poetry, however, posed no threat to Curnow's ideological constructions of reality and poetry or, following on from that, to his sense of identity. In publishing Maori poetry in the English language he was colonising Maoridom to a certain extent – although that is to judge Curnow's editorship of 1960 against contemporary social criteria,<sup>18</sup> and it ignores the fact that the book was pitched at a predominantly British audience in the British Isles. Contemporary politics aside, Curnow recognised that

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<sup>18</sup> By way of comparison, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry*, (Auckland: Penguin, 1989) has three editors – Miriama Evans, Harvey McQueen and Ian Wedde. As Maori editor, Miriama Evans contributes a second introduction to the volume. The book's proportion of poetry in the Maori language roughly reflects the percentage of Maori to New Zealand's population at the time of publication.

the pakeha (European) has generally felt his own New Zealand tradition to be enriched and dignified by association with those older Pacific navigators and colonists, his forerunners and fellow-citizens – though the feeling has not always been happily or becomingly expressed.<sup>19</sup> (135)

Not all early efforts at acknowledging Maori culture pleased Curnow. He said of the "huge ramshackle" twenty-five cantos long *Ranolf and Amohia: A South-Sea Day-dream* (1872) by Alfred Domett: "Nobody questions the total inadequacy of the poem as a representation of the Maori people" (148-9). In "A Note on New Zealand Verse and Maori Tradition," Curnow extends his criticism of the "colonist-poet" to include "Domett's own bitter prejudice against the Maori of his time" as a politician in the New Zealand Assembly in 1860 (178). Curnow argues that Domett "set the course, if it needed setting, for later poeticizers" which resulted in what he terms the "pakeha harp" of the 1870s and 1880s.

As one more stillborn Victorian epic, *Ranolf and Amohia* need be neither here nor there. But for New Zealand it is, for better or worse, *here*. In the totality of its failure – its complacent failure – to reconcile European and Polynesian, it is exemplary: it could not have failed better. Two generations of enthusiasts all abusing Maori matter in much the same spirit as Domett's were more than enough to discredit the whole enterprise. (180)

Hence, Curnow's use of Maori poetry, despite being translated into English, can be seen as a germane attempt to redress deficiencies going back a century or more. By not perceiving Maori discourse as a potential challenge to his own, Curnow betrays a naiveté of which, admittedly, it is unjust to accuse him from a vantage of almost forty years. More significantly, his inclusion of Maori poetry illustrates that although he had become conservative and entrenched in his attitudes towards the younger generation of Pakeha poets, he was not generally closed-minded. Curnow's own poetry remained dynamic and dialogically challenging throughout this period and beyond, despite the stance he took in his critical prose. His introduction of Maori poetry to an influential anthology of New Zealand poetry suggests that even his literary criticism was not as fixed – that is, monologic – as has sometimes been suggested.

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<sup>19</sup> In 1968 in a paper Curnow delivered at a conference in Australia, he wrote: "In my generation, and since, the poetic treatment of Polynesian subjects, anything *specifically* of the Maori tradition, has not surprisingly fallen into neglect, if not discredit" (*Look Back Harder* 217).

## VIII

Curnow's "New Zealand Literature: the Case for a Working Definition" (*Look Back Harder* 191-208) was originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Auckland in 1963, was published in 1964 and was reprinted in 1973.<sup>20</sup> According to Simpson, the essay "reflects in its disputatious manner and the 'velocity of its wit' (Bill Manhire's phrase) the adversarial atmosphere generated by the Penguin anthology" (xxi). Curnow uses the essay to restate his established position, which is his insistence on referentiality. In his introduction to *Look Back Harder*, Simpson discusses Curnow's argument that if writers are to achieve universality by transcending time and place they must (says Curnow) "achieve a correct vision of their own time and place" (202). I have already noted Simpson's observation, which in part concludes:

It is his notion of the "real" as existing prior to and outside language which has become the main bone of contention among writers of modernist and postmodernist affiliation. (xxii)

The aspect of Curnow's argument that particularly concerns me is how close he comes to articulating a dialogic interaction before he retreats to an essentialist position that ignores the influences of language on the speaking subject and on the speaker's interpretation of reality:

Always, the strength of a true influence by one poet on another ('true', not that of the parrot's owner on the parrot) has to be matched by the counter-influence of the other's individual vision of reality. Is it supposed that any work of original merit, whether poem or story or play, can be composed without distinct references to sensible objects, actual memories, images or a home, a climate, a city or a mountain? Or that these references can occur without accompanying tones of acceptance or denial, responding to the pressures of a society, a tradition, a people? (202)

Although a parrot owner's discourse may brook no meaningful response from the parrot itself, the parrot owner still speaks dialogically. Where necessary a notional other is constructed, whose anticipated responses may, for example, represent social viewpoints

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<sup>20</sup> According to Simpson's endnote (208) it appeared in a series published as *The Future of New Zealand*, edited by M.F.Lloyd Prichard (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs for the University of Auckland, 1964), 84-107. It was reprinted in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, edited by Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), 139-54.

within the speaker's speech community. A dialogic reading of Curnow's "true influence by one poet on another" would suggest an ideological struggle that must necessarily always take place between two speakers as they attempt apperception. Instead, however, Curnow constructs the poets' influences on each other in Yeatsian "vision of reality" terms. It would seem from Curnow's claim – "Is it supposed that any work of original merit . . . can be composed without distinct references to sensible objects . . . ?" – that he was positing the existence of an *essential* reality in New Zealand. As a realm that exists outside of language, and consequently beyond the analytic experience which is necessarily contained by the limits of speech, that is perfectly acceptable. However, a major premise of Curnow's literary doctrine is that access to that reality occurs through a writer's "vision," which is to ignore the mediating processes of language.

The Bakhtin school maintains that apperception can occur only through language:

Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction. (Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. 11)

However, Curnow posited, in effect, a circular argument: his ideal poets, provided of course that they adhere to "the minimal requirements [of] accuracy, purpose, coherence of design, and original vision," can see "real things" (201). From that point onwards Curnow's argument becomes again strikingly close to dialogic theory. The "distinct references to sensible objects . . ." speak of interpretation of reality through discourse that the poets share with their listeners. If they did not share the discourse the poetry would risk becoming obscure or even unintelligible. Curnow's sentence – [Is it supposed] "that these references can occur without accompanying tones of acceptance or denial, responding to the pressures of a society, a tradition, a people?" – is in the form of a rhetorical question that is dialogically axiomatic. In effect, he is arguing from the dialogic stance that those shared references cannot occur without ideological positioning ("tones of acceptance or denial") that results from cultural and societal pressures.

One other major critical endeavour, "Distraction and Definition: Centripetal Directions in New Zealand Poetry" (1970), brings to a close the period (based on Simpson's schema mentioned earlier) in which Curnow defended his generation's critical stance. The essay was

originally a paper delivered at a conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, at the University of Queensland in 1968,<sup>21</sup> and is the third of the three critical pieces Curnow wrote for overseas audiences. Simpson says that both this lecture and the one previously discussed which he delivered in 1963

are essentially restatements by Curnow of his established position, but introduce subtle modifications by way of clarification of points most persistently misread. . . . [T]he repeated claim that his stress on "the New Zealand referent" amounted to a kind of vulgar and prescriptive nationalism led him to refute this assertion with particular care. (xxi-xxii)

Near the end of the paper, Curnow recorded "a few opinions in brief" which significantly inform a dialogical reading of his theoretical stance (*Look Back Harder* 228). Curnow's first proposition is that "if the 'centripetally' guided work of New Zealanders is excluded, what is left of the country's poetry is a dull and random residue" (228). The Bakhtin school used the word "centripetal" to indicate the centralizing forces in any language or culture. Hegemonic groups within society exercise centripetal influences to homogenise and hierarchicize. Curnow's statement cited above may not have deliberately implied the political implications that the Bakhtin school attached to centripetal forces, but the consequences are nevertheless the same. Curnow's statement suggests that if the ideologically and politically dominant literary work from the 1920s and 1930s generation of poets were to be excluded, what would be left would be the subdued, marginalized and unsuccessful residue. The discourse that Curnow privileged from the 1930s onwards was – at least for a couple of decades – successful in dominating opposing ideologies; hence it became centripetal in its tendency towards monologism. However in 1968, when he delivered this paper, opposing literary discourses were at least as successful.

Curnow's second "brief opinion" is that "the evasion of, or ignorance of, one's place and circumstances, has been the cause of more bad writing than even the most chauvinistic obsession with them." The dialogic model as a process is not primarily concerned with attributing value judgements, but writing that does not at least attempt to speak its own

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<sup>21</sup> According to Simpson's endnote, it was published in *National Identity*, edited by K.L. Goodwin (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970) 170-86.

discourse – that is, contend with opposing voices – must inevitably be subsumed into that opposing discourse. Hence, "one's place and circumstances" is the writer's apperception of the moment. He or she "speaks" his or her self into existence in the process of utterance. As discussed in Chapter One, the interlocutor is an "other" – if necessary a notional one, or God, or a collective social voice – with and against whom the speaker struggles through language to define "reality" in a continuous process of definition. If the speaker does not at least attempt to construct a defining "place and circumstances," then the interlocutor's version of reality will dominate.

Curnow's third opinion reads: "That the finding of an audience at home is a condition for the finding of an audience abroad." This opinion naturally follows Curnow's previous statement. At any one point in time a speaker has negotiated, through the other, a construction of self-identity. As Bakhtin puts it, a writer is never "the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time" (*Speech Genres* 9). Even to have consciousness of self is to have contended with the voice of the other in order to arrive at that sense of apperception. However, the process is not unilinear; unless a speaker chooses to become totally subsumed into the discourse and consciousness of an other, that is, to lose all sense of identity, according to Bakhtin the speaker must struggle with the other by becoming *other* to that other. Curnow's point suggests that if New Zealand writers wish to be recognised overseas by an "other" audience, they cannot afford to deny their "otherness" as New Zealand writers. To deny otherness is to collapse the very aspects of identity that make New Zealand writers distinct.

Curnow continues: "That a poet cannot do without a country: instances adduced to the contrary can prove only that in exceptional circumstances a poet may change his country." This opinion parallels the dialogic principle that it is not possible for a speaker (writer) not to speak (write) from a certain axiological or ideological stance.

Curnow concludes his record of brief opinions with the claim that "the less a young or small country worries about all this the better: the worrying, if any, may be left to those who chose the wrong place to be born in, and can find no other excuse for failure." Aside from the delightful comment in the latter half of the sentence, Curnow's concluding statement

recommends acceptance of the inevitable. Becoming selfconscious about the process of identity construction – or of apperception – does not enable a speaker to circumvent that process.

No doubt Curnow never envisaged that his short paragraph would fall prey to such interpretation as mine; we may nevertheless observe in it a doctrine that competently withstands theoretical scrutiny thirty years later. Naturally, critical discourse has changed, and the poetic "theme of *there* in Europe, and *here* in New Zealand" (227) might be better served now by an American-New Zealand dialogic struggle for identity.

The younger generation of poets and critics, in opposition to whom Curnow continued to define himself even when delivering this lecture at the University of Queensland, are themselves voices of a past (although not defunct) discourse from today's perspective. To preserve his own authority, Curnow felt obliged by the late 1960s to fight what has been perceived as merely a stubborn rearguard action against those literary critics of a younger generation. If we focus on those skirmishes at the expense of detailed study of Curnow's critical writing, we risk losing the benefits suggested by my dialogic reading of his criticism. It is indicative of the quality of Curnow's critical thought that even his "few opinions in brief" – not to mention all the other essays and reviews he published during half a century – will continue to offer valuable insights into the ideological struggle of New Zealand literary criticism in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Detailed study of Allen Curnow's work supports, I believe, claims by some critics that Curnow is among New Zealand's greatest poets, and reinforces my personal view that he is this country's foremost literary figure. Peter Simpson observed in his introduction to Curnow's collected critical writings that "Curnow's criticism remains a continuing point of reference in the literary microcosm in relation to which all new arrivals inevitably locate themselves in the process of differentially defining their own critical positions." I suggest that Simpson's accolade be extended to include not only Curnow's critical writings, or even his poetry, but his entire oeuvre.

Scholars and critics overseas have increasingly used the Bakhtin school's theory of dialogism to provide new readings of literature – for example, much work has been done on Spanish and English-language literature – since Bakhtin's writings have been translated from Russian, in the past two decades. However, dialogism has only rarely been applied to New Zealand works. This study is the first to examine Curnow's oeuvre from a dialogic perspective. One of dialogism's most significant contributions to literary criticism is its ability to provide explanations for the processes of challenge and subversion within texts. Curnow's oeuvre lends itself to a dialogic reading because his writing deals predominantly with the construction of a New Zealand identity. In attempting to develop such an identity, he found himself in conflict with some of the most profoundly entrenched dogmas of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western society, for example, colonialism, religion and censorship. Though he generally stopped short of openly opposing hegemonic discourse, his texts nevertheless demonstrate an acute awareness of a stance that is potentially oppositional. Further, throughout his writing, he deals with questions of identity. Dialogism is useful in discussing subversive texts like Curnow's because it suggests that identity is a continual process of challenges between ideologies through language.

Particularly exciting has been my personal discovery of Curnow's juvenilia from the 1930s. This early verse, much of it published in the periodical *Tomorrow* and frequently under the pseudonym Julian, has been almost entirely overlooked by critics until recently, and I believe it merits further research. It has, however, been shown (most recently by

Stephen Hamilton) to provide a rare insight into Curnow's "work in progress," as Curnow developed a few of his verses from this period into later poetry collections. Curnow's verse from the 1930s and the publications in which they appeared prove particularly valuable to bibliographical scholars who will eventually, I hope, produce a complete record of his work, making it available to critical readings based on theories other than those used in conventional historical or biographical studies. During my study, reading Curnow's early works from a dialogic perspective, I found that some of the most apparently insignificant verses were the most fruitful in illustrating clashes of ideologies.

A considerable part of my study is devoted to Curnow's "serious" poetry – that which has been discussed in more depth than his verse, and which earned him his literary reputation. However, despite the fact that these poems form an integral and significant part of the canon of twentieth-century New Zealand literature, I remained surprised that more studies have not been undertaken. This has been partly due to the critical climate in New Zealand, where for many years English and American poetry took precedence over our native productions. The emerging interest in New Zealand literature and post-colonial studies, both here and overseas, is now rectifying the imbalance. I note in passing that as with his "minor" verse, those poems that were more overtly subversive were less likely to reappear in later collections or selections.

My examination of Curnow's social satire, which he published under the *nom de guerre* Whim Wham, is the first detailed study on this part of his oeuvre. I was initially hampered by a lack of bibliographical references, which I hope to have partially remedied with two appendices that grew out of my own research. I have restricted my examination of Whim Wham's verses to those verses that appeared in the *New Zealand Listener*, and discuss examples only from the five published collections. A complete listing of Whim Wham's contributions to *The Press*, the *Southland Times*, and the *New Zealand Herald* remains to be compiled.

With the exception of a couple of short pieces of prose fiction that Curnow wrote and published in *Tomorrow* during the 1930s, his efforts as a playwright are considered his least successful writing ventures. Nevertheless, read dialogically and in conjunction with his other writings, Curnow's drama exhibits clashes of ideologies.

Unlike other areas of his work, Curnow's critical writings have been well documented. Most notable is Peter Simpson's collection *Look Back Harder*, which includes all critical essays, with the exception of a few minor reviews. In my dialogic reading of Curnow's critical work, I found subversive elements similar to those in his other writing. Curnow was one of the few literary authorities to question the conceptual basis of an identity pertaining specifically to the New Zealand psyche and New Zealand society. In so doing, he challenged those hegemonic discourses that had been entrenched in the New Zealand literary canon, inherited from the mother country, England. In his later years, Curnow inevitably came up against a younger generation, whose discourses clashed with his own. As a result, he found himself having to engage in a struggle for the "word" he had fought so hard to establish.

Finally, after I had completed this study Curnow, now aged 86, published yet another collection of poems. *Early Days Yet* (August, 1997) seemed intended to confound any thoughts I may have entertained about "pinning down" the meaning of Curnow's work in a way which the Bakhtin school would term monologic. The delightfully ironic title of Curnow's latest publication captures perfectly the spirit of his oeuvre, which, I feel sure, will continue to contribute to the emerging New Zealand identity.

APPENDIX I: INDEX OF CURNOW'S CONTRIBUTION TO  
*TOMORROW*

This is an index of Allen Curnow's contributions to *Tomorrow*, based on the examination of the periodical, J.J. Herd's *Index to Tomorrow 1934-40* (1962), and Stephen Hamilton's *New Zealand English Language Periodicals of Literary Interest, Active 1920s-1960s* (1996). As discussed in Chapter Two, Herd's list contains one omission from the contributions Curnow is now known to have published in that periodical: "The Rubbish Heap" published over the *nom de plume* Amen. Hamilton's annotated bibliography refers only to those items in *Tomorrow* by Curnow which Hamilton discusses earlier in his text.

The items are here listed with the name to which each entry was attributed in *Tomorrow*: the *noms de plume* Julian and, in a single case, Amen; in a few instances the initials A.C.; and the name 'Allen Curnow.' The eight poems marked "\*" were reprinted in *Verse Alive* (1936), while the four marked "#" all appeared in *Verse Alive number two* (1937); Chapter Two details changes in attribution and text made to those twelve poems. Endnotes provide further information about some of the poems, including the five that later developed into sections of *Not in Narrow Seas*.

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Page</b>
1	Lunar Prospect	Allen Curnow	1:11	19 Sep 34	3
2	*Daily Office	Julian	1:11	19 Sep 34	6
3	Parable	Julian	1:13	3 Oct 34	18
4	Per Ardua Ad – ? [Article]	Julian	1:14	17 Oct 34	6-7
5	*The New Betrayal	Julian	1:19	21 Nov 34	3
6	Complaint	Julian	1:31	20 Feb 35	3
7	Renunciation (II)	Julian	1:32	27 Feb 35	3
8	Song For Her Approach	Julian	1:32	27 Feb 35	3
9	*Absolute Idealism	Julian	1:34	13 Mar 35	17
10	Factory Weight	Julian	1:35	20 Mar 35	3
11	*Restraint <sup>1</sup>	Julian	1:36	27 Mar 35	3
12	*Aspect of Monism <sup>2</sup>	Julian	1:38	10 Apr 35	13

13	*Experience	Julian	1:41	7 Aug 35	19
14	*Monody	Julian	1:44	28 Aug 35	12
15	Meditation on the tenth commandment	Julian	1:45	4 Sep 35	20
16	*The Usurper	Julian	1:47	18 Sep 35	16
17	Attainment	Julian	1:47	18 Sep 35	18
18	Letter to Editor	Allen Curnow	2:11	22 Jan 36	24
19	#Apocalyptic <sup>3</sup>	Julian	2:12	29 Jan 36	20-1
20	#The Rubbish Heap <sup>4</sup>	Amen	2:13	5 Feb 36	13
21	#Pull the blind on the country scene	A.C.	2:20	15 Apr 36	20
22	#Wicked Words	Julian	2:23	27 May 36	16
23	Work And Prayer <sup>5</sup>	Julian	2:27	22 Jul 36	22-3
24	Flotsam	Julian	2:29	19 Aug 36	17
25	Orbit <sup>6</sup>	Julian	3:6	20 Jan 37	188
26	Rats In The Bilge <sup>7</sup>	Allen Curnow	3:16	9 Jun 37	496
27	The Potter's Field <sup>8</sup>	Julian	3:20	4 Aug 37	628-31
28	A Bad Liver [Prose]	Allen Curnow	3:24	18 Aug 37	661-2
29	Variations on a Theme <sup>9</sup>	Allen Curnow	3:25	13 Oct 37	774
30	Unemployed	Allen Curnow	3:25	13 Oct 37	778
31	Day of Wrath. A Tale [Prose]	Julian	3:25	13 Oct 37	788-90
32	Interval	Allen Curnow	4:1	10 Nov 37	15
33	The Disintegrating Thought	Allen Curnow	4:2	24 Nov 37	55
34	"O Can Ye Brew Poisons – ?"	Allen Curnow	4:3	8 Dec 37	67
35	The Last Phase	Allen Curnow	4:3	8 Dec 37	92
36	Review of <i>Dominion</i>	A.C.	4:14	11 May 38	438-39
37	Sestina <sup>10</sup>	Allen Curnow	4:14	11 May 38	440
38	Hot Air Force	Julian	4:17	22 Jun 38	531
39	The Sword and the Bomb	Allen Curnow	4:21	17 Aug 38	664
40	Predestination <sup>11</sup>	Allen Curnow	4:21	17 Aug 38	665
41	A Loyal Show <sup>12</sup>	Allen Curnow	4:22	31 Aug 38	685
42	Mother And Child <sup>13</sup>	Allen Curnow	4:23	14 Sep 38	716
43	Defence Policy	Julian	4:24	28 Sep 38	760

## ALSO OF INTEREST:

Review of Curnow's *Poetry and Language*, by HWR [H. Winston Rhodes], 2:10, 15 Jan 36: 20-1.

Review of Curnow's *Enemies, Poems 1934-36*, by ARDF [A.R.D. Fairburn], 3:13, 28 Apr 37: 414-416.

Letter to editor by Curnow (included above) responding to HWR's review of *Poetry and Language*, 2:11, 22 Jan 36: 24.

Review (included above) of ARD Fairburn's *Dominion*, "Rata Blossom or Reality? New Zealand and a Significant Contribution," by A.C. 4:14, 11 May 38: 438-439.<sup>14</sup>

Review of Curnow's *Not in Narrow Seas*, by FG [Frank Gadd],<sup>15</sup> 5:17, 21 Jun 39: 539.

Reference to *Not in Narrow Seas* contained in article "These Two Islands," by H. Winston Rhodes, 5:19, 19 Jul 39: 600-2.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Became the second item in *Three Poems* (1935).

<sup>2</sup> Became the first item of *Three Poems* (1935).

<sup>3</sup> Page 20 of *Tomorrow* 2:11, at the foot of which the first half of Julian's verse "Apocalyptic" falls, is incorrectly dated 1935 instead of 1936.

<sup>4</sup> This entry is not contained in Herd (1962), but Hamilton (1996) discusses it as a contribution by Curnow, apparently the only time the poet used that *nom de plume*.

<sup>5</sup> Appeared as "Chief End" in *Enemies* (1937).

<sup>6</sup> Appeared in *Enemies* (1937).

<sup>7</sup> The Prelude and the first three parts of "Rats In The Bilge" became Parts 1 to 4 of *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939).

<sup>8</sup> The seven parts of "The Potter's Field" became or were drafted into Parts 5 to 11 of *Not in Narrow Seas*. Unlike "Rats In The Bilge," "The Potter's Field" included introductory prose paragraphs, most of which are the same or similar to those in *Not in Narrow Seas*.

<sup>9</sup> "Variations on a Theme" became the "Epilogue" to *Not in Narrow Seas*.

<sup>10</sup> This earlier contribution bears no resemblance to the 'Sestina' of *Island and Time* (1941) apart, obviously, from its poetic form.

<sup>11</sup> "Predestination" became Part 12 of *Not in Narrow Seas*. It included the date (July 3, 1938) after Cumow's name.

<sup>12</sup> "A Loyal Show" became the first half of Part 10 of *Not in Narrow Seas*. It included the date (July 2, 1938) after Cumow's name.

<sup>13</sup> "Mother and Child" included the month and year (June, 1938) after Cumow's name.

<sup>14</sup> Reprinted in Peter Simpson, ed., *Look Back Harder*, 1987: 10-12. Simpson observes in a footnote that part of a passage in Cumow's review is quoted from J.C.Beaglehole's *New Zealand: A Short History* (London, 1936) and was also used in the epigraph to Cumow's *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939) collection which, as already observed, grew out of five contributions to *Tomorrow*.

<sup>15</sup> Herd (1962), who cross-references initials and pseudonyms to names "only if the approval of the author has been given" (Preface), merely attributes this review to FG. However, Hamilton (1996, 1:98n18) identifies the reviewer as Frank Gadd.

## APPENDIX II: CHECKLIST OF REFERENCES TO WHIM WHAM

As the following list illustrates, little space has been devoted to comment about Whim Wham's verse, and the weekly verse satire has not been deemed sufficiently worthy, either by literary critics or by Curnow himself, as a subject for serious discussion. There are two notable exceptions, both of which appeared in the same 1973 edition of *Islands*. One is a single page of MacDonald Jackson's "Conversation with Allen Curnow" which provides us with Curnow's fullest public opinions of Whim Wham. The second exception is within Ian Wedde's review of Curnow's *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*. Wedde draws a comparison between the serious poet and the social satirist, and states: "It strikes me that in these poems Curnow and Whim Wham have become one." Other critics' references included below should not be read as necessarily indicative of their considered opinions because in none of the cases was Whim Wham the focus of their discussions. The references have been culled from context, but illustrate where and the extent to which Whim Wham features in literary criticism; they also indicate the variety of attitudes towards the satirist's verse. Newspaper and magazine reviews of Whim Wham's five verse collections have not been included.

James K. Baxter. "Political Verse." Rev. *Sagittarius, Pipes of Peace* (Jonathan Cape). *New Zealand Listener* (566) 28 Apr. 1950: 13. In discussing poems by Sagittarius that appeared in *The New Statesman and Nation* between 1945 and 1948, Baxter compares her with Whim Wham "without discredit to either." He concludes that "Sagittarius possesses what Whim-Wham lacks – a direction in politics."

James Bertram. "Staying upright here." Rev. *Selected Poems* (1982). *NZ Listener*, 12 Mar. 1983: 84-85. Includes an observation that the "useful role of no-nonsense commentator on the passing scene was increasingly delegated (without authorial acknowledgement) to that banjo-bard of the newspapers, Whim Wham" (84). He also mentions Curnow's "literary schizophrenia" in respect of Whim Wham, a term Leggott (1984) echoes.

Steve Braunias. "Sweating Poesy." *Metro*, Apr. 1996: 76-79. Brief reference to Whim Wham – "the enormously popular satirist" – who eventually became a distraction and a threat. Curnow is quoted: "I was conscious that I might never be known as anything else other than the author of these damned verses" (79).

- Edward Burman. "The Culminating Sacrifice: An Interpretation of Allen Curnow's 'Moro Assassinato.'" *Landfall* 39.1 (1985): 22-36. Curnow's poem "Lampoon" is described as having been written with "the technical virtuosity of Whim Wham" (32).
- Allen Curnow. *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*. Ed. Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1987. Makes few comments on satire, none specifically on Whim Wham.
- 1941: ". . . satire is an escape pattern which the true poet must reject if he expects to endure" (27).
- 1943: "[Fairburn emerged] . . . from the pearly twilight of the newspaper versifiers into broad New Zealand daylight" (37).
- 1960: "I have chosen . . . one of Baxter's ballad satires . . . which, as a satire should, hits New Zealand where it needs hitting" (173).
- Theresa Graham, comp. *A Bibliography of Works By & On Allen Curnow*. Wellington: Library School, National Library of New Zealand, Sep. 1976. Lists the five Whim Wham publications with brief descriptions (serials 7, 11, 13, 34, and 52), but deliberately excludes Whim Wham verses from the accompanying title index to poems, and from the index to first lines, as being of "less immediate interest to the student." Contains brief comments on Jackson's 1973 conversation with Curnow about Whim Wham (serial 62).
- NZ Listener*. 14 Jan. 1944: 14. Unattributed and short book review of *Whim-Wham: 1943*.
- Rob Jackaman. "An Impossible Dream: Some Thoughts on the Poetry of Allen Curnow." *Pilgrims* 9 (1980): 61-68. Contains an isolated reference to the "Whim-Whamishness" of an example of Curnow's rhyme (62).
- MacDonald Jackson. "Conversation with Allen Curnow." *Islands* 2.2 (1973): 132-162. A page of the interview deals specifically with Whim Wham and includes detailed observations by both Curnow and Jackson. It is the most explicit public statement Curnow had made about his role as verse satirist (147-8). See also Ian Wedde later in the same issue.
- Michele Leggott "Joker – Playing Poetry in the Eighties: Manhire, Curnow, Stead, Horrocks." *World Literature Written In English* 23.1 (1984): 154-164. Contains passing reference to Whim Wham as Curnow's "alter ego" (155), with an endnote claiming Curnow to be "mildly schizophrenic about Whim Wham" (163n3). Compare with Bertram (1983).
- John Thomson. "Bibliography." *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Auckland: Oxford UP, 1991. 601-709. Five Whim Wham collections listed under the entry on Curnow. Curnow is described as an "accomplished verse satirist" (651).

Ian Wedde. "Look Back Harder." Rev. *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*. *Islands* 2.2 (1973) 204-6. The matter-of-fact review of the poems in the context of the weekly satirist is possibly the only serious attempt by any critic to discuss one in terms of the other. See also MacDonald Jackson earlier in the same issue.

John E. Weir and Barbara A. Lyon, comps. *New Zealand Poetry: A Select Bibliography 1920-1972*. Christchurch: The Library, U of Canterbury, 1977. 166-89. The alphabetical listing of Curnow's poetry (171-182) includes Whim Wham's verse (marked by an asterisk) that appeared in the *New Zealand Listener*. However, the sample is not complete and contains some errors in publication details. (See my Appendix III for an amended and chronological listing of Whim Wham verse in the *Listener*.)

Whim Wham [Allen Curnow]. *A Present for Hitler and Other Verses*. Christchurch: Caxton, 1940.

---. *Whim-Wham 1941-1942*. Christchurch: Caxton, 1942.

---. *Whim-Wham 1943*. Wellington: Progressive Publishing Society, 1943.

---. *The Best of Whim Wham*. Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1959.

---. *Whim Wham Land*. Auckland: Blackwood & Paul, 1967.

APPENDIX III: WHIM WHAM VERSES PUBLISHED IN  
THE *NEW ZEALAND LISTENER*

This chronological checklist of verses published by Whim Wham in the *New Zealand Listener* has been compared with alphabetical listing, produced by Father John E. Weir and Barbara A. Lyon (Christchurch: The Library, University of Canterbury, 1977), of poetry published by Curnow up to that time. A number of omissions, errors and misprints in that list have been corrected. The titles of the verses are reproduced below in the manner in which they appear in the *Listener*.

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Page</b>
1	I Saw U Saw	136	30 Jan 1942	4
2	"A Deaf Ear"	137	6 Feb 1942	4
3	La Belle Dame Sans Merci	138	13 Feb 1942	4
4	Entertained To Death	139	20 Feb 1942	4
5	Tears For Todt	140	27 Feb 1942	4
6	Overtures	141	6 Mar 1942	4
7	Facts and Figures	142	13 Mar 1942	4
8	It Isn't Cricket	143	20 Mar 1942	4
9	The Year's At The Spring	144	27 Mar 1942	4
10	Churchill, Curtin and Casey	145	2 Apr 1942	4
11	Big Money	146	10 Apr 1942	4
12	The Nameless War	147	17 Apr 1942	4
13	Radiation	149	1 May 1942	4
14	The Target	150	8 May 1942	4
15	Ennui	151	15 May 1942	7
16	Disorder In The Dress	152	22 May 1942	4
17	Win and Place	153	29 May 1942	4
18	Hit Song for Muss	155	12 Jun 1942	4
19	Warpaint	157	26 Jun 1942	7
20	Good Night!	158	3 Jul 1942	8
21	Slightly Shaken	159	10 Jul 1942	6
22	Pests	160	17 Jul 1942	7
23	NOT SO HOT	161	24 Jul 1942	9
24	Second Front	163	7 Aug 1942	7
25	Finishing Touches	164	14 Aug 1942	10

26	Right Dress	165	21 Aug 1942	6
27	Question Time	166	28 Aug 1942	6
28	Morals	167	4 Sep 1942	11
29	In Due Season	168	11 Sep 1942	11
30	Intentions	169	18 Sep 1942	3
31	Sound Logic	170	25 Sep 1942	10
32	Local Success	171	2 Oct 1942	2
33	Malnutrition	172	9 Oct 1942	2
34	Cockcrow	174	23 Oct 1942	2
35	Global Thinking	176	6 Nov 1942	2
36	All For Culture	177	13 Nov 1942	2
37	Going Wrong	178	20 Nov 1942	2
38	For The Young	179	27 Nov 1942	2
39	Tremble!	180	4 Dec 1942	4
40	Anglo-Saxon	181	11 Dec 1942	12
41	Going The Whole Hedgehog	182	18 Dec 1942	5
42	Tales Out of School	183	24 Dec 1942	2
43	1942-1943	184	31 Dec 1942	2
44	Analysis	185	8 Jan 1943	8
45	Bloatographs	186	15 Jan 1943	10
46	The Moa Hunt	187	22 Jan 1943	10
47	Through Glass	189	5 Feb 1943	9
48	Seeing Red	190	12 Feb 1943	5
49	The General Situation	191	19 Feb 1943	10
50	Necessity Knows No Law	192	26 Feb 1943	16
51	Now Or Later	193	5 Mar 1943	5
52	Dry Rations	194	12 Mar 1943	10
53	Talked Out	195	19 Mar 1943	2
54	All Aboard!	196	26 Mar 1943	2
55	Diversity By Unity	197	2 Apr 1943	2
56	Drunk Again?	198	9 Apr 1943	2
57	News Blues	199	16 Apr 1943	2
58	Brainpower	201	30 Apr 1943	2
59	Mob Economy	202	7 May 1943	2
60	Big Medicine	203	14 May 1943	2
61	Longevity	204	21 May 1943	2
62	Another Castle In Spain	205	28 May 1943	2
63	Suspense	206	4 Jun 1943	2
64	Current Fiction	207	11 Jun 1943	2

65	No Further Use	208	18 Jun 1943	2
66	A Touch of the Sun	209	25 Jun 1943	2
67	The House Will Razoom	210	2 Jul 1943	2
68	A Deferential Rejoinder	211	9 Jul 1943	2
69	Productivity	212	16 Jul 1942	2
70	What Else?	213	23 Jul 1943	2
71	Current Moods	214	30 Jul 1943	2
72	An Insular Outlook	216	13 Aug 1943	2
73	Kite-Flying	217	20 Aug 1943	2
74	Self-Determination	219	3 Sep 1943	2
75	Cold Water	220	10 Sep 1943	3
76	South and North	222	24 Sep 1943	5
77	Soapsudden	225	15 Oct 1943	3
78	Hair-Brained	226	22 Oct 1943	2
79	A statement to the Police	227	29 Oct 1943	2
80	In Old Argentina	228	5 Nov 1943	2
81	Your Guess and Mine	229	12 Nov 1943	2
82	Magnanimity	230	19 Nov 1943	2
83	Strong Drink	231	26 Nov 1943	2
84	Totality	233	10 Dec 1943	2
85	Tea or Coffee?	235	24 Dec 1943	2
86	Showing Their Metal	236	31 Dec 1943	13
87	Communiformity	239	21 Jan 1944	2
88	Alma Mater	240	28 Jan 1944	4
89	Well Preserved	241	4 Feb 1944	2
90	Vita-Beer	242	11 Feb 1944	2
91	Horsepower	244	25 Feb 1944	2
92	Aquaris	245	3 Mar 1944	2
93	Building The Nation	246	10 Mar 1944	6
94	Getting It Straight	247	17 Mar 1944	4
95	Familiar Ring	267	4 Aug 1944	7
96	Film Over The Eyes	271	1 Sep 1944	22
97	Wood-Notes Wild	277	13 Oct 1944	15
98	History Lesson – C.2900 A.D.	307	11 May 1945	18
99	Alien Ways	315	6 Jul 1945	5
100	Saving Clause	339	21 Dec 1945	12

Other publications of verse by Whim Wham

"Alien Ways" (*Listener* 315, 6 Jul 1945: 5) also appeared in *Salient* 8.9, 11 Jul 1945: 3.

"Hydroponics" appeared in Woodhouse, A.E. ed., *New Zealand Farm and Station Verse*, 1950: 122.

Two verses appeared in the current affairs monthly magazine *Here and Now*, which was edited and published by Bob Lowry and ran from 1949 to 1957:

A Credit to his Country	Dec 1955	26
Testing Times	Sep 1956	17

"For Everybody's Benefit" appeared in Smart, P.R. *Exploring New Zealand Writing*, 1964: 114.

"Any Complaints" appeared in Reid J.C. ed., *A Book of New Zealand*, 1964: 332.

Poems that appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* under the name of Allen Curnow include:

1	The Changeling	602	12 Jan 1951	15
2	Jack-in-the-Boat	718	17 Apr 1953	11
3	Spectacular Blossom	810	4 Feb 1955	14
4	To Forget Self and All	819	7 Apr 1955	14
5	To Introduce the Landscape	850	11 Nov 1955	25
6	A Small Room with Large Windows	854	9 Dec 1955	13
7	A Year and a Day	1360	29 Oct 1965	9

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