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A STUDY OF
TWO LONG POEMS
BY C.K. STEAD

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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I.

C.K. STEAD'S POETRY AND ITS CRITICS.

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

Introduction

Poetry is at the very heart of C.K. Stead's literary work.

I would make the claim that I'm a fully paid
up poet, but I wouldn't make the claim for
myself in fiction.²

Stead has produced five volumes of poetry and a sixth is ready for
publication. As well, he has written a number of highly acclaimed
short stories and two novels.³

As he professes in "Birthday Poem", he has an awareness of his
vocation.

October.
No more grave poems.
My birthday bloom
Is royal purple.
Royally gifted
I become the subject.

Thirty-five years and I'm out
To butt my head again
Against air, and bawl.
Mother, you expelled me with
A silver tongue
A country in my cry
A trenching tool
To seed fresh furrows.
Long, long I've crouched
In the kitchens of art
Over the hot stove of letters.
Hear me now.
Before the fingers are bone
Hear me.⁴

At thirty-five it seemed urgent that he should dedicate himself to
writing poetry; his own experiences, responses and feelings must

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1. Allen Curnow: "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch". Selected Poems (Penguin Books 1982), p77.
 2. Landfall 148. C.K. Stead replying to interviewer M. Harlow, p455.
 3. Stead's second novel will "it appears be published in London next year" (ibid). He has also published two books of literary criticism and a third is with a publisher.
 4. C.K. Stead: "Birthday Poem" in Crossing the Bar (Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press 1982), p35.

provide much of his "subject"⁵ matter. Until that age, Stead's academic work had limited his output as a poet.⁶ But what he did publish was of extraordinary merit. His poem "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea"⁷ gained an award for the best Landfall poem in the first fifteen years of the publication of that periodical. "Birthday Poem" marks his awakening to the fact that "...writing was beginning to take second place or worse".

I had suddenly to scuttle and recover my sense of myself, which was myself as a writer; and I would say since that time the poetry has really been the centre of my intellectual life.⁸

In the last ten years Stead's most significant poems have been long poems. The successful technique of "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" which "...owes everything to Pound's innovation in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and the Cantos"⁹ has been applied to other long poems. "Quesada" marked a development.

It was the longest poem I had written and I felt in many ways the best - that was reassuring for a poet just past 40.¹⁰

Other long poems were less satisfying to him. The imagist sequence "15 Letters from the Zebra Motel" left "...no space for sustained feelings" and lacked "density and texture".¹¹ As for his "Twenty-one Sonnets", though he claims he does not reject them, they are "...not central to what I see as my own line of development".¹² The long poem in "open form" is Stead's preferred genre. He is at present composing a sequence of four long poems of which only "Walking Westward" and "SCORIA" have been published.

But since these sonnets I have gone back to open form; and the title poem in Walking Westward is itself conceived of as section 1. of a longer poem.¹³

5. Stead, referring to himself in 1951 wrote: "I didn't see what I see now: that I had no great subject; that the age was not 'demanding' poems of me as it had seemed for example to demand them from Ezra Pound; that consequently I had no obvious material to work on but myself..."

(C.K. Stead: In the Glass Case (Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press 1981), p264.)

6. At the age of 35, Stead received a Chair at Auckland University.

7. Landfall 50, p116.

8. Landfall 148. Stead to Harlow, p457.

9. C.K. Stead: In the Glass Case, p266. ("Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" was published in 1959.)

10. *ibid*, p275.

11. *ibid*, p274.

12. Landfall 148, p45.

13. C.K. Stead: In the Glass Case, p277.

I

Stead's poetry has the effect of polarizing opinions. It has received severe condemnation and high praise. One critic complained of an "...unintelligibility ... generated by the method of surprising juxtaposition".¹⁴ In contrast another appreciated that "...it is left to the reader to infer from the minute particulars laid before him the pattern of meaning that the poem embodies".¹⁵ Others have focused on the quality of the poetry:

I know of no other New Zealand poet (except Allen Curnow, though Stead is free of Curnow's cold edge) capable of commanding such an elegant justness of line and phrase.¹⁶

An "unfavourable review"¹⁷ of "Walking Westward" was submitted by John Needham who did not perceive the ambiguity that characterises Stead's work. Stead shares with many modern writers a sense of the ambiguity in the events of his era. The problem has been with us throughout this century. Ortega y Gasset observed that:

...modern art is of an ambiguous nature which, as a matter of fact, does not surprise us; for ambiguous have been all important issues of these current years. A brief analysis of the political development in Europe would reveal the same intrinsic ambiguity.¹⁸

In "Walking Westward" almost every line conveys more than one meaning. Needham attributes to the poet "untenable beliefs and attitudes", but Stead does not often express "beliefs and attitudes". He imparts an impression of the ambiguity of this age. From the equivocal evidence that he places before us, we come to realise with Erich Heller that "Uncertainty alone is ineluctably real".¹⁹

Stead asks questions to which there is no clear answer:

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14. John Needham: "Sterile dichotomies" in Comment, May 1979, p34-35.
 15. Peter Simpson: Landfall 132, p369.
 16. Mike Doyle: Landfall 144, p478.
 17. Editor's description. Landfall 133, p81.
 18. Ortega y Gasset: The Dehumanization of Art (Doubleday Anchor 1948), p43.
 19. Erich Heller: The Disinherited Mind (Penguin 1961. First published 1952), p233 and 252. The statement occurs twice in the concluding chapter of a book dealing with Goethe, Nietzsche, Burckhardt, Rilke, Spengler, Kafka, Kraus.

made excuses for the Russians
 (Suez was OUR crime)
 or didn't know what to believe
 but asked ourselves was totalitarianism
 was repression
 inherent in Socialism
 the big question
 ask it still and sometimes answer yes²⁰

One of Stead's Australian friends "Izzy G German Jew", responds to history by hoisting the "black flag of irony". This response is seen by Needham to be Stead's "recommended attitude". Izzy G has known at first hand the inhumanity of the Nazis and the inefficiency of the Russians. He distances himself from the events that sent him "walking" from Germany into Siberia and is able to see their mix of comedy and pathos. A sense of irony allows him to see events in two ways at once. History is not simply a "joke"; it is also tragic. Like Izzy G, Stead distances himself from the confusing events of his lifetime.

Stead, unlike Baxter, does not define or comment upon the ambiguities he discerns. Baxter often makes it clear that the poet's opinion is crucial to the poem.

I thought of our strange lives, the grinding cycle
 Of death and renewal come to full circle
 And of man's heart, that blind Rosetta stone²¹
 Mad as the polar moon, decipherable by none.

We are never in doubt as to Baxter's personal attitudes:- "It hurts me to watch the snaring of the unicorn".²² Stead's personal opinion is difficult to identify because he may invest one and the same image with many contrary effects as in the following example:

Milhaud in a wheelchair
 80, with dyed hair²³

Milhaud displays dignity and vanity, resolution and deception. In addition, the reader compares Milhaud's flamboyant, distinctive career with his tragic image at the age of eighty.

To Needham, the "vision" of "Walking Westward" is "pernicious" and its "extreme position...unfounded". Since the poem's ambiguities have eluded him, he perceives only a "sense of emptiness", a "bleak

20. C.K. Stead: "Walking Westward". (The Shed 1979), p34..

21. J.K. Baxter: "Rocket Show". Collected Poems (Oxford University Press 1980), p81.

22. *ibid.* "Autumn Testament 25", p553.

23. C.K. Stead: "Walking Westward", p35.

cosmic and historic framework" and a grotesquely exaggerated impression of the "discontinuity of human experience".²⁴ The lack of balance in his interpretation has led him to the conclusion that to Stead the land and the people of New Zealand are "meaningless". Needham has assumed Stead's position to be that of nihilism or a stoic despair.

Stead's response to Needham revealed only the most superficial facet of the meaning of some of the poem's early lines. Needham, since his interpretation differed from that put forward by Stead, retorted:

it may be that Professor Stead is cultivating some subtle paradox; but at present I can only regard his words as bearing out my contention that his poems exaggerate the bareness of 'Lackland'.²⁵

In fact, the poem does accrete many a "subtle paradox".

Needham does not declare a religious stance but hints that religious attitudes lie behind his response to "Walking Westward". He evades clarification by remarking that -

...this question is evidently complicated by religious issues which it would be folly to broach in a short review.²⁶

From a traditional religious standpoint, despair is anathema. Needham's erroneous perception of an "extreme position" has led him to find that the poem offers -

too little of a general human bearing along which the reader can enter into the experience.²⁷

Another criticism of "Walking Westward" concerned itself exclusively with the poem's form. Alan Loney considers that a modern poet should be working in a form that involves "risk...uncertainty...fascination and delight in...accidents". The use of

established forms does not seem (...) a viable way for a mature writer to take up his own speech as the 'cry of its occasion'.²⁸

24. Comment May 1979, p35.

25. Comment September 1979, p10-11.

26. Comment May 1979, p35.

27. ibid.

28. Alan Loney: "Some Aspects of C.K. Stead's 'Walking Westwards'" (sic) in Islands 30, Oct 1980, p249.

Stead writes, according to Loney, with an "air of certainty". This "self-certainty" will -

as long as he hangs on to it, prevent him from achieving anything like truly open form.

Loney avoids offering his own definition of open form by saying:

It would be more useful to talk of "field composition" and so by-pass the 'open form/closed form' antagonism.²⁹

Stead had no doubt that the mode in which he was working was open form.³⁰ He describes a poet using open form as one who

...wants literature to invade, to absorb life, almost to become indistinguishable from it, to collapse conceptual distinctions (...) That is one aspect of open form - an openness to experience as it occurs (...) an attempt to get nearer to the true feel of experience;³¹

Stead regards poetry as "not a form but a quality. Achieve the quality one might say and the form will look after itself".³²

Stead's "air of certainty" may result from his belief that "the form will look after itself"; the urgent matter that has prompted the poet to write will find its own form. Each section takes the form demanded by its mood and focus.

Loney has judged the form of "Walking Westward" while ignoring its intention and the themes that find expression there. He has separated form from content. By contrast, Trevor Dobbin has observed that -

meaning and form are generated from within the poetry allowing these elements to fuse in a unique manifestation of imagination and energy.³³

Michael Harlow's view is in line with Dobbin's when he suggests that "the language and shape (is) called forth by the material of the poem".³⁴

Loney complains that Stead "values his considerable skills more

29. *ibid.* p248.

30. "... I have gone back to open form..." C.K. Stead: In the Glass Case, p277.

31. *ibid.* p248.

32. *ibid.*

33. Trevor Dobbin: Climate Winter 1980, p84.

34. Michael Harlow: Landfall 133, March 1980, p79.

highly than his language".³⁵ Such a remark constitutes a personal attack upon the poet, calling into question the value of Loney's criticism. Stead's language and his skill cannot be separated.

Among the reviewers who have appreciated "Walking Westward", Peter Simpson has observed the surface "lucidity and clarity of Stead's work".³⁶ Simpson and Trevor Dobbin have noted that the reader responds to "minute particulars" or "fragments of experience" by making what Dobbin describes as "imaginative leaps from specific to wider contexts". This "poetry as exploration" requires that the reader "must create his own understanding from a myriad of experiences".³⁷ The method is what Michael Harlow calls "escribing" rather than "describing"; Stead's "trusting strategy" allows texts to "declare themselves".³⁸

Artistry lies beneath the artlessness of a seemingly random sequence of impressions. Simpson observes "a cunningly concealed art which binds the whole into an impressive and subtle unity". Dobbin considers that a tightly crafted amalgam of open form poems is linked by a series of images that "ripple through the sequence". To Harlow, Stead is a poet in the Greek sense of "a maker of texts". Images and motifs insistently reappear in his work "like a rondo motif in musical composition".

Dobbin appreciates Stead's conversational rhythms, his subtle use of spacing to indicate pauses and the unobtrusive end rhymes and internal rhymes. Stead, in Harlow's view is "listening to the character of his own speech and scoring it on the page spacially and semantically (...) The scoring on the page (...) is reflective of sense and the peculiar speech arc of the experience".

The notion that academic poetry implies a lack of 'raw' emotion is refuted by Harlow. History, literary allusions, place names may all have "an affective content". Stead's concern is with the "apprehension of the absolute condition of present things". Everything has its own resonant value.

35. Islands 30, p250.

36. Peter Simpson: "The Modernist Tradition". Landfall 132, p362-369.

37. Trevor Dobbin: Review of "Walking Westward". Climate 31, p79-85.

38. Michael Harlow: Review of "Walking Westward". Landfall 133, p73-80.

II

By contrast "SCORIA" has been uncontroversial. It has in fact provoked very little comment. Twelve favourable lines appeared in a brief Listener review of Geographies.³⁹ Mike Doyle in his Landfall review⁴⁰ devoted two pages to it, and K.O. Arvidson, without explanation, omitted "SCORIA" from his commentary on Stead's recent poetry - though he offered his reaction to the other three sections of Geographies.⁴¹

Doyle discerns in "SCORIA" "overt traces of Pound's influence". Stead himself has affirmed that

Pound has influenced me strongly, and Eliot has been important too; but also the poets who have written since Pound and Eliot and who owe a lot to them have been influences as well.⁴²

While acknowledging that Stead has been influenced by Pound, I would take issue with Doyle's assessment of what it is that Stead has gleaned from Pound.

Doyle finds that Stead's internal rhyme is "typical of Pound - via Anglo-Saxon". But internal rhyme abounds in poetry in English - "via Anglo-Saxon":

By the Isar, in the twilight
(D.H. Lawrence) 43

Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey;
(G.M. Hopkins) 44

I should hear him fly with the high fields
(Dylan Thomas) 45

The barriers shining vertical and white
(Roy Fuller) 46

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39. Listener, Vol 102 No. 2226, p94.
40. Mike Doyle: "The Poetics of C.K. Stead". Landfall 144, p472-474.
41. Journal of New Zealand Literature No. 1 1983, p38-42.
42. Landfall 149, p450-451.
43. D.H. Lawrence: "River Roses". The Complete Poems (Penguin 1977) p216.
44. G.M. Hopkins: "The Wreck of the Deutschland". Poems and Prose (Penguin 1953), p14.
45. Dylan Thomas: "Fern Hill". Collected Poems 1934-52 (Dent 1956) p160.
46. Roy Fuller: "The Image". The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse (Oxford 1973), p453.

order - "Empty are the ways of this land"⁴⁹ - and by using older forms - "Pull down thy vanity / Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,"⁵⁰

It could be that Doyle sees both Pound and Stead as encompassing verbal fields that range through culture, languages, history, memory and literature. But Pound ranges far more widely than Stead, so widely that he himself acknowledged that the Cantos lack coherence.

And I am not a demigod
I cannot make it cohere⁵¹

I consider the allegation that "the influence of Pound is not always fully assimilated" to be unwarranted. Stead does owe a debt to Pound. But it is a different kind of debt from that alleged by Doyle. Stead claims to have learnt from Pound how to relegate the 'I' of the poet to the background, instead of placing it at the centre of the poem.⁵² And he has also taken from Pound the method of accreting "radioactive fragments"⁵³ in order to achieve a work that has length without loss of energy and intensity. The technique of bringing unity to a long poem by means of recurring motifs is one that is not entirely successful in the Cantos, though Stead employs it effectively in "Walking Westward" and "SCORIA".

The reader of Stead's work "...does not get the sense of a single voice (...) One cannot yet say with certainty, 'This poem can only be a C.K. Stead'."⁵⁴ In this opinion Doyle is at variance with Harlow who finds "one of the unifying principles of "Walking Westward" to be "quality of voice - the emotional range and impact of the voice;"⁵⁵ Like Harlow I find that Stead does have a clearly discernible "voice". In my concluding chapter, after a study of "Walking Westward" theme by theme and "SCORIA" section by section, I shall try to define his distinctive "voice" as a poet.

49. Ezra Pound: "'Ione, Dead the Long Year'", p54. *ibid.*

50. Pound: "Canto LXXXI", p180. *ibid.*

51. Pound: "Canto CXVI", p191. *ibid.*

52. Landfall 148, p450.

53. C.K. Stead: In the Glass Case, p149. Stead's use of "radioactive" implies expression that causes maximum agitation or response in the reader.

54. Landfall 144, p480.

55. Landfall 133, p74.