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Allen Curnow:
"the mixture's moment"

Allen Curnow's latest and last collection, *The Bells of Saint Babel's*, contains just twelve poems, five of them sustained meditations composed in lines measuring from three to six syllables, four more being poems imitated from originals by Pushkin. The remaining three are a rhyming pantoum for Peter Porter's seventieth birthday, an opening sequence of free verse lyrics called "Ten Steps to the Sea", and "The Pocket Compass", an unrhymed sonnet. "When and Where", one of the poems after Pushkin, speculates about the exact time and place of the poet's own death:

> And which day of which year
> to come will turn out to have been
> the anniversary, distant or near,
> of my death? Good question. The scene,
>
> will it be wartime, on a trip,
> or at home or in some nearby
> street, crashed coach or a ship-
> wreck that I'm to die?

Allen Curnow died of a heart attack in Auckland, New Zealand, on 23 September 2001, in his ninetieth year, the month he published *The Bells of Saint Babel's* with Carcanet Press. "The Pocket Compass" both re-renders and re-obliterates ("I paint it over again") one of Curnow's local scenes. In it, the poet may be echoing the first lines of "A Small Room with Large Windows" ("What would it look like if really there were only/ One point of the compass not known illusory,/ All other quarters proving nothing but quaint/ Obsolete expressions of true north") with lines about how he once used the dedicatee's compass to chisel the four cardinal points on the top of a wooden rail long since rotted away and replaced: "pencil or chisel can't replicate/ the rose in the mind's eye, indelibly true/ north by needle."

"The Pocket Compass", in memory of someone identified by initials only, is inclined to be far more specific about the *when* and *where* of the context than the *who* that was present, or significantly not present, at its sponsoring occasion. Such questions have echoed down the years for New Zealand poetry, at least since the controversy that grew from a galley proof of Curnow's introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1958 and delayed the book's publication until 1960. This "here-anywhere" controversy, as it's been called, was still rumbling in the distance when Ian Wedde wrote his introduction to an anthology with the same name published in 1984:

> The *who* and the *where* are interdependent, yet at times one will be a more appropriate question than the other. The concern with *who* you are implies a sense of tenure... By the time you have got it straight about *where* you are (where *here* is), the *who* may follow more naturally...

Wedde is addressing the problem that the earliest poetry written out of New Zealand was too concerned to indicate an identity that found its self-esteem elsewhere, which staked a claim on the basis of ancestry, for instance, as against a more mature sense of identity that would first acknowledge the immediately local. While is seems unlikely that Curnow could have disagreed with this, and Wedde recognises the importance of the older poet's "own disenchanted occupancy of that where", it might be that a certain divergence is being marked—for Curnow was nothing if not a New Zealander proud of his ancestry and concerned throughout to render in poetry the exact facts of that history too. Indeed, the last poem Curnow published in his lifetime, "Fantasia and Fugue for Pan-Pipe", is about the *who* in Ian Wedde's ancestral sense—being a rumination on two related love poems, by his father and father's fiancée, in a book called *New Zealand Verse*, whose publication details Curnow characteristically gives in the poem ("Walter/ Scott Publishing./ London. New York./ 1906") and comments with a glance at a far-away country churchyard and its elegy "—Safe/ distances, for/ blushing unseen".

In an e-interview with Andrew Johnston published in *Doubtful Sounds: Essays and Interviews*, Bill Manhire recently reported:

> There's an interesting tape recording which Allen Curnow made at the Library of Congress back in the '60s, where he makes it clear that the moa's egg in his famous sonnet, while he describes it as being "found in a thousand pieces", actually existed in just over 700 pieces. Facts are sacred for Curnow—as you might expect in someone who became a journalist after growing up in a vicarage—so, of course, he makes a mild apology.

The famous sonnet, "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch", is called "Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet (iii)" in Curnow's 1960 anthology—suggesting a further importance in matters of fact for this founding father of contemporary New Zealand verse. Manhire's point is that Curnow made a decision "on behalf of the poem's music". It would be interesting to know if the poet knew the exact number of pieces when he wrote "a thousand', or checked up on his poem later. For if it were the latter, then he could be said even more firmly to have decided for the fact of the poem over the fact of the correct number. Moreover, Manhire's remark suggests a further complexity to the matter of fact in Curnow's poetry—for it was in flight from a mistaken vocation for the ministry that the poet switched to working as a journalist.

The factual and its sacredness will have been, then, a context for the uneasy accommodation of secular and spiritual concerns. After all, the way that facts are sacred to a journalist involves a sense of responsibility to the subjects treated, to the newspaper owners, and to the readership. It involves exercising the etymological relationship between "true" and "trust" in the everyday conflictual business of producing copy. The way facts might be sacred to someone brought up in a vicarage could well involve a responsibility to created nature and, by way of nature, to a creator. In "Early Days Yet", the title poem of his 1997 new and collected poems, Curnow remembers his father preparing for a round of visiting his parishioners by car:

Lift out front seat-
cushion. Unscrew
filler-cap. Insert

large funnel. Spike,
and up-end four gallon
can of Big Tree

Motor Spirit. Let
flammable contents
flow *pingle-pangle-*

pingle through fine
gauze filter. Your new
1919

Model T is now
fuelled for the week's
pastoral mileage...

And it is exactly the fact of the petrol's antique name that mobilises the pun which fuses together the material life of the poet's father and the non-material vocation that, in another sense, set his car in motion. The poem's first section ends by comparing the clergyman's car with the one used by the local GP—quietly enriching the colloquialism "miles better" by giving it a literal, factual underpinning in the miles per gallon of the economical Model T Ford:

miles better than the doctor's
barge-size guzzler,
and the right image

for the poor *The Lord be*
with you the pews creak back
And with thy spirit.

In the earlier "A Raised Voice", Curnow calculates the height ("twelve feet 'clothed in fine linen'") from the ground to his father's pulpit by conjuring up "a voice/ that says Jess to my mother, heightened/ three steps, to which add the sanctuary/ rise, the subdued pile of the Axminster/ runner." This poem too ponders death and the afterlife: "I'm looking up into my thought/ of my father, my certainty, he'll/ be safe, but what about me?"

Curnow is by no means the first poet to put minute particulars of measurement into his work, but two English instances that spring immediately to mind serve to show how different his use of them can be. "I've measured it from side to side:/ 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide." Wordsworth could use his supposedly bathetic line from "The Thorn" to measure not only the grave but his narrator's character, and Philip Larkin could measure a gap to underline the non-poetic nature of Mr Bleaney's room: "Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,/ Fall to within five inches of the sill". Yet, rather than marking a limit to the poetic, something somehow diminished by the pedantic details, Curnow deploys precisely measured facts of time and place as access to his vision. In "A Nice Place on the Riviera", he recalls the precise circumstances ("Villa Isola/ Bella, Menton,/ 18 October") of Katherine Mansfield's writing "No personal God/ or any such/ nonsense" to Middleton Murray, then links it to the life of Pascal "to whom God/ personally did/ appear that day/ from about ten/ thirty p.m./ till past midnight." Such fascination with the exact moments when things happened, and the precise reporting of the circumstances when they did, is at one with Curnow's preferred modes of composition.

Talking to Peter Simpson in 1990, he responded thus to a question about how he structures his poems:

> Impossible to say. A good deal of the work involves moving the poem out of one measure into another—it can start in short lines with no special attention to length, and then be moved into nine-syllable measure, in stanzas of five or three lines—if this isn't adequate, I can try a different count of syllables.

So the poet counted syllables, though, as he later says "I've never counted stresses." Is he then following the rules of poetry in syllabics? Perhaps he is, and this might be a critical issue about his work, as it can be with Marianne Moore's. The line length appears to follow a stiff rule, one which challenges the reader's ear, as Auden noted in an essay on the poet in *The Dyer's Hand*: "syllabic verse, like Miss Moore's, in which accent and feet are ignored and only the number of syllables count, is very difficult for an English ear to grasp." That there can be such a difficulty suggests a reluctance to find poetic value in the following of what appears an arbitrary, imposed rule. However, how arbitrary is Curnow's syllable count? He also says "if it isn't adequate, I can try a different count". Here, a highly-skilled practitioner is not merely "following the rules", because his search for an adequate structure is described as one of trial and error ("moving the poem out of one measure into another") and, as he goes on to say, this process of recasting the lines discovers the poem's "necessary form", though only after "a good many versions"—and he adds:

> I do want to say that there's nothing mysterious about any of these matters, and they're not trade secrets, either. What is mysterious, or at least unexplainable, is the way every one of these decisions affects the whole eventual structure and character of the poem.

Curnow's account of writing a poem illustrates Richard Wollheim's point in the second edition of *Art and its Objects* that, for the artist, evaluation "functions regulatively, and it controls how and whether the artist should go on." The poet makes evaluative decisions about an aspect of the work that can be controlled (its shape), deciding that this is "inadequate" or the other is "necessary", but the ramifications of these decisions on the entire "structure and character of the poem" is not wholly subject to the will or judgement of the poet, so results are produced that could not be intended.

Nevertheless, Wollheim's sense of evaluation would come in again, for the final decision to stop changing things involves registering at some level that all these effects have produced something to leave as it is and to offer as a candidate for the evaluation of others. And an extraordinary thing about Curnow's syllabics is that they allow his verse to sound at once almost fussily correct, and casually colloquial. What's more, because two four-syllable lines have the length of a standard tetrameter, one of the most common forms in English verse, Curnow's late meditations are able to gain formal complexities from the interplay of cross-cutting structural principles—as here in a later section from "A Nice Place on the Riviera":

> That rabid wind
>
> bangs shutters, dis-
> colours the sea,
>
> dishevels the world
> outdoors. Beside
>
> the demitasses
> the Abdullahs in
>
> their silver box,
> the *Imitation*
>
> waits to be read...
> The climate here's
>
> her only hope,
> some doctor said.

I hear the contour of the colloquial phrases, the unexpected and occasionally arbitrary-sounding line endings produced by the syllable count, the ghosts of more standard iambic metres, and all this underlined at times by internal or end rhymes that arrive with the assurance and closure of stanzas that have been re-lineated according to a different principle. The result is a unique mixture of inherited techniques and an old dog's new tricks. They combine a flamboyant *sprezzatura* with a doggedly puritanical sticking to the task.

Curnow's phrase "the mixture's moment" comes from the first part of "Moro Assassinato", a sequence first published in *An Incorrigible Music* (1979). His title might be revising Wordsworth's "still, sad music of humanity" by crossing it with Tennyson's nature "red in tooth and claw", though not with the vagueness of a generality but, as might be expected, with painfully specific facts of violence and cruelty, whether in life or in the representations of art. "Dichtung und Warheit", from the same book, caused controversy in the early 1980s with its fiercely revolted account of "A man I know" who "wrote a book about a man he knew/ and this man, or so he the man I know said, fucked/ and murdered a girl to save her from the others..." Something of this controversy involving M.K. Joseph's *A Soldier's Tale* (1976) can be gathered from Curnow's "Dichtung und Warheit: a Letter to *Landfall*", reprinted in *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, where he describes himself as "repelled by a new and much-praised novel", but not "for its 'blend of violence and sex': on the contrary, for what struck me as a sentimentally fudged presentation of those very subjects." The poet's unadorned account of the novel's plot functions thus to express his repulsion and to avoid the least taint of sentimentality. The result, an instance of disturbatory art (Arthur Danto's term), would not be my favourite work of Curnow's, but it earns its place in a vision of reality.

The poem I like best from *The Bells of Saint Babel's* is the first piece, "Ten Steps to the Sea", which takes its bearings from the crucial issue in pain control clinics, that "They can control/ the pain till there's well really/ no pain, but then there's no reality"; so, says the cancer sufferer talking in the poem's seventh part, "I try to balance/ the two, as little pain/ as possible, as much reality/ as possible." The sequence concludes:

VII
The pain is the dog
not heeding the whistle, on account
of scenting a rabbit or an old
turd, his own possibly, or snuffing
ashes of a Sunday campfire because of
the slab and the grate provided there.
Will he follow?

IX
Up and over the sandhills? Not much
help in the sea's habitual heave,
sprawl, grumble, hiss.

X
In reality,
no. A step in the right direction.
The pain is in the wind, which blows the whole

time, uncontrollably.
In your face.

As in “miles better”, so with the colloquialism “in your face”. By placing a stop at the end of the poem’s penultimate line, and a capital letter at the beginning of the last, he brings together a probably passing bit of slang and the enduring, painful fact of the human position in nature. And as if to underline Curnow’s stubborn determination to stick with the matter and trajectory of his art, this late poem might be exemplifying a key sentence from his 1960 anthology introduction, also reprinted in *Look Back Harder*: “Reality must be local and special at the point where we pick up the traces: as manifold as the signs we follow and the routes we take.” That dog “snuffing/ ashes” (deadly enjambment) among dunes seems, with whatever irony, to be following the programme of Curnow’s old polemic. While his “in your face” directness can be hard to stomach, as it is for me in “Dichtung und Warheit”, such intentness is also a part of the poet’s respect for the sacredness of facts and his unflinching attention to what our manifold reality can contain. Looking up into my thought of Allen Curnow, I want to say that if there is an afterlife for poets then “he’ll/ be safe” and, not least because of this acute attention to such mixtures, that his work is bound to live far and away beyond its moment.