

Reconnecting With Nature: Place and Self-Construal in the Poetry of Allen Curnow

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According to researchers from North Carolina State University and the University of Georgia, Wednesday 23rd May 2007 marked a ‘major demographic shift’. These researchers calculated that on this date the global population, ‘for the first time in human history’, would tip from a rural to an urban majority.¹ From the point of view of environmental psychology this is cause for consternation. Clive Hamilton points out that ‘[t]here is persuasive evidence that our concerns about the environment, as well as our attitudes and values, are influenced by the extent to which we feel ourselves to be part of the natural world’.² It is self-evident that a growing urbanised majority population would equate to a wider disconnection of humankind from the natural world. In the light of impending ecological catastrophe—particularly that of climate change, habitat destruction, species extinction, industrial pollution and finite resource depletion—this demographic shift marks a potentially disastrous *fait accompli*.

Ironically, the Romantic response to widespread urbanization at the turn of the nineteenth century coincided with the growth of a leisured middle class, a growth enabled by mechanization and industrial development, which in turn produced an expanded, predominantly cityfied, readership for the ‘return to nature’ project of the Romantic poets. As such, the advent of the geological period informally referred to as the Anthropocene³ is coextensive with the shift in focus of contemporary poets away

from the urbane sophistication and periphrasis of the late Augustans, to the direct expression of the natural world as the essential site of spiritual veneration and awakening. The Romantic poets thus offered nature-worship together with the celebration of *vis medicatrix naturae* as co-constituents of an existential alternative to the perceived maladies of the urbanized industrial scene. In an ongoing response to the exponential growth of human population, industry and urbanization, from the Romantic period onward, a vast body of poetry has been written with this problematic phenomenon specifically in mind.

Jonathan Bate, drawing on the ontology of Martin Heidegger, suggests poetry ‘has the peculiar power to speak “earth” and ‘may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature’.⁴ Bate, explicitly concerned with the anthropocentric dilemma, invokes Raymond Williams to this end, quoting from the latter’s *The Country and the City*: ‘recognition of the crisis, and almost all possible ways of resolving it, are functions of consciousness’.⁵ Of course, there are means of influencing changes in consciousness, both literary and extra-literary, other than reading poetry. Poetry, however, is a possible exemplar in the area of conscious place-making, and the forms of self-construal such place-making entails.

This essay seeks to explore the perception and construction of *place* in a selection of Allen Curnow’s poems, and how this interaction might influence the self-construal of both poet and reader. On the face of it, Curnow may seem an unusual choice of poet to exemplify the ecocritical turn in literary studies. Received wisdom casts him as the patriarchal arbiter of mid-twentieth century cultural nationalism who overshadowed and outlived most of his contemporaries, thus earning himself the title of elder statesman of New Zealand letters. Curnow’s poetry is stony, imposing, gimlet-eyed, and, as such, has little in common with the laudatory effusions of the Lake Poets or American Transcendentalists—the darling children of the (early) ecopoetic apologists. Nevertheless, Curnow’s poetry is comprehensively

invested in the relationship between place and self-construal, and can therefore be very usefully read in this context.

Lawrence Buell defines 'place' as 'space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness. Placeness, then, is co-constituted environmentally, socially, and phenomenologically through acts of perception'.⁶ Etymologically the prefix 'eco' derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning 'household'. 'Poetry' derives from the Greek root verb *poiein* 'to make'. Taken literally, then, ecopoetry is the making of households, the making of places in which we live and dwell, indeed, in the making of living-places—albeit in consciousness only; but, as we have seen, it is in consciousness that we form our perceptions of the world, which in turn informs how we behave in the world and relate to our living-places. Furthermore, it is through our relationship with 'place' that we construe our sense of self.

Self-construal, simply stated, is 'how human beings construct and perceive their very definition of self'.⁷ Arnocky, Stroink and DeCicco propose a three-fold model of self-construal. *Independent self-construal* is 'comprised of specific morals, traits, abilities, and values that promote self-esteem. [...] The thoughts and actions of a person holding an independent self-construal serve to enhance the qualities that make them stand out from others'. *Interdependent self-construal* relies on 'representations of the self [which] are connected to close others, for example, family relationships. [...] [O]ne's self-enhancement is derived from perceptions and emotions that remind them of their connectedness with others. [...] [T]here is a sense that the self and others are interconnected'. *Metapersonal construal* 'involves the perception of the self having a deep interconnection with all forms of life. [...] [T]he separate self is understood to be an illusion, and the ideal state is believed to be one in which the distinction between subject and object disappears, and all things are experienced as one'.⁸ The first two of these three types of self-construal can be

considered anthropocentric (moreover, egoistic and altruistic respectively), the third eco- or biocentric. Arnocky, Stroink and DeCicco acknowledge that ‘all three selves can exist within an individual, and situational cues determine the momentary accessibility of each, and their influence on the stream of behaviour’.⁹

This essay proposes that the situational cues that determine the accessibility of these three forms of self-construal in Curnow’s poetry are interdependent on the various poems’ construction of place. This proposition will be tested through close readings of three of Curnow’s poems in particular—‘At Dead Low Water’, ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas’ and ‘There Is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods’, respectively—before opening out into a broader consideration of Curnow’s construction of the place of nature and the place of humankind within nature. Although Curnow’s oeuvre offers a sustained commitment to the construction of place and self over a career spanning the better part of seventy years, the three poems subjected to close reading in this essay have been chosen as examples sufficiently representative of the interdependence between different conceptions of place—local (‘At Dead Low Water’), national (‘Landfall in Unknown Seas’) and wild (‘There Is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods’)—and the types of self-construal as defined above.

‘At Dead Low Water’ depicts the return to a childhood haunt, which inspires a complex reflection on childhood, maturation, genealogy and death. Peter Simpson remarks of this poem that ‘the seashore is arena for disillusioned adult recollection of moments of childhood innocence’,¹⁰ and already in this terse appraisal might we intimate, by the admission of adult disillusionment, that this return will not replenish the affections that one might have held as a child. The specific place that engenders the recollection is Governor’s Bay in Lyttelton Harbour at low tide. Furthermore, Curnow dated ‘At Dead Low

Water' December 1944 in postscript, signalling the wartime context that underpins the poem's images of decay and death.

The harbour bottom is described as a '[s]ump of opulent tides' where weed and silt twirl 'in foul chinks'.¹¹ The jetty's limbs are 'tettered', which is to say that they are afflicted with an eruptive skin disease. Driftwood, that is *deadwood*, will drift in oceanic limbo 'till fire or burial'. The beach is strewn with '[d]erelict shells' and 'weed crisped or rotting'. The tide 'puts on corruption', shoring up heaps 'where the fly breeds', intermingling '[d]eath with life and life with death'. Birth and life have their place in the detritus and 'the rancid shallows', but are immediately qualified and implicitly trumped by death, or the aeonian silence of the extinguished past: 'Salt rocky chink, nude silted cleft give off / Birth smell, death smell. Mute ages tread the womb.' The very title of the poem suggests that the tide itself is somehow fatally noxious—an implication borne out by the emptied bay's disclosure of ubiquitous putrescence, a littoral phenomenon Curnow was to revise, and with considerably greater biodiversity, about forty years later, and on a different beach, in 'Moules à la Marinière'.

The father and child, figures introduced in the poem's second section, are represented as 'stepping hand in hand / Within an inch of the harmless sea'. The adjective 'harmless' does a lot of work in this poem. On the one hand, '[f]inding itself so far inland', Governor's Bay is a shallow inlet sheltered from the extremities of the open sea, and could therefore be superficially construed as a seemingly innocuous body of water. Also, the adult reflecting on this childhood moment would remember the sea as harmless because of the reassuring presence of his father, and that it was during a peaceful time when the water did not threaten a potential route of ingress for military invasion. However, '[t]wenty years' have elapsed since this time. During this interval the child has put on the corruption of adulthood, which is figuratively mirrored in the action of the tide layering its corruption upon the bay. Similarly, the heightened awareness of

encroaching mortality that comes with the development into adulthood is embedded in the poem's meditation on the '[t]ideswept' process of biodegradation that pervades the now no longer 'harmless' bay.

Although this poem successfully engenders a strong sense of place, in that it clearly reflects personal attachment and physiographic distinctiveness, the self-construal that manifests here is arguably not metapersonal—there is no interconnection with living things, for instance, primarily because there is little that is alive to connect with. What arises most prominently out of the poem is a solitary, plaintive ego lamenting that which is inevitably lost to the passage of time—a stark reminder of the way of all flesh, a *memento mori* that casts birth as merely the inception of eventual death. There is barely the slightest *affirmation* of life—the paramount biocentric value—to temper the poem's mortal fatalism, other than the reclamation of the forgotten boat's '[b]olt and strake' by 'the shrimp's forest, all green-bearded timbers'. The 'kindness' of the father and child walking the beach together, 'an inconsequent pastime', culminates in '[m]eaningless[ness] but for individual pain / No death, no birth relieves or lunar pulses drown'. The triple negation of this final line insists that the pain of recollected loss surpasses and even defies death, reiterating the earlier declaration that 'death does not rid / [...] the deformed sunk sifted thing / Memory's residue'. That loss is being perpetually generated—manifest in the images of what has come and gone on the tides, reaching as far back as '[w]hen the word alone was, and the waters'—seems to indict the inexorable order of nature as a deleterious influence to be apotropically shunned. It could be, of course, that the mind of the perceiver is toxifying the landscape, rather than the other way around. However, reading this poem as simply a case of the pathetic fallacy, the projection of the perceiving mind onto the landscape, is inadequate when one considers the interdependent dynamic of place and self-construal.

The recollection of childhood enacted in ‘At Dead Low Water’, as argued above, is originated by returning to the place where certain remembered experience(s) occurred. The elegiac tone struck in the poem is one of lamentation over loss. The intimacy the child shared with his father at Governor’s Bay is betrayed by the physical absence of both father and child upon the former child’s return to the place itself; their historical presence is apparitional. The anxiety brought about by the recognition of mortal transience, distilled in the image of the ‘footprint / Brimming and fading, vanishing’ in the quicksand, is dwarfed by the scale of ‘the whole terror / Of time and patience’ in which even the surrounding ‘[o]nce violent hills, volcanic shapes’ have passed into an immemorial dormancy.

The identity of this poem’s speaker floats and fades, just out of focus. The speaker does not disclose a subjective ‘I’, but in the final section of the poem makes an address in the second person. Whoever the speaker might be, and it is very probably a protean being, ‘they’ discover at Governor’s Bay a natural environment sympathetic to reflecting upon loss: the bay shores up the degenerative phenomena required to turn the metaphor of corruption, while at the same time the effacing tide acts as a disillusioning purgative. Nature informs the figure of the ‘child returned’ that he is no longer that child walking hand in hand with his father—he has grown, he sees differently now, and yes, he is that much closer to death. The bay has kept its own record ‘[i]n time’s tormented rock’ and imparts its wisdom: the lesson of growth and degeneration—correlational transitions in the cycle of life and death, regeneration and decline. The lesson might well be a painful one, and so a corollary lesson is also imparted: that nature is not necessarily benign or munificent. The speaker respectfully acknowledges this lesson, and offers the poem as testimony. Nature and the mind of the poet-speaker are thus interconnected through the reciprocity of exchange—an exchange the reader of the poem can participate in, both vicariously and in practice: the reader might take the example of

Curnow's poem and recollect her very own places of childhood attachment, and return to them, freshly attuned to the wisdom of place and history, and look and listen to what nature has recorded therein of her lived experience. In doing so, the human subject, whether poet or reader, is made sensible of the agency, the dynamism, of nature and place, and through this reconnection a metapersonal expansion of consciousness is allowed to evolve.

Unlike the immediacy of presence of poet-speaker in place enacted in 'At Dead Low Water', 'Landfall in Unknown Seas', a poem marking the tercentenary of Abel Tasman's 'discovery' of New Zealand on 13 December 1642 requires the poet-speaker to travel back through history to a time and place predating his existence. It could be assumed that in this context self-construal is redundant, and that nature, if present at all, is reducible to setting, 'mere backdrop for the human drama that really counted'.¹² These assumptions necessitate a number of counterclaims: first, in attempting to write about a time and place predating one's own existence, one is primarily reliant on oral, written and artefactual cultural record, in concert with one's imagination. Second, Curnow does not construe self in the imagined first person here as he had earlier done with 'A Victim', in which the poet delivers a monologue from the posthumous point of view of Jan Tyssen, 'one of the four Dutch killed by Maori when Tasman anchored in Murderer's Bay in 1642' (p. 236). He opts instead for the public voice of an historical commentator, reimagining the embarkation and voyage leading up to and culminating in the violent occasion of first encounter between Māori and Pākehā in the first two sections of the poem, and speculating upon this event's socio-historical implications in the third. The type of self-construal that predominates in the poem is perforce one of (civic) interdependence, wherein the poet extrapolates a postcolonial ethos out of originary historical events. Third, an ecocritical reading of the poem cannot in good faith relegate nature to the diminutive of a cycloramic backdrop.

Bearing in mind Richard Kern's intriguing contention that 'ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful [...] when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere',¹³ we turn now to weather talk, that glib refuge of ill-suited minds, to illustrate nature's ubiquitous influence.

Tasman and his sailors set out 'On a fine morning, the best time of year, / Skies widening and the oceanic furies / Subdued by summer illumination' (pp. 226-9). The historical day of Tasman's departure from Batavia in August 1642, as the poem would have us imagine, might well have been fine. Whatever the case, it is clear that Curnow is deploying fine weather as a deceptive clemency, emblematic of the optimism buoying up the prospective mission. This serves to underscore the bloody and inclement clash of indigene and explorer later in the piece, which also took place in summer, in a region of New Zealand renowned for its agreeable climate. Tasman named this site of conflict Moordenaar's Bay (Murderers' Bay), which subsequently underwent a series of name changes until in the 1850s, when, with the discovery of gold in Collingwood, it was given its current appellation: Golden Bay. Curnow ironizes this recontextualization of place-naming, which buries the unsavoury past in revisionist euphemism, as 'a chapter / In a schoolbook, a relevant yesterday / We thought we knew all about'. Moreover, as Curnow obliquely acknowledges, such recontextualization is 'much apter / To profit'. Golden Bay is a name suitable for the lustre of its sand and fine weather (as much as for its once-held precious metal deposits)—attributes that make it such a desirable hotspot for domestic and international tourists alike. Furthermore, contemporary 'explorers' need not fear 'murderers mooring in our Golden Bay': these days the consumerist explorer is welcomed with open palms for that all-important tourism dollar by industry operators shrewdly cashing in on the New Zealand (especially South Island) myth of a land as yet unconquered, the desolate wide-open spaces and densely fertile

bush regions of the South Island wilderness, ‘with never a soul at home’—a myth to which Curnow made no small contribution.¹⁴

And then we fall upon the following declamation:

But now there are no more islands to be found
And the eye scans risky horizons of its own
In unsettled weather, and murmurs of the drowned
 Haunt their familiar beaches—
Who navigates us towards what unknown

But not improbable provinces? (p. 288).

Although Curnow probably had other things in mind for these ‘not improbable provinces’ towards which an indefinite navigator sets our collective sail, the climatological figure of ‘unsettled weather’ is nonetheless uncannily prescient. With climate change (which does not discriminate between conquered or unconquered lands) verified by an overwhelming majority of the scientific community as an apodictic phenomenon, ‘the improbable provinces’ looming largest on the biospherical horizon, one might infer, have now been convincingly predicted. Curnow’s question requires rephrasing—*how* are we to navigate ourselves *away* from these not improbable provinces?

A response to this question will have to wait; in the meantime, a departing word on ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas’. The ‘Sailor’, in the poem’s conclusion, is sacrificed: ‘Out into our time’s wave / The stain of blood that writes an island story’. This bloodletting into latterly national waters retroactively sacralizes the ceremonial place-making of a colonial nation. But it is a toxic ceremony—the blood and sweat shed for the sake of colonial expansion and industrial capitalism have since proven demonstrably pollutive, in both an ecological and socio-ethical sense, a theme Curnow returned to throughout his career in such poems as ‘A Fellow Being’ and ‘The Unclosed Door’.

Following Kern’s suggestion to recover the environmental orientation of work whose conscious interests lie elsewhere,

reading the conclusion of Curnow's government-commissioned poem with this in mind carries harrowing implications for collective self-construal in post-colonial New Zealand. The reader might feel compelled to ask herself if the human presence is a pollutant one, through to the very blood of its citizenry? She might further enquire that if this is the case, and we are aware of the ecological crises wrought by our pollutive history, are we now capable of detoxification and the responsible stewardship of our communal living-place? This, one of Curnow's paramount nation-state place-making poems, urges its readership to pursue this sort of enquiry into the interdependent self-construal of a New Zealand people, and their relationship to the place they call home.

Michael J. McDowell in his essay 'The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight' claims to 'have generally chosen writers who at least try to dissolve their egos and to enter the private worlds of different entities in the landscape'.¹⁵ In Curnow's 'There is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods' the ego is dissolved into disembodied observation; the subjective point of view is implicit. Although the place in which this disembodied eye roves is not explicitly named, the Māori nomenclature speaks for itself: we are looking at the (remnants of the) native subtropical rainforests in the far north of the North Island. The title of the poem, lifted from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, is a curious borrowing—a prime example of Curnow's appropriation of 'old word' literary figures that he then, to turn a Curnovian phrase, introduces to the New Zealand landscape. The 'pathless woods' are in fact the well-trodden and severely diminished native forests of the Far North, and the 'pleasure' the implicitly identified poet-perceiver bears witness to, in the first five lines, is an anthropomorphized sylvan orgy of a peculiarly homosocial, onanistic variety:

When the green grenade explodes, does the kauri
experience an orgasm of the spent cone?
What is the king fern doing with its hairy knuckles?

Wildling and epiphyte, do they have problems too?

There's a reason for the spastic elbow of this taraire (p. 173).

This comical, defamiliarizing, prosopopeial shift is then abruptly superseded by a brusque imperative: 'Look hard at nature'. For Curnow, this type of injunction, thrust invasively into the fluency of his poetic syntax, became a common enough rhetorical ploy, serving to admonish and instruct the poetic observer. Taken alone this injunction is problematic, for it would appear to reinstate the Cartesian division between subjective perceiver and natural world, and thus render explicit the human subject as apart from nature, rather than a part of nature—not to mention the decidedly androcentric casting of a voyeuristic gaze contextually implied by the masculinized nature of the preceding lines. Anticipating this, Curnow immediately dissolves any such divisiveness within a mutually subjective perspectivism inherent in all of nature: 'It is in the nature / of things to look, and look back, harder' (p. 173). The human seer is seen and watched with greater scrutiny by the arboreal sentinels whose vigilance belongs to a superior order of biotic patience. The humanly subjective realization of this is disquieting: 'Botany is panic of another description' (p. 173).

Harry Ricketts characterizes this final line as 'riddling', offering a paraphrase he acknowledges in advance will be awkward and insufficient: 'The science which treats of plants in its attempt to control nature by classification is merely the product of another kind of inhuman panic'.¹⁶ The panic is, however, rather all-too-human, stemming from the anthropocentric compulsion to subdue nature by way of classification. Presumably, if we can know a thing by name and its taxonomically identified attributes, the thing will lose its mystique. Pan's branch-rustling mischief will no longer frighten us, for we would have driven Pan out of Arcadia by revealing him as an extrinsic agential force; thus deprived of his habitat—as with countless other species human civilization has driven to

extinction—Thamus's report of the demi-god's death would prove incontrovertible.¹⁷ Such is the ethos of post-Enlightenment philosophy: to subordinate a once-beheld animistic nature to a systemic interplay of manipulable physical laws and objects.¹⁸

But Curnow will not let the matter rest here. In defining botany as 'panic of another description', he acknowledges that this branch of scientific epistemology constitutes yet another anxious failure to see the wood for the trees. The description of parts cannot outstrip the richer intuition of direct experience of the whole, and Curnow would have us consider the possibility that first-hand experience of nature will awaken us to *its* subjectivity. Being there, in a place of nature, would reveal self-construal as a foundational, reciprocal process concurrent in all of nature. Furthermore, panic, of whatever description, cannot be overcome, because Pan is not an extrinsic agent, but an intrinsic component of natural agency. The rustle and roar of the wild will continue to unnerve, no matter how comprehensive our classifications of their sources.

In 'An Incurable Music' Curnow asserts: 'There's only one book in the world, and that's the one / everyone accurately misquotes' (p. 132). The book Curnow refers to is nature, and the oxymoronic 'accurate misquotation' of nature became a central concern in much of his later work. John Dolan, writing on the parallels between Curnow and Wallace Stevens, aligns the two poets thus: 'like Stevens, Curnow is preoccupied with problems of perception; like Stevens, he frequently writes about the impossibility of maintaining a stable perspective in a fragmented world'.¹⁹ And later, in the same article, writing about 'An Incurable Music' specifically, Dolan says: 'There is a mind encountering a landscape and attempting to tame, define and order it; there is the apparent victory of that mind; and there is the dissolve to immanence and wonder at the end, when this "rage for order" is defeated'.²⁰ The arc of poetic argument as outlined by Dolan is suggestive: what begins as an independent,

egoistic form of self-construal *vis-à-vis* the natural environment—the attempt to tame, define and order nature—is ultimately frustrated by nature’s recalcitrance to containment, and the perceiver can therefore only submit to the self-transcendent, metapersonal realization of nature’s immanence. Human beings, including poets, who look hard at nature are intuitively aware that it is neither as inert as orthodox Newtonian materialists had conceived of it, nor is it as balanced or harmonious as outdated notions of scientific ecology held; rather, nature is in a state of flux, it is contingent—in another manner of speaking, nature is animate, adaptive, evolving.²¹ As Gerard Manley Hopkins observed: ‘nature is never spent / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’.²²

Notwithstanding the putatively unbridgeable rift between signifier and signified, the insoluble paradox of linguistically recreating perception is especially frustrated by nature precisely because it is an animate, mutable entity, and therefore resistant to syntactical fixity. Yet the problem is only one of textual surfaces. What the poet can do is invoke the immanence of nature by articulating its resistance to textual enframing, employing figural logic—the correspondences of metaphor, the extensions of catachresis, the attributions of metonymy, the substitutions of synecdoche, the inversions of chiasmus, the ruptures of anacoluthon, the subversions of irony, the opacities of paradox, the invocations of apostrophe, and the mimicries of onomatopoeia (to gather but a handful or two of pertinent figures)—to connote nature’s diversity, flux, and supersession of univocal diminution. This is one way to construe the aforementioned citation from Bate, in which he argues that poetry ‘has the peculiar power to speak “earth”’.

Curnow is apt to trope on this telluric ventriloquism by allowing the earth to speak for itself, albeit via the indicative conduit of signification, which is as much as a poet can expect and be expected to do. A closer look at a few of Curnow’s ‘accurate misquotations’, his ‘quotations lifted from / life into a

stony text' ('Moules à la Marinière') should serve to clarify his technique.

Curnow's keenest strategy for allowing the earth to speak for itself is his frequent imputation of linguistic capacity to nature. The sun, earth's life-giver, is especially articulate: 'the monologue of the morning sun' ('The Parakeets at Karekare'), '[f]luent in all the languages dead or living,' ('A Balanced Bait in Handy Pellet Form') 'is mumbling the day's news / over my head. In so many words' ('A Sight For Sore Eyes'). This brief cento demonstrates Curnow's insistence on nature's ability to speak for itself. In 'Dialogue With Four Rocks' Curnow finds 'all of us talking all / at once in our own languages', citing as examples 'the parakeet's brilliant remarks / the fluent silences of the / eel in the pool' (p. 84). Curnow recognizes that this plurality of language is interconnected, but not necessarily intelligible, between speakers of different languages. These languages are at once distinct and communal, and although they may be untranslatable into human language, this does not negate their co-existence with ours (human) and other (nonhuman) languages. At best, we can hear 'out of the gut of the gales the noise / the haze the vocabulary of / water and wind' ('Dialogue With Four Rocks') but not presume to transliterate this vocabulary into our own textual marks. These languages may be listened to, not mastered. So too, the language of 'Dead snails / have left [...] baffled epigraphy' ('A Balanced Bait in Handy Pellet Form'), and Curnow would seem to imply that it would require breaching the self-transcending threshold of death, as per the drowned fisherman, 'fluent at last / in the languages of the sea' ('Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan With an Hook?') to decipher this epigraphy. But the occlusion of death need not concern the quotations lifted from life, the accurate misquotations from nature. Better to listen to the 'water [running] / down above and below the road [running] down | primevally babbling' ('A Family Matter'), for in listening to this primeval babble we are reminded of the 'Logos begotten of log' ('A Four Letter Word'). Although the origins of

human language are unknown, Curnow suggests, out of this 'Logos begotten of log', a genetic link descends from nature to language. Perhaps, then, Curnow is implying that it is principally important to listen closely to nature, more so than to look hard at it. In looking there is confrontation and divisiveness. Listening, on the other hand, is an involitional activity that situates the listener *within*, rather than *against*, their place.

The argument of this essay has not merely foregrounded nature and the natural environment, but specifically nature and the natural environment as inherently animate. And it is this that poetry can exemplify—the representation of our living-places as significantly *living*-places, a place in which a metapersonal shift of consciousness conducive to ecocentric self-construal is most profoundly affected. To perceive the environment, the natural world, nature and the cosmos, as fundamentally inanimate is an historically recent shift in (primarily Western) human consciousness, issuing from the so-called Enlightenment. Ever since the Cartesian mind/body, mind/matter split coupled with Newtonian physics to engender the ascendant *Weltanschauung* of modernity, the mechanistic worldview has predominated, and continues to sustain the hegemonic discourse of industrial capitalist ideology. Hamilton claims that 'a return to pre-scientific animism is out of the question; we know too much'.²³ This dismissive statement invites us to ask the question as to what it is we know too much about. Defining life itself proves elusive, not least of all owing to the ancient quandary of how life and consciousness can arise from so-called non-living, unconscious matter in the first place. Science abounds with abiogenetic models; philosophers pitch in with hylozoism, panpsychism, holism, and various other enticing metaphysical theories. The fact of the matter is that life is a moot point; nobody really *knows* exactly the 'what' or the 'how'. What we do know, however, is that the business-as-usual presumption that the natural world exists as an inanimate resource for indiscriminate human consumption is no longer tenable.

The English biochemist Rupert Sheldrake, a staunch (post-scientific) animistic revivalist, points towards how

[...] science has begun to transcend the mechanistic worldview. The idea that everything is determined in advance and in principle predictable has given way to ideas of indeterminism, spontaneity, and chaos. The invisible organizing powers of animate nature are once again emerging in the form of fields. The hard, inert atoms of Newtonian physics have dissolved into structures of vibratory activity. The uncreative world machine has turned into a creative, evolutionary cosmos. Even the laws of nature may not be eternally fixed; they may be evolving along with nature.²⁴

Sheldrake is prepared to admit that '[b]oth animistic and mechanistic thinking are metaphoric',²⁵ but he would contend that animistic metaphors are vastly preferable to their deadening, mechanistic counterparts. To conceive of the natural world in terms of mechanical utility, subjecting it to the ignominies of cost-benefit analyses, growth value and wholesale plunder, is manifestly ecocidal. To go out into the world and experience nature as an animate and valuable subject in its own right, inherently worthy of our respectful caretaking, is the properly ethical response to the Anthropocene dilemma. Poets, by and large, have taken it somewhat for granted that nature is intrinsically vital when writing about it as both environmental place and agential force. As such, poetry is a peculiarly adept medium for rejuvenating an animistic way of thinking. Steely, cold, apocalyptic, impersonal Curnow, as determinedly invested in 'place' as he was, perceived that this was the case, and construed himself accordingly.

Notes

- ¹ 'Mayday 23: World Population Becomes More Urban Than Rural', *ScienceDaily*, 25 May 2007, <<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070525000642.htm>> [Accessed 8 April 2013]. See paragraphs 1 and 3.
- ² Clive Hamilton, *Requiem For A Species: Why We Resist The Truth About Climate Change* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2010), p. 134.
- ³ A controversial term used to account for the anthropogenic modification of the planet during 'the unprecedented rise in human numbers since the early nineteenth century—from under a billion then to six billion now, set to be nine billion or more by mid-century [... which] is intimately linked with massive expansion in the use of fossil fuels, which powered the Industrial Revolution, and allowed the mechanization of agriculture that enabled those additional billions to be fed'. Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen, 'The New World of the Anthropocene', *Environmental Science & Technology*, 44.7 (2010), 2228-31.
- ⁴ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, (London: Picador, 2000), p. 251; p. 245.
- ⁵ Raymond Williams quoted in Bate, p. 23.
- ⁶ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 145.
- ⁷ Steven Arnocky, Mirella Stroink and Teresa DeCicco, 'Self-construal predicts environmental concern, cooperation, and conservation', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27.4 (2007), 255-64, (p. 255).
- ⁸ Arnocky, Stroink and DeCicco, pp. 256-257.
- ⁹ Arnocky, Stroink and DeCicco, p. 257.
- ¹⁰ Peter Simpson, "The Trick of Standing Upright": Allen Curnow and James K. Baxter', *World Literature Written in English*, 26.2 (1986), 369-78, (p. 372).

- 11 Allen Curnow, 'At Dead Low Water', *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997), pp. 208-10. All subsequent references to Curnow's poems are taken from this volume.
- 12 Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 4.
- 13 Robert Kern, 'Ecocriticism: What is it Good For?', *ISLE*, 7.1 (2000), 9-32 (p. 11).
- 14 See John Newton, 'The South Island Myth: A Short Story', *Australian-Canadian Studies: A Journal for the Humanities & Social Sciences*, 18.1-2 (2000), 23-39.
- 15 Michael J. McDowell, 'The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight', *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Georgia: University of Georgia, 1996), pp. 371-391, (p. 372).
- 16 Harry Ricketts, 'Looking Back at Curnow, Harder', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 5 (1987), 111-12 (p. 112).
- 17 The story of the announcement of Pan's death is given in Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum (Why Oracles are Silent)*. See also Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Volume One* (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 101-103.
- 18 This summation has been made by countless thinkers. The *locus classicus* is perhaps Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973) is also worth mentioning in this context.
- 19 John Dolan, "'A War between the Mind and Sky": The Praeteritic Antithesis in Curnow and Stevens', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 17 (1999), 2-25 (p. 3).
- 20 Dolan, p. 10.
- 21 Some of these distinctions are indebted to John Parnham's article, 'The Poverty of Ecocritical Theory: E. P. Thompson and the British Perspective', *New Formations*, 64 (2008), 25-36.
- 22 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', *Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 27.

²³ Hamilton, *Requiem For A Species*, p. 146.

²⁴ Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 5.

²⁵ Sheldrake, p. 13.