

BACK OPERATION

in Mr Cotton's Pictures

Leigh Davis

1. What is metaphysical in Maori?

It's a pretty strange stake in the ground for a talk¹ on the New Zealand painter Shane Cotton, whose works have a look of Maori art. It is especially strange given the lost currency of the word metaphysics, a word for a bundle of things supplying the Western idea of space. And by asking this question I do not want to imply that we can take this bundle, for Maori, back to the point it was 150 years ago in their life and times,

when I think it's mostly all gone or changed now and I don't know what's replacing it as we speak. But I want to step straight to a missing space now and not get stuck in a thin ethnography where brown things are mixed up with white things in a certain slackness of regard. We don't want radical chic nowadays. Metaphysics is startling thought. It is a stubborn constant I look for to make a present history out of, a blinking icon on interpretation's desktop. It leads to what's unsatisfied and unspoken of, and replenishing, in the back operation of meaning. It's a striving and charisma of thought so let's pimp its ride.



2. Every time you have a language experience that leads you to observe “so and so has many levels of meaning”; or when you read in *The Sydney Magazine* of September 2004 that “you don’t have to be pretty, thin, or tall, to be considered sexy... there has to be more than meets the eye, something that I’m interested in”, and you begin to read into what is trying to be said; or when someone says of your tee shot, “there was a lot of golf in that tee”; or you think about the paradox of Ezra Pound’s “The poem is not its language”; and finally, in a DVD about his selection of either steel or concrete for a new work you hear the sculptor Richard Serra observe that: “matter has an ability to give form to form”, and you grasp it; well, every such time you’re being held in the spacious skirts of Mother Metaphysics.

3. And it is a word that I make stand for the work in a work of art, for that which supplies both its avidity and detail. I use metaphysics, some exotic polysyllable for acute angles of recognition, to try to drag discussion of art's temper from a gravity of duller sense or cant. So as to look at Mr Cotton's pictures.

4. It is an ornery view to present Maori cultural expression through an old Greek portal like metaphysics, but so too is the consideration of art, another Greek word, in Maori as well. The two, art and metaphysics, are joined at the hip in the West such that if one dies both die. So I project the same pairing for Maori culture, and assume that one needs to find the unknown city of Maori metaphysics to get to the street of Mr Cotton's pictures. And further, set up the reading that applies if this city cannot be found, because it is occluded by another, mulatto, one.

5. We are dealing with the exchange of brown and white meaning in New Zealand, where venturing can trigger complexity, warring possessiveness, and bombs, so the thought is usually punch-drunk. It is inclined to both demonise and take fright.



6. What metaphysics in Maori might be sets up a peculiar blankness, still, after all this time. It also seems likely to end in melodrama or embarrassment, this effort to make metaphysics deviate from the traditional discourse it was designed for, to be put to work among second language cultural phenomena, unthinkable in the classic form of the word. But there is little satisfactory making-present of something we, who are European, judge is there or was there, through fragmentary encounters of Maori. It may be that the white tools have not been in place to know the brown equivalent of what we call high in culture. Whites have lost the generality and impact of the word metaphysics too. It is a loss of a classic visualising capacity. We no longer feel ourselves underwritten by the

spiritual gravity of Western cultural production and thought. We don't know ourselves. We don't know what's in the West's bones. It may be that Maori don't know themselves either in a like manner of forgetting, or that they know themselves well enough but don't translate it. So it is possible that neither white nor brown can talk about what is most important in their histories. That two origins cannot address each other because they are asleep. And as for the lost white realm of metaphysics so too for the lost white realm of art: whites know art too vaguely too, and so are badly placed to see its brown match. In the cultural encounter I propose we may have the blind leading the blind with both insufficiently troubled by what they can see.

7. Or it may be a different problem. Maybe white and brown cannot talk fruitfully of their respective metaphysics because their worlds are not separated and lack the clarity of first contact; that the problem isn't the unclear grasp of separated worlds but the blurring and confusion that occurs when each discussant has come to be a version of the other. If this is the conception to use then the metaphysical search is different. It directs itself toward the something-new that is arising through the eager, promiscuous and fecund relationship of two languages' fight-filled marriage.

8. So I am not going to talk about Mr Cotton's pictures for a while. We don't yet have a starting point for that discussion, and if you read a lot of the present Cotton commentary, you won't get one in that place either, because what's there has some weight of bowing and mystification.



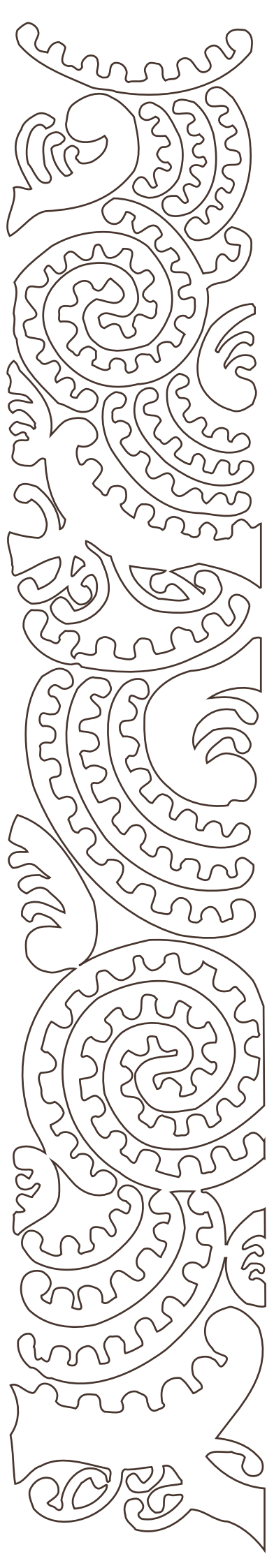
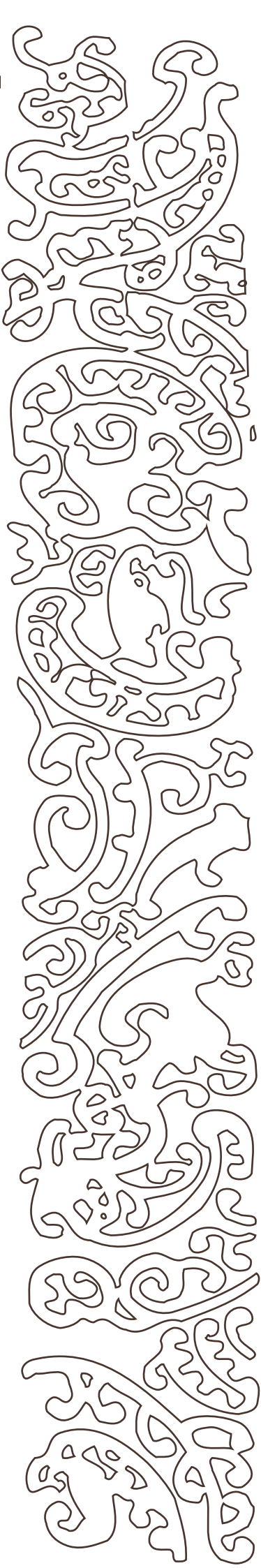
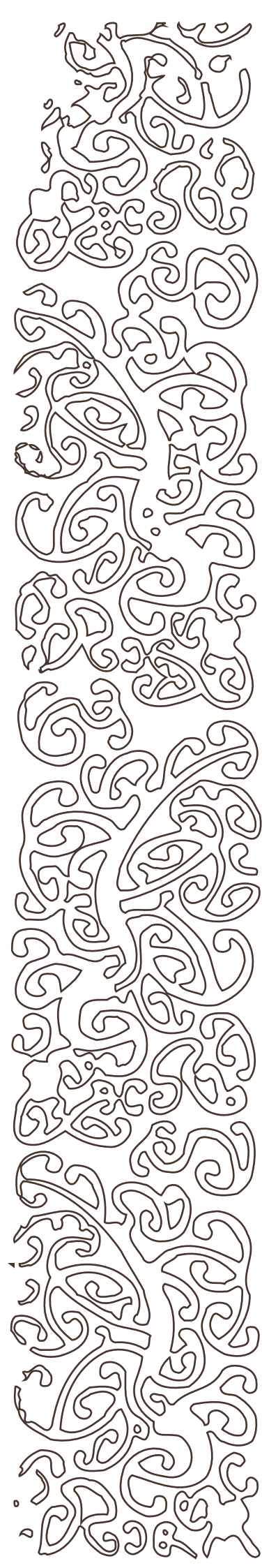
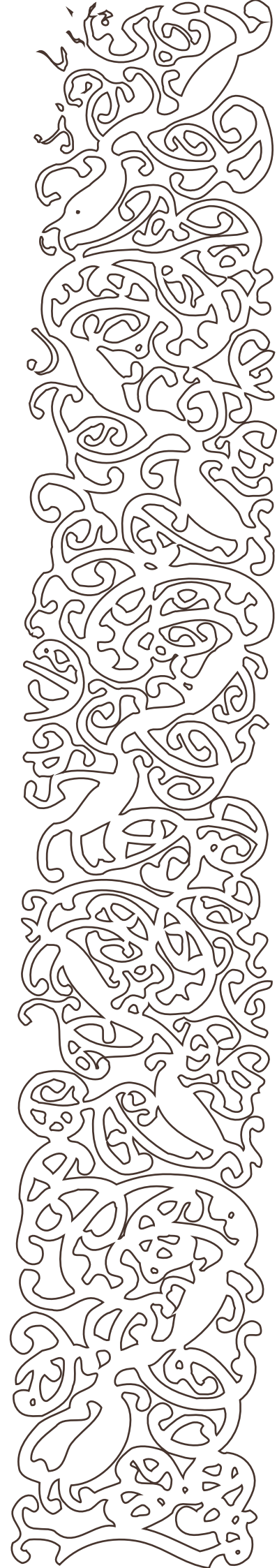


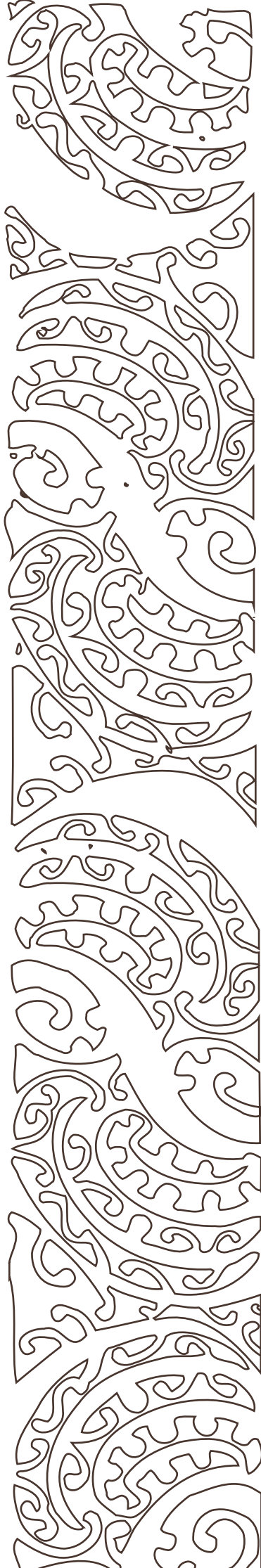
9. Thus, pulling back: we see a wealth of Maori cultural objects too rich and too strange to be originless, mere gestures or objects of craft. We judge ourselves frequently as before signs of depth. We want to know the gravity that might make these objects fall down upon us given a manageable adjustment in our eyes and ears. For without such a metaphysical grasp being visible or audible to us in a requisite layering of thought the Maori-derived art we sense that lies before us cannot come into presence. We cannot know how it *works*. We cannot fashion ourselves as audience. One reaches for a sensitive general attunement against which to differentiate the *sound* of Maori art from the cacophony of its fake forms and cultural noise. Those works that are popularly

termed Maori art may lie before us powerless and unconvincing – either because we do not know their frequency or because the things held up as art before us are not art at all – so we should stand up and not salaam before such things. These latter works: they might well be some branch of pop psychology for a race; some version of a politics for consciousness raising; or the affirmation of identity, like personalised number plates; or some interesting work upon materials more correctly termed craft, good textile designs say for printing shirts. Something *else*, lots of good and important things, but not *art*.

10. Roger Neich's book *Painted Histories* on Maori painted artefacts illustrates both the fascination and torment. Faced with a wealth of Maori works, the mass of which integrates into wholes, that overwhelm his study of its individual objects, Neich's technical history falls more or less short of knowing its back operation of meaning. He categorises, links, and lists. He places the work in its produced volume and in contexts, by region, objects, chronology, and relationship with other media. But there arises in the book an inability to name the works' native beauty or the beauty it names. And that's why *Painted Histories* is good. It makes visible what it can't address. The work's Oceanic question expands in proportion to the effort made to pin it down. What is *meeting* this gorgeous

kowhaiwhai art? It is a representation after all, and not 'a mute, nocturnal, immediate and happy opening of animal life' as Michel Foucault said of something else. What is being *drawn out* in the smoothed hurricane of this all-over machinery? The instructions of its recurring imagery given that it is recurrence itself that dominates attention?





Metaphysics' *Portal*

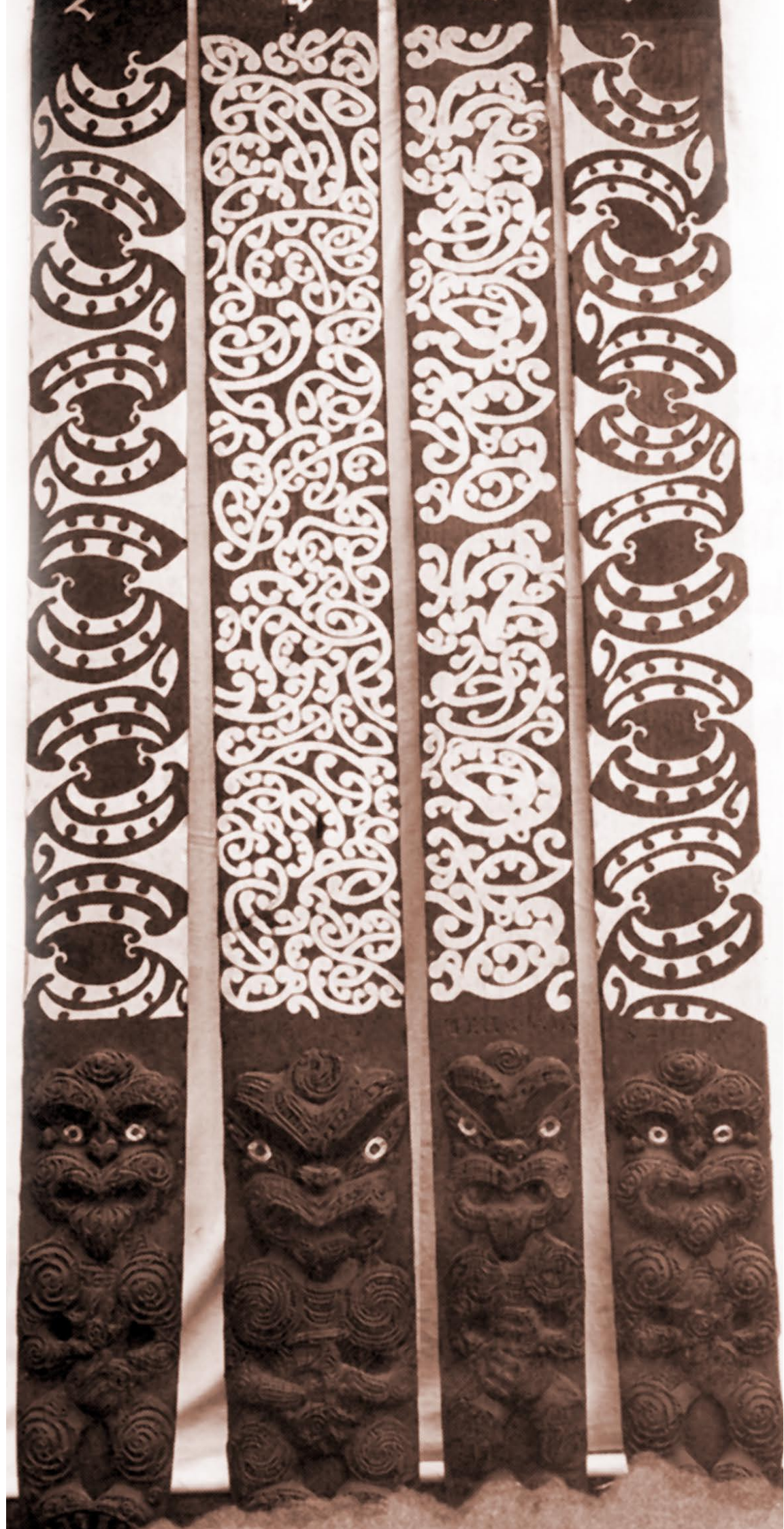
- 11.** Mr Cotton's pictures seem a long way off – but wait. We're making a tuning fork and striking it often. So that the pitch we accustom to can exert its absence later.
- 12.** We are taking something subtle and disruptive, a disposition and complexity of signs long familiar in one language, caught up in but not the same as the experience of art and religion, so as to look for its same in another language. This search for a same is dangerous analytically and politically. Or creative. What is there, in Maori, may be some other property, something else comparably shaped, rich and strange, and productive of high culture, that lies beyond our expectation. Great violence can be done fitting that richness to this supposition of it, or fitting that *something* – the Maori art-like – to this supposition of, and desire to find, Europe's complexity. There: that's my nod to correctness. It's done. And now I resume my wilful course.

13. But the whole problem rears up before us, intimidating and irresolvable. We seek to know Maori metaphysically, but there are likely no guides or torches. One branch of the problem, to grip Maori metaphysics in unalloyed form, is likely beyond both Maori and Pakeha reflection. We are looking for a characteristic transistor – for which the word metaphysics can be used in Maori labour, life, and language – and we may not be able to come upon it. More on this later: there is much to be gained in taking up the search.

14. We are looking for metaphysics in Maori, but it is a decoy pursuit. By taking ourselves into unfamiliar cultural territory, in a livery of thought familiar to us, we know that the figure we cut will either be ridiculous and inert, or will draw out its same-but-different in Maori. But: by looking in a particular direction, and with a particular patience of detection, what we are looking for can start to react with what is there. Our best mind is engaged for over-reading, a barbarous and anti-social pursuit, as conspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food, as Raymond Chandler said. In predisposing attention through the portal of a Greek word, we are preparing ourselves to free or invent metaphysics' forceful counter part in brown.

15. If art is the manipulation of materials to make a trance of language, what is *that* manipulation with Maori, and *that* trance?

16. What is metaphysics? It is a transformation of meaning to increase its complexity and interpretive range. It is a push of mind to the far left-hand end and right-hand end of meaning's ruler. There is a 5000-year traditional discipline of doing this. It's an extensive one, forming a big, peculiar Western park, you need to go for a walk in, to let its different aspects and phantoms appear. Metaphysics is an abstract noun, like love and work, so it is a custom and behaviour, not a meaning in a dictionary. Tracing its disposition, in this or that case, warms you to its usefulness, and accustoms one's eyes and ears to see and hear the cultural necessity of having it.



17. Metaphysics is a complex. It is centrifugal thought, where there is a critical effort to get in behind, beyond, or before, a given object of representation. To hold a more original object of attention in an explanatory context with a particular present one. We use these terms of spatial orientation, behind, beyond, before, even *way through*, to image the abstract process involved. If everyday experience is as set out on a big screen, metaphysics is the search, step by step, for its projector and code, sometimes as a donkey and carrot. It is a striving in thought that has traditionally yielded that which is superlative in culture – that is, the mechanism of meaning revealed and pushed to its extremes. *High* is just the comparative that got to be used for this, as in *high culture*.

Supreme, deep, powerful, profound, ultimate, essential, are other words you could use. This leaning towards the superlative in culture comes from the original Greek focus on the upper case and lower case pair of *Being* and *being* as a core construct of knowing and experience. Being – upper case – is the centre of metaphysics' enormous shockwave. Unless a thoughtful work achieves the purchase and high ring tone derived in some concentrate or tincture from this centre it is not metaphysical.

18. The process of mind-involved is as a blinking: holding up the everyday to its origins, in a doubled-vision of ordinary life:

“Just as it is with bat’s eyes in respect of daylight, so it is with our mental vision in respect of those things which are by nature most apparent”

(Aristotle, Metaphysics, ch. 1, Bk. 2, 993b).

It is a classical moment, this double vision, but to grasp it – to understand the history of this blinking mode of attention – we have to acclimate to an uncommon form of knowledge, not a conventional, scientific one, say. Metaphysical investigation is not any derivative of theoretically responsive observation made solid by tests – partly the reason it does not yield a paraphrase description, again. It is not a *positive* discipline. It is a fever. It is not a reasoning, but a heat-seeking, or an attentiveness like listening, and hence a blind procedure. To quote Martin Heidegger of this:

“Metaphysics is anchored in our being gripped, in which we do not represent before us that which we conceptually comprehend, but adopt a different attitude to knowledge. Metaphysics is an aspect of philosophical comprehension where man is in the grip of an attack – driven out of everydayness and driven back into the ground of things”

(Martin Heidegger, The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, p21).

So we can add to the sense of blinking thought the further sense: that there is a distinctive abstract emotion named by this word, a reverence, an attitude and a forceful reverse inquiry, with respect to origins, that goes out to the margins of what can be thought (“we do not represent before us that which we conceptually comprehend”). And what is the direction of this questioning, toward which the pace of thought quickens and scatters? In its classical form, it is a tendency toward that which is unthought, so it is both a grasping of something and of that something’s disappearance.

19. Further, metaphysics is a disposition and process of thought, not a timeless content of it. Strictly, it is a content of content, a means of distilling that, and a motivation to do so. There is a metaphysics dimension sitting like an exponent above and to the right of every significant object of attention. There is a metaphysics of time, representation, texts, architecture, meeting houses, crime fiction, and so on. It is a way of marking out the foundations of these ideas, the aspects that lie unfinished or unexamined within them and therefore the direction of development they can follow. In addition metaphysics is a discipline of discovery, an archaeology perhaps, that imposes or extracts instructions for cultural change. It does this in two ways, not one. It holds things

up to an interrogative weight that can deform what we thought we knew. This is its depth aspect. But secondly, it does it again. So metaphysics is a dynamics of thought, a traditional axis along which high culture has been generated, that is, held up to its origin conditions, made questionable there, and accordingly made amenable to reinvention. Metaphysics is the old quality in the new work it continually throws. The word is therefore a traditional scrutiny accorded at the wells of meaning, but it is also a capacity for the replenishment of such wells.

20. It is important to separate metaphysics from the popular freeze-dried handy accommodations with which it is now fuzzily equated. Metaphysics is wider in scope than *theory* as in, say, cultural theory or theory of language, and wider and more complex in scope than *abstraction*. These are limited representations, aspects of lesser wholes, and like mice too, to metaphysics' cat. Neither is metaphysics the derivation of a worldview or a cosmology, a static or essential belief about how things are that does not allow of metaphysics' questioning, chameleon, propulsive force. Metaphysics has been wounded by reification. Of all words, it should not be hurt this way, since it represents the single, Classic antidote to this process of being rendered inert. Metaphysics disturbs reification. It is often an axis of blasphemy. It's restful in substance but restless and processual in its forms. When Herbert Marcuse says, somewhere, that all reification is a process of forgetting, but that art interrupts that process, he is referring to art's metaphysical work. Nevertheless in its various reified forms metaphysics has

been made synonymous with diverse occult beliefs like numerology, theosophy, creation and other myths, or deep psychology, culture and other esoteric or suggestive metaphorical systems assuming transcendence. It is often a name for marginalised discourse, the way that, say, Christianity or Judaism is not thought of as metaphysical but Rosicrucianism or the Khabbalah is. And metaphysics does not lay down propositions of a specific religious form, although the transformation of Classical metaphysics into mediæval Christianity gives that impression. For example, in the mediæval period the “meta” no longer indicated a peculiar turnaround in the face of everyday thinking and inquiry, but became the name for a hierarchy of invisible beings – God and his Angels – who lay behind, above, or in some different spatial orientation toward, other beings.

21. You can forget all that dumbing-down and false equating.

22. Metaphysics also theatricalises thought. You can catch a sense of this when someone says: “Let me philosophise about that for a moment”. Their thought heads in a distinctive direction beyond, behind, or before the object of attention. A particular language game emerges. The person enacts a performance. Propositions are held out for evaluation and relationship with more original propositions. It is a moving backward in thought at times and at other times it is a moving around in circles in a search pattern for where the power lies. Totals are being felt out. Objects of attention are held in a double aspect, in a tension between their concrete presence now and their presence in a larger and more explanatory whole. This is not philosophy’s theatre but philosophising’s one. It’s an aspect of the verve of metaphysics.

23. To counter-read an example that was familiar to all Stage One English students when I was at university: one is not being metaphysical if led by William Carlos Williams, the American poet, to contemplate his red wheelbarrow poem as a celebration of the presence of independent objects in a right hygiene of thinking:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

24. No. It is not being metaphysical for the mind to focus on the wheelbarrow, and “see” only it. That is the error of reading the poem as a simple representation invoking sight. It is an error not to see that the red wheelbarrow blinks in the poem. We need to regard the poem as Aristotle regards the most apparent in the quote above. One is being metaphysical when thinking takes up this red wheelbarrow and stands it in a tension of questioning with the phrase, “So much depends/upon.” What is thus dependent? Can you think that? How large a thing or domain is this so much? Are there boundaries to it? Are there other things like the red wheelbarrow that are depended upon as well in an identical manner? And what kind of alighting occurs in the word “upon”? What

is touching the red wheelbarrow in this way and why is it forceful and necessary? Is there a *very large* released by the attention placed upon this *very particular* and if so, *what is it?* A metaphysical habit of thought comes to regard the richness and strangeness of the red wheelbarrow and its setting, and is nudged toward uncovering in the poem an aspect of language's ability to present and propose.





What Giotto Saw

25. Metaphysics is not a content or fixed representation, but a blinking that reveals itself in one. I have discussed the traditional art history device for it, one of rupture (*Country and Western*, jackbooks.com). An example is helpful here. I return to Giotto's *Saint Francois Recevant L'Hommage d'un Homme Du Peuple* (commonly termed, *Homage of a Simple Man*). What is most important to this image cannot be seen. But one brings to the work the strength and clarity of instant recognition. So: it is of course an old Italian work. It is a Giotto. Look at how the colours have patinated; see the transitional semi-naturalism of the figures, their relative importance in the action and scene of the work, and see how and where they stand in the street; and look, there is another Giotto,

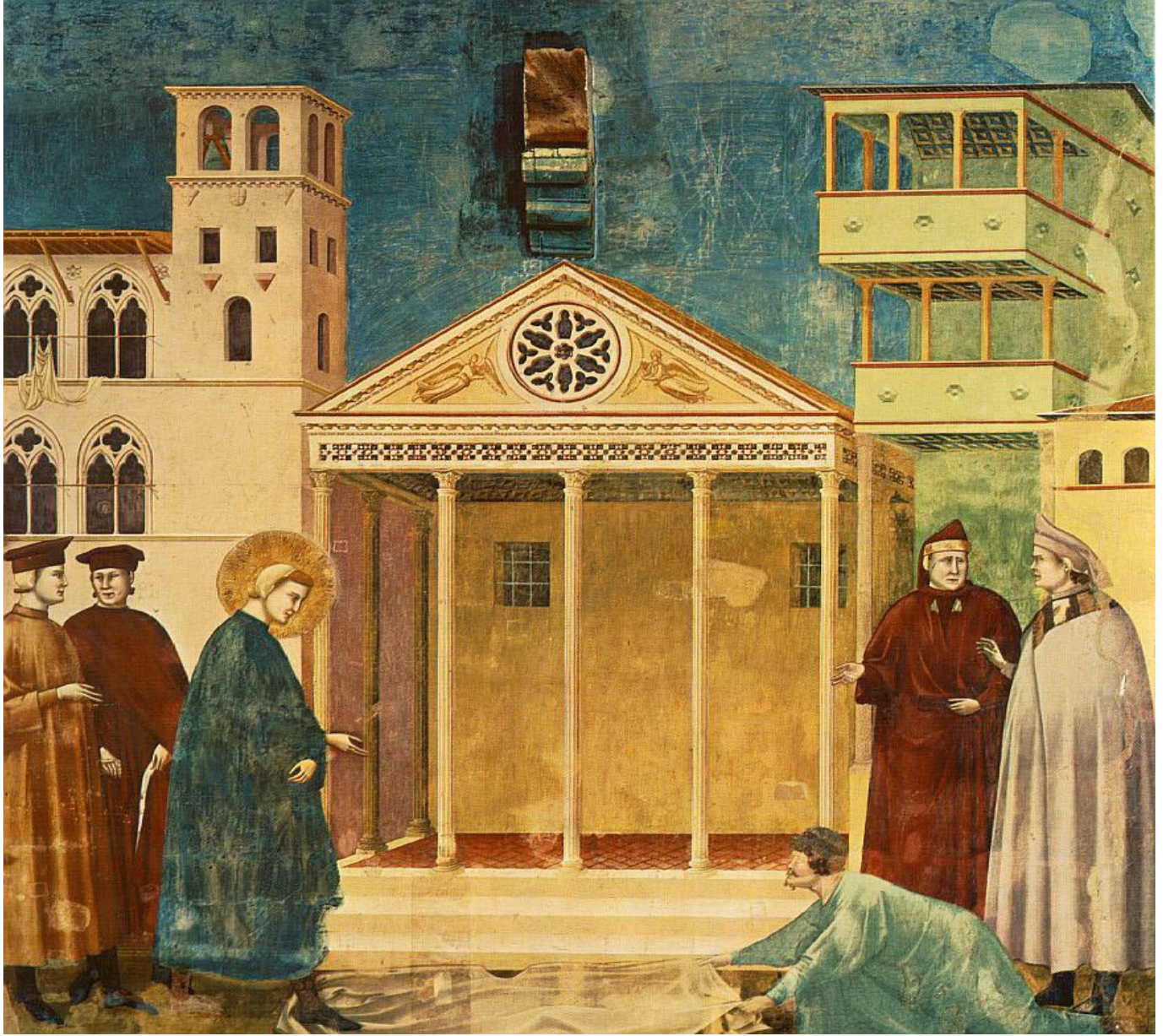
too, alongside this one, on the wall, in the book. *Homage* is an object of history in this gaze which assimilates and flattens and finds the work in a condition of Giotto-ness, an already-read, whose capacity to astonish is no longer present or is held to reside in other facets of its presence. It's my own experience: the supplying of a famous name, the grasp of a gloss, and the moving on. But this eagerness to familiarise the genuinely strange, to erase it before sight, appears to break down with time (but actually only breaks down with learning). The glazing of the visible fades and is displaced by another content, which is literal and prominent in the work. The displacement is metaphysics' subversion. It returns that which is contrary to prominence, and invisible to normal sense.

In this manner, here, attention is prised from the people and the foreground – who are engaged with each other and are presented as detached almost from the rest of the painting – and is claimed by the central porch and the tiered assembly of the buildings. The magnetism of the porch begins to fasten its presence upon the viewer, over and above the people. The porch – a built space without sides - is both a denial and a fullness in the work. It sucks. It has an unexplained barefaced prominence, function, and hollowness that is radiant. It asserts itself by symmetry and intensity as the central image of *Homage*. It competes with the simple man as the object of the gesture of homage in the painting. This gesture is the curious sacramental invitation to *pass across*

that is the laying-down of the sheet on the ground (for the viewer as the simple man to cross over on his journey deep into the picture and the picture's porch?). The ornamental rose above the porch is a hole, and one in the painting, almost, as are the windows surrounding this structure. And these are not as gothic as the truss end in the sky above them, which I can't figure out, probably because I am looking at book images. An intensity of fashioned space looms upon the figures. The direction of dramatic action swings around and takes the eye, busy at first with the exchanges on the line from left and right in the foreground of the painting, to fasten upon the axis between the painting's front and back. I come to the point of this example now. It is the relationship of

the work to metaphysics' and its history. The prompting of the porch and the architecture of the work would be invisible if not looked for. And they would not be looked for if they did not activate another circumambient representation. The contemporary audience of *Homage* understood another coherence outside it. This other image is mediæval metaphysics, the installation of Christ in Plato's space, and it supplies the point of Giotto's (and subsequently, all) painting's visual language and representational potency. It is this other image, semi-traversed within *Homage*, that lifted up all its basic gestures and made them vivacious, and in history still. Giotto's is a picture within a picture, and knows itself as one. To make a distinction: this background picture of space in its Christ-and-Plato form,

which gives to space its art history passion, is not itself metaphysical. The drag it exerts in the picture is. In mediæval life Giotto supplied depth into the demand that existed for it. It is not a drag or depth that can be seen if the background meaning isn't. If this background is invisible the wholeness of *Homage* would sit in a blind spot. Sensing its absence in a sense of repressed heat in the work – which is the clue of depth – and accustomed to living without power, and inclined to trust her sight, the viewer would otherwise recuperate the image. *Homage* would then be strongly visible but unseen. The axis from the viewer to the picture's deep back *and beyond* would not be travelled. Hence: what is metaphysical in Maori?



26. The phenomena we have just discussed belong to the study of resemblance. The traditional study of this – certainly the literary study of this, with its extremely odd preoccupation with parsing the rhetoric of resemblance (metaphor, simile, analogy, metonym, and so on) – is frequently prim, and often humbug, thought. Perhaps the number of terms grows to compensate for the minor nature of the learning each carries. The traditional rhetoric of resemblance does not cope with what Giotto saw and what this discussion is trying to cope with. Metaphysics is badly needed. It is a traditional technique of vision, that is, of understanding resemblance, not in terms of the pairing of piece-parts in an uninspected total oblivious to itself, but of comparing to-

tals themselves. The common term for total is of course world. Metaphysics is the traditional term for the comparison of worlds, or more accurately, the holding of these in superimposition. A more plain language term for this is Wittgenstein's crossing of pictures, again. And a caution, for this or for metaphysics: the term should not lead the mind to see some new blended thing that supersedes its antecedents, the way green and red are lost in brown. Metaphysics' technology of depth relies on seeing both worlds in their crossing, together with the action that sheers in the space between them. It is a seeing-double.

Bridge

27. We seek a like process of high cultural value in Maori, but we're already struggling with a translation in English. Our focus is on something Greek in origin and expression, curiously. But we must increase the depth of view afforded Maori things, and peer at their limits and ambiguous narratives. And we must change the angle of gaze from down to up. Look at Maori through this portal - to find the set of things where works of entertainment are also works of metaphysics. It's where art is.

28. But it's a hopeless project where much is sought, and little can be found but roving sets of unrequited vigilance and expectation. There is likely too much lost audience knowledge and representation for Maori art to have presentness now. Maori art is dead (but its vestiges, translations and successors need not be). That's the case if such an art is a reference to a singular representation revealed in a pure space of entertainment and metaphysics, yielding a performance binding maker and populous audience. How can it be otherwise? How can Maori art be present now if its social context, an already constructed network of comprehension, saturated in a population, struggles to exist? And searching for such art, ignoring the reality that it now lies outside of history, by projecting its continued or possible existence for too long, sets up a pathology. Leaning toward its presumed being, at an angle of 45 degrees just say, may show an unreasonable mourning, that is, a constructive belief in resurrection.



29. For Maori art to exist requires an allusive, energetic simultaneity between artist and audience, in a singularity of signs, exhibiting a sustainable capacity for making and taking pleasure. It is living presence, as in “living tradition”. If it exists you’d know it in New Zealand. It would be in the vicinity. Power would be there. It would have a visibility of textual and other performance. The following is a Victorian image of a past of it. It sets a standard of presentness.

30. Margaret Orbell quotes the first Governor of New Zealand, Sir George Grey, commenting on Maori oratory in the early 19th Century:

“Sir George Grey describes the techniques employed, and the reactions of the audience, in a passage explaining the origins of the songs in his collection. Most of them, he tells us, were initially obtained at great tribal meetings, at which the most effective speeches always consisted mainly of recitations of passages from ancient poems. The orator would begin with a quotation which figuratively but dimly shadowed forth his intentions and opinions: “as he spoke the people were pleased at the beauty of the poetry, and at knowledge of their ancient poets, whilst their ingenuity was excited to endeavour to detect from his figurative language what were his intentions and designs, quotation after quotation as they were rapidly and forcibly chaunted forth, made

his meaning clearer and clearer, curiosity and attention were by degrees riveted upon the speaker, and if his sentiments were in unison with the great mass of his assembly, and he was a man of influence, as each succeeding quotation gradually removed the doubts which hung upon the minds of the attentive group who were seated upon the ground around him, murmur of applause rose after murmur of applause, until at some closing quotation which left no doubt as to his real meaning, the whole assembly gave way to tumults of delight, and applauded equally the determination which he had formed, his poetic knowledge, and his oratorical art, by which under images beautiful to them, he had for so long a time veiled, and at last so manifested his real intentions”.

(Traditional Songs of the Maori, Mervyn McLean and Margaret Orbell, Auckland University Press, 3rd ed 2004, p. 30).

31. Grey describes a past in full cry, and it comes to possess the pathos of the plate detail of a Buller bird. Both are now extinct, implicate the past observer, and lie beyond any contemporary equivalent. The knowing play of cat and mouse/call and response that binds audience and performer in one performance, described above, can be made present again now – it is a feature of a Che Fu or Nesian Mystics concert, for example – or you can see an image of what Grey saw in the brilliance of any MTV awards, say. But the representation at work in the Grey account cannot be made present again. It was a layered, particular population-based pleasure, an X at the heart of the performance. It caused the progressive erosion of all audience doubt. It *commanded* attentiveness.

It was a rapid and forcible presence. It resulted in the ripple of “murmur of applause [arising] after murmur of applause”. It yielded the spell of confirmation made more intense by means of feints and delays in the disclosure of a pattern not once in substantial doubt and never actually shaken. This is the space that I want to say is extinct or only residual now: the content and depth of which was once confirmed by the sounding of it in long-chain probes of genealogical reference to and from a vanishing point of history. The names in that genealogy might still exist. But such a list of names is not that which puts them into history. The listing of the names is the telling of some more important eponymous thing, probably. For example, Giotto, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Judd and any other beauties are not themselves the history they stand for. I don’t know anywhere that says what this other history is, for Maori, convincingly.

32. Grey's portrayal is of an image of oblivion, of the complete absorption of performer and audience in a concord without boundaries; a language game regarded as a world, unconcealed in the cross-section of a lucid moment. In the black and white silence of the Grey account there still appears: conventionality and theatre grasped as nature; dream, as wakefulness; a portrait of happiness; an entertainment set piece porous with metaphysics. And much much later you realise what is glowing beyond the Grey account. It's the description of an Annunciation. I hope he didn't put it there.

33. We will encounter this intensity – great
avidity – again.

34. The first quality set out in the quote above, the narrativisation of performer and audience, is poetics' work. The second quality, the image of oblivion, the spell that blinds, is an aspect of metaphysics'. These are two concentric circles, the latter wider and supplying a distinctive emotion and forgetfulness across the whole. It's the difference between fiction and supreme fiction. Over the course of the twentieth century the area between the two reduced a lot.



35. I don't know why the image of blindness often holds company with a disused Greek word. Maybe because it has always been there, as in Aristotle's bat's eyes reference again. It is caught up in the presence of a rounded world. The key word is rounded, that is, edgeless. You can't get behind it. Blindness: it is a self-awareness, of substitutability and difference of origins, that is missing. In another context Jean Giraudoux finds such a rounded presence to exhibit blindness too. He could have written the following after contemplating Grey's account, or after what I wrote of it before I read:

“Epochs are in accord with themselves only if the crowd comes into these radiant confessionals which are the theatres or the arenas, and as much as possible...to listen to its own confessions of cowardice and sacrifice, of hate and passion. For there is no theatre which is not prophecy. Not this false divination which gives names and dates, but true prophecy, that which reveals to men

these surprising truths: that the living must live, that the living must die, that autumn must follow summer, spring follow winter, that there are four elements, that there is happiness, that there are innumerable miseries, that life is a reality, that it is a dream, that man lives in peace, that man lives on blood; in short, those things they will never know.”

(Quoted in Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”, in Must We Mean What We Say, Cambridge, p. 44)

36. Think about the Grey a lot. Could Grey find what he once saw now? It is doubtful. And doubtful too that there can be a dominant, singular answer now to the question: what is metaphysical in Maori? And it is therefore doubtful that there is a categorical definition of Maori art that's live now. Both lose vital signs dramatically if the habitat that sustains each does too. But the question remains productive. Because it defines a gap, which defines a realisation. The question insists on the necessity of that which now can't be found.



37. By holding to a metaphysical standard we can at least see where this peculiar turnaround in thought, its famous back operation, and even erotics, is absent. Being alert to this absence, knowing what is not at hand in what you see, enables your knowledge of this artefact or that. Otherwise we could accelerate the extinction of that which we most want to survive, by bringing to it a sluggard mind accustomed only to mannerist knowledge. We could fasten upon poor substitutes for art, and hold them up, and be misled. For example, we could call an art a person, by finding the name of an artist associated with some weight of Maori-looking things, and in a dizzying geometric movement, come to rush together everything by that artist, under the name of an unknown art privileged for be-

ing unknown. Or we might adopt Pavlov's stance again and take everything spiral, everything carved and whorled, everything that combines red ochre and black, as Maori art, and in this triumph of reverence over sense know nothing important. And we can inflate unfitting things and make them popular substitutes for metaphysics too. One such is the semi-equation of art and anthropology in which attributes of tribal structure, land possession, regional identity and belonging, personality and its ordinary milestones of growing up come to stand, wrongly, as cornerstones of art knowledge. It turns art into a dull imitative form, at best, and does it for anthropology too. It is the stumbling action that points to the proximity of the sirens of essence once more.

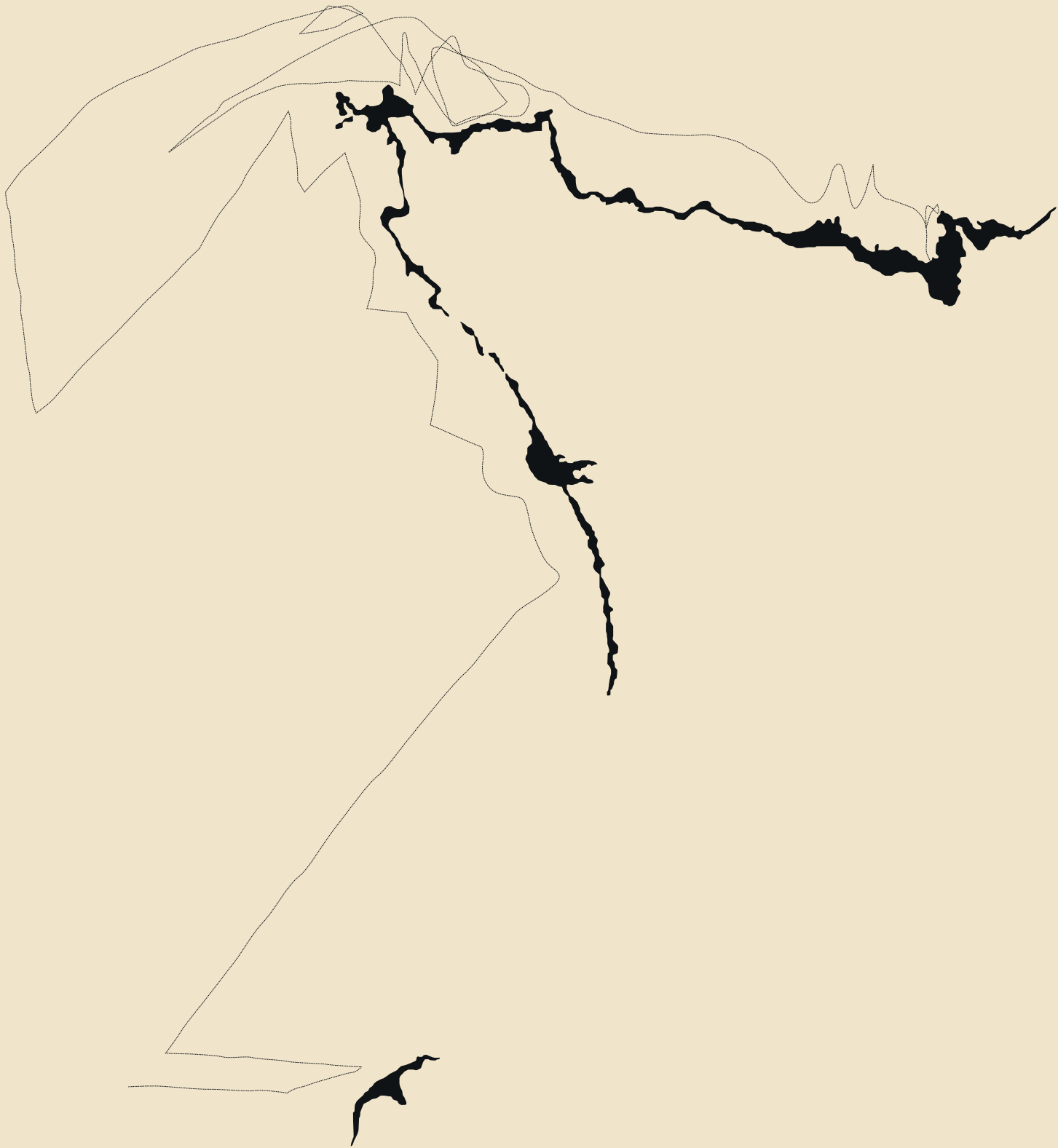
38. Looking for metaphysics' trace through the portal of Maori works should torment and test whatever we consider worthy of time and thought. It raises expectations. 'High' starts hunting. It pushes us toward over-reading (from under-). I remember the dual shock of pleasure and confusion, and then anger, which accompanied my reading of the traditional Maori story *Te Ao Huru*. The shock of pleasure and confusion was the discovery of what seemed a powerful representation of a mix of sex, death, voyeurism and the light of the world. It is a resonant but unfixable traditional story, the more so for me, a white outsider. The anger came when I learned that the university level teaching of this story deemed its weight of cultural value to be its mnemonic worth, with the

story held out to be a kind of oral culture trick to lock in the name of a landmark: that is, that something that so clearly possessed the shimmer of art was taught as a mapmaking adjunct and an argument for a politics of identity.

39. There is another fruitful product of the question. It follows from the sense that what it asks of lies hidden and may not be able to be found, or is extinct. It produces the realisation that therefore there can now be no Maori artists and no Maori art if this is deemed to be a singularity in the domain of signs for a brown maker and a brown audience. It is not possible for there to be an essential Maori being or other appellation certificate that can guarantee the ongoing existence of a past wealth of representation and make it present once more. If the siren claims of essence are rendered dumb then artists who rely on those claims can fall dumb too, and be caught in the act of curious motions. A past high culture does not resurrect itself in bloodline or soil. So there are no in-

siders. There are only outsiders now. If you want to see an argument foundering on the assertion of the privilege of insider status, read Rangihiroa Panoho's well-mannered but Indian rope-trick essay on this (*"Maori – At the Centre, On the Margins"* in *Headlands*, MCA, Sydney, 1992). Artefacts need a history to be made of them, and if they are to sit in art's category they need a history of their metaphysics too, and both histories are not the same thing as their pasts. Whatever's to be made is a new manipulation of materials, to make a new trance of intertextuality, a new realism or capacity for generating experience attributable, not to Maori, but to that which can be made of it through mediation and invention now.

40. Western metaphysics in some trace fetched up on the shores of New Zealand in the 18th century at least, something, a strain of thought, as virulent, invisible, fatal and strange in its impact as the influenza or chicken pox that landed with it. The first European landed here and brought Parmenides-turned-into-Christ-turned-into-Adams Smith – all raging – and diseases.



41. And the last point, and segue: philosophical investigation here may yet yield a distant image of its object. The call may unearth response, not directly from a representational habitat either unknowable or past, but in an image of this, in European records and texts. The shape of the X that looms in the Grey account, looked for, may emerge at the mutual edges of both history and the past, in the upturned mould of its presence in transformational exchange. The inflection or distortion, that was visible in the European tradition as it came in contact with Maori cultural charisma for the first time in 19th century New Zealand, dangles a piece of tell-tale metaphysical string to pull at. It is an echo that sets in train an abstract emotion and yields adoration, pity and fear. It under-

lies the New Zealand song of innocence and experience called Ringatu (below). To Europeans in the last half of the 19th century something strange projected itself onto the screen of something familiar. Possibly a weight and measure of Maori essential thought was brought to the surface in the rippling reverse assimilation seen in hybrid forms of 19th century Christianity.

42. It is the hybrid world in the back of Mr Cotton's pictures.

Great Avidity

- 43.** Consider the following from Judith Binney’s book of greatness, *Redemption Songs*. (Note that “Wharekauri” is the Maori name for the Chatham Islands, which was a 19th century penal colony off the east coast of New Zealand’s South Island, to which Te Kooti – see below – was exiled in June 1866.)

“Walter Christie, who was a guard on Wharekauri in 1867, said that Te Kooti had borrowed his bible and copied out portions of it. The remark suggests (as does Monita Delamere’s narrative) that the text Te Kooti used was an English-language bible. Indeed, the complete Maori bible was published only in 1868. We know that Te Kooti read aloud portions from a ‘large’ English-language book in 1869: it may have been Christie’s bible. It is also thought that Te Kooti owned a little pocket-book of English School Songs, Sacred, Moral, and Descriptive, published in 1859 for use in the day schools; admonitory and self-improving in its tone, it probably derived from his days at the Three Kings Institution. He also owned a volume of which contained together the Anglican-Maori prayer book and psalms of 1859 and the Maori New Testament of 1862. It is possible that he had that volume with him on Wharekauri. Leonard Williams was told that, at first, Te Kooti had refused the Testament offered him when

he was ill but took the prayer book and 'read the psalms from it to himself with great avidity'. Later, Williams also wrote that, during his convalescence, Te Kooti has studied 'imprecatory passages in the Psalter', and this prayer book and Testament contains a few (but not many) annotations in what appears to be Te Kooti's hand, making deletions from the text and emphasising certain passages in the psalms and the scriptures. In Te Kooti's Wharekauri diary there are many passages copied out from the scriptures, both the Old and the New Testament in his diary are close to (but not identical with) those in the 1868 Anglican Maori bible, which suggests that Te Kooti had had access to or had memorised passages from earlier Anglican translations of various sections of the Old Testament, which had been published in three separate parts by 1858. However, the juxtaposition of passages and verses, by which he created his services with their particular emphases, was entirely his own" (pp 66-67)



44. The text is extremely significant to the awakening of Maori metaphysics. Te Kooti is arguably the greatest *New Zealand* figure of meaning given the form and depth of his civil, religious, and cultural incision. He is the kind of figure so abnormal that you enquire, who or what is his ventriloquist? While it is customary to read the above description as the story of a native exile, swayed by the biblical poetry that was to generate a new revolutionary movement and faith, this is not the only view. Te Kooti is equally here swaying the biblical poetry. His is a reverse assimilation. He regards the biblical text as the subaltern one with his “bad” reading and cut-up approach. And it is his “great avidity” that should fasten present thought. “Avidity” is eager and greedy, and that Te Kooti should

have it here is inexplicable. We know that from out of the research quoted above Te Kooti forged the forceful power and language that gave him his historic leadership. But none of this can be explained satisfactorily. His “rebirth” here at Wharekauri as a prophet is enigmatic. Prior to his exile he was a missionary-educated private individual and merchant. But then emerged this “great avidity”. It was an interpretive seizure presenting as a manner of reading. But it was writing that he was doing. His seizure of reading/writing is so obviously strange to Europeans. It is a big shift in normal proportion. There is a touch of madness in it. It is a disproportion that marks the effect of power but the origin of this is obscured. It is derived from an encounter, clearly enough,

but what is being encountered? One option is that the biblical was the spark that ignited Te Kooti's vision and spirit in his then exile setting, which produced a burden of oppression and lamentation, and which made of him a powerful reagent. This suggests that the encounter is between a person disposed by stress to revelation, on one side, and a European sacred text. But another option might be that the biblical was colliding with something characteristic of, and essential to, Te Kooti's cultural existence – which pre-existed the encounter and became present in it such that there occurred a colliding of metaphysical systems at Wharekauri – the resulting fission of which ballooned and split the country. In this version, we might say, there was a collision of two strange texts,

each familiar, but not to the other – with one being amenable to European historical records and the other not, and only detectable there, if at all, by inference. The second interpretation may be more satisfying since it is less intuitively correct to judge Te Kooti as culturally unimprinted. The view begs the question, what is this native text that the Bible encountered through Te Kooti?

45. Thus thinking metaphysically: there is a reference by Martin Heidegger to the difference between origins and beginnings, and it can be set alongside the obscurity or oblivion that lies in this *great avidity*, which we do not understand, in Te Kooti's prophetic beginning:

“ In fact the history of Western thought begins, not by thinking what is most thought-provoking, but by letting it remain forgotten. Western thought thus begins with an omission, perhaps even a failure. So it seems, as long as we regard oblivion only as a deficiency, something negative. Besides, we do not get on the right course here if we pass over an essential distinction. The beginning of Western thought is not the same as its origin.

The beginning is, rather, the veil that conceals the origin—indeed an unavoidable veil. If that is the situation, then oblivion shows itself in a different light. The origin keeps itself concealed in the beginning.”

(p. 152, Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking, Harper Perennial).

46. For “Western” in the above, substitute *Ringatu*, the religion founded by Te Kooti. We have little knowledge of the origin of Ringatu but know by the great avidity present at its beginning that there is one.

47. What is great avidity in reading? What is reading when it behaves greedily, when it moves over the face of the page in an uncommonly eager and desirous way? In the description above one does not picture Te Kooti going about his research calmed and confined by the pages before him. His is a different relationship with the books that he has sent for and gathered urgently. There is a disproportion, once more. We say the reader is gripped. He reads with a peculiar temper, with an intensity and gathering in of all there is, but impatiently, immoderately. Time may be confused. There is a hurrying, and something both thoughtful and thoughtless happens. It is as though the texts including the “imprecatory passages of the Psalter” are asynchronous and display

themselves as layers, over-read texts, hypertexts, such that the reader's gaze is filled with re-and de-contextualised words and phrases that clamour. Sentences cannot calm this property and cannot do their normal work of ushering the compliant reader across the page, cannot impose their normal marshalling. They cannot flatten and smooth an attention that is here sped, there arrested, everywhere *distracted*. The text is not read but watched. This avidity: it is as a magnifying glass held in some motion and distance over the page that tears the text and lifts the font size under it. It is the fixing effect of subtle seizures. The reader is on the verge of a powerful meaning, is almost there, where incomprehension is speeding towards release but some key yet remains missing. There is a crossing of pictures about it. Something other than what lies on the page appears to one side of what lies on the page. And what this other something is, as in the example above, is unknown. And the two together can gain the mind-altering complexity that we associate at the crossover of entertainment and metaphysics.

48. I have used the following quote before, as an example of this complexity. I think it shows a mesmerising cultural fusion, in a cadence: of disruption, authority – submission? – that lacks precedent and is arresting.

“The name of the woman taken in adultery was Herita.

The blind man whose eyes were anointed with clay was
Tapaineho.

The fig tree that was cursed was Hiona.

Naboth’s vineyard belonged to Tapupera

The woman whose case was the commencement of
Solomon’s

Wisdom were Hanutu the mother of the living and Perira
the mother of the dead child.

The woman who anointed Christ's feet with oil was Ripini.

The name of the paralytic who was let down through the roof of the house was Keremete.

The blind man brought unto Jesus by Hepama (?) was Pairoroku.

The young man whom Jesus told to give all his goods unto the poor was Heretiera (Zalthiel?).

The one who went into a far country was Arepanora (Arepanara).

The rich man's name was Paroa (?), Lazarus, Israel."

(Turnbull Library translation of longhand text from a Chatham Islands notebook "believed to have been dictated by the notorious Te Kooti". Quoted in Ross, Te Kooti, Collins, 1966)

49. Again, it is a crossing of pictures, this collision of representational systems that seems an origin of this avidity. And the above chain is a crucial double helix of New Zealand cultural DNA: with its twisting and incompleteness but formal balance; its extreme poise and openness; with the sense that it is part of a much longer or wider translation; its equal measure of speculative and certain pronouncement, public address and private soliloquy; and with its ambiguous mixing of past, present and future time. It is a complex mark of the intertwining of two metaphysical streams of code, in this case, each genealogy extracting abstract resemblance from the other.

50. *"The name of the woman taken in adultery was Herita."* There it is. Pay attention to it for a long time. Labour it. Do not be quick to pass over it and do not let your thoughts be kept entire. Put yourself in a position to be troubled. It is the helix word-picture again: there came a new leading role into the arms of something Western and metaphysical, and a new spiral of dance steps you still don't know about, and neither do you know who it was that led that dance and hummed in it. The experience you have is the experience of transport, that is, of being taken away from where you thought and made to wonder. To use another word-picture: you have seen an eclipse of the sun but you don't know which planet is crossing it. You have picked up a new cadence of disruption, authority, and submission in a disturbance to tradition's picture. Who were or are Herita, Tapaineho, Hiona, and why are they solemnised, and roll-called with counterparts in the biblical text? Are they Maori names or names in a new language? Another has taken control of the microphone.

51. This *creole* moment is the most important in the country's art history. Politics, conflict, translation are part of its moment but they do not give it its art history importance. The art history importance comes from grace and complexity of sense. It is where something brown came to stand in a particular relationship with something Western. Something unfamiliar to Europeans became bound to something with which we are very familiar, *and took it over*. But it is not hostile per se, this new thing that stepped into the field. We do not experience negation of that with which we are familiar, but are calmed and charmed by a new actor which takes what is a high culture narrative for us to disrupt it, overlay it with an apocrypha, make it encounter a new authority and in this time accord it reverence and to take up a posture of submission before it. In short, to ravish it. The Bible was thus abstracted in a fascinating call and response.

52. What are the features of this creole (Ringatu) art that began in the 19th Century? Here's not the place to describe a new expressive language. It was convincing new work, where one culture, Maori, assimilated English and created a new representation out of "bad" copies of it. The movement was a crossing of metaphysical pictures. It spliced Maori and English to make a new ambience of experienced signs in a medium.

53. This is the lode behind Mr Cotton's pictures. It is the veil of an oblivion that needs to be seen in Heidegger's light, the main features of an emergence that still conceals what drove it.

54. My point is that we have some attunement to the West's metaphysical legacy, even filtered through the complex translations of Christianity. Our peripheral vision is loaded up. We are aware that we are aware of metaphysics' immense trace. But we have no grasp yet of the equivalent that rose and flowed through Te Kooti to both meet and subsume one of our masterpieces to produce great avidity. But there was such a counter weight. We know the West's call in its traditional depth but not the Maori response except that there was one. We simply see in our history that there is a second origin behind one of the country's most distinctive cultural heritages, know it as obscured, and only know how to adopt its look not relay its masterpieces.



S.W.G.

Mr Cotton's Pictures

55. It's been a long way round: so how do we find the Cottons?

56. Brought to bad temper by the exhibition book dust jacket:

“ (Cotton) ...is one of Aotearoa New Zealand's leading contemporary painters...(who)...has helped redefine the nature of contemporary Maori artistic practice. Dealing with issues of land, spirit and identity – and focussing on historical and contemporary exchanges between Maori and Pakeha – his work has also contributed to ongoing debate about post-colonial New Zealand identity.”

(Liner notes, “Shane Cotton”, exhibition publication).

“Artistic practice...issues...ongoing debate...post-colonial...identity: none of this fudge satisfies our epic mood.

57. I dunno about this painting, mate. Until the last works, it paralyses me.



58. Cotton's strategy is an attempted adoption of the Ringatu one, the crossing of Christianity's picture with a native picture. It is the attempted fusion of Maori signs with a narrative medium that belongs to a high culture of the West. The first picture Cotton crosses is Christianity's artform, *painting*, the ways and means of it, which installs a revelation-sensitive subject in a theatre of visions.

59. There is much evidence of *painting* in Mr Cotton's pictures, the European familiar, before which one can relax and take up the reverent stance communicated by its presence. You can compose yourself readily in revelation's medium. The detail and tableaux excite. So does the layering of surfaces and effects of illumination. There is the sense that the picture plane has depth that you can peer into in the customary manner. The key moment of mediæval art's wonder – what lies behind the representation? – falls gently upon the viewer. The wealth in colours, the sensuous bodies of the blacks, say, attract, and light shines out of their wealth and/or upon it. The intricacies of visual incident cause one to marvel at the painter's skill, too. The dynamics of viewing distance

change: required as one first retreats to grasp the work as a whole and then moves up close to decipher its often-minute incidents – writing, and other drawings, say. Further, the visual styles of the painting, a fusion of figurative and abstract, foreground the medium's exertion. There is no difficulty taking up the posture of painting's supplicant viewer here.

TE INOI A TE ATUA

E T O M A T O U M A T U A I T E R A N G O C R I A T A P U T O U
 M E A T I A T A U E P A I A I K I R U N G A K E I T E W H E N Y A
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 K I M I S T C K A W C K I W R A K E A W A I A E N C A L I W H
 A R G T R O T A N G T E K A A A M E T E
 E T S M E Y C M T U I T O T O K K O K O C I A



2 Lord's Prayers ABOVE, 1 BELOW.

KIA MEATIA TAU E PAI AI
 KI RUNGA M TE WHEHYA
 KIA RITE ANO KI TO TE RANGI

HOMAI KIA MATOU AIANATI
 HE TARE MA MATOU MA TUUM PA
 MURUA E MATOU HAKA
 ME MATOU KOI I HAKA KEI

I O TE RANGI TE HAKA ANO
 KI E M AYO

AND HOMI MAHEU RORANGA IHO
 ENCARI WRAKI OR PACOM H A T A U

TE KOU
 KAI PEKI TO RANGI IHO
 TO KOUA
 TO KOUA

A K I E
 A K I E



A K I E

60. But the limit with Cotton, the source of a peculiar lack that commonly holds throughout until the last diptyches painted for the survey is that the second picture of this creole crossing, Cotton's portrayal of a Maori world, is metaphysically inert and rarely strives to create a transformation of the first. The result's too thin. It lacks a depth. It lacks a reverse assimilation. It turns Maori objects into quasi signs. They – white horses, Maori language words, portrayals of coasts, Maori patterns, carved figures and ghostly ones - are not brought seamlessly into painting as representations with their origins or conventions evident around them. They are not performed and are not made to resound. They are depictions of denatured objects. And so the strategy of the work stops short

of producing complexity as both the painting and the Maoriness are held in intransitive confusion. The work seems to go somewhere but doesn't. Cotton's Maori things are frequently not deeply performed. They are held in clusters. They lack a present continuous form. The representation here preserves a reified image of Maori, and plays sidekick to a prevailing and culturally *correct* view that there is a past essence of Maori life, and that some mouth-to-mouth of cultural work applied to its mummified forms will resurrect it. But we've discussed that. It's a blind alley and a dusty kiss. As a result of this misplaced concreteness, of taking a thing separated from that which makes it a concept, Cotton makes of his painting a kauri gum in which Maori things get stuck. There is a pathos and

enigmatic power about this work as a result, reminiscent of the feelings engendered by comic book or Hollywood representations of voodoo. But like voodoo dolls Cotton's Maori-looking things are metonymically restricted. The things they stand for are few. They're space litter. They are wafers of the Other and capture attention as such for a brief moment and then they are nothing. They are unfathomable not because they are held in a great depth but because they fall away into nothing. Cotton is very popular because he makes of painting a museum cabinet containing objects posed in this flat manner of popular fascination. Therefore the whole is often painting stopped short of being art. There is too little of crossing – hybridisation- of pictures because the mutuality of disturbance, the bending and commuting, the forwards and backwards translation that occurs in this idea is missing. Without this resolution the attempted lay-up of codes produces something vague. For the time that this limit applies the paintings, which are generally attractive, make one point, again and again, and are one-liners even.

61. Think of the vibrancy Grey saw and hold it against the Cotton's.

62. How do Cotton's Maori signs extract plasticity from painting and transform it, as Te Kooti bent and reshaped the Biblical text and transformed that? How do they not talk past and over the viewer, issuing from out of their own language to take authorial control, exert realism, and make evident the conventions by which their representations can be interpreted? Instead of reviving Maori content Cotton leaves it in a bare nostalgic state. He leads the eye to see Maori things in painting, not an altered experience of Europe's medium in Maori. He doesn't transform language. To switch this way Cotton would have to invent and interpret substantially, as mentioned, to reverse-assimilate, to court paradox and re-present a Maori theatre possessing all of the realism

of an essence; envision it, and in doing that allow himself to go behind cultural artefacts so that they do not sit out of time and out of place and do resume their status as verbs again. He needs to lift the range and weight of their exertions upon meaning, extract their secrets and background, in short propose for them a history and in this manner represent his second language as reburdened with its metaphysical working so that it can then have its ordinary life back. Not to do this is to leave his pictures as a more dismissible encounter in the blank brown and white faces of *homo correctus*. It is entering the ethnographic moment of work *from Te Kooti's side*, to seize Europe's high culture with a great avidity and reverse-engineer painting itself to the needs of a realism and force of Maori representation. But at present he is on the white visitor's side of the beach where these two world's meet, trying to reverse-engineer a thin and sensational realism of Maori through a weight of painting.

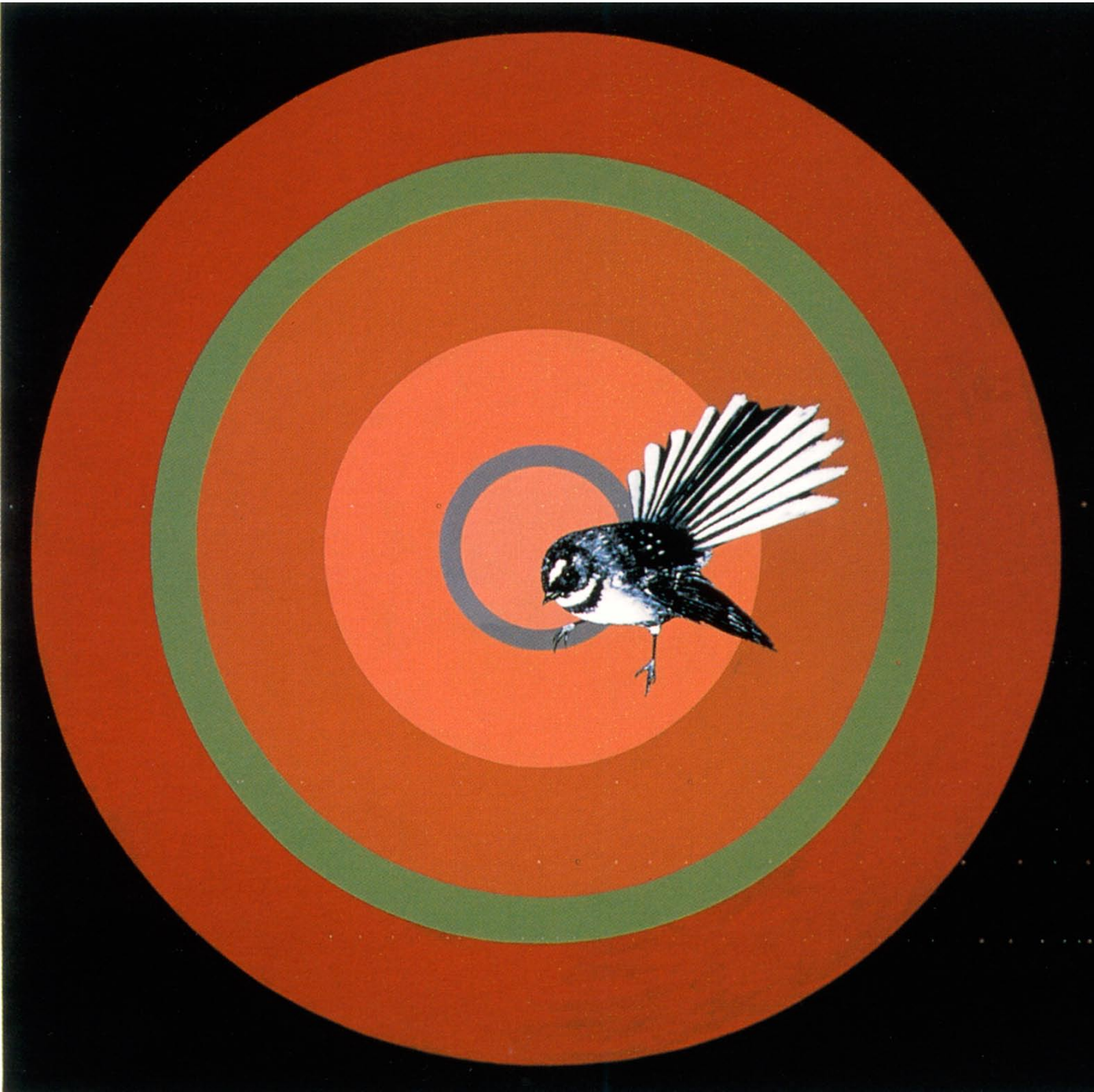


63. The problem lies with the compositional strategy of the work. Its placing of components, in banding and other sectioning devices, limits it. It is not a comprehensive representation. Composition in Cotton tends to be a method of achieving a distribution of images. It's more a cabinetry and less an argument. As a compositional strategy it attains a certain meaning, but not more than that. It's a graphic distribution device, mostly. It is the main reason the Cotton's *go native*, only so far, and then become idea-checked. I could bring many examples of art that drives composition as an idea to exemplify this lack in Cotton. But one we all know will do: Cotton's compositions are not load bearing structures, building bridges, gates, necessary protections, walks, songs, jumps,

blinds, panels. It's why McCahon, a New Zealand painter, said somewhere that there has to be another layer in the work if it is to "tick over" (and did not say, another incident). There is an essay in these words "tick over". The words are NZ idiom for a car engine - a reciprocating one - running. This is that essay. Any visual art connects weakly with its idea if its structure is just a butler for the distribution of pieces, and does not itself carry a weight of representation - reciprocation - or is not itself the back of the work.



64. It is no glory to New Zealand's bicultural piety at present that Cotton's current efforts are greatly celebrated. The cultural encounter depicted has been at a similar liberal *confirming* rapture and telling over-enthusiasm for 150 years, sort of. It is a wall that looks like a window, a contact study with an ancestral link to tourism where Maori supreme fictions are repressed as silenced and unseen. Suffocated, distraught, and in oblivion. We learned how to do this at least in the 1890s. We're all over it. We got what we called forth and it bloomed so vigorously it choked what was on offer.





My Dinner With Freddy

65. *You sound like a stereotype. A classic music lover dismissing hip-hop with an air of knowledge. Your response is just incommensurate with the work. You want an opening up in the space of the painting. Notice what is denying that opening up, that contradiction in the work that you call the crossing of pictures. There is so a second comprehensive thinking in the work but it just cuts across what you want. It lies in a space between dream and abstraction. That's where all the blacks and the apposition of images come from, an underworld you don't know about or want to know about. And the Cotton composition is thoughtful and effective. His compartments give you silhouettes, edges, the backlighting of metaphor at least that you look for. Look at the repeated idea of the coastal margin, the beach, in the work. See how it casts its general idea of contact over the whole. Take "Convertible". That's pretty successful. It says what it does and does what it says. It puts a name on the switching that goes on in the painting, between the pictures in the picture, the ones in that, and you. Your comments: it is either an absence of metaphysics in the Cottons, this world quality as a whole, or*

an absence in your grasp of it as a viewer. Yours is an interpretive problem for the artist in this bicultural work, which is not a representation of a private language with arbitrary marks or images. It is just a second language to the white viewer. Cotton is trying to teach – surface – an emotion called Maori through feelings – pieces of imagery – called Maori. The viewer has to actively seek to extract a world from a representation that includes visual objects.

66. I get feelings. Some of the works I fear and some I just turn my back on as ethnic wallpaper. Take *He Pukupuku*. It spills its guts and rises over me. A big-production-and-no-story.

67. “Go, whitey...”

68. You can't just discount my reaction, or elevate it as a proof that the painting is doing its job surfacing the other and alienating the viewer. That might be fair of some works. My disquiet's with monotonous vision. It leaves me in the position of a visitor to a museum looking at artefacts. You stand there with wonder that can't connect with meaning apart from the meaning that it can't connect. You say, "Oh wow" and move on to the next one, times over. It is like your reaction to a circus contortionist, this sensation of "oh wow". You try to find a way past that, in the museum. "It's carving", you tell yourself, "and so is that, and that". It's a mostly meaningless face-off. You see emblems unable to become signs for you without some metaphysical traction to do with what these things are totalised by. So you end up thinking, they're sacred, which is like saying, "Oh wow".

69. *“There can be no metaphysics for you in the way you want. It’s different now. There’s no essential Maori experience for you to gain access to. It’s shattered. Too much change in representation’s market, to the supply side and the demand side, the push and the pull of it. The Maori world’s moved on. Its objects perform differently now. They’re like dolls, these things – images, place names, emblems, all on the same level as basketballs – for whom everybody who encounters them is a stranger, brown or white. They have no history just a past. There is very little presentness of their past. What is present with them is their context of failed memory. You get given what they leave behind. So you are not going to get the classic holy you want. Just holey. And that is the Cotton compositional strategy restated too.*”

70. Here's what I say to that. It's a *correct* scepticism, and leaves any artist stranded as only a skilled acrobat of empty astuteness. I don't care about the water table height in metaphysic's well, at hand for Cotton to draw on, but the depth of the old well he fashions and how he fills it. Cotton, like us, is confronted by the tailing echo of some otherness that is outside his cultural system, which he has set himself to interpret. This effort of translation is the same as the one that occurred in Te Kooti's reading of biblical texts. There, Te Kooti was mesmerised at the glossalalia in the pressure of two languages. And he was oblivious to two oppressive fictions. One was the oppressive fiction of Maori as some essential thing. It was not a representation before him. That confusing mirror came later. He bypassed the oppressive fiction of biblical accuracy too. There was no guiding representation of that active for him either. That is, Te Kooti was not *correct*, I suppose, or more specifically, he was unselfconsciously incorrect. His racial performance was not a rite in the funeral of a denatured culture but a rite in the wedding of a re-natured one.

We need to go wide for this, Freddy. It's been a long speech and there's more. If you can get past the claustrophobic correctness that dooms any "bi-cultural" discussion, past the enclave discourse surrounding Cotton's work, there emerges the real action, which is Modernism's strategy (it will do for now) and it's about 800 years old. That is, the crossing of the picture that art history provides with a contemporary one. Cottons' are works in art history. Their NZ bicultural look is just the clothing of this. Having launched his career on an echo of Ringatu Modernism he struggles to re-present the heart of that, which is a gracious blasphemy, cutting both ways to brown and white.

71. *"You shouldn't overplay Ringatu work, Tonto. It's folk art, made quickly by untrained, displaced fundamentalists who were moving quickly, agog at new things and giving it a go. It is a kind of Mormonism in the culture, but without the smooth. Don't look there for the presence of the classical that you hunt."*

72. This folk art label is a knee-jerk and shuts off thinking. It's a placeholder, like the "decorative art" that you speak of when you don't have the term you need. I *can't* overplay Ringatu's avant-garde. Enough. I want to change examples. Take Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as a case of bicultural art – both – and compare his strategy with Cotton's. The idea appears to be intertextuality and how to do it. But it's really ordinary life. Pound wanted to put occidental and oriental cultural heroes and heroism in his work. He represented this material extensively but didn't leave his Greek and Chinese in a condition of claustrophobia. They were second language things but not as husks and emblems for whatever enigma they might introduce. He historicised European reference points for his *Cantos*, and did it too for Chinese. He made them actors in an old/new play, one very similar to what Giotto saw. Pound teased the mixed material into his text, *translated it*, in effect, through slow cycles of device repetition. Quotation offered Pound differences of graphic and sound texture but Pound does not quote. He translates, again. Foreign texts sup-

plied beings, both actors and a theatre. Pound worked them into his own coherent fiction. Cultural histories were brought into his text and made present. It was part of a wider strategy. It is as though their histories did not lie in the past but in a future toward which the Cantos was drawn. In the play of this present/past/future there is a mutuality of experience between performer and audience where interpretation is liberated. These features help to create the great space that is in the Cantos. Remember this sense of space. I come back to it. The Cantos is space-filled because it dissolves customary boundaries: (again) between past, present, and future; between first and second languages; between reading and writing; between the classical being of timeless things and the life experiences of the imprisoned poet outside Pisa in 1944; (through repetition) between parts of the poem; and between static and dynamic constructs (see *periplum* below). And this great theatre is more itself, is more a region, has greater realism, and is more startling and cunning, because it is an environment that is scaled off details

operating in it like tracer fire. There is the detail of idiom's rapid shifts. There is detail in the switching completion and incompleteness of thought and perception. More broadly, it is in the bits and bit-rate of the writing. And there is a detail of personification, in particular.

73. Pound personifies his classic content to increase its realism and to make it present. The idea's common, the execution isn't. He attaches a tone to this content and causes it to generate eye contact. His classic figures exist in the sensual present of an encounter now. They are *suave; quiet, not scornful; subtle; undying, luminous, and transparent*; they touch lightly (*'there came'; 'without anger'; 'careless or unaware'*). It is the same device that grants Aphrodite her peripheral visibility (below). It's an intimately constructed reality-effect. And reinforcing this effect, the text makes it's Greek and Chinese ancestors almost literally (that is, figuratively, and figuratively) look out from within its niches. Pound used many references to eyes, to further dramatise the presence of a classic second-culture past.

74. And lastly the Cantos' great space and detail is a representation in motion. The Cantos' events occur in a history understood as a process, in which Pound's Odysseus-figure either circumnavigates or is circumnavigated (in a great *periplum*). It's a compositional device that gives the narrative dynamic of the poem.

75. You can see and hear some of the above things in:

“To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour
of

stars.

The suave eyes, quiet, not scornful,

rain also is of the process.

What you depart from is not the way

And olive tree blown white in the wind

Washed in the Kiang and Han

What whiteness will you add to this whiteness,

What candour ?

‘The great periplum brings in the stars to our shore.’

You who have passed the pillars and outward from
Herakles...

If the suave air give way to scirocco

NO MAN NO MAN ? Odysseus

The name of my family.

The wind also is of the process...

night green of his pupil, as grape flesh and sea wave

undying luminous and translucent..

Olivi

that which gleams and then does not gleam

as the leaf turns in the air"

76. There's the merging of suave eyes and wind; and the night green of Odysseus' pupil resembling olives, peeping from beneath the whiter underside of leaves, upturned by wind, intermittently. And these abstracted, recurring eyes in the Cantos morph too, into the eyes of Aphrodite as, in one part, pictured by Botticelli. Venus is only made present as the implication of the features around her:

"As by Terracina rose from the sea

Zephyr behind her...

and the Pleiades set in her mirror..."

(Canto LXXIV)

77. *I thought this was a conversation, and about some bicultural paintings. I sense where you are going, linking an art of painting and one of writing by comparing and contrasting their strategies of representation. But I am left with the feeling that each medium is too different to do that. That the co-presentation ignores some differences, which might make all the difference.*

78. For now I am assuming that each is a language and a language of a language and each represents in a way that can be compared. I don't speak of the limits of this approach. I have no need to think about it now or here but I have doodled about it somewhere else. The main thing is to reach back to the sense of the vivid normal supplied by metaphysics' inert gas, in the present case, in literary representation. There is a sentence by Stanley Cavell that sort of fits:

“...my sense that in appealing from philosophy to, for example, literature, I am not seeking illustrations for truths philosophy already knows, but illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped – as though an essential part of its task must work behind its back”.

(Preface to updated, Must We Mean What We Say, 2002)

79. *“You just want to bring Pound’s or Odysseus’ or Aphrodite’s eyes into the Gallery, to present them all, and Pisa or Dioce, the Kiang or Han rivers, in their common ground, and in silent company, to make a marae with the Cottons...”*

80. ...that rarely liberate the viewer's interpretive skills because these paintings have abundantly stocked surfaces but a vision which goes to monotony. They foreclose representation's life-giving means. As a consequence, they hollow out its ability to regenerate a picture of depth in Maori things. I said to remember the sense of great space in Pound. The traditional name for great space in the West is world. And *world* is one of metaphysics' principal representations. As is *presence*. It takes Pound's fibrillated text to create the reality effect we know and recognise in it. So metaphysics is the name that allows us to bring into discussion the roundness and depth of presence that you get when many of its neuronal aspects – time, space, depth, history, language, theatre, memory, world, – are firing. It is the charge that supplies representation's being. And it is the word that helps us to know the tremendous thing that's missing when this doesn't happen.

- 81.** *“So why write on the Cottons if they piss you off so much? And why come here to this seminar in the Auckland City Art Gallery?”*
- 82.** Partly because I was invited to, partly because the seven most recent two-panel paintings in the show caught my attention, a lot. To me they're good Ringatu, and Modernist, and therefore traditional, artworks. And partly I wanted to bring Te Rongopai Marae's interpretive richness to mind once more, for four reasons; to also escape the English; to get beyond the dull debate that reifies identity; to feel once more that rare swishing of air that you get in the presence of Maori metaphysics; and to push the Cotton's likewise. In the Cotton diptyches the cacophony of Maori emblems withers away across their sequence of 7 paintings and comes to be concentrated in the image of birds. It is a powerful transference and reduction that makes these painted creatures strange and rich. More so, you might think, because they sit in space with paint-by-number pictures of dried human heads. But these heads do less to contextualise

the birds than the large concentric painted circles do. These circles thrum. They foreground painting's three dimensioned illusion of expansion and contraction through the picture plane. Two visible mysteries are placed beside each other in a balance in these works, the birds and the concentric circles, as signs or carriers of brown and white metaphysics. *Metaphysics* because both images stand in a relationship to depth of beings. Each has histories. Each comes into the viewer's experience in the guise of a medium. So far so good, but the viewer is not yet as implicated as he or she will be when it comes to be seen that the paintings are full of beady eyes that look back at you: that the birds too are turned to us in an aspect of painting. The large painted circles extract an echo from the alert points in the heads of birds, or the other way round. There begins to intrude an ambiguity of figure and ground. And the last point: these are pictures of innocence and experience.

83. Go back to the Ringatu tradition referred to above, and the dance idea again, where there came a new leading role into the arms of a dangerous Western and metaphysical partner. This new leading role was unknown then by whites and unknown by most now. And shift forward to the present time, here, at the end of this talk: it's a feeling that you get Freddy – when you pull out of the parking lot and point the skinny-wheeled Plymouth down the Pacific Highway to some cheap Santa Monica hotel two blocks back from anything that might overlook the sea – that a culture dies soon after its supreme representation shatters. Soon after it ceases to be able to generate the renewal of it, a renewal of “the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself”. In these reduced circumstances such a culture can come to be gruesomely adored for its capacity to generate an eeriness of space litter.

September 2004

(1) A version of this paper was given at a Shane Cotton seminar held at the Auckland City Art Gallery July 2004.

Photographs of kowhaiwhai paintings are from the National Museum.

All Cotton painting images are photographed by Norman Heke, from "Shane Cotton", the catalogue of the City Gallery exhibition "Shane Cotton: Survey 1993–2003" published by Victoria University Press.