

That Second Body: An Australian View of Allen Curnow's Progress

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IT IS EASY FOR ME to remember when and where I first saw a poem by Allen Curnow. After my father came back from the War, back from his years in Asia early in 1946, he bought several copies of John Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*: unusual objects in a household — flat-hold, rather — starved of modern poetry except for the narratives of Stephen Vincent Benet. In *Penguin New Writing* number twenty-seven, published in April of that year, there were some good modern poems. Three were by Louis Macneice and one of these three, "Carrick Revisited," might fairly be regarded (to refine a suggestion of Peter Levi's) as the seed from which that rich crop of Ulster poetry has since sprung.

Another was a fine poem by Allen Curnow, his by now much-anthologized "Landfall in Unknown Seas."¹ Its curiously impersonal vocative opening seized the attention:

Simply by sailing in a new direction
You could enlarge the world.

Although this elegantly self-deporting public poem was clearly about New Zealand, I did not know that Curnow himself was a New Zealander. Nor did I even know that there were New Zealand writers at all. Not that I assumed there were not: it was just that in those days of centripetal empire, I did not think of New Zealand at all, except for the geography which we had carefully learned at school. If it comes to that, for a long time I knew of no Canadian writers except Leacock and C. G. D. Roberts, no South Africans except Olive Schreiner.

When I turned back to Curnow's poetry in the mid-fifties, beguiled by the great moa and by the bounding lyricism of "Wild Iron," there was no need to flip a special Kiwi switch in readerly production, no call for inter-dominion adjustments, since he was already assimilated to a generation of poetry which was appealing to me strongly: that of Macneice, Auden, Bernard Spencer, Empson, and Sidney Keyes. Looking back at the poems collected in *Island and Time* (1941) and *Sailing or Drowning* (1943), one can now find much that was written *by* the early forties, in a sense that is not dishonourable or reductive: we all have to get our bag of tricks from somewhere. History does not remain passive when there are texts being produced.

Curnow's most derivatively thirties utterance is to be found in "Dialogue of Island and Time," where his syntax gets itself caught in Audenesque cramps along with the flying line-endings of adverbial *sdrucchiola*:

The third and fourth generations
Begin to speak differently
Suffering mutations,
Cannot help identity

But the Audenesque is far more spryly used in "It Is Too Late" from the same volume, used to confront the beginning of the Japanese war with elastic rhymes and the quickness of short lines. One thing Curnow had yet to do was to move from the shepherding of plural, often abstract, nouns to the delineation of singular objects like those in the alarming catalogue, "Baldachin, black umbrella, bucket with a hole / drizzled horizon, sleazy drape," where metonymy leaps with all the grandeur of metaphor.

In early to middle Curnow we can see much of the then-common enterprise of assimilating late Yeats: dialogues, choruses and large announcements; an interest in experimentally plucking available verse forms, including sonnets, quatrains, ode stanzas (in "The Scene"), free verse, and even pantoums; and an un-pastoral interest in the expressive possibilities of hardish landscapes.

By the 1943 volume Curnow was beginning to show signs of a more pervasive irony, a sardonic long view of possibilities:

Between you and the South an older enmity
Lodged in the searching mind, that would not tolerate

So huge a hegemony of ignorance

Awkward but interesting; apart from a proleptic use of that nowadays cant term, "hegemony," this already shows affinities with the use of wry, shouldering polysyllables of "Moro Assassinato," another slant on the harshness of history from twenty-five years later:

Normality was the moment's
mixture, moment by moment
improvising myself,
ideas, sensations, among them
the lacquered acridities
of ducted air in the car,

One can readily see why some readers have found Curnow's delivery to be cold or abstracted, but such a judgement seems to me merely to account for surface, and not always for that.

The polysyllables that began to flourish in *Sailing or Drowning* were taking the place of a theolog's elemental monosyllables, Curnow having been in fact a theology student in Auckland for a couple of years in the early 1930's. The early poems are chocked together from such elemental building blocks: eyes, cold, stars, blood, light, soul, dry, Christ. But he had come to see the inflexibility of these materials and had fallen into his generation. For may we not by now think of a generation which held their art in place by fastidious linguistic fingering: Auden, Empson, Macneice, Elizabeth Bishop, F. T. Prince, Slessor, and sometimes Hope? All had been released by Yeats and Eliot from the declared self; all were fond of impersonal forms of syntax; all could have written, "Blood from a conundrum: insoluble but endlessly / Amusing in the attempt." The heritage is foregrounded by the title of Curnow's "Spring 1942," which resembles "Sept. 1, 1939,"² which in turn derives from "Easter 1916."

Another interesting development in Curnow's poetry during the war decade is to be seen and heard in his expressive use of

rather heavy enjambments, like these in the first stanza of "Dunedin":

Is it window or mirror the enormous
Deforming glass propped on horizons here?
What did we see? Some town pinched in a pass
Across which stares perpetual startled sheer
Vacuous day, the kind blind wilderness,
Space put behind bars, face pushed too near:

We may see this kind of muscle-flexing versification as a staging-post on the way to the easily colloquial enjambments and waterfall lines of late Curnow: to that unbuttoned style which has reached its extreme in section VIII of "Organo ad Libitum," from Curnow's 1982 collection.

Poems 1949-57 show some further turning points, a swerving away notably from the authoritative iambic epigrams which lie down together in the sonnets of the two previous books ("Each day makes clear a statement to the next"; "Unhurt, there is no help for her who wakens"; "Transport is licensed somewhere at the top"; "This you suppose is what goes on all day"). Although such well-trodden pentametric neatness of mind was loosening up through run-on and heavy caesura in *At Dead Low Water*, readers must have rejoiced in the new formal freedoms, the range of shaping, that were to be found in Curnow's 1957 volume. Heaven knows how any particular creative imagination goes about its work, but we may think wonderingly about the fact that this volume preceded a virtual silence of fifteen years, a silence which looked at the time like the drying-up so common in creative artists once they have exhausted their first barrel of goods: the middle years' syndrome, indeed.

"Some burn damp faggots, others may consume / The entire combustible world in one small room," Yeats declared, and it is certainly the case that poets of distinction tend to fall into two categories or life-curves: most burn up their talents quickly (a trope not included in Jesus's parable), but a few like Hardy or Yeats himself — and we take this for a mark of peculiar distinction of character — go on developing new artistic strengths into their old age. All honour to Curnow, then, who could emerge from his silence to sail on into his seventies by way of four truly

impressive books of poetry. He survives amongst us, having out-lived such turbulent younger incendiaries as Dylan Thomas, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and Baxter. Not merely endures, but survives.

To return to that curious threshold, the 1957 collection: here almost every poem was a fresh protean enterprise, whether into short couplets, half-rhymed quatrains, long stanzas, the broken alliterative measures of "The Changeling," the Pindaric ode become elegy ("In Memory of Dylan Thomas"), a shrinking suite in honour of Wallace Stevens and one lonely self-subverting sonnet of vivaciously spring step and turn:

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

By one like wet matches you scrape and drop.

"To Introduce the Landscape"

The mixed diction of this sonnet also ventures far out beyond those proverb-forging habits of the late 1930's and early 1940's, years of what G. Rostrevor Hamilton called "the tell-tale article." Here is room in an once-colourless writer for such mandarin colourations as "Ponderous pine wagging his wind-sopped brushes / Daubs Latin skies upon Chinese lagoons." We are following a self-inventing poet who has moved far out from those modest beginnings fairly characterized by C. K. Stead when he wrote, "Mr. Curnow, one feels, was never chosen by the Muse."³

Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects of 1972 introduces what we may call late Curnow, whose nimble poems inhabit a post-Stevens, post-Wittgenstein and, as people are so fond of saying these days, post-modernist climate. They belong to a word-world, they textualize themselves, they joke about their own acts of mimesis, and they are manifest descendants of "He Cracked a Word" and "To Introduce the Landscape," poems which were already subverting the claims of perceptionism. Indeed, we may say that just as Curnow has become more and more skilled at memorable mimesis he has come to build into his poetry disavowals of the linguistic possibility of mimesis:

A wood god botherer stands
not fifty feet from his own
door, calls trees by name.

Speak up we can't hear you.

This line, the way of disenchanting landscapes and disclaiming the romantic religion of natural perception takes us on into the writing syntax of a far more complicated poem from Curnow's most recent collection:

as you recline bare-armed looking
up the spongy firmament has begun
drizzling the paper's getting wet

put the pen down go indoors
the wind bloweth as it listeth or listeth
not there's evidently something
up there and the thing is the spirit

whistle for it wait for it
one moment the one that's one too
many is the glassiest calm an
"intimate question" for the asking.

"The Weather in Tohunga Crescent"

In the work of a poet who has long adhered to the regional against the so-called claims of the universal, a poet who has stood for the "local and special," these circumlocutions are hard-won. In a very young poet syntax like this might well sound smart or trendy; in Curnow this writing is a very late point in a long process of renunciations in the course of which the poet has become less and less shaman or god-botherer, and his writings more and more provisional. The poems declare themselves to be products of a poetic tradition, of our language games, even of print culture itself. Let me cite an especially subversive, self-dismantling stanza from *You will know when you get there* (1982):

Absently the proof-reader corrects
the typesetter. According to copy
the word is exotic. He cancels
the literal r and writes an x.

All this might suggest that Curnow is no more than the lapsed theolog turned into intellectual sceptic, that he who once believed in the fall of man now believes in little more than the collapse of the signifier. A reading of the last four volumes of his poetry (and I shall say nothing of his plays here) will show that this is far from the case. His poems continue to be full of that old-fashioned ingredient, subject-matter. As I observed in a review of *You will know when you get there*,⁴ his striving for intense mimesis of natural objects has grown stronger and stronger. He strains his lines after the evanescent physical experience, as in

or ten summers
later the long breath held
bursting under —
water in Corsair Bay
and breaking
surface from the deep green
dive,
the breathless
exhalation tweaking
the neck,

even if he can also turn to parodying the appeal back to fact and experience, as he does in the opening of "A Window Frame":

This paper is eleven and three-quarter
inches long, eight and one quarter inches
wide, this table four feet five inches long,
thirty-two inches wide, this room
twelve feet square, this house one
thousand square feet,

But this is a poetry which continues to lay claim to wind, water, cloud, trees, timber, steel, traffic, and household objects, even in the very same poems in which the acknowledged limits of language keep beating the claim down.

More than this, Curnow's recent poetry continues to be strong on subject matter in a larger, looser sense of that phrase: the man in the street's sense. The two long sequences around which *An Incorrigible Music* is structured dramatize and explore assassinations: those of Giuliano de' Medici and Aldo Moro. They

are in a sense echoed by "Dichtung und Wahrheit," another murder poem, even though it derives from a fiction. Knife, gun, sacrifice, and death recur, Isaac-wise, through the seven other shorter, non-dramatic poems in *An Incurable Music* to the point where even the moon is described as "cutting it fine," or to where a quaint bump of syntax produces the line, "Millions die miserably never before their time." This poetry is absorbed by what Anthony Hecht once called "the place of pain in the universe."

As well as the place of pain, there are the pains and pleasures of place. Curnow's concern with region, with rootedness and with the Adamic naming of antipodean phenomena were well known as early as the 1940's. Not only did he evince his appetite for locality in particular poems; he spoke to the cause again and again in essays and introductions, slamming the loose term, "universal" and even going so far as to assert, "I wanted to place New Zealand at the centre, the only possible place." And his excellent *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960) might be seen as a deliberate verbal mapping of a place in time.

In Curnow's most recent verse this passion for a particular location reasserts itself, although by now it is less New Zealand as phenomenon than familiar bits of coast, bay, suburb, recorded and rendered lovingly: in the process, a new joyousness makes itself felt in the poetry, the syntax becoming not merely subversive or provisional but downright jaunty. If one expects chill, hardening or sloppiness in an old man's poetry, the creative buoyancy of "You Get What You Pay For" and "The Parrots at Karekare" will come as a remarkable surprise. Not only are they as tautly written as anything that the poet has ever done but they have about them an air which I would call, at the risk of sentimentality, falling in love with life all over again. Their crisp phrasing combines a sense of delight with a nimble spirit of enquiry: place and time elicit the leaps of self. Language lives in the body.

Curnow is in his seventies, and I shall make no attempt to predict what he might still do, but the excited intelligence of his recent poetry, its joy in rootedness, directs me back to a comment

he made years ago, which may serve as an epigraph to his own work:

Santayana somewhere calls a man's native country "a kind of second body". A writer's vision may be said, I believe, to be mediated through that second body, in some sense analogous to the mediation of his personal body and the agonizing limitation of his private individuality.⁵

NOTES

- ¹ I had no way of knowing then that "Landfall in Unknown Seas" had already been published in Curnow's 1943 volume, *Sailing or Drowning*. It seems that John Lehmann regarded previous New Zealand publication as no impediment to the appearance of a poem in England.
- ² It has not been noted that Auden's famous/notorious poem reappeared during the war with a new title, later discarded. In Tambimuttu's anthology, *Poetry in Wartime* (1943) it was entitled "September 1 1941."
- ³ "Allen Curnow's Poetry: Notes towards a Criticism," *Landfall*, 17 (1963), 45. Stead also, rightly, draws attention to "those bland and breathtaking gear-changes" in Curnow's poetry.
- ⁴ Allen Curnow: Further Out," *Scripts*, II, 2 & 3 (Spring 1983), 143-45.
- ⁵ "New Zealand Literature," in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), p. 152.