

From Galileo to Aldo Moro Italian Imagery in Contemporary New Zealand Literature

Paola Della Valle
(Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia)

Abstract Italian images and symbols are numerous in contemporary New Zealand literature. A basic distinction must however be drawn between Pākehā writers, that is, New Zealanders of European origin, and writers belonging to the indigenous minority: the Māori. Italy has aroused a different emotional response and its imagery has served (or not) a political purpose according to the author's affiliation to the group of the colonizers or that of the colonised. In this article I will analyse how Italian images are employed by two living Māori writers, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, and by a Pākehā poet, Allen Curnow, passed away in 2001. In particular, I will focus on whether these images pertain to a common system of values and on the extent to which they are functional to the dominant discourse or constitute a means of subversion of it.

Keywords Patricia Grace. Witi Ihimaera. Allen Curnow. Galileo. Aldo Moro.

Although there have never been historical reasons of close contacts between Italy and New Zealand or a substantial immigration flux from Italy comparable to that which took place in other parts of the New World such as Australia, Argentina or the USA, our country has aroused the interest of many New Zealand writers for its past history, its immense artistic patrimony and its being the cradle of Western culture and civilisation. Italy has always left a symbolic mark in the New Zealand authors who came, one way or another, in touch with it either physically (as visitors or soldiers during World War II) or through readings and pictures. However, a basic distinction must be made between writers belonging to the indigenous minority (the Māori) and Pākehā writers (that is, New Zealanders of European origin). Italy has drawn a different emotional response and its imagery has served (or not served) a political purpose according to the authors' affiliation to the group of the colonised or that of the colonizers.

In this essay I will analyse how Italian images are employed by two living Māori writers, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, and by a celebrated Pākehā poet, Allen Curnow, who died in 2001. Since I have already explored this theme in earlier publications on Ihimaera's and Grace's novels, I will just briefly outline some of the points previously treated and focus on

new works and images I still have not dealt with so far, namely Ihimaera's libretto *Galileo. A Millennium Opera* and Curnow's poem *An Incurable Music*.

As writing was not part of their cultural legacy, Māori were subject to Pākehā and European literary representations for more than one century, from the beginning of the British colonisation in early 1800 to the Māori Renaissance of the 1960s. In this period Māori started to publish their first works, expressing their own world-view, becoming agents of their literary representations and finally asserting their right to show "others who they were", in Grace's words (Grace 1975, 88).¹ This enacted a process of appropriation of the dominant language (English) and of the Western canon, and the abrogation of a monocentric view of human experience, leading to the production of syncretic and hybridised (or composite) works. Interestingly, Italian imagery has become the ridge-pole of two novels and an opera libretto by Ihimaera, respectively *The Matriarch*, *The Dream Swimmer* and *Galileo*, and of a novel by Grace: *Tu*. The process of appropriation has, therefore, gone beyond the boundaries of the imperial centre (namely Britain and the Pākehā view) to include another European culture that is not directly set in binary opposition to the Māori world but rather re-interpreted and used for the assertion of Māori identity and rights.

The Italian nationalist movement of the 19th century (the Risorgimento) and its invention of an 'Italian nation' prompted Ihimaera to trace an interesting parallel with the New Zealand Wars between British and Māori, which were occurring at about the same time and led to the invention of an alleged 'Māori nation' too. As Judith Dell Panny says, "[t]he references [to the Italian context] assist the European reader to proceed from the familiar to the unfamiliar, to see history in a wider context, and to see it from a Māori perspective" (Dell Panny 1998, 6). What is particularly striking is the fact that, in *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), Ihimaera does not appropriate to his use the history of the Risorgimento itself but rather the artistic genre that was its most important source of ideological transmission: the *melodramma* (Della Valle 2011, 104). The spirit of the Italian nationalist struggle is fully evoked

1 This is what a Māori elder tells the protagonist of Grace's short story *Parade*, from the collection *Waiariki*. The narrating protagonist is a young Māori woman who returns from the city to her family in a rural area to participate in the celebrations for the carnival. During the parade, however, she feels uncomfortable in front of the Pākehā public clapping and cheering at them as if they were clowns in a circus and perceives the shallow friendliness of the authorities, who seem to remember and cooperate with the Māori community only once a year to put on the colourful spectacle for tourists. She is angry at the condescension of her relatives, but she finally discovers that the elders are as aware of the patronising attitude of the Pākehā as she is. Yet, they are proud of their traditions and believe it is the Māori duty "to show others who we are".

by Ihimaera's drawing on the emotional Manicheism and characterisation of Verdian operas and by blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, which characterised both the Risorgimento and its most remarkable artistic product. In this period, while Italian political events went on stage, allegorically entering the plots of operas, the aesthetics and ethics of *melodramma* reached out beyond the theatrical world to deeply influence language, fashion and behaviour of common people and politicians, as though the country had been transformed into one giant stage where patriotic actors performed their struggle for liberation. The interconnection between art and life was a defining characteristic of the Risorgimento: opera conveyed major historical issues and inflamed the patriotic spirit, while nationalists dramatised their political ideals according to the aesthetics and ethics of an artistic genre. Similarly, the characters of Ihimaera's novels wear clothes that resemble theatrical costumes and use melodrama's hypertrophic rhetoric and gestures. The plots reproduce the triangle formula ever present in melodrama (opposing the couple of soprano and tenor to an antagonist, a baritone or mezzosoprano). Moreover, Ihimaera inserts numerous operatic quotations functioning as comments on the actions or characters. In *The Dream Swimmer* all quotations are from *Aida*, while in *The Matriarch* he draws on a wide number of Verdian operas, such as *Aida*, *Otello*, *La forza del destino*, *Macbeth*, *Nabucco*, *Don Carlo*, and *Un ballo in maschera*. The subversive power of Ihimaera's novels lies in their evocation of Risorgimento's emotional spirit through its most forceful rhetorical weapon, which is applied to the Māori predicament and serves to legitimise their cause.²

Ihimaera's appropriation of Italian melodrama is learned and intellectually articulated, grounded on his musical studies and refined musical sensibility. He is also a well-known opera reviewer and wrote four libretti himself, among which *Galileo. A Millenium Opera*, based on the life of the 17th century Italian scientist.³ This chamber opera in four acts, with music by John Rimmer, was completed in 1998. After a successful concert performance in the same year, it premiered at the Maidment theatre in Auckland with a four-night season in April 2002. The opera is designed for a Chamber Ensemble of eight players accompanying seven singers and a chorus, but the orchestration features taped electronic music as well. As Manai and Hanna explain, while the story belongs to the Renaissance, the music

2 For a thorough analysis of the use of melodrama in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* see Della Valle 2011.

3 The other libretti are: *Waituhi. The Life of the Village*, music by Ross Harris, performed at the State Opera House, Wellington, 1984; *Tanz der Schwane*, music by Ross Harris, performed at the Adam Concert Room, Victoria University of Wellington, 1993; *The Clio Legacy*, music by Dorothy Buchanan, performed at the Composing Women's Festival in Wellington Town Hall, 1993.

includes a variety of styles and forms in sharp contrast with each other. They range from traditional tunes, such as the fifth century hymn sung by Grand Duchess Christina (Galileo's protector), to sophisticated electronic sounds, like the leitmotif of the whole opera, the so-called "Music of the Heavens" (Manai, Hanna 2005, 264). Such mix seems to create a link between different epochs and underlines the authors' will to provide a new reading of Galileo's story applicable to their own time and context. This is further confirmed by the multimedia apparatus of the work. The scenery involves a giant screen curving around and partially above the audience, incorporating them as actors within the show. Video and slide projections integrate the story enlarging on the meaning of the facts narrated and connecting them to contemporary reality. The opera itself is framed within two references to recent historical events that received worldwide media coverage. At the beginning, the giant screen shows a rocket being launched, while a voice over of a TV newsreader informs the audience that, on 8th December 1992, the Galileo probe, launched by NASA three years before, passed by earth's moon on its way to Jupiter. The opera closes with a reference to Galileo's rehabilitation by Pope John Paul II in 1992. Within these two scenes, it follows Galileo's life in chronological order, charting his scientific achievements, pinpointing his increasing popularity among scholars, courtiers and common people, recording the Church's growing diffidence, and finally describing the trial and his famous recantation. After the Pope's condemnation of Galileo for heresy and before Galileo's submission, the stage directions suggest the screening of images of old and modern horrors: the inquisitorial burning of heretics, gas chambers at Belsen and Pol Pot atrocities.

Manai and Kirsten have explored two previous works centred on Galileo's story: Bertolt Brecht's play *Life of Galileo* and Italian director Liliانا Cavani's film *Galileo*. They contend that they both present a reading of the scientist's life that is deeply influenced by historical and personal events. Brecht wrote three different versions of his play. All of them are centred on the relationship between science, society and power, but the second and third versions differ considerably from the first one. If the first version, written in the late thirties when he was in exile in Denmark, seems to provide the typical picture of Galileo as a positive hero, trying to defend his experimental method of research and his discoveries from the interference of the powerful Catholic Church but finally having to succumb, in the later versions Brecht depicts an ambiguous character, who represents "the betrayal of scientists and their submission to power" (Manai, Hanna 2005, 268). Brecht wrote the second and third versions respectively in the USA in 1945-46 and in East Berlin between 1953 and 1955, that is, after the atomic explosions that had put an end to World War II. He clearly wants to emphasise scientists' ethical responsibility. He even makes Galileo utter a speech of self-condemnation at the end

of the play, where the scholar claims he had never been in real danger and had been as strong as the ecclesiastical authorities for many years. Therefore, he regrets his lack of steadfastness, which “might have had tremendous repercussions”:

If [he] had held out, scientists might have developed something like the physicians’ Hippocratic oath, the vow to use their knowledge only for the good of mankind. As things stand now, the best [they] can hope for is a generation of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose. (Manai, Hanna 2005, 268)

Liliana Cavani’s film (1968) reflects instead the radical atmosphere of the late sixties, the battles against any kind of authority, the fight of young people for a society liberated from the repressive power of outdated institutions and narrow-minded bourgeois morality. Cavani follows Galileo’s life step by step, emphasising that he had no choice but to act as he did. The alternative would have been martyrdom, as for Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake because of his open attack on the Church. She stresses Galileo’s pragmatism and prudence that allowed him to survive and continue working in captivity.

As to the latest interpretation of Galileo by Ihimaera, Manai and Hanna maintain that he represents an allegory of humankind in the New Millennium: a new Prometheus, delving without restraint into nature’s deepest secrets, from biotechnological manipulation to the search of life on other planets. Like Prometheus, Galileo defies his superiors and shows *hubris* (arrogance, presumptuousness) but, unlike the Greek hero, he finally submits himself to the humiliation of the trial and the recantation, which makes him appear flawed and weaker, but also more human. Galileo becomes a symbol of diversity and of the “repression of difference in self-proclaimed democratic societies” (Manai, Hanna 2005, 263). In particular, his ordeal represents the silencing of the intellectuals in modern regimes like German Nazism, Italian Fascism, Stalin’s Soviet Union and post-colonial Algeria.

If these parallels can certainly prove the multifaceted nature of Galileo’s story, one more interpretation can be added, which also takes into account the indigenous origin of the script’s author. Ihimaera forcefully stresses the scientist’s tenacity in defending his autonomy of thought and, more generally, the existence of ‘other’ perspectives different from the widely accepted mainstream one. Actually, Galileo does not want to demolish the Holy Writ’s narrative but only trace the boundaries within which its perspective can act and find its deepest sense. Here is how he exposes his point of view to Gran Duchess Christina, who is warning him against the ecclesiastical disapproval of his theories:

GALILEO

My Lady, who would set a limit to the mind of man?
 Who dares assert we know all there is to be known?
 The articles concerning salvation and the establishment of the Faith
 are in no danger of valid contradiction – the Church is safe
 But the world of Nature is not the same as the world of the Spirit
 God has given his Holy Writ to understand the one –
 And to man his aspiring intelligence and science
 to understand the other –
 (Ihimaera 1998, 3, 1)

In defending his discoveries and method, Galileo does not try to deny the existence of God. He is interested in analysing the functioning of the world, not in debating about the existence of a final cause or unmoved mover or *primum mobile*, which is conversely the Church's duty. While he respects the Church's role as arbiter of spiritual and metaphysical matters, the ecclesiastical authorities do not respect him as scholar. In Ihimaera's version, the despotic and absolute stance of the Church is emphasised, a position that does not admit 'other' views or possibilities. Here is how Galileo replies to Cardinal Bellarmino during the trial, a few lines before the Pope's final pronouncement.

BELLARMINA [sic]

You question others more learned in God than you, Galileo?

GALILEO RESPONDS WITH A FLASH OF COURAGE

GALILEO

The Scripture is not only capable but necessarily in need of interpretations different from the apparent meaning of the words, and it seems to me that in disputes about natural phenomena the Scripture should be reserved to be the last place –
 (STRONGLY) But what have I done to deserve this?
Two truths can never contradict each other –
 All I have done is look into the face of God and tell what I have seen
 (Ihimaera 1998, 3, 2) [Emphasis added]

According to Galileo, both faith and science, the Bible and nature, come from God. The contrasts that may arise can be solved by determining the boundaries of each other's sphere of intervention. Today we see Galileo as the initiator of the experimental method and of a new school of thought. His approach to knowledge enabled the Western world to achieve extraordinary technological and scientific advances and to claim the right of reason to decipher and measure material reality, an attitude that had

considerable influence on the following trends of Western civilisation. It has also become the symbol of secular culture. Actually, Galileo's position has been later assumed by the Church too, who has acknowledged the validity of the scientific method in natural studies and agreed, at the same time, that the literal meaning of the Holy Scriptures should be re-interpreted (Abbagnano, Fornero 2007, 108). Galileo's assertion in the text that "two truths can never contradict each other" is ambiguous. It might mean that, if two assertions are true, they necessarily cannot contradict each other or that they can be two faces of the same and only truth. According to present studies, Galileo always rejected the idea of two separate truths, in favour of one single truth, from which faith and science derive (128). The second possible interpretation appears therefore more plausible.

In any case, Ihimaera seems to use Galileo's predicament as a metaphor of the challenge to conformity and absolutism: a symbol of the battle that the 'diverse' or the 'other' has to fight to be acknowledged. His 'other' cannot but be, first of all, the indigenous minority of New Zealand in relation to the overwhelming power of the European dominating majority. The ideological frame is however reversed in this context, as the authority is a highly technologized, capitalist and materialist coloniser, who has taken scientific progress to extremes almost as a new faith, while the 'other' is an indigenous population with a holistic spiritual approach to reality, pervading every aspect of their life. This necessarily entails another ontological system, involving different views of nature/mankind relationships, land and land ownership, family, history, identity and sense of belonging. Power relations in Western empires have always been based on a presumption of superiority of the colonizers, which led them to impose their vision and act on behalf of the colonised in political, economic and cultural matters. Ihimaera's Galileo can be rightfully seen as a role model for a hero defying absolute forms of authoritative knowledge, pre-established cultural paradigms and institutional power. According to this reading, his recantation could be interpreted as a strategy and highlights a pragmatic attitude pertaining to Māori people too, as shown by the numerous negotiations characterising New Zealand history and the dialectic evolution of race relations in this country. In fact, after his submission, Galileo addresses the audience and says: "It still moves; eppur si muove!" (Ihimaera 1998, 4, 2).⁴

Another major field of interest concerning Italy is the 28th Māori Battalion's participation in the Italian campaign of World War II. After the 1943 armistice with the Allied forces, the Anglo-American troops started the liberation of Italy from the (now enemy) German occupiers. The Māori

4 Galileo is referring to the Earth. His discoveries convinced him that the heliocentric Copernican view was right. The Church still believed that Earth was the immovable centre of the universe, as the Bible claimed.

Battalion was a distinct infantry unit within the Second New Zealand Division and was exclusively formed by Māori soldiers coming from all over the country. Although conscription was applied to Pākehā only, over 17,000 Māori enlisted for combat and 11,500 took places in essential industries (King 2001, 89). As Michael King mentions, “the Maori Battalion covered itself in glory as a combat unit in North Africa and Italy” (90). The number of casualties was extremely high, since the Battalion fought in some of the most difficult and ill-conceived actions at Orsogna, Cassino and Rimini. In the disillusioned words of the protagonist of Grace’s novel *Tu*, they “took part in the most stupid and meaningless sector of the whole business” (Grace 2004, 277).

Patricia Grace’s father, Sergeant Edward Gunson (Grace 2004, 283)⁵ went to war in 1944. His diary, read by the writer twenty years after his death in 1983, prompted her novel *Tu*. The main subject of the book is the reason for the massive voluntary enlistment of young Māori men in the Battalion. Not only did the government encourage their enrolment, but also the majority of Māori people were in favour, including Māori politicians and authorities, on the ground that it was a way to demonstrate their “pride of race” to the world (and their own country) and have their rights and full citizenship acknowledged at home. But the novel also provides an unprecedented view of Italy from a Māori perspective, invested with their animistic and spiritual philosophy. Besides, Italy does not appear at all as part of the imperial centre, nor is it set in binary opposition to Māori culture. On the contrary, the protagonist discovers a series of cultural affinities between Italians and Māori about which he had only read at school, that allow him to re-interpret and validate his own heritage: in particular, the sense of family, the central importance given to food, the enjoyment of music and singing as an emotional and communal experience, and their melodic language, whose flow is similar to that of Māori (see Della Valle 2010, 218-30). Like Ihimaera’s works, *Tu* implies an act of conscious appropriation of another culture, to the service of Māori. The result is the blurring of the centre-periphery dichotomy and a re-centring of the Māori position.

Italy is also found in Allen Curnow’s poetry, but from a completely different perspective. In February 1974, Curnow came to Europe on his last university leave, half of which was spent in Italy. This must certainly have inspired the second of a series of three poems that he first published in the literary journal *Islands* in 1978 and that will be the ridgepole of his collection *An Incurable Music* (1979): “Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan with an Hook?”, “In the Duomo” (set in Renaissance Florence) and “Bring Your Own Victim”. The collection, which can be better defined as a sequence

5 The pages correspond to the “Author’s Notes”. See also the dedication of *Tu*.

of interconnecting poems on the same theme, also includes “Moro Assassinato”, a natural postscript to the whole work inspired by another trip to Italy he took in 1978, after his retirement. During this stay Curnow was able to follow the predicament of Aldo Moro,⁶ kidnapped by members of the Red Brigades on 16th March 1978 and assassinated fifty-four days later. As Alex Calder states, the poet arrived in Italy “to find that the sacrificial themes and political violence he had been writing about were unfolding in a real-life drama involving one of Italy’s most senior politicians” (Calder 2011, 238). The ubiquity and persistence of violence throughout space and time, as an obscure and primordial force in human life, is in fact the collection’s subject matter explored by Curnow in the different settings of the poems, which move between worlds and different ages: from Karekare’s Cathedral Rock (a popular surf-casting spot in New Zealand) to 15th century Florence and the Pazzi conspiracy (*Congiura dei Pazzi*), up to Rome and the Moro affair.

The collection opens with a detailed description of an act of ordinary violence: the catching and killing of a big kahawai, a local fish, at Karekare’s Cathedral Rock. The event is anticipated by other images of natural violence, the sea waves breaking against the rocks:

The big kahawai had to swim close
to the rocks which kicked at the waves [...].

The rocks kicked angrily, the rocks
hurt only themselves, the seas without a scratch
made out to be storming and shattering,
but it was all an act that they ever broke
into breakers or even secretively
raged like the rocks, the wreckage of the land,
the vertigo, the self-lacerating
hurt of the land.

6 Aldo Moro (1916-1978), leader of the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*), was one of Italy’s longest-serving post-war Prime Ministers, holding power for a combined total of more than six years. He was one of the most convinced supporters of an alliance of his party with the Italian Socialists in the 1960s, and with the Communist party (PCI) in the 1970s: the so-called ‘Historic Compromise’. Moro wanted to conciliate the Christian and popular mission of the DC with the rising laicist and liberal values of the Italian society, in order to integrate new important social groups (youth, women, workers) in the democratic system. He was a progressive politician and a tenacious mediator, particularly skilled in coordinating the varied trends of his party. His ‘Historic Compromise’ was strongly opposed by the conservative wing of the DC and the USA government. The USSR was not favourable either, as they considered potential participation by the PCI in a cabinet a form of emancipation from Moscow and rapprochement to the Americans.

Swimming closer
 the kahawai drew down the steely cloud
 and the lure, the line you cast
 from cathedral rock, the thoughtful death
 whispering to the thoughtless,

Will you be caught?
 (Curnow 1979, 9-10)

The incident is described in detail, in all its brutality, as from the victim's point of view:

Fingers and gobstick fail,
 the hook's fast in the gullet,
 the barb's behind the root
 of the tongue and the tight
 fibre is tearing the mouth
 and you are caught, mate, you're caught,
 the harder you pull it
 the worse it hurts, and it makes
 no sense whatever in the air
 or the seas or the rocks
 how you kick or cry, or sleeplessly
 dream as you drown.

A big one! A big one!
 (11)

This is further followed by an act of gratuitous cruelty – the gills are lacerated with a twist to make blood pour out fast – pertaining to habit or ritual rather than to necessity or real effectiveness, and justified by the proverb-like formula “quick bleeding makes best eating” (Curnow 1979, 10). The fish dies in a rockpool full of its own blood as “in a red cloud of itself” (11).

The image of Karekare's Cathedral Rock, with its massive natural dome, dissolves into a man-built dome, that of Santa Maria del Fiore during the High Mass of 26th April 1478, place and time chosen by members of the Pazzi family to murder Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici and put an end to their rule in Florence. The conspiracy, backed by Pope Sixtus 6 and the Duke of Urbino, ended up with the death of Giuliano only and the unexpected retaliation of the whole city against the conspirators, who were all tortured and put to death in the most brutal ways. The artwork and decoration of the cathedral are described in natural terms: “It is all in the walls of one great shell incised” (14). At the altar, the priest is offering God

the body and blood of his “butchered son”. As Calder notices, the rite of transubstantiation is suggested by the word “homooosianus” (which means ‘of the same essence’) (241). A portion of the white Host, dropped into the chalice, floats in red wine and reminds us of the kahawai fish floating in a red cloud of its own blood. Moreover, the section’s last lines are gradually reminiscent of the natural world and Cathedral Rock:

[...] the blood is poured
by experienced hands which do not shake

serving up to Messer Domeneddio god and lord
the recycled eternity of his butchered son,
this mouthful of himself alive and warm.

This is homooosianus, this is the cup
to catch and keep him in, this is where he floats
in a red cloud of himself, this is morning sun

blotting the columns, the ogives, the hollowed throne,
smoking the kite-high concavity of the cliff.
This is the question, *Caught any fish?*

Say, No.

(15)

The fish was a symbol of Jesus in early Christianity and has a lot of theological overtones in the Gospel.⁷ Fish and Jesus seem to belong to the same sacrificial logic, inherent in both nature and religion. The beach is a place of transience and transubstantiation, like the altar during the mass at consecration. The image of a stream of blood is another recurring image in the poem, connecting natural and religious imagery. It is no coincidence that the next section opens with a quotation from Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and the description of the Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood in the Seventh Circle of *Hell*, in which the bodies of those who committed crimes of violence are immersed. Then we are introduced to Giovanni Battista da Montesecco, a professional soldier and leader of the papal mercenaries hired by the Pazzi family for the conspiracy, who explains the reason why he refused to perpetrate the crime at the last moment and had to be substituted by two clerks, spoiling the whole business: he did not want to

⁷ The Greek word for fish is ‘ichthys’. As early as the first century, Christians made an acrostic from this word: Iesus Christos Theou Yios Soter, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. Moreover, Christ fed 5,000 people with 2 fishes and 5 loaves and called his disciples “fishers of men”. Water baptism, practiced by immersion in the early church, created a parallel between fish and converts.

shed blood in the church and commit sacrilege. He believed, says Curnow, in the words of the “divinest poets” (16) and, despite his being a ruthless killer, he would not kill anybody in a church, as he explains to one of the Pazzi family members:

You keep your side of it, I'll keep mine,
 I'll dagger you a dozen Medici at anybody's table
 except Christ's. Two will be sufficient, Pazzi said.
 Who's paying? And Montesecco, Who's going to burn?
 (17)

When Giuliano is struck by the daggers, the images of the red cloud and of a body floating in its own blood are used again, as previously for the fish and the body of Jesus Christ incarnated in the white Host:

Giuliano de' Medici
 bled where he had to bleed,
 bedrock flat on the church floor
 in the cloud he made
 of the strong bestial smell
 of dissolving clay,
 their offering to the oldest god
 that holiest day.
 (20)

Calder suggests that the images of blood, death and sacrifice in the collection are distributed through the three orders of things, as in the Great Chain of Being (Calder 2011, 242): the natural order (the fish), the human order (Giuliano de' Medici) and the divine order (the rite of High Mass, celebrating God and his “butchered son”). The theme of violence goes hand in hand with that of sacrifice. The catching of a fish responds to a natural necessity. Giuliano's murder to a political logic. Christ's martyrdom and crucifixion to a religious vision. But the epilogue, the poem on the Moro affair, seems to underline how questionable the sacrificial logic is. Moro was given the role of assigned victim by both the Red Brigades and his own party, the Christian Democrats. The former wanted the liberation of some of their jailed fellows and hoped to radicalise the quiescent Communist Party. The latter were in power at that moment and did not want to come to terms with terrorists. Moro was however lucid and courageous in his determination not to accept this role. As Calder underlines: “Moro's letters affirmed he was a person, a member of a family, a friend appealing to friends not only in response to the impersonal violence of revolutionary fanatics but more particularly to the depersonalizing violence of the state” (249). Caught between two

opposing forces, he was inevitably squashed.

Like the previous sections, "Moro assassinato" is also haunted by the echo of earlier times and distant beaches. Words and images from different worlds and epochs overlap and are mixed in the text: New Zealand and Italy, present and past, Pacific Ocean and Adriatic Sea. The poem starts with Curnow sitting in a cafeteria at Zattere in Venice and reading about the Moro affair in the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*:

All the seas are one sea,
the blood one blood
and the hands one hand.

Ever is always today.
Time and again, the Tasman's
wrestler's shoulders

throw me on Karekare
beach, the obliterations
are one obliteration

of last year's Adriatic,
yesterday's Pacific,
the eyes are all one eye.

Paratohi rock, the bell-tower
of San Giorgio recompose
the mixture's moment;

the tales are all one tale
dead men tell, the minor
characters the living.

Nice and all as it was
And is, the dog-trotting sun
Of early April nosing

The 'proud towers', to sit
At Nico's tables
On Zattere, [...].
(34-5)

An Incurable Music is a study on the ordinariness of violence in human life, and especially in human relationships. In the poem "Moro Assassinato", this is shown by the insistence on the world "normality", when the

Italian politician recalls the moments of his kidnapping:

Normality was this car's
warm vinyl under the buttocks [...]

Normality was the guns
worn close to the body of each
of the guards, god friends, composing
my escort sitting behind me [...]

Normality was the moment's
mixture, moment by moment
improvising myself,
ideas, sensations, among them [...]

Normality was no less
what it had to be, the ambush,
the crashed cars and the guards
gunned down dead in the street;
and the car that carried me next
here, to the dark classroom
of the Prison of the People.
Normality is, do you follow?
a condition very like mine.
(38-9)

Curnow moves from the terrorists' point of view to Moro's. He represents the former as cold, disenchanted and matter-of-fact, directed by a sense of intrinsic necessity:

He wrote letters, we willingly accepted them
for delivery, Fanfani, Zaccagnini, Andreotti,

Cossiga, Dell'Andro, Eleonora his wife.
Did we seriously expect these would procure
The political deal, the exchange for our comrades

gaoled by the State, their liberty for his life?
'An episode in a war', terror for terror,
An honourable swap. So his letter argued.

He knew us better than they, adduced Palestinian
precedent, humane principle, the party interest,
all that shit. What did he, or we, expect?

Jesus wrote no letters to Judas or Caiaphas.
 It was he or Barabbas, and that was another Rome.
 Not known at this address. Try Simon Peter.
 (42)

On the other hand, Moro's excruciating letters forcefully affirm his refusal of the sacrificial role. He appeals to his fellow party-men, asking for possible negotiations with his jailers, confirming the authenticity of his handwriting and signature, asserting the sincerity and reasonableness of his requests. His last letter to his wife Eleonora (Noretta) sounds as an act of accusation to the Italian authorities, the State and his party, who have abandoned him:

My darling Noretta, After a little optimism,
 fleeting and false, as it turns out, something
 they said, I misunderstood, I see that the time
 has come... No time to think
 how incredible it is, this punishment
 for my mildness and moderation... I have been wrong
 all my life, meaning well, of course...
 too late to change, nothing to do but admit
 you were always right. What more can I say?
 Only, could not some other way have been found to punish
 us and our little ones?... I want one thing
 to be clear, the entire responsibility
 of the Demo-Christian Party by its absurd,
 unbelievable conduct. Friends have done too little,
 fearing for themselves perhaps...
 (45)

Andrew Johnston has associated the phrase that gives this collection its title (*An Incurable Music*) with "our capacity for evil".⁸ Calder prefers to recall the "still sad music of humanity" that Wordsworth wrote of in his poem *Tintern Abbey* (Calder 2011, 252). One way or another, Italian imagery is used in the collection to reinforce Allen Curnow's central idea. The insertion of the Pazzi conspiracy urges the uncomfortable question: 'How was it possible that so much art and so much violence could co-exist at a time and place reputed to be a pinnacle of Western civilisation?', a point reinforced by the development and conclusion of the Moro affair in the present. Although the use of rituals and the re-elaboration of language can create a security distance between humans and their actions, the in-

8 "Late, Late Curnow: A Mind of Winter" (quoted in Calder 2011, 252).

humanity of humans lies within the ordinariness and ubiquity of violence, as a constant of their nature, and in the unbridgeable gap between human and humane.

Unlike Māori writers who appropriate Italian images to assert and legitimise their own cultural and ethnic specificity – a politically connoted act –, in Curnow’s verses Italy becomes a symbol of a universal attribute of the human condition, which blurs national and ethnic differences. One of Curnow’s early poems *Landfall in Unknown Seas*, written in 1942 to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of New Zealand by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642, derides fatuous celebrations of national identity, evoking the violence of that first encounter between Europeans and Māori forebears at Golden Bay and the memory of “[t]he stain of blood that writes an island story” (Curnow 1960, 208). On that occasion, four members of Tasman’s crew were killed. But everybody knows that, when James Cook landed in New Zealand about a century later, he got even with the Māori and “showed what the musket could do”, as remembered in another poem of Curnow’s, *The Unhistoric Story* (203).

To conclude, Italian imagery in Ihimaera, Grace and Curnow shows the great evocative valence of our landscape, culture and history for New Zealand writers. It also reflects existential conditions and power-relations in a post-colony. A disempowered minority in its own country applies strategies of survival, abrogates rules and canons, appropriates another culture and bends it to its needs. By contrast, the European invaders’ children look back to the Old World from the Antipodes to bridge distances, fill voids, find elements that allow them (for better or worse) to perceive the universal in mankind and be part of a larger community, although this might mean reflecting on a negative attribute of humanity. The utilization of external imagery is a projection of one’s needs and tells much more about the users than the used.

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