

*Knowing Your Katholon from
Your Hekasta:
The Practical Poetics of
Allen Curnow and Ezra Pound*

MICHAEL FAHERTY

EVEN THOUGH Ezra Pound spent a dozen or so of the most energetic years of his life in London trying to slap some sense, and the occasional bit of nonsense, into English poetry, he left Britain almost as if he had never been there. This is not to say that he did not leave behind a disciple or two, but they remained as alien to the literary establishment in London and Oxbridge as Pound himself had been. There was, of course, Basil Bunting, Pound's handpicked successor, who might be found in the hinterland of Persia or his hometown in Northumberland, but almost never in Bloomsbury or on the banks of the Isis; there was Hugh MacDiarmid up in Scotland, quite often on the remote Shetland island of Whalsay, hell-bent on matching Pound eccentricity for eccentricity; and there was Donald Davie working in the universities, both on the British Isles and abroad, waging a lonely and largely unsuccessful war to put Pound's name on the syllabi of more English departments. But apart from these rare exceptions, Pound was not the sort of literary predecessor that a British poet is likely to cite as an influence, much less a mentor.¹ As Davie himself pointed out, "British contemporaries, with very few exceptions, have buried their heads in the sand whenever the name of Pound has come up" ("A Response" 61). This has not been the case, however, in New Zealand. Not only has Pound been mentioned with remarkable frequency in recent discussions of poetry there, but where one used to hear the name "Yeats," one now often hears, "Pound." A good example of this is the debate on

“open form” that took place in New Zealand in the late seventies and early eighties. In one memorable episode, Karl Stead argued that what was needed was a good dose of Pound to cure New Zealand verse of its residual Georgianism, while Allen Curnow, one of the poets sometimes held responsible for importing and nurturing this regressive tendency, kindly reminded his friend that Pound had been there all along, lending support not only to the poems he (Curnow) had already written, but to the ones he was writing still.

Stead probably did not need too much reminding. He had repeatedly stated that what kept Curnow a good poet was his simple and straightforward insistence that the poem not lose contact with the world to which it referred, and that it adhere to Pound’s first and foremost principle of “direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective”:

We are all in the habit of saying that poetry must be “concrete.” Few of us look for reasons why this should be so; we simply observe again and again that “abstraction,” appropriate to large areas of science and philosophy, is destructive to poetry. What do we require of a poem when we say that it should be “concrete,” that its “texture,” its “imagery,” should be rich and full? In effect we are asking for an assurance that there is (to employ a phrase from the introduction to Mr. Curnow’s Penguin anthology) “a reality prior to the poem.” To come honestly to grips with experience here and now (by which I do *not* mean writing descriptive or “scenic” verse) is to submit oneself to the most rigorous of all disciplines; it is not to negate the constructive intelligence, but to subordinate it to the recognition of “things as they are,” in all their complexity, and thus to insist that our poetry should be a truthful report upon experience. (“Poet of the Real” 203-04)

However, like writers nearly everywhere in the sixties and seventies, Stead began to wonder whether New Zealand poets could still make such a bold claim for a direct relationship between their poems and “a reality prior to the poem” without having to look constantly over their shoulders for critics fresh from the Continent with copies of the latest structuralist or post-structuralist treatise tucked securely under their arms, and whether this did not suggest that perhaps the poetics behind the writing had had its day and that it was now time for what he called “another set of terms” (“From Wylan” 139). In what

became an important address to the Writers' Conference at the Victoria University of Wellington in August 1979, Stead paid tribute to Curnow for having directed the debate in New Zealand since the thirties with the introductions to his two anthologies and the critical response that had followed them but, at the same time, he suggested that a poetics that was appropriate nearly half a century ago might not be so anymore:

It was very much a product of the literary thinking of the 1930s. It placed great emphasis on "truth" and on "reality"; and Curnow added a regional element by implying that in our case the "reality" laid bare by the poem might be expected to be recognizably "New Zealand." As a general expectation this was not unreasonable. But was it also, as some poets felt, prescriptive? Certainly Curnow himself could not have written some of the best of his recent work if he had stuck exclusively to what he called in his 1963 lecture on this subject "the New Zealand referent." ("From Wystan" 139-40)

Although Stead argued that this sort of poetics owes more to "modern" British poets like Hardy, Auden, and Larkin than it does to "modernist" poets like Pound, Eliot, and Williams, since it insists on poetry that is "harnessed to something beyond itself," he also felt the need to explain, in a postscript to the lecture, that this does not mean that he (Stead) had banished "things" from his verse any more than Pound himself would have, and that "what the poems of Pound, early Eliot, and Williams at their Modernist best force upon us remorselessly is things, scenes, sounds, voices, particulars – a real teeming world" (159). Nor did this mean that Stead thought that much of Curnow's recent work was not "modernist" in the best sense of that term, that the poems published since the end of the semi-mythical "long silence" that lasted from 1957 until 1972 showed that he had abandoned the "closed form" of his British models and adopted the "open form" of the Americans, pointing to "Moro Assassinato" as a perfect example of this change of style, witting or otherwise.² Apparently coached to some extent by Stead, Alistair Paterson repeated this praise in his 15 *Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, an anthology published in 1980 to trumpet the arrival of the "open form" to those shores, not only suggesting to his readers that one of the finest examples of the

new poetry was the same poetry Stead had cited above, but placing Curnow amongst the new movement's exclusive "vanguard" (xiii, xv).

While Curnow was no doubt grateful to Stead for linking his recent work with that of the younger "open form" poets, he was a bit puzzled as to how he should respond to all this. His bemusement was particularly evident in a lecture given at the Turnbull House in Wellington in the winter of 1981:

It was quite a surprise to me, not very long ago, to find a few of my recent poems featured in a rather special anthology called *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*. I should explain that the surprise wasn't that the poems were included — I had been asked for them, everything had been done properly — it was to discover that this anthology, with its preface, was designed as a kind of manifesto for a poetic theory called "open form poetry." I might have been prepared for it, perhaps, by C.K. Stead's illuminating discussion of the whole subject in his lecture to the 1979 literary conference in Wellington. But surprised I was; a bit like the surprise of Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme* on discovering that he had been talking prose all his life. ("Olson as Oracle" 305)

What puzzled Curnow even more, however, was that Stead had proposed replacing his poetics with a new theory of poetry based on the teachings of Pound and, as far as he could remember, that is precisely where his own approach had come from. This is not to say that Curnow is the sort of writer who writes according to a set of rules and that his rules just so happen to be Pound's. In fact, he seems to have a rather healthy suspicion of literary theories and aesthetic discussions and, as he recalled in 1973, an aberrant attempt at the age of twenty-one to compose a "theory of poetry" persuaded him that he would probably be better off without one and, happily, the urge had not returned ("Conversation" 255). This personal distaste for dogma seems to have had something to do with the way in which Curnow responded to the debate on "open form," clearly surprised that younger poets who felt that his poetics had become a touch too "prescriptive" might turn to the Black Mountain Poets instead, writers who seemed to think long and hard about what a poem should be before putting pen to paper:

In the case of “open form” poetry, I think we have seen a peculiar tendency to put theory first and poetic practice second. In order to write “open form,” the poet is assumed *first* to have read and mastered the principles of “projective verse,” in particular as these are expounded by the late Charles Olson, by Robert Creeley, and other American poets associated with them. (“Olson as Oracle” 306)

Curnow contrasted this approach with that of the poet whom Olson often referred to as “the master” and whom Stead had already identified as the mentor of this new movement, arguing that Pound’s three “rules” of Imagism remained valid simply because they were never meant to be “prescriptive,” but merely “descriptive”:

It’s worth noting that Pound does not pretend to offer a brand-new system for producing a brand-new kind of art. He is describing, in his own terms, a process by which “the greatest works of art” have already been achieved, and by implication, the way towards all new achievement in art. *And* he is deducing theory from art, not art from theory; the right way round, as it seems to me. (308)

What clearly perplexed Curnow was the claim that the writer who insisted that the only way to learn to write poetry was to read poetry, was also behind this new movement, whose only contributions to the development of verse in the twentieth century were, as far as he could tell, an “attempt to provide poets with a *method*, a kit of practical rules for the composition of ‘projective verse’” and a certain amount of “evangelical enthusiasm”:

From the start, it’s clear that we are in for something more radical than Pound ever dreamt of; we are in another world, if not another planet, from Pound. Pound, whatever we choose to make of his political aberrations, took poetry with an immense and, for his time, extraordinary *seriousness*. He was, I believe, humble before it and its history. I’m not sure that he didn’t say the last word — in English anyway, and if there can *be* a last word — on the subject of *vers libre*, and a few other problems of diction and versification which have confronted poets in our century. He affirmed his belief that poets should try to know, and learn from, *all* poetry, of all possible ages and languages, and to master *all* systems of metre. A poet could not have too many masters or too many languages. Whatever Pound was, he was not, and here’s the contrast I wish to point out, a poetic Messiah, whose mission and message was to

correct the errors of centuries past. The errors which concerned him were "modern" errors. His "modernism" was grounded on a profound sense of tradition, not merely classical and Renaissance, but more recent and Romantic. Not many of us may be able to follow Pound's advice, for instance, "to dissect the lyrics of Goethe coldly into their component sound values," but it is within anybody's means to "read as much of Wordsworth as does not seem too unutterably dull." In all this, Pound seems to me to be in a true line of descent from the great innovators and reformers of poetry; in contrast to the kind of extravagant syncretist and philosophical dilettante whom I find addressing me in Olson's "Projective Verse" essay. (309)

Following his own study of this new poetics, Curnow said he could find nothing "new" in it whatsoever other than a rehash of Pound's standard assault on the flatulence and rhetoric of the Edwardians and a couple of paragraphs all but directly lifted from Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," merely substituting the word "emotion" for the word "energy." As he had said a few years prior to this debate, if observant readers like Stead and Paterson saw a resemblance between the work he was doing now and the work being done by younger writers following the dictates of "open form," it was not because he had absorbed anything from them or their American contemporaries, but because he had been reminded, through their "discovery," or rather, "rediscovery" of poets like Pound, Eliot and Cummings, of what he had discovered himself decades before ("Conversation" 263-64).

Not only did this debate give Curnow an opportunity to sound off on the current state of New Zealand poetry in the public manner that the introductions to the anthologies had previously allowed him to do, but it also sent him back to his bookshelves to dig out his copy of Pound's *Literary Essays*, the collection edited by Eliot that contains, among other curiosities, the famous bit of prose that is little more than a ragbag of odds and ends that the thirty-three-year-old Pound gathered together in 1918 under the somewhat telling title of "A Retrospect," clearly confident that it held the seeds of a new age in English letters. Amongst those seeds are the three Imagist principles that Curnow felt could still stand some repeating, item by

item, in his lecture in 1981, and the two pieces that he has reported having reread in preparation for it, "A Few Don'ts" and "Credo" ("Olson as Oracle" 307-08). It may well be that he had not reread these pieces since he was a young poet, the sort of "neophyte" that Pound said they were intended for, but it is clear that many years later, he still believed writers at the start of their careers could glean much more from that short list of "do's" and the somewhat longer list of "don'ts" than they could ever hope to learn from Olson's muddled essay. Those lists were no doubt even more useful in the days when Curnow himself was attempting his own early poems since, if nothing else, Pound's first principle was there to help bridge the gap that seemed to concern so many New Zealand writers at the time, that is, the gap between the literary text and the somewhat intimidating natural world outside it. As Curnow recalled in a conference paper delivered in the late sixties:

Poetry, it may be supposed, does not exist to define *things*. Rather, things provide the terms, as they uniquely offer themselves to the poet, by which alone the definitions which we call poems are possible. It may happen that the mere learning to read a landscape, in a country colonized not much over a century ago, and doubtfully taking up the burden of its national identity, is a necessary, if rudimentary, accomplishment for a poet. He will attempt this, not out of patriotic piety, but out of his own search for self-definition. ("Distraction and Definition" 220)

It is obvious, however, that Curnow was implying once again that while these basic instructions can save many young poets from unnecessary headaches, they may not have a lot to say to those who have the better part of their careers behind them and who now have other concerns than those of "self-definition." This is not true, however, of the other piece of prose that Curnow mentioned in his lectures, Pound's first attempt at a "Credo." Although it was most likely written, as Curnow correctly noted, in 1911, before most of the other statements contained in "A Retrospect," including his early, somewhat cryptic explanations of Imagism, it provides a glimpse of what would eventually be his mature poetics, the sort of thinking that would carry him into his epic work and return with the full force of

rediscovery in *The Pisan Cantos*. At the time Pound wrote it, his interests were more thirteenth century than twentieth century, still very much absorbed in the post-graduate work he had brought with him from the States on the troubadours and one of their Tuscan successors, Guido Cavalcanti. However, that does not mean Pound was studying their poetry without an eye to improving his own:

My pawing over the ancients and semi-ancients has been one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do, and plenty does remain, for if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations. Each age has its own abounding gifts yet only some ages transmute them into matter of duration. (*Literary Essays* 11)

Pound's early findings, which actually altered very little over the years, were that while much of modern poetry was mired in thoughts and emotions whose only measure was yet more poetry, the lyrics of the troubadours and the Tuscans dealt directly with the outside world, or, as Pound put it in his "Credo": "In the art of Daniel and Cavalcanti, I have seen that precision which I miss in the Victorians, that explicit rendering, be it of external nature, or of emotion. Their testimony is of the eyewitness, their symptoms are first hand." Some years later, he developed these ideas at greater length in "Cavalcanti," an argument that Eliot considered important enough to include in his selection of the *Literary Essays* and that Pound, in his own way, considered important enough to warrant a post-graduate degree, sending the thesis on to his former professors at the University of Pennsylvania in the hope that they would accept it as the equivalent of a doctoral dissertation. They apparently did not think as much of it as Pound did, but a professor at the University of Georgia, Hugh Kenner, thinks it is "perhaps his most pregnant single prose essay" and as crucial to an understanding of Pound's later poetics as Ernest Fenollosa's treatise on the ideogram (394).

What Pound thought he had stumbled upon in his reading of Cavalcanti, and later, coincidentally, in the unpublished essay

Fenollosa's widow handed him in 1913, was some "dangerous thinking," or at least, thinking "dangerous" to "the peace of the medieval mind" that saw fit to ban the teaching of Aristotle at the University of Paris and to send Simon De Montfort to Occitania to level the "heretical" culture that had given rise to the troubadours. What first caught Pound's eyes were a few stray lines of a poem he was busy translating at the time, "Donna Mi Prega," a version of which later became the better part of Canto 36, that include what he believed to be the potentially blasphemous expression "*natural dimostramento*," words that seemed to sum up the thinking he had previously commented upon in "Credo." What the ostensibly innocent concept of "natural demonstration" challenged, thought Pound, was not only the medieval mandate of mind over body and its consequent "idiotic asceticism," but the entire medieval system of logic. Those two words were evidence enough for Pound that Cavalcanti's mind was more modern than medieval and that he, like Albertus Magnus and all the others who eventually made the renaissance possible, "wants no proof that contradicts the '*rationes naturales*,' he is not jamming down a dogma unsupported by nature" (*Literary Essays* 158-59). Pound probably could not believe his luck when he came across the same conclusion in Fenollosa's essay, where the American Sinologist observed, "It is a mistake to suppose, with some philosophers of aesthetics, that art and poetry aim to deal with the general and the abstract. This misconception has been foisted upon us by mediaeval logic. Art and poetry deal with the concrete of nature, not with rows of separate 'particulars,' for such rows do not exist" (23). Just as Pound admired the troubadours and the Tuscans for their attempt to counter this sort of thinking with "almost biological proof," Fenollosa admired the classical poets of Eastern cultures, whose ideogrammic language, he believed, had kept them in constant contact with the natural world, unaffected by the harmful influences of Western thought:

According to this logic, thought deals with abstractions, concepts drawn out of things by a sifting process. These logicians never inquired how the "qualities" which they pulled out of things came to be there. The truth of all their little checker-board juggling

depended upon the natural order by which these powers or properties or qualities were folded in concrete things, yet they despised the "thing" as a mere "particular," or pawn. It was as if Botany should reason from the leaf-patterns woven into our table-cloths. (12)

While Pound believed that Gemisto had introduced "a brand of Platonism" into Italy whose inherently practical approach posed a serious threat to those philosophies that were little more than "a mass of nomenclatures completely unstuck from reality" (*Guide* 44-45),³ Fenollosa concluded that, despite the best efforts of this "scientific" approach, Western thinking had largely retained its medieval appetite for abstraction and generalisation:

Let us consider a row of cherry trees. From each of these in turn we proceed to take an "abstract," as the phrase is, a certain common lump of qualities which we may express together by the name cherry or cherry-ness. Next we place in a second table several such characteristic concepts: cherry, rose, sunset, iron-rust, flamingo. From these we abstract some further common quality, dilution or mediocrity, and label it "red" or "redness." It is evident that this process of abstraction may be carried on indefinitely and with all sorts of material. We may go on for ever building pyramids of attenuated concept until we reach the apex "being." (26)

Or, as Pound put it, paraphrasing Fenollosa, if you ask a Westerner to define "red," he goes on about "a vibration or refraction of light" and "modes of energy" and so on "until you arrive at a modality of being, or non-being, or at any rate you get in beyond your depth." In contrast, if you ask an Easterner to define "red," he talks about roses and cherries and iron rust and flamingos, in other words, specific "things" that everyone "knows" (*ABC* 19-22). Although it was easy enough for Fenollosa to explain why medieval logic had never penetrated the East and corrupted its verse, Pound attributed the "Tuscan aesthetic," this "Mediterranean sanity" with its demand for "proof by experience" and its desire for poetic thoughts and feelings that "correspond to definite sensations undergone," to something as simple as the sun and higher temperatures: "The senses at first seem to project for a few yards beyond the body. Effect of a decent climate where a man leaves his nerve-set

open, or allows it to tune in to its ambience, rather than struggling, as a northern race has to for self-preservation, to guard the body from assaults of weather" (*Literary Essays* 152). Whatever the cause, Pound felt certain that he could detect "not a mere difference in degree" but "a difference in kind" between the austere art of the Dark Ages and the poetry of Daniel and Cavalcanti, the paintings of Botticelli at the Uffizi, and the architecture of St Hilaire, San Zeno and the Duomo di Modena (153-54).

In a poem written a couple of years after his attack on Olson and "open form" — composed partially in Rapallo, where Pound lived for twenty years before being arrested and put into a cage by the American government, and set just south of there in the sombre compartment of a train travelling through the almost endless series of tunnels along the rugged Ligurian coast towards Tuscany — Curnow also explores this Platonic dialogue between the things that the mind knows and the things that the senses know. The opening lines of "Do Not Touch the Exhibits" not only set out this distinction between the mental and sensual worlds, but bring in Plato as a tour guide:

A gulp of sea air, the train
bites off a beach, re-enters the rock.
A window, a blind cathode, greyly reflects,
Plato sits opposite, his nose in a map.
Where you're going's never what you see

and what you saw, is that where you went?
(*Selected Poems* 158-59)

Despite the obvious parallel between the dark enclosure of the railway tunnels and Plato's well-known analogy of the cave, Curnow seems to follow Pound in taking a keener interest in the discussions of the sixth book of *The Republic* than in those of the seventh, the earlier book where Socrates addresses the adverse relationship between the world of "things seen" and the world of "things thought," or, roughly, between "objects" and "ideas." This travelling companion is the same Plato who appeared earlier in a section of Curnow's long poem, *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects*, appropriately positioned between the

“things” blowing down the street and the “angels” rising into the air, not unlike the “ideas” of Plato that Dante transformed into “angels” in the *Convivio*, floating above the “concrete” world in their lighter font:

*all the little angels
ascend up ascend up*

with
Plato in the middle
holding out his diddle in the
way souls piddle from a
very great height and
dead against the wind,
dead against the wind. (140-41)

Like Pound before him, Curnow’s response to Plato is mixed, admiring that part of his philosophy that encouraged “natural demonstration” but ridiculing his weakness for the syllogism. While Curnow places him in the “middle” in the above poem, it is Plato’s own “middles” that take a “piddling” in a poem first published in 1982, “A Fellow Being,” where even the title pokes fun at this abstract form of deductive reasoning:

How is it that the thought
occurs
 over again of not
being (myself that is being
not) Dr Rayner
 and that when
it does that same moment the thought
of being him
 he being
dead for one thing and in
the light of such darkness
a fellow being?
 The syllogism
bubbles like
 a fart in a bottle
all men (major term) are
mortal all
 doctors (minor term)
are men
 therefore all

doctors
 divinity dentistry
 laws letters sciences cats
 horses Dr Faustus Dr
 Syntax Dr Slop and Thomas
 the angelic Dr are
 (were)
 mortal alas

Against all this flimsy, even if correct, logic, Curnow weighs what he calls the "poetry of fact," which includes such everyday items as names on gravestones, clippings from newspapers, and old photographs:

 the sillyolgism
 says that makes two of us and
 what are we going to do about
 that
 sub specie
aeternitatis?
 Anyway the
 thought occurs and it's a fact
 'attested by'
 the occurrence from
 time
 to time. (177-78)

Like Pound, Curnow has no particular quarrel with many of the conclusions of logical thought, but he does object to the way in which logic arrives at those conclusions. As Pound said in *ABC of Reading*, "Any general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what there is to meet it" (25). Just as a cheque is only considered "good" if there are sufficient funds to back it up, a general statement is only "good" if there are sufficient "facts" behind it.

The same Platonic dialogue between what the mind says to itself and what the senses say in response provides the poetic structure of "Do Not Touch the Exhibits," where the brief moments between one tunnel and the next do not so much distract the speaker from the pleasure of his own thoughts, as provide him with something to think about. This is not a movement out of the relative darkness of Plato's cave into the bright light of dialectical thought (although Pound himself pursued

an interest in the rites of Eleusis and Neo-Platonic mysticism), but rather, a welcome movement back into the light of the Mediterranean sun, intense as that light may be at times:

Daylight chips in again, with cypresses,
 olives, loquat (*nespola* the Japan
 medlar, not the one you eat rotten,
 the other sort, butter-yellow, sweet
 embedding slippery outside pips),
 artichokes, the native littoral
 cultivations, rivermouth litter,
 punctured cans, plastic bottles,
 and behind (supposedly) the weatherish
 pink and chrome villas gingerly
 seated, shutters to seaward,
 the Ligurian blue, too much of it.

These lines demonstrate precisely the sort of practical, "scientific" approach that Pound advocated in his poetics, the continual comparison of one thing with another, the endless search for the concise word and the correct definition, with Curnow first telling the loquat growing along the northern Italian coastline from the cypress and olive trees, and then taking some pains to point out the difference between the fruit of the medlar, eaten later in the season when soft and pulpy, and the fruit of the loquat, the so-called "Japan medlar" (*nespola* in Italian), with its larger pips. This is, of course, the same poet who, during an exhausting trip to Toronto, took the time to stop at the duty-free shop in Los Angeles just to ask whether they had any perfume that cost more than Patou, boarding his connecting flight with the satisfaction that he had got that particular detail right in "Blind Man's Holiday" (Hulse 37). He is also the same poet who took considerable offence to a reader's suggestion, in the *New Zealand Listener*, that he had got a detail wrong in "A Small Room with Large Windows," that geraniums would not, in fact, grow "wild on a wet bank":

Immediately a reply came back from the poet insisting that, irrespective of the customary behaviour of those plants in Wellington, there was, observable from the window of his house, "a scarlet geranium wild on a wet bank." Mr. Curnow is not in the

habit of replying to his critics. He has ignored the most flagrant misrepresentations of his position as anthologist. And it would not have been an occasion for a reply had the *New Zealand Listener's* correspondent suggested that the poem failed *as a poem*. But a letter suggesting an error of detail, an untruth, was a matter for earnest concern. How could the geranium represent more than itself if it were only a geranium of the mind — if it were not first, potentially or actually, an experience. ("Poet of the Real" 204-05)

This belief that there should be an honest and evidential relationship between the poem and external reality extends to Curnow's reading as well as his writing, occasionally following Davie's advice that what contemporary scholarship needs is more "pedestrian" criticism, especially when dealing with a work such as *The Cantos*, whose allusions are as likely to be "topographical" as they are literary or historical (*Studies* 210-17). Just as Davie found a visit to the Dordogne indispensable to his understanding of certain sections of Pound's long poem, and just as Pound himself spent weeks walking the trails of the troubadours through the South of France as part of his research into their work, Curnow reported that it was not until he actually went to New England that one of the *Four Quartets* opened up to him:

A couple of years ago, during a fortnight among the Atlantic bays and islands of New England, I think I understood for the first time why T.S. Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" is the most beautiful and profound of his longer poems. The colours, the smells, the weather of that coast supplied the physical experience, the physical aspects and details of the area of reality to which the poem refers. ("New Zealand Literature" 148-49)

Although at times he has criticized Eliot for his timidity and his refusal to take on reality "naked," with his "bare hands" ("Conversation" 259), this particular experience only strengthened Curnow's belief that the best poetry often has more to do with reality, and less to do with the imagination, than one might think. As he said of this occasion, "It was not so much a corroboration of the poem that the visit gained me, as a corroboration of a critical principle."

The same critical principle could easily apply to "Do Not Touch the Exhibits," where a ride on the train through the

Cinque Terre and its profusion of tunnels might help the reader appreciate the amount of time this poem spends in the dark, the villages, trash and all, suddenly appearing outside the window like picture-postcards. This is not to say that the poem is incomprehensible to the reader without such knowledge. The reader would do well, however, to assume the perspective portrayed in the poem, the perspective of a tourist acutely aware of the conflict between what the mind hopes to see on such holidays and what the senses actually tell it, between what the senses saw and what the mind actually remembers. Thus, the speaker goes from what he imagines can be seen along the coast outside the tunnel, to what is actually out there, and back again, showing the extent to which these images remain distinct:

Is there a reef with an angler on it
 whose rod makes a twitching U?
 Has he landed his fat silver-gilt
dorado, smack! on a pan in the mind?

Like this fish, known for its bright colors as well as the rapid change those colors undergo once it is removed from the water, the objects outside the train alter as they are removed from their environment and placed within the imagination, or placed within the makings of the imagination, the poem. However, this disagreement between what the mind thinks in the dark and what the senses see in the light does not seem to bother the speaker all that much, contentedly summing up the situation as the “red and white Martini sunbrollies” disappear from view once again: “Beachcombing, introjections / best stuffing for tunnels.” Just a few steps down the line at Pisa, Pound came to a similar conclusion, recalling the Cavalcanti poem that he had translated years ago in London and the poet-ics that it had inspired. In large chunks of his epic published prior to *The Pisan Cantos*, Pound had all but abandoned this approach in favor of lengthy Chinese and American histories but, at the detention center, circumstances forced him to work without his books, drawing only upon what his mind could remember and his senses could detect. As in Curnow’s poem, the structure of these cantos is a balance between the objects of the outside world, immediate and present, and the mind left to

itself, sometimes faithfully recording those objects for little more than the pure pleasure of it, as in Canto 74:

and there was a smell of mint under the tent flaps
 especially after the rain
 and a white ox on the road toward Pisa
 as if facing the tower,
 dark sheep in the drill field and on wet days were clouds
 in the mountain as if under the guard roosts.
 A lizard upheld me
 the wild birds wd not eat the white bread (*Cantos* 428)

And sometimes, like the image of the lizard supporting him above, for the absolute necessity of it, as in Canto 83:

and Brother Wasp is building a very neat house
 of four rooms, one shaped like a squat indian bottle
 La vespa, *la vespa*, mud, swallow system
 so that dreaming of Bracelonde and of Perugia
 and the great fountain in the Piazza
 or of old Bulagaio's cat that with a well timed leap
 could turn the lever-shaped door handle
 It comes over me that Mr. Walls must be a ten-strike
 with the signorinas
 and in the warmth after chill sunrise
 an infant, green as new grass,
 has stuck its head or tip
 out of Madame La Vespa's bottle
 mint springs up again
 in spite of Jones' rodents
 as had the clover by the gorilla cage
 with a four-leaf
 When the mind swings by a grass-blade
 an ant's forefoot shall save you
 the clover leaf smells and tastes as its flower (532-33)

As Kenner and others have noted, the phrase from Cavalcanti that Pound recalls in these cantos is "*natural dimostramento*," but the phrase he actually cites — "*dove sta memoria*" — expresses a concept that he also attributed to Platonic thinking (*Literary Essays* 159) a concept that helps him, at Pisa, to move towards his vision of Aphrodite, in the same way that it helped Dante construct his Beatrice. Having conscientiously gathered together a considerable number of luminous details, *spezzato*,

family trait as it is the trait of a certain strain of Western culture, an ascetic reserve that wants to keep the things of the mind on one side of the glass and the things of the outside world on the other, producing an aesthetic that prefers its art unblemished by the touch of external reality.

There is a somewhat unresolved tension in Curnow's poem, a debate between a self that would like to "cut corners and have them" and one that knows all too well that you cannot have your Botticelli without an adequate amount of olives and artichokes, punctured cans and plastic bottles, even "NATO frigates" with their "unmuzzled guns." Despite this debate, it is clear that Curnow has no more intention than Stead has of purging his poetry of "things." Curnow's poetry, as Chris Wallace-Crabbe has pointed out, "continues to lay claim to wind, water, cloud, trees, timber, steel, traffic, and household objects," given his latest verse conveys the feel of "falling in love with life all over again" (73-74). This is the same sort of feel that one gets so often in *The Pisan Cantos*, despite the obvious physical and mental anguish that they also express. Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but both Pound and Curnow seem to have rediscovered this practical style of poetics, first set down in "Credo" by the elder poet the same year the younger was born, in their sixties, in what Stead has aptly called Curnow's "second wind" (99). It may also be mere coincidence that it was not until their sixties that both writers became, for the first time, the obvious personae of their poetry, thus gaining Pound a readership he had never had before and never really had after. Even in his younger days, Pound was fond of reciting Constantin Brancusi's remark that "la sculpture n'est pas pour les jeunes hommes" (*Guide* 59), an observation that was obviously intended as a twist on the same philosopher that Pound recalled in the cantos written in the sun and the rain at Pisa, when he began to feel like an old man for the very first time in his life:

as says Aristotle
 philosophy is not for young men
 their *Katholou* can not be sufficiently derived from
 their *hekasta*
 their generalities cannot be born from a sufficient phalanx
 of particulars (441)

There can be no question that this is meant to apply to poetry as well as philosophy. As Pound stated on at least one occasion, the only mistake Plato made when he banned poets from his republic was that “he failed to specify that he meant sloppy poets” (*Guide* 128). While it would be silly to argue that this argument dismisses everything Pound wrote prior to these cantos as little more than juvenilia, or to contend that the same goes for Curnow, even though his own edition of *Selected Poems* includes only a handful published prior to his sixties, the examples of both these poets do seem to suggest that, as with the fruit of the medlar tree that Curnow can clearly tell from his loquat, a little ripeness does not hurt.

NOTES

- 1 A recent book on the subject has made this even more evident, despite its title (*Sons of Ezra: British Poets and Pound*). As the editors report in their introduction, this antagonism towards Pound seems to extend to British publishers, none of whom showed any interest whatsoever in their project, including Faber and Faber (Alexander and McGonigal 6).
- 2 Curnow has said that he never really stopped writing, that “quite significant parts of that 1972 book were written, at least in draft, as early as 1961. In fact, I think of *Trees, Effigies* as work of the 60s — contrary to the assumption that it was a decade of ‘silence’ on my part” (“Allen Curnow talks to Peter Simpson” 300).
- 3 Like the Neo-Platonists before him, Pound tended to gloss over any fundamental differences between Platonic and Aristotelian thought.

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