

**C.K. STEAD AND THREE MODES OF NEW ZEALAND POETRY**

by

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## ABSTRACT.

The majority of New Zealand's poetry critics take a purist and prescriptive approach to their subject, dividing poems and poets into one of three modes: realism, modernism and postmodernism. Furthermore, critics usually hold up one of these modes as the 'best' way to write, dismissing the others. My thesis argues for an adjustment of that paradigm to allow for poetry that crosses boundaries and combines aspects of more than one mode. C.K. Stead's writing illustrates both of these tendencies: purist theories in his critical work, post-purist practice in his poetry.

Stead's career covers a broad cross-section of New Zealand's recent literary history, from 1951 to 1997. Chapter one introduces this period by surveying its critical methodologies, arguing for a shift away from the dominant purist paradigm. This opening chapter also proposes an adjustment in one of the turning points in New Zealand's literary history, the arrival of modernism. Most surveys place that arrival at approximately 1970, ignoring the publication of Stead's "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" in 1959, likely the first modernist long poem written by a New Zealander.

Chapters two and three explore Stead's modernism in theory and in practice, and provide the first detailed critical discussion of "Pictures in a Gallery." Chapter four casts back to Stead's early use and rejection of realism, while chapter five shows realism continuing in a seam that runs throughout his work. Having established a mixture of realism and modernism, Stead then demonstrates his skill with postmodernist techniques, creating a three-way mixture of modes. Chapter six shows how that mixture develops in his poetry, while chapter seven traces a similar pattern in his fiction. Finally, chapter eight explores how the later poems cross these categorical boundaries, developing a poetic that relaxes hierarchical divisions.

Stead's practice contravenes the prescriptions of many New Zealand poetry critics—and it particularly counters his own purist critical arguments in favour of modernism. This thesis proposes a criticism that can allow for and describe Stead's post-purist practice. My conclusion suggests that this post-purist approach applies not only to the work of C.K. Stead, but also to some of the recent work by other New Zealand poets, such as Allen Curnow, Bill Manhire and Ian Wedde.

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## ABBREVIATIONS.

### 1. C.K. Stead's Criticism.

- AL*     *Answering to the Language: Essays on Moderns Writers.*  
*GC*     *In the Glass Case: Essays on New Zealand Literature.*  
*NP*     *The New Poetic.*  
*PYE*    *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement.*

### 2. C.K. Stead's Poetry.

- Bar*    *Crossing the Bar.*  
*Bet*    *Between.*  
*Geog*   *Geographies.*  
*Paris*   *Paris: A Poem by C.K. Stead, Illustrated by Gregory O'Brien.*  
*PD*     *Poems of a Decade.*  
*Q*      *Quesada: Poems 1972-74.*  
*SG*     *Straw Into Gold: Poems New and Selected.*  
*WW*     *Walking Westward.*  
*WWF*    *Whether the Will is Free: Poems 1954-62.*  
*V*      *Voices.*

(Note: most references to poems from *Q* and *WW* will be to the corrected versions in *PD*.)

### 3. C.K. Stead's Fiction.

- AVA*    *All Visitors Ashore.*  
*DB*     *The Death of the Body.*  
*End*    *The End of the Century at the End of the World.*  
*FS*     *Five for the Symbol.*  
*SD*     *Smith's Dream.*  
*SH*     *Sister Hollywood.*  
*SW*     *The Singing Whakapapa.*  
*VV*     *Villa Vittoria.*

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.**

For my closest friend, Laura.

## CHAPTER I. CRITICAL FICTIONS.

“A whole dimension of sophistication, present in the practice, was absent from the theory.”

—C.K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (1986) 289

### 1. The New Zealand Context: Three Modes of Poetry.

A critical fiction in New Zealand literature suggests that poets must write within prescribed modes. This critical paradigm has changed very little over the last fifty years, resulting in a gap between theory and practice—hence the epigraph above. The impulse to categorize can be a useful one, helping readers to find their way through an ever-increasing number of texts. In New Zealand criticism, though, taxonomy has been used as a rigid categorization of value, with critics selecting one mode as ‘the best’ and dismissing all the rest. This method imposes limitations that the actual practice of poets tends to resist. In the course of this thesis, I want to acknowledge the existence of poetry that falls outside (or combines) the three established modes, with particular focus on the work of C.K. Stead. In following this impulse to classify, I hope to avoid the prescriptive paradigm that dominates New Zealand’s poetry criticism.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, the prescriptions that dominated poetry criticism in New Zealand were those of Allen Curnow. In his seminal introductions, to *A Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1945 and *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1960, Curnow established realism as the central mode of New Zealand poetry. Poets must, he argued, concentrate on “truth” and “reality.” Their poems must have a New Zealand referent, and an identifiable “reality prior to the poem” (*Look Back Harder* 172). “Reality,” Curnow stated, “must be local and special where we pick up the traces” (133). There were many “musts” in Curnow’s introductions, as he set about centralizing the mode of poetry that he preferred to read and write. New Zealand realism was supposed to focus on local concerns, not local colour, and poems written in this mode usually ended with some kind of moral or political statement that the poet set up as the (generally hard and unpalatable) ‘truth.’ Curnow dated the beginning of this mode at 1923, the year that R.A.K. Mason published his first volume of

poems. “Curnow’s conclusion” was, as Mike Doyle states, “that most local poetry prior to 1923 was vitiated by rhythmical deadness and thematic colonization and was in fact ‘ghost poetry’” (“Growing Into the Language” 51).

From the 1920s to the 1960s, realism became the most acceptable mode in New Zealand’s poetry criticism. There was some argument—what Ian Wedde would later call “The ‘here-anywhere’ controversy” (Introduction 23)—about certain aspects of Curnow’s realism. After the publication of the 1960 *Penguin Book*, Louis Johnson, James K. Baxter and the Wellington group squared off against Curnow over nationalism and internationalism, arguing that the “reality prior to the poem” need not be rural and need not be identifiably local either. However, their main topic of discussion was not what to do instead of realism, but what sort of realism was the ‘best’ kind to write.

In the early 1960s, Kendrick Smithyman laid out a different taxonomy. He argued, in a group of essays collected in *A Way of Saying* (1965), that romantic and academic were the two categories into which New Zealand poetry could be consigned. Essentially, he agreed with Curnow that a dividing line existed between colonial and provincial poetry in New Zealand, and that the former ought to be dismissed. Smithyman therefore labelled colonial poetry as “romantic,” while defining the poetry of his own age—what he called “that phase of New Zealand poetry which matters” (1)—as “academic.”

Within the academic mode, Smithyman distinguished “two wings”: “the one wing (social, direct, sentient, or ostensibly these) inherits more that is plainly a legacy of the romantic than the other does . . .” (5-6). Smithyman later refers to this first wing as “neo-romantic” because, as Patrick Evans points out in *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*, “Like [Louis] Johnson, he was trying to authorise the generation they were both part of . . .” (174). Within that “generation,” Smithyman preferred the sort of academic poetry that he himself was writing. Thus he characterizes the other wing of academic poetry in anti-romantic terms, as “tending to be asocial poetry . . . to be oblique . . . to be

intellectual, rather than sentient; to attend to surface finish and manner, more than being concerned about making ‘significant’ statements about society” (5).

Later critics did not adopt Smithyman’s modes—perhaps because, as Elizabeth Caffin noted in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, “while ‘romantic’ is a term broad enough and familiar enough to serve, ‘academic’ is too narrow in its implications and fails to acknowledge the links between these poets and movements in other places” (Sturm 396). The three modes of realism, modernism and postmodernism proved to be more popular than Smithyman’s taxonomy. However, New Zealand critics did adopt Smithyman’s method of division and classification. His methodology is a paradigm of the critical fiction that New Zealand poets can and must be fitted inside prescribed categories.

In the late 1970s, C.K. Stead proposed two binary modes that were similar to Smithyman’s. This time, the labels used were those of realism and modernism. Stead laid out this division in his seminal essay, “From Wystan to Carlos—Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry” (1979).<sup>1</sup> Ignoring Smithyman’s terminology, Stead took Curnow’s realism as his starting point:

In so far as the discussion of New Zealand poetry has had any critical structure over the past quarter of a century the structure has come from Allen Curnow’s introductions to his two anthologies and from the counter-statements these elicited. What I propose to do in the present lecture is to enquire whether we can’t discover another set of terms—not because there’s anything wrong with the ones we have, but because a new point of observation is likely to alter the picture, and it is surely time for a change. (139)

Stead derived his “set of terms” from modernism. This mode, he argued, represented “the broad tide of poetry in English during this century” (145). Stead dismissed postmodernism as merely a surrealist branch of modernism, and a dead branch at that: “I find the surrealist strand in Modernism the least satisfactory, except perhaps as an occasional weapon for deflating pomposities. . . . There is in fact no surrealist tradition in the poetry of the English

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforth cited as “From Wystan to Carlos.”

language" (154). In a postscript to the essay, he finally rejected postmodernism as "lacking in texture" and "boring."

Other critics asserted that Stead's modernism was passé, and that postmodernism was in fact the dominant mode of poetry in the 1970s and the 1980s. Alan Loney, for example, argued that Stead—in setting up modernism as the major mode—was writing "as if no conversation, no dialogue, no poetic thinking, no pressing the limits of known form had taken place since, say, 1950-51 . . ." ("Some Aspects of C.K. Stead's "Walking Westwards" 249). The postmodern critics asserted that the work of older poets, such as Stead and Curnow, was the poetry that was "boring." In particular, they characterized such work as "slow." Loney cast Stead as getting in the way of "what's happening in the fast lanes" (Interview 54), while Leigh Davis likened Curnow to "a 1957 Chrysler": solid, slow, and out of date ("Solo Curnow" 61).<sup>2</sup> Patrick Evans, in *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*, summarized these exclusive strategies: "The rhetoric is different (no one before had thought of describing Curnow as a 1957 Chrysler), but the aim is the same, to authorise one's own view as the only view, one's own language as the only language . . ." (223).

## 2. Critical Methodologies: From Purism to Post-Purism.

Thus three modes of poetry were set up as prescribed areas, into which poets could be sorted and classified. Poetry criticism in New Zealand became an exercise like drafting sheep, sorting the animals into pens and marking them with different coloured lumps of chalk: realist, modernist or postmodernist. The critical fiction was that poets had to stay in their pens and write within the critics' prescribed modes. Reviewers perpetuated this fiction by giving evaluative precedence to poets that bore the reviewer's own chalk mark.

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<sup>2</sup>See also Gregory O'Brien's wry cover illustration for Mark Williams's *Caxton Press Anthology*, "New Zealand landscape with 1957 Chrysler." The car has a personalized license plate, "AL 57," and is juxtaposed to a tower block labelled "DAVIS CORP."

The fiction was also perpetuated by anthologists who selected only one type of poetry, making purist claims in their introductions that their chosen method was the way to write. One might take as an example Alistair Paterson, who issued *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets* in 1980. This anthology, Paterson says at the beginning of his introduction, “is designed to represent one of the more interesting and exciting directions in which poetry has been moving in New Zealand over the last few years.” Paterson defined that “direction” as open form. He then cited Stead’s “From Wystan to Carlos” in order to support his statement that open form was a new, important and widespread mode:

this new direction is not a regional quirk, an isolated local development. . . . It is a development which has been gathering momentum throughout the English speaking world since the beginning of the century (and earlier). . . . For a detailed account of this development, see C.K. Stead’s *From Wystan to Carlos: Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry (Islands 27)*, published since the completion of this anthology. (xii)

Paterson thus promotes open form as an instance of Stead’s “broad tide” of modernism, though he characterizes it as “the main thrust” (xi).

In the effort to make their chosen mode appear as the central one, anthologists often try to include as wide a variety of poets as possible. Alistair Paterson called this approach an attempt to provide “a representative cross-section” of open form poets (xiv). This method sometimes stretches the limits of a reader’s credulity, as Mike Doyle noted in his appraisal of Paterson’s “‘programmatically’ anthology”: “One is puzzled and interested to find Curnow, Smithyman, and Stead, featured as proponents, along with Wedde, Alan Loney, and a bundle of new names” (“Growing Into the Language” 59). Murray Edmond puts the matter more bluntly in his review: “The anthology attempts to put fifteen poets into one collecting bag and fails miserably” (166). Instead of sheep in a pen, Edmond sees the poets as butterflies in a bag, but both metaphors involve critics confining poets into a prescribed space. That space—the critic’s chosen mode—has to stretch to take in a wide variety of poets, and thus it is that Paterson manages (or does not manage, depending on one’s perspective) to include the poetry of self-proclaimed postmodernists such as Loney and Michael Harlow alongside that

of the self-proclaimed modernist Stead, as well as less “programmatic” writers such as Curnow and Wedde. The limits of the mode (the fence around the sheep) begin to blur and morph, even as the anthologist asserts the purism of his or her stance.

In Paterson’s view, open form was the new poetry. In order to support this belief (and his anthology), he issued a pamphlet in 1981 called *The New Poetry: Considerations Towards Open Form*. This forty-page essay follows the same methodology as the earlier introduction. Paterson’s first step is to establish his chosen mode—“the new mode” (10)—as central:

With the publication of Karl Stead’s *From Wytan to Carlos: Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry* and the more recent *Fifteen Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, ‘open form’ writing has not only become identified as a distinct *genre* in its own right, but has also been recognised as having established itself as the major direction in recent New Zealand writing. (9)

Thus, in a fairly circular, self-referential fashion, Paterson argues that his main thrust (or Stead’s broad tide) has become “recognised” and “established” as “the major direction.” His second step is to marginalize dissenting critics, such as Basil Dowling, by characterizing their denial of open form as a kind of wilful blindness: “The questions Dowling asks suggest a lack of understanding and a restriction of sensibility . . .” (10).<sup>3</sup> Paterson later dismisses Dowling for trying “to make nonsense . . . of much that should be highly revered as amongst the best that art (and poetry in particular) has to offer.” In this way, all who agree with Paterson are placed “amongst the best”; all who “believe otherwise” are cast as insensitive philistines (20).

Paterson’s third step is to marginalize any poets who are not writing in his “new mode.” He lays great stress on the poet’s need for “openness,” requiring “the poet’s constant and realistic awareness that the poem can never be complete without the creative contribution that

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<sup>3</sup>Basil Dowling is a realist poet who published three volumes of poetry in New Zealand in the 1940s before moving to Britain in the 1950s. (His poem “The Trapped Hare” makes an interesting contrast to one of Stead’s first realist poems, “Trapped Rabbit.”) In 1979, Dowling wrote a “Letter From an Expatriate” to *Landfall*, criticizing the writing of “the current generation of New Zealand poets,” which he found eccentric, irritating, “pointless and arbitrary” (287-88). It is the questions raised in this letter that Paterson refers to.

comes from his reader—and he must allow for it or sacrifice something of that multi-dimensional quality that makes a poem luminous and alive” (29). Paterson implies that all other forms of poetry are incomplete, one-dimensional and dead. Open form thus becomes the only choice, something a poet “must” do. Paterson claims that poets writing in open form are “truly aware of . . . subtleties,” while readers and critics who do not recognize those subtleties are guilty of a kind of failure: “readers and critics who do not have a similar awareness become hopelessly confused and commit the most cardinal of errors—fail to recognise the quality of excellent new work when they see it, or to appreciate the originality, advantage, and value of a new view and approach” (21). Paterson loads his preferred mode with adjectives of newness and “originality,” presenting it as “a new view,” “a new mode,” “The New Poetry.”

As if in answer to Paterson’s “New Poetry,” an anthology appeared in 1987 called *The New Poets of the Eighties: Initiatives in New Zealand Poetry*. One of its editors, Murray Edmond, had scathingly reviewed Paterson’s anthology in 1981, saying “it is all so dead, so dreary and dead; it is all presented to us as the great new orthodoxy, as the way we all ought to be doing it” (161). What one anthologist privileges as “New,” another anthologist will cut down as “dreary and dead.” This process parallels the American poetry scene of the 1960s, which produced many anthologies claiming to represent the “New Poetry.”<sup>4</sup> Charles Bukowski reflects on this scene in his 1968 assessment of the then “New Poets” in America:

a professor from a local university came by to see me yesterday . . . he was tired of the same insensible gatherings of the so-called NEW POETRY. poetry is still the biggest snob-racket in the Arts with little poet groups battling for power. . . . in essence, the generally accepted poetry today has a kind of glass outside to it, slick and sliding . . . it does get backing and it does survive because the secret is in that those who belong really belong and to hell with the rest. but the poetry is dull, very dull, so dull that the dullness is taken for hidden meaning — the meaning is hidden, all right, so well hidden that there isn’t any meaning. but if YOU can’t find it, you lack soul, sensitivity and so forth, so you BETTER FIND IT OR YOU DON’T BELONG. and if you don’t find it, KEEP QUIET.

meanwhile, every 2 or 3 years, somebody in the academy, wanting to keep his place in the university structure . . . brings out the same old collection of glass and

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<sup>4</sup>Mike Doyle has noted this parallel. When he reviewed *The New Poets* in *Landfall*, he saw “shades of Don Allen’s *New American Poetry*” (210).

gutless poetry and labels it THE NEW POETRY or THE NEW NEW POETRY but it's still the same marked deck. (177)

Bukowski captures the feeling of coterie and paranoia that can result from "poet groups battling for power." He himself does not "BELONG" to the "NEW POETRY," so he characterizes it as "dull, very dull, so dull." His tone parallels that of Edmond decrying Paterson's introduction as "all so dead, so dreary and dead."

Moreover, Bukowski's complaint about the exclusivity of theorists who make confused readers feel as if they "lack soul, sensitivity and so forth," sounds very close to Edmond's dismissal of Paterson's "great new orthodoxy":

How it all comes down to us from on high. If we do not understand it, it is because we lack the essential sensibility. . . . Can something like "open form verse" become a new orthodoxy? Yes, I am afraid it can and it has here. It is so boring and so vague, so overbearing and so tedious, and so dead, dead like a row of butterflies. ("Please Classify and File" 161-62)

However, when Murray Edmond and Mary Paul brought out their own anthology, they too promoted "a new orthodoxy." Except now, in their preface, "new" equals postmodernism:

We hope that this preface has introduced readers to some of the new and controversial ideas in New Zealand poetry. . . . Our chief interest has been to show the range of new poetry—we have been searching, in our selections, for the horizontal spread in the present rather than the vertical line of hierarchical history. We have looked for clashes, disjunctures, differences. We have tried to highlight poets who are poised on a threshold, a beginning. (xiii)

Like Paterson, the anthologists try to offer a cross-section ("the horizontal spread"), but this time the hope is to represent "difference" rather than similarity. The methods are the same; it is merely the agenda that has changed. Instead of open form, the editors offer a five part plan of what they see as "new and controversial." Among these (arguably new) five points is "the idea that language is a commodity in which poems can be found or out of which poems can be arranged"; other points include the use of feminism, Maoritanga, and popular culture (xi). Finally, in a postmodern fashion, Edmond and Paul undercut what they see as "the mainstream of New Zealand poetry" ("the poet as seer") and then humorously co-opt that

mainstream by reducing it to “a subculture itself” (xii). What was once “the mainstream” becomes one of many channels that postmodernists can choose to access or ignore. In this way, the editors break down the hegemonic discourse of one mode in order to elevate the discourse of another. Their chosen mode is a postmodern one that emphasizes “clashes, disjunctions, differences.”

The critical fiction that poets must write within prescribed limits produces a kind of Hobson’s choice for the writers themselves. To be taken as a poet in New Zealand, one must apparently choose one of the three modes that the critics have defined: realism, modernism or postmodernism. Yet, by choosing a mode, one runs the risk of being called out of date (like a 1957 Chrysler), or even of being called a ‘bad’ poet if one has chosen what a critic might see as the ‘wrong’ field.

Consider, for example, Stead’s critical attitude (articulated in “From Wistan to Carlos”) toward Fleur Adcock’s realism and Alan Brunton’s surrealism. Stead equates Brunton’s surrealism with postmodernism, and in dismissing that mode he dismisses, in effect, all of Brunton’s poetry:

Even in the work of someone as brilliant as Alan Brunton (who illustrates the kind of thing I mean here by a surrealist) I feel there is a thinness in the language because the poet has let invention supersede perception. The language is showing us the mind of Brunton rather than the world as it appears to the mind of Brunton. To seek deliberately to detach the mind and the poem from its physical and social environment is I think a self-defeating game for a poet to play. (154)

This analysis casts Brunton as “brilliant” but misguided because, in Stead’s view, Brunton squanders his talent in a marginal, “self-defeating” mode.

Similarly, Stead admires Adcock for being a skilled practitioner. However, because she too works outside Stead’s chosen mode, he characterizes her poetry as following the wrong path and reaching a “dead” end:

the change from Wystan [symbolizing realism] to Carlos [symbolizing modernism] represents . . . an expansion of possibilities, and it was something which had to come, I believe, if our poetry was not to grind almost to a halt or settle down into a staple of polite middle-class writing which is what most of the poetry in Britain in the seventies has amounted to. Fleur Adcock is I think a case of a poet perfectly attuned to the British literary scene at the moment—enormously accomplished, no doubt of it, but so much of her skill is directed towards that deadening effect which occurs when the absence of stylistic vices becomes more important than the presence of virtues. When poetry refuses to live dangerously, it gives away a good deal of its reason for living at all. (154-55)

In other words, when poetry refuses to live in what Stead sees as a new, dangerous mode (modernism), then in his view it might as well not bother existing. Thus the critic presents his preferred mode as a necessary—indeed an inevitable—evolutionary force: “something which had to come.” In Darwinian terms, the fittest survive while the rest are cast as weaker members of the flock. Those weaker members slow down progress, exert a “deadenning effect,” play “a self-defeating game” and seem to have little “reason for living at all.”

Stead’s critical attitudes are those of a purist, supporting one mode over all the others:

my own feeling is that the broad tide of poetry in English during this century, the durable part of it, will be seen in retrospect to have moved towards open form, towards the poem as imaginative act rather than as vehicle, towards the maximizing of linguistic energy, towards the sense of language as the material of art not the servant of an idea—towards all that is characteristic of Modernism at its best. (145)

Having placed modernism as the central mode of twentieth-century poetry (what he calls a “supposition”) Stead goes on to offer Ezra Pound as his figurehead, the paradigm of a poet who exemplifies “Modernism at its best.” “And if that supposition is correct,” Stead goes on to say, “it explains why Yeats seems a splendid but remote monument, while Pound is still an imperfect but operative force on the production of new poetry.” For Stead, “new” equals modernist. He follows the same method as Murray Edmond and Mary Paul, elevating a “new poetry” while simultaneously reducing what was formerly seen as “the mainstream of New Zealand poetry.” He simply prefers to elevate a different mode from theirs.

Stead claims that this process does not involve any judgement on his part between ‘better’ or ‘worse’ poetry: “It [the supposition] also explains what I mean when I say—as I do

now—that New Zealand poetry in the 1960s and seventies had moved forward. It's not a question of poetry getting better but rather of poets doing what is most appropriate, or most apposite, to the age in which we live" (145). Here, once again, Stead offers modernism as a natural force, an "appropriate" evolutionary step. This presentation sounds very like Alistair Paterson's proffering of open form as "a development which has been gathering momentum throughout the English speaking world," or Ian Wedde's arguing (six years later in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*)<sup>5</sup> that the history of New Zealand poetry has been a "progressive one" away from hieratic acts of "will-to-language" (24) towards a demotic and "refreshed language" (28) that feels 'right':

The process of undamming that leads to a sense of 'rightness' (or uprightness, as Allen Curnow might say) . . . has been a lengthy and progressive one of readjusting the relation in favour of the demotic. Only in this way could a locally original culture establish its relation 'in the world' to the point where it became internally familiar rather than willed.

The uneven history of this process . . . has been the short history of our developing English language literature in New Zealand. And that history has been coeval with the growth of the language into its centring ganglia of relationships, to the point where we can feel ourselves to be its original poets, its consummators. (29)

Even as he denies any presentation of history as "linear" (40), Wedde sets in motion his own broad tide, flowing from the "dam" of colonial poetry to the "freed" verse of his own contemporaries. He claims that the culmination of this flow arrives with a "renaissance in poetry during the 1960s and the 1970s" (24). In Wedde's view, "The language seemed to have flowed more naturally from the hieratic towards the demotic . . . this flow must have been freed by the progressive erosion of various cultural dams" (24-25). By using the phrases "must have been" and "only in this way," Wedde sets up a necessary evolutionary movement that culminates (or "consummates"), not in the modernism of Stead, but in the mode used by "ourselves," the "original poets," the "freed" poets.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Wedde co-edited the anthology with Harvey McQueen. However, McQueen was something of a silent partner, as Stead points out in his review of the anthology: "Wedde acts as spokesman, both publicly and in the introduction—so much so that it's difficult not to think of it as the Wedde Penguin" (*AL* 136).

<sup>6</sup>*The Word is Freed* (usually referred to as *Freed*) was a periodical that ran through five issues from 1969 to 1972. It published, amongst others, Wedde, Alan Brunton and Russell Haley—all of whom Stead has attacked at some point for espousing postmodernism or

Thus, while his anthology covers the entire history of New Zealand poetry, Wedde privileges the poets who wrote “during the 1960s and the 1970s.” And, while he admits that his hands were somewhat tied in relation to pre-1960 verse—“a core tradition needed to be respected” (“The Penguin: Texts and Contexts” 49)—his introduction tries to move the reader’s attention away from that “core.” Indeed, in spite of this acknowledged core, Wedde asserts that “This anthology is as much ‘post-Baxter’ as it is ‘post-1960’” (44). This assertion implies that the editors are particularly interested in the 1970s, the period after Baxter’s death. *The Penguin Book* thus involves a shifting of focus, what Iain Sharp has called “Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen’s crafty derailing of the literary main trunk line” (150).<sup>7</sup> Wedde’s focus, and the greater part of his discussion, is on the period of time that brought to prominence such poets as Bill Manhire, David Eggleton, Murray Edmond, and himself. Every other period is presented as a necessary preparation for this time when language would finally “fit” (39) and feel ‘right.’

Having established his historical focus and poetic preference, Wedde goes on—like Stead in “From Wystan to Carlos”—to set up a paradigm representing the sort of poetry that he prefers. His paradigm is not Pound’s *Cantos*, however, but David Eggleton’s “Painting Mount Taranaki”:

the poem’s sense of natural relation is instinctively satisfying evidence of language centred in a culture whose dimensions are internally familiar. It is possible to read influences there without doubting the originality of the poetry. The poem is the subject, not just about it—where ‘about’ implies will, a philosophic determination. (28)

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surrealism. However, in “From Wystan to Carlos,” Stead co-opts both *Freed* and Wedde as part of “a broad development out of Modernism” (147).

<sup>7</sup>Sharp’s assessment was mild compared to the response of some critics. As Peter Simpson pointed out in his review, “One reviewer has referred to the treatment of the pre-1960 period as a ‘hatchet-job’” (157).

This poem corrects all the shortcomings that Wedde saw in the “startlingly inappropriate” work of the colonial poet Hubert Church (27).<sup>8</sup> Eggleton’s poem also provides a step forward from what Wedde depicts as Charles Brasch’s failed attempts at “advancing the possibility of a natural relation, an internally familiar culture.” “In diagrammatic form,” Wedde argues, “Charles Brasch can be represented as a square peg in a round hole: Church’s chasm has gone, but there still isn’t a fit” (39). For Wedde, Eggleton’s poem consummates the flow of New Zealand poetry’s language from hieratic to demotic:

the historical process towards the sense of consummation in location that comes a quarter-century after [Brasch’s] *The Estate* with a poem like David Eggleton’s “Painting Mount Taranaki” is also a development towards a sense of culture that is internally familiar. . . . And, in the central shape of the mountain, there is a cipher for the latest contraction of the diagram of development from Church’s colonial abyss, through Brasch’s existential struggle to fit, to the natural sense of relation of Eggleton’s poem. (39-40)

After establishing his “diagram of development,” Wedde claims—again, like Stead—that his version of literary history involves no value judgements on his part: “‘Painting Mount Taranaki’ is not a ‘better’ poem than *The Estate*, that goes without saying; but it was written at a more integrated stage of our literary history, and it enacts that integration” (40). Wedde is careful to emphasize that “We must not attach too much value to these dialectical developments” (39). These caveats sound very similar to Stead’s repeated protestation in “From Wystan to Carlos” that “The change from Wystan to Carlos represents—as I’ve explained—not a case of poetry getting better, but of poetry moving with what I see as the tide of literary history” (154).

Wedde declared, in a 1987 interview, that his critical approach in *The Penguin Book* had been something innovative and new: “The book involved a new approach to the literary tradition and was aimed at making certain other approaches obsolete” (O’Brien 66).

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<sup>8</sup>Like Wedde, Alistair Paterson judged colonial poets’ “transposition . . . of Tennyson’s Italianate English salon sonorities” to be “inappropriate.” In his 1976 survey, “Poetry in Transition,” Paterson singled out Thomas Bracken (instead of Hubert Church) as being “representative of his period”: “he drew on the most inappropriate of models—Tennyson, Longfellow and the contemporary English public versifiers . . .” (76-77; emphasis added).

However, while the mode that he supported was different, Wedde's methodology (and some of his vocabulary) does seem very similar to that of his predecessors. Like Stead in "From Wistan to Carlos" (or Paterson in *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, or Smithyman in *A Way of Saying*), Wedde sets up his version of literary history, establishes his preferred mode as the culmination of that history, and then adds the proviso that his "making certain other approaches obsolete" has involved no value judgement on his part.

Purists offer their preferred mode as the only mode of poetry worth working in. They rarely dismiss other poetry as 'bad'; they simply consign it to the margins of their version (or "diagram") of literary history. Modes that they dislike are set aside as "startlingly inappropriate," whilst those they prefer are held up as "most appropriate . . . to the age" (*GC* 145). This methodology, used so frequently in New Zealand's poetry criticism, is exemplified by Stead's "From Wistan to Carlos."

Critical methodology and terminology must try to keep pace with new developments. If "new" is simply equated with the critic's personal preference out of three established modes, then any really new development will not be recognized as such. Any attempt at change or combination by a poet will simply be shoehorned into whichever mode the individual critic prefers. Bits left over will be trimmed off or ignored, however tight the fit. For example, Frank McKay (faced with Stead's mixture of modes in "Quesada") argued that "The real Stead is the romantic Stead" (qtd. in *GC* 275). Similarly, Martin Edmond complained, in 1976, that "Stead's older style still serves him best," while Alistair Paterson ignored Stead's other styles in order to emphasize his use of open form. All these critics push aside or decry any element in Stead's poetry that does not suit their chosen mode. This methodology produces a kind of critical loop, where each critic tries to advocate a single category, regardless of the poetic practice that they are faced with. These purist critics include Stead himself: "I have a preference for Modernist poetics—or perhaps for my own poetics as I derive and formulate these from modernist texts" (*GC* 144).

Readers might assume from this statement that Stead's poetics are purely modernist. At the conclusion of "From Wystan to Carlos," while he claims that he has not prescribed modernist poetics for everyone, he does state unequivocally that the tenets of modernism are strict prescriptions for himself: "In tracing the development 'from Wystan to Carlos' I have not been trying to lay down prescriptions which poets should follow (any prescriptions are for myself)" (158). In practice, however, there is more to Stead's poetry than modernism. These extra elements shake one's belief in what the critic claims to be a neat fit. While Stead the critic may appear to be prescribing and limiting his own practice, Stead the poet has refused to be tied to any one field.

Given Stead's purist promotion of modernist poetry, what are readers to make of his increasingly non-purist practice as a poet? Stead's poetry often resists the single chalk mark of any one mode. In his first volume, *Whether the Will is Free: Poems 1954-62* (1964), realist works ("Night Watch in the Tararuas") lay alongside modernist works ("Pictures in a Gallery Undersea"). This beginning reveals the possibility of one poet using more than one mode within a single book. In recent years, Stead even combines different modes within individual poems. "Yes T.S.," for instance, accommodates the use and mixture of all three categories. Critical purism, the unswerving application of one of the three modes, is unable to contain or describe such a mixture. A less purist approach—and a different terminology—is needed to assist readers in dealing with this mixture, this 'post-purist' poetry. To illustrate the need for this new critical approach, I shall trace the movement of Stead's poetry, from his first volume to his most recent (*Straw Into Gold: Poems New and Selected*, 1997). Stead's work has shifted and developed, taking account of both realism and postmodernism, in spite of his critical prescriptions to the contrary. Stead's modernist poetic, so authoritatively prescribed in "From Wystan to Carlos," does not fully describe his practice as a poet.

This argument for a different critical approach might be couched in terms of reception theory. This theory views literary history as an account of the dialectic between successive readers, and the changing but cumulative way that texts get assessed as the horizons of their

readers change. New Zealand literary history has followed a shift in horizons from realist expectations, to modernist expectations, to postmodernist expectations. At each stage, the method of reading remains the same: a purist approach that judges one mode as good and the others as insignificant or passé. What I propose, then, is a two-fold adjustment: not only in horizon (recognizing and allowing room for the crossing of boundaries between modes), but also in approach (from a purist to a post-purist way of reading).

### 3. Tradition and the Individual Voice.

Perhaps one clue to Stead's post-purist practice—as opposed to his purist critical prescriptions—lies in his broad conception of tradition:

I inherit the tradition of poetry in English. . . . There is no set of rules which defines what a poem is, or what a work of art is—it only defines itself as a work of art by fitting into a tradition. You have to reach back into the stream or tradition of your art—yourself is not enough. . . . The things that are important to you may come from anywhere English is spoken or written. (Ricketts 107-9)

While for Stead it may constitute the major aspect, modernism is not the only element in this broad tradition. Neither is the apparent restriction to places “where English is spoken or written”; Stead's poetry has drawn on (amongst others) French, Latin, and Asian writing.

A similar breadth of tradition can be seen in Stead's work as a writer of fiction. In “Narrativity, or the Birth of Story” (1993),<sup>9</sup> he begins by asserting the importance of “the tradition” (213) and “a canon,” and then conflates the two by saying “The tradition is a canon (dangerous word, I know)” (215). However, Stead undercuts the apparent conservatism of this statement by defining this canon as being one made up “of works which have each in their way escaped from the merely conventional.” This is an immensely broad conception of a canon, embracing any work that challenges a reader's preconceptions.

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<sup>9</sup>Henceforth cited as “Narrativity.”

This canon, as in Stead's poetry influences, is not confined to writing in English. Indeed, none of the three writers considered in "Narrativity" come from an area "where English is spoken or written":

I thought . . . it might be of interest to set fiction in English aside for the moment and say something about each of three twentieth-century writers, Alberto Moravia, Jorge Luis Borges, and Günter Grass, whose work has been of great importance to me—not of course because they're 'better' than anglophone writers, but because, working in another language, they offer something different. ("Narrativity" 218)

Something that escapes convention, "something different": these are Stead's definitions of the works that interest and influence him as a writer. The breadth of this tradition is such that modernism written in English—while it is Stead's main influence—becomes one of many potential traditions or modes that might occur in any given language, work of fiction or poem.

Since "For the Hulk of the Worlds Between" in 1960, Stead has emphasized the poet's need for a sense of tradition. He began that lecture by saying that "the artist must maintain a living contact with the tradition in which he is writing or painting. This contact with the tradition is as important as the living contact with society" (*GC* 245). Thirty-three years later, his views on tradition had not changed: "Anyone who ventures to write begins by being a reader. You work within an existing tradition. Your own talent and experience of life are never enough. You must be fed by what has gone before. That's the nature of all the arts" ("Narrativity" 212-13). Like Eliot and Pound before him, Stead sees writing poetry as a dialogue with tradition, a "reaching back into the stream" ("Craft Interview with C.K. Stead" 450).<sup>10</sup> He finds how to say things and then says them in his own distinctive voice. That "how" may take the shape of a modernist sequence, a Baxterian sonnet, a poem in Latin, or a Japanese uta.

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<sup>10</sup>Henceforth cited as "Craft Interview." See also T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Ezra Pound's "A Retrospect."

Sometimes he even finds what to say in the tradition, taking subjects from Catullus (“The Clodian Songbook”) or making translations of Apollinaire (“The Mirabeau Bridge”), Baudelaire (“The Swan”), and Asian poets (the Chinese “Ai Ai Tei Wun” and the Japanese “Uta”). Where—like Pound in his Cathay poems—he does not know the original language very well, the sources become “a trigger or a taking off point” for a new and original poem (“Craft Interview” 463):

[The Catullus poems a]re obviously not translations and I can’t pretend to know Latin. I occasionally did something that was *like* a translation, not of the words but of the situation, into a New Zealand and personal context. Other times the poem just takes off from some point in Catullus and goes in its own direction. (“C.K. Stead and Fleur Adcock: a Conversation” 60)<sup>11</sup>

Stead’s use of tradition provokes critical arguments about his individual voice: is he a poet or merely a pasticheur, does his own voice come through or not? Almost every review of Stead’s poetry touches upon this issue, an issue I would like to address by examining some poems from the Catullus sequence (one from *Geographies* and one from *Between*, both selected at random).

Stead’s Catullus poems shift the reader “into a New Zealand and personal context.” The Roman source fades away as “the grove of Priapus” sprouts “ferns and pongas” (*Geog* 71), Catullus flies “Air New Zealand” (*Geog* 65) and his companion “Furius” turns into Frank Sargeson. Stead takes “Furius” into the twentieth century, describing him as a “Gay Rights” supporter (*Geog* 69) and “a writer,” complete with “the vegetables he grows,” his “overdraft” at the bank and “his hedge / . . . falling over the pavement” (*Bet* 43-44). The latter represents one of Stead’s personal preoccupations, a subject that runs through much of his work: Sargeson and the blossoming of the arts community on Auckland’s North Shore. By way of comparison, Stead had already used that hedge, in a poem “Written in London in 1965” (*GC* 47), to praise Sargeson’s commitment to writing:

On the Publication of Frank Sargeson’s “Memoirs of a Peon”, August 1965

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<sup>11</sup>Henceforth cited as “Conversation.”

The Grub Street dogs are yapping after their tails.  
 Someone has made the books they said were dead  
 Get up and talk in Auckland.  
 Frank, you always grow the best tomatoes,  
 The fattest peppers. Only your book makes clear  
 Why coming through your hedge to get my share  
 I have to bow so low. (*Bar 45*)

In the seventh poem of the *Between* sequence, Stead employs the same hedge, as well as the vegetables and books, praising once more Sargeson's ability to make things "grow" and come to life. This time, however, Stead also uses the hedge as an image of the barrier between Sargeson and the puritan society that the elder writer so abhorred. On one side the narrator's mother warns him off:

'Young man,' she used to say  
 'you stay away from old Furius.  
 His hedge is a disgrace to the suburb.'

I tried to excuse it:  
 'You should see the vegetables he grows  
 behind that hedge.'

'That may be so'  
 she said  
 'but they say he doesn't have a  
 washing machine.'

'He always looks clean'  
 I said.  
 'He's a great cook  
 and he lets me borrow his books.'

On the other side of the hedge lies a bohemian world of fine art and fine food, a world that the "Young man" cannot resist. This division not only shows one of the choices faced by the youthful Stead, it also reflects a binary that Sargeson used in much of his own writing. Stead attaches a layer of irony to this local signification, because Sargeson frequently attacked mother-figures in his books. Thus, beneath the literal situation—a mother warning her son—allusions abound, both personal and literary.

In addition to this layering of allusions, Stead's poem combines seriousness and levity, as he tries to represent the complexity of the situation:

She wanted to know  
why he didn't cut his hedge.

'He's a writer'  
I told her. 'He's very busy and famous.  
'His books are published in England.'

'What's the good of that'  
she asked  
'if he doesn't have a washing machine  
and his hedge  
is falling over the pavement?'

One can hear the rhythms of a young adult voice, listing reasons and excuses, struggling to find a way around the double barrier of parental rules and suburban conventions. One can also see the pauses as the son tries to work out what to say next and, more importantly, what he thinks his mother wants to hear. He tries the gambit of hard work and fame and then—after a pause conveyed by a line break and a switch to the other margin—he plays upon the 1950s respect for England (the 'mother' country). After the tension of this build-up, Stead delivers a punchline at once humorous (as the mother sidesteps her son's logic and doggedly stands her ground) and tragic (as the boy loses the battle and the chance for freedom). In this mixture of responses, Stead captures the subtle undercurrents of human interactions, particularly those that occur in a family context.

This combination of seriousness with levity, along with the careful layering of allusions and the visual rendering of speech patterns, characterizes much of Stead's writing. Another example can be seen in the seventh poem of the *Geographies* sequence, where the narrator turns his attention to Clodia:

Air New Zealand  
old friend of Catullus  
you offer a quick hike  
to Disneyland  
the South Pole  
Hong Kong's hotspots  
to ease a jealous ache.  
  
Thanks brother  
but I'd rather  
you flew downcountry a message to Clodia.



is, he would be, if she were paying any attention to him at all and not “downcountry” with other men.

There may also be a more temporally specific local referent in this poem. For many New Zealanders, there are tragic connections between “Air New Zealand” and “the South Pole.” On 28 November 1979, an Air New Zealand DC10-30 was flying over McMurdo Sound on a scenic Antarctic flight when it crashed into Mount Erebus, killing all 257 people on board. Stead’s placement of this destination between the hot spots of Disneyland (the self-proclaimed “Happiest Place on Earth”) and Hong Kong (notorious for its sex trade) may simply reflect a series of advertisements that Air New Zealand was running in the late 1970s. However, because the poem was published only two years after the Erebus disaster, the central, end-stopped location of “the South Pole” casts a sad and questioning pall over just how attractive any of these “offers” may be, not just for Catullus himself, but for any New Zealander.

This effect depends in part on the way Stead places (and spaces) the words. Such close attention to visual detail has become a characteristic part of Stead’s work. This poem simply does not look like anything that Catullus wrote. The whole piece takes shape around a single, fragile stem. It is one of the few Clodian poems to be structured around a central margin and, of those few, it is the only one that has two consecutive lines cutting across its margin. Just as the daisy is cut in half by the two rotary blades of a Masport Mower, so the central stem of the poem is bisected by two long lines. These lines also embody the separation between Catullus up north and Clodia down south, between dream destinations and sad realities. This (at once wry and humorous) sensitivity to the shape, sound, and placement of words adds to one’s sense of a distinctive Stead presence in and behind the poem.

Part of Stead’s personal voice, or style (as he prefers to call it), is an irrepressible sense of fun, a joy in language and its many possibilities. In Stead’s hands, an apparently simple phrase can vibrate like a plucked string, producing layers of reverberating effects over and

above the initial movement. For example, the description of “the lone lawn daisy” works on one level as a strikingly visual image, a single white speck set against an expanse of green. After this first note, reverberations begin to make themselves felt, as readers notice or hear certain other effects. The alliteration of the “l” and “n” sounds tie the daisy’s adjectives together as they wash in and out of each other. These two words also enact a visual and aural parallel to their similar (yet isolated and different) neighbour, the word “love” on the line above. In addition to these fertile juxtapositions, Stead puns on “lawn.” This word modulates out of the sound and context of “lone” into an appropriate homophone, “lorn.” A final, pianissimo note might be the possible echo of a famous Dickensian catchphrase. In *David Copperfield* a lonely figure, the widow Mrs Gummidge, constantly describes herself as “a lone lorn creatur.” She gets upset and says this whenever she thinks of her dead husband, who went to sea one day and never returned (28-30; Ch. 3). The allusion casts ‘Catullus’ in a slightly different light: like Mrs Gummidge, he may be alone and full of self pity, but then his partner’s absence is voluntary and impermanent.

All these reverberations, after the initial note, cause the reader to make a series of adjustments. With each vibration that is felt, the poem broadens and deepens. Thus, the Catullus of “The Clodian Songbook” is not distinguished from his famous Roman forebear merely by his location in the southern hemisphere. These poems may owe their initial subject to Catullus, but their style, form and music seem unmistakably that of C.K. Stead.

The Clodian poems (initially titled “Catullus in Auckland”<sup>13</sup>) may be called loose adaptations: “something that was *like* a translation.” Indeed, in *Geographies*, “The Clodian Songbook” is subtitled “15 Adaptations.” They might even be called a series of *vide* poems; Stead provides the corresponding numbers of the Catullus originals in the notes to

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<sup>13</sup>The first Catullus poem, “Caesar is Still Caesar,” appeared in *Walking Westward* (1979). The next appears in Paterson’s 1980 anthology, and is described as the ninth poem from a series called “Catullus in Auckland.” The series is finally published, however, as “The Clodian Songbook” in *Geographies* (1982) and *Between* (1988)—possibly signifying a shift in what Stead sees as the central figure.

both *Geographies* and *Between*. Stead enjoys the “freedom” that these adaptations give, allowing him to range away from both the source poem and himself:

the speaker in the poem becomes a persona somewhere between myself and Catullus. That allows me a freedom to use personal experience, to invent experience I've never had, and to adapt experience of Catullus's, in a mixture which is determined by the poem. The poem gets in control instead of either me or Catullus or the facts. (“Conversation” 60)

Similarly, in the Japanese poems, Stead feels “a freedom” that allows for originality. He feels that these poems allow him to add to what he finds in the tradition: “It may be that there is more of the poet in the Japanese translations than anywhere else, because there is nothing of him but his style. ‘Le style, c’est l’homme’—I believe that” (Blurb to *Walking Westward*).

Stead views the French poems rather differently, because his better knowledge of this language forces him to be more faithful to the original sources:

French . . . [is] the only language I can claim to know in the sense that I know its grammar and its structures and have a decent vocabulary and that I read easily. So translation is *real* translation. The original has to dominate, and you have to be faithful to it. My freedom in using, say, Latin or Japanese is the freedom of ignorance. It's the kind of freewheeling use of something for your own purposes, rather than serving it.

Thus, where he is “using” the tradition for his own purposes, Stead feels he can be “freewheeling” and creative. Where he is merely “serving” the tradition, however, Stead is less happy with the results: “there are two poems in *Quesada* that are from the French . . . I think they have to be judged as translations; and I know they're not such good poems because one is so constrained by the original” (“Conversation” 62).

Stead's work with other languages provides a paradigm of what has been a lifelong effort to assert his own voice, while drawing upon and using the voices of others:

In writing poems I like to approach, or use, my own experience in an oblique way. It's not a matter of evasiveness, it's more a matter of inclusiveness. If you adopt the simple ego position you are really falsifying in some ways. It's a great simplification

of experience . . . the stamp of the self is something which the ego and the will alone can't give; . . . it's something which is there in the style. So a concern with style is not 'art for art's sake'; style is not an escape from the truth, or from one's self, or from experience. If you get it right, style is the truest register of the self, the truest register of the experience of the individual. And my aim is to get that; to get in under the ego and achieve my own style. ("Craft Interview" 461-62)

Stead contends that in the process of creating poems, one's own ego and one's own "living contact with society" are insufficient in themselves. There must be a playing off with (and against) tradition, a balancing act between the two:

The poets are the mediums through which the continuum of poetry passes; and if you are not reaching back into the stream, what you contribute of yourself is not enough. Anything I say about poetry will be predicated on that. You've got to become part of the stream. So the answer to the question [about influences] is that of course there are influences, many influences, because I'm a serious poet. If the answer were no, there are none, I would not be a serious poet. ("Craft Interview" 450)

In poems where the "influences" dominate (as in the French translations), Stead feels that "they're not such good poems because one is so constrained."

On the other hand, "yourself is not enough." So Stead reaches back into the stream of tradition, while always trying to maintain his own voice, style and "the stamp of the individual sensibility rather than the stamp of the individual ego" ("Craft Interview" 450). Some critics have taken this attempt to downplay ego for a lack of voice. In her introduction to *The Oxford Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* (1982), Fleur Adcock called him "too knowing about his craft" and characterized his recent poetry as "a post-Poundian modernism so calculatedly imitative as to read like parody" (xii). Similarly, in his review of *Geographies*, Mike Doyle accused Stead of "eclecticism": "one does not get the sense of a single voice . . . one cannot yet say with certainty, 'This poem can only be a C.K. Stead' . . ." (480). In any balancing act, the performer must sometimes fall; Stead himself admits that in some poems his own voice does get "constrained" by his sources.

Other critics, however, find that Stead—more often than not—reaches the point of balance that he has always aimed for, that point where (as he says in “Narrativity”), “Whatever the author may have learned from what has gone before . . . the unique mark remains. It’s what . . . Wallace Stevens called ‘the presence of the determining personality’” (224). Both Dell Boldt and Michael Harlow assert that, whatever Stead may have learned from tradition, his “unique mark” does remain. As Boldt argues in her dissertation (about the two long poems “Walking Westward” and “Scoria”):

Doyle is at variance with Harlow who finds ‘one of the unifying principles’ of *Walking Westward* to be ‘quality of voice—the emotional range and impact of the voice.’ Like Harlow I find that Stead does have a clearly discernable . . . distinctive ‘voice’ as a poet” (12).

Like Boldt and Harlow, Dennis McEldowney asserts that “the unifying principle of a poet’s work is the poet’s own voice and personality coming through quite disparate things. I don’t ever myself have any difficulty in hearing Stead’s voice” (Alley 279).

Trevor Dobbin, in his review of *Walking Westward*, also sees a distinctive style in Stead’s work. He does not find this poet, as Fleur Adcock did, “too knowing about his craft”:

. . . subtle shifts in mood, tone, technique and voice are drawn together. Like the composer who, knowing his craft well, wishes to experiment with ideas and forms of varying weights, Stead traces one movement into another, apparently asking how open an aggregation can be while retaining the unity of a sequence. (Dobbin 80)

Stead would argue that this “unity of sequence” derives from “the unique mark” of the individual author, “the presence of the determining personality.” In *The New Poetic* (1964), he defined this “unique mark” as an author’s “style—his own way of knowing and describing ‘reality’” (14). In “From Wystan to Carlos” (1979), Stead expanded upon this view, arguing that style consisted of “The broad interests, the recurring emotional concerns, the individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the world . . . what recent American poetry has called the ‘Field’” (149). Like Boldt, Harlow, McEldowney and Dobbin, I do find a distinct style, field and voice in Stead’s poetry. What Doyle dismissed as “eclecticism,” I view as Stead’s openness to many traditions and modes of poetry.

#### 4. Modernism and the Turning Point.

This breadth of poetic practice exposes part of the critical fiction in “From Wystan to Carlos.” Stead says there that he is laying out prescriptions for himself as a poet, and to take these prescriptions at face value would be to expect him to write purely modernist works. However, there is more than just modernism in the broad tradition that Stead draws upon as a writer. Stead’s practice as a poet belies the critical fiction that to write ‘well’ (or in a manner “most appropriate . . . to the age”) one must fit into a specific mode.

This resistance to conventional classification has been noted by Mark Williams. His 1988 article, “T.S. Eliot, Tradition and Contemporary New Zealand Poetry,” supports the idea that the established categories of modern criticism are no longer sufficient to describe or contain the work of certain New Zealand poets. He argues that there is a need for critical change:

the need for a new understanding of literary change and development in this century, one in which a truly international sense of English literature leads to an acceptance that there are no longer any secure vantage points—Bloomsbury or Black Mountain, modernism or postmodernism, T.S. Eliot or Louis Zukofsky—from which to look back and form a “Tradition” sufficiently authoritative and sufficiently encompassing to account for and include the truly adventurous writing (what Eliot himself called “the really new”). . . . (149-50)

As in his 1987 introduction to *The Caxton Press Anthology: New Zealand Poetry 1972-1986*, Williams goes on to offer the poetry of Curnow and Stead in particular as examples of “truly adventurous writing” that transcends the existing critical categories.

Williams concludes that this “really new” writing results from a mixture of previously exclusive traditions: “where two or more of those competing traditions are coming together in a particular writer . . . ‘really new’ writing is being produced” (160). He states that this mixture, this movement from exclusivity to plurality, is one option that New Zealand poets have open to them:

the contemporary writer in New Zealand . . . must choose whether to continue to view literary history as a coherent, identifiable flow in some given direction or whether to see the English-speaking world in the latter half of the twentieth century as a vast diaspora of literary forces, trends and movements in which there are no longer any

“sidelines.” Whether writers choose to place their writing in the context of some authoritative “Tradition” or whether they choose to locate themselves on some periphery of gender or geography, they still affirm the existence of centres. The truly radical view is that which asserts that there are no longer such things as centres or peripheries at all. (160)

Williams’s argument in relation to Stead is that, while his criticism may “affirm the existence of centres,” his practice as a poet does not.

In his major critical works—*The New Poetic*, “From Wystan to Carlos,” *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement*—Stead does “continue to view literary history as a coherent, identifiable flow in some given direction.”<sup>14</sup> “Stead has remained,” as Williams says, “remarkably consistent in his essential poetic principles and his poetic sympathies (and tolerances) have strayed little beyond the range of the late Yeats to the Pound of the Pisan Cantos” (152). In his practice as a poet, however, Stead has remained aware of and open to all the traditions available to him, accessing them in order to create astonishing bricolages that defy easy categorisation. Williams uses “Yes T.S.” as an example of the way that Stead’s poetic practice ranges beyond the boundaries set by his own theories: “The whole effort of the poem is directed at stepping beyond Eliot . . . and Pound” (154-55).

Williams asserts that “Stead’s poetic practice shows him alert to those fundamental shifts in global literary relations that are the consequence of the break-up of a unified and preeminent European ‘Tradition’” (154). Stead’s practice as a poet reveals that perhaps he is not so unaware of developments “since, say, 1950-51” as Alan Loney claimed he was. However, like Loney, Williams (perhaps owing to the space constrictions of his article) does simplify the extent of Stead’s theory and practice. First, in relation to Stead’s theory, Williams gives the impression that “in the fifteen years from 1972,” Stead’s poetics have never moved beyond the modernism of Yeats, Pound and Eliot. This view of Stead’s critical career does not take account of the 1983 retraction, in the “Craft Interview,” where Stead

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<sup>14</sup>For a detailed discussion of these works, see chapter two.

acknowledged the existence—and his use—of a surrealist tradition in poetry.<sup>15</sup> This retraction makes a small but crucial adjustment to Stead's dismissive statements about postmodernism and surrealism in "From Wytan to Carlos."

Second, in relation to Stead's practice, Williams gives the impression that all of Stead's poetry before 1972 followed the New Zealand realism of Allen Curnow, and that it was not until 1972 that "his poetic preferences and practice" turned to modernism:

C.K. Stead offers a suitable entry point to a discussion of New Zealand poetry and poetics since 1972. The date is important because it marks the death of James K. Baxter and the reemergence of Allen Curnow after an almost unbroken fifteen year poetic silence. For Stead, it marks a significant shift in his poetic preferences and practice away from his longstanding attachment to Curnow as mentor and poetic father-figure and to the high modernist poetic he had elaborated in *The New Poetic*. (151)

This argument reflects the dating of Williams's own *Caxton Anthology*, which begins at 1972 and casts that year as a turning point for New Zealand poetry. It also reflects his assertion of the importance of the small magazine *Freed*, which ended in 1972 after what Williams calls, in his introduction, "five exuberant blasts against literary orthodoxy" (13). Williams argues that *Freed* is "clearly" a catalyst for the change that he perceives in Stead's post-1972 poetry: "some of his own poetic peregrinations throughout the seventies were clearly motivated by his alert reading of poets loosely associated with *Freed*" (15).

Certainly Stead read the *Freed* poets in an "alert" fashion. As he says in "From Wytan to Carlos," he was "conscious of reading [them], not in the spirit of an indulgent senior, but as practising poet alert for sharpening plunder" (156). However, while Stead praises the advent of *Freed* as a symbol of modernist change, he points out that "*Freed* was not the beginning of the new movement" (147).<sup>16</sup> It also seems odd that Stead, having promoted a

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<sup>15</sup>See chapter six.

<sup>16</sup>Caffin does not take this distinction into account when she summarizes Stead's approach to literary history in "From Wytan to Carlos." "His thesis," she argues, "was simple: New Zealand poetry, by following English models, had missed out on the modernist revolution until the appearance of *Freed* . . ." (Sturm 421).

modernist poetic as early as 1964, should show no evidence of that poetic in his own poetry until 1972. By placing Stead's shift from Curnow to modernism at such a late date, Williams ignores the existence of "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea." That poem owes little, if anything, to Curnow, and almost everything to Eliot and Pound. Perhaps 1972 does mark a turning point for New Zealand poetry as a whole, but in Stead's own career that turning point came much earlier. It was in 1958 that he wrote his first modernist long poem.

Looking back over his own poetry in "A Poet's View," Stead placed a great deal of emphasis on this shift from the realism of Curnow to the modernism of Pound:

When I wrote a long poem called 'Pictures in a Gallery Undersea' in London in 1958 I was at least half conscious of doing something that hadn't been done in New Zealand poetry before, tapping sources that hadn't been tapped . . . technically the poem owed everything to Ezra Pound's innovations in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' and in the Cantos. (266)

Contrary to Williams's suggestion, Stead did not turn to modernism in 1972. Many poems written by the "early Stead"—as Roger Smyth points out to Michael Morrissey in the latter's introduction to *The New Fiction*—"evinced modernism" (35). Similarly, Mike Doyle stated in "Growing into the Language" that "Stead has been thoroughly familiar with the implications of 'open form' throughout most of his career" (60). Indeed, Stead's 1972 collection *Crossing the Bar* marks, if anything, a brief return to realist techniques.<sup>17</sup>

Elizabeth Caffin, however—in the poetry section of *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*—simplifies these shifts in Stead's corpus of work. Like Mark Williams, she has a short space in which to consider Stead's whole career, and she comes to a similar conclusion about *Crossing the Bar*: "This collection marked the quite distinct development of a poet into his own voice, a modern, indeed modernist, one . . ." (Sturm 408). In her discussion of Stead's career, though—like Williams—Caffin never mentions "Pictures in a Gallery." This

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<sup>17</sup>See chapter five for a detailed discussion of this development.

poem is something of an anomaly: it appears to be years ahead of its time, because it does not fit the broad patterns imposed by literary historians.

The broad pattern that dominates recent literary histories is a binary shift located around the publication of *Freed* at the end of the 1960s. For example, one can see this pattern operating in Alan Brunton's article "Holding the Line: Contested Contexts in Recent Verse" (1995), which places *Freed* at the centre of change in New Zealand poetry. Brunton criticizes the pre-*Freed* poetry of Curnow and Baxter as "Imperial Standard English" (what Wedde would have called "hieratic"):

This was the Imperial Standard English, tenebrist 'drumming, drumming, drumming' whistled to a stop by the Young New Zealand Poets of the *Freed* era (1969-72). (251)

Like Wedde, Brunton was one of the *Freed* poets. Given this context, their (re-)presentation of *Freed* at the cusp of New Zealand literary history is perhaps not surprising. Brunton characterizes pre-*Freed* writers as tied up in regular forms and restricted in their use of "Standard English"; whereas the *Freed* poets, in his view, represent "abandonments of decorum," "Inclusive Carnival" and "The new culture of liberation" (251).

Sounding like a tape loop of somebody else's recording, Brunton argues that "the tradition of the new had to be made anew," and that a part of the inspiration for his Young New Zealand Poets was "Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*" and other recent "American poetry" (251). Similarly Kendrick Smithyman, in his afterword to *The Young New Zealand Poets* (1973), gazes upon the *Freed* group and proclaims that "Pound and neo-Pound poetics has at last arrived and this strikes as being important indeed" (198). Michael Morrissey, in his introduction to *The New Fiction*, also locates a seismic shift around the epicentre of the *Freed* group: "Not until the American-influenced *Freed* group began to emerge did the humanist-realist seam begin to rend" (54). Brunton, Smithyman, and Morrissey (like Wedde, Caffin and Williams), ignore Stead's use of Pound in the 1950s and 1960s, because that anomaly does not fit their binary pattern of pre-*Freed* and post-*Freed* poetic practice.

Through a kind of wide-angle lens, however, these literary historians do present an accurate general picture. What Caffin and Williams are highlighting about *Crossing the Bar* is a general shift in Stead's poetry. Overall, he had gone from a volume dominated by realism in 1964 to a volume dominated by modernism in 1972. But this general shift did not happen in 1972. Stead's shift to modernism began at least as early as 1958 and developed through the 1960s, the decade in which all of the poems in *Crossing the Bar* were written.<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that the pivotal poem of Stead's career—and the winner of the Reader's Award for the best poem published in *Landfall* during its first fifteen years—has received so little critical attention. Anthony Cronin, reviewing *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in the *London Daily Telegraph* in December 1960, described "Pictures in a Gallery" as "one of the best poems in the book, and a remarkable poem by any standards." Rob Jackaman, looking back on *Whether the Will is Free* in 1975, found that "standing head and shoulders above the rest of the work at this stage (for me at least, and I think for many anthologists), is the skilled neo-modernist excursion round London which is 'Pictures in a Gallery Undersea'" (165).

Kendrick Smithyman presents an opposing view. In a brief critical essay on Stead, written for the 1970 edition of James Vinson's *Contemporary Poets*, Smithyman cryptically refers to "Pictures in a Gallery" as "an act of criticism, and a tribute to his scholarship." In 1980 he revised this essay, quietly countering Stead's assertion (in "A Poet's View") that "technically the poem owed everything to Ezra Pound":

In the 1950s he was accomplished, resourceful, but fairly conservative. His "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" which put to work his expertise in the New Poetic, is an accomplished suite which readers have seen as a tribute to Eliot but which Stead himself regards as more of a tribute to Pound. The success of "Pictures" made him more confident.

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<sup>18</sup>Stead recalls in "On *Quesada*" that he "hadn't written any poems" during the three years prior to 1972 (GC 272). Since the subtitle of *Whether the Will is Free* reads "Poems 1954-62," and the subtitle of *Quesada* reads "Poems 1972-74," one can conclude that *Crossing the Bar* (which has no subtitle) contains poems from the period 1963-69.

Smithyman sees the “Pictures” as pivotal for Stead, marking the shift from a “fairly conservative” to a “more confident” poet. However, he is somewhat damning with faint praise, twice repeating the epithet “accomplished.” The experimental aspects of “Pictures in a Gallery”—emphasized not only by Stead, but by Cronin and Curnow<sup>19</sup>—are reduced by Smithyman to an act of criticism and scholarship.

Smithyman expands on this view of the poem in his 1982 article, “Singing to the Ancestors: Some Aspects of Present Poetry in New Zealand.” In this article, he calls “Pictures in a Gallery” “a moderately self-conscious exercise honouring the earlier T.S. Eliot with some familial and pious allusions” (37-38). Here Smithyman reduces the “tribute” to “an exercise” and replaces the epithet “accomplished” with three less positive assessments: “moderately self-conscious,” “familial,” and “pious.” If an exercise is something done as a warm-up before attempting the real thing then, by Smithyman’s definition, “Pictures in a Gallery” is not even a poem.

None of the above critics who mention “Pictures in a Gallery” have examined the poem in any detail. While they offer various opinions about its place in New Zealand literature, they produce little or no evidence to support those opinions. E.A. Horsman, in his review of *Whether the Will is Free in Landfall* in 1964, offers perhaps the most evidence of all the critics who have considered “Pictures in a Gallery.” Nevertheless, he also begins from the assumption that a critic can possess ‘objective’ standards by which to judge a poem. For Horsman (as for Cronin), a poem can be judged bad (or “better” or “the best”) depending on how closely it accords with his supposedly objective scale. For example, Horsman proclaims that “‘Pictures in a Gallery Undersea’ (p.52) would be better if its mocking tone were more sustained, for it seems too literary to stand on its own feet as a serious poem” (276; emphasis added). This sentence—in both senses of the word—asks its reader to agree that “a serious poem” should not be “too literary.” Exactly what constitutes a serious

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<sup>19</sup>According to Stead, Curnow “saw the Pound connexion at once and didn’t read it as a pastiche of Eliot” (“A Poet’s View” 267).

poem, Horsman does not say, nor does he explain how many literary elements would be too many, or why this would be the case. All he offers is the implication that he knows these things, and that they are true and unassailable.

Horsman's standards, then, are offered as objective, and by those standards "Pictures in a Gallery" is a failure:

The sequence of pictures fails to establish an individual attitude towards the dead men, the dead years, the drowned city. The 'I' of the poem is a mere flake of the outer world and the life of the poem is in the mockery. . . . (276)

Horsman implies that any "serious poem" ought "to establish an individual attitude" towards its subject matter. In other words, the individual writing or narrating a poem should establish for the reader what it is that he or she thinks about his or her subject matter. This poem, however, is a series of modernist pictures. The pictures, or scenes, are juxtaposed without comment from the author. The narrator is not a single character who can be "formulated . . . pinned and wriggling on the wall": he is a mature lover in one section, a boy selling newspapers in another. Garnett speaks, Yeats speaks, Queen Victoria speaks, Christian Karlson speaks, Newbolt speaks, Paul Valéry speaks, an unidentified woman speaks, and an unidentified voice sings "songs on the night." In the midst of this heteroglossia, Wilde is lynched, Eliot trots by, a sailor heads south, and an old man plays a violin in the snow. Nowhere, though, is a single attitude established towards the voices that speak and the events that occur. Readers are left to establish their own "individual attitude."

Horsman is fully aware of this modernist technique. He has read the recently issued book *The New Poetic*, and he is familiar with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, asserting that (in addition to some of its allusions): "It is to poems of this sort, which Mr Stead has praised as 'non-discursive', that this one also owes its form" (276). However, Horsman finds the modernist forms and techniques frustrating, and judges the poem to be a failure for not making its point clear. He singles out the unexplained epigraphs as particularly annoying: "the 'Pictures' fail to make precise the implications of the quoted

lines" (276). This kind of critical approach is like shooting a dog for not being a very convincing cat. Poets employ modernist techniques exactly because they want to leave implications uncertain, and to involve readers in the process of the poem. By modernist standards, the poem is a technical success. By Horsman's 'objective' standards, it is a failure; whereas a "less literary" poem is, in his view, "more successful": "'Dialogue on a Northern Shore', despite the use of Greece and Ithaca, is altogether a less literary poem and more successful" (276).

I do not intend to present an opinion as to whether "Pictures in a Gallery" is "a remarkable poem by any standards," or a mere "exercise." Nor do I wish to judge whether it is "one of the best poems," or to assert that it "would be better" if it were written in some other way. I propose instead to look closely at the sources of the poem, both in terms of its technique and its subject matter. The subject matter, particularly the many allusions, epigraphs, historical events and characters, has never been explored in any detail. The technique will provide a window into Stead's modernist prescriptions for himself as a poet. I want to look at the techniques used in "Pictures in a Gallery," not in order to see if they fail or succeed by my own personal standards of what a poem should be, but to see if they correspond with Stead's own definition of modernist poetics. Chapter two analyses Stead's definition, chapter three applies it to "Pictures in a Gallery." As a result, we will be able to assess how accurate New Zealand's literary historians have been in dating the arrival of modernism in New Zealand, and in Stead's poetry, at around 1972.

## CHAPTER II. MODERNISM IN THEORY: PRESCRIPTIONS AND PARADIGMS.

“[He] knew clearly enough what he was opposing and why. His programme (like that of most poet-critics) was the promotion of his own kind of poetry.”

—C.K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (1986) 340

### 1. Critical Purism and the ‘Balanced’ Mode.

C.K. Stead’s criticism has consistently promoted modernism as the central mode not of New Zealand poetry alone, but of twentieth-century poetry in English. Stead’s first major critical work was *The New Poetic*, a book that came out of his PhD thesis on the poetry of Eliot and Yeats. This volume sets up modernism as the “correct,” “honest,” and “balanced” mode of literature. In Stead’s judgement, the modernists were “men who were attempting to face honestly the problems of the day” (74). These “honest” poets were placed between the extremes of public poets (such as Kipling and Newbolt) and aesthetes (such as Wilde). By defining these two groups as extremes, Stead was able to centralize his preferred mode and simultaneously characterize the other modes as “unbalanced”: “The [public poet’s] concern is not literary but political—an unbalance at least as serious to literature as the unbalance of the Aesthetes” (74). A few pages later, Stead moves from the concept of ‘unbalanced literature’ to the idea that some types of literature are “wrong.” In the early part of the century, he tells us, “the ghost of aestheticism occasionally raised its wrong-but-more-reasonable voice” (79).

If the aesthetes, in the scales of Stead’s modernist judgement, were “wrong,” then the public poets were worse. Not only were they less “reasonable” than the aesthetes, they were “more damaging” to Stead’s conception of what literature ought to be:

The illusion collectively held by these men [the public poets] was that they wrote about ‘life’, that they were in touch with reality. In fact most of their poems had as little relevance to ordinary living as the poems of the ‘nineties; but they were more damaging to literature because of the great claims made for them. (70-71)

Having thus stigmatized his opponents, Stead goes on to state precisely what he thinks is “wrong” with their verse: “The highly developed sense of fact which T.S. Eliot writes of as an essential element in the production of poetry is totally absent” (74). Literature is therefore equated with modernist poetry and poetics. Stead later concludes that the work of public poets like Newbolt, Kipling, William Watson, Alfred Noyes and John Oxenham “represents the kind of imbalance which the best poets of this century have worked to eliminate” (188). These “best poets” are all modernists: Stead notes in particular Pound, Lee Masters, D.H. Lawrence, and especially Eliot and Yeats. Thus the “best” sort of poetry is associated with modernism. In Stead’s view, modernist poets could achieve a ‘perfection’ that writers in the other modes could not hope to reach: “For the sake of the ‘perfection of the work’ Yeats was always prepared to disappoint the Irish patriots. ‘Perfection’ was no object of Kipling or Newbolt . . .” (70).

Stead claims that Yeats, as a modernist, is capable of being “correct” where the other poets are “wrong.” “It is,” Stead reasons, “a matter of establishing a correct distance between the poet and his subject. The soldier poets stand too close to their subject, the patriots at too great a distance. Yeats’s dramatic ‘mask’ is a means of holding himself at a correct distance” (40). To Yeats’s mask he later adds Eliot’s “impersonality,” and then Stead’s construction of a new and “correct” poetic is complete. In the rhetoric that he uses to elevate that poetic, Stead begins to sound like his nemesis Henry Newbolt—particularly when he says that “the best motivations and attitudes . . . lead directly towards the best poetry . . .” (98). Stead differs only in his conception of what “the best motivations and attitudes” are supposed to be, and what form “the best poetry” should take. Whereas Newbolt preferred English nationalism and Public School values enshrined in ballad forms, Stead prefers the use of masks and impersonality in modernist forms. While he criticizes the 1909 *Times Literary Supplement* reviewers of “established poets” (like Watson, Noyes and Newbolt) for employing “a tone which suggests that any other approach to poetry is undesirable” (55), Stead’s own tone in this book “suggests” a similar monopoly. The only difference is that, by 1960, modernists had become the new group of “established poets.”

In *The New Poetic*, Stead produced exactly what he had criticized Richard Aldington for publishing: “the kind of writing in which the [author] presents himself as one of a group who know the truth . . . a truth which eludes all but the elect” (*NP* 106). The “truth,” according to Stead, was that Yeats was “the greatest English-speaking poet alive and writing at this time [1920]” (117), while the aesthetes, the imperialists, the Georgians and the war poets were all—to a greater or lesser degree—“wrong.” The imperialists (particularly from Stead’s post-colonial, liberal perspective) were most “wrong” because they promoted a literature that had an “unbalanced” view of reality; painting an England full of “‘happy homes’, ‘hamlets meek’, ‘proud demesnes’ and ‘Blue spires of cottage smoke ’mong woodlands green’” (74). They seemed to be “working to undermine the efforts of men who were attempting to face honestly the problems of the day” (74). The aesthetes presented a “wrong-but-more-reasonable voice” (79), while “the Georgians were limited in their experience, and confused in their attitude to the public” (86). Finally, the work of the war poets “was limited in application and often inadequate in technique” (89). In Stead’s view, the war poets were inadequate because they “failed to achieve the universality Yeats achieved in ‘Easter 1916’” (89).

Behind all this rhetoric of limitation and failure lies the implication that Stead himself is privy to what is “correct” and leads to the “best poetry.” “The Georgians,” he concludes at the end of chapter three, “were not daring enough. In this matter of the relation between poet and audience, a more violent thrust than theirs was required if a correct distance was to be achieved” (65). We have already been told, at the end of chapter two, that Yeats was the only poet (at this time) capable of “holding himself at a correct distance” (40). Like the Georgians, the war poets “failed” because “their poems . . . fall short of the yardstick we have taken—Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’” (92). Thus, the critic informs us of “the truth” that “we” should know and the yardstick that “we” ought to seize and use to measure and judge

poetry. The implication is that, as readers, “we” either agree with the author and become part of “the elect,” or disagree and join the ranks of the “wrong.”<sup>1</sup>

If the aesthetes, the imperialists, the Georgians and the war poets were all “wrong,” who was on the ‘right’ side of the yardstick? The Georgians were the best of a bad crop in that they at least were the “precursors” of what Stead calls “the natural development of modern poetry” (81). Rupert Brooke is, for Stead, “a representative Georgian. . . . He helped to prepare the ground for the work of better poets” (84). Stead defines imagists in identical terms, as poets who simply served “to help prepare the reading public for the better poetry that followed” (98). Yeats is “the greatest English-speaking poet,” but only up until 1920. So who—apart from Yeats—represented these “better poets”? Who was writing this “better poetry”? Stead’s conclusion is that “the best post-war poetry moved towards the achievement of T.S. Eliot” (93). That achievement, according to Stead, culminates in *The Waste Land*: “It contains, I believe, Eliot’s finest poetry, that which best ensures his permanence in English literature” (149). Stead devotes the final section of *The New Poetic* to praising Eliot’s poetry (apart from the *Four Quartets*, which he presents as something of a retreat from modernist principles). Nonetheless, Stead retains the “yardstick” of Yeats, proclaiming that Eliot has “*tendencies*” towards the discursive and the moral, “and that this keeps his work short of the complete success achieved in the finest poems of Yeats” (118-19).<sup>2</sup> Despite these precise internal distinctions, however, the modernism of Yeats and of the early Eliot remains “the natural development of modern poetry.” All other types of poets are thus rendered ‘unnatural’ opposers or mere “precursors” of the one great mode.

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<sup>1</sup>Stead’s approach was no means unique. Such assumptions and divisions are widespread in the criticism of this period. Compare Horsman’s review of *Whether the Will is Free*, discussed at the end of chapter one.

<sup>2</sup>In Stead’s view, Yeats’s “finest poems” appear between 1910-30, in volumes such as *Responsibilities* (1914), *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* (1928). He dismisses Yeats’s early work as “faery poetry” (NP 28).

Stead's initial published stance, therefore, was that of a critical purist. He promoted one mode exclusively, at the expense of all the others. His view was that modernism was the correct, honest, balanced, and most appropriate mode of literature to employ. Twenty years later, when he wrote "From Wystan to Carlos," his view had not changed. The "natural development of modern poetry" (*NP* 81) simply becomes "the broad tide of poetry in English during this century" (*GC* 145). This time, however, his opponents were not the aesthetes, the public poets, or the soldier poets of early modern British literature. Stead's critical guns were now levelled at the New Zealand schools of realism and postmodernism.

## **2. *The New Poetic* and "From Wystan to Carlos": The Song Remains the Same.**

Nevertheless, "From Wystan to Carlos" is more subtle than *The New Poetic*. By 1979 Stead may not have mellowed, but critical modes of discourse had changed. In the course of twenty years, poststructuralism and relativism had become more widespread, and the critic as objective lawgiver (complete with yardstick and elect knowledge about "the truth" and "the best poetry") had become less popular. In "From Wystan to Carlos," the overtly judgemental diction of words such as "wrong," "correct," "better," and "best" is conspicuous by its absence, and is even denied by the author: "I have a preference for Modernist poetics," says Stead, "I acknowledge that preference. But it would be ridiculous to use it as any kind of measuring stick for the worth of particular poems" (144). Stead abjures the "measuring stick"—or "yardstick"—and no longer explicitly sets himself up as an objective judge, able to decide between "balanced" and "unbalanced" literature.

However, while the judgemental adjectives may be gone, the methodology of judging between schools remains the same. By describing some poetry as "most appropriate" and able "to live dangerously," and other poetry as "self-defeating" and "boring," Stead centralizes modernism as a broad tide. He pushes all the other modes to the margins as 'inappropriate' ways of writing. Stead claims that he is only observing and describing poetic developments, not prescribing them. Nonetheless, as Patrick Hutchings remarks in his review

of *In the Glass Case*, “a ‘must fail’ sometimes haunts his ‘does fail’: and criticism should not be as *a priori* as that” (83).

In addition to its methodology, “From Wytan to Carlos” also echoes the idea—first raised in *The New Poetic*—that modernism is the best kind of mimesis. This idea has its basis in Stead’s belief that “a poem is to be tested not by what it *says* but by what it *is*” (NP 125), and “that the refusal to accept the moralist’s role which the Victorians imposed on their poets *need not imply a rejection of all commerce between morals and literature*”:

Popular morals are generalized statements which have no place in literature; urgent, argumentative morals compel the poet to debase his work to rhetoric. But a true mimesis, a faithful reflection of experience, implies subtle distinctions between particulars which need never be forced, but simply exist in the work. The aesthetic concern, in short, could be elevated to a *higher kind of morals*. This, I believe, is Eliot’s particular achievement. (NP 132-33)

According to Stead, therefore, “Eliot’s particular achievement” was to insist that poems be judged not by the soundness (or unsoundness) of their philosophy or morals, but as poems. Stead asserts that Eliot adjusted the “aesthetic concern” for form, elevating it into the principle that critics should stop dividing form from content:

In Eliot’s view, a poem is not moral by saying ‘moral’ things—as his attitude to Tennyson indicates; and . . . his remarks on Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, show that he does not consider a poem is immoral for saying, or describing, ‘immoral’ things. A poem is ‘moral’ only in being *complete*, in being healthy, a true mimesis of ‘things as they are.’ . . . (NP 145)

In Stead’s view, critics should focus on poems as a whole—“as a total complex unit” (118)—rather than the ideas and moral statements that might be abstracted from them. The correlative of this concern is that poets ought to stop using poetry as a platform for didactic moral statements. Stead is arguing, like Archibald MacLeish in “Ars Poetica” (1926), that “A poem should not mean / But be.

This argument is restated in “From Wytan to Carlos” but, instead of being aimed at the Victorians and the British public poets, it is directed against New Zealand’s realists. Stead

claims that, by rounding off their poems with didactic statements and presenting those statements as the unassailable “truth,” New Zealand realists are guilty of simplifying human experience: “political, or economic, or national, or moral truths are themselves simplifications; . . . the poet trying to get inside the very skin of experience is a greater truth-teller, a more profound realist, than a poet who sets out to improve the world” (150). Stead defines this “greater truth” as “the truth of the imagination.” He proposes that this “greater truth” is better represented by modernist methods than by the methods of the realist poets of the thirties:

the Modernist would not concede that the pure poem, the poem as pure work of art, tells less truth than the poem as vehicle. In fact, he would argue that the truth which can be lifted out of the poem is less true than the truth which is indissoluble from it—because insofar as a statement can be removed from its ‘vehicle’, precisely in that degree it fails to partake of the truth of the imagination. And it is perfectly respectable to argue that the truth of imagination is less vulnerable, more durable, more comprehensive, subtler—in fact *truer*—than the truth of politics, morals, philosophy, or whatever removable, abstractable, restatable ‘content’ the poet as moralist, or as realist, chooses to load into his vehicle. (143-44)

Thus, realists are reviled as moralists, and displaced by “more profound” writers who have access to a “greater truth,” a “*truer*” truth. This emphasis on “the pure poem, the poem as pure work of art,” repeats the argument that Stead used against public poets in *The New Poetic*. As in that book, Stead presents modernism as the guardian of “true mimesis”: “Putting it technically (and over-simply), Modernism is a mimetic principle, an alternative to the didactic principle” (*GC* 150).

Didactic, public poetry is one pole that Stead attacks in both *The New Poetic* and “From Wistan to Carlos.” The other is private poetry. Stead has consistently argued the need for a balance between these two poles. In *The New Poetic*, he argued that poets must steer a path between aesthetic withdrawal and public rhetoric. The latter he dismissed as a “simplification,” where poets ended up “asserting hard abstractions which the sinuous complexity of experience failed to ratify” (13-14). The former he dismissed as “narrowly personal, or in some other way esoteric” (14). In writing private poetry, poets run the risk of seeming (and here Stead adopts Yeats’s terminology) “out of reach of common sympathy,”

a mere “disembodied mind” (30). Stead’s remedy is that poets must try for the “development of a style which could handle themes of a wider importance than those of a personal and private dream world” (27). Thus the poet must float carefully between two extremes, like Odysseus trying to sail between Scylla and Charybdis.

In “From Wystan to Carlos,” the two extremes are postmodernism and realism. However, while they may have different names, the poles remain the same. The public pole, as we have already seen, follows a didactic principle and involves both abstraction and “simplification.” The private pole moves from the “personal and private dream world” of the aesthetes to “certain recent manifestations of ‘post-Modernism.’” Stead characterizes postmodernism as “fantasy, invention, surrealism, a sort of meta-discourse without meaning or reference” (159). His response to such a poem is to say that “this is merely a mindscape” (157). Stead sees poets like Alan Brunton as playing a “self-defeating game,” and his solution—as in *The New Poetic*—is to move away from the private pole:

I currently feel poetry must be public: not in making political, or moral, or religious, or philosophical, or national pronouncements (though of course it may want to do any of these things). Primarily the poem must be public *in not being private*. It must be one man’s vision, or one woman’s vision, of a shared world. (154)

Once again, Stead implies that too much remedy can lead to an overdose. Poets must take care not to overcompensate or they might end up at the opposite extreme of public rhetoric and abstraction.

In both *The New Poetic* and “From Wystan to Carlos,” public poetry receives much more attention than private. In 1964, Stead considered the latter a “wrong-but-more-reasonable voice,” because aesthetes at least view the poem as an art object and the “aesthetic concern” can be elevated into modernism by “better men.” Similarly, in 1979, he thought that surrealism—while generally unsatisfactory—could nevertheless be used “as an occasional weapon.” The rhetoric of public poets, on the other hand, is one of the “antitheses of poetry” (*NP* 27) and has nothing to do with Art. In both works, Stead saves most of his

ammunition for blasting the public pole because he sees it as the “more damaging to literature.” In addition, public poets were more numerous and popular in both contexts, so they presented Stead with a bigger (and potentially more dangerous) target at which to take aim.

While Stead may view the private pole as the lesser of two evils, he still sees it as an evil. In *The New Poetic*, Stead even goes so far as to call both poles “heresies.” Thus modernism becomes a kind of religion—the one true faith beside which all other faiths are mere cant. Stead’s aim is not just to burn the unrepentant (such as Newbolt, Austin and Noyes), but to persuade heretics back into the fold:

one of the principal problems for twentieth-century poets has been to bring together those extremes, each of which, apart constitutes a heresy. The branch had to re-knit. The pure aesthetic mode, like the pure rhetorical mode, was the product of a partial mind (13).

One might carry this religious imagery a little further, and say that the saints of *The New Poetic* are Yeats and the early Eliot: “Eliot avoids two heresies: that of the aesthete, and that of the popular rhetorician” (122). Stead argues that, in Eliot’s early work, “What is relevant . . . is that an escape hatch has been found out of an old trap: poetry is neither ‘public’ as in the moralist tradition, nor ‘private’ as in the aesthete’s” (120). According to Stead’s hagiography, however, Eliot later lapses in an unforgivable fashion. When Eliot turns away from modernism in the *Four Quartets*—by explaining and commenting upon reality rather than presenting it—Stead accuses him of “failure” and “a literary heresy” (184). Because the later Eliot turns to abstraction, Stead finds him guilty of “A failure of style . . . a false report, the creation of an image which misrepresents ‘things as they are’” (184). This phrasing reveals that, in Stead’s view, Eliot had fallen to the level of Newbolt, because Stead had earlier attacked Newbolt for “unreality” and the inability “to come to terms with things as they are” (*NP* 77). For Stead, the *Four Quartets* represent a public poetry of statement and explicit moral conclusions—the kind of poetry that he rejects in “From Wistan to Carlos” as part of a didactic, realist tradition.

Stead's conclusion in *The New Poetic* is that the two poles (or "heresies") are dangerous extremes, and that his book "has traced the gradual success among a few men of an effort to balance the poet's public and private responsibilities" (188). On his final page, Stead asserts that "the most vigorous poetic minds have striven . . . in order to achieve middle-ground": "the principal effort has been to avoid the isolation of 'aesthetic' and 'moral' qualities in poetry, and to achieve a fusion of these into a new wholeness." In "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead proposes an identical middle ground (modernism) between the poles of public and private poetry: "Primarily the poem must be public *in not being private*." He dismisses both realism and surrealism, stressing the need for a balance between the two:

There is in fact no surrealist tradition in the poetry of the English language. I hope my context—and the contrast with realism—will make clear what I mean here. My preference is for the point of balance between subjective and objective, where language consequently is used at maximum stretch. 'To orchestrate the real' is how I sometimes put it to myself. (154)

Stead no longer characterizes these extremes as "heresies," but he does say that Fleur Adcock's verse lacks "the presence of virtues" (155). Non-modernists may no longer be burnt at the stake, therefore, but they are still presented as sinners against "virtue." While Stead's diction in the later work is a little less provocative, his aims and results seem to be much the same: centralizing modernism and dismissing all other modes as unbalanced and, essentially, untrue.

A final similarity derives from Stead's approach to the way that critics and poets alike tend to separate form and content. In *The New Poetic*, Stead called this separation "the primary division—between meaning and expression, or content and form—which has haunted English poetry for more than a hundred years, the emphasis passing from one to the other always unsatisfactorily" (71). Stead saw this division as another casualty in the battle of "the public moralist against the private aesthete" (78). The aesthetes insisted that poetry was all beauty and song, while poets such as Kipling felt (according to Stead) that "poetry was only another vehicle on which opinion and prejudice could be trundled into the drawing-room" (76). Thus the two poles move apart on the issue of form, and tear poetry asunder as

they go. Not surprisingly, Stead shows modernism mending “The crude division between ‘meaning’ and ‘form’” (77). He offers *The Waste Land* as a paradigm of this reintegration:

Parts of the poem stand (this is not a question of ‘evaluation’) . . . as the purest ‘poetry’ in the language, the irreducible ‘first voice’. It is not a vehicle, or an agent, but a self-contained poetic entity. The only way it can be said to ‘act’ is in offering an experience which modifies and enriches the sensibility of the reader. (149)

*The Waste Land* moves away from poetry as “vehicle” and is, Stead concludes, “the end product of successive movements against abstractable poetic discourse” (149).

He repeats the same argument in “From Wistan to Carlos,” but with more visceral images. Instead of being a drawing-room trolley with its sweets, form and content become a donkey and its load. The argument also takes on a more paradoxical bent:

Spender says, ‘We were putting the subject back into poetry’. This is true and not true. Because ‘putting the subject back into poetry’ is much the same as taking the subject out of it. ‘Subject’ in either case has become something distinct from the poem, like the load put on the donkey’s back. (142)

This paradox is simplified once we realize that “either case” is meant to refer to the two poles of public and private poetry. One loads subject into poems, while the other takes it out. Both actions perpetuate the “primary division” outlined in *The New Poetic*. Once again, the healer (or veterinary surgeon, in this case) is modernism: “for the Modernists a poem is not a vehicle; it is a work of art whose material is language—language in action—language at maximum energy, or resonance, or intensity. The realist tradition, by contrast, tends always towards using the poem as a vehicle” (143). That “realist tradition” began in New Zealand in the 1930s, and is represented by the early work of Curnow and Baxter. Stead claims that even in the 1950s Baxter was still separating “form and content—‘verse-form’ on the one hand, ‘ideas’ on the other. . . . In 1951 nothing had changed. There was still the donkey and his load . . .” (151).

Stead’s argument in *The New Poetic* thus resembles that in “From Wistan to Carlos”: the “true poet”—the ‘balanced’ poet—needs to steer a central path between two extremes. In

both instances, that “middle-ground” is occupied by modernism. Stead contends that modernism represents the complexities of experience by presenting a world without commenting on it, a world that the reader can share and help to create. This method of representation avoids shutting the reader out of the form by being too personal or obscure (“esoteric”). Simultaneously, modernists avoid rendering the reader passive by drawing explicit conclusions and making abstract statements. The poem becomes a complex world shared between reader and writer, as opposed to a too obscure world that alienates readers, or a simplified world that keeps readers (regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the statements) at a distance from the poem. Thus, in Stead’s view, the modernist poet manages to avoid the extremes of public and private poetry, while simultaneously reconciling aesthetic and moral concerns about form and content.

Despite all these similarities of aim, methodology and conclusion, the two statements of theory do differ in some significant respects. Two of these differences have already been noted: Stead’s shift to a New Zealand context and a decrease in his reliance on openly judgemental diction. A related change is that Stead updates his terminology from the 1950s to the 1970s: Yeats’s “mask” and Eliot’s “impersonality” are conspicuous by their absence. In their place are modern American terms such as “open form” and “Field” composition. Finally, Stead changes his representative modernist poet, codifies modernism into three principles, and calls those principles “prescriptions” for his own poetic practice. These last three changes are crucial to an understanding of Stead’s poetry, and will be dealt with now at some length.

### **3. Pound and the New Zealand Context.**

By 1979, Yeats and “Easter 1916” are no longer the representative figures in Stead’s modernist Hall of Fame. One of the most important shifts between *The New Poetic* and “From Wystan to Carlos” is that, as Stead explains, the yardstick of Yeats has been replaced by the paradigm of Pound:

In my previous book . . . I was interested in an historical umbrella—I called it ‘the new poetic’—which would cover Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. Now I’m more interested in what separates Yeats on the one hand from Pound and early Eliot on the other. In particular I’m curious to answer for myself the question why Yeats, for all his greatness, should seem not to be a living force on the practice of poetry, while Pound, on the other hand, is still animating the writing of poetry and the development of poetic theory. (140)

Despite this shift from Yeats to Pound in “the practice of poetry”—particularly his own—Stead nonetheless felt, in 1979, that Pound had not yet had much to do with “the development of poetic theory” in New Zealand. He states at the beginning of the essay that “From *Wystan to Carlos*” came about, not just to answer his own questions about Yeats, but because New Zealand critics were still chewing over arguments that began as early as 1945. Moreover, they were using an outmoded vocabulary to do so: “the discussion of New Zealand poetry . . . has come from Allen Curnow’s introductions to his two anthologies and from the counter-statements these elicited. What I propose to do . . . is to enquire whether we can’t discover another set of terms” (139).

Why was critical discussion of modernism so long in coming to New Zealand? Why did Curnow’s “critical structure,” and its various “counter-statements,” not contain any reference to the poetic that Pound helped to set in motion? The answers possibly lie in the intellectual and critical climate of New Zealand in the 1920s and the 1930s. Modernist poems were certainly read at this time, but the theory behind them (Stead argues) was not yet understood: “The young New Zealand poets of those years would have read everything of Eliot and probably something of Pound. . . . But the theoretical basis of the Modernist experiment was certainly not understood in those years” (*GC* 143). Moreover, New Zealand in the 1920s had no thriving cosmopolitan centre, like London or Paris, to attract people like Joyce, Eliot, Yeats or Pound. There was no Harold Munro, with his Poetry Bookshop, to encourage early Georgian, imagist, vorticist, and futurist meetings, readings and publications. There were no rich patrons or daring publishers—like Elkin Mathews, John Quinn, Harriet

Monroe, Harriet Weaver, or Margaret Anderson<sup>3</sup>—willing to take risks on experimental writers. Nor were there any university poets or critical journals. Pound's manifestos were therefore not absorbed or promulgated. By contrast, for example, Montreal in the 1920s had the McGill Group, a set of university poets who were interested in modernism and had a vehicle (*The McGill Fortnightly Review*) with which to promote this new poetry and poetics (Dudek 24-25).<sup>4</sup>

No such intellectual and critical climate existed in New Zealand until the 1930s. Then, *The Phoenix* came out at Auckland University, *Oriflamme* was issued at Canterbury University, and Denis Glover established the Caxton Press in Christchurch. The only prior outlets for New Zealand poets had been to send their work to England or to publish it themselves. Mason, for instance, had tried both options. His first publication had been sold by Harold Munro in England, but New Zealand bookshops refused to display poetry by a local artist. Mason was forced to sell his book door to door. Eventually he despaired, throwing the hundreds of remainders into the Waitemata Harbour (Weir 11, 22). At the beginning of the 1930s, however, young poets like Mason, Curnow, Glover, Brasch, Robin Hyde and A.R.D. Fairburn were suddenly provided with local platforms that not only published their poetry, but also allowed them to engage in critical comment.

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<sup>3</sup>Mathews published Wilde, Yeats, the notorious "Yellow Book Series," and Pound's first books of poetry; Quinn helped to fund Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis as well as numerous literary ventures, including *The Egoist* and *The Little Review*; Monroe edited *Poetry* (Chicago) and published some early poems by Eliot, Pound and D.H. Lawrence; Weaver helped to fund and edit *The Egoist* and published, at her own expense, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Tarr*, as well as making "a standing donation . . . [that] kept Joyce somewhat extravagantly alive" (Kenner, *The Pound Era* 303); Anderson edited *The Little Review* and spent some time in jail for printing *Ulysses* (Lander 28-54).

<sup>4</sup>Compare also Auckland University circa 1951. Stead recalls discovering *The Pisan Cantos* through the University's communication network of students, poets, and periodicals: "Student Poet 1 [Bernard Clark] tells Student Poet 2 [Stead] . . . that Pound has published something called *The Pisan Cantos* which must be read. Almost certainly his attention has been drawn to them by a New Zealand literary periodical called *Arachne* . . ." (PYE 289).

However, it was too late for Pound. The current critical influence by then was W.H. Auden—one of the “Wystans” of Stead’s title. Auden and the poets of the thirties were interested in a gritty realism, packed with moral and political pronouncements. This sort of realism flourished in New Zealand because it seemed the perfect antidote to the Victorian excesses of the Kowhai Gold School.<sup>5</sup> Realism also offered a way of confronting the Depression. Instead of writing sentimental verse perpetuating the myth of New Zealand as a South Seas Paradise, the poets who followed Auden were able to discuss the economic and social problems that surrounded them.

The result of New Zealanders adopting this poetic was some marvellous poetry, from Fairburn’s *Dominion* (written in 1935), through Curnow’s *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939), to Glover’s *Arawata Bill* (1953). Each was packed with the political posturing that their realist poetic dictated. Glover tells Arawata Bill, the deceased gold prospector, that “You should have been told / Only in you was the gold.” Curnow rebukes colonial attitudes in the “New land New Zealand / Dancing before the throne,” where the colonizers remain obsessed with the ‘home’ and throne of England. In this poem, the only thing that colonists have added to the “New land” is the “Z” sound of boredom and sleep, and their jingoism is matched by the childish internal rhyme of a nursery jingle. Fairburn is even more blatant in chastising the people of his country. He is especially harsh on a new wave of European immigrants that seem, in a time of economic depression, to be the (with)holders of the gold:

The army of the unliving, the cells of the cancer:  
 small sleek men rubbing their hands in vestibules,  
 re-lighting cigar-butts, changing their religions;  
 dabblers in expertise, licensed to experiment  
 on the vile body of the State; promoters of companies;  
 efficiency experts (unearned excrement  
 of older lands, oranges sucked dry),  
 scourges of a kindly and credulous race. . . . (*Dominion* VII)

This sort of poetry blew away the cloying blossoms of the 1920s, and became very popular with the new magazines and younger poets. Thus, in New Zealand, Poundian modernism

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<sup>5</sup>Compare the Maple Leaf School of Canadian verse (Ross ix).

skipped a generation and did not appear in print until the late 1950s. Stead's "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" was perhaps the first modernist long poem written by a New Zealander, and it was not published until 1958. Even then, as Stead recalls in "A Poet's View," he "had at first to twist Charles Brasch's arm a little to persuade him to print it in *Landfall*" (267).

However, the critical arguments of the 1960s did not involve Stead's new work. "Pictures in a Gallery" was popular with readers—winning the *Landfall* Reader's Award in 1960—but the critics of the time did not seem interested in anything other than realism. Poetry critics obsessed about subject matter, and whether New Zealand poets should take a nationalist or internationalist stance. Curnow fired a shot at Baxter and Johnson; Baxter and Johnson fired back. The realist poetic became a battleground, but the battle was an insular one. Critics were not looking for poetry that moved beyond realism; they were trying to establish the 'best' sort of writing within the realist mode.

#### 4. The Three "Prescriptions."

"From Wystan to Carlos" represents Stead's attempt to move beyond that insular battle and "to propose a new set of terms"—those of modernism. One subtext to this effort is that "From Wystan to Carlos" is necessarily something of an exercise in self-promotion. Stead had admired Yeats and Eliot (in the introduction to *The New Poetic*) for finding a style and then advocating it in their criticism: "The poet in each case has had to begin by finding a style. . . . But once a style was achieved, an audience could be encouraged to understand it" (14). Stead had found his style in the late 1950s. Thus "From Wystan to Carlos" (and *The New Poetic*, and *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*) are attempts—on an implicit level at least—at encouraging an audience to engage with the type of poetry that Stead himself wrote.

The essay is also a revisionary exercise. Stead tries to qualify his insistence on the centrality of Yeats and Eliot in *The New Poetic* by turning his attention to Pound. Pound's poetry is hardly discussed in that earlier work. Stead mentions some of his irascible imagist manifestos, and some of his early "Blasts," but "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" is barely

touched upon and *The Cantos* are ignored. Conversely, by the 1970s Stead had come to see Pound as the centre of the modernist tradition, and a “still active” influence on the poetry of the day. Stead sets aside Yeats and “Easter 1916,” asserting that “the great texts”—“the two great monuments of modernism”—are Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*.

It is primarily out of Pound’s practice that Stead claims to derive three modernist principles, the “prescriptions” for his own practice as a poet:

we have now as elements in Modernist practice first the lack of logical or narrative structures, and in their place the aggregation of radioactive fragments within a ‘Field’; second, the scoring of speech patterns to create a music which must predominate over any externally imposed form; and third, the use of suggestion, approximation, a carefully judged incompleteness as a way of engaging the reader in the action of poetry itself. . . . (153)

However, these three principles are not wholly derived from Stead’s recent work on Pound. In these prescriptions, Stead clarifies and codifies some of the techniques that he touched upon in *The New Poetic*.

I will examine the third rule first, because Stead calls it “the most fundamental”:

[This] aspect of Modernism . . . is one that goes right back to Mallarmé and the French Symbolists. Perhaps the most fundamental sense in which the Modernist poem is ‘open’ is in never quite completing the statement, never closing the account, never letting that gate clang shut on the imagination of the reader. It is ‘open’ in reaching out and engaging the reader’s imagination in the poetic act. (153)

This rule is aimed against public verse; the rhetoric, opinion and didacticism that Stead called, in *The New Poetic*, the “antitheses of poetry” (27). In that book, Stead elevated “the Symbolist doctrine that the poet’s opinions, his beliefs, his discursive ideas, had no place in poetry” (32). Much of *The New Poetic* was an attack on rhetoric, on “poetry as a vehicle,” so this third prescription—and Stead’s emphasis on it—comes as no surprise. In *The New Poetic*, however, it was not Pound’s practice but that of Eliot which Stead held up as his exemplum: “It [‘The Waste Land’] is not a vehicle, or an agent, but a self-contained poetic entity. . . . ‘The Waste Land’ is, then, the end product of successive movements against

abstractable poetic discourse; it is the justification of the Symbolist exercise . . .” (*NP* 149). Thus his third prescription has its roots in French Symbolism and the work of T.S. Eliot. Stead cannot have derived this principle entirely from Pound’s practice, though Pound was one of its most vociferous advocates.

While the third rule addresses issues of closure, the first rule relates to overall structure—particularly of long poems. This prescription is the one whose source is the most difficult to trace. As Stead himself points out, it is one of the few things that Pound simply did, without exhaustively discussing it in his criticism: “how could you write a long poem if both narrative and logical structures were artificial, non-poetic? I’m not sure whether Pound ever articulated how he solved this problem, but he did it by a principle which I describe as accretion, or aggregation” (*GC* 149). Aggregation therefore seems to be a concept that Stead has invented in order to describe Pound’s practice in *The Cantos*, though his discussion of Eliot’s early poetry in *The New Poetic* contains many of the same terms:

When we read a poem by Yeats . . . we perceive at once . . . a sequence, a temporal (narrative), or spatial (descriptive), or logical structure. ‘The Waste Land’, on the other hand, is likely to seem poetry aspiring to the condition of music: ‘a structure like that of a Bach fugue’ (as Yeats says in surprise at Pound’s *Cantos*); ‘. . . no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse’. (*NP* 150)

In addition to these similarities, Stead begins his discussion of Eliot’s poetry by praising “the best of his early poems,” arguing that none of them “follow a structure of ‘ideas’ or narrative” (*NP* 149). Thus Stead was aware of the practice of aggregation as early as the late 1950s, though he had not yet given it a name. This debt to “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* probably explains why—in spite of his new insistence on Pound—Stead is careful at the beginning of “From Wystan to Carlos” to acknowledge both “Pound and early Eliot” (*GC* 140).

Where the first prescription deals with the overall structure of poems, the second is concerned with the placement of individual lines and words. This is probably the principle that owes most to Pound’s innovations. While Yeats stuck to “closed forms” and Eliot

declared that “no verse is truly free,” Pound struck out into unknown territory, exploding traditional margins, line lengths, spaces between words and even punctuation. His work in *The Cantos* is particularly experimental. This experimentation had its roots in imagist principles, which asserted that poems should not be fitted into preset forms or metres. In *The New Poetic*, Stead calls these principles “an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of ‘organic form’, including where serviceable the language and rhythms of common speech” (96). Later in the same book, he expands on this concept of ‘organic form,’ arguing that “In the purest poems of the first voice . . . the feeling itself determines the form” (144). Stead then quotes Eliot in support of this argument: “the ‘psychic material’ tends to create its own form—the eventual form will be to a greater or less degree the form for that one poem and for no other” (144). These general statements certainly apply to Eliot’s early poetry, or to Stead’s own “Pictures in a Gallery.” However, these early conceptions of ‘organic form’ do not account for Stead’s later, more visual poetry, nor do they wholly account for the principle of visual ‘scoring’ on the page.

Stead’s visual experimentation in the 1970s moves beyond Eliot’s ‘organic form’ and Pound’s “musical phrase,” because these terms had basically been conceived by the early modernists in order to describe and valorize the advent of free verse. By the time Stead wrote “From Wystan to Carlos,” he had come into contact with what he calls “The line of development out of early Modernism” that had occurred in America (141). Most critics refer to this development (which includes such poetic movements as the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, the San Francisco Renaissance and the New York Group) as postmodernist. Nevertheless, Stead associates these poets with modernism by citing Donald M. Allen and saying that they all have “a common point of origin in Pound and Carlos Williams” (141). This is a little like grouping tuataras with dinosaurs, but Stead is careful to acknowledge—in a footnote—that “The various discriminations possible within the Modernist (or as one may choose to call it, post-Modernist) tradition, are very important, but there is no room for them in a discussion such as this which aspires to represent recent literary history only in very broad terms” (147).

Semantics aside, the point is that by the 1970s certain aspects of Stead's poetics (and his practice as a poet) had come to reflect influences other than simply those of "Pound and early Eliot." Hence Stead describes the principle of aggregation in "recent American" terms such as "radioactive fragments within a 'Field.'" Roger Horrocks—whom Stead elsewhere attacks for being an "academic guru" of "modishness" (Ricketts 112)—is praised for his work in promulgating recent American poetry.<sup>6</sup> So, while the greater part of Stead's three prescriptions can be traced to his work in *The New Poetic*, they do take on some of the vocabulary and atmosphere of recent American developments.

The result is an essay that looks more modern than it actually is. Stead updates his diction and terminology with much the same effect as painting flames on the side of a Model T Ford: it may look faster, but it's still the same car. The argument and methodology have been shifted to a New Zealand context, but they still attack the same enemies (public and private poetry) with the same results (the centralization of modernism). The three "elements in Modernist practice" that Stead attributes to Pound in "From Wystan to Carlos" are not so very different to the techniques that he ascribed to Eliot in *The New Poetic*. Stead has simply come to prefer Pound because (in Stead's view) Pound carried on with modernism where Eliot left off, and where Yeats could not follow. Stead's Model T now has a new driver; a red-headed, eccentric fellow, who doesn't seem to mind running people down. He drives with great gusto through Stead's next major critical work—but what, if anything, did that work add to "From Wystan to Carlos"?

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<sup>6</sup>Horrocks's work on modern American poetry in the mid-1970s was obviously important to Stead. Stead supervised his unpublished PhD thesis, "MOSAIC, A Study of Juxtaposition in Literature as an Approach to Pound's Cantos and Similar Modern Poems" (1976), and has acknowledged its influence on both his criticism (*PYE* chapter eight, n. 8, n. 19) and his poetry (*GC* 267, 275).

### 5. *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement: Extensions and Repetitions.*

Reviewers of *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* compare it with *The New Poetic*, but none of them examine it in the more immediate context of “From Wystan to Carlos.”<sup>7</sup> *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* is for the most part an extension and repetition of the dialectic in that essay. Stead extends his arguments by applying them to England and producing an elaborate series of examples, along with close readings that the smaller essay could not accommodate. Pound’s career in particular is discussed in much more detail. However, repetition occurs in most of Stead’s arguments and thesis statements. For example, the title and thesis of chapter one (“Yeats and Pound—The Modern and the Modernist”) echoes the subtitle and thesis of “From Wystan to Carlos—Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry.” Stead’s thesis suggests that Yeats was stuck in “closed forms” and therefore “that Yeats was a modern in his time but not a Modernist” (*PYE* 75). Having repeated this general argument, Stead gives examples from Yeats’s verse throughout chapters two and three and then extends the argument to include Thomas Hardy in chapter five. Thus Stead ends up with what he describes as “Yeats and Hardy, two moderns who were not Modernists” (4). His stated purpose for chapter five might well apply—in the context of “From Wystan to Carlos”—to the function of the book as a whole: “the purpose being to extend the comparisons and also to fill out the history . . .” (4).

Similarly, Stead sets up “the Modernist phenomenon . . . as the principal tidal movement of poetry in English in the twentieth century. That is not to say a poet may not choose to swim against the tide, and do it very well; all I would argue is that he cannot alter the direction of the flow” (*PYE* 4-5). This premise echoes that of “From Wystan to Carlos,” where Stead asserted that “there is just this to be said. If one looks at developments in the arts from an

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<sup>7</sup>See Makin and Davie (and Stead’s response) in *Scripsi*, Ruthven (and Stead’s response) in *Landfall*, Kermode (and Stead’s two responses) in *The London Review of Books*, Spoo in *Paideuma* and Witemeyer in the *Yeats Annual*. Stead’s defenses of the book reveal his surprise and disappointment at its reception. A fictional version of this experience can be found in *Sister Hollywood*, where the narrator teaches at Auckland University and publishes two books of poetry criticism: “My first book on Keats [*The Keatsian Poetic*] was followed by a second, *Keats and Belladonna*, much better, I thought, and less successful” (156).

historical perspective it does seem there is a certain flow of the tide. You can choose to swim against it if you want to, and you may swim brilliantly. What you can't do is turn it back" (*GC* 144-45). Stead's paradigms for this "Modernist phenomenon" are once again Pound and early Eliot, while his main focus of attack remains the public pole of poetry. In "From Wystan to Carlos" that pole was represented by Curnow, Glover and Fairburn, all of whom Stead characterized as realists. In *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, that pole is labelled "the realist tradition in modern poetry" (137)—one after another Stead sets Yeats, Hardy, Larkin and Auden adrift in this tradition, then blows them out of the water.

Stead turns his torpedoes on private poetry as well, but once again this pole receives much less attention. The insistence is on what Stead called in "From Wystan to Carlos" "a shared world," a poetry that is not detached "from its physical and social environment" (*GC* 154). Thus, in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, he banishes surrealism and 'mere mindscapes' for being "thin" and having "little reference to the 'real' world" (114). Nevertheless, the length of the book allows Stead to indulge in qualifications and digressions. The nineteen lines of *The Waste Land* that deal with surreal images of cities bursting in mid air, musical hair and "bats with baby faces" (ll.367-85), escape his ban because, Stead argues, "they . . . create a densely textured world of their own (they are possibly one of the few entirely successful passages of surrealism in English poetry)" (*PYE* 114). Stead is careful to stress, however, that these lines are an exception: "Words for their own sake, totally unrooted in a recognizable and known world, are seldom satisfactory, and it is not this which Eliot's poem offers. *The Waste Land* has quite clearly its connections with a known world . . ." (165).

In Stead's view, *Ash-Wednesday* lacks these connections and therefore fails to be poetry: "it is Eliot's farewell to the phenomenal world, and so in effect to poetry itself" (222). Similarly, Stead criticizes "The Hollow Men" for not presenting enough links to the 'real world':

'The Hollow Men' is an authentic poem—it seems to draw life from Eliot's private imaginative landscape—but there is a thinness in the verbal texture and a lack of that

grounding in the real recognizable contemporary world which makes 'Gerontion' and *The Waste Land* public property. (214-15)

Like Brunton's detachment of "the mind and the poem from its physical and social environment," Eliot's withdrawal from a "recognizable" world is presented as "private," self-defeating and anti-poetry. Once again, Stead has set up a middle path between two extremes. One should not be too public, like the realists, but neither should one set up 'private property' that denies access to the reader. As Stead asserted in "From Wystan to Carlos," "Primarily the poem must be public *in not being private.*"

Many of this essay's phrases echo through *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*. Stead reiterates his "preference" for "that middle ground where 'subjective' and 'objective' meet and absorb one another" (312, 45-7, 166). He inserts the by now familiar caveat about not intending "to decide questions of better or worse, but only to plot once again a shift in literary history" (47). He repeats his analysis of "The Red Wheelbarrow" almost word for word (180, 187) and reuses Mallarmé's retort to Degas (186, 327). He emphasizes over and over that "poetry is not a form but a quality," and that a poem's final lines should not be allowed to clang "shut like a gate on the reader's imagination" (158, 327). Almost every page of the essay has its parallel somewhere in the book. For example, in two pages of "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead quotes Spender's *The Thirties and After*, dismisses Owen and Auden (calling them "moralists" and "roundheads") and tries to distinguish between the truth of politics and the truth of the imagination—which is "less vulnerable, more durable, more comprehensive" (GC 142-44). In chapter six of *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead uses the same Spender quote, dismisses Owen and Auden, and criticizes Owen's "characteristically Roundhead vice of moralism without style" (175). He concludes the chapter by trying to distinguish between the truth of politics and "poetic truth"—which he calls "more complex, more comprehensive, less vulnerable" (192).

Of course, the nearly 400-page book does contain many subtleties and analyses that are not found in "From Wystan to Carlos." Stead is able to discuss *The Cantos* in depth, and to

introduce a discussion of Pound's "presentative method."<sup>8</sup> He embarks on some detailed textual criticism, making points about *The Waste Land* manuscripts that are both original and persuasive. Stead also makes forays into biographical and psychological criticism, exploring the sources (and consequences) of Eliot's religious and social attitudes. In a less convincing fashion, Stead attributes to Eliot "the deviousness of an ego that has grown up under the oppression of five elder siblings," concluding that "He does not quite truly believe in himself . . ." (250). Conversely, Stead manages to see "something of the only child of doting parents recognizable in all of Pound's history" (250). In addition to these extra levels of criticism, Stead has room to refine some distinctions he felt were "blurred" in *The New Poetic*, and to offer a revised version of his 1966 essay on Auden's "Spain." He also attempts to distinguish between (and ultimately reconcile) political and existential poetry, as well as proffering some interesting asides about the "mystique" of poetry and the incantatory effect of foreign language words and phrases. Finally, there are many close readings and personal anecdotes that were not contained in the earlier essay.

In its main arguments, however, the book offers a repetition and extension of theories that Stead first put forward in "From Wystan to Carlos." Stead's distinctions between mimetic and didactic poetry are reiterated (328-33, 393), as are those between the "*musée*" of Yeats's closed form and the "*atelier*" of Pound's open form (158, 328). Poetry as a "vehicle" is once again Stead's major enemy; the imagery simply shifts from a donkey and its load (*GC* 142, 151) to a coal truck and its coal (*PYE* 329). Most importantly, he invokes and explores at length his three "prescriptions"—with very similar results.

On the very first page of the book, Stead restates his third and "most fundamental" prescription, deriving it once again from Pound, Eliot and certain aspects of the "Symbolist method":

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<sup>8</sup>Stead argues that "the one immutable law of the presentative method [is] that nothing should be explained or logically structured" (249). Thus the presentative method combines approximation and aggregation, two of the principles laid out in "From Wystan to Carlos."

these were the concerns of the Symbolist movement. The reader of a poem was not to be addressed (to adopt a phrase from one of Eliot's later essays) 'as if he were at a public meeting', but won over, whispered to, set wondering by hints and half-statements, his imagination engaged, his own creative powers activated. Reading could no longer be passive. The realm of poetry became a kind of participatory democracy. As reader you might not be sure what was going on, but you could not avoid playing a part. (9-10)

Here are Stead's familiar strategies of attacking poetry that aspires to be "public," and of valorizing poetry that allows readers to engage in the creative act. Stead goes on to announce, as he did in "From Wystan to Carlos," that poetry should be seen "not as a form but a quality," and that poetry should not be used as a mere vehicle for removable, restatable "content" (10). He then cites Rimbaud's "dismissal of the whole of French poetry before his own":

'Tout est prose rimée'—It's all rhymed prose. The form was achieved, but only as a container for something detachable, a certain 'content', and at the expense of that mysterious and accidental essence which for the Symbolist was poetry itself.

These few examples reveal the way in which *Pound*, *Yeats*, *Eliot* works. The principles and paradigms of "From Wystan to Carlos" are taken as starting points for a series of elaborations. For example, in the essay Stead simply stated that this third "aspect of Modernism . . . goes right back to Mallarmé and the French Symbolists" (153). In the book he expands this statement by looking at Mallarmé, Verlaine, Baudelaire and Rimbaud; he then contrasts them with the French Parnassians, compares them with the English Pre-Raphaelites and Yeats's Irish Symbolism, cites some of their writing, and finally explains in detail how he thinks they exemplify a movement towards modernist "approximation."

Stead's elaboration of approximation results, as it did in "From Wystan to Carlos," in his rejection of Yeats:

the Modernist poem encouraged [the reader's] own contribution to the act of creation. Eliot always insisted that his poems meant what his readers wanted them to mean. . . . What Yeats struggled to close off and make clear and precise, the Modernist worked to keep open and full of suggestion. (166)

Stead's elaboration also results, more generally, in the rejection of "the realist tradition in modern poetry." He attacks any poet who employs statement and conclusion. Thus when Auden "warns" the reader, indulging in "resonant generalization" in "a poem of statement" (179-80), Stead asserts that "This is very different from the Modernist leaving his reader room to *imagine*" (183). Even Eliot, in the *Four Quartets*, is sometimes criticized for what Stead sees as 'failing': "As the verse moves over into direct expository statement we may agree or disagree, but in either case our sense of the work as a poem fades and fails" (227). As he did in "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead presents "direct expository statement" as counter-productive and anti-poetry. In that essay, Stead criticized the New Zealand realist poem, "where the final statement of the poem tended to have the effect of a gate clanging shut on the imagination" (GC 152).

In *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead couches one of his conclusions about "the Modernist experiment" in very similar terms:

The well-made poem, the formal artefact with a beginning a middle and an end, its final rhyme clanging shut like a gate on the reader's imagination, was replaced by the open-ended piece in which a nicely judged incompleteness might invite the reader into participation in the linguistic action. . . . Since life was open-ended so should poetry be if its function was to be mimetic rather than didactic. (327-28)

This principle of approximation is tied very closely to the principle of aggregation. Both can have the effect of inviting the reader into the process of the poem, as Stead's analysis of Canto 47 shows:

With this Canto, Modernism receives strong confirmation as a viable method. It is a very fine example of what was yet to be called 'open form' or 'field' poetry, having firm outlines and hard edges, yet inviting the reader into the process to make his or her contribution to the final effect. To compare the structure of one of Yeats's mythical poems with that of Canto 47 is like putting (for example) a pattern of beads on a framework fixed along four edges beside a bead curtain that moves and moves differently according to the breeze that blows through it. (272)

Stead is particularly critical of "Yeats's mythical poems" because (in his view) they were versified ideas, doggedly following a preset structure, simply offering "a code to be 'cracked'" (155). Conversely, a structure based on aggregation—because it does not follow

a fixed, logical narrative—allows the reader to influence the beads and contribute to the shape of the poem.

In *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead defines aggregation as the structural innovation that allowed Eliot and Pound to create the modernist long poem:

What Eliot and Pound added to Imagism was what I shall call the principle of aggregation. Pure images could be added one to another, without the imposition of a structure, without logical or narrative continuity; and given that there was a singleness of poetic impulse they would be found to cohere, or could be edited into coherence. This was the principle on which most of Eliot's early poems were constructed and on which all of the Cantos depend. With that discovery Eliot and Pound . . . invented Modernism, and demonstrated that Imagism was not a dead end . . . but . . . a starting point for a new development in the poetry of the English language. (39)

As he did in "From Wystan to Carlos" (and *The New Poetic*), Stead treats imagism as a "necessary cleansing," a mere "starting point." His talk about "Pure images"—and the way that "given . . . a singleness of poetic impulse they would be found to cohere"—likewise echoes his definition of aggregation in that essay: "Whether your basic poetic unit is the image, or the vortex, or both—insofar as the units are pure, and come from one man at one phase of his life, they will be found to cohere, to have natural unity, without artificial structural linking" (*GC* 149).<sup>9</sup>

In *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, however, Stead expands upon this definition by associating aggregation with collage, mosaic, film and juxtaposition. These analogies are particularly useful for readers of Stead's own poetry because they provide us with insights into the actual effects that he was hoping for in long poems, such as "Pictures in a Gallery" or "Quesada":

a major (if unspoken) principle of Modernism [is] that poetry is not a form but a quality, and that one's sense of it is not dependent upon 'understanding' in the way, or to the degree, that one's sense of the value of a piece of prose is. One 'understands' it in its particularity, without necessarily seeing, or feeling any anxiety about, its connections with what precedes and follows. . . . It is a quality we have come to associate with the technique of film—one shot, so singular, vivid and

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<sup>9</sup>Compare also Stead's analysis of "Prufrock" in *The New Poetic*: "its coherence depends on consistency of feeling, not on a fixed sequence of idea or event" (152).

precisely chosen, that its particularity explodes into a significance beyond itself.  
(243)

In addition to the quick cuts of film,<sup>10</sup> Stead compares aggregation with the art of collage or mosaic. Typically, he draws his examples from *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*. In regards to the former, Stead singles out “The Burial of the Dead”:

it exemplifies better than any other section the enormous power to be derived simply from the mosaic placing of pieces one in relation to another. The quality of each of the five sections of ‘The Burial of the Dead’ is fine in itself; but the quality of each is finally determined, and given emphasis, by what comes before and after. This is Eliot’s special skill as a ‘composer’. Contrast, not continuity, is the basis of recognition. (99)

Stead sees Pound working towards this technique in his first three Cantos, and finally reaching it with the fourth:

in 1919 Canto 4 was written, and at this attempt what was to become the method of the Cantos was established. It is in essence the method of an impersonal collage or mosaic—the items, large or small, ‘invented’ or quoted, taken from life or recalled from art, were to stand in hard-edged relation, one to another, without explanatory or connective matter. (243)

Thus Stead elaborates upon the principle of aggregation through a series of analogies with film, collage and mosaic. He tries to explain the technique further by equating it with juxtaposition. For example, in his analysis of “Prufrock,” Stead stresses “the importance and originality of Eliot’s use of what I have called aggregation—or, as it is more usually called because of its effect, juxtaposition”:

What is clear, I think, is that the discontinuities are much greater than any which had occurred in English poetry before; and that they work. The imagination is carried along so effectively by the musical unity that the gaps are not felt to be a problem. Nothing in the poem will support any of the explanations offered in terms of logic or narrative of how, for example, the pregnant couplet

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michaelangelo [sic]

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<sup>10</sup>In relation to his “point about cinematographic method,” Stead cites Walter Baumann’s 1970 book on Pound. However, Hugh Kenner makes this connection as early as 1951, when he compares Pound’s poems to the work of the Russian film maker Sergei Eisenstein (*The Poetry of Ezra Pound* 60-61, 113-14, 260-62).

follows from or relates to the opening twelve lines of the poem. (50-51)

Despite these four elaborations, Stead's point remains the same: aggregation allows for 'organic form' in long poems by rejecting the artificialities of logical or narrative structures. "The juxtaposition," he argues in relation to *The Waste Land*, "is so effective not because it accords with a plan, but on the contrary because, unplanned, it is able to follow the natural organic movement of the poetic imagination . . ." (96). Similarly, in relation to *The Cantos*, Stead asserts that "juxtapositions and dissonances . . . sharpen apprehension, provide variety and a sense of life" (262). These assertions are all very close to Stead's original analysis in "From Wystan to Carlos," where he argued that:

Poetry, then, is not a form but a quality. Achieve the quality, one might almost say, and the form will look after itself. So the *Cantos*—the best of the *Cantos*—or equally a poem like *The Waste Land*, and many Modernist poems since—are built up of these radioactive fragments, without logical or narrative linking. In this way the long poem becomes possible again, while at the same time the purity of poetry is retained. And I repeat that by purity is meant, not the aesthete's detachment from life, but on the contrary immersion in life, likeness to life—life-likeness in the very absence of those mental structures which life as we live it moment by moment doesn't have. (GC 149)

Stead's elaboration of musical 'scoring' reflects his growing impatience with Yeats and preset forms. As Hugh Witemeyer noted in his review of *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, one of the main differences between this book and *The New Poetic* is Stead's increasing emphasis on 'open form':

Stead's definition of Modernism has changed . . . and with it his pantheon of poets. He now views Modernism in terms of an ideology of open forms. He therefore demotes from a central position in the movement all poets who write in closed forms and traditional metres. (282)

By the 1970s, Stead had come to see Yeats's use of preset forms and metres as a limiting factor, a non-modernist (and hence non-poetic) restriction. In *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead calls this "Yeats's enslavement to fixed forms and modes" (32), and argues that "his anguish over Pound's deletion of two syllables from 'Fallen Majesty' shows his lack of freedom" (50). In this way, Stead sets up a scale of freedom and slavery, with Pound at one end and Yeats at the other. Eliot falls somewhere between the two, because his use of "free verse"

usually stayed tied to a “basic metrical unit.” Stead asserts that Eliot’s verse was only free in a “limited sense” and concludes that “This probably remained true of Eliot throughout his career, but not of Pound, whose later Cantos are not simply free verse, but achieve open form” (49). Stead’s scale therefore runs from closed form, to limited free verse, to open form—with Stead elevating the latter as something for a poet to “achieve,” something to aim for.<sup>11</sup>

In Stead’s view, free verse aspires to musical form. In “Prufrock,” he argues, “it is above all the music that holds the poem together” (48). Similarly, *The Waste Land* enacts a “musicalization of experience” (336). These poems represent the beginnings of modernism. Nonetheless, for Stead the paradigm of musical form is *The Pisan Cantos*:

The staple of *The Pisan Cantos* is an energetic free verse in which there is almost no possible distinction to be made between ‘form’ and ‘content’. The lines move and are shaped by their sense and by nothing else; but their ‘sense’ (as I have tried to show) is much more than a mere prose ‘meaning’, and consequently both grammar and punctuation, moving with the cross-weaving of thought and perception, are totally unorthodox. (296)

Where Eliot’s free verse was “limited,” Pound’s is “energetic”—moving lines, words, spaces and even punctuation into a form that is never preset. Stead sees *The Pisan Cantos* as a movement towards musical form, an attempt to ‘score’ the patterns of speech and experience as they appear to the individual poet. “Pound’s talents,” Stead concludes, “were all in the direction of greater freedom, openness of form. . . . Pound had been working steadily to . . . loosen his statement from formal trammels so the effect of his poems would be clear, sharp, vigorous, a direct transmission of the author’s sense of life” (56-7).

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<sup>11</sup>These kinds of exclusionary tactics bothered reviewers such as Witemeyer, who felt that “Stead’s . . . restrictive argument takes a moralistic turn that may antagonize more readers than it wins over” (282). This attack could be levelled at much of Stead’s criticism. However, just how “restrictive” an argument is may depend on one’s perspective (and one’s audience). Witemeyer is writing for the *Yeats Annual*, and while he admits that “Pound is the hero of Stead’s argument,” he wishes that Stead had looked “in detail” at Yeats’s poems (284). Conversely, Robert Spoo, writing in *Paideuma*, also states that “Pound is the hero,” but has no problem with the short shrift given to Yeats. Indeed, he finds that Stead “now recognizes his [Yeats’s] limitations” (249) and concludes that “It is good to have Stead among the Poundians” (252).

Stead's definition of open form stresses this "sense of life," the attempt to transmit "the actuality of experience" as opposed to the distortions that may result if one tries to shoehorn life and experience into preset shapes:

The Modernism of Pound and Eliot set in motion what has come to be recognized as 'open form'—something more than just 'free verse', in that it is an attempt to preserve a close sense of the actuality of experience by not allowing established stanza and metrical patterns to appropriate the subject or occasion of the poem. Form must follow upon, or spring from, experience rather than be imposed upon it. (158)

These definitions are very similar to that of "From Wystan to Carlos," where Stead described open form as an effort to escape preset structure and get closer to "life as we live it moment by moment":

And to get even nearer to veracity, to that linguistic re-enactment of life as it feels moment by moment, there is an attempt to exploit, as the basic material of poetic music, the natural speech patterns, the runs and pauses, the interweaving of breathing and vocalizing, which is the poet's own individual manner of speaking. As Michael Harlow said in a recent review 'the poet is listening to the character of his own speech and scoring it on the page spatially and semantically'. The word 'scoring' is important because it reminds us of the underlying 'musical' structure of Modernist poetry. (GC 149)

One telling implication of this definition is that Stead sees his own poetry as putting this principle into practice; the article that he quotes is Harlow's review of Stead's own *Walking Westward*.<sup>12</sup>

Stead's conclusion in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* is that "the only escape from the Modernist inheritance in the twentieth century is an escape from poetry itself" (353). Stead equates modernism with poetry, effectively pushing aside all other modes as 'not poetry.' Thus, by a process of critical purism, he reaches much the same conclusions as he did in "From Wystan to Carlos" and *The New Poetic*.

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<sup>12</sup>There is another review cited in "From Wystan to Carlos" where the book remains unnamed. Once again, the book is *Walking Westward*, but this time the review is unfavourable. Stead implies that for "someone called Needham" to attempt to abstract content from form in a review of Stead's poems is to take his poetry on realist terms and thus to do it an injustice (GC 143).

I have used this chapter to chart Stead's critical purism in favour of modernism, his definitions of modernism, and his prescription of that mode for his own poetry. It is now time to test Stead's critical statements against his practice as a poet. In chapter three, I will assess how far Stead's practice actually conforms to his own prescriptions. "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" was written in 1958, at approximately the same time that Stead was drafting *The New Poetic* in Bristol. As such, it brings to life many of the characters of that book. Furthermore, "Pictures in a Gallery" carries into effect the principles that Stead was exploring in *The New Poetic* (and was to repeat, update and codify in "From Wystan to Carlos" and *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*). Close scrutiny of the techniques and sources of "Pictures in a Gallery" shows it to be not only a paradigm of Stead's early modernist practice but also a pivotal point in his career.

CHAPTER III. MODERNISM IN PRACTICE: “PICTURES IN A GALLERY  
UNDERSEA.”

“Now this will seem a lot of fuss about one poem. But . . . it struck me that here was a point  
at which I added something distinct.”

—C.K. Stead, “A Poet’s View” (1974) *GC* 267

Looking back over his career in 1974, Stead made “a lot of fuss about one poem”: “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea.” This long composition, comprising seven sections, was written in 1958 and first published in *Landfall* the following year. (The complete text, along with a short discussion of its variant editions, can be found in the appendix of this thesis.) Clearly the poem ranges over a variety of experiences—literary and personal, historical and geographical. My concern, though, is not to extract the subject matter from the poem but to analyze its techniques. By exploring those techniques in detail, I hope to show how closely “Pictures in a Gallery” accords with Stead’s own modernist prescriptions: aggregation, musical scoring, and approximation.

If it does exhibit all the characteristics of a modernist text, then “Pictures in a Gallery” necessitates some historical revisionism. The presence of the poem in a 1959 *Landfall* shows that modernism arrived in New Zealand poetry much sooner than literary historians generally allow. More importantly, if the poem satisfies all of Stead’s prescriptions, then it will be shown to meet the demands of critical purism. In this respect—while it may have been revolutionary—“Pictures in a Gallery” was of its time because (like the majority of poems from the period) it proves amenable to purist theories of classification. The only difference is that New Zealand poems written in the 1950s tend to slot neatly into the realist mode, whereas “Pictures in a Gallery” was the first long poem to fully inhabit the mode of modernism. It is my contention that while most New Zealand poetry written prior to the 1970s does fit into one of the three modes defined by New Zealand critics, some more recent poems do not slot so easily into purist classifications. The very ease with which “Pictures in a Gallery” fits into

Stead's modernist prescriptions reveals the purism that—as a poet—Stead was soon to move beyond.

**1. Aggregation: “the lack of logical or narrative structures, and in their place the aggregation of radioactive fragments within a ‘Field.’”**

The first modernist technique that “Pictures in a Gallery” exemplifies is that of aggregation. This principle demands that the poet eschew all logical or narrative structure. At first glance, though, “Pictures in a Gallery” does appear to have a logical narrative structure. The narrator begins in an upstairs room in Ladbroke Square. He then sets off on a long walk through the streets of London:

. . . wherever I walked on that long haul, midnight to dawn,  
Stones of a sunken city woke, and passed the word,  
And slept behind me; but the notes were gone,  
Vanished like bubbles up through the watery air  
Of London

This “I” figure mentions many street names and places, from Devonshire Street to New Oxford Street, from Soho to the Circus, “from Kew to Battersea.” He takes in Russell Square and the British Museum, the Marble Arch and the Admiralty, Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London. As he records these places, he has visions of the people (poets, monarchs and ancestors) who have made the landmarks into magical names for him. He finishes up by “The River” at London Bridge with an old man playing a violin.

However, if one treats “Pictures in a Gallery” like a seventeenth-century topographical poem (where a narrator surveys a prospect, describes the sites around him—it was always a “him”—gives some of the history of the area, has a vision of the future and winds it all up with a handy moral) then one's expectations will very quickly be frustrated. The apparent narrative of this poem is neither logical nor literal. For example, if the narrator is really walking from “midnight to dawn,” how can the final section take place at sunset? Similarly, how can the penultimate section begin by saying that “Now it was time for the drawing of curtains” (emphasis added), when “bright curtains” had already been drawn in the first

section? Like these time slippages, the “I” of the narrator seems elusive and illusory. He is at once a grown man in section I and a newspaper boy in section V, while in sections III, IV, and VI he does not appear at all. The woman of Section I tells him that “You too must stay,” but she never reappears and her injunction remains opaque:

‘You too must stay’ (loosening her sun-bleached hair)  
‘You more than I—you will defeat their fashions.’

Where and why he must stay, who ‘they’ are and what “their fashions” might be (and how he “will defeat” them) are never clarified. This sort of dialogue (like the ‘nerves monologue’ in *The Waste Land*)<sup>1</sup> does not fit into any logical narrative; nor do the temporal and spatial shifts that occur between and within the sections of the poem.

In the place of logical narrative is an intuitive structure, what Stead sometimes refers to as a “musical structure.” Readers must trust to their own ears, and make of the fragments what they can. In *The New Poetic*, Stead explains how he thinks readers should approach a modernist long poem like “Pictures in a Gallery.” At the beginning of his chapter on Eliot’s poetry, Stead pleads with readers not to treat such a poem as “only discourse with a suppression of certain ‘links in the chain.’” He argues instead for a more intuitive, musical response:

When we read a poem by Yeats, or Tennyson, or Milton, or Spenser, or Chaucer, we perceive at once—what ever else there may be in the poem—a sequence, a temporal (narrative), or spatial (descriptive) or logical structure. ‘The Waste Land’, on the other hand, is likely to seem poetry aspiring to the condition of music: ‘a structure like that of a Bach fugue’ (as Yeats says in surprise at Pound’s *Cantos*); ‘. . . no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse’. (150)

In place of a logical narrative, readers face what Stead calls “a procession of non-discursive images,” and must react to them accordingly. “Coherence,” Stead argues, “depends on consistency of feeling, not on a fixed sequence of idea or event.”

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<sup>1</sup>In a letter to Pound, Eliot referred to one part of “A Game of Chess” as the ‘nerves monologue’ (Valerie Eliot 504).

Thus his conclusion about time and space in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” applies almost exactly to “Pictures in a Gallery”:

We do not ask *when* the yellow fog ‘licked its tongue into the corners of the evening’; whether this happened before or after the voice invited us to follow it. Normal temporal or spatial relationships do not apply, any more than they apply in listening to music. (152)

Asking how the narrator can be both a lover and a newspaper boy, or where exactly the princess and her ballroom are located, is about as useful as asking where the Chapel Perilous is in *The Waste Land*. A more profitable approach might be to ask how the “shouting” of a stationary Newbolt and the ‘mouthing’ of an imperious Queen (both of whom are placed indoors) relate to the graceful movements of music and poets through the trees and snow outside. Moving to the next set of images, one might ask how the “prim,” “stiff,” “nerveless” figures of section III, with their gossip and their “racket,” relate to the poets who preceded them and the princess who appears after them. The princess is not stiff or prim, but races out of doors and dances with abandon. Like the poets (and the narrator), Stead associates her with trees and movement, music and creation. These leitmotifs and juxtapositions carry the reader through the poem. They replace logical narrative with their suggestive opacities.

One can see an example of this aggregation in the placement and function of section III. This section appears to be a fairly straightforward lyric about “prim lips” gossiping:

The prim lips, homing, round the wind,  
Condensing news along the Strand.  
Nerveless, the words assault, descend—  
Stiff jaws convey them underground.

The verb that rackets through the mind  
Transports the body far beyond  
Expected stops.  
                    Swirled on the wind  
The lost, chaotic flakes ascend.

This section describes the way that “prim” gossips can be thrown into “transports” of glee at the reception of certain “news.” Any “verb that rackets through the mind” must be a

powerful one; but Stead also implies that the verb causes a “racket” and rattles around because there wasn’t much else in the mind to impede its progress. In this way, Stead satirizes the sort of person who abuses language, the type of vicious gossip who doesn’t know when to stop and continues in “transports” of vehement emotion “far beyond” what is usually “Expected.”

Beyond the simple satire, however, lies a less critical image of someone who can be transported “far beyond / Expected stops” by the sheer power of words. The second part of this section provides a picture not just of a gossip but of a poet (and perhaps the poet’s readers) as well. Stead finds a metatextual image for the way that the words of an apparently “chaotic” surface can sometimes swirl together and lift one in an unexpected way:

Swirled on the wind  
The lost, chaotic flakes ascend.

There are times when the words, the writer and the reader all “ascend” in ways that none of them could have foretold. This second part may be an image for what the words in poetry can sometimes achieve.

So section III begins in prim satire and ends in evocative imagism. Somewhere in between a transformation occurs, and the locus of that shift might be the punning placement of the word “underground.” Part of the London “Transport” system is called the Underground, and passengers have to “descend” a set of stairs and enter the “stiff jaws” of a metal carriage in order for it to “convey them” to their “Expected stops.” In addition, the Underground makes an enormous “racket” as it “Transports the body.” The ensuing image of a runaway train that takes its riders “far beyond / Expected stops” does double service, capturing the processes of both gossip and poetry at once. The sheer power of words can transport one “far beyond” expected results. Thus this short lyric simultaneously contains the poetry of satire and of wonder. It also encompasses comedy, by punning remorselessly on the terminology of a subway system. It is the unrestrainable force of



involves a narrowing of perception. As the eye takes in this shift, the mind registers a change in topic: the poem moves from a description of poets to a discussion of gossips. Thus Stead funnels readers into an area where “words assault” the ear and “descend” to lower levels. Coming as it does after the long, spacious, delicate lines about three poets, this section jolts the eye and ear into recognizing a contraction of form and a lowering of subject matter. Of course, short lines do not always embody a meanness of subject; it is the immediate context that determines the effect. Just as in a piece of music, the way that a listener responds to a certain sound depends on what it is placed next to—bass voices are not always base characters. Similarly, one’s reaction to the princess may involve a certain relief at escaping the narrow shape of the short line, the narrow confines of the underground, and the narrow views of the gossips. This relief combines with one’s pleasure at her escape “from her ballroom’s glass” and her movement “down the wide, white stairs.” She descends not into a hellish underworld of “stiff jaws” and “nerveless” motion, but into a garden of that contains “trees” to walk among and “lawn” to walk upon. The word “trees” jangles the memory: it connects the princess back to the poets among the “great trees” of section II and the “Tenacious” life of the “two veined leaves” in section I. These responses are all determined by the juxtaposition of certain sights and sounds. The poet has never said how he thinks the sections go together or what he thinks of their subject matter.

As a critic, however, Stead has tried to explain the overall structure of “Pictures in a Gallery”:

I knew that I wasn’t—as a number of people thought when the poem appeared—writing a pastiche of T.S. Eliot. I knew that though there were some echoes of Eliot for particular effect, technically the poem owed everything to Ezra Pound’s innovations in ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ and in the Cantos. I think I was aware that those innovations of Pound’s were parallel to developments like the use of atonality in music, or to cubism in painting. And I think I could have said that the musical structure of my poem was built up partly by putting contrasting things alongside each other—bits of literary history alongside obvious fictions, a passage in long lines after one in short lines, resonant romantic statements after curt ironic ones. (GC 267)

This “musical structure” represents the modernist technique of juxtaposition or mosaic. It is not to be confused with musical scoring—the latter applies to the placement of individual words and lines, while the former refers to overall structure. Indeed, “musical structure” is just another attempt to describe the principle of aggregation, a term Stead would not come to until 1979. Thus, in Stead’s structural terms, section IV can be described as “a passage in long lines after one in short lines,” and one that places “resonant romantic statements after curt ironic ones.” Its effects are achieved “partly by putting contrasting things alongside each other.”

Another such juxtaposition appears in and around section VI. This (comparatively) short-lined passage pushes curt ironic statements up against resonant romantic ones, and sets them simmering in the reader’s mind:

Now it was time for the drawing of curtains.  
 The smoke climbed, hand over hand, its difficult way,  
 Rested, or sank back in the thick air.  
 The River swans nor sang for the dead day  
 Nor proudly departed; but each hooked  
 One leg across its back, displaying a dirty web,  
 And (strong beak poised on graceful neck) poked  
 The rubbish drifting at the water’s edge.

These lines evoke a picture of pollution, but they also show elements of beauty persisting despite the decay. Swans are conventionally beautiful birds—their song is supposed to be incomparable, and their appearance has inspired many poets, from Drayton to Yeats. They may not be singing here, but neither are they leaving: the potential for music remains, even in the most unlikely setting. Paradoxically, by telling us that they are not singing, Stead reminds us that they can and do sing extremely well.<sup>2</sup> As in the sext section, music can be backed “in a corner,” but still it can and will come out swinging. When death and winter is all around, Stead reminds readers that “the blood still pulsed.”

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<sup>2</sup>At least in legend; in reality, no one has ever witnessed a “swan song.”

Part of that eternal pulse is the work of poets such as Eliot and Yeats. In a way, their very presence in the poem supplies an implicit answer to the impending question, "*Chanterez-vous quand vous serez vaporeuse? . . .*" These poets—for Stead and many other readers—do sing on when they have become "*vaporeuse.*" These two also seem to stand, chorus-like, behind the images of section VI. Having just watched "old Possum" as he "faded from sight," (became *vaporeuse?*) the reader is suddenly faced with a Thames sunset that contains "some echoes of Eliot for particular effect":

Now it was time for the drawing of curtains.  
The smoke climbed, hand over hand, its difficult way,  
Rested, or sank back in the thick air.

Eliot set many of his early poems in the afternoon and evening, at a "time for the drawing of curtains." Stead also conjures up the atmospheres of *Waste Land* sunsets ("the violet hour, the evening hour, . . . the sun's last rays") and Prufrockian smoke ("The yellow smoke that slides along the street"). He then conflates them with his own image of a schoolchild attempting the dreaded rope exercise in Physical Education. Like that unlucky child, the smoke struggles to climb upwards, "hand over hand, its difficult way." Even the pollution has trouble rising above "the thick air" of this "sunken city."

Stead juxtaposes this curt irony against the romantic resonance of swans on the river. However, the swans too seem to be having difficulty navigating through an element that is unnaturally clogged up. The ghost of Eliot drifts through this part of the setting as well. Behind "The rubbish drifting at the water's edge" lies the catalogue of Thames litter that opens "The Fire Sermon":

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (ll.177-79)

In Eliot's poem there is no rubbish on "The river," but winter is coming and beautiful things have "departed." (Eliot insists that they have "departed" by repeating this word three times in the space of seven lines.) In Stead's poem rubbish and winter both encroach, but the

lovely tenants of "The River" have not "proudly departed." Through this slight change, Stead presents a slightly more positive image than the deserted, desolate "brown land" of Eliot's autumn.

Stead's winter landscape also contrasts with Yeats's autumn in "The Wild Swans at Coole." Stead's swans may not be in as beautiful a place as Coole Park yet, paradoxically, they seem to convey a more affirmative image to the viewer. Where Yeats got depressed at the thought of his own mutability, Stead seems to celebrate the possibilities of something eternal—some essence, some beauty, some music will survive, in spite of the cold, "The dead day," "The dead years," and the rubbish that may surround it.

The swans also become a gentle leitmotif, reminding the reader of Yeats, Yeats's dream of "a great bird" in section V, and Yeats's poetry about swans. In section V, the great bird lay in a context of sexual liaisons, therefore alluding not just to "Among Schoolchildren," but to "Leda and the Swan" (Yeats's famous poem about a swan and a sexual encounter). Stead echoes the latter poem more explicitly in section VI, where he mentions webs and legs in one line, and a "strong beak poised on a graceful neck" in the next. These details echo Yeats's use of the same four elements in a two line space: "her thighs caressed / By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill." Again, the contrast serves to emphasize that Stead's image seems the more affirmative. In his poem the swan's "strong beak" is not involved in any horrific deed.

Of course, Stead might be alluding to any number of the swan poems that Yeats wrote. Another strong contender is "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," which takes place "under a wintry sun," and "Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood." The season, the bird, the time of day and the diction ("drifts" and "drifting") are all similar and, as John Unterecker points out, "swans on dark waters symbolized always for Yeats the artist who, dying, sings in fading light" (212). There could be some connection here to the question about singing at the beginning of the next section; however, it is as well to remember that this detailed Yeatsian

symbolism may be too remote from Stead's poem. On one level at least, Stead's swans are real swans on the Thames, simply poking about looking for food. Stead has always been wary of Yeats's tendency to push nature into pre-set symbolic patterns, to see a swan and cry out (as he did in "Coole Park and Ballylee") "Another emblem there!"<sup>3</sup> Naturally Stead wants the swan to mean something, to play a role in the poem. But perhaps the major difference between the two poets is that Stead lets the swans float by without trying to explain exactly what he thinks they mean. This is poetry of approximation, not discourse.

All these echoes (and foreshadowings) work on an intellectual level, and require some knowledge of Yeats and Eliot. Nevertheless, the "Picture" works on purely sensory, intuitive and thematic levels as well. One does not need to know Yeats's poems in order to see that the swans (and the river) are beleaguered and not singing. "Dirt" weighs upon their webs, "rubbish" encumbers the drift of the water's movement. Even the smoke finds it "difficult" to move, forced to rest and sink back in the "thick air." This urban tableau evokes a wasteland even if one knows nothing of *The Waste Land*. One can feel and see movement and nature and song all weighed down and made difficult by the rubbish of modern life. This is a world where a sunset can be reduced to a crushed orange, and where the river is forced to "accept" artificial, man-made "lights":

And as the last orange of the sun was crushed  
The River accepted its lights, from Kew to Battersea  
On, winding, to the Tower.

Like the river and the poem, readers wind on into the final section and wind up with the Tower of London (resonant with blood-soaked deeds), winter and death: "It was winter . . . / And many were dead." The images and associations are all negative, crushed, weighed down and dying.

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<sup>3</sup>This phrase has become something of a touchstone for Stead in his increasing attacks on Yeats's methods of representation, and what he sees as "The priority of symbol over fact in much of his work" (*AL* 11; see also *AL* 32 and *PYE* 342).

However, just as everything seems to submit quietly to the forces of winter and death, movement and life suddenly return:

It was winter, the year '58,  
 And many were dead. But into the same heart and out  
 Through channels of stone and light, the blood still pulsed—  
 Carried me with it down New Oxford Street  
 Through Soho to the whirling clock of the Circus,  
 Then down, on to the bridge.

This surprising return has already been prepared for thematically. Throughout the poem, when all seems dead, when people despair, music resurrects itself and pulses anew. In section I, for instance, Mozart provides a bubbling, uplifting counterpoint to the palpable tension of the couple. Similarly, at the point when Wilde is “lynched” and Garnett gives up hope, Yeats, Pound and Eliot arise to counter that despair. So in the final section, just as sunset, winter and death seem about to overcome the poem, the form and content shift away to surprise the reader. “But,” Stead tells us, after leaping away from the Tower and the left margin, “the blood still pulsed.” Amidst the stillness—the “stone,” the “freezing” and the “middle-poised” train—appears the music and movement of the old man:

Then down, on to the bridge. The snow was freezing.  
 A train stood middle-poised beside the footpath  
 Above the water. And in a corner, hunched,  
 An old man's unsheathed fingers struggled to revive  
 The dead years on a battered violin.

Much of the poem enacts a recurring relationship between atrophy and movement, with the latter appearing most often in the theme of music and the revitalising of tradition. For every death, for every death force, for every Newbolt and Victoria and “their fashions,” there is an old man—or a young poet—a figure struggling to revive music and “the dead years.” Dense allusions support this theme, but they do not carry it. To dismiss the poem as a collection of “pious allusions,” as Smithyman did in “Singing to the Ancestors” (38), is to miss the point of its music. Stead does convey his themes in part by alluding to other poets, but those themes also come through his own imagery, his juxtapositions, and his use of form.

In accordance with the principle of aggregation, Stead places those juxtapositions together without any gloss or explanatory statement. However, Stead's dismissal of narrative and logic does not involve a dismissal of unity. He contends that the fragments in a modernist poem, such as "Pictures in a Gallery," aggregate and accrue meaning through the imaginative participation of the reader. Stead also argues that some measure of "unity and coherence" (*GC* 149) can be found in Charles Olson's concept of a 'Field.' Where the elements in a mosaic prove difficult to place, recognition of 'Field' can offer some assistance to the reader.

## 2. 'Field': Grazing in Stead's Paddock.

In "Projective Verse" (1950), Olson promotes any poet who "works in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the 'old' base of the non-projective" (16). Olson felt that 'Field' provided a new, idiosyncratic framework for the poem. Instead of following forms available to all poets—preset metrical patterns—a writer who follows his or her individual 'Field' will achieve a form unique to that particular poem and that particular writer. In Olson's view, form thus becomes guided by the writer's personal speech patterns and breath units; it becomes internal and organic rather than artificial and externally imposed:

any poet who departs from closed form . . . involves a whole series of new recognitions. From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. (16)

In Stead's view, Olson's concept of 'Field' composition offers one way of describing the practice of early modernists, such as Ezra Pound.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>While Stead makes use of Olson's criticism, he has never been much attracted to Olson's practice as a poet. He criticizes Olson's poetry in an interview with Harry Ricketts (111) as well as in the "Craft Interview," where he cites a difference in "temperament": "I enjoy some of Olson's work, but on the whole I'm not enthusiastic about him. . . . He seems to me a strange mix—a rather flat, colourless poet, but at the same time nervous, twitchy. . . . I suppose I mean it's a very mannered kind of writing—hypertensive poetry, and it puts my blood pressure up to read it. It's an anxious kind of poetry" (451).

Olson's organic approach appeals to Stead, who believes that "if poetry come not as naturally as the leaves to the tree it might as well not come at all" (*GC* 273).<sup>5</sup> When questioned about "technical matters" in the "Craft Interview," Stead offered the following as his credo: "'Don't work on the poem, work on yourself. Your self will write the poem.' This is a sort of Zen Buddhist attitude to writing poetry, and in fact a lot of other things, that I've always had" (452).<sup>6</sup> Stead feels that 'Field' composition helps him to facilitate this approach. He argues, in "From Wystan to Carlos," that this method of construction allows poems "to have a natural unity":

Whether your basic poetic unit is the image, or the vortex, or both—insofar as the units are pure, and come from one man at one phase of his life, they will be found to cohere, to have natural unity, without artificial structural linking. The broad interests, the recurring emotional concerns, the individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the world, all these, I think, constitute what recent American poetry has called the 'Field'—and it is the Field that gives such unity and coherence as the work requires. (*GC* 149)

Where Olson remained on a very general level, Stead actually defines what he conceives the elements of a 'Field' to be: "The broad interests, the recurring emotional concerns, the individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the world." This 'Field' can help to unify a single poem or book of poems; it can even operate between separate books.

For example, some of the 'Field' and atmosphere of "Pictures in a Gallery" recurs in the final section (17) of "Quesada":

Pictures in a gallery in his brain  
Were turned facing the wall, his limbs jolted  
Coming down into a valley, night coming down  
Sun catching flax and pampas along a stream  
A church white in the foothills, the dead on his mind  
The empty world full of their singing ghosts.

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<sup>5</sup>This phrase of Keats's has become increasingly important to Stead. He cites it—in relation to the process of writing poetry—not just in "On *Quesada*," but in the "Craft Interview" (452) and *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* (336).

<sup>6</sup>See also Ricketts 119-20, where Stead repeats this credo.

In terms of engaging the reader and provoking a response, these images and juxtapositions might well be sufficient in themselves. However, an additional level of response becomes possible if one knows something of the author's 'Field.' For readers familiar with Stead's work, the words "Pictures in a gallery" can trigger a series of memories and associations.

Such a reader might recall that in the first section of "Pictures in a Gallery," "night" (and almost everything else) was "coming down" and "Pictures in a gallery undersea / Were turned facing the wall." By quoting this line, Stead invites the reader to link the two poems. After this initial docking procedure, other connections soon appear: like "Quesada," "Pictures in a Gallery" contains a persona with "the dead on his mind," who sees visions "in his brain." These visions are "full of . . . singing ghosts," the ghosts of dead poets such as Wilde, Hueffer, Yeats, Pound and Eliot. They sing in the very stones of a city that seems to be "deserted"; "the great cup of London" has tipped over and run out:

. . . all the lions and literary men of London  
 Heaping in gutters, running away in drains  
 The falling snow, the city falling.

An "empty world" appears in "Pictures in a Gallery" as well as in "Quesada," but in both poems Stead presents music as an alternative to the emptiness. He gives singing—even the singing of ghosts—the potential to fill an empty place, to prop up a falling city. In "Pictures in a Gallery," where almost everything seems to be "falling . . . descending, dissolving," and "running away in drains," music is one of the few things that rises. In section I, the notes "beat" wings and "took off" like birds, moving "up through the watery air / Of London." Later in the poem, "Songs on the night" rise "above a quarrel of barrow wheels" and "Hueffer" (a poet) "ascended" from the street. Finally, in the street, "An old man's unsheathed fingers struggled to revive / The dead years on a battered violin" (emphases added).

All these similarities and echoes reveal the operation of a 'Field.' Emptiness and the things that can fill it (from music to the ghosts of the dead); the need to be aware of and

connected to one's surroundings—these are some of “the recurring emotional concerns” that preoccupy Stead when he writes poetry. Another preoccupation is his “broad interest” in modernism and its icons. As MacDonald P. Jackson says—in his introduction to the poetry section of *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Writing Since 1945*—“The wraiths of many poets, living and dead, haunt Stead’s pages” (xxix). These haunting presences manifest one element of Stead’s ‘Field’: his reverence for and reference to modernist poets and their texts. He repeatedly invokes the spectres of Pound and Eliot in particular. Pound glides through “Pictures in a Gallery” in his distinctive “billiard cloth trousers” and “single blue ear-ring.” His presence can also be felt in “Quesada,” but in a more subtle fashion: when Stead lists his poetic models in section 9, “Make it new” repeats one of Pound’s manifestos.

Eliot appears in both poems as well. In “Pictures in a Gallery” he shows up quite literally as “old Possum.”<sup>7</sup> Stead also makes use of Eliot in a number of allusions, most of which are to the seduction scene (and its aftermath) in “The Fire Sermon.” In Eliot’s poem, this scene begins “At the violet hour,” when the typist comes home and “lights / Her stove.” Like the woman in section I of Stead’s poem, she looks “Out of the window” and sees “the sun’s last rays.” The light may have changed from “violet” to “orange,” but in both scenes a woman is “Upstairs” at sunset, confronting a man. Eliot’s picture concludes as follows:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
 . . . and  
 Paces about her room again, alone,  
 She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
 And outs a record on the gramophone.

‘This music crept by me upon the waters’  
 And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.

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<sup>7</sup>‘Old Possum’ was Pound’s nickname for Eliot, which Eliot later acknowledged by titling his collection of whimsical of cat poems *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939).

This part of “The Fire Sermon” shares a number of parallels with the opening of Stead’s poem: both involve a room with a “window,” a “glass” and a “gramophone”; both contain women who walk about the room, light the gas, touch their hair and play a record.

For his part, the man—like Tiresias in Eliot’s poem—will soon have “walked among . . . the dead.” Stead also echoes Eliot’s “along the Strand” (in section III) and “up Queen Victoria” (the figurative sense of her presentation in section II). It is as if Stead took a moment from *The Waste Land* as his starting point for all these odd surfacings of history, literature and people; however, one cannot say how conscious all these echoes might be. The typist scene (ll. 215-56) and its musical coda (ll. 257-65) were certainly favourites of Stead’s at the time, and were probably fresh in his mind from his reading at Bristol University that led to *The New Poetic*. In that book, Stead examines “a short passage from *The Waste Land*,” involving solely these two sections. Indeed, he quotes the musical coda in its entirety twice in the space of two pages, calling it “one of the most beautiful lyric passages in the poem” (164).

Stead also alludes to *The Waste Land* in “Quesada.” In section 17 of the latter, a questing figure hears music and sees a white church beside a river. These images recall “The Fire Sermon,” even as Stead juxtaposes them to a rural New Zealand scene of “Sun catching flax and pampas along a stream.” In this final section of “Quesada,” Stead employs not only the inexplicable splendour of “A church white,” but also the various voices of thunder speaking over and over. His repetition of “Thunder” echoes both the form and content of “What the Thunder Said,” the final section of Eliot’s most famous long poem:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
 The shouting and the crying  
 Prison and palace and reverberation  
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
 . . . dry sterile thunder without rain (ll.322-42; emphases added)

By employing the device of anaphora in the first few lines, Eliot uses repetition to build a sense of expectation in the reader, which is at last partially fulfilled by the arrival of thunder. The “thunder of spring” in turn produces an expectation of rain, which eventually comes:

a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust  
 Bringing rain. . . .  
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
 Then spoke the thunder (ll.394-400)

The word “thunder” flashes repeatedly through part V of *The Waste Land* like a neon sign of hope, until finally rain brings the Ganges to flood and thunder speaks in a series of parallel phrases (DA Datta, DA Dayadhvam, DA Damyata, Shantih shantih shantih).

Like *The Waste Land*, “Quesada” is a long poem full of unexplained juxtapositions, the final section of which concludes with the many-faceted voices of thunder bringing spring rain to dry mountains, floods to the fields and hope to the defeated:

Owl in the poplar candles, a pheasant dead on the road  
 Thunder over the treeless mountain burned brown by summer  
 Thunder over the flooded fields, thunder over the dunes  
 Thunder over the darkened ocean shafted with light  
 Thunder in the long line of the surf breaking against an offshore wind  
 Thunder in the long line  
 Exaltation in the defeated heart of Quesada.

The thunder speaks to all, in all areas, in a voice whose rolling reverberations Stead echoes with a repetitive, chant-like structure. The form and content at this point in the poem, because they are reminiscent of “What the Thunder Said,” both reveal the ‘Field’ of one of Stead’s “broad interests.”

However, there are other areas of ‘Field’ at work in this stanza. By itself, “a pheasant dead on the road” might be an image of death and decay but, in the context of this poem, it becomes transformed into an image of (paradoxical) potential. Traces of memory connect the pheasant and the road back to section 8, where Quesada said farewell to Dulcinea:

Saying goodbye

In the flooded courtyard  
 He gave her a quill plucked  
 From a pheasant dead on the road.  
 She was to write him a poem.

Thus, in the 'Field' of this particular work, "a pheasant dead on the road" becomes a source of new life and new art. It connects the lovers and gives birth not just to a poem, but to a poem within a poem. As these details accrue, so too does the reader's knowledge of Stead's 'Field': the way that art can deny and transform death establishes itself as one of the author's "recurring emotional concerns." One can see this concern recurring in section 12:

He has taken her breastbone for a flute  
 On her skull's cave he has painted  
 The Bulls of Lascaux.

Where a feather produced and became part of a poem, bones lend themselves to the creation of both music and painting. In these ways, death—in spite of itself—becomes part of the process of, not just one, but three of the fine arts. Stead also alludes to the transformation of a woman's breastbone into a musical instrument in "Pictures in a Gallery," so this particular interest—this element of his 'Field'—is not confined to "Quesada."<sup>8</sup>

The "Thunder" section of "Quesada" displays another aspect of Stead's 'Field': his fascination with the malleable nature of perceptions and words. When the poet's eye shifts from the land to the sea, the "darkened ocean" becomes a mirror to the sky, reflecting and refracting its lightning into deep shafts of light. Stead's appreciation of the way perceptions can shift and morph then turns from setting to language. Literal thunder becomes figurative as the surf hits the beach, and little inverted shafts of lightning are implied in "an offshore wind" lifting spray up into the air. After this image comes another shift, as the figurative thunder of surf becomes the figurative thunder of the poem itself, rolling through the long lines of "Quesada." One final shift occurs as the poet turns his ear to the "heart of Quesada," thundering in "exaltation." This Steadian play with language lifts the stanza

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<sup>8</sup>See the discussion of "Binnorie" in Part 5.

beyond pastiche, revealing the 'Field' of this particular author's "individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the world."

This kind of play also occurs in "Pictures in a Gallery," where Stead revels in the suggestive multiplicity of "language . . . used at maximum stretch" (*GC* 154). For example, he enables an apparently simple phrase—"snow falls . . . / On all the lions and literary men of London"—to contain a number of levels of meaning. On a literal level, the "lions" represent the decorative beasts Stead would have seen all over London, from the stone lions at Buckingham Palace to the "little lions on the railings" at the British Museum (*Ford* 51). However, the close proximity of "literary men" causes the two concepts to meld together, creating a third concept, that of the literary lion. Thus the phrase works on a figurative level, referring to persons of literary celebrity. These are usually older, established figures such as Newbolt, but this concept might also include the younger ones that Ford remembered from 1914, when "Ezra and his gang of young lions raged through London" (399). Finally, the phrase operates on a proverbial level as well. The "lions" are all the sights worth seeing in town, a maxim derived from the "custom of showing country visitors the lions formerly kept in the Tower of London" (*OED*). Stead's careful placement of words makes the reader see in turn "the lions," "lions and literary men," and "all the lions . . . of London." This suggestive phrasing lets the words refer to three things—literal lions, figures of celebrity, and a proverb about great sights—all especially apt for the setting of London. Stead's poetry often reveals a joy in the possibilities of language, in the way that words can twist and combine, producing phrases that are at once economical and multi-layered.

Stead also enjoys defamiliarizing clichés, transforming them into something rich and strange. His use of the proverb about 'seeing the lions' is one example; another might be his twist on the common expression 'there's nothing in the papers.' In section V, Stead has a character take this expression literally: he waves a newspaper and cries out "there's nothing in it." Stead pushes the phrase to its logical extreme, making the character actually return the paper to its vendor and demand his money back. The same section begins with another

apparent cliché: “Wilde had been lynched.” To lynch someone (at least in the polite British society that Wilde inhabited) meant to ruin their reputation and their life. Stead plays with this concept, stretching it to its literal limit by having Wilde’s head hacked off and exhibited throughout the city:

Wilde had been lynched. His head, grown larger, grinned from  
the Tower of London,  
Swung by its hair under the Marble Arch,  
And looked out from the point of a spear down Constitution Hill.

The Tower, the Marble Arch and Constitution Hill were all, at various times, places where the decapitated remains of criminals might be displayed as a warning to other transgressors. Having imagined the course of Wilde’s head, Stead goes on to describe the fate of his body:

South of the River they were roasting him slowly on a spit,  
And in Knightsbridge several of the best families dined delicately  
on his battered parts.  
He, in Reading, enjoyed the debauch by proxy

Once again, Stead shifts a cliché into overdrive by defamiliarizing it, pressing the phrase ‘to dine on him for weeks’ towards its graphic and literal worst. This extreme is absurd and yet horribly appropriate, because it shows how killing gossip can be. Even before his trial concluded, Wilde was cut by all but his closest friends.<sup>9</sup> The playwright was deserted and sent to Coventry (as well as “Reading” Gaol) by the fashionable people of South London and Knightsbridge. The majority of these people, who had once applauded and lionized Wilde, turned on him virtually overnight. Stead takes this figurative lynching and brings out its undertones of summary execution and even cannibalism. He has a fruitful habit of peeling clichés and cutting them open in order to reveal unforeseen layers of possibilities.

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<sup>9</sup>In 1895, Wilde was charged with indecency and sodomy—which in England “ranked only one step below murder” (Ellmann 458). The judge declared (with scant impartiality) that “It is the worst case I have ever tried.” Before the trial ended, Wilde’s house and goods were auctioned off, while family, fortune and reputation were all stripped from him. His condemnation was as widespread as it was hypocritical; after his sentencing, prostitutes danced in the street. During two years of hard labour, Wilde lost health and happiness. He died shortly after his release. See appendix for a contemporary view of the trial.

This punning and playing with words suggests another element of Stead's 'Field': his distinctive sense of humour. Because most critics seem to focus on his 'intelligence' and the nature of his allusions, this humorous element in Stead's writing has been little discussed. As Gregory O'Brien commented, in *Moments of Invention: Portraits of 21 New Zealand Writers*, "It's not surprising Stead has been described by more than one critic as being 'too clever' and 'too knowing at his craft'. His eloquence has been taken for detachment" (77-78). However, Stead's sheer joy in the multiplicity of words can surface and provoke laughter in the most unlikely of contexts. He analyses this method of mixing registers in the "Craft Interview":

I'm given to what you might call variously jokes or wit in poetry, which is again kind of a breach of the romantic peace; because people are inclined to think that you can't laugh and be serious, or you can't be witty and feel deeply, whereas I think the reverse is true. . . . I'm inclined to think that this going backwards and forwards between wit and emotional resonance is more convincing; it's a truer representation of the complexities of a feeling mind. (458)

This humour permeates most of Stead's writing, even more serious works such as "Pictures in a Gallery." This poem's combination of "wit and emotional resonance" makes it much more than the "pious" exercise that Smithyman felt it to be.

For example, one might expect Stead to present Yeats—the hero of *The New Poetic*—in a pious fashion. However, bedtime for Yeats (in section V) takes on aspects of a modern situation comedy:

Drew down the dim blind of Olivia's hair  
And dreamed of a great bird. Then woke  
Calling 'Maud. Maud.' But the room was empty.

And Yeats

Yeats loves two women, "Olivia" and "Maud." He sleeps with Olivia, but he can't stop thinking about Maud. He starts with one woman, moves to another, and ends up with neither. The love life of this famous lyric poet was not without its aspects of farce. He proposed to Maud Gonne many times before turning aside, briefly, to an affair with Olivia Shakespear, deciding that (as he put it in his *Memoirs*) "after all, if I could not get the woman I loved, it

would be a comfort even but for a little while to devote myself to another" (85). Yeats was soon to repeat this pattern: when Maud turned down what must have seemed like his hundredth proposal of marriage, he turned around and proposed to her daughter. Stead captures some of the farcical elements in Yeats's private life, and then ends on a nicely ambiguous note: "But the room was empty." Life is never as simple as farce, and this final phrase hovers between comedy and the tragedy of a lover waking up alone. This attempt to render the complexity of the moment—rather than to simplify it—is a part of Stead's 'Field,' one of his characteristic "ways of looking at the world."

Stead also makes complex use of Yeats's propensity for dreaming and seeing visions. He uses the "dream . . . of a great bird" to mark the transition from "Olivia" to "Maud," and to hint at Yeats's preference for the latter. Yeats often associated Maud Gonne with great birds. In his poem "Friends," he gives her an "eagle look," capable of gazing proudly into the sun without a single blink; in "His Phoenix" she braves the refining fire and outshines all rivals. Both these birds and poems probably fall within Stead's frame of reference, but in the context of Yeats's "dream" (and the fact that swans are the only birds mentioned in "Pictures in a Gallery") the most prominent allusion may well be to the "swan" in "Among School Children":

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
Above a sinking fire. . . .  
I look upon one child or t'other there  
And wonder if she stood so at that age —  
For even daughters of the swan can share  
Something of every paddler's heritage —  
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,  
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
She stands before me as a living child.

Here are all the elements of Stead's picture: Yeats's "dream," "a great bird" and "Maud" Gonne.<sup>10</sup> There are also the sensual overtones (he is "driven wild" at the very thought of Maud) which may well explain Yeats's anxious awakening. In Stead's poem, Olivia's

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<sup>10</sup>Frank Kermode glosses "Ledaean" as "Helen-like, referring to Helen the daughter of Leda. The reverie is of Maud Gonne" (*Modern British Literature* 198).

presence heightens these overtones, while her absence (and that of Maud) heightens the pathos of a lonely man's dream. In art, as in life, Maud has cancelled Olivia out, leaving Yeats alone and pining for both.

Alongside the pathos lies Stead's ubiquitous sense of humour. He takes the idea of Yeats dreaming "of a Ledaean body" and plays with the concept. The non-specific nature of the "great bird" allows the image to contain both the Ledaean body of Maud Gonne and the implied source of all such bodies in Leda, who was raped by a giant swan (the god Zeus in anthropomorphic form). Yeats's anxiety may be at the thought of Maud's Ledaean body being taken by someone else. Stead then moves Yeats beyond the dream and has him wake up crying Maud's name. The implication that Maud Gonne—in Yeats's dreams—was at once "a Ledaean body" and "a great bird" (modern British slang for an attractive woman) is too delicious to pass up. The lines may also allude to *The Pisan Cantos*, where Pound too made an imaginative connection between Maud and a great bird, (b)rogueishly merging two of Yeats's passions:

as old Billyum found out in Oireland  
                   in the Senate, Bedad! or before then  
                   Your gunmen thread on moi drreams  
                   O woman shapely as a swan,  
 Your gunmen tread on my dreams (80/74)<sup>11</sup>

Even if these implications are not all present in Stead's lines, his image of Yeats waking up and repetitively calling Maud's name certainly reveals the poet's central obsession. Yeats's 'wake-up call' adds a coda to the dream that is at once plaintive and whimsical. Unrequited love can be tragic torture, but it can also make fools out of us all.

Eliot does not escape this touch of whimsy. When Stead describes "old Possum hackneying past in a bowler to his funeral at the bank," one can see Stead's idiosyncratic

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<sup>11</sup>References to *The Cantos* will contain the Canto number followed by the page number of the quotation (thus Canto 80/page 74). Pound adjusts Yeats's early, idealised picture of Maud by inserting "gunmen" into a line from his limpid, courtly love poem "He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven."

vision of language allowing him to mint all sorts of new coinage. Writers do not normally employ “Hackneying” as a verb, but used in this way it captures the shuddering pomposity of a man who tried to out-English the English. The effect of this word, as well as the focus on details such as a bowler hat, a hired coach and his job at Lloyds Bank, enable Stead to sketch a picture of Eliot that reveals both his obsession with all things English and his yearning to be accepted by a certain element of English society.<sup>12</sup>

Stead’s choice and placement of words supports his careful selection of detail. For example, by using the words “in a bowler” instead of the more complete phrase ‘dressed in a bowler’ or ‘wearing a bowler,’ he allows the words to hint at the ridiculous sight of Eliot actually riding by “in” an enormous bowler hat. The dreamlike nature of the “Pictures” turns almost surreal at this point. Stead also allows a double meaning to explode like a landmine beneath the concept of a poet who is “hackneying.” Language becomes hackneyed when made “common or trite by indiscriminate use” (*OED*) and—in Stead’s opinion—Eliot was guilty of “hackneying” in his later poetry. Stead views this use of language as a form of poetic death, and his use of the word “funeral” evokes something of what he sees as the tragedy of Eliot’s career.

However, Stead does not paint Eliot in entirely negative tones. The jocular nickname “Old Possum” serves to humanize this figure, hinting at the complexity of the man beneath the uniform. In addition, some sympathy might be implicit in the word “funeral”: by linking this word with “the bank,” Stead acknowledges that the repetitive nature of Eliot’s job must have involved a kind of creative death.<sup>13</sup> Eliot lost a lot of writing time during seven years at Lloyds of London (only during his leave of absence for a breakdown—and

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<sup>12</sup>As Eliot put it in his ‘Preface’ to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, he wanted to join the ranks of those who were “classicist . . . royalist . . . and anglo-catholic” (ix).

<sup>13</sup>A similar kind of ‘funeral’ awaits Curl Skidmore in *All Visitors Ashore*. The repetitive work and long hours as a machine moulder in a factory have the effect of pushing the “books to be written” out of his head: “he is here all day, the sacred scrolls of fiction so shaken and jolted by the machine that there are times when . . . he finds them mixed or blurred, one spool running into the other and both fading into an obscurity . . .” (62-63).

recovery—could he draft and type much of *The Waste Land*, at Margate, Lausanne and Paris). Pound and Vivien Eliot certainly saw the poor pay and long hours as inhibiting the Possum's poetic output, and they tried their best to get him out of the job.<sup>14</sup> Eliot's own view of office life can be seen in "The Burial of the Dead," where each day in the "Unreal City" begins "With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine." Eliot pointed out, rather wistfully, that this was "A phenomenon which I have often noticed." Hugh Kenner even goes so far as to argue (in a book Stead cites in *The New Poetic*) that Eliot's breakdown in 1921 was at least partly caused by "the conditions of his servitude to a bank in London" (*The Invisible Poet* 145). Eliot's friends felt that the job was killing him as a person and a poet.

Stead imports some of this concern into his poem through the concept of a "funeral." He may also be alluding to Canto 80, where Pound looks back on his literary life in London and mourns the passing of the "British Museum era": after 1914, Pound opined, "mysterious figures" and buildings around Russell Square "died into banking" (80/84). Hence the "funeral at the bank"—like "hackneying" and the "bowler"—works simultaneously on a number of levels. As Elizabeth Caffin states, "Stead is absolutely precise in his choice of words, with puns and allusions doing double time" (Sturm 408). In the space of one line, Stead manages to convey both criticism and sympathy for Eliot. This way of looking at people, this mixture of humour and pathos, this appreciation of complexity in language and in life—all constitute a part of Stead's idiosyncratic 'Field.'

Thus "Pictures in a Gallery" and "Quesada" exemplify the accretion of elements in a 'Field.' Both poems reveal "The broad interests, the recurring emotional concerns" of the author, as well as showcasing his "individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the

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<sup>14</sup>Eliot joined Lloyds Bank in March 1917. "In mid-1917 Mrs. Eliot reported to Pound that her husband had done no work of the kind that augments vortices . . . He returned daily from the bank and fell into a leaden slumber until bedtime" (Kenner, *The Pound Era* 288). By June 1920, "Ezra Pound wrote to Quinn, 'It is a crime against literature to let him waste eight hours per diem in that bank', and in July he initiated a scheme in which four or five people would raise between them £400 per year to subsidise Eliot and allow him to leave the bank. But the scheme . . . came to nothing" (Ackroyd 101).



When the scene shifts “Upstairs,” so too does the line. This line break operates much like a traditional break between stanzas or blank verse paragraphs—it signals a change in topic or focus. However, traditional form demands a predetermined number of lines or syllables between such breaks. In direct contrast, “Pictures in a Gallery” eschews set form, following instead the poet’s idiosyncratic shifts in perspective and units of breath. Thus the appearance of the lines depends entirely on how Stead sees, hears and says them in his head. When he wants the reader’s voice and eyes to pause, he inserts a line break.

The next part of section I shows this governing principle in action. In visual terms, a camera has zoomed back from the trees and the light outside in order to focus on the woman in the room. Each line (and its punctuation) marks a stage in that camera’s progress:

Upstairs, she lit the gas,  
And drew bright curtains on the whitened eaves,  
And said (her hand above the slowly turning disc)  
‘I shall never go back’.

The reader’s eyes follow the movements of her hands, from lighting the gas, to drawing the curtains, to hovering over “the slowly turning disc.” Finally, she speaks, but her companion’s attention (and the reader’s) is caught by—and follows—the music. A line break marks this movement, as the camera (and the soundtrack) shift away from the woman:

‘I shall never go back’.  
Mozart in the delicate air  
Slid from her glass, beat vainly against the cushions,  
Then took off gladly across the deserted Square.

Thus the line break enacts a shift in focus, from the actual motion of the woman to the imagined movement of the music. The break also distinguishes between two types of sound by separating them visually: Stead places the sound of her voice beside—and yet sets it apart

from—the music of Mozart. In this way, Stead’s use of form allows the music to capture both the eyes and ears of the reader.<sup>15</sup>

However—and here Stead sets a crucial theme in motion—the music seems to disappear. It will recur within six lines, but in the meantime the woman’s voice takes over:

‘You too must stay’ (loosening her sun-bleached hair)  
‘You more than I—you will defeat their fashions.’

Following her voice comes a carefully spaced, symmetrically isolated line. Like a white shark in an aquarium, that line is surrounded by an impressive distancing that immediately alerts the viewer. After the steadily increasing shoals of three, then four, then five lines, this single line arrests the vision:

‘You too must stay’ (loosening her sun-bleached hair)  
‘You more than I—you will defeat their fashions.’

Invisible fins guided her to my chair.

Pictures in a gallery undersea  
Were turned facing the wall, and the corridors were endless;  
But in the marine distance, floating always beyond me,  
A girl played Mozart on her sun-bleached hair.

The isolated line manages simultaneously to divide and link the change from her speech / to his sight (or feeling) of her movement / to his thoughts about her.

The scoring of speech patterns is not simply a visual way of encoding shifts in focus, content and meaning. In addition to the visual factor, a musical element operates in these lines. This music is not governed by any preset metre, but neither is it simply random. Generally speaking, flexible units of breath govern Stead’s line length: at any time those units can be broken (or extended) in order to achieve certain aural, visual or conceptual effects.

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<sup>15</sup>Like Pound, Yeats and Eliot, Mozart was one of Stead’s idols in the 1950s. In Stead’s semi-autobiographical novel about this period—*All Visitor’s Ashore*—the narrator remembers his younger self playing his favourite records, and Mozart’s Night Music is one (or, in those days, four) of them: “You spent the day reading and listening to records . . . the ‘Eine Kleine Nacht’ music on four sides of 45s, one side for each movement . . .” (142).

For example, the lines of this opening section hover between six to twelve syllables in length, until the section opens out into “endless corridors” and a “marine distance.” These two lines swell out into fourteen and fifteen syllables, embodying the sudden increase in space. Similarly, the longest line in this section—“So that wherever I walked on that long haul, midnight to dawn”—evokes the length of the walk, a walk that will encompass both time and space as the streets of London, their history and the poet’s imagination all run together. Conversely, the shortest line contracts into two frozen leaves, curling up and marshalling their remaining powers against the surrounding winter: “Tenacious in frost.”

A flexible line length is not the only musical adjustment that Stead makes in his move away from preset forms. He also scores individual words, not to meet a metrical pattern but to match their subject matter and to help the reader visualize (hear and ‘see’) the images. For instance, when Mozart is “in the delicate air” or sliding “from her glass,” weak stresses are prevalent, darting around with the notes. However, when the notes “beat vainly” and “Then took off gladly,” strong stresses come to the fore, enacting the more emphatic wing motion of the verbs. In direct contrast, the varied motion of the music slams up against the slow spondees of the woman’s speech: “‘You too must stay . . . / You more than I—you will defeat their fashions.’” Thus Stead enables the placement, movement and contrasts of words to have a musical effect without having to conform to a preset rhythm.

Stead employs rhyme in a similar way:

So that wherever I walked on that long haul, midnight to dawn,  
 Stones of a sunken city woke, and passed the word,  
 And slept behind me; but the notes were gone,  
 Vanished like bubbles up through the watery air  
 Of London, nor would again be heard.

Many of the lines in this poem are end-rhymed, but not in any regular or recognizably traditional scheme. As in “Prufrock” and “The Hollow Men,” the rhymes usually sneak up on readers and surprise them. Hence the word “air” (quoted above) seems to be freefloating and unconnected; but then one sees and hears its links back to “hair” in the previous part,

“chair” in the part before that, and then “Square,” “air” and “hair” in the part before that. Like music in the poem as a whole, rhymes surface unexpectedly, forcing readers to make connections and see links where initially there seemed to be none. Thus—before it vanishes across the “Square”—the Mozart “air” connects to the woman’s “hair,” and both impact upon the man in the “chair.” Then, in his imagination, the “air” is played on the “hair” itself, as if on a violin, before it enters the “air” and seems to vanish once more, this time forever.<sup>16</sup> Later in the poem, though, another woman will unbind her “hair,” and more “Songs on the night” (a little ‘night music,’ perhaps?) will be “spent.” These more distant echoes form conceptual rhymes; beautiful things, it seems, never really disappear forever, they just live on in different forms. Thus rhyme moves through this poem like leitmotifs through “The Rites of Spring”—its irregular music coheres not in preset, expected patterns, but in the connections made by the minds and ears of individual listeners.

Stead tried to describe this “element of music” when he looked back on “Pictures in a Gallery” in “A Poet’s View” in 1974:

If I say the music of poetry is the prime vehicle of feeling and the true fabric of imagination, I mean by ‘music’, not merely the way the words are gathered into groups to create a texture of sound, not merely how that texture moment by moment is relating to an overall sound structure, but in addition, how those sound patterns affect, and shape, and space out, and regulate, our rational apprehension, and our visualization of the images placed before us word by word, phrase by phrase, line by line. The whole business is so dense and so simultaneous, the mind staggers trying to comprehend it; and the totality of elements could only receive expression in something that might look, in fact, very like a score for a full symphony orchestra. (GC 266)

Nevertheless, despite these large claims for the poem, the visual and musical scoring of “Pictures in a Gallery” seems tentative when compared with that of some of Stead’s later works. End-rhymes in this poem—though they do not follow a preset scheme—are at least used more often than not. The only exception is the final section, which approximates to a

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<sup>16</sup>In the hair, the music and the situation, Stead is probably using “some echoes of Eliot for particular effect.” First he alludes to “A Game of Chess,” where a woman in an upstairs room brushes her hair while talking at a silent, musing man; second he provides a more positive version of the “music” in “What the Thunder Said,” where “A woman drew her long black hair out tight / And fiddled whisper music on those strings” (ll.378-9).

kind of blank verse. Indeed, almost all the poems in *Whether the Will is Free* alternate between regular rhyme and blank verse. “Pictures in a Gallery” begins to move away from these patterns, but not as dramatically as later poems such as “Quesada,” “Walking Westward” and “Yes T.S.”

One reason for this difference might be the “later American poets”—Ginsberg, Olson, Duncan, O’Hara and others—that Stead cites in “From Wystan to Carlos” as “the inheritors of Modernism” (141), and in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* as “the true heirs of Modernism” (328). Their influence (and that of their *Freed* followers in New Zealand) must have encouraged Stead to experiment further with ‘scoring’ techniques than he could have thought possible in the 1950s. In his critical work of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Stead is careful to acknowledge these postmodern influences. He also singles out Roger Horrocks’s “survey of various kinds of experimentalism in modern poetry” for giving him “a renewed feeling of excitement about purely technical matters” (*GC* 275). All these new influences help to explain why “Pictures in a Gallery” looks so different when compared with Stead’s later long poems. On a purely visual level, the former would not look out of place beside some of the earliest works of modernism (such as *The Waste Land* or “The Hollow Men”), whereas the latter are definitely products of a postmodern environment. “Pictures in a Gallery” may be a paradigm of Stead’s modernist practice but, in the area of visual ‘scoring,’ it represents only his first tentative steps towards the open form advocated in “From Wystan to Carlos.”

Of course, the principles articulated in “From Wystan to Carlos” cannot all be applied retrospectively. As shown in the previous chapter, this second prescription was not wholly articulated in *The New Poetic*. The “scoring of speech patterns” is something more visual than Pound’s injunction “to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase not in the sequence of a metronome.” Pound was against strict metres, and attempting the “organic form” that Stead recognized in *The New Poetic* (and tried to follow in “Pictures in a Gallery”). What is missing from the modernist principles of *The New Poetic* (and the poetic practice of “Pictures in a Gallery”) is the ‘open form’ placement of words anywhere on the

page—where following the music of the breath can mean the possibility of words moving outside the limits of lines and margins. For Stead, this visual element, and its critical definition, came later.

Thus, visual ‘scoring’ appears to be rudimentary in “Pictures in a Gallery” simply because it was not yet a fully developed part of Stead’s poetic. Stead does not begin to really play with margins and visual placement until he writes “Quesada,” particularly sections 6, 9 and 11.<sup>17</sup> Section 9 marks the first occasion that Stead avoids returning to the left margin by default after one indented line. This development continues in “Woken,” “Cinquains at a Poetry Workshop” and “Breaking the Neck,” where Stead begins experimenting with the double margin (later used so effectively in “Yes T.S.”). In “Pictures in a Gallery,” Stead employs a great variety of forms, line lengths and line breaks, but nothing approaching the visual ‘scoring’ of this later work. I would argue that the visual aspect of this prescription is the one that Stead owes most to American developments in the 1960s and the *Freed* group.

#### **4. Approximation: “a carefully judged incompleteness as a way of engaging the reader in the action of poetry itself.”**

While Stead had only begun to experiment with visual element of ‘scoring’ at the end of the 1950s, his use (and critical conception) of approximation was more fully developed. Approximation was, and remains, Stead’s main prescription: that poetry should present and not explain, that discourse and conclusions are to be avoided, and that poems be left open for the reader to engage in the creative act. One way to illustrate Stead’s use of this principle is to compare his poetry of the period (in “Pictures in a Gallery”) with his discourse (in *The New Poetic*). Both were written at around the same time and include many of the same characters and sources. However, in one Stead writes explanatory prose that demolishes public poetry and concludes that Pound, Yeats and Eliot are the “true poets”; in the other he writes a work of modernist approximation that avoids explicit conclusions.

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<sup>17</sup>Stead acknowledges, in “On *Quesada*,” that “The idea for the ‘double poem’—section 11—came straight from Horrocks” (*GC* 275).

By way of example, sections II and V of "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" are very close in setting and content to chapter three of *The New Poetic*. In that chapter ("1909-1916: Poets and their Public"), Stead criticizes the literary lions of the day for kowtowing to public opinion; he derides their verse as mere jingoism, calling it "more damaging to literature" than any other type of poetry (71). In the course of this attack, Stead's references are dominated by two books (often set in opposition): *The Later Life and Letters of Sir Henry Newbolt*<sup>18</sup> and Ford Madox Ford's *Return to Yesterday*. Newbolt's book represents "the established poets" (55, 56) of the Edwardian years. These poets were didactic defenders of the status quo, carrying out a rearguard action on behalf of imperialism, Victorian attitudes and the (by 1906) ousted Conservative Party. In direct contrast, Ford's book constitutes an appreciation of writers such as Wilde and Pound, voices in the wilderness during the years of the public poets.

The most popular of these public poets were Rudyard Kipling, W.E. Henley, William Watson, Alfred Noyes, Alfred Austin and Henry Newbolt. This group of men represents a kind of rogues' gallery for Stead, and he lists them repeatedly in chapter three. Throughout the chapter there are a number of variations on this list, but one name consistently appears. Stead's roll-call begins with an attack on "one of the great 'names' in English poetry of the day (Maurice Hewlett)" for praising a new book of poems by "another, more important (Henry Newbolt)" (49). From Hewlett and Newbolt, the list quickly expands to include "Newbolt . . . Kipling . . . Watson . . . [and] Noyes" (50). "But," Stead goes on to argue, "perhaps the best illustration of the level to which poetry had sunk is . . . Newbolt" (51).<sup>19</sup> The list of straw men reappears four pages on, reduced to "William Watson, Alfred Noyes and Henry Newbolt." Next, Stead vilifies generally "writers like Newbolt" (57), while a few

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<sup>18</sup>Henceforth cited as *Later Life*.

<sup>19</sup>Stead echoes Pound's attitude here: "'The general tendency of British criticism at the time', Pound says, 'was towards utter petrification [sic] or vitrefaction [sic], and Henry Newbolt was as good an example of the best *accepted* criteria as can be unearthed'" (NP 49).

pages later he complains of “a public conditioned to the work of Kipling, Newbolt and Noyes” (61).

By the opening paragraph of chapter four, Stead feels able to look back on “Rudyard Kipling, William Watson, Henry Newbolt, and Alfreds Austin and Noyes as the men from whom the general reading public of 1909 expected to receive its poetry” (67). In his background reading for these chapters, Stead’s attention had obviously been caught by these literary lions, particularly Henry Newbolt. Newbolt’s name is the one constant in Stead’s attacks, and after a while the lists begin to sound like a biblical litany: ‘X and Y and Newbolt, and the worst of these is Newbolt.’ Upon reaching the turning point of World War One, Stead concludes his survey of the Edwardian period with a final swipe at the author of *Admirals All*:

Looking back on his life as a writer Newbolt expresses a delight in his own successes. In the present age it is difficult to take the following quotation seriously; but in the literary discourse of pre-1914 England this was unquestionably one kind of success:

‘I’ve had in the last twenty years all the satisfaction that could ever be got out of the place—I’ve written and published in *The Times*, or on public monuments, all the Trafalgar odes and commemorative verses that were wanted. . . .’ (70)

Stead repeats this pattern—a general portrait of the literary lions of the day, followed by a specific focus on Newbolt—in section II of “Pictures in a Gallery”:

On steps of the British Museum the snow falls,  
The snow falls on Bloomsbury, on Soho, on all  
Cradled in the great cup of London.  
On all the lions and literary men of London  
Heaping in gutters, running away in drains  
The falling snow, the city falling.

Snow behind iron railings, drifts, collects,  
Collects like coins in the corners of Nelson’s hat  
(Newbolt from a window in the Admiralty shouting  
‘Umbrellas for Nelson’ and waving a sheaf of odes)  
And down the long avenue.

Here is a poetic version of Newbolt offering “all the Trafalgar odes and commemorative verses that were wanted.” However, because this is approximation and not discourse, Stead does not go into what he thinks about Newbolt’s poetry. The prose statements of *The New Poetic* are replaced by images, from which readers are forced to draw their own conclusions.

Stead does not explain Newbolt's character—all that readers have to work on are his actions and their context. Thus, in the general context of the poem as a whole, Newbolt is juxtaposed and contrasted with the other poets who Stead mentions by name (Hueffer, Wilde, Pound, Yeats and Eliot). In the specific context of section II—because he is placed right beside them—readers are forced to consider Newbolt's immediate associations with the Admiralty, the imperious Queen and the literary lions of London.

On the level of his actions, Newbolt parallels the complaining man in section V, whom Stead also describes as “shouting.” What Newbolt means by yelling “‘Umbrellas for Nelson’” seems unclear, but one thing is certain: this is not very dignified or poetic behaviour. Newbolt's “shouting” (along with the Queen's imperious ‘mouthing’) is not exactly positive. Neither is an Admiralty that supports the invasion and colonization of countries such as New Zealand. The negative implications of colonial wars—as well as their ensuing (and often more notorious) ‘treaties’—are highlighted by the presence of that radioactive word “*Waitangi*.” Newbolt's placement in the Admiralty, and next to Queen Victoria, reveals how closely that poet had allied himself with the government and its military endeavours (no pun intended).

Stead portrays Newbolt with accuracy and concision, sublimating a lot of history into a single vivid image. Newbolt had begun his career by writing poems that praised the Admiralty. His most famous and best-selling volume was his first: *Admirals All and Other Poems*. This book appeared on the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar (October 21) in 1897; it celebrated English naval warfare, containing odes to Admiral Nelson and ballads such as “Drake's Drum.” The author went on to join the Council of the Navy Records Society and, in May 1908, “was invited to join the Fleet in the Channel for a week, an invitation he eagerly accepted” (Jackson 101). This expedition increased Newbolt's love for the Navy and its Admirals, prompting his *Songs of the Fleet*—which boasted such patriotic ballads as “Sailing at Dawn,” “The Middle Watch” and “The Little Admiral.” He also wrote *The Year of Trafalgar*, a book about Nelson's conduct and tactics during that battle.

Henry Newbolt became known as a poet and historian of the English Navy and—as he wrote on 9 August 1917—he was pleased when the Admiralty asked him to work directly for them: “Only one letter this morning but that’s a cheering one: from the Intelligence Department at the Admiralty asking me to write for them . . . my mission is a Publicity Stunt” (*Later Life* 236-37). He was commissioned to write a study of the Navy’s underwater achievements in World War One, *Submarine and Anti-Submarine* (1918). Newbolt went on to pen *A Naval History of the War* (1920) as well as the last two volumes of the Admiralty’s official history, *Naval Operations* (1928 and 1931). Newbolt wrote a great deal of what he himself referred to as “Admiralty propaganda” (*Later Life* 252), and his work became inextricably linked with that institution. He recalled in a letter of 10 May 1928 that his naval poems had been so successful that they prompted a special Navy ceremony: “They made me (in 1921) an honorary member of the British Navy to prevent anyone from saying that the Navy’s own poems were written by an outsider!” (*Later Life* 355-56). As Vanessa Furse Jackson concluded in her book about *The Poetry of Henry Newbolt*, “Newbolt was very often thought of, and described, as the Poet of the Fleet . . .” (102).

By putting Newbolt “in the Admiralty,” Stead places him figuratively as a public poet who spoke for such institutions. Stead also employs the irony that Newbolt, quite literally, spoke for and worked for the Admiralty. In this context, Newbolt’s praise of Nelson appears bombastic, self-serving and a little comic. Stead increases this deflation by having Newbolt speak “from a window”; this forces the reader to view Newbolt—like Queen Victoria—through a pane of glass. Stead erects visual and physical barriers between the reader and these two figures of British authority.<sup>20</sup> In direct contrast, the person appearing immediately after these characters is Scandinavian, “young and bearded.” This grandfather figure—like Pound, Eliot and the old man at the end—is met in the street; there are no barriers associated with these positive characters.

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<sup>20</sup>Compare the princess in section IV who—like Cinderella and the heroine of the film *Labyrinth*—has “Escaped from her ballroom’s glass.” This figure may also parallel Yeats’s Princess Edain: Aengus, the god of love and poetry, “kept her in a house of glass, where Yeats imagined her weaving harp strings out of her hair” (Jefferes, *Yeats’s Poems* 486).

In addition, the positive characters in section II are all (in one way or another) forebears of C.K. Stead. Pound, Yeats and Eliot are his literary ancestors, while the grandfather is his literal ancestor. As Stead would later explain in a number of prose works, his mother's father was indeed a Scandinavian sailor who emigrated from London to New Zealand:

My grandfather, Christian Karlson, after whom I was named, was a Swede who left his country as a young man, became a seaman, and finally a sea captain and never returned. ("Stockholm Diary" *AL* 265)

In "John Mulgan: A Question of Identity" (1979), Stead sketches his own biography and talks about his "Swedish/German grandfather," describing him as both a mariner and a "bearded foreigner" (*GC* 68, 89-90). This character reappears in autobiographical poems such as "April Notebook," "Sonnet 6" and "Scoria." He also surfaces in fictional versions in *Sister Hollywood* ("My grandfather was a sea captain" 151) and *The Singing Whakapapa* (where Christian Karlson becomes "Master Mariner Carl Christianson" 190). Stead's compulsive telling, re-telling and imaginings of family histories constitute another part of his 'Field.' In "Pictures in a Gallery," this "young and bearded" relative is linked—both schematically and visually—with Stead's three poetic forebears. Stead groups these four positive figures together in the final part of section II, using a telling line break to formally dissociate them from the imperialists.

Thus Newbolt's physical placement works on a number of levels. He is associated with lions and the British establishment, separated from Stead's forebears, distanced from the reader and rendered somewhat comic. This comic effect increases when the poet who set himself up as the bard of Olde England starts "shouting" instead of singing, and hawking his wares like a costermonger. The "coins in the corner of Nelson's hat" heighten the implication that Newbolt's "odes" ("in *The Times*, or on public monuments") were all bought and paid for. At the same time, the small denominations suggest that his offerings to Nelson's memory are small coin, and do not add much to the Admiral's statue or stature.

In a similarly indirect fashion, Stead also pokes fun at the sheer volume of praise poured out by public poets in the pre-war years. Newbolt has “all the . . . odes . . . that were wanted,” a whole “sheaf” of them. His cohorts, the “literary lions,” are so plentiful that they are at once snowed on and falling in drifts like snow:

. . . all the lions and literary men of London  
 Heaping in gutters, running away in drains  
 The falling snow, the city falling.

Stead does not see this plenitude as a positive thing, but he never says so explicitly. Instead, he simply places the lions alongside—and figuratively “in”—gutters and drains. This series of juxtapositions implies that the heaps of literary lions are at once connected to “The falling snow” and “the city falling.” In some part they are responsible for the lack of music in the city; they have smothered it and ruined it, even as they sought to build it up and sing its praises. The juxtaposition of these images works through approximation. These two techniques combine to create a picture of London (and its poets) that avoids didacticism and clear conclusions.

Stead’s depiction of the literary scene in London at this time coincides, not surprisingly, with that of Pound:

‘There is no town like London’, Pound wrote in a letter, ‘to make one feel the vanity of all art except the highest. To make one disbelieve in all but the most careful and conservative presentation of one’s stuff’. But his essential seriousness was to remain unrecognized during what he called ‘eight years hammering against the impenetrable adamant’. (NP 56)

Pound arrived in London during the Edwardian period, and while he may have been unrecognized on the literary scene, he was determined to alter this state of affairs. In Stead’s poem—in direct contrast to Newbolt—Pound’s presence seems full of promise and potential. His immediate context is a natural one: Stead places him outdoors (not behind glass) and associates him with “great trees” (not gutters and drains). He is also placed beside people full of action and “potency” (the grandfather, Yeats and Eliot) instead of drifting, imperious figures. Stead never actually says—as he does in *The New Poetic*—that he prefers Pound,



for the young aesthete, “the toff of the buildings.” However, he avoids the excesses of the sombrero, the droopy tie and the baggy trousers, selecting the one item that allows Yeats to appear larger than life without looking silly or foppish. Capes carry certain connotations of romantic heroism, having become unavoidably attached (for twentieth-century audiences) to characters such as the Byronic lover, Dracula, Zorro, Superman and a host of others.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Stead evokes Pound’s renegade, ‘épater les bourgeois’ character through “a single blue ear-ring.” One might compare Ford’s more detailed description in *Return to Yesterday*:

Ezra . . . would approach with the step of a dancer, making passes with a cane at an imaginary opponent. He would wear trousers made of green billiard cloth, a pink coat, a blue shirt, a tie hand-painted by a Japanese friend, an immense sombrero, a flaming beard cut to a point, and a single, large blue earring. (356-57)

Stead selects two of these details to represent Pound. Once again, he rejects the sombrero, the flashy tie and the loudest articles of clothing, concentrating instead on the aspects that might convey Pound’s striking personality without making him appear ridiculous:

And Ezra in billiard cloth trousers across the street  
Wearing an ear-ring of aquamarine,

Hard, jewel-like and colourful—in contrast to the whiteness of “snow,” “sun-bleached hair” and “waxen branches”—Pound becomes one of the bright spots in the poem. In an imagistic way, Stead captures the spirit of his subject without having to describe him at great length. Neither does Stead go on to sum up his subject’s character, as Ford’s prose account does. Ford asserts that (amongst other things) Pound was “the most erudite of poetic beings and the most poetic amongst the erudite” (357). Stead’s principle of approximation demands that he avoid such concluding statements.

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<sup>22</sup>The cape has had different connotations for different periods. At the turn of the century it was associated with aesthetes, pre-Raphaelites and poetic figures, an image fostered by the artists themselves. Like Yeats, Pound wore a cape in his early days in London; Ford “took to wearing D.G. Rosetti’s black Inverness cape” (Judd 28); even Wyndham Lewis affected an “immense black Inverness cloak” (Meyers 30).

Like the cape, the ear-ring and the billiard cloth trousers, the “bowler beneath the great trees of Russell Square” evokes a certain type of character. This set of details conjures up the less flamboyant—but no less determined—spirit of Eliot. Even before he took a job in Lloyd’s Bank, Eliot donned the English upper-middle class uniform of a bowler hat and a malacca cane.<sup>23</sup> This image clearly caught Stead’s imagination for, over twenty years after “Pictures in a Gallery,” he would still describe Eliot as “bowler-hatted and looking like the bank official he was later to become” (*PYE* 45). Eliot’s other famous occupation was as an editor at Faber. In Eliot’s time, this publishing house was located at 24 “Russell Square.” The Square also housed another attraction for many poets: the British Museum. Yeats and Ford both talk about doing research there, and Jeffrey Meyers recalls that “Pound . . . tried to be a portable substitute for the British Museum” (32). Eliot himself commented (in “Five Finger Exercises”) that “The songsters of the air repair / To the green fields of Russell Square.” As the final “songster” in sections II and V, however, Eliot appears somewhat different to his predecessors. In both sections, as in life, he is the last of the three to appear on the literary scene in London. His clothing and occupation reflect the difference of his arrival, adjustment to and reception in England.

In *The New Poetic*, Stead has no qualms about hoisting up these three writers as the “best” sort of poets. He praises Eliot’s “honesty”; he talks about “genuine poets like Pound and Yeats” (48). He effuses about “the greatness of Yeats’s poetry” (41) and Pound’s “essential seriousness,” while admiring Eliot for writing the “music of the ‘soul’” (157). Stead’s conclusion about Eliot’s poetry reads like a piece of proto-hippie didacticism:

One must love created things in order that one may have love to divest. And one enters the world of imagination—or spirit—only by contemplating with love, not by renouncing, the immediate and the particular. The ‘unified sensibility’ is in itself a kind of ‘divine union’, and the will-driven intellect may not achieve it alone. (185)

Conversely, in “Pictures in a Gallery,” Stead does not tell readers what “One must” do or think. Judgemental epithets such as “honest,” “genuine” and “great” are conspicuous by

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<sup>23</sup>See photograph in appendix.

their absence. In this work, Stead forbears from making any comment about the characters of Pound, Yeats or Eliot. At no point does he offer an opinion about the value of their poetry. In this—Stead’s first modernist long poem—the clear conclusions of his prose are replaced by the “carefully judged incompleteness” of approximation.

### 5. Sources and Allusions.

Another aspect of approximation is the modernist technique of alluding to other works. These references usually go unsourced, and are simply inserted into the new work without explanation. Thus the technique also becomes a form of juxtaposition: the author pushes two texts up against each other and leaves it for the reader to construe their relationship. But what if the reader does not recognize the allusion? How much knowledge is necessary?

Stead asserts, in the first sentence chosen for the cover of *Answering to the Language*, that “There is no one so blind to a poem as a scholar who has spent a decade, or an uninterrupted summer, working at it.” After months of pondering “Pictures in a Gallery,” I begin to see what he meant. When I first saw this poem, I was an undergraduate who had read little Eliot and no Pound. I knew parts of Yeats and Conrad, and through them I had heard of Wilde and Ford; but the names of Hueffer, Garnett, Newbolt, Olivia and Old Possum were unknown to me. I could not read the lines in French, and I had no idea what “*Binnorie, O Binnorie*” might mean. These gaps in knowledge provoked some frustration; and yet they did not detract from my overall enjoyment of the poem.

Five years later, after reading Stead’s criticism and doing some research on Early Modern British Literature, I recognize these allusions and their sources. I begin to understand Smithyman’s view of Stead’s poem as “a tribute to his scholarship,” one “which put to work his expertise in the New Poetic.” I can even see why he felt that the poem was a mere “exercise” full of “pious allusions” (though I do not agree with this latter point).

Which reader is to be privileged, the undergraduate or the scholar? Perhaps neither need be set up as a paradigm—but the limitations of both need to be addressed. The former’s naivety might lead to non-recognition of pastiche, and therefore to an over-valuation of the poem. On the other hand, the latter’s knowledge of sources might lead to a weary and impatient dismissal. Instead of seeing what has been done in the poem, such a reader might get so caught up in tracing sources and quotations that the poem itself begins to recede from view.

Take, for example, the lines concerning Hueffer and Garnett in section V:

Wilde had been lynched. . . .

Snow fell—fell where Hueffer ascended  
From Great Russell Street to meet the eyes of Garnett;  
And heard the scholar’s voice: “Now it is all ended—  
England shall breed no poet for fifty years.”

Ford Madox Hueffer is the original name of the writer Ford Madox Ford. He changed his name in June 1919, partly to dissociate himself from the forces of Prussian aggression in World War One: “A teutonic name in these days is disagreeable & though my native stubbornness would not let me do it while the war was on, I do not see why I sh[ould] go on being subjected to the attacks of blackmailers indefinitely” (letter to his agent, qtd. in Judd 324). Thus, at the time of Wilde’s ‘lynching’ in 1895, Ford answered to the now less familiar name of “Hueffer.”

Stead cites Ford’s *Return to Yesterday* six times in *The New Poetic*. This 1931 book of reminiscences provides many of the anecdotes that appear in Stead’s early chapters. By examining Stead’s selections, one can see what held his interest during the period that produced “Pictures in a Gallery.” For instance, Stead quotes—at some length—Ford’s account of Wilde’s destruction:

‘The Book World was electric. Books were everywhere. Accounts of the personal habits of writers filled the daily papers. Minute volumes of poems in limited editions fetched unheard of prices at auctions. It was good to be a writer in England. And it

is to be remembered that as far as that particular body [the Aesthetes] were concerned the rewards were earned. They were skilful and earnest writers. They were an immense improvement on their predecessors. They were genuine men of letters. . . .

'But all that went with the trial of Wilde. . . .

'Wilde then brought down the *Yellow Book* Group and most of the other lyrists of London that for its year or two had been a nest of singing birds.' (*NP* 67-68; *Return to Yesterday* 50-51)

Ford's paragraph proceeds to elaborate on the results of Wilde's fall: he states that "James and Harland were almost the only survivors." Stead, however, is interested in the arrival of Yeats, Pound and Eliot, not the presence of "survivors," so he ignores this assertion and jumps ahead to Ford's next sentence: "Poets died or fled to other climes, publishers also fled, prosateurs were fished out of the Seine or reformed and the great public said 'Thank heavens, we need not read any more poetry'" (*NP* 53; *Return to Yesterday* 51).

Ford devotes a page to the end of Wilde; Stead quotes nearly the whole of this page in *The New Poetic*. This section of *Return to Yesterday* obviously caught Stead's imagination, for it was the very next paragraph—not quoted in *The New Poetic*—that he used in "Pictures in a Gallery":

You may think that an exaggeration. So did I at the time. But, just after the papers had announced the conviction and sentence on Wilde, I was going up the steps of the British Museum. On them I met Dr. Garnett, the Keeper of Printed Books, a queer, very tall, lean untidily bearded Yorkshire figure in its official frock coat and high hat. I gave him the news. He looked for a moment away over the great yard of the Museum, with its pigeons and lamps and little lions on the railings. Then he said:

"Then that means the death of English poetry for fifty years." (*Return to Yesterday* 51)

The Garnetts were an important literary family at the time, and Edward Garnett was a friend and publisher of both Ford and Conrad. This particular "Garnett," however, was Edward's father Richard, the "distinguished scholar and Museum Keeper" (Karl 335). Dr. Richard Garnett worked at the British Museum, which was on Great Russell Street. He also lived where he worked, as Ford explains:

In those days it was Dr. Richard Garnett whose reputation as Principal Librarian of the British Museum was world-wide. He had a number of sons and daughters and, for a long time, I was in and out of the Garnetts' house in the Museum courtyard every day and all day long. (*Return to Yesterday* 20)

It was here, just past “the Museum courtyard,” that “Hueffer ascended / From Great Russell Street to meet the eyes of Garnett.”

For some readers, a proliferation of sources can spoil a poem. The reader who is unfamiliar with Stead’s references may feel threatened, and reject the poem as ‘intellectual.’ The learned reader may see the allusions, trace the sources, and dismiss the poem as ‘derivative.’ However, it is not the sources in themselves that should capture our attention, but what the poet does with them. Has the poet merely echoed other works in order to mask a lack of imagination, or have the sources been transformed in some way? Has the poet—to use both Stead’s and Pound’s dictum—‘made it new’?

The first thing that Stead adds to Ford’s material is an image of W.B. Yeats:

[Hueffer] heard the scholar’s voice: “Now it is all ended—  
England shall breed no poet for fifty years.”

Yeats not a mile from where they stood

And Yeats

Drew down the dim blind of Olivia’s hair  
And dreamed of a great bird.

Readers are given the space of a line to think about Garnett’s prediction, which Stead then undercuts by producing Yeats. This poet’s name appears twice in as many lines, a quietly emphatic contradiction of “the scholar’s voice.” “And Yeats”—as the biographies explain—did indeed take rooms, at about this time, in a building just off Russell Square.

However, if one did not know precisely where Yeats lived, or who Garnett and Hueffer were, one’s appreciation of the poem need not be destroyed. One could infer, from the details given by Stead, that Garnett and Hueffer were men of letters musing over the ‘lynching’ of Oscar Wilde. One could then enjoy the juxtaposition of the scholar’s assessment—“England shall breed no poet for fifty years”—with the immediate presence of a poet “not a mile from where they stood.” It was Yeats who forced dreams, and his

unrequited love for Maud Gonne, into some of the most memorable poetry of the Early Modern period. The mere presence of Yeats and his subject matter serves to counter Garnett's pessimism. For this juxtaposition to work, one need have only the general knowledge that Wilde and Yeats were famous poets. Thus the reader can enjoy this section of the poem without having to worry overmuch about the identity of Hueffer and Garnett, or their source in Ford's book.

On the other hand, for readers who do know this source, the section need not disappoint. Knowledge of *Return to Yesterday* shows that Stead was not parroting Ford, but actively disagreeing with him. It was Ford's view that Dr. Garnett was quite correct:

I knew well how immense was his North Country common sense. [. . .] On this occasion he held his top-hatted head obstinately and deftly on one side and repeated, with half closed eyes:

"That means the death blow to English poetry. It will not be resuscitated for fifty years." . . . We have a decade or so to wait for that phoenix. Dr. Garnett was in the right of it. (*Return to Yesterday* 52)

Clearly Stead does not agree that "Garnett was in the right of it," because he takes the Doctor's melancholy statement and juxtaposes it with another, quite opposite possibility: the image of Yeats. Stead uses Ford's material in order to evoke the gloomy feel of the *fin de siècle*, but he also places this material in such a way that it reveals the necessary limitations of contemporary assessments.

An image of Yeats is not the only thing that Stead adds to Ford's anecdote. By surrounding it with dreams—Cinna's dream of Caesar and Yeats's dream of a great bird, as well as the narrator's own visions—Stead incorporates his source into the poem's 'Undersea' atmosphere. In addition, Stead invents the extended metaphor of Wilde's being hung, drawn, quartered and eaten. He also inserts the falling snow (an image not found in Ford, but one that permeates Stead's poem) and then juxtaposes it with Hueffer's 'ascension' (a concept more luminous than Ford's prosaic "I was going up the steps"). Stead even adds a pun on the stony "eyes of Garnett." Finally, where Garnett saw the death of poetry, Stead shows

poetry surviving and recurring. Thus Stead does not quote *Return to Yesterday* merely to repeat Ford's views; instead, he integrates Ford's remembrance into the imagery and themes of his own text.

So, while Stead appropriates much of *Return to Yesterday*, he manages to heat, hammer and transform it into something new. It cannot be denied that Ford's book is an important source of the poem. From it comes the description of Pound's clothing and the image of Hueffer going into the British Museum on Great Russell Street. When Ford describes the Museum courtyard he mentions "little lions on the railings"; Stead puns on "lions" in section II and mentions "railings" within three lines. He also repeats the title of Ford's third chapter—"The Outer World"—in the song of section IV. This third chapter provides the meeting of Hueffer and Garnett, as well as snippets of their conversation and attitudes. In addition, the first four chapters of *Return to Yesterday* (grouped under the heading "Landscapes and Letters") have something of the atmosphere of "Pictures in a Gallery." Ford repeats the mournful phrase "They are all dead now" (26, 39); Stead shares his elegiac attitude towards the artists of the past: "It was winter . . . / And many were dead."

Stead and Ford both convey the sense of a rich past living on in the present. For Ford, the very stones of English towns seem laden with history: "An historic patina covers their buildings. . . . Indeed, I know of no place save for Paris, where memories seem so thick on every stone" (26). Like Ford, Stead feels the "Stones of a sunken city" come to life and speak to him. In his excited eyes, the marble buildings of London are aquiver with ghostly presences ("*Où tant de marbre est tremblant sur tant d'ombres*"). Stead also shares Ford's respect for a modernist literary tradition—except Ford's is a prose tradition that includes Conrad, Henry James and Stephen Crane:

They are now all dead, a fact which seems incredible to me still. For me they were the greatest influence on the literature that has followed after them—that [. . .] tradition will not soon part. To that tradition I will one day return. For the moment I have been trying to make them live again in your eyes. . . . "It is, above all, to make you see." (*Return to Yesterday* 39)

Just as Ford uses Conrad's words here, Stead makes use of Ford's words and attitudes, echoing and transforming them. Traces of Ford's first four chapters shine throughout "Pictures in a Gallery." Those traces spark with a new light due to their new context.

As Hugh Kenner said of *The Cantos*, "What the reader . . . should try to grasp is not where the components come from but how they go together" (*Poetry of Ezra Pound* 13-14). In relation to modernist allusions, Kenner's dictum is a useful rule of thumb. However—as Kenner's own later work, *The Pound Era*, showed—a study of sources can provide a useful background for the reader. Such a study can help to identify figures (such as Garnett and Olivia) who may have become vague with the passage of time. It can also offer insights into the author's aims and methods, when one discovers the context of—and what has been added to or left out of—an image or anecdote.

For instance, a study of Hone's biography reveals a major source of Stead's portrayal of the London life of W.B. Yeats. In 1895, Yeats left home and began living in the Temple, sharing rooms with Arthur Symons. At the end of the year, he moved to 18 Woburn Buildings, just around the corner from Russell Square.<sup>24</sup> Hone gives a full account of Yeats's living conditions:

On the ground floor of his house, No. 18, lived a cobbler; on the first was a workman's family; the attic housed an old pedlar who painted in water-colours . . . Symons' charwoman at the Temple, Mrs. Old, looked in two or three times a week. Later on, she became his regular and devoted servant. (124-5)

Given that Yeats was the only tenant who did not have to work at a regular job—yet retained a servant and took frequent holidays overseas—it is not surprising that Stead's newspaper boy labels him "the toff of the buildings."

However, in 1972 Stead made some revisions to "Picture in a Gallery," and one of the more intriguing changes was his placement of single quotation marks around 'the toff of the

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<sup>24</sup>See appendix for a photograph of these buildings.

buildings' and 'the toff.' Perhaps this change was made in order to acknowledge that Stead had not invented the phrase, and was in fact quoting somebody else's work. The source of this 'quotation' is probably Hone's description of Yeats's "life at Woburn Buildings":

his life at Woburn Buildings was laborious and ordered. Unless he was working at the British Museum, he would be indoors writing until four, when he dressed, and either received visitors or went out to seek literary friends or his "mystics". When he had no evening engagements he would take long solitary walks, because his eyesight discouraged reading by candlelight; and his tall cloaked figure, seemingly oblivious of its surroundings, was very familiar to the late home-comers of Bloomsbury. (177)

Here are the "Buildings," "the British Museum" and a "cloak"—all prominent features in Stead's dramatization. Stead also mentions "Bloomsbury" in his poem. Hone continues:

To the humble folk of his immediate neighbourhood he was known as "the toff wot lives in the Buildings". It is said that he was the only person in the Buildings who ever received a letter. He had added to his accommodation by taking the attic, formerly lived in by the pedlar, and this he turned into the bedroom, making the smaller room below into a kitchen, so that he would no longer need to go out for his meals. There was no carriage-way through the alley, and the carriage people who came to his Monday evening receptions had to seek his door beside the cobbler's shop on foot, children swarming around them. (177-78)

Here is the "toff" epithet, as well as a small "alley" too slender for a carriage to pass through. In "Pictures in a Gallery," Stead has Yeats "go out for his meals" (or at least for coffee) "Across the narrow alley." It is not a large step to imagine that one of the "children swarming around" may well have been trying to sell a paper or two.<sup>25</sup>

Hone's book provided Stead with an in-depth description of Yeats's lodgings: from its brass name plate to its blue curtains; from its many distinguished visitors to the children and beggars that surrounded it. Out of all these details, Stead selected the narrow alley, Yeats's

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<sup>25</sup>Another possible source is John Masefield's *Some Memories of W.B. Yeats*, which also describes Woburn Place and mentions that "Yeats was known there as 'the toff what lives in the Buildings'" (15-16). However, unlike Hone's biography, this book is not cited in *The New Poetic*; nor does it mention such significant details as the narrow alley, or that Yeats wore a cape, drank coffee, and took the rooms in order to take a married woman as his lover.

predilection for coffee,<sup>26</sup> and the fact that Yeats took the rooms in order to facilitate a love affair. To these particulars he adds the true name of the woman in question, “Olivia” (which Hone never specifies, remaining content to use Yeats’s pseudonym of ‘Diana Vernon’). Stead also adds his vision of a Yeatsian dream, plays with the idea of “a great bird,” juxtaposes Olivia against Maud, pictures Yeats going out for coffee after a hard night, and imagines himself a paperboy who actually gets to meet the great man:

And Yeats

Drew down the dim blind of Olivia’s hair  
 And dreamed of a great bird. Then woke  
 Calling ‘Maud. Maud.’ But the room was empty.  
 Across the narrow alley he drank coffee,  
 Bought his paper from me at the corner  
 (I only a few feet tall, in cloth cap and boots  
 Three sizes too large. He the toff of the buildings.)

In this dramatization, Stead goes beyond the methods of most biographers: he deviates from sources (the ‘facts’) and imagines what might have happened. Yeats did sleep with Olivia Shakespear, and Yeats did dream of Maud Gonne; but no biographer puts the two together, because no source specifies such an incident. Stead plays with the two facts, combining them and creating a fictional scene that seems imaginatively ‘true.’ Thus, in section V, Stead takes the details of biography and—through a process of combination and imagination—creates a dramatic scene that is rich and strange, yet somehow feels ‘true’ and ‘real.’ In other words, Stead achieves the aim that he would later articulate in “A Poet’s View”: “*réalisation*—realizing in the sense of making real, bringing to life, so that the literary moment is lived through by the reader, experienced and retained like a piece of real life: these are the qualities to be striven for and celebrated” (GC 270-71).

Writing as he was in 1958, Stead was actually quite daring in naming Yeats’s lover as “Olivia.” He was one of the first authors to do so. Up until the end of the 1950s, Yeats

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<sup>26</sup>Immediately following the page that ascribes the ‘toff’ nickname to Yeats, Hone mentions coffee and quotes Yeats’s introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1935). Stead quotes this introduction in *The New Poetic*, saying that “the poets of the 1890s” were fond of talking “to one another over their black coffee—a recently imported fashion ” (17).

scholars skirted the issue of positively identifying 'Diana Vernon.' Indeed, this convention of avoidance (initiated by Yeats himself) persisted until the 1970s, as John Harwood explains in *Olivia Shakespeare and W.B. Yeats: After Long Silence* (1989): "Yeats's letters to her have been available since 1954; the publication of *Memoirs* in 1972 gave his account of their affair in 1895-7. But Yeats's biographers have been content to paraphrase these materials" (ix). The first biography of Yeats was published by Joseph Hone in 1943; the second by A. Norman Jeffares in 1949 (*W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*). Part of what Harwood means by "paraphrase" is that—while Hone and Jeffares both had access to the material later printed in *Memoirs*, and while they both give an account of the love affair—neither of them actually says that 'Diana Vernon' is Olivia Shakespeare. Jeffares quotes almost all the memoir material on the affair, and concludes his chapter on 'Diana Vernon' with two quotes from Olivia Shakespeare—but he leaves the connection implicit. Hone and Jeffares (along with Allan Wade in his 1954 edition of Yeats's letters) only ever refer to Olivia Shakespeare as "Yeats's old friend," and the majority of Yeats scholars followed their example.<sup>27</sup> Given the reticence of pre-1959 biographers on this point, the naming of "Olivia" in section V of "Pictures in a Gallery" comes as something of a revelation.

Apart from Yeats's letters and memoirs, little biographical material remains about Olivia Shakespeare. Stead put his own view of her fairly succinctly in a 1994 article about Pound:

The Yeats-Pound connection was through Olivia Shakespeare, the married woman who had relieved Yeats of the virginity, or anyway the chastity, which his love for Maud Gonne had seemed to require. Around 1912-13 Pound acted as Yeats's unpaid secretary; and Dorothy, whom Pound married, was Olivia's daughter. ("Rapallo: Discussing Ezra" 100)

Luckily, other authors have been more expansive. In 1988, Jeffares issued *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography*, in which he revises his earlier book and identifies 'Diana Vernon.'<sup>28</sup> Jeffares

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<sup>27</sup>Joining Stead in the minority at the end of the 1950s were George Brandon Saul in his 1957 *Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems* (66-69) and John Unterecker in his 1959 *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (91-92). The latter was published one year after Stead had written "Pictures in a Gallery."

<sup>28</sup>All the following references to Jeffares are to his *New Biography*.

states that when Olivia met Yeats (through her cousin, Lionel Johnson), she had been unhappily married for nine years to Henry Hope Shakespear, a solicitor who “had ‘ceased to pay court to her’ from the day of her marriage.” Jeffares concludes that “It was a loveless marriage” (79).

One of the first things that Yeats did with Olivia—somewhat typically—was to tell her all about his love for Maud Gonne. Maud was his perfect rose, his Helen of Troy, and (to a certain extent) his muse. He had fallen for this Irish beauty in January 1889 and, as Benedict Kiely says, “She was to be his torment and inspiration for many years” (27). Many of Yeats’s early lyrics—such as “The Pity of Love,” “When You are Old,” “A Dream of Death” and “The White Birds”—cry out his love for Maud. Hence when Yeats meets Olivia in April 1894, the image of Maud still dominates his life. He was, as he said in his *Memoirs*, “still deeply in love” with Maud Gonne (79). Thus Stead can show Yeats making love to Olivia, but waking up calling out Maud’s name: the event may not have occurred, but the image embodies Yeats’s probable state of mind at the time, as well as the tricks that the subconscious mind can play on us all.<sup>29</sup>

After their initial meeting, Yeats goes to Ireland to write a play—but he corresponds with Olivia, writing what she would later describe (to Yeats’s “surprise”) as “unconscious love-letters” (*Memoirs* 85). When he returns to London in May 1895, Yeats visits the Wilde family to offer his support. (Oscar had just gone on to his second trial.) He then renews contact with Olivia and, after much agonizing, they embark on a nervous courtship. During the daytime they study together at the British Museum, while at night (after some impotence on Yeats’s part) they become lovers. However, Olivia could not always stay the night, as Jeffares points out: “Olivia, having tried to get a separation from her husband who became deeply distressed and ill, decided to give up the project, saying it would be kinder to deceive him

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<sup>29</sup>Yeats offers a more prosaic example in his *Memoirs*. On a night when he invites Olivia to tea, he spends his time thinking of Maud, forgets his key, and locks himself out. Then, after Olivia leaves, he says “to Symons, who had just come in, ‘Did I ever tell you about Maud Gonne?’ and till two or three in the morning I spoke of my love for her” (86-87).

than leave him” (83). Thus Stead can describe Yeats going to bed with Olivia, but waking up alone. Olivia could get away at times, but she could not escape her husband completely.

For his part, Yeats could never stay with Olivia, neither physically nor mentally. In the summer of 1896 he went to Ireland with Arthur Symons; in December of the same year he visited Maud Gonne in Paris. Maud was never far from his heart and mind, and Olivia could find little space for herself:

His affair with Olivia lasted only a year. Maud Gonne wrote to him early in 1897 to say that she was in London, would he dine with her? His trouble increased, he wrote nearly twenty years later: he had a struggle to earn his living, he was often preoccupied when Olivia came; then one morning instead of reading her love poetry—‘as was my way to bring the right mood round’—he wrote letters. She burst into tears and said, ‘There is someone else in your heart.’ It was ‘the breaking between us for many years’. ‘The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love’, first published in 1898, puts the situation clearly:

Pale brow, still hands, and dim hair,  
I had a beautiful friend,  
And dreamed that the old despair  
Might fade in love in the end;  
She looked in my heart one day,  
And saw your image was there,  
She has gone weeping away. (Jeffares 101)

In the second chapter of *The New Poetic*, Stead wrote about “W.B. Yeats, 1895-1916.” At the time of writing “Pictures in a Gallery,” therefore, he would have been familiar with much of Yeats’s verse—especially early works such as this one. This particular poem contains some of the seeds of Stead’s portrait. On a general level, here is Yeats ‘dreaming’ and torn between two lovers (or more precisely, his image of those lovers). On a specific level, this poem contains the “dim hair” that Stead takes up and adapts for his picture of Olivia. Mrs. Shakespear did indeed have long, luxurious hair that she generally wore bound up in a knot.<sup>30</sup> Unbound at night, it would have fallen like a blind, and Yeats certainly enjoyed drawing it down. He mentions Olivia’s hair in almost all the love poems that he wrote for her.

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<sup>30</sup>See photograph in appendix.

For example, in “The Lover Asks Forgiveness Because of His Many Moods” (written in August 1895), the poet sees his lady “cover the pale blossoms of your breast / With your dim heavy hair.”<sup>31</sup> In January 1896, in *The Savoy*, Yeats published “Two Love Poems,” both written for Olivia. One was “The Travail of Passion,” where a lover—suffering from “an immortal passion”—is comforted by a magical figure with long hair:

We will bend down and loosen our hair over you,  
That it may drop faint perfume, and be heavy with dew,  
Lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream.

The other of the “Two Love Poems” (later titled “He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace”) contains the following lines:

Beloved, let your eyes half close, and your heart beat  
Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast,  
Drowning love’s lonely hour in a deep twilight of rest. . . . (written 24 Sept. 1895)

As Yeats’s affair with Olivia intensified, so too did his poems about love. In “He Remembers Forgotten Beauty” (first published in July 1896), the poet dwells once more on “that pale breast”—but this time he gets a bit closer to her “lingering hand”: “my arms wrap you round,” he gushes, “And . . . you sigh from kiss to kiss.”

In Yeats’s love poetry of this period, it is hard to escape pale breasts, cascades of heavy hair, and the ubiquitous adjective “dim.” All these elements come together in “He Reproves the Curlew” (first published Nov. 1896):

O Curlew, cry no more in the air,  
Or only to the water in the West;  
Because your crying brings to my mind  
Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair  
That was shaken out over my breast:  
There is enough evil in the crying of the wind.

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<sup>31</sup>All dates of composition and publication (as well as the texts of the poems) are taken from the edition of *Yeats’s Poems* edited and annotated by A. Norman Jeffares (1989).

Yeats collected all these early poems for Olivia in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), and this volume must have formed a part of Stead's reading for *The New Poetic*. In his discussion of Yeats in that book, Stead complains about "the relative weakness of many of his early poems" (29); conversely, he expresses satisfaction with Yeats's "new poetry," written when "He had left the aesthetic tower of the 'nineties" (18). Nevertheless, Stead was struck by Yeats's obsession with the unbinding of Olivia's hair; he also noticed the repetition of the word "dim" in Yeats's early love poems.<sup>32</sup> Out of these sources, Stead creates a beautiful image of the poet undressing his lover: "And Yeats / Drew down the dim blind of Olivia's hair." The five "D" sounds alliterate in order to echo the languid, falling motion; at the same time, the concept of a falling "blind" fits in with the "drawing of curtains" that occurs in sections I and VI. Once again, Stead makes an allusion and simultaneously manages to 'make it new.'

In tracing the sources of Stead's allusions, I have tried to follow the probability of links between his academic research and his creative writing. Certain traces of his reading for *The New Poetic* do show up in "Pictures in a Gallery." However, I don't want to give the impression that Stead adapted and combined these sources in a strictly logical or conscious way. The modernist poet is not a spider squatting over source books, purposely weaving a web of erudite allusions; nor is a poet a computer that can enter data, logically select certain elements, and then spit out a poem. Stead did try (in "A Poet's View") to describe in retrospect the way that "Pictures in a Gallery" was constructed: he talked very generally about "putting contrasting things together—bits of literary history alongside obvious fictions, a passage in long lines after one in short lines, resonant romantic statements after curt ironic ones." Nonetheless, he was careful to conclude with the following proviso:

But I may not have had even this degree of consciousness. One of my failings perhaps has been a fear of doing things consciously. I've preferred to be acted upon in the old wind-harp tradition, rather than act. (*GC* 267)

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<sup>32</sup>Over twenty-five years after writing "Pictures in a Gallery," Stead still recalled "dim" as "Yeats's own most overworked adjective" (*PYE* 13).

In this self-deprecating fashion, Stead places himself where he placed Eliot in *The New Poetic*: in the Romantic tradition of poetry, where instinctive outpourings are valued more than preset plans and fixed forms of verse.

## 6. Epigraphs, Quotations and “Magical Incantations.”

A more specialized form of allusion is the use of epigraphs and direct quotation. This technique does not involve paraphrase or indirect references; instead, whole lines and segments of other works are simply cut out and pasted into the new poem. However—unless the quotation is in a language that the reader is familiar with—these references often require more work outside the poem than do general allusions. I have left this aspect of modernism till last because Stead seems to view it as one of the least important. He does not mention the technique of quotation in “From Wytan to Carlos,” even though it fits the categories of both aggregation and approximation. Indeed, there is a sense in which Stead feels that quotations have the dangerous potential of distracting the reader away from the poem. In revising “Pictures in a Gallery” in 1972, he deleted all the epigraphs.

These excisions may simply reflect the dominant fashions of the day. Stead used no epigraphs, and very few direct quotations, in the poems that he wrote between 1963-69 (collected in *Crossing the Bar*). Generally speaking, New Zealand’s poetry critics of the period were quick to lambast anything that smacked of high modernist elitism. In his 1964 review of *Whether the Will is Free*, Horsman criticized “Pictures in a Gallery” for having “portentous French epigraphs” (276). Eight years later, not much had changed: in reviewing *Crossing the Bar*, James Bertram notes with satisfaction that “‘Pictures in a Gallery Undersea’ has lost its flowery epigraphs.” In Bertram’s view, the epigraphs are “superfluous words,” representing “the occasional affectation or self-indulgence of his [Stead’s] first book of poems.” In the space of a single paragraph, Bertram uses with approbation the words “cut,” “pare away,” “pruned,” “trimmed and tightened,” concluding that Stead’s revised poems “are undoubtedly the stronger and better for it” (169).

Are the epigraphs in “Pictures in a Gallery” “superfluous” and “flowery,” a mere “affectation”? Affectation is form without substance—like Osric in *Hamlet*—but there does seem to be substance in Stead’s epigraphs. These opening phrases help set the tone for the section that follows. Take, for example, “*Binnorie, O Binnorie.*” As the very first line of “Pictures in a Gallery,” this quotation not only prepares the reader psychically for section I, it helps establish the atmosphere of the poem as a whole. One could argue that the expression seems mournful, with its drawn out moan around the comma and the long “O” sound. It sounds like, and has the form of, an old lament. These vague connotations of song, melancholy and repeating patterns may be enough in themselves. However, one might just as easily read the phrase in a jaunty manner, as if it were part of a child’s nursery rhyme (and, indeed, the epigraph rhymes within itself as well as with “Gallery” and “Undersea”). The issue is that—unlike the general allusions discussed earlier—the phrase remains ambiguous and inert unless one recognizes its signification.

“*Binnorie, O Binnorie*” is the refrain of an ancient Scottish ballad. It existed mainly in oral tradition until Francis James Child collected twenty-seven versions of it in his mammoth *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98). This old song has a variety of titles, but editors generally refer to it as “Binnorie,” “The Two Sisters” or “The Two Sisters of Binnorie.” Sir Walter Scott wrote a version of it called “The Twa Sisters”; Victorian anthologists retitled it “The Cruel Sister.”<sup>33</sup> William Wordsworth alluded to the ballad in his poem “The Seven Sisters or The Solitude of Binnorie.” Stead’s allusion is probably more difficult for his audience to recognize: ancient ballads are no longer widely known or popular, particularly in a late twentieth-century New Zealand context.

Nonetheless, this particular ballad does offer an appropriate context for “Pictures in a Gallery.” “Binnorie” is a poem about love, death and the magic of music. In it, a knight woos two sisters “By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.” He courts the eldest, but prefers her

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<sup>33</sup>For an illustrated example of the latter, see appendix.

fair-haired sibling. Upon noticing this preference, naturally, “The eldest she was vexed sair.” Unnaturally, though, she lures her sister “down to the river strand,” pushes her in and watches her drown—ignoring and even mocking her pleas for help. A miller fishes out the corpse, and there the story would have ended; but, just as all hope seemed dead, there came “A famous harper passing by”:

And when he look'd that lady on,  
 Binnorie, O Binnorie;  
 He sigh'd and made a heavy moan;  
 By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

He made a harp of her breast bone,  
 Binnorie, O Binnorie;  
 Whose sounds would melt a heart of stone;  
 By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

The strings he fram'd of her yellow hair,  
 Binnorie, O Binnorie;  
 whose notes made sad the list'ning ear;  
 By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

He brought it to her father's hall,  
 Binnorie, O Binnorie;  
 And there was the court assembled all;  
 By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

He laid his harp upon a stone;  
 Binnorie, O Binnorie;  
 And straight it began to play alone:  
 By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

The harp sings in the ghostly voice of the dead maiden: it addresses her lordly relatives (King, Queen and Prince); it praises her knight, “sweet and true”; and at the last, it accuses and brings down the evil sister.<sup>34</sup>

The Binnorie ballad connects strongly with the first section of Stead's poem. In section I of the latter, a man and a woman appear involved in an uncertain relationship. Stead associates the woman in particular with a mystical, underwater atmosphere: she has “invisible fins” and seems to the narrator to be off “in the marine distance, floating always beyond me.” Like the young sister of Binnorie, this woman has long blond hair, on which music

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<sup>34</sup>For a similar transformation of a “breastbone,” see section 12 of “Quesada.”

magically plays: "A girl played Mozart on her sun-bleached hair." Connections can also be made between the ballad and Stead's poem as a whole. Throughout "Pictures in a Gallery," the dead reappear and speak to the present; and they often do so through their music or their poetry. In one of these ghostly visions of the dead, Yeats (like the young knight) woos one woman even as he thinks of and prefers another. In section IV, a "princess" appears, and Stead links her with music and "Songs." A river also runs through the poem and, finally—at the end of the last section—a man attempts "to revive / The dead" on a musical instrument. The better one knows the source, the more parallels arise.

Without such knowledge, however, "*Binnorie, O Binnorie*" remains inert. Readers may hear some music in the words; but they are just as likely to dismiss this epigraph as arcane gibberish. In direct contrast, the epigraph to section V is easier to deal with: "*I dreamt tonight that I did feast with Caesar.*" Readers can make something of this statement without having to know its source. Unlike the "*Binnorie*" phrase, one need not go beyond the words on the page in order to glean some meaning from them. All that is needed is a little historical knowledge about the first and most famous of the Caesars.

Julius Caesar conquered the known world and died before his time, murdered in the Roman Senate in 44 BC. He floats into the poem through somebody's subconscious: "*I dreamt tonight,*" says the voice of the epigraph. Thus, like much of the section that follows it, this first line constitutes a dream vision of a ghost. In addition to this dream of the dead, the epigraph connects with its ensuing section through the word "feast." This word has connotations of a large, joyous, celebratory meal—and contrasts bitterly with the delicate dining and debauchery of "the best families" and their cannibalism. Finally, the name, concept and fate of Caesar connects with that of Oscar Wilde. In section V, Stead places "*Caesar*" immediately next to "*Wilde.*" Both were great men who suffered terrible fates at the hands of their own people; in each case, a human being was destroyed in the name of 'justice.' When Wilde and Caesar reached the height of Fortune's Wheel, their followers turned on them: hands that had fawned and applauded now held daggers.

This series of connections can be derived from the epigraph as it stands. Knowledge of the quotation's original context adds some more layers of meaning. The line comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (III.iii.1), and sets in motion the falling action of that play: it occurs just after the assassination and Antony's famous eulogy over Caesar's body. Cinna the poet comes on-stage alone, and confides in the audience about his dream of (to quote Perry White) 'Great Caesar's Ghost.' Considering that Caesar is no longer around to eat with, Cinna finds the vision to be a foreboding one; but he ventures out of doors against his premonitions. He is immediately set upon by a mob, who have been roused into a frenzy by Antony's rhetoric. The plebeians do not listen to Cinna's testimony: they are determined to have a victim, and even though they know this man is not Cinna the assassin, they "tear him" apart in spite of the facts. As M.M. Mahood says in her analysis of the play, this scene involves "Cinna the poet being lynched in error" (Ure 77). Like Wilde, Cinna is not literally "lynched," but the processes and results are similar: both poets are forewarned (friends begged Wilde to flee to France); both ignore those warnings; both are then destroyed by a group of people who demand a scapegoat, and will not be denied by such niceties as truth and fairness.

Thus "Binnorie" requires explication, while the "Caesar" reference initially stands alone. The epigraphs written in French can fall into either of these two reader responses. If one does not know the language or have a French-English dictionary to hand, these phrases are likely to remain as inert and frustrating as "*Binnorie, O Binnorie*"—all that they will signify is a series of unpronounceable sounds. If, on the other hand, one recognizes the words, then the lines can be approached as was the "*Caesar*" quotation: first by analyzing the parallels within the poem; second by going to the source and sifting through any extra possibilities. In this way the reader can engage in the creative act—and take part in the processes of the poem—in accordance with Stead's modernist principles.

The epigraph to section II (*Où tant de marbre est tremblant sur tant d'ombres*) translates as "Where so much marble is trembling over so many shadows." The phrase creates an

evocative atmosphere, conjuring up visionary moments when stones seem to move and shadows come to life. Such an atmosphere is contextually appropriate because, just prior to the quotation, Stead's narrator felt the "Stones of a sunken city" awakening, passing the word, and then sleeping behind him. These voices might represent the eerie, early-morning echoing of cobblestones, an effect Stead would have been struck by because—as a New Zealander—he would not have experienced this effect before coming to England.<sup>35</sup> In New Zealand the streets and footpaths are generally paved with bitumen, gravel, or concrete. Following this literal level a little further, in a visual sense the marble may seem to be trembling because of the movement of snowflakes over its surface.

Just after the quotation, Stead's narrator describes the British Museum: a marble building where many shades linger.<sup>36</sup> In the context of the poem, "shadows" could be translated as 'shades,' the ghostly presences that Stead saw and felt trembling around him. For a modernist scholar such as Stead, London—and the area around Russell Square in particular—would be a luminous, magical place. The epigraph captures his excitement at finally seeing the town where "so many" of his favourite characters and writers gathered, wrote and sang. Their presence haunts the poem: stones melt away, and the past shimmers through, from Newbolt to Pound, from the Admiralty to Russell Square.

The second French epigraph (*Chanterez-vous quand vous serez vaporeuse? . . .*) heads the final section of the poem, and reads "Will you sing when you become vaporous? . . ." Visually, this line links back to the end of section IV, which contains the only other ellipsis in

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<sup>35</sup>Stead was born in Auckland in 1932 and did not leave the southern hemisphere until 1958: "I . . . spent all my childhood in New Zealand, [and] came to England for the first time as a post-graduate student having taught for a year and a half in Australia first . . ." ("Conversation" 43). This time-line is echoed by his dividing *Whether the Will is Free* into four parts: The first part written in New Zealand, the second in Australia, the third in England and the fourth back in New Zealand. Stead explains, in a 1964 letter to *Landfall*, "that the poems, with only one or two exceptions, are printed in the order of writing" (393).

<sup>36</sup>Compare Martin Rowson's illustration of this building and its ghosts, reprinted in the appendix.

the poem. As in the French epigraph, this ellipsis occurs at the close of an italicised passage related to singing:

Songs on the night:

*Flakes of the outer world  
Through London fly  
Together hurled  
Under the heavy sky . . .*

Songs will always be “spent” on the night: they disappear and yet—as both sets of ellipses imply—they seem destined to reappear, to enchant some other listener. As Stead will say at the end of *Voices* (1990): “It doesn’t finish. These verses have no end.”

Moving forward from the epigraph, section VII supplies a contrast between the abstract concept that in 1958 “many were dead” and the physical image of a musician struggling “to revive / The dead years on a battered violin.” Things live on in spite of death, as the narrator discovers:

And many were dead. But into the same heart and out  
Through channels of stone and light, the blood still pulsed—  
Carried me with it

The explicit question of the epigraph is implicitly answered in the final section, and throughout the poem as a whole. The blood in the old man’s fingers, in the poet, and even in stone and light, seems to sing on in the face of stillness and silence. As Shakespeare foretold in his sonnets, artists may pass away but their art lives on. The very stones where they lived may contain some trace of their presence (now “*vaporeuse*”), to live on in the memory and be sung anew by those who remember and feel their influence. Thus the poem enacts its own answer, responding to the question of the epigraph with an implicit “*oui*.”

The French epigraphs, literally translated, set the tone and atmosphere of their respective sections. They also work together in a more general fashion because—unlike the other epigraphs—they both come from a single source. They can be found in Paul Valéry’s “Le

Cimetière Marin” (“The Graveyard by the Sea”), in stanzas 10 and 17 respectively. This French poet was one of the key modernists in European writing: Eliot praises him in “The Three Voices of Poetry” and “From Poe to Valéry,” while Yeats discusses “Le Cimetière Marin” in *A Vision* (225-26). The poem (originally published in 1920) is perhaps Valéry’s most famous: it has been translated by figures as various as C. Day Lewis and Owen Leeming, and “is regarded as one of the greatest of all post-Romantic poems” (Leeming 238). Its narrator lingers in a setting of marble gravestones, stones that seem to tremble as if about to give up their dead. “Le Cimetière Marin” parallels “Pictures in a Gallery” because its author meditates—as Stead does—on the many ghosts around him, as well as the possibility of their singing on after death. However, as with the Ford allusion, Stead does not merely voice another writer’s ideas. Instead, he engages with Valéry in an intertextual dialogue: where Valéry’s answer was a pessimistic “Allez! Tout fuit!” (which Leeming translates as “Come off it! Nothing remains!”), Stead’s ellipsis and imagery seem to offer an alternative response.

Therefore, it seems too simplistic to say (as Horsman does) that “the portentous French epigraphs . . . merely reinforce the notion of a *cimetière marin*” (276). Horsman goes on to argue that “the second and seventh of the ‘Pictures’ fail to make precise the implications of the quoted lines, which reverberate too far beyond the range of the poem.” He demands that Stead make his “implications” precise. However, such a demand runs contrary to the modernist principle of approximation: it is up to the reader to make imaginative connections between the ‘portents’ of an epigraph and its attached poem. Each reader must establish the “range of the poem” (and its ‘reverberations’) in his or her own mind. For Horsman, the range of “Pictures in a Gallery” was mockery—“the life of the poem is in the mockery”—and therefore he found the French quotations were not light enough for his taste. If, on the other hand, the “Pictures” are allowed to contain more than mockery, might not the epigraphs be entirely effective? In any case, to dismiss or delete such lines seems a drastic response. “Pictures in a Gallery” can survive if the epigraphs are cut, but it becomes a different and less intriguing text without them.

In his poems of the 1960s, Stead retreated from using epigraphs and direct quotations. After 1972, though, these more specialized aspects of juxtaposition and approximation crept back into his poetry, reaching a peak in the early 1980s with “Yes T.S.” In his major critical work of the same period—*Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement*—Stead devotes a section to defining the “technique of quotation”:

there is also in the history of Modernism a technique of quotation, of collage, of mosaic, in which things are wrenched from their context to stand in contrast with other things, to form a pattern, no doubt to retain something of their source but not simply to return us there. The emphasis falls on their use as the materials of art. (255)

Stead goes on to assert that there are “Two possible approaches” to quotation. One can “go back to the full sources of each ‘Luminous Detail’ in order to learn what it implies,” but Stead stigmatizes this as “the *Annotated Index* approach” (256). He offers as an alternative “the ‘big gulps’ approach” (260), which means “to read the poem for the life it contains without stopping to learn more than we are able to find contained in or suggested by the words on the page” (256). In Stead’s view, the latter is the only viable approach, because it involves “treating the poem as poetry” while the former does not.

In my view, something between the two methods seems more practical: staying primarily with the poem, but consulting sources where one feels completely at a loss. For example, the “Caesar” quotation can be interpreted as it stands, as an evocation of a ghostly presence coming to somebody in a dream—a picture in a gallery seen through the sea haze of the imagination. Conversely, as shown in relation to “*Binnorie, O Binnorie*,” some phrases cannot stand alone. One does not need an exhaustive knowledge of ancient ballad poetry, one simply needs enough to be able to make something of the line. When the reader needs help in order to place the signification of the words, neither poet nor critic should be allowed to ban such assistance.

As Stead’s initial definition admitted, quotations “retain something of their source.” His ensuing effort to prevent excessive source-hunting, however, disbars that “something”

entirely. In most cases, a little reading outside the poem will be necessary with “*Binnorie, O Binnorie*,” just as most modern readers need help with the Sibylline epigraph to *The Waste Land*. That assistance—that “something”—can help the reader to place the piece in the mosaic. Stead’s naive/ideal reader, swallowing ‘big gulps,’ runs the risk of becoming Spenser’s monster Error (in Book I of *The Faerie Queen*): sooner or later it will vomit up books and pages without having digested them in any useful way. I am quite willing to treat a poem “as poetry and not as some other thing”; but at the same time I am not ashamed to consult a dictionary or an encyclopedia—or a source book or a fellow reader—whenever I can make nothing out of a word or a phrase.

The ‘big gulps’ approach is convincing when it, as Stead says, “yields up the basic meaning” (260). My concern is with quotations that are so abstruse (or in an unfamiliar language) that they yield up no meaning at all. Whenever modernist juxtapositions are in recognizable words—as they are in the example that Stead offers from *The Cantos*, in which Pound quotes the letters of Thomas Jefferson—then ‘big gulps’ do yield up the “basic meaning.” On the other hand, where the juxtaposed fragments are French, or Greek, or obscure (as in “*Binnorie*”), ‘big gulps’ quickly become unsatisfying. For example, when Pound quotes “*brododaktulos Eos*” he is talking about Homer’s “rosy-fingered dawn”: to miss this basic meaning is to miss too much.

Therefore, I agree with Stead when he states that one should try to take quotations as part of the poem, and not allow their existence somewhere else to distract one from their function within that poem:

[In] Canto 39 . . . the intermittent quotations from Greek and Latin texts are best seen primarily as language (in this case foreign language) serving the feeling of the occasion, worked into its rhetoric, rather than as signpost directing us away from the bed in which the consummation is occurring. (263)

Just as one need not read all of Jefferson’s letters in order to appreciate Canto 31, one does not have to keep racing off to Homer to get some sort of response to Canto 39. Nevertheless,

one does eventually need to know what the Greek and Latin passages are saying—otherwise large swathes of *The Cantos* remain inert. Similarly, one can get a “basic meaning” from “Pictures in a Gallery” without knowing what “Binnorie” or the passages in French mean—but sooner or later the reader will want to see how they fit into the poem. Otherwise, the mosaic will always have some pieces that are covered up, or out of focus.

Stead suggests that the reader might treat “foreign words and phrases as magical incantation” (112).<sup>37</sup> As an example of this method, he offers the following analysis of some German fragments (“Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu / Mein Irisch Kind, / Wo weilest du?”) in *The Waste Land*:

such a quotation may be said to work more purely the less that is known about it. To the innocent reader who knows no German and nothing of Wagner, it is a magical incantation, the words and their context creating their own reality. As this innocence is lost, it is replaced by intellectual, and what might be called secondary emotional, recognitions. (96)

Stead states with some certainty that—for a ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’ reader—“it is a magical incantation.” He does not allow that “To the innocent reader who knows no German,” the words might equally seem like the sound of a yapping lap dog. The first few times one hears the noise, it retains a novel value—a kind of cuteness that lasts only as long as the listener’s patience.

If it is merely yapping because *it* finds the sound magical, then the dog will wear out its welcome very fast. If, on the other hand, the animal is trying to communicate something, then the auditor will need to find out what it is or remain in a perpetual state of exasperation. Of course (unless one is lucky enough to own Lassie), one cannot always understand Dog; but German, Greek, Latin and Chinese ideograms can be translated. Stead’s “magical

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<sup>37</sup>Stead’s position is similar to that of Kenner’s initial stance. In *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, Kenner tried to deal with foreign languages, allusions and unfamiliar names by dismissing them in a five page chapter called “Minor Troubles.” For example—in relation to languages—Kenner states that “one need not know the meaning of a phrase to apprehend its function—1. As music” (215). He lists some foreign phrases and asserts that “Even when we can’t read them, their very inscrutability performs half their poetic function” (216).

incantation” could work in isolated examples—but, as a consistent way of dealing with “foreign words and phrases,” it might lead just as often to a state of frustration as it does to a feeling of being magically entertained. What magic, to take an extreme instance, might be derived from the two cantos that Pound wrote entirely in Italian? How long could an “innocent” reader mouth the words without understanding, and still maintain his or her enjoyment of the poem?

Stead’s opposition of magical incantation and a scholarly approach seems a little misleading. Readers don’t have to be naïve in order to enjoy the magic of sounds; nor is scholarly knowledge of a certain source or language—in its own way—any less magical or satisfying. Both approaches can wash in and out of each other in the same line of the same poem, and that line need not be any the worse for its reader being open to both approaches.

Stead does admit, towards the end of *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, that “innocent” readings are “incomplete”:

This kind of reading is incomplete; but it is the only sound basis for a complete one. All else ought to be supplementary. In the case where a reader is unable to recognize, and to *feel*, that the poem exists and stands viable without benefit of scholarship, then scholarship will merely mask a basic failure, serving as an alternative to and substitute for recognition of the work as it exists on the unglossed page. With that point made, we can now take our reading a little (but not too far) beyond the phase of innocence. (293)

This insistence on the relative primacy of ‘innocence’ over ‘scholarship’ seems more viable than his earlier either/or stance. Here at least Stead allows scholarship—but only ever as a “supplement” to the main diet of ‘big gulps.’ In this assertion Stead repeats a point that he made over twenty years earlier in *The New Poetic*:

If the apparatus of criticism, the notes and the sources, were necessary before the poem could be fully experienced, then ‘The Waste Land’ would have to be dismissed as inferior poetry. But Eliot clearly meant what he said when he wrote: ‘I myself should like an audience which could neither read nor write’, and when he argued that poetry could communicate even *before* it was understood. In this he was acknowledging that the experience of poetry is foremost an aural, emotional experience. . . . One would not, of course, deny all validity to a discussion [of

sources]. . . . But there is clearly a danger that such discussions will offer us . . . a substitute for the poem which ought to be the object of our attention. (*NP* 167)

The words as they stand on the page must work as poetry. If they do not, no amount of scholarship can save them. However, if the poem on the whole communicates some “basic meaning,” then scholarship can assist by elucidating any minor exceptions. I hope that my discussion of “Pictures in a Gallery” has shown that the ‘innocent’ reader and the ‘scholar’ can both contribute to a poem: they need not be mutually exclusive.

### 7. Conclusion: Breaking Out of Boxes.

“Pictures in a Gallery Undersea” represents a paradigm of Stead’s modernist practice, because it exemplifies his ‘prescriptions’ and satisfies his critical purism. It also represents a turning point in three major ways. First, it marks a shift in his own career—a turning away from realism to modernism. Most of Stead’s poetry up until 1958 had followed Curnow’s version of New Zealand realism, as Stead acknowledges in “A Poet’s View”:

Certainly I favoured Curnow. . . . But I knew there was no point in trying to repeat what Curnow had done; and in any case my own temperament, and the peculiar bent of such talent as I possessed, was bound to take me off in another direction. . . . So when I wrote a long poem called ‘Pictures in a Gallery Undersea’ in London in 1958 I was at least half conscious of doing something that hadn’t been done in New Zealand poetry before. . . . (*GC* 265-66)

Stead saw this shift as a move from Curnow’s influence to that of Pound: “technically the poem owed everything to Ezra Pound’s innovations” (266).

Stead also felt—in describing this movement from realism to modernism—that he was making “one small (or large) assertion on my own behalf”:

Now this will seem a lot of fuss about one poem. But . . . it struck me that here was a point at which I added something distinct, and the addition was technical—it was in the realm of poetry as an *art*, not poetry as the bearer of tidings. So much of the argument about poetry in New Zealand has been about subject matter—what should we write about? ‘What can I take that will make my song news?’ Charles Brasch asks himself despairingly. In ‘Pictures in a Gallery’ I demonstrated to myself what I knew anyway, that the distinctive poetic element was not *in* the subject—that in fact, as Mallarmé said, poetry is not made of ideas, or subjects, it’s made of words. (*GC* 267)

In Stead's view, "Pictures in a Gallery" added something new to poetry in New Zealand: the "technical" aspects of modernism. That "assertion" contradicts the general picture painted by most literary historians, who place the arrival of modernism in New Zealand poetry at circa 1972. As shown in this chapter, "Pictures in a Gallery" is a modernist poem. As such, it marks a turning point not only in Stead's career, but in New Zealand poetry as a whole. However, because it presents an exception to the patterns of literary history, this revolutionary aspect of "Pictures in a Gallery" has been largely ignored.

A third aspect of this turning point remains to be examined. "Pictures in a Gallery" follows all of Stead's prescriptions about what a modernist poem should be. However, once somebody has fully mastered something he or she usually moves on, or at least tries to add something to that peak. Stead had moved from realism to modernism; the searching mind needs the stimulation of movement, and if he had reached this point by 1958 one might expect some sort of change again, if a little less dramatic.

Stead has acknowledged his shift from Curnow to Pound. What Stead has been less quick to acknowledge is that realism continued to colour his career after 1958, and that postmodernism has also influenced his poetic practice. Thus "Pictures in a Gallery" marks a third turning point, from the pure modernism of this poem to a much less purist practice. There are many poems published since 1958 to consider, as well as the 1979 prescriptions in "From Wystan to Carlos." "Pictures in a Gallery" is the first poem that these prescriptions fully apply to: it is a purely modernist work. Nevertheless, there are realist poems before it, and less modernist poems after it. These other poems are the crux: in what way do the prescriptions apply to them? Are these poems merely an interesting diversion, or do they deserve recognition in what Stead referred to (in "From Wystan to Carlos") as "my own poetics" (GC 144)?

In grappling with these questions, readers may be misled by the purist stance that Stead takes in "From Wystan to Carlos." In that essay, he set about defining and elevating

modernism as a mimetic alternative to the didactic poetic of realism. Amidst all these definitions and exclusions, Stead never mentions that—as a poet—he actually employs a variety of poetics. The blurb to *Walking Westward*, for example, states that there are four blocks of poems in this book: “each with its own principle of composition.” The title sequence is modernist, and “put together as ‘music’”; but the sonnets are “confessional,” and very close to pure realism. Are the two traditions as mutually exclusive as Stead implied in “From Wystan to Carlos”? Stead the poet seems to dismiss the difference by describing “the ‘confessional’ mode” as “really only another principle of composition.”

In the “Craft Interview” (1983), Stead states that “I think there are times and phases in any poet’s career when people want to put him in a box” (449), and this is precisely what Stead attempts to do to himself in “From Wystan to Carlos.” However, Stead the critic’s effort to confine poetry to one tradition does not prevent Stead the poet from drawing upon any “principle of composition” that suits his context and his feelings. Rather than simply accept the ‘boxed’ version of the critic, I want to acknowledge all the traditions that Stead has drawn upon as a practising poet. Having examined modernism in some detail, I will turn now to the tradition in which Stead began his career—that of realism—and assess what happened to that tradition after the turning point of 1958.

## CHAPTER IV. REALISM: FOUNDATIONS AND REJECTIONS.

“. . . at heart I am, for all the difficulties such a position involves, a realist before all else.”

—C.K. Stead, “Introduction: At the Grave of Yeats” (1989) *AL* 11

### 1. Terminology.

Given Stead’s purist stance in favour of modernism, the above statement might seem something of a contradiction. However, Stead employs two types of realism in his criticism. When he talks about New Zealand poetry, Stead uses ‘realism’ to refer to the specific variety of didactic realism that he defines and rejects in “From Wystan to Carlos.” Conversely, when discussing the requirements of art in general, Stead promotes—as he does here—a very general sort of realism. Stead feels that this general realism should infuse all areas of literature, and that the writer’s governing principle ought to be, quite simply, fidelity to reality.

Throughout his career, Stead has tried to articulate and follow this principle. For example, in his introduction to *New Zealand Short Stories* (1966), Stead considers two scenes written by Marilyn Duckworth and Frank Sargeson, and subjects them to the following questions: “Why are such scenes memorable? Why is one compelled . . . to store them *as if they were real*? It is not to an ‘idea’ one has responded” (*GC* 18). Having elevated moments of fiction that felt “*as if they were real*,” Stead goes on to criticize the “simple didacticism” of “stories which . . . resolve themselves in a statement” (18). This analysis repeats the paradigm that Stead articulated two years earlier in *The New Poetic*: a binary opposition between the presentation of ‘reality’ and the presentation of ‘ideas.’

The same paradigm operates over twenty years later in Stead’s introduction to *Answering to the Language*. He considers Yeats’s epitaph (“Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!”) and muses: “*What* horseman? Why did Yeats not write ‘Motorist, pass by!’? Because, of course, such an injection of reality would have interfered with the rhetoric

of the occasion" (10). In Stead's view, anyone who indulges in rhetoric or argument may be tempted to put aside reality in order to make a stronger (or, in Yeats's case, more 'poetic') point. For this reason, Stead rejects the didactic elements of New Zealand realism and argues that modernism—with its emphasis on "the thing itself"—represents a greater form of mimesis, a 'truer' truth.

Thus, when Stead calls himself "a realist before all else," he implicitly rejects New Zealand realism—or at least New Zealand realism as he defined it in "From Wystan to Carlos." That definition involves something of a rhetorical re-definition. The realists of the 1930s would have seen themselves as being true to the state of things in their country. Looking back on their work, Stead acknowledges this referentiality but downplays it, emphasizing instead their use of closed forms and didactic conclusions. In this way, he defines a poetic that can be labelled as "New Zealand realism" without allowing it under the umbrella of his sense of "realism" in general.

"From Wystan to Carlos" involved a major shift in perspective, as Stead himself acknowledged in a 1985 interview with Harry Ricketts:

. . . I said very clearly what I was doing. The terms in which New Zealand poetry had been discussed for twenty years had been the terms of Curnow's introductions—and there was nothing wrong with that—but why not shift the terms? It's just like saying, 'Instead of standing here and looking at it, let's go over and look at it from that angle and see what we see.' (Ricketts 112)

Hence, where the realists saw themselves focusing on reality and truth, Stead sees them as focusing on didactic conclusions: "Even Glover's 'Arawata Bill' sequence . . . which ought to have been able to stand on its own feet as a piece of scene-setting and characterization, had to be rounded off with a bit of conventional moralizing, as if that was where we'd been heading all along" (*GC* 151). Stead rejects such conclusions as artificial, rhetorical and didactic—in short, as unreal. They may involve fidelity to politics, or morals, but they do not involve fidelity to reality: "Life does *not* order itself into narrative, or into logical argument;

so in the degree to which the poem organizes itself that way, it falsifies. Life does *not* explain itself or point a moral; so the poem which does these things is artificial” (148).

Unlike New Zealand’s postmodernist theorists, Stead has no quarrel with the referentiality of realism. He never rejects referentiality in “From Wystan to Carlos”; instead, he concentrates on the realist poet’s compulsive interpretation and explanation of those referents. Only when he has underlined (and undermined) its closed forms and didacticism does Stead reject New Zealand realism. A different perspective might focus on referentiality, and portray New Zealand realism as an aspect of modernism. For example, Peter Simpson views Curnow’s early criticism as “revealing the realist foundations of his aesthetic, deriving ultimately from Pound’s imagist insistence on ‘direct treatment of the thing’” (“Ways to the Museyroom: Poetry Anthologies in the Fifties” 98). Hence Simpson’s description of “the Anglo-modern regional realism . . . practised by the Caxton poets” (102): the very breadth of his terminology enables Simpson to include Pound as a precursor of the Caxton poets. Stead, on the other hand, keeps Curnow and his cohorts separate from Pound, linking them instead to Auden and his English contemporaries. Stead wants Pound on his own team of poets, so in describing the practice of the Caxton group (and the Auden group) he rejects overarching terms such as “Anglo-modern” in favour of a category that excludes modernists: “Georgian realism.”

Thus one can see how artificial the drawing of boundaries can become: New Zealand realism might be divorced from modernism or incorporated into it. The way that critics define a mode often seems to depend on their own poetic preferences and where they want to place their favourite poets (or who they want on their team for the big game). Simpson himself comments on this critical manoeuvring in his introduction to *Look Back Harder*:

It is his [Curnow’s] notion of the ‘real’ as existing prior to and outside language which has become the main bone of contention among writers of modernist or postmodernist affiliation. For some writers (such as C.K. Stead) Curnow’s critical position is identified with the ‘modern’ in contradistinction to ‘modernism’; for others (such as Roger Horrocks and Leigh Davis), Curnow’s position is seen as ‘modernist’ in contradistinction to ‘postmodernist’. (xxii)

I do not want to join in the game of praising one mode (or poet) as better than any other. I want instead to follow the implications of Stead's narrow definition of realism and see how that (re)definition relates to his own career as a poet. How much does Stead's practice as a poet bear out his own description and rejection of realism? Does he still employ realist techniques after the turning point of 1958 and, if so, how do these techniques jell with his own modernist preferences and prescriptions? It is my contention that, after 1958 at least, Stead's critical purism—with its neat separation of modes—no longer adequately describes his practice as a poet.

## 2. Theory: New Zealand Realism.

Despite its nationalistic label, the mode of New Zealand realism is not wholly indigenous. It derives from a strand of Georgian realism in Britain, just as modernism might be traced to the work of the British romantics and French symbolists. One cannot establish final sources for any tradition, because modes of writing are constantly evolving and having new principles added to them. However, one can establish the contributions of certain individuals. What Allen Curnow added to the realist tradition was a particularly New Zealand referent. In his criticism of the late 1930s, he demanded that poets address the country they lived in without the veneer of colonial idealism. To write about New Zealand as if it were an English country garden—with the addition of exotic birds and kowhai gold—seemed inadequate to the ravaged landscape, subsistence farms and 'unjust cities' of the depression. In addition to these physical realities, Curnow also wanted to see poetry that offered "some glimpse into the unconscious mind of this island community" (*Look Back Harder* 26). By 1945, Curnow felt able to historicise these beginnings by arguing (in his introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*) that a "general picture is true, of a rebirth in New Zealand writing in the early thirties; of a number of young poets and one or two older ones, in the knowledge of economic stress and frustration, making a new discovery of their country" (*Look Back Harder* 62-63).

That "discovery" did not involve modernism. Curnow was critical of what he saw as "the anguished incoherence of much poetry which followed the last war, poets torturing

themselves with the deliberate denial of form" (*Look Back Harder* 19). He favoured a poetry of statement within set forms, featuring clear descriptions and explicit deductions. For example, in his 1938 review of Fairburn's *Dominion*, Curnow asserts that a poet should start with "things actually seen and faithfully reported. . . . Then he can go ahead and see visions, which in another context might be described as deductions. True poet as he is, Mr Fairburn has attempted to deduce imaginatively the meaning of it all" (*Look Back Harder* 10). In Curnow's view, the "true poet" will move from description to deduction, will attempt to say what "it all" means. Hence he praises *Dominion* for containing, "here and there, the highly-charged statement of the best of recent English verse" (12). Eight years later, in the first of his introductions, Curnow still felt able to praise Fairburn for "making a poetic statement, or series of statements about New Zealand which he feels to be generally true" (57).

Apart from his insistence on an engagement with the New Zealand landscape (and mindscape), Curnow's approach basically followed that of the poets who were writing what he saw as "the best of recent English verse": the Auden school of the 1930s. As Stead says of Curnow in "A Poet's View," "Stylistically he and fellow poets owed most to the Auden group in England" (264). Stead expands upon this statement in "From Wystan to Carlos":

. . . Curnow's critical position with its emphasis on 'truth' or 'reality', was very much a product of the thinking of the 1930s. . . . The poets of the 1930s inherited I think this strand of Georgianism—the realism, the truth-telling, the sense of public responsibility. They gave it a political emphasis. Their poetry was committed to uncovering the ugly truths about society which conventional literary sentimentality had conspired to cover; and from this it was hoped might spring the seeds of political revolution or at least of social change. So poetry in the 1930s was harnessed to something beyond itself. It became an instrument for social change. (*GC* 141)

So the aim of the 1930s realists was to concentrate on "ugly truths" in order to drive home an idea or a moral. As Patrick Evans says of Curnow's early poems, "Sometimes Curnow sounds . . . like a crabby teacher rapping us over the knuckles for not seeing what is plainly before our noses" (*Penguin History* 97).

The Curnow of this period (writing in a 1940 review of the Auden school called “Prophets of Their Time”) was well aware of “the misgivings of the modern poet that preaching and teaching are stuff foreign to poetry” (*Look Back Harder* 15). Nevertheless, he suppressed these misgivings in order to promote the role of poet as prophet, “teacher and philosopher”:

Prophecy is not a telescope for looking at the future. It springs from the irresistible compulsion of the poet to speak with larger inspiration, addressing himself as teacher and philosopher to the individual, the nation, and the race. Humbert Wolfe, in a generally unconvincing study of the nature of poetry, makes the one significant comment that ‘speaking with authority’ is the mark of true poetry. If that is so, prophecy should be poetry at its highest; and to be born into prophetic times the highest honour for a poet. (*Look Back Harder* 15)

Eleven years after this assertion—when he came to review the first two issues of the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* (1951-1952)—Curnow had stopped talking about prophecy. He still demanded “truth,” “reality” and poems that carried their subject matter towards a “particular destination” (*Look Back Harder* 110-11), but his misgivings about “preaching and teaching” resurfaced to haunt him. Faced with the didacticism of much of the *Poetry Yearbook*, Curnow felt “anxious to defend us from this poetic Humpty-dumpty-ism—‘this poem means what I say it means in the last few lines’” (113). This anxiety reveals Curnow’s first recoil from the type of New Zealand realism that he had helped to set in motion.

However, by 1951 Curnow’s prophetic torch had been taken up—and was being waved vigorously—by James K. Baxter. In his address to the 1951 New Zealand Writers’ Conference (“Recent Trends In New Zealand Poetry”), Baxter echoed many of Curnow’s earlier injunctions about prophecy, with none of the older poet’s misgivings:

. . . I think it reasonable and necessary that poetry should contain moral truth, and that every poet should be a prophet. . . . [W]e must take our lead from the doctrinaire philosophers. . . . What Justice demands is . . . that he should remain as a cell of good living in a corrupt society, and in this situation by writing and example attempt to change it. (Baxter 10-11)

Baxter and Curnow may have argued noisily about subject matter and the relative merit of their peers, but—at consecutive points in their careers—they both promoted the concept of

poet as prophet, philosopher and teacher. Thus, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, New Zealand poets were encouraged to prophesy, to hand around the hard truth and the tough moral.

Looking back on this period in "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead sums up the New Zealand realist method as he came to it in the early 1950s:

The staple book of poems of the 1950s contained thirty poems, each of a page and a half. . . . Each poem has a subject and works its way towards a statement—usually a moral statement—which one often feels carries no great conviction but is really an artistic device for rounding the thing off. My own 'Night Watch in the Tararuas' . . . is a pretty fair sample of the type—the scene set, the problem elaborated, the conclusion drawn:

And know that though death breeds in love's strange bones,  
Its failing flesh lives warmer than the stones.

It was a poetic strategy I had learned especially from the early Baxter . . . a mode which I suppose goes back to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', and even to Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard'. (GC 150)

According to Stead, the "poetic strategy" used by Baxter and Curnow was more immediately derived from the Georgian realists of the 1930s, particularly W.H. Auden.

Therefore, when he came to consider Auden in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead summarized this poet's "strategy" in almost identical terms:

the poems are structured in terms of the unfolding and exposition of ideas. . . . [A]ll begin from a particular scene, well described, and move outward to reflect on society at large, its present problems and the responsibilities to commitment or action it calls for. In this development from particular scene to general moral reflection Auden is drawing on a tradition that goes back not merely to Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', for example, but to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', and even further to Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. (PYE 177)

One might speculate about the sources of the realist tradition, and spiral back further than Wordsworth and Gray, but I am more concerned with the definition of realist poetics on which Stead relies. Stead consistently reduces realist poetry to a formula that involves three stages. In "From Wystan to Carlos," he defines the realist poem as a predictable "type": "the scene set, the problem elaborated, the conclusion drawn." The third part of this

formula draws most of his ire, because Stead believes that a poem that “works its way towards a statement—usually a moral statement” will have the effect of falsifying reality and shutting the reader out of the poem. Thus Stead inverts previous critical approaches, rejecting prophecy and statement just as adamantly as Curnow and Baxter had praised them. Similarly, in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, Stead stigmatizes realists for taking experience and “shaping . . . it towards moral or ‘philosophical’ conclusions,” producing as a result “The well-made poem, the formal artefact with a beginning a middle and an end, its final rhyme clanging shut like a gate on the reader’s imagination” (327).

### 3. Practice: Stead’s Early Poetry.

How well does Stead’s description and rejection of realism apply to his own practice as a poet? Stead began writing poetry long before articulating these critical definitions, and in the early 1950s he added his voice to the realist tradition. His earliest published poems appear in the *Jindyworobak Anthology* (Australia) and the *Poetry Yearbook* (New Zealand). These works are often Curnowesque (or Audenesque) experiments in sestina or sonnet forms, and they usually work their way towards a general statement about the nature of death, time, history, memory or love. For example, in the first stanza of “Settlement” (a sestina published in the *Poetry Yearbook* 1953), Stead remembers an old settlement, describes it, and then tells the reader what he thinks of it all: “I wonder at fascination preserved in memory.” After three more stanzas depicting a place where “the wind . . . whistles in the wires of time,” Stead ponders—at the end of the penultimate section—“How much of this scene has changed?” In the final stanza, the poet answers his own question, concluding that:

Its pattern whispers

As if preserved from time and the machine’s click  
 It is to remain for ever, hearing grasses whisper  
 And milk cans clatter, so that all memory  
 In each generation shall include the symbol stream,  
 The bush on distant hills, and the warm sun above.

The narrative of this poem moves inexorably from description, through elaboration, to a “moral or ‘philosophical’ conclusion.” The structure of Stead’s early poems tends to confirm his later criticism, because the majority of them follow this three-part formula.

Stead’s vocabulary reflects and supports this didactic format, this movement towards explication. Imperatives abound in his early work, as the poet urges us to “see” what he has learnt. In “Pause,” for example (published in the *New Zealand Listener* 1955), Stead’s injunctions to himself might apply equally to the reader:

Follow this path. The reeds make way for you  
Down to flat water to the lake at dusk— . . .  
See! you disturb the ducks to skimming flight,  
Dissolving formations. Sit here alone. . . .

This is your tranquil moment; do not ask  
Forgiveness of the shadows beyond your sight:  
Here is perception given, day’s self destroyed. . . .

See how the rain draws down  
Last cold light gutters and the dismal frogs  
Groan into silence.

Pitch here, construct, understand  
You are alone.

Cutting away even more of the description reveals a poem with a skeleton that consists of a series of commands and explanations: “Follow this path . . . See! . . . Sit here alone . . . This is your tranquil moment . . . Here is perception given . . . See . . . understand / You are alone.” Stead implores us to “See” (twice) and “understand” that we are “alone” (twice). Prophecy becomes repetitive “Humpty-dumpty-ism,” and the presentative method seems a long way off: instead of showing the reader his experience, the poet strains to tell, to instruct, to explain.

As well as directing his readers to “see,” Stead asks them to “know” what life has taught him. In this he follows Curnow’s guidelines for the New Zealand poet: “At present,” Curnow wrote in section XII of *Not In Narrow Seas* (1939), “an artist can only suffer, and record his suffering; hoping to make others suffer with him the necessary pains of first self-

knowledge.” Curnow repeats this mandate in his 1945 introduction, criticizing Douglas Stewart for “evading the suffering a poem must entail” (*Look Back Harder* 68). Stead would probably not agree with such an insistence on “suffering”—in his note in Charles Doyle’s anthology, *Recent Poetry in New Zealand* (1965), Stead hopes that his poems have room for “Truth, Generosity and Delight” (179)—but in the early 1950s he did try hard to make readers share his “self-knowledge.”

A paradigm of this process can be seen in “Night Watch in the Tararuas.” This poem meets Curnow’s demands in both its form and its method. The poem offers no modernist “deliberate denial of form”: its six stanzas all contain seven lines of iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme that provides an interlocking variant on Chaucer’s ‘rhyme royal’ pattern. In terms of method, Stead himself (in “From Wistan to Carlos”) describes this poem as a paradigm, or “type,” of the realist approach. The first two stanzas set the scene: a “hard,” rocky landscape, where “Moon bathes the land in death” and the author is “Placed now alone,” shaping a poem for his sleeping lover. If she would only join him, the poet asserts, her presence would “make this place an Eden.” He then moves on, in the third stanza, to elaborate his problem:

So bondage holds me, but commanding love  
(Itself a discipline) is free to move.

And watching the ghosts of sheep in scrubby fields  
Prisoned by walls of stone war-prisoners built,  
I know myself more bound by what love yields  
Than by the laws that thought as often melts  
as hand obeys; so seem a slave to commands  
I most despise, while yet all thought moves free  
Into your greater serfdom, binding me.

Through this metaphysical conceit, Stead tries to delineate what he is beginning to “know” about love. The rule of “law” may govern his actions, but his thoughts are free; they are bound only by the greater power of “what love yields.” Thus what is freely given becomes more binding than any “command”—and while sheep may be “Prisoned by walls of stone,” lovers are not.

In the fourth stanza, Stead wheels down from his metaphysical plane, returning to the “hard-grained land” and describing it in more detail. This elaboration leads to a “vision” about “Adam’s tree” and a “green sensual time” and, in Stead’s view, this “fertile dream / Makes clear the valley’s hard, contrasting theme.” The poet then sees his lover wake and, like a lawyer summing up his case, offers a concluding statement:

I understand  
 The choice we make binding ourselves to love  
And know that though death breeds in love’s strange bones,  
 Its failing flesh lives warmer than the stones. (emphases added)

These final lines communicate the “self-knowledge” demanded by Curnow. Stead ends by telling the reader what he has come to “understand,” just as he did in “Pause.” Not only do Stead’s early poems share a common method, they sometimes repeat words and phrases that reflect that method.

“Night Watch in the Tararuas” appeared in the American annual *Poetry Awards*, having won the first prize in its university poets’ section for 1954. In another poem of the same year—“Poem at the Bus Depot”—Stead reused the phrase “And know that” as if it were a magical formula:

I catch one cringing breath of Autumn . . .  
 and know that here is the first snapped strand. . . .  
 I catch one falling glance . . .  
 and know that here the first thread breaks  
 within the Summer mind

All these epiphanies occur “at the depot where I wade in tides of love,” and as the poet’s companion departs on her bus, he clarifies what he has come to “know”: “What kills is this knowledge of change.” This ending might be deconstructed—one could suggest that perhaps the poet is crestfallen at not having enough “change” for his own bus—but Stead proceeds to clarify his clarification:

What kills is this knowledge of change,  
 the measure of loss in timetabled, nervous hours,  
 and the geometrical shadows of an ordered day.

These early poems focus on “knowledge”; they strain to describe and convey exactly what it is that the poet has begun to “know.”

Apart from “Night Watch in the Tararuas,” none of the above poems were printed in *Whether the Will is Free*. When Stead came to compile this first volume, he set aside much of his early material. Selecting only from the period covering 1954-1962, Stead concentrated on those of his poems that had been published in *Landfall*. At the time, *Landfall* was considered New Zealand’s premier magazine, as Stead recalls in “Remembering the Fifties” (1993):

Of course I wanted to be published in *Landfall*. Monte Holcroft’s *Listener*, and Lou Johnson’s *Poetry Yearbook*, were important starting places. But just as the young Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother when his work was admired by Eddie Marsh, editor of *Georgian Poetry*, ‘I am a poet’s poet; I am started’, so a young New Zealand poet of the Fifties whose work was smiled upon by Charles Brasch could consider himself launched. (10)

Thus the first section of *Whether the Will is Free*—which covers the years 1954-1955 (poems written before Stead moved to Australia in 1956)—contains ten poems, the majority of which had been printed in *Landfall*. Stead left out all of his work that had been accepted by the *Jindyworobak Anthology* and the *Poetry Yearbook* (a total of eleven poems), as well as most of the pieces that he had published in the *New Zealand Listener*, *Numbers*, *Arena* and *Meanjin*.<sup>1</sup>

Seen in this context, the contents of *Whether the Will is Free* reveal an author who (like most authors) shows a marked preference for his more recent work. One might also argue that Stead’s choices represent a modernist poet trying to edit out of existence his younger, realist self. However, Stead’s selection process seems to be governed more by the quality of the poem within its mode, rather than simply by the mode of the poem. In other words, the works that Stead leaves out are not excised because they are realist poems, but because they are not particularly original realist poems.

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<sup>1</sup>See Works Cited for a complete list of these uncollected poems and their sources.

This point can be illustrated by comparing an early poem that Stead included (“Carpe Diem”) with some early poems that he left out (three lyrics from the 1954 *Poetry Yearbook*: “These Ships That Leave,” “An Elegy Renewed” and “A Valedictory Sonnet”). The excluded works are all realist poems; they are also loaded down with abstractions, clichés and repetition. In “Remembering the Fifties,” Stead himself notes a certain repetitiveness in his early verse:

‘Hard’ was a word I used quite often (‘Sky is hard in which the hawk hangs fire’)—along with images of rocks and thorns. Donne’s intellectual toughness, Eliot’s critical sharpness, were touchstones. Effort was essential—and this is something you see surviving in everything Allen Curnow says about the business of writing. (10)

In emphasizing ‘hardness,’ Stead tries to associate himself with the spare, concentrated imagery of Donne, Eliot and Curnow. Nonetheless, if ‘hard’ was a word Stead used “quite often,” then ‘time,’ ‘death,’ ‘truth’ and ‘love’ were words that he used extremely often. Hardness certainly appears, but it is usually submerged beneath waves of abstractions. As Horsman points out in his discussion of Stead’s early poems, “abstractions, particularly ‘time’, ‘love’, and ‘death’, are very frequent” (274).

For example, in “An Elegy Renewed,” Stead bounces from one abstract concept to another:

Time has moved on. Autumn stirs in the leaves  
the cool breeze, clears the mind of a warm sun;  
again the pause—no thought the mind receives  
of change, yet knows this verbal tear, begun  
in the greater shock and sob of grief,  
no longer grieves. The Autumn leaf  
had truth lasting as this, that was an elegy,  
and map to my sorrow’s course. What chill remains,  
what loss, to speak of death? The truth must lie,  
or time reverses truth when mind would strain  
for grief, and grieves for lack of pain. Yet more  
the inner eye brings forth its store  
of memory, and sooner it would bind  
this image in the ice of present truth, than drown  
such certainty beneath a flood of tears. Confined  
in time, then, sorrow has its death, and owns  
no elegy.

“Truth” makes four appearances, “time” makes three, and “death” makes two. After Stead has used all these abstractions (as well as four variants of “grief”), the reader is left with a vague feeling that something momentous has occurred—something the poet has circled and tried to pin down, like a crazed dart player who never quite manages to hit the board. Stead recalls that “that was an elegy,” and he may be referring back to his 1953 “Sestina—The Cycle of Days,” another Autumnal poem in which he lamented “Death’s swift knife,” “Time’s knife,” “Time’s pervading knife,” and “the painful knife / Of the past, that lies in death with all our grief.” The “touchstone” for these early poems seems to be sentimental Georgian imprecision, not the “intellectual toughness” of Donne or Eliot.

In addition to a series of abstractions, these early poems also repeat a series of clichés. In the poems that he published in 1954 in particular, Stead tends to wallow in vagueness and cliché while trying—as he puts it in “An Elegy Renewed”—to convey “the greater shock and sob of grief.” In this poem he fears that “certainty” will “drown . . . beneath a flood of tears.” The same commonplace appears in “These Ships That Leave,” further encumbered by a mixed metaphor, as Stead laments that his loving impulses “must drown / In tears which cannot melt what time’s hand wove.” As if to counter this lachrymose flood, Stead resolves (twice) in “A Valedictory Sonnet,” that “hope will brook no tears!” In these poems, Stead claims to be “searching for strand / Or stray of truth’s magnitude”—but he produces instead an inert repetition of clichés and a multitude of nebulous abstractions.

Like these excluded works, “Carpe Diem” is a realist poem that follows the standard three-part formula. This poem also contains clichés, abstractions and repetition, but the similarities end there: this time Stead employs these devices in an original fashion. In the *Poetry Yearbook* pieces, Stead simply imported holus such commonplaces as “Death’s swift knife,” ‘drowning in tears,’ and ‘brooking no tears’; in “Carpe Diem” he transforms clichés by defamiliarizing them (a technique that helps to energise “Pictures in a Gallery” and much of Stead’s later work). For example, the first two lines of “Carpe Diem” present some familiar phrases in an unexpected and wryly humorous way:

Since Juliet's on ice, and Joan  
 Staked her chips on a high throne—

Putting something “on ice” is a common, colloquial expression for putting something out of circulation. To be “on ice” is to be frozen but, because Stead invokes the ancient “Carpe Diem” tradition—in which virgins resist a suitor’s sexual advances—he makes the phrase contain undertones of non-participation, perhaps even ‘frigidity.’ On another level, the gangster’s parlance of ‘putting someone on ice’ also seems appropriate. Shakespeare’s Juliet, destroyed by the intrigues of a family feud (and separated from both love and life) embraces and underscores all of these combinations.

Where Juliet had chastity forced upon her, Joan of Arc elected to reject physicality in favour of a spiritual life, turning her face towards the “high throne” of God. Stead uses the cliché of ‘staking one’s chips’ on a big gamble to undercut the piety of Joan’s aims. In addition, his careful choice of words allows one to see Joan tied to a “stake” and burning on a pile of wood “chips,” even as one hears—because of their proximity—the combination of ‘steak and chips’ frying over a hot flame. The phrase burns with tragi-comic irreverence and Joan loses either way but, by implication (because he is without her), so too does the poet.

Joan is an appropriate choice for a “Carpe Diem” poem because—according to Shaw’s account in *Saint Joan* at least—she spurned all the attentions of her suitor. Poems in this mode are traditionally addressed to reluctant ladies, with the poet reminding them of the shortness of life and the need to seize upon love while they have the chance. Stead’s title implies (indeed, insists upon) just such a poem, thus setting up the reader’s expectations. However, Stead does not simply write one more ‘seize the day’ poem; he reanimates the mode by thawing the ice of its conventions. For example, Stead does not address his poem to a coy or reluctant virgin, but to himself. He does not urge any particular person to love, because all his lovers (represented by Juliet and Joan) are gone. Instead, he advises himself to write about love, to “sing” and “dream” about maidens that might hear and enjoy his song. Stead places another twist on the reader’s expectations by having Juliet freeze and Joan fry:

in poems of this tradition, it is usually the poet who suffers the pain of alternate burning and freezing, not the objects of his desire.

Having lost two great female archetypes, Stead considers his alternatives in the next two couplets:

Sing a waste of dreams that are  
Caressing, moist, familiar:

A thousand maidens offering  
Their heads to have a poet sing;

A Freudian analyst might sense a set-up: the diction here is so “familiar,” and the dreams are so “moist” that they are all wet. Once again, Stead plays with expectations, and has a bit of fun doing it: the *carpe diem* poet traditionally suffers frustration, so why not show him besieged by wet “dreams”? Stead then toys with another archetype by reversing the Salome paradigm: instead of a prophet singing out of a well and losing his head to a woman, the poet dreams of singing so well that maidens will lose their heads (and offer their maidenheads to him). This dream is at once wistfully hopeful and a hopeless “waste” of time: the excessive number of “A thousand” underlines the fact that this is just a “dream.” A poet in New Zealand could hardly hope for a thousand readers, let alone a thousand readers of such a specific type.

These “dreams” run up against the reality of the lines that follow them:

Hard-drinking beaches laced with sun,  
The torn wave where torn ships run

To wine and whitewashed bungalows.

This 1950s landscape contains no maidens or martyrs or thrones: it is a scene of hard drinking. The people on the beaches drink up their “wine,” and even the beaches themselves are “Hard-drinking,” forever soaking up the sea. Just as drinks can be “laced” with alcohol and ‘brightened up,’ so the beach is laced with sun—thus it becomes at once a

drinker and a drink. Stead makes the words do double, even triple, duty. Similarly, to “run / To” something denotes speed of movement, but it also suggests excess: the “ships run / To wine” like an epicurean who ‘runs to fat.’ Stead’s seaside portrait has a surface of jolly vibrancy, a surface disturbed by an ever-increasing undertow. Gone are the soft caresses and the virginal offerings; we have moved to a place where things are “Hard,” “torn” and “whitewashed.” This last word hints at a society of conformists, where everyone paints their “bungalows” the same colour. At the same time, to “whitewash” can mean to cover something up. These surfaces may be misleading, their whiteness may suggest a purity that does not actually exist.

Stead underscores this possibility by focusing his final three lines on an archetype of false behaviour, “a cuckoo”:

This summer sing what winter knows:

Love keeps a cuckoo in its clock,  
And death’s the hammer makes the stroke.

Because the first five couplets all rhyme perfectly, this final couplet achieves a special dissonance. The false note of death’s “stroke” ends the pattern and enacts the poet’s message: even things that seem endless while you are in them—such as summer, love and dreams—may not be as eternal as they appear. The fun in the sun with the pun comes to a sudden end in “winter” and “death,” and in this way the final line returns readers to the urgency of the title: the need to love and—if one cannot love—the need at least to sing about it.

Just like the *Poetry Yearbook* poems, “Carpe Diem” concludes with a generalizing moral and, once again, Stead ends a realist work by telling the reader what he “knows.” In “Carpe Diem,” however, the close focus of a line by line analysis fails to net much in the way of inert clichés or abstractions. Even Stead’s old favourites, “Love” and “death,” are transported beyond the abstract: they come to life in the image of a wall clock. Love has a clock (a time

limit?), and betrayal and death lurk beneath its surface—the hidden attributes that, although you may not see them at first, eventually make themselves seen and heard. But while my paraphrase may fall into cliché, the image itself does not. This poem shows Stead using language in an original way: transforming clichés, making abstractions concrete and minimising repetition.

The comparison between “Carpe Diem” and the *Poetry Yearbook* poems reveals an author working in the same mode and with many of the same preoccupations. The only difference derives from the level of originality, and this element seems to be the one that governed Stead’s choices when he compiled *Whether the Will is Free*. Stead did not reject poems simply because they were in the realist mode. The early sections of this first volume are still dominated by realist verses, the very titles of which reveal the tradition of New Zealand realism: “Trapped Rabbit,” “Iron Gully,” “The Garden,” “Carpe Diem,” “Four Minute Miler.” These titles also reveal the problems of working in that tradition in the 1950s: the great political subjects of the 1930s appeared to have gone.

For most people, the 1930s were a terrible time to live in New Zealand. My father recalled wearing clothes sewn out of flour sacks and being sent away from his family—because he was an out-of-work single adult male—to live in a tent in Fiordland. Drenched in the almost constant rain of that area, the men in his work-camp were forced to build the Milford road and tunnel, using only pickaxes, shovels, wheelbarrows and plugs of ‘geli.’ Writers who look back on the 1930s, though, have a slightly different perspective. Fairburn felt the Depression was “the happiest time of my life,” and Robin Hyde viewed it as an essential creative catalyst:

Dorothea Turner—“You know what Robin Hyde said? She said, ‘No writer regrets the Depression.’ The Depression of the thirties broke the pattern of respectability in New Zealand that had got frozen in during the twenties. It had to break. Writers can’t write unless there are cracks.” (McNeish 80)

These “cracks” appeared to have frozen over again by the time Stead came to write his first poem. In the economically prosperous 1950s, political and economic tirades like Fairburn’s “Dominion” (written in 1935) no longer seemed feasible. According to Stead, in “A Poet’s View” of the post-war decade, writers and intellectuals “were in retreat and political and literary radicalism was exhausted” (*GC* 264).

Of course, that is not to say that Stead did not try his hand at writing political tirades. One of his earliest poems (published in the *Jindyworobak Anthology* 1953) was called “Sonnet for a New Zealand Soldier Killed in Korea”:

Perhaps you hoped to lose the thin despair  
 Of discontent, or gain the praise that always lies  
 In a cause the headline newspaper glorifies.  
 Or seeking money and a change of scene, you saw  
 Reason there, and armed against Chaos to share  
 The elaborate burden. Knowing what death implies  
 You may have steeled your purpose in colloquies  
 Of a liberal tradition—small comfort when the heart is bared.

Fed on the manufactured truth, you stilled  
 An older boredom in the gamble of guns and shells,  
 And paid the debt calmly when your loss was billed.  
 Your epitaph is the outworn battlecry that tells  
 How you died ‘fighting for peace’—words fogged in sighs:  
 In the arms of our hate you were strangled by a knot of lies.

In this sonnet, Stead performs some experiments with the Petrarchan form. He carries the ‘b’ rhymes of the octave over into the final couplet of the sestet, emphasizing the repetition (as well as the shift in meaning) of the crucial word “lies.” The word returns to haunt the rhyme scheme and the poet, moving as it does from the detached medium of newsprint to invade the personal life of the narrator.

In addition to experimenting with the rhyme scheme, Stead makes some metrical forays. He delays his first inversion until the fifth line, where the iambic pentameter stumbles over the capitalized concepts of “Reason” and “Chaos.” Stead uses trochees here to emphasize the importance of the two abstractions and the extent of their impact on the life of the young

soldier. A similar sensitivity to sound patterns can be seen in the final line, which provides a fine rhetorical flourish:

x x / x x / x x / x x x / x /  
In the arms of our hate you were strangled by a knot of lies.

Stead makes this the longest line in the sestet, turning away from the dominant iambic pattern into an anapestic rhythm. This rhythm strangles momentarily (and appropriately) over an extra weak stress at the end of “strangled,” and then ends with an iamb to lay a strong stress on the concept of political “lies.”

While the metre and rhyme scheme show a young technician of some ability, the poem as a whole sounds very like an attempt to write in the style of Allen Curnow’s famous 1943 sonnet, “In Memoriam 2/Lieutenant T.C.F. Ronalds.” Stead admired this particular sonnet, quoting it in full in “A Poet’s View” as representative of “What was happening on the New Zealand literary scene during those years” (260). Curnow was one of Stead’s teachers at Auckland University in the early 1950s, and Stead states—in a “Conversation” with Fleur Adcock—that “Curnow I had admired even before I came to the University and recognised what I felt then, and still feel, was his superiority to everyone else in the field” (43). When Stead did arrive at Auckland University, in 1951, he felt great “excitement” at discovering “the work of New Zealand poets” in a small glass case in the library (*GC* 262). To him this work was “more important” than any other “English literature,” as he recalls in “A Poet’s View”: “I studied the books in that glass case more intensively than anything set down in the courses I enrolled for” (262). Given all these antecedents, it is not surprising that Stead’s first few (published) poems are Curnowesque and derivative of 1930s New Zealand realism. However, Stead quickly came to realize that “there was no point in trying to repeat what Curnow had done” (*GC* 265).

Moreover, the “Sonnet for a New Zealand Soldier” contains none of the imagistic power of Curnow’s opening lines: “Weeping for bones in Africa, I turn / Our youth over like a dead

bird in my hand.” Curnow takes abstractions such as “youth,” “death,” and “history,” and transforms them into challenging, visceral images, whereas Stead’s abstractions—“Reason,” “Chaos,” “death,” “truth,” “peace”—generally remain abstract and inert. When he came to collect poems for his first volume, Stead left out his “Sonnet for a New Zealand Soldier.” There are no other overtly political poems in Stead’s early work, perhaps because—for Stead at least—there seemed to be no great political subjects in the New Zealand of the 1950s.

In “A Poet’s View,” Stead describes how it felt for him to be a “poet stepping on to the scene in 1951”:

I didn’t see then what I see now: that I had no great subject; that ‘the age’ was not ‘demanding’ poems of me as it had seemed, for example, to demand them of Ezra Pound; that consequently I had no obvious material to work on but myself. (GC 264)

Forced to turn inward for subject matter, Stead had to moralize about himself. He did this with typical honesty, opening up his emotions and probing them for the reader. For example, in the opening poem of *Whether the Will is Free*, Stead sees a rabbit in a trap, dancing “On the knife-edged knowledge of death.” He then describes killing the rabbit with “hands made hard by the cycle of birth / And pain.” At the end of the poem, Stead concludes by explaining what the experience made him feel:

then I felt  
Neither guilt nor superfluous pity, but smelt  
Clay at my heels, manuka breath  
In clean air, denying this shapeless death.

Most of the poems in this first section follow the pattern set by “Trapped Rabbit”: moving from a particular episode to a generalizing statement. That statement usually involves some kind of rumination about the workings of death, love, or time, as in “And Could He Now . . .” In this poem, Stead remembers the North Auckland farm of his childhood holidays, and asks the question “And could he now go back?” After a lengthy account of

what he wants to go back to—"the milky mornings," "The gorse bright yellow," "the long kitchen, candle for light"—the poet offers up his answer:

Leather and horse smell, smell of privy and pine,  
And the muddy matron sow with her snout of squeals  
Escaping, jolting through scrub that climbed the hill:  
But not the ash-white roads nor clacking lines  
That led the boy, counting on flying wheels,  
Can find him these where time is quick to kill.

Like Dylan Thomas in "Fern Hill" (1946), Stead comes to accept that his childhood farm has flown away, and that "time is quick to kill."

Stead's early poems about the settlements and farms of North Auckland have many parallels with the opening chapters of *The Singing Whakapapa* (1994). In that novel, Stead returns to "the big farm kitchen" (20), the milking shed, the horses, the pigs, the "clacking lines" and "flying wheels" of the north-bound train. The narrator recalls having to trap rabbits (55) and work with a bullock team (53); he even quotes a line from "Settlement," one of Stead's early, uncollected poems (17). Forty years after asking "And could he now go back?," Stead considers once more—through the Stead-like figure of Hugh Grady—what it might be like to return to one of the magical places of his youth:

Here a single chimney stands, all that's left of the old house, an acknowledgement, a memorial.

There are places Hugh would like to rediscover—the site of the old milking shed, the well, the buggy shed, the giant kauri in the bush, places along the stream where he fished. . . . He and Hat walk over fields, scramble through undergrowth, walk some way into the bush. . . . They come upon a cow in a drain, thoroughly dead and loud with flies.

Away from this place he carries its map in his head; but in fifty years everything has changed. The present reality imposes itself. That interior map, which can't be made to match it, fades. It will come back, but only when he removes himself. (31)

Hugh reaches much the same conclusion as the young author of "And Could He Now . . .": special places may be preserved in the imagination (and in works of art), but they cannot be preserved in reality, where Time—as can be seen in the lone chimney and the "thoroughly dead" cow—is indeed "quick to kill."

Stead articulates a similar learning process in “Carpe Diem”—the conclusion of which provides a paradigm for most of the end points of Stead’s early poems—where the poet recognizes and advocates “what winter knows” about love, time and death. While the attitudes expressed in “Carpe Diem” towards time and death parallel the final lines of “And Could He Now . . .” and “Trapped Rabbit,” the view of love also encapsulated in the closing statement of “Carpe Diem” is perhaps closest to that of “Night Watch in the Tararuas.” In both “Carpe Diem” and “Night Watch,” Stead reaches the knowledge that love is assailed by the “clock” of time and that “death” breeds in its “strange bones.” Stead may even hint, through the “cuckoo,” that cuckolding is a part of the “death” that lovers must endure. Nonetheless, in each poem the poet chooses to “sing” and “bind” himself to love, to engage in a qualified celebration of the warmth that survives in—and in spite of—“failing flesh.”

Similarly, Stead acknowledges his forebodings in the final stanza of his “Letter (to R.R.D.),” but elects to “trust that love outlasts our fears”:

And you have chosen Greece, alone,  
While I, a husband grateful where  
Your blessings on us both have shone,  
Watch from this shell the breeding storm  
And trust that love outlasts our fears  
When ocean’s ominous winds are born.

Here the poet moralises the first year of his marriage (1955), when he and his wife Kay “lived in a glassed-in veranda right on Takapuna beach” (*GC* 48).<sup>2</sup> Stead revised this “Letter” (in public at least) more than any other poem.<sup>3</sup> It was originally published in *Landfall* in 1955 as “Letter to R.R. Dyer”; it was then heavily revised for *Whether the Will is*

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<sup>2</sup>This “shell” is named more explicitly in “While Down the Fleeces of Our Sky,” where “Our glassed-in shell is busy trapping sun” and the narrator works at covering “the boards” with “matting.” For a fictional version of the same scene, see *All Visitors Ashore* (142).

<sup>3</sup>Stead states, in the “Craft Interview,” that “there are poems that I’ve revised a great deal. I can think of one that went through literally hundreds of drafts, a poem about a Fijian Brass Band. . . . But that’s untypical, and I think now, looking back, the phases when I’ve worked hard at poems have been the least satisfactory” (452).

*Free*, where Stead gave it the less explicit title of “Letter (to R.R.D.).” Stead subsequently made a number of changes for the poem’s appearance in *Crossing the Bar*, where he gave it the more colloquial (and, one assumes, more appropriate to the 1970s) title of “Letter to Rob Dyer.”

However, while Stead made changes to the title and body of the text, his conclusion hammered away at the same topic. The original ending read as follows:

And you have chosen Greece, alone,  
While I, less strong, or more aware  
Of beauty from completion grown,  
Watch from this shell the growing storm,  
And learn that love can hide despair  
When ocean’s ominous winds are born.

Here Stead touches upon the godwit concern of the 1950s: does staying at home make a New Zealand writer “less strong” or does it give a sense of “completion,” a greater awareness of the beauty at hand? When he published this poem in 1955, Stead had never left the country of his birth; by the time he came to compile *Whether the Will is Free*, though, Stead had experienced what New Zealanders call ‘the big OE’ (Overseas Experience) to Australia and Europe. These lines must therefore have seemed redundant to him in 1964. The penultimate line, by comparison, undergoes a more gradual, subtle shift: in this original conclusion, Stead hoped to “Watch . . . And learn that love can hide despair,” whereas, in later conclusions, Stead presents himself as a “grateful” husband who has learnt this lesson and come to “trust that love outlasts our fears.”

These early poems embody a paradox of the New Zealand realist method. On the one hand, the poems capture moments and convey them with immediacy. Their detailed descriptive passages can draw the reader in, allowing that reader to share the poet’s experiences as they happen; “to store them *as if they were real*.” On the other hand, the inevitable didactic conclusions have a tendency to alienate, to make the reader feel—in Patrick Evans’s terms—like a child in a classroom (*Penguin History* 97). Thus, in trying to

get closer to the reader by opening his heart, Stead found himself balked by the didactic aspects of realism.

Stead became increasingly frustrated with moralizing about himself. When he included "Some Earlier Poems" at the back of his second volume—*Crossing the Bar* (1972)—realist works were in a distinct minority. Stead discarded such poems as "Trapped Rabbit," "Iron Gulley," "And Could He Now . . .," "Four Minute Miler," and even the prize-winning "Night Watch in the Tararuas." By this stage, the mode of the poems had become a factor in Stead's selection process, resulting in some historical and actual revision. An example of Stead's increasing preference for modernism can be seen in his treatment of the "Poems in Afterthought." These were first published as a sequence of four realist lyrics in *Landfall* in 1956. Stead gave each poem a place name as a title, indicating four shifts in setting: the first three sections take place in Auckland—"Almora," "Waitemata," and "Remuera"—while the final section occurs in "Armidale" (the town in Australia that Stead moved to in 1956). Like the chapters of a tiny novel in verse, these sections describe, elaborate and look back on an unhappy love affair. Stead sets the tone for the sequence with an epigraph from Yeats's poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": "Man is in love and loves what vanishes."

When the time came to collect this piece for *Whether the Will is Free*, Stead cut the second poem—"Waitemata"—and named the remaining sequence "Three Poems in Afterthought." He also changed the individual titles of each section: "Almora" became "He Walks Where They Have Spent Warm Nights," "Remuera" became "Now She Owns Golden Things," and "Armidale" was renamed "In Wind They Walk Above the Town." The reasons for these title changes are unclear; perhaps Stead wanted to shift the emphasis of the poems from a particular and local love affair in order to suggest a more universal couple and symbolism. Thus "the town" in section III becomes any town where lovers have walked, not just "Remuera" in Auckland.

What is clear, however, is that Stead's deletion of the entire second section reveals a growing dissatisfaction with certain aspects of his own early work. By looking at the excised poem in full, one can deduce what Stead had begun to dislike about his early poetry:

She sighs, is silent, etched a moment  
 On the moon-graced sea, eyes shut to sense,  
 Sudden, firm-set intransigence  
 Becalmed on hopelessness, all love spent.

And becomes for him that past dream of death,  
 Pursued, lost, pleaded with, who turned away  
 Strewing a moon-wake of promises over the sea;  
 Whose yield remains in mind, desire and myth.

'It is you' he breathes, love out of the past  
 Swiftly reborn; eyes lift to his, smile  
 Into sight, sensing his change of will.  
 Life flames in her, in him withers to dust.

She waits. 'It is difficult' he mumbles,  
 'To love without obstacle, to desire when loved.'  
 She turns again, her dream reproved:  
 Over her tongue the name Death quietly stumbles.

Like Stead's rejected *Poetry Yearbook* pieces, this poem "quietly stumbles" over abstraction after abstraction: "sense," "intransigence," "hopelessness," "love," "death," "mind," "desire," "myth," "love," "the past," "will," "Life," "love," "desire," "dream" and—finally—"Death." Stead emphasizes the thrice repeated "love" and its twice repeated counterpart, "Death." In this poem (as in "Carpe Diem") the more powerful of the two proves to be Death, which gets the last word and the added emphasis of a capital letter. The relationship between these two lovers appears troubled.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, this flashback does not add anything new to the sequence. Instead, it slows things down by repeating the lovers'

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<sup>4</sup>There may be a connection between these lovers and the young couple in *All Visitors Ashore*. All these vague mentions of "death" may even be Stead's roundabout way of talking about an abortion in the 1950s. After all, the previous poem states that the woman is "She who chose the worst to prove / The choice was hers. Not loss / But death," while the following poem says that (again, like Pat in the novel): "She was to triumph over / Art and the world." Reginald Berry makes a similar connection in "A Deckchair of Words," suggesting that "One can even find evidence of part of the original model for Patagonia Bennett (probably an amalgam of the daughter of the Auckland painter Louise Henderson and Stead's own wife, Kay) in Stead's poem 'Remuera'" (319). However, I agree with Bennett that this kind of speculation is incidental to an engagement with the novel itself (or the poem)—a mere "parlour-game of connections between real and fictional worlds" (319).

situation in an abstract and wordy fashion. Pound warned poets to “Go in fear of abstractions” (*Literary Essays* 5), and in 1964 Stead followed that dictum by cutting “Waitemata” from his sequence.

By 1972, Stead had come to reject not just abstractions and clichés in poetry, but realism as a poetic mode. Thus, in the “Earlier Poems” section of *Crossing the Bar*, only one of the “Poems in Afterthought” remains. It is section I, slightly revised and now called simply “The Street.” Gone are its companion poems that took up the “he” and the “she” and expanded on their situation. Gone, too, are the epigraph and the overarching title. What remains is a short realist lyric that concludes with a clear statement about the lovers: “They may not even keep their pain.” However, Stead does not go on to give three more examples of the same situation and conclusion. In compiling his early poetry in 1972, Stead could not deny his realist roots, but he did try to minimise their presence.

One can see these modernist preferences operating on a broader level by comparing Stead’s treatment of the nine ‘sequence poems’ (poems comprising two or more sections, labelled numerically) that existed in *Whether the Will is Free*. Selecting from these poems for *Crossing the Bar*, Stead retains only the modernist sequences—“Pictures in a Gallery Undersea,” “Whether the Will is Free” and “The Fijian Police Band Performs in Albert Park, Auckland”—in their entirety. He also retains most of the imagist sequence “Four Harmonics of Regret” (now called “Three Eights”), while rejecting an earlier attempt at imagism, “Three Imperatives in White.” His four realist sequences, on the other hand, undergo a more uniformly ruthless excision. Two late examples (“Elegy” and “Of Two Who Have Separated”) are deleted completely, while two earlier sequences (“Elements” and “Three Poems in Afterthought”) are reduced to one poem each. Stead had obviously lost patience with the ‘plots’ of these realist sequences, preferring the more ambiguous juxtapositions of his modernist works. Thus one can see a definite ‘pecking order’ in Stead’s 1972 selections—running from modernist long poems at the top, down through imagism, to realism at the bottom.

In his review of *Crossing the Bar*, James Bertram expressed some nostalgic frustration at the selection of “Earlier Poems”:

some youthful pieces that had slipped into the bloodstream of New Zealand poetry—‘Night Watch in the Tararuas’, ‘Dialogue on a Northern Shore’—will surely be missed, and not just by older readers. (169)

Bertram implies that his stance is not bound by time or age, but reflects more universal expectations of poetry that most people, “not just . . . older readers,” will (or at least ought to) share. One can perhaps contextualize Bertram’s stance by pointing out that—as the first editor of *Phoenix* in 1932—he encouraged the beginnings of New Zealand realism and published (amongst others) Mason, Curnow, Brasch and Fairburn. He also went on to praise “the new romanticism” of Robin Hyde in 1952 (*Flight of the Phoenix* 18). It is not surprising, therefore, to find Bertram in 1972 criticizing “Stead’s later manner” for being “compressed, colloquial, abrupt, and at times undeniably cryptic” (169).

Like Horsman in his review of *Whether the Will is Free*, Bertram wants Stead to write a certain type of poetry—a poetry that makes its implications clear—and is disappointed when he does not. For example, he finds “Crossing the Bar” too ambiguous:

This poem I find both telling and teasing. With the last two lines I am lost in ambiguities: the argument (for surely there is one?) seems to have turned itself inside out. . . . I don’t want to quarrel with a poem whose form impresses me enormously; but should like to be sure I knew what the last line was saying—or, indeed, what it was about. (169)

Bertram argues here for the very separation of form and content—as well as the final line clanging shut like a gate on the reader’s imagination—that Stead argues against in “From Wistan to Carlos.” In Bertram’s view, “Crossing the Bar” ought to work its way towards an explicit conclusion. Conversely, he finds that others of Stead’s poems “are clear enough,” and that “a few” are very “fine” indeed:

“In a few poems where an older and ampler style of writing is allowed—‘Ode at the Grave of Martin McDermott’, ‘What Will it be?’—one glimpses the fine rhetorical romantic poet Stead might have been, a generation or so earlier.” (170)

In other words, for a poem to be very “fine,” it simply needs to be written in the mode that Bertram prefers: an “older” mode that indulges in “rhetoric,” a poem that makes plain statements and leaves the reader in no doubt as to its “argument.” Thus a poem should operate in the New Zealand realist mode, and end by “saying . . . what it was about.”

Bertram employs a rhetoric of constriction and freedom, opposing the “ampler style” of realism (sometimes “allowed” by Stead) to the more “compressed” style of the majority of “these strait-jacketed poems” (170). Stead, just as much a purist as Bertram, employs the same rhetoric in his criticism—he simply reverses the modes to which these terms are applied. By 1972 he had come to reject poems like “Night Watch in the Tararuas,” and in 1973 (in an article about James K. Baxter) he explained why:

In the early fifties when I was a student poems like ‘Rocket Show’, ‘Wild Bees’, ‘Letter to Noel Ginn II’ . . . —these and others were as important a part of my intellectual landscape as the poems of Donne and Eliot, Curnow and Fairburn. They had in common a . . . formal, well-managed stanzaic pattern, and a more or less contrived movement through varieties of sensuous experience towards moral statements. These poems of Baxter’s more than any others probably lie behind my own ‘Night Watch in the Tararuas’; and I suppose my present discontent with that poem comes precisely from its forced march to a moral conclusion. Those orotund Baxterian roundings-off. . . . (GC 216)

By 1979, in “From Wistan to Carlos,” Stead was even more dismissive about “Night Watch in the Tararuas” and the “type” of poem that it represents, arguing that “Life does *not* explain itself or point a moral; so the poem which does these things is artificial” (148). This modernist attitude found a voice in 1958, when Stead wrote “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea.” This pivotal poem seemed to be the point where Stead eschewed the mode of realism for good. Pure realism had given way to pure modernism.

#### 4. What Stead the Critic Rejected.

According to Stead’s criticism, that was exactly what had happened. Realism was of no further use to him as a poet after 1958:

In 'Pictures in a Gallery Undersea' I demonstrated to myself what I knew anyway, that the distinctive poetic element was not *in* the subject—that in fact, as Mallarmé said, poetry is not made of ideas, or subjects, it's made of words. (*GC* 267)

Poems should not exist simply to expound an idea. The shape of a poem should not be an incidental vehicle like a "donkey" (*GC* 142, 151) or a "coal truck" (*PYE* 329). As a critic, Stead attacked "that Georgian realist tradition" where poets were "practising all the negative virtues that follow from a rejection of the Romantic inheritance" (*PYE* 329). In his view, the modernism of Pound and early Eliot exemplified "the Romantic inheritance," while poets such as Auden and Larkin embarked on the following:

not simply the rejection of Modernism as an influence, but the return to that neo-classical separation of 'form' and 'content' which makes the poetic act a writing-up and decorating of a given 'subject' or 'idea' existing independent of the verse vehicle" (*PYE* 329).

Thus, in Stead's conception of literary history, "the "negative virtues" of realism led to a situation in the 1950s where "Poets were now (in the Leavisite sense) 'practitioners'; their function was social and moral; poems were vehicles like coal trucks and the critic was an inspector checking on the quantity and quality of the coal" (*PYE* 329-30).

As a poet in the late 1950s, Stead wanted to leap out of the driver's cab and fuse both coal truck and coal into one burning mass of molten possibilities. If form and content were to melt together into one inseparable unit, the "negative virtues" of realism had to be set aside. Looking back on the 1950s in "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead expressed and rejected all the things he felt were negative about realism. He insisted that a realist tradition had three drawbacks: first, an insistence on a fixed, pre-set form, second, the use of that form as a vehicle for ideas and statements, and third, the rounding off of those ideas and statements with a didactic conclusion. It seemed that these were the lessons he had learned from realism and, consequently, he had no further use for it as a tradition to draw upon.

Stead restates these negative lessons in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, exploring them in more detail. For example, in his first 'Interlude' ("Some Reflections on the Poetry of Hardy and Yeats"),

Stead sees Hardy as laying “secure ground for . . . the realist tradition in modern poetry” (137). Stead characterizes Hardy’s use of closed metrical forms as a “limitation,” one that constricts the poet’s expression of feeling:

such feeling as [Hardy’s] poem carries is signalled on the whole mechanically rather than given full-blooded expression. The language is tamed by the demands of the form, which rides roughshod over both pathos and superstitious fear, rendering them secondary to their vehicle. (148)

Strict metrical form, therefore, becomes an evil suppressor, riding “roughshod” over language and ‘taming’ it into dull submission: “The language is tamed by the demands of the form.” This is the prescriptive author of “From Wytan to Carlos,” attacking pre-set forms as restrictive containers, artificial restraints. For Stead, “the human drama has been somewhat mechanized and diminished” by Hardy’s strict adherence to a pre-set form (149).

Stead’s imagery and diction place open form—by implication—as the rescuer, coming to emancipate poetry from a mechanical, diminishing tyrant. He implies that only open form allows “full-blooded expression.” These implications highlight a contradiction in Stead’s criticism. He constantly protests that, in spite of his preference for modernism, he does not want “to take sides” or argue that one way of writing is “better” than another. This kind of approach can be seen developing in “From Wytan to Carlos,” where Stead states that:

I have a preference for Modernist poetics. . . . I acknowledge that preference. But it would be ridiculous to use it as any kind of measuring stick for the worth of particular poems. Clearly very bad poems are written every day according to Modernist principles; and the whole history of English poetry up to about the time of the First World War got along very nicely without Modernist poetic theory. So I don’t want to use this distinction in order to prove that some poems or poets are better than others. (GC 144)

He proceeds to argue that he is merely plotting the development of literary history, merely describing what happens without judging it:

But there is just this to be said. If one looks at developments in the arts from an historical perspective it does seem there is a certain flow of the tide. You can choose to swim against it if you want to, and you may swim brilliantly. What you can’t do is turn it back. (GC 144-45)

This argument recurs in an article called "What Became of Modernism?" (1980):

In all the arts there are broad movements which are inexorable. You may choose to swim against the tide, and perhaps do it very well, but you can't turn it back; and English poets for half a century have mostly chosen to swim against what my hunch as a literary historian tells me will prove to have been the major tide of poetry in this century. That broad tide is represented by the Modernist movement. (*AL* 108)

Stead prefaces this "hunch" by claiming impartiality; apparently his dismissal of realism as being "less spacious, less athletic, less stylish, less magical" than modernism simply reflects literary history as it seems to "someone with no axe to grind (I mean myself)" (108).

Stead repeats this pattern in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, a book that represents his effort to explain "what separates Yeats on the one hand from Pound and early Eliot on the other" (*GC* 140). In looking at the work of Yeats and Eliot, Stead insists once more that he is merely describing, not judging:

To put the Yeats poem ["These are the Clouds"] and the Eliot poem ["Prufrock"] together is not an exercise here intended to decide questions of better or worse, but only to plot once again a shift in literary history. (*PYE* 47)

Stead consistently states that his criticism involves an exercise in description, not a judgement on which types of poetry are "better or worse." However, the way that he goes on to describe the broad tide of open form almost always contains an attack on its opposite as small, closed, mechanical, tame, restrictive and artificial. Having protested that he does not want to take sides, he then proceeds to do so.

For example, Stead describes Yeats—like Hardy—as a poet who is 'trapped' by closed forms:

Pound was able to help him [stylistically]. . . . But there was a further step that Yeats would not take; and to Pound that placed limits on Yeats. At first these did not seem absolute limits . . . but only historical ones. There was a time gap which Yeats could not cross, and no reason why he should. Later, the limits must have come to seem to him more fundamental. Yeats could not free himself from the well-made poem, the isolated self-enclosed unit. . . . (*PYE* 20-21)

Despite Stead's claim that he restricts himself to charting historical shifts, he says here that there are "more fundamental" differences between Yeats and Pound than those that are "only historical." Stead casts Yeats as a fly in the web of closed forms, a poor creature in need of help. Pound, the emancipator, "was able to help him" a little, but you cannot save a fly that keeps flying back into the web: "Yeats could not free himself."

This metaphor of a trapped poet continues when Stead compares Yeats to the early Eliot:

Only by comparing Eliot's practice with Yeats's at this time is it possible to illustrate how tightly bound a poet can feel himself to be within the accepted metrical forms, and to recognize Eliot's achievement. It is easy to *decide* to break out of the traditional form; but to do so effectively the ear must be reeducated—and . . . Eliot achieved this. . . . (PYE 49)

Again Stead compares a "tightly bound" poet with a modernist poet who is able to "break out." He labels this break for freedom as an "achievement"—Eliot is able to master free verse, which Yeats recoils from as the "devil's metres" (24). Eliot's free verse, however, (as Eliot himself noted) was never "truly free," and Stead presents this fact as a limitation:

[Eliot's] own poetry, in so far as it was a kind of *vers libre*, was only so in the limited sense. . . . There was, that is to say, a continual breaking away from and return towards a basic metrical unit, the shadow of which remained detectable in the poem. (This probably remained true of Eliot throughout his career, but not of Pound, whose later Cantos are not simply free verse, but achieve open form.) (PYE 48-49).

Thus Stead sets up a scale of achievement in which poets must free themselves from the strictures of closed form, not simply to go as far as free verse, but to go further and "achieve open form." In this scale, Yeats fails because he "could not free himself," and Eliot succeeds only in a "limited sense," while Pound—who tried to help both—is able to "achieve open form" as if that was what they should all have been aiming for in the first place.

Sometimes *Pound, Yeats, Eliot* reads as if its author were handing out report cards in the area of form. Pound gets an 'A' for achievement (and for selflessly trying to help his fellow students), Eliot receives a 'B+' (and a slap on the wrists for the *Four Quartets*), Yeats gets a

'C,' and Hardy is "a failure." Stead argues, in relation to Hardy, that "It is, I think, a failure of the heart that keeps him always laced up inside his metrical forms" (146). In this way, Stead equates formal achievement with adequate emotion: poets without 'strong hearts' will remain "trapped" and "laced up" in metrical forms, while those with adequate emotion will presumably spill over into more open forms. In comparison with Hardy, Stead feels that even Yeats sometimes possesses "emotion" sufficient to enable him to break out of pre-set metres:

The ability Yeats demonstrates in 'The Cold Heaven' to sustain his long line, rendering metrical regularity irrelevant, seems to come direct from the emotion itself. That is what gives the lines their tensile strength. (146)

At this point in his argument, Stead endows Yeats with "ability," "emotion," and "strength," which sometimes push him into "rendering metrical regularity irrelevant." Hence Stead will later conclude that—compared to Hardy—"it seems to me there is no argument about the fact that Yeats was a better writer. . . . Yeats was the superior artist. . . . Yeats is superior" (157).

This kind of judging continues in Part II of *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, where Stead asks of Auden and his contemporaries: "Why did these poets . . . not produce better poems?" (174). The short answer is that they did not produce the type of poetry that Stead wanted them to. Instead of following Eliot and modernism, they turned to the closed forms of Georgian realism:

Auden . . . represented the beginnings of a retreat from Modernism and a consequent constriction of possibilities—even, one might argue, a constriction from which English poetry has still not recovered. . . . In *Look Stranger* he retreated into closed form, conventional poetic genres, statement. Historically speaking he took a step back, roughly, one might say, from Eliot to Yeats—and his contemporaries retreated with him. (171)

Stead characterizes Auden and his contemporaries as 'retreating' from what they should have aimed for: the modernism of Pound and early Eliot. In doing so they rendered themselves unable, in Stead's view, to "produce better poems." Hence modernism becomes equated

with “better poems,” for all Stead’s protests that he did not intend “to decide questions of better or worse.”

In terms of his ‘report card,’ Stead places Auden “somewhere between” Yeats and Eliot:

He falls somewhere between Yeats on the one hand and Eliot on the other, with something of each but not enough of either one to be poetically complete, and suffering in opposite ways when either comparison is made. He has in the end neither the courage of his rational structure nor the courage to break out of it, and the two remain at odds. (192)

Stead sees Auden as tied up like Hardy and Yeats, lacking “the courage to break out.” He ends by suggesting—once again “in terms of literary history”—“that had Auden gone about things differently he might have become a greater poet” (192). From Stead’s perspective, Auden chose a Georgian method that could not “be reconciled with the freedoms of Modernism” (192). It seems that if only Auden, Yeats and Hardy had chosen “the freedoms of Modernism,” each “might have become a greater poet.” Because they did not choose that mode, Stead marks each with some aspect of “failure” and “limitation.” He concludes his chapter by listing how Auden “failed”:

What Auden failed in might be called simply seriousness. He was not convinced enough about the importance of poetry; he lacked confidence in the role of the poet—and that, I think, is at, or close to, the core of his limitations. The possibilities open to poetry, as to music and painting, had been so revolutionized during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was no longer good enough to make do with that unsophisticated distinction, to which Auden so often resorted, between the language and the ‘ideas’ it serves as vehicle. . . . History—literary history—was demanding more of him than this, more than he was able to give. He had, of course, no responsibility to be a larger poet than it was in him to be; but his failure . . . and his example must surely be seen to have helped to bring almost to a standstill in Britain a poetic movement from which there were still gains to be made. (193)

Sounding like a petulant headmaster reprimanding a pupil, Stead complains that Auden’s behaviour is “no longer good enough.” His “failure,” as Stead sees it, was in falling away from promising modernist beginnings to Georgian realist ‘truth-telling’: “literary history,” Stead concludes, “was demanding more of him than this.”

Thus while he claims merely to describe trends and not to judge them, Stead's imagery and diction reveal his preferences. Beneath his protests of detachment—in "From Wystan to Carlos," "What Became of Modernism?" and *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*—lies a scale between "failure" and "achievement," where some poets attain the freedom of open form while others remain laced up in "the artificialities of rhymes and stanzas" (*GC* 149). Strict adherence to these "artificialities" is Stead's first count against realism. Indeed, he implies that such forms help to render realism essentially non-poetic: "Poetry," Stead asserts in "From Wystan to Carlos," "is not a form but a quality. Achieve the quality, one might almost say, and the form will look after itself" (149).

Stead's second and third counts against realism are its tendency towards explicit statements and clear conclusions. It is in these two areas, Stead argues, that Eliot's *Four Quartets* constitutes a retreat from modernism:

Assertions are made which invite counter-assertions, and this is destructive to 'that willing suspension of disbelief which alone constitutes poetic faith'. . . . As the verse moves over into direct expository statement we may agree or disagree, but in either case our sense of the work as a poem fades and fails. (*PYE* 227)

Stead uses the concepts of 'fading' and 'failing' repeatedly in relation to the *Four Quartets*. For him "the poem feels only half alive" (229), and its opening lines "are a kind of poetic death" (225):

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.

Stead says of these words that "They challenge the mind conceptually and the effort to come to grips with the abstract assertions reduces any poetic effect almost to nil" (225). For Stead, Eliot's "assertions" constitute a retreat from the techniques of modernism. He argues that

Eliot's retreat, like that of Auden, reveals a lack of faith, an inability to maintain "the preservation of poetic faith into middle age" (199).

Stead also contends that part of Eliot's "failure" stems, like that of Yeats, from not (or at least no longer) listening to Pound: "lacking a Pound to do with the manuscripts of the Quartets what had been done to those of *The Waste Land*, there was bound to be a good deal of dross" (233). Not only did Eliot lack Pound and "poetic faith" but, according to Stead, he also lacked "spirit": "Eliot's poetry, I conclude, was a victim both of the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s and of his own inner failure of spirit . . ." (235). All this terminology of "failure" explains why Stead usually takes great care, when listing his own poetic mentors, to specify Pound and the early Eliot. In Stead's view, because he withdraws into abstraction and expository statement, "Eliot's later poetry . . . fails by comparison" with Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (311).

Once again, where Stead's criticism purports to be descriptive it actually turns out to be evaluative. He sets up explicit statements and clear conclusions (as he did with preset forms) in opposition to his own conception of what poetry ought to be:

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

Here is a perfect image. . . . Nothing but works of art can give us knowledge and secondary experience of that area which in fact we occupy every moment of our waking lives—and it is for that reason that we respond to them, and are probably deluded when we value them for anything that is abstractable and capable of restatement.

So (to return to the Yeats poem) in so far as it makes a statement it engages us in an area which is not quite 'pure'—and the clearer the statement, the less enriched, complicated, qualified and pulled out of shape by the texture of word and image, the more remote from poetry. (*PYE* 45-46)

So Stead's definition of "poetry" excludes certain types of discourse, and any readers who might disagree are dismissed as "probably deluded." 'Pure' poetry—which in Stead's view is epitomised by "Kubla Khan" and *The Waste Land*—ought to be suggestive and incomplete. Therefore, any poem which makes explicit statements and attempts to draw a

clear conclusion is, to that extent, less of a poem: it becomes “not quite ‘pure’” and “more remote from poetry.”

At the heart of this rejection of Yeats—and of the realist tradition—lies Stead’s dislike of didacticism. He believes that poets ought to avoid attempts at closure, as Eliot does in *The Waste Land*:

The poem (and here, to keep alive a useful comparison, is where Yeats and Eliot diverge) will be partly created by its readers, just as what the eye ‘sees’ in many modernist paintings is an interpretation of objectively neutral but super-suggestive, mind-activating forms and colours. (PYE 95)

In reader response theory, every poem “will be partly created by its readers,” but Stead is not simply espousing reader response. He is arguing that poetry which makes explicit statements and conclusions is less open to reader participation. Every poem evokes a response, but not every poem actively invites readers to participate in the creative act and draw their own conclusions. Because Stead prefers the latter, he judges the realist work of Yeats, Auden and Hardy (as well as that of the later Eliot) to be a “failure,” “not quite ‘pure’” and “remote from poetry.”

When Stead turns to examine New Zealand literary history, he levels the same judgement at James K. Baxter’s poetry:

you don’t make poems more significant by stuffing them with weighty pronouncements. Baxter (to return to that thorn in all our flesh) was only beginning to sort out the difference between the poem and the pulpit when he died. (“Craft Interview” 467)

In his 1974 blurb to *Quesada*, Stead described Baxter as “a dour Kiwi ghost” who haunted New Zealand poetry; by 1983 he had come to see Baxter as a “thorn in all our flesh.” Stead articulates the reason for this increasing negativity in “From Wystan to Carlos”:

James K. Baxter enunciated what was to be the predominant literary attitude of the 1950s when he said, in his celebrated address to the 1951 Writers’ Conference in Christchurch, that a poet must be ‘a cell of good living in a corrupt society’; and he concluded: ‘I have dealt with the development of ideas rather than the development

of verse-forms; mainly because to me verse-form seems a tool for sharpening ideas.' There you have that separation of form and content—'verse-form' on the one hand, 'ideas' on the other—which had been characteristic of the 1930s. In 1951 nothing had changed. (151)

In Stead's view, Baxter had (like Auden in Britain) set everyone on the wrong track by promoting closed forms, prophecy and didacticism. Stead saw Baxter as a "thorn in all our flesh," because his promotion of New Zealand realism dominated the 1950s and, to a certain extent, held back "the broad tide of Modernism."

Baxter's approach does dominate New Zealand poetry in the 1950s. In relation to Stead's own poetry, one can see Baxterian form (and content) not just in "Night Watch in the Tararuas," but in much of his early work. For example, Stead's 1955 poem "Logging: Mangawhai" echoes, amongst others, Baxter's imaginative connection with past settlers in "The First Forgotten" (a poem collected in Curnow's 1945 anthology). Furthermore, "Logging: Mangawhai" takes readers on a "forced march to a moral conclusion," enacting Stead's description of the Baxterian format, the "formal, well-managed stanzaic pattern, and a more or less contrived movement through varieties of sensuous experience towards moral statements" (*GC* 216):

All day the shouts, cracking of leather whip  
Over bullock team, and the tree's loud groan:  
Until, down the path that remains of the old slip  
Through forest to ruined mill, the kauri was won  
Free of the bush. And when we had trimmed the log  
Clear from the tangled vines, and only the drag

To the distant road remained, there was time for rest,  
A bottle or two, and talk of the bush-bound days  
When sound of pit saws hummed over the breast  
Of hills tied tight in green, and the falling trees  
Split with the cracking of whips. Not now those teams  
Creeping like a disease along the seams

Of the mountain range. Still on these higher slopes  
The bush grows thick, where wild boar dives  
For cover under fern and supple-jack ropes.  
And there the oldest hand, lean, with the grave  
Humour of age recounted the past, so that we  
Withdrew suddenly from the straight monotony

Of time, becoming his gang, without home

But the brown shacks by rushing water, and no town  
 Worth the name within a hundred miles: to seem  
 Part of the land he drew was more than we could own  
 For long; and returning in trucks that night  
 Over smooth roads, we were glad to see the lights  
 Of a town, sprouting where trees had grown. (*Poetry Yearbook* 1955)

In terms of its “sensuous experience,” this poem offers a fairly standard mid-1950s male perspective on New Zealand. Like most male poets of the time, Stead genders the landscape as female, with its “breast / Of hills” wrapped in a “tight” green outfit. Another of Stead’s 1950s poems, “Tall Girl,” describes a girl whose own “breasts full of a melancholy sway”—followed by the male gaze—“fade . . . among the great breasts of hills.” Charles Brasch uses a similar image in “The Silent Land,” telling us that “Man must lie with the gaunt hills like a lover” (implying that the ideal woman will also be “Silent”); Hubert Witheford calls “the wild bush” a “wanton,” severed from “its fond lover” (“Elegy in the Orongorongo Valley”).

Baxter, in typical fashion, tries to outdo everybody else, calling himself a “land-lover” whose mountains are “clear / groined”: he wants to “lay aside / Dry brick,” lie with the ground, and “Here stay, deep in clay” (“Hill-country”). Baxter’s mountains “await / As women wait,” calling to men like sirens or witches—“They call: but he whom they lay their spell upon / Leaves home, leaves kindred” (“The Mountains”). For this poet—and apparently “For us” as well—“the land is matrix and destroyer”:

Remote the land’s heart: though the wild scrub cattle  
 Acclimatized, may learn  
 Shreds of her purpose, or the taloned kea.

For those who come as I do, half-aware . . .  
 For us the land is matrix and destroyer  
 Resentful, darkly known . . . (“Poem in the Matukituki Valley”).

Baxter turns the land into a “Resentful” woman whose “heart” is “Remote”; only wild animals may learn “her purpose.” Curnow, just as typically, is one of the few poets to move beyond this cliché, casting the land as a crucified Christ in “The Unhistoric Story,” where he

sees New Zealand being populated with “Miners, not husbandmen, who piercing the side / Let the land’s life.”

This kind of environmental concern can also be seen in “Logging: Mangawhai,” where Stead uses another pervasive trope of the period, the image of a mistreated landscape. Looking back on the clearcut logging of the colonial period—which was once celebrated in verse as heroic and essential—Stead describes the influx of loggers and their bullock teams as a “disease” that crept through the New Zealand bush. This attitude towards the environment marks a shift into the post-colonial: like Curnow, Mulgan and Sargeson before him, Stead criticizes the damage that the colonial “pit saws” have left behind. “Still on these higher slopes / The bush grows thick,” but that qualifying “Still” makes it clear that there is not much bush left down below, “along the seams / Of the mountain range.” The narrator implicates himself, and his own time, for continuing to log and force nature to “dive . . . / For cover,” even as that cover is being increasingly removed.

Stead’s narrator appears to be a hard-working, ‘crumpy’ sort of chap, enjoying “A bottle or two, and talk of the bush-bound days.” About halfway through the third stanza, however, this narrator seems to shift out of character, becoming as literate and distant as his language:

the oldest hand, lean, with the grave  
Humour of age recounted the past, so that we  
Withdrew suddenly from the straight monotony

Of time

By placing a line-break around “grave,” Stead manages to pun on the oldest worker’s appearance (“lean, with the grave”), style of speaking (“grave / Humour of age”) and subject matter (“grave / Humour”—the times and the people he talks of are gone). The narrator then interprets the results of the speech in an elevated manner, before slipping back into vernacular speech, with “no town / Worth the name within a hundred miles.” Finally, in Baxterian fashion, he concludes by stating what he and the other young workers felt:

to seem  
 Part of the land he drew was more than we could own  
 For long; and returning in trucks that night  
 Over smooth roads, we were glad to see the lights  
 Of a town, sprouting where trees had grown.

The younger men could not stay in the past for long, because they received a frightening glimpse of what life for the first colonists might have been like. Despite reservations about clearing the land, therefore, they “were glad to see the lights / Of a town, sprouting where trees had grown.”

“Logging: Mangawhai” offers a vignette, a captured moment, and—unlike many of Stead’s early poems—it does not flounder over ‘big’ abstractions. Nevertheless, as a purist modernist critic, Stead would probably judge this poem to be a “failure,” because it has a fixed form, makes explicit statements, and attempts a clear conclusion. For example, the poem has a “formal, well-managed stanzaic pattern,” with regular metre and rhyme scheme. The final line provides a nicely judged exception: it presents an extra ‘b’ rhyme that makes the final stanza one line longer than all the rest. Describing as it does the “town, sprouting where trees had grown,” this extra line echoes the narrator’s attitude to both “town” and “trees.” The town has sprouted out of nowhere, taking over from and breaking the spell of the ancient bush; like the town, the line itself is a surprising new growth, appearing unexpectedly on the edge of the stanza. At the same time, this final line is one of the shortest in the poem: all the lines have five feet except this one and the line in the third stanza that reads “The bush grows thick, where wild boar dives.” By shortening these two lines to four feet, Stead invites the reader’s eye and ear to make a connection between them. Just as the boar did, the narrator dives for cover in his natural habitat—but the unusual shortness of this pair of lines highlights the possible transience of both areas. This parallel reminds readers that, like the bush, the “sprouting” town may not be as durable as it appears. In addition, Stead’s carefully placed stanza break undercuts the imaginative escape from time by reminding readers visually that the men are always a part “Of time, becoming his gang.”

Thus they are not just the old man's gang but—on a symbolic level—time's gang as well, and just as subject to his rule as the landscape that surrounds them.

Looking back on this poem in the late 1980s, Stead commented obliquely on his change in method since the 1950s:

When I wrote of Mangawhai what I remembered was  
 the crack of whips and the weight of wooden yokes.  
 What's known now seems to come, half from what's written  
 half from what's half-recalled. It was a warm morning  
 the bush wet, the bullocks' steaming flanks  
 heaving, sinking cloven shafts in the tracks.  
 We were re-enacting history, not for itself  
 but for a purpose, the removal of one kauri  
 to be sawn at the pit. . . .

What I remember is fact.

'How deal with' is half our story. Words come first. (*Bet* 61-62)

This passage appears in section 3 of "The Kin of Place," a seven part poem that Stead subtitled as "a poem for Kendrick Smithyman." Like Stead, Smithyman wrote poetry and criticism, became a lecturer in English at Auckland University, and championed the *Freed* group in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> The first part of the final line—"How deal with' is half our story"—appears to address and acknowledge their task as poets. If their "story" is poetry, then their task is to deal with "fact" in such a way as to make it into a poem. The answer seems to be, as it was for Mallarmé, "Words come first."

One might argue that—like Stead's Baxterian work—this section works its way through "varieties of sensuous experience" in order to conclude with an explicit statement. However, the meaning of the final phrase seems far from clear. Stead's conclusion that "Words come first" may contain a rebuke for his younger self, a rejection of the way that realist poets elevated 'ideas'—but any such suggestion remains implicit. Similarly, the phrase could mean that words ought to come before anything else, a kind of romantic wellspring theory like that valorized by Stead in *The New Poetic*. Moreover, the phrase might mean that "Words come

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<sup>5</sup>See Smithyman's "Afterword" to Arthur Baysting's *The Young New Zealand Poets* (1973).

first,” that “Language is power,” as Stead argued in a 1982 address to the National Association of Teachers of English (AL 252). Only language can make “fact” (and ‘fiction’) seem ‘real’; words can make things come to life, and this power fascinates most poets:

It was something that didn't happen, like the gun that wasn't  
deflected, like the rope not cut from the wrists  
of the man in the check shirt who didn't walk away.  
In words these things that didn't happen. (“Paris: The End of a Story”)

For poets such as Stead and Smithyman, the interrelationship between “word” (language) and “fact” (the real) is one of their “first” concerns.

On the other hand, Stead may simply mean that his memory of the “Words” of the 1955 poem has come to dominate his “half-recalled” memory of the actual “facts” of the event. Such a reading would accord with that of Stead’s central narrator in *The End of the Century at the End of the World*, Laura Barber, who muses “Fact? Fiction? No, I’m not sure where the line between them lies” (123):

I put the typescript down. I remembered this scene, but only faintly; and now I couldn't be sure whether it came back to me as something that had happened, or only as something written. I thought of one of Hilda Tapler's notes suggesting that fiction which was supposed to deal with your own experience had the effect of replacing it. What you wrote became your memory. (130)

Like Stead in “The Kin of Place,” Laura reads over something she wrote in her youth (when her name was Laura Jackson), and tries to sort out what she wrote from what she remembers. This process induces a kind of ripple effect, because the reader may recall (“half-recall”) that part of the typescript that Laura examines actually appeared—in embryonic form—in *Islands* (1972) as a short story. That story was written about a character called “Laura Jackson” by an author called C.K. Stead. Thus the poem that refers to a poem also connects with a novel that refers to a manuscript that refers to a short story; “fact” mingles with “word,” and so the ripples spread.

In any case, these possible interpretations are only implicit in “The Kin of Place.” What Stead means by phrases such as “our story” and “Words come first” have to be extrapolated by the reader. This creative engagement increases as the reader grapples not only with the complexities of this section, but also attempts to construe its connections with the other six sections of the poem. In modernist fashion, Stead has avoided “narrative and logical structures” (*GC* 149), inviting readers to find a path through the poem that makes sense for them. For example, section 6 returns to the relationship of “word” and “fact,” but with some ambiguity as to which “comes first”:

Strange flocks are seen to straggle over the isthmus  
fact carrying word, word carrying fact—  
ungainly pairs.

Does word carry fact, or does fact carry word? These lines imply no disjunction between the two—they are as inseparable as a bird and its flight. One might even argue that this image modifies the earlier statement that “Words come first,” by implying that words need facts in order to fly. The combinations may be “Strange,” ‘stragglings’ and “ungainly,” but they are all a poet has to work with, and “half” the poet’s job is working out how to “deal with” these things.

Thus section 6 may be a sonnet in its own right, but the reader cannot separate these fourteen lines from the words that surround them; the sonnet sends out tendrils to the other sections, and gets cross-pollinated by them in turn. For instance, the first half of the sonnet ends with another juxtaposition of words/facts:

Pain is reflexive  
to be read between the lines, not for discussion  
while fish swim and butter melts in a pan.

“Pain” is close to “pan,” and we all simmer in it. In the larger context of the poem, however, this pain may refer back to section 5, and Smithyman’s “domestic conflict”:

Sargeson told me domestic conflict  
was killing your talent. He was wrong.

Your talent was a hungry dog. It fed on scraps.  
On that North Shore we all bayed at the moon.

Pain (and especially “domestic conflict”) might be “not for discussion,” but it can feed the fires of art, and can then “be read between the lines” of a poem. On the “North Shore” of Auckland in the 1950s, Stead read Smithyman’s poems in “typescript,” and must have seen the pain—“between the lines”—that Smithyman had transmuted into poetry. Stead may even be punning here on ‘bays,’ the traditional prize for the best of poets. When Smithyman met with a fact, it could quickly become the words of a poem, and Stead admired his ability:

No day beyond Kaitaia or east of Eden  
was ever ordinary, not anyway after  
your eye had lit upon it. Up went your words  
like salt on the wind. In came tide under mangroves.

Stead’s placement of the “salt on the wind” links it simultaneously to the “words” of a poem, to the “tide” from which it came, and to the salt tear of the viewing “eye.” Word and fact wash together and become indistinguishable, like the “Strange flocks” in the sonnet that ride on the very same wind.

A similar set of connections occurs where “fish swim and butter melts in a pan.” Stead’s word placement prompts the reader to wonder whether the fish is swimming in water (and alive) or in butter (and not so alive). The ambiguity of this image reminds readers that death and “pain” are inextricable from life (and life-giving meals). The image of a swimming fish also links back to section 2, where a fish swam into view:

Casual as a cocky  
one kahawai is herding mackerel in the green of the stream.

A kahawai is a large New Zealand fish, prized by fishermen and chefs alike. Here Stead sees the big fish preying on the smaller mackerel, and envisions him as a “cocky” (a farmer) casually going about the everyday business of driving his herd. On both levels, this image connects to the pan and the food chain, how natural it all is, the pain and the life. Nonetheless, Stead leaves all these connections implicit, to be made by the reader.

One might contrast the method of “The Kin of Place” with that of a 1965 poem, “You Have a Lot To Lose.” In the latter, Stead also goes fishing and watches the movement of fish in the harbour, but this time he draws an explicit conclusion:

He strikes.  
 You had known death and a good meal  
 Were inextricable.  
 You know it again.

Stead leaves nothing unstated here. In realist fashion, he interprets his experience for the reader, once again explaining what it is that he has “known” and come to “know.”

Returning to section 6 of “The Kin of Place,” the sonnet ends with an image of the way that words (and water, and cities) spill out in uncontrollable growth:

One poet, asked to dream,  
 conjures a mud-flat; another, a scoria cave.  
 Scene becomes anecdote, anecdote history, and still  
 verbs tug at their moorings, nouns are tossed,  
 the harbour spills its sails out on the Gulf,  
 a city goes on growing under our feet.

After these lines, the poem as a whole draws to a close with its seventh section. This short, three-line section avoids any sort of Baxterian “forced march to a moral conclusion”:

A dwarf with a billiard cue and a mania for fact  
 was asked was there life south of the Bombay Hills.  
 He said he believed there was, and went on working.

No explicit conclusion here—just an image, and an opaque one at that. The poet seems to share the dwarf’s “mania for fact,” so this kind of madness is probably being presented in a positive light, just like that of the North Shore artists who “bayed at the moon.” Like those artists (as well as the cook and the poets in section 5, the loggers and “Champion” sawyers in section 3, the cocky in section 2 and the student in section 1) the dwarf “went on working” in spite of interruptions and obstacles. Thus the poet appears to endorse the dwarf’s “mania” and work ethic, but any such endorsement remains implicit.

In addition to this aggregation, other levels of meaning accrue via the technique of allusion: local readers will recognize the old New Zealand joke that Aucklanders believe—and act as if—there is no “life south of the Bombay Hills” (the southern boundary of their city). That the dwarf should deny the joke, and simultaneously affirm the presence of life, seems to add to his positive stature. Readers familiar with Smithyman’s verse will identify the dwarf with him, because in 1978 he published a volume of poems called *Dwarf With a Billiard Cue*. In the title poem, Smithyman praised “Innate decorum, fitness of whatever.” He also honoured the determination, work ethic and potting abilities of a certain dwarf:

a dwarf, with a billiard cue  
longer, taller than  
the tale which a barman was telling  
about how game he was, fishing.

. . . he compelled you  
to honour determination,  
his applied intent mathematically  
stern. Parameters in chance he guided  
through his sets. Existence is  
like this. You live, contracted, engaged. (42)

As in “The Kin of Place,” here is fishing (with a pun on the barman’s ‘fishing for compliments’), and a poet who celebrates life, “contracted, engaged.” Smithyman offers his respects to the dwarf, and Stead offers his respects to Smithyman by alluding to that dwarf in a positive fashion.

Beyond this simple level of praise, Stead’s reference also contains a trace amount of literary politics; local readers may remember that Lauris Edmond wrote a scathing review of *Dwarf with a Billiard Cue* (in the *Listener*, 14 April, 1979), criticizing Smithyman for his “obscurity” and his “impulse to be clever.” She concluded that Smithyman’s was “not, I think, essentially a poetic mind.” Smithyman’s supporters were incensed at this kind of evaluation and, as Roger Horrocks notes in “No Theory Permitted on These Premises,” “Stead wrote a thoughtful letter to the editor (in the May 19 issue) defending Smithyman’s poetry and challenging Edmond’s assumptions about ‘literature’ not being a part of ‘real life’” (125). Stead was defending a fellow poet from Edmond’s realist purism, the same

kind of purism that attacks Stead's own poetry for being "too clever." In the same year, Smithyman wrote a letter to *Comment*, defending Stead's latest volume of poems (*Walking Westward*) from a negative review by John Needham. Smithyman described Needham's article as "regrettable" and "very questionable," as well as stating that "Mr Needham has not exceeded, he has travestied, the competencies of criticism" (15).

The point here is that "The Kin of Place" ends with many implications, and invites the reader to help create those implications. In direct contrast, Stead closes "Logging: Mangawhai" with a clear, explicit conclusion. He even underscores that statement by adding a line to the preset form of the poem. In other words, a gate clangs shut on the reader's imagination, the very type of effect that Stead attacks in "From Wystan to Carlos." In that essay, Stead asserts that modernist poets "don't want the concluding line to shut the gate on the experience of the poem" (150):

the Modernist poet, the 'open form' poet, wants literature to invade, to absorb life, almost to become indistinguishable from it, to collapse conceptual distinctions. Life does *not* order itself into narrative, or into logical argument; so in the degree to which a poem organizes itself that way, it falsifies. Life does *not* explain itself or point a moral; so the poem which does these things is artificial. That is one aspect of open form—an openness to experience *as it occurs*, not a bringing of experience to be judged at the bar of previously formulated ideas or ideals; an attempt to get nearer to the true feel of experience; a preference for the possibly incoherent actual as against the organized abstraction. (*GC* 148)

That Stead felt strongly and consistently about these issues can be seen in that he repeats these counts against realist poetics—with many of the same phrases and images—seven years later in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*:

Traditionally poetry differs from 'reality' in that whereas life is open-ended, on-going, life as it is shaped to the conventions of poetry is closed off, measured, given a conclusion—something which is more than ever emphasized by a final rhyme, clanging into place often like a gate shutting on the imagination. Of course if life and art are to be distinguished there must always be a degree of artificiality—unreality—about the latter. But the conventions can at least keep changing ('Make it New'). . . . (*PYE* 158)

The same arguments against realism can be found in Stead's 1980 article about modern British poetry, "What Became of Modernism?":

Open form, the aggregation of numinous fragments without logical or narrative structure, the movement of spoken rather than written language, incompleteness of statement so that the reader is invited into the poem and required to participate in the imaginative act—these are some of the features of the Modernist poem. They are common to the work of widely divergent inheritors of Modernism, and they are seldom found in the modern British poem which is often the short, well-made article, completing the statement, closing the account, shutting the gate on the reader who must stand outside the linguistic action, looking in. (AL 108-09)

This binary opposition between realism and modernism appears repeatedly in Stead's criticism. He consistently attacks preset forms, statements and conclusions, promoting instead the 'open form' poetry of modernism:

The Modernism of Pound and Eliot set in motion what has come to be recognized as 'open form'—something more than just 'free verse', in that it is an attempt to preserve a close sense of the actuality of experience by not allowing established stanza and metrical patterns to appropriate the subject or occasion of the poem. Form must follow upon, or spring from, experience rather than be imposed upon it. The new poetry has been 'open' also in that, by not closing off the account, not saying the last word, not drawing the obvious conclusion, not even perhaps quite completing the statement or making itself fully intelligible, it invites the reader in as a participant in the poetic act. (PYE 158)

Thus Stead employs the rhetoric of critical purism and 'open form' becomes "The new poetry," the preferred mode. As chapter one demonstrated, many New Zealand critics promote their favourite sort of verse in this way, not just as an option but as the option.

So, in theory, Stead was in favour of pure modernism. However, while Stead the theorist states a simple division between realism and modernism, Stead the poet seems to have suffered conflicts; things were not so easily carved up in practice. In order to prove this assertion, I want to turn now to the poems that Stead wrote between the pivot point of 1958 and the prescriptions asserted in 1979. One can see, having examined Stead's criticism, that he had learnt negative lessons about realism and was determined not to write closed, didactic verse again. How then can one explain any realist elements that appear in *Crossing the Bar*, *Quesada* and *Walking Westward*, the three volumes produced between those vital dates? Such elements must be evidence that Stead the poet had learned some positive lessons about realism—lessons not mentioned in "From Wystan to Carlos"—and had incorporated them into his practice.



The music belongs to the poet. The professor can label it and even try to restrict it, but the music wells up and takes shape according to the poet's impulse, not the critic's will. I am not trying to present a conflict between Stead the poet and Stead as a professor of poetics—though he has himself intimated this possibility by asking (in sonnet 8) “Do good poets / Make bad professors?” (*PD* 46). I am suggesting rather that the poet may add to what the professor maps out. In Stead's case the same man is both, so one might expect a certain degree of consistency in his production of texts. However, though the poet tries to stay ‘in bounds’—and mainly does so—anything that he produces outside those bounds need not detract from the poetry. A purist critic might try to ignore or rule out any such transgression, but I propose that seam realism does not have to be seen as a transgression at all. If one steps outside the rhetoric of purism, evidence of conflict and ‘wrong-doing’ might alternately be viewed as an experiment in combination.

So, while the seam of realism does qualify Stead's prescriptions in “From Wystan to Carlos,” it need not be seen as a detraction from Stead's poetics; on the contrary, seam realism might supply an added dimension to both the theory and the practice. While the theory displays and dismisses all the elements of realism that Stead sees as negative, the seam of realism that remains can represent the elements that he feels to be positive. These positive elements seem to fall into three areas: subject matter, the ability to work within fixed forms, and drawing the reader into the poem.

### **1. Subject Matter.**

In “From Wystan to Carlos,” Stead rejects the use of poetry as a mere vehicle for subject matter. Allen Curnow, in what seems like a sly putdown of Stead's rejection, implies in the note to his *Selected Poems* (1982) that while subject matter may lead to the production of “claptrap,” it can also produce “poetry.” Curnow takes as his example the hoary subject of New Zealand's national identity:

There is indeed a claptrap of the subject, we have heard enough of 'national identity', but this doesn't mean that it will go away. There is also, I hope, a poetry of the subject. (x)

One of the crucial lessons of a realist tradition is that sometimes a subject will grip you so strongly that you have to let it into your poetry. Stead may have changed traditions after 1958, but he could not control events, and his flexibility as a poet can be seen in that he did not ignore this lesson.

I have already touched upon two general subjects of New Zealand realism: politics in the 1930s and the self in the 1950s. In "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead dismisses such subjects as the "removable, abstractable, restatable 'content' the poet as moralist, or as realist, chooses to load into his vehicle" (144). In theory, a modernist poet would have no need for such 'content,' but important events in Stead's life caused him to fall back on it. Having rejected poems about politics and self at the end of the 1950s, Stead found that both subjects re-entered his verse in the 1960s.

#### a) Politics.

Looking back on "Pictures in a Gallery" in "A Poet's View," Stead felt that writing this poem was the point at which he moved away from a realist poetry that insisted on subjects and ideas. As soon as he turned to consider his poems of the 1960s, though, Stead found that he had to qualify Mallarmé's (and his own) insistence on "words":

In 'Pictures in a Gallery' I demonstrated to myself what I knew anyway, that the distinctive poetic element was not *in* the subject—that in fact, as Mallarmé said, poetry is not made of ideas, or subjects, it's made of words. . . . Poetry is made with words; but during the middle and late sixties a very large *subject* forced its way into my poems. (GC 267-68)

Stead was so angered by the Vietnam War that he chose to do what he himself rejects in "From Wystan to Carlos" as "putting the subject back into poetry" (142), denying the access of readers' imaginations in order to make his point.

This process can be seen in one of the first poems in *Crossing the Bar*, “A Small Registry of Births and Deaths,” where Stead juxtaposes the birth of his son with the slaughter in Vietnam. He begins by setting the scene in a maternity hospital, where he feels “terror,” hears “a scream” and sees “A doctor in a butcher’s apron”—all sensations that might adorn a battlefield. However, while his wife may be “Bloodshot,” at least the process is natural and the results turn out to be positive:

I watch our two-year-old  
 Among the lawless tribes  
 Of nursery children.  
 My skin prickles.  
 I scan the air for eagles.  
 It is as if the three of us were born  
 In that one moment to this one concern.  
 I lost myself to become  
 This wary, watchful thing.  
 I scan the air.  
 I do not want myself back.

In the manner of a realist poet, Stead makes a clear statement about what he feels and has come to know. The poem might have ended with this conclusion but, as the title warned, a “Registry” of deaths has yet to come.

Where the first section connected birth with apparently incongruous images of war, the second section conveys an apparently irrational fear that New Zealand children may be attacked by “eagles.”<sup>1</sup> The implications of this imagery become clear in the third section:

Six months ago a Free bomb fell on a school.  
 Forty-five children were changed.  
 They became a job for the cleaners.  
 Villagers carried their bodies  
 To the southern border, protesting  
 While in Detroit  
 Every three seconds  
 A car was born.

Today America sits at its television.  
 Its heartbeat rallies with the heartbeat  
 Of Lyndon Baines Johnson.

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<sup>1</sup>Outside of captivity, there are no eagles in New Zealand.

Children can become victims of battle, children anywhere can be vulnerable to attack from the air, and an eagle can symbolize America, home of the capitalized “Free.” In war the unnatural becomes the norm: what ought to be a job for teachers becomes “a job for the cleaners.” Stead attacks the killing of innocents, exposing the human weakness that allows and even supports such actions.

Having set the scene and elaborated the problem, Stead proceeds to offer his conclusions. First comes a scathing statement about the “misguided” nature of American foreign policy under President Lyndon Johnson:

Even without his gall  
 He has a heart that can speak  
 For a sentimental nation  
 That loves its cars  
 As it loves its children.

Lyndon  
 If ever a missile  
 Blows one of your Birds to bits  
 Don't hate it, Lyndon—  
 It was only misguided.  
 It wanted to make her free.  
 Take heart that in Detroit  
 Every three seconds  
 A car is born.

Here Stead makes explicit the parallel between the metaphorical “eagles” that threaten his nursery and the American “Birds” that bomb Vietnamese schools. He also brings out the parallel between the birth of New Zealand children and the birth of American cars (and which the American “nation” is more likely to be “sentimental” about). He then turns American propaganda back on itself, by pointing out that the Vietnamese might just as easily say to Johnson that their actions too—however destructive—are “only” meant to make things “free.” Therein lies the hypocrisy of Americans taking the high moral ground (and the capital letters) as if their sense of what it means to be “Free” is somehow bigger and better than anybody else’s.

After this dissection of American foreign policy, Stead analyses his own response to the war and questions the purpose of poetry. He begins by quoting a statement about the aims of art in general—“To see Life steadily and see it whole”—to which he then offers a qualified agreement:

Yes. But I wonder what the sideburned sage  
 Allowed was Life. Where did he see it whole?  
 Must the Muse eat carrion, and her True Servant  
 Construct of the small picked bones a White Tower  
 To see Life steadily and see it whole?

In times of war, what must a poet do? Where must a poet look—look away, as Yeats did, and refuse to consider war poetry as art? Or must one face the event and allow the issues of politics that lead to war to enter the halls (or towers) of verse? The ensuing (and final) section represents Stead’s response to and conclusion about this issue:

All day it has bullied me.  
 If it shook me hard enough  
 They’d put me away.  
 I represent  
 My terror so minutely  
 It will pass unnoticed.

I have never been so nearly anonymous.

Stead knows—as he showed in his novel *Smith’s Dream* (1971)—that vocal opposition to imperialism can get you “put away.” As in that book, the most frightening enemy is not an individual leader like Volkner or Johnson but the more amorphous, less identifiable “They.” Juxtaposed to this, vague, threatening pronoun, Stead’s “I” on the next line appears minute, “nearly anonymous.”

Nevertheless, Stead’s final decision is to “represent / My terror.” He will, he must, speak out. He might run the risk of being (as he was following the birth of his son) “full of pieties,” but he will write of his opposition; he will make a “Registry of Births and Deaths,” no matter how “Small” it may seem. His concluding lines reflect on the impact of poetry in

modern society as well as the probable reception of one citizen's representation of terror: both "will pass unnoticed."

Like most of Stead's 1960s poems, this piece eschews preset form in favour of free verse. As Stead said of *Crossing the Bar* in the 1970 edition of Vinson's *Contemporary Poets*, "Poems since the 1964 collection . . . have largely abandoned rhyme and regular verse forms. The lines are shorter and more dramatic, governed by the natural flow of speech." Apart from its metrical structure, however, "A Small Registry of Births and Deaths" follows the standard New Zealand realist pattern: it sets the scene, elaborates the problem, makes a series of statements about its subject, and then draws an explicit conclusion at the end. How can a purist modernist justify writing an essentially realist poem like this one? Stead himself has struggled with this question. Faced with the political poems in *Crossing the Bar*, Stead argued (in "A Poet's View") that "subject matter" does not really matter—what makes a poem is its "strong feeling":

How important is the 'subject' in such poems? This is a question that defeats analysis, because the 'subject' is an abstraction. Perhaps we can say that what gets into the poem is not the piece of history which we call its 'subject' but the poet's feeling about that piece of history; it's that feeling which remains durable and vivid while the events of history fade. (GC 268)

When faced with exceptions to his own critical rules, Stead tends to fall back on vague standards such as "feeling" or "passion."

"Passion" appears in an article called "Poetry" (1988), where Stead tries again to make allowances for 'political' poetry. He asserts that "sometimes" political verses can be seen as poems:

There is a special kind of neutrality about poetic language. As soon as it begins to argue, to cajole, to insist, the sense that we are reading a poem diminishes. Of course poets can write political or 'committed' verses, and these will sometimes (not always) survive as poems. But when they do, that is because their political statement seems to exist in inverted commas. They dramatize the passion of commitment. As soon as reasoning replaces passion and dramatization in such writing, the sense that this is a poem vanishes. It is this latter kind of writing that twentieth-century criticism has tended to call 'rhetoric.' . . . (AL 20)

“A Small Registry of Births and Deaths” does seem to “dramatize the passion of commitment.” Stead has laboured to give birth to a poem, to achieve “passion and dramatization.” Whether or not these things are outweighed by his “reasoning,” though, is difficult to determine. One cannot establish exactly when one element will “replace” another: how much “reasoning” would be too much “reasoning”? This point can probably only be decided by the temperament (and political persuasions) of the individual reader.

Despite the vagueness of his terminology, Stead’s 1988 argument does stand as a slight revision to his earlier dismissals of realist poets. In “From Wystan to Carlos” Stead set up Williams’s “No ideas but in things” against poets like Auden. In that essay, Stead argued that the poets of the 1930s took British poetry away from “things” and ‘open form’ and returned it to “ideas” and ‘closed forms’:

[Pound and Eliot] created what can be called ‘open form’. . . . Auden returned British poetry to closed forms. . . . Auden was conservative. He took British poetry back more or less to what it had been before the American invasion; and there, for better or worse, it remains. The line of development that runs, for example, from Thomas Hardy and Owen through Auden to Larkin is far more real than anything one might trace in British poetry out of Pound and Eliot. (*GC* 142)

Thus Stead elevates the modernism of Pound and Eliot over the realism of Hardy, Auden and Larkin, and consigns the latter to the margins of literary history.

By 1988, however, Stead seems to have found room in his definition of “Poetry” for the work of both Auden and Larkin. In this essay he places their names alongside that of Williams, this time in order to include rather than to exclude them:

Poetry deals in the concrete, not in abstract ideas, which belong to philosophy and other forms of prose discourse. ‘No ideas but in things’ William Carlos Williams insists—a statement nicely matched by his wheelbarrow poem. And even poets like W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin who were, or became relatively conservative in their attitude to poetic form, and who seem at times to versify abstract ideas, are really dramatizers of a position rather than its proponents. Along with the ‘idea’ in their poems goes the dramatized persona, its upholder, to whom various readers are free variously to respond. (*AL* 25)

Auden, Larkin and realism had been dismissed by Stead in 1979. In 1988, he was still against using poetry to “offer . . . general truths” and “abstract ideas”—but now he was willing to see more in realism, especially where it offered not just ideas but a “dramatized persona . . . to whom various readers are free variously to respond.” Thus Stead’s 1988 essay allows for some of the realism of Auden and Larkin (and perhaps even of his own career) whereas in 1979 it had been completely rejected. While Stead does not retract his prescriptions against realism, he does adjust them slightly in order to include what he sees as positive aspects.

Pure realism—“dramatized” or not—does not often occur in Stead’s later poetry. Works that are dominated by realism, such as “A Small Registry of Births and Deaths,” appear less frequently in Stead’s work after 1958. More usually, the reader will find isolated elements of realism existing within a modernist poem. These realist elements can work with the larger modernist context, helping to illuminate the whole. The resulting poem may appear to be an odd combination of two traditions. The realist element injects subject matter full of “feeling” and “passion,” a poetic rush of blood. The modernist context transforms this element by trying to avoid trite conclusions and preventing the gate from “clanging shut” on the reader’s imagination.

Because he began in a realist tradition, Stead must have felt the urge to close poems off with neat conclusions. Even in the late 1970s, while writing “Cinquains at a Poetry Workshop,” he was conscious of fighting that urge:

I mend an intended  
absolute closure so you may  
enter.

The modernist in him sees “absolute closure” as something that can wound a poem, something that need to be “mended” and, if possible, avoided.

Stead manages just that in “April Notebook” (a long poem in *Crossing the Bar*). The last section of this poem embodies Stead’s prescriptions, with an ‘open,’ purely modernist ending:

Each day He dies to do me good.  
I sign a protest, join a march.  
What Wolf began, Eagle accomplishes.

Minerva had a mouse in mind.  
It was a weasel, tore her beak.  
What Owl began, Eagle accomplishes.

Eagle bears the snake to die.  
Up there it twists about his throat.  
Out of the sun they fall like brass.

I signed a protest, joined a march.  
Today he dies to do me good.  
What Eagle began, Serpent accomplishes.

This ending contains resonant symbols that are far from self-explanatory; these symbols engage the imagination, inviting readers to help create their meaning. However, readers’ imaginations are guided in part by earlier, realist subject matter and statements, and this is one way that seam realism can operate. When readers extract their own meaning, a little of Stead’s must come with it because of his earlier comments about the consequences of warfare.

For example, the poem begins with the narrator “anticipating fires” and contemplating ways of protecting his home. Section 6 finds him trying to “buttress” the corner of his garden, attempting to keep something out (and protect what lies within):

April 21. Far north  
The sun enters the Bull.  
I buttress this garden corner  
With chimney bricks and plant  
One palm, one pink hibiscus  
One bronze flax.

Stead sets the reader wondering what could be happening in the “Far north,” and what the Zodiacal portent might mean for the narrator’s building and planting. He goes on to clarify the source of his fears:

All roads lead to it  
A neighbourhood where  
The dogs of war have never gone unfed.

‘All roads lead to Rome,’ the saying goes, and Rome symbolizes the centre of a mighty empire, the source of invasions and “war.” However, because of the carefully vague referent “it,” another possibility exists: standing in his garden, “Ears full of children,” Stead can see “All roads” heading for his neighbourhood and bringing “The dogs of war.” In either case, taking into account the historical context of this poem (written in the mid to late 1960s), the war to the “north” of New Zealand probably refers to Vietnam.

This speculation gains confirmation in the final stanza of section 6:

The wing of fire is clipped.  
I look towards the dark,  
into the sullenness of its coming on.  
Beneficence of the Eagle  
Corrupts our days.

“The wing of fire” represents the last arc of the sun disappearing below the horizon. For Stead, this sunset brings with it thoughts of the “the Eagle”—perhaps even a hope that its wing too may be “clipped.” This personified, capitalized bird probably stands for the United States, particularly given Stead’s prior use of this symbol in “A Small Registry of Births and Deaths.” Here the poet associates the Eagle with darkness, sullenness and corruption, and he goes on to interpret this imagery for the reader, stating exactly what he thinks: “Beneficence of the Eagle / Corrupts our days.” The American “Eagle” may be beneficent towards New Zealand, but Stead sees this imperial patronage as having a corrupting effect. New Zealand has to be seen to support its patron—even in an unjust war—and so our politicians rush to join what Stead characterizes (at the start of the next section) as a “comedy of errors.”

This combination of subject matter and explicit conclusions continues in section 9. In the presence of his son, the poet watches history repeat itself—New Zealanders sailing off to die in someone else’s war, for the sake of someone else’s empire:

Climbing on that same gun  
 Below the bloody flags, above the harbour,  
 I learned as you do my son  
 While April swept the vault and seemed to show  
 The place they’d sailed to  
 How boots and trumpets of good men shook down  
 Walls, and whole towns.

Stead underscores his sense of a repeating pattern (what Pound called the “repeat in history”) by making this section the only part of the poem with a regular pattern of end-rhymes. The line break after “shook down” may simply occur in order to meet this rhyme scheme, but it may also imply that on such occasions as “the bloody flags” demand, “good men”—and not just walls—are “shaken down,” cheated. In any case, Stead makes his opinion on the matter clear in the final four lines of the section:

Medals aren’t worn on sack-cloth.  
 The dead are ashes. Orations won’t bring them back.  
 That jaw-bone of an ass was God’s wrath.  
 We call it Anzac.

Anzac: the combined Australia and New Zealand Army Corps. Every April 25 is Anzac Day, when New Zealanders gather in remembrance of those who died, not just in the colonial slaughterhouse of Gallipoli, but in two World Wars. It must have seemed to Stead in the late 1960s—with the escalated fighting in Vietnam and the talk of sending a New Zealand contingent to fight there—that another Anzac sacrifice was on its way, maybe even another World War.

This buildup of subject matter and explicit statements helps the sections of the poem to cohere in the reader’s mind. These realist elements also help the reader to engage with the final, purely modernist section. In this poem, Stead draws on both traditions and makes them work together. Later realist poems come to bear on “April Notebook” as well, adding

another seam to the one already present in the poem. This effect allows readers to return to poems and perhaps take more from them than an initial reading allowed. They are mining another seam, but the result is the same: one tradition adds to another, helping readers to increase their imaginative yield.

For example, sonnet 18 (“The Fall of Saigon”) provides some details about Stead’s actions during the Vietnam War:

Our biggest march came late. It was ’71.  
A girl walked with me starry-eyed bewildered  
  
Shocked at the war frightened locked in that crowd—  
Fifteen, twenty thousand pushing into Queen Street.

This realist poem informs the refrain of the final section of “April Notebook”: “I signed a protest, joined a march.” The sonnet helps to clarify—or remove any lingering doubts about—what Stead was marching for and protesting against.

Another modernist allusion in “April Notebook” might be reconsidered in the light of an earlier, realist work. In one part of section 6, Stead contemplated his position in a rather oblique fashion:

I stand between the columns  
The unerected statuary of this garden  
Caesar, and Henry Ford.

Statues of Caesar and Henry Ford remain “unerected” but, like the darkness and the Eagle, they may be “coming on.” Henry Ford—founder of the production line and the Ford motor company—represents the capitalist power of modern America.

However, the reference to “Caesar” remains puzzling until one links it back to the first of “Three Caesarian Poems” (three pages earlier in *Crossing the Bar*), “Dallas, 1963”:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>When first published, in *Mate* magazine, this poem was titled “Death of a Statesman.”

Caesar, you were everybody's baby  
 But not mine.  
 I thought the broken warhorse that doddered before  
 Alone made you shine.  
 But when your head leaked blood on the lap of the world  
 Like those your mistakes murdered,  
 I thought it was the golden apple  
 And the holy wine.

"Caesar" here is President John F. Kennedy, assassinated in Dallas, Texas in 1963. In this context, the "Caesar" in "April Notebook" probably represents an American President, and not an Ancient Roman. Therefore, the statues symbolize America's threat to New Zealand's autonomy: given America's actions in Vietnam (and other countries), how long will it be until New Zealand gardens are forced to contain such emblems? In addition, if "Caesar" refers to an American President, then the allusion in section 6 to 'Rome' ("All roads lead to it") probably refers to Washington, the centre of this modern Caesar's empire.<sup>3</sup> In this way the subject matter and statements of Stead's realist work can shed light on some of the obscure references in his modernist poems.

Stead's use of seam realism has not been addressed by critics, probably because it does not fit into any one of the "boxes" of purist classification. The unusual nature of this seam makes it difficult to categorize in any final way. In modernist principles, the way that the seam operates may accord with the idea of a 'Field.' Nonetheless, its subject matter and statements make it a curiously realist element working within the "structural principle" of a modernist poetic. Stead appears to have it both ways and, though purists may protest, the mixture can help to make his poetry more accessible.

#### b) Self.

A dream about Maurice Duggan's death, combined with the actual deaths of his mother and Norman Kirk, set Stead writing a spate of sonnets that explored these and other personal

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<sup>3</sup>Stead supports such a reading in his 1970 statement about the soon-to-be-published *Crossing The Bar*: "the collection (I hope) is held together by a recurring image of 'the West' as a new Roman Empire, Washington as Rome" (Smithyman *Contemporary Poets*).

experiences. They first appeared as twelve sonnets in *Quesada* (1975); their numbers were augmented to twenty-one in *Walking Westward* (1979) and twenty-two in *Poems of a Decade* (1983). Apart from the final one—which Stead “added by way of postscript” in Autumn 1978 (*WW* “Note”)—the sonnets were written in two short bursts: twelve in October–November 1974 and eight in the following Autumn. For these short periods of time, as Stead put it, “life kept presenting itself in 14-line packages” (*GC* 276). Once again, Stead’s poetry was all about subject matter, packed full of political commentary, literary reflections and explicit moral conclusions.

Stead’s political commentary in the sonnets includes (amongst others) his labelling the “patriots,” who chased his mother “home from school / Because her name was Karlson,” as representing “the malice of the world” (sonnet 6). He also mourns “BIG NORM” (Norman Kirk)—the Labour Party Prime Minister who died suddenly in office (sonnet 1)—while lampooning his conservative National Party predecessor, Keith Holyoake (sonnet 16). As well, he savages once more the power-brokers responsible for the slaughter in Vietnam:

Xuan Loc fallen, Danang fallen, we wait for the fall of Saigon.  
Nobody weeps or cheers, nobody puts on sack-cloth

For the thousand thousand lives we took or broke  
To get our own sweet way. We didn’t get it.

Does Lyndon Johnnie underground sleep sound  
Dreaming light at the end of a tunnel? Holyoake hasn’t been told.

Harold Holt went swimming, and all those airy ministers  
Of canister bombs and body counts took jobs

With the World Bank, UNESCO, the Ford Foundation.  
Washington, Wellington, leather chairs, inflatable arses

“Peace with Honour”—and last night, walking home,  
I saw in a darkened house a fish tank glowing

With purple lights. There’s no God. We don’t answer for  
Our violences, nor even for our sense of beauty.

Stead fulfils here his own prophecy in “April Notebook” about “sack-cloth,” and his conclusion shows quite clearly his bitterness over the whole affair: “There’s no God,” he

asserts, when such atrocities go unpunished. In fact, as he reveals with another reference to “Ford” and American big business, the perpetrators actually get rewarded. Stead’s pun at the end of line four states his view of the war: “We didn’t get it”—not only did the invading parties not get their way, most people didn’t really understand what was at stake. The only winners were the “inflatable arses” who stayed at home and got very, very rich.

Like these political comments, Stead’s literary reflections in the sonnets involve direct statements. For example, he judges Roy Fuller to be “the best poet writing in Britain” (sonnet 11). Similarly, Stead asserts that “Roddick of Invercargill / Is a true poet” (sonnet 4, “to Alan Roddick”). He delivers a slightly less absolute judgement on someone called “Healy,” declaring in sonnet 20 that “Healy is probably / The best Yorkshire surrealist writing in New Zealand.” Since it seems likely that Healy is the only “Yorkshire surrealist writing in New Zealand,” this praise is somewhat double-edged. In addition—given Stead’s critical rejections of surrealism—it might not be all that good to be “The best” at a mode of writing that Stead dismisses elsewhere as “boring” (*GC* 159). Healy is probably another name for Russell Haley, a postmodernist writer whom Stead describes in “A New New Zealand Fiction?” as “Yorkshireman Haley” (*AL* 241).<sup>4</sup> Since Stead gave Fuller and Roddick their correct names, his adjustment of Haley into “Healy” hints that the portrait of the writer in sonnet 20 may have been shading into libel.

As can be seen from all this talk about what is “best” and what is “true,” Stead’s sonnets are full of explicit moral conclusions. In sonnet 9, for instance—which takes place on his forty-second birthday—Stead pronounces that God does not exist: “the silence of God . . . has lasted forty-two years.” “There’s no God,” he confirms in sonnet 16, because “We don’t answer for / Our violences.” Having disposed of God, Stead turns to consider the soul.

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<sup>4</sup>Further confirmation can be found in that Stead specifies of “Healy” that “He’s forty-one, looks twenty” (*PD* 53). Russell Haley was born in 1934 and was therefore forty-one when Stead wrote this poem (1975).

Following the death of his mother, Stead poses the question: "Has man an immortal soul?" (sonnet 17). His answer arrives in the final lines of the same poem:

My once and only music teacher mother

Those lessons were hard; this, your last, is harder—  
Man has a soul indeed. That soul is mortal.

Stead opens his heart to the reader in realist fashion, but runs the risk of sounding both didactic and trite. Echoes of Baxter are unavoidable, not simply because Stead has chosen to write in the form of the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, but also because he has returned in part to "Those orotund Baxterian roundings-off . . ." (GC 216). These poems recall Stead's early days, when the main poetic for New Zealanders was realism, and he was left "Groping for truths that fade in day's dull light" (WWF 15).

In the mid-1970s Stead felt the need to express himself on vital issues, so he reached back into the tradition most amenable to the expression of opinions and ideas. Reflecting on this period in "On *Quesada*," he describes the confessional, realist poetry that resulted:

The sonnet suits the confessional mode (as Baxter and Lowell use it) which at the same time can be the vehicle for commentary on public events. My sequence begins with the death of Norman Kirk. It ends . . . with the para-military operation to clear Maori land protesters from Bastion Point. In between come the end of the Vietnam war, the death of my mother, literary reflections—private and public intermixed. It has the kind of substance interesting to readers for whom poetry is more a vehicle than a pure art—a wider appeal than some other things I have done in recent years.  
But since these sonnets I have gone back to open form. . . . (GC 277)

Once again Stead employs the kind of purist terminology that elevates one mode (open form modernism) as "pure art," while dismissing the other mode (confessional realism) as a mere "vehicle" for opinion, rhetoric and ideas. Nevertheless, in spite of Stead's simple division, the "substance" that he confines here to the sonnets does appear in some of his other poems. Throughout Stead's career, there are occasions when a desire to analyze events in his life results in poems that owe much to the realist tradition. Consulting his volumes after *Whether the Will is Free*, one can still find poems that seem to draw more upon realism than modernism.

For example, “With a Pen-Knife” (in *Crossing the Bar*) describes Stead’s childhood vandalism of a school desk and his caning as a consequence by a teacher called Tammy Scott. The poet then interprets the event, explaining to the reader what he “truly” felt:

I walked past him, and out.  
 I looked at him, not ‘daggers’,  
 But truly without feeling.  
 My pride was exact.  
 I would not go down  
 In Tammy’s book.  
 He would go down in mine.

Tammy had been recording the names of distinguished old-boys (“the school’s two hundred war-dead”) in a book, and Stead determines not to become another one of his trophies. Indeed, he manages to reverse their roles, eventually writing “Tammy’s” name down in a “book” of his own. The final line exhibits Stead’s typically multi-layered, economic use of language: to “go down” in this context means to be written down, but it is also New Zealand slang for losing a fight.

However, Stead does not simply use this poem to score off an old foe. He also offers a guardedly fond remembrance of his old teacher:

I think of Tammy  
 Who meant no harm  
 Labouring among the dead.

In this construction, “the dead” refers simultaneously to the long gone old-boys in Tammy’s book and the present, recalcitrant pupils ranged before him—both are a labour. Stead balances the portrait by conceding that his teacher “meant no harm,” and so the poem becomes a mixture of criticism and tribute. Tammy was not a bad man: he simply came from a different generation with different attitudes. In Tammy’s time, a war overseas was worthy of commemoration, and art was supposed to be ornate: “He . . . painted bowls of roses / In a fine dead style.” Stead, on the other hand, would grow up to a war without glory and a

generation that preferred their art in “the bald style / of a life-inscription.” The poem records these differences without condemnation.<sup>5</sup>

Another example, chosen this time from *Quesada*, might be “Cold Moon.” In his article about *Quesada*, Stead explains that “Cold Moon” was written in London, in Autumn 1972, as “a piece of nostalgia for the South of France”; he also characterizes it as “a poem I had to work hard at” (*GC* 272). Like “With a Pen-Knife,” this poem follows the standard realist tripartite structure. In the first three stanzas, Stead describes a variety of scenes—from London to Paris, from the Cote d’Azur to the Tuscan woods—and then contrasts them with the “Cold” moon’s dispassionate detachment. He goes on to summarize both the scenes and the moon by commenting that “Nothing is changed by change. You are as you were / Madonna of the skies.” The poet then states that the moon prompts heat (“Moon-crazed folly set a city blazing”) in spite of its coldness. It also engenders “story” (“story sprang from that illustrious wrong”) and “song,” in spite of its frigidity:

Cold moon, you showed me once an olive grove  
 And cypresses bathed in such beauty it seemed  
 The voices of their dead cried out demanding  
 The twang of an ancient wire, the words of an ancient song.

This final stanza explains how the moon revealed “such beauty” to the poet that it demanded a “song.” Thus, in this text, Stead takes the reader on a panoramic tour of Europe by moonlight, opines that nothing has changed, and then closes with a statement about how the poem came to be written.

So, despite his rejection of realism, Stead continues to employ elements of that mode throughout his career. Even a late poem such as “After the Wedding,” published in *Between* (1988), involves a realist discussion of ideas, prompted by the event of the title. One can highlight the seam of realism in this poem by contrasting it with section 15 of “Quesada”:

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<sup>5</sup>Initially, however, the poem did lean more towards condemnation. According to Frank McKay, the three lines that evoke sympathy for the teacher “Who meant no harm,” “were added to the first printed version of the poem” (*New Zealand Poetry* 93).



another dream vision (“I see something that might be myself”), and then states rather bluntly that “death will come . . . but that was always the case” (section 7).

All these statements begin to pile up like logs at the mouth of a river, and the poet rounds them off with one short concluding section:

‘Marriages are made in Heaven’  
—not so.

We marry to be nearer the earth  
cousins of the fur and stalk  
talking together

that brown water reflecting  
those green hills. (section 8)

The poem began with Stead “After the wedding comparing notes with / Cousin Elspeth and Cousin Caroline”; at the end, still “talking together” with his “cousins,” Stead feels able to explain his feelings about marriage and the nature that surrounds them. To help prove his point, he merges his human “Cousins” with his “cousins of the fur and stalk” (and asserts their sexuality). He then returns to the image of the pool, his childhood “Eden.” In Stead’s view, Heaven is here on earth and we must grasp what happiness and companionship we can. Marriages are made by people, not “in Heaven,” because in Stead’s conception of the universe (as was apparent in the sonnets) there is no God:

the Supreme Intelligence  
is always silent  
and death will come. . . . (section 7)

A similar kind of vision can be seen in *The End of the Century*, when Stead has a character called Maurice Scobie recall his childhood farm:

Maurice’s mind shifted a gear into something that was as vivid as a dream. He was a boy again. . . . Now he was making his way over the . . . fallen kauri foliage in the filtered light, until he came to his favourite place under a high enclosing roof of trees and sat watching shafts of light striking into a broad, still pool below a little waterfall.

Maurice sat there in his mind. He saw himself and was himself. He saw his boy’s brown knees, his gumboots, his khaki shorts, his green shirt, his tousled hair and freckles, his keen eyes and eager pointed face. That’s me, he thought. Everything

else comes after, added on. When that boy goes, everything goes. The great Nothing will meet me, face to face. (115-16)

As in "After the Wedding," Stead sketches the scene of the sacred pool, interprets the image for the reader, and then concludes by stating his ideas about life, death and what comes after ("The great Nothing").

Stead returns to the same scene and topic in the penultimate poem of *Between* ("The Kin of Place"), but this time he projects them through a more modernist lens:

I think of a stream flowing out of pensioner rocks  
to a shingle pool where brown fish hung suspended  
in shafts of light. That was the place of beginning.  
Even fantails seemed to respect its oracular quiet  
so the water words that gurgled from the rock  
were properly heard, never interpreted.

What "the water words" meant to the boy—or mean to the man—are not explained; the poet simply presents them without comment. This image embodies, implicitly, Stead's modernist principle that something "properly heard" never needs interpretation to prop it up or tear it down. A poem (or a memory) will stand on its own merit without having to rely on learned notes or explicit conclusions. The fact that "Even fantails" respect this place works in two ways for local readers. Fantails are the noisiest, cheekiest, most visible birds in the New Zealand bush; inquisitive and fearless, they seem attracted to human beings, flitting around them chirping and cocking their bulbous heads sideways at intruders. Thus their silence here shows an unusual degree of respect, but it also serves to underline the child's state of "beginning" and his distance from death—for in Maori legend, the fantail's voice often announces an impending death, from the time of Maui's passing to the present day.

In addition to the magic pool,<sup>7</sup> Stead also returns in this poem to the possibilities of a

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<sup>7</sup>The childhood pool first appears in "Quesada," but this radioactive fragment becomes a kind of talisman in Stead's work, accruing more and more significance with each subsequent appearance. For example, in *The Death of the Body* a fantail twitters before Harry Butler reaches the pool, and when "the sun angles through it in shafts" he sees not small brown fish but the dead body of one of his friends (170). This desecration of the pool adds to the

Heaven. However, where the narrator of “After the Wedding” concluded that “Eden” was earthly and “won’t ask you back,” the narrator of “The Kin of Place” seems less certain, less absolute in his assertions:

Those of us who know the far north know  
 that if death isn’t total extinction  
 we will cross a bridge on rotting piles  
 over an estuary. On the far side  
 tide out, day hot, the light grey-green under mangroves  
 the ears and eyes of childhood  
 will be restored to us.

That single crack is a mud-shrimp;  
 that far wet flap, a heron departing.

Casual as a cocky  
 one kahawai is herding mackerel in the green of the stream.

Instead of realist conclusions, the author offers here a series of unexplained juxtapositions. It remains unclear whether the sound of the mud-shrimp and the “departing” heron support or undercut the poet’s intimations of reincarnation, nor does Stead explain what the image of the “casual” kahawai means: it just swims into view, prompting readers to engage their imaginations and construe the image for themselves.

In direct contrast to “The Kin of Place” and “Quesada,” poems such as “After the Wedding,” “Cold Moon” and “With a Pen-Knife” not only keep a seam of realism alive, they allow it to dominate. This dominance of realism only seems to happen in areas of subject matter where the poet is so overwhelmed by events that he turns in upon himself, becoming introspective to the point of confession.

Readers can easily recognize this element of the seam, because it involves something close to pure realism: the subject is clear and closely analyzed, with the poet offering clear statements and moral conclusions. However, this kind of realism occurs infrequently in

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sinister atmosphere of what turns out to be a drug-related murder. The “sacred place” (*End* 178) resurfaces three times in *Between* (9, 58, 63), three times in *The End of the Century* (115-16, 141-42, 178-79), and twice in *The Singing Whakapapa* (31, 182).

Stead's later work. Indeed, Stead himself stresses that poems such as the sonnets "are not central to what I see as my own line of development":

There's a sequence of sonnets I wrote which were not exactly an imitation of Baxter, but they certainly wouldn't be what they are if Baxter hadn't written his sonnets. . . . I'm not rejecting them, but they are not central to what I see as my own line of development; and I think the reason very simply is that Baxter is in the category of poets I think of as Wordsworthian. . . . That is, he was the sort of poet who sits at the centre of the poetic web and says 'I this, I that, I thought this, I felt that'. ("Craft Interview" 450)

In most of his criticism, Stead maps out his "line of development" as a move towards modernism. Nevertheless, the seam does exist and, while it may not be "central," it certainly adds to the central line. This seam shows the poet drawing upon more traditions than the one stressed by the critic. At times, it even shows the poet allowing these 'peripheral' traditions to dominate.

The confessional mode of the sonnet involved Stead placing himself, like Baxter, "squarely into the centre of the poems" (*GC* 152). However, this was not a repetition of 1950s realism, and "not exactly an imitation of Baxter" either. In reaching back to those influences, Stead tried to draw out only those elements he felt were positive. To further illustrate how he combines the realist tradition with that of modernism, I want to turn now to Stead's use of form.

## 2. Fixed Forms.

The most obvious lesson of a realist tradition is the ability to write within fixed forms. Having learnt this lesson, Stead could move on to what he sees as a less artificial but more demanding form:

I've gradually moved away from fixed forms. There was always a tendency, but the tendency has got stronger, and I think of this as a movement, not, as some people would think, away from music, but towards music. Because composing a poem say in a tight stanza form with lines and end-stops and pentameters and all the rest of it, is a kind of martial art; it's hardly music at all. Whereas when you begin to space words out on the page according to your sense of the run of the line, the pauses, how the voice will lift and fall, you are really much nearer to composing in the way that a musician places notes according to how he hears them. So the freeing up of form in

my poetry has definitely been a move towards music, not away from it. (“Craft Interview” 451-52)

It may be hard to write in a defined pattern but, in Stead’s view, “the harder thing [is] just to launch out and let the poem discover its own shape” (*GC* 277). In his criticism, Stead seems to deny the value of realism, dismissing it as “mathematical,” “a kind of martial art”—hardly an art at all. In 1979 in particular, when he valorized a modernist poetic in “From Wistan to Carlos,” Stead was almost fanatical in denying that realism (and surrealism) might have any bearing on his practice as a poet.

By 1983, though, he appears to have shifted ground a little on the place of realism in his poetry:

I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with [realism]. It’s a strong and important tradition in poetry and everybody has to absorb it, and from time to time everyone wants to do it. I might almost accept that to be able to do it is your trade certificate. (“Craft Interview” 459)

So despite Stead’s dismissals of realism—and his implication here that realism is merely an apprentice stage on the journey towards modernist mastery—he still reaches into this “strong tradition.” At times, like “everyone” (a concept that postmodernists, and other modernists, might cavil at), Stead feels the need to work within preset forms.

This need might result from external pressure, as in the Government commission to write a poem for the New Zealand 1990 sesquicentenary. This request led Stead to respond with *Voices*, a series of realist poems in fixed stanzas, many of them sonnets. As he explained to Dennis McEldowney in 1991, Stead felt the commission demanded a “more conservative” approach to form:

That was an interesting exercise for me. I did it very conscientiously, worked hard at it; but the way I did it was to go back to the forms I would have used when I was young. There’s a lot of half-concealed rhyming, quite tight verse forms, and a basic regular five-stress line; so it’s more conservative—there isn’t the kind of technical excitement that there has been with other things I’ve written. I suppose I felt intuitively that to mix that sort of historical material with technical experimentation wouldn’t have been quite fulfilling the commission. (*Alley* 278)

Another example—this time from *Quesada*—might be the poems that Stead wrote “For a Children’s L.P.” He called the second of these “Ecology”:

Look there—down on the bay  
Where a blue heron is wading  
Dump trucks and bulldozers  
Are fulling the edges with clay.

Soon the mangroves will be gone  
The heron will fly away.

When you run on the new sportsfield  
Think of the lives that stopped  
Six feet under the clay.

Aimed at the children who “run on the new sportsfield,” this poem follows an appropriately simple, trimeter rhythm, with plenty of end-rhymes and a clear message.

More usually, Stead’s need to work within fixed forms comes not from external but internal pressure, as in the sonnets. Stead describes the latter kind of compulsion in “On *Quesada*”:

in late October 1974 I was . . . in Northland. Maurice Duggan was dying of cancer and I dreamed of saying goodbye to him. Next morning . . . I heard that Norman Kirk had died. I spent the hours driving back to Auckland thinking out a poem that would bring these two facts together.<sup>8</sup> The images were right but it felt shapeless until I tried it in the form of the open sonnet Baxter had adopted from Lowell—and there it could be made to fit nice and tight. (*GC* 276)

So “from time to time” Stead needed to write in a fixed form, and this was one of those occasions. His experience in the realist tradition enabled him to create a “neat short poem with a beginning, a middle and an end. The anthology piece” (“Craft Interview” 458).

How much were the sonnets a compromise of the modernist poetic that Stead articulated in “From Wistan to Carlos”? Were they simply an exercise in making “anthology pieces”?

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<sup>8</sup>In all published versions, this first sonnet bears the date “1 September 1974.” Stead therefore dates the poem to refer to the time of Kirk’s death (31 August 1974) not the time of composition (“late October 1974”).

Critics such as Martin Edmond—in his review of *Quesada*—certainly rejoiced at Stead’s return to “more straight talking and more particulars”:

My feeling is that C. K. Stead writes most clearly when he loses himself in his subject, as in the fine sonnet on the death of Norman Kirk. . . . [*Quesada* is] a book which is often experimental; but it seems Stead’s older style still serves him best. (319)

Edmond takes up the position of a realist purist, arguing that it may be all very well to be “experimental,” but the “best” sort of poetry will remain in the mode of realism. He therefore concludes that the sonnets “are easily the best things in the book” (319). Edmond’s position represents the sort of polarization Stead usually provokes among critics. He focuses on the realist elements of the poems, without considering the mixture that may lie beneath them.

For example, Stead defines “the traditional well-made anthology piece” as a realist text: “you have a scene described, an action occurs, and then a moral is drawn. It becomes almost mathematical . . .” (“Craft Interview” 459). However, some of his own sonnets avoid drawing an explicit moral. Sonnet 20, for instance—in which “Healy” subjects the narrator to remorseless verbal abuse—ends in an ambiguous fashion:

“And that shit you wrote about me . . .” It’s true I wrote  
I didn’t like Healy’s poem, and now I think

I don’t like Healy. When the Dimple’s gone he goes—  
Kisses me at the door, asks me to dance.

Stead seems to state his opinion about Healy, but the double line break after “I think”—combined with the imagery of the final sentence—makes this thought appear conditional. Healy’s association with someone called “the Dimple” may link him with smiles, and his behaviour in the last line may be positive, but Stead offers no final judgement—only a series of three images. The final line does not “clang shut,” and Stead invites readers to engage with the text at this point in order to form their own opinions. In such instances, purist methods of classification (and evaluation) seem inadequate to the poem. In reaching back to the realist tradition, in using what he sees as its most useful elements for his purposes, Stead

may not be abandoning his modernist poetics or even compromising them. One might argue that he simply adds to his poetics by broadening their base.

Critics tend to ignore this mixture. They generally fasten on to the element they like personally and treat any other elements with disdain, rapidly untying what Stead has been so careful to bind together. One can see this purism in action by considering the various critical responses to “Quesada” and “Fifteen Letters From the Zebra Motel” (both in *Quesada*). Martin Edmond complains that “Quesada” “might have made better verse” if it had been written more like the “Fifteen Letters”: “The ‘Fifteen Letters’ . . . is to me a better poem” (319). Rob Jackaman, on the other hand, elevates the modernist long poem, arguing that “Quesada” represents “some of the most stimulating verse written in New Zealand” (167). One sentence later, he states that for him it is “True, the ‘Fifteen Letters From the Zebra Motel’ seem shallow by comparison. . . .” Both critics assert their own poetic ‘truths,’ while they seem to ignore what Stead has achieved by putting the two modes together. As a critic, Stead himself may take sides, but in his poetry he manages to play for both teams at once.

This combination occurs not just in separate poems. Stead does not have a checklist where he marks off ‘one realist poem here, four modernist poems there.’ In practice, Stead picks his main tradition (usually modernist, but realist in some texts) and overlays it with what he finds to be useful from other traditions. This kind of mixture can be seen within the “Fifteen Letters,” where Stead combines a confessional realist approach with a form derived from a modernist source, imagism. He analyzes this method of combination in “On *Quesada*”:

My own feeling about it is technical. It is (roughly) an Imagist sequence, and Imagism . . . always feels evasive. . . . There is also the problem of persona. In ‘15 Letters . . .’ I speak in my own voice, out of my own circumstances. But the technique of Imagism and the confessional mode seem alien—the one not expansive enough for the other. (*GC* 274)

The author seems ill at ease with this particular effort. In Stead’s analysis, this was one combination that did not jell to his satisfaction.

A combination that he seemed more comfortable with—returning to the form a number of times—was the Baxterian sonnet. Some of these realist sonnets, so amenable to anthologists, have a curiously modernist feel to them. In “From Wystan to Carlos,” Stead argues that Baxter’s later sonnets possess some characteristics “at least in common with Modernism, if not derived from it directly” (*GC* 153). One might assume that where such modernist features appear in Stead’s own sonnets, they are probably more consciously “derived.”

For example, within its relatively fixed form, sonnet 8 manages to enact most of Stead’s modernist prescriptions. The sonnet opens with a witty translocation of another text:

To Maurice and to Maurice and to Maurice  
 Duggan, Shadbolt, Gee, how they load us down with fictions  
  
 And all our yesterdays maybe have lighted fools  
 The way to Dostoyevski.

At the same time as he jokes about the proliferation of ‘Maurices’ in New Zealand fiction, Stead echoes—and transforms—Macbeth’s soliloquy on time and death. That speech represents the king’s response to the news of his wife’s death:

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing. (V.v.19-28)

On a rudimentary level, Stead’s allusion performs a playful linguistic game, attempting to stretch Shakespeare’s words into the names of modern fiction writers: “Tomorrow” / “To Maurice,” “dusty death” / “Dostoyevski.”

On another level, though, beyond the shift in diction, lies an adjustment of Macbeth's message: when assessing one's life (as this character is doing), one need not remember only fretting and strutting and tales full of nothingness. Stead questions Macbeth's certainty about this view of life by inserting a modifier—"maybe"—into the middle of Shakespeare's line. In this way, the poet relocates the original iambic pentameter around a caesura of two extra syllables, and those syllables further dislocate Macbeth's rhythm by forming an inverted iambic (or trochaic) foot. Thus the sound, sense, and placement of the word all serve to undermine Macbeth's original statement, and Stead's skill in working with fixed forms helps him to get maximum mileage out of this allusion.

Next to this opening gambit, the poet juxtaposes a personal remembrance:

How many years ago was it  
 That Curnow's bantams roosted in his macrocarpas  
 And he and I one midnight crept under the moon  
 And swung on the branches bringing those feathered half-wits  
 Down around our heads with a flapping and a squawking  
 That echoed over Big Shoal Bay?

This anecdote also helps to adjust the Macbeth perspective on life. One need not concentrate on bad memories; one may also recall happy moments, friends, authors and books that have made the time special. In Stead's view, pleasure and joy can be found in the past, and the only real idiots ("half-wits") are the bantams. In his poem, the chickens alone—and not the human beings—are "full of sound and fury" ("with a flapping and a squawking") and "Signifying nothing" (with their empty "echo").

The poem begins, then, with a sequence of allusions and unexplained juxtapositions. Stead does not say how the three Maurices relate to Dostoyevski or Curnow, nor does he comment on the poets swinging in the macrocarpas. He simply presents these images, and then follows them up with some provocative questions:

Do good poets  
 Make bad professors? Do many Maurices  
 Make light work, as one Sargeson made a summer?  
 How many K.S's could the North Shore harbour  
 Before the Fall?

Not only does the poet find pleasure in the past, he finds pleasure in language, playing with words here simply for the joy of doing so. He does not seem interested in making explicit statements, but rather dances through a succession of approximations. Of these, the first question seems the most straightforward. Stead's behaviour with Curnow may have been 'un-professorial,' and it may have been fun, and it may have produced poetry—but can poets teach? Since Stead and Curnow went on to teach at the Auckland University English Department, this was probably a question that concerned them both.

The next question appears more difficult to grasp, as Stead's wordplay gets more slippery. On one level, he puns on the old saying, 'many hands make light work': the sheer number of Maurices operating at one time in New Zealand fiction have made light work of producing many books. On another level, Stead implies that rather than lighting "The way to dusty death"—or blowing out the "brief candle"—the authors named actually "make light work." Stead transfigures the stock phrase by allowing readers to make a connection back to Macbeth's words: "light" can lead you other ways than death, and fiction can make the "work" of life a little lighter. The work of "many Maurices" combine—along with the deeds of Curnow and Sargeson's "That Summer" (1946)—to help make life worth living.

The third question seems the most opaque of all. One might speculate that in addition to creating a summer in his long story, Sargeson also "made a summer" for the Steads during the period that they lived on the "North Shore harbour." In other words, the one summer that Karl and Kay Stead (both "K. S's") spent on Takapuna Beach in 1955 was "made" by

the presence of the old master, his books, and his vegetables.<sup>9</sup> Once again, Stead takes a cliché ('that person made my day') and stretches it into a new shape. His reference to "the Fall" also contains a number of implications. The capital "F" hints at a "Fall" of a biblical nature, so Stead may be saying that the summer of 1955 seemed like paradise to him. Conversely, he may be implying that things after that time were never quite the same. Another possibility might be that Stead simply means "Fall" to be read as 'autumn,' the autumn that followed (and ended) 'that summer.'

This opacity continues into the final line of the poem:

I tell you my lord fool  
Out of these nettle prophets we still pluck our safety-pins.

The preset form of a sonnet leads the reader to expect some sort of closure in the last couplet. Stead's final sentence looks like it offers a kind of resolution but in effect it baffles, and intrigues the reader, more than it explains. No explicit realist conclusion here, simply a modernist approximation. One thing does seem certain, though: in twelve lines, the poem has moved a long way from the tragic situation and attitude of Macbeth. The final lines allude to a more optimistic Shakespearian character, the ebullient Hotspur. Like Macbeth, Hotspur has to face bad news (a "Lord" deserts his cause, leaving his army outnumbered), but the latter does not dissolve into melancholy:

*Hotspur* (Solus, reading a letter): "The purpose you undertake is dangerous"—why, that's certain. 'Tis dangerous to take a cold, to sleep, to drink, but I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety. (*1 Henry IV* II.iii.10)

Unlike Macbeth, Hotspur responds by railing against the odds: he searches for a light in the darkness, a flower among the nettles.

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<sup>9</sup>These initials may also refer to Kendrick Smithyman and Keith Sinclair, two other members of the Auckland scene in the 1950s. During the early 1970s, *Islands* ran a series of advertisements that grouped these poets with Stead under the heading "K.S., K.S., & K.S."

What does Stead gain, though, by replacing “danger” and “safety” with “prophets” and “safety-pins”? Prophets tend to be forerunners, people who say and write things before other people think of them. Moreover, they usually address an unreceptive audience. In the context of this poem, “these nettle prophets” are probably Sargeson, Curnow, Duggan, Shadbolt and Gee: the architects of New Zealand literature, the prickly prophets who came first, and from whom later writers “still” draw inspiration and react against.<sup>10</sup> I find my reaction to “safety-pins” more difficult to articulate, but it seems to me a positive image. Safety-pins hold things together, and (in the days before disposable diapers) were associated with nappies and babies. So Stead may be sketching an image of consolidation and birth. On the other hand, he may be hinting at something more obscure, some reference that I do not recognize.

The point here is that all of these responses to sonnet 8 involve a certain amount of speculation. The poet encourages reader participation through his use of approximation, allusion and unexplained juxtapositions. In addition, the final couplet of the sonnet offers no explicit conclusion—it simply prompts the reader to question and engage with the text. However, this whole process takes place within a relatively preset form: the lines of sonnet 8 never fall below five feet, and never rise above seven. The shortest line contains ten syllables, the longest fifteen, with an average length of around twelve. As Stead points out in “On *Quesada*,” the “open sonnet” may not be so “open” as it looks:

The open sonnet is really something of a compromise between traditional forms and the open form which the Modernist movement has led to in America. Fourteen unrhymed lines look about as free as poetry can get. . . . But in fact to shape experience again and again to fourteen lines is a very tight discipline. . . . The sonnet is the most artificial of forms, and the absence of rhyme only relaxes it superficially. As the reader runs from sonnet to sonnet . . . it all has a loose free-and-easy feeling about it. But look at it from the poet's end, and compare it with the openness of a

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<sup>10</sup>Katherine Mansfield may also be implied here. Though Stead does not mention her by name in this sonnet, his extensive research—as a Mansfield scholar and editor of her selected *Letters and Journals* (1977)—would have made clear the importance of the Hotspur quotation to Mansfield. She used it in her story “This Flower” and placed it as an epigraph to her collection *Bliss and Other Stories*; her husband, John Middleton Murry, had it carved on her gravestone. A painting of this stone (with its inscription) appears on the cover of Stead's novel *The End of the Century*, in which he uses the reference as a plot device (26-27).

Canto by Pound or a poem by W. C. Williams, which must find its own length and its own shape, and the tightness is obvious. No sonnet is truly 'open'. (GC 276)

Nonetheless, within its relatively fixed form, sonnet 8 avoids realist narrative structures. This intriguing mixture provides another example of Stead's post-purist combination of modes.

So on top of realist form, some elements of modernist practice (accretion, allusion, approximation) can be subtly overlaid. As well, explicit statements about subject matter can sometimes provide a seam of realism within or between predominately modernist poems. Faced with such combinations, purist methods of classification risk appearing selective and misleading. In practice, Stead makes his prescribed poetic work together with other traditions. As a result, the neat "boxes" that he promotes and separates in theory spring open and meld together.

### 3. Drawing the Reader in.

This last example of a seam of realism may strike the reader as something of a paradox: it has the same aim as Stead's third principle of modernism, but achieves it in a different way. Instead of drawing the reader in by approximation, it does so by the placement of significant realist detail. In a way, this seam begins where approximation leaves off. If an approximation feels too obscure, and does not fulfil its purpose of allowing the reader to share the poem with the poet, then the seam of realism can open other doors for the reader to enter through. So, while these two principles seem opposites in theory, Stead makes them work together in practice.

To put it another way, this seam prevents readers from being left—in confusion—on an immaculate surface: the seam helps to draw us down, into the poem. For example, "Bald Caesarian" (which appears in *Crossing the Bar*), offers the reader a purely modernist surface:

Bald Caesarian  
 Among the hairy Caesars  
 Trailing your gown or your coat  
 In the groves of academe

At Rome's far-flung remove  
 No one would ever guess  
 You rode once hell-for-leather  
 Bareback  
 Bees in your hair.

This poem can have a bemusing effect. Some knowledge of ancient Roman history seems necessary to make any sense of the names and allusions. "Caesarian" may be a diminutive of Caesar, or it may refer to a form of birth, or it may be a pun on 'Caesarion.' Caesarion was Julius Caesar's illegitimate son by Cleopatra, but Stead appears to have inverted their physical characteristics: Caesar was bald, and Caesarion had hair. So who is this bald bastard, and who are these hairy father figures? Why is there more than one "Caesar" in this poem, and when and where is the setting? The allusions and the setting (both temporal and spatial) are difficult to work out. Where exactly "Rome's far-flung remove" might be seems impossible to say.

However, there does appear to be a clue in "the groves of academe." According to the *OED*, this phrase derives from Milton's "grove of Academe" (*Paradise Regained* iv.244), and has come to mean a "university environment." Thus the setting could be a university, affiliated with and yet far away from "Rome." How this detail relates to "the hairy Caesars" and the "Bald Caesarian," though, is still difficult to ascertain.

Perhaps more progress can be made in the area of characterization. Turning, then, to the character of the Bald Caesarian, a revealing pair of images occurs in line three. His "gown" is long and "Trailing" on the ground, so perhaps he wears an academic gown. This detail would fit his being in "the groves of academe." Yet he is also "Trailing [his] . . . coat," an expression for someone who tries to pick an argument. Thus there appear to be two conflicting impulses in this figure. On the one hand, his gown shows some respect for the groves and the experienced patriarchs he walks "Among" (and who perhaps have the "hairy" fur trim that his "Bald" gown does not). On the other hand, Caesarian has an impulse to pick a fight, and to assert his own individuality and experiences.

Another aspect of character can be derived from the form of the poem. Stead places “Bareback” on a line by itself, the only word to be singled out in this way. This emphasis allows the reader to pause and feel the literal level of the horse’s bare back, but it also allows for a conceptual contrast between the “Bareback,” driven style of youth and the gowned, coated, sedate, “Trailing” style of the older man. Appearances have changed so much that “No one would ever guess” what the man once did and was.

This poem is pure modernism, with no easily identifiable referents. It provides a group of images and allusions for the reader to hypothesize about, but it contains no seam of realism. However—as shown in relation to “April Notebook”—seam realism can run between separate poems, and even between separate books. Consequently, when the reader discovers sonnet 15 (“for Sam Hunt”) in *Walking Westward*, this realist poem rings all sorts of bells of recognition, contrapuntally illuminating the earlier “Bald Caesarian”:

That story I wanted to tell—it was how I rode  
To the gate for the meat and bees had swarmed in the box.

I was 9 or 10, riding a horse called Bosun  
From a house among macrocarpas half a mile

Through manuka over a hill above a brown dam—  
All the way along that clay track singing

In my best voice, my loftiest soprano.  
I reached for the meat not noticing the swarm

And they came at me, stinging. Sam, they say when Pindar  
Lay in his crib bees hovered over his mouth—

And yours too, I think—an emblem of sweetness  
And lyric grace. With me they played Kamikaze.

I galloped hell for leather, bees in my hair,  
Trailing across that sky a dark and angry plume.

This sonnet opens a door into “Bald Caesarian,” enabling readers to return to that poem and explore it further. We now know that the Bald Caesarian, who “rode once hell-for-leather / Bareback / Bees in your hair,” was Stead himself. The “Bald . . . hair” antithesis now also makes sense because, at the time of writing (as the early-1970s jacket photograph for *Smith’s*

*Dream* shows) Stead had already lost most of his hair. In addition, readers can now infer that “the groves of academe / At Rome’s far-flung remove” represent a university where Stead has been—possibly New England (New South Wales), Bristol (England), or Auckland (New Zealand).

Stead himself has hinted that the university was located in New Zealand. In his 1970 comments in Vinson’s *Contemporary Poets*, Stead intimated that *Crossing the Bar* was originally going to be titled *Bald Caesarian* and centred on the persona in that poem. He glossed both the book and the poem in the following terms:

Poems since the 1964 collection (i.e. those recently collected for publication under the title *Bald Caesarian*) have largely abandoned rhyme and regular verse forms. . . . The subjects vary but the collection (I hope) is held together by a recurring image of ‘the West’ as a new Roman Empire, Washington as Rome, and the poet as Bald Caesarian—

In the groves of academe  
At Rome’s far-flung remove.

Stead employs a nice circularity in this shifting of the centres and margins of empires. In Julius Caesar’s time, Britain was “Rome’s far-flung remove” (it was known as “ultima Thule,” the Empire’s farthest known point). Almost two thousand years later, Britain had become a centre and one of its “far-flung” removes was New Zealand. Then, as Britain’s influence fades, America’s imperial star ascends. In the late 1960s, it might have seemed that New Zealand—instead of becoming independent from Britain—was merely changing one empire for another. Over and over, Stead saw the soldiers of his country committed to foreign wars, and then he saw American troops in New Zealand. Like Caesarian, he must have longed for a time when ‘Egypt’ would be free.

Also like Caesarian, Stead grew up in a marginalized colony of a vast empire. His country provided food for the centre and a place to send people who needed to be exiled. As Stead recalls in “A Poet’s View,” imperial indoctrination began early:



This restraint and sense of duplicity grates on the poet, resulting in an outpouring of realist explanations and statements:

Deception? Yes. But what a pose to declare  
 Our differences. What a catalogue.  
 'I read two novels before puberty. Read one of them twice.  
 The time you gave to classics I gave to comics.'  
 Who's better for either? Neither of *us* can say.  
 But I'm the one who travelled the distance between us.  
 Ungrateful, your guest, if I didn't play my part.

As Stead points out in his 1979 article on John Mulgan, this “catalogue” of “differences” exaggerates the situation: “I once wrote in a poem that I had read only two novels before puberty. This exaggeration for comic effect was far from the truth” (*GC* 68). Stead’s “exaggeration” allows him to create a simple binary between the English Lord and the Kiwi joker. The poet simplifies his upbringing, not just “for comic effect,” but also to get readers ‘on side,’ to engage our sympathy and identification with the underdog.

Behind the facade of the polite “guest,” the colonial visitor feels a longing to let it all “drop,” to articulate the ‘difference’ that causes him—simultaneously—internal pride and external shame:

And yet I think of dropping it—just like that—  
 Letting my vowels out of their corsets and telling  
 How I backed Benghazi at Alexandra Park.  
 I was fourteen with a bandage round the six stitches in my head  
 And a smashed bike no one would pay to repair.  
 Benghazi paid. Over the cocktails I silently drink  
 To his chestnut mane flying round the field at the bend  
 To come in third at seven-to-one for a place.

Stead acknowledges in poetry what he can only acknowledge “silently” in English society. The line break after “I silently drink” emphasizes that none of Stead’s memories get told out loud. He explores internally the negation of marginalized experience in the centre of empire.

Having “silently” articulated his own experience, Stead goes on to consider the other side of the equation. He wonders how a representative of the ‘centre’ might view life in New Zealand:

And what do you imagine I live in? Certainly not  
 The wooden box it is, on whose iron roof  
 The rain crashes three winter weeks on end  
 While the grass I curse and push-mow mounts and thickens.  
 I try to see it as you might—rambling and white  
 Spanish style, among palms?

The Englishman’s gaze typically mythologizes colonial landscapes into something idealized and unreal. There are no “palm” trees in New Zealand—the closest equivalent might be the flaxen-leaved cabbage tree, which bears neither fruit nor coconut. Nor does the weatherboard “box,” with its corrugated “iron roof,” live up to the exotic “Spanish style” villa of romantic imagining.

Nevertheless, the Peer’s perceptions are not the only target of satire in this final section of the poem. The poet also contemplates his own shortcomings in this meeting. Neither he nor the Peer have managed to reach out and connect in any meaningful way:

Driving home in my professorial Morris  
 I shrug it away. Nobody’s fault but my own.  
 The good Lord whose hand I shook was only a Life Peer—  
 It could happen to anyone. He was a decent bloke.  
 But could I have spoken of something out of joint?  
 He’d have thought I was quoting Hamlet.

If Stead had tried to explain why his “big toe” (and perhaps his nose) was “out of joint,” his lordship would only have misunderstood. Yet beside this sardonic picture of a bumbling imperial representative lies a criticism of the colonist’s “deception.” The narrator reveals his guilt at not speaking out: he feels at “fault” because, on a number of levels, he has not been true to his inner voice. All the vernacular expressions of the last five lines—“Nobody’s fault but my own,” “good Lord,” “It could happen to anyone,” “He was a decent bloke”—have literally been left unsaid. The poet may have been “Putting it Straight” to his readers, but he has not been “Putting it Straight in London.”

One might see this poem as post-colonial, dealing as it does with issues of voice, 'difference,' and the relationship between the margins and the centre of empire. However, while its subject matter may be 'modern,' its format follows that of the traditional New Zealand realist poem: the scene set, the problem elaborated, the conclusion drawn. This realist poem opens an alternative doorway into the modernist text of "Bald Caesarian." The "professorial" figure in "Putting it Straight" seems very similar to the character who dragged his coat in "the groves of academe." Like the Bald Caesarian, the central figure of "Putting it Straight" has trouble integrating his past experiences with his present situation. He resents having to hide the "bareback" incident (a detail that helps to further illuminate "Bald Caesarian") as well as other formative experiences. He sees these early episodes as a crucial part of who he is, and denying them hurts and disturbs him.<sup>11</sup>

Thus "Putting it Straight" joins sonnet 15 as part of a realist seam, a seam that runs through the books of poetry that Stead published after *Whether the Will is Free*. These two instances of the seam do not tack a moral on to or 'explain' "Bald Caesarian." They merely provide another point of access. Readers who had been put off by the obscure references of the purely modernist text might now come back to it, enter via the seam, and mine anew. The seam, with its door-opening effect, can be vital to the reader who has not read Stead's criticism and does not know the facts of his life.

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<sup>11</sup>Like the magic pool, the bareback episode becomes something of a talisman in Stead's later work. For example, in *The Singing Whakapapa*, Hugh Grady describes the incident as seminal: "he had ridden Bos'n to collect the meat, and bees, unseen, had swarmed in the box; and as he stretched an arm around to the front of the box, which pointed towards the road, reaching for the parcel in its brown paper, out they came at him, up reared Bos'n and away, and he was borne saddleless, headlong, elbows knees tight against neck and flanks, over fields, through manuka and gorse, along the ridge mirrored in the brown waters of the dam, bees in his hair and swarming behind in furious pursuit. That picture would be on his coat of arms if he had one, his insignia, his emblem, a boy in pain on a horse in panic, trailing behind them a widening plume of bees. Life since had seen repetitions of that moment—the blind reaching for something, the fury of the response, the wildness of the ride, the tranquillity of the dam and the vastness and indifference of the sky" (16).

#### 4. “Walking Westward”: Modernism and the Seam.

This kind of seam can even be found in the modernist long poem “Walking Westward.” This poem was published by Stead in the same year that he delivered his prescriptions in “From Wistan to Carlos” (1979), and represents Stead’s attempt at a process poem in the manner of Pound. It delivers a series of moments—images strung together without traditional narrative or logical structures. As Mike Doyle stated (in his review of *Poems of a Decade*):

This poem . . . has the allusiveness and juxtapositional adroitness first learned from Eliot and Pound. . . . Though I do not wish to make too much of the ‘Pound connection’ it must be said that it is of first importance to Stead’s poems. (497)

Like Pound in *The Cantos*, Stead places the pieces of the poem in juxtaposition and lets the reader make of them what they will. In theory, this sort of text should make no attempts at closure and offer no moral pronouncements.

In most parts of the poem, this theory holds true. For example, the final page of the whole work offers no explicit conclusions: it simply carries the reader over various bodies of water. The first of these is the River Thames:

London  
                   not style  
 but sanity  
 light on leaves falling over the towpath  
 a red bus crossing Brunel’s bridge  
 the swans turning with the turning tide.

These lines mark the end of a long section set in London, and it draws to a close without any sort of realist statement. Stead’s does make the assertion, “not style / but sanity,” but he lets the words float free without interpreting or applying them. They may refer to “London” in general, or the “red bus,” or “Brunel’s bridge,” or the “swans.” They may even be linked to an earlier allusion (in the same section) to Janet Frame:

Janet in the Maudsley   blankets up to her chin  
 wearing dark glasses

The “blankets” and the “dark glasses” might not have “style,” but at least their owner possesses “sanity.” The “Maudsley” was a London mental hospital that—unlike its New Zealand counterparts—judged Frame to be quite sane. However, Stead makes none of these connections for the reader. Instead, the reader has to place the poet’s words (“not style / but sanity”) in the poem, interpret them, and set about finding examples that seem to fit that interpretation.

The “London” section ends with a picture of Autumn on the Thames, and then runs up against the conjunction that opens the next section:

but first things  
 as fernstars for example  
 or moon’s path off Ngongotaha  
 with Ainsley under the willows  
 1949  
 slow reel  
 fishermen casting in gold

The lower case “but” leads the reader to expect some kind of logical argument, some kind of qualification on what preceded it. This word also sets up an expectation of clarification, but that clarification never comes: Stead forces readers to do their own reasoning. To begin with, he cuts short the expected phrase (‘but first things first’), another way of dislocating readers into engaging with the text. Next, rather than completing his statement, Stead presents a series of images, and these are all that he gives the reader to work with. They are apparently an “example,” presumably of “first things”—but what are “first things”?

After prompting this question, the author implies (through the Maori place-name “Ngongotaha”) that the poem has shifted from London to New Zealand. Perhaps this country and its vegetation represent “first things,” because the author was born in New Zealand, and the text of “Walking Westward” began “here” too:

Walking westward  
 you have it all before you  
 the great out-reach. . . .



Ngongotaha,” for the first time. What precisely that “first thing” may have been he never specifies, but he renders it delicately:

with Ainsley under the willows  
1949  
    slow reel  
fishermen casting in gold

The isolated “slow reel” has filmic connotations, and by indenting the line Stead forces the eye to pause on the way to, and on the way back from, these two words. Form and content work together here to help create an image that works in slow motion, frame by frame. On the next line the “slow reel” becomes part of a fly-rod, and the eye then takes in a picture of “fishermen” casting in gold and cast in golden light. Finally, like the “casting” of a “gold” bar (and the memories of the stanza as a whole), they become a precious thing moulded into a compressed space.

Next to this imagist moment, Stead juxtaposes a description at once reminiscent of Eliot and indigenous to New Zealand:

After dry weeks  
                    rain  
and that’s to say “rain”  
as it hammers on iron  
nothing to do with Spain

Traces of Eliot linger from a previous reference (in the London section) to the “sweet Thames.” Stead’s phrasing of these first two lines recalls more of Eliot’s poetry: after the “dry season” of “Gerontion” (l.75), after the desert of *The Waste Land*, at last there came “rain.” This allusion allows Stead to evoke and employ the same pattern (“After dry weeks / rain”) at the end of his own long poem.

Along with these symbols and allusions, however, goes the literal fact that this precipitation belongs distinctly to New Zealand. Other places may feature roofs and rain, but they are not the roofs and rain of home. Thus travelling—for all its riches—will have an

aspect of dryness to it, a lack that cannot be filled until one returns to the weather and sounds that one grew up with. Even the rain in Spain will seem plain to someone used to the “hammer” of Auckland downpours on an “iron” roof. The poet reminisced about the same domestic situation in “Putting it Straight in London”: “The wooden box . . . on whose iron roof / The rain crashes.” In that poem, Stead also differentiated rough New Zealand style from elegant “Spanish style,” but in “Walking Westward” he makes the comparison more tongue-in-cheek by punning on an elocution exercise (and a popular song from the musical, *My Fair Lady*): “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.”

After this stanza, the poet places the single word “Rested.” By visually isolating this word, Stead allows it to radiate out to everything around it. In this way, the word describes the narrator’s actions (coming to rest). It also refers to his state of mind (tranquil), implicitly induced by everything that came before, and comes after, this small breathing space:

Rested  
     could focus on nothing  
 but sparrows in the pear tree  
 exits / entrances  
 remembering last night’s  
 denim itinerant  
 chain-smoking poems.

Rain, sparrows, pear trees, exits / entrances, poems: all these things whirl around, and somehow produce, a mind that is “Rested.” By placing “exits” so close to “entrances,” Stead creates a philosophical ideogram; on another level, the vertical stroke helps readers to visualize the tree that the birds simultaneously leave and enter. In addition, the poet’s carefully placed line break allows another of the “entrances” to become the memory of “last night’s / . . . poems,” coming back to him and entering his mind. This part of the poem—through all of its visual and verbal techniques—enacts Stead’s modernist principle of musical form.

This section also works through the modernist techniques of aggregation and allusion. The “denim itinerant” probably alludes to Robert Creeley, who visited New Zealand in 1976

(the same year that Stead wrote the first draft of "Walking Westward").<sup>12</sup> The concept of an itinerant poet also refers back to "Henshu emperor among the poets," a writer who (like Creeley, and the narrator) set out westward and "walked into Paradise" (*PD* 62). In a similar aggregation, the word "Rested" contains traces of two earlier sections, both of which end with the phrase "longing for rest" (*PD* 77). Thus the close of the poem simultaneously recalls and fulfils this "longing." The reference to "sparrows" also contains traces and allusions. In addition to the visual effects of their flight patterns, these birds recall the sounds of the "cicadas and sparrowtalk" that brought some measure of peace to the fourth section (*PD* 63). They may even allude to an early, realist poem by Stead ("A Natural Grace"), in which he considered the nest-building of "Two sparrows" outside his window and concluded that "all who make are passionate for line, / Proportion, strength, and take what's near and serves" (*WWF* 65).

Stead does not make any of these connections explicit; nor does he comment on the various images of poets, rest and flight. He simply moves on to another stanza, and another set of flying entrances and exits:

Here today  
still at hand and at heart  
soothed as if by fingers  
that know a need  
nowhere to jet to but  
                  gone tomorrow  
walking westward  
the green doors  
the runnels of water.

The narrator has returned to New Zealand and to "fingers / that know a need," which recalls (and contrasts strongly with) the Mistral wind of the Menton section:

barrenness of that wind . . .  
an old wind that knows no need but its own  
unloving wind that drives the lovers in hell  
Francesca recalling the tributary rivers

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<sup>12</sup>Dell Boldt, in her "Study of Two Long Poems by C.K. Stead," states that this wandering poet is definitely Creeley, though she offers no evidence for this assertion (50).

longing for rest (*PD 77*; emphasis added)

“Barrenness” and Purgatory fade in the face of “first things,” “Paradise” and lovers who (unlike Dante’s Paolo and Francesca) feel “soothed” and “Rested.”

As at the beginning of the poem (“Lackland” / “Paradise”), Stead puts paradoxes together and makes them fit. He manages to be “Here today / still at hand,” feeling the peace of “still” hands and a “soothed” heart, while simultaneously feeling an unspecified “need” and knowing that he will be “gone tomorrow.” Once again, the poet uses form to emphasize how close opposites can approach to each other:

Here today . . .  
gone tomorrow

Despite—and maybe within—these opposites, arises a sense of cohesion. This feeling of wholeness resonates in the final line, because the last word returns to the “water.” Water has brought healing rain, and runs through almost every section of the poem, joining all locations with its clear, flowing “runnels.”

And then—nothing. You turn the page to realize that there is no more. “These verses have no end,” Stead will explain at the end of *Voices*, but here he explains nothing. When “Walking Westward” finishes, readers have to engage with the images, put the pieces together themselves, and draw their own conclusions.

However, that is not to say that the entire poem operates this way. “Walking Westward” also has its moments of realism:

fresh-faced  
as if he ate well slept well  
the CIA man who thought  
Phoenix had been wrong  
because half the 20 thousand murdered  
were “innocents”—meaning not VC  
(imagine Dr Goebells saying  
the programme for the Final Solution

had been wrong  
because half the 6 million weren't Jews)

he was free to walk about  
so is Nixon (so is Holyoake)  
Lyndon Johnson died in his bed (PD 71)<sup>13</sup>

With its attacks on American Presidents (and their New Zealand supporter Holyoake, forever doomed to the brackets of history, yet forever implicated in the Vietnam War), this section has parallels with earlier realist poems such as "A Small Registry" and a number of the sonnets. One can sense the moral conclusion, and the section has only reached its halfway point.

Politics and war do seem to bring out the critical realist in Stead but, by way of comparison, one can see a more modernist presentation of politicians (and the Vietnam War) in section 7 of "April Notebook":

Happy birthday Shakespeare  
the comedy of errors escalates  
there aren't enough nettles to go round  
among the grasping statesmen

The lower case, non-italicised letters imply that Stead is not referring to Shakespeare's play *The Comedy of Errors*, but to the actions of the "grasping statesmen." Stead then alludes to another Shakespeare play—the same part of *Henry IV* that he uses in sonnet 8—where Hotspur defends going to war by arguing that "out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety." In the late 1960s, though, New Zealand politicians were hard pressed to present any nettles that threatened them. The 'Red Tide' of the 1930s seemed a long way off, and reasons to go to war (such as the aim of "safety") did not really exist. Yet still New Zealand soldiers were sent to Vietnam, and still New Zealand "statesmen" defended their deaths with rhetoric that seemed more empty than usual.

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<sup>13</sup>There were misprints in the original version of "Walking Westward," most of which were corrected in *Poems of a Decade*. For example, in the Venn diagram section, "he had explored with her / to caves of generation" (*WW* 45) becomes "he had explored with her / the caves of generation" (*PD* 75). Similarly, in the section quoted here, "holyoake" becomes "Holyoake." However, the misspelling of Goebbels appears in both texts and does not get corrected until the publication of *Straw Into Gold: Poems New and Selected* (1997).

This section of “April Notebook” invites readers to tease out its meaning, to engage with its allusions and juxtapositions, to work it out for themselves. In direct contrast, readers do not need to explicate the CIA section of “Walking Westward”—Stead explains it for us:

the mean masters of destruction  
 the mealy mouths that abet them  
 they don't figure among the unemployed  
 there's work for them always

smell of rotting bodies  
 fades into text-books  
 resolves into numbers  
 20 thousand  
 6 million  
 50 million  
 and half of them were “innocent” (*PD* 71)

By putting the CIA man's quotation into the context of another war—and another ethnic ‘cleansing’—Stead destroys his credibility, as well as the credibility of his “mean masters.” In this section, Stead makes his opinions clear about politicians (and overseas wars in the name of peace at home) by drawing not one but a number of explicit moral conclusions.

The only detail here that Stead leaves uncertain is the number, “50 million.” This radioactive detail appears earlier in the poem, as part of a modernist juxtaposition:

a white butterfly drifts across the tomatoes  
 a bell rings  
     50 million. (*PD* 68)

As Stead points out in “A Poet's View,” “the events of history fade. . . . Time takes the heat out of every cause, blurs the memory of the most memorable events, and dulls even the colour of blood” (*GC* 268-69). For readers that do not have Stead's knowledge of the statistics of history, a seam of realism can help illuminate these abstruse references. The allusion to “50 million” (and the ringing bell) becomes less mysterious in the light of an earlier, realist section about Stead the schoolboy and the end of the Second World War:

Pemberton  
     who told me to ring the bell  
 because the War was over

(50 million dead and half of Europe in ruins)  
 and ringing the bell I was worried  
 it had been War so long  
 what would Peace be like? (*PD* 67)

Readers familiar with “A Poet’s View” would already have taken this route into the poem:

Before I’d turned seven a war began. Six years later when it stopped the headmaster of the school I was attending instructed me to ring the school bell and keep on ringing it for as long as I could. I didn’t know, and I don’t suppose he did either, that fifty million people had died violently during those six years. I remember enjoying ringing the bell but worrying about what Peace might be like. (*GC* 259)

For the reader who has not read Stead’s criticism—for the person simply reading the poetry for its own sake—the seam of realism can provide this extra dimension.

So “Walking Westward” contains sections of pure realism (such as the piece about “the CIA man”). It also has seams of realism that work within—and between—predominantly modernist sections. In addition, those modernist sections can be illuminated by realist details from others of Stead’s poems. For example, the imagist section that occurs in “Ngongotaha” can be read by itself, or it can be read in conjunction with the following excerpt from “Putting it Straight”:

I drink to the Catholic girl—the first ever to undo me  
 Without an argument—with whom I tucked up in fern  
 While her father fished the lake at Ngongotaha

In “Walking Westward,” the “fern” turns into “fernstars,” the “Catholic girl” gets called “Ainsley,” and “her father” becomes the “fishermen,” but this looks like the same incident. The only difference lies in mode of depiction: what one poem explains, the other poem simply presents.

Thus the “first things” of “Walking Westward” probably refer in part to “the first ever” sexual relationship that the poet had, but does this explicit knowledge help or hinder one’s experience of the poem? Only the individual reader can decide this point. One might argue that the poet of “Walking Westward” was careful not to specify who—or even

what—"Ainsley" might be, or what was occurring "under the willows," or who the "fishermen" represented. Indeed, the narrator might simply have been one of the (plural) "fishermen," and stood casting "with Ainsley under the willows" in 1949. The exact occupation "under the willows" does not seem so important as the knowledge that this action is one of the "first things," an "example" of something "gold" and precious. The modernist section can therefore stand alone—but if readers have difficulty with its imagistic brevity, the seam does exist and can provide some assistance.

Given Stead's rejection of realism in "From Wytan to Carlos," his use of that mode in "Walking Westward" seems surprising. However, the presence of seam realism in this poem appears doubly surprising when viewed in the context of the critical responses that it evoked. Most critics treated "Walking Westward" as a purely modernist poem, and responded to it as such. For example, John Needham (writing in *Comment*) found Stead's modernist techniques frustrating. Needham stated in his review that a "feeling of unintelligibility is . . . generated by the method of surprising juxtaposition" (34). This review sparked a variety of responses from critics who supported modernism. Stead wrote a letter to the editor of *Comment*, complaining of Needham that "his remarks about the unexplained fragmentary 'moment' in a poem suggest that he doesn't know much about Symbolist and post-Symbolist poetic theory" (11). Kendrick Smithyman also wrote a letter to *Comment* supporting Stead's practice. In addition, Peter Simpson weighed in on behalf of both poets, publishing an article in *Landfall* called "The Modernist Tradition" (1979).

As one might expect from his title, Simpson asserts that the mode of poetry written by Stead and Smithyman "seems a wholly satisfactory mode, the allusiveness justified by the richness of the implication (366). His overall conclusion is that:

The wealth of possibility inherent in the Modernist idiom is well illustrated by these two poets, both highly skilled yet very different practitioners. Their work deserves to be read with sympathetic appreciation of the principles it embodies. It is available for both our profit and our delight. (369)

Like Stead in his criticism, Simpson regards modernism as deserving a capital “M.” In relation to *Walking Westward* in particular, Simpson dismisses the sonnets as belonging with Stead’s “earlier work,” while arguing that “the title poem is the most innovative and the one which links Stead most clearly to the Pound / Williams tradition of Modernism” (366). Simpson found that “‘Walking Westward’ . . . is a most impressive poem, one of the most convincing excursions in *open form* yet seen in this country” (367). Where Needham saw only “Sterile Dichotomies” (the title of his article) and “untenable beliefs” (34), Simpson argues that “Stead’s vision extends beyond simple dichotomies” (369).

Simpson’s pro-modernist stance parallels that of other reviews of *Walking Westward*, such as those written by Michael Harlow (in *Landfall*) and Trevor Dobbin (in *Climate*). Like Simpson, Harlow set aside the sonnets and focused on the title poem. Harlow also felt compelled to write against the kind of critical approach represented by Needham and earlier reviewers such as Martin Edmond and E.A. Horsman:

It will no longer do—as is done too often with Stead’s work—to label the poet’s work as ‘academic’; as if evidence of scholarship and the acknowledged talents of critical analysis somehow interfere with the emotional ‘stuff’ of poetry. Specifically—that the use of history and literary allusion, the seemingly random insertion of place names, etc., somehow dilutes the purity of poetry, somehow detracts from fidelity to ‘real’ life; that the display of intelligence in some quirky way results in a cerebral poetry at the expense of ‘raw’ emotion. (77)

Writing from a similar perspective, Dobbin also took issue with Needham’s review, arguing that Stead offers “a perspective that looks beyond dichotomy to a larger unity” (79). Moreover, Dobbin cites “From Wystan to Carlos,” and praises “Walking Westward” for putting the terms of that essay—“aggregation” (80), “accretion” (84) and “organic structure” (85)—into action.

Thus, two critical camps set themselves up on either side of Stead’s poetry. Needham, Martin Edmond and E.A. Horsman seem to prefer the kind of realist poetry that makes its implications clear. In their view (to use Needham’s terms), the “surprising juxtapositions” of modernist poetry appear simply “unintelligible.” On the other hand, Simpson, Harlow

and Dobbin set out to praise what Simpson called “The wealth of possibility inherent in the Modernist idiom.” However, by the late 1970s these two critical camps no longer battled alone: a third arises with the arrival of Alan Loney. Loney favoured postmodernism and so—in an article published in *Islands* titled “Some Aspects of C.K. Stead’s ‘Walking Westwards’” (1980)—he criticized Stead’s modernism for being, in his view, hopelessly out of date. Like Needham’s review, Loney’s article provoked some angry pro-modernist letters to the editor (this time from Alistair Paterson and J.D. Boldt).

Of all the reviewers who dealt with *Walking Westward*, only Michael Sharkey (in *Pacific Quarterly*) cannot be placed into any one of the three camps. One reason for this difficulty is that Sharkey’s review feels—to this reader at least—disjointed and confusing. However, a more revealing cause might be that “Walking Westward” is difficult to classify in any conclusive way. Sharkey initially sets out to attack Stead for falling into realist explanations:

For all the impulse in Stead’s Oriental ‘models’ to be attentive to the activity of things, Stead does not free himself of the urge to make sense of what he perceives. Stead’s works show the inescapable analytic predilection of the scholar. (406)

Sharkey seems to criticize Stead for drawing explicit conclusions, but on the very next page he complains that “Stead does not offer any answers to the questions . . . that he has raised with such concern.” Sharkey discovers that “There is no resolution” in “Walking Westward” (407-8), and for him “This is a cop-out” (407). Sharkey’s very confusion, though, supports my view of “Walking Westward” as a post-purist mixture of modes. Even though it professes to be—and largely is—a Poundian process poem, elements of seam realism do exist in and around this work.

##### 5. From Wistan to Carlos and Beyond.

So Stead’s denial of realism as an option—in “From Wistan to Carlos”—does not constitute an abandonment of what he sees as its useful aspects. As poet he still employs realism, and in the “Craft Interview” at least (if not in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*), he relaxes his stance towards that mode:

It's still true that in some basic sense I'm a product of the New Zealand realist tradition. I inherit that tradition and it's indelibly part of me. ("Craft Interview" 464)

The lessons learned from realism do not lose their importance in the face of new lessons. They simply become part of a broader perspective: no longer the only option, but one of a number.

In the "Craft Interview," Stead noted "something . . . which is typical of intellectual life in N.Z., in that people do like things to be contained in boxes, and small tidy boxes preferably" (458). As a critic, Stead has sorted realism and modernism into two types of box, and attempted to keep them separate. He has even gone so far as to label one mode as "poetry" and the other as "something else." In his practice as a poet, however, Stead has broken out of the "boxes" that he tried to place around his own work. Stead's ability to change modes raises a question about the third tradition of New Zealand poetry: postmodernism. If realism can exist in a seam, does postmodernism ever figure in his work? In "From Wystan to Carlos," Stead dismissed postmodernism in a footnote. His focus was on moving from Wystan (realism) to Carlos (modernism). I want to move now beyond that division, and consider the place of postmodernism in Stead's poetry and poetics.

## CHAPTER VI. POSTMODERNISM: NUGGETS ON THE SURFACE.

“The various discriminations possible within the Modernist (or as one may choose to call it, post-Modernist) tradition, are very important. . . . ”

—C.K. Stead, “From Wystan to Carlos” (1979) *GC* 147

### 1. Definitions and Semantics.

Postmodernism resists definition, partly because of what Fredric Jameson called “The seemingly irreducible variety of the postmodern” (Lodge 373), and partly because critics have used the term in such different ways that no single definition can encompass them all. For example, as Stead acknowledges in “From Wystan to Carlos,” what one critic describes as ‘modernism’ another “may choose to call” ‘postmodernism.’ Stead anticipates the argument put forward five years later by Michael Morrissey in his introduction to *The New Fiction* (1985):

In short what has happened in New Zealand is this: our art (painting, prose and poetry) has made a bold leap from realism to postmodernism without a defined intervening period of modernism. . . . C.K. Stead in his essay ‘Wystan to Carlos’ purported to deal with Modernism in recent New Zealand poetry but the poets he focused on—the *Freed* group—I (and others) would consider postmodernist. (35)

Like eager shop-assistants armed with label guns, New Zealand critics tend to rush about the shop of poetry, putting their mark on a new commodity as soon as it appears. The result can be a confusing palimpsest. How can readers know which label to look at, and what the cost will be if they choose one over another?

Elizabeth Caffin recognizes this problem of definition when she writes about “the *Freed* group” in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*. Rather than choosing between Stead’s description or Morrissey’s, Caffin suggests a compromise: “They might be called . . . ‘laid-back modernists’” (420). This new term suggests a fourth—that of the ‘uptight postmodernists’—but none of these semantic shifts take the reader any closer to identifying what might constitute a postmodern poetic. One reason for this hesitation can be found in

Caffin's assertion that New Zealand critics have struggled with terms such as postmodernism: "exactly what it was they could not agree on" (422). New Zealand critics are not alone in this anxiety. Jameson, in his introduction to *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), claims that "*postmodernism* is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience" (xxii).

I find a mixed blessing in Jameson's approach. On the one hand, it can be of some comfort to discover that even specialists struggle with the concept of postmodernism. On the other hand, the slippery intransigence of the term can be discouraging. Jameson asserts the impossibility of offering any sort of "coherent thumbnail meaning" (xxii). However, I hope to provide at least a working definition of postmodernism by embarking on a brief historical overview of the way that critics have used this category in relation to New Zealand poetry.

In the early 1980s, two types of postmodernism were touted in New Zealand critical circles. The first was based on the "romantic and bucolic" ideas of Charles Olson (Wilcox 344). This version of postmodernism was advocated by Wystan Curnow in "Post-Modernism in Poetry and the Visual Arts" (1982) and Terry Locke in "Trekking Beyond the Modern" (1983). Both critics defined the postmodern poem as being "untrammelled" by metre, with line and rhythm being shaped instead by units of breath. They also proclaimed that the poem was a "process" for the reader to take part in rather than a "product" to admire from a distance (Locke 317). In order to support this assertion, Curnow and Locke draw parallels between poetry and painting, with the latter stating that "There is no hierarchy. Painter, critic and viewer contribute to the making" (318). As with the "viewer" of painting, so with the reader of poetry: Locke suggests that "postmodernism (at least theoretically) seeks to extend an uncompromising invitation" (317).

The catalyst of these two articles was a new publication called *Parallax: A Journal of Postmodern Literature and Art* (edited by Alan Loney and in existence from 1982-83). Curnow's text provided the leader for the first issue, while Locke's article was a

review—written for *Landfall*—in which he argued that “*Parallax* is to be welcomed” (318). Many writers associated with *Parallax* saw themselves as taking an anti-modernist stance, particularly in relation to Stead’s position in “From Wystan to Carlos.” Roger Horrocks, for example, published “Off the Map” (*Parallax* 3) as an explicit “reply to C.K. Stead’s ‘From Wystan to Carlos’” (247). Locke struck a similar attitude, casting his review as an “implicit rejoinder”: “I have found recent attempts by Karl Stead and Alistair Paterson to address the current literary ferment in some respects unsatisfactory. This article is an implicit rejoinder to them” (310).

Despite this oppositional stance, Locke’s definitions of postmodern practice sound very close to Stead’s conception of modernist poetry. In “From Wystan to Carlos,” Stead argued—like Locke—for the poem as “process,” one that eschews metre in favour of the ‘musical scoring’ of breath patterns, and also invites the reader to join in the creation of the text. Many of Stead’s statements, particularly those about “inviting the reader into the process” (*PYE* 272), seem to fit the tenor of Locke’s review. So while Locke claims to be “Trekking Beyond” modernism, his article does not appear to offer any radical departures from Stead’s position.

The same kind of parallels arise in relation to Wystan Curnow’s article. As Simon During notes, in “Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits” (1983), a discrepancy develops between Curnow’s initial stance and the body of his argument:

Wystan Curnow in his seminal and programmatic essay ‘Postmodernism in Poetry and the Visual Arts’ sets post-modernism against its precursors. As a critic he cites, says, ‘it’s an anti-modernist aesthetic’. But certainly it isn’t anti-modernist in its internationalism. . . . Nor is it anti-modernist—at least Stead’s modernism—in its emphasis on ‘breath and utterance’ which is Stead’s ‘interweaving of breathing and vocalising’ again. Nor in its demanding participation of an audience—which in Stead’s underreading lexicon is called eliciting an ‘imaginative’ response. (90)

During does go on to argue that Curnow’s essay departs from Stead in one “genuine” respect:

It is genuinely anti-modernist however in its having a 'new stance towards reality'. It has 'a willingness to let things be', and, most distinctively, it is against 'the pathologies of epistemology' [sic] which 'distance us from experience, make us take our stance outside, to one side of, or prior to our experience'. What we have here is a desire for immediate access to a real, but not to a real which is necessarily authentic. It's the real just as it is, post-modernist art is an art which doesn't frame that real, doesn't go behind it; as Curnow says, it simply presents it. (90)

One might argue that—far from being “new”—this stance simply echoes Stead's elevation of a “presentative method”: “the real just as it is . . . it simply presents it.” Like Curnow, Stead promotes a method that asks the poet to avoid mediation and didacticism in “an attempt to get nearer to the true feel of experience” (*GC* 148).

So when Stead says that his modernism might alternatively be called postmodernism, he clearly has in mind the postmodernism that so influenced Curnow and Locke: that of Olson and “the post-war American poets” (*GC* 147). In “From Wylan to Carlos,” Stead subsumed this kind of work into “the Modernist tradition”:

In the 1960s . . . [a] new wave of young New Zealand poets discovered what I'm calling the Modernist tradition. They found it partly in Pound and Carlos Williams; they found it even more in the post-war American poets who . . . constitute a broad development out of Modernism. (*GC* 147)

In terms of both the poets they cite and the techniques they describe, the differences between Stead's modernism and the postmodernism of Curnow and Locke appear to be minimal. Such equivalency can lead to semantic confusion, rendering this sort of postmodernism difficult to apply. For the purposes of a 'working definition,' therefore, this first type of postmodernism seems to be of little practical use.

A second type of postmodernism arose in the 1980s, however, that did not fit into Stead's “broad development out of Modernism.” This second variety was articulated by Leigh Davis in his interviews, criticism and poetry, Simon During in “Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits” and Leonard Wilcox in “Postmodernism or Anti-Modernism?” (1985). Wilcox in particular takes issue with the definitions of Curnow and Locke:

Locke's essay is characteristic of New Zealand critical discussions of postmodernism: self-congratulatory and simplistic, romantic and bucolic (postmodernism being a kind of code word for a pastoral space beyond the ravages of modernist culture), and out of touch with current overseas discussions on the nature of postmodern society and culture. (344)

Wilcox presents Curnow as being similarly "out of touch," complaining that "Charles Olson is his chief exemplar," and rejecting "his sixties style postmodernism with its ludic emphasis on process" (351). Wilcox also points out—as Simon During did—that Curnow tends to employ "terms that are more properly associated with modernism than postmodernism" (360). In his view, both Curnow and Locke represent "a cultural lag, a tendency of New Zealand critics to be grounded in the sixties" (351). Such a position, Wilcox argues, has had a regressive effect on New Zealand poetry: "Curnow's definition of postmodernism [has] been extremely influential—provoking young poets to study and emulate the work of Charles Olson as *the* postmodern poet. . ." (352).

Wilcox turns away from Olson and the "'pastoral' postmodernism" of Curnow and Locke (351). He prefers to base his definition on Jameson's pronouncement that "flatness or depthlessness is 'the supreme formal feature of all postmodernisms'" (345). Wilcox emphasizes this concept by repeating it throughout his summary of postmodern art:

If it were possible to sum up in a short space the diverse and heterogeneous characteristics of postmodernism one would mention the following, organized around the constitutive features of a new depthlessness and a whole new culture of the image and the simulacrum: in fiction . . . we find the eclipse of the subject, 'decentered' narrative modes, the 'blank parody' or pastiche, the prevalence of surfaces rather than depths (or the multiple surfaces of intertextuality), discourses and textual play replacing older modernist depth models. . . . In architecture we see a similar commitment to surfaces and intertexts. . . . Similarly, in architecture, art, and other postmodern forms, an older surface/depth model is implicitly rejected in the effacement of the distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture. . . . In music we are confronted with a similar depthlessness. . . . (344-45; emphases added)

In Wilcox's view, "All these forms and features are far removed from the bucolic and 'countercultural' postmodernism that Locke espouses" (346).

During adopts a similar approach, rejecting Curnow's definition of postmodernism in favour of what he calls "another, probably stronger, 'postmodernism' than that which, for poetry at least, largely derives from Charles Olson" (91). Leigh Davis likewise stands up for an aesthetic of surfaces, asserting in *Willy's Gazette* (1983) that "Barthes was better than ten Frank Wrights" (sonnet 91). In other words, Davis feels that a postmodern writer such as Roland Barthes is ten times "better" than a modernist such as the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Thus Wilcox promotes his version of postmodernism by repeating the word "new," During employs the word "stronger," and Davis uses the word "better": this kind of vocabulary reveals the critical purism that underlies the work of all three writers.

Like most purists, Davis protests that "I don't mean to say the latest is the best." He makes this statement in a 1985 interview with Hugh Lauder entitled "Debate with Leigh Davis" (312). Nevertheless, in the same interview, Davis argues that his own kind of writing represents the most interesting option for New Zealand poetry. He supports this argument by creating a binary division between 'us' and 'them,' 'avant garde' and 'establishment,' 'emergent' and 'boring.' Davis makes the 'us' side of the equation stand for himself and his postmodern colleagues, a group that he describes with some affection as "the *enfants terribles* of the time" (311). He then casts Stead and Allen Curnow as the establishment opposition, dismissing them both—and indeed most of New Zealand poetry—as "boring" (312):

What's happening here is that I'm finding ways of coping with my own boredom when I read these texts. . . . I think NZ literature has got to the point where the conventions operating are so massive that when you see a book of poems it's recognizable—that's an important word in my vocabulary. In essence what I'm about and what Alex Calder and Roger Horrocks are about is the simple political point of saying this genre is recognizable, i.e., we know about it, it's getting close to exhaustion and we're interested in the unrecognizable, the emergent. (312)

For Davis (and, he implies, for others of the avant garde), "A Curnow text comes across as not-us" (314). From this perspective, anything that Davis chooses to place in "the dominant culture" (312) becomes "not-us," "recognizable" and "boring."

Thus Davis presents—and rejects—Curnow and Stead as “recognizable” commodities. Curnow’s work appears like “A 1957 Chrysler” (314), while Stead’s latest book of poems arrives like so much fast-food fodder: “*Paris* is like a McDonald’s hamburger” (315). Davis makes his attitude towards this kind of commodity quite clear, stating that “it’s not my kind of product” (314). Presumably when he argues that “The point is to give an ear to the unrecognizable, the emergent” (312), Davis refers not to the new work of Stead or Curnow, but to recent postmodern texts such as his own *Willy’s Gazette*.

In *Willy’s Gazette*, Davis takes the sonnet form and gives it a good, hard kick—not just into touch, but well out of the park. Each poem in the book contains fourteen lines, but that appears to be Davis’s only concession to the demands of convention. Sonnet sequences generally set out to persuade somebody to do something, to sketch characters and their actions, or to mull over events and issues. Davis, however, offers little in the way of character, plot or confessional verse. He tries to avoid these expectations by focussing on language, as he explains to Hugh Lauder: “my interest is in language’s capacity to become opaque, to foreground itself, to take over the stage” (317). “*Willy’s Gazette*,” he goes on to specify, “is the thoroughgoing working through of Saussure’s notion of the arbitrary signifier” (319).

One can see Davis attempt to carry out this manifesto throughout the course of his sequence. In what seems like a parody of the Zen principle *tat tvam asi* (“thou art that”), Willy becomes everything he sees, from a boat, to a sparrow hawk, to a shirt on a washing line. He also becomes anything the author imagines, such as an “outlaw” riding the range or a character from a nursery rhyme:

Willy the outlaw’s long ride, his long  
unreeling line. There comes Willy  
the old Lord Mayor of London  
Dick into the sunlight any ordinary  
man bland & squinting and common

Here, in a few lines from sonnet 64, Willy turns into “the outlaw,” “the old Lord Mayor” (“Dick” Whittington), “any ordinary / man” and possibly a penis (“comes,” “Willy,” “Dick”). Difficult for one man to be so many, but then in sonnet 71 he becomes a whale, a mouse, and a poem. “Eventually”—with a wry intertextual glance at Davis’s own descriptions of Allen Curnow—“Willis” even becomes a car:

He would use a newsbloc and arrangement. .  
 eventually Willis would appear, consumer durable, Dior trousers  
 with small pleats and doublefront coat in the dark, fenders,  
 and his face beloved, when he looks to sea,  
 like a moon on the water. Willis is a chevrolet

. .a late model 4 door saloon, in history. .  
 Cartier-Bresson catches the whole car  
 disappearing and leaving a moment’s taillight:  
 M. Strand makes it stop, curiously,  
 in the carpark overlooking the sea (Davis’s ellipses)

As a result of these constant shifts, “Willy” becomes a series of simulacra—not a character, but a word that simply attaches to other words, one arbitrary signifier among many.

Davis takes this technique further in “Heavenly Bodies,” where a series of television images beam into the poem and bounce off each other:

Calm as a poster, Mao remembered in TV shines  
 in your show room. His are the wet years, the  
 convergence of big fish, giubiloso, once in a  
 blue moon. Caravan pasts wave and once more  
 fold away, parachutes tumble all day, under the  
 technology of arms. Rereading economies of  
 scale wonders never cease. The Envoys you  
 don’t remember are smiling, talking slippery,  
 ionised on wild analysis. Things that take time  
 over and over again, the blaze of uniform which  
 is only talk, the rigor of the people’s wishes  
 rubbing the surface, holy mackerel. Mao  
 remembered (Williams, *Caxton Anthology* 159)

One might cut the flow at this point in order to underscore the image of the narrator remembering Mao, watching “the people” remembering Mao, in a programme remembering Mao. A crowd can be imagined filing past Mao’s coffin (displayed in state for some time), “rubbing the surface,” eking out some sort of contact with a “big fish.” Thus the “holy

mackerel” that follows becomes at once a description of Mao (a “big fish” who achieved a kind of “holy” status), a viewer’s exclamation (at the sight of such large scale devotion) and a participant’s imagined response (to the probable stench of a body rotting in the sunlight). Such an “analysis” may be “wild,” though, because it imposes a linearity that the author has avoided: it takes no account of “The Envoys” (advertisements?) who appeared earlier, nor does it address the “Tarzans in snow, Polynesian palms and native / thoughts” who occur later. The author tries not to accord privilege to any one discourse, but to allow instead for what During called “A play of differences” (91).

A similar kind of interplay occurs in “Face Choices,” where Davis aims for “laden appellatives and surface / as opaque” (another statement of his interest in “language’s capacity to become opaque”). On this “surface”—as in his other poems—Davis tries to achieve an unconventional sequence of words, what he calls an “adjustable story”:

I wanted to make a mosaic, maquette, maison-  
 ette. A mediator funding for bus drivers.  
 Unscissored into tiny leaders for folders.  
 But I was past my depth. A Calypso, a Broker Back On,  
 A Revoir, I Came Into My Own.  
 De Beauvoir. Properly part of all I see. Mostly out  
 of sight. Name of an occasion past my depth, my Nilotics,  
 my collection, my Orderly Passengers, plumbing  
 for bus divers. My My. . . .  
 Tumbling with divers. De Beauvoir calm with various  
 headings, made behaviours travelling past my depth.  
 I want to be a Female Astronaut. (Williams, *Caxton Anthology* 158-59)

Davis arranges his components in an “adjustable” way: words slide into each other (“mosaic, maquette, maison- / ette”) in what seems like a random, dreamlike progression. “Bus drivers” merge into “bus divers,” translate (via the French) into ‘diverse buses,’ and touch upon such concepts as ‘plumbing the depths’ and ‘bobbing for apples.’ Groups of words glide together like mercury on water, simultaneously hinting at other possible combinations and prompting the author’s self-reflexive response (a response that also names one of the “occasions” of the poem): “My My.” Davis revels in “Tumbling with divers,” spinning (and performing) among diverse differences. The arrival of the final line—“I want to be a

Female Astronaut”—adds a touch of surrealism to an already bewildering cluster of suggestions.

Iain Sharp, in a 1985 review of *Willy's Gazette*, praises Davis in the following terms: “He has the concentration and agility of a juggler keeping a dozen or more balls in the air at once” (385). This metaphor provides a useful entry point into Stead’s view of this type of postmodern poetry. Five years prior to Sharp’s article, in a review of (amongst others) John Tranter’s anthology *The New Australian Poetry*, Stead made rather different use of the juggler metaphor:

In *The New Australian Poetry* I was impressed, sometimes dazzled, by the way so many of these poets could sustain fantasy, invention, surrealism, a sort of meta-discourse without meaning or reference, like the game children play of going around the room without touching the floor. But how long can you watch even the cleverest juggler before you begin saying ‘So what?’ (AL 110; GC 159)

One might say that Stead went straight for the jugular in this review, dismissing the poets in Tranter’s anthology as talented but “boring” (AL 110; GC 159). Just as Leigh Davis does in his criticism, Stead takes a purist approach, casting a certain type of poetry as worthy but dull, and ultimately ill-equipped to sustain the reader’s interest.

Stead felt that this particular article—“What became of Modernism?” (1980)—expressed his views on postmodernism so well that he appended parts of it to the final published version of “From Wystan to Carlos.” The reasons for this “Postscript” lie in the initial brevity of Stead’s discussion of the postmodern. In the twenty pages that make up “From Wystan to Carlos,” Stead spends only one paragraph dealing with postmodernism. In that paragraph, he equates postmodernism with surrealism, and rejects it as “private poetry”:

The surrealist, I think, tends to deplete the language by diminishing its reference to a verifiable world, and thus to turn poetry into verbal play. . . . Even in the work of someone as brilliant as Alan Brunton (who illustrates the kind of thing I mean here by a surrealist) I feel there is a thinness in the language because the poet has let invention supersede perception. The language is showing us the mind of Brunton rather than the world as it appears to the mind of Brunton. To seek deliberately to detach the mind and the poem from its physical and social environment is I think a self-defeating game for a poet to play. (GC 153-54)

This dismissal feels a little brief—particularly in an essay that takes so much trouble to define and discuss the other modes of New Zealand poetry (realism and modernism).

Stead must have felt this lack, because in 1981 he added a lengthy “Postscript” in order “To complete . . . the picture”:

To complete—or at least to extend—the picture I should add that my negative feelings about certain recent manifestations of ‘post-Modernism’ hinted at here in the remarks about ‘surrealism’ (see p. 154) were developed in a review of a number of books of poetry in *The London Review of Books*, 1 May 1980. (GC 159)

In this “Postscript,” Stead defines postmodernism as “fantasy, invention, surrealism, a sort of meta-discourse without meaning or reference.” He also characterizes such work as “boring” and “lacking in texture”:

Wondering why I admired many talents yet found John Tranter’s anthology *The New Australian Poetry* boring, I wrote:

It is not that one necessarily demands ‘Australianness’, explicit regionalism, of Australian poets. It is rather that one requires of poetry—any poetry—the real, the concrete, the particular, not on any theoretical grounds but simply because without it the language will seem underemployed, lacking in texture. (GC 159)

In Stead’s view, such poetry lacks the elements that distinguished “the poems of Pound, early Eliot and Williams at their Modernist best”: “things, scenes, sounds, voices, particulars—a real teeming world” (GC 159).

In Stead’s criticism, then, two kinds of postmodernism manifest themselves. The one that Stead admires (Olson’s ‘Field’ and other post-war American developments), he simply absorbs into the modernist tradition. The one that he dislikes (surfaces of fantasy, invention and meta-discourse), he ostracizes as surreal and postmodern. In this separation and taxonomy—if not in matters of evaluation—Stead appears to agree with Wilcox, During and Davis. For the purposes of my working definition, therefore, the second variety shall constitute postmodernism.

This postmodernism provokes widely divergent critical judgements. The kind of poetry that Davis approves of as “emergent” and “unrecognizable,” Stead repeatedly casts aside as “no more than verbal gesture” and “ultimately boring”:

When modern poetry loses its sense of what John Crowe Ransom calls ‘things in their thinginess’, it slides away into verbal gesture, a mime of meaningful speech, and the result is always something narrowly personal and ultimately boring. . . . [T]here is too much in Tranter’s anthology that is no more than verbal gesture. (*AL* 110-11)

Stead makes it quite clear in “What Became of Modernism?” that his comments apply not just to the overseas poets under review, but to the New Zealand scene as well: “I felt more and more troubled as I read on, and even slightly bored, by something that bothers me equally in the work of the younger New Zealand poets” (*AL* 109).

Stead’s assertion that “the result” of such poetry “is always . . . boring” seems absolute to an unworkable degree. One might just as well say that green is “always” an ugly colour. In any case, I am not interested in judging postmodernism as either good or bad, emergent or boring. I want to see how far Stead’s poetry reflects his critical assertions. After his vehement rejections, one would expect there to be no room for postmodernism in Stead’s own practice as a poet. However, as Stead himself points out in the “Craft Interview,” “the theory follows the practice, and it doesn’t always fit it exactly” (453).

## 2. Stead’s Practice Prior to the 1979 Rejection.

One clue to Stead’s use of postmodernist techniques can be found on the page following his dismissal of Alan Brunton in “From Wistan to Carlos”:

Of the group of poets who began to appear during the 1960s David Mitchell, Alan Loney, Murray Edmond and Alan Brunton (despite my reservation of a moment ago), Bill Manhire . . . and of course Ian Wedde, are the ones I’m most conscious of reading, not in the spirit of an indulgent senior, but as a practising poet alert for sharpening plunder. . . . (*GC* 156)

Paradoxically, after rejecting postmodernism as “a self-defeating game for a poet to play” (154), Stead appears to embrace certain aspects of that mode. However, he only ‘plunders’

postmodernism; he never embraces it completely. The difference in Stead's work between the tradition of postmodernism and the two previously discussed (realism and modernism) is that Stead has never adopted it fully as a way of saying: he just adopts some of its elements. Because he has never been a pure postmodernist, these elements cannot be said to continue in a seam through his work—but they might be likened to isolated nuggets gleaming on the surface.

In other words, Stead rejects postmodernism as a whole, but uses parts of it to embellish his poetry. This 'plundering' of postmodern techniques can be seen emerging in his work of the 1970s, after an enforced break from writing poems. Stead recalls, in "On *Quesada*," that he suffered a long "dry spell" prior to 1972: "I hadn't written any poems, except a few lines now and then, for some time—it might have been as long as three years" (GC 272). After a car accident in the South of France in 1972, Stead began composing poetry again (a modernist sequence called "Under the Sun"), yet he felt that the results marked no significant change from his work of the 1960s: "'Under the Sun' was for me a new beginning, and I was pleased with it. But it was not something new" (274).

In Stead's view, that "something new" came with the arrival of "Quesada" in November 1973:

the opening lines of 'Quesada' were triggered off by a conjunction of personal and literary accidents, and I continued writing the sequence through December and into January. It was the end of the academic year, and while marking examination scripts I began reading *Don Quixote*. At the same time I was dipping into Whitman. And my colleague Roger Horrocks sent me from New York a large piece of his PhD thesis which I was supervising. It was a survey of various kinds of experimentalism in modern poetry and it gave me a renewed feeling of excitement about purely technical matters. (274-75)

*Don Quixote* may have prompted some aspects of *Quesada* and his lover "Dulcinea," while Whitman may have catalyzed Stead's return to the long line that he had used in the 1950s, but neither of these "accidents" caused any technical innovation in Stead's poetry. The

latter seems to have come from his contact with “various kinds of experimentalism in modern poetry.”

For example, as Stead explains in “On Quesada,” “The idea for the ‘double poem’—section 11—came straight from Horrocks” (275). In sheer visual terms, this section marks a departure from Stead’s previous work:

(for two voices)

*It is not merely the grandiose claims of the hero*  
 Morning that reeled and trembled for Quesada  
*to be proud knight and lover of women*  
 Dawn of his new day, lantern-jawed lean man  
*that are mocked here, nor is the story only an exposure*  
 In middle years making a break for life  
*of the distortions of life which art can bring about;*  
 Through fields where birds first talked to one another.

These interlocking lines arrest the eye and make the reader search for an approach. Should one take the italicised parts separately or read the lines in sequence? Poems had been written “for two voices” before (as in Yeats’s “The Folly of Being Comforted”), but Stead’s placement of the lines defamiliarizes what might otherwise be a fairly conventional sonnet.<sup>1</sup> The result seems like a version of the parallel text technique, more usually employed by writers of postmodern fiction.

A similar kind of technical innovation occurs in section 6:

the wave that  
 rides over  
 age  
 advances  
 briefly  
 never long  
 victorious

the wave that  
 brings back  
 youth  
 retreats  
 at length  
 always  
 defeated

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<sup>1</sup>The original version in *Quesada* has a line break between the octave and the sestet, while the text in *Poems of a Decade* appears as a single fourteen line group, further de-emphasising the traditional sonnet form that underlies this poem.

This parallel text can be read up and down, or side to side, and its form invites the reader's eye to flow in and around these various options. Of course, neither section 6 nor section 11 try to match the method of Leonard Wilcox's "'decentered' narrative" or Leigh Davis's "adjustable story." On the contrary, Stead explains quite clearly what he thinks "*the story*" of section 11 contains: not "*only an exposure*" and "*a warning*," but also a celebration of "*the hero . . . making a break for life.*" However, while these two sections may not mark what Wilcox would call "a commitment to surfaces," they do reveal Stead's willingness to incorporate at least some of the techniques of postmodernism.

Another departure from Stead's work of the 1960s can be seen in section 9, where the words dance across—and around—the page:

And a partridge in a poetry.  
 Not collar edge      *Coal-ridge*  
 Not bodle air      *Bo-dlaire*  
                             Get it right  
                             Make it new  
 And don't forget Les Fleurs du Mal—  
   arm—  
   é  
   he say  
                             "Poetry—she's made wiv woids"

Donkey Shot and Liberty Prance  
 Off with your pants and on with the dance

So  
     Kubla if you can  
   Juan Quesada  
 And if you can't—  
   *try teaching!*

These visual pauses and leaps mimic, in a kind of notation, the rapid shifts and connections that occur within the author's mind. One might argue that this kind of word placement simply reflects Stead's interest in the modernist "scoring" of speech patterns. While Stead has always been meticulous in his spacing of words and lines (particularly after "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea"), the shapes that occur in section 9 do nevertheless seem unusual when placed beside any of his previous poems. This section marks the first time, after over twenty years of writing poetry, that Stead does not return by default to the left margin after indenting

a line. This change shows the impact of “various kinds of experimentalism,” the influence of certain postmodern developments, beginning to alter the surface of his work. On a visual level, “Quesada” ushers in a different phase in Stead’s career: a phase characterized by a new interest in experimenting—and even playing games—with form.

Not only does section 9 contain visual innovations, it also moves some way towards the kind of “private poetry” that Stead criticizes in “From Wytan to Carlos.” In that essay Stead argues that “the surrealist, I think, tends to deplete the language by diminishing its reference to a verifiable world, and thus to turn poetry into verbal play” (153). As a critic, Stead dismisses this sort of postmodern game-playing as an attack on what he calls “the seriousness of poetry” (153). In section 9 of “Quesada,” though, Stead seems “to turn poetry into verbal play.” One might read this section as a “mindscape” (*GC* 157), in which the author lets his intellect range across an opaque surface of puns. The sensation of being inside the private world of the poet’s mind feels almost surreal.

Because this kind of surface deviates from the usual pattern of Stead’s work, critics often single out this section, and their response leans towards the negative. For example, Martin Edmond states in his review of *Quesada* that “Section 9, which consists of a series of puns on the names of poets, I find simply embarrassing” (319). Similarly Elizabeth Caffin, writing in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, calls this section “a punning anti-literary counterpoint” which the poem as a whole was “strong enough to take . . . without collapsing totally” (434). However, the kind of game-playing that postmodernism fosters need not be seen as “embarrassing,” or as something that poetry must be “strong enough” to withstand. Such an approach would confine literature to a single mode and then banish any other possibility as “anti-literary.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Not all New Zealand critics have adopted this stance. Michele Leggott, in a 1984 article about the “Jokers” of New Zealand poetry, quotes the whole of section 9 and praises Stead for his “undercutting of decorum” (162). In her view, “we should . . . think about the kind of offences the play is perpetrating, and see what this has to tell us about our expectations of a poem” (163). Leggott argues further that readers and critics need to adopt a more relaxed approach to such poetry, and try to “join in the game” (163).

This kind of critical purism can also lead to inaccuracies, particularly in Stead's case, since few of his poems remain in purely one mode. Even section 9, which at first sight seems like an opaque surface of postmodern game-playing, contains some other options for the reader. For instance, in addition to the dazzling surface of puns, this poem might also be viewed as a realist structure. Stead sets the scene: poetry and poets converging from all sides. In the last line of the previous section, Dulcinea herself was about to try her hand at a poem:

He gave her a quill plucked  
From a pheasant dead on the road.  
She was to write him a poem.

Stead follows this set-up with an elaboration of the problem: how does one write, not just a poem, but a poem that feels "right"? The author suggests that in order to "Get it right," one has to follow Pound's advice and "Make it new."<sup>3</sup> Stead then admonishes the reader not to "forget" Mallarmé's dictum about poetry being made with words rather than ideas. He even provides a list of exemplars, such as Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (complete with hints on pronunciation). Finally, Stead concludes the poem with a realist statement addressed to "Juan Quesada," to the reader, and perhaps even to himself: "if you can't" write as well as Coleridge did in "Kubla Khan," then you might as well "*try teaching!*" With this italicised ending, Stead underlines the joke against himself and his chosen profession, as well as putting a new spin on the old adage that 'those who can, do; those who can't, teach.' He may even be suggesting, since he—a teacher—has written a poem, that some practitioners might manage to do both.

Thus this section follows the conventional three part structure of the New Zealand realist poem: "the scene set, the problem elaborated, the conclusion drawn" (GC 150). However, this section of "Quesada" could also be read as a series of complex modernist allusions. On an external level, some knowledge of Coleridge and Baudelaire seems necessary before the

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<sup>3</sup>Stead repeats these two lines when he describes—in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*—Pound's attitude towards literature: "The job was to get it right, to make it new . . ." (14). Pound published a book of criticism called *Make it New* (1934), and this was one of his credos.

reader can even see their names, let alone connect them with the texts encrypted in the lines that follow. Similarly, the line in quotation marks needs some explication before one can link it to the staggered name that precedes it. Stead's allusions also spiral out to incorporate Ezra Pound, *Make it New*, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," and possibly even the New Zealand-born lexicographer Eric Partridge. Partridge wrote *The Concise Usage and Abusage* (1954), the back cover of which states that "he offers advice on the best and worst uses of English," a task that Stead goes on to do—and mock—in his poem. Of course, since all the other names in this poem receive capital letters, this reference may just allude to the Christmas carol, and a whimsical wish for "the first day of Christmas" to contain poetry instead of a "pear tree."

On the level of internal allusions, a connection can be made between section 9 and section 14. The former contains an apparently nonsensical, visually isolated rhyming couplet:

Donkey Shot and Liberty Prance  
Off with your pants and on with the dance

This couplet finds its visual and aural counterpart in section 14:

Honi soit qui mal y pense  
Don Quichotte et le Petit Prince;

Both couplets end with the same rhyming sound and, in French pronunciation, the second line of the latter corresponds almost exactly with the first line of the former. In other words, the puzzling "Donkey Shot and Liberty Prance" simply provides an English transcription of two French book titles. Consequently, a line that makes little sense by itself explodes into meaning when read in conjunction with section 14, allowing it to join "Coal-ridge" and "Bo-dlaire" as another phonetic rendering of some of Stead's favourite reading material.

Stead sees *Don Quixote* as a crucial influence on his poem, particularly in relation to the character of Juan Quesada. As Stead explains in "On *Quesada*," his "proud knight" shares many characteristics with the knight errant of Cervantes's novel:

The name Quesada is a variant of Quixote. Quesada himself is not strictly a persona (there is no first person speech in the poem) but a character. He is like Quixote but not Quixote. Like Quixote he has a mistress (real or imaginary) called Dulcinea. His mood is a sort of controlled hysteria—exhilaration in despair. He suffers defeat and is glad to suffer because he values intensity more than comfort. He wills his own defeat because he knows his life requires it . . . but the defeat is painful. (GC 275)

In addition to Don Quixote, another type of Quesada might be the title character of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943). Like Quixote, the Little Prince has a "mistress (real or imaginary)"—his allegorical rose. He also "wills his own defeat because he knows his life requires it," offering his bare ankle to the poisonous serpent in a Quixotic (or Christ-like) gesture. In this context, Stead's reference to "Liberty Prance" in section 9 allows the ensuing line—"Off with your pants and on with the dance"—to take on more than its apparently sexual connotation. At the instant the Little Prince bares his leg, a number of things occur. On a physical level, the snake bites him and he dies; on an allegorical level, though, he feels (again, like Christ) that he is finally "going back home" (Saint-Exupéry 80). "I shall look as if I were dead," he warns his human companion, "and that will not be true" (84). Thus, for the Little Prince, "the dance"—of death, of new (after) life, of "liberty"—may be just beginning.

For anybody who thinks ill of such characters and events, Stead reserves a reply in section 14. The French phrase that constitutes this section translates literally as "shame to him who thinks ill of that / Don Quixote and the Little Prince." This reference ignites a chain reaction of further allusions, like a row of firecrackers tied together by a single fuse. The first of these allusions probably refers to the books themselves, classics of Spanish and French literature respectively, and both celebrating a heroic, innocent sufferer who "values intensity more than comfort" (GC 275). In addition to these books and characters, the couplet recalls the only other French phrase in the poem, the epigraph "Je pense . . . aux vaincus." These lines mean 'I think . . . of the defeated,' and come from Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Swan," first published in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).<sup>4</sup> As he states in the preface to that collection,

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<sup>4</sup>Stead provides his own translation of "The Swan" later in *Quesada*.

Baudelaire felt himself to be a “passionate lover of fine style,” who tried, “because the task was more difficult, to extract *beauty* from *evil*” (xxvi). Despite this “passionate love,” and its influence on later poets, Baudelaire’s poetry was banned and slighted in his lifetime. Stead’s allusion to this author, and his sentiments about “the defeated,” therefore seems an appropriate opening for a long poem about “*the hero/fool*” who loves wholeheartedly, even to the point of his own destruction.

Another allusion skips across the channel to England and a similar kind of romantic hero, King Edward III. Edward married Queen Philippa, but he fell in love with Alice, the Countess of Salisbury. Accounts of this love affair differ, though most historians suggest that Edward treated the Countess gallantly.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one of the most popular tales of his reign claims that Edward founded England’s first chivalric Order (the Order of the Garter), in honour of the Countess. In 1344, the King was dancing with this lady when one of her blue garters fell to the floor. According to Holinshed’s *Chronicle* (1577), Edward “stooped downe and tooke it vp, whereat diuerse of his nobles found matter to iest, and to talke their fansies merilie, touching the kings affection towards the woman” (Melchiori 116). Edward tied the garter onto his own leg, admonishing the courtiers in French with the phrase that remains the Order’s motto: “Honi soit qui mal y pense.” Holinshed also attributes to Edward the following words:

he said, that if he liued, it should come to passe, that most high honor should be giuen vnto them for the garters sake: and there vpon shortlie after, he deuised and ordeined this order of the garter, with such a posie, wherby he signified, that his nobles iudged otherwise of him than the truth was. (Melchiori 116)

Stead incorporates this story—along with its chivalric atmosphere—into his poem via the highly charged motto of the Order. By placing this motto in section 14, Stead allows it to refer not just to Edward and Alice, but to “Don Quichotte” and Dulcinea, “le Petit Prince”

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<sup>5</sup>One contemporary French writer argues that Edward visited the Countess in her castle and raped her while her husband was on a mission in France. However, this account—by Jean Le Bel in his *Vrayes Chroniques* (c.1355-60), written during the ‘100 Years War’ between England and France (a war initiated by Edward)—seems closer to propaganda than history, since it offers no proof and finds no corroboration in any of the other chronicles.

and his rose, Juan Quesada and his “Dulcinea,” and lovers everywhere who find themselves facing adversity. As Stead declares in the opening line of section 1: “All over the plain of the world lovers are being hurt.” The allusions in section 14 offer some ways of dealing with and even celebrating that pain. Through a process of accretion and internal allusions, therefore, section 14 connects to various parts of the poem—especially section 9, where it helps to gloss one of the more difficult references in that sequence of puns.

Thus “Quesada” marks the beginning, in Stead’s poetry, of a triple mixture of modes. In section 9 in particular, Stead manages to combine aspects of a postmodern surface with an allusive, modernist depth, and at the same time to employ some conventional realist structures. I am not arguing that section 9 would ‘fail’ without these other levels. To treat the visual experimentalism, linguistic tricks and game-playing aspects of postmodernism as ‘non-poetic’ seems narrow and exclusive, and some New Zealand critics have taken this stance to rigid extremes. The issue here is not one of relative quality between modes; I simply want to point out that all three modes can and do exist within a single poem. Purist approaches tend to obscure the possibility of such a mixture, and this mixture of modes allows the reader a number of paths through the text. Consequently, if one does not appreciate the postmodern surfaces, then perhaps the allusions can help to illuminate them, and if the allusions go unrecognized then maybe the realist aspects can keep the reader’s interest.

Stead’s early use of postmodernist technique occurs mainly on the level of visual experimentation. This development, which originates in “Quesada,” can be seen continuing in his next long poem, “Walking Westward” (written at the beginning of 1976).<sup>6</sup> When discussing this poem with David Hill in 1984, Stead characterized “Walking Westward” as part of a movement towards a more open form: “The poem represents part of a progressive opening out in form which has allowed me greater freedom to be the ‘composer’ in poetry” (Hill 48). Part of this “greater freedom” can be seen in Stead’s willingness to include things

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<sup>6</sup>Stead explains that “the writing went on through most of February and March 1976 and on into part of April” (Hill 48).



Love poems often list and compare lovers, but such catalogues hardly ever take the shape of a Venn diagram. By using such a form, Stead undercuts the reader's expectations both of the particular genre (the love complaint), and of what poetry in general ought to look like.

This diagram helps create an ambivalent surface. Stead's "use of the new maths" could be a criticism—and an embodiment—of his ex-lover's coldness. On the other hand, the diagram might represent the poet's attempt to deal with the pain of those "three nails," and to drive them a bit further away from his "heart." In this sense, by transforming the situation into classroom exercise, Stead tries to reduce the phonecall into something less important, less life-shattering. One might argue, though, that his very ability to do so suggests that the end of this relationship may not be so difficult as he makes out. However, in such circumstances the old saying could apply: 'if you didn't laugh you'd cry.' Stead manages to include both impulses in his poem, laughter and tears, and shows how hard it can be to separate the two in moments of great stress. Breakups affect the participants on many levels, and Stead uses the language of more than one "dimension" to communicate the different responses that the phonecall evokes.

Finally, though, it seems that Stead includes the diagram in order to criticize it as an inadequate representation of human relationships. Emotional traumas cannot be reduced to statistics, nor can a series of numbers communicate that "he had explored with her / the caves of generation and the terraces of the stars." Stead's reference to "the language of another dimension" echoes an earlier section of "Walking Westward," in which he argued that "Art has nothing to do with perfect circles":

but a rough triangle  
                                   that's different  
 the Nile Delta for example  
 or what Antony saw first and last in Cleopatra  
 a blunt arrow-head of crisp hair  
                                   pointing the way  
 down  
                                   into another dimension  
 only perfect world (*PD* 66)

On a literal level, this section constitutes another of Stead's statements that "Fucking, I feel at one with the world . . . it's like rowing into heaven" (*Geog* 71). However, on a figurative level, the poet suggests that "perfect circles" cannot wholly capture or express such a feeling. There remains "another dimension," more elusive than the clear lines of geometry. Venn diagrams may help to distance one from "nails meant for the heart," but they cannot show what that heart might feel from moment to moment. The "cold beauty" of the new maths seems inadequate when it tries to capture the complexity of human interactions.

Another section of "Walking Westward" also imports a diagram into its structure, with similar results:

This morning a quartz sky an opal harbour  
 late summer gardens in flower  
 city of clean edges  
 and the little boys in black and the bigger boys and the big ones  
 gathering in tens in scores converging in hundreds  
 across the Domain up from Newmarket down from Mt Eden  
 staggering  
 their bags full of what might be stones  
 but are free text-books  
 to learn in English "the 8 modes of language"

(oracy)      { speaking                  reading } (literacy)  
                   { listening                writing }

(production) { moving ←→ watching } (reception)  
                   { shaping ←→ viewing }

confusion of thought enshrined in diagrams from the Government printer  
 tortured into text-books  
 small clear brows furrowed with incomprehension  
 or ruffled in revolt  
 to be read as failure. (*PD* 68)

Where the Venn diagram proved inadequate for love, the “diagrams from the Government printer” prove inadequate for the imagination. Instead of helping the schoolchildren to think for themselves, the diagrams promote only a “confusion of thought.”<sup>7</sup>

The diagrams in these sections may not seem much in themselves, but in the context of Stead’s career—and New Zealand poetry of the time—they represent quite revolutionary formal experimentation. A glance through Stead’s previous books, as well as the New Zealand anthologies of the 1970s, shows nothing like these shapes. In addition to diagrams, these sections of “Walking Westward” contain an extension of the flexible margins and visual gaps that Stead began experimenting with in “Quesada.” For example, the poet uses visual spaces within individual lines to enact the distance travelled by his eye between “a quartz sky” and “an opal harbour,” or by the schoolchildren who move “across the Domain up from Newmarket down from Mt Eden.” Stead also uses space between lines, creating a wide range of effects:

October she phoned to say  
for her at last it was      over  
   forgotten  
   irrelevant  
3 nails meant for the heart

The flexible margins here allow Stead to approximate the deliberate pauses of the speaker in this telephone conversation, as well as the stunned silence of the listener. He also places the three words in such a way that they become something close to concrete poetry: “3 nails” hammered in at precise intervals, deep into the poem and “the heart.”

In his review of *Walking Westward*, Alan Loney asserts that “Part of the whole thrust of post-modern concern with technique is that the way the words are put down on the page are

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<sup>7</sup>For a prose version of this attack on “the 8 modes of language,” see Stead’s 1982 address to the annual conference of the National Association of Teachers of English. In that address, he explains that the diagram comes from the New English Syllabus of the early 1970s, and argues that “the ‘eight modes’ formula flouts common sense, creates confusion and misdirects energies” (AL 250). The parallel nature of these texts can be seen in Stead’s reuse of words such as “enshrine” (AL 249) and “confusion” (AL 250).

the clues to their operation in the poem” (244). However, Loney also argues that these developments do not apply to Stead:

I get no sense throughout *Walking Westward* that the poet is placing himself at any formal *risk*. . . . What is surprising is that the poet is struggling to achieve, and to speak authoritatively on, Ezra Pound’s ideogrammatic method in 1977-8, as if no conversation, no dialogue, no poetic thinking, no pressing the limits of known form had taken place since, say, 1950-51, with the birth of Cid Corman’s magazine, *Origin*. I will not detail the ‘developments’—the point is, things have happened. And the place of recent, current and continuing dialogue, is a place of *risk*, of uncertainty. . . . This conversation is active and widespread; and it’s impossible that Stead does not have access to it. (248-49)

In Loney’s view, Stead’s poetry ought to contain some traces of postmodern influence. Nevertheless, when Loney does find an experimental element in *Walking Westward*—such as the oblique stroke—he dismisses it as “uncharacteristic . . . in Stead’s work” (244). In this way, Loney pushes aside any instances of postmodernism in Stead’s poetry in order to accuse Stead of being closed to that development. This questionable syllogism enables him to conclude that “to date . . . the poetry of C. K. Stead has failed to push his ‘givens’ into his own time” (250).

I would agree with Loney that elements of postmodernism are “uncharacteristic” of Stead’s work. However, the oblique stroke (in “April Notebook”), the linguistic play and phonetic spelling of words (in “Quesada”), as well as the diagrams and visual innovations (in “Walking Westward”), all point to some kind of contact with the “recent, current and continuing dialogue” of poetry. Stead may not go far enough to please a purist such as Loney, but he does make incursions into the area of experimentalism. Nonetheless, given Stead’s vehement rejection of postmodernism in 1979, one might expect such incursions to decrease during the 1980s. The reverse proves to be the case.

### 3. Stead’s Practice After the 1979 Rejection: *Geographies*.

The first book of poems that Stead produced after “From Wystan to Carlos” was *Geographies* (1982). He divides this volume into four sections, beginning with two long poems (“Scoria: A Reconstruction,” “Yes T.S.: A Narrative”) and ending with two

selections of shorter works (“The Clodian Songbook: 15 Adaptations,” “At Home: Weathers and Coastlines”). According to Michele Leggott, *Geographies* invites readers to move across the boundaries of “various modes”: “its effects are dazzling. Four sections pitch at us demonstrations that Stead is expert at the various modes of contemporary poetry” (157). I want to examine each of these sections in turn, focussing on their shifting relationship to Stead’s critical prescriptions.

a) “Scoria.”

The opening poem of *Geographies* had been first published in *Islands* in April 1979, shortly before “From Wistan to Carlos.” In view of this proximity, one might predict that “Scoria” would exemplify the modernist purism of that essay. In many respects, “Scoria” does enact Stead’s prescriptions. As Mike Doyle points out in his review of *Geographies*, this poem follows modernist models and, in particular, it owes “a great deal to Pound” (473):

The material is local and personal, the method is partly that of mythical analogy, derived from the authoritative text of Eliot’s essay on Joyce’s *Ulysses* (or, better, the ‘sacred text’ itself). The other and more dominant part is the Poundian method of juxtaposition. (472)

Doyle states at the beginning of his review that “Like my own, Stead’s sense of the contemporary poem is informed by an acceptance of modernist principles” (471). In Doyle’s view, Pound and modernism dominate “Scoria”: “In this poem especially . . . there are overt traces of Pound’s influence” (473).<sup>8</sup> Thus Doyle concentrates on the modernist elements in Stead’s poetry—Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Williams—and in no part of his review does he mention the modes of realism or postmodernism.

However, within the modernist structure of “Scoria,” these ‘other’ modes can be seen operating at isolated points. In this way, “Scoria” looks and feels very much like “Walking

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<sup>8</sup>Doyle argues further that “the influence of Pound is not always fully assimilated” (474). For an alternative view, see Boldt (diss. 10-12) and the “Craft Interview” (448-50).

Westward.” Indeed, Stead conceived of “Scoria” as a kind of sequel to that poem, as he explains in an interview with Michael Harlow:

I had a general plan to do a long poem when I wrote ‘Walking Westward’; and in order to indicate that it was going somewhere as well as being a poem in its own right, I wrote a section which refers forward to ‘Scoria’, ‘Paris’, ‘The Wars’, ‘The Smoky Athletes’. That was repeated when I came to write ‘Scoria’, which is the second part of that sequence. What I had in mind in a general way was that ‘Walking Westward’ would move very broadly in space but narrowly in time. The time compass would be that of my own adult life. ‘Scoria’ would reverse the time-space thing. It would have a very narrow physical compass—that of the garden and house in which I grew up, and the surrounding suburb; but it would move broadly in time, going back through European history, Maori prehistory, even the geological ages when the volcanic cones of the Auckland isthmus were formed. (“Craft Interview” 459)

Even though “Scoria” marks the temporal and spatial “reverse” of “Walking Westward,” Stead uses many of the same techniques and forms in both poems. Like its predecessor, “Scoria” follows the shape of a modernist long poem in the manner of Pound. In addition to this modernist base, “Scoria” likewise contains some realist techniques and some aspects of a postmodern surface.

For example, the third section of “Scoria” constitutes a short, realist statement about the poet’s youthful attitude towards “the rock”:

Dry  
 its pores edged  
 sharp to the touch  
 bearded often  
     with a white lichen  
 hard on palms  
     on bare knees  
 but a warm refuge  
     my friend the rock  
 SCORIA (10)

Here the poet describes “SCORIA,” and then explains how he felt about it as a boy: “a warm refuge / my friend the rock.” However, such moments of explanation occur rarely in this poem, because the author tries to avoid explicit conclusions and devote himself to the presentative method. As Stead explained in a 1983 radio interview about “Scoria,” he wanted to stop analyzing events and simply invite readers to “experience the experiences”

(qtd. in Boldt, diss. 75). Nonetheless, seams of realism do surface, as when the poet announces—and implicitly endorses—the boy’s judgement of adult hypocrisy:

And she said ‘Please get me that horse manure’  
 meaning the beautiful big bran muffins  
 steaming in the roadway  
 handing me a bucket and shovel  
 a day full of hammering  
 that seem to stop and listen  
 repeating ‘manure—for the garden’  
 pushing the bucket at me  
 and whose garden was it  
 and if it was no shame and no one would laugh  
 why didn’t she get it herself  
 forced out protesting  
 to scoop it up (20)

Thus, while “Scoria” generally follows Stead’s modernist prescriptions, one can see isolated moments of realist judgement and explanation within the poem.

One can also see moments of linguistic play that might be described as postmodern experimentalism:

bk bk bk bkaa bkaaa  
           bkaa bkaaaa  
 bk bk bk bk  
           bkaa bkaaaa  
 bk bk bk  
           bk bk bk bk bk  
 lay language  
           your waking  
 subsiding (bk bk bk)  
 to the languid/discontented  
 kaaaaa  
       kaaaaaa  
           kaaaaaa (16-17)

The high modernist texts cited by Doyle offer little precedent for this kind of poetry. Here, Stead employs the oblique stroke and the kind of phonetic representation normally associated with postmodern texts. In addition, the phonetic combinations don’t appear to say anything intelligible. There seems to be a game going on here, as Stead creates an opaque surface of repetitive nonsense words. Perhaps the key lies in the repetition, maybe the letters form some

kind of code; the shapes made by the letters “b,” “k” and “a” may even form some sort of concrete poem.

By itself, this section stands as a linguistic riddle, one that resists conventional reading processes. However, postmodernist techniques rarely stand alone in Stead’s work. One might be able to extrapolate a possible meaning by looking at the surrounding sections and following the modernist process of juxtaposition. The preceding section offers a kind of ‘memento mori’ portrait, a sleeping boy with flies walking across his face: “how you slept knowing it was your own sleeping / face the flies explored their walk your waking” (emphasis added). This image explains that the repetition of “your waking / subsiding” refers back to this boy. The following section takes the reader—without any kind of transition—away from the boy, outside “the hot room,” and into the garden:

Veronica  
of the spread wing in sunlight  
and to Dieffenbach  
          that other veronica  
speciosa  
          the koromiko  
in lilac flower among flax  
its scent on the air  
‘where this shrub grows  
          is richest soil’ (17)

A boy sleeping in a room; birds and plants in the garden outside. This juxtaposition provides the setting, but does not appear to help solve the phonetic mystery. Likewise the allusion to Ernst Dieffenbach (a naturalist and geologist who assessed the possibilities of colonisation for the New Zealand Company between 1839-1841): Dieffenbach’s profit-motivated assessment contrasts with the boy’s love of the plants for their shape and “scent,” but provides no insight into the possible meanings of “kaaaaaaa.”

However, “the spread wing in sunlight” echoes back to a passage that occurred five pages earlier:

As the matador’s cape concealed the steel



illuminated by the modernist processes of juxtaposition, accretion and allusion. However, while they rarely stand alone, such elements of postmodernism do exist in Stead's work and need to be acknowledged.

**b) "Yes T.S."**

These elements appear more frequently in "Yes T.S." (composed in 1980), a long travel poem that moves through many different countries and modes of writing. In some sections of the poem, Stead even allows postmodernist techniques to dominate:

'Avant qu'Abraham fût  
Je suis'

'Avant qu'Abraham fût  
Je su s'  
'i'

'Avant qu'Abrah fût  
Je su s'  
'i am'

'Je sus'  
'I am

Jesus'

'I am  
before Abraham was' (47)

The first two lines, loosely translated, mean the same as the last two lines. In a complex verbal and visual game, Stead extracts letters from the French words and transliterates them down the page. He also reveals his gradual thought processes as he does so, picking out each stage in quotation marks. Eventually, by a process of visual isolation and compression, Stead translates the whole phrase—in every sense. This section seems purely postmodern, a linguistic game simply for its own sake—what Stead dismissed in "From Wistan to Carlos" as "verbal gesture," "language for its own sake" (159).

Unlike the language play in "Scoria," this section does not appear to be illuminated by any of the poetry that surrounds it. In the preamble to this section, the poet moves from Paris



argue that the “Abraham” game represents the attempt of a lonely mind to amuse itself, to keep active and engaged with something, anything. Nonetheless, while the elements of postmodernism that enter this poem may not stand alone, they do mark a significant increase in Stead’s use of—and openness to—the mode of poetry that he rejected in “From Wystan to Carlos.”

Another example of this openness can be seen in Stead’s increasing use of diagrams and concrete poetry, as in the section that marks his transition from “London” to “Paris”:

17/10/32  
London—Charing Cross

48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48

Dover

↑  
↓

Boulogne

48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48  
48 48 48 48 48 48

Paris—Paris-Nord  
17/10/80

No conventional grammar or word structure here; only a group of numbers, dates, pronouns and arrows. Doyle asserts that this diagram represents “a train-ticket which is a concrete poem (and an emblem of shifting geographies)” (475). In this assessment, Doyle touches indirectly upon Stead’s technique of combining different modes of poetry. The diagram represents at once a postmodern surface (“a concrete poem”) and an “emblem” of something beyond itself (the kind of “depth” that postmodernism eschews).

Recognition of the concrete poem alone would obscure this mixture of modes, since such a reading would focus only on the form of the section. Stead consistently argues against separating form and content. Indeed, in the section that immediately precedes the diagram, he lampoons a “poetry editor” for concentrating on “Form”:

and this poetry editor  
     in his lovely Muse flat  
 with a Sunday  
 Times table

  set for 6  
 is talking about ‘the return to  
 form’.

  Oh Form!  
 honourable suitcase  
 battered  
   covered with labels  
   have you anything to  
 declare?

Thus—to return to the train ticket—Stead invites the reader to consider not just the shape of the section, but also the words and the numerals that make it up.

On one level, the grid simply illustrates the poet’s age: “48” years old on “17/10/80.” This detail explains why Stead selected the number “48,” and why he chose to repeat it (in eight rows of six) forty-eight times. Perhaps, following on from the literal meaning of the previous line (“have you anything to / declare?”), someone had asked Stead for his passport, prompting him to contemplate the distance travelled from “17/10/32” (his date of birth) to “17/10/80.” On another level, Stead may be suggesting that it feels as if it takes ‘half a lifetime’ to get from London to Dover, and then another half to get from Boulogne to Paris. This interpretation could explain why the poet splits the grid at twenty-four (exactly half his age). In addition to Stead’s age and reactions, this cryptic section also describes the journey, step by step: from “London” to “Charing Cross” on the Underground; then on to “Dover” by train and across to “Boulogne” by ferry; then to “Paris” and onto a station at the Metro (the Parisian Underground) where he takes the famous “Paris-Nord” line.

Stead begins the next section in “Paris,” and helps to illuminate the diagram by quoting Jean Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr McKenzie*:

‘He was forty-eight years old.  
 ‘Paris had attracted him as a magnet does a  
 needle . . .  
 ‘He hid behind a rather deliberately absent-  
 minded expression. Once, in his youth, he had  
 published a small book of poems. [ . . . ]  
 ‘Mr McKenzie’s code, philosophy, or habit of  
 mind would have been a complete protection to  
 him had it not been for some kink in his nature—  
 that volume of youthful poems perhaps still  
 influencing him—which morbidly attracted him  
 to strangeness, recklessness, even unhappiness.’

By itself, this quotation describes a character called “Mr McKenzie.” However, by placing this quote after the diagram, Stead reveals a surprising amount of synchronicity between his narrative and that of Rhys. Both texts describe a poet who “was forty-eight years old,” and feels “attracted” to Paris. Mr McKenzie also feels “attracted . . . to strangeness, recklessness, even unhappiness.” Stead’s journey involves similar emotions, as he explains in the “Craft Interview”:

‘Yes T.S.’, incidentally, is a good example of a poem that turns strong feeling—mainly loneliness and depression—into wit, but without (I hope) in any way burying the original emotion. (460)

One aspect of this “wit” might be understood in Stead’s implication that, like Mr McKenzie, he sometimes adopts the mask of an “absent-minded expression” (an expression often jokingly associated with professors). This kind of witty intertextuality constitutes a self-sufficient game, but it also provides some assistance for readers who find the diagram too opaque. Stead therefore combines modernist allusions with elements of a postmodern surface, and allows the two techniques to work together side by side.

In addition to the ‘train ticket’ diagram, another part of the “London” section approaches concrete poetry:

Today

no one has spoken to me  
 no one has spoken  
 no one has  
 no one  
 no

Doyle sees a “kind of ‘concreteness’” (474) in the shape of this poem, as narrator and narrative slowly disappear into the margin. In this context, the final line constitutes both a visual fade-out and a vocal protest—“no”—a protest that gains in pathos because it goes unheard. The poet adds to this effect by not placing a period at the end of the section, so that the final “no” falls away into space, and nothing breaks its fall. As in the train ticket—and the “Menton” section—Stead tries to combine loneliness and wit without sacrificing either impulse.

So, “Yes T.S.” constitutes a modernist long poem—with accretion, allusion, musical scoring and the juxtaposition of open-ended fragments—but it also contains the occasional realist lyric. Moreover, the poet embraces certain aspects of postmodern experimentation, such as linguistic word games, diagrams and concrete poetry. Another postmodern form enters in the shape of the double margin:

This syntax  
                   as in the sand  
 mix  
                   of a Braque  
 surface  
                   won't let the  
 eye  
 not lightly  
                   slide  
 over. (33-34)

Stead uses the double margin to prevent “the eye” from ‘sliding over’ the words of the poem. K.O. Arvidson analyses this technique in his review of *Geographies*:

the eye is guided not from line to line, but from perception-point to perception-point, and the rhythms of the poetry are located not in stress patterns or syntactical units so much as in eye movements and the relative perceptual densities of the points. That, at any rate, is as near as I can get to describing the sensation this non-linear kind of verse gives rise to. It is not kinaesthetic, but is I think a pragmatic stimulus for the states of curiosity the language itself carries. (40)

This “non-linear kind of verse” marks an extension of Stead’s ‘musical scoring,’ a new way of arresting the reader’s eye and guiding it through the poem.

Another aspect of postmodernism in “Yes T.S.” might be Stead’s use of popular culture. These references to pop culture seem infrequent compared with those of a writer—such as Ian Wedde—who has more fully embraced the techniques of postmodernism. Mark Williams points out this difference when he compares “Yes T.S.” to Wedde’s 1986 novel *Symmes Hole* in *Leaving the Highway* (1990):

Wedde’s debts are not predominantly high-cultural, as Stead’s are. Wedde draws on comics, pop songs, advertising, the classics, contemporary literature—everything imaginable. (158)

I agree with Williams that Stead’s debts in “Yes T.S.”—as in most of his work—seem “predominantly high-cultural.” However, one might argue that the poem also makes an effort to include “everything imaginable.”

Stead, for example, draws on “pop songs,” from the punk rock of “London Calling” (28-29) to the Music Hall strains of “the hot-plate / whistling / ‘aint we got . . .” (31). He inserts clippings from newspapers (27), and he remembers the “advertising” for “a long-ago tobacco / that was also a racehorse / Desert Gold” (28). Stead also incorporates the language of popular cinema, punning on “Childhood’s / iron-crossed / ach-tongued / movies” and comparing them to “history’s / hard porn” (49). The poet even tries to emulate the jaunty phrasings of a Fred Astaire song and dance number, writing a “*Song*” that simultaneously parodies and celebrates the genre (31-32). Moreover, in contrast to Williams’s ‘high-culture,’ Stead includes the so-called ‘low-brow’ sports of racing (“Desert Gold”) and boxing (“the fight / Sugar Ray won”); he even quotes a sign from a toilet wall (46). All these elements of pop culture—songs, sports and films, as well as the language of newspapers, advertising and other ‘found’ material—weave in and out of Stead’s allusions to “the classics” and “contemporary literature.” Thus, Stead’s writing may not be as postmodernly inclusive as Wedde’s, but it does not seem to be as exclusive as Williams implies.

However, Williams further argues that even where Stead does refer to pop culture, he de-emphasizes its importance by formally holding it “at a distance”:

Stead introduces the refrain of a song by The Clash in ‘Yes T.S.’, but the quotation is *placed* in the work, as the passage from ‘Mrs Porter and her Daughter’ is placed in *The Waste Land*. It is held at a distance by the high-cultural context into which it is inserted. Stead’s poem, like Eliot’s, implies a hierarchy of traditional sources in which the echoes from the great tradition of Europe are superior to those of popular songs. Snatches of pop songs from the sixties, abstruse references to *Moby Dick*, records of oral cultural forms, historical material—all these cohabit in Wedde’s texts in a democratic, if not entirely harmonious, fashion. (158)

Williams asserts that Eliot’s and Stead’s poems both take an autocratic and hierarchical shape, while Wedde’s intertextuality feels somehow more “democratic” in its placement of material. I agree that *The Waste Land* creates a hierarchical structure: Eliot makes the obscene Australian ballad about Mrs Porter’s brothel stick out like a bruise by placing it just after quotations from Spenser’s “Prothalamion,” Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and just before Verlaine’s ecstatic lines about Parsifal (the purest of the Grail Knights).

It seems more difficult, though, to deduce any kind of “hierarchy” from Stead’s poem—particularly the section that alludes to The Clash:

Yes t.s.		
		it’s
(it is)		
still		
	whirling away	
	a world	
	it’s London	
calling		
the Clash	/	dreadlocks
toilets		
	(and thanks	
for the anagram		
	to Rosie Allpress)	
		flush
(t.s.)		
	aux etoiles.	

On a purely visual level, this section offers a multitude of possible combinations. The shift from margin to margin invites readers to take each sound or image one by one, and then to

slowly piece them together, at last forming a subjective whole. These carefully spaced approximations allow each reader to imaginatively group them in his or her own way. For example, the placement of “London” makes it “a world” in itself, “still / whirling away,” but then—looking across (and back) over the line break—“it’s London / calling.” This phrase can call up wartime radio broadcasts, or the song by The Clash, or it might simply be read as the physical and emotional pull that large urban capitals can exert.

The words may be grouped in a number of ways but, as in a piece of music, the silences also come alive with possibilities. A diagonal gap, for instance, allows readers to see, hear and feel the space between the stillness and the “whirling.” Then, from another perspective, a large vertical gap embodies the sound of someone “still . . . calling” over a long distance. Like the narrator throughout the “London” section, the reader will sometimes be faced with a loud “Clash” and sometimes with an awful “silence.” There will be telexes, long-distance phone calls, “next door’s cough-storm,” singing kettles, nightingales, cocks crowing, taxis, jet planes, “voices / off the flat fronts,” rock music, pianos and violins; but there will also be silence “at the well’s edge,” voiceless patients like “Beate” facing the terrors of heart surgery, and long nights of writing, alone under the desk lamp’s “circle of light”:

Silent (it is)	
at the edge of the	the circle
square. (33)	silent

This muted “(it is)” echoes the silence with its parenthesised sibilant, but it also echoes and casts the reader back to the “(it is) / still” of the opening section.

So, aurally and visually, this poem stretches the limits of communication. Readers hear the conversation between the narrator and a ghostly T.S. Eliot—“Yes t.s. / it’s / (it is) / still / whirling away”—but they also see the opposition of images due to the elaborate layout:

still	
	whirling

Some readers might also hear an allusion to Eliot's poetry, with visual and conceptual echoes of *Ash-Wednesday* (part V):

. . . the unstilled world still whirled  
 About the centre of the silent Word. . . .  
 Where shall the word be found, where will the word  
 Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence

Stead employs Eliot's paradoxical image of a "still / whirling" world, but he puts a visceral twist on the image—"toilets" also whirl about a still centre.

Flush against this image, Stead places a phrase that emphasizes the narrator's view of London: "it's . . . away / a world"—a world in itself, but also 'a world away' from family, friends and home. On top of this reality, Stead adds a postmodern reference to pop culture circa 1979. At the end of that year, a punk rock band from "London" called "the Clash" (who also made use of the "dreadlock" rhythms of reggae) released an apocalyptic single entitled "London Calling." That song ends in the following way:

the ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in  
 engines stop running, the wheat is growing thin  
 a nuclear error but I have no fear  
 cos London is drowning and I live by the river . . .

London calling at the top of the dial  
 an' after all this, won't you give me a smile?

I never felt so much a' like . . . [fade out to the morse code of 'S.O.S.']

Stead incorporates the atmosphere of this song into his poem, just as he incorporates the atmosphere of *Ash-Wednesday*. Then he uses the oblique stroke—another postmodern signature—to stop the reader's eye and force it to consider "the Clash": why the word has been capitalized, how it connects back to "London / calling," and how it might link forward to "dreadlocks" and "toilets." The stroke also enacts a visual "Clash," even as it paradoxically forms a visually "still" centre about which the words of this section whirl.

Then, at “toilets,” the reader sees the whole lot go rushing down the drain, as Eliot did (“Unreal City”) and as The Clash did (“London is drowning”). London, dreadlocks and even Stead himself may one day go “whirling” around the bowl, with a flushing that may sound something like “(t.s.)” This isolated and bracketed “(t.s.)” forms a spatial and grammatical transformation of its vertical counterpart: “(it is).” Things seem to be contracting and disappearing as the poem nears its ambiguous end. Horizontally, the “(t.s.)” forms a visual and conceptual gap between the “flush” that connotes expulsion and waste, and yet somehow leads on ‘to the stars’ (“aux étoiles”). Thus, grouped around a final “t.s.” comes a juxtaposition of disappearing earthly matter and the eternal shining of the stars.

However, the whole section also involves a series of postmodern games. At the beginning, Stead plays a visual game with consonants: nine out of the first fourteen letters are “t” or “s.” In a similar fashion, he rhymes his own initials at the end of “dreadlocks” and “thanks.” Furthermore, “dreadlocks” refers to a hairstyle (a visual opposite for the “skin’eads” of the next section), but it also jokes about a “dread” of being locked in the “toilets.” The poet then plays a witty word game that changes the apocalyptic tone even as it concludes the apocalyptic ideas: “toilets” is an anagram for “T.S. Eliot.”

The game does not end there. Stead’s allusion to “Rosie Allpress” constitutes a reference to a contemporary New Zealand poet, Rosemary Allpress, who published a poem in 1980 called “Anagram”:

look t.s. eliot  
 the world will renew  
 itself—  
 toilets  
 flush  
 aux étoiles (Paterson, *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets* 4)

Stead inserts the visual and aural pause of “(t.s.)” into the middle of Allpress’s final three lines. He also uses brackets to source his quotation, in an informal, colloquial way: a method quite foreign to the high modernist stance of standing aloof from the art object.

So the Clash lyrics appear beside an allusion to Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*. They also appear beside “dreadlocks,” “toilets” and a quotation from “Rosie Allpress,” as well as a variety of linguistic jokes. Among the latter, Eliot gets transformed into a toilet, his first two initials sound like a “flush,” and ‘the stars’ beckon ambiguously. Which in this mixture (that, like a Braque surface, “won’t let the / eye / not lightly / slide / over”) does Stead privilege? None of these elements sound so emphatically like the ‘odd one out’ as the Mrs Porter ballad does in *The Waste Land*. They all seem to whirl together, hitting the eye as London does the eye of the visitor: everything, all at once, a “whirling” mass of diverse stimuli.

Stead’s “placements” in “Yes T.S.” rarely seem to be as autocratic and hierarchical as those of Eliot. For example, in the stopover between Singapore and London—at “an Arab airport”—he describes the contrasting movement of the sun:

We ‘pause for breath’  
‘take on fuel’  
(or whatever)  
and still he comes.  
  
His chariots inflame  
the dark cusp  
of the world.

This description involves a classical allusion in the manner of Eliot, with its mythical casting of the sun as a chariot led by fiery horses. As he muses on this image, however, the narrator’s mind takes him to a memory of another fiery steed:

half close  
over the marvel of it  
an inward concert  
bugles trumpets remembering

Eyelids  
attending  
horns

a long-ago tobacco  
that was also a racehorse:  
Desert Gold.

Apollo and a racehorse; a “concert” and a tobacco advertisement—all these things mingle in the narrative, and there does not seem to be any particular “hierarchy” to their placement. One might expect the juxtaposition of Phoebus and a New Zealand racehorse to result in humorous parody, but the narrator’s memory of a the “long-ago” days of tobacco and racehorses seems to be a fond one. He associates “Desert Gold” with the “inward concert” just as much as he does the sunset. Stead’s juxtaposition of classical references and popular culture seems more “democratic” than the “hierarchy” that Williams described in Eliot’s verse.

Of course, connections do exist between the modernist poetry of Eliot and the modernist poetry of Stead. However, connections can also be made between the postmodernist techniques of Wedde and the postmodernist techniques of Stead. The demarcation that Williams draws up in *Leaving the Highway* points towards a balance in Stead’s work that leans towards modernism, but it does not sufficiently account for Stead’s use of postmodernism. Stead’s placement of postmodern elements into “Yes T.S.” does not appear to leave them “at a distance”; rather, he incorporates them into a whirling mixture of radioactive fragments. Those fragments interact and illuminate each other, instead of establishing a binary where one set of references feels “superior.”

In addition to the double margin and references to pop culture, Stead incorporates other aspects of postmodern experimentation into “Yes T.S.” For example, he uses the technique of the ‘found poem,’ quoting obituaries verbatim from the “Straits Times” in Singapore (including grammatical errors, Chinese script and different font sizes), and reproducing the “Notices in the Lavatory” of the “Hotel Richelieu” (complete with thumbtack and frame). He also employs the postmodern technique of phonetic spelling, but not on a regular basis.



the 'real' situation that underlies the game. The narrator—tired, lonely and stranded in a London flat—would love a cup of tea:

to know the  
beauty of the Beverage  
    you must be deprived  
    of the means to make it. (29)

Stead therefore uses his own name to explain what “the Beverage” was on the previous page. If the name had not been emboldened by large capitals, readers might have missed the pun, so well does it fit the situation. In this way, a self-conscious embellishment on the surface adds to, but never dominates, the poem as a whole. Stead tries to maintain a “shared world” with the reader, without letting “invention supersede perception” (*GC* 154).

Stead's typographical experiments sometimes depart from the double margin:

‘The pianist runs  
                    on  
                    the  
                    spot.  
                    Also on batteries. (34)

As one can see from this section, Stead shifts his margins whenever the content seems to justify a change in shape. All of these developments, but particularly the latter, might remind one of Stead's analysis (in “From Wystan to Carlos”) of the changes in Curnow's poetry:

A man's career can illustrate literary history without his being aware of it. . . . When he reappeared in 1972 his poetry had—I would say had of necessity—assumed at least some of the features I've suggested in this lecture are the features of Modernism. And perhaps the most interesting point for my purposes is to recognize that of all the poems in his recent books, the longest, 'Moro Assassinato', is the freest, the most open in form. . . . (155)

Stead asserts here, as he does later of Baxter and Smithyman, that it is impossible for poets to write and not be aware of the developments around them. Aspects of those developments that appear in their own work—whether deliberately 'plundered' or unconsciously absorbed—can reveal the poets's openness to other modes. This openness can help to explain changes in a poet's practice, such as Curnow's movement towards a more open form in the 1970s.

An example of this development that Stead pointed to in *Trees, Effigies, Moving Objects* (1972), provides an intriguing parallel to the “pianist” sequence in “Yes T.S.”:

Make it what height you like, the  
sky will not fall nor will the dead  
president rise because of his

O  
B  
E  
L  
I  
S  
K

Stead appeared fairly convinced, despite Curnow's denial, that some influence of the magazine *Freed* might be asserted as one source of this change in form (GC 284).

That Stead's own form has opened out over the years seems in part a debt to the risks taken by postmodern poets. Stead's modernist beginnings resulted in “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea,” which he put into a relatively strict form: seven sections in carefully spaced verse, close together, breaking the odd line up, but never attempting the kaleidoscope of forms that one can see in “Yes T.S.” The stylistic gap between the two poems can be at least partially explained by postmodern developments. Verbal and visual games, diagrams and concrete poetry, the double margin, references to pop culture, ‘found’ poetry, phonetic spelling and typographical experiments—all seem to tip the balance towards postmodernist influences. The very argument that revealed modernism in Curnow's work could point to postmodernism in Stead's work. Like Curnow, Stead has been encouraged to experiment by what has been going on around him—even though the poet himself might deny that influence, and even offer prescriptions against it.

### c) Shorter Poems.

So, where “Scoria” generally follows Stead's modernist prescriptions, “Yes T.S.” swings towards a mixture of modes. In spite of “From Wystan to Carlos,” this poem contains postmodern experimentalism and inclusion, and more so than any of Stead's previous works.





Fall.” In this context, the “insurance salesmen” seem almost Satanic, slipping into the garden and corrupting an idyllic state of affairs.

These details explain Stead’s attitude towards “the days of our youth,” and they also help to illuminate an earlier reference (in sonnet 5) to life on “the North Shore harbour / Before the Fall.” A similar scene appears in *All Visitors Ashore*, when Stead describes Auckland in 1951:

There is talk of a harbour bridge and of taller buildings in Queen Street and of new methods with cargo and of huge airliners and airfreight but this is only the first year of the second half of the twentieth century—all that is to come and meanwhile Auckland still looks like a South Seas port with a predominance of wooden buildings and wooden wharf piles. (22)

Two prows each with a lantern, two wheelhouses, two screws, front and rear, two decks, upper and lower, all wood, grinding now against the wooden piles because the skipper hasn’t made his run quite straight. This is the ferry *Toroa*, over from Northcote. . . . And these are the thick ropes creaking and slipping and tightening around the bollards. . . . Now the North Shore passengers are all ashore. . . .

It is a quick turnaround . . . ropes unwind, bosun’s whistle blasts, pistons move, screw that drove draws, screw that drew drives.

This rusted hull they are running the length of is a cargo ship over which wharf cranes hang idle in darkness, and now they are past it and this is open harbour reflecting the still night and wharf lights in straggling lines across its surface. (26-27)

Many of the same words and details appear: “a harbour bridge,” “wharf piles,” “grinding,” “the ferry “*Toroa*,” “the bollards” from which “ropes unwind,” the “open harbour,” “the still night and the wharf lights.” In this case, though, Stead makes no explicit moral judgement on the scene that he describes. In comparison with these prose extracts (and the North Shore sonnet), the morally conclusive Catullus poem seems much closer to the mode and conventions of New Zealand realism.

One might argue that this swing towards realism simply reflects Stead’s adoption of a Catullus-like persona and approach. However, the “At Home” section that concludes *Geographies* also contains several elements of realism. For example, in this part of the book, Stead returns to preset form and stanza structure. Each of the six poems contains a series of four line stanzas, all with roughly the same line length: never exceeding tetrameter and never

less than trimeter. In addition to this preset structure, Stead also uses the three-part realist format in a number of the poems.

The poem written for Frank Sargeson, for instance—"A Warm Wind From the East"—begins with a character sketch of "Our friend the novelist seventy- / eight next week." The poet then moves through a reminiscence of life "on Takapuna Beach . . . twenty-five years ago," and then offers his conclusion:

Well that's  
over and everything like a novel  
has a beginning a middle and an  
  
end except that novels like  
life go on repeating themselves  
long after the garden's gone back  
to wilderness the house to ruin  
  
the old man to dust and his last  
green sheet has flown off into  
the sagging hedge on the broad back  
of a wind that blows from the east. (78)

Not all the poems in the final section follow this structure, however, and Stead generally tries to avoid explicit conclusions.

Nonetheless, while he may not round them all off with a clear moral, these poems do mark a movement away from the presentative method and towards a poetry of statement. For example, "A Poem called 'The Weather in Tohunga Crescent' (for Allen Curnow)" simply ends with an image:

The cat's asleep  
under the ti-tree's flick-  
knives our distinguished neighbour's  
retyping a poem called 'The Weather  
  
in Tohunga Crescent' and the weather's  
keeping its own countenance in  
the glass of a bay that's for the  
moment just as blue as the sky. (76)

No explicit conclusion here, but just before this image Stead makes a series of clear, realist pronouncements:

Someone who doesn't  
think beauty should happen by chance  
has burned the toi toi to make  
a little beach where the road ends

but there are no visitors except  
the tide twice daily making its  
own broad way over the  
mudflats. Tohunga Crescent

you could say begins in the  
mangroves and goes on up to the  
stars a euphemism for last  
night's breathlessness or just

an acknowledgement that here  
we're born we die not without  
effort but as the tides and seasons  
come and go (can't we say?)

'naturally'. (76)

Stead sides with people who "think beauty should happen by chance," and asks the reader to acknowledge "(can't we say?)" that the 'natural' washes over—and eventually washes away—any work that depends solely on "effort" and the will. One might argue that in this poem, Stead follows a realist structure, and then tacks an image on at the end as if to say 'well, I'm not really drawing an explicit conclusion.'

This technique occurs in a number of Stead's later poems, and not only in *Geographies*. Dennis McEldowney, in his review of *Between* (1988), saw a similar tendency in "the title piece":

Stead renounces the kind of poem which 'has a subject and works its way towards a statement'. . . . Yet the title piece of this volume, 'Between', is precisely a poem of that type. Well, perhaps not precisely; the technique has been varied with a dying fall:

The cat has come to rest  
on my lap and my ears are growing out  
like vines into the spaces of silence beyond the pear  
tree in blossom between the dark houses.

But the statement which precedes this is direct enough:

I know how  
 Passion always gets a good press and why it should be so  
 but have you ever thought of Reason as  
 the neglected child of our time? (105)

One can see here a return to the kind of poetry that dominates Stead's early career, in which he employs capitalized abstractions ("Passion," "Reason") and explains to the reader what he has come to "know." The parallels with the "Tohunga Crescent" poem also seem clear: Stead ends both works with an image of his sleeping cat and sounds of the neighbourhood, but precedes these images with a series of "direct" statements.

These kinds of realist judgements run in a seam through the poems at the end of *Geographies*, as in "St Francis at Karekare." Here the poet casts himself as a droll Kiwi version of the Saint who loved animals, teaching two opossums to "trust" him, and feeding them by hand on his "verandah." In this poem Stead returns to political commentary, summarising the characters of two New Zealand politicians before feeding them to the 'possums:

Here I  
 tell them are our political  
 leaders and I name that cheek-  
 scarred Caesar and his lame  
 well-meaning rival (83)

The "cheek- / scarred Caesar" must be Robert Muldoon, the National Prime Minister who came into power shortly after the death of Norman Kirk. Stead had already attacked this politician in the poem that opened *Walking Westward*:

Caesar is still Caesar  
 even if he breakfasts on turds  
 before a speech in the House. . . .

Is it Caesar's cheek-scar you lust after . . . ? (PD 34)

Muldoon had a scar on one cheek that twisted his face into a permanent sneer, a sneer that often seemed to match his sarcastic, energetic, and autocratic style of government. He also

had a “well-meaning rival” in Wallace (‘Bill’) Rowling, the soft-spoken leader of the Labour Party opposition through most of the 1970s and into the 1980s. In “Saint Francis,” Stead’s carefully placed line breaks emphasize what he sees as the dominant characteristics of these two figures: Rowling’s “lame” anti-charisma and Muldoon’s sheer “cheek.”

Some political cartoonists of the period saw an Orwellian parallel in *Animal Farm*, drawing Muldoon as a pig and Rowling as a mouse. Like these satirists, Stead seems to say that in their own ways “our political / / leaders” may be equally bad. He places them “together”—like “Sin and / Death” and “my worst / critics”—and destroys them both:

’possum fingers apply them to

’possum teeth and down they go  
inch by inch together with  
Sin and Death. Enough I think  
but those pink twitching noses

tempt saintly excess so again  
it’s back to the breadboard a slice  
each to represent my worst  
critics (83-84)

Like most saints, this ‘Francis’ tries to rid the world of all that he views as ‘wrong.’ Thus, this poem involves a series of statements about what the narrator sees as the “worst” of life. In “St Francis at Karekare,” Stead returns to the kind of explicit moral judgements that mark his earlier, realist works.

Michele Leggott ‘suspects’ that Stead had a clear ‘intention’ in writing *Geographies*: “The book is his play against mean-spirited reception” (157). Whether or not the whole volume can be read in this way, “St Francis at Karekare” certainly seems amenable to such an interpretation. In that poem Stead actually names his enemies (in allegorical form), and dismisses them as “half-men”:

I name two mean-

spirited half-men who write  
under the by-lines of Style

and Content. Fingers shut tooth-  
machines click into action

I see the critics slowly  
chattered away (84)

This whimsical allegory masks a realist attack on what Stead sees as “mean- / spirited” ways of writing. Like Maurice Gee’s *The Half Men of O* (1982), Stead’s “worst critics” lack an essential element: in separating “Style” and “Content,” they separate themselves.

Here, Stead employs again the capitalized abstractions (Sin and Death, Style and Content) and the explicit moral judgements (“worst,” “mean-spirited”) that characterized his poetry in the early 1950s. However, as he does in “A Poem called ‘The Weather in Tohunga Crescent’” (and “Between”), Stead ends the poem with an ambiguous image:

I see the critics slowly  
chattered away and still the big  
round moon-reflecting eyes are  
clear and perfectly neutral. (84)

The poet does not explain why the ‘possums’s eyes might be “clear and perfectly neutral,” nor does he explain why they “still” seem to hunger for more. Perhaps Stead implies that the content of their diet (spiritual problems, political issues and literary aesthetics) may be intrinsically unsatisfying; or he could be implying that there will always be “more of the same,” and that the topics have a continuing (if morbid) fascination. So while Stead tries to avoid conventional realism—especially in not allowing “the concluding line to shut the gate on the experience which is the occasion of the poem” (*GC* 150)—the poems that close *Geographies* take on at least some of the aspects of that mode.

Thus the first book of poems that Stead produced after “From Wytan to Carlos” does not seem to mark a move towards purism. Rather than rigidly applying the principles of that essay, Stead appears to carry on much where he left off in *Walking Westward*—experimenting with a mixture of modes. One can see this mixture throughout *Geographies*, particularly in the longest poem of the book (and of Stead’s career to date) “Yes T.S.” Modernism usually

dominates within this mixture, but the balance does vary. For example, after the relatively purist modernism of “Scoria,” “Yes T.S.” marks a swing towards postmodernism, while the shorter poems that conclude *Geographies* mark a swing towards realism. Both movements seem surprising, coming as they do after the critical prescriptions that Stead laid out “for myself” in “From Wystan to Carlos” (GC 158).

#### 4. Stead’s 1983 Retraction.

Three years after “From Wystan to Carlos”—and one year after the publication of *Geographies*—Stead expressed some concern regarding his “negative feelings about . . . ‘post-Modernism’” (GC 159). This concern surfaced in the “Craft Interview” (1983), where Stead touched upon the idea of not being bound by prescriptions, even his own. When questioned by Michael Harlow about his “dismissive” approach to the postmodern in 1979, Stead explained that by 1983 he had ‘shifted his ground’:

I think I might have shifted my ground slightly on this point and I have a feeling that what I did say about it was fairly brief and in passing—it might even have been in a footnote. If I have shifted my ground it’s perhaps partly from having come into contact with some examples of European surrealism when I went to an international poetry festival in Toronto in 1981. (464)<sup>10</sup>

Stead’s comments here reveal some regret about his “brief” dismissal of postmodernism in the postscript to “From Wystan to Carlos,” and might even amount to a retraction of—or at least an adjustment to—that 1979 rejection.

Stead amplifies this stance by asserting an openness to various postmodern influences:

I saw new possibilities in their poetry—surrealist elements of a kind I hadn’t really seen in English language poetry, although no doubt there are examples. That influenced my thinking about surrealism. It’s still true that in some basic sense I’m a product of the New Zealand realist tradition. I inherit that tradition and it’s indelibly part of me. But I do delight in language, in verbal play, and I would like there to be

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<sup>10</sup>The European poets that Stead names in the “Craft Interview” are as follows: “Miroslav Holub from Czechoslovakia. . . . Hans ten Berge from Holland, Horst Bienek from Germany, Henri Mecshonnic from France, and a number of others” (464). Also at the festival, and cited by Stead in an article called “The Swarm of Human Speech?” (1983), were Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Henry Beissel (AL 113) and John Montague (AL 117).

more room for it than there is in the tradition I've grown up in. I feel some of my own poetry has been moving more in that direction. (464)

While the tradition he works in may be primarily modernist, Stead allows that modernism in itself might not be enough to explain the range of his "own poetry." The "New Zealand realist tradition" still seems important to him, and he wants there to be "more room for" elements of postmodernism as well.

Stead's 1983 retraction essentially relaxes the rigid stance he took in 1979. He retains some of the terminology used in "From Wylan to Carlos" by talking about a "balance" between subjective and objective—but the similarity ends there. That balance was Stead's main "preference" in 1979, whereas in 1983 he stresses the importance of room to move, leeway for the balance to tip either way as the occasion merits. Stead still retains the word "boring" to describe a complete tip into postmodernism, but this time he does not discount its use in combination with other traditions. That Stead thinks the same way about postmodernism in fiction can be inferred from his generalising about "literature" and not just "poetry":

In my own mind I still make an antithesis between the world 'out there' and the world 'in here'. . . . In the ordinary sense we know what we mean by subjective and objective; and I still tend to think as a generalisation that the best literature is a meeting somewhere pretty much in the middle between those two extremes. (464)

Stead sets up the "balance" here. He then re-states what he thought in "From Wylan to Carlos" about pure realism and pure postmodernism:

An objective account of reality which has no colouration of the mind that's perceiving it, is dull. Or it's science. Conversely, I think to be buried inside the individual sensibility with little knowledge or sense of what's going on outside it—a social context, a physical context—is very quickly boring or exhausting. (464-65)

Immediately following these statements, however, Stead relaxes his hardline stance:

But that's a very general statement. I like room for poets to manoeuvre, and therefore I don't really want to dismiss a surrealist element and say that it's unimportant. I don't think it is unimportant. (465)

Stead's thinking about postmodern techniques had changed since 1979, when he asserted that "I find the surrealist strand . . . the least satisfactory" (154). By 1983 he had seen the possibilities of using elements of postmodernism in combination with other modes. He even gives an example in the poetry of Frank O'Hara. On the one hand, Stead despises what he calls O'Hara's "long surrealist raves," because they represent pure postmodernism; on the other hand, though, Stead finds certain aspects of postmodernism "very very ingratiating" if they overlay a "realist" base:

where Frank O'Hara, say in his New York poems, walks out and buys himself a hamburger and a coke, and listens to a record, and does this, and does that—you know exactly where he is. In one sense he's just as much a realist as say Gary Snyder is in Piute Valley or wherever it may be. But there are all these wild and witty surrealist elements coming into the O'Hara poem at the same time that it's so thoroughly grounded in New York; and that sort of middle ground I find very very ingratiating. (465)

This kind of approach leaves "room for poets to manoeuvre." In his own poetry, Stead incorporates a seam of realism into his modernist practice. By adding a surface of postmodernist elements, as he does in "Yes T.S.," he creates an innovative, three-way "middle ground."

Taking a purist approach to this kind of poetry, therefore, would produce a series of inaccuracies. Examining Stead's poetry in the context of only one tradition—pure realism, pure modernism or pure postmodernism—will no longer work. Even his own "From Wystan to Carlos" has become inaccurate in the way that it prescribes a purely modernist poetic for himself. Michael Harlow touches upon this sort of purism when he questions Stead about the "critical climate" in New Zealand. Harlow found the anti-postmodernism in some critical articles "disturbing":

*MH There seems to be an attitude, a critical attitude (and this may in fact say something about the area of criticism in New Zealand) which says 'Oh yes, obscure or fantasizing—i.e. surrealist and not serious. There seems to be this critical climate, or there has been.*

*CKS Well, I think what I'm saying is that I'm a product of that climate but I hope I have some sense of expanding my consciousness beyond it. (465)*

Stead's response to Harlow's suggestion reflects the direction his poetry had taken, as well as his approach to criticism and his attitudes towards literature as a whole by 1983.

This 'shift in ground' can be seen in other works of criticism that Stead published after 1983, and not just in relation to postmodernism. For example, when Stead first published "What Became of Modernism" in 1980, that review articulated his purist rejection of realism (as represented by modern English poetry) in favour of modernism (as represented by modern American poetry):

insofar as it's possible to abstract 'the modern English poem' and 'the modern American poem', the former seems to someone with no axe to grind (I mean myself) less spacious, less athletic, less inventive, less stylish, less magical than the latter. (*AL* 108)

This rejection of realism presents the mode as having "less" of everything, effectively marginalizing any poet that employs its techniques. However, when Stead edited this review for republication in his 1989 collection *Answering to the Language*, he added a footnote to this sentence that adjusts (and implicitly criticizes) its purist stance: "What seemed so clear to me in 1980 no longer seems so in 1989" (108).

A similar kind of adjustment takes place in Stead's 1991 "Conversation" with Fleur Adcock. He raises the topic of "From Wystan to Carlos," and the laying out of critical "prescriptions":

Coming back to the question of form, it would be interesting if we could talk a little bit more about this. We don't have adequate terms, but let's for the moment talk about closed and open forms. I have never felt prescriptive on this issue, particularly because I wouldn't want to be prescribed to. (48)

After this caveat, Stead proceeds to defend his use of the "closed forms" of realism in his own latest volume of poetry, *Voices* (1990):

what I'm doing is acknowledging that though I have experimented in the other way—and there are very good reasons for that which I could also go into but I had better give you a turn—I don't want either possibility to be closed off, I don't see why anybody would want either possibility to be closed off. (49)

This kind of approach reflects Stead's desire to move "beyond" the critical climate of purism that he himself had helped to foster. After arguing so long against both realism and postmodernism, Stead tries in some of his more recent criticism to allow more "room for poets to manoeuvre." This shift to a more inclusive criticism can be seen mirrored in his practice—both as a poet and a novelist—throughout the 1980s.

## CHAPTER VII. FICTION: A PARALLEL MIXTURE OF MODES.

“... I don't mean to imply that the old realist tradition in fiction seems to me good enough for all purposes. It doesn't—and in the fiction-writing I have done I have found myself again and again driven beyond it.”

—C.K. Stead, “A New New Zealand Fiction?” (1986) *AL* 238

### 1. Critical Responses to Stead's Use of Postmodern Techniques.

In the 1980s, Stead incorporated postmodern techniques more frequently, not only in his poetry but in his fiction as well. In both areas, his method of selective ‘picking and stealing’ upsets purist postmodernists. In regards to poetry, Alan Loney—whom Mark Williams once described as “a somewhat messianic New Zealand postmodernist” (“T.S. Eliot” 149)—sees Stead as an obstacle to the implementation of his ‘religion.’ As Stead remarked in an interview with Harry Ricketts, Loney views and presents him as “just getting in the way”:

that cult aspect of American poetry irritates me to be perfectly honest: this feeling of ‘We know better, we're one stage ahead of you.’ It's like Alan Loney saying in an interview recently that Stead was ‘cluttering up the fast track’. And what this was supposed to mean was that they were all really going faster, but I was pretending to be on the same track and I was just getting in the way. (Ricketts 111-12)

From Loney's perspective, Stead is “cluttering up the fast track” by taking elements of postmodernism but not using them to the extent that a purist such as Loney or Brunton or Davis might do.

Loney's “fast track” metaphor probably derives from Roger Horrocks's response to “From Wylan to Carlos” in “Off the Map.” In this article, Horrocks argues that postmodernism represents the “advanced position” in New Zealand poetry:

it is time that Stead's ‘open form’ ceased to be thought of as an advanced position, as ‘the new mode’. Certainly there are still readers who regard *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* as their bible, or who wish that Stead spent more time with British poets and stopped hanging out with American punks. Still, the position described in “From Wylan to Carlos” is smack in the middle of the road, and it's taking up so much room it blocks the fast lanes. (248)

Like Loney, Horrocks wants to move Stead off “the road.” Horrocks sees “the fast lanes” as encompassing a variety of postmodern practice, from language poetry to surrealism, and he complains that “writers whose work seems heavily ‘surrealist’ still receive little support. Michael Harlow and Russell Haley, for example, have received more than their fair share of uninformed reviews” (254). While Horrocks criticizes Stead for “measuring” different modes of poetry (250), he concludes with some measuring of his own: “Stead’s essay . . . has helped a great deal to bring certain questions into focus. But the most interesting places to visit right now lie outside his map” (255). From Horrocks’s point of view, postmodern poets are “the most interesting,” so writers such as Stead ought to move aside and let the ‘real’ avant garde take their rightful position.

Stead’s work in fiction provokes a similar response. His combination of modes in *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) upset Wystan Curnow, whose critical stance on fiction seems more insistently avant garde than does that of his poetry criticism. Indeed, Curnow’s “Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles” (1985) represents something of a fiction equivalent to Horrocks’s “Off the Map,” in that both writers try to set up postmodernism as an “advanced position.” Curnow wants to cordon off this mode from interlopers who do not meet his ‘qualifications’:

Various critics, among them Alistair Paterson, Michael Morrissey and Francis Pound, have moved a number of New Zealand painters and writers into ‘advanced’ positions for which they do not, in my opinion, qualify. They include some of the people under discussion in this essay. What comes through . . . is a kind of laid back modernism in the work of Wedde, Frizzell and recent Stead. . . . (126)

Here Curnow fences off the ‘fast track’ from certain “people.” Paterson (in his work on open form) and Morrissey (in his introduction to *The New Fiction* and his review of *All Visitors Ashore*) had both called Stead’s work postmodern, and Wystan Curnow sees this as an affront. Curnow characterizes postmodernism as ‘advanced,’ the place to be, and in his view Stead does not belong there.

Thus Curnow argues that Stead (and Wedde, and the painter Dick Frizzell) practice not postmodernism but “laid back modernism.” In other words, Curnow criticizes these artists for “making use of” postmodern techniques without committing themselves fully to the mode. For Curnow, criticism becomes a question of motives, of placing people not so much by what they do but by what he thinks they are trying to do. For example, he questions Frizzell’s “use” of postmodernism:

Works incorporating comic book styles and characters have been a standard feature of his output from the beginning of his exhibiting career. Associated with the occasional pastiche of high art, imitation labels, posters, verbal and visual puns, and the dumb ordinariness of much of his subject matter, his use of them formed part of his strong claim to superficiality. But what was he really? (145)

In Curnow’s view, Frizzell might have deserved much—he could have occupied an “advanced position,” but something went horribly wrong:

Frizzell changed his style around 1983. The emergence of the New European painting style saw him switch off his shit-detector and use that style to strengthen his mainstream position. A more personal myth-oriented imagery and handling that is rather *faux naïve*, sincere, has deepened and subverted his previous manner, putting popular culture at a distance. (145)

In other words, Frizzell became just another “laid back modernist,” an intruder who “uses” postmodern techniques for a dastardly purpose: “to strengthen his mainstream position.”

Curnow sounds a little like Brian Jones or Eric Clapton at the end of the 1960s, blues purists who criticized their former bandmates (in the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds respectively) for diluting their styles and selling out to the “mainstream.” But Curnow does not head for the forgetfulness of drugs and a swimming pool (or a new band); he defends his area like a paranoid general fighting—and essentially creating—his own cold war. The “laid back modernists” constitute Curnow’s own ‘red horde,’ the ‘reds under the bed’ who need to be flushed out and exposed for what they are. Hence his title page, featuring a square-jawed gunman bursting through a door and shouting Curnow’s name and title: he has come to shoot it out with the bad guys, to expose and drive out the intruders.

When Curnow comes to deal with *All Visitors Ashore*, he therefore begins by acknowledging that it uses some postmodernist techniques: “Stead’s is a comic book—a giggle and without depth. Relatively speaking” (147). Very quickly, however, he points out and criticizes its modernist elements. To Curnow’s horror, the book contains symbols and even some “depth”:

This ‘is a comic strip world’. . . . But near the end *All Visitors Ashore* shows unfortunate signs of all-out seriousness. The abortion chapter is none too humorous, at the same time Melior’s cartoon series runs dry, the wharfies throw in the towel. And that, the towel, Curl’s towels, these, turn out to be fully-fledged symbols—when it comes to depth there’s nothing like a symbol. (147)

Curnow sees these elements of modernism as “unfortunate.” It turns out that sometimes “Stead is in earnest; the superficiality is a standard sort of cover-up for depth” (147). In Curnow’s view, Stead cannot have it both ways. The presence of postmodernism in his work must necessitate some sort of shady dealing, a “cover-up.”

Curnow does not allow for the possibility that aspects of both modes can exist in the same text, and might even be complementary. Readers can enjoy the surface and the games if they wish, or they can enjoy the depth and the symbols—but they might enjoy both. In a way, Stead offers a treaty and engages in friendly fraternization, where Curnow wants the cold war to go on. From the latter’s perspective, postmodernism is good and modernism is bad; Stead represents modernism, therefore his use of postmodernism is wrong. Curnow extends that argument to critics and reviewers. In his view, Ian Cross (like Michael Morrissey) is “wrong” for seeing *All Visitors Ashore* as postmodern: “*All Visitors Ashore* is not . . . marked for postmodernity. Ian Cross had it wrong when he accused Stead of following Robbe-Grillet’s lead . . .” (148). On the other hand, Curnow asserts, “Michael Gifkins”—who concentrates on the modernist elements of Stead’s novel—“has it more or less right” (148).

Curnow concludes that “For all its lovely ease . . . it is a modernist ego which drives the novel” (148). One cannot disagree with this assertion: Stead has never argued for anything less than the centrality of modernism, not only in his own work, but in twentieth-century

literature as a whole. However, one can disagree with the kind of purism that divides modes of writing along a binary of “right” and “wrong.” In Curnow’s paradigm, aspects of postmodernism will always be “lovely,” while aspects of modernism will always be “unfortunate.”

Lawrence Jones suggests an alternative paradigm. In discussing the books of 1984, in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors: Essays on New Zealand Prose*, he summarizes “the contemporary critical debate” as revolving around “A series of . . . binary oppositions,” including “the opposition of modernism to postmodernism” (282). He also points out that books that contain a mixture of modes—such as *All Visitors Ashore* and *the bone people*—are “being placed on different sides of various divides by different critics. There has been a tendency either to enlist them on one’s own side to show that it is turning up winners or to deconstruct and otherwise disarm them if one sees them as on an opposing side” (283). Jones takes issue with what he calls Curnow’s “more purist definition” (284), and argues that “Stead is distinctly postmodernist” in some of his techniques (290). Jones even suggests that, in Stead’s fiction, “The encompassing element is . . . metafiction, carried even further than Haley or Morrissey take it” (290).

Thus, while Stead may not write the “pure postmodernism” that Curnow requires, his writing embraces a major “element” of that mode. Indeed, Jones argues that Stead carries that mode “further” than many of its more purist practitioners. However, Jones also allows Stead’s novel to contain aspects of “the impressionist-modernist mode,” as well as some “elements . . . of simple realism” (287). Unlike Curnow, Jones feels that the “narrative games fit in with the other virtuoso techniques” (291). In Jones’s view, the metafictional games—as well as the “pastiche and parody”—of postmodernism, all “fit in” alongside the techniques of modernism, such as “the quick cuts and counterpointing of scene to scene,” “recurring motifs” (the teatowel again), and “literary allusion” (291). These two modes also combine with a layer of “simple realism,” which Jones accepts as one more reason to celebrate what he calls “a performance rare in New Zealand fiction” (291). Jones proposes

that Stead's work "brings together many elements of both the realistic and the 'other' tradition" (287), and suggests that—in combining these traditions—perhaps Stead is "able to have his cake and eat it too" (284).

Jones and Curnow therefore offer two different approaches to the novel (and to literature as a whole). One remains purist, zealously and jealously guarding boundaries against incursion; the other moves towards a kind of post-purism, willing to accept combinations of different modes within a single text. Where Curnow sees a "cover-up" of a literary crime, Jones allows a space where "narrative games fit in with the other virtuoso techniques" (291). In New Zealand literature, most critics—including Stead himself—have followed the purist approach, elevating one mode at the expense of all others. However, a few critics have touched upon the latter approach, among them Michael Morrissey and Mark Williams.

In general, Morrissey tends to favour postmodernism, as his anthology *The New Fiction* illustrates. Nonetheless, within the introduction to that anthology, Morrissey praises *All Visitors Ashore* for containing a mixture of modes:

As this anthology goes to print I read C.K. Stead's *All Visitors Ashore*, a novel which seems almost to have been written to fulfil many of the lacks complained of in this Introduction. Both modernist and postmodernist, *All Visitors Ashore* contains numerous metafictional devices as well as faction and cinemimetic techniques. It is, incidentally, richly erotic without being pornographic and, of course, 'experimental'. (16)

Unlike Curnow, Morrissey accepts Stead's combination of modes, and allows the novel to be "Both modernist and postmodernist." Morrissey even wrote a review of *All Visitors Ashore* (for *Landfall*) expanding and expounding upon this view:

Stead's continuing adroitness in 'keeping up to date' with literary modes and techniques enables him to reconcile being contemporary (he uses modernist and postmodernist techniques) with the counterbalancing pressure of traditionally realist narrative and psychological markers. It is surely no surprise that Stead should attempt such a resolution for he has always made it clear that he does not care for literary creations that aim to disconnect themselves from the real world going so far as to suggest (in his much commented on essay 'From Wystan to Carlos') that such a course is in the direction of insanity. (395)

So where Curnow sees opposition and betrayal, Morrissey sees ‘reconciliation,’ “counterbalancing” and “resolution.” Morrissey enjoys not just the metafictional elements of *All Visitors Ashore*, but also “the pleasures of its rich characterisations” (391). Like Jones, he recognizes and allows a three-way mixture of modernism, postmodernism and realism in Stead’s later work.

Mark Williams similarly allows for the mixing of modes. In *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists* (1990), he argues that purist classifications can “misrepresent” an artist’s work (21). In Williams’s view, isolating (and privileging) one mode sometimes “oversimplifies” a text to the point where “the complexity and contradictions” become lost (21). He goes on to point out that Stead’s fiction contains a three-way mixture of modes, despite Stead’s critical insistence on modernism:

. . . in Stead’s fiction, where we find most clearly a stylistic debt to the concision and hard particularity of Imagism and that hatred of cliché and love of ‘the composed phrase’ that Cyril Connolly identifies as essentially modernist, modernism has to co-exist with elements of traditional realism and postmodernist flourishes. (211)

Of course, when Williams refers to “Stead’s fiction,” he (like Morrissey and Jones) concentrates on the work of the mid-1980s that garnered Stead his most critical acclaim to date: *All Visitors Ashore* (which won the New Zealand Book Award for fiction in 1985) and *The Death of the Body* (which received many positive reviews in 1986 and has since been translated into Swedish, French, Portuguese, German, Italian and Spanish).

It is instructive at this point to take an overview of Stead’s fiction, because a post-purist practice can be traced not just through these later novels, but throughout his career. In addition, one can see in Stead’s work in fiction—both as a practitioner and a critic—many parallels to his work in poetry. For example, Stead’s work in the 1980s showed an increasing use of postmodern techniques, even as his criticism rejected that mode as a whole. Another similarity can be seen in the way that Stead moves away from his realist beginnings, without ever quite abandoning that tradition.

## 2. Away From Realism and Back Again: Early Stories and *Smith's Dream*.

Stead began writing fiction in the Sargeson tradition of critical realism. Thus his first published short story—"Girl Under the Plane Trees" (1956)—establishes a binary opposition between the unemployed but happy girl of the title, and the active young office worker who finds himself increasingly annoyed by what he sees as her "aimless" presence:

to stand in the same place, day after day, indicating no purpose at all, was disturbing. He wanted a policeman to "move her along." He felt there was something dangerous about her.

A few days more and he began to feel irritated. He tried to ignore her. . . .

Then he realised that his work at the office was beginning to pile up. . . . Her rather stupid face and lank hair, and especially the oddness of her stance kept coming back into his mind. The aimlessness of it troubled him.

He needed to work solidly to keep his position. Now he was finding it hard to concentrate. Stanford, who had the desk opposite, was getting ahead of him.

He became desperate. He would speak to her. (3)

He downs a couple of whiskeys and confronts her, demanding to know why she just stands about under the plane trees. She responds simply "I like it here," and the narrator asserts that "There was nothing more to be said. He hurried on, beaten, his face burning" (4). In a puritan society, the work ethic demands that everybody act towards some practical purpose. The girl's idleness—as well as her simple enjoyment of nature—rebukes that ethic, leading the narrator to comment that its representative feels "beaten" and ashamed. However, the boy learns nothing and changes none of his habits, while the implied reader presumably absorbs the lesson and sides with the outsider.

While this two-page sketch shows how well Stead had absorbed the pattern and techniques of Sargeson's early narratives, he was clearly unsatisfied with simply copying the master. When he came to collect his stories in *Five for the Symbol* (1981), Stead left this first effort out. His second effort at fiction was more ambitious: "A Race Apart" (1960) won the Katherine Mansfield Award for fiction in 1961. This story stretches over 37 pages and stretches Stead's technique beyond the didactic, limited omniscience of his first narrative. However, that is not to say that "A Race Apart" moves beyond the mode of critical realism; it simply takes a less insistent, more subtle approach.

For example, the narrative takes the form of a diary, written by an English woman, Mrs Emily Summerscroft. Emily has none of the laconic denseness of Sargeson's naïve narrators: indeed, she seems to understand the actions of the people around her all too well. She sees through and patronises most of her family, from her "cumbersome son-in-law" ("poor Oliver"), to her well-meaning but dim-witted husband ("Dear old George"), to her flighty daughter Belinda ("such a silly little coquette"). She also sees that her new chauffeur—a New Zealander called Andrew Nicholson—feels "defensive and aggressive" about his homeland, so she plays "what I now see was an unfair game of flicking Nicholson's pride where it was most sensitive":

What angered me most was that I felt Nicholson's defensiveness came unprovoked by anything I had said. I felt, too, that while he criticized us as a race 'blasted'—I remember the phrase—'by the problem of whether to pull the bloody thing down or prop it up', he was proud to find himself here among the ruins, and would carry away the mere fact of having set foot on our soil like a prize to his wretched little islands. (142)

Emily quickly finds out Nicholson's "sensitive" spots, and then probes them mercilessly. She recognizes this impulse as both socially and intellectually "unfair," but she cannot resist the fun of the "game."

Emily also interrupts and interrogates her own diary, casting a haze of uncertainty over events and her memories of those events. In this way, Stead invites the reader to question his narrator's motivations. Why does she judge her own daughter so harshly? Why does she often contradict herself in relation to the actions and the presence of her chauffeur? And why, having decided on the fifth of May that Nicholson is "someone we can treat as part of the family," does she decide to sack him four days later?—is it concern for Belinda, as she seems to insist, or is it something more? By the end of the story, Emily appears to have turned from "the body" of the athlete Nicholson (her unattainable "Greek God"), to the mind of his rather more available friend, the American student Parker.

Stead underlines this shift by having Parker explain to Mrs Summerscroft that “to put it crudely . . . Andrew would think love-making bad for his running” (155). This explanation makes sense of an earlier reference to Nicholson’s future wife, an aristocrat who owns a racehorse, “her gelding *Southern Splendour*” (121). Nicholson may run well, and he may look “splendid,” but he turns out to be of little practical use to the women that admire him. Stead also has Parker remind Belinda (and the reader) that “untouched purity” cannot exist in “the world of reality”:

—You will recall our conversation on *The Turn of the Screw*, he said. Only idealists think corruption, or evil if you like, can be eradicated finally by right action. And ideals, like little boys in novels who symbolize untouched purity, die at the first breath from the world of reality. (152)

Parker offers a series of realist statements, explaining characters and events for his auditors. Twenty years later, Stead must have felt some impatience with this technique, because when he republished “A Race Apart” in *Five for the Symbol*, he cut all of the passages quoted in this paragraph.

Stead also deleted the “conversation” to which Parker refers. He still mentions that Nicholson delivered “a long explication of James’s intentions” (*FS* 17), but he does not say what that explication involved. In the original version of the story, though, Belinda makes explicit (and agrees with) Nicholson’s idea that “the book is a vision of evil” (133). Stead then has Parker—who begins to sound like a mouthpiece for the implied author—set about contradicting that idea:

—Maybe it is, he said. But why not a story about goodness—purity that’s prevented from mixing with its natural complement of evil and can’t survive in the world.  
—You mean the little boy, Nicholson asked. You think James intended him to represent something only half-human, as Quint does?  
—I don’t know that James intended anything. I mean just that you can look at it that way. The little boy dies because he’s shielded from the Peter Quint half of life. (133-34)

One can see here the preference for “natural” behaviour that Stead privileged in “Girl Under the Plane Trees.” He then describes Belinda’s response in melodramatic terms:

Belinda looked at him with profound horror. Her eyes widened as though she had been threatened with a knife. Parker watched her intently. Nicholson looked embarrassed.

—Half of life! she said. But Quint is horrible. He’s—he’s horrible. And the little boy—Miles—is so sweet.

—Well maybe, Parker said. But Quint is dead when the story begins. And Miles dies too. Maybe it’s a half-and-half mixture they’re both struggling towards. In terms of these abstractions of evil and purity—which I wasn’t the first to raise—each character needs something of the other to make . . . .

—Oh but that’s preposterous, Belinda burst out. (134)

When Stead revised “A Race Apart” he cut all of this melodrama, explanation and heavy-handed parallelism. In the revised version, Stead simply alludes to James’s book and leaves the reader to work out any possible connections with the characters involved.

Stead also cuts a long colloquy (142-44) about contemporary colonial issues and how New Zealanders viewed their own country in the late 1950s. In this exchange, Emily catechises Nicholson on “Life in the colonies,” and he gives a series of stock answers about the standard of living, the weather and the status of New Zealand as a “spiritual dependency of Europe”:

—Then you don’t really believe New Zealand is a spiritual dependency.

—Well yes, in some ways. But there’s something entirely our own. . . .

I tried to look comprehending.

—Everyone agrees it’s a remarkable landscape . . . .

He was struggling with an idea. (143; Stead’s ellipses)

Nicholson enacts an Allen Curnow-esque striving towards articulating origin and a sense of place. He also provides a neat summary of the issues in Stead’s contemporaneous lecture “For the Hulk of the World’s Between” (a transcription of which won the Katherine Mansfield Prize for non-fictional prose in 1961). Nonetheless, by 1981 Stead probably saw this question-and-answer session as political ballast, the “removable, abstractable, restatable ‘content’ the [author] as moralist, or as realist, chooses to load into his vehicle” (*GC* 144). Having published “From Wytan to Carlos” at about the same time as he was revising “A Race Apart,” Stead must have felt that the colloquy did not partake of “the truth of the imagination,” and was merely a fashionable diatribe inserted into the text.

Stead's changes to this story reveal a modernist writer revising the work of his younger, realist self. Stead's revisions move the focus of the text from its author (like Nicholson) "struggling with an idea," to the presentation of characters and events. Christopher Bates, however, in his review of *Five for the Symbol*, asserts that Stead's revisions result in an increased focus on Nicholson:

. . . it is of interest to compare that early version with the present text. A great deal of pruning has been done, the main effect of which is to strip away inessential material and bring the focus to bear more sharply on the central character, the New Zealand athlete Andrew Nicholson, who is competing in England. (466)

I disagree with Bates's placement of Nicholson as "the central character." Readers learn more about the narrator and her inner life than they do about Nicholson. Indeed, the revisions tend to trim away details about Nicholson's life: his childhood (142), his university education (134), the subject of his book (156), his curse on Parker (157) and his marriage to "The Hon. Clara Smith-Withers" (121) all get deleted. Presumably Stead found details about Nicholson to be "inessential material." In any case, "A Race Apart" in both of its incarnations feels like a Jamesian portrait of a lady, not the story of a New Zealand runner.

Stead's interest may have begun with the New Zealander in England—who, like Stead, had gone there and was "trying to write a book" (125), grew up in the country at the top of the North Island and once dragged "timber from the forests with a bullock team" (142)—but his attention turned at some point to the English woman, Emily. Stead's own comments on the story, delivered in passing at a Peace Conference in 1968, point to this shift in focus:

Once when I believed myself to be a Marxist I wrote a long short story in which an upper middle-class Englishwoman with right-wing opinions proved herself in every way superior to a young Kiwi idealist. My sense of style had rebelled against my beliefs. ("The Conference on Peace, Power and Politics in Asia" 154)

The "young Kiwi idealist" is just that: a flat character who mouths conventional responses and offers no surprises to the reader. Emily, on the other hand, confronts physical corruption (which Nicholson cannot face), contends with emotions and memory, and finally tries to "rebel against the conventions of my family" (149). Thus Nicholson exists more as a

catalyst and a foil to Emily's behaviour, rather than as "the central character" of the work. The close of the story implies that Emily even manages an intimate relationship that crosses the boundaries of sex, class and culture: for the first time she and the American student Parker break the social rules and call each other by their first names. Stead increases the surprise of this moment in the revised version by making this the only time that Parker's first name (Herman) appears in the text.

The next story that appears in *Five for the Symbol*—"A Fitting Tribute" (1965)—contains no revisions. This story, which Stead dates at 1964 (*FS* 62; *AL* 236), marks a departure from the critical realism that dominated New Zealand's fiction at the time. Stead supports this assertion, with his analysis of the 1960s as "a time when I remember my two favourite fiction writers were the Italian Moravia and the Argentinian Borges, and when I wrote a story called 'A Fitting Tribute' which made a real and radical break with Sargesonian realism" ("A New Regionalism? Writing in New Zealand" 269).

Looking back on "A Fitting Tribute" in 1992, Stead defined it as "a fantasy":

. . . I wrote a fantasy called 'A Fitting Tribute' about a character I called Julian Harp, who solves the problem of engineless flight. . . . He takes off from the Auckland domain during a gymkhana, watched by a huge crowd, and vanishes out over the Pacific, never to be seen again. His success in flying is soon hailed around the world, and in his absence, presumed dead, Harp becomes a New Zealand hero. Statues and monuments are erected, works of art commissioned, even a religion founded, around the figure of the first man to fly. The story is told by his girlfriend, who has a child by him. She knows what he was really like and that the sanitised hero who is becoming a national icon bears no resemblance to the real Julian; but when she tries to tell the true story she's not believed. ("Here to Take Karl Stead to Lunch" 18)

This fantastic story, about a strange inventor who makes wings out of stolen umbrellas and flies off into the sunset, was just the kind of postmodernist experimentation that Michael Morrissey wanted for his 1985 anthology, *The New Fiction*. However, as Morrissey remarked in his preface, "A Fitting Tribute" had been written before its time; he argued as a consequence that it "pre-dates this collection" and reluctantly left it out. Stead comments, in

his review, that Morrissey's chronological exclusion left his story in a kind of critical limbo: "too early to be 'new', though not realist enough, apparently, to be 'old'" (*AL* 236).

In my view, "A Fitting Tribute" is one of the first stories written by a New Zealander that contains a mixture of realist and postmodern techniques. While the story may constitute a fantasy, Stead nonetheless sets it in what he calls a "recognisable reality" (Ricketts 110). Stead demands this realist base of all fiction—indeed, all literature. In "A Fitting Tribute," therefore, the reader feels no doubt as to the setting: Auckland in the early 1960s when, in the author's opinion, "the sense of moral repression, the crushing weight of propriety, was extraordinarily strong" ("Here to Take Karl Stead to Lunch" 18). In this society, difference can be a crime, and even someone that you have dated might consider turning you in to the forces of Big Brother:

I was feeling angry with Julian and I started to think I might get back at him by ringing the police and telling them he was a dangerous communist. I probably would have done it too but I didn't know his address exactly and I only knew his Christian name. (*FS* 49)

The threat of repression, the Prime Minister commandeering the radio, the patriotic Anzac parade, the mud on the domain, the street names, the wooden houses, the grotty coffee bar, the fussy organization of the gymkhana—all these things feel familiar to the local reader. Place and society never become surreal (as they do in the short stories of Russell Haley or Michael Harlow). In this context, Julian Harp's actions may seem super-surreal, but—like the cannibalism of babies in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"—this contrast simply makes people's responses appear more extreme, and the ensuing satire more delicious.

For example, the reactions to Julian's flight follow a familiar pattern. The public replaces its initial scepticism with a revisionist embracing of the local hero once he has succeeded. His female assistant's contribution gets denied because everyone wants to fit Harp into the dominant and popular mythology of the "Man Alone" (*FS* 40). After Julian's success, the Prime Minister can be heard "on the radio urging the youth of the nation to aim high like

Harp" (*FS* 60). Harp may have been a long-haired radical who launched a "Subvert the Press Campaign," and who had "decided to bring the Government down" (*FS* 47), but these little details get ignored by the public, the press and the Government once they realize they have a hero in their midst:

Of course now it's different. It's different partly because Julian succeeded, partly because he's supposed to be dead and everyone likes a dead hero better than a live one, but mostly because he made us famous overseas, and when all those reporters came pouring into the country panting to know about the man who had succeeded where men throughout history had failed—that was what they said—everyone began to pretend New Zealand had been behind him on the day. People started to talk about him in the same breath as Snell and Hillary and Don Clark, and then in no time he was up with Lord Rutherford and Katherine Mansfield and now he seems to be ahead of them and there's a sort of religious feeling starts up every time his name is mentioned. (*FS* 60)

This pattern exemplifies what I call the Crowded House syndrome. Crowded House were a New Zealand band in the 1980s that everybody ignored—until they had a number one hit in the U.S.A. Only then were they embraced as Kiwi artists and defended against all comers, but too late to be of any real support or use to them. The same pattern can be seen running from Mansfield through to Harp, where Stead extracts extra comedy by exaggerating Julian's case to the point of religious mania: "there's a new sect called the Harpists and they believe Julian wasn't a man but an angel sent down as a sign that God has chosen New Zealand for the Second Coming" (*FS* 54).<sup>1</sup>

So Stead uses fantasy in "A Fitting Tribute" to highlight the comic possibilities in New Zealand's social pattern. Along the way, he satirizes almost every Kiwi institution, from the press to the police, from the Government to the church. Stead also manages to hold up a cracked mirror to military fervour, anarchist pretensions and N.Z.B.C. censorship policies. He even punctures his own set—the intellectuals who haunted coffee houses such as

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<sup>1</sup>Stead satirizes the same syndrome in "A Quality of Life," this time in relation to a New Zealand (or 'Nova') novelist: "I speak not only to Nova but to the world. In all my writings this is so, because if I spoke to Nova only, Nova would not believe what I had to say was worth listening to. Therefore I speak to the world in order that Nova will listen" (*FS* 114). Stead also comments on this connection in a 1991 interview: "There's some relationship between 'A Quality of Life' and 'A Fitting Tribute' in that they're both about *reputation* in New Zealand" (Alley 280).

“Somervell’s in Queen Street” (“Remembering the Fifties” 9)—and the way they put to use their Overseas Experience:

Julian said the nice thing about coming back to Auckland after being away was the old wooden houses. . . . He liked the harbour too and the bridge and everything he looked at and I found that unusual because the people who came into Gomeo’s were forever arguing about which buildings in Auckland were any good and which were not and nobody was ever enthusiastic about anything, least of all those like Julian who had been away overseas. (*FS* 45)

What the narrator finds “unusual” in Julian highlights just how mean-spirited and small-minded the “usual” behaviour and accepted attitudes can become. Thus “A Fitting Tribute” feels like a realist short story, but with an element of fantasy attached. The resulting comedy evinces a sense of humour not often found in the New Zealand fiction of the time.

Gregory O’Brien, in his 1988 survey of Stead’s career, highlights the artist’s awareness of—and reaction to—this historical and literary context:

When he returned to New Zealand in 1960 after three and a half years abroad, he realised fiction here ‘wasn’t a barrelful of laughs’. ‘A Fitting Tribute’ . . . was an attempt to break through that high-mindedness and overseriousness he encountered. (*Moments of Invention* 78)

Reflecting on the story in conversation with O’Brien, Stead commented that “There are elements of surrealism in it. In the context of much of what is written here now, it doesn’t seem all that radical, but at the time it caused quite a stir” (78).

The next story that Stead published increased these “elements of surrealism.” Written for a series called “Out of London,” “This Year in Auckland” appeared first in 1966, on a single page of the British weekly magazine *The New Statesman*.<sup>2</sup> This brief sketch also showed Stead experimenting with another postmodern technique, that of metafiction:

I talk first to Droescher, our host. . . . He asks me about the novel and I tell him it is going satisfactorily. Have I time for it? Yes. There is only one other job to do—an article for a British weekly. Won’t that throw me out of gear? (I have spoken of

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<sup>2</sup>Stead later republished this story, slightly revised, as “Auckland Diary” (*AL* 254-57).

'getting into gear' for writing fiction.) No. I will write the article as fiction. Will that suit them? Yes, because characters, places and events will be actual. 'This conversation could become part of it. You would be named "Droescher."' I see he is going to ask how such a piece of writing could be fiction and I stare at him, I suppose in a way which inhibits the question. Does he recognise that my answer would have to be theoretical, and that literary theory will have no place in my fiction? At any rate, he does not ask the question, and I see that I am already controlling the actual. (915)

Here a character called "Droescher" becomes real, as the host of an "actual" party, only to become a character again. As the reader's brain wraps itself around this twist, the narrator hints that the conversation could become fiction in "a British weekly," and then places "'This conversation'" into quotation marks as if to say: 'Look—I'm doing it as we speak.'

The narrator, whose name turns out to be "Stead,"<sup>3</sup> goes the next day to a beach where a man in a suit and tie catches his eye: "A moment later I see that it is the Professor. I am not surprised, merely delighted to have confirmed my power of eliciting fiction from the actual." In these passages, Stead introduces a metafictional layer in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges, whom he mentions a number of times in the course of the story. As Stead recalled in 1986, in his review of *The New Fiction*, Borges made an impression on him in the mid-1960s:

More than twenty years ago I was reading Jorge Luis Borges, whose name comes up from time to time in Morrissey's introduction, and whose influence can be felt on a number of the writers represented. What seemed to be noticed about Borges at that time (and I suppose is still noticed) was the sophisticated games his stories played, questioning fiction itself, and hence the nature of reality. ("On the Margins" 75)<sup>4</sup>

This kind of reviewing wields a double-edged sword. Even as Stead cuts down Morrissey and "a number of the writers represented" for being "more than twenty years" behind the times, a footnote to the first sentence implies that Stead's own writing was there first: "A story of

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<sup>3</sup>In the 1989 revised version, the author removes the names of "Stead" and "Mayer."

<sup>4</sup>"On the Margins" also appears, slightly revised, as "A New New Zealand Fiction?" in *Answering to the Language*. All other citations refer to this later edition.

mine which referred to Borges and imitated him appeared in the *New Statesman* (London) for 16 December 1966.”<sup>5</sup>

In this story, not only does some of the action appear surreal (a man “controlling the actual”), but the background also becomes unreliable. Stead avoided the latter technique in “A Fitting Tribute,” but in “This Year in Auckland” he creates a kind of dreamscape:

Oliver begins to cry. He has left his stick behind. . . . It was a fine stick. But I am held now, truly caught, by a memory of where he left it—at the bottom of the concrete steps we climbed from the sand to the grass where Mayer stood waiting. I see those steps quite clearly, surmounted by urns. I know they cannot exist in that place—they belong last year at Marienbad—yet no effort will remove them.

Here the urns and the steps appears to be in control, and not the narrator: “no effort will remove them.” Paradoxically, it seems that while he can control “the actual,” he cannot control the creations of his memory and imagination. Fiction and reality become indistinct; Marienbad washes in and out of Auckland in a way that presages the kind of techniques that Russell Haley would later use in stories such as “Barbados—A Love Story” (*Islands* 1977) and “The Balkan Transformer” (*Hawkeye* 1977).

Stead’s next story, “A Quality of Life” (1970), continues this experiment with meta-fiction. The story opens with a novelist burning his novel, and then writing a story about the subject of that novel (his first love). When the narrator comes to the most painful scene—the discovery that his lover has decided to marry someone else—he tries a number of ways of writing it:

Sometimes, wandering restlessly about the shed in which my fiction is written, I have contrived dialogues to cover the event. Some faceless fellow student comes to me and asks have I heard the news: Veena Leclerk is engaged to Mike Mileage. I laugh obligingly, although I don’t think it a very amusing joke. Then I become aware that the student is staring at me. He says, ‘I didn’t think you’d believe it’—and he walks away, leaving me with a sudden coldness in the stomach, a feeling of weakness in my limbs. . . .

Or I imagine an entirely literal and serious friend who says so often, and with such round eyes, ‘Have you heard the news?’ that I know whatever is coming is going to

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<sup>5</sup>Stead expands upon his discovery and debt to Borges in “Narrativity” (222-24).

be hard to take. And then I am told. And I swallow something that feels like a piece of scoria, my face burning, my fists clenched—and I say, in a parody of casualness, ‘I think she could have done better than that.’ . . .

Or I see myself in bed with Myra, who is reading the newspaper. She says, ‘There’s something here about your friend Veena.’ I roll over sleepily and ask her what it is, and Myra says, ‘I’m afraid it’s going to make you unhappy.’ . . . (FS 131-32; Stead’s ellipses)

This passage reads like a forerunner of Stead’s work in *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Death of the Body*, in which the narrators self-consciously interrupt themselves in order to re-write (or ‘re-shoot’) a single scene in variety of styles. Thus “A Quality of Life” marks one of Stead’s first efforts at the postmodern technique of laying bare—and extracting fun out of—the artifice of the fiction writer.

However, Stead also opens the story by saying that “What follows here will be simply an explanation,” and in many ways the reader gets just that: an explanation. As in one of his realist poems, Stead takes the reader on a “forced march to a moral conclusion” (GC 216). Following the same three-part structure as his realist poetry, he begins by setting the scene:

On the island of Nova my readers will know we have a city worthy of the name—Nova City. . . . When I was a young man I attended the University of Nova and graduated in Modern Literature. My story concerns that time in my life.

It is a commonplace story—everyone has to fall in love for the first time—yet I need only give all my thought to it for a few minutes and it can still cause me pain. (FS 114)

In this lasting pain and emotional attachment lies the narrator’s problem, and he proceeds to elaborate this difficulty:

. . . that youthful affair. . . . It was a subject I had always avoided, fearing I might fail to objectify my emotions in the way that fiction requires. But more than thirty years had elapsed. Surely the time had arrived when I could deal with it dispassionately. I planned my new novel accordingly. (FS 120)

Having set the scene and elaborated the problem, the narrator details the love affair through a series of flashbacks, abandons his novel and then offers his conclusion:

. . . my will to continue the novel had entirely left me. I had written out of the memory of my own youthful suffering only to discover that Veena, who had caused it, had suffered more than I. We had both been defeated. . . . Perhaps it was, as I had

believed, the best fiction I had written. Or perhaps, on the other hand, it was only an elaborate poultice to cover a wound my ego had sustained in youth and which would never entirely heal. But I was no longer interested in judging its merits. As I took it to the incinerator I wondered why I had ever supposed I could possess in art what life had denied me. (FS 138)

The narrator discovers that the wounds have not healed, the time has not arrived when he can “deal with it dispassionately,” and the novel will not allow him the easy resolution that life has denied. In explaining these matters, the author brings his story to a clear conclusion about what has been learned. In the context of Stead’s career as a fiction writer, therefore, “A Quality of Life” marks a return to realist structures and explanations.

As Lawrence Jones notes in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors*, the short fiction that Stead published in *Five for the Symbol* moves along a continuum from realism to postmodernism, but not in any kind of neat chronological order:

. . . although all the stories deal with the common theme of New Zealand identity, they differ in their places along the realism / non-realism continuum (it should be added that their places on the continuum have nothing to do with their dates of composition). (229)

To this analysis, I would add only that the “continuum” that Jones identifies runs not just between Stead’s different works of fiction, but also within individual texts. Thus after writing “a fantasy” and a piece of neo-Borgesian metafiction in the mid-1960s, Stead returns to realism in 1969 with “A Quality of Life.” But each of these works contains aspects of other modes—and so in each story, to varying degrees, the fantasy and metatext mixes with elements of realism.

That is not to say, though, that Stead never returned to writing purely realist texts. Indeed, his very next piece of fiction—the novel *Smith’s Dream* (1971)—reads like Stead’s most conventionally realist work to date. This move seems less surprising when viewed in the context of a similar shift towards realism in Stead’s poetry of the time. As he explained in a “A Poet’s View,” “during the middle and late sixties a very large *subject* forced its way into my poems” (GC 268). Stead’s reactions to the Vietnam War dominated his poetry during

this period and, in *Smith's Dream*, they came to dominate his fiction as well. In an interview with Cherry Raymond in 1973, Stead defined *Smith's Dream* as a "moral tale," one that works out what he calls "a basic obsession with the Vietnam situation":

I've been actively campaigning against it for years . . . nothing has affected me as deeply as that war. I used to think, 'If only people could understand what it would be like if it was happening in their own country,' but I knew it was hard to make the imaginative transfer. (Qtd. in Robertson 99-100)

In *Smith's Dream*, Stead makes that "imaginative transfer," and his "moral tale" involves an effort to make "people . . . understand what it would be like." One can see from this choice of words that *Smith's Dream* marks a return to the approach and the terminology ("see," "know," "understand") of Stead's early realist poems.

In addition to its methodology, *Smith's Dream* also reprises some of the social concerns of the 1950s. In "Fretful Sleepers: A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist" (1952), Bill Pearson argued that "The reason why the New Zealander is willing to invest his responsibility in a strong benevolent ruler is that he himself is afraid of responsibility" (4). Stead enacts this theory through his presentation of Volkner (the "benevolent" leader) and Arthur Buckman (the "average Kiwi"):

It was perfectly true. Arthur Buckman did not know how it had happened. Yet he, like so many of us who came to regret it, had voted 'Yes' in the referendum that asked New Zealanders whether or not the special powers Volkner had taken to deal with the emergency were to be confirmed. Again like many of us, Arthur was later to grow ashamed of his vote, to conceal what it had been, to pretend he had voted 'No', even to join the whisperers who said the count of votes had been rigged. What made him unhappy was the secret conviction that the count had not been rigged at all; that the 'average Kiwi' (which was how he described himself) had been panicked into voting as Volkner wanted. So that now the only political choice remaining was to accept passively the rule of a man who increasingly revealed himself to be insane, or to oppose actively, by force, at the risk of life itself. (SD 49)

Stead also illustrates Pearson's statement that "New Zealanders may well wake up one day to find a military dictator riding them and wonder how he got there" ("Fretful Sleepers" 4). In *Smith's Dream* that prediction comes true: Volkner seizes power, suspends Parliament, installs martial law, and the average Kiwi "did not know how it happened." Stead, like

Pearson, concerns himself with setting out why this kind of thing can happen and what—if anything—can be done about it. More than any of Stead's fiction before or since, *Smith's Dream* offers explicit realist analysis of New Zealand society, and the narrator often underlines that analysis by using the rhetoric of assessments such as "It was perfectly true."

Smith usually supports the narrator's assessments, both by his actions (or lack of them) and his statements. For example, face to face with Volkner himself, Smith argues that "I think New Zealanders are too gutless . . . even to stage a rebellion against you" (45). Two representative New Zealanders then appear, as if to illustrate this statement. Arthur and Sylvia Buckman seem like the classic late-1960s, middle-class Kiwi couple: the narrator asserts that "She was a woman who would no more appear without makeup than without clothes," while Arthur's first response when he sees his fugitive son-in-law (wanted dead or alive) is to "at least get a drink under the belt first" (47). When Smith questions them about Volkner they react, as predicted, in a passive and self-serving way: "here we are, Sylvia and me. We haven't been hurt by it," says Arthur with a shrug and a smile (48).

Stead wants to reveal and attack what this kind of "I'm ok / She'll be right" attitude can potentially produce. The actions of Volkner, Sid Holland, Keith Holyoake—and, for later readers, Rob Muldoon—all start to run together. The Special X police, with their batons and their sanctioned brutality, look uncomfortably similar to the Special Forces that Holland sent in to break the workers in 1951 Waterfront Dispute. The Special X also appear uncannily like the Red Squad that stalked the streets and the playing fields of New Zealand during the 1981 Springbok Tour. When Stead wrote *Smith's Dream*, Muldoon's authoritarian style of government still lay in the future, and the Red Squad had yet to be formed, so in these two areas at least, the novel seems remarkably prescient. When I first read *Smith's Dream*, in a third-form english class in 1981, I could not believe that it had been written in 1970—it felt too close to what I saw every night on the local news.

To a number of writers in the early 1970s, a logical extension of New Zealand's passive political stance seemed to be the possibility of American infiltration: economic deals backed up with a military presence. In Craig Harrison's 1974 play, *Tomorrow Will Be a Lovely Day*, a Volkner figure quite literally becomes an American puppet. Through this non-realist device, the audience sees a character with puppet strings and painted mouthlines, and when his limbs start to fall off they do not get replaced. By this point in the play the Prime Minister / puppet has served his purpose, and the American military 'advisors' can dispense with the show of working through the New Zealand Government, because all meaningful power has passed into their hands.

*Smith's Dream* also illustrates this kind of American infiltration, but in the less dramatic mode of critical realism. An example of Stead's method can be seen in his observation and use of the smallest social details, such as the kinds of cars that people drive. Early in the book, for instance, he has the narrator make an apparently casual comment about the police station in Coromandel: "In front of it and along one side were a number of large American cars all of recent make, some painted in army colours, others black" (22). The station turns out to contain Captain Jespersion and the forces of the Special X, who take Smith into custody and interrogate him. As they drive him south for "further questioning" (and torture), the narrator stresses that Smith finds himself sitting "in the back of the big American car as it bowled along the Southern Motorway" (25). Then, in the wider context of Auckland after one year's absence, Smith notices that "The clothes were brighter and more fashionable. There were more big American cars and fewer patched-up British ones" (29).

These details hint that "little New Zealand" (108), once a colony of the "British" Empire, appears to have shifted into the orbit of "big American" influence. Next the reader finds out that part of Jespersion's file on Smith contains the observation that, amongst other supposedly "subversive" attributes, "You were consistently Anti-American" (33). Then Smith makes a pointed discovery by questioning Volkner himself:

'The Americans are supplying you with arms.'

'Counter-insurgency material. Yes.'

'And the economy. It was in such a mess eighteen months ago. Have they helped there too?'

'The economy,' Volkner said stiffly, 'is responding to the measures we have taken.' (44)

These early suggestions about cars, clothes and arms gain sinister significance when American troops start to arrive. In Vietnam and Panama the troops came first, followed by chewing gum and coca-cola. In *Smith's Dream* this process occurs in reverse, but with the same eventual ultimatum: become an American colony or fight for your land and rights.

Exactly halfway through the book, the narrator makes this process explicit: "the American invasion . . . was beginning to be noticed" (73). The rest of the novel elaborates this problem, as the combination of American imperialism and New Zealand passivity allows the bloodshed to increase. Most of the New Zealanders try to be "innocent of politics and determined to avoid trouble" (107), but this approach only exacerbates the situation. What began with the death of Cousins and Golding, moves through 'the Buck's Hotel massacre' and Arthur's death by torture, to the final assault on Coromandel with napalm and gunships "firing unceasingly down to where . . . civilians and guerrillas alike must have been running to escape the bombardment of the town" (124). Smith witnesses the bloodshed, and he offers an acerbic conclusion: "It was 'superior firepower'; it was 'overkill'; it was the Free World at its work on a fine morning in the name of all that was affluent" (124).

The narrator provides an even more explicit conclusion at the opening of the last chapter:

Who would not die to save his country from annihilation?

If only the issues had been presented to us in such simple terms we would have shown our mettle. There is not one of us who would have proved too weak to wield the knife or too cowardly to bare his breast to it, if only it would have released us from the curse chance or our own folly had brought upon us. But the curse remained. Murder and self-destruction begot no release but only more of their kind. We lived in fear, and bafflement, and frustration, and hate, while our bland ally, the great Vampire solemnly dedicated to defend us, mixed its blood with ours and declared that thus our union had been cemented for all time. (135)

The ironic image of America representing “the Free World” turns into the blatant image of America as “the great Vampire.” However, while he may criticize the Americans, the narrator does not absolve New Zealanders from what “our own folly had brought upon us.” Smith, Bullen and a few other “liberal radicals” eventually choose to fight but—out of Volkner’s nearly three million “children”—they represent a pitiful minority. As Smith predicts in chapter four, New Zealanders turn out to be “too gutless” politically, and take the passive easy option. By the end of the book, Smith and his friends lie dead, the fifty-first State of the U.S.A. no longer seems in doubt, and neither does the moral of the story.

*Smith’s Dream* can be read as the story of a man alone—embodying both an enactment and a criticism of that myth—as Roland F. Anderson places it in his article “The Rise and Fall of the Man Alone?” (95-97). However, the novel can also be read as a political treatise against American foreign policy, the dangers of New Zealand’s acquiescence, and the apathy of New Zealanders in general towards political events. In particular, Smith’s story illustrates how vulnerable New Zealand’s democracy and independence might be: like the narrator in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Stead pokes a finger into a revered edifice and finds a dangerously hollow core.

Against this political background, Smith initially tries to opt out, to break away, to live a self-sufficient life: “Smith did not report that day at the library. Nor did he ever report there again. Shortly afterwards he had sold the house for what little he could get, settled his bills, and left Auckland to follow his dream” (*SD* 8). Stead defines “Smith’s dream” twice, in his article on John Mulgan, as a wish to “escape political and social responsibility” (*GC* 82; 88). Smith appears to achieve that “escape” in the first few pages of the novel:

He took the bus from Auckland to Thames, thence up the peninsula to Coromandel township. . . .

There is on that road a view of the Gulf and its islands from the hills shortly before you descend to the town. On a good day that view is like no other. These are mythical islands, afloat, anchored off a perfect coast. The sunlight and the air are such that every colour is clear and sharp—as bright as they can be short of that intensity of tropical light by which colour is subdued.

It was a good day. At that point on the road tears sprang to Smith's eyes and at the same time he found himself laughing. 'My God,' he muttered, wiping his eyes clear so that he would not lose the view, 'I'm free.' (SD 9)

Things seem "mythical," "perfect," "bright" and "good"—and the reader may begin to sense that the narrator is setting Smith up for a fall. Smith does feel a little "guilt" over his decision to leave, but he tries to justify it to himself by arguing that "surely he was only acting out a dream that lived in the heart of every Kiwi" (SD 11).

After this idyllic opening, Stead spends the rest of the novel proving (as he put it in his Mulgan article) that "Smith's dream . . . is false" (88). He even revised the novel's original published ending in order to underline this point:<sup>6</sup>

The novel offered a fairly simple moral proposition. That you can escape political and social responsibility by getting away and being a 'man alone' in the bush is the old New Zealand dream—Smith's dream—and it is false. There is no escape. Smith tries it but life catches up with him in the form of Volkner's Special X. To have him drift off alone at the end of the book was to contradict its whole moral point. (88)

For Stead to write what he himself calls a "moral tale," with a "simple moral proposition" and a clear "moral point" seems an odd stance for the author of *The New Poetic* to take. Where did he, where could he go from here? Stead's own criticism about fiction, which begins around this period, provides a clue.

### 3. Stead's Fiction Criticism: Familiar Rejections.

Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Stead's criticism concentrates mainly on poetry. As a critic, Stead tends to write only on areas where he himself practices. For example, among the many essays and reviews published by Stead, I have seen only one on drama (a short review for the *New Zealand Listener* in 1963), and that review remains uncollected.<sup>7</sup> Stead's fiction criticism, therefore, begins in 1966 with an essay on the short story, a genre

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<sup>6</sup>In the first, "nebulous ending," Smith escapes; in the second he is shot by the Special X. Stead analyses this revision in "John Mulgan: A Question of Identity" (87-88). For an alternative analysis of Stead's changes, see R.T. Robertson's "The Nightmare of Kiwi Joe."

<sup>7</sup>"Conversation in a Square." *New Zealand Listener* 19 July 1963: 13.

that he had begun to gain some prestige in. Similarly, his first essay on the novel appears in 1971, after the writing of *Smith's Dream*. This critical attention to fiction increases through the 1970s and 1980s, in tandem with Stead's own fictional output.

In his first collection of criticism—*In the Glass Case* (1981)—Stead gives precedence to two “Preliminary” essays. He chooses “From Wytan to Carlos” as the “Preliminary” component of the poetry section: this statement of aims stands at the beginning of ten of Stead's reviews and essays about poetry, setting the tone and the context for what follows. The fiction section of the book contains the other “Preliminary” statement, a short article entitled “What is Fiction?” Like its poetry counterpart, this article lays out Stead's position and critical attitudes towards the genre he is about to discuss.

“What is Fiction?” made its initial appearance in 1966, as part of the untitled introduction to Stead's selection of the *World's Classics New Zealand Short Stories*. In that introduction, Stead asserts that as an anthologist “he should say something of the method by which he has arrived at his decisions” (x). That “method” involved a variation on reader response criticism, incorporating something of a Barthesian pleasure of the text:

What I have sought might be described simply as pleasure, if that did not seem to put too commonplace a value on the qualities which achieve it. One looks of course for formal competence; or rather, one is distracted when it is absent. But no amount of competence will alone achieve the moment, or moments, of illumination (in a short story there may be no more than one) which, on the other hand, a minimal competence may be sufficient to support. (GC 17)

One can see here the argument, repeated in “From Wytan to Carlos,” that no amount of skill in using pre-set forms—no act of will—can produce the moments of “illumination” that Stead prizes.

He goes on to define those “moments” as a point of connection between the reader, the writer and the ‘real’ world:

Why are such scenes memorable? Why is one compelled—by that power which belongs uniquely to fiction—to store them *as if they were real*? It is not to an ‘idea’ one has responded. There is, I suppose it may be said, a ‘perception’—about our society, about ourselves—bodied forth in these scenes; but if so, it is a perception more comprehensive, more satisfying, and more general (its instance being more particular) than anything which may be stated in intellectual terms. (GC 18).

Thus Stead values moments of recognition, where the reader perceives something—but not because the author has told the reader what to perceive. Stead rejects such explanations, criticising “stories which . . . resolve themselves in a statement” (GC 18).

Stead expanded upon this theory of reading in 1974, in “A Poet’s View.” In that article he argued that something belonging “uniquely to fiction” could be found in poetry as well. By this point, though, he had come to think of moments of “illumination” in terms of the French concept of “*réalisation*”:

Ebullience, energy, eloquence, wit—and perhaps something beyond all these that lacks a word in English: what I think the French call *réalisation*—realizing in the sense of making real, bringing to life, so that the literary moment is lived through by the reader, experienced and retained like a piece of real life: these are the qualities to be striven for and celebrated. (GC 270-71)

In the late 1970s, Stead would argue that such moments were best achieved by employing modernist techniques. In relation to poetry, this argument found its expression in “From Wystan to Carlos.”

In relation to fiction, Stead makes the same argument—using many of the same phrases and images—in an article called “Katherine Mansfield: The Art of the ‘Fiction’” (1977). In Stead’s view, “linear narrative was not going to be Katherine Mansfield’s fictional mode. . . . What she worked for continually was texture, density, a feeling of richness, of reality . . .” (GC 33). Stead values in Mansfield’s writing the same quality that he elevated in “What is Fiction?” and “A Poet’s View,” moments where “the reader . . . is left afterwards with a sense of having experienced a piece of real life” (GC 33).

Despite its focus on fiction, the Mansfield article reads like a prototype of “From Wystan to Carlos.” Stead begins by asserting that “In England art is seldom valued for its own sake; it is a vehicle, like a coal truck” (*GC* 29). The same image and assertion reappear in “From Wystan to Carlos” (*GC* 142-43). Stead also distinguishes between two kinds of fiction: one follows a linear narrative leading to a *dénouement*, and encompasses “a whole genre of New Zealand fiction” (32); the other avoids linear story-telling and explicit judgements, turning instead towards modernist techniques such as “accretion” (33). Stead characterizes the former as “conventional” (33), while for him the latter represents “something of a technical breakthrough; and this means a breakthrough not merely for Katherine Mansfield but in the history of fiction” (34).

Thus one can see in this essay the same paradigm that operates in “From Wystan to Carlos”: Stead sets aside realist modes and privileges modernism as innovative, placing it at the forefront of the tide of literary history. In Stead’s view, modernist techniques allow Mansfield to eliminate “explicit judgement” in favour of a presentative method: “Katherine Mansfield doesn’t describe in abstract—she presents” (39). Stead views this movement away from realist techniques as a crucial lesson:

What had that prolonged exercise [the writing of “Prelude”] taught Katherine Mansfield? First I think it had taught her that fiction did not have to be shaped towards a conclusion, a climax, a *dénouement*; or, as I have suggested already, that a fiction is not quite the same thing as a story. A fiction survives, not by leading us anywhere, but by being at every point authentic, a recreation of life, so that we experience it and remember it as we experience and remember actual life. (*GC* 38)

As in “From Wystan to Carlos,” therefore, Stead argues that modernism presents a “truer truth,” allowing the author to render the complexity of “real life” without pushing it into a preset form or passing judgement upon it.

Stead describes this method with terms such as “authenticity,” “precision” and “a direct transmission of the author’s sense of life” (38). In his view, Mansfield’s use of modernist techniques places her alongside Eliot and Pound:

I made the point early on that Katherine Mansfield worked largely by instinct. If I ask myself what it was an instinct *for*, I can only answer that it was for the real fiction, which comes from the exercise of imagination, rather than for the imitation which the constructing intellect can so obligingly produce when the imagination refuses to do its job. And it is this which places her among the moderns and makes her contemporary, in a meaningful sense, with Pound and Eliot.

If there is one discovery at the heart of the Modernist revolution of sixty years ago it is that there is something which is 'poetry' as distinct from anything else, and that this is not a form but a quality. Further, the fragments which exhibit this quality, if they come from the same man at the same period and out of related pre-occupations, will naturally cohere, without structural linking. In fact the structural elements are almost always non-poetic, and are better dispensed with. This is one of the lessons of Pound's editorial exercise on the manuscripts of 'The Waste Land'. (45)

In the second of these paragraphs, one can see the genesis of Stead's arguments about 'Field' and structure, later developed at more length in "From Wytan to Carlos."

One can also see a parallel to the third principle of that essay—that the "most successful" writing will avoid explicit statements in order to engage the reader's imagination:

Katherine Mansfield was . . . aware of what was going on, and influenced in her practice by the feeling that the artist's job at that time was to 'make it new'. Her work . . . demonstrates that fiction, too, is a quality, not a form. The items of 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay' cohere without narrative linking. And individually they are most successful when they are not forced to make a point. (45)

Conversely, Stead claims that Mansfield's "weakest" writing takes a deliberate, realist form:

When she pushed herself, when she tried to write virtuously, when she worked too deliberately to shape the fictional fragment, of whatever length, to make a point or to come to a conclusion, she produced her weakest work. In her later writing she is still learning to be content to be fragmentary, learning that it is part of the writer's job to engage the reader's imagination by leaving gaps as often as by filling them, learning not to interfere with the creative process once it has completed itself. Murry describes 'A Married Man's Story' as 'unfinished yet somehow complete', and in that he is right. (45-46)

Thus one can be "right" only by falling into line with Stead's modernist preferences. In "Katherine Mansfield" as in "From Wytan to Carlos," modernism represents the "most successful" literature, whereas realism—which tends towards making a point and drawing an explicit conclusion—can lead to an author's "weakest work."

In both essays, Stead provides a realist writer as a negative comparison. In the poetry essay he compares Auden (his usual poetic punching bag) unfavourably with Pound; in the fiction essay he sets up R.L. Stevenson in opposition to Mansfield. In Stead's view, Stevenson represents a conventional, realist story-teller:

Stevenson is a great story-teller and that is the story-teller giving the life of his characters in summary before he narrows his focus on to a particular scene. We hear it as a voice. Someone is telling us all this. Someone has made this summary and may at any moment step in during the action and direct our judgement. In the Mansfield by contrast, rather than being related the events *occur*. Immediacy is achieved by a combination of imaginative involvement and intellectual detachment, a combination which Frank O'Connor, for example, admires and yet is shocked by—precisely because explicit judgement is eliminated, the author will not intervene directly. (39)

For Stead, therefore, modernist techniques offer an object lesson in avoiding linear conventions and “explicit judgement.” Where Stevenson tells stories, Mansfield presents ‘fictions.’ This kind of division enables Stead to dismiss “a whole genre of New Zealand fiction”—that of realism.

The Mansfield essay does not touch upon the other genre that Stead dismisses in “From Wistan to Carlos,” that of postmodernism. This mode receives somewhat later dismissal in Stead's work on fiction. Only when he comes to review *The New Fiction* in 1986 does Stead attack postmodernism directly. In the meantime, his fiction criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s concentrates on repeating the anti-realist, pro-modernist judgements of earlier essays. For example, in 1982 he praises Hal Porter for using “the most sophisticated of fictional methods” (AL 212). It should come as little surprise to the reader that the word Stead uses to describe Porter's technique—“circumlocution”—is the same word that he used to describe Mansfield's (GC 33). Furthermore, Stead praises Porter's work by stating that “No one would read these fictions for the ‘story’” (AL 212). This assessment repeats the fiction / story dichotomy that Stead had earlier applied to Mansfield in 1977, to Janet Frame in 1979 (“One does not read Frame for a ‘story’” GC 133) and to Maurice Duggan in 1980 (“there was no need to push the material falsely into the shape of a ‘story’” GC 109).

Similarly, in 1983 Stead praises Elizabeth Jolley for conveying “a direct transmission of her abundant sense of life” (*AL* 220). Stead first used this phrase in 1966 as a definition of “style” and a requirement of fiction in general: “the direct transmission of the writer’s sense of life” (*GC* 19). More specifically, he uses the same words to describe “style” in 1971 in the work of Ronald Hugh Morrieson (*GC* 100), and in 1980 in the work of Maurice Duggan (*GC* 121). In addition, when Stead discusses what he sees as “Katherine Mansfield’s writing at its best” (*GC* 24), he emphasizes the same attributes: “style is of immense importance, not for its own sake, but because through it we receive a direct transmission of the author’s sense of life” (*GC* 38).

In contrast to this apparently unmediated “direct transmission,” Stead opposes the realist method of interruption and explanation. For instance, in a 1982 review of David Malouf’s stories, Stead launches another attack on writing that “explains” its point and indulges in a literature of “ideas”:

... ‘The Prowler’ tells the same kind of truth (or half-truth) we might expect from a good essayist. Idea, I think, has been superimposed upon that texture of intractable, ungraspable reality which is life as we know it in our bones to be, and which we expect our best imaginative writers not to explain (do we ever quite believe the explainers?) but rather to put before us in such a way as to give us what Edmund Wilson calls ‘the shock of recognition’. (*AL* 216)

In Stead’s view, Malouf erodes the boundary between the fiction writer and the essayist, a boundary that Stead likes to police with maximum force. Once more he calls for the presentative method, a method that puts reality “before us,” but never tries to explain it.

In a similar fashion, in 1979, Stead attacks Maurice Shadbolt for using “plot . . . artificial crises, implausible dénouements, melodrama” (*GC* 124).<sup>8</sup> Stead sees these devices as

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<sup>8</sup>A minor literary feud between Stead and Shadbolt runs as far back as 1957, when Shadbolt wrote a letter to *Landfall* criticizing Stead’s poetry reviewing as “annoying,” “sour,” “pointless” and displaying “a certain lack of critical insight” (93-94). Stead responded with a letter attacking “the intense mist of Maurice Shadbolt’s prose” (180). A similar exchange occurred over Stead’s “John Mulgan” article in *Islands* (1979). This is not to suggest that Stead lets his personal feelings prejudice his critical judgements.

representing Shadbolt's "strivings for effects of style." By way of comparison, Stead offers David Ballantyne's more "natural" style, as well as praising him for "transcending the limits of 'social realism'" (GC 124). In particular, Stead singles out Ballantyne's "presentation" in *The Talkback Man* (1979):

Ballantyne's observation is sharp and his presentation deft and subtle. He doesn't intrude on the action nor cajole us in an attempt to make us feel what we have not felt or see what he has failed to show. He doesn't tell, he presents. (GC 128)

Once more the critic insists on the presentative method. The same terminology reappears in his 1993 review of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*—Stead simply reverses his terms in order to show his dislike of Malouf's explanatory style: "In such writing we are told what we have not been shown" ("Ellipticity" 28).

Returning to 1979 and to the Ballantyne article, Stead's conclusion strikes a note that sounds through much of his criticism:

The final and least measureable [sic] writing skill is the ability to judge correctly what can be left out. A novel that gives us as much to build on, and so little constricting interpretation, as this does should leave us with a sense of liberation, if we are willing to be liberated and not habituated to being told. Our imaginations are set free to complete what lies under, or behind, the surfaces sketched out in the telling of 'what they say and what they do.' (GC 128-29)

Again, the same judgement can be found in a later essay—Stead's review of Stephanie Dowrick's novel *Running Backwards Over Sand* (1985)—reversed in order to dismiss a realist writer. Following this logic, Dowrick might be seen as the anti-Ballantyne:

Skill in writing is as much knowing what to leave out as what to put in. Dowrick not only tells all; she explains all. She cajoles. She will leave nothing to the intelligence or to the imagination of her reader. . . . The reader becomes spectator rather than participant. (AL 198)

Behind both of these analyses lurks the third principle of "From Wystan to Carlos," that an author must engage the reader's imagination in the creative act.

All of these reviews simply repeat Stead's earlier theories about fiction and his preference for modernist presentation as opposed to realist didacticism. However, in 1986 Stead came to review *The New Fiction*, which brought him into direct confrontation with postmodern fiction. In this review, Stead articulates all that he dislikes about this mode of writing, dismissing it—just as he did in “From Wystan to Carlos”—as a self-defeating game to play:

There is . . . a feeling of abstraction about a succession of stories which insist on being ‘unreal’—because they become then mental exercises instead of records. It has to be a very interesting mind indeed before its exercises are worth watching. (AL 238)

The postscript to “From Wystan to Carlos” and the review of *The New Fiction* both express Stead's mixed response to postmodernist writers. He admires the talent that can produce such complex mind games, but becomes frustrated with the repetitive unreality of abstractions: “At its best this writing evokes my admiration and a certain pleasure, limited by the limits of my patience” (AL 239). To sum up the cumulative effect of reading postmodernist poetry and prose, Stead uses the same word in both articles: “boring” (GC 159; AL 238).

After this repudiation, one might expect no room for postmodernist techniques in Stead's own fiction. However, in his review of *The New Fiction*, Stead makes a distinction between pure postmodernists and those writers who combine its techniques with those of other modes: “I am not wanting to deride the avant garde in fiction. But it seems worth pointing out that where it succeeds it often uses what it may be thought to repudiate” (AL 239). Stead enjoys fiction that uses “narrative skill, however it may be disguised” (AL 240), and a ‘real,’ recognizable world to underlie any surreal flights of fancy. As examples, he singles out Ian Wedde and David Eggleton: “They are dynamic writers, moving through a landscape which is at once real and surreal . . .” (AL 240). One can see here the same kind of mixture of realist and surrealist elements that Stead praised in the poetry of Frank O'Hara: “that sort of middle ground I find very very ingratiating” (“Craft Interview” 465).

Stead's favourite *New Fiction* writers, therefore, are those who combine postmodernism with the older traditions. This emphasis parallels the new poets that Stead admired (and "plundered") in "From Wystan to Carlos" (*GC* 156); there he singled out David Mitchell and (again) Ian Wedde. Stead praises Mitchell for using a modernist framework of musical scoring and aggregation, which underlies "the contemporary influences" that, by themselves, Stead calls "pointless" (*GC* 240). Wedde also shows evidence of combining traditions:

Wedde has assimilated the poetic developments I've spoken of in order to give fuller expression to that forward rush of feeling which is native to himself. There is a momentum in his poetry which is fresh and exhilarating; and at the same time there is density of reference—objects, scenes, talk, people—so that there is never the sense that this is merely a mindscape. (*GC* 157)

This method of combining modes seems analogous to Stead's own use of postmodernist techniques, both in poems such as "Yes T.S." and in his fiction.

In relation to his fiction in particular, Stead avoids the approach of purist postmodernists, such as that of Wystan Curnow:

I part company with this author in what I want from fiction. I want it to be as complex and as self-conscious as need be to stay alive and fresh as an art in 1985. But I don't want it to stop doing what it has always done—telling stories, and seeming to convey some truth broader than its immediate subject. Wystan Curnow will have none of such falseness. (*AL* 239)

One might see an inconsistency between Stead's insistence here on "telling stories," and his earlier praise of writers who set aside 'story' in order to concentrate on "fiction." However, when Stead talks about 'story' in inverted commas he refers only to the conventional realist tale, not to the general "narrative skill" of telling a story. Stead sees the latter as breaking with convention, and requiring a "highly developed sense of narrative sequence. And by narrative sequence I mean an instinct for arousing a new interest / anticipation / expectation / appetite in the very act of satisfying one previously aroused" (*AL* 239).

In his fiction criticism, therefore, Stead rejects both purist postmodernism and purist realism. Nevertheless, that rejection does not stop him from using aspects of both modes in his own practice:

. . . I don't mean to imply that the old realist tradition in fiction seems to me good enough for all purposes. It doesn't—and in the fiction-writing I have done I have found myself again and again driven beyond it. But if realism fails it seems to me it fails in surrendering the real—the truth—the actual. One goes beyond realism in order to get nearer to reality, not to dispense with it. (AL 238)

In other words, in his fiction Stead wants to go “beyond” realism, but not as far as pure postmodernism. As in his poetry criticism, Stead looks for and praises a kind of “middle ground,” a location that avoids the conventions of the realist ‘story’ without resorting to the “mindscapes” of the postmodernist non-story. One can see the repetition of this argument in his long essay about “Narrativity” (1993), in which Stead states that the first principle of his own fiction “has been to keep the writing at some distance from what I’ve always thought of . . . as ‘conventional fiction’—not to abandon it altogether, since on the whole it’s what readers expect, but not ever to relax into it either” (213).

So while Stead generally divides fiction into modernism (“most successful”) and other modes (“weak,” “conventional,” “boring”), he sometimes qualifies those judgements and allows for the other to inform his practice. For example, in his introduction to *In the Glass Case*, Stead argues that “There are few critical absolutes” (9). Thus he ends his review of *The New Fiction* by asserting at least one positive influence for its stories:

. . . they arouse interesting questions about fiction itself. And the fact that that kind of questioning has gone on, and has carried into practice, should mean that fewer writers will feel free to sink back thoughtlessly into the old conventions of representation. . . . (AL 242)

One can see a similar openness in Stead's response to Janet Frame who, as he points out with some approbation, has been “writing new fiction all her life” (AL 237).

For instance, Stead begins his review of Frame's *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) by acknowledging and accepting its aspects of postmodernism:

The jacket describes it as 'a Novel' . . . though the description may arouse the wrong expectations. Perhaps it needs some classification like 'post-modernist fiction'—but that would suggest an exercise in theories Frame is probably indifferent to. She works by instinct, and what she offers is a mixed genre. (GC 130)

Stead admires Frame's fiction not for its adherence to any one mode, but for its offering "a mixed genre." One can see in this assessment an implicit recognition of post-purist practice, the resistance to classification that prevents authors such as Frame from being pushed into a single category. Stead underlines this point by also acknowledging Frame's use of realism:

A reader has to be flexible and open-minded to get the best out of Frame—to recognize that her fiction is not 'pure' because, as well as being the vehicle for ideas which another writer might segregate into separate essays, it challenges its own genre, questions its own 'reality', and finally collapses in upon itself. . . . (GC 133)

Thus Frame combines aspects of realism ("being the vehicle for ideas") with aspects of postmodernism ("it . . . questions its own 'reality'"), and Stead argues that in such a case "A reader has to be flexible."

Stead's own fiction can require the same kind of flexibility. While his criticism generally praises modernism to the exclusion of all other modes, his own practice often involves (like Frame's) "a mixed genre." Like a skilled outfielder, he sometimes manages to cover all the bases at the same time. However, that technique depends very much on what Stead calls "the pressures of the age" (GC 143). In other words, Stead's mixture of modes tends not to be settled, but varies with the times. Thus in the 1950s, his fiction leans towards realism. In the 1960s, under the influence of Borges, he experiments with metafiction and fantasy. Then, under the pressure of his feelings about the Vietnam War, Stead returns to the techniques of realism in *Smith's Dream*. One might expect, therefore, given the focus of Stead's fiction criticism in the 1970s—particularly his attention to Katherine Mansfield—that Stead's work after *Smith's Dream* would turn away from the realism of that novel.

#### 4. Covering All the Bases: From “Horses” to *The Death of the Body*.

After *Smith's Dream*, Stead published “Horses” (1972), a short sketch about the same length as “Girl Under the Plane Trees.” Unlike that early story, though, “Horses” marks a move towards the impressionist tradition in New Zealand fiction. Critics generally credit Katherine Mansfield with initiating this mode, and they characterize it as focussing not on realist anatomies of society, but on the private worlds and psyches of individuals. Lawrence Jones, for example, in his study of New Zealand prose, talks about the separation of the realist tradition of “barbed wire and cowpats” on the one hand (Mulgan, Sargeson, Shadbolt, Gee), from the impressionist tradition of “mirrors and interiors” on the other (Mansfield, Ashton-Warner, Frame, Shaw). Of course, this separation is not ironclad, and in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors* Jones posits a “realism / non-realism continuum” that allows for the shifting of writers from one mode to the other (228-29). Similarly Mark Williams, in *Leaving the Highway*, argues that even the work of founding figures such as Sargeson and Mansfield cannot be divided into completely separate traditions (21-22).

In “Horses” Stead makes his first real use of impressionist techniques. Until this point his narratives usually favoured the first person point of view, but avoided such impressionistic devices as free indirect thought and stream of consciousness. “Horses,” conversely, while it moves into the third person, uses both devices:

She didn't mind that she was lost. And she wasn't going to let herself—she wouldn't, she positively *wouldn't* think about the mess she'd run away from. But she supposed it must be creeping up on her. No it wasn't that. It couldn't be. Not here. Not in this place. It was hunger maybe. Oh and now she thought of it it wasn't hunger maybe it was hunger for sure. In letters a foot high. In lights. *Berruther!* She could eat a horse. And speaking of horses there were two in that field down there. . . .  
(107)

I don't want to make any great claims for this story; like “This Year in Auckland,” Stead did not collect it in *Five for the Symbol*. However, one might argue that both of these stories mark a radical move away the realism that dominates that volume, and may not have been included for that reason. Alternatively, perhaps Stead felt that his modernist leanings would be better represented by the much longer and more complex story, “The Town” (1974).

After the publication of "Horses," Stead revised the end of *Smith's Dream*, then he embarked upon another novel, but this time moving towards a modernist style of reticent imagism and rich allusion. The first fruits of this novel appeared in *Islands* (1974), under the title "Voiture d'Occasion (From a Novel in Progress)." No more was heard of this work until 1981, when it appeared as a long short story called "The Town" in *Five for the Symbol*. "The Town" travels over forty-five pages and five sections, somewhere between a short story and a novella. Stead dates the work at 1974, so clearly he carried on from "Voiture d'Occasion"—which, revised and retitled "Buying a Car," constitutes the first section of "The Town"—but felt that the material would not stretch into a novel. In this decision he might be seen as following the modernist principle of not forcing a text into a pre-set form, allowing it instead to take its own shape (what Stead sometimes calls "organic form").<sup>9</sup>

In any case, "The Town" feels like a modernist story. For example, the fifth section opens as follows:

Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge* in the Salle Garnier at Monte Carlo. Chopped children's voices and gobbled electronics, clicks, bumps, wails, trills, all stereophonically directed under a green light growing steadily brighter, bathing the auditorium. Everyone's flashback. The young in one another's arms. The old subdued or outraged.

I was thinking of the skins of tomatoes, how durable they are. (*FS* 102)

This kind of writing seems a long way from the linear progressions and transparent prose of *Smith's Dream*. Here the prose turns opaque, slowing readers down, forcing them to make imaginative leaps between seemingly unconnected items, or at least to store the images in the hope that they may eventually reappear, or connect with something elsewhere in the story.

Most of "The Town" operates through this modernist technique of aggregation, inviting the reader to pick a strand and follow it through. One might take up the Stockhausen

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<sup>9</sup>Stead makes a similar point in his introduction to the *Collected Stories* of Maurice Duggan: "Publishers want novels. . . . For the writer, on the other hand, there is the fiction he wants to write, and its proper length is determined internally. Like Katherine Mansfield, Duggan was always hoping to complete and publish a novel. Like her, he never succeeded, and the failure can be seen in both cases as a kind of artistic scrupulousness" (*GC* 108).

reference, and connect it to a poem in *Quesada* called “Stockhausen ‘Ylem’”; or one could link “*der Junglinge*” back to the narrator’s “reading Jung” and “recording my dreams in a notebook” (*FS* 90)—perhaps these scattered fragments represent just such a dream? Alternatively, one might trace an echo in “The young in one another’s arms” to a line in Yeats’s “Sailing To Byzantium.” In that poem, Yeats meditates upon the struggles that an aging man must face: he sees “The young / In one another’s arms” and thinks to himself that “That is no country for old men.”

One can also thread this line through to the end of the story. The narrator sees an old man lying in a coffin; then he sees his car die—quite literally—and decides “to go at once to Javine,” his young French lover. As the Yeats allusion foretold, the man confronted by his own mortality must deal with the double wound of seeing the young in one another’s arms:

The shutters were open. Colourless in the pewter light Javine’s dresses swayed from their hooks in the ceiling. Her crowd of scarves stirred on their stand. I stood at the bottom of the bed and looked at her. She was asleep. So was Raoul, her student friend, who lay beside her. She faced the wall. He faced her back, one arm lightly over her shoulder. I remembered noticing how their profiles seemed to match. (109)

The author does not explain why they “seemed to match,” other than in their profiles. This reticence leaves the reader to recall the Yeats allusion, and to extrapolate that the young fit together in ways that leave the older man marginalised. Both literally and in a Yeatsian sense, Raoul represents Javine’s countryman: he is young, single and French, whereas the narrator remains, as he says twice in the course of the story, “38, New Zealander, divorced” (65; 104).

As in his long poems, Stead scatters allusions and images throughout the story and—rather than explaining them—leaves them like seeds to germinate in the reader’s mind. This aggregation works together with the modernist technique of approximation, as can be seen in the ending of the story. Where “A Quality of Life” and *Smith’s Dream* ended with explicit conclusions and moral judgements, “The Town” closes with an ambiguous scene:

Half drowsing in the warmth of the wall I heard no footstep behind me, only felt a hand come down lightly on my shoulder. I opened my eyes, turning, I suppose hopefully, to see who it was.

'Ah mon cher,' Fabrice said. 'You are so indelibly Anglo-Saxon. But never mind, mon ami. The sun is shining, the town is still here. Come and have a drink with me and tonight I will take you to a little place . . . .' (109-10; Stead's ellipsis)

What happens to the narrator, and what does the ending 'mean'? His lover has left him for another man, his friends (along with his unrequited love) have left and gone to Paris. All that remains is the narrator and what he started with: the title of the story.

Then Fabrice appears and promises that "tonight I will take you to a little place . . . ." The vagueness of this phrase and its ellipsis invites the reader to question its meaning. On one level, the ending might be taken literally. Throughout the story, Fabrice intervenes and saves Rod Miller from loneliness and himself. Fabrice takes Miller sailing on a rich friend's yacht, invites him to parties, rescues him from penury at a Monte Carlo gaming table, gives him free tickets to the lemon festival, and helps him to bed when he drinks too much. In this context, the ending might just provide one more instance of Fabrice to the rescue. Of course, the ending could also be read ironically: the narrator spends most of the story chasing, obsessing and dreaming about women—always looking around "hopefully"—only to end up alone with a homosexual man.

On another level, though, the ending could constitute a metatextual diversion. Fabrice—whose name suggests the fabrication that goes with story-telling—has earlier been associated with the creation of this tale. In the fourth section, the narrator falls asleep at his table, knocks his typewriter to the floor, and dreams of making love to Javine. Fabrice comes to the narrator in that dream with a piece of advice about his writing: "'If you don't believe what you write,' he said, 'who else will believe it?'" (94). In this instance, once again, Fabrice's phrase feels ambiguous: it might be taken as encouragement or criticism. So when Fabrice offers to take the narrator "to a little place," does he mean a small room with a typewriter; has Stead enshrined the beginning of his story in this end?

Shifting to a biographical level, one might argue that in some ways Fabrice represents a Frank Sargeson figure. This figure appears a number of times in Stead's work as an older, friendly, generous homosexual man, who offers food, lodgings, and advice about writing. He arises in the character of Melior Farbro in *All Visitors Ashore*; he can also be seen in the character of Furius in Stead's Catullus poems. Like Fabrice, all three figures have a name that echoes "Frank" by starting with the letter "F." Along with these parallels goes the sexual tension that the narrator (usually a younger man) feels but tries to ignore. In *All Visitors Ashore*, for example, Farbro places a heavy emphasis on "the right way" to go about things, a hint that "Curl Skidmore knows, half-knows, has picked up but won't let himself quite recognize it, won't do more than glance at it obliquely. . . (3). Like Miller in "The Town," Curl does not know how to react; like Fabrice, Farbro sees the younger man's confusion and fear, yet continues to extend his kindness and assistance.

However, perhaps the final phrase of "The Town" moves beyond literal, metatextual and biographical resonances to embrace a more psychological meaning. "Come and have a drink with me and I will take you to a little place . . . ." takes on Freudian overtones if the reader considers that Rod Miller has been in 'tight spots' with Fabrice before. In section three, for instance, Miller feels unsure and—in typically uptight New Zealand male fashion—afraid that Fabrice has touched him in a way that might be construed as sexual: "I was standing in the street wondering what I should make of the invitation. Had he really squeezed my hand, or had I imagined it? He looked up, and seeing my face, he laughed" (88). Fabrice may even have kissed Miller after the party at which the latter got too drunk to see straight (so to speak): "I was dozing again. 'Sleep tight,' he said, and I thought he bent over the bed and kissed me on the mouth" (82).

Placed in this context, the final phrase of the story deconstructs into a series of double entendres in which readers—and possibly Miller, given his earlier reactions—feel unsure whether they have heard Fabrice correctly. "I will take you" becomes a threat (or a promise), while the words "come," "have" and "drink with me" become at once sensual

and sexual. Finally, the “little place,” with its accompanying ellipsis, implies what Miller had earlier feared and dreamed:

. . . worst of all was the nightmare in which I myself was tied to the post, and while Hironnelle stamped up and down in an officer’s uniform, impatiently looking at his watch and smacking the leg of his trousers with a swagger-stick, the executioner unmasked himself and came towards me. It was Fabrice Giovanni. ‘Comme la mort est belle,’ he said—and he kissed me on the mouth. (91-92)

Of course, the emphatically heterosexual Miller represents the scene as a “nightmare,” the “worst of all.” His dream links Fabrice with S & M undertones, with the ropes, the mask and the lash of the “swagger-stick.” Tied to a “post,” the phallically named “Rod” faces a kind of “death”—one of the oldest sexual metaphors in literature.

Thus the ending of this story—in sharp contrast to the endings of *Smith’s Dream* and “A Quality of Life”—creates an ambiguous array of possibilities. A gap opens up in the text, inviting readers to drive through it, and to carry away whatever load they think appropriate. In other words, “The Town” does not provide a realist vehicle with a preset tonnage, but lets the reader determine its weight capacity. In this kind of text, readers can never be sure what the story means, but they can be certain that they have had a hand in creating that meaning. By 1974, Stead had turned away from the closure of realism and had begun to write fiction in a more open, modernist fashion. As he would later state in his introduction to the *Collected Stories* of Maurice Duggan (1980), Stead felt that “Much of New Zealand fiction . . . was devoted to a mixture of documentary and moralizing. These are legitimate pursuits, but the language of fiction can do other, and more” (GC 121).

One can infer from this statement that, for all his privileging of modernism, Stead still felt in 1980 that realism might be a “legitimate pursuit.” As in his discussion of open and closed forms in poetry, Stead tries not to close off any options: “I don’t want either possibility to be closed off, and I don’t see why anybody should want either possibility to be closed off” (“Conversation” 49). So, while the probability of Stead turning back to realism seems remote, one can never rule out that chance.

Hence Stead's next two short stories—"A New Zealand Elegy" (1979) and "Concerning Alban Ashtree" (1983)—can be placed at opposite ends of the realism / non-realism continuum. As Lawrence Jones points out in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors*, "'A New Zealand Elegy' is anchored firmly in a realistically presented Auckland, and is a variant on the common New Zealand realist story of sexual initiation . . ." (229). Set at the end of the 1940s, the story enacts an "Elegy" for the New Zealand of that period:

Those were the years of the Cold War. The excitements of the real war had gone; so had the political idealism of the thirties. The Left was in retreat. I didn't understand it then but I felt it. The defeat of Labour after fourteen years in office was like a family tragedy. But what troubled me more was the feeling that my father had been defeated too, in himself. It was as if his manhood had been undermined at the very moment when my own was arriving. (*FS* 148)

Here the narrator explains problems and draws conclusions, both about his family and the society of the time. This piece of writing sounds very similar to an essay that Stead wrote in 1974, "A Poet's View," in which he looked back on "New Zealand, where 1949 saw the defeat of Labour" (*GC* 264):

As the fifties went on there was some recovery of the political idealism of those pre-war years, but not enough to shake the predominant conservatism. . . . To emerge in 1951 from the silent wastes of the volcanic suburbs on to an intellectual scene had to be exciting, even if the intellectuals themselves were in retreat and political and literary radicalism was exhausted. I didn't see then what I see now. . . . (*GC* 264)

In "A New Zealand Elegy," therefore, Stead does what he later criticizes David Malouf for doing: allowing the judgements and explanations of essay-writing to enter his fiction. At the end of the story the narrator judges both himself—"I was young and puritanical and unappeased" (164)—and his situation: "Everything was dark and ugly, there was nothing to be said or done and nowhere to go" (167).

This situation comes about through the death of his close friend, Ian. Throughout the story, Ian takes the narrator on illicit rides at high speeds ("up to sixty and beyond"), first in his grandfather's Rover and then on his own Norton motorcycle. They wrestle with each other and various girlfriends, experience movies, dances, and fights, and go "camping on the

West Coast” north of Auckland. At the end of the story, Ian dies alone on the Norton in a road accident, and the narrator analyses his own pain: “I could feel the tears pushing into my own eyes now. There was such a sense of ugliness, of defeat” (167). A similar loss—and its attendant mourning—occurs in one of Stead’s Catullus poems:

Ianus I’m camped a hundred yards from your bones.  
 The moths attack the lantern and die as surely  
 as you did on that asphalt strip near home  
 we used to burn up with our eager wheels.  
 Defeated in love and in my dearest ambitions  
 I’ve come to visit one who took the last blow first.  
 The world’s sweetest when it offers us nothing.  
 Remember our eel-trap that summer polio closed  
 the schools and drove us north? These tears are happy.  
 I wish you manuka on the eternal winds.  
 ‘So long’ we used to say, not knowing what it meant. (*Geog* 73)

Here Ian becomes “Ianus,” and the tears become “happy,” perhaps because the narrative takes place in a different context, at a greater remove from the event.

So the narrator of “A New Zealand Elegy” elegizes his friend Ian, as well as his family and the society of his youth. From another perspective, however, the story might also be read as an elegy (and a tribute) to the realist tradition in New Zealand fiction. In writing this story, Stead could be seen as celebrating a way of living, thinking and writing that had dominated his youth. Whatever its sources, one can place the “Elegy”—along with Stead’s mid-1970s sonnets—as a kind of seam realism. As Stead said of those poems: “I’m quite glad to have written them. . . . I’m not rejecting them, but they are not central to what I see as my own line of development” (“Craft Interview” 450).

In direct contrast to this conventional realism, “Concerning Alban Ashtree” employs modernist techniques; it also moves towards metafiction, linguistic games and a playful questioning of the relationship between fiction and reality. As such, this story represents a paradigm of Stead’s “own line of development” in the 1980s. In his fiction of this period, Stead returns to the techniques that he first experimented with in the 1960s, developing and extending them in novels such as *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) and *The Death of the Body*

(1986). "Concerning Alban Ashtree" also makes a foray into surrealism (though this aspect seems less "central," and does not appear in the novels). Once more, an extension of technique occurs: Stead does not simply repeat the surrealism of background that he used in "Auckland Diary," or the surrealism of action that he used in "A Fitting Tribute"—this time the very personality of the central character becomes doubtful, phasing in and out like an unreliable hologram.

At the start of the story, a "Distinguished Visitor" (who appears to be a poet / professor from New Zealand) goes to a Canadian university to lecture on literature and teach creative writing "for just a few months" (292). He seems to have been to Denmark recently—but he begins to confuse his own experience with that of the man whose office he has taken, the Canadian poet / professor, Alban Ashtree. Stead forces the reader to ask a series of questions: is the Distinguished Visitor "Helmet Schmidt" (293), "Professor Blow" (296), or some kind of doppelgänger that assumes the lingering traces of Alban Ashtree? Even the narrator seems figuratively and literally unsure of himself:

She was wearing a coat with a fur-lined collar and in the half light it reminded me of something out of my past—or was it out of the forbidden filing cabinet? (already I'm uncertain). I was in Denmark in the late autumn, a little snow was falling and I was standing outside a discotheque called Locomotion with a lady whose name was Bodil. We had been dancing in the discotheque—God knows why. Bodil was a respectable bourgeois Danish lady with a husband. . . . But I had been a visitor (Distinguished?—yes, I think so) and she had been entertaining me. (299)

The narrator suggests that his memories might be something that happened to Ashtree, the owner of the office's "forbidden filing cabinet". Here markers of uncertainty ("already I'm uncertain"; "yes, I think so") appear in parentheses, but soon they invade the text itself:

I'm suspicious of that voluptuous filing cabinet. . . . Have I ever been to Denmark? Did I ever know a bourgeois lady called Bodil who danced like a demon and refused to kiss me in the snow? Was it part of something dreamed last night (when I woke and couldn't remember the geography of my apartment) or am I right in recalling someone telling me that Ashtree's itinerary will take him to Scandinavia? (300)

This kind of uncertainty produces an almost Pynchonesque paranoia until, by the end of the story, one cannot be sure who the narrator is or where he has been.

Similarly, the Canadian Ms Libby Valtraute starts to run together with the Danish Bodil, Schmidt's "girl student" (292), and Ashtree's "Snow Maiden." The narrator sees her in a movie theatre and she shifts in the half light: "Ms Valtraute . . . has set me thinking of Danish Bodil whom I hugged (or was it Ashtree hugged her?) in the snow . . ." (300). In a twist on Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, she then seems to go into the action onscreen, leaving her coat behind: "it sits facing forward and doesn't move. It's possible (anything is possible) she has vacated it" (301). A parallel shift occurs when the narrator sits "at Alban Ashtree's desk reading a poem sequence by Alban Ashtree" and discovers that "It's about Death and the Snow Maiden. He longs for Death. He longs for the Snow Maiden" (302). Perhaps because "anything is possible," or because he "longs" for her, the narrator looks up from the poem and Ms Valtraute appears outside his window, in the snow. At the end of the story, he thinks of her as "My Snow Maiden!"; she in turn begins calling him "Alban" (308). To his ears, she seems to call him "All Bran," and with a postmodern slippage the narrator becomes a commodity, the brand name of a popular breakfast cereal.

This kind of slippage dominates the story. Indeed, Stead appears to have structured this text a little like a game of (in the words of Monty Python) "word association football." Each section contains an image, word or allusion that runs over into the next section, kick-starting a series of connections that seem somewhat circular, sometimes surreal, and almost always amusing.

For example, in one section a Canadian professor tells the narrator about "Margaret Trudeau having sex in a car with Jack Nicholson" (305). As if prompted by this detail, the next section contains Ashtree having sex with Bodil in a "big German Ford" (306). This coincidence forces the reader to wonder if the latter actually happens, or if it occurs because the narrator has the event suggested to him, and he merely imagines it taking place. Stead sows more uncertainty in this area by having the narrator wrap himself up in "a big old German tweed coat" and think of himself as "looking like a big old German" (293). In this

context, perhaps the “big German Ford” constitutes wishful thinking, a hope on the lonely narrator’s part to get some warmth from more than just a coat.

These kind of “word association” connections appear with such regularity that they become one of the few certainties in the story. For instance, when the narrator gets seduced by ardent feminist Libby Valtraute, he comments “Why resist the flow of history, especially when it offers to irrigate the desert?” (308). In this metaphor, he echoes the many arguments offered by a writer called Stead in relation to modernism and the influence of Ezra Pound. Then, as if by coincidence, at the start of the following section the narrator gives a lecture on Pound that contains “of course something about the flow of history, and the pointlessness of setting your face against it. As I say this my eyes wander over the audience towards Libby Valtraute . . .” (308). Similarly, Stead follows the section containing the Danish discotheque called “Locomotion” with a fire alarm in Quinton, where “soon we’re all drinking and dancing, the flashing red and orange lights of the firetruck turning the lobby into a disco. This is the Locomotion again” (301).<sup>10</sup>

This kind of slippage / linkage, in which Stead employs linguistic traces as a structural device between different sections, also occurs within individual sections. For example, one section begins with the narrator going for a jog in his apartment building (it being too cold to jog outside):

The building is circular, you understand, with elevators running up the middle. When you step out of an elevator you’re at the still centre, with green carpet . . . —longer haired, but matching the apartment in colour. . . . Encircling this central space runs the corridor off which the apartments open. So I listened out for the bells that would warn me if the lift was stopping at my floor and included that circular corridor in my run. It made for some fine turns of speed and a little excitement. (303; emphases added)

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<sup>10</sup>“Quinton,” with its deep river valley running through the city, its “campus . . . across the river” (292), and its “minus 27 celsius” (293), sounds very like Edmonton, Alberta. As Reginald Berry points out in his article “A Deckchair of Words: Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism, and the Novel of Self-Projection in Canada and New Zealand,” this story was “written after Stead’s sojourn as Distinguished Visitor to the University of Alberta” (319).

This paragraph simply describes a building and an event, nothing unusual in itself—but the next paragraph picks out the detail of a green, long-haired surface and plays a riff on it:

And in the library on Saturday afternoon I found a copy of a New Zealand literary magazine. It was called *Landslide*, of course (or was it *Eyeful*?) and there was a story about two young men on motorbikes riding through the long green-haired countryside south of Auckland. An *Easy Rider* kind of story—one of those up-to-the-minute fictions by writers who deny themselves (or is it just that they don't see them?) every little gem of coincidence or connexion turned over in the path of their wandering furrow. (303; emphases added)

As well as riffing on certain words, Stead performs a little wordplay on the titles of two of New Zealand's major literary magazines: *Landfall* and *Islands*.

He then returns to the previous paragraph, plucks out the words “circular” and “corridor,” and riffs on those concepts:

In a pub along the way they're goaded by a bully into a fight and one of the two smashes a bottle over the head of their tormentor. They vanish into the night and ride away on their powerful bikes leaving they don't know what, but maybe a corpse, behind. And of course that's all about that. There's no connexion with what happens next, no thread to be taken up later, because this is life, man. A slice of life. No phony plot. No circular corridor bringing you back where you started. (303-04; emphases added)

Here the narrator criticizes postmodern techniques even as he indulges in them. His criticism of 'the new fiction' gets jokingly contradicted by his 'real life' experience in the previous paragraph, where the narrator jogged around a “circular corridor” that brought him back to where he had started. In this way, Stead reveals the “slice of life” experience as just another literary construct, one that deliberately sets out to have “no connexion with what happens next.” In doing so, he puts in as many connections as he can, to highlight the artificiality of both methods.

By way of a coup de grace, Stead then draws an analogy between the apparently plotless “up-to-the-minute fiction” and the plot-bound clichés of the Western movie genre:

Reading it I translated it into a Western movie. Two cowboys ride into a town on their way home after a long absence. In a saloon someone picks a fight with them and our

hero—former lover of the waiting girl—is called. He’s reluctant, of course, but fast (yep), and when the bad guy draws he shoots him dead. They sink their whiskies and ride on out of town. They return to the beautiful girl on the ranch, and soon she’s falling in love again with our hero, whose presence makes her recognize she hasn’t ever loved the man she’s engaged to marry. But then comes the word that her fiancé has been shot dead in a saloon gunfight and that the killer and his friend rode away into the night.

Now write on . . . (304; Stead’s ellipsis)

This paragraph contains traces of an earlier section, where the narrator translates a couple’s conversation into a Western movie convention: “She’s shy and never raises her voice . . . and Eugene Fish covers for her with quick loud quips, like a back-up gun in a Western movie” (295). The story crosses its own path over and over, like a tenderfoot lost in the desert and marvelling that he never meets the owners of all these footprints. This section also ends on a three-way wordplay: “ride on” spoken to the cowboys; “right on” delivered, with an ounce of irony, to the groovy 1970s hipsters (“this is life, man”); and “write on” addressed to the author—an injunction both to the narrator of “Concerning Alban Ashtree” to continue on to the next section, and to the author of the *Easy Rider* story which Stead views as incomplete.<sup>11</sup> Stead may also be addressing the readers of his story, because his techniques invite readers to take a hand in creating the text that lies before them, to “write on . . .” in their own way.

The whole story becomes a criss-crossing web of connections, woven together in an often humorous and highly self-conscious way. Elizabeth Smither, in her 1986 article about “The New Zealand Short Story,” asserts that in the area of humour “the best prospect is undoubtedly Stead; his is the writing with the most pace and the likeliest to blend new elements with ease” (72). One might argue with Smither’s use of absolute terms, such as “undoubtedly” and “the best,” but her analysis of Stead’s technique—the way he blends “new elements” into his fiction—seems a useful summary.

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<sup>11</sup>This *Easy Rider* story bears many resemblances to a short story called “Winter Riders,” written by Michael Gifkins and published in *Islands* (“or was it *Eyeful?*”) in 1973. However, the correspondences are not exact: Stead leaves out the implications of incest, adds a previous connection between the friend and the sister, and turns an assault into a “fight.” However, my focus is not on Stead’s fidelity to the original, but what he makes of it in his own story.

For instance, one of those “new elements” appears in the resurgence (beginning in the 1960s and peaking in the 1980s) of metafiction. This technique can be seen in “Concerning Alban Ashtree,” where the whole narrative gets called into question by Stead’s use of metafictional devices. The narrator suggests in the opening sentence of the story that what follows cannot be taken as ‘real’: “On the bus this evening I thought ‘Anything can look like a movie of itself—i.e. unreal’. Can I recover the buoyancy of that thought?” (292). He then offers an example:

What was the movie I seemed to see myself cast in as I came out . . . to catch my bus into Quinton? It was of course a North American campus movie. A student—a girl student—with pink fingers searching for her bus pass ought to have accidentally spilled the contents of her bag on my lap. . . . She discovers I am a visitor. Not the Distinguished Visitor, Helmet Schmidt? I admit it’s so. She’s so pleased she tells me at once about her boyfriend. He was supposed to meet her this evening. Didn’t show up. Unreliable. She agrees to have dinner with me. Later in the week (to condense this tedious and trivial narrative) we go skiing together and finish up in a chalet naked in a barrel of hot water soaping each other’s nipples . . . (292-93)

After offering this “campus movie,” and what “ought to have” happened in that genre, the narrator highlights its aesthetic unreality: it involves a series of conventions that, through repetition, have come to seem “tedious and trivial.”

Having pointed out the scene’s aesthetic unreality, he then points out its actual unreality:

No student fell into my lap this evening, none spoke to me or recognized me as the Distinguished Visitor Helmet Schmidt. I don’t complain of this nor believe it ought to have been otherwise. I note only that it is these little divergences that make the reality of the movie, or (as this evening) the reality of reality (you take your choice according to mood, circumstance, and that buoyancy I spoke of) unreal. (293)

In this way the author prevents readers from suspending their disbelief and relaxing into the conventions of realist fiction. Rather than offering a narrative, Stead offers the possibility of narrative, repeatedly drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of that story as it proceeds, winds back upon itself, and tries to proceed once more. Stead even has the narrator question his own dramatic (or “picturesque”) climax:

I’m drifting towards and away from sleep, asking myself could anyone be called Alban Ashtree and die so alliterative a death—in an avalanche in the Austrian Alps?

Are there Alps in Austria? Or, on the other hand, if it's all real and true, could it really be accidental? Has Ashtree designed a picturesque end for himself? (309)

Has Ashtree died? Did he ever actually leave? Even his colleagues begin commenting on the narrator's "resemblance to Alban Ashtree." They tell him that he acts in ways that are, "they assure me, 'pure Alban'" (309).

I have spent a lot of time on the method of "Concerning Alban Ashtree" because it provides something of a blueprint for Stead's next two works of fiction. Both novels, *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) and *The Death of the Body* (1986), use a similar approach to that of "Concerning Alban Ashtree." Both shift towards modernism, and both manage to "blend new elements with ease," incorporating a large number of postmodernist techniques. The surrealism may fade—Elizabeth Smither even suggests that the Distinguished Visitor's "surrealism rises out of hypothermia" ("The New Zealand Short Story" 71)—but Stead's move towards metafiction, linguistic games and a playful questioning of the relationship between fiction and reality persists and increases in these two texts.

In *All Visitors Ashore*, Stead signals this interest even before he commences chapter one. The dedication reads, narrative tongue firmly in cheek, "To whom it may concern." This linguistic game takes the convention of dedicating a novel "to" a particular person, mixes it with the conventional opening of a form letter, and leaves the reader with both a wry smile and a sense of inclusion. The phrase embraces both the person "concerned" with the book (the reader who has picked it up), and the people that it "concerns" (the many historical figures who appear in its pages).<sup>12</sup> This playful approach sets the tone for the text that follows: a novel full of metatextual jokes and constantly aware of—and drawing the reader's attention to—conventions both in literature and in language.

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<sup>12</sup>For a list of the "obvious connections . . . between real people and events and those in the novel," see Reginald Berry's article "A Deckchair of Words" (319). Berry also points out that simply to equate Frank Sargeson with Melior Farbro, or Janet Frame with Cecelia Skyways, or Karl Stead with Curl Skidmore "is ultimately to radically under-read the novel."

Set in Auckland in 1951, the novel focuses on a small artistic community on the North Shore. The background involves the Waterfront Dispute of that year, which led to a lockout, a riot and a snap election.<sup>13</sup> The foreground concerns a young student called Curl Skidmore who—embarking on his third year in the local university’s arts faculty—writes poetry, wants to write novels, and lives with his lover Pat in a flat on Takapuna Beach. As such, the novel incorporates aspects of Auckland in 1955, a period that Stead predicted, in “A Letter to Frank Sargeson” (1978), that he would “one day” write a book about:

There is a whole book, a novel perhaps, to be made out of just one year, 1955, when Kay and I lived in a glassed-in veranda right on Takapuna beach, Janet Frame was writing *Owls Do Cry* in the hut behind your house, and you were working on your plays. (GC 48)

Stead’s novel fictionalizes these people and events, creating a fluid mixture of fiction and fact. Michael Morrissey, in his introduction to *The New Fiction*, defines this device as the postmodernist technique of “faction” (63-64). Another postmodernist tactic appears in Stead’s metafictional narrator: writing from a narrative present of 1981, the older Curl (now a professor at Auckland University) frequently interrupts his narrative in order to discuss the way that he writes it or, conversely, the way that he chooses not to write it.

Two distinct types of metafiction occur in this book. The first involves imaginary conversations between the narrator and his characters. For example, the narrator may ask a character for their opinion, as when he questions Pat about a sexual ritual:

It was your favourite wasn’t it, Patagonia? Why the silence? Are you refusing to answer?  
 Since this is going on inside your head Curlyboy, it’s up to you whether I answer or not. (AVA 8-9)

Similarly, the narrator may ask a character to verify certain ‘facts,’ as when the older Curl goes to the younger Curl to confirm his version of Pat’s abortion:

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<sup>13</sup>For a detailed account see Lawrence Jones’s 1994 essay “From Fretful Sleepers to Juice Extractors: Versions of the 1951 Waterfront Dispute in New Zealand Writing, 1952-1986.”

Accept no imitations (there are some). This is the real story. As you will see we have gone to the only available source for the truth. So here is Takapuna beach empty at perhaps 2 a.m. and here is Curl Skidmore carrying a soaked towel and a bowl of blood. Could we just check on that Curl.

It was a bowl of blood?

It was an old po lent me for the occasion by Nathan Stockman. (132)

Stead conducts the whole scene like a parody of a television interview, particularly the kind of news item where a member of the media thrusts a microphone at someone who has just suffered a great loss or a disturbing emotional trauma. At the same time, Stead performs a little intertextual jab at a fellow author: his intimation about “imitations (there are some)” probably refers to Janet Frame’s short story, “The Triumph of Poetry” (1963).<sup>14</sup>

Another aspect of these ‘conversations’ occurs when a character initiates them. This variation involves characters stepping out of the text, in order to interrogate the narrator on some point that concerns them. For instance, when the narrator describes Patagonia de Thierry Aorewa Bennett as “sunk in a chocolate silence impenetrable to the European eye” (50), she politely waits until he finishes his paragraph, and then intervenes to lodge a protest:

Are you there Early?

That’s Pat. It’s you isn’t it? Pat?

Aorewa. I think I stopped being Pat a quarter of a century ago.

Aorewa. Correction noted. Welcome. You can call me Urlich.

Urlich. OK Early, got it. But look—I have one or two objections. Do you mind?

Objections? But you told me it was all going on inside my head.

You’d prefer I went.

No don’t go. Pat? Aorewa? Are you there? Fuck it why don’t you use a telephone? (52)

The omission of speech marks and the whimsical reference to a telephone reveal that this exchange occurs inside the narrator’s head, thirty years after the event, with Aorewa gone to Europe and not actually in contact with Curl Skidmore anymore. But in fiction (as the narrator of “Concerning Alban Ashtree” points out) “anything is possible”:

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<sup>14</sup>In that story, a university student writes poetry and lives with his lover in “a tiny flat,” “so close to the beach” (*The Reservoir* 221). His lover becomes pregnant and decides on a backstreet abortion (222-23), the same course of action chosen by Pat in *All Visitors Ashore*. According to David Young in “The Tenants of Fiction” (1984), “Frame acknowledges that more than 25 years ago Stead took exception to . . . *The Triumph of Poetry*” (33).

So now—you have some objections.  
 Only if you're interested.  
 I'm interested.  
 I mean in getting at the truth. The facts.  
 The truth. The facts. They're not quite the same sweetheart. But fire away. I'm listening.  
 You're not taking me seriously Oilrich.  
 All ears. Pencil's at the ready.  
 I know that tone.  
 Ao please.  
 Well to start with 'Sunk in a chocolate silence' . . .  
 OK so you weren't chocolate.  
 Not even milk chocolate Early.  
 True. But I've said somewhere else you were olive-skinned.  
 So what are your readers going to think? One minute I'm olive, the next I'm chocolate. (52-53; Stead's ellipsis)

Stead catches the barbed shorthand that can occur when ex-lovers confront each other after a gap of many years: the instantly recognized tones of voice, the sometimes unconscious use of old pet names and the deliberately ironic use of terms such as "sweetheart." Behind this realistic surface, however, the reader sees a fiction (Curl) talking to a fiction of a fiction (his imagined ghost of Pat) about fiction (Curl's 'book') within fiction (Stead's book).

This character's intervention forces the reader to question a number of details in the preceding paragraph, particularly the narrator's presentation of female characters such as Pat and "the momma." In this way Stead undercuts the narrator's supposedly authoritative version, and reveals something about Curl's attitudes towards women:

And what about the momma. She was small.  
 She seemed pretty big to me.  
 She was small Early. She was fat but she was small. And why have you given her that Katzenjammer accent?  
 It's how I hear her in my head.  
 She didn't talk like that.  
 So the momma in my head has a Katzenjammer accent, the momma in yours hasn't. It's what I mean about the facts and the truth. They're not always the same.  
 (53)

By the end of this dialogue, readers possess another matrix through which to view the text. They have been led to question Curl's imagery, but they can also see that perhaps not all of Pat's "objections" can be sustained. As Jean-Pierre Durix notes in his article about *All*

*Visitors Ashore*, “The novel is like a vast theatre play in which the stage director intervenes to discuss with the actors how the plot should or might have developed” (118).

The second variety of metafiction in *All Visitors Ashore* can be seen in embryo in some of Stead’s early short stories, such as “This Year in Auckland” or “A Quality of Life.” This kind of metatextual intervention occurs when the narrator interrupts himself in order to ‘reshoot’ a scene, or to reassess the nature of a scene that he has written (or is trying to write). The opening of chapter five explores most aspects of this technique:

So if Chapter Five should be done professionally, by what I’ve heard called ‘a fully paid-up novelist’, it might begin as follows:  
 ‘Pass me the butter, Cecil,’ said Melior.  
 They were sitting on either side of the counter. . . .  
 ‘It’s what I want,’ she said—and clearly she was not referring to the butter. . . .

At this stage one might point out that Michael Gifkins (the author of “Winter Riders,” which Stead satirized in “Concerning Alban Ashtree”) once said to Stead “I don’t think of you as a fully paid-up fiction writer” (“Craft Interview” 455). One might also point out that Stead closes his review of *The New Fiction* by referring elliptically to this piece of dialogue: “that kind of questioning . . . should mean that fewer writers will feel free to sink back thoughtlessly into the old conventions of representation, as if “Pass me the butter,” said Margery’ was a secure, unambiguous and necessarily meaningful mode of discourse” (AL 242).

However, the focus of this scene lies not in its implicit intertextuality, but in its explicit metatextuality. After a long dialogue between Melior and Cecelia, the narrator intervenes and exposes the conventions of “fully paid-up fiction” as fully played-out:

This was not the first time it had been discussed. For weeks now they had . . .  
 And so the narrative, having begun concretely and dramatically, with the butter to lend authenticity, and with dialogue which did not fully explain itself and thus had the flavour of the real, would now track back and fill in what had not been explained. . . .  
 Such an account would be thoroughly professional. But perhaps the character of Cecelia Skyways, lying as it does a little to the east or perhaps to the south of that norm of the normally abnormal which is the province of professional fiction, might in any case slip through every net put out for it. . . . (AVA 71-72)

“Professional” and “fully paid-up” fiction sounds, from this description, very much like New Zealand realism. In that mode, the narrator would “track back and fill in what had not been explained,” putting out “nets” for any unexplained details and sticking carefully to conventions, such as the “norm of the normally abnormal.” Stead wants to avoid such established literary types; he wants the complexity of real people, not a preset “norm.”

He also wants to avoid the explanations of realism, and so his characterizations tend to emerge out of a modernist, presentative method. For instance, the narrator presents Curl’s foibles alongside his endearing habits, without judging either set of actions. Curl does not constitute a conventional hero, with amazing insight and a jaw to match, but a human being; when confused or distressed (as he often seems to be) he turns to music or food:

And U.A. Skidmore, third-year student, woke from this particular reverie to find himself once again in the kitchen unscrewing the lid of the peanut butter jar and staring . . . blindly out at the rain that seemed to be easing. Did he imagine he would find whether ‘atelier’ was masculine or feminine by opening the peanut butter jar?— and he screwed the lid shut again. (105)

Most readers will recognize these symptoms of stress. Later in the novel, though, when Curl faces problems larger than those of French grammar, peanut butter will not be enough. As he waits for Pat and the election results, Curl pulls out the big guns of housework, music and haute cuisine to occupy his mind and assuage his “nervousness”:

You had the outhouse flat clean and tidy. . . . You spent the day reading and playing records—those old 78s of Beniamino Gigli singing ‘La Donna e Mobile’ and ‘Salve Dimora casta e pura’ . . . and of course the Wagnermusic. . . . And as the day wore on you got more and more nervous because you were worrying about the election result or because Pat hadn’t turned up. . . . You made pan-fried rice and oysters, enough for you both, and as the first election results came over the radio and she hadn’t come you began to eat it, meaning to leave half in case she should arrive later in the evening, but in your nervousness you ate it all. (142-43)

He tidies, he tries to read, he plays music, he eats (and eats), he “did a lot of walking up and down,” he talks to the moon. The narrator never judges Curl, never steps in and says ‘he was a good chap at heart, he really worried the whole day through.’ Stead simply presents Curl’s emotions through his actions, and echoes them with a rambling and jumpy sentence structure.

He also implies—ever so lightly—that Curl got himself into this situation: the last time the reader saw oysters and opera together, Curl was caught by Pat in (amongst other things) the arms of his adulterous soprano neighbour Felice. So while a mixture of irony and sympathy underlies this presentation, the narrator avoids any direct statement of either.

On the occasions when the narrator does try to sum up a character, that character often rebels. For example, when the narrator says that Curl “is full of some unresolved and swelling emotion, part fear, part horror, part guilt,” Curl himself objects:

Look here, aren't you laying it on?  
 Is that not what you felt?  
 I was prone to melodrama.  
 So you didn't, as reported, feel a sense of sin?  
 How do we know what we feel? We find words for what we think we feel and that  
 puts a limit on it. Perhaps falsifies . . .  
 Thank you for that reminder. (133; Stead's ellipsis)

The narrator probably feels a bit miffed at this interruption, but despite his sarcastic thanks, one can see here a repetition of his own argument with Pat about the difference between “the facts and the truth” (53). The facts may have been that Curl was carrying a bowl of his lover's blood to the sea, but the truth of his feelings on such an occasion cannot be explained by anybody, even his older self. As Curl reminds the narrator about the limits of words, Stead reminds the reader about the limits of this text. A realist text such as “A New Zealand Elegy” might tell the reader when a character feels pain, feels aggrieved, or feels “young and puritanical and unappeased,” but one cannot expect such didactic summaries from a novel that concentrates on modernist and postmodernist techniques.

Like this method of characterization, Stead's approach to political issues in *All Visitors Ashore* tends towards a modernist, presentative method. He may have disliked Sid Holland's autocratic government, he may have worried about the Emergency Regulations (which were still on the books at the time he wrote the novel), but neither of these issues get the didactic treatment that he gave them in *Smith's Dream*. As Lawrence Jones comments in “From Fretful Sleepers to Juice Extractors,” “Although Stead's novel represents the historical

experience of the Dispute and the personal lives that take place in front of it, it refuses to allow us to read itself as traditional historical realism” (153). Jones goes on to list the use of postmodernist techniques such as “Stead’s narrator calling attention to his own artifice,” and modernist techniques such as the filmic “series of quick cuts,” as reasons why this novel reads “unlike works of critical realism” (153-54). In Jones’s view, Stead still draws upon a realist tradition, but in this novel ‘the flavour of the real’ gets “placed against his own more discontinuous and interior method” (154). Like Mark Williams, Jones argues that realism persists in Stead’s later fiction, “though modified and distanced in a new situation” (153).

This three-way mixture of modes can be seen in a single image from chapter one, where Curl walks along the beach and sees a woman walking towards him:

... he registers that it is Felice, the wife of Nathan Stockman the violinist, and that the little hand of Felice (who is a soprano) is resting in the large red hand of their cook. Not that they have a cook as people have cooks in novels or in history or in England, but the beautiful house of Nathan and Felice . . . has been turned into a restaurant . . . and since every restaurant of quality needs not so much a cook as a chef it is in fact (correcting the fact) in the hand of their chef that the tiny hand of a potential Mimi called Felice is at present unfrozen and indeed entirely unthawed. And Skidmore thinks it’s odd they should turn away. . . . They are walking away now, she and the cook, no longer hand in hand. Perhaps he’s her brother, Curl thinks. . . . (5-6)

This extract reveals the distance between the knowing narrator and his naive younger self, in the method of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. In addition, the whole passage can be read as the conventional establishment of a subplot: it hints at the characters of the voluptuous wife and the intemperate chef (who will try to trade her in on her husband’s sportscar), and lays the ground for the farce to come when the husband will chase them both with a slasher. In New Zealand realist fashion, the narrator also points out the gap between his country and England, both in ways of speaking and in ways of thinking.

However, two metafictional asides break up this realist surface. Firstly, Stead jokes about something happening only “in novels,” even as it happens in a novel—his novel. Secondly, the narrator self-consciously sets about “correcting the fact” of his diction, drawing attention as he does so to his own narrative artifice and his own play with words.

On another level, Stead makes an allusion to high culture that helps create the “modernist depth” complained of by Wystan Curnow in his “Speech Balloons” article (147). In one way, Felice’s “tiny hand . . . is at present unfrozen and indeed entirely unthawed” because it rests in the big red hand of a chef (with the implication that while he may thaw her out, he might also cut her up and use her like a piece of meat). In another way, though, because she “is a soprano,” Felice possesses “the tiny hand of a potential Mimi.” Opera fans will recognize “Mimi” as the name of one of the most celebrated soprano roles. Moreover, in Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème*, in Mimi’s first scene, her lover clasps her hand and sings to her “Che Gelida Manina” (“Your Tiny Hand is Frozen”). The parallel extends even further because Mimi—like Felice—starts out well and falls in love, but chooses a man who will eventually push her away.

So in a single image, one can see three modes operating at once. One can also see an element of crossover between these modes, as when Stead injects some self-conscious humour into his allusions. The author does not stand back as high modernist priest of art, but enters into the text and nudges the reader with his elbow. For example, when Stead alludes to Sargeson’s short stories, he cannot resist pointing out the factional / fictional possibilities. Ken Blayburn, the narrator explains, lives at “Mrs Hinchhorn’s boarding house, well known as it is to readers of our peninsular literature” (61). The narrator then describes the boarding house exactly as it appeared in Sargeson’s later stories, using more nudging parenthetical phrases such as “it will be remembered.” Stead thus places Ken—Melior Farbro’s lover—in a boarding house created by Farbro’s factional double, Frank Sargeson.

In the same chapter, when “little Kenny” bicycles out to deliver food to the locked-out workers, he does so with “another from the union who is probably called Fred” (68-69). This situation creates more whimsical allusions: in Sargeson’s story “A Great Day” (1937), two unemployed men called Ken and Fred go out on an expedition together—though in that story Ken “was a big hefty bloke” and Fred “Well, he wasn’t much to look at. There was so little of him” (*The Stories of Frank Sargeson* 68-69). Stead reverses these physical attributes,

with “little Kenny” later explaining that “Fred—he’s a real big joker” (AVA 115). More importantly, though, Stead’s use of the word “probably” undercuts the conventional realism of the scene, at the same time as it highlights the intertextual joke. In this way, Stead injects a modernist allusion with an element of postmodern play. The same type of crossover occurs in Stead’s poetry of this period, as in his references to T.S. Eliot and Rosemary Allpress—“toilets / (and thanks / for the anagram / to Rosie Allpress)”—in “Yes T.S.” (*Geog* 29).

A similar effect can be seen in Stead’s use of the “word association football” technique from “Concerning Alban Ashtree.” This self-conscious game often occurs between the end of one section and the beginning of the next, as the words run on and elide into each other. For instance, one section ends with Curl Skidmore finding a hole in his right trouser pocket. He widens that hole, works his penis into it, and then tells his friend June to “come and discover what he’s got in his pocket.” The section immediately after these words runs as follows: “‘Sentimental prick,’ says Melior Farbrow, reading over his letter to little Kenny. But he seals it up and addresses it care of Mrs Hinchingshorn” (12). These two sentences stand out as the shortest section in the book: they seem to have been inserted simply for the pleasure of the joking connection between Curl’s “cock” and Farbrow’s “Sentimental prick.” The same device occurs between the next two sections, with Cecelia Skyways’s “Blessed Virgin” following on from Curl’s statement about “the last supper” (14). This device breaks up the realistic flow of the chapter by drawing the reader’s attention to the artifice of language patterns. Thus realism may persist in Stead’s fiction, but “modified and distanced” as he uses it in conjunction with modernist and postmodernist techniques.

Lawrence Jones, in his article “From Fretful Sleepers to Juice Extractors,” begins his discussion of *All Visitors Ashore* by calling it “trendily post-modern” (151). However, he ends his discussion by concluding (as he did in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors*) that Stead’s novel “is not pure post-modernism. Wystan Curnow is right to complain that ultimately ‘it is a modernist ego which drives the novel’, but that does not diminish it” (156). Conversely, Reginald Berry, in “A Deckchair of Words,” finds *All Visitors Ashore* “typical of post-

modern fiction” (315). He argues that with the publication of this kind of novel in New Zealand, “post-modernism has really arrived, fictionally, in that culture” (312). As shown in the opening section of this chapter, the critical responses to *All Visitors Ashore* cover a whole spectrum of stances, probably due in part to its mixture of modes. Some welcomed it as postmodernism in the New Zealand novel at last (Michael Morrissey, Reginald Berry); some rejected the novel as not postmodern enough (Wystan Curnow); some saw it as mixing postmodernism with realism and modernism (Lawrence Jones, Mark Williams).

In addition to these responses, some found *All Visitors Ashore* too postmodern, particularly those at the realist end of the critical spectrum. Ian Cross, reviewing *All Visitors Ashore* in the *Listener*, rejects it as entirely unpalatable, calling it “Cerebral gymnastics” and arguing that Stead’s “contrivances will put many readers ashore, because they exist at the expense of narrative and story-telling disciplines” (45). In Cross’s view, *All Visitors Ashore* “is not . . . even a genuine novel”: he sees it as an avant garde weed in the garden of New Zealand fiction. While conceding that Stead uses “the techniques of the art novel” in a skilful way, Cross argues that such work holds only “academic” interest, “leaving ordinary readers cold.” Cross positions himself as defending other writers from Stead’s pernicious influence: “I hope his successful use of such techniques does not encourage other writers to follow suit” (45). He then concludes by encouraging Stead “to use his heart more than his head in future” (45).

This last review seemed to have a deep effect on Stead. He even set out to write his next novel in a more straightforward fashion, as he explained to Dennis McEldowney in 1991:

. . . after *All Visitors Ashore* I was aware that there were people who reacted negatively to the metafictional aspect of it—the kind of reaction I got in the *Listener* from Ian Cross, for example, who said it was too clever for its own good and so on; and I think I thought, well, I would write a more conventional novel. I was in London and I worked on it for a month. . . . One day . . . I knew that I had to ditch everything I’d written up to that point. I hadn’t analysed why: I just knew that it was no good. . . . But the point is that it was then I introduced all the complexities to the story—the story-within-the-story, and Uta, and all the rest of it. (Alley 271)

So after a month-long false start, Stead carried on where he left off in *All Visitors Ashore*: experimenting with and extending the techniques of metafiction. This time, rather than having conversations with his characters, the narrator finds himself under siege from a variety of potential readers. These readers (Uta, the padrone, the Consul) meet the narrator as he travels through Europe and they respond to, question and make demands of the text as he tries to write it.

That text—*The Death of the Body* (1986)—involves a professor at Auckland University called Harry Butler. The plot follows a rather harried Harry as he tries to deal with a police stake-out in his kitchen, an increasingly detached wife, a crisis of his academic faith, and his involvement in a drug scandal, a sex scandal and a murder. For Stead the novelist, there has to be a story: indeed, the narrator of *The Death of the Body* finds himself dominated by a cantankerous blue folder called (and capitalized as) “the Story.” However, the nature of that story, as Stead points out, resists being pinned down and classified:

One of the things that *The Death of the Body* is about is narrative and narrative frames. It says here are different frames that you can put around these events. You can say it's a murder mystery; that's one frame. It's an academic novel, that's another. It's a domestic novel. The picture is there and you pick up one frame and you pick up another. (Alley 270)

So the nature of the story depends on how one looks at it, on which narrative viewpoint one chooses to privilege. In *The Death of the Body*, perhaps his most polyphonic fiction, Stead offers many viewpoints. In keeping with Stead's modernist preferences, though, the narrator never assumes the viewpoint of a realist moralist. That role falls to Uta and, in Stead's view, her approach turns her into “a semi-comic figure” (Alley 271), forever trying to sort Harry's actions into boxes labelled Good and Bad. However, like an impossible Jack-in-the-Box, Harry (and the Story) keep bursting her bonds.

This process simmers throughout the novel and boils over in chapter twenty-one, when Uta demands that the narrator judge his characters. One after another she presents them to him and grills him for an opinion; one after another he sidesteps her requests. Uta places

Harry in the dock first: “His Singapore adventure has particularly angered her. . . . Uta considers Harry to be selfish and self-serving and self-indulgent” (149). The narrator acknowledges that this might be one possible reading of Harry’s behaviour, but he refuses to make any judgement himself: “Maybe it’s deplorable—if that’s how Uta feels about it then I accept that. But my job is to present it as it was. As I’ve told her before, I don’t want to defend Harry. I want to represent him” (150). Here the narrator asserts a modernist presentative method, in which Uta (and other readers) must engage with the text and draw their own conclusions.

One might argue, though, that the narrator often presents Harry in a more favourable light than his various female partners. He shows Harry bombarded from all sides—by the police, his wife and family, the Dean of Arts, his secretary, his lover Louise—“Too many things were coming at him all at once,” asserts the narrator (53). Readers get shown all these things acting on Harry, whereas they do not get to see what bombards Louise (outside of her relationship with Harry). The camera shows Harry at home, follows him walking to work, reveals him at the office—by the time Louise Lamont appears and bursts into tears, the reader might already have been predisposed to identify with Harry as a kind of victim. So while the narrator refuses to judge his characters, that does not prevent the possibility for judgement from being already imbedded in the text.

In other words, there may be no explicit judgement in the narrator’s voice, but he can and does lead the jury. Stead seems to be aware of this submerged role of defense attorney. After all, to “represent” someone means to “defend” them, and Stead may be punning on the impossibility of a detached, ‘objective’ perspective.

However, the narrator continues to fight against making an explicit judgement, even—and perhaps especially—when Uta continues to demand one:

“But how can you avoid judging,” she asks. “I think the facts speak for themselves.”

There I can agree with her. The facts speak for themselves. “But they have to be allowed to speak,” I tell her. “And you have to allow that they will speak differently to different people.” (150)

Here Stead summarizes the modernist technique of his narrator. To continue with the legal metaphor, he cannot avoid representing, but he can avoid judging. This method makes the reader the judge, and therefore forces her or him to watch the evidence closely. Another analogue of this reading experience occurs when Phil listens to Harry’s story:

Harry recounted it in a random, dreamy non-sequence. . . . Phil was alert. He asked questions. He tried hard to see it . . . and to understand it. He took trouble over it, as if it had been a news story. So you could say in the end Phil’s head contained a more exact record of those two or three days than Harry’s did. The facts came from Harry, but it was Phil who put them together, and Phil who drew the conclusion. (115)

Faced with a non-linear, non-didactic sequence such as Harry’s story—or *The Death of the Body*—the audience has to pay close attention, ask questions of the text, “take trouble over” reading and draw their own conclusions.

Thus the novel offers a kind of modernist primer, but conveys it via a postmodern device. Stead posits a series of different potential readers, each of whom appear physically and make their own metafictional demands. As the narrator points out, “the padrone and the Consul’s wife sometimes argue with me about how the story should be told” (61). The padrone, for instance, stands for “no intellectual” (29), “He’s not interested in books as such” (26), but he likes movies and so his interjections usually involve a demand for visual action:

“Give me a scene,” he says, holding his palms open across the table. “Background. Foreground. I don’t care. But a scene please Maestro.”  
So I riffle through my notes and come up with the following. The place is the village of Sallanches in the French Alps. Harry and Phil are walking. . . . (27)

In direct opposition to the padrone, the Consul asks for an intellectual perspective. Described as “well-educated and intelligent,” “What interested him was Harry Butler as a philosopher” (47). Significantly, neither the padrone nor the Consul last very long in the book, but the Consul’s wife Uta does—perhaps because she may represent the majority of Stead’s readers, a demographic raised on critical realism and whose expectations he wishes to challenge.

The process of sifting through evidence and possibilities frustrates Uta. Having received no judgement on Harry, she moves on to the case of Mandy: generous lover or detached drug addict? She wants the truth, but the narrator offers only facts. Uta remains unhappy, like the perennial first year student who demands to be told exactly who the Fisher King in *The Waste Land* really is:

“Couldn’t we know some of these things for certain,” she asks.

I tell her I don’t have answers to everything. And then there’s the Story’s habit of letting things out bit by bit. I have to respect that. I can’t for example say whether Mandy took drugs because I don’t know. I just have to recognize it’s a possibility, and also that it’s a possibility that doesn’t seem to have occurred to Harry at the time all this was going on. (152-53)

A series of scenes, a scattering of evidence, a variety of possibilities, but never any final judgement from the narrator. Some quiet representations perhaps, nudging the reader in certain directions, but never an explicit moral pronouncement.

Perhaps the most revealing nudge of all occurs when Uta briefly recants and appears to come over to the modernist camp: “She looks at me. Her ice-blue eyes are strangely heart-warming at this moment. ‘If everything could be explained,’ she says, ‘nothing would be interesting’” (155). That the narrator’s heart should be warmed at this moment does not seem “strange” at all, given his consistent battle against Uta’s previous attempts to make him explain and judge the characters for her. Thus his one-word response to her capitulation ironically and revealingly marks his most explicit judgement in the book: “Yes,” he says, for the first and only time completely unequivocal.

Not only does Uta stand for realism, she also stands up for feminism. She points out the narrator’s focus on Harry, and demands that he also give room for the female characters:

. . . she didn’t want to see Harry’s heart (his false heart, she called it). She wanted to see the broken hearts of his women. She wanted the truth to be told.

“You don’t want heart,” I told her. “You want morals.” (76)

Because Uta couches her request in didactic, moralistic terms, the narrator rebels. He refuses her simple binaries of true and false, of “right” and “wrong” (150). He also argues that “my feelings had nothing to do with it. My job was to get it down exactly as it happened” (61). Here the voice of “the Story” rises up from the blue folder and concurs: “it doesn’t seem to like Uta, especially when she claims to speak for the human heart, which the Story regards as an inferior recording instrument, not to be compared with the camera . . .” (62).

That is not to say that Stead can be equated with the voice of the Story. After all, Stead makes Harry put his heart (or at least his chest) in front of a police camera in order to protect an old friend. In this way he shows that the heart can and will interfere with the camera’s supposedly “neutral” perspective (32). Similarly Harry’s wife Claire, while she tries to have “neutral eyes” (35), discovers that her heart and emotions cannot be suppressed. Even as she rejects her body and attempts to look at things from “the perspective of eternity” (20), Claire finds that her feelings interfere: she “feels as if she would like to protect Mandy from all these prying male eyes” (39). Claire also sees some humour in the way that she finds herself making passionate love to Harry at the height of her meditative exile: “she looks up at him with an expression of languor and mild surprise. She says, ‘I am not this body’—and she laughs” (46). Through the actions of people such as Harry, Claire and Uta, Stead makes sure that the Story, the camera and the narrator—with his assertion that “feelings have nothing to do with it”—do not have everything their own way. However, while Stead may allow for Uta’s promptings of the “heart,” he refuses to allow her “morals” to simplify those impulses, to classify them as necessarily good or evil.

In his 1991 interview with Dennis McEldowney, Stead confirms that he deliberately set up an on-going dialectic between Uta and the blue folder:

. . . I tend to say that the authority of the blue folder is the authority of *art*. It won’t allow the story to deviate too far from a kind of artistic unity. Uta, on the other hand, who’s a semi-comic figure, is perhaps muse; but she’s also a moralist—probably more moralist than muse. So there’s conflict between them. (Alley 271)

Thus Uta sets out to draw moral conclusions: in her view, “People know right from wrong” (150), and all right-thinking people will agree with her. She refuses “to allow that others will respond differently. ‘How is it possible to respond differently,’ she wants to know” (151). The narrator, true to Stead’s principles of “*art*,” tries not to pass any moral judgements. At the end of the book, the final image of Uta might represent any reader of a modernist text who has expected the narrator to do the work for her and answer all her questions: “Uta was silent . . . staring at me as if she didn’t know what to believe” (211).

Some critics’ responses to *The Death of the Body* strike just such an image: a reader frustrated that Stead does not offer up conventional critical realism. Paul Driver, for instance, writing in the *London Review of Books*, criticizes what he calls Stead’s “Modernist chic” and “Stead’s ‘Post-Modernist’ wit” (24). Driver dislikes what he sees as “irritating authorial intrusions” (24), and rejects books whose “moral backbone is difficult to discern” (25). In his view, “novelistic play [will] thin down for the reader what density of truth the book’s subject matter might have afforded” (24).<sup>15</sup> As the review proceeds, Driver makes it clear what he expects from fiction: he wants novels to be “fully charged with moral passion,” offering “down-to-earth lucid writing,” “real lives,” “reality” and “truth” (25). He feels himself least comfortable when texts deny these expectations, when they leave him feeling that “one is never sure what kind of novel one is in” (24).

Driver wants a purely realist novel, and therefore refuses to accept Stead’s post-purist mixture of modes. Reginald Berry, on the other hand, calls such critics to task for what he calls their “alarming . . . conventional expectations of realism” (“Stead’s Dream” 345). In a similar fashion, Mark Williams argues of such critics that “Their realism is literalist. They assume that events and details in a novel must be consistently predictable and ‘lifelike’”

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<sup>15</sup>A similar approach can be seen in the *Times Literary Supplement* review, where Galen Strawson argues that “the simple fictional core is dwarfed by the narrative game-plan, the apparatus. The distinction between structure and content is currently disreputable and often indefensible. But never mind” (933).

(*Leaving the Highway* 78). Williams goes on to describe what he sees as a “balance of realistic and metafictional tendencies in Stead’s fiction” (*Leaving the Highway* 80):

whatever he has taken from . . . modernist or postmodernist poetic theories, Stead insists that there is a real world. . . . What Stead rejects is naive realism, not realism itself. . . . He wants a realism that allows for his ‘delight in language, in verbal play’. The naive notion of realism as the representation of experience in transparent language must give way. . . . (*Leaving the Highway* 80)

As Lawrence Jones points out in his review of *Leaving the Highway*, “as Williams sees him, Stead in *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Death of the Body* incorporates elements of postmodern metafiction without rejecting realism (and modernism) . . .” (128-29).

Stead’s fiction, therefore, marks a tendency towards the inclusion, modification and mixture of a variety of modes. This tendency begins in his stories from the 1960s, with their mixtures of realism and surrealism, as well as their early efforts at metafiction. One can see this tendency develop through the 1970s, with moves towards realism in *Smith’s Dream* and modernism in “The Town.” As in Stead’s poetry, a three-way mixture dominates his work of the early 1980s. This balancing act involves realist, modernist and postmodernist techniques: like someone dancing on the highwire, Stead sways one way and then another, moving to a kind of internal rhythm that sustains and propels him. However, the balance can tip strongly on occasion, as in the swing towards realism in “A New Zealand Elegy,” or the sway towards postmodernism in “Concerning Alban Ashtree.” The balance may have seemed fairly equal in *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Death of the Body* (and in “Yes T.S.”), but in the work that follows those texts the balance begins to swing and sway once more.

##### **5. Stead’s Later Fiction: The Balance Tips Back and Forth.**

In 1986 Stead retired from the university in order to write full time. The fiction that he produced over the next ten years (four novels and four short stories) continues the three-way mixture established in *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Death of the Body*. However, Stead’s later fiction varies the balance of those novels. For example, his next two works—“The Last Life of Clarry” and *Sister Hollywood* (1989)—both mark a shift towards realism.

Lawrence Jones, in "Beyond Barbed Wire and Mirrors: The Contemporary New Zealand Short Story" (1992), places "The Last Life of Clarry" squarely "in the Sargeson tradition, although quite different in tone and language":

Here the first person narrator is highly articulate, a New Zealand writer, separated from his wife, working on a book in Sydney. As with many of Sargeson's narrators, he is both character and observer. He observes the last days of an Australian working-class Ocker who would be at home in a Sargeson story, and he observes him with a Sargesonian sympathy. At the same time he reveals his own pain and loneliness, for which his sophistication and articulateness provide no answers. (44)

Nevertheless, Jones goes on to observe that "While the story is recognisably traditional and realistic, it has . . . an implicit metafictionality, for the novel on which the fictional narrator is working sounds very much like Stead's own recent novel, *Sister Hollywood*" (44-45). So while some postmodernist devices do occur in this story, they remain only "implicit," leaving "The Last Life of Clarry" an essentially realist text.

One of these "implicit" references can be seen in the second section of the story, where the narrator explains what he has chosen to write and his reasons for that choice:

I'm writing a novel which is set partly in Auckland and partly in Los Angeles. . . . Everyone is tired, I'm told, of the novel about the novelist writing the novel. Was it invented by the French Existentialists? I think I read somewhere that it was. (But what about Lawrence Sterne and the *Sentimental Journey*?) In any case, I'm not tired of it. I've written one and would write another if I thought it safe. Since it's not safe I'm defusing that impulse with these notes. The novel is about Auckland and Los Angeles. It is not about the writer in Sydney who is writing it. These pages are about him. ("The Last Life of Clarry" 165)

Unlike *All Visitors Ashore* and *The Death of the Body*, therefore, *Sister Hollywood* turns away from metafictional play "about the novelist writing the novel." One might infer from this passage that Stead felt somewhat worn down by the reactions of realist critics to those two books: it seemed as if "Everyone" had come out in favour of realism, and demanded a return to that mode.

Like "The Last Life of Clarry," *Sister Hollywood* constitutes an essentially realist text. As such, it represents the "safe" alternative predicted in that story, as well as the "more

conventional novel” that Stead felt constrained to write after *All Visitors Ashore* (Alley 271). Lawrence Jones once more provides a useful summary, this time in his survey article “Doing Things With Realism: The Novels of 1989.” Jones calls *Sister Hollywood* “a predominantly ‘straight’ novel” (117), arguing that “It can be taken as straight historical realism” (115). Indeed, Jones asserts that in writing this book, Stead becomes “the ‘paid-up novelist’ he parodies in chapter five of *All Visitors Ashore*” (117).

However, that is not to say that this novel marks a return to the pure realism of *Smith’s Dream*. *Sister Hollywood* does contain “hints” of other modes, as Jones points out:

The narrative method is that of realism, with a first-person point of view modulating into a limited third-person one, and with the social world and the characters shown to a great extent from the outside. However, hints of the metafictional keep appearing. (“Doing Things With Realism” 116)

These “hints” occur mainly at the beginning of the novel. Bill Harper (a professor of English at Auckland University) sets out to tell the story of his family; particularly his sister Edie, who disappears in the 1940s and carries out the dream of escaping to Hollywood. While the narrative remains in the first person, metafictional devices occasionally float to the surface. For example, when Bill creates the character of his grandmother, he draws attention to his own invention of details:

I suppose one or another or several of her ‘books’ ran the syndicated Hollywood columns. . . . So knowing what I know now—and what I know now is what is to follow—I like to invent a paragraph of a kind my grandmother might well have read (and in fact I will chance my arm and say it’s certain she did read such a paragraph) but the significance of which, and I mean the significance to her, she wouldn’t have been able to guess. (*SH* 11-12)

Here the narrator self-consciously “invents” an occurrence and then makes it “certain” for the purposes of the plot. However, when the narrative shifts into the third person, as it does for much of the novel, these “hints of the metafictional” disappear.

In this way Stead “defuses” his own impulses towards narrative play, snipping out most of the metafictional wires. Ironically, the *Listener* reviewer—not Ian Cross this time, but

Debra Daley—treated *Sister Hollywood* as a retrograde step. Daley complains that in this novel Stead “buttons down his powers of invention” (108). Similarly Stead himself, looking back over his career in 1991, expressed some doubts about *Sister Hollywood*: “I’m not sure whether it’s altogether successful. . . . It’s a novel I don’t feel entirely clear about in my own mind” (Alley 276).

After this swing towards realism, Stead wrote probably his most modernist novel to date: *The End of the Century at the End of the World* (1992). Frank Kermode characterizes *The End of the Century* as entirely modernist, calling it “that rather old-fashioned thing, a serious Modernist novel” (“Apocalyptic Opacity” 17). This description seems less surprising when one considers that Kermode views *The End of the Century* not in the context of Stead’s fiction, or even New Zealand fiction, but in the context of Stead’s purist attitudes in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement*. Kermode reviewed that book when it came out in 1986, and engaged in a lengthy debate with Stead in the correspondence columns of *The London Review of Books*. Thus Kermode approaches *The End of the Century* with a purist eye: expecting and looking for modernism in the text, he finds only that mode.

While I disagree with Kermode’s purist label, I agree that *The End of the Century* does employ many modernist techniques. The book confronts readers with a series of unexplained juxtapositions before they even reach chapter one. The cover of my edition offers a tennis ball bouncing off a racquet head that melds into a moss-covered gravestone bearing the words: “Katherine Mansfield / Wife to John Middleton Murry / ‘But I tell you, my lord fool out of this nettle danger, we pluck this flower safety.’” With these words and images still swimming together, the reader then sees a page containing three stanzas from Allen Curnow which mention “islands,” “beaches,” “speeches” and “a discoverer’s elation.” Here I simply pick out the words that catch my eye; other readers may remember different phrases and other connotations, or they may think generally of the whole poem—“Landfall in Unknown Seas” (1942)—which Stead does not name. Then the title of chapter one: “1990—At the Bay” (9), which recalls the title of a Katherine Mansfield story even as it

implies some connection to the narrative present of 1990. Mansfield, Curnow, beaches, bays, tennis, death, even perhaps balls: the text invites readers to engage their imaginations, retain and connect these things (or not) as the story unfolds.

In other words, the novel holds out a modernist contract, and as soon as readers sign on they face the following opening: “Aprils bring birthdays, and memories of birthdays—‘his and hers’ (his and mine). They bring Dan Cooper back into my life . . .” (9). This beginning recalls another beginning, that of *The Waste Land*: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire.” The reference connects “Dan Cooper” with “Memory” and implied “desire,” as well as suggesting that his re-entry into the narrator’s life may bring some cruelty with it. Dan, a member of Parliament (traces of Curnow’s “speeches”), later excuses his visit to the married narrator (an ex-lover that he still desires) by alluding to the same poem: “He was ‘in the area’. He always thought of me in April—the cruellest month . . . That sort of thing.’ And then, self-mocking: ‘No good reason. A lingering passion. Nostalgia’” (33; Stead’s ellipsis). In addition to “The Burial of the Dead,” the narrator refers to “A Game of Chess,” Donne, Hopkins, Sargeson, Dylan Thomas, Grantland Rice, Shakespeare’s *I Henry IV*, *Richard II* and sonnet 107, Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” and *A Tale of Two Cities*, the bible stories of Jael and Jacob’s ladder, the fairy tale of Rapunzel, and some C.K. Stead—all in the first chapter.

This scattering of allusions suits the temperament of the narrator, a postgraduate student at Auckland University called Laura Barber (ex-tennis champion), who cannot turn off her “mind machine” (29). Her work involves an academic mystery about ‘Hilda Tapler,’ ‘Katya Lawrence,’ and the possibility that Katherine Mansfield faked her own death (hence the gravestone). Laura alludes to Mansfield a number of times, particularly when she sees her husband in the hall with the baby-sitter: “What came into my mind was a story by Katherine Mansfield, in which a woman, watching through an open door, sees her husband saying goodbye to their guest and recognizes that he is telling her he loves her” (24). This reference to “Bliss” implies that the Barbers may not be in for too much of that particular

emotion—at least not together. Laura also mentions her “Supervisor, Steve Casey (Professor),” a name that sounds almost like an anagram for ‘Stead K.C. (Professor).’ She even associates him with a “sly image of a train” (10), “a fast train” (9), an image that recalls (even as it rebuts) Roger Horrocks’s and Alan Loney’s attempts to shunt Stead’s criticism off “the fast track.” Another possibility also arises: “Casey” marks the reverse of ‘C.K.,’ perhaps because—unlike Stead—he admires and practices “Post-Structuralist modes of thought” (26).

All of these connections occur in chapter one, and the author makes none of them explicit. In other words, in accordance with modernist principles, these links occur in the mind of the individual reader. Many modernist techniques—accretion, aggregation, allusion, unexplained juxtaposition, approximation—occur throughout the novel, and all invite the reader to take part in creating the text. This last principle, which Stead calls “Perhaps the most fundamental” (*GC* 153), allows for the possibility that a different reader might thread together the above details in an entirely different way.

In contrast to this reader response perspective, one might look at *The End of the Century* through Stead’s own summary of Katherine Mansfield’s modernist narrative technique:

Why did Katherine Mansfield write after finishing ‘Je ne parle pas francais’ ‘I feel I have found an *approach* to a story now which I must apply to everything?’ What was the technical advance she had made? In ‘Prelude’ . . . she had broken the dominance of narrative in fiction; but the events were still arranged in a linear sequence. The real achievement of ‘Je ne parle pas francais’ . . . is that it establishes a central point of reference and then moves in circles about it, going back and forward in time. The result is a further thickening of texture. (*GC* 42)

This “*approach*” applies almost exactly to *The End of the Century*. The novel “establishes a central point of reference” (Laura, and perhaps Dan) and then “circles about it, going back and forward in time.” The plot of the academic mystery quickly recedes, and the novel begins to circle Laura and her relationships (both past and present) with National husband Roger, Labour ex-lover Dan, old potential lover Maurice, and new potential lover Steve. These elements appear piecemeal, as the narrative present (1990) washes in and out of various

narratives from the early 1970s. Stead complicates this process by juxtaposing different points of view: Laura's present narrative, Laura's early fiction, Dan's memoir, passages of pure dialogue, television transcripts, and a number of letters.

A complex example of this "circumlocution," as Stead calls it (*GC* 33), can be seen in chapter five, "1970 / 1990—Lies or Madness." Laura opens the chapter by contemplating an incomplete, 10-year-old piece of fiction:

My typescript has a red cover held together by metal clips that are tinged with rust. The name "Laura Jackson" is inked across the top, the "Jackson" crossed out and replaced by "Barber".

I cross out the "Barber" and write "Ingalls Wilder".  
Delay, evasion, cowardice, funk. (119)

The typescript concerns her early student days, and covers the same period as Dan's memoir, forcing the reader to compare and contrast the two texts. As Laura begins to read, her daughter comes home to read *Little House on the Prairie* (by Laura Ingalls Wilder). Then the baby-sitter visits, after which Laura reads a section depicting a break-up between Larissa (her younger self) and her fiance Larry (her future husband Roger). The baby-sitter will later precipitate an actual break-up between Laura and Roger: 'fact' begins to meld into 'fiction.' Next, fictional Dan links up with fictional Caroline, as they will later do in 'real life,' preempting any reunion with Laura. Then Maurice calls on the telephone, prompting Laura to look for him in her typescript and, not finding him there, she invents a new section to fill the gap. Thus Laura's old fiction runs up against her new fiction, and her inability to deal with Maurice in the past contrasts with her present action, forcing the reader to make another series of comparisons.

As all these stones hit the pond, ripples begin to overlap, creating a variety of patterns. Stead complicates these patterns in the text by linking them with patterns in other texts. Dan's memoir "1970—The Magic Bagwash" alludes to a poem of the same name by C.K. Stead, a poem that considers the early 1970s and begins: "Remember writing a story 10 / years ago . . ." (*Bet* 14). The poem mentions Joni Mitchell's "Clouds," quoted by Laura in

her own 10-year-old story (129-30). The poem also describes “someone really / young giving it away // cutting his losses,” and this description might apply to both Dan and Laura; Dan gives up his radical politics, Laura gives up her writing, and they both give up each other. Laura even decides to burn her typescript, page by page in “the garden incinerator” (145). This image recalls another Stead text, “A Quality of Life” (1970), in which the narrator also consigns a younger self, a youthful love affair and an unfinished novel to “the incinerator” in his “back garden” (*FS* 113).

Another stone strikes the water when Larissa finds herself in Northland, “sitting alone in a cream stand at the roadside, watching two horses in a paddock” (137). This situation echoes that of another “Laura Jackson,” the one who appears in Stead’s uncollected short story from the early 1970s, “Horses.” In that story Laura has run away from a “mess” and at the end of the story she sees a full moon sitting on a spike on a roof ridge: “An omen, thought Laura Jackson. An omen. And another of those lurches into tears threatened . . .” (110). Stead takes this story and throws it into the cross-currents of *The End of the Century*, where fictional Dan sees a similar scene:

“Look at your roof spike.” The yellow moon ball is sitting exactly on the point of the finial. The scene concludes:  
 “She turned to him. ‘Cuckoo clocks and spiked moons’, she said. It was like a question.” (120)

In modernist fashion, Laura offers a “scene” without a conclusion, a “question” without an answer. However, the “Cuckoo clocks and spiked moon” may seem ominous to the reader, particularly in light of the “omen” in “Horses,” the unfaithful connotations of a “cuckoo,” and maybe even the fate of love in Stead’s early poem “Carpe Diem”: “Love keeps a cuckoo in its clock, / And death’s the hammer makes the stroke” (*WWF* 22).

In addition to modernist allusions and narrative patterns, Stead also structures the novel around a series of dreams, as he explains in “Dream On” (1992):

In my experience the dreams that are recovered (most are lost) fall into two categories—the majority, which are pedestrian and seldom interesting, and the few which are so different from the many as to belong almost to a distinct category of experience. Vivid, full of atmosphere, these latter are insistently ‘significant’ beyond their literal import while at the same time resisting any simple symbolic interpretation; and if they can be retained through the levels of waking, they often seem worth recording. There is for me, in other words, a poetry and a prose of dreams. . . .

In my most recently published novel I decided one or other of the central characters should experience or remember a significant dream in each of seven chapters. When I tried to invent these they seemed in some indefinable way fake; so I hunted through old notebooks and found dreams I had recorded which could be used with a minimum of alteration. (31)

So *The End of the Century*, in addition to its many different ‘texts,’ also contains a set of dreams that Stead cut and pasted into the novel. These dreams, in modernist fashion, seem “significant” yet resist “simple symbolic interpretation.” In other words, like the tarot figures in *The Waste Land*, their significance depends very much on the text being created in the mind of the individual reader.

Over this modernist presentation stands Laura the novelist, creating and commenting as she goes. Thus postmodernist devices also appear in *The End of the Century*, as when Laura decides to burn her typescript: “What is to be done with the contents of this red-covered folder of false starts and unfinished stories? It’s fiction (isn’t it?) so let fiction dispose of it—as follows” (145). She “follows” this statement with a third person depiction of herself burning pages in the manner of “A Quality of Life”: a fiction within a fiction, written as fiction, and echoing another fiction. Similarly when Laura finishes her section on Maurice, she wonders how accurate her writing was: “I’ve wondered about my memories. Are they safe—or just inventions?” (144). She then performs a kind of metacriticism, by going to the library and verifying the allusions that she has just made. When she locates her source, she remarks: “Strange, but it gave me a great kick of pleasure to find it . . .” (145).

The shifting nature of memory—and the arbitrary nature of fiction—worries at Laura throughout. When she remembers some lines from a poem, for example, she comments: “I remember quoting them at Dan when we quarrelled. Or did he quote them at me? We all remake our memories, rewrite history to suit ourselves—so let’s say Dan and I took turns to

quote them at one another . . ." (14; Stead's ellipsis). Here, as he often did in *All Visitors Ashore*, Stead invites the reader to join the game by using the formula of "'let's" do this or that to the narrative.' Also like the narrator of *All Visitors Ashore*, Laura toys with the idea of slipping into conventional ways of saying:

I have a strong impulse (one I may yet give in to) to tell it like a story—beginning, let's say, "On the night of . . ."

For example:

On the night of Laura Barber's 38th birthday her husband Roger took her out for dinner at the restaurant upstairs in the old ferry building. (16)

Verisimilitude wanders in and out of the text, like a drunken poet at a reading. When Caroline informs Dan of her pregnancy, Laura conveys their dialogue in a realistic and convincing scene, but she prefaces it with a caustic reminder to the literal-minded reader: "No, of course I was not there to hear what was said; but something of the kind must have passed between them, and this will do as well as any other. If you don't find it convincing or to your taste, you may invent your own. The only rule is that it must convey the same piece of information" (185-86).

At the end of the novel, as in Alberto Moravia's *Conjugal Love*—a book praised by Dan in chapter six (153-54) and by Stead in "Narrativity" (219-21)—readers discover that the narrator is only just beginning the novel that they have just read. In "Narrativity," Stead summarizes the importance of this device to him as a writer:

Finally, and of most direct relevance to the concerns of the writer as writer . . . there was in *Conjugal Love* the conundrum of the novel that seems to be about itself. I know this is something that readers can find irritating; but it is really the source of some of the most profound aspects of twentieth-century fiction. . . . It is the way fiction has of being 'philosophical': not in offering packaged wisdom . . . but in exploring what is meant by 'truth'; what is meant by 'reality'; what is meant by 'history'; and what is meant by 'meaning'. (221)

In the midst of this analysis of a postmodern technique, one can see Stead's insistence on the modernist principle of "not . . . offering packaged wisdom."

In spite of this insistence, however, a curious residual realism exists in *The End of the Century*. As seen in the narrator's isolated "Yes" in *The Death of the Body*, Stead sometimes becomes didactic about not being didactic. Damien Wilkins pursues this paradox in his review, "The Self-Loathing of a Stead Novel" (1992):

[Stead's] work produces an odd phenomenon: while constantly promoting notions of 'freedom', the sensation is one of programme and of predetermined ends. We are told so often that this is one version of the story and any other might do just as well that we begin *not* to believe it. The accumulations have the curious effect of flattening everything out. There is no 'deeper' in Stead's fiction. (6)

I disagree with Wilkins's blanket statement about 'depth.' In my view, the sheer volume of modernist techniques in *The End of the Century* creates enough "modernist depth" to make Wystan Curnow's eyes glaze over. Nonetheless, Wilkins does pick out an odd pattern in Stead's work: the occasional use of realist techniques to promote an anti-realist principle.

This pattern reoccurs in one of Stead's later short stories, "Class, Race, Gender: A Post-Colonial Yarn" (1996). At the beginning, the narrator (a New Zealand writer called Carlo) sets up two opposing critical approaches, his own and that of an English academic called Peter Mapplethwaite:

. . . all serious 'analysis' (his favourite word) of anything and everything came down to three words: class, race, and gender.

That's why Peter Mapplethwaite figures in my account: because if I told him this story (something I can't imagine I would want to do) he would say that it illustrates perfectly the justness of the intellectual framework which has ruled his life; whereas to me it illustrates (if it illustrates anything) just the opposite—that life is subtler and more complex than the theories men construct to explain it. (254)

Carlo underplays the theoretical nature of his own stance—a ploy that Stead often uses in his own criticism—in order to privilege that stance. Carlo's position, not surprisingly, echoes Karl's position: in most of his criticism Stead argues that literature ought to render the complexity of life, not to pass judgement upon it. However, in "Class, Race, Gender," Stead couches this modernist principle in realist terms. He does so with a twist on the New Zealand realist formula: rather than setting the scene, elaborating the problem and drawing his

conclusion, Stead has Carlo draw his conclusion before the story even begins. Carlo's parenthetical gesture at openness ("if it illustrates anything") remains simply a gesture.

Stead also uses the "Post-Colonial Yarn" to criticize a certain type of reader. Carlo states that "I can't imagine I would want to" tell Peter this story, and in doing so he rejects one element of the fiction-reading audience.<sup>16</sup> A similar approach can be seen in "A Short History of New Zealand" (1992), where Stead satirizes his own narrator for having realist expectations. That narrator, James Barrett (a 52-year-old expatriate Kiwi journalist, living in England), interviews Angela McIlroy, "a 26-year-old fresh from New Zealand" (185). He dislikes the metatext in her novel, *A Short History of New Zealand*:

She'd solved her problem by adding a second layer—the story of the writer writing the story. It was what James had liked least about her novel, but he could see why she'd done it. There could be no end, so there had to be many ends—many possibilities, all left open. It was called 'meta-fiction' these days and it was very fashionable, but how could you get around the basic human appetite that every story should have a beginning a middle and an end, and that to be enjoyed it had to be believed? (195)

Barrett's response to this novel sounds very like Ian Cross's response to *All Visitors Ashore*. As Lawrence Jones points out in *Barbed Wire and Mirrors*, "metafictional games are not everyone's cup of tea. They make Ian Cross cross . . ." (290). Like Cross, Barrett feels nostalgic for the techniques of an earlier time: though he lives in a postmodern world, he does not think that postmodern narrative devices can be a part of believable or enjoyable stories. Barrett cannot get past the form in order to appreciate the content and, in separating the two, he ends up being unable to do justice to either.

Thus Barrett ends the story literally and figuratively caught between two worlds. He returns to New Zealand and says "wonderful to be home" (189), but finds himself thinking of "his Northamptonshire garden" (195). Then he begins dreaming, and finds himself

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<sup>16</sup>This story, and its various rejections, might also be read in the context of the fuss about Stead's editorship of *The Faber Book of Contemporary South Pacific Stories* (1994). A number of writers refused to allow their stories to appear, primarily raising issues of race, but also of class and gender. Stead outlines his position in "A Note on Absences" (xv-xvii).

drifting between the worlds of sleeping and waking. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Barrett dreams that the young New Zealand writer tries to tell him something:

He strained to catch what it was she was telling him, certain that he did understand—that he was capable of it—but never quite making sense of it. It was like something beyond reach, or a word on the tip of the tongue. (195)

While Barrett feels that he should be able to understand McIlroy's words, he cannot do so. The novel bothers him, even in his sleep, and his uneasiness shows how far Barrett feels cut adrift. Having begun the story feeling confident and superior—"Did she want him to write about her book? Did she understand that he was doing her a favour?" (187)—he ends up unable to feel at home, either physically or intellectually.

In addition to its satire of an unsympathetic reader, this story raises issues of narrative and history. Many of McIlroy's attitudes seem close to Stead's own: she employs metafiction, wants stories to be open-ended, and shares his interest in "what is meant by 'history'" ("Narrativity" 221). Stead returns to this latter issue in *The Singing Whakapapa* (1994), a novel that traces the history of a New Zealand family through seven generations. A useful place to begin discussion of this book might be the following excerpt from Yeats's *Autobiographies*:

All the past had been turned into a melodrama with Ireland for blameless hero and poet; novelist and historian had but one object, that we should hiss the villain, and only a minority doubted that the greater the talent the greater the hiss. (206)

Yeats's summary parallels quite closely how Stead had begun to feel about the history and literature of his own country towards the end of the 1980s. One can see his increasing alarm in reviews of novels such as Stephanie Dowrick's *Running Backwards Over Sand* (1985) and Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986). In Stead's view, these novels illustrated a shift towards melodrama, and a simplification of complex issues. Stead felt New Zealand writers were in danger of becoming "The New Victorians"—ramming simplistic morals down the reader's throat—and he said as much in an essay of the same name in 1989.

Stead's attitudes to history and representation have remained constant throughout his career. He consistently calls for art that represents "the complexity of what we call 'reality'" (AL 11), rejecting as a simplification any work that divides people and events into categories of good and bad, right and wrong. As far back as *The New Poetic*, Stead rejected as rhetoric the work of imperialists and soldier poets alike, and saved his praise for the work of Yeats: "Yeats stands alone among English speaking poets of this century in his ability to assimilate a complex political event into the framework of a poem without distortion of the event or loss of its human character in abstraction" (39). Stead singles out Yeats's "Easter 1916" because, in his view, "The events are . . . presented with an ambiguity which does justice to their complexity" (38). Over twenty years later, Stead's review of *The Matriarch* applies the same principles: that the use of art as a vehicle for rhetoric results in a reduction of art.

To illustrate this point, Stead begins his review with an anecdote from his grandmother:

A story she told me more than once was how my great-great-grandfather, John Flatt, a lay catechist, had fallen out with the Church Missionary Society by suggesting that its missionaries in New Zealand were acquiring too much Maori land. Twenty years ago in the British Museum I looked up the evidence Flatt gave . . . to a Select Committee of the House of Lords looking into 'the State of the Islands of New Zealand'. I found that he had defended the acquisition of land by missionaries. . . . (AL 189)

The historical document seems to contradict the anecdote, but Stead does not offer one form of history as better than another. He simply comments that history contains such complex ambiguities. He also points out "something relevant to Ihimaera's novel: that family mythology likes heroes and prefers them simple" (189). In Stead's view, *The Matriarch* not only offers a "family mythology" full of heroes and villains, but exaggerates it into "a gross piece of personal mythologizing" (192):

The novel repeatedly, and in the end tiresomely, asserts the stature of the matriarch. The language ('amazing', 'breathhtakingly stunning', 'an incredible beauty', 'a blinding presence', 'charismatic', 'extraordinary', 'astonishing') becomes florid as if with the effort of conjuring into being a greatness. . . . (193)

In addition to this simplification of character, Stead argues that Ihimaera simplifies history by indulging in “political posturing” (194) and “rhetoric” (195). He sees Ihimaera as turning history into a Western movie, with good guys and bad guys clearly and predictably identified.

In this context, *The Singing Whakapapa* can be seen as writing back against both *The Matriarch* and the popular ideologies of the late 1980s. Stead takes the story of an ancestor (lay catechist John Flatt), mixes it with the story of a contemporary narrator (amateur historian Hugh Grady), and tries to present them without passing any explicit moral judgement on their characters or their histories. Thus when Hugh has his “moment of recognition” (13), and decides to explore the whakapapa of his family, he wonders how best to write such an account. Given a “fact” (such as his uncle’s knowledge of Shakespeare “by heart—and at heart”), how was one to present it?: “There was something to be explained in that fact, by God there was, and that meant (Hugh thinking again as historian) grappling with it, not explaining it away, moralising it out of existence . . .” (14).

Herein lies the rationale of the book: to grapple with people and events, but not to explain or moralise about them. Mark Williams, in his article about “C.K. Stead and the New Literary Order” (1994), praises the novel for “its complex engagement with history” (702). Williams elaborates upon this statement in his review for *Landfall*:

In *The Singing Whakapapa* Stead joins the line of revisers and reinterpreters of New Zealand history. In novel, film and play since the 1980s New Zealand history has been revisited and rewritten again and again on the side of the oppressed. . . . Stead joins this line, but he deconstructs the deconstructions. It isn’t that he sides with the oppressors, he offers compelling insight into missionary complicity in Pakeha land greed. But he cunningly shapes the narrative to reveal the ambiguities of moral and legal transactions between cultures which can scarcely apprehend the other’s intentions or meanings. (305)

Thus Williams focuses on “complexity” and “ambiguity”—the very concepts that Stead singled out in Yeats’s presentation of history, thirty years previously in *The New Poetic*. Stead’s narrative may be “shaped,” but not towards any kind of explicit conclusion.

As in *The Death of the Body*, therefore, Stead's narrator sets out to represent not to judge. However, *The Singing Whakapapa* marks a shift away from the postmodern techniques of that novel. Perhaps Stead simply felt like a change, or perhaps he felt prompted by the lack of response to his last book—*The End of the Century*—which reportedly “sold only about 500 copies” (Cox 16). Whatever the reason, *The Singing Whakapapa* contains only a few metafictional moments. Most of these moments involve brief comments on point of view, drawing attention to the artificiality of the positioning of the camera:

There was an early afternoon, whether before or after Willis Handy's visits began Hugh can't now be sure, when the boy ran out of the house on to the front verandah where he stopped to think. There was no one in the garden, but if we place ourselves there we will see him hesitating, then returning indoors. After a minute or two he comes out again and this time comes down the steps and along the path until once again he pauses and ponders, and returns indoors. We have time to take in the garden, enclosed on three sides by trees and on the fourth by the house. Its beds of shrubs are unweeded but in profuse bloom. . . . (27-28)

Once again Stead uses the “We” device of *All Visitors Ashore* to let the reader in on the joke, to involve him or her in the making, while at the same time the device serves the conventional narrative ploy of delaying the reader's knowledge (and thus building tension) about what might be happening inside the house.

The same device occurs once or twice in the 1840 narrative, as when Stead describes “Three young Englishmen (should we call them?)” in New Zealand: “Here they sit . . . speculating about what lies ahead. We may hover over them, angel-like, with the knowledge only gods and angels possess of what for them, being the future, is unknowable” (211). However, such interventions happen rarely in this book. *The Singing Whakapapa* contains less metafiction than any of Stead's novels since *Smith's Dream*. This swing of the balance away from postmodern techniques also characterizes Stead's poetry of this period, particularly *Voices* (1990), the volume that contains poems about John Flatt, the Treaty of Waitangi and the nature of New Zealand history.

While it marks a reduction in Stead's use of metafiction, *The Singing Whakapapa* continues the technique of circumlocution that he experimented with in *The End of the Century*. This modernist narrative method occurs particularly in the modern part of the story; the colonial tale follows an essentially linear pattern. With Hugh as the "central point of reference" (*GC* 42), the story circles around him and his memories. In a non-linear progression, the narrative shifts from the funeral of his uncle (a Sargesonian mentor and man of gold called "Frank Mangold"), to his childhood holidays on his uncle's farm, to his extra-marital affair (by now a familiar motif in Stead's fiction).

Other motifs reappear as Hugh's story leaps from his protest-marches at the end of the 1960s to his attraction to a young research assistant in the 1990s to the meeting with his future wife at university in the 1950s. The "Wagnermusic" of *All Visitors Ashore* makes an appearance, as does the Irish catholic father, the music-loving mother, and the Swedish sea captain—all a part of Stead's modernist 'Field.' One can see these figures in various guises throughout Stead's work, from "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" to "A New Zealand Elegy," from "Scoria" to *Sister Hollywood* to the following passage in "April Notebook":

An oak-headed catechist  
 A Swedish captain and  
 His daughter whose exact blood  
 This world affronted  
 Met there the black Celt  
 Uttering  
 History, music. (*PD* 2)

These figures swirl about Hugh Grady and, as he reflects upon their story, they reflect upon his, and the details from all these layers of history aggregate in the mind of the reader.

A similar method can be seen in Stead's short story of the same period, "Sex in America" (1994). This story begins with a sex act between a man and a woman, viewed through the consciousness of the man. As they reach towards orgasm, the man's mind bounces back and forward through time from their meeting "two days ago" (66), to his holiday in Monterey, to the fiction of Henry Miller:

. . . he recalls, sees behind closed eyes, the sea lions among the wharf piles at Monterey, lolling back in the green water, barking for scraps, and the huge pelican birds looking down at them—some part of his consciousness going randomly off on a track of its own, indifferent, and then puzzling at itself.

It is as if the mind were a series of shut doors any one of which he can choose to open and look into. Here are the sea lions. Here is the beautiful monastery on the hill. Here are the shade-trees, some species of pine, and the white sands at Carmel; or the barren slopes of Big Sur about which Henry wrote his only boring book.

And here, behind this door (she twists on him and it springs open of its own accord, slamming the others shut) are simply colours—greens and purples and plum-reds, strong, heavy, dark. . . . (67)

This circumlocution, this opening of various doors, captures the method of the whole story. Apparently random connections continue back to a meeting with a scientist “A few weeks back in a bar in Los Angeles” (68), then further back to the man’s childhood in New Zealand, then forward to his meeting the woman in an art gallery, then back to his trip through Yosemite, then forward to his job as a travelling salesman. Eventually the orgasm (‘remember that?’ as a Stead narrator might say) reappears, and the story resolves itself in an opaque image of joining and parting. Like the painting “about the Fall” (73) that she tried to sell him, the man seems to undergo a loss of innocence even as he falls in love. In typical Stead fashion, the story ends not with an answer, but with a question, one that appears to include the reader: “I feel now as if I’m in love. Can you explain that, mon vieux?”

Stead’s most recent work of fiction—*Villa Vittoria* (1997)—marks another swing of the balance, this time away from modernist techniques and back towards linear, genre fiction. Indeed, the novel might be characterized as a thriller / romance, because it follows most of the conventions of those two genres. For example, the romance involves two men with three women in a series of interlocking triangles. At the end, as in a Shakespeare comedy, all problems get resolved and everyone pairs off with an appropriate partner. In a coincidence of mammoth proportions, all five of these characters get pulled into the same mystery plot, a plot that draws on the conventions of thrillers from the Victorian mystery novel to the modern Bond movie.

In Victorian fashion, each section has a cliffhanger ending, a technique that permeates the novel as Stead drops little hooks (and red herrings) throughout the narrative, leading the reader on and tempting speculation. Spy story clichés abound, with two men lurking suspiciously under a street lamp across from the hero's house (70), a super-spy Englishman who works out of an enormous labyrinthine building, a French prostitute who might be a double agent in the tradition of Mata Hari, a phoned threat to the hero's wife and children delivered by the Italian Mafia, and a bizarre chase scene in which a car gets driven into a lake. The hero fills the role of an everyman figure drawn in against his will, but who still manages to fly to France, bed the heroine, avert her murder and foil a mafia hitman. Stead even uses the by now tired conventions of the undercover reporter on a dangerous stake-out, the criminal mastermind who fakes his own death, and the decisive clue hidden in the corner of a photograph (which the super-spy enlarges and discovers—though only just in time).

Within these genre frames, however, Stead plays the odd metafictional joke. These jokes do not address the reader or a character directly (as in Stead's previous fiction), but take the form of isolated, quiet, nudging references. These small jokes do not disrupt the *Smith's Dream*-like flow of the plot, but they sit just under the skin of the narrative like an epidermal injection. For example, when Miranda (the reporter who loves the hero) meets up with Bruno (the super-spy and ex-husband of the hero's wife), she says: "Are you a double agent?" And then, as he frowned, 'I'm sorry. I suppose that's not the sort of joke a security person laughs at.'" He replies: "On the whole, no. All the fictions are about double agents" (145). The reader already knows that Bruno has fallen for a double agent called Adèle in a French brothel, and that this has taken place in a fiction called *Villa Vittoria*. In this context, Bruno's response to Miranda works as both dramatic irony and implied metafiction.

Similarly, as the plot rolls towards its inevitable double conclusion—a happy end for the romance, a cliffhanger escape for the thriller—the narrator (once more via Bruno) injects a small metafictional joke:

Bruno smiled, watching the roadside scud by, the green pastures, ploughed fields, woodland. Adèle, it struck him now, was committed to his welfare, to the welfare of all of them, but for no reason that bore in any way upon her own life. There was nothing in it for her apart from the pleasure of rearranging the world a little, tidying it, giving the story a better shape and a proper ending. (164)

Thus the prostitute turns out to have a heart of gold, as well as altruistic narrative tendencies. Stead allows himself a wee joke with the reader, a knowing nudge that he's aware of the conventions he's working in: the story will have "a proper ending," for all the dangerous possibilities that currently beset the hero.

That hero, perhaps not surprisingly, turns out to be an expert on modernist poetry called "Steve" who teaches literature at a university and tries to cheat on his wife—Bruno's ex-wife Jean. Steve meets and falls in love with Miranda at a conference on the "American poet, Stirling Grant" (an Ezra Pound figure) in "the little Italian resort town of Tigullio." Along with a pun on the worth of Pound / Sterling, Stead creates many puns of situation between Pound's love triangle and Steve's. In addition, just as Pound, the poetry of Pound, and Pound's love for Olga Rudge bought Steve and Miranda together at the beginning, so it helps to bring them together at the end. Steve leaves Miranda in the final chapter, ostensibly to return forever to his wife, but as he hits English soil he sees a cloud moving in the sky:

A single cloud went over, and he remembered the Stirling Grant line, 'Say to la Cara, "Amo"'.  
 "Amo"'.  
 'Yes, say it,' he said—to himself, or to the cloud if it should be listening.

His own bag was tagged for transfer to the onward flight, but he picked it up. 'It's okay,' he said to the baggage handler. 'I'll look after it.' (206)

His heart speaks at a moment of intense pressure, and chooses to speak its love, just like Pound in Canto 76:

O white-chested martin, God damn it,  
 as no one else will carry a message,  
 say to La Cara: amo. (76/459)

However, unlike Pound in the cage at Pisa, Steve remains free to move and communicate with whoever he wishes. He may be in a kind of trap—"a trap of his own making" (15)—but he chooses to telephone Jean, leave her with Bruno, and go back to Miranda.

As Damien Wilkins says in his review, "Get Personal" (1997): "Genre stuff maybe, but done with a light touch and a sure sense of timing, and always kept slightly—and enjoyably—off centre by the author's own, well, *quirks of intelligence*" (51). So while *Villa Vittoria* represents what Wilkins calls "Genre stuff"—"a love story, or a couple of love stories, set against a thrillerish background" (50)—Stead manages to assert his own voice and keep things "slightly—and enjoyably—off centre." In my view, that decentering often occurs because Stead inserts a modernist or postmodernist device into the midst of the genre driven narrative.

For example, at the close of the novel Stead includes a modernist allusion to *The Cantos* (and contrasts Pound's circumstances with those of Steve), but he also includes a reference to the popular cult film, *Casablanca*. This reference begins with a seemingly irrelevant anecdote about an airport cafe in France:

There were birds in cages on the café counter, two parrots and a sleek black bird with a yellow beak. The woman behind the counter opened the cages and let them out. All three 'spoke', but only the black bird, which Steve thought might be a minah, was bilingual. In a voice not unlike Humphrey Bogart's it said at intervals, 'Au 'voir, monsieur' and 'Bonjour'; encouraged by attention it said, 'I fly so high,' and 'That's all right then.' (204)

What these birds accomplish seems difficult to ascertain. Perhaps they provide an analogue for Steve's (and Bruno's, and Jean's, and Miranda's) behaviour in "doing the right thing, the accepted thing." Like the birds, they parrot what they have been taught to say and do, and each remains in their respective cage: Steve returns to wife and children, Bruno keeps a stiff upper lip and accepts his loss, Miranda remains the marginalised mistress. Like Harry in *The Death of the Body*, or Hugh in *The Singing Whakapapa*, they may get out for a bit, but they always go back and, in doing so, suppress the longings of their hearts.

However, why one of the birds should sound “not unlike Humphrey Bogart” seems more difficult to gloss—but that name provides a context in which to read the next scene:

It was still too early for boarding. They returned to the car and Miranda drove into a maze of overgrown and abandoned ‘roads’ which, he pointed out, were not roads at all but the landing strips . . . of an old, probably wartime, airfield.

‘We could make a movie here,’ he said.

‘We could? What about?’

‘About us, why not?’

She looked around at the cracked, weed-infested concrete, the strange trees, more like huge vegetables than real trees, blocking off views between the strips. ‘She says goodbye. He goes. Is that a story?’

‘It’s a start.’

‘No it’s not. It’s a conclusion. It’s the end.’ (204-05)

“Bogart,” “a movie,” a wartime French airstrip, a pause before the plane leaves, a lover’s final farewell. All these things conjure up the end of *Casablanca*, where the characters involved in a love triangle all do the right thing and return to their respective cages.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Stead’s pop culture reference infuses the end of the book and—like his parallel references to Pound, Eliduc, Byatt and *Twelfth Night*—provides one of a number of love triangles against which the ones in Stead’s novel can be contrasted and measured. With remarkable lightness of touch, Stead places modernist allusions alongside postmodern references to pop culture. He even makes another implied metafictional joke with Miranda’s question (“Is that a story?”) receiving two possible and ambiguous answers: “It’s a start” and “It’s the end.” It could be (to transpose the final lines of *Casablanca*) “the start of a beautiful friendship,” but only if Steve comes back to Miranda. If not, it might be “the end” of everything. When Steve decides (with no prompting apart from the cloud) to break from his marriage and go back to Miranda, readers feel that he does the right thing, in spite of what social conventions might say.

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<sup>17</sup>That this echo is conscious, and that Stead knew *Casablanca*, can be confirmed by the narrator’s praise of that film in *Sister Hollywood*: “there are movies from that period that were to stay fixed in my consciousness. One was *Casablanca*. The love agonies of Bogart and Bergman, renouncing one another for the greater Good, combined with the excitement of a thriller set in an exotic place . . . it was irresistible . . .” (53-54).

So on the one hand Stead ties up all the loose ends: implying that Bruno and Jean get together, establishing the happiness of the kids, that Steve will quit his job, and that Steve and Jean “will be” friends (a lot for one phone call). On the other hand, he breaks up the flow of this Dickensian ending with a series of jokes, allusions and implied metafictional passages. Paradoxically, this method keeps readers from losing patience with the conventions, even as it satisfies their basic human desire for a happy ending. As he does so, Stead subverts what has become a convention of the modern novel: that things generally end unhappily, particularly for lovers. Stead even subverts one of the conventions of the thriller: in a novel full of threats, spies and guns, the only one who dies in the end is Bertie Wooster—one of the children’s goldfish.

Thus while *Villa Vittoria* marks a return to the plot-driven thriller of *Smith’s Dream*, it also carries the marks of Stead’s various experimentations with the techniques of modernism and postmodernism. In this novel, the balance may swing away from the postmodernist games of *The Death of the Body* and *All Visitors Ashore*, but not completely. Like Stead’s later poetry, Stead’s later fiction generally avoids settling on one specific mode of writing, preferring to swing across genres and barriers, refusing to be tied down. By way of comparison, I want now to look briefly at that later poetry, from *Paris* (1984) to *Straw Into Gold: New and Selected Poems* (1997).

CHAPTER VIII. STEAD'S LATER POEMS: A SIMILAR SWING OF THE BALANCE.

“. . . let's for the moment talk about closed and open forms. I have never felt prescriptive on this issue, particularly because I wouldn't want to be prescribed to.”

—C.K. Stead, “C.K. Stead and Fleur Adcock: A Conversation” (1991) 48

1. “The End of a Story” and “The Poetry Room.”

Like his later fiction, Stead's later poems encompass a variety of modes of writing. *Geographies* (1982) set the tone for this later work, with its three-way mixture of realist, modernist and postmodernist techniques. After that book, Stead sometimes swings towards one mode, sometimes another, and sometimes he balances all three within a single text (in the manner of “Yes T.S.” and *All Visitors Ashore*). This mixture can be seen continuing in the first poetry that Stead published after *Geographies*: “The End of a Story” and “Poems From: ‘The Poetry Room’” (*Landfall* 1983).

“The Poetry Room” takes the shape of what I think of as an ‘imagist list poem.’ Such a poem consists of short, numbered sections—a compilation of separate imagist moments. For example, number 5 (“Steady”) records the images that occur to the poet at a precise time (“four-thirty”) on a particular day:

At four-thirty remembering Frost at midnight  
and thinking of ‘Frost at Midnight’ by Coleridge  
put me in mind of that shark with its fin de siècle  
languidly cutting warm shadow in Hobson Bay  
south of the pipe in bright blue autumn weather  
promising cool nights. It was Paavo Nurmi of Finland  
and latterly Murray Halberg used to run round and around  
the track at the same pace steady as the second hand  
of a second-hand stop-watch going and going and going. (471)

One can see here another version of the word association football technique that Stead used in “Concerning Alban Ashtree”: Robert Frost melds into “Frost at Midnight,” a shark's fin combines with the “fin de siècle,” which then turns into a Finnish runner. Similarly, the circling of the fish recalls the circling of an athlete, and both echo the circling motion of the

poet's mind as it glides from topic to topic. Like Laura in *The End of the Century*, the narrator cannot turn off his "mind machine": the watch hand circles, the seasons cycle, a "second hand" becomes "second-hand" and everything goes "round and around," finally turning into a "stop-watch" that never stops. In addition, Stead places modernist allusions to 'high culture' (Coleridge and Frost) side by side with postmodernist references to popular culture (sporting heroes and a television advertisement for Energiser Batteries that keep "going and going and going").

Number 17 ("The Craft of Poetry") records another such moment, at the same time on a different day:

At four-thirty he rested elbows in sunshine on the sill  
of his office window. A woman walked down the drive  
and another walked up and both of them were pregnant  
and they smiled as they passed like craft exchanging salutes. (471)

The whole poem turns into an elaborate pun, as the women become large ocean-going "craft" even as they get shaped into a poem by (and about) "Craft" (including a 'pregnant pause' in the line break after the word "pregnant"). Number 2 ("Cold Rock") also takes place at "four-thirty," and leaps from coffee to "a dark side / to every moon," from Nixon to the first moon-landing. This word association football occurs between sections as well, with "Richard Nixon" reappearing in the number 6 to describe "a poem called SCORIA . . . as 'heavily influenced by Pound.'"<sup>1</sup> Similarly the "planet and sun" in number 1 revolve into the "moon" of number 2, which then turns into "Professor Moon" in number 3, while "the Moonlight Sonata" plays in number 6.

Thus "The Poetry Room" offers a series of juxtapositions that might be read together or separately; they can be taken as a group or they can be read out of sequence. The latter approach seems justified partly because Stead has never published "The Poetry Room" in its

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<sup>1</sup>This reference may contain a criticism of Mike Doyle who, in his review of *Geographies*, criticized "Scoria" for containing what he saw as "overt traces of Pound's influence" (473), and concluded that "the influence of Pound is not always fully assimilated" (474).

entirety. The *Landfall* version contains a selection—"1 Black Hole," "2 Cold Rock," "3 Professor Moon at the Lectern," "5 Steady," "6 Crossing the Bar," "17 The Craft of Poetry," and "18 The Poetry Room"—with numbering that implies a possible group of at least eighteen poems. Four of these reappear in *The Malahat Review* (1984): "Professor Moon at the Lectern," "Steady," "The Craft of Poetry," and "The Poetry Room." These two publications might reflect an editor's selection, rather than Stead's own choices. However, a further rearrangement occurs in *Between* (1988), where Stead drops the "Poems From" prefix, as well as the original numbering system. He also takes out three of the *Landfall* poems and adds two previously unpublished sections, leaving the reader with the following arrangement: "1 Black Hole," "2 Professor Moon at the Lectern," "3 Where Alf the Sacred Beater Ran," "4 Lawn Order," "5 The Craft of Poetry," and "6 The Poetry Room." Whichever group the reader chooses to look at, the final impression seems one of a series of imagist moments, in which the poems (both separately and together) draw attention to their own whimsical, apparently arbitrary connections.

In direct contrast to "The Poetry Room," "The End of A Story" takes the shape of a more conventional long poem. Its eight verse paragraphs do not split up into named and numbered sections, but run on from each other and riff around a central preoccupation: the unknown soldier and the nature of death. The poem takes place in Paris, a slightly surreal dreamlike Paris, where "Notre Dame sets sail down the river Seine," corpses march through the streets, and the narrator claims that "My death sits at a table in the Champs du Mars." Before these surreal visions occur, however, the poem opens with a realist structure:

The tomb of the unknown soldier, le tombeau  
 du soldat inconnu—London, Paris, and I guess  
 Arlington and elsewhere, but this guerrilla fighter  
 nameless in a check shirt, there's no tomb for him.  
 In a million stills he flinches from the levelled revolver  
 of the chief of police. Last night on television  
 he died again, falling back in a sitting posture,  
 then toppling sideways spilling blood on the street.  
 He's been dying like that in public for more than a decade. (468)

After setting the scene in this way, Stead moves on to a new verse paragraph in which he elaborates the problem:

And the ones with back-to-front collars they'll tell you  
 'He's in heaven now', 'He's with God his Maker'—  
 and the ones with shaven heads and saffron robes  
 they have their mysteries too—'This world's an illusion'  
 'Everything is spirit.' I say the poor bastard's dead  
 and what's more mysterious than that?  
 Gone. Dead

and no bugles. (468)

A realist poem probably would have ended there, with the poet's explicit conclusion placed alongside (and after) the received wisdom of organised religions. Stead's conclusion echoes some of his earlier realist works (such as "Trapped Rabbit" and sonnet 16) and presages more such statements to come (in "After the Wedding" and *The End of the Century*).<sup>2</sup>

However, Stead does not end the poem with this conclusion. Instead he opens the poem up into a series of questions, images and dreams:

What if that tomb burst open  
 and out the Unknown walked at the head of a column  
 soldier after soldier down the Champs Elysée  
 proclaiming the end of war, the end of a world—  
 would he wear the face of the guerilla fighter?  
 To be stuck on this twig in the universal wind  
 whining for answers! Listen out there—you hear it?—  
 that silence beyond the silence of the stars? (468)

These questions and images echo earlier poems and reveal part of "The broad interests, the recurring emotional concerns, the individual tricks of speech and ways of looking at the world" of Stead's modernist 'Field' (*GC* 149). For example, the end of this verse paragraph recalls "the silence of the stars" in "Walking Westward" (*PD* 61-62), where Stead looked out at the universe and saw no God. Similarly, the image of the poet stuck on a "twig in the

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<sup>2</sup>See also Stead's short essay about religion and belief in *What I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Twenty-Two New Zealanders* (1993) 221-27.



This riff modulates from Wittgenstein's face and words into the "beautiful face" of a woman who "didn't say a word":

I remember dark clouds banking up over Paris  
 and a beautiful face in rain that wanted to speak  
 and I too wanting—we were as silent as the stars.  
 It was something that didn't happen, like the gun that wasn't  
 deflected, like the rope not cut from the wrists  
 of the man in the check shirt who didn't walk away.  
 In words these things that didn't happen happen.  
 I see him leading his column down the Champs Elysée  
 past a café where I sit with the beautiful woman  
 who didn't say a word, under that louring sky. (468-69)

Here, as with "the hyacinth girl" in *The Waste Land*, the lack of words becomes part of "the fucking mystery," and a connection that might have been made gets lost forever in the silence of the protagonists.

At this point the poem moves into the realm of the surreal, where "things that didn't happen happen," graves yawn wide, and the poet enters into "A dream of Paris." Where the "Ode" presented an "I, knowing again," the end of "The End of a Story" offers a poet who does not "know" but can only "imagine":

Here now's your bed, flowered paper, windows opening  
 to a narrow balcony over the Rue Madame,  
 rain still falling on the yellow gravel  
 of St Sulpice. Turn off the light, shake up  
 your pillow, imagine this sleep to be your death,  
 this room your tomb, that rain falling for ever,  
 the Seine flowing, traffic on the Boulevard Saint Germain  
 endless, the cafés noisy. A bullet in the brain  
 is only the end of a story. It starts again. (469-70)

The ambiguity of the final phrase invites the reader to speculate what "It" might refer to. The phrase might imply that "It starts again" for those left behind, from the family of the dead who must go on living, to the television viewers who must watch the killing repeated "In a million stills." Every night, in a million homes, people get shocked into stillness as "It starts again." On the other hand, this ending could intimate the possibility of reincarnation, where life "starts again" for the deceased. One might even argue that "A bullet in the

brain” refers metaphorically to the effect of such images on both poet and reader, where the shock of the image shoots through the brain and ricochets “for ever,” resisting any simple moral resolution.

This pattern of a long poem riffing around a central preoccupation continues in Stead’s next volume of verse: *Paris* (1984). As if to mark a connection between the two texts, Stead retitled “The End of a Story” as “Paris: The End of a Story” when it appeared in *Between*. He even cross-references this poem by repeating its title in the sixth section of *Paris*:

The morning is a paradigm of vermouth, cool and dry  
and heady as you walk across the Pont Neuf already  
making for the end of a story. (*Paris* 6)

However, probably because “The End of a Story” constitutes a long poem in its own right, and because it uses a different verse form, Stead did not print this piece in *Paris*.

## 2. Fixed Forms and Postmodernist Play: *Paris*.

In the “Craft Interview” (1983), Stead places *Paris* as the third part of a sequence that began with “Walking Westward” and “Scoria”:

I had a general plan to do a long poem when I wrote ‘Walking Westward’; and in order to indicate that it was going somewhere as well as being a poem in its own right, I wrote a section which refers forward to ‘Scoria’, ‘Paris’, ‘The Wars’, ‘The Smoky Athletes’. That was repeated when I came to write ‘Scoria’, which is the second part of that sequence. . . . And the third section, ‘Paris’, which has now been written, was to be about Paris, but Paris almost as symbol, Paris as the sphere of art, imagination, dream. (459)

Where “Walking Westward” ranged across the world, and “Scoria” concentrated on the Auckland isthmus where Stead grew up, *Paris* focuses in upon a single city. Along with this shift in focus came a surprising change in form, as Stead explained to Michael Harlow:

What has surprised me is that the third section, ‘Paris’ . . . has come out in a different form from the others. It’s in ten twenty-line sections, with a very long line. . . . Basically it’s a 5-stress line, but insisting that every stress be real, and therefore often using many syllables to each stress. (“Craft Interview” 460)

Thus where “Walking Westward” and “Scoria” follow the flexible margins and variable line lengths of a Poundian process poem, *Paris* marks a shift towards preset form.

One reason for this shift could be that Stead changed his method of writing around this time. All of his previous poems had been written in longhand, as Stead pointed out in a 1985 interview with Kamala Jackson:

I always used to write everything longhand. This recent novel I've just had published (*All Visitors Ashore*) was the first time I've written a prose work straight on to a typewriter. . . . Since then I've done a poem on the typewriter, a long poem which has just been published, called *Paris*. With a lot of walking around the room I may say. You know, long, long pauses. Getting the thing into my head first. (126-27)

Whatever the reason for its shape, *Paris* constitutes a curious mixture of fixed forms and postmodernist play.

For example, in a pastiche of classical long poems—such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*—Stead opens *Paris* with an invocation:

City so long announced come home to my dreams.  
 These are the days of my defeat when I long for  
 your anonymity, your bidets. Light me a whiffing candle,  
 pour me a small black coffee, send down-river your glass barges,  
 let your new immaculate wheels put forth on their tracks  
 to St Lazare, tell your best-breasted girls to expect me,  
 your clowns before the Beaubourg to hold their fire;  
 ask the crisp ready leaves of St Germain-en-laye  
 to delay their plunge, the plumbing everywhere to hold back  
 its last laugh, the cars to polish their hubcaps. (1)

Stead invokes not a deity or a muse, as tradition demands, but a city, the dream of a city. That dream gets suffused by a torrent of Steadian wordplay: he plays on the popular phrase ‘hold your fire,’ giving it a literal twist by applying it to fire-juggling “clowns before the Beaubourg”; likewise, he renews ‘having the last laugh’ by applying it to the gurgling of “plumbing” in the walls of ancient buildings. Stead uses sound to support the sense of this latter expression by placing an early caesura after “last laugh.”

This skill with traditional verse forms can also be seen in the placement of words such as “I long for / your,” where the poet uses both a run on line and a run on rhyme to stretch out and convey the extent of his longing. A twist on this technique occurs in Stead’s rhyming of words from English across to French. For example, the “days” of his defeat echo into and contrast with the “bidets” that might help to clean him up. A parallel use of such internal rhyme takes place when the poet asks the “leaves of St Germain-en-laye / to delay.” This rhyme crosses the line break and enacts both the falling pattern of the leaves and the stalling pattern that the poet requests. He then rhymes “plunge” and “plumb,” and puns on the plunger (a leaf in flight and a plumber’s tool) that might be appropriate for the situation.

Similar techniques occur at the end of this first poem, where Stead plays with such stock expressions as ‘look to your laurels’ and ‘put me in the picture’:

City so long undreamed, please look to your laurels.  
 Here there’s nothing but the spite of choked passages  
 and green bananas, nothing but the spirit of Palmerston North  
 going to bed in lambskins. Paris, summon me to your table.  
 I invite myself to your board, I accept your invitation  
 and my defeat. Paris, put yourself in the picture. (1)

On an external level, this passage echoes the opening section of “Walking Westward,” which posed a similar problem: “Out there is the world” / “here is . . . lackland” (*PD* 61). On an internal level, the “choked passages” and unripe fruit of New Zealand contrast with the bidets (clean) and the plants (ripe and “ready”) of Europe. Stead also inserts an extra foot to choke up the line and add a verbal echo of someone straining with “choked passages” (possibly from eating “green bananas”). The poet prefers—and privileges—the “table” of Paris, with a pun on “board” / bawd casting back to the “best-breasted girls” that he also seems to salivate over, and who contrast strongly with the prim “spirit of Palmerston North / going to bed in lambskins.”

This kind of playful, leisurely unfolding continues through the next nine poems. In no hurry to get anywhere, Stead strolls through the Paris of his mind. While that mind

concentrates on Paris, it occasionally recalls the South Pacific, as in the memory of a New Zealand television advertisement that opens section 4:

Magic you are, Mr Muscle, magic you always have been  
but so much is yet unspoken and would have remained so  
had your neck broken before the fall of the 4th Republic.  
You have come at last and again to the city of liberation.  
Up go the starlings in alarm, down come the pigeons to greet you,  
out go the trains and in comes the breath of the soul. (4)

“Mr Muscle” refers to a popular New Zealand household cleaning product. This commodity boasts a bald, muscular genie on its label who comes to life in his television commercials, explodes into the kitchen and cleans everything like “Magic.”

Along with this postmodern reference, Stead may also be alluding to his own experience here. As Kendrick Smithyman notes in his 1985 essay for *Contemporary Poets*, Stead sometimes writes about “a neck broken while swimming.” So much would have remained “unspoken” had the poet damaged his neck beyond repair. He had been to Paris before the accident, and now he comes “at last and again”:

There will never be a notion so brilliant as this actual,  
these surfaces giving you yourself without recognition,  
without name, with only the tattered rags of a language,  
with the eyes of a child let loose in a field of flowers.  
Paris has its hand in your pocket, its escalators  
are touring your dreams, its gendarmes directing  
with whistles and truncheons the flow of your blood.  
Lie down among stars along the Champs Élysée,  
let them sing to you of a famous victory over death,  
stamp into every line the determined blood of your birth. (4)

The imagery in this section feels at once self-effacing (the narrator jokes about his baldness, has “only the tattered rags of a language,” and feels like “a child”) and self-aggrandizing (he calls himself Magic, Mr Muscle, and crows in Yeatsian fashion about “the determined blood” of his birth). However, the common factor throughout seems to be a poetry of statement. In other words, a seam of explicit realist assertions runs alongside Stead’s verbal play and postmodernist employment of pop culture and the language of advertising.

Thus *Paris* steps back not from set forms, realist statements or postmodernist techniques, but from the modernist principle of musical scoring. As Kendrick Smithyman argues in *Contemporary Poets* (1985), Stead's work in *Paris* contradicts some of "the principles he expounded in 1979" in "From Wistan to Carlos":

The *Paris* sequence is not open form. The poems of the sequence are regulated about lines and sentences which have not entirely forgotten about pentameters and hexametrics. Liberty is not license, discourse not readily digressive, spontaneity a something less than what it wants to pass for. At the centre is a regulating intelligence, cunning about the poems' craft.

In addition to the metrical patterns that Smithyman focuses on, *Paris* tends towards traditional three-part realist structures. Some of the poems even contain the kind of political attacks that filled Stead's "Letters to the Enemy" in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

Section 8, for example, sets about criticizing the French policy of testing nuclear bombs in the South Pacific:

This is where the President of the Republic spends his afternoons.  
Here's the street where his motorcade passes. From this dias  
he pins on ribbons and medals and kisses wrinkled cheeks.  
He's the one who decides whether fish in your southern ocean  
should wear water wings or grow two heads.  
Sometimes he leans to the left sometimes to the right,  
sometimes he's ten feet tall, sometimes he accepts diamonds  
but the bombs go off on time. (8)

The President promises a variety of things (leaning left and right) but, for all his apparent vacillation, "the bombs go off on time." Stead gives this phrase additional aural weight by placing "on time" directly after the four-part anaphora of "sometimes." Stead then uses irony to undercut the President's position, stating that "This is the Rue de la Paix," 'the Street of Peace' (with a pun on the political cliché of 'the road to peace'). The poet's moral conclusion already seems clear, and he still has another twelve lines to go.

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<sup>3</sup>When selecting poems for *Straw Into Gold: Poems New and Selected* (1997), Stead grouped his 1960s texts in a section called "Letters to the Enemy."

However, most of Stead's conclusions in *Paris* avoid political issues and concentrate on the city itself. For example, section 3 constitutes a conventional praise poem. Stead begins by stating "that's how you seem to me / this morning, Paris, drinking my café au lait: 'Authentic'. / I salute you . . ." (3). He then repeats the refrain "I salute you" another three times, before concluding as follows:

This is my day Paris, you will fall for me today  
like a Roman Empire, like Jacob's laddered stocking,  
like a devaluation. Paris, I wish you good morning. (3)

As the poet's mood changes, so do his conclusions. Section 5 ends with the line "there's no end in sight. This Paris is like a disease." Conversely, the close of section 6 mixes criticism with affection: "Paris, you ancient sewer, / my spectacles and my shoe-leather embrace your ways." Most of the poems begin with a statement—"Paris, you don't know yourself" (2), "It is because we're all to die that we visit Paris" (7)—then set about illustrating and commenting upon the issues raised by that statement.

Part of the fun of this book lies in watching the performance of the poet, and wondering what he will make of the statements that he sets himself. For example, the seventh poem takes up the challenge of its opening by juxtaposing God to a bathroom, and birdsong to language:

It is because we're all to die that we visit Paris—  
not that we want salvation or think eternity possible  
or believe more fervently in God than in the bathroom,  
nor in Notre Dame with its burning bushes of candles,  
but that this is an arcane language we can turn an ear to  
as to the thrush on a wet evening, knowing more or less  
its import without understanding. (7)

One might see a precursor here of Stead's argument (in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*) that "arcane language" need not be "understood" in the literal sense but—like birdsong—can be taken in as a kind of magical incantation simply by opening one's ears. Stead then adds another reason to his argument as to why people visit Paris:

This and the sense that  
not being gods or angels we have slipped right by

the frontier guards and are walking invisible in a heaven  
of plausible dimension leading by cobbled backstreets  
to the breadsticks, berets and bicycles of favourite old movies. (7)

Paris gives Stead the sense of “walking invisible in a heaven,” a feeling that tourists sometimes get when arriving in (or, more often, anticipating arrival in) a country that they have dreamed of or seen in “favourite old movies.”

Stead then comments that an imagined “heavenly” place sometimes turns out to have a “bloody,” “cold” and dangerous reality:

Paul Gauguin came to our ocean for similar reasons  
and the blood still shows on the walls of the Beaubourg.  
Night is certainly a laboratory in which are made  
colours of the trees, the river and the morning sky,  
and you'll need your wits about you walking home  
through the cold dawn without a visible presence  
seeking only the safest route to the Rue Madame. (7)

After setting the scene, elaborating the problem—and providing a parallel example in the case of Gauguin—Stead offers his conclusion: “To the riddle of Life the best short answer may be Death / but not desiring it we can always settle for Paris” (7). In other words, Stead prefers the problems of “a heaven / of plausible dimension,” where “you’ll need your wits about you,” to the short answer of “Death” which may hold no heaven at all.

While many of its poems tend towards such realist structures, *Paris* does not represent pure realism. The book as a whole avoids linear narrative, using instead a modernist structure of aggregation. For instance, like a single strand in a spider web, section 7 may be traced through a variety of routes to many other parts of the web. The “bushes of candles” link back to the “whiffing candle” that the narrator asked for in section 1: Paris outdoes itself, and his expectations. Similarly, the blood “on the walls of the Beaubourg” seeps back to the fire “before the Beaubourg” (1): art combines in a mass of “blood” and “fire.” Meanwhile, the “burning bushes” in Notre Dame (Our Lady), entwine with the “neat and busy bush” (10) of Catherine Deneuve (the Lady of *Paris*, whom the narrator worships in his

own secular way). The narrator's "favourite old movies" also tie into his surreal "movie with Catherine Deneuve" in sections 5 and 10.

In a more sinister fashion, the capitalised "Death" at the end of section 7 echoes through the poem, particularly in the ensuing section where it lurks behind the French nuclear tests. In the same context, Gauguin's reasons for coming to "our ocean," and the artistic "blood" that resulted, contrast starkly with the President's aims and actions in "your southern ocean." Similarly, the "diamonds" accepted by the President in section 8 reappear at the start of section 9, where "starlings / are drinking diamonds." This image suggests that the natural diamonds of water may be more precious than the artificially cut ones of the necklace, as they feed both body and soul, and do no harm. Stead supports this concept of water in the opening of the final section, even as he pokes fun at his old realist habit of personifying and capitalizing "Death": "Now is the night we used to call Symbol of Death / but there's water through branches and lights and stars on the water" (10). All these connections occur in the mind of the reader, as the parts of the poem grow together like a slowly rising soufflé. The poet supplies the ingredients, the reader supplies the heat, and the shape of a poem—one of many possible shapes—results.

This modernist aggregation of elements in a 'Field' also stretches out to include previous poems, particularly "Yes T.S." Both texts involve a New Zealander who goes to Europe and has to leave his lover behind:

My love will be broadcast at eight to the underworld  
 which is not Paris, the world which Paris is not  
 where you may be walking at dusk not thinking of me. (*Paris 9*)

A similar telephone call occurs in the London section of "Yes T.S.":

3 crows in the square  
 S.T.D.  
     you say it's night there  
 flap down through sun-shafts  
 missing me  
   loving you

those flowers from the pear tree  
these leaves beginning to fall (*Geog* 32-33)

Both poems present a consciousness caught between two hemispheres, trying to deal with the differences and connections between “those flowers” and “these leaves,” between “the world” and “the underworld.” In *Paris*, the narrator (like the father at the opening of “A New Zealand Elegy”) ties himself up in “nots” in an effort both to illustrate and to bridge the gaps. In “Yes T.S.,” Stead underlines the complexity of these connections by visually emphasizing the distance between “me” and “you” (placing them on opposite sides of the double margin), while simultaneously tying them together with an interlocking rhyme scheme (the “square” in London rhymes with the night “there,” while “S.T.D.” links the “missing me” with the blossoming “tree” back home in Auckland).

These ‘Field’ connections between *Paris* and “Yes T.S.” increase in number when the narrator of the latter moves from England to France. For instance, the “I salute you” refrain in section 3 of *Paris*, along with its reference to Matisse—“I salute you. / Give me all your Picassos, donne-moi tous tes Matisses”—echoes the following lines from “Yes T.S.”:

Matisse is an odyssey in one hotel room  
in a city that rhymes with Matisse  
Matisse is the dream of the poem of  
the life tout en couleur  
I salute you Matisse. Matisse  
je vous salue. (*Geog* 44)

Similarly the mixtures in the fifth section of *Paris*—“first blue sky” and “falling leaves,” a woman who “looks up and smiles” and “a girl on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens weeping”—recall the mixtures that “come together” in the same location in “Yes T.S.”:

The leaves are falling fast  
the shadows our bodies cast are long  
the pool of the fountain of the Medicis  
is carpeted with gold.

There’s warmth on the face  
there’s a lift in the voice and  
something like sadness in the air  
they come together

in the Luxembourg Gardens. (*Geog* 43)

Here one can see many of the same details, viewed through a slightly different lens. Indeed, much of *Paris* might be seen as an extrapolation of the “Paris” section in “Yes T.S.,” particularly the couplet that brings that section to a close:

Au'voir Paris  
get fucked / I love you. (*Geog* 44)

In addition to this aggregation of elements in a ‘Field,’ another technique that tips *Paris* away from pure realism can be seen in its moments of surrealism. One might take as an example Stead’s presentation of Catherine Deneuve:

Here’s Catherine Deneuve. . . . The cameras love her and so do you.  
Take her to coffee in your head. Take her to bed.  
On the escalators gipsy children have picked your pocket  
and in the dingy gendarmerie you hammer out a statement.  
Disguised as a spaniel she waits in a nearby café  
drinking thé citron and rehearsing her fabulous lines. (5)

The poet’s fantasy (his “head” rhymes the actress into “bed”) turns surreal as Deneuve morphs into a “spaniel.” In a possible tribute to the French sources of surrealism, *Paris* contains Stead’s most insistent and playful use of that mode. Gendarmes direct “the flow of your blood” while “escalators / are touring your dreams” (4), “a white dove flies / out of the face of Magritte” (6), “hard-boiled eggs” become armed and dangerous (8), and “the cats on the mansard / quote Rimbaud at the moon, which answers in French” (10).

Stead’s use of surreal images and game-playing in *Paris* prompted some scathing critical responses. Bernard O’Donoghue, for example, reviewing *Paris* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, judges that “it is a very self-indulgent piece of post-modernism” (753). One can contextualize this judgement by pointing out that of all the poems in *Poems of a Decade*—which he was also reviewing—O’Donoghue found the twenty-two realist sonnets “fine” and “possibly the most satisfying thing in the book” (753). Given this preference

for realism, it is perhaps not surprising that O'Donoghue dismissed the postmodernist aspects of *Paris* as unsatisfactory.

On the other hand, some critics enjoyed playing the games that *Paris* offers. Elizabeth Smither (herself a New Zealand poet fond of linguistic play) reviewed the book in *Landfall* by writing a poem of her own:

This poem is a tickle in all the right places.  
The poet with his legs as long as breadsticks  
Has paced ten boulevards with his hold on grammar  
Finding whores or Catherine Deneuves  
And culture's strong connection with his spirit. . . .  
To those who take its tone the city is available  
'Une phrase bien faite est une bonne action'. . . .  
Stead's Paris in the head is bon apéritif. (106)

Apart from its capitals at the start of each line, this response to *Paris* captures the form and tone of Stead's poem, as well as conveying Smither's appreciation of that text. In her view, the poem tickles "in all the right places," and contains many "a well written sentence" ("Une phrase bien faite").

However, where Smither finds *Paris* "good eating" (punning on "bon appetit" and "bon apéritif"), Leigh Davis judges that "*Paris* is like a McDonald's hamburger" (Interview 315). What feels "right" and "well written" to one critic, may feel tasteless to another—this much seems a truism of criticism—my interest lies not in these value judgements, but in the critical attitudes that produce them and the purist expectations that they often reveal. For instance, as a purist postmodernist, Davis finds too many "recognizable" elements in *Paris*, and therefore dismisses the poem as a part of the New Zealand realist tradition. Similarly Michael Hulse, writing in the *PN Review*, isolates the realist aspects of the text:

the ten twenty-line poems that make up *Paris* . . . encourage no realizations or recognitions. Instead, they teach, enthuse, insist or proclaim. . . . To read Stead after Manhire is to exchange an untrammelled imagination for the constrictions of the lecture theatre. (57)

Ironically, Hulse demands “realization,” “recognition” and “imagination”—concepts that Stead often calls for in his own criticism. Thus Stead’s own purist arguments in favour of modernism can get turned against him. *Paris* allows a variety of critical responses because of the variety of modes that it contains. In my view, to isolate any one of those modes simply in order to praise or damn that mode, does an injustice to the combination that Stead creates. This combination continues in his next volume of poetry: *Between* (1988).

### 3. In Between Various Modes: *Between*.

That *Between* contains a mixture of modes can be seen in the uncertainty that it produced in Dennis McEldowney when he came to review that book for *Landfall*. He begins by admitting “I enjoyed my first reading of *Between* immensely. . . . But I didn’t know how to review it” (104). McEldowney gives his reason for this puzzlement as “mainly the unusual variety of the poems. A large statement originating in one of them seemed unlikely to apply to most of the others” (104). McEldowney finds his enjoyment as a reader matched only by his confusion as a critic and reviewer. In the purist climate of New Zealand criticism, he feels impelled to make “A large statement” about the mode of the poems—yet finds this impulse stymied by Stead’s elusive habit of “turning his skilful hand to any style going” (104).

Thus McEldowney finds himself unable to blanket the poems with a general description, discovering “the kind of poem which ‘has a subject and works its way towards a statement’” (105), alongside works of “open form (look-at-the-words, sound-the-words poetry)” (106). The reviewer sees Stead’s inclusion of realist poems as a contradiction of “that landmark declaration of support for ‘open form’, the 1979 lecture ‘From Wystan to Carlos’” (105). However, unlike many poetry critics, McEldowney does not try to separate and judge between these modes. Instead, he simply comments that “An . . . indication of the poetic presence is its willingness to flout Stead’s critical principles” (105). This “flouting” produces a variety of modes among separate poems, as McEldowney points out. In addition, this mixture also occurs within individual poems, particularly the longer texts.

*Between* contains a number of long poems. Two of these constitute imagist list poems, “The Poetry Room” and “As if Nothing had Happened,” and one can see a mixture of modes operating in both these texts. For example, “The Poetry Room”—while it generally provides a series of imagist moments—sometimes swings towards realism, as in the previously unpublished fourth section, “Lawn Order”:

In this photo the Squad in blue metal and visors  
are gathered around like wasps. That’s a wrist they’re breaking.  
At the picture’s edge that’s me, waiting to be next.  
Whoever dislikes disorder must like the Squad.  
When they break a wrist it’s always for the best. (28)

In 1981 the South African Springbok rugby team toured New Zealand, and faced many anti-apartheid protest marches and demonstration rallies. The police formed a special “Squad” to counter these marches, and the largest clash took place in Waikato when protesters occupied the local rugby ground. The anti-tour protesters sat chanting in the middle of the field, while the Red Squad dragged them away one by one. Nevertheless, by the time “Lawn Order” had been re-established, the game had been called off.

Stead got actively involved in these protests, and that action spilled over into his poetry, as he explains in the “Craft Interview” (1983):

My own political obsessions can be pretty unrelenting. The Vietnam War got into my blood and into my dreams, so it got into my writing too. More recently there was the Springbok tour. That got me off my chair and even showed me the inside of a cell for the first time in my life. But I think so far it has only got into a very few lines of my poetry—and then rather obliquely. (456)

To local readers, the subject matter of “Lawn Order” hardly seems “oblique,” and neither does the poet’s moral point. Stead casts the “Squad” as “wasps,” insects notorious for their violent, swarming attacks. He then shows them methodically breaking the bones of the people they drag away. His conclusion then satirizes the supporters of such actions, who naively assume that police actions must be “always for the best.”

While this poem marks a swing towards realism, with its heavily ironic moral, the other new poem in this sequence—"Where Alf the Sacred Beater Ran"—swings towards post-modernist techniques:

The quick brown fox jumps over the over. What  
 a lazy dog. Clean bowled. Looking down the vista  
 of the Vistula I came up against a cliché. It was  
 squinting into the sun where the brown fox had run.  
 Only Clap Cleanser will scour you a clean bowl.  
 Now is the time for all good moon to come to the aid of . . .  
 Moon? Did you say moon? Hurry up please, it's time. (27-28; Stead's ellipsis)

At first glance, this poem seems to approximate the kind of depthlessness that postmodernist critics admire. The whole section constitutes a linguistic game. Stead starts with a line from "Kubla Khan"—"Where Alph, the sacred river, ran"—and changes Alph into "Alf" and the river into a "beater." He may be punning here on the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: "Alpha, Beta." The poet then embarks on a game of word association football, moving from these letters to a phrase commonly used as a handwriting or typing exercise (because it contains all the letters of the alphabet), "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Stead then plays on the expression "bowled over" by introducing the cricketing terminology of "run," "over," and "clean bowled." The latter turns into the "clean bowl" of a toilet cleanser advertisement and then—for no apparent reason—the poem jumps off into another common typing exercise, "now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party." Words melt into each other as vista becomes "Vistula," men turn into "moon," and moon may even connote bare buttocks. The effect of this poem seems quite surreal.

However, alongside this surrealism and linguistic play, Stead employs some modernist techniques, particularly aggregation and allusion. Aggregation connects this section with other "Poetry Room" poems. For example, the "Moon" links back to the previous poem, "Professor Moon at the Lectern," but in more than a simple word association. The professor had been giving "a lecture on darkness," from "the blackness of the earth" to "the caverns of the ear." In this context, perhaps the caverns imply the "caverns measureless to man" where Alph the sacred river ran in "Kubla Khan." After reaching this "sunless sea," the

reader emerges to join the poet in “squinting into the sun,” trying to work out where the quick brown fox had run, and what that phrase might signify. Perhaps Stead simply makes a joke on a “quick brown” case of the “runs,” which would explain the need for a good toilet cleanser. The toilet may even allude to “toilets,” an anagram for “T.S. Eliot,” and that name might connect to another famous Thomas, one Thomas Crapper (the inventor of the flush toilet), which makes an odd kind of sense in the context of “Crap Cleanser.” In any case, having begun the section by alluding to one of his poetic touchstones (“Kubla Khan” appears in much of Stead’s criticism as an example of what he calls “pure poetry”), Stead ends by alluding to another: *The Waste Land*. His final line echoes the close of “A Game of Chess,” where a disembodied voice repeats “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.” In this way—as one might expect given Stead’s work in texts such as “Yes T.S.” and *All Visitors Ashore* (and Wystan Curnow’s disgruntled response to the latter)—what appeared to be purely postmodernist turns out to contain a mixture of modes.

The other imagist list poem in *Between*, “As if Nothing had Happened,” offers a similar mixture. This text takes on an aura of surrealism, largely because it takes place in the area of dreams. Stead likes to record his dreams—as seen in the previous chapter’s discussion of *The End of the Century* and “Dream On”—and this process dominates the seven sections of “As if Nothing had Happened.” For instance, the poet titles his first three sections as “Dream One & Dream Two,” “The Dream of a Dream” and “The Dreams Continue.” The third of these sections might be taken as typical:

Landed at Amsterdam he slept in the airport lounge  
 waiting for an onward flight. The huge round orange lightbulb  
 over the tarmac was the Holland sun through fog.  
 Where was the black box? He could paint Van Goghs in his sleep  
 or slide in A4 bank and bang away at dreams  
 of the freckled lakeside lady her sky on a spike.  
 She was wild with wanting, but only to go down on paper. (15)

This dream takes its tone from the city of Amsterdam, with the national colour “orange,” the national artist Van Gogh and the focus on sex. This focus invites a Freudian interpretation of such words as “huge,” “black box,” “slide in . . . and bang away” and the “lady . . . on a

spike.” Indeed, the whole poem seems to exist simply in order to produce a pun on “going down,” where the poet has fellatio in mind but the lady desires “only to go down on paper.” Thus, like much of “The Poetry Room,” “As if Nothing had Happened” leans towards the postmodernist techniques of linguistic play and surreal images.

In contrast to these two texts, the other long poems in *Between*—“The Kin of Place,” “Paris: The End of a Story,” “After the Wedding,” and “Going to Heaven”—seem more conventionally modernist. They generally follow the modernist principles, articulated in “From Wystan to Carlos,” of aggregation, musical form and approximation. “The Kin of Place” in particular, as shown in chapters four and five, exemplifies all of these principles. The other three poems, though—while they remain essentially modernist—do not conform to that mode in such a purist fashion. “Paris: The End of a Story,” as discussed earlier, contains aspects of both realism and surrealism. Similarly, “After the Wedding” (analyzed in chapter five), contains a seam of realism. So while these long poems may lean towards the modernism that Stead prescribes, they sometimes incorporate the techniques of other modes.

“Going to Heaven” offers no exception to this pattern. This poem contains ten sections in the manner of “Yes T.S.,” all in double margins and separated by asterisks. In modernist fashion, the poem opens with an unexplained juxtaposition:

married one  
 fathered three  
 travelled far  
     wrote (say) a round  
                     dozen  
 died and  
 \*

mangroves  
 moongroves  
     salt on a light wind  
                     rattling  
 cabbage trees  
 blinds (29)





the brown dam” (31-32). Stead contemplates this seminal memory (in sections 5 and 8), provides a number of images of time passing, both in his life and in nature, and then offers a fairly explicit moral conclusion in the final section:

breaks as always  
 all over  
                   another sunday  
  
 here is heaven  
  
                   take off your  
 clothes and  
                   lie down  
  
                   prepare for  
 (again?)  
 takeoff (32)

The poet takes the capital letter out of his “sunday,” and makes his worship a secular one of nature and natural drives. He explains that for him “here is heaven” (again without a capital letter), in the love of a partner and the dependable sound of “the sea,” which “breaks as always” outside his door.

As Mark Williams points out, in his introduction to the 1989 *Journal of Commonwealth Literature Bibliography*, “*Between* is by far Stead’s simplest book to date: generally realist, very ‘New Zealand’ in its voice, diction and imagery” (98). This “generally realist” tone comes about partly because of seam realism in the longer poems, and partly because over a third of the book gets given to a sequence of twenty-one Catullus poems. Like the “Clodian Songbook” in *Geographies*, these “adaptations” (as Stead calls them), “are not translations, but each gets its start from a particular Catullus poem” (*Bet* 6). Stead puts these poems into a visually open form—usually a double or central margin—but packs them full of explicit realist statements. Sometimes he even resolves these poems with a clear moral conclusion, as in the aphoristic final line of number 4: “Human folly is constant. Only the bombs get bigger” (40).



don't deny that there is a connection between 'Catullus' and CKS, but to make it so literal is as crude as it is to suggest that this poem's 'message' has more to do with personal pique than with the serious subject of positive discrimination" (134).

For all that he places the word 'message' in inverted commas, Stead's letter seems aimed at showing what the poem was 'really about.' The nature of the Catullus poems makes such an approach possible, and shows how far these texts diverge from Stead's own modernist principles. In "From Wystan to Carlos," he had argued against the poem that "has a subject and works its way towards a statement" (*GC* 150). Most of the Catullus poems, however, fall into this realist format, and so Stead ends up writing a letter arguing about the subject matter of his poem. In doing so, he writes the kind of criticism that he rejected in "From Wystan to Carlos": "The realist tradition . . . tends always towards using the poem as a vehicle. You may decorate the vehicle, but the critic who inspects it will want to know what's *in* it, and what value its 'content' has beyond the values of art" (*GC* 143).

In addition to the Catullus poems, *Between* contains seven other short poems, and most of them fall into this "realist tradition." Sometimes these poems vary the usual three-part format by making an explicit conclusion and then following it with an image, as in the title piece "Between" (discussed in chapter six). Mostly, though, these poems mark a return to the realist discussion of subject matter, such as politics and the self.

For example, one can see Stead musing over political issues in poems such as "Two Dates From the Auckland Calendar" and "Deconstructing the Rainbow Warrior." The "Two Dates" concern group protests and the police actions they prompted, one over the Springbok Tour ("12th September 1981"), the other over Maori land at Bastion Point ("4th April 1982"). These two poems praise the protesters—both texts describe them as "singing"—and satirise the police. The latter, for instance, casts the protestors as a "fire" that cannot be put out:

To put it out you put in  
two hundred men in metal blue and visors  
with truncheons. It's happening now.

Arrest the fire, put it in handcuffs  
carry it to the cells, bring it before the Court.  
Give the fire a good stiff sentence. (21)

The act of trying to capture such an elusive and powerful element “in handcuffs” makes the police seem ridiculous. For all the attempts to “arrest” it and to “put it out,” the fire lives on. Stead concludes, with some satisfaction, that “The fire / has many tongues and many children” (21).

Similarly in “Deconstructing the Rainbow Warrior,” Stead criticizes the use of force against political protestors. The *Rainbow Warrior* was the flagship of Greenpeace, an organization devoted to protecting the environment, saving endangered wildlife, and preventing nuclear tests. This vessel was on its way to protest French nuclear tests in the South Pacific when, on 10 July 1985, French frogmen mined and sank it in Auckland Harbour. One of the crew members was killed, and two French intelligence agents involved in the sinking—Dominique Prieur and Alain Marfart—were captured and put on trial in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup>

Stead approaches this event through a pun on the French love of “clever theories,” both in literature and in politics: “In my game (and yours, reader) it was always the Frogmen / had the clever theories” (22). He then shifts into the present tense, where “two rubberised heads have set their Zodiac on course.” Stead comments that “they’re ferrying a transitive verb / / called Bomb.” This use of a capital letter reminds the reader that subtle theories and

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<sup>4</sup>Prieur and Marfart had entered New Zealand as Swiss tourists, under the false names of Alain and Sophie Turenge—hence Stead’s pun “Turenge’s don’t make it right” (*Bet* 22). Though eventually sentenced to ten years in prison, these agents returned to Paris after serving little more than a year. Stead returns to this event in *Voices* with a poem, told from Prieur’s point of view, called “The Secret Agent.” For another account of this episode, and its attendant conspiracy theories, see Paul Thomas’s 1996 novel *Guerilla Season* (248-50).

euphemisms do not change the fact that this “transitive verb” destroys human life. After a passage showing tension among the agents, Stead returns to this separation of theory and fact:

Remember, reader, poems don't deal in fact.  
This is all a bad dream in the Elysée Palace.

Now scatter—it goes like the Paris Metro, according to plan.  
Soon you will hear explosions. Someone will die.

More than a ship will founder—and the theory? Ah, the theory!  
Dig a hole for it with your English trowels. (22)

In realist fashion, Stead instructs the reader to “remember” that the French theory of deconstruction argues that “poems don't deal in fact.” He then undercuts this theory with the bald, end-stopped fact that “Someone will die.”

While these short poems confront political issues, others—such as “Between,” “The Magic Bagwash” and “Goodbye”—deal with personal problems. In “Between,” for example, the poet gets caught in the middle of a family argument, and concludes that “I know how / Passion always gets a good press and why it should be so / but have you ever thought of Reason as / the neglected child of our time?” Likewise, in “The Magic Bagwash,” Stead explains what he has come to “know”:

You know  
how it is the human  
spirit keeps on breaking  
out (14)

This method and vocabulary echoes Stead's realist poems of the 1950s, where the poet frequently analyzed and explained his feelings (though in a much less conversational tone).

While “The Magic Bagwash” contemplates the passing—and persistence—of youthful idealism, “Goodbye” describes the passing of the poet from one country to another. He takes off in a plane, leaves his lover behind, and writes her a poem:

I was away as

ever over  
 seas in my flying  
 chair taking my pre-drink

drink writing on  
 the head of a pin good-  
 bye again. Goodbye. (33)

This concluding passage presages a series of statements in the fifteenth Catullus poem, where the poet asserts that "I'm flying north," "Goodbye Clodia . . . and never doubt I love you." He then explains that "Travel is my vice," and concludes as follows:

My heart is an anchor  
 my head a dinghy on the running tide. (52)

These shorter poems all contain a seam of realism, often following the three-part formula in which the poet sets the scene, elaborates the problem, then offers an explicit conclusion.

The final poem in the book—"The Radiant Way"—exemplifies this pattern. Like many of Stead's poems from the 1950s, this text constitutes a realist sonnet:<sup>5</sup>

A good student, 'The place is lumbered,' he tells me  
 'with a Rump of ageing Hippies'—and it's true I can see  
 Blakemen trapped in their burning beards and hair.  
 For lack of invention the Age strikes some to pillars  
 of Marxist / Feminist / Post-Structuralist salt.  
 Stiff-jointed liberals dance to escape insult.  
 'Academics are Saussure they know everything'  
 goes the graffito, 'they know Foucault about anything.'

Remember those post-war silken ladders unrolled  
 from palaces of cloud? The hard-working world  
 was going to join us there, Leavis and Levis in  
 the Realms of Gold. Now everything has to come down.  
 There's text in a bus ticket. Anyone tape-talks  
 and it's history. I tell him, 'Believe in your books.' (64)

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<sup>5</sup>Stead wrote a lot of realist sonnets in the 1950s: "The Tree," "Sonnet for a New Zealand Soldier Killed in Korea," "A Valedictory Sonnet," "Sonnet (for T.M.M.)," "She Shall be Mine," "Sonnet for a Rebirth," "Homage to Ancestors," "Dissolution," and "While Down the Fleeces of Our Sky." Of these, only the final two got collected in *Whether the Will is Free*. For complete publication details of these poems, see "Works Cited."

In his discussion of Margaret Drabble's 1987 novel, J.C. Ross notes that "her title, *The Radiant Way*, she has taken from an old book on education (gaining knowledge)" (Ross 314). Stead's use of the same title exhibits a nostalgia for an older, text-centred style of education, such as that practised by F.R. Leavis. In direct opposition to this approach, Stead places the groups that he sees as "The New Victorians." He even lays a biblical curse on the academic behaviour that he dislikes.<sup>6</sup> In realist fashion, the poet tells the reader what to "Remember," and explains what he thinks is "good" and "true."

In addition to its use of moral conclusions, this poem also marks a return to the pre-set forms of Stead's early poetry. The shape of this sonnet follows the Petrarchan division between octave and sestet but, in a twist on the usual rhyme scheme of that form, Stead offers a series of rhyming couplets. He also uses those rhymes to echo the sense of his argument: the octave contains four nearly perfect rhymes, but disjointed half-rhymes take over in the sestet. In other words, when "everything has to come down," the rhythm gets disrupted. Similarly, the pentameter stumbles over a proliferation of weak stresses around the "Marxist / Feminist / Post-Structuralist" theories. This return to traditional metrical patterns set something of a blueprint for Stead's next book of poems: *Voices* (1990). Like his fiction of the same period (*Sister Hollywood* and "The Last Life of Clarry"), this volume marks a swing towards the mode of New Zealand realism.

#### 4. A Return to Realism: *Voices*.

A good place to begin a discussion of *Voices* might be 1942. Alan Roddick, writing in his book about Allen Curnow, states that "that year . . . brought [Curnow] the major poetic commission of his career (perhaps indeed the only poetic commission for any New Zealand

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<sup>6</sup>Stead may embrace some aspects of postmodernism, but he rejects the theories of post-structuralism. Mark Williams discusses this distinction in "On the Margins? New Zealand Little Magazines from *Freed* to *And*" (1987), arguing that Stead's preferences can be illustrated by the difference between *Freed* in the 1970s and *And* in the 1980s. Jonathan Lamb simplifies this distinction, in "Risks of Myth: The Politics of New Zealand Literary Journals" (1987), by positing a simple binary flip in "the literary journalism of C.K. Stead, erstwhile herald of post-modernism but now a sort of cultural revenue man . . ." (195).

poet, this century—so unlikely does such an occurrence seem to be repeated)” (22). The Government asked Curnow to write a poem for the tercentenary of Abel Tasman’s discovery of New Zealand, and he produced “Landfall in Unknown Seas.” Roddick states that “The poem needs little explication, being a model of clarity and directness. In this, it is . . . a fine example of the ‘public’ poem” (23).

Forty-eight years later (and ten years after Roddick’s prediction), the New Zealand Government commissioned another poem. The Minister of Arts and Culture, Michael Bassett, asked Stead “to write a poem for the New Zealand 1990 sesquicentenary” (V 5). As Roddick points out, the response to such a request must to some extent be a ‘public’ one because, in theory, the Government commissions such works for the people of New Zealand. Thus, whether or not the people of New Zealand actually read the poems, the poems must be able to be read. In *Voices*, therefore, Stead casts “the whole thing . . . in somewhat formal verse structures appropriate to semi-public poetry” (V 53).

In this return to “formal verse structures,” one can see another aspect of Stead’s post-purist practice. While, as a critic, Stead may argue for the primacy of modernism and open form, as a poet he seems determined to be allowed access to other ways of writing. This determination sometimes appears in his criticism as well, usually as a caveat to the main thrust of his argument. For example, in 1980 Stead wrote an essay lambasting the closed forms of A.D. Hope, asserting that “I think it is one of Hope’s limitations as a poet that he is not able to work outside closed forms; it is certainly his limitation as a critic that he is not able to appreciate the work of men like Eliot and Pound” (AL 97). However, in the midst of these familiar arguments, Stead inserts the following proviso in relation to his own work: “As a poet I have written in tight forms and in free verse and don’t wish to be talked out of either” (AL 97). So even as he embraces one kind of writing, Stead makes it clear that “As a poet” he remains open to other forms and poetic methods.

Stead reiterates this poetic openness in his “Conversation” with Fleur Adcock in 1991:

let's for the moment talk about closed and open forms. I have never felt prescriptive on this issue, particularly because I wouldn't want to be prescribed to. . . . I don't want either possibility to be closed off, I don't see why anybody would want either possibility to be closed off. (48-49)

Just as Stead's 1983 retraction allowed for the influence of postmodernist techniques in his poetry, so these statements allow for the persistence of some aspects of realism. Stead goes on, in the same "Conversation," to offer *Voices* as an example of the latter:

My most recent book of poems in fact was commissioned for 1990, I was commissioned to write a poem. What I finally wrote was a sequence of poems which is published as a book and the only way I could see to do this, a fairly unoriginal uninventive way of doing it, was to write an historical sequence in which I took characters from every phase of our history from the beginning right through; I felt this very much had to be a conscious work, you know. It was a commission that had to be met, and the only way I could do it, because the material was going to be historical, was to go back more to what you might say were the forms that most people wrote in when I was young, more like the forms that I would have written in in the 1950s, basically five-stress lines. A lot of them were sonnets. I worked in fairly unobtrusive rhyme patterns, so that the rhyme scheme for example in most of the sonnets is very tight but they're not obtrusive. . . . (48-49)

In contrast to much of Stead's work in the 1980s, therefore, *Voices* offers a series of fifty-one short poems, all of them in pre-set forms.

However, form can be deceptive if analyzed in isolation. What looks as if it were "written in the 1950s" may not be as traditional as it appears. For instance, in *Voices* Stead does not—as he did in the 1950s—set out to offer moral conclusions to his readers. Indeed, Stead makes this distinction in a note on "The Poems" on the back cover of the book:

For me, poetry is never satisfactory when it comes out of theorizing or moralizing. Its job is to cut right through the inessentials and capture the instant, the revelatory instance, the symbolic moment. . . . In these poems the work went, not into demonstrations of sensibility and humane compassion, but aural composition and formal structuring. That was my function, as I saw it, if the past was to be allowed to speak for itself with a clear voice.

Thus, while these poems mark a return to the "formal structuring" of the 1950s, they try to avoid the explicit "demonstrations of sensibility and humane compassion" that characterize the poems of that period.

To illustrate this point, one can compare two poems that Stead wrote about his ancestors in North Auckland; one published in *Landfall* in 1957, the other published in *Voices*. The former constitutes a realist sonnet called “Homage to Ancestors”:

Already forgotten the men and women whose journey  
 Half round the world to find a pair of islands  
 Set my life here. Forgotten their names, whose hands  
 Pointed to mountains leaping from the sea,  
 Who rowed ashore with pigs, tall stores of grain,  
 Sharp implements to beat a stubborn ground  
 They could not own, hearing always the sound  
 Of chipping surf that shared their own frustration.

Forgotten, but not lost, who nourish soil  
 In rainy Kamo under some crumbling stone,  
 First layer of whatever our blind toil  
 Shapes without plan. To them may words atone  
 For what seemed like failure, and for small success  
 Among these hills they tore in their distress. (277)

Here the poet tries to demonstrate his own “sensitivity and humane compassion,” offering his words as an “Homage,” and hoping that they may “atone” for the suffering of his ancestors. In striking this bardic pose, though, the poet ends up celebrating himself as much as his forebears. He praises them not just for their labours but because they “Set my life here.” He also places them as the necessary “First layer” on which presumably he represents the culmination, the top layer. They may be “Forgotten, but not lost,” for they have produced a writer, and he has produced “words.”

In the 1950s, Stead placed the poet at the centre of his poems, moralizing and judging. In *Voices*, the poet effaces himself and tries to portray characters and events without explicitly judging them. For example, in “1917 The Mother,” he lets an ancestor speak for herself:

Widowed, I came north with three small girls.  
 A nail was all it took—a gash that swelled  
 and he with it, three days. He died in pain.  
 Despair was my bitter secret, married again  
 for need, not love, to a Gospel-harsh  
 and mortgaged farmer. I bore him a boy.

Owen Vincent Freeman—how his names glow  
 on the bronze plaque, as if we had foreseen  
 death and glory. “He died for freedom and honour.”

I see his little legs running to school  
 over frosty paddocks. I can forgive so much  
 but never this. The blast took off his head.

These green hills of Kamo—see how the sun  
 shines on them after rain. Two of my girls  
 are buried in the Churchyard, Owen in France.  
 I listen to tuis, smell cut grass,  
 read and remember. If I believe in God  
 there's no love lost. Here, we are out of touch. (31)

Here the “distress” that Stead’s ancestors felt in “rainy Kamo” gets specified and given life. The poet no longer assumes any pathetic fallacy that the sea “shared their own frustration,” nor does he draw any conclusions about the “ground / They could not own,” or their “small success / Among these hills.”

Instead of generalizing about “blind toil” and “Shapes without plan,” the poet provides a character sketch where abstractions give way to the details of a life. He places that life in 1917, before tetanus injections, when a gash from a rusty nail “was all it took” to cause death. Stead captures a time before effective contraception and social welfare, when mothers often bore many children, and a solo mother might be forced to marry “for need / not love” in order to survive. Infant mortality was also high, and those that were not carried off by illness or infection often died in wars overseas.

All of these trials converge at once on a single woman, and the convergence shakes her faith. Her children were mowed down like the “cut grass” she smells, and she feels unable to forget or forgive. The birds are singing, the sun is shining, rain has fallen and the hills are green—but these images of renewal and redemption get overwhelmed by her many losses. Her memories contain too much sorrow for the present beauty to be of any comfort. She acknowledges the presence of lovely things, but she cannot hold or cherish them as she might a lover or a child. The church provides no solace either: religion appears only in her “Gospel-harsh” second husband, or in the reduced form of “the tui” (known as ‘the parson bird’ because of its jet black coat and white neck tuft). The poem ends with a list of sensual

experiences—sight, sound, smell and memory—but this list only serves to remind her of what she longs to, and cannot, touch.

In contrast to the clear conclusion of the 1957 poem, the final two sentences here contain an aspect of ambiguity. The meaning of “If I believe in God” depends whether the reader stresses the word “If” or the word “believe.” The latter allows lost love to be found again in heaven, where children and husbands may be restored; the former emphasizes the popular phrase “there’s no love lost,” a phrase that implies its opposite. In addition, Stead does not explain where “Here” is or who “we” might be. “Here” could mean the country of New Zealand (as opposed to England and “Home”), the countryside of Kamo (as opposed to the city of Auckland), the earth (as opposed to heaven) or the end point the narrator seems to have reached in her life and her poem. Similarly, “we” could refer generally to New Zealanders, or more specifically to the narrator’s relationship with God, or her husbands, or her children, or the landscape, or other people. These vague referents invite the reader to wrestle with them, to create some semblance of meaning.

One might compare this method of drawing the reader in with the more explanatory method adopted by one of Stead’s narrators in *The Singing Whakapapa*. In that novel, Hugh’s mother Ethel writes a “memoir” detailing the history of her mother Charlotte Flatt. Ethel recounts that Charlotte’s father “died young of septicemia after a gash from a rusty nail became infected” (195). Charlotte’s mother then remarried, to “a farmer at Kamo”:

Mr Freeman was what was known in those times as “a God-fearing man”; or as my mother preferred to describe him, a “mean and bigoted old hypocrite”. His big black Bible full of revenges and punishment, his homilies, his demands for attention and lip-service, and his loveless discipline, were the means by which Charlotte was (as she later saw it) released from the burden of the Christian faith. . . . (SW 195-96)

These conclusions all seem quite clear, as Ethel sums up characters and their actions. Much of what “The Mother” leaves implied in *Voices* gets explained in Ethel’s narrative. Ethel

also goes on to assert that “In my mother’s lexicon the darkest word was diphtheria” (both of Charlotte’s sisters died of that disease).<sup>7</sup>

So while *Voices* may mark a return to realism, it usually stops short of the pure realism seen in Ethel’s narrative, or in poems from the 1950s such as “Homage to Ancestors.” One reason for this difference lies in Stead’s use of the modernist technique of approximation. Another reason might be that in *Voices* Stead avoids lyrics from the poet’s point of view, and uses instead what Pound called the “dramatic lyric”:

The short so-called dramatic lyric . . . is the poetic part of a drama the rest of which (to me the prose part) is left to the reader’s imagination or implied or set in a short note. I catch the character I happen to be interested in at the moment he interests me, usually a moment of song, self-analysis, or sudden understanding or revelation. (Letter to William Carlos Williams, 21 Oct. 1908)

In *Voices* Stead leaves out “the prose part,” and uses no “short notes,” leaving just “the moment”—a voice and the revelations of its diction.

For example, the first speaker in the book—a “Missionary” in 1820—describes New Zealand in a curious mixture of religious and sexual metaphor:

God who delivered us out of Leviathan’s jaws  
has brought us here where welcoming thighs open  
to the dark pathway. Better we had gone down  
in that cold hell than in false paradise.  
Dreams and mosquitoes plague me in my tent. (9)

The speaker seems confused as to why “God . . . has brought us here.” He casts the land as female temptress (“welcoming thighs open”) and “false paradise.” A colonist’s dreams run up against the physical actuality of mosquitoes, and he comes to see both as a form of plague.

Sixteen years later, “The Catechist” wakes from a similarly unspecified dream:

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<sup>7</sup>Completing the circle, Charlotte’s only brother, Vincent, had his head “blown clean off his shoulders” in France (*SW* 65). Charlotte memorializes him with a “bronze plaque” inscribed “He Died for Freedom and Honour” (*SW* 65).

Dogs bark me from sleep. Pale light through an open flap.  
 Grass swish. Twig snap. Whispers—and now this hush  
 a thread in the book of my dreaming—a threat? (11)

Here the rhythms evoke that drifting state between hearing a noise and becoming fully awake. The syntax shifts from the sharp, waking phrases of the first line back to dreamy perceptions: “Grass swish. Twig snap.” Complete sentences drift back into phrases and sounds, heard but not fully understood. A series of interlocking rhymes help to convey this sleep-fuddled state: “flap” runs into “snap” as “swish” melds with the sound and sense of “whispers.” The line’s many sibilants underscore this effect, running together until they come to the strong stress and end-stop of “hush.”

Suddenly the dreamer feels things have become too quiet: “thread” turns into “threat” in the time it takes to change a single consonant. His fearful question—“a threat?”—lingers across a line break, then ushers in the harsh sounds and complete syntax of full wakefulness:

I wake to myself—John Flatt, crossing the Kaimais  
 from Matamata down to the Bay of Plenty.  
 The forest lifts dark arms to that billowing light  
 expecting song. Why are its choristers silent?  
 Fear won’t dispel this well-being of my waking. (11)

John Flatt knows that the threats of the land (such as “young warriors armed”) may “serve / to wipe my dream-slate clean of trade and farming.” Nevertheless, the catechist seems to feel more comfortable than the missionary did: his waking contains elements of “well-being.” Moreover, in the place of mosquitoes and plague, the catechist has dogs and a horse, the two essentials for rural life in New Zealand. Even after the warriors strip him of his clothes and goods, Flatt still manages to sing as he rides bareback on a track through the bush.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Stead often writes about his “great-great-grandfather, John Flatt, a lay catechist” (*AL* 189). This episode with the warriors reappears in *The Singing Whakapapa*, where Hugh Grady calls it “the most terrible of John Flatt’s adventures” (71). Just as he does in *Voices*, Flatt ends up riding bareback and singing (96), like his fictional descendant Hugh Grady (54), and his actual descendant Karl Stead (sonnet 15).

Thus both of these nineteenth-century churchmen reveal distinct personalities and habits of speech. However, Stead tries to make them representative as well, as he explains in his “Note” at the back of the book:

I was looking for personalities that were typical, and for events and circumstances that seemed to represent more than themselves, and could even, at times, seem to carry symbolic overtones. . . . (53)

These symbolic overtones arise in part through a process of aggregation. Placed beside each other, the two portraits combine to create the impression of an archetypal male colonist. For example, both speakers cast the landscape as a female body, “where welcoming thighs open / to the dark pathway” and “The forest lifts dark arms.” In addition, both colonists see the land as welcoming, possibly treacherous, but ready to be ploughed by energetic males.

Unlike the 1950s poem “Tall Girl”—where the poet surrounds himself with hill-like breasts and breast-like hills—the author of *Voices* sets himself at a distance from the attitudes expressed in his poems. In other words, rather than unconsciously revealing his own stance towards women and landscape, Stead consciously presents what he sees as “typical” colonial attitudes. Land becomes woman becomes lover, opening her thighs and arms to a new man. In this way, colonists annexed property emotionally before proceeding to annex it in deed. Moreover, both poems cast that body as other—not just as female, but as “dark.” Stead uses diction, therefore, to reveal the speakers’ attitudes as archetypically colonial. In two short phrases, they cast the land as female, dark, exotic, other, dangerous, paradisaical, and—above all—already theirs. These characters convince themselves of their possession in emotive language, even as they reveal to the reader the gaps between their view of themselves as rightful owners and their actual situation as invaders and colonists.

Another trick in the invader’s lexicon can be seen in their characterization of native peoples as naive, child-like and in need of help. Colonists used this tactic to provide

themselves with a responsibility, a civilizing mission.<sup>9</sup> The people of the land, the tangata whenua, get reduced to superstitious children. They run from the missionaries' callous shouts of "Atua!" (gods), just as they "seem to fear" the catechist's horse. In addition to this patronising perspective, colonists also view the people as dangerous, and therefore in need of a controlling hand. "They would eat their enemies," reports John Flatt, and the missionary comments that "The natives kill without rancour."

However, Stead makes both of these phrases ambiguous because of their context. He has the natives point out that the missionaries eat their God—who then is the superstitious one? Similarly, while the missionary's statement that "The natives kill without rancour" seems critical, Stead juxtaposes their killing to behaviour of a more sinister sort. "They" get contrasted with "Our half-drunk countrymen," who presumably do kill with rancour, and who "trade / muskets for women" (9). In these few lines Stead conveys at once the colonist's attitude to and treatment of the native peoples. These portraits move beyond the one-dimensional: the missionary is no evangelist, he does not wield "Marsden's lash."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, he questions himself and the behaviour of his people, asking "where is our Faith?" He even wonders whose faith ought to be privileged:

They say their recent dead go by this headland  
on their way to Reinga. At night they hear them whistle.  
I wonder, mocking their faith, do we mock our own? (9)

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<sup>9</sup>One can see this tactic in much of New Zealand's colonial verse. For example, in William Golder's "Stanzas"—written on a ship to Wellington in 1840—"Britannia" goes "In quest of savage nations . . . t'assay / To civilise and lead them by the road / Of sound instruction (changing into day / Their moral night)." Golder then reassures the Maori:

Fear not, New Zealander, we do not come  
With hostile feelings, but with all good will;  
Though we adopt your country as our home,  
'Tis but to teach you industry and skill. . . . (McQueen 16)

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Marsden (1765-1838) was a driving force behind the establishment of missions in the Bay of Islands. He held the first Christian religious service in New Zealand and supervised the affairs of the Missionary Society in that country from 1814 till his death. Marsden had a reputation for cruelty: in his capacity as magistrate in New South Wales (a post he was dismissed from for legal impropriety) he once sentenced a convict to 300 lashes.

The missionary does not accept any simple separation into “we” and “they”; he analyses and questions that binary. These dramatic monologues may aim for “personalities that were typical,” but those personalities rarely fall into simplistic types.

Lawrence Dale, reviewing *Voices in Landfall* in 1991, offers an opposing view. He quotes the missionary’s statement about “welcoming thighs” and comments that “These are sleazy lines. . . . They only work as a semi-outré parody, rooted in the historical irony that the missionary-calling will come to take a new unlikely signified” (250). Dale complains about what he sees as “the awkwardness of that missionary image” (251):

The poem has no credibility as a dramatic monologue—which is what readers will have been expecting from the book’s title—but only self-reflexively, as a monologue plainly built and initialled by C.K. Stead. (250)

Such an argument denies the humanity of the missionaries. Surely such men could and did sometimes think in sexual terms. There may be always / already something of the author in this and all of his poems—yet to say that this text works “only self-reflexively” denies the possibility of a character revealing himself at a moment of great stress. Readers may not expect a missionary to use sexual metaphors, but this displacement of their expectations forces them to reassess that stereotype of the ‘holy man.’

One might even argue that there seems nothing “new” or “unlikely” in using such imagery in relation to the missionaries in New Zealand. As Stead points out in *The Singing Whakapapa*, the mission’s own records reveal a variety of unpriestly thoughts and deeds:<sup>11</sup>

Over them all hung the spectre of the missionary Thomas Kendall, who had found himself unable to resist the availability of native women, and who had brought disrepute upon the New Zealand mission. Among themselves now, Fairburn’s drinking, his depressions, his occasional extravagant or outrageous outbursts, were well known—and there were other and worse rumours about him. It was said that in Rotorua the catechist Henry Pilley had been accepting sexual favours from native women; and though at first he protested his innocence, it was not long before the Rev

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<sup>11</sup>One might also compare Keith Sinclair’s 1950s poem “Memorial to a Missionary,” which discusses Thomas Kendall—“first resident missionary in New Zealand”—and places him alongside imagery of “maidenheads,” virgin “legs” and “unconverted flesh.”

Brown was writing to London, 'I fear another trial awaits the Society in the iniquity of Mr Pilley. He is now residing to the south as a flax collector and has taken a native girl for wife; but these things are as nothing compared with the wickedness of which he is said to have been guilty of while a member of this Mission.'

And finally . . . William Yate, ordained missionary at the northern station, had been found to be engaging in homosexual practices with young native boys under his protection. 'There was a time,' Brown wrote, 'when the title of a New Zealand Missionary was an honourable one, but we shall soon, I fear, think it a disgrace.' (83)

To argue, as Dale does, that Stead's characterization of the missionary works "only self-reflexively," seems to deny both history and human nature. Dale finds that he cannot "get past the Steadiness of the sequence" (251), but this response appears more directed by his opinion that "The dramatic monologue . . . is a discredited form" (253), than it does by any engagement with the poems.

Compared with Stead's other books of poetry, *Voices* received perfunctory critical attention. Charles Croot includes *Voices* in his survey of "New Zealand Poetry in 1990," but offers no examples from the text. With scant regard for metrical details, he even describes the poems as "open form verse" (52). Similarly, Emma Neale, in a survey of "New Zealand Poetry 1987-1990," provides only a brief summary (133-34). Perhaps the most prescient comment on *Voices* appears in Elizabeth Caffin's essay in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991). Looking back over Stead's career, Caffin argues that *Between* and *Voices* both "suggest that Stead has exhausted the long poem" (435). This statement turned out to be more accurate than Caffin could have predicted because, in the seven years following the publication of *Voices*, Stead published no long poems—indeed, he published almost no poetry at all.

##### 5. Spinning the Strands Together: *Straw Into Gold*.

After *Voices* came out in 1990, Stead concentrated on writing fiction. Over the next seven years, he produced three novels (*The End of the Century*, *The Singing Whakapapa*, *Villa Vittoria*) and three short stories ("A Short History of New Zealand," "Sex in America," "Class, Race, Gender: A Post-Colonial Yarn"). Stead's criticism in this period also focused on fiction, resulting in articles such as "Narrativity, or the Birth of Story," and

various reviews of novels. In the same period, Stead published only one poem—a short piece in the *London Review of Books* (12 May 1994), called “Sylvia Plath”:

Ten days after I was, you were born.  
 Heading out past sixty, I'm still hanging on  
 But you baled out at thirty, telling the world  
 'Dying is an art. I do it exceptionally well.'  
 Now you're a young poet of deserved fame, I  
 An aging one of modest reputation.  
 From where I sit, cool Daddy looks at you.  
 He sees the pain, and the brat—and the brat in pain.  
 Living is an art. He does it as well as he can. (5)

In 1962, Plath wrote in “Lady Lazarus” that “Dying / Is an art. . . . I do it exceptionally well”; in 1963, she took her own life. Stead demystifies Plath’s suicide by casting it not as the artistic endeavour that she claimed, but as an act of cowardice: “you baled out.” He also alludes to “Daddy” (1962), a poem in which Plath attacks the characters of her father and her husband (the poet Ted Hughes), characterizing them as Nazis, vampires and devils. Stead implicitly deconstructs this poem by viewing it through the eyes of a father and another poet.

Like the poems in *Voices*, “Sylvia Plath” contains a strong seam of realism, with its explicit statements and judgements (both literary and moral). The poem may also have been written in response to a commission, because the issue of the *London Review of Books* in which it appears contains a leadoff article about Plath and Hughes. Whatever its source, this short realist piece constitutes the only poem that Stead published between 1990 and 1996.

Towards the end of 1996, Stead began publishing poetry once more, this time in New Zealand journals. Three short poems appeared in November 1996, one in *A Brief Description of the Whole World* (“The Real Thing”), and two in *Sport* (“The Right Thing,” “Janet Frame’s House”). The editor of *Sport* for that issue, Sara Knox, claimed to offer “familiar writers writing in an unfamiliar form” (3). Stead’s two poems, however, follow the same format as some of his earlier short works. For example, “The Right Thing” covers seven stanzas, each containing three narrow lines, the same pattern as that of “Goodbye” and “The

Magic Bagwash” in *Between*. Similarly, “Janet Frame’s House” contains seven stanzas of four narrow lines, in the manner of all the poems in the “At Home” section of *Geographies*.

Moreover, both of these *Sport* poems follow a realist structure. In “The Right Thing,” Stead explains that “Job answered correctly” by saying “I am a sod, Lord . . . I can answer nothing.” Sometimes, therefore, “The Right Thing” to do involves doing nothing at all. Stead concludes by listing Job’s rewards for doing “The Right Thing”:

Sheep were his reward,  
 good pasture and camels,  
 also daughters  
  
 and the defeat of foes—  
 Eliphaz the Temanite  
 and Bildad and Zophar. (136)

“Janet Frame’s House” contains a similar ending, with the poet explaining his thoughts, stating what he “would like” to occur and what he happens to “secretly wish” (137).

In direct contrast to these poems, “The Real Thing,” offers an enigmatic “dream”:

This was the dream—  
                   the moon a big  
                           complete  
 circle  
 yellow as  
                   no not butter  
 but as the moon is  
                   except there was one  
                           small  
                                   perfect  
 triangle  
                   clipped out of it  
 through which could be seen  
 the darkness of forever. (54)

Without explaining, Stead simply presents an image, inviting the reader to grapple with it. He also invokes the modernist ‘Field’ of “Walking Westward,” in which the poet contrasted “perfect circles” with “a rough triangle.” In both poems, the triangle points the way “into another dimension” (*PD* 66). In “The Real Thing,” though, Stead emphasizes innocence:



“Walking Westward” and “Yes T.S.”—space constraints forced Stead to include only excerpts, but he still provides a reasonable cross-section of these pieces.<sup>12</sup> One might compare Stead’s treatment of his work in preset forms, most of which he leaves out. For instance, much of Stead’s early efforts went into writing sonnets, sestinas and odes, but none of these works from the 1950s and 1960s appear in *Straw Into Gold*. Similarly, in the 1970s, Stead produced twenty-two Baxterian sonnets, but only four of these show up in his selection. Likewise, most of the short, four-line stanzas from *Geographies* seem conspicuous by their absence, as does the realist sonnet from *Between*, “The Radiant Way.” Finally, out of the fifty-one preset forms in *Voices*, Stead includes only nine poems—and none of them sonnets. Thus, while Stead incorporates some of his realist work, he does seem to minimize the presence of that mode.

A parallel process can be seen occurring in “New Poems—The 1990s.” In this section, out of the four poems that he published between 1990-1996, Stead leaves out the three realist works (“Sylvia Plath,” “The Right Thing,” “Janet Frame’s House”) and collects only “The Real Thing.” This text joins thirty-nine other new poems, many of them in the same double margin format.

That is not to say that a visually relaxed form necessarily makes a poem ‘open.’ Stead’s Catullus poems often employ a double margin, but in conceptual terms they tend to follow the three-part realist format. In Stead’s “Ode to Emptiness,” for example, a television crew “arrives / at the house of Catullus” (SG 135). After setting the scene—with all its props of make-up and lighting—Catullus heads for the toilet and uses the occasion to offer a moral conclusion on the value of television:

Made up to look like himself  
 Catullus escapes to the bathroom  
 while they set up shot.

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<sup>12</sup>The single exception is “Scoria,” the only long poem that Stead leaves out completely. Perhaps he felt the nature of this poem—with its interlocking sections and its focus on a single spatial area—does not lend itself to excerpting.

In preparation  
for the emptiness of the medium  
he empties himself. (SG 135)

In the poet's view, television interviews involve a "set up" worth "escaping." One can see the same message in *The End of the Century*, where Dan's *Frontline* interviews get cut and spliced in such a way that Laura calls them "So unfair. Such a misrepresentation" (203). Dan comments that "If TV wants to go for us they'll always find a way" (204).<sup>13</sup> On a more general level, the Catullus poem pronounces upon "the emptiness of the medium," and associates it quite explicitly with 'a load of shit.' Stead also puns on the Latin word for "empty" by giving the interviewer the name of "Vacuous" (SG 135; 136).

The back cover of *Between* asserts that "Stead's bold, witty, scurrilous adaptations of Catullus" are "thought by some to be his most accomplished mode of comment." Most accomplished or not, they certainly reveal Stead operating in an explicit, realist "mode of comment." This mode did not end with *Between* because, out of the forty new poems in *Straw Into Gold*, at least fourteen of them constitute Catullus poems. Precision in this matter becomes difficult because, for the first time, Stead does not place these poems into their own separate "Clodian Songbook," nor does he provide any note listing their counterparts in Catullus, as he did in *Geographies* and *Between*. In those two volumes Stead numbered his Clodian poems and grouped them together, whereas in *Straw Into Gold* he gives them their own individual names and scatters them throughout the section.

The remaining twenty-six "New Poems" reveal a mixture of modes. For example, the first piece—"These Poems are Safe . . . and Clean"—constitutes a postmodernist word game:

Won't you come into my parlour  
said the . . .

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<sup>13</sup>Stead himself has appeared on *Frontline* a number of times. For example, Zoë During describes "the glimpse we had of him and his critics on *Frontline* (TV1, August 21)" (11). During asserts that "Stead made a few reasonable points calmly and dispassionately, whereas Professor Roger Robinson was vitriolic, likening Stead to the infamous Tonya Harding" (11).

No, I'm not a spider  
 and you're no fly  
     this is the end of the century  
     of the millennium—  
 no flies on us!

Won't you come . . .

As in  
     my mouth?  
                     my hand?  
 even in that orifice God  
 (who is seriously ill  
     who may be dead)  
 intended? (125)

Stead toys with a variety of popular phrases, inviting the reader to join in the game. To create the jokes, the reader must complete each phrase, register the different possibilities, and acknowledge the gaps that can arise between signifier and signified:

Not at all, friend!  
 It was the parlour I mentioned  
 never the bedroom—  
     as in parlance  
     l'on qui parle.  
 I meant to say, Let's talk—  
 come for a chat.

It's a matter of language you see

as in la langue anglaise  
 the English tongue.

Come then, high-flier  
     into my world-wide web.  
 Let me put my tongue in your ear. (125)

This meta-poem seems aimed at the specialist reader, the “high-flier” who knows about the internet and its “World Wide Web” service, who recognizes the implications of Barthes’s distinction between “langue” and “parole,” and who doesn’t mind accepting Stead’s sticky invitation to parle in the parlour of parlance.

That parlour—or web, or net—contains no long poems, which seems surprising given Stead’s critical preference for longer forms. He voices this preference in most of his articles,



runs into a different shape. He may also be echoing Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1923), another poem that playfully considers death, desserts and the function of poetry. Stead's "Poetry" in this instance invites "eyes" to look not just at, but around things. Rather than offering moral conclusions, he provides a series of "distractions" for readers to analyze and put together in their own way.

Another example of this technique can be seen in "Ghosts." The first half of this poem provides three groups of images, set in unexplained juxtaposition:

The leaves on the tower  
that was Höderlin's prison  
are turning red  
and gold

Down there  
on an island in the river  
huge trees are giving up  
their ghosts

In a small tavern  
of crooked beams and stairs  
I eat one slice  
of onion pie  
and drink one glass  
of frothy  
Swabian wine (143)

The effect of these images works partly through Stead's use of musical form. For instance, the first stanza provides a visual analogue for the falling of leaves, drifting slowly off to one side. Then, by inserting a line break and turning suddenly to the other margin, Stead takes the reader's eye through the same process as his own, from looking up at a tower to looking "Down there" at "an island in the river." A similar shift allows the eye to imagine trees "giving up" in the face of winter, then "giving up / their ghosts" (on one level letting their dead leaves fall; on another letting their own skeletons show through). However, that short pause also forces a reconsideration of the stock phrase 'giving up the ghost': by interrupting the flow of the expression, and adding a plural where none was expected, the poet hints at "ghosts" of a more sinister nature.

After a brief respite of food and drink, the second half of the poem turns away from nature and looks at the creations of man:

Through the trees  
dismantling themselves  
looms the sculpted figure  
of a folk composer  
honoured by the Reich

Out of his bronze pockets  
from under his bronze coat  
climb ferocious  
men-at-arms—  
the spirits or sprites  
of Germany at war

Mad Höderlin's ghost  
35 years in his tower  
looks down  
celebrating  
the lengthening shadows  
longing for death (143)

As in “Chocolate is Thicker than Blood,” Stead provides a series of images, but draws no explicit moral conclusion.

One might also compare this poem with Stead's prose version of the same event, in an article called “Re-Reading Spender,” published in the *London Magazine* in 1992. The latter sets the scene explicitly “in Germany . . . in the university town of Tübingen,” and begins with “the tower where Höderlin, because he was mad, or thought to be, was incarcerated for 35 years, and where, mad or not, he continued to write poetry” (56). As in the poem, Stead describes “a tiny pub or tavern,” eats “slices of onion pie,” drinks “a frothy red wine” and then discovers “a huge statue erected by the Nazis, or under Nazi aegis, representing a 19th-century composer of folk music. Out of his bronze pockets and from under his bronze coat emerged armed men, soldiers, showing that the might of Germany sprang from its folk tradition” (56). In this last phrase, one can see the author's interpretation of the monument, a “showing” and telling that he avoids in the poem. Having explained who Höderlin was, and what he thinks of the statue—both details absent from the poem—Stead concludes the anecdote by analyzing his own response:

As I looked out from Höderlin's garden across the river to the island, it occurred to me that as the autumn advanced into winter the monument would gradually be discovered, first a dark shape, then an unpleasantly explicit symbol. I felt at once that I was 'inside literature', a feeling that comes at rare moments in Europe. . . .

Germany at a decisive moment in its history, which meant in turn a decisive moment for Europe and for the world—that was one element in the equation; but the moment as experienced took its special quality from others—the presence of youth, beauty, falling leaves, the madness of poetry in its locked tower, the river flowing by dependable and imperturbable; and finally, down there among the trees, that hidden hulking shadow of a shameful past. (56-57)

Here the author states what he thinks "unpleasant," "rare," "decisive," "special," and "shameful." He attaches an explicit moral value to everything he sees, and then offers his judgement of the scene as a whole. Where the prose explains, the poetry tends more towards a presentative method, drawing the reader in via the modernist technique of approximation.

That is not to say that all of Stead's "New Poems" avoid the techniques of New Zealand realism. A number of the poems represent straightforward narratives about other writers, some elegiac ("E.P. (1885-1972)," "K.S. (1922-95)"), some satiric ("R.B. (1887-1915)," "R.G. (1895-1985)," "Faber & Faber"). For instance, "E.P." simply praises Ezra Pound:

Blue Tigullio  
     tawny Liguria  
 and between  
     an old man  
 climbing  
     the salita. . . .  
  
     —Ezra  
 blessed-and-burdened  
     a vision of  
     earthly Paradise  
 locked in  
     behind blue  
 clouded eyes. (150)

Where Stead rolls out the lyrical red carpet for Pound, he pulls the rug out from under Robert Graves ("R.G."):

When his mistress jumped  
 from a third floor window  
 he ran downstairs  
 and jumped from the second.

Thus he proved  
 his right to the title  
 'Great love-poet of the age'  
 and lived to enjoy it. (161)

Like Stead's critical writing, this kind of poetry sets about assessing and grading different writers—as well as their characters and convictions—some getting an “A” (usually Pound), others getting a less enthusiastic appraisal.

That Stead consciously adopts the mode of realism can be seen in the title of one piece in particular: “A Discursive Poem About Poetry and Thought.” As the title suggests, this poem discusses a subject—the kind of “ruminating” that Stead rejected in *The New Poetic* and “From Wystan to Carlos.” He begins by wondering “Who cares what the poets think?” (145). He then goes on to separate his thinking (such as “writing a column for *Metro*”) from his poems, and concludes as follows:

I still have strong opinions  
                   like to hold forth  
                   but it must be the poet in me says  
                   'Thinking is what creeps up on me  
 when I'm not thinking.  
                   It's the living that matters.' (146)

Presumably “the living” goes with the poems and the “thinking” belongs elsewhere. In this assertion, though, Stead raises once more the paradox that he sometimes uses a didactic statement to promote a non-didactic principle.

So the “New Poems” in *Straw Into Gold* offer a mixture of modes, spinning together the strands of realism, modernism and postmodernism. However, this section also marks a shift away from the long process poem that has been the focus of so much of Stead's career. Each of the decades covered in *Straw Into Gold* offers at least one long poem—except the 1990s. Perhaps Stead has exhausted this form. Predictions can be slippery ground, though, as shown in Alan Roddick's forecast about the likelihood of another commissioned piece. Stead's next published work—“Cartoons” (1997)—shifts back into a longer form.

## 6. Coda: “Cartoons.”

At about the same time that *Straw Into Gold* came out, *Sport* published an issue of “New Zealand New Writing” (April 1997). The leadoff piece in that issue was “Cartoons,” a long poem by C.K. Stead. Compared to Stead’s previous long works, though, “Cartoons” marks quite a departure. In place of the process poem’s interlocking sections, this text—with its separately dated sections—reads like the diary of a television critic. Stead heads each of the eight sections with a date, covering a three-month period from “8.8.96” to “1.11.96.”

Moreover, as its title suggests, “Cartoons” offers something of a postmodernist surface. Stead channel surfs from section to section, skimming the news of the day. Whatever catches his eye goes into the poem, from Paul Keating’s trampoline to “A lost tribe” in Irian Jaya, from an “Alzheimered / Ronald Reagan” to a philandering priest (“21.9.96”):

A Catholic Bishop  
runs off with  
a Mrs McPhee  
and sells his story

to the popular press  
but the cash is to go  
to his teenage son  
by a former mistress.

His housekeeper  
who used to browse  
in his wastepaper basket  
says there were others. (6)

This poem—like most cartoons—ends with a double-edged joke:

Everyone’s distressed.  
The ailing Pope,  
the nervous clergy,  
the sad parishioners

of Argyll and the Isles—  
even (I think)  
I am distressed.  
How could it be

we ask one another.  
Isn’t a handjob  
good enough

for the modern priest? (6)

Here Stead takes on the blaring headlines of a tabloid newspaper, and plays with the language of sensation journalism. The poet at once adopts and undercuts the balancing of a prurient interest with the pose of a ‘strong moral stand’ that often appears in “the popular press.”

However, beneath this surface play lurks a layer of New Zealand realism. One can trace a three-part structure here—from set up, through elaboration, to ironic conclusion—all cast in the preset form of a series of four-line stanzas. At an average of five syllables per line, these poems mark a shift into one of the shortest line lengths that Stead has used. This line length contributes to the feeling of simplistic reportage, with the added sense of anticipation that, sooner or later, the narrative will explode in somebody’s face like a trick cigar.

One can trace the same techniques through the section about “life on Mars” (“8.8.96”):

Scientists discover  
there’s been life on Mars  
though dead for aeons,  
that’s to say yonks. (3)

This fourth line employs the New Zealand vernacular of “yonks” to undercut the Latinate language of scientists. Stead casts himself—as he does in much of his criticism—as translator for ‘the common reader,’ mocking the use of archaic words. He then turns to the political posturing prompted by the discovery:

President Bill says  
if there’s life in space  
he wants the United States  
to have an input.

Somewhere in Siberia  
a bronze statue of Lenin  
falls over  
and kills a man. (3)

Stead reduces the usual title of President Clinton to a cartoonish “President Bill” (with perhaps an echo of Berkeley Breathed’s satiric *Bloom County* cartoons, in which a character

called “Bill the Cat” runs for President). A modernist poem might have ended here, with the image of the statue, but Stead goes on to offer a conclusion:

Watch out for the dead!  
They leave their traces—  
ideas for example  
and heavy statues. (3)

As in the Catholic Bishop section, the author ends this piece by telling the reader what “I think.”

This kind of realist conclusion, though, appears infrequently in “Cartoons.” More often than not, the sections simply end with an image, as in “26.8.96”:

All forgetful  
he knows however  
that Nancy  
is his mother.

So why  
after his haircut  
does she lock him  
in his room?

When the big light  
goes down  
he sits at his window  
in pyjamas

hearing the moon  
mumble to the hills  
its threats  
and rumours. (5)

“So why” does Ronald Reagan—once “the world’s / / most powerful man”—get locked in his room at night? Stead invites readers to engage their imaginations and work this problem out for themselves. Perhaps, while he no longer carries “the codes / to corpse a planet,” Reagan still constitutes a danger to himself. On the other hand, maybe Nancy, having controlled him from behind the scenes for long enough, simply decides—with her husband out of office—to dispense with the pretence of deferring to his wishes. Whatever the case,

those “threats / and rumours” show Reagan still hearing things that aren’t really there, just as he did during the pseudo Cold War of his Presidency.

Another example of this modernist approximation can be seen in the final section of “Cartoons,” “1.11.96”:

After two centuries  
of displeasure  
Horsham will acknowledge  
its famous son.

A sculpture  
honouring Shelley,  
poet, atheist  
and adroit eloper

will be unveiled  
in the town square.  
Three thousand  
gingerbread men

each with a fact-sheet  
about his life  
have been distributed  
to local schools. (8)

Stead offers no explicit moral conclusion here. He simply leaves the reader to contemplate the way that “two centuries / of displeasure” can suddenly turn to hero worship. Moreover, the opaque image of the “gingerbread men” causes one to wonder how true the “fact-sheet” will read, and how local officials may have ‘sweetened’ things for easy consumption. Stead also leaves the reader wondering which might be worse: years of “displeasure” or a “sculpture” (with echoes of Byron’s lines about “the end of fame” bringing only “A name, a wretched picture, and worse bust” *Don Juan* I.ccxviii). Stead also implies that amidst all the public fanfare of statues, fact-sheets and cookies, no mention gets made of Shelley’s poetry.

In addition its use of approximation, “Cartoons” marks a return to the modernist method of building long poems through a process of aggregation. In this poem, for example, all the public figures—Keating, Clinton, Lenin, the Reagans, the Bishop, “The ailing Pope” and

“the late leader” (Mao Tse Tung)—aggregate in the reader’s mind, building an unsettling picture of the people who control the distribution of laws, bombs and contraceptives. Furthermore, Stead’s tongue-in-cheek warning in the opening section—“Watch out for the dead!”—reverberates throughout “Cartoons.” The “bronze statue of Lenin” manages to kill one more citizen, just as “the figure in bronze” (Chairman Mao) goes on punishing the state long after his death. Both of these images connect with the “sculpture” of Shelley—another man who wanted recognition as one of the “legislators of the world.” However, one might argue that while the Presidents and Popes cause war and destruction, the only death that Shelley can fully be blamed for is his own, because he never learned to swim.

Thus “Cartoons” marks a swing towards modernist structures, but it also retains some aspects of realism, as well as incorporating the occasional postmodernist technique. As Stead’s career in poetry heads towards its fiftieth year, the balance in his mixture of modes continues to shift and sway. This sequence also marks Stead’s return to the long poem, with a number of twists on his usual approach to that genre. Finally, the appearance of this poem sequence serves as a reminder that one of the constants in Stead’s poetry—for this reader at least—remains a continuing element of surprise.

## CHAPTER IX. CONCLUSION: POST-PURISM.

“He did not know what kind of art work it was, what technique it exemplified, only that its  
strange mixture . . . excited him.”

—C.K. Stead, “Sex in America” (1994) 73

This quotation captures something of my own response the first time I saw “Yes T.S.” in an undergraduate course in 1989. The shapes and techniques of the poem captured my attention: they didn’t look like any New Zealand poetry that I had seen before. This excitement increased because one of the student flats that I walked past on my way to lectures displayed a poster of a guitarist smashing his instrument, surrounded by the words “London Calling / The Clash”—and here were those very words in a poem. Moreover, right beside those words lay T.S. Eliot and “The Hollow Men,” an echo from my first English course, when everything seemed to open up. Somewhere in the midst of these reactions I was hooked, and the lines reeled me in.

It took much research before I realised that no critical writing would explain this combination of shapes and techniques. Criticism of New Zealand poetry seemed to circle over the same three categories—realism, modernism, postmodernism—determined to separate, judge, and lift one category up over the others. This was the orthodoxy I set out to challenge; not to lift up a new mode as ‘the best,’ as a new orthodoxy, but simply to make room for that “strange mixture.” I wanted to acknowledge Stead’s mixture of modes, and help readers who—like myself—saw Stead’s poetry and liked it, but found existing critical approaches unequal to describing it. In other words, this thesis tries to make space for a kind of writing that purist critical paradigms do not allow for. My general aim has been to describe Stead’s post-purist practice, and to break out of the boxes created by purist criticism.

In addition to proposing this paradigm shift in criticism, I also wanted to argue for a reassessment of conventional assumptions about events in literary history. In my view, the

arrival of modernism in New Zealand poetry took place much earlier than historians usually allow. Most literary histories place that arrival at around 1970. Likewise, most literary histories ignore the existence of “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea” (1958), probably the first modernist long poem written by a New Zealander. So the first chapter of this thesis offers a different lens through which to view New Zealand’s literary past. Histories can harden remarkably quickly—particularly with the publication of apparently authoritative surveys such as the *Penguin History* (1990) and the *Oxford History* (1991)—so I wanted to lodge a caveat before the concrete set, and before “Pictures in a Gallery” was forgotten.

History always gets retold to suit the purposes of the teller, and this thesis involves just such an exercise. For example, I chose to look at the contribution of C.K. Stead, rather than focus on Curnow, Baxter or Johnson. New Zealand poetry histories usually concentrate on the 1950s realism established by that triumvirate—and examine their various feuds—then shift to the modernism of the *Freed* group in the late 1960s. This kind of approach produces a useful broad picture, but it marginalizes, and often ignores, Stead’s modernist practice in the late 1950s. This pattern becomes even more prevalent as the *Freed* group publish their own anthologies and write their own histories, which tend to place themselves at the centre of events. I hoped to adjust this broad picture by pointing the aerial back to 1958, rescreening “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea.”

This exercise in retelling occupies the first three chapters of my thesis. After examining Stead’s use of modernism both as a critic (chapter two) and a poet (chapter three), I then cast back to the mode of New Zealand realism that occupied the beginning of his career. My purpose in defining these two modes was not to set up an aesthetic hierarchy. Rather, having established what these two modes were like in the form that Stead first used them in the 1950s, I could then go on to show how he combined these modes in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter four, therefore, examines Stead’s purist use and rejection of realism; chapter five undercuts that rejection by tracing a seam of realism that persists in his work.

On top of this two-way mixture of modes, Stead incorporates a third: while he rejects postmodernism as a critic, Stead nonetheless makes use of postmodernist techniques in his creative writing. Thus the 1970s and 1980s reveal Stead developing a three-way mixture of modes. My sixth chapter illustrates that development in his poetry, and my seventh chapter argues that a similar pattern can be seen in his fiction.

Each of these modes of discourse represents a choice by the poet, and each choice results in a different effect. For instance, realist techniques result in a poetry of statement, one that allows the author to adopt a stance of truth-teller—often purveying unsettling insights about politics or personal relationships. Conversely, modernist techniques avoid explicit statements, thereby inviting the reader to enter the text and join in the creative act. This mode also insists upon allusive and symbolic depth, often involving a high cultural stance and vocabulary. The postmodernist writer usually opposes these latter aspects of modernism, creating instead a poem that insists on depthlessness, as well as allowing a use of language that embraces pop culture and self-conscious linguistic play.

These analyses are necessarily brief—the body of my thesis offers fuller definitions—but, by considering the effect of these discourse choices, one can see that post-purist techniques produce a fourth and different effect. In my view, by relaxing the boundaries between the existing modes, post-purism adds another option to what poets can do. In a sense, this discourse choice has the effect of freeing up the imagination to go where it will, without being restricted within pre-set parameters. Thus the poet need not worry about making explicit realist statements, or creating modernist approximations, or maintaining the postmodernist illusion of depthlessness. Instead, the poet has access to all techniques and to the variety of effects to which different combinations lead. Of course, one may choose to concentrate on a single mode, or two of them together, or combine all three; post-purism allows these options to exist. None of these options can be judged as ‘better’ than another, because a post-purist approach rejects such hierarchical divisions and judgements.

Having explored the development of this approach, I wanted to show in my eighth chapter that even though Stead's criticism still insists on modernism—particularly the modernist long poem—his practice as a writer constantly shifts the balance from one mode to another, in varying combinations. Consequently, while his critical writings in the 1990s remain predictable, his work as a poet continues to surprise and challenge the reader. However, if one takes a purist approach to Stead's writing, no such surprise can occur. Purist critics concentrate only on the mode that they favour, rejecting or ignoring any other method, and so they can never be surprised: they can only be disappointed (or pleased) as a poem fails (or meets) their expectations. For this reason, my thesis carries out a different approach to New Zealand poetry. By avoiding purist demands and prescriptions, with their accompanying binaries of right and wrong, I found I could read Stead's poetry in a new way. For me, Stead's poems represented a post-purist crossing of boundaries, and I have endeavoured to write a critical analysis that would acknowledge and do justice to that mixture of modes.

The post-purist approach that I have taken with Stead can also be applied to other writers. Indeed, the recent work of poets such as Allen Curnow, Bill Manhire and Ian Wedde seems to encourage such an approach. Curnow seems the most obvious example. Like Stead, he began writing in the mode of New Zealand realism, then moved to something less definite, more open in form and open to other traditions. Curnow even got included in Alistair Paterson's 1980 anthology of poets whose work contained elements of "recent 'post modern' developments" (xi). Peter Porter writes, in his section on Curnow in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (1994), that "The later volumes . . . show the remarkable development of Curnow as a quirky, experimental, perhaps even 'post-modernist' poet" (111). Of course, Curnow cannot be wholly categorised as a post-modernist, but—as with Stead—his work has taken on some aspects of that mode. As Lawrence Jones says in his review of *You Will Know When You Get There* (1982), Curnow's later poetry "contains the free intensity of open form poetry within a conscious poetic order, quite transcending the critics' categories" ("Tides and Harvests" 95).

Like Lawrence Jones, Mark Williams seems to be one of the few New Zealand critics who questions the paradigm of forcing poets into pre-existing “categories.” In his introduction to the 1987 *Caxton Press Anthology*, Williams cautions “against too aggressively assigning poets to camps, cliques, movements”:

The trouble is that such categorizing dangerously simplifies the process of reading poems by encouraging the reader to expect certain kinds of performance, certain rules to be followed. Moreover, such categories do not allow for the complexity of any particular poet’s reception of or reaction to whatever poetic ‘movements’ are in the air, the way in which apparently conflicting streams can co-exist in the work of, for example, Curnow and Stead. (18)

This assessment of Curnow and Stead might be read as a reaction against the purist methods of classification that dominate New Zealand’s poetry criticism. Williams finds Curnow’s verse “resistant to classification” (19), and comments that “What is most interesting at the moment in the work of, say, Curnow, Stead or Manhire is the resistance of their poetry to being confined closely in any particular camp” (18).

Bill Manhire has proved difficult for critics to pin down to one mode of writing. Stead seemed to want to claim Manhire for the “broad tide” in “From Wistan to Carlos,” yet felt that he had to acknowledge that, of the younger poets that he admired, “Manhire . . . owes least to the Modernist tradition” (*GC* 156). Conversely, Roger Horrocks, in ““Natural” as only you can be’: Some Readings of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry” (1985), dismissed Manhire as an outmoded, essentially “modernist” poet (119). Somewhere between these two critical stances lies an implicit recognition of Manhire’s post-purist practice: he combines modernist techniques with those of other modes. For example, Manhire might employ the language and characters of comic books such as *2000 AD* (“Allen Curnow Meets Judge Dredd” 1988), he might experiment with concrete poetry (“The Asterisk Machine” 1991), he might even try his hand at a create-your-own-adventure book (*The Brain of Katherine Mansfield* 1988).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Like Stead’s *Paris* (1984), *The Brain of Katherine Mansfield* contains illustrations by Gregory O’Brien. The inclusion of these pictures indicates a relaxed attitude in both texts towards the boundaries between genres and modes.

Like his poetry, Manhire's prose hops from mode to mode, never letting the reader relax. As Lydia Wevers points out, in her review of *Songs of My Life* (1996), Manhire's short stories represent "Very Carefully Sidelong Postmodernism":

Compared with much postmodern writing, Manhire's is very readable. I think his work, rather than being effortlessly exemplary of what "postmodern" might be, is selective in its use of postmodern techniques. (1)

This "selective" method clearly does not commit itself to a single mode. In other words, Manhire seems closer to writers such as Stead and Wedde—whom Wystan Curnow dismisses as "laid-back modernists"—than he does to the kind of purist postmodernist of whom Wystan Curnow most approves.

Similarly, Ian Wedde writes with an eye to relaxing boundaries, to combining different modes of writing. Asked about writers's values and methods in 1977, Wedde replied simply "You shouldn't *worry* so much" (qtd. in Evans, *Penguin History* 205). He expanded upon this view in 1992, in an interview with Michele Leggott: "You have to run right across the genres, the forms, or you're stuck with their pieties, their petty tyrannies" (Alley 305). This kind of approach produces poetry—and fiction, such as *Symmes Hole* (1986)—that runs from realism to surrealism, from comic strips to high modernist allusions. Like Manhire, Wedde has been claimed by modernist and postmodernist critics alike, but his actual practice resists any purist classification. What all these writers have in common is the creation of texts that resist the purist paradigm dominating New Zealand's poetry criticism. My thesis springs out of this gap between the theory concerning New Zealand poetry and its actual practice.

Northrop Frye used to tell his students that "If you want to learn about Dickens, go and read another book by Dickens; don't read a book about Dickens" (qtd. in CBC Radio show, "The Ideas of Northrop Frye" 1990). I agree—and yet criticism has its function. Reading through one's own eyes, and the filters of one's own opinions and prejudices, can become limiting. Contact with a community of readers, on the other hand, can open up a variety of hermeneutic options. My thesis invites people to read Stead in a different light, to consider

an approach that departs from established critical views—even those of Stead himself—in order not merely to demonstrate the limitation of categorical enclosure, but also to recognize the character of the alternatives to which Stead's post-purist practice gives voice.

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## APPENDIX. "PICTURES IN A GALLERY UNDERSEA."

### 1. The Text of the Poem.

"Pictures in a Gallery Undersea" exists in a number of different versions. It was first published in *Landfall* in June 1959 and was quickly selected by Allen Curnow for his 1960 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. It was then reprinted in Stead's first collection of poems, *Whether the Will is Free* (1964). These first three versions are identical, apart from some minor typographical inconsistencies. Presumably the version in his own book is the one that Stead had most editorial and visual control over, so that is the version I have chosen to work from and to reprint here. (It will henceforth be referred to as the "original version.")

After 1964, the textual history of the poem gets more complex. It was printed in a number of New Zealand anthologies, with some minor textual changes. For example, in the original version, all speech is in single quotation marks except for Garnett's remark to Hueffer in section V, which appears in double quotation marks. Vincent O'Sullivan's anthology normalizes punctuation, placing Garnett's speech in single quotation marks. O'Sullivan also makes some visual adjustments, changing some of Stead's spacing between words and lines. The isolated "And Yeats" (in section V), for instance, appears much closer to the left margin than in the original version. It is difficult to know whether Stead knew of or authorized any or all of these changes.

However, in 1972 some major changes were made by the author to the original version. In *Crossing the Bar*, Stead revises "Pictures in a Gallery," making it a very different poem. I will refer to this revised text as R.I. In R.I., Stead deletes five commas: after "railings" on l.29, after "pane" on l.35, after "departed" on l.41, after "wind" on l.51 and after "me" on l.92. He also deletes the long dash after "me" on l.93, replacing it with a fullstop. As well, he adds a comma after "There" on l.34 and he adds a fullstop after "stood" on l.83. In addition to these punctuation changes, Stead alters the visual justification of a number of

lines (particularly the indentations on ll.4, 8, 34, 38, 44, 47, 49, 58, 67-70, 84, 100, 112). For example, he shifts the “And Yeats” line to the left and has the line space above it removed. Finally, the epigraphs are all jettisoned, quotation marks are placed around both references to “the toff,” and “old Possum” becomes “Old Possum.” In the midst of all these changes, some minor errors are inevitable: “Ear-ring” is hyphenated in section II (as in the original version), but it is not hyphenated in section V; “accepted” is spelt incorrectly in section VII.

There are so many changes that—unless one is compiling a variorum edition—one is forced to choose between the original text and the new text. In such a situation, where authors have revised their own works, there is no hard and fast editorial rule. Making a choice (for example, between Samuel Richardson’s many versions of *Pamela*) can be agonizing. Which version should be given precedence and, when a decision has been made, will readers be misled?

Thankfully, the decision regarding “Pictures in a Gallery Undersea” is a little easier to make. Every editor, before and after 1972, has chosen to anthologize the original version. By themselves, these precedents are not conclusive, and one might still argue that the second version is the more authentic and authorized. However, Stead’s own dicta about poets’ revisions can be of some service in this area. In 1984, he told David Hill that “I don’t ever these days try to re-write earlier things. I’m a different person now, and I can’t re-enter the person who wrote an earlier poem; so it must stand for me as I was then . . .” (48). In July 1991, Stead repeated this attitude in an interview with Dennis McEldowney: “I don’t like older poets rewriting their younger work. I think it’s a mistake in every case—even Yeats’s. I think it’s better left alone” (Alley 280). While rewriting may not be a mistake in every case, Stead’s own words certainly lend some weight to the primacy of the original version.

Another reason for preferring this text is simply the historical gap between 1958 and 1972. The original version can be seen as both reflecting and breaking away from the literary climate of New Zealand in the late 1950s. The 1972 version, on the other hand, is

something of an anachronism. It may tell us something about shifts in Stead's attitudes between 1958 and 1972, but it cannot stand in for the original in any study of literary history—the gap between the original and the rewrite is simply too great. The same argument can be applied to the most recent publication of this poem, in *Straw Into Gold: Poems New and Selected* (1997). This volume selects nine of Stead's poems from the 1950s, but eight of them follow the revised versions that appeared in *Crossing the Bar*. In relation to "Pictures in a Gallery Undersea," all the R.I. changes are retained (apart from the dropped hyphen in section V and the spelling error in section VII). Again, this choice may reflect Stead's editorial preferences in 1997, but the R.I. text seems of little relevance for a literary historian who wants to discuss the poetry scene in New Zealand in the late 1950s.

Thus, because of the demands of editorial precedent, authorial obiter dicta and historical accuracy, the original text from *Whether the Will is Free* is the one reprinted here (with the addition of line numbers):

## PICTURES IN A GALLERY UNDERSEA

### I

#### *Binnorie, O Binnorie*

In Ladbroke Square the light on waxen branches—  
The orange light through two veined leaves  
Tenacious in frost.

Upstairs, she lit the gas,  
And drew bright curtains on the whitened eaves, 5  
And said (her hand above the slowly turning disc)  
'I shall never go back'.

Mozart in the delicate air  
Slid from her glass, beat vainly against the cushions, 10  
Then took off gladly across the deserted Square.  
'You too must stay' (loosening her sun-bleached hair)  
'You more than I—you will defeat their fashions.'

Invisible fins guided her to my chair.

Pictures in a gallery undersea  
Were turned facing the wall, and the corridors were endless; 15  
But in the marine distance, floating always beyond me,  
A girl played Mozart on her sun-bleached hair.

So that wherever I walked on that long haul, midnight to dawn,  
Stones of a sunken city woke, and passed the word,

And slept behind me; but the notes were gone,  
 Vanished like bubbles up through the watery air  
 Of London, nor would again be heard. 20

## II

*Où tant de marbre est tremblant sur tant d'ombres*

On steps of the British Museum the snow falls,  
 The snow falls on Bloomsbury, on Soho, on all  
 Cradled in the great cup of London. 25  
 On all the lions and literary men of London  
 Heaping in gutters, running away in drains  
 The falling snow, the city falling.

Snow behind iron railings, drifts, collects,  
 Collects like coins in the corners of Nelson's hat 30  
 (Newbolt from a window in the Admiralty shouting  
 'Umbrellas for Nelson' and waving a sheaf of odes)  
 And down the long avenue.

There through her aquid glass  
 Circumambient Regina, turning slowly from the pane, 35  
 Is seen imperiously to mouth 'Albert, my dear,  
 How do we pronounce *Waitangi*?'  
 And snow descends.

There I met my grandfather, young and bearded,  
 With thick Scandinavian accent, who asked me 40  
 Directions to the dock; and later departed,  
 Bearing me with him in his northern potency  
 South.

South. Earth's nether side in night  
 Yet hardly dark, and I under this day 45  
 That's scarcely light.

Flakes descending, dissolving  
 On the folds of a cape  
 on a single blue ear-ring,  
 On a bowler beneath the great trees of Russell Square. 50

## III

The prim lips, homing, round the wind,  
 Condensing news along the Strand.  
 Nerveless, the words assault, descend—  
 Stiff jaws convey them underground.

The verb that rackets through the mind 55  
 Transports the body far beyond  
 Expected stops.  
 Swirled on the wind  
 The lost, chaotic flakes ascend.

## IV

All evening the princess danced, but before dawn  
Escaped from her ballroom's glass down the wide, white stairs,  
And walked among bare trees that spiked the lawn. 60

Far from her ears, airy and thin, the beat  
Of goldsmiths' hammers rang in Devonshire Street,  
And spent, above a quarrel of barrow wheels,  
Songs on the night: 65

*Flakes of the outer world  
Through London fly  
Together hurled  
Under the heavy sky . . .* 70

## V

*I dreamt tonight that I did feast with Caesar*

Wilde had been lynched. His head, grown larger, grinned from  
the Tower of London,  
Swung by its hair under the Marble Arch,  
And looked out from the point of a spear down Constitution Hill.  
South of the River they were roasting him slowly on a spit,  
And in Knightsbridge several of the best families dined delicately  
on his battered parts. 75  
He, in Reading, enjoyed the debauch by proxy,  
Bored at last with the rented corpse of Art  
Whose delicate lusts had never been near to his heart.

Snow fell—fell where Hueffer ascended  
From Great Russell Street to meet the eyes of Garnett;  
And heard the scholar's voice: "Now it is all ended—  
England shall breed no poet for fifty years." 80

Yeats not a mile from where they stood

And Yeats

Drew down the dim blind of Olivia's hair  
And dreamed of a great bird. Then woke  
Calling 'Maud. Maud.' But the room was empty.  
Across the narrow alley he drank coffee,  
Bought his paper from me at the corner  
(I only a few feet tall, in cloth cap and boots  
Three sizes too large. He the toff of the buildings.) 85 90

And as he went a man approached me, shouting  
'This paper you sold me—there's nothing in it'  
(Waving the packed pages and snatching back his money).

And the toff, a hundred yards along the street,  
And Ezra in billiard cloth trousers across the street  
Wearing an ear-ring of aquamarine,  
And old Possum hackneying past in a bowler to his funeral at 95

the bank,

Turned  
turned, and watching, faded from sight. 100

## VI

Now it was time for the drawing of curtains.  
The smoke climbed, hand over hand, its difficult way,  
Rested, or sank back in the thick air.  
The River swans nor sang for the dead day  
Nor proudly departed; but each hooked 105  
One leg across its back, displaying a dirty web,  
And (strong beak poised on graceful neck) poked  
The rubbish drifting at the water's edge.

## VII

*Chanterez-vous quand vous serez vaporeuse? . . .*

And as the last orange of the sun was crushed  
The River accepted its lights, from Kew to Battersea 110  
On, winding, to the Tower.

It was winter, the year '58,  
And many were dead. But into the same heart and out  
Through channels of stone and light, the blood still pulsed—  
Carried me with it down New Oxford Street 115

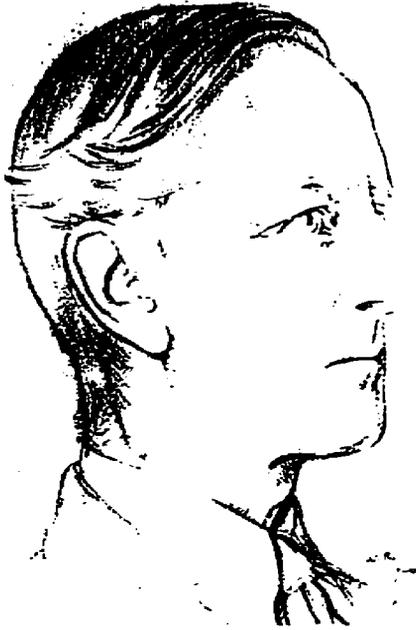
Through Soho to the whirling clock of the Circus,  
Then down, on to the bridge. The snow was freezing.  
A train stood middle-poised beside the footpath  
Above the water. And in a corner, hunched,  
An old man's unsheathed fingers struggled to revive 120  
The dead years on a battered violin.

## 2. People and Places in the Poem.

i) "*Binnorie, O Binnorie.*" The last stanza of "The Cruel Sister," illustrated by Edward Corbould. In the lower right is the harp, strung with the dead maiden's hair, magically singing in her voice. This nineteenth century version of "The Two Sisters of Binnorie" focuses on the ballad's moral aspects by pointing as many fingers (and paws) as possible.



ii) "Newbolt . . . in the Admiralty."  
 Sir Henry Newbolt. By William Rothenstein, 1920.

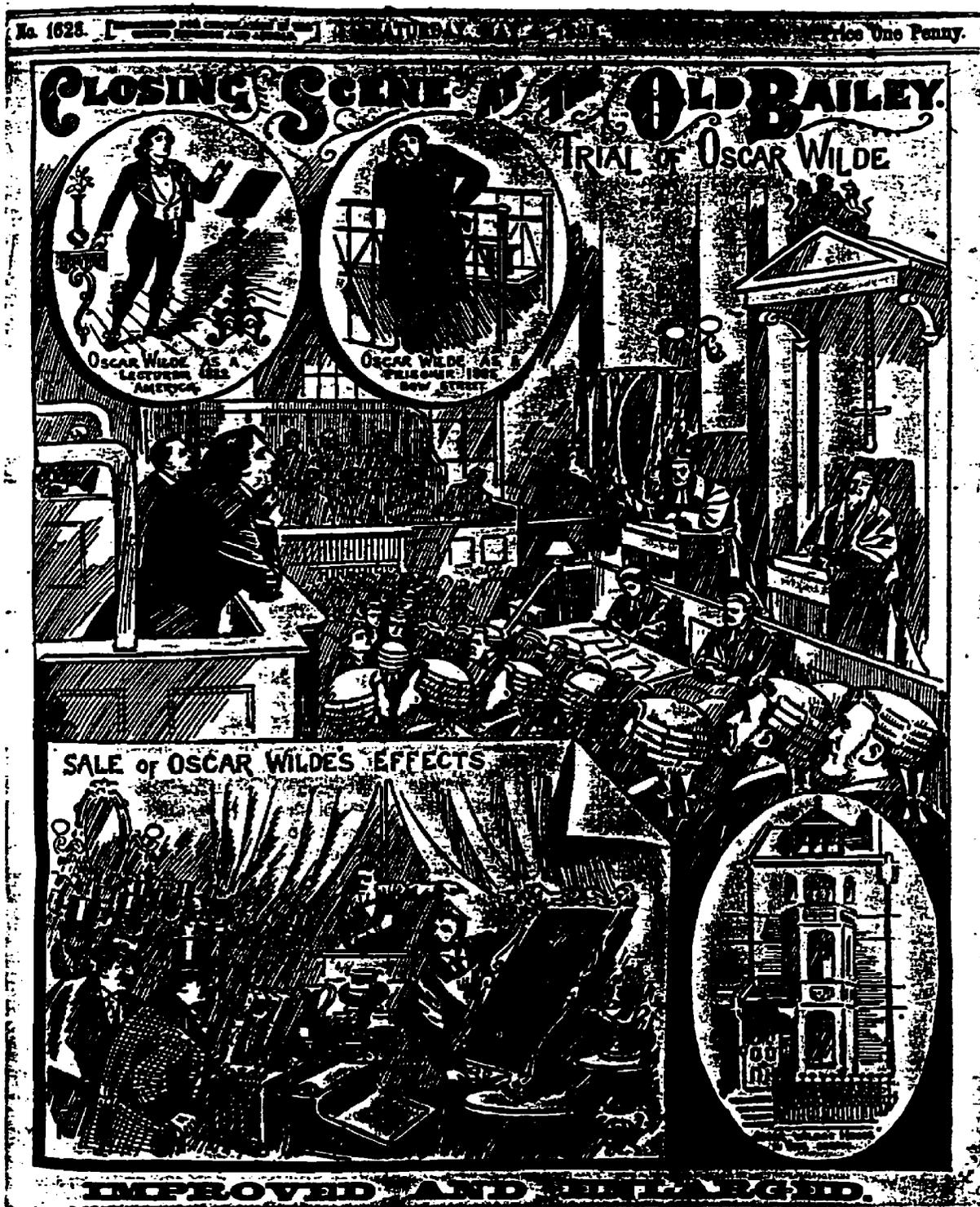


iii) "Albert, my dear. / How do we pronounce *Waitangi*?"  
 Early portraits of Queen Victoria and her husband Albert, the Prince Consort.



iv) "Wilde had been lynched."

An illustration in *The Police News* 4 May, 1895. This cartoon captures the way that the majority of Londoners reacted to Wilde during his trials. The disapprobation is palpable: from the folded arms of the jurors to the smug gaze of the law. The audience at the sale of Wilde's effects—which took place in the house in Tite Street during his first trial—lean forward eagerly, like vultures on a tree branch.





v) "On the folds of a cape . . ."  
W.B. Yeats in 1894, "the toff of the buildings"  
in all his aesthetic finery, complete with long  
black Inverness cape.

vi) ". . . on a single blue ear-ring,"  
Ezra Pound photographed in 1914.



vii) "On a bowler beneath the great trees of  
Russell Square." T.S. Eliot in 1926, by the  
offices of Faber at 24 Russell Square.



viii) "And Yeats / Drew down  
the dim blind of Olivia's hair."  
Olivia Shakespear (top right) in  
1897, at the time of her affair  
with Yeats.

ix) "Then woke / Calling  
'Maud. Maud.'"  
Maud Gonne (top left).

x) "He the toff of the  
buildings."  
Woburn Place, off Russell  
Square, formerly Woburn  
Buildings. Yeats lived in No.  
18 (now No. 5 Woburn Walk)  
from 1895 to 1919—though  
he originally moved there in  
order to have more privacy and  
time alone with Olivia. At a  
later point, he let the rooms to  
Maud Gonne.



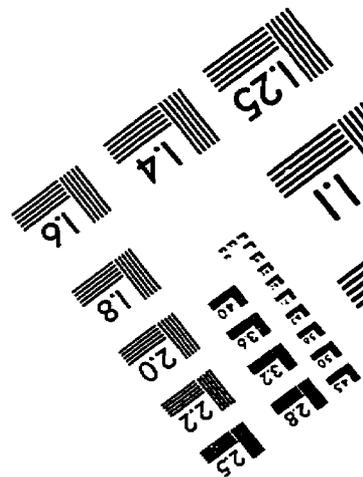
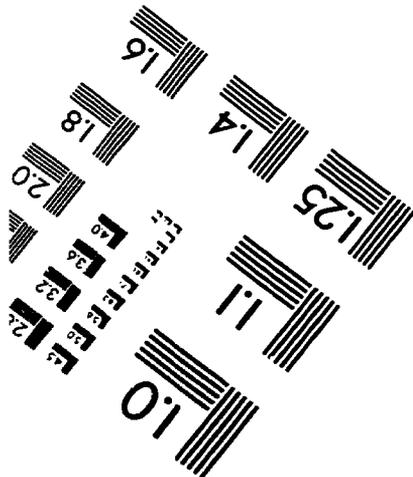
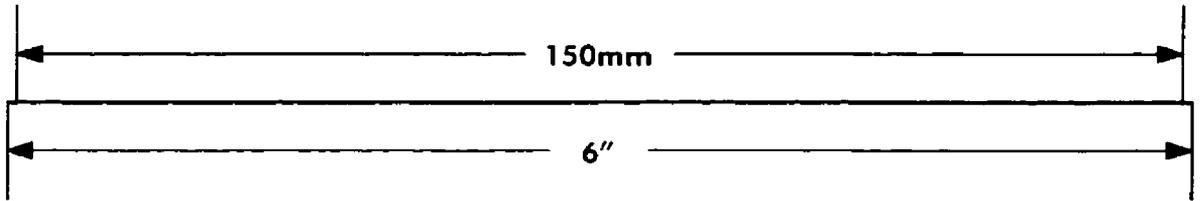
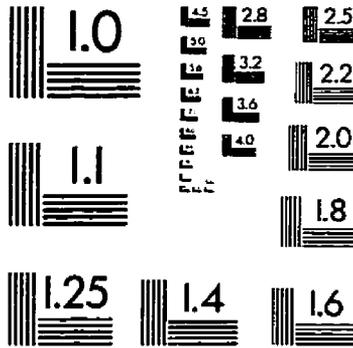
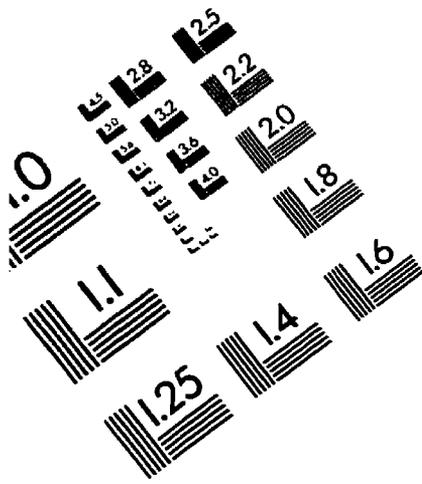


xi) Another artist's impression of "the British Museum" and its various modernist 'shades.'

Sources of photographs and illustrations:

- i) Hall 387-392.
- ii) Lady Dynevor. Jackson viii.
- iii) Garrett 36.
- iv) Hyde 109.
- v) Lady Albery. Tuohy 74.
- vi) Photography Collection, Humanities Research Centre, U of Texas, Austin. Ackroyd 373.
- vii) The Houghton Library, Harvard U. Ackroyd 374.
- viii) Robin Lubbock. Jeffares, *A New Biography of W.B. Yeats* 56.
- ix) National Museum of Ireland. Tuohy 73.
- x) English Department, U of Reading. Jeffares, *A New Biography of W.B. Yeats* 56.
- xi) Excerpted from Martin Rowson's graphic novel, *The Waste Land*, Chapter 3. N.pag.

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