THE FIRE AND THE ANVIL

'The smith also sitting by the anvil, and considering the iron work, the vapour of the fire wasteth his flesh, and he fighteth with the heat of the furnace: the noise of the hammer and anvil is ever in his ears, and his eyes look still upon the pattern of the thing that he maketh. . .'

ECCLESIASTICUS

***By** the same Author*

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THE FIRE AND THE ANVIL

NOTES ON MODERN POETRY

by

JAMES K. BAXTER

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Dedicated to

FRANK SARGESON

THE FIRE AND THE ANVIL

Contents

1

THE CRITICISM OF POETRY

AT THE PRESENT DAY, in New Zealand and elsewhere, the relationship between poets and readers is rarely a happy one. On the side of the public there is indifference or the resentment of those who feel that the modern idiom is unnecessarily highbrow and obscure; on the side of the poets there is isolation, and often the touchiness of those who feel that their best labour goes unappreciated, or the aggressiveness of those who must raise their voices to be heard at all. Since I am a poet, I may tend to raise my voice.

In this country our standard of living is high; we are assumedly educated men and women; our population is many times that of ancient Athens, and, though we may deny it, like Athens we have our slaves. But our intellectual climate is singularly unfertile. I do not think for a moment New Zealanders have a low standard of intelligence, in the ordinary sense of the term; rather I think that, because of various factors, some local and some shared with the world at large, we possess in a high degree what Erich Fromm has called the 'fear of freedom'. Literature would trouble us and lead our feet perhaps in dangerous paths. So instead we pick up the *Reader's Digest.* Frank Sargeson, probably our most vigorous writer in prose, certainly the one who has mirrored most accurately some features of our common living, sells less than the cheapest American or English hack-writer. Verse, however, is written here and at times read. There are many men and women in New Zealand who have written a little verse, or read it; and some who are not hostile to modern idiom. It is to such people primarily that I want to speak, and if possible help them to break down the fences of traditional prejudice which prevent them from enjoying and under. standing modern poetry. Auden has spoken sharply, wittily, and well about poet and audience:

> The ideal audience the poet imagines consists of the beautiful who go to bed with him, the powerful who invite him to dinner and tell him secrets of state, and his fellow-poets. The actual audience he gets consists of myopic school-teachers, pimply young men who eat in cafeterias, and his fellow-poets. This means, in fact, that he writes for his fellow-poets.

If Auden is correct, I am addressing not the fellow-poets who are always at hand, but school-teachers and pimply young men in cafeterias.

The functions of poet, reader, and critic, are closely related. While not all poets may read widely, and many readers of verse have never written a line, both must be critics. Without ability to criticise, a reader is a mere sink of ideas; without self-criticism, a poet cannot improve. The professional critic or reviewer differs from the casual reader only in making an occupation, paid or unpaid, of what all must do to understand a literary work; and he is as easily subject to prejudice. Wordsworth writes in the opening remarks of his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads:*

> . . . by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association . . . this exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different eras of literature have excited very different expectations.

To my mind a literary critic has two main tasks: to examine individual texts; and to broaden and enrich in the reader's mind his known habits of association, thus clarifying for his own age the nature and scope of the *formal engagement.* He is the best man at the marriage of poet and public, and often also the lawyer at their divorce. But in our time there is great and real confusion as to what constitutes a good poem. One cannot take for granted as common knowledge even the simplest axioms of critical theory. A complaint commonly made about modern poets, after that of obscurity, is that they hamstring their verses by neglecting the laws of metre. It may be worth while to examine this charge in detail.

There is an idol of the classrooms called *prosody,* in the service of which verse is butchered, flayed, and hung up by *the*feet* like a sheep's carcase in the abattoirs. According to

those who abide by its laws, there are certain fixed patterns of metre in English verse, which a poet can only disturb at his peril—the main patterns being called, *iambic, trochaic, anapaestic,* and *dactylic.* In fact, every second line of Shakespeare and Donne, and every first line of Milton's later work departs from so-called strict metre. In the work of the masters, this has been called irregularity; in the moderns, lack of craftsmanship. But if irregularity is found to be more frequent than the rule, and that in the best poetry written, it is time to find another rule.

On examining its genealogy, one sees that the idol *prosody* was born on the wrong side of the blanket; as Marvell says in another context, 'begotten by despair upon impossibility'. Thomas Campion writes thus in 1602:

> The eare is a rationall sence, and a chiefe judge of proportion, but in our kind of riming what proportion is there kept, where there remaines such a confused inequalitie of sillables? *lambick* and *Trochaick* feete which are opposed by nature, are by all Rimers confounded. . . .

The authorities for his argument are nearly all drawn from Latin poetry. He himself has confounded the Latin system of scansion, which is rigid and depends primarily upon length of syllable, with the English system, which is highly flexible and founded on stress. His error, after three hundred and fifty years, still determines the pattern of classroom prosody. Even Saintsbury (I say this on the authority of Professor I. A. Gordon), on account of his lacking a background in the study of Old English, makes no clear distinction between Latin and English scansion. Gerard Manley Hopkins, however, who had perhaps the most sensitive ear of any English poet for spoken verse, meets and destroys the fallacy on its own ground:

> I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm ... To speak shortly, it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be one strong syllable or it may be one light and one strong. I do not say the idea is altogether new; there are hints of it in music, in nursery rhymes and popular jingles, in the poets themselves ... it is amazing that so great a writer as Newman should have fallen into the blunder of comparing

the first chorus of the *Agonistes* with the opening of *Thalaba* as instancing the gain in smoothness and correctness of versification made since Milton's time—Milton having been not only ahead of his own time as well as all after-times in verse-structure, but these particular choruses being his own high-water mark. It is as if you were to compare the Panathenaic frieze and a teaboard and decide in the teaboard's favour.

One could say briefly all that needs to be said about English metre in a few axioms:

1 Its basis is one of *stress.*
2 In a given passage of verse a rising or falling pattern of stresses will generally be found dominant.
3 Any degree of variation or substitution of the so-called metrical feet, or units, is permissible; this variation, indeed, is essential to avoid monotony and to mirror accurately changes in thought and feeling.
4 Though various formal patterns, such as the five-beat iambic line of blank verse, have been established, they are not sacrosanct; and provide merely a metrical groundwork for the variations of each individual poet.
5 The difference between the rhythm of verse and that of prose resides not in kind, but in the more detailed and careful effects of verse, the repetition of certain basic patterns, and the coinciding of the emphasis of stress and the emphasis demanded by meaning.
6 There is no substitute in the speaking of verse for a sensitive ear and an understanding of the poet's meaning.

I remember my own Sense of discovery when it dawned on me in my fourteenth year that English metre is not a rigid system: I wrote then for the first time a poem which deviated from what I had supposed to be rules of prosody:

A ship is sailing in the harbour mouth . . .
While the sails and the spars, swaying and taut,
Are creaking 'neath the breezes of the South;
While the prow greets each wave, firmly, spray-fraught—
Swiftly, swiftly, a bird of storms,
Speeds the vessel—no more the forms
Bleak, bare, mist-hung,
Of rocky islets on her bow
Looming, shall fright the bark by wild waves flung.

A mechanical little piece, but a good deal better than the rhythmically 'correct' doggerel I had written until that time.

A metrical pattern is, of course, the mere bones of verse: its flesh is the infinitely variable repetition, clashing, or correspondence of vowels and consonants. Edith Sitwell in her sensitive though highly coloured biography of Pope argues that in spite of his adherence to a rigid metrical system he avoided monotony by his mastery of these devices. Certainly the emotional impact of a poem is determined largely by them.

> For you know, you know the graves that cover
> the verbal crimes of vows and the raven
> that croaks at the doors of the myriad lovers
> who came and went out like comets lost in
> a vast heaven.

According to the classroom yardstick, in this final stanza of a poem by a New Zealand poet, Louis Johnson, the metre is slovenly iambic, and the rhymes are imperfect. In fact, the four strong beats—'you know, you know'—give the beginning of the stanza peculiar emphasis. The substitution of running metre—'and the raven'; 'at the doors'; 'of the myriad';—produces an effect of desolation. The internal assonance—'graves'; 'raven'—with its long heavy vowel is highly appropriate to the sense. The alliteration of harsh consonants—'graves'; 'cover'; 'crimes'; 'croaks'; 'came'; 'comets'—lends the poem a certain savagery. The main half-rhymes—'cover, lovers'; 'raven, heaven'—avoid what would here be the over-emphasis of full rhyme. The last six-beat line with its internal half-rhymes—'lost' and 'vast'—gives strength and finality to the end of the poem. It is most improbable that the poet calculated these effects; but his mental testing of words and phrases would involve an unconscious recognition of them; and a critic who examined the auditory pattern of the stanza solely in terms of rhyme and stress would have missed the major part of it.

Much could be said of the relation of sound to meaning in poetry. For the purpose of my argument, however, it is necessary only to open the gate to an intelligent use of prosody. A sensitive ear, once it is delivered from blind formalism, can be its own guide. But there is another idol besides *Prosody:* it has no *feet,* but instead a hundred *heads,* like

something out of Indian mythology—*Simile, Metaphor, Personification, Metonomy, Transferred Epithet*—and its name is *Poetic Diction.* There is one charming *head* called *Tmesis* (useful for crossword puzzles, as it is the only word in English beginning with a *TM)* which could properly be called *Word-Sandwich,* as it consists of one word sandwiched into another. Robert Graves uses it:

> The wild-swan-breasted, the rose-ruddy-cheeked
> Raven-haired daughters of their admiration . . .

and Hopkins also:

> See his wind-lilylocks-laced . . .

but the figure is rare and on the whole un-English.

The fault, however, of classroom analysis of the language of poetry does not stem chiefly from the innocent game of hair-splitting and calling English idiom Greek names; but from the general assumption of teacher and pupil that poetic devices are gratuitous—elaborate mechanisms developed by the perversity of poets, and removed from ordinary speech usage. This assumption makes a natural appreciation of poetry impossible. The whole picture-gallery of figures of speech can profitably be carted away, leaving one central term only—*metaphor.* The rest are chiefly matters of common sense. *Metaphor,* the one essential term, has an unfortunate history. It was classified by the medieval rhetoricians as a figure of speech, though it is, in fact, a mode of thought; and in our own day it is described in the classroom as a compressed form of *simile.* Until its true function is grasped, there can be no common agreement about what constitutes a good poem. As a test for analysis I will quote a sonnet by Allen Curnow, in itself a sustained metaphor:

> Nightwatchman in some crater of the moon—
> No, not that lunatic
> But the dumb satellite itself, my tune
> The cold sphere's silence; and I stick
>
> (Abiding, law-abiding) to that orbit
> Fire once described, tossed into space to cool
> From my earth's body; a gyrating habit.
> What if she watches? She'll

Mask with the mirror of her tides those shores
Her flesh makes in the heavens, and even
While dawn destroys me her young foliage stirs;
Neither is mathematical space forgiven

My dear earth's distance, though her heart descry
With how mad steps, her moon, I climb the sky.

The poet equates his relationship with his absent mistress to that of the moon with the earth: he feels that he in her absence, like the moon, is cold, dumb, and sterile. And as the moon in the form of fiery gas was tossed off from the earth to cool in space, so he is torn from physical intimacy; but his mind and heart still revolve about her, as the moon does in its orbit. She, however, reflects tranquilly the image of his despair in her own fertile world, and hides from herself the knowledge of his pain. As the morning moon, pale and barren in the sky, watches the young freshness of the earth, so he watches her; and mathematical space exemplifies both the distance of their separation and the distance occasioned by their opposite states of being.

This is a subjective interpretation, but I imagine substantially correct. But shall we suppose that the poet constructed an elaborate metaphor to say what any paraphrase could say more clearly? No. The metaphor is the poem: an inward non-verbal experience expressed in concrete verbal images. Eventually metaphor is the only method by which new language can be evolved to describe a unique situation: and this is precisely the labour of the poet, by reason of which he has been called in Greek and in Scots a *maker*. Metaphor and symbol are the language of poetry. In fact, poetic language is more accurate than that of prose, for its tools are sharper, being tempered and ground newly for each occasion. Aristotle has written in his *Ars Poetica:*

> It is a great thing indeed to make a proper use of these poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words- But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.

In spite of the bouquet which he hands to the user of metaphor, Aristotle does not seem to have grasped that metaphor is

essentially an expression of an inward situation in outward and concrete terms. His examples are all at the mechanical level of elaborate and special language; whereas metaphor is common wherever speech is vivid, just as melodies (which composers would give their eyeteeth for) have been created by illiterate European peasants.

There is a borderline at which metaphor and symbol are indistinguishable. In his sonnet Allen Curnow introduces the moon as a symbol of sterility and isolation; fire as a symbol of sexual desire; the sea become a glassy *mirror* as the symbol of the woman's introspection. I intend to discuss further the symbolism of New Zealand poetry in the final lecture of this series. The symbolism of poetry is a wide field and not readily amenable to criticism. But, broadly speaking, it can be said that, while *metaphor* reflects those inward events of which the poet is clearly conscious, and involves a *conscious* mode of thought and manipulation of words, a *symbol* reflects the stirring of massive intuitions inaccessible to reason, frequently obscure to the poet himself, and only comprehended by those readers who are similarly moved.

Though the preceding analysis by no means exhausts the subjects of prosody and poetic diction, it may help to correct some common misconceptions. The so-called licence of modern poetry has precedent in the best writing of the past. Only critics who have either never read or never understood Webster, Donne, Dryden, and the later Milton, are likely to find themselves at sea; for one finds in the work of those poets the same hard accuracy of language, the same wide range of metaphor, and frequently the same troubled underworld of irrational images that characterizes the work of modern poets. Only because we have been fed almost solely on a Romantic diet do we find Auden or Eliot strange. The Romantic genius, with its emphasis upon the magical effect rather than the content of poetry, though it produced a bewildering display of fireworks at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has much to answer for. The whimsicalities of Lamb, the song of Keats's nightingale, the mysterious Lady of Shalott, the Blessed Damozel, have led us down the narrow stairs to a very draughty basement where there is little to choose between what is popularly regarded as poetry and the children's verses in an evening newspaper. Poetry has become for many the scratching

of a private itch- And those poets in this country who have climbed laboriously back up the stairs to a position where words make direct if painful sense are likely to find themselves whistling alone on the landing.

It could be argued that a more flexible approach to the appreciation of poetry in our schools would clear the lines of communication between poet and reader. But this is a superficial solution. Quite apart from the natural mental indigestion of a reader who has attempted unsuccessfully to 'get at' a poet's meaning, there is a dragon at the gate which magical persuasion cannot subdue, but only patience, tenacity, and the hard edge of reason: I refer to unconscious prejudice of the reader against the central meaning of much twentieth-century poetry. At the risk of being obvious, I will quote the last stanza of *Brother Fire,* a poem written by Louis Macneice during the bombing raids on London. In the first two stanzas, Macneice expresses the plight of the Londoner whose town and life are falling about his ears; in the last he turns with daring analysis to the heart of the common disaster:

> 0 delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,
> 0 enemy and image of ourselves!
> Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear
> When you were looting shops in elemental joy
> And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,
> Echo your thought in ours?—*Destroy, Destroy!*

Because it is in a large measure true, the statement Macneice makes in these magnificent lines would be quite unacceptable to the average reader. What the man in the street probably wanted, and got, was a slogan—*Johnny, get your gun: The Hun's on the run.* Macneice, however, expresses the hidden exultation of the prisoner who sees the long-loved-and-hated cellblock going up in smoke: perhaps at its deepest level the exultation of Samson, who involves in his own death the civilization which has blinded him. But such exaltation is anathema to the social conscience; hence the average reader cannot make the necessary imaginative act of sympathy with the central meaning of the poem. He replies (through the mouths of educated critics as well as the silence of the multitude)—*This is immoral; This is untrue;* or, more devastatingly, *This is meaningless.*

In the past fifty years there have been significant changes

in the kind of sentiments which poets have expressed toward common situations. This is particularly true of war poems. In the First World War, poetry was written mainly by younger single men, willing combatants loyal to some national ideal, nostalgic for a pastoral security. Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle' still has some echo of the sabre-rattling 'Charge of the Light Brigade'—the soldier is a young man among comrades, a dedicated mystic eager for death and glory. And even the trench poems of Rosenberg, Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen carry some overtone of dedication, a sense that war experience, though calamitous, is of extraordinary value. It is far different with the best poets of the Second World War, Roy Fuller and Alun Lewis. Both are married conscripts. Their sentiments are purely personal: grief at separation, some community with the men they are among, resentment at the vast impersonality of the destructive process. They do not pay tribute to large moral concepts:

> Once as we were sitting by
> The falling sun, the thickening air,
> The chaplain came against the sky
> And quietly took a vacant chair.
>
> And under the tobacco smoke:
> 'Freedom,' he said, and 'Good' and 'Duty.'
> We stared as though a savage spoke.
> The scene took on a singular beauty.
>
> And we made no reply to that
> Obscure, remote communication,
> But only stared at where the flat
> Meadow dissolved in vegetation.
>
> And thought: 0 sick, insatiable
> And constant lust; 0 death, our future;
> O revolution in the whole
> Of human use of man and nature!

The chaplain may know a few things which Fuller does not; but Fuller regards the war as a struggle of stick insects which has maimed for him a complex and vital relationship, the best thing he knows. He has experience on his side.

Poems are produced in response to innumerable situations; but, while it may begin at a personal level, a good poem generally enlarges to a statement about problems and situations common to all men. To save (in a purely aesthetic sense) his soul, a poet must be more honest than his everyday cowardly or jocular self. Agonies, desires, and dilemmas which the housewifely mind has cast out on the rubbish-heap must be unearthed and exposed to the sun; with those sexual, aggressive, and anarchistic motives which enter uneasily the drawing-room of verse, being accustomed to darker and worse lodging, yet provide the power that makes the poem live. Before they can be admitted, a poet has to struggle at the door with his own butler conscience; and by the time they have been washed, shaved, and deloused, they may be, except to the trained eye, unrecognizable.

Yet many critics would have it otherwise. They demand, like Carlyle, a message, an ethical motive, and a moral housecleaning in poetry. He writes thus in his *Essay on Burns:*

> And what then had these men (Locke, Milton, and Cervantes) which Burns wanted? Two things; both of which, it seems to us, are indispensable for such men. They had a true religious principle of morals; and a single not a double aim in their activity. . . . Not personal enjoyment was their object; but a high, heroic idea of Religion, of Patriotism, of heavenly Wisdom in one or the other form, ever hovered before them. . . . In a word, they willed one thing, to which all other things were subordinated and made subservient; and therefore they accomplished it. The wedge will rend rocks; but its edge must be sharp and single: if it be double, the wedge is bruised in pieces and will rend nothing.

It seems that Carlyle does not understand the uncontrollable nature of an associative process. Though he is sensitive to other features in the poetry of Burns, he wishes to find in it an earnest moral statement, a prophetic doctrine. It is an error of simplification into which most critics slip at one time or another. I have spoken myself in much the same way, and been applauded for it; an audience is delighted to have their suspicion removed that a simple ethical interpretation may not be applicable to every aspect of human knowledge. There

is, indeed, a fundamental ambiguity in Carlyle's conception of the artist's role. He is a Hero-worshipper; he confuses inextricably biographical detail and literary criticism. In syllogistic form—*All poets are men: Burns is a good poet: Therefore Burns is a good wan.* The proper conclusion would be a truism—*Burns is a man.* The word 'good' is used in two senses between which Carlyle nowhere explicitly or implicitly distinguishes. It is mainly irrelevant to literary criticism (though not to himself, his wife, his friends, the police, and God) that Burns was often drunk and fathered illegitimate children. These were some of the circumstances, among many less sensational, which served as subject-matter for his verse—the value of which depends finally on his accuracy, the vigour of his imagination, and his triumphant solution of the technical problems of his craft.

In New Zealand many hold the opinion, like Carlyle, that a poet is a *votes* or seer, inspired by a holy madness and exempt from human weakness: a kind of bronze griffin. Men and women are disillusioned to find a commonplace man, a little anxious, a little stupid, a little vain of his accomplishments, working as a clerk or school-teacher, with nothing to recommended him but a particular talent for the use of words. Unfortunately, it is pleasant for a while to be regarded as a griffin: so poets, when not writing, are tempted by money or flattery to become bogus oracles for W.E.A. groups, or even an audience such as the present one. The personalist heresy of equating a writer and his work can be peculiarly dangerous. On one hand, the reader's attention is diverted from the valuable insights which poetry can provide to a flurry of confused emotions and expectations, of which no man should be the object; on the other hand, writers themselves may think that the fascinating game of art, in which each man makes his own rules, can be played in the sphere of human relationships—thus, bohemianism.

The demand, however, that poetry should contain a moral statement is not to be wholly confuted by pointing out that it springs from false expectations of the poet. One must grant that words lay an obligation upon their user—even if one rejects Milton's appalling statement that *he who would not bejrustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to bee a true Poem.* But what is the

nature of the obligation? To please the reader? To amplify the truths of a religious or social doctrine? To aid the establishment of a just State? To support a wife and family by writing what the radio will accept? To gratify a private itch for image-making? To offer one's gift to God and make every poem a prayer? I believe that no statement quite fills the bill; though the last is highly seductive to an orthodox Christian. However, as the hymns of the Church show plainly, a prayer need not be a work of art; and if a work of art must be a prayer, then we sweep away the whole structure of humanist literature. The popularizing of Christian theology or Marxist socialism is better helped by pamphlets written in plain speech than by odes or sonnets. In short, one's obligation is to the language, and is fulfilled by honest use.

Sidney, in his essay *An Apologie for Poetrie*, puts forward some spirited arguments for the educative value of poetry. He was replying in part to the Church prejudices of his time, which tolerated uneasily rather than sanctioned the dangerous contemporary developments of literature. He writes:

> He [the poet] beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but hee cometh to you with words set in delightfull proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for the well inchaunting skill of Musicke; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you: with a tale that holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intende the winning of the mind from wickednesse to virtue: even as the child is oft brought to take most wholsom things, by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant tast. . . .

This concept of poetry as a sugared pill can hardly be maintained except with Sidney's hand-picked examples from classical sources. How, for example, would he apply it to his elder, and near-contemporary, Wyatt?

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek,
> With naked foot stalking in my chamber . . .
>
> Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise
> Twenty times better; but once, in special,
> In thin array, after a pleasant guise,

When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small,
Therewith all sweetly did me kiss,
And softly said, *Dear heart, how like you this?*

One could no doubt wring from the succeeding stanza of the poem the moral that fornication breeds unhappiness. But the triumphant 'Thanked be fortune!' bears a different interpretation. Plainly Wyatt, in one of the finest love poems of the language, is chiefly concerned to mirror accurately his own longing and memory of sensual delight.

The answer to Sidney's argument comes from the poets themselves, even from Sidney himself. When labouring with a poem, they have no more concern for its possible moral effect on the reader than a woman in child-birth has for the doctor's fee. They have left that to the ethical critic, who solves the problems of the inner life by trampling them underfoot, as Cromwell's soldiers paved the way with broken statues for the grossness of the Restoration. I do not hold that such attitudes are consciously maintained, or that my own analysis of the problem is final. But, lest I should be thought another Cromwellian who tears down much and raises up nothing, I will try to set down some possible criteria by which a good poem may be judged.

METAPHORICAL EXACTITUDE. Metaphor must be regarded as a figure of thought rather than a figure of speech, to include all representations in concrete images of an inward event. Thus, in Wyatt's poem the *loose* gown which the woman wears is an outward sign of her abandonment; exact, because no other image could carry so well all relevant associations and exclude the irrelevant. This metaphorical exactitude is the mark of true excellence in a poet's work.

CLARITY. Obscurity in a poem may arise from two factors: the reader's failure to identify himself sympathetically with the poet's attitude and intention; or the poet's confusion of thought and inability to bring the poem to a final coherent shape. As a poem moves from private to public utterance, it acquires clarity. One must distinguish, however, between obscurity and ambiguity: the many levels of meaning at which a complex poem exists must always make a cut-and-dried

interpretation inadequate. Essentially, clarity is that quality in a poem by which its parts are related and subordinated to the whole meaning.

FORMAL STRUCTURE. By this is meant the obvious technical devices of stanza form, alliteration, assonance, rhyme and half-rhyme, patterns of stress. These should aid the development of the poem's meaning. For example, there is a poem of Blake's, *The Fly,* which he began writing in heavy four-beat lines but changed to two-beat lines because the form would have destroyed the lightness and fragility of his theme. It should be held in mind that each poem written has a unique formal structure, whether it be sonnet, couplet, or free verse; for each poet has his own distinctive habits in the handling of verse forms, and each poem is a response in words to a unique occasion- A poem must be read by ear for the formal structure to be appreciated.

VIGOUR. A poem may be well conceived and subtle, yet lack this quality. Byron, on account of possessing it, rates as a finer poet than Tennyson, though his ear is less sensitive and his intellect blunter. More than any other quality, it seems to depend on sheer animal vitality.

GLAMOUR OR INCANDESCENCE. This quality is not an essential part of every good poem; it is lacking, for example, in much eighteenth-century verse. But certain images in combination, especially in the great Romantic poets, can affect the reader so profoundly that his critical faculty is for the meantime laid asleep. The reputation of Shelley rests largely on his possession of this quality. Among New Zealand poets, Alistair Campbell has perhaps the greatest share of it:

> The streaming woods, the pigeon-moaning knoll,
> And swarming under cliffs like smoking swords
> The rock-torn Clutha. . . .

SIGNIFICANCE. This may be defined as the umbilical cord which binds a poem to the world of real experience. A poem with significance is a microcosm which contains by implication the author's central view of the world and human nature- Around it the whirlwind of critical controversy always, revolves; for it is the one quality ultimately unseizable.

Perhaps I have in spite of Sidney's warning, 'blurred the margent with interpretations'; but without some groundwork of critical method the appreciation of poetry becomes a purely subjective matter. That one *likes* a poem cannot serve as a critical criterion. One may like it for the wrong reason—because it supports a favoured system of ideas; because one's grandfather recited it when one was a child; because the poet is a man after one's own heart. And even if the principal function of poetry were to please, one would still be obliged to ask, *Why does this particular poem please me?* The answer may well be that it confirms one's original prejudices and turns the key a second time upon the self-knowledge one has long rejected. As Allen Curnow has written in the introduction to his anthology of New Zealand verse:

> Whatever the causes, I know that this poetry has a use for us. And it is the *uses* of poetry we need to realize; and that what is admired, but does not change the imagination, has been wrongly admired.

A wrong admiration may proceed from many sources. There are, however, three outstanding categories in which one can place the poem which elicits an illegitimate response—propagandist, sentimental, pornographic. Their common feature consists in a failure of the imagination at some crucial point: a passing of false coin over the counter, in the knowledge that the reader also wishes to be deceived.

The propagandist and sentimental poem persuades all is well when all is not well. In this context I would like to quote a short parable. Prometheus in the parable is the technician or political man who manipulates the world of things to his own advantage. Orpheus is the poet, able to be bribed, but well aware that if he gives his audience the poems they ask for, he will forfeit his gift.

> The punishment of Prometheus for his attempt to conquer the spiritual world by technical devices has been represented crudely in the original legend. Nothing so natural as a vulture was sent to prey on his liver. Instead, he was left alone in a wilderness of oil derricks and chromium-plated beer-pumps which he had himself created—his sole distraction from himself being the crash of falling markets and the louder and louder explosions of atomic physics.

He continually asks Orpheus to exercise his magic and dispel the abominable boredom. But the magic of Orpheus resides in the truth of his song. Prometheus demands a pastoral ode or a slogan for National Savings; but hears instead an elegy which reflects accurately the voice of the wind among bombed cathedrals, the weeping of ulcered children, and the anvil chorus of the pimp and D.P. Prometheus loses his temper and sacks Orpheus from his job as Court Poet. He then proceeds to build himself a bigger and better jukebox.

For a deliberate use of political propaganda in verse, one would have to go to the United States or the U.S.S.R. But often a writer's political preconceptions may determine his view of society, as in A. R. D. Fairburn's *Dominion*, a saga of depression days and very likely the best long poem written in this country:

> This is our paper city, built
> on the rock of debt, held fast
> against all winds by the paperweight of debt.
> The crowds file slowly past, or stop and stare,
> and here and there, dull-eyed, the idle stand
> in clusters in the mouths of gramophone shops . . .

So brief a quotation does no justice to the breadth and vigour of the poem. But the fact that it is propaganda weakens the force of his social statement. The workers must be good men out of a job (many in the thirties were); men and women with money and social status *must* be tyrannical, inept, and overfed (as some, no doubt, have been and are). For exploration he substitutes declamation, and for a statement about the human condition, the statement of a political and economic viewpoint, valuable in itself but antithetical to poetry.

It is not commonly realized how much religious poetry falls into the category of propaganda. A conventional stereotype of religious idealism is substituted for a vision of the real world. Because of the evocative power of traditional religious symbols, the Christian ethical critic is often prepared to call a poem good simply because it embodies these symbols; and reject those poems which deal with sexual ambivalence, the fear and knowledge of death, and the evil which men do

and suffer. The Christian doctrine of the Fall should make the vision of a Christian poet more real and exact: he or she should be able to present a lifesize portrait of Fallen Man. But far too much of the religious poetry produced in this country shows a basic timidity in regard to problems of human suffering; and the criticism of a maturer approach to such themes comes frequently from a religious quarter. An awkwardness and over-sweetness of sentiment characterizes the religious poetry of Basil Dowling, J. R. Hervey (with several notable exceptions), and even that of Ursula Bethell and Eileen Duggan. In the poems of Mary Stanley, however, published in her recent and first volume, *Starveling Year*, one finds a completely unsentimental, vigorous poetry in Christian terms, in which Fallen Man is given his due as capable of acting freely for good or evil:

> We are what we have been. The living creature wears
> like trees his grain of good and evil years. The face
> is schooled by daily argument of pain to learn
> disguises for the private wound. None knows what country
> lies under the shut skull, or dazzling beacon of cloud
> beckons the always outcast through stubborn exile home.

She does not manufacture in her verse a fake response of religious optimism to those situations of anxiety and pain which no man or woman faces easily.

Both propagandist and sentimental poetry are characterized by a failure of the poetic imagination. In propagandist poetry, however, the accuracy of the poet's insight is sacrificed to some system of ideas; in sentimental poetry there is a blockage of associations, a partial blindness brought about by the poet's unwillingness to make fully conscious relevant but disturbing material. The development of most New Zealand poets could be described as a slow convalescence from the disease of sentimentality, punctuated by frequent relapses. For we are not only a young but also a spiritually unenterprising nation. Our pioneer fathers while laying waste the bushland wiped out also the spiritual flora and fauna of Polynesian animism, and replaced it, not, as we might think, with the highest humanist values and the seasonal ritual of the Church, but with Douglas Social Credit and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In our arts and institutions we have cultivated

a narrow ground — political loyalty; business acumen; an admiration (via the Tourist Bureau) of large scenery; the community of the hotel bar and playing field; the Puritan virtues, with their accompanying vices, which John Mulgan attributes to us in his *Report on Experience*—but outside the cultivated area remain unexplored the creative powers of man. It is no accident that Katherine Mansfield went away and never came back. We could not have provided her with the tools of her trade—intellectual maturity and the courage to commit to paper what she had painfully learned of intimate human relationships. The pressure towards paralysing conformity seems to bear hardest on our women writers. They rarely manage to unlock their own special experience of life. Robin Hyde, in her poetry and novels and perhaps in her life also, is representative of a large group of women writers whose movement toward an intellectual rebirth has been smothered by social pressure and their own sense of inferiority and isolation. She tried to come to grips with real problems rather than the paper dragons of Georgian poetry, but could not make a clean break until it was so late that she had not the strength to make use of her new knowledge. She could say truthfully with Rimbaud, The dried blood smokes on my face', but in her hands the image would have been a knife with a turned edge.

Under the smoothness of New Zealand Georgian poetry lie many bad dreams and a fundamental uncertainty of direction. Whenever I read the poems in the anthology *Kowhai Gold* I am haunted by the lines written by an Australasian poet of the turn of the century. They celebrate the beauty and sanctity of a young woman who has lately been buried. After a lyrical description of bird, tree, and stream, the poet arrives at her grave and tells us that 'Flowerets breathe forth Lilian!' The implications of this piece of necrophilia are relevant and disturbing. There is a close connection between the state of a man's sexual impulse and the poetry which he is likely to write. I would almost say that a poet who abolished from consciousness all sexual awareness would simultaneously murder his gift. In the work of this unnamed poet the source of his sexual feeling is dead and rotten. The sprightly young wives of Chaucer, Donne's loved and hated mistresses, the comely witch of *Tam o' Shanter,* Blake's meditative virgins,

the black-eyed beauties of Byron, the troublesome *belle dame sans merci*—all are buried with her in her grave, and apparently the poet and his readers found the odour of corruption exhilarating. I regard much modern New Zealand poety as a labour to resuscitate this unfortunate lady.

The problem of pornography in poetry may seem a simple one; for, while the poetry of the sexual relation is erotic and metaphysical, pornography celebrates simple lust. Though one may in an off moment produce a pornographic poem, it cannot by the laws of our country be published. The real problem, however, is to define what is permissible in the use of sexual imagery. The terrible dread of our older critics seems to be that our literature may become pornographic: they react to a rough word as the horse does to a horsefly. Most are totally unable to distinguish between the sexual and the pornographic image. But if we consider the pornographic poems which are the repertoire of every soldiers' camp, we see that they do not change the imagination but rather establish it in a well-worn groove. This is not to say that the 'Good Ship Venus' or Tat McGinty's Ball' lack all the qualities which go to make a good poem. They are vigorous, metaphorically exact, and no doubt have their own glamour. But they must drug the critical faculty before they can be appreciated. Pornography succeeds by the battering force of physical detail; but a true sexual image contributes to the total meaning of the poem. Pornography I regard as the ugly sister of sentimentality; and, because more obvious and limited in its action, less offensive. An excessive gentility brings it to birth by refusing to countenance the ordinary coarseness which goes with anything like a total view of the world. Pornography is serious with the seriousness of a little boy looking up the naughty parts in the Bible. Thus the more genuinely humorous it becomes the less it is able to fulfil its function. Sexual humour, like irreverence in religious matters, is a natural though not entirely defensible human response to situations which inflict great pain and humiliation. The obscene mysteries of sex and death confront the shivering ghost of Adam: if you rob him of his coarseness you rob him of his courage. It seems that Chaucer repented of his 'Reeve's Tale' and 'Miller's Tale', but heaven help us and our literature when we do. The material of every good poem is in some sense

forbidden; and it is my opinion that the greatest latitude should be allowed a poet in the use of coarse language and sexual imagery. In a review of a local verse periodical, Allen Curnow recently wrote disparagingly of the young Rimbauds . . . also any to whom the mere names of booze, lechery, back rooms, nakedness give the most delicious shudders (not so, alas, the reader) . . .' Passing over his somewhat auntish solicitude for New Zealand letters, one must still regret that a prominent and intelligent critic should choose to attack at the point where the big guns of ethical criticism are already trained. The origins of good poetry are complex and manifold; but Mr. Curnow as a practising poet must know well how often the socially unacceptable sentiments are a detonator for the main explosion which occurs in a poem, and how much good fruit can grow from that apparently unpromising ground.

There is always a close relation between the vigour of poetry and that of common speech. A good deal of Shakesperian diction must have been straight vernacular; but in an urban or suburban civilization the forces that mould the language (radio and newspaper) demand a purely technological accuracy and in the literary sphere a colourless gentility. The native vigour of the language retreats from the drawing-room and broadcasting studio to areas where no convention applies. Our own century has seen a resurrection of this vigour in the realist novel (for example, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead)* and a near-poetic use in the writing of James Joyce and William Faulkner. The movement in verse is less marked; but perhaps George Barker has done the same kind of thing in his 'True Confession', and Lawrence Durrell in his 'Ballad of the Good Lord Nelson':

> The good Lord Nelson had a swollen gland,
> Little of the scripture did he understand
> Till a woman led him to the promised land
> Aboard the Victory, Victory 0 . . .

It is not likely that we will have a 'Ballad of the Good Lord Nelson' written in New Zealand; though some of the founders of the country might suitably qualify for the central role.

We have all heard lamentations about the lack of a popular literature in New Zealand. But the true answer is, I think, that if one had appeared our various Holy Willies would have

hunted it into the ground. Poetry, like a rose, needs heavy manuring. We need all kinds of verse, polite and impolite, religious elegy, epithalamium, and drinking song. We have come much closer to inanity in our poetry through a sentimental and genteel tradition than its opposite could ever bring about. This statement will, of course, be interpreted as advocacy of free love and the robbing of Boxes for the Blind; but I am really hinting at something much more dangerous—that we should be able to look around us and write about what we see.

2

THE CREATIVE MASK

HITHERTO I have discussed mainly the formal aspects of poetry, and tried to establish some common ground for criticism; but the core of the matter I have hardly yet touched upon—the *significance* of a poem, that quality which governs all others, implicitly recognized by every critic, yet hard to grasp and harder to analyse. Like the seagod Proteus, it takes a thousand shapes—a forest fire, a bull, a serpent, a waterspout, a running river—and one has to grasp it through every change till it delivers up its identity. One can hardly speak of the *significance of Poetry,* only of the significance of an individual poem. Other qualities of a poem, such as *clarity* or *metaphorical exactitude,* though they depend in some measure on the subjective response of a reader, can be discussed in the abstract. But general statements about the significance of Poetry become philosophical or metaphysical statements about the nature of reality. Each poem's significance is unique and particular. The abstract statement is dangerous ground for the critic; he may easily find that he is talking nonsense. Therefore I will confine myself as far as possible in the first part of this lecture to the discussion of individual texts, and of the process of making a poem as one knows it by introspection.

Poetry as an art form differs from all others in that its medium is words. In painting, a single line is not significant, or in music a single chord—they derive their significance from the intention of the artist, and in the final composition from their relation to other parts of a complete pattern. But each word has already a minimum significance in its own right: it has its dictionary meaning. Thus a poet may, without the impetus of a unique and real experience, so arrange his verbal symbols as to produce the appearance of a poem, as Ixion embraced a cloud mistaking it for Juno and so fathered

the race of centaurs. For the sake of this argument I will now make a mock poem; not for the first time, but this time deliberately. Let the subject be Mount Egmont, because I know only that it is a mountain in Taranaki; and let the form be a Petrarchan sonnet, because in that form the metre is rigid and one rhyme can automatically generate another.

O giant! with thy coronet of snows . . . Egmont is, I believe, snow-covered; though why a giant should wear a coronet I cannot say.

And hanging woods about for mantle green . . . Egmont is also bush-covered. A mantle hangs and so the woods must also. It will not be hard to find three words to rhyme with *green.* What are the most obvious kinds of mountain scenery? Waterfalls, gorges, and what runs over or through them.

Clear-sounding cataract and dark ravine
Where night and day the turbulent torrent flows . . .

Clear-sounding, dark, and *turbulent* are stock adjectives supplied gratis by the poets of the past two hundred years. But the vein of mountain scenery has run out. We must go back to the top of Egmont.

Cloud-piercing sentinel! . . . If there are clouds in Taranaki it is likely that the top of Egmont will be near them; and anything upright can be called a sentinel, Now, every mountain has a *brow;* but let us be bold and call it a *forehead.*

Cloud-piercing sentinel! thy forehead knows
Both tempest-bearing cloud and sky serene . . .

A safe bet that it will be one or the other. Egmont rises out a flat plain; and Taranaki is fertile.

And fair farmlands surround thy wild demesne
Where now the bright December harvest grows . . .

The meaning of *demesne* I do not know, unless it is a *place;* but it is a good stock rhyming word. Now, what would grow on a Taranaki farm? Cows, perhaps; but they are not subjects for heroic verse. Or wheat? Harvest is a good blanket term. The New Zealand seasons are the reverse of the English—

thus, December. The octave is now complete. The sestet will require some large remark about Maori legend. If I remember rightly, Egmont quarrelled with Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe, and Tongariro, and went away on her own; or it may have been some other domestic disagreement; but the reference is vague enough, it will do very well. And, as the Government Tourist Department reminds us, *Tane* is god of the bush.

> *Far to the East thy mountain brethren stand*
> *But thou, long sundered from their company,*
> *In solitude, since Tane's forest grand*
> *Stretched from thy bastion to the distant sea . . .*

A bastion, I believe, is some kind of medieval fortification. Now for a loud noise to end with, in the words of Ezra Pound —'sonorous, like the farting of a goose.'

> *In state majestical thy realm hast scanned,*
> *Thy snows a symbol of eternity.*

In our end is our beginning; and a sonnet has been constructed out of no material but the natural possibilities of the English language and a few rudimentary twitchings of the sympathetic nervous system.

SONNET TO MOUNT EGMONT
(Dedicated to the New Zealand Forestry Department)

0 giant! in thy coronet of snows
And hanging woods about for mantle green,
Clear-sounding cataract and dark ravine
Where night and day the turbulent torrent flows—
Cloud-piercing sentinel! thy forehead knows
Both tempest-bearing cloud and sky serene;
And fair farmlands surround thy wild demesne
Where now the bright December harvest grows.
Far to the East thy mountain brethren stand
But thou, long sundered from their company,
In solitude, since Tane's forest grand
Stretched from thy bastion to the distant sea
In state majestical thy realm hast scanned,
Thy snows a symbol of eternity.

The most horrifying feature of such inflated trash is that it can often deceive the eye of a practised critic. The evocative

force of the English language, in the hands of a writer accustomed to the use of assonance and alliteration, is enough to create an impression of depth, even though he has added no significance to that with which the language has presented him. Admittedly, there is in every poem a double level of significance—the rubbed and rounded unessential meaning of any verbal structure, and the new significance which a living core of experience dictates. But the characteristic struggle of poetic composition fluctuates between these two levels, now advancing toward truly significant statement, now retreating to the minimum statement of ordinary language. The unfamiliar image or word sequence, however, is no guarantee of genuine significance; in fact, much modern poetry can come under the same stigma as traditional. Here is another manufactured poem:

The unambitious swan
Lies in her lake of wings
My love whose eyes are roses
Beckons me from sleep.

Oedipus from his tower
Can hear the dreaming sigh
Of seven doves roosting under
The cold sycamore bough.

But her unbridled lightning
Upon a sky of silk
Writes for the world to see
Its burning signature.

The basis of composition is still the same: words generating ideas which generate words. At most the poem reflects a few erotic associations. But how are we to know the difference between a genuine symbolist or imagist poem and such verbal hash? In the long run the answer lies with the instinct and sensitivity of the critic. Let us examine a few lines by a genuine imagist poet, Laurie Lee:

November loosens the tongue
like a leaf condemned,
and calls through the sharp blue air
a sad dance and a dread of winter.

* * * *

I hear the branches snap their fingers
and solitary grasses crack,
I hear the forest open her dress
and the ravens rattle their icy wings.

I hear the girl beside me rock
the hammock of her blood
and breathe upon the bedroom walls
white dust of paper roses.

* * * *

. . . she smiles with her warm mouth
in a dream of daisies,
and swings with the streaming birds
to chorus in the chimneys.

In this poem there are several features which guarantee its genuineness. The images, though joined like a string of beads, are fresh and apt—'the branches snap their fingers'; 'the hammock of her blood'—and carry an immediate physical reference. Also, the images form a clear contrasting pattern—the winter melancholy with which the poet identifies his own mood, and the innocent sensual lightness of the girl's; and, further, on a close reading of the poem (which I quote only in part), one senses an inner core or matrix which governs the development of images—a real girl and a November in the mind.

The difference between statement and pseudo-statement in poetry should be apparent. The statement embodied in a true poem *refers* to a real occasion of illumination: it is the mirror of a spiritual event. In a pseudo-statement the true labour of composition has not occurred; there is no spiritual event in which the reader can participate. What shall we say, then, of the early poems of Edith Sitwell or the nonsense verse of Edward Lear? Have they significance? If we answer in the negative, we ignore the subconscious elements which contribute to the meaning of a poem. Edith Sitwell's highly sophisticated formal structures are like landscapes by a surrealist painter. They have their own logic derived from childhood fantasy. Similarly, the incongruity of Edward Lear's poems follows definite patterns and reduces tragedy to the happy proportions of a game of Animal Grab played in a nursery. The imagina-

tion is changed by them; and that is all we require even of Keats.

It may be worth while to coin a few definitions for use in examining the process of poetic composition. I do not hope to emulate the American New Critics and produce an entire new glossary—*autotelic, aesthetic distance, rational coherence, concrete universal, designatum, denotatum, fallacy of expressive form.* In the field of aesthetics, as in the field of ethics, one's data are derived in the last analysis from introspection; and it is useless to attempt to reduce subjective criteria to an exact objective science. Beyond a certain point definition defeats its aim of clarifying, for the terms become more exact than the processes they describe. My definitions will be few and unscientific.

THE WORLD OF THOU. Some such concept is necessary to express what lies at the heart of the making of a poem: that is, a heightened sense of reality. I borrow the term from Martin Buber: he uses it to denote the whole various world of relationship where being meets being, as distinguished from *the rtorld of It* where use supplants relation. Without some such concept we are likely to fall into the fallacy of regarding an art form as a purely arbitrary structure. It may be said that I am bringing God in the back door; yet one does not have to believe in God to write a good poem. The concept is not strictly a theological one; it records a common spiritual experience 'rather than a dogma of revealed religion. It is enough to say that the work of most artists is convulsed about some mystery *other* than themselves, whether it be God, the natural world, or the life of their fellow-beings.

The MATRIX of a poem. By this term I refer to the primal substance of a poem, non-verbal, which the verbal structure of a poem reflects; not its overt meaning, but its secret incandescence, its point of contact with the *world of Thou.*

The FORM of a poem: that is, the whole complex verbal pattern which the poet creates in his defining response to the *matrix.* It is a commonplace of the experience of artists that the *form* is always felt to be a highly inadequate reflection of the *matrix.*

INCUBATION. The period of gestation for a poem, during which the *matrix* is carried obscurely in the mind, waiting for its verbal definition. Gerard Manley Hopkins writes:

> The fine delight that fathers thought, the strong
> Spur live and lancing like the blowpipe flame
> Breathes once, and quenched faster than it came
> Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.
> Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
> Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same . . .

Hopkins's analogy of feminine conception is a very apt one; but it does not make plain the masculine and energetic response which is embodied in the *form* of a poem.

TEXTURE. In verse, the use, distinctive to each poet, of rhythm and bare or rich vowel and consonant patterns, with their accompanying emotional associations and physical effect.

TIME-LIFE. An important concept, used by Allen Curnow in the introduction to his *Book of New Zealand Verse:* the *form* of a poem regarded as a complex 'living' structure in time—for, as the form of a painting exists in a spatial context, so the form of a poem exists in time.

The critic who neglects the audible pattern of a poem may find its meaning impenetrable or superficial. Thus, in one of the few good poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, 'The Song of the Surf:

> White steeds of the ocean that leap with a hollow
> and wearisome roar
> On the band of the ironstone steep not a fathom's
> length out from the shore . . .

The phrases Gordon uses are familiar coinage. But the audible pattern of the poem reflects closely the movement of surf on a rocky beach, and more, the poet's underlying fatalism. The form does not exist solely in time; for the pattern of the words on the page, the long hexameters, contributes towards the same end. Even slight changes in the *time-life* of the poem have a marked effect:

Not far from this very place, on the sand and the shingle dry
He lay with his battered face upturned to the frowning sky . . .

When Gordon speaks of the drowned man, the poem's tempo decreases, the strong stresses begin to outnumber the weak. When one has grown accustomed to the light anapaestic rhythm of galloping hooves which Gordon favoured, these changes have almost the effect of counterpoint in music: they create tension and introduce a different mood. It is most improbable that Gordon consciously contrived these effects; but he was for once inspired, and the time-life of the poem benefited.

INSPIRATION. The traditional term used to describe the sense of heightened reality experienced in the making of a poem: literally a *breathing-in* of divine power, for originally a poet was regarded as one possessed by a god or demon. The concept of *inspiration* as entertained by the popular reader ignores the necessity of a conscious willed response on the part of the poet, regarding him rather as a kind of somnambulist medium. The citizens of Dunedin who set Burns's statue on a steep lawn in the centre of the town with its back to the cathedral and its face to the Oban Hotel may have shown some unconscious humour; but the sculptor made clear their notion of the poet's role. Burns could have been shown walking behind a plough or tapping barrels in the course of his excise duties. Instead, he is seated on a cleft stump, a scroll across his knees, and a quill pen in his hand. There is an expression of expectance on his face: he is waiting for the Muse to speak. Undoubtedly there is an element of truth in the picture. Every good poem is in some sense the product of inspiration; but a writer who has no gift may be inspired to write doggerel. Burns's countryman, William McGonagall, wrote thus at the end of last century:

> . . . I imagined that a pen was in my right hand, and a voice crying, "Write! Write!" So I said to myself, ruminating, let me see; what shall I write? then all at once a bright idea struck me to write about my best friend, the late Reverend George Gilfillan; in my opinion I could

not have chosen a better subject, therefore I immediately found paper, pen, and ink, and set myself down to immortalize the great preacher, poet, and orator. These are the lines I penned, which I dropped into the box of the *Weekly News* office surreptitiously, which appeared in that paper as follows:

Rev. George Gilfillan of Dundee,
There is none can you excell;
You have boldly rejected the Confession of Faith
And defended your cause right well.

The first time I heard him speak,
'Twas in the Kinnaird Hall,
Lecturing on the Garibaldi movement,
As loud as he could bawl.

* * * *

My blessing on his noble form,
And on his lofty head,
May all good angels guard him while living,
And hereafter when he's dead.

P.S.—This is the first poem that I composed while under the divine inspiration, and is true, as I have to give an account to God at the day of judgment for all sins I have committed.

This is the true Delphic utterance. With less than no talent, McGonagall has been visited by Apollo, and for the rest of his life is doomed to be the butt of drunken students and the terror of his friends. McGonagall should be canonized as the patron saint of those poets who regard their work as too holy for criticism.

It is doubtful if any analysis of the non-verbal processes which accompany the making of a poem can ever be wholly satisfactory. Yet the attempt must be made; otherwise criticism becomes a mere filing of images and counting of stresses. In this country the critical work of M. H. Holcroft and Allen Curnow has been influential because, whatever their limitations of approach and insight, they have tried to grapple with the more massive problems of self and not-self, flesh and spirit, man and society, anxiety and inspiration. Holcroft writes,of Eileen Duggan in one of the finest passages of his trilogy:

> If she turns questioningly towards the physical environment, feeling the primal urgency beyond the deceptive bareness of outline where the hills dwarf our dwelling places, it is to discover the loneliness of the artist . . . But when she turns in thought to the enigmas of experience, or feels a reminder of them in the southern stars, her ideas flow back to the symbols of her religion, and she is safe again from the unfamiliar wilderness.

And further, of Ursula Bethell:

> There are traces in some of the poems of the spiritual aftermath of vigil—almost the dryness that comes when prayer seems to be defeated by the uncomprehending silence. It is this feeling of marginal experience which gives her work a genuine religious significance, for religion at its best can never be separated from struggle and aspiration. A poet who looks into the night and ponders the mysteries of life and death with a mind creatively disposed must find pain as well as reassurance. Poetry is a striving towards enlargement. The ceaseless attempt to fix thought and feeling into perfect imagery means that something beyond the actual scene or idea—the nimbus of association—must fill the mind and leave its colouring in the completed stanzas . . .

I have quoted at length from Holcroft because his work suffers when one considers phrases in isolation. It is easy to ridicule his method of broad statement; and many of his critics have done so. But he is here attempting to define the complex movements of the human spirit which in the case of two religious poets underlie their creative activity. In that sphere there is no ready-made terminology. With, as it were, hand-made tools Holcroft makes a clear distinction between the religious timbre of the poems of Eileen Duggan and those of Ursula Bethell—by no means a simple accomplishment. His criticism has the faults and virtues of the intuitive approach. A treatment of poems purely in terms of their *form* would be no adequate substitute.

One can say that the *form* of a poem embodies the poet's response toward that event which I have called the *matrix*; and to discuss the problems involved in this response requires a knowledge of the cultural and ethical background of Western civilization. My own knowledge is highly limited; but there

are two related problems which I intend to explore tentatively, as they have a strong bearing on significance in poetry—that of *total vision,* and that of *creative freedom.* It may be possible to make plain what I mean by total vision by examining a few lines from a poem by St John of the Cross:

> Deep-cellared is the cavern
> Of my love's heart, I drank of him alive:
> Now, stumbling from the tavern
> No thoughts of mine survive,
> And I have lost the flock I used to drive . . .
>
> Cease, then, you arctic gale,
> And come, recalling love, wind of the South:
> Within my garden-pale
> The scent of flowers exhale
> Which my Beloved browses with his mouth.

The central spiritual event to which St John responds is the Beatific Vision, the marriage of the soul to its Creator. Yet what constellation of image does he find to express this mystery? The image of a drunken herdsman who emerges from a roadside tavern to find his flock dispersed; and that of a woman in a walled garden awaiting the approach of her lover. Plainly this is the language of mysticism which must draw figures from every quarter to express an experience which ultimately cannot be formally expressed. But, though a psychological critic who was disposed to interpret the experience as erotic because the poet's images are sensual would shoot absurdly wide of the mark, we need not therefore think that the imagery is a veil only, and that mathematical or geological images would have served as well. The poem is the response of the entire man, spirit and animal, conscious and subconscious. Thus the herdsman and disconsolate woman, appetite and feeling, are—let us not say *sublimated*—but gathered in to the creative response of the poet. In this sense it is as true and concrete a love poem as any written to a human lover. We touch, as it were, the poet's work, and say: *This is substantial man;* not a mere ghost blown upon by *Agape,* but the hide, hair, and inward quality of the human creature. It may offend the conventional ear to be told that St John's poem and Robert Burns's To a Haggis' may be

equal in quality; but in each case the creative response of the whole man, rather than the occasion which calls it forth, gives the poem its peculiar excellence.

A great disservice is done for poetry by those critics who wish to prune, purify, and make polite. Gerard Manley Hopkins, himself a critic with a strong ethical bias, wrote as follows in 1888, in a letter to Coventry Patmore:

> There is an old Adam of barbarism, boyishness, wildness, rawness, rankness, the disreputable, the unrefined in the refined and educated. It is that I meant by tykishness (a tyke is a stray sly unowned dog) and said you had none of; and I did also think that you were without all sympathy for it and must survey it when you met with it wholly from without. Ancient Pistol is the typical tyke, and he and all his crew are tykes, and the tykish element undergoing dilution in Falstaff and Prince Hal appears to vanish, but of course really exists, in Henry V as king. I thought it as well to have ever so little of it . . .

Hopkins's criticism is acute. This tykishness, the troubled energy of the natural man, gives Browning, Hardy, and even Meredith their superiority as poets over Patmore. Without it, poetry becomes a ghost of its proper self, a *Testament of Beauty* whose beauty is that of an ornamental duckpond. It is an essential part of the total vision which goes to make a poem; but the spiritualizing tendency of modern progressive semi-Christian society is against it. There is always an element in Christian thought which is, in fact, Manichean—the old dream that man's freedom is to be found by release from his body, rather than by acts of prayer and labour in a material world. It sets its face against the unity of flesh and spirit, and hence against the unity of an art form.

The problem of creative freedom has stimulated many quarrels between religious men and poets; for the individualism of artists and their stubborn adherence to the truth of a particular vision has seemed to many a Churchman indistinguishable from spiritual pride; and especially their demand for freedom in the handling of their medium, when that medium happens to be words. There may well be truth in the accusation of pride; but it is by no means the whole picture. In early centuries a St Jerome or St Augustine could exercise

their creativity in the gigantic task of amalgamating pre-Christian cultural tradition with Christian theology. Jerome lived and breathed the classics; Augustine established study groups among the young men of his acquaintance, on the model of Plato's Academy, in which they read Virgil daily, bathed and walked together, and discussed metaphysical problems. Yet both men were deeply disturbed by the sensuous power of pagan art, partly because it was associated with the vices of the theatre, but partly because the vision it embodied seemed incompatible with that of Christian moral order. Jerome in the desert dreamed that he was at the judgment seat and beaten by angels for preferring Greek and Latin authors to the Hebrew scriptures; and the story goes that he woke with the bruises of the beating still on his shoulders. Augustine wrote passionately in his *Confessions* of 'that sea of custom which they scarcely escape who climb the Cross'. The moral vision of early Christian ascetism was gained at a loss—neglect of, and even contempt for created things, and a fear of natural animism. The Devil was credited with more than his due. A modern intellectual world can hardly realize how close the Fathers stood to the pagan animism against which they erected the dams of rational theology; but the fruit of their reaction is still with us, for good and for bad. Though the Church has understood and given scope to man's ethical nature, she has left in the main man's creativity unexplored and uncultivated; and this seems all the more unfortunate to those who believe (as I do) that the medieval conception of human nature is more real and stable than the Hellenic or the modern. The Church succeeded in part in its task of sanctifying the lives of men by the example of the saints and the closely knit order of sacrament, hierarchy, and dogma. But man's creative energy, and those works which are not necessary to salvation, yet are the product of man's free will and part of his destiny, remained on the whole outside its sphere, and emerged with the Renaissance as secular aesthetic humanism.

One can trace the development of narrative in prose and verse, from the moral fable that adds point to a sermon, to the fables of Boccaccio and Chaucer, which have no such didactic intention. Undoubtedly the tension of Christian Catholic morality informed and gave depth to the work of these writers; but the meditation of artists was now diverted

from the Four Last Things to the treasures of life possessed even by the corrupt and foolish. A cut-and-dried division between Christian and humanist tradition can scarcely be made; the development of each has been affected by the other, if at times only in reaction. But the narrower Christian apologists have inclined to regard much humanist literature as 'the wisdom of the children of darkness'; and writers such as Nietzsche and Voltaire have opposed Christianity as much for its curbing of energetic free speculation as for its ethical preoccupations. No dichotomy of form and flux, of Apollonian and Dionysiac principles within modern humanism is so great as the gulf between the battlements of the Church Militant and the stony ground below where men struggle often with the same basic problems under different names, yet fear to accept orthodoxy lest their present armour should be called intellectual arrogance and stripped from them.

Lacking a Christian humanism, men have turned to agnostic or atheistic humanism for an understanding of their problems. Maritain, von Hugel, and a few novelists excepted, there is hardly in modern literature a Christian humanism worth the name. Perhaps I speak in ignorance. But to have an effect on the course of modern secular thought a Christian apologist has to recognize that Karl Barth, or the Council of Trent, have not said the last word about human nature, and that Dostoievski or even Sartre may shed light on our problems. Modern man desires as much to be delivered from an uncreative society as from his sins.

But these are large matters, and somewhat beyond the scope of my argument; so I will return to the first problern—that of significance in poetry. In attempting to assess the significance of a poem, one must realize that nearly all poetry is dramatic in character. The catharsis which a reader experiences could not occur if he felt the self that the poem expresses to be entirely actual; rather, the self is a projection of complex associations in the poet's mind, and the poem enables the reader to make the same projection. The / of a poem may not exist. Thus, if one regarded the work of Burns as a poetic *credo,* one would have to conclude that he was either insincere or schizophrenic. His quiet nature lyrics rub shoulders with bludgeoning satires; the piety of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' with the iconoclastic wit of The Jolly

Beggars'; romantic love poetry with brutal cynicism. But the problem arises from a false conception of the poet's role. If Burns had been permanently committed to any one attitude, he could not have attained the objectivity necessary to write at all.

In ordinary life each man plays many parts. We count a parson at fault who carries his pulpit self into the home; and what is good manners in the pub is not in the parlour. The self which a man unconsciously assumes in a given situation is a kind of tribal mask for which the psychological term is *persona.* A New Zealand poet, Hubert Witheford, has written of inspiration as a rite which bestows on the poet a new self with the anonymity of a masked priest or dancer:

> Dazed by the loud dementia of each sense,
> Hounded towards the ritual he shuns,
> The poet, drained of virtue, dons the mask;
> On his blaspheming mouth and weeping eyes
> He puts the crest of his celestial task . . .

I quote from the title poem of his book, *The Falcon Mask.* The kind of *persona* a poet may assume depends on many factors—the society in which he lives, his own frustrations, his religious and ideological background. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* for example, and in Goethe's *Faust,* the poet becomes master magician; in the work of Rimbaud and Hart Crane, hobo and outcast, the scapegoat taking upon himself the burden of tribal guilt. Where tradition is strong, an Apollonian role is most probable. The poet tries to remain unmoved and subjugate his images to a formal order; as Yeats once asked the spirits at a seance why they had come; and got the polite answer, 'To provide you with images for your poems'. Many poets, however, in the sterile order of modern civilization take on a Dionysiac *persona* and submerge themselves in the flux of sensation and primitive mysticism:

> . . . sleep, death, desire,
> Close round one instant in a floating flower . . .
> 0 minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
> Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
> Is answered in the vortex of our grave
> The seal's wide spindrift gaze towards paradise.

So writes Hart Crane—who was accustomed to compose with a jug of wine on the table and a gramophone at full blast. He eventually stepped off the stern of a ship in the Caribbean Sea, thus affording a whole generation of critics with an opportunity for myth-making. The fate of an Apollonian poet is generally less spectacular: a job in the Army Intelligence Department. But either way, one thing is certain, that an art form is not as efficient a magical symbol as a dollar bill.

'Whose is that head that I see on my wall?'
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson.
'Is it anyone's head whom we know at all?'

'I *point what I think,' said Rivera.*
'I *paint what I paint, I paint what I see,*
'I *paint what I think,' said Rivera.*
'And the thing that is dearest in life to me
'In a bourgeois hall is Integrity;
'However . . .
'I'll take out a couple of people drinkin'
'And put in a picture of Abraham Lincoln,
7 could even give you McCormick's reaper
'And still not make my art much cheaper.
'But the head of Lenin has got to stay
'Or my friends will give me the bird today,
'The bird, the bird, forever.'

'It's not good taste in a man like me,'
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson,
'To question an artist's integrity
'Or mention a practical thing like a fee,
'But I know what I like in a large degree . . .
Tor twenty-one thousand conservative bucks
'You painted a radical. I say shucks . . .
'And though your art I dislike to hamper
'I owe a *little* to God and to Gramper,
'And after all,
'It's *my* wall . . .'

'We'll see if it is? said Rivera.

One can even sympathize with Nelson, grandson of John D. Rockefeller. As a member of a society based on monetary values, he feels that those values are being affronted. Irritation with the artist's demand for creative freedom is not peculiar

to capitalist America. Here is a comment from the other side of the Iron Curtain, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on Literature and Art, August, 19461*

> What is the significance of the mistakes committed by the editors of *Svedzda* and *Leningrad?*
>
> The leading workers of these journals, and above all their editors, Comrades Sayanov and Likharev, forgot the Leninist proposition that our journals, whether scientific or literary, cannot be apolitical. They forgot that our journals are powerful media of the Soviet state in educating the Soviet people, and especially the youth . . The task of Soviet literature is to help the state correctly to educate the youth . . .

This is the call of the bull elephant in the mating season, echoed from the towers of Manhattan, and in a weaker voice by our own Y.M.C.A.s, school committees, and other cultural bodies. Do not imagine that I am attacking Russian communism, and so passing the buck. It would be an error to suppose that the *Decision of the Central Committee* was based on political rather than social prejudice. Though the original Bolshevik revolution in Russia drew most of its leaders from the ranks of the intellectual class, the stability of Soviet society is now maintained by the support of the great middle class which in every society looks upon art forms as saleable commodities and is bitterly intolerant of the artist's demand for intellectual freedom. Naturally so; for society cannot be maintained without commonly accepted stereotypes of thought and action, and the self-imposed task of the artist is to break down these stereotypes and achieve an individual vision, a task which runs counter to the ordinary citizen's very real horror of freedom. The deadweight of stereotyped thinking can hardly be gauged by those who have never attempted to move against it. For example, in this country most poets and prose writers are likely to be engaged in broadcasting, teaching, or journalism, all occupations that demand some literary background and skill in the use of words. The words are directed to a social aim, often worthwhile in itself, but remote from the larger preoccupations of the writer. Half his energy is devoted to working the poison of dead symbols out of his system.

The rebellion of artists against the social patterns of their time and place is often cried down as childish and gratuitous; but it is the inevitable accompaniment of their growth towards maturity. The seedtime, as it were, of creativity occurs in adolescence, that time in the life of modern man when he moves furthest from the influence of social custom, propelled by the newly wakened force of his critical faculties, and the pressure of his sexual instinct. He recognizes then for the first and often the last time that he is an individual, a free agent; for a child is unconscious of its freedom, an adult generally conscious only that he has somehow lost it. Adolescence is the cradle both of delinquency and of creativity. The secret joy in the act, say, of smashing the windows of an empty house, and the joy in that act of choice which lies at the core of the creation of an art form, spring from the same root (though one act is fruitful and the other demonic)—*It is I who choose to do this.* By refusing to believe in the possibility of a fruitful freedom, a critic then relegates the creative impulse itself to the category of delinquency. In the experience of the adolescent, demonic and fruitful freedom are terribly linked, in his sexual knowledge and his acts of anger and rebellion against his home. About this spiritual crisis his struggles and his shames are bound:

> The veils descend. The unknown figure
> Is sheeted in the indecencies
> Of shame and boils. The nose gets bigger.
> The private parts, haired like a trigger,
> Cock at a dream. The infant cries
> Abandoned in its discarded larva,
> Out of which steps with bloodshot eyes,
> The man, the man, crying *Ave, Ave!*

Those who cannot remember that crisis are good forgetters. But too frequently the man never emerges, because the social stereotypes of thought and action smother his secret knowledge of freedom. Society fears the sexual crisis and belittles the spiritual one. The adolescent crisis in itself does not make an artist; but in an artist's life it is invariably perpetuated in some way. Wallace Fowlie writes thus of Rimbaud:

> Whereas the bohemian and the rascal oppose conventional living through some principle of reaction against the

> familiar, the *voyou* in Rimbaud (as well as in Villon, Apollinaire, and Hart Crane) opposed conventionality through a deep principle of changing his being . . .
>
> For certain men it first is necessary to act, to explode, and to vituperate, before they can discover the reasons which prompted their deeds and explosions and vituperations.

The huge discovery of the adolescent, which brings with it a torment that most are glad to shrug off in conformity, consists in his knowledge that freedom is not an ideal to be attained but already man's condition, like a ruby in an old ring, that has been taken for a garnet. Significance in poetry depends largely on the poet's capacity to make a free and entire response to the world in which he lives: a capacity of which he first becomes aware in adolescene. How to maintain creative freedom without its demonic counterpart is a problem of each man's destiny—often a tragic one, for artists are generally less efficient in their lives than in their art.

One cannot ignore the part that tradition plays in generating creative freedom. Tradition is not fathered by that great incubus of the marshes, the master State, but by those men who have realized in part that freedom is a primary human condition, and have written their knowledge into innumerable art forms and even into the customs of the society they inhabit. The concept of a nation as a community of free men, however much misused in the interests of State propaganda, can still waken the mind in a time of discredited gods and dreadful idols:

> I thought of Britain in its cloud
> Chained to the economic rocks
> Dying behind me. I saw the flocks
> Of great and grieving omens crowd
> About the lion on the stone.
> I saw Milton's eagle mewing
> Her dereliction in the ruin
> Of a great nation, alone.

In these lines George Barker avails himself of a privilege which history has denied as yet to the New Zealand poet. He is able to refer to a Britain which is more than a geographical unit or a social structure built up by historical accident and the demands of commerce—rather a complex spiritual identity of people, time, and place, which his audience in some

measure share. The lion of tradition and the armed eagle are at one level merely the insignia of a State organization; but at another, they are still the totem beasts of the tribal unit. Where the texture of community life is sufficiently rich and complex, not only in idea but in fact, the poet can say *We* without surrendering his vision to the dead grip of a constricting stereotype. This unity in time and place of a complex group seems to have occurred in the Greek and Italian city-states, and in Elizabethan England. It removed in a great measure the burden of isolation from artists and provided them with a constant ground of inspiration. Why (one may ask) cannot a New Zealand poet say *We* as readily as /? There are many factors which prevent him; and chief among them the fact that the only language which our society speaks with understanding is the language of money and status. Perhaps on an Auckland beach or in the badlands of Central Otago a New Zealand poet may be able to say, 'This is my country'. Our poems are largely landscape ones. The unofficial and real history of the country, its legend, remains uncreated. Not until a poet walking up Queen Street or down Lambton Quay can feel part of a complex spiritual identity, as Catullus did in Rome, Baudelaire in Paris, George Barker in London, can that legend begin to live. When poet and reader alike share the experience of having a history greater than their own lifespan, then full communication is possible. A society is itself the creation of all its members; when it forbids their creative activity it has begun to fossilize. The pioneers wished to found in New Zealand an Athens of the South; but we are more likely to become a lesser Sparta, a community notable for its soldiers, its athletes, and its ignorance of the meaning of spiritual freedom. It is necessary for any artist to look clearly at the country in which he lives. But a country is like a woman: if there is no love in the look, the response will always be negative. New Zealand has perhaps forgotten her poets because they have in some measure forgotten New Zealand. The subject-matter of literature lies always at one's own backdoor; and, though the language of love is full of hard words and complaints, an active love is the only possible ground of creative freedom.

In this lecture, setting out to discover what makes a poem real, I have ended by discussing the problems of poets. This

may not be so great a divergence from the original direction as appears at first sight; for the problems I have discussed are not the peculiar property of poets. The feeling of men, even unintellectual and unaesthetic men, that they share these problems of conflicting loyalties leads them to poetry. What is forged out between the hammer of individual striving and the anvil of group necessity enriches eventually the life of the group. The significance lies in the fact that the struggle is real.

3

SYMBOLISM IN NEW ZEALAND POETRY

IN THE FIRST TWO lectures of this series I have said something of the criticism of poetry and its inspiration. I have tried to speak to some purpose—but after so many words from one mouth I am reminded of a certain Chinese painter's notion of a poets' heaven. The beatified poets recline on clouds, each one writing interminable verses on rolls of toilet paper; the toilet paper dangles in the wind; and each poet is very much on his own. One could be certain that the poems they would write would all be bad. Poetry is written by men and women; and if there is no life in them there can be no life in their work. As Dylan Thomas has written:

> To take to give is all, return what is hungrily given
> Puffing the pounds of manna up through the dew to heaven,
> The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft.

Living is a difficult task and often a painful occupation; but not a job that one can walk out on—there is nowhere else to go. One can, of course, make one's art a kind of perpetual retreat from every real problem; but in such a situation the art itself gradually withers away. The prototype of the active poet is not, to my mind, the magician or dreamer—rather the emu, who digests stones and old boots; or the punchdrunk boxer coming back for more.

Today I will say something of concrete symbolism in New Zealand poetry. There is no real contradiction in speaking of *concrete* symbolism; for a symbol takes its shape and colour from the experience which it affirms. Furthermore, one can hardly speak of symbolism as a conscious technique like the mechanics of verse construction. It lies at the roots of a

poem where art form and suffered reality coalesce, and may be more apparent to the critical reader than to the author himself, as archaeologists unearth city after city from underneath a mound of simple rubble. Therefore it is not wholly fantastic to look for symbolism in the work of New Zealand writers who would themselves have scouted one's findings. A symbol is often most vigorous when unsuspected by its author; as when a child relives in its play and fantasy the totemism of primitive man, or a civilized adult governs his life by an intricate ritual.

We are inclined to cry down the Victorian Age as unimaginative, and to forget the vigorous fantasy of Carroll, Lear, Kipling, or George Macdonald—the unique symbolism which could only occur in a time when progress seemed not a fanatic's dream but something in part already realized; when children could grow to manhood and womanhood without the threat of annihilation. My grandfather, John Macmillan Brown, in whose name and memory these lectures were inaugurated, was a product of that age. I remember him as a white-haired elderly man in a black coat who inhabited a vast private library, which one entered by a varnished staircase—a benign figure who patted me on the head when I showed him my Christmas presents. No doubt if he were alive today he would find his grandson uneasy company. As a pioneer in education, whose labour and devotion helped to shape our society, he would find it hard to understand the view of a descendant that the pioneer ideals were constricting and even destructive. Yet he himself wrote a vigorous satire on his contemporary society, *Riallero;* and in *Limanora* constructed a Utopia where men combined technological progress with moral near-perfection. At the end of the Utopian fantasy the hero and his female counterpart, Thyriel, visit the antarctic polar regions, where volcanic activity has broken out threatening the island paradise.

> Everywhere we flew were marks of the recent volcanic work; and not merely creative, but destructive. . . . We hurried to the various points of danger and discovered only too clearly that the first storm would send the waters of the ocean breaching into many new volcanic vents . . .
>
> The difficulty came when we passed beyond the Antarctic Ocean, and voyaged high above the heaving trackless desert

> of water which lies between the region of icebergs and the first ring of islets . , . How were we to find resting-places at night or during the day?

Eventually the hero is abandoned by his guardian spirit, whose wings have grown tired, and wakes disconsolate in a hut above the bushline of the Southern Alps. The narrative has the familiar contours of an anxiety dream. The Utopia embodies the idealist superstructure of the Victorian era. In our own time we have seen the too ethereal *anima* of social goodwill, romantic affection, and self-improvement, vanish, leaving us on the cold damp ground; and the volcanic forces within the soul of man blow every imagined Utopia skyhigh in two World Wars. We are still learning the hard lesson that neither happiness nor sanctity can be attained by a simple act of the conscious will. Perhaps that 'heaving trackless desert of water' over which the two Utopians fly is the terrifying but regenerative chaos out of which every island and myth rises, and into which it returns. Their island, with its elaborate mechanisms to keep out prohibited immigrants, natural or supernatural, has much in common with Mr. Curnow's isolated New Zealand.

A symbol cannot be *explained;* rather, it must be regarded as a door opening upon the dark—upon a world of intuitions and associations of which the poet himself is hardly conscious. It is the nature of symbolism to be ambiguous. Yet certain patterns of symbolism can be more or less accurately determined. M. H. Holcroft and Allen Curnow among our critics have shown most awareness of symbolic implications in New Zealand poetry. Curnow acknowledges his considerable debt to Holcroft in an early sonnet, and much of his argument in the introduction to his *Book of New Zealand Verse* explores further the themes which Holcroft had already broached; but where Holcroft is discursive and speculative, Curnow works as a literary critic pure and simple, from the texts at hand. Inevitably, his interpretation reflects his own dilemmas. What he writes of D'Arcy Cresswell and R. A. K. Mason could be applied to his own work, both in verse and criticism:

> These poets were two who could not falsify their situation, and that is why they made these gestures. To seem real to themselves they had to seem such solitary figures, outpost survivors of a great but dead past.

Curnow works most naturally from an Apollonian position: his omnipresent theme is that of the isolation of the conscious ego, in time and space..Like Yeats he has been impelled to construct a hieratic figure, that of personified Time, to set against the flux of events and be a mouthpiece for oracular statements. But the *persona* is too abstract and unstable. The oracular statement becomes confused. This is not to deny Curnow's talent and integrity, and the value of his criticism as a springboard to further analysis. But his Biblical, geological, or entirely personal symbolism seems more immediate and fruitful than the myth of insular isolation:

> . . . the harmless sea
> Pure, unfractured, many miles,
> Still steel water sheathed between
> Once violent hills, volcanic shapes . . .
>
> . . . . because the dead,
> Father and child, still walk the water's edge:
> A kindness, an inconsequent pastime, froze
> In time's tormented rock, became an age
> When tropics shifted, buried rivers rose . . .

In this, probably his finest poem, 'At Dead Low Water,' Curnow uses the relation of father and son symbolically to represent an age of forgotten innocence. The 'once violent hills' I take, perhaps arbitrarily, to symbolize the even earlier identification of child and mother (any analysis of the symbolism of New Zealand literature must take into account the great part played by mountains and volcanic activity, and that in more than guidebook terms). The splendid geological symbolism with which the poem ends rests on the antithesis of fire and cold which I have remarked in an earlier lecture as characteristic of Curnow's poetry: the fire of instinctive vigour and the winter of necessary custom.

The myth of insularity, however, by which New Zealand became an Island in time and in human culture as well as in the visible Pacific, though cogent for the thirties, has proved something of a stilt-house against the tide of new development. Curnow has felt, perhaps more acutely than any other New Zealand writer, the burden of social stereotypes; and his gesture is often that of a man fanning the fog away from his

face. His reluctance to allow another view of New Zealand society and letters than his own intensely felt myth of isolation explains the otherwise unaccountable neglect, in bringing his anthology up to date, of Alistair Campbell, M. K. Joseph, and Louis Johnson—three poets widely differing in mood, of obvious talent and vigour, alike in their unlikeness to his prototype of what the New Zealand poet should be. At the present time our problems may not differ greatly from those of life and literature in England or America: the specifically *New Zealand* features of our writing are not in any case what appeals to the overseas reader, but the sense of reality suffered, which is much the same in any time or country.

My interpretation of the 'once violent hills' as mother symbols in Curnow's 'At Dead Low Water' raises the problem of psychological analysis. How far can a literary critic be permitted to interpret a writer's symbolism in Jungian or Freudian terms? The obvious answer is—*Who is going to stop him?* Yet neither a psychology of sexuality nor one of so-called archetypal patterns is concerned with the *quality* of a work of art: hence their analysis has a purely clinical value. All the same, one cannot dismiss a psychological interpretation as unreal. The critic who has once realized that the the enchanted pleasure-ground of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' may be, at one level, a vivid symbolic description of the female genitalia can never look at the poem with the same eyes again—I would say, to his definite advantage. In any given poem there are many levels of symbolism; and each level when recognized makes clearer the contours of that reality which the symbol reflects.

We are told that in primitive society the modern distinction between objective and subjective experience did not exist. The gods walked among men; ancestral spirits guarded every burial-ground against the trespasser; the sunrise was as much an inward as an outward event, and might not occur if certain rituals were neglected. This view of the world we may now consider superstitious; but it still governs all our most significant actions, from the planting of trees on Arbor Day to the relation of man and woman. The soldier, as John Manifold observes, goes out to battle with as much ritual observance as any aborigine:

Comfort him, ancients in your several moulds,
Sphinx, Lion, Lamb, Eagles of West and East,
And send him out on what his future holds

Vicariously bold, or safe at least
From tribal censure, while around him folds
The monstrous shadow of his totem beast.

A poet's task is not to *explain* rationally the animistic pattern which underlies civilized activity; but to lay it bare, and draw upon its strength without being submerged by it—a difficult and even dangerous procedure.

The first attempts made in New Zealand to draw upon Maori legend and mythology as a source for poetry were uniformly unsuccessful: they were vitiated by a sentimental tradition. The faces that look out of the early sketches of Maori chiefs are softened by the draughtsman's concept of the Noble Savage. And similarly such works as Domett's 'Ranolf and Amohia' carry a weight of sentimental idealism. No doubt many a settler walking into the fern out of sight of his steading felt a sudden panic descend, as if the bush were more than so much timber; and no doubt many another looking along a rocky coast-line felt for a moment his European cultural mask torn away, and saw it nakedly as a Maori fisherman might have done. But these moments did not find their way into the poetry of the time. Not until Jessie Mackay's 'Noosing of the Sun-God' do we find a nearer approach to a Polynesian mythological basis:

Thou art the Sun-God,
Te Ra of the flaming hair.
Heretofore man is thy moth.
What is the life of man,
Bound to thy rushing wings,
Thou fire-bird of Rangi?
A birth in a burning;
A flash and a war-word;
A failing, a falling
Of ash to the ashes
Of bottomless Po!

She has achieved some of the vigour of a canoe-chant or saga; and the poem stands out from similar writing like a hawk

among chickens. But it lacks the immediate *concreteness* which the symbols must have had for a Maori: it has a tinge of the over-literary statement. There is no reason, actually, why a New Zealand poet should use Polynesian symbolism rather than the Greek myths of Orpheus and Prometheus, or the medieval legend of Faustus. A correspondence with Polynesian culture should occur naturally; and can only succeed when the symbols are an integral part of the poet's mental equipment. Keith Sinclair, an Auckland poet, has made perhaps the only successful conscious use of Polynesian myth and symbol. In a remarkable poem, 'Memorial for a Missionary', he writes of Thomas Kendall, the first resident missionary in New Zealand, who was converted by those whom he came to convert:

> He drank the waters of the underworld
> Lying all day in the unconverted flesh,
> Entangled in old time, before Christ's birth . . .
>
> Did he fall through pride of spirit, through arrogance
> Or through humility, not scorning the prayers
> Of savages and their intricate pantheon? . . .
>
> Drowning off Jervis Bay, 0 the pain,
> For death is a virgin rich in maidenheads
> And memories, trees two hundred feet and tall.
> The sea is a savage maiden, in her legs
> Sharp pangs no missionary drank before,
> And the immortality that Maui sought . . .

In the haunting figure of a ruined missionary, Sinclair has embodied the conflict and merging of two cultures; and his symbols throughout the poem are drawn naturally from Polynesian sources. The sea as a symbol of death and chastity is linked to the myth of Maui and the Death-Goddess; yet recalls Hart Crane's image of the 'undinal vast belly'. The kauri tree as a phallic symbol is indigenous; yet the 'waters of the underworld' flow from the Greek *Lethe.* Polynesian and European symbolism merge, as they must inevitably do in the mind of a New Zealander of European extraction, however close his sympathy may be with the culture of his adopted country. Generally the Polynesian symbol has been awkwardly used by New Zealand poets. The only successful use I can

recall, after Sinclair's 'Memorial', occurs in some passages of Curnow's *The Axe,* and notably in a poem by Alistair Campbell, The Return':

> Their great eyes glowing, their rain-jewelled, leaf-green
> Bodies leaning and talking with the sea behind them,
> Plant gods, tree gods, gods of the middle world. Face
> downward
> And in a small creek-mouth all unperceived
> The drowned Dionysius, sand in his eyes and mouth,
> In the dim tide lolling . . .

The images, like many of Campbell's, have an almost hallucinatory force. The Polynesian gods and demigods have returned from the sea (Jung would say, from the collective unconscious) ; the falling rain is a symbol of their regeneration; their bodies are 'leaf-green', a symbol of the energy of the unconscious mind. But, as Sinclair has done in the 'Memorial', Campbell uses Greek mythology also—Dionysius (perhaps in another role Eliot's drowned Phoenician Sailor) lies submerged: a mysterious figure in this context, *unperceived,* perhaps the Dionysiac self which must die in order that the gods may return. Campbell's strongest personal symbols are always of separation and death. In his superb 'Elegy', mountain, gorge, tree, and river, become protagonists in the drama of the death of the young mountaineer. In 'Hut Near Desolated Pines', perhaps his finest poem, he considers the death of an old recluse: the rats, the spiders, the wind which bursts the door open, are all animistic and hostile. The old man himself is on one level the isolated self, on another the.bearer of ancestral wisdom. Campbell's poetry is static in the sense that in it the action has always just occurred; the sublimal violence is over, but the evidence of the crime remains. The gesture of even his love poems is elegiac; or perhaps it would be true to say that the 'Elegy' itself is his strongest love poem.

The South Island landscape which provides an arena for Campbell's poetry, has done the same for Brasch, Glover, Curnow, and Ursula Bethell : it may seem strange to speak of their nature poetry as symbolist, yet it is precisely that quality in their poems by which natural features assume the significance of a pattern in the mind which distinguish them from the guide-book verse which had come before. I have often felt

the same excitement in reading a nature poem by Brasch or Glover as in looking at a painting by Rita Cook or Doris Lusk: the contours of mountain, bush, and seacoast, are richly alive with the animistic force of a ritual dance. Thus in Brasch's poem, 'A View of Rangitoto':

> Harshness of gorse darkens the yellow cliff-ledge,
> And scarlet-flowered trees lean out to drop
> Their shadows on the bay below, searching
>
> The water for an image always broken
> Between the inward and returning swells . . .
>
> Finally, holding all eyes, the long-limbed mountain
> Dark on the waves, sunk in a stone composure.
> From each far cape an easy flank lifts
>
> In slow unison, purposeful all their rising length
> To meet and lock together faultlessly
> Clasping the notched worn crater-cone between them.

The trees 'searching the water' for a broken image are plainly a narcissist symbol; the mountain, as Brasch describes it in his poem, is one of the clearest symbols of maternal sexuality in New Zealand poetry. If this interpretation raises any doubt, one has only to examine his explicit statement in *The Land and the People:*

> The maternal nightly flood
> Where all things rest and are renewed
> And separateness falls away . . .

The attitude of the child to the mother and the New Zealander to the landscape of his country is identified. The marriage of earth and sea, of the static maternal symbol and the destructive yet rejuvenating element of flux, is also a constant motif in his poems. The maternal symbol carries the weight of human, or even cosmic suffering: it is felt as a burden against which the individual strives unsuccessfully, and to which he must be reconciled in order to find peace.

In the poems of Denis Glover, the same symbols occur with a different emphasis. The sea is omnipresent, as a symbol of death and renewal:

To the north are islands like stars
In the blue water
And south, in that crystal air,
The icefloes grind and mutter,

Sings Harry in the windbreak . . .

But his later verse turns to the land, and to the imagined Eden of childhood experience. He has constructed a *persona* through whose mouth the symbolic statement can be made—Harry, the casual man, the onlooker at the game of life. The statement itself is frequently nihilistic:

. . . praise St Francis feeding crumbs
Into the empty mouths of guns . . .

Very likely no better compressed statement of the modern social chaos has been made: the whole force of Christian charity and humility given over to the processes of destruction.

In Glover's most recent work, Harry has been replaced by the figure of Arawata Bill, gold prospector and eccentric. The *persona* moves through a hostile country, menaced by flooded rivers, avalanche, and tangled bush. The sequence contains some of the best of Glover's nature symbolism: one is introduced to the powers of earth, air, and water, a Heracleitean cosmos, with the hidden fire of the gold burning at its centre.

The work of Ursula Bethell, another South Island poet, is marked by her use of Christian symbolism, which does not merge easily with natural animism. The tension is often evident; but in several poems is completely resolved:

These hills at dawn are of austere architecture,
Claustral; like a grave assembly, night-cold numbed,
Of nuns, singing matins and lauds in perpetuity,
While the sluggard multitude without is dumb;
But at sunrise carmined, gilded; as of rare cosmetics
A girl takes, for more beauty now, lest her lover come.

This quotation from 'Levavi Oculos' shows a use of symbolism at many levels. The hills are identified with nuns rising before the dawn: they symbolize thus the purity and strength of the natural world when theocentric. The sun comes like a lover;

but in this context the sun symbolizes Christ, the Master of nature. The hills are 'gilded': that is, they take their light from the Face they look upon: they use it as a girl uses 'cosmetics' to prepare for her lover. A breath-taking symbol; and extraordinarily apt. One may say that the hills themselves symbolize the instinctive life of man, which is quickened and changed by the power of the Resurrection. Ursula Bethell's work is remarkable in that she sees the Christian drama of redemption performed in the natural world, in the Southern Alps and the Canterbury foothills. She belonged by age to an earlier generation of poets; but, like Eileen Duggan, had the intellectual fibre to grasp the benefits of a modern tradition.

If, as many critics are inclined to do, one were to take leave of the symbolism of New Zealand poetry at this point, the impression would be gained that we had some first-rate landscape poets, and nothing more. But, in fact, a good deal of recent poetry has moved towards a symbolism more immediately related to our personal lives. The social emphasis of the thirties was by no means all a product of the depression: it was an effort to break down the barrier which had grown up between poetry and the concrete detail of our lives. The best of the Georgian poets also made this effort; in particular, Alan Mulgan in his 'Golden Wedding'. In another poem, 'Success', he writes about the funeral of a city business man:

> Through the cold hall they carry the shining coffin;
> Past the icy statuary, the stiff palms and the pictures,
> Bloodless this spring afternoon as the body within the rimu;
> Down the broad steps on to the concrete pathway,
> Bordered by convict-cropped grass and grenadier shrubs
> at attention.
> The dry-eyed dry-stalked daughters watch
> from the verandah;
> Their mourning garments are easy for them who
> have never known joy . . .

This poem, with a few extracts from 'Golden Wedding', could well have been included in the *Book of New Zealand Verse* in place of the somewhat arid meditations of Arnold Wall. The 'stiff palms' and 'grenadier shrubs' are effective symbols of the rigidity of a rich suburban household; the 'grass, cropped' like a convict's hair, as if criminal, represents the

rejected energy of the natural world. The daughters are 'dry-stalked', since a lady must learn to wither becomingly. The 'body within the rimu' may have symbolized for Mulgan the death of the instinctive man within a too rigid social order. Mulgan shows a profound grasp of the pressures at work within the family:

> . . . and in front are the boys,
> Correct, Laodicean, within them release at war
> with their duty.
> / *am free, I am free,* the soft wheels murmur
> their surging . . .
> They do not know that use is a habit not now
> to be broken;
> Through the coming years they cannot straighten
> the will that is bent.
> The old man is dead, but the old man will live,
> their master . . .

In the father-son relationship, Mulgan makes concrete the whole tension between the individual and the social *mores.* The loose running hexameters and the hard, clear metaphors are a sign of the release that occurs within this poem. If Mulgan had been able to keep the vantage-point he achieved in 'Success', his work might have been different in character. But writers as able as any today were strangled by a bad tradition. The Georgian dilemma had its roots in the structure of New Zealand society: in the great pressure towards conformity which prevented poets, and novelists also, from exercising a free and critical insight. They were quite literally, afraid of what they might find themselves writing; and the demand by every newspaper reviewer for an optimistic, sentimental tone prevented them from following up their own best work. Robin Hyde, whose failures are as significant as her successes, was plainly aware of the lack of sensuous directness in her own early verse, and tried continually to remedy it. If we compare her 'Requiem for Singers', beginning 'Hang up the bays: let the laurels shine on'—with R. A. K. Mason's similar poem "The Lesser Stars'—'We are they who are doomed to raise up no monuments to outlast brass'—we see clearly that the failure is not wholly a matter of tradition or lack of tradition (Mason's poem is an equally

formal and traditional gesture), but stems from a basic timidity, an uncertainty of the reality of her theme. Her symbols are predominantly narcissist, the beleaguered castle, the mirror, the shield; and the focus of her clearest and most direct poetry in *Houses by the Sea* indicates the source of her conflict:

> Close under here, I watched two lovers once,
> Which should have been a sin, from what you say . . .
> It wasn't long before they came; a fool
> Could see they had to kiss; but your pet dunce
> Didn't quite know men count on more than that . . .
>
> . . . and when they'd gone, I went
> Down to the hollow place where they had been,
> Trickling bed through fingers. But I never meant
> To tell the rest, or you, what I had seen . . .

She feels that she is dealing with forbidden material; and the gesture is partly one of apology for writing at all. But the poem derives its strength from the direct sexual implications. This particular sequence is called The Beaches'. It seems that the 'beach', which symbolizes a no-man's-land between conscious and unconscious, plays a most important role in New Zealand poetry. Sinclair writes of the 'beach' which 'fends off the wild-tongued sea ... from our bright crumbling enclosure'; almost every New Zealand poet uses the symbol at some time or other. One might infer from the evidence of our poetry that every erotic adventure which finds its way into print has its setting somewhere among the sandhills: a nonsensical conclusion. But the Sea symbolizes the fruitful chaos which nourishes the sexual instinct; and the Beach the meeting-place of conscious and unconscious, the Dionysiac ground, the haunted playground of children and lovers, scattered with orange-peel but swept clean each day by the tide, the place where we can sleep without bad dreams and wake refreshed. It is not strange that Robin Hyde should turn to this arena; since it is far removed from the closed room where poetry becomes a rather desperate parlour game. We can realize how much of what is shoddy in her writing came from the verse tradition of her time, when we see the clarification and hardening which has come about in the work of her

former protege, Gloria Rawlinson. Many Georgians seemed afflicted by a genuine paralysis of the will before the task of writing real poetry; and though they resented deeply a tougher tradition, which seemed to put their poems on the shelf, they have also learnt from it. Good poems are not produced by schools of writing; but happen when individuals sharpen their sense of reality and extend their frame of reference. A poem such as Gloria Rawlinson's 'Ur to Erewhon' could not have been produced within the Georgian tradition; but only after the door had been laboriously opened upon the world of forbidden knowledge.

One could make a simple, though by no means exhaustive list of the larger nature symbols that occur in New Zealand poetry:

THE SEA:	as a symbol of death and oblivion; as a symbol of regeneration.
THE MOUNTAINS:	as protective maternal symbols; as symbols of ideal purity; as menacing and hostile powers.
THE BUSH:	as a symbol of the energy and fruitfulness of the natural world; as a menacing and entangling wilderness.
THE BEACH:	as an arena of historical change, the arrival and departure of races; as a place where revelations may occur; as the no-man's-land between conscious and unconscious; as an arena for sexual adventure.
THE ISLAND:	as a symbol of isolation from European tradition, both in place and time.

Each poet has, of course, his own unique emphasis, and his original version of the general ideograph; but the symbols recur so frequently in the work of poets otherwise quite dissimilar in intention that one must conclude that some deep connection exists between these natural features and certain

areas of spiritual experience. What the connection is, psychologists may explain; but it lies outside the scope of literary criticism.

The dominant symbol, however, of New Zealand literature has not yet been touched on: *Man Alone.* I take the name from the title of John Mulgan's novel. The symbol, no doubt, is characteristic in all modern literature; but in New Zealand prose and verse it has taken on a local colour and a central importance. The 'Man Alone', whether young or old, lives on the fringes of society, often eccentric, sometimes criminal, aware of acute isolation from every social aim. He is the central figure in all of Sargeson's work; and appears regularly in the work of every other prose writer of note. I intend to discuss the symbol mainly in its occurrence in New Zealand poetry.

As Auden writes, Narcissus is not the archetype of the poet as such, but of the poet who loses his soul for poetry. Yet it does not seem that a man can be an artist without also being narcissist—that is, without creating a fictitious self more powerful, knowledgeable, and loveable, than, in fact, he is. This self appears in fairy stories as the fortunate Younger Son who kills the dragon and marries the princess; and in the comic strips as Superman. A child, however, soon realizes that its fantasies are, in fact, impossible. It will never become a Napoleon or a Nansen; nor will it ever be loved very much or very long. Most men after adolescence reject their own fantasy life and concentrate on what they can actually do. But an artist retains the early image of himself as important—capable of learning the secret of the universe; possessing a magic that rearranges, not, it is true, the laws of nature, but the inner world of symbols. The insane person with delusions of grandeur possesses very much the same image of himself. But for the artist we must add another characteristic, which children have also, along with their egotism: a love of the world, and a wish that it should respond to this love. Every good poem is in a sense a love letter to the world; and, like all love letters, full of endearments, private language, complaints, and swearwords; but worth more to the beloved than a drawerful of statistics.

The composite image of child, magus, and lover, must of necessity be solitary; for its fantasy can only be made real

in and through the poem. When Basil Dowling writes:

> Ocean and child became acquainted here
> And I learnt all her secrets, save the fear
> Of those jade doors through which the countless toll
> Of men and ships have passed to burial—

the knowledge he speaks of was never truly possessed by the child, except, as it were, in a dream. It is paradisiacal knowledge, which the weakness and humiliation of a child's life denies at every turn. Similarly, when Louis Johnson writes:

> *When all the wild summer was in her gaze*
> her love was as lithe as the leaning wind
> and waters danced in the words of mind,
> love grew through bright unnumbered days—

he records an innocence in the relationship of man and woman not possessed in fact but in what he specifically calls the 'summer dream'. Yet the vision of a perfect knowledge, of an undivided love, and a sense of dereliction at its unfulfilment, are the constant subject-matter of poetry; and to dismiss them as meaningless is to dismiss the strongest aspirations of which men are capable, almost to deny their humanity. If we had no intuition that the Fall had occurred, then indeed the Fall would be complete. The *personae* of child or lover which the poet wears, are variants of the central role of *magus*, the *Man Alone* who, by the performance of a symbolic ritual attains to forbidden knowledge. William Hart-Smith uses Columbus as a *?magus-symbol:* the man who goes out to find the Earthly Paradise. And Hubert Witheford conceives of the poet's task as a symbolic ritual:

> This is the trysting place, its certain signs—
> The congealed sea, the bones of ancient fire
> And in the ruined cliffs a shallow cave.
> . . . I stare at the few blackened sticks without,
> Kindled long since to be my whole world's ash.
> I yield before the silence and I know
> Your servants who are waiting at my side.

The poet begins with the desire for wisdom, for a changing of his being, and ends with a poem in his hands which may

be no more than a record of the search. Very likely the symbol of *Man Alone,* does not, in fact, reflect a morbid state of isolation from the European cultural tradition, but rather the condition of solitude essential for the performance of a ritual act. The anxiety, however, which accompanies the taking on of this role is a different matter. It seems to derive from the artist's awareness that his activity is regarded with indifference or even hostility by the society in which he lives. The symbol of *Man Alone* is thus objectified as the hobo, the social outcast, standing for the outcast energies, both criminal and creative, which the artist tries to reintegrate in his view of the world. The hero of Sargeson's *That Summer,* Bruce Mason's Firpo in *Summer's End,* Denis Glover's Arawata Bill, and many less obvious *personae* in prose and verse fall into this category. The hobo or eccentric, however, has not chosen his role of isolation: it has been forced upon him by his inability to cope with the pressure to social conformity. Nor has he the compensating power of the artist to make use of his position outside society as a vantage-point from which to see more than those within. Yet, since an artist's sole justification for his departure from the social stereotype lies in his work, and that work is generally limited in quantity and unpredictable in quality, he must share in some degree the same tensions. An artist also is likely to have discovered early in his career the inadequacy of the social categories of good and bad, since he has disinterred in his own mind the same anti-social motives which many citizens regard as the peculiar property of those who go to gaol. The act of sympathy with the *Man Alone* who has incurred the disapproval of society is a basic element in many works of art; and R. A. K. Mason takes the act to its logical conclusion in his poem, 'On the Swag':

His body doubled
under the pack
that sprawls untidily
on his old back
the cold wet deadbeat
plods up the track . .

Let the fruit be plucked
and the cake be iced,
the bed be snug

and the wine be spiced
in the old cove's nightcap:
for this is Christ.

He implies that the rejection of man is equally a rejection of God. And this attitude is a mainspring not only in much of the social idealism of the thirties, but also in some of the best New Zealand poetry of the past decade, even where by no means specifically religious. The Second World War which, on the face of it, has brought men nearer to despair and nihilism by making clear the impermanence of every social order, has also brought them face to face with the suffering of their fellows, perhaps nearer the suffering of the Man on the Cross. M. K. Joseph writes in 'Simon of Cyrene':

Heaven broke its back in the dusty road
When we followed the torn man shuffling in bonds
Through the heat of a taxi overturned and burning
Past the students clubbed by police as they demonstrated
Before the corinthian pillars of the city hall
And the windows of multiple stores fanged and broken
And the women wailing in front of the fried-fish shop.

The agony of the Stations of the Cross has for its background the entirely natural picture of a city riot; just as the Italian masters rightly would have painted the same scene in contemporary terms. In Joseph's work the symbols recur of a culture broken apart in order that truth may emerge: he does not turn a blind eye to the modern chaos. And, as in the poems of Louis Macneice, his symbolic use of the furniture of civilization is extraordinarily vivid and natural. His best poems rarely contain an obvious New Zealand image. He is not, it seems, vitally *concerned* about being a New Zealander. It happens to be the country he lives in. Similarly, Kendrick Smithyman:

Our beautiful inheritance
was built of glass was built of glass
where, in legendary country, love
stripped power from eagles, gave the dove
tokens and days and in the pass
between the littoral and the chance
waters were singing and pavilions
stood from our heavens to horizons . . .

The symbol of a glass tower for romantic love could come from any fairy story; the dove and the eagle, the bright pavilions, have no locale except that of the poet's inward experience. Yet the immediacy of Smithyman's feeling, and his very real sense of tragedy in human affairs, sustains the symbolic structure. His own poetry, and that of M. K. Joseph and Louis Johnson, shows plainly that the myth of the isolated New Zealander is not of universal application. With the ordinary cultural background of an educated man, talent, and a mind alive to the meaning of his experience, a New Zealand poet need be no more isolated than one living in London or Greenwich Village. Even the inevitable isolation of an artist can be over-emphasized; for it exists not between person and person, but between the poet in action and the dead wood of society on which he sharpens his teeth and claws. A society is constituted of individuals; and often their chief insight into their own condition is derived from the work of artists. The adolescent finds that his or her problems are shared by others, the older man or woman renews the power of growth and perhaps a failing courage. The subject-matter of a writer is often precisely those wishes and fears which paralyse the capacity for action, the shames and unsolved problems which are quietly locked away in the social cupboard. The work of a writer is one of liberation—not the persuasion to good or evil, but the liberation of the creative will of both himself and the reader to do either—a work continually renewed and never done with. As an example of what I would call genuine social poetry, I will quote a poem by Louis Johnson, 'Magpie and Pines':

> That dandy black-and-white gentleman doodling notes
> on fragrant pinetops over the breakfast morning
> has been known to drop through mists of bacon-fat,
> with a gleaming eye, to the road where a child stood,
> screaming.
>
> And in the dark park—the secretive trees—have boys
> harboured their ghosts, built huts, and buried treasure,
> and lovers made from metallic kisses alloys
> more precious, and driven the dark from pleasure.
>
> A child was told that bird as his guardian angel
> reported daily on actions contrived to displease;

standi petrified in the sound of wings, a strangle
of screams knotting his throat beneath the
winter leaves.

Look back and laugh on the lovers whose white mating
made magpie of dark; whose doodling fingers swore
various fidelities and fates. They found the world waiting,
and broke the silence. A raven croaks 'Nevermore'

to their progenitive midnight. The guardian is aloof
on his roof of the small world, composing against morning
a new, ironic ballad. The lover has found small truth
in the broken silence, in faith, or the fate-bird moaning.

One might have expected that a poem with this title 'Magpie and Pines', would turn out to be a metaphysical nature poem—a trifle arch, neatly turned, telling us what we know already, that birds and men must die. But Johnson's 'dandy black-and-white gentleman' in five words brings before our eyes the actual magpie, inquisitive, sprightly, and menacing. The 'secretive trees' symbolize the warm hidden life of instinct and emotion: under their shelter the children play and the lovers spoon. The kind of 'treasure' that the boys bury and the lovers find is of the magical variety which retains its value only in the half-light under the trees. But the central and terribly acute symbol of the poem would probably be clearly apparent only to a person who had spent his childhood in the country. Magpies are accustomed to attack children; and, whether or not fairly, are accused of pecking first at the eyes. This blinding, as in the legend of Oedipus, is symbolic castration: so the 'strangle of screams' is justified. The magpie at one level may be the bird of Zeus, the avenging eagle that punishes Prometheus; but principally is the 'guardian angel' of moral law, the spy for a jealous father-god who does not much like his creation—as such the symbol of a kind of clerical sadism not unknown in this country. Johnson has presented the clash of the libido and moral law in concrete symbols. It may be that the phrase 'new, ironic ballad' echoes Clover's poem, 'The Magpie', in which the song of the magpie provides an anvil chorus to social, economic, and personal disaster. Like Glover, Johnson presents a situation in symbolic terms and does not argue about it. What is important for us

is that Johnson has made a completely real and personal use of symbols which New Zealand poets have in the past used very differently. The courage and conviction of experience sustains the poem, rather than the scaffolding of an artificial myth.

There is another large symbol which underlies much New Zealand poetry: that of the 'voyage' or 'journey'. Though it is probable that our geographical and historical environment has predisposed New Zealand poets toward the use of this symbol, one need not postulate, as M. H. Holcroft has done, an ancestral memory of early settlement or Polynesian migration. The 'voyage' or 'journey' recurs in all literature as a symbol of man's life-span; but, more specifically, as a departure in search of new knowledge. As Curnow writes at the beginning of 'Landfall in Unknown Seas':

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

A. R. D. Fairburn, however, has made the most comprehensive and successful use of the symbol. In *Dominion* he devotes a passage of magnificent rhetoric to the arrival of the ships of the early settlers; and in his recent poem, 'The Voyage', describes symbolically the departure from youth:

> Through giant seas our ship is thrusting,
> her ropes rotting, her keel rusting . . .
>
> The burning days are done,
> the heat and light are lost
> from our enamelled summer coast,
> and that heart-searching whiteness of the breakers
> dispersed and gone.
>
> Cold is the wind that blows
> and bears us in its hand like a falling rose,
> and like a storm-blown rose the deep-sea wave
> bursts on our bows.
>
> Three sailors dressed in red and blue
> play cards on the fo'c'stle deck. The master
> stands on the bridge . . . etc.

The peculiar force which Fairburn can give to a very simple statement is a mark of his stature as a poet. He has enter-

tained perhaps more consistently than any other New Zealand writer the vision of the Earthly Paradise; and this poem is in one sense a relinquishment of that dream, but in another its fulfilment, in recognition that the natural world is not our final home. The 'three sailors' may be the Jungian faculties of sensation, emotion and intuition; while the 'master' can be identified, though not completely, with human reason. His role is Apollonian; and the sea over which he sails symbolizes the Dionysiac flux of experience. But Fairburn makes of the 'voyage' more than a personal symbol. The tragedy (in the Aristotleian sense) of social humanism is the live core of the poem; and the sense of a deep love of the world frustrated.

I have necessarily omitted in this lecture to discuss a great deal of New Zealand poetry which could have served equally well to illustrate my theme; but I have probably said enough to indicate that our verse contains more than guide-book references. Other critics better informed or more acute may have a totally different view of the same material.

In this series of lectures I have spoken on three related topics: criticism, inspiration, and symbolism. None of these matters is susceptible of final definition; but each is related to the central problem of the *significance* of any given poem. Lewis Mumford has written in *Art and Technics:*

> Western man has sought to live in a non-historic and impersonal world of matter and motion, a world with no values except the values of quantities; a world of casual sequences, not human purposes . . . we must salvage and redeem the Displaced Person; and that means that we must pour once more into the arts some of the vitality and energy now almost wholly drained off by a depersonalized technics.

In this country, or any other, such a renewal cannot occur until it is realized that an aesthetic statement is a statement in the context of *human purposes.* Indeed, we have looked upon art too often as an escape from everything human. The wonder is not that our writers are often isolated men, whistling to keep their courage up, but that we have any literature at all. Yet without literature and other art forms we would be a great deal worse off than we might suppose; for a living work of art can assist the restoration of hope—not only the

hope of heaven, but the hope that our lives, however harsh, may be real, and our thoughts and actions those of men rather than of automatons. That paralysis in the mind which is a product not of age but of our submission to the weight of custom, is overcome when we share the purpose and understanding of other men. And even the most negative poem rests on the basic affirmation that human experience is worth understanding and that the buried power to enter into relation with person and thing can be renewed—without which the most perfect Utopia would be a hell on earth. Hope is a secretive virtue. It survives many droughts and tramplings, like the scabweed in Central Otago; but it cannot survive the death of the creative will. As a final symbol to end this talk on symbolism, I will tell again a story that I once heard Frank Sargeson tell.

Christmas had come round again; and with it, the local Chinese greengrocer to the back porch of one of his customers—a lady, a New Zealander and a keen evangelist. He brought with him the gift of a jar of preserved ginger. The lady accepted it; and a one-sided conversation began. Soon the crucial point was raised: 'John, have you been saved?'

It seemes John's answer was unsatisfactory. In return for the stone ginger he received a Christmas card with a suitable text on it, and also a lecture on the Atonement. But there was a language difficulty; he did not seem to grasp what it was all about. So there on the steps of the back porch the Crucifixion was enacted in pantomime—the lady evangelist meanwhile grasping firmly in one fist the jar of ginger. The moral, for the New Zealand writer, seems to me obvious: *Write what you like; but keep a firm hold on that stone ginger!*

In these lectures I have attempted to outline some of the larger difficulties of writing and the criticism of writing, with particular application to modern poetry in New Zealand. Much of it may be no more than a 'blind man's dreams on the sand by dangerous tides'—but if we are to know more we must venture more. The dead history of our country is already in the schoolbooks. The living history is myth and symbol; and this our poets both create and clarify.