

“It’s Hard to Keep Track”:
Mapping a Shifting Nation in Dylan
Horrocks’s Hicksville

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In loving memory of my parents, Chris and Mark Clayton

Hamish Clayton, April 2009

Note

In accordance with MLA conventions, this thesis comes with a “Works Cited” rather than a bibliography. Hence only works which have been referred to directly have been included. Important articles such as Wystan Curnow’s “Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles”, for instance, that were read but not used directly have therefore not been acknowledged. In saying that, a minor liberty has been taken with MLA’s preferred layout; in order to best accommodate illustrations and colour reproductions, paragraphs have not been indented but are separated by a spare line. Note also that Hicksville, Atlas, and Pickle are not paginated; all parenthetical references to these are to chapters, where possible, or to the primary text itself.

Abstract

Using an art form that justifiably lays claim to both visual and literary genealogies—the graphic novel—Dylan Horrocks’s Hicksville advances, rather than strictly challenges, many of the discussions which have informed the local manufacture of art and literature. My purpose in this thesis is to explore Horrocks’s deployment of the critical perspectives of both art historical and literary discourse as they have developed from the pre-colonial to the twenty-first century in New Zealand, especially those associated with cultural nationalism.

Hicksville claims a particular relation to the existing traditions within both art-historical and literary lines wherein they are conjoined in practice; integrated into the formal properties of Horrocks’s work, the traditional concerns of local art and literature are not only subject matter but guide Horrocks’s approach to narrative. The tension between art and place—the responsibility of the artist to the nation and its referents—appears in Hicksville as a structuring device rather than polemic via its concern with the economisation of art—or global capitalism—as it bears upon particular places and art practices. Yet Horrocks’s handling of this theme upholds neither aestheticism nor populism. Rather, he invites the reader to make sense of extensive references to a range of artistic figures, from Heaphy to Hergé to Hotere, in a way that accounts for their equal force. Hicksville thus deliberately destabilises the joint histories of art and literary history to pointed effect, valuing its range of artistic and cultural inheritances—whether the visual or literary, the highbrow or lowbrow—for how they can remind us that contemporary artistic accounts of New Zealand must also consider the various ways the country has been constructed throughout its wider cultural history.

Introduction: Local and Special

At the time of writing, February 2009, Dylan Horrocks seems, curiously, everywhere and nowhere; in the eleven years since his graphic novel Hicksville first appeared (published initially by Black Eye Books in 1998, but reprinted in 2001 by Drawn and Quarterly), Horrocks has become a significant local presence via exhibitions and publications at the centre of mainstream critical attention. Included in Wellington's City Gallery show, Small World, Big Town: Contemporary Art from Te Papa, he also designed the exhibition's catalogue cover (Horrocks, "CV"), while his critical acumen was announced in his contribution to the Mark Williams-edited Writing at the Edge of the Universe, a collection gathering the views of a range of significant critics and writers. The more recent collections Are Angels OK?, edited by Paul Callaghan and Bill Manhire (whose cover was graced by another Horrocks-designed strip), and Look This Way, edited by

Sally Blundell, both included critiques by Horrocks, significantly written in comic-strip rather than essay form. Yet while Horrocks has been well-represented in recent anthologies, Hicksville, and its associated comic books, Pickle and Atlas, remain relatively obscure works passing below the radar of the general literary readership. Pickle and Atlas remain rarities in bookshops, while Hicksville is currently out of print.

While critical attention to Hicksville has been sparse, it is not surprising that the beginnings of such critique have already proven significant and notable. Sam Lister won the 2007 JNZL Prize for New Zealand Literary Studies with his essay, “Playgrounds, Gardens, Communities, Worlds: Dylan Horrocks’s Hicksville”, published in the Journal of New Zealand Literature, while Gregory O’Brien’s lecture, “Where the Alphabet Ends”, delivered as part of the Small World, Big Town exhibition, but doubling as a eulogy for the recently deceased Janet Frame, drew significantly from Hicksville. O’Brien observed, for instance, that the high incidence of tea-drinking and an associated distrust of coffee in Hicksville spoke both to Horrocks’s insulations of the local from globalising culture, and also to a fond regard for the quaintness of fading yet enduring domestic customs. “With its tinge of Old-New Zealandism and provincialism,” for O’Brien, “tea drinking can be thought of as a last stand against the encroachment of the international coffee-café culture” (“Lecture”). While Hicksville’s tea motif neatly summarises how the local presents itself in the face of the global, it also offers O’Brien a productive link between Horrocks and Frame: “Between Hicksville and Parihaka and Frame’s small town of Puamahara [. . .] I imagine a river of tea flowing through this country” (“Lecture”).

The connection O’Brien makes between Horrocks and Frame is a resonant one. Frame’s wider status as a literary and national icon is reflected in Horrocks’s observation that “the

image of the older Frame as presented in the movie [An Angel at My Table by Jane Campion] was a part of the inspiration for [his character] Mrs. Hicks” (“Lecture”). While Frame, seemingly entrenched in the local cultural landscape has indeed become a symbol of that landscape itself, throughout Hicksville, the terrain of local culture, encompassing not only letters but also fine art, is surveyed and boldly refigured. Horrocks’s small East Cape town, the fictional Hicksville, has more than enough hallmarks of the familiar to be recognisably New Zealand. Many of its picture frames are carefully drawn in a comic-equivalent of the local regionalist paradigm, evoking the quiet of rural roadsides and empty paddocks beneath clear skies. Yet this is a corner of New Zealand where, despite what other stereotypes of the provincial apply, comics are the dominant art form. Horrocks’s juxtapositions see comics regarded with the attention normally reserved for fine art and high literature, a reversal paralleled by shifting the cultural centre to the provincial outskirts.

Horrocks delights in the narrative possibilities his playful revisions of local culture afford. Into this isolated corner of an isolated country arrives Leonard Batts, a North American comics journalist visiting Hicksville to research the obscure origins of one its most famous sons, Dick Burger, creator of the Captain Tomorrow series of graphic novels. For Leonard, dedicated to the achievements of mainstream comics, Hicksville is as baffling as it is unwelcoming; its vast stocks of even the rarest and most valuable comics on the planet can scarcely be believed, while Leonard’s esteem for Burger sees him unaccountably avoided and ostracised by most of the locals. Hicksville is a quest-story of a sort, though not the quest Leonard was expecting; his journey to Hicksville reveals the unexpectedly dubious morality of his hero, Dick Burger, and prompts a serious revising of artistic and cultural assumptions. Yet Horrocks’s purpose is not to revalue the local in judgemental terms which simply invert the existing hierarchical order of relative worth.

The appearance of historical figures Captain Cook, Hone Heke and Charles Heaphy as characters in a mysterious comic whose pages haunt Leonard throughout his stay offers a calculus of the cultural relocations at play in Hicksville. The reinvention of Cook, Heke, and Heaphy as comic characters, created not only by Horrocks but also by their internal fictional author, the enigmatic Augustus E., both distorts historical reference and yet charts it as well; although not historical contemporaries, in the pages of a comic the three are allowed to meet and discuss the diverse engagements with the land they symbolise. Hence, Horrocks is interested in the connections that can be made within a varied range of inheritances. Drawing from both high and low culture, Hicksville lauds historical comics figures Jack Kirby and George Herriman with the esteem usually reserved for fine artists, while canonical representatives of fine arts and literature—Picasso, Stein and Lorca—are refigured as comics artists.

As a graphic novel engaging in a history of representations, Hicksville makes pointed use of both its visual and literary ancestry. While it refutes many of the traditional distinctions between the high and the low in a familiar local setting, Hicksville's natural terrain seems less to be New Zealand itself, than the wider history of how New Zealand has been figured by a range of culturally-biased interests, not only literary and artistic, but also scientific and indigenous. Horrocks recognises New Zealand as both stage and subject of much of the country's most significant and far-reaching cultural production. If its history in representation has often been a disputed one, Hicksville is less interested in presenting another version of New Zealand, correcting past oversights and marginalisation, than in assessing the worth of a history of representations when these are brought into close proximity with one another. For such proximity, Horrocks

suggests, shifts rather than merely opposes the focus of the critical discussions that take notions of cultural authenticity in local art and literature as their prime motivation.

Hicksville can thus be placed in relation to critical frameworks, artistic and literary, that consider the way New Zealand has been seen by its artists and writers—and thus also created by them. Roger Horrocks takes up this notion directly in his essay “The Invention of New Zealand”, aspects of which his son Dylan applies in Hicksville. For Roger Horrocks, the reality of the local has been an ongoing concern for a canonical though diverse set of writers—A. R. D. Fairburn, Allen Curnow, and James K. Baxter all linked the exploration of the local with not only aesthetic concerns but moral ones as well (“Invention”). Though Hicksville is situated in a dramatically reinvented New Zealand, its inhabitants’ commitment to place is similarly framed. Yet if Fairburn’s rejection of modernism for its internationalist taint still resonates in contemporary debate—as in Patrick Evans’s charge that Manhire’s writing programme is merely a conveyor belt exporting local literary products to a global market—Dylan Horrocks’s relationship to the international is altogether more complicated.

Horrocks values a cultural history whose development has been dependent on its adaptation of imported styles to fit the demands of the local scene. His favoured aesthetic vehicle, the comic-strip, is entirely of this mode, yet its outsider status from the accepted literary kinds—and also those of fine arts—allows it to comment pointedly on the state of local culture from a position of engaged distance. Related to both art and literature, yet not purely either, Horrocks admits the comic form’s low-brow origins even as he overhauls its performance, loading his narratives with metafictional devices more characteristic of supposed high literature, and making subtle though extensive reference

to a range of New Zealand artists such as Augustus Earle, Charles Heaphy, Christopher Perkins, Rita Angus, Doris Lusk, Colin McCahon, Dick Frizzell and Ralph Hotere.

Though Allen Curnow was discussing poets when he made his famous call for reality to be “local and special at the point where we pick up the traces” (Penguin 17), the above roll call represents artists engaged in a similar search in visual terms. What Horrocks, the comics writer quoting art historical as well as literary precedent, adds is that our “local and special” reality is no longer just a matter of producing poetry or prose or paintings marked by the “peculiar pressures” Curnow identified, “arising from the isolation of the country, its physical character, and its history” (ibid). New Zealand now houses an accumulation of cultural capital local and special in its own right. For Horrocks, notions of cultural belonging can thus be drawn via a range of aesthetic or literary avenues, not to override the seriousness of Baxter’s or Curnow’s search for a place truly and justly inhabitable, but to take under advisement the prescriptive mandates of Evans in his “Spectacular Babies” and Wystan Curnow in “High Culture in a Small Province”. Horrocks’s invigorating experimentalism thus positions itself as a counterpoint to stringently defined requirements of a culture designed to meet the nominated needs of the local.

Hicksville, then, does not passively receive its influences, but pushes them towards new expressive ends. The particular traditions Horrocks inherits—comics, New Zealand art history, and New Zealand literary history—are not categories with firm boundaries or settled pasts, but are sites of contention whose shifting registers Horrocks comprehends and moves between. In Hicksville comics are recognised as both pop-cultural artefacts and serious art forms; New Zealand’s art history is noted for its assimilatory and differentiating struggles with western and Maori art; and New Zealand’s literary history is

seen as one which has produced (and been produced by) a series of related conceptual critical shifts. For Horrocks, comics criticism is not a matter of insisting that comics be admitted to the canons of art and literature, but neither is it satisfactory to abandon those categories altogether. Horrocks points out that although comics have often been roundly dismissed on aesthetic grounds, so too have many works in the past that are now canonically secure (“Perfect” 198). Horrocks does not seek to inflate the worth of his own comic through associations with, or the clever mimicry of, works belonging to the supposed higher echelons of fine art and literature, but rather pursues a paradigm shift affecting the way readers can position themselves in relation to binaries such as high and low, cosmopolitan and provincial, commercial and artistic, centre and periphery.

So while this study looks at the joint use of art and literary history in Hicksville, its enquiry also follows something of the narrative method of its subject. Just as Horrocks draws on a range of histories and traditions and is careful to avoid privileging any at others’ expense, his graphic novel requires a reading which is sensitive to the traditions on which it draws but that, similarly, avoids the binaries. Hicksville bears a distinct relation to both art and literary history, registering their mutual dialectic interests. The familiar tension between creative expression and the cultural politics of place, measuring the artist’s moral responsibility to nation, is explored in Hicksville through the particular case of how global capitalism has affected art. Yet even here Horrocks avoids polemic. Rather, his canny acknowledgement sees the dispute adopted as a structuring device underpinning his narrative. Horrocks aligns himself with neither populist nor aestheticist extremes, but registers another space, beyond rather than between them, which values considered shifts rather than radical overhauls in the current critical accounts of art and literary history. It seems appropriate, then, that the particular readings of art and literary history accounted for here are not meant to be comprehensive, but focus an interest in

how those histories have been interpreted and hence perpetuated by key figures. As Hicksville suggests, such histories can be seen as conceptual maps which create realities as much as they discover them. For Horrocks, accounting for New Zealand is not a matter of finding an authentic means of artistic expression, but rather one of considering the often opposed ways New Zealand has been constructed and positioned by its artists, writers and critics.



Fig. 1. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

1. Local Heroes

Although the painters and writers most often implicated in the local transaction between art and letters—Colin McCahon, John Caselberg, Ralph Hotere, Bill Manhire, Ian Wedde, Gregory O'Brien and others—collectively and individually represent an engagement between separate art forms and styles, they at least share the context of high art. While Horrocks seems to claim an inheritance from both fine art and literary lineages, acknowledging and commenting on these in his own work, he also raises questions about the seeming stability of either as high art through his primary and avowed allegiance to comic books.

Horrocks's destabilising tactics, although they gain traction from what has often been seen as a repository of the low-brow—the comic book—are neither straightforward in their subversion, nor critically superficial. Rather, heightened by the quirky charm of the

disposability often associated with the precursors of its chosen medium, Hicksville's references to historical figures such as Hone Heke, Captain Cook, Charles Heaphy and Augustus Earle playfully disrupt the accepted version of the past. Stylistically Horrocks's drawings show an obvious debt to the muscular modernism of McCahon and the regionalism of Rita Angus and Doris Lusk, but they also recall the witty responses to these of Dick Frizzell. Hicksville thus treats cultural production in New Zealand with a mixture of reverence, subversion and insight.

If it seems a critical sleight-of-hand to hold New Zealand cultural production as the centrepiece of Hicksville's concern, given the novel's most visible subject matter is comics, the argument here will maintain that, although comics are the dominant art form throughout Hicksville, the novel is, thematically, more deeply engaged in the nature of cultural production associated with artistic expression. After all, as the novel approaches its climax, the oblique, virtually background, references to influential modernists such as Georgia O'Keefe (ch. 4) which mark the early stages of the narrative bloom into more substantial and thoughtfully deployed considerations of Picasso and Lorca (ch. 9). Horrocks's references to high art partly justify comics as an art form, but more pointedly they add that, as well as his obvious affection for and knowledge of the comic genre, Horrocks is not closed to its metaphorical potential in wider cultural terms. Comics stand in for creative expression generally. Indeed, the metaphorical position that Horrocks visits and explores within Hicksville is central to the argument that the novel is less concerned with bringing the reader or the viewer closer to any fixed understanding of what counts as the authentically local as it is with discussing the values and limitations that artistic and literary engagements with New Zealand represent in themselves, and how these shape what we understand the local to be. In this sense, Hicksville is primarily concerned with the ways of viewing New Zealand that have been offered—and at

various times endorsed and dismissed—by writers and artists as well as by their critics not in corrective or evaluative terms, but for the extent to which they have taken hold in viewer and reader consciousness. As Hicksville suggests, such views now resonate to the point where a legitimate version of New Zealand can exist through reference made primarily to the views of it, rather than remain reliant on a close and measurable correlation to a particular locale.

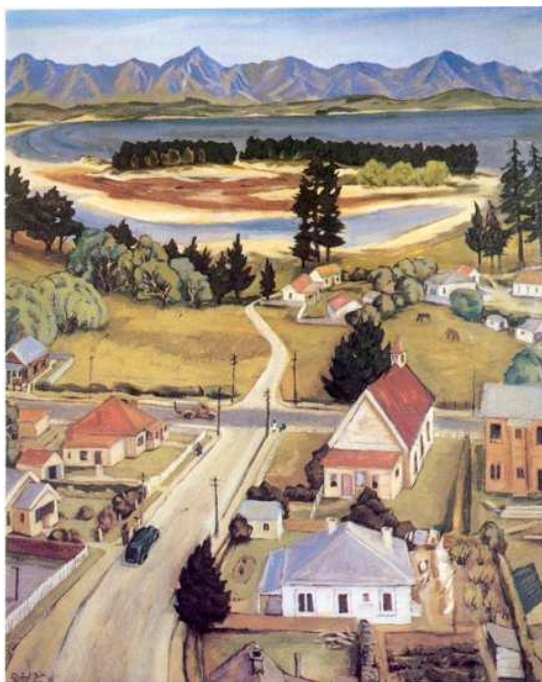


Fig. 2. Doris Lusk, Tahunanui, Nelson, Hocken Library Collection, Dunedin.

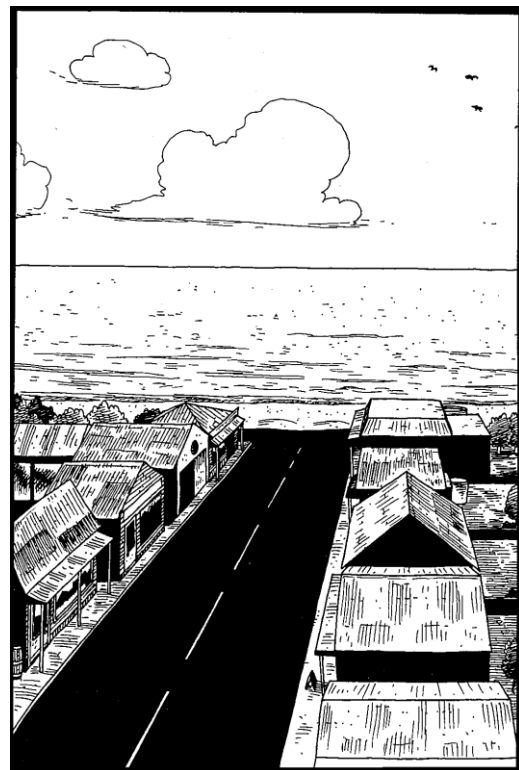


Fig. 3. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Hence, the reader's first view of Hicksville bears a canny resemblance to the regionalism of Lusk. As an example, her painting Tahunanui, Nelson offers a “sense of solidity and pictorial organization” (Brown, 1940-1960 64) whose values, as Horrocks's invented Hicksville demonstrates, are not limited to New Zealand's regionalist painters of the 1940s and '50s. While Lusk's Tahunanui declares itself to be a close reading of a specific and recognisable locality, Horrocks's Hicksville, though invented, nonetheless makes use

of a similar set of small-town buildings which seem neither entirely rural nor urban. As in Tahunanui, Hicksville's tin-roofed houses conform to a series of triangles, flattening the picture plane. Both locales are viewed from a high-vantage point, producing, in both cases, vistas over quiet wide roads leading, via T-intersections, to the horizon-line of the sea in the background. As a pair the images are strikingly similar, then, but it is more crucial to consider what is represented and implied by such similarity rather than dwell on a visual comparison which can be drawn in such superficial and therefore self-limiting terms. The visual comparison which may be made, although compelling itself, has a deeper resonance in terms of illustrating an embodiment of shared cultural and artistic values.

Hicksville's similarity to Tahunanui does not necessarily amount to Horrocks's direct quotation of a prominent painting in the oeuvre of a locally prominent painter, but rather indicates the extent to which representations of the local are characterised by a peculiarly regionalist set of artistic concerns. The high-vantage point depiction of landscape favoured by Lusk has imbued many local iconic painters' canvases with a regionalist air: McCahon's 1930s landscapes of Otago, or his 1950s Canterbury, Toss Woollaston's Mapua of the 1930s and '40s, or Christopher Perkins's Volcanic Country Near Rotorua. In each of these the flattening of the landscape effectively refers to the flatness of the picture plane itself, and, in McCahon's and Woollaston's cases, hints towards a bolder modernism as well; the art thus takes part of its purchase from a more abstract pictorial concern than the purely descriptive, rooted in a reverence and a response to a specific location.

Equally, however, these paintings retain a primary attachment to place, their canvases typified by earthy hues, their titles characteristically nominating a particular setting. Even

Angus's non-specific Central Otago, a composite landscape derived from multiple studies made in Otago in 1938 and '39, suggests, perhaps troublingly, both a willingness to prioritise artistic values and concerns over location, while maintaining an underlying faith in the stabilising specificities afforded by a place name. Horrocks extends the parameters of Angus's approach in Central Otago, deploying a set of regionalist pictorial devices yet refusing to ground them in a location recognisably and fixedly attached to a real-world equivalent and thus dispensing with many of the reassuring particularities offered by a firm sense of place. At once fictional and familiar, the representation of Hicksville points out the extent to which peculiarly regionalist views no longer rely on achieving a descriptive fidelity to place, but can be valued for their contribution to the manufacture of the perception of the local.

While Hicksville reflects the ongoing sway and resonance of, for instance, Lusk's view of the local, it also extends the impact and force of regionalist values under the rubric of a branch of fiction—the graphic novel—which might be a recent enough literary development to be considered relatively experimental.¹ While Andrew Paul Wood's claim that "New Zealand art has always had and [. . .] retains a certain regionalist spirit" (25) is broadly legitimised through Hicksville's subtle quotations of regionalist tendencies, Horrocks's claims extend even further, and with a pointed historical resonance. As a graphic novel, Hicksville's capacity to weld the visual to the literary echoes the approach of such foundational critical texts as, for instance, E. H. McCormick's Letters and Art in New Zealand of 1940, which "preferred to trace the development of New Zealand letters and art as a social phenomenon rather than as independent departments" (dust jacket).

¹ Although drawing on "a respectable history stretching back to the 1940s", it was not until the 1980s that 'the graphic novel' as a term came into widespread usage, with later titles such as Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale (1986)—which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992—bringing the genre to wider critical literary attention (Sabin 165).

The linkage between McCormick and Horrocks is not made arbitrarily, for, like McCormick, other significant commentators have avoided preserving the boundaries between art and writing. Fairburn and Charles Brasch, though both poets, were actively and vocally involved in the politics of the country's art-scene, while more recently poet-critics Wedde and O'Brien have become significant commentators on both art and literature. Hicksville reminds us that the proximity between artists and writers on the local cultural front—a relationship forged by both practitioners and critics—has been vital and continuous. Indeed, the cultural landscape inherited by Horrocks is one whose most notable achievements have often underlined the constant fraternisation between representatives of each. McCahon, for instance, owed much of his textual content to the poetry of Caselberg (Brown, Keith 194), while Hotere has routinely imported poetry from Manhire, Hone Tuwhare and Cilla McQueen, as well as illustrating and contributing cover art to these and other poets' collections such as Baxter's Jerusalem Sonnets and Wedde's Pathway to the Sea. Yet the extent to which the relationship has become productive in its own terms is most boldly underlined by Hicksville's refusal to prioritise either its visual or literary component over the other through Horrocks's position as, primarily, a comic artist. Rather than a poet who turns to painting, or a visual artist who makes use of the poetry of another, Horrocks inherits the country's visual and literary perspectives evenly, speaking to McCormick's view of the relationship therein as a "social phenomenon".

Here, the central relevance of the character Augustus E. to Horrocks's purpose becomes apparent. Of course, Horrocks, unlike McCormick in his capacity as an essayist, or Fairburn, Brasch, Wedde and O'Brien in their roles as commentators, details the working relationship between arts and letters as a fictional account. Yet, as a fiction which

exhibits a curious regard for the factual world from which it takes its purchase, it offers pointed comment. In a direct if oblique reference to the historical Augustus Earle, Horrocks's Augustus E., the enigmatic author of what might be described as colonial comics, seems important not only as an artist and writer but also a cultural pioneer whose relevance spans both disciplines. Like Earle, Augustus E.'s double significance points to the foundational importance of art and literature conjointly for local culture.

Earle's founding status in the country's art history is assured; cornerstone surveys of New Zealand art history such as Michael Dunn's New Zealand Painting: A Concise History, and Brown's An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980, with Hamish Keith, note his importance as a colonial painter, not only for his renderings of landscape, "endowed [. . .] with a brooding obsessive quality" (Brown, Keith 16), but for pioneering the artistic representation of a complicated relationship between colonist and Maori. Pointedly, Augustus E.'s comic details an engagement within this relationship.



Fig. 4. Augustus Earle, Meeting Between the Artist and the Wounded Chief Hongi at the Bay of Islands, November 1827. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Although Dunn shares with Brown and Keith the lament that Earle's model of engagement with Maori was not adopted and developed by artists that followed, Charles

Eldredge observes that from the 1930s, New Zealand's national maturity has been marked by a "quest for local cultural traditions" (22), inevitably renewing the interest in the works of early authors and painters. Such interest has secured Earle's reputation, although usually in his capacity as an artist. As a travel writer and diarist, however, Earle's output, though attracting less attention than his paintings, is still significant. His published account of time spent among various Maori communities, A Narrative of a Nine Months' Residence in New Zealand in 1827, which appeared in 1832, was edited by McCormick in 1966 and described in the Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature as a "unique written [. . .] record of the lives and customs of the Maori with whom he lived" (Barton 157). Although beginning his official account at 1890, Patrick Evans, in The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature, theorises that "all colonies begin as words," drawing particular attention to McCormick's notice conferred on "the remarkably early texts Europeans wrote about New Zealand" (18). Earle's Narrative surely figures among these, but its author's particular example suggests colonies begin not only as words, but as paintings too.

Retrieving Earle's literary standing and elevating it alongside his artistic one, though important, leaves the greater, more accumulative significance of his work unaccounted for. Somewhat similarly, when Eldredge vaguely, if without controversy, calls Earle "the 'father' of [New Zealand] art" (20), painting seems to be privileged over the literary. By contrast, through the fictional character Augustus E., Horrocks's reference to Earle cannily refuses to partition the visual from the verbal. Augustus E., as a comic artist (neatly repeating the model of Horrocks's own engagement), is not only able to access both visual and literary genres, but indeed must honour the two avenues of artistic expression equally.

Hicksville thus takes up part of a broad challenge laid down by Allen Curnow in his 1945 conversation with Ngaio Marsh, where he offered a rallying cry to interested parties from a range of cultural fields. “Strictly speaking,” said Curnow, “New Zealand doesn’t exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created—should I say invented—by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers; even a politician might help....” (Look 77). While Curnow thus prescribed an interdisciplinary approach to the manufacture of a national identity, more than fifty years later Horrocks advances the basic tenets of the cross-disciplinary. Yet Horrocks’s championing of colonial, foundational figures such as Earle, while reflecting the comic book’s varied artistic inheritance, undoubtedly complicates Curnow’s contentions, demonstrating the dramatic ends to which invention might be deployed.

Horrocks’s purpose, then, is to forge an alternative New Zealand in fiction, one that rejoices in the deliberate skewing of reality and yet that nonetheless advances a collective understanding of how New Zealand is perceived; through its dramatic reinvention of familiar cultural markers Hicksville effectively re-invents New Zealand. Augustus E., after all, is not Augustus Earle, the historical colonial painter and diarist, but a fictionalised comic artist who, although never seen, seems to inhabit an approximately contemporary New Zealand. The terms of Horrocks’s engagement are distanced from an underlying assumed reality, and instead fabricated from a network of artistic and critical constructions.

While Roger Horrocks claims that in New Zealand, “tradition has never been monolithic—somewhere there have always been alternative styles of reading, [and] alternative fictions,” (“Invention”)—Curnow’s terms seem only unwittingly to allow for such alternative visions. In the singularity of its terminology, his assessment that New

Zealand “remains to be created” cuts against the kinds of open-ended possibilities his terms elsewhere permit—that is, for views of New Zealand which, in the “possible New Zealands” they present, actually legitimise multiple New Zealands, forged from the wide range of models of cultural engagement which artists now have available to them. His essay, “New Zealand Literature: The Case for a Working Definition” (whose title’s phrasing seems to sanction revision and re-interpretation), begins by noting that predictions concerning local literature are odious: “we have had plenty, none very satisfactory” (139). For Curnow, “one thing leads to another”, and yet, of the future of New Zealand literature, “nothing can be known and therefore nothing profitably said” (ibid). Curnow thus allows that although the country can be invented by a consensus of artists, writers and critics working towards an ostensibly common goal, it can also be re-invested with a new store of value as the terms of this consensus are challenged and advanced.

New Zealand’s history of representation has been marked by a constant appraisal and re-appraisal in such terms. In the 1890s an injection of European artists—Dutchman Petrus Van der Velden, Italian Giralamo Pieri Nerli, and Scot James Nairn—brought styles which galvanised local painting, producing a generation of expatriate painters, keen to hone their skills and styles in Europe, while later arrival, the Englishman Perkins (active in New Zealand 1929-33), was quick to take issue with what he perceived to be “the stultifying effect of British art on local painters” (Dunn, Painting 73). Perkins’s view “that artists should develop their own national school based on the local subject-matter” (ibid) is echoed by Curnow in his famous introduction to The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse where he notes “The best of our verse is marked or moulded everywhere by peculiar pressures—pressures arising from the isolation of the country, its physical character, and its history” (17). Yet Curnow’s history is a selective one. As Wedde

reasonably points out, his own version of The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse—which appeared in 1985—paid closer attention to Maori poetry than either of the earlier Curnow-edited versions. For Wedde, a peculiarly New Zealand subject matter is still important, but the varying emphases which respective artists, writers and critics choose to accord elements within the local referent can be examined and reconsidered. The cultural climate and its critical reception, then, seem founded on a heritage of viewpoints, each of which build on those fashioned previously in terms that are, if respectful, then also implicitly corrective.

If this broadly describes a programme of artistic and critical advancement, Hicksville both acknowledges and questions the assumptions behind such a construction of cultural progress. Within the more or less linear scheme of artistic development and its critical reckoning—Curnow’s one thing leading to another—Horrocks credits early views of New Zealand with a force equal to those which have come later. Thus, from its late twentieth-century vantage point, Hicksville’s perspective of New Zealand democratises the overarching history of visual and poetic claims made on the country. Brown and Keith observe that the New Zealand landscape itself, along with the apparently “distinctive qualities of New Zealand light” (9), have provided the major artistic concerns over the extensive period of their survey. The benchmark for New Zealand art history this represents is both acknowledged and slyly undercut through a casually off-hand comment from Augustus E. in an informal hand-written note to another (ex-pat) comic artist. The daunting issue which Horrocks takes up, then, is how to invest accepted tropes with new meaning in a time when, as his comic book suggests, to posit the “distinctive qualities of New Zealand light” underlying so much representation risks becoming a hackneyed phrase.

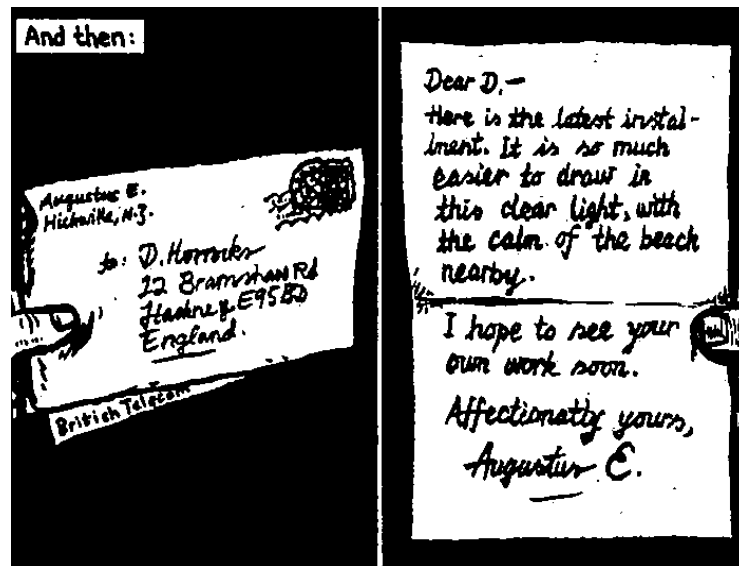


Fig. 5. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Horrocks toys with the twinned ongoing relevance of landscape and light to New Zealand artists by tinkering with its accreditation. In a reference which subtly dislocates historical time, his fictional Augustus E., recently arrived in Hicksville, writes that “It is so much easier to draw in this clear [New Zealand] light” (introductory section). Although Earle’s landscapes pay careful attention to light, he is not credited with a statement which so boldly prefigures later critics’ preoccupation with how local light conditions were transmuted to formal artistic concerns. Rather, his Narrative is full-to-overflowing with more altogether romantic musings:

The red glare of the setting sun, just touching the top of every object, beautifully illuminated the landscape; and its rays, bursting through the black woods in the back-ground, gave the woods an appearance of being on fire; while a beautiful rainbow, thrown across the sky, tinged the scene with a fairy-land effect. (70)

Because Augustus E., while obviously modelled on the historical Augustus Earle of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, occupies a roughly contemporary New Zealand while parading the 1930s values of Perkins, who expounded the relevance of local light conditions to nationalist artistic ends, the late twentieth century blends with earlier

periods; the crediting of attitudes particular to historical moments forms something of a collective cultural memory. Horrocks suggests that previous views of the country, whether endorsed or dismissed by those that come after, inescapably contribute to the contemporary views which can be made of New Zealand. Horrocks's sense of history is one where differences are allowed to form a positive whole.

Such is the basis for Hicksville's most pressing and complex formulations of the local. For Horrocks, Curnow's conception of a New Zealand to be invented and understood through artistic work must allow for alternative New Zealands to constitute part of this vision. Hence, Hicksville marshals and continues one of the recent trends in New Zealand fiction which has seen writers increasingly willing to experiment but without discarding entirely the traditional exploration of the local. Williams justified the choice of authors in his critical study, Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists, by claiming that the collected writers (Frame, C. K. Stead, Maurice Gee, Witi Ihimaera, Wedde, and Keri Hulme) "had moved beyond realism without abandoning it altogether; all had struggled to forge a more complex realism" (Highway 9). If Horrocks represents a move away from realism's stock tendencies, even as he invites his readers to reconsider their history in local literature, then he is in good company.

Horrocks, though, belongs to a slightly later clutch of writers who have proven willing to stretch realism's boundaries even further than Williams's canonical grouping. Like Horrocks, Elizabeth Knox, Lloyd Jones and Nigel Cox have produced novels since Williams's 1990 study which, though unique, can be grouped together for their pointed if subtle challenges to the local canon. Elizabeth Knox's The Vintner's Luck, a love-story between a mortal and an angel, takes leave of New Zealand almost entirely, thus challenging the more programmatic definitions of what qualifies as local literature. Lloyd

Jones's The Book of Fame is a prose-poem which lovingly retells one of the country's most resonant of modern myths (the Original All Blacks' remarkable tour of 1905-1906) but which more critically renders its unique aesthetic from the substantial and traditional gap between New Zealand's usual literary subject matter and the sporting obsessions of the general populace. Nigel Cox's The Cowboy Dog reinvents New Zealand's North Island to far-reaching effect: the volcanic plateau becomes a desert of the Wild West, a home to caricature cowboys and Mexican bandits, while snakes and cacti inhabit a landscape marked out by New Zealand power pylons. Cox's story is a classic Western of revenge and betrayal, dramatically reshuffling the familiar reference points of place and narrative convention rather than discounting either of these at the other's expense. These are novels whose local referents shape rather than circumvent their authors' experiments with fictive devices.

Similarly, Hicksville's relies on thoroughly grounding its experimental or anti-realist elements in recognisably, if stereotypical, local referents. Though not quite magic realism, it suggests that "complex realism" can be more unhinged than Williams allows. Horrocks's portraits of Hicksville and its inhabitants evoke a small town trapped in 1970s New Zealand—tea and lamingtons dominate the local cuisine, the town has neither fax machine nor internet, and the library runs on self-service. Perhaps most tellingly, librarian Mrs. Hicks professes to have no knowledge of the insurance value of her library's collection, telling the stunned Leonard Batts, "We don't pay any attention to that sort of thing in Hicksville!" (ch. 3). Horrocks trades on the stereotypically provincial outlook underpinning New Zealand's self-worth, but affectionately so, investing Hicksville with a familiar set of attitudes—humility, honesty, and unpretentiousness—rather than disputing their currency. Hicksville thus finds a place in the terms of Lydia Wevers's argument for New Zealanders' favoured self-representation as "a wry, laconic

and unpretentious people” (1). Yet these values are thoroughly revised by the complicated and playful reinvention at the heart of the novel’s enterprise: that small-town New Zealand could, through its very marginalisation, provide a spiritual Mecca for an art form often marginalised itself as necessarily underground—the comic book.

Horrocks thus consciously adopts what Lister calls a “form doubly marginalised: the local graphic novel” (138) to distance himself from Wystan Curnow’s admitted “anxieties about the audience in a society with a negligible high culture” (170). Instead Horrocks openly pursues an alternative mandate: to consider the root of such anxieties as a facet of the local which, in itself, constitutes part of what Allen Curnow described as belonging “uniquely, here, to the islands of New Zealand” (Penguin 17). The celebration might feel ironic, but there is no denying the extent of its purchase. With a similar intent Manhire’s selection, 121 New Zealand Poems, openly embraced local poetic products in the widest possible terms—John Clarke’s “We Don’t Know How Lucky We Are” is an iconic yet surprising addition for the obvious populist displacement of high cultural assumptions it represents within the anthology as well as its blatant but affectionate parody on local types. Manhire also consciously “sneaked in one or two bad poems, like Thomas Bracken’s “Not Understood”, once New Zealand’s best-known poem” (“introduction” emphasis original), and Florence E. Allan’s “What Next?”, a poem irredeemably bad in every measure but for the fun which can be made of it. Yet while Allan’s voice encapsulates the utter lack of sophistication and provincial amateurism which, for Wystan Curnow, was both “pervasive” and yet dangerously subversive for being “seldom public” (163), it also provides the foundation for Horrocks’s most meaningful reassembling of cultural types.

Like Manhire, Horrocks questions the serious purpose underlying Wystan Curnow's crisis implied in the title of his essay "High Culture in a Small Province". Manhire playfully suggests what Curnow's supposed crisis of "imaginative excellence in a welfare state" (155) allows if his professed "elitist" (ibid) boundaries are tested. Allan's poem, detailing the speaker's "dreadful experience" (6) with an eel dropped on her head, is ironically humorous; though intended to amuse, what can be inferred of the speaker's character from her voice more emphatically underlines the most baldly stereotypical of associations between the domestic and the unsophisticated:

I was kneeling in my garden, one lovely sunny morn,

I had planned a busy schedule and had commenced my task at dawn.

Bill set off with the car and trailer to take branches and hedge clippings to the tip

I was wishing I could have accompanied him. It is always an interesting trip. (1-4)

The combination of its unlikely inclusion in a Manhire-edited anthology (that includes Curnow, Baxter, and Stead among other luminaries) with its inadvertent but unrelentingly clunky rhyme-schemes and appalling scansion allows Allan's poem to become unwittingly entertaining. Manhire rejoices in the limitations provided by the provincial, the domestic, or the amateur, generating comic potential that is sharply pointed through its placement in—and gesture towards—a forum for high art.

Horrocks's parody of local types is similarly shrewd beneath its surface humour. Hicksville's Mrs. Hicks, evokes something of Allan's homely simplicity inscribed with a naivety towards the wider world; the proprietor of the local lending library ("self-service of course—that way we never have to close" (ch. 3)), she has only a vague interest in and knowledge of its wider cultural appeal. Leonard's incredulity that a tiny provincial town-

library could house “Things so rare [he had] only read about them” is met with Mrs. Hicks’s understated, “I understand some of the early numbers are rather hard to come by these days,” qualified by her humble assertion that she tries to “keep a good range [. . .] as any library should” (ibid). Even leaving aside aesthetic or critical measures of artistic and literary appreciation Horrocks’s small-town library is an internationally significant site of cultural capital, for the rarity of its holdings prescribes a considerable monetary value representative of their worth as artefacts. Just as Manhire playfully disrupts the supposed borders between high art and the throwaway low-brow within the confines of an anthology of New Zealand poetry, Horrocks’s lending library similarly disrupts perceived notions of the relationship between worth and context. While Horrocks’s tactics are to inflate the currency of canonical valuation and Manhire’s are deflationary, for both, the cultural elitism associated with the notion of the collection, whether the anthology or the library, is undercut by a revision of reader- and viewer-expectations.



Fig. 6. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

This, then, is the basis for Horrocks's enterprise. Horrocks answers Allen Curnow's call for a reality made "local and special at the point where we pick up the traces" (Penguin 17) while furthering the impact of its claims, radically destabilising Curnow's intentions. Hicksville picks up the traces of the "local and special" which are already familiar to us and makes these the point where his own invention and artistry begin. Hicksville takes recognisable character types such as Mrs. Hicks with their familiar small-town rural and semi-rural surrounds, and not only invests in them the shrewd artistic nous and appreciation of aesthetic form so lacking in Florence Allan, but also shifts the terms of aesthetic appreciation to an art form traditionally at the margins of high art. Further, even within a marginalised art form, Hicksville's locals prefer the most obscure of its products. Mrs. Hicks's penchant for comics from Mongolia and Helsinki—"they're a boisterous lot up there in Finland!" (ch. 3)—leaves Leonard, as an ambassador of metropolitan American comics criticism, baffled. He also suffers the disconcertingly snooty condescension of the local postman, Harry, who disapproves of Leonard's mainstream tastes: "I'm more of a mini-comics man myself. Comes of being a postie I suppose. Ed Pinsent. Chris Reynolds, that's more my line—the English school, you could say. Still everything has its place..." (ch. 3). Harry's subtle deprecation demonstrates the book's gentle good humour—aimed with and at Hicksville's locals—but also hints towards its wider and more pointed concerns. Horrocks's handling of the local, as both a space and a product of artistic engagement, is framed through a questioning of the way place has been perceived and conceived.

While Horrocks both articulates and disrupts traditional hierarchies between provincialism and elitism, and between fine art and supposedly lower art forms, his revisions are staged against a background of recognisable cultural markers. For Allen Curnow in the early 1950s, as Peter Simpson has summarised, "New Zealand poets' lack

of ease in their environment” could be attributed to “their shallow occupation of the country” (134). Horrocks revisits this unease but replaces Curnow’s “shallow occupation” with one that—recalling the actual country’s geothermic instability—is, instead, merely shifting. As Heke ominously tells Cook at one of their mysterious meetings, “The islands are moving... They are riding the sea like a ship, Captain... drifting” (introductory section). Throughout Hicksville the reshuffling of historical realities—for instance, rearranging the historical Heke, Cook, and Heaphy to become contemporaries—metaphorically calls for an artistic re-cataloguing; Horrocks thus accepts Curnow’s credo that reality be made “local and special” but reinvents and revises this engagement with a surprising and original shifting of artistic and aesthetic parameters.

Hicksville’s dramatic re-ordering of New Zealand thus fuses historical facts—such as Cook’s and Heaphy’s pioneering scientific interest which inevitably collided culturally with Maori—and the pervasive stereotypes whose own origins seem implicated in and attendant on such histories. Heke, for instance, appears as the wise and mystically-inclined but politically-savvy Maori, able to straddle indigenous and colonising positions without reneging on the integrity of his parent culture. Yet Horrocks does not submit to the perpetuation of stereotypes; rather, he actively engages with them, turning them to his own ends and demonstrating a range of possibilities for a conception of place which feels both new and familiar.

The critical and artistic constructions which have combined to create the idea of New Zealand amount to the reality with which Horrocks contends as an artist-writer maturing on the local scene as it embarks on its third century of manufacture. If Curnow’s New Zealand was still to be created at the mid-point of the twentieth century—though, given

the Penguin anthologies of New Zealand poetry, the scaffolding was up and the construction visibly underway—by its closing stages a range of New Zealands had been circulated. On the one hand, remarkably singular visions, such as Cox’s or Knox’s have drawn new attention to the ongoing relevance of New Zealand as an idea embodied in artistic construction. On the other, an extensive proliferation of local anthologies, each proclaiming to celebrate or present for overdue inspection an aspect of New Zealandness, swarmed and became stock items even beyond high school and university curricula.

Over the last forty years dozens of short story collections and poetry anthologies have appeared, representing a range of interests. While the Manhire- and Marion McLeod-edited Some Other Country: New Zealand’s Best Short Stories, though periodically updated, proclaims a collection gathered according to exacting aesthetic considerations, others’ mandates have been governed by more political editorial parameters. Books whose selections were chosen to represent the interests of, for instance, Maori, Pasifika, or women writers began to appear. Wevers observed in the mid-1980s a “transforming energy in New Zealand writing [. . .] located in those groups of writers who are outside inherited, Pakeha traditions” (qtd. in Highway 16) and backed up her claims by anthologising women writers in Yellow Pencils: Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women, and, with McLeod, Women’s Work: Contemporary Short Stories by New Zealand Women. In turn, since Hicksville first appeared in 1998, there have been fewer national or representative-style anthologies, though Huia continues to publish collections of the most contemporary Maori short fiction. Horrocks thus enters a scene where intersections between the cultural politics of representation and the basis on which the local product is esteemed are shifting.

Hicksville seemingly falls beyond Wevers's "inherited, Pakeha traditions", with the comic book form representing assumed cultural degradation for much of the twentieth century in New Zealand (Lister, 139). Yet neither does it belong to the groups most obviously resistant to the claims of "Pakeha traditions", by whom Wevers meant women and Maori writers with "little use for the apparent literary connection between (white) maleness and New Zealandness" (Highway 16). Hicksville registers, in its own narrative, a concern for marginalisation drawn not on gendered or racial lines, but on artistic ones. Horrocks wittily plays on the marginalisation of the comic book but focuses his concern with a consideration of how art, generally, struggles to be valued on its own terms: the perpetually out-of-work comic artist Sam Zabel must reconcile the conflicting demands of artistic integrity with harsh economic realities; arch-villain Dick Burger exploits part of the town's collective cultural heritage for his own financial gain on an overseas stage; and librarians Mrs. Hicks and Kupe are custodians of collections whose cultural and spiritual force, for locals and comics fans, outweighs their monetary value.

Horrocks thus subtly points out that New Zealand's concern to include the full representation of women or Maori writers and artists in its own canon, while perhaps still registering the force of the local, have waned. Maori and women are now so routinely represented in the highest echelons of cultural output that singling out particular examples risks reintroducing outdated notions of exceptionalism. Celebrating writers or artists for their gender or race also sidelines their product. The corollary of the achievements of, for instance, Ihimaera or Hulme was, in Williams's words, marked by a shift towards "making distinctions and discriminations rather than simply welcoming the writing" (Highway 18). But while Hicksville similarly advocates an art that can and ought to be measured on its own terms, it also cannily ushers in other current political concerns. Horrocks registers a transmutation from cultural heritage into cultural capital

with a peculiar contemporary significance. His considerations of the local artistic product as it exists at the turn of the second millennium entail a crucial examination of New Zealand's share in the current climate of globalised economies. In acknowledging the growing domestic concern for the export value of the products of local creative industries in an increasingly competitive world market, Hicksville points out that New Zealand's cultural concerns are implicated with those of elsewhere. Yet, as Horrocks also reminds us, they always have been.

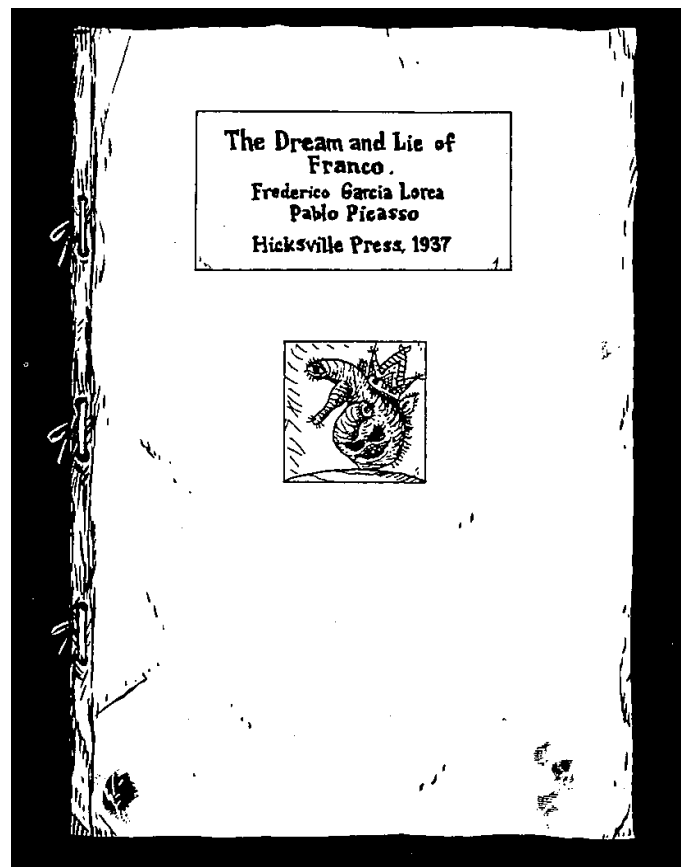


Fig. 7. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

2. Going Global

When Patrick Evans wrote his essay “Spectacular Babies: The Globalisation of New Zealand Fiction” early in the new millennium, reaction was swift. Evans’s stinging attack on the worth of creative writing classes—especially Manhire’s—was bound to earn reprisal. Taking aim at a host of major writers—as well as Manhire himself, Damien Wilkins, Knox, and Emily Perkins—Evans’s essay appeared across a number of publications and in multiple versions. First published in Kite, the Dunedin-based literary newsletter, in 2002 and revised the same year for its inclusion in World Literature Written in English,² a variation on “Spectacular Babies” called “Baby Factory” also appeared in the New Zealand Listener in August the following year. Evans’s campaign drew attention from not only publishers but writers too: Wilkins offered a reply to Evans

² Although published in 2002, World Literature Written in English 38.2 was dated 2000. Editor Janet Wilson noted a “backlog of years” accumulated with the journal’s move to University College Northampton, rectified over subsequent issues.

in his own essay, “True Tales from the Fiction Workshop”, which was, in turn, praised by Paula Morris as she took issue with Evans’s “bad-tempered polemic” (“Kill Bill”). In light of its reception, Evans’s concern for “whether globalisation will remove the distinctive regional and local identity of New Zealand writing” (“Babies” 94) is worth considering. Yet New Zealand’s artists, writers and critics have always been involved in negotiating a potentially difficult relationship with the influence of foreign counterparts, particularly those representing British and American interests. Thus Evans’s apparently controversial thesis identifying the malign influence of the pressures of globalisation on the domestic product is not a dramatic challenge to the established local literary or fine art establishments but rather a critical variation on a theme familiar to both of them.

The key terms in the title of Evans’s “Spectacular Babies”—globalisation and New Zealand fiction—imply from the outset a concern with the commoditising of local literature aimed at achieving more favourable performances in international book-buying markets. For Evans, globalisation and New Zealand fiction are categories whose symbiosis dangerously prioritises commerce over art. The Manhire-directed creative writing programme at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) is thus a “conveyor belt” to literary success measurable by “contracts with major publishing houses overseas” (“Babies” 96). Once limited to a single undergraduate English paper in composition, VUW’s creative writing has been expanded over the last thirty years into the International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML), a name whose overtones of multinational corporatisation conveniently fit Evans’s theme.

Hicksville, meanwhile, cannily registers the intersection of globalised market forces and artistic practice in both its form and content. Firstly, comics have never shied away from confronting their own commercial potential—as low-brow magazines their survival has

often relied on maximising circulation. Roger Sabin's comprehensive account, Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art, notes the genealogies of comics in Britain and America were in both cases highly commercial—in Britain comics developed from satirical magazines, while newspapers were the main precursors to the form in America (19). Sabin admits in his introduction that “throughout their history [comics] have been perceived as intrinsically ‘commercial’, mass-produced for a lowest-common-denominator audience” (8), yet, in spite of this, Hicksville treats commercialism with serious intent. Commercial pressures are a pointed recurrent plot device: Burger has risen from hopeful cartoonist on the edge of obscurity to an international celebrity whose wealth is stereotypically obscene, and Sam constantly struggles to pursue artistic endeavour in the face of dire financial strife. In Hicksville, where familiar cultural markers are extensively re-ordered and reinvented, the claims of globalisation and commercialism are notably resonant with real-world equivalents.

Hicksville regards comics' transcriptions into larger and even more commercial formats—such as the Hollywood blockbuster—as a standard market practice, but, in doing so, inverts Evans's order of value; whereas Evans views globalisation's impact on local literature as both inexorable and detrimental, for Horrocks, a provincial base of operations allows art to flourish undisturbed by the commercial pressures prevalent at metropolitan financial centres. The isolated East Coast of New Zealand becomes an idyllic artistic utopia free of the financial imperatives that elsewhere drive and sustain production, but that also harbours and promotes learning and knowledge without professionally organised institutions. Mrs. Hicks's amateur interest does not prevent her from acquiring specialised knowledge, while Kupe's library seems virtually Borgesian, containing, apparently, all the comics ever written. Leonard's journey of self-discovery begins in North America and ends in Kupe's library, offering a gentle riposte to Evans's

“conveyor belt” which transports writers from the provincial periphery to the metropolitan centre. While Evans worries that local literature is corrupted by the glamour associated with lucrative overseas markets, Hicksville’s tactics preserve the value of the local even as they admit the force of globalisation.

In the alternative universe Hicksville represents, inhabitants of small-town New Zealand can forge meaningful cultural connections with artists working out of Finland, Mongolia, or the fictional Cornucopia, while remaining relatively unimpressed by the clout of Hollywood. If the provincial can be a site of culturally significant artistic practice and learning, then global financial centres do not automatically connote artistic or critical authority.

Horrocks’s version of the Hollywood movie and international comics industries from which Burger has made his wealth undoubtedly recall Evans’s IIML “conveyor belt”. Once a promising cartoonist in his own right, Burger has sold out the artistic integrity of the original Captain Tomorrow comic series, first stealing the storyline from Mort Molson, a respected elder statesman among America’s comic fraternity, and then changing the ending to ensure the viability of sequels and thereby increasing the series’ appeal to publishers and Hollywood movie producers. Horrocks is thus alert to the pernicious influence of commercial pressures on artists, and yet he avoids attacking multinational film companies and international publishing houses for how they devalue art. Horrocks prefers to consider what the artist’s options are in a world where business and cultural interests collide. Los Angeles and New York are the scenes of Burger’s greatest, or most visible, triumphs—the former as the production-centre of his burgeoning film empire, and the latter as the scene of his induction into the Comic Book Hall of Fame—yet as locales they are only backdrops to the human drama unfolding

between him and his childhood friend Sam, whose paths diverge as a result of the very different choices they make as artists. Burger's Faustian pact with the powerbase of Hollywood is mirrored inversely by Sam's rejection of it. In *Hicksville* the crass commercialism Hollywood represents may be a dangerous influence but only to the degree that artists themselves buy into its glamour.

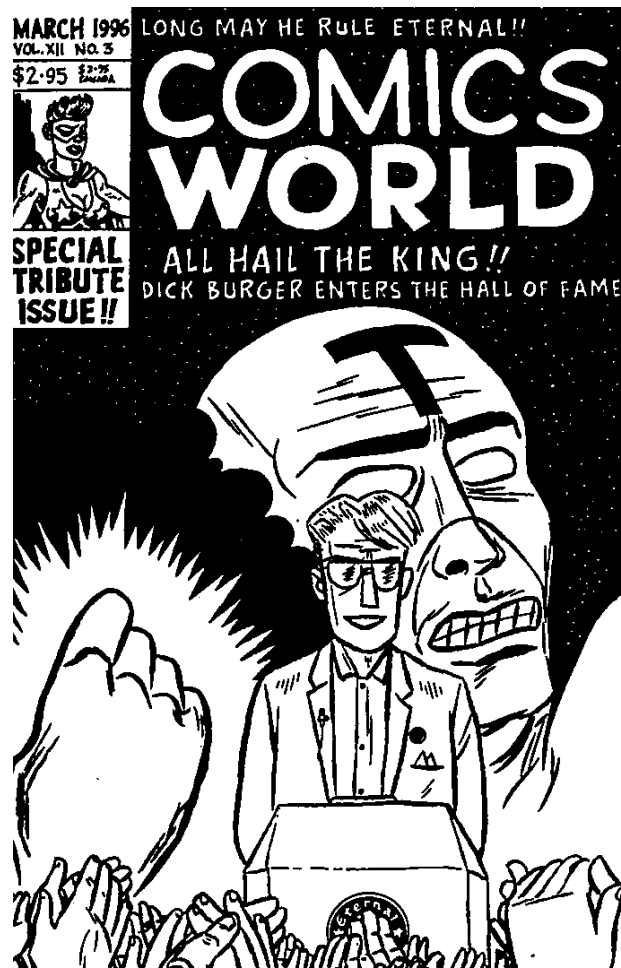


Fig. 8. Dylan Horrocks, from *Hicksville*.

For Horrocks, then, artists in the globalised arts economy are empowered individuals, free to embrace or dismiss the claims of globalisation, depending on their own, self-defined, terms. Sam's turning away from the lucrative appeal of Burger's comics empire is a gesture which seems, by contrast, beyond the writers singled out in Evans's essay. Making particular examples of Kapka Kassabova, Catherine Chidgey, Emily Perkins and

Kate Camp—all these having been adopted as media darlings by various enthused reviewers, editors and photographers—Evans point out the curious lack of control which many writers have over their own image. The proliferation of marketing ploys surrounding local, young, and most often, female, writers suggests that it is not local literature which is dangerously commoditised, but the writers of it themselves. Evans even goes so far as to call Knox, Chidgey, and Perkins the “successful products” of the globalising process enacted by the triumvirate of the IIML, Victoria University Press, and its flagship literary journal, Sport (“Babies” 94-95).

By regarding writers as the products rather than producers of local literatures, Evans cleaves closely to Graham Huggan’s argument in The Postcolonial Exotic. Summarising Huggan, for Evans the commoditising of literature represents “an endpoint of the larger postcolonial experience of the last forty years,” resulting in fiction that is “overshadowed by the imago of the author who has written it, represented as a glamorous and successful celebrity who wins prizes and awards” (“Babies” 100). Evans notes Huggan’s handling of Margaret Atwood in particular—“the writer with the status of an international filmstar, winner of the publishing industry’s equivalent of the Oscar”—who represents the translation of the author “to the ultimate stage of commodification” (“Babies” 101). Furthermore, the commodification of the writer feeds into the commodification of their nation, whereby the author-celebrity forms “part of an international pantheon of writers, each of whom stands for a particular region—Rushdie’s India, Coetzee’s South Africa, Atwood’s Canada and so on” (“Babies” 100-101). As products, authors, it seems, can be literally exported to foreign markets where, as synecdoches of nation, they can earn cultural capital domestically.

Evans and Huggan invest the author-celebrity with the properties of an export commodity, thus indicating how wider national interests have become increasingly conflated with the creative industries. Horrocks, however, regards the exploitative claims of globalisation on the connections between author and nation with more discretion. Burger's international success has not floated New Zealand on an international cultural stock exchange—the way, say Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy did in the early part of the twenty-first century—but rather, represents the severing of ties between the artist and the domestic scene in which he was nurtured.

Horrocks, however, does share the wary cynicism of Evans and Huggan towards author-celebrity. While Evans dubs Manhire's writing school "McManhire" (95) and Huggan credits the success of the "Atwood industry" (209), Burger's celebrity status overshadows his credentials as an artist or a writer. Although the young Burger exhibited a talent which could have seen him become, in Mort Molson's estimation, "the William Shakespeare of comic books" (ch. 10), as an adult he has reneged on artistic priorities in favour of pursuing the glamour and prestige associated with them, measurable by his financial net worth. He no longer draws his own comics but manages their production, while his status as "the most successful man in comics today" (ch. 3) prioritises expanding business interests over lasting and meaningful artistic development.

Hicksville's scepticism regarding commercially-driven expansion is pervasive and deep-seated. Hollywood actress Cincinnati Walker, playing the lead in the film based on a Burger-produced comic, Lady Night: Death Babe, knows nothing of the deeper, older artistic heritage of her character, telling Sam, "I don't read comics, Sam. I just dress up like 'em for a living" (ch. 6). Cincinnati Walker cynically declares that, for her, "The tits come with the costume", whereas for Sam, whose dedication to comics is sensitive and

studious, comics provide a touchstone of all that is worthwhile in himself and the world around him. As he tells Cincinnati, the original Lady Night series of the 1950s bears little resemblance to its Hollywood action-movie spin-offs but was “exciting, a bit sad and very moral and humane” (ibid). While Hollywood’s interests are presented as transparently and unashamedly superficial—and blatantly driven by the desire to accumulate revenue—the original works which they appropriate and repackage were themselves stores of deeper human value. The massive sums recouped by their contemporary spin-offs ultimately mean little to those such as Sam who preferred to invest in the originals emotionally and spiritually, as well as culturally and artistically.

Sam’s judgements might be surprising; after all, Hollywood movies and comic strips seem to share a common bond as not only symbols of but also products arising from the conjunction between creativity and mass consumerism. This conjunction, of course, occurs in a space articulated and explored by pop art. Yet Sam’s discerning distinction between the merits of the Hollywood blockbuster—represented by Lady Night: Death Babe, in which hero “Lady Night decapitates Deathscum with a piece of dental floss”—and the comic books which, in the words of Mort Molson, aspired to be “about serious things ... grown up things”, is a reminder that despite pop art’s widespread and influential appropriations of the icons of popular culture, the original forms retain value for those sensitive to their characteristic turns. For Horrocks, pop’s appropriations of a range of low-brow products—whether advertisements, commercial film and television, comic strips or newspapers, magazines and product packaging—need not monopolise the meaning of them all, reducing their originals to artefacts of no intrinsic worth whose only artistic meaning is that generated through their secondment to the avenues of high art.

Within Hicksville's own narrative, Sam, although broadly a fan of comics, discriminates between the "fresh moodiness" of 1950s comics artist Lou Goldman, and the work of Zack and Todd, "the best in the business" according to Rogers, Burger's head of production, but whose work Sam finds perniciously commercial (ch. 6). To Toxie's advice that he has to "draw what the public want", Sam replies, "Well this isn't what I want! Zack's understanding of anatomy is non-existent and Tom seems to have inked it with a needle—all these scratchy lines—no form beneath it. It's all pin-ups and splash pages with no story-telling sense!" (ibid). Horrocks points out that if comics are to be taken seriously as art, then, within the comics genre, the scale of artistic merit must be a graduating one. For comics to have their masterpieces, they must also be allowed their failures.

Horrocks's discriminations follow, in some measure, Scott McCloud's in his influential study of comic books, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. McCloud's book stems from the central premise that "The artform—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The 'content' of those images and ideas is, of course, up to creators, and we all have different tastes ... The trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger" (6). Like Horrocks, for McCloud, that some comics are crudely drawn and poorly told does not automatically consign them all to the lower echelons of cultural activity. Horrocks's discriminations have a heightened significance though. As Lister points out, "Hicksville dissolves the cultural prejudice that marks the comic as an inferior, sub-literary form by investing the narrative with levels of complexity usually associated with the densest high modernist texts" (138). Horrocks's narrative complexity is underpinned by the nuanced distinction he draws between the distressingly commercial fare of Burger on one hand and, on the other, Sam's lamentably

un-marketable creations Moxie and Toxie, the central characters of a self-described series of “loser autobiographical strips and moving epistemological treatises” (ch. 6).

Such distinctions are far-reaching. Just as comics can be disentangled from their commercial capacities, Hollywood, though it may operate as a symbol of American cultural hegemony, need not represent all American interests. Horrocks rejects the rampant commercialism so easily associated with Hollywood, but carefully avoids the wholesale rejection of American values or culture. America’s corpus of cultural production includes, after all, a rich comics history cannily acknowledged by Horrocks; within Hicksville’s narrative, fictional Americans Lou Goldman and Mort Molson represent artistic excellence, while real-world American cartoonists and comics creators Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, George Herriman, Will Eisner, and Martin Goodman are directly quoted in epigraphs at the start of each chapter. Even so, Horrocks does not endorse America as the unequivocal centre of a cultural or artistic empire, preferring instead to allow a more democratic engagement between locales. Hicksville thus forges links with Helsinki as easily as it does with Hollywood. America is not required as a point of common cultural connection between two (perhaps hitherto, or perhaps still) marginalised, or at least relatively inconspicuous, cultures. When Leonard wakes for the first time in Hicksville’s unfamiliar surroundings, his room is furnished with comics, apparently Eastern European in origin, that he cannot understand. Nonetheless he attempts to read them. Leonard, as the American reader here, offers a presence in a cultural matrix that is very far from the defining one.

Horrocks acknowledges, however, the perception that America offers a centre of cultural authority reflected in the international regard for its popular art forms. Leonard’s swagger seems derived from his achievements as a journalist and critic for Comics World

magazine. When he meets Grace for the first time he expects to impress her with his sophisticated metropolitan credentials. Comics World, in its very name, declares itself to be at the centre of the comics-universe, yet, because it is Los Angeles-based, implicitly suggests that any other centre of comics activity can be regarded as relatively marginal. Leonard is Canadian, but, embarrassed to be identified as a Newfoundlander, he claims to be American, revealing the extent to which he has bought into the assumptions underlying American cultural supremacy. Ironically, it is only when he admits he is not an American, but a “Newfie”, that Grace’s attitude thaws towards him, in turn revealing her own cultural prejudices. As she has already put it to Leonard, in the plainest terms available: “You’re arrogant, you’re a geek, you’re full of bullshit and you think you’re God’s gift ... You’re an American, basically” (ch. 9).

While Grace rehearses a familiar strain of anti-Americanism as uninformed as the attitudes she supposedly rails against, Sam reassures Leonard, worried that no one likes Americans, “plenty of Americans have visited Hicksville. Some of them end up staying quite a while” (ch. 7). American comics legend Lou Goldman has heard of Hicksville, his friend and fellow comics-giant Molson having visited it, as recalled by Goldman to Sam: “Hicksville eh? No shit... Yeah I’ve heard of Hicksville... Old Mort Molson used to talk about Hicksville—said he’d been there a couple a times, but you know I always figured it was like a metaphor... well, whaddaya know?” (ch. 6). Although both Molson and Goldman have become implicated in the Hollywood machine, Hicksville’s discriminations between place and worth reflect those between artists and the industries associated with them. By making the space between Hicksville and Hollywood fluid Horrocks allows artists such as Molson and Sam to dwell in—or move between—both.

While Leonard has come to Hicksville to uncover the little-known history of its most famous comics creator, he has unwittingly also repeated the steps of Molson, travelling from America to New Zealand, from a visible metropolitan centre of culture to a perceived margin. The second time Leonard journeys to Hicksville, towards the end of the novel, it is a trip made knowingly and pointedly. Leonard no longer clings to the vestigial glamour of his role as a journalist working for Comics World but has come to explore the libraries of Hicksville on his own terms. Previously an ambassador of a hegemonic cultural interest, Leonard has become a more self-assured and independent critic, who, tellingly, is now also revealed to be Canadian.



Fig. 9. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

If Horrocks hints at a fraternity between Canadians and New Zealanders, he elaborates on a connection which has been made before, though not always favourably. Answering Irving Layton's conjecture that without the United States Canadian culture would have been "a disaster", specifically one "like Australia or New Zealand", Wystan Curnow responded that "Canada's culture was a disaster, albeit a disaster very different from the one New Zealanders had to cope with" (156 emphasis original). Despite sharing Commonwealth membership, Canada is obviously distinguished from its antipodean

counterparts by its proximity to America. While Layton disparagingly implies that if not for the cultural influence of the United States Canada would have become a backwards-looking colonial outpost of the British Empire, and while throwing off the yoke of the home country might seem desirable for countries with strong colonial legacies, Canada's liberation seems to carry with it greater exposure to American cultural imperialism.

For Curnow, "The richness of American culture is no more valuable to Canadians, or New Zealanders, than the judgements Canadians or New Zealanders can make of it. And the difficulty is, simply, that those judgements will tend to be as good as Canada's or New Zealand's culture is itself rich" (157). While Curnow's "difficulty" implies a familiar low regard for the local product, Horrocks is keen to historicise such attitudes; hence, Leonard learns to overcome the inferiority complex rooted in his own provinciality. Grace even values her garden in Hicksville as a "sanctuary" (ch. 4) from the outside world, "a world" as Lister has put it, "increasingly inundated with international ideas, values and standards" (154).

In the early '70s when Curnow was writing, measuring cultural wealth in relatively provincial centres like New Zealand or Canada still relied on fixing local standards to a centralising cultural authority such as Britain or America. Yet in Hicksville's final scene Horrocks details a cultural exchange between Canada and New Zealand in which the presence of the United States is diminished: Leonard, no longer masquerading as an American, is granted direct access to the libraries of Hicksville. While Horrocks thus suggests that by the close of the twentieth century New Zealand had built up its stocks of cultural value, he also revises the assumptions underlying both Layton's and Curnow's claims—just as Leonard is no longer embarrassed to be a "Newfie", neither is Horrocks embarrassed by New Zealand's provincialism. Rather, Horrocks toys with the cultural

cringe, reinventing it as subject matter, and naming his fictional town “Hicksville” with an affectionate irony measured to override any pejorative charge the term might otherwise carry.

Horrocks’s calculated playfulness counters both the high seriousness of Curnow and the panic-stricken moralising of Bill Pearson, Margaret Dalziel, and Fairburn, who, in the early 1950s, became mouthpieces for what Horrocks called the “widespread concern in New Zealand about the influence of comics on young readers” (“Planet” 197). If the kinds of moral outrage formerly reserved for comics has more recently been channelled to, for instance, “gangsta rap, television, the Internet, and video games”, Horrocks looks to neutralise rather than inflame the moral debate, pointing out that “the problem lies in the way we unthinkingly apply whatever aesthetic paradigm is our most familiar, regardless of whether it’s relevant to the work we’re dealing with” (“Planet” 197-198). Horrocks’s calm appraisal cannily shifts the terms of debate back to artistic ones, calling for a measured shift in the critical apparatus supporting aesthetic paradigms.

In doing so Horrocks also registers a recent critical tendency which has seen comics justified as worthwhile cultural products through an insistence on their status as art. Among the most forceful examples of such critique is McCloud’s Understanding Comics, which has become emblematic of the move towards more theoretically sustained engagements with comics. Widely reviewed and approved of within the comics industry as well as by non-specialist reviewers, it is routinely recognised as “arguably the most important book of comics theory published in English so far” (Horrocks, “Inventing”). Not coincidentally, the book explores, as Horrocks says, “two central questions: ‘What is/ are comics?’ and ‘What is art?’” (“Perfect” 199).

While comics have increasingly subjected themselves to self-reflexive interrogations more characteristic of high art and literature, at the same time the echelons of high culture has been forced to register—as in Evans’s concerns—the growing pressures of commoditisation. While the low-brow considers itself with the seriousness characteristic of high culture even as the same high culture becomes subject to forces stereotypically attached to the low-brow, Hicksville rehearses the juxtaposition in its use of a combined cultural heritage. As opposed to Roy Lichtenstein, for instance, who introduced the aesthetic of comic books into the realm of high art via his large canvases, Hicksville makes the opposite traverse, importing the values of high literature—such as dense narrative layering conflated with metafictional frame-breaking—into a comic strip. Hicksville proudly retains its comic status—its full title declares Hicksville: A Comic Book—and thus keeps sight of its low-brow origins, embracing the association with an art form designed to sell as a disposable good. Even the term graphic novel, distanced from the more low-brow comic book, represented “an effort to elevate the medium’s artistic status” which proliferated most visibly in advertising campaigns keen to extend the markets available to comics (Harvey 116). Although Burger’s product represents the endpoint of an overblown commercialism to which Horrocks is opposed, becoming implicated in the complex web of commercial forces permeating the publishing industry is hard to avoid.

Similarly, long-standing arrangements exist in the art world, in which dealers can be as important as artists. As an example drawn by David Hopkins describes:

The Italian-born dealer Leo Castelli, assisted by his talent scout Ivan Karp, was pre-eminent in marketing American Pop Art. Having already snapped up Johns and Rauschenberg for his gallery, Castelli took on Lichtenstein in 1961, followed by Rosenquist and Warhol three years later. [. . .] When Rauschenberg won the

Grand Prize at the Venice biennale in 1964, aided by a string of strategic European exhibitions and Castelli's promotional machinations before the event, it was clear that the art world's financial capital was now New York. (114)

Hopkins might regard Rauschenberg's Venice Biennale win with cynicism, but only insofar as such prizes can, at least some of the time, be credited to a successful marketing and public relations machine whose interest it is to ensure financial success. The question of how such prizes measure artistic virtue is passed over. Not distracted by the economic or financial imperatives associated with the art he discusses on aesthetic and socio-cultural terms, Hopkins calmly allows their presence as part of a dense field of influences to be negotiated by artists.

Hopkins suggests that where there is creativity there will be, inevitably, an industry and a critical structure partially supporting it and partially steering it. The abstract-expressionists of New York, for instance, did not form a movement of their own volition, though, crucially their group was "unified to some extent by the patronage of Peggy Guggenheim" (8). The importance of Guggenheim to the group's eventual rise to dominance can hardly be overstated:

This wealthy heiress was beginning to shift the emphasis away from Surrealism at her newly established Art of This Century Gallery, and she gave several Abstract-Expressionists early exhibitions, notably Pollock. Critics such as Johnson Sweeney and, most significantly, Clement Greenberg started to support the new tendencies from 1943 whilst exhibitions such as Howard Putzel's 'A Problem for Critics' (1945) overtly fished for ways of characterizing the new aesthetic momentum. (ibid)

Evans, however, frames the equivalent forces in publishing in pernicious terms, worrying that

international publishing and the rise of postcolonial studies in Western academe have conspired increasingly in the period to produce a literature that is commodified for Western consumption, on the one hand tending to impose uniformity and homogeneity as dictated by the book-buying market, on the other hand fetishising each new book so that it seems fresh, new, inventive, groundbreaking. (“Babies” 100)

So while Hopkins seems unflustered by the ongoing involvement of dealers with artists, even noting the potential benefits, Evans is alarmed by the increasing influence of “the book-buying market” to the detriment of true “originality”.

Hopkins’s and Evans’s differences can partially be put down to the different demands on their particular projects. Hopkins’s After Modern Art is, more or less, a guide and a survey-text exploring a period which art history defines as controversial, and is thus required to intelligently account for key debates. On the other hand, Evans—and Huggan, on whom he draws extensively—are less expository, less concerned to synthesise key debates than to manufacture them. Furthermore, whereas Hopkins writes his survey of modernism’s aftermaths with the clinical detachment and declarative authority characteristic of a major survey-text from one of the world’s central academic publishers, the anxieties exhibited by Evans and Huggan, seem altogether more characteristic of attitudes at the provincial margins, where postmodern self-reflexive questioning takes the form of interrogations into not just the legitimacy of occupancy but also the legitimacy of cultural expressions arising from such occupancy.

Even so, Hopkins shares with Evans and Huggan an interest in how globalised markets are implicated in artistic production, and the points at which their concerns intersect are telling. Although patronage has long been at the heart of the production of much fine

art, Hopkins notices “the dizzying escalation in postwar art prices” (114), while Huggan registers that literary prizes reflect “shifting patterns of patronage” (105). For Huggan these shifts are significant in wider cultural and artistic terms: “In a global cultural economy controlled by huge multinational companies, the corporate sponsorship of the arts has become an indisputable fact” (ibid). Hopkins meanwhile notes the force of similar developments in the fine arts—especially prevalent in the 1980s—when “Collectors, business corporations, and banks began to see [art] as a reliable means of acquiring assets. In 1985 the private sector in America contributed \$698 million to arts sponsorship compared to the government’s \$163 million” (206). Hopkins thus confers notice on trends in the visual arts which match approximately the pattern of increasing commoditisation as suggested by Evans and Huggan played out by literary publishing houses.

Evans’s arguments could even gain some traction from the attention Hopkins draws to the increasing numbers of “Businesses [which] developed policies of ‘enlightened self-interest’, realising the benefits that could accrue from being associated with art’s universalizing and libertarian rhetoric” (ibid). If it is accurate to draw art’s appeal for corporations in terms of its “universalizing and libertarian rhetoric”, then the art-investments of big-business and corporate sponsorship must translate those properties into monetary worth. The trajectory of Evans’s argument would even prescribe that they are prioritised over the aesthetic qualities of the work, clouding critical judgements, and sidelining the individualised concerns of artists. As he argues of the equivalent power-relation between publishing houses and authors, “Form replaces content, resulting in a fiction which represents originality while actually taking no risks” (“Babies” 100).

The problem seems compounded when the “libertarian rhetoric” that art supposedly engenders is endorsed and promoted from the multinational quarter, many representatives of which present themselves as natural targets for artists and writers practising a libertarian interest. Yet as German-American conceptual artist Hans Haacke demonstrates, artists need not shy away from the troubled ethics of a politics of conflicted economic and cultural entanglements. His sculptural piece MetroMobiltan takes up the complicated and controversial involvement of Mobil Oil in politics and art. In the early 1980s Mobil sponsored the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition Treasures of Ancient Nigeria. At the time they were oil suppliers to the military and police of South Africa’s apartheid government. Haacke’s work suggests the cynical involvement of Mobil in the cultural heritage of Nigeria, one of Africa’s richest oil-producing nations (Kleiner, Mamiya, Tansey 1136). While Mobil did not submit to growing public pressure demanding the end of dealings with South African governmental bodies, their arts involvement also continued—notably sponsoring the Pegasus Award in fiction, won in 1984 by Hulme.

For Haacke, the workings of museum practice and corporate patronage must be interrogated as subject matter if artists are to retain ethical integrity. Reviewing Haacke’s work in 1986, New York Times art critic Michael Brenson commented,

In today’s art world, Hans Haacke may be not only inevitable but also indispensable. With the money now invested in art, with the growing corporate and political involvement, with a new breed of collector who approaches art as something to display, like jewelry, or barter, like stocks, it is logical that some artists want no part of art making as usual. (“Political Tone”)

Hicksville, similarly, wants “no part of art making as usual”, if the usual is to become complicit with structures which compromise rather than accommodate what artists’

choose to produce. Sam's work thus represents a disentanglement from the art market; though torn between pursuing art as a career and as a calling, the independent mini-comics he produces expose the workings of the publishing system which has repeatedly rejected his work. Further, Hicksville is a comment made from outside the supporting infrastructure of the local product. Horrocks's publisher, Drawn and Quarterly, is Canadian, and Hicksville remains an obscure text in New Zealand, despite being taught on University literature courses and, increasingly, becoming a subject of local critical interest.

Curiously Evans does not propose Haacke's approach—applauded by Brenson and adopted by Horrocks—whereby the supporting structures of the art museum or the publishing house can be critiqued from within the expressive sphere of the arts themselves. Although Evans has cynical regard for the IIML's involvement in local literature, he nonetheless concludes, somewhat rapidly given the charge of his initial assertions, that it has “often produced writing of undoubtedly high quality” (“Babies” 106). Evans's argumentative force is undone by his own partiality to the forms he criticises. While Evans never resolves the paradox implied by a mass-produced writing product that maintains excellent standards, Horrocks's mix of affection and frustration—affection for comics and frustration for the industry surrounding it—is explored as subject matter. Sam, threatened with sacking should he fail to amuse Ed, his hard-nosed editor, laments, “He's got a point. ‘Laffs’ is a humour magazine. And I am supposed to do comic strips. [. . .] Of course it's a pity I'm such a miserable bastard, 'cause I really need the money...” (ch. 2 emphasis original).

Evans comprehends, however, the tricky balance between respecting the needs of writers and meeting those of the audience. His overriding concern, as he puts it, is that the

writing of the so-called VUP school, despite its undoubted quality, maintains a “purpose and relationship to its readers [which] are nonetheless difficult to see” (“Babies” 106). But in the terms of his essay this seems confused at best. Evans’s initial postulation rests heavily on a cynical regard for the influence of the book-buying market, comprising not, it seems, readers, but consumers. Having lamented the scant critical regard for Wilkins’s first two novels, The Miserables and Little Masters—New Zealand’s “critical capacity [being] simply too feeble, too primitive, to cope with writing of such stature”—Evans alleges “it is obvious that Wilkins’s next two novels, Nineteen Widows Under Ash and Chemistry, represent a reaction to this silence, a determination to alter the terms of his fiction in order to find a wider market” (“Babies” 104). Hence, depending on his purpose, Evans advocates both more and less reader-power. Similarly, he condemns the activity of the institutionalised writing school while nonetheless praising books which count among its products.

While Evans identifies a “significant attempt to break away from [the past] by integrating New Zealand writing into the global market” (“Babies” 95), Hicksville’s publication history represents an ironic alternative to such commoditisation. Neither published in New Zealand, nor by a publisher of so-called contemporary or literary fiction—and preceding Evan’s “Spectacular Babies” by around two years—Hicksville has not garnered the particular kinds of prizes and subsequent mainstream critical attention that other New Zealand literary novels are more easily in line for and, in Evans’s view, tend to both aspire towards and be measured by.³

³ Hicksville has, however, attracted significant attention from within the comics fraternity, reflected in an impressive list of awards. Comics Journal (USA) named Hicksville “Book of the Year”. It won an Eisner Award (USA) in 2002, and was nominated for an Ignatz Award (USA), Alph’Art Award (France), Attilio Micheluzzi Award (Italy), and “Best Foreign Comic” at Spain’s Barcelona Comics Festival.

On this note, Evans's scepticism for the high regard in which the literary prize market is held locally is direct, refreshing, and hard to refute:

Reviewers seem increasingly to judge in terms of prizes and awards and the unexamined value system winning writers are required to express. Thus Frank O'Shea rates the Wellington writer Lloyd Jones's novel Choo Woo with those of Patrick McCabe, the Irish writer who has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and Marion McLeod begins her review of Randall's The Curative by noting the author's earlier awards as if they are an unquestioned part of the aesthetic process. Attributes valorised by reviewers include seriousness of tone, social responsibility in subject matter, universality of theme and sensitivity to the potentials of the English language to the point of showing a suitable—though preferably not too threatening—awareness of poststructuralist practice. (“Babies” 100)

Notably, though, Hicksville has won several comics prizes—markers which, like the literary prizes Evans discusses, straddle national and geo-political boundaries. Yet unlike those prizes and the industry they represent, comics awards and recognition are innately specialist, not speaking to a wider audience of cultural legitimacy and sophistication. Hicksville is thus recognised overseas, yet still something of an outsider locally, acclaimed by both academics and comics enthusiasts yet barely raising a blip on a mainstream radar constantly tuned into Booker, Pulitzer, and Montana success. But this allows an intriguingly complex relationship to New Zealand's apparently increasingly globalised literature. For the way it both conforms to and dramatically revises conceptions of the worth of local literature, Hicksville thus revises and revalues local literariness as a store of local knowledge.

3. Local Knowledge

Towards the end of Hicksville an imagined summit-meeting between legendary figures of local culture—Hone Heke, Captain Cook and Charles Heaphy—concludes that New Zealand has, disturbingly and magically, slipped into “an entirely new hemisphere”, one that requires “a new way of mapping” (ch. 10). The meeting is historically impossible, for the three men were not contemporaries, and, underlining the fantastic element, is staged as the narrative of a mysterious internal comic. One of the products of the enigmatic character Augustus E., its pages magically and ominously appear to Leonard throughout the course of the novel. Mixing history, myth, and metafiction, the encounter registers the depth and breadth of the novel’s engagement with the local; distinct brands of knowledge are positioned in relation to one another and, it is suggested, through such contiguity new meaning is generated.

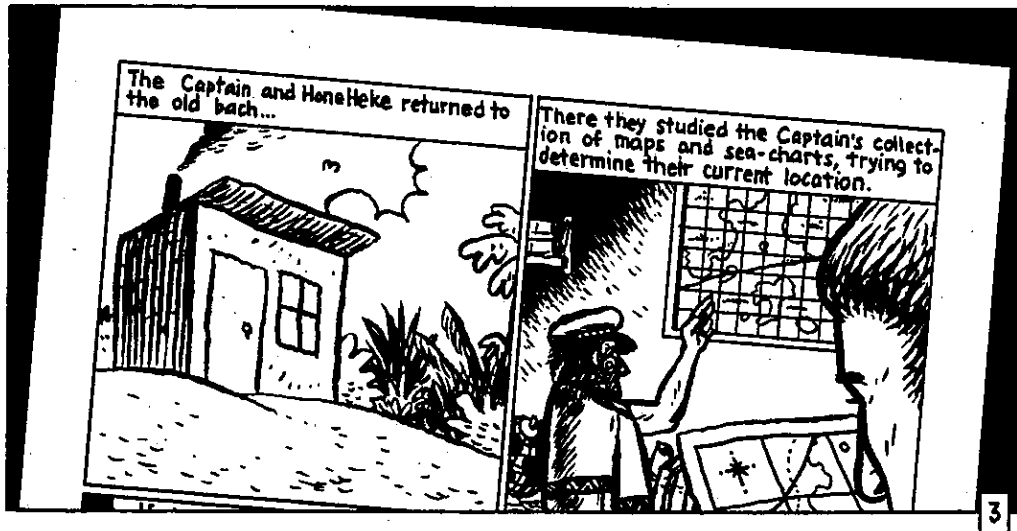


Fig. 10. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Although Heke voices familiar indigenous concerns by critiquing the branches of knowledge which Heaphy and Cook represent, disputes between the three are not beyond reconciliation. Heke tells Heaphy, “You are a surveyor. Your maps allow the land to be carved into pieces that may be owned and sold. They are tools of commerce and law—of alienation” (ch. 10 emphasis original), and Cook: “Your charts build a road from one place to another. And by naming the other in your own language, you seek to take possession of it...” (ibid). Horrocks, however, allows Heaphy and Cook their retorts, Heaphy answering Heke that “the precise relationship between places and things” are “aspects of landscape that neither painting nor poetry can adequately record” (ibid), and Cook that in the face of the unknown, he seeks “to bring intelligibility to the unexplored” (ibid) through his maps, expanding both knowledge and wisdom. Closing the conversation in the spirit of reconciliation, Heke answers, “We too have our maps. Some can be seen—those made of wood or shells or weaving. But most are spoken with words” (ibid).

Augustus E.'s comic suggests that the separate engagements with the land represented by Heke, Cook, and Heaphy—indigenous, cartographic, topographic—can generate new knowledge when gathered collectively. Similarly, Hicksville is concerned with what can be made of an inheritance of varied perspectives of New Zealand. In this way, the encounter staged within Augustus's comic metaphorically represents Hicksville's relation to established forms of cultural knowledge. Although Heke is a figure drawn from historical record, because he is re-imagined as the fictional construction of the contemporaneous Augustus E., his assertions that "We are entering a new world; one in which everything is alive and in motion" (ibid emphasis original), speak to Lister's view that Horrocks's characters move within a contemporary world "increasingly inundated with international ideas, values and standards" (154). If this world, with its saturations of information and network of various—and variously located—media, can be symbolised by the role of the internet in people's lives, Horrocks's comic-within-a-comic device introduces layering of inter-textual reference that imitate the way we all must negotiate and make sense of it.

The points of connection between characters are where most meaning and understanding are to be found. Although Heke is the character with the deepest local knowledge, at the internal comic's conclusion, Cook and Heaphy bring their own knowledge to bear as all three carry the story to its affirming conclusion. In spiritual terms that will be known to many New Zealanders—or anyone familiar with Maori mythology—Heke describes the significance of the rock called Rarohenga at Cape Reinga to his companions; for Heke, this rock is "where the spirits of the dead leap into the Underworld to make their journey to Hawaiki, the Spirit World" (ibid). While Cook is sensitive to the importance of this sacred site in Maoridom, Heaphy is blind to its significance until Cook adds, "There is a lighthouse on the point. It will serve as an

observation post” (ibid). “Rather like a crow’s nest”, ventures Heaphy (ibid). The site has a double significance then—it is as spiritual for the indigenous culture represented by Heke as it is strategic for the surveyors of the colonising one—yet their concerns are translatable rather than mutually exclusive. While the point of intersection between colonising and indigenous people historically involved a power-relation of appropriation and loss, the “new hemisphere” that Horrocks envisages for them points to the possibilities of repatriation based on a mutual respect for culturally-specified engagements with the land.

When Heke, Cook, and Heaphy all go to the lighthouse at Te Reinga, the northernmost point of the North Island of New Zealand, they are met with the view of land advancing towards them over the sea. Equally, though, the view could be of stable land towards which they are advancing upon their shifting island. After all, as Heke has earlier claimed, “Te-ika-a-Maui [literally, ‘the fish of Maui’, a common Maori name for the North Island] has begun to swim once more through the sea” (ibid). Either way, the metaphor runs that the movement of the land—while recalling New Zealand’s renowned geo-thermal activity—implies a stable relationship between the land and its representation is at best illusory, for the views of New Zealand which can be made are many and various. The only stable referent point for the land lies in holding each of these views in equal regard, brought into a more equal and interactive relation than was possible when colonial ideas held sway. For Horrocks, views of New Zealand previously pitted in competition can be combined; allowed to retain their distinctions, they bring forth new knowledge, clarity and self-awareness.

While Horrocks might qualify as the artist or writer who, in Baxter’s terms, “has grown up in entire acceptance of his environment, truly inhabiting the country” (*Critic* 4),

Hicksville offers both a savvy acknowledgement and a clever questioning of belonging in such nationalistic terms. Hicksville seems to ask, to what do a nation's citizens really belong—a place, or their conception of it? Horrocks thus also questions the “truly” of Baxter's phrase, putting the word “country” into ironic quotation marks and suggesting that belonging is more than a matter of merely inhabiting. Belonging can thus be framed not simply by residence within geo-political borders, but also by artistic and cultural heritage. While this introduces a more amorphous, almost arbitrary, understanding of identity, it is one that, surely, Horrocks intends us to notice for the way it articulates the particular force of artistic expressions made in New Zealand, so long centred on cultural nationalism.

Hicksville's position in a framework of western art and literature which has increasingly incorporated the low-brow (often in order to pass comment on the high) grants it a crucial significance within New Zealand's own cultural history. The novel comments pointedly on the way this country's artistic identity can never be considered in isolation, but rather is always defined, at least partly, by its relationship to overseas models. Colonial art and literature in New Zealand, for instance, were engaged in representing the colonial situation in ways that did justice to the local but that also had to negotiate a complicated relationship with the European models to which they naturally deferred. Hence Alfred Sharpe's paintings are seen as “purely an objective [record] of New Zealand landscape” (Pound 3), yet his poems cannot escape the romanticism underpinning their musings:

And then, within that deep, primaeval forest,

I stood all dumb and still

While of the grand and solemn beauty round me

My soul drank in its fill

I could not even to a word give voicing
E'en if I had the will.
For there are solemn temples, where the voicings
Of lips are seldom heard
And where, amid the mighty works of Nature,
The heart alone is stirred;
And though it quivereth with its thronging feelings
It utters not a word. (1-12, in Blackley)

Objective the paintings may be, yet it is hard to divorce them entirely from the romantic sentiments of the time. Even later, when New Zealand artists attempted to extricate themselves from such specifically European paradigms as romanticism in an attempt to view the landscape anew and with renewed accuracy, they often relied on regionalist or modernist styles, thus registering a break from models imported by early artists, but still aligning themselves with non-autochthonous modes of artistic practice.

Horrocks's use of the comic book knowingly repeats the local appropriation of foreign art forms, but with a renewed purpose and scope. Recalling Dunn's observation that New Zealand painters and writers saw the country's natural features as "art works waiting for the right sensibility" ("Frozen"), Hicksville, while registering the importance of the landscape to the ongoing local artistic interest, conceives of art history itself as if it were a comic waiting for "the right sensibility". Roger Horrocks's comment that "there is art in a realist style [and] there is art that is not realist but very concerned with notions of reality" ("Invention") registers nicely the shift that Hicksville stages, for Hicksville is not concerned with finding an authentic way of representing New Zealand—or its landscapes—but with considering what the ramifications of this (familiar) search are.

According to Roger Horrocks, for New Zealand writers such as Baxter, Brasch, and Curnow, “adventuring in search of reality was not only a stylistic preference—it also involved a moral responsibility to nature and to the local community” (ibid). Further, “like Curnow, Fairburn conceived of the role of New Zealander as a total commitment, moral and aesthetic” (ibid). Dylan Horrocks reinvents these concerns as subject matter, but they also provide the structuring principle of his text and the point of its interaction with readers; although the fictionalised town Hicksville points to the possibilities for the actual New Zealand to be both affirmed and dramatically reinvented, its inhabitants’ commitment to place represents nonetheless a search, an “adventuring”, closely tied to both ethical and aesthetic appreciation.

Leonard’s journey into the country’s obscure outer reaches represents not only an approach towards a refined aesthetic appreciation, but also one towards moral refinement. Leonard’s quest for Burger’s mysterious origins has not only been unexpectedly fulfilled, but also prompted his self-discovery, and a subsequent revising of cultural and artistic assumptions. At Hicksville’s conclusion Kupe reveals the final instalment of Augustus E.’s comic to Leonard. Heke’s advice to Cook and Heaphy—“If we are to find our way, we must learn to map water and fire, wind and mist—even te wairua e te mauri [or, in English, ‘the spirit and the life force’]” (ch. 10 emphasis original)—seems equally applicable to Leonard himself. While Hicksville’s conclusion summarises Leonard’s newfound cultural knowledge and self-awareness by way of Augustus E.’s comic, Hicksville’s first chapter begins with Leonard reading his beloved Captain Tomorrow: Rebirth, representing not only the zenith of popular comics achievement, but also the attitudes in Leonard which are waiting to be revised. Burger’s Captain Tomorrow is not only a mainstream comic but also one whose global success has been engineered by immoral means. Hicksville’s plot culminates in the revelation

that Burger stole the Captain Tomorrow story from comics legend Mort Molson, revising the original ending along more marketable lines and redrawing it in a contemporary style. The moral heart of the country is thus moored not simply to the authenticity of its aesthetic affects, but in their just attribution.

Even though Leonard takes the Captain Tomorrow series entirely seriously, its title character seems to parody the conventions and conventionality of mainstream comics, declaring to his arch nemesis, “How much longer are you going to keep this up, Nullifier? We’ve been playing reruns of this old schtick for longer than I can remember! And we both know how it ends... same every time!” (ch. 1). Because this riff on conventional comic endings ironically foreshadows Leonard’s shock at Hicksville’s conclusion, when Burger’s villainy is laid bare, Captain Tomorrow (like the internal comic by Augustus E.) illuminates the themes of the wider text, Hicksville, that surrounds it. The very first words of Captain Tomorrow even echo Heke’s arcane musings throughout Augustus’s obscure strip. The Maori chief’s sage, quasi-mystical warnings to Cook—that “The islands are drifting” (prologue), that “The fish has woken up and started to swim” (ch. 1), and that “The land has never been still like a corpse” (ch. 7)—emphasising movement, amorphousness and instability, find their mainstream comic equivalent in Burger’s narration: “From up here, all you can see is motion... The sea and the clouds—churning billows and flecks of gold, rolling shadows of violet and grey... Nothing is solid, nothing fixed... Everything’s made of shifting vapours... Constantly dying and being reborn...” (ch. 1). Horrocks’s ear for comic and other linguistic conventions both extends and represents the reach of his revisions and reinventions.

Just as Hicksville contains the story of Burger’s meteoric rise to success, the Captain Tomorrow series—to which Burger owes his fame—contains the story of how “an

average Joe trying to keep his head above water [. . .] becomes a hero” (ch. 9). Burger, to his legions of fans, is synonymous with the title character of his graphic novel series, Captain Tomorrow. Like Tomorrow, Burger has risen from obscurity to a position of power, an ascendancy which captivates the curious Leonard, who, interviewing Burger, begins:

Mr. Burger, at the age of thirty you are widely seen as the most influential comic book creator of your generation. Your Captain Tomorrow series and various graphic novels have sold in the millions and have been translated into seven languages, earning you the epithet ‘the successor to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby...’ Five years ago you gained a controlling interest in the publisher that first discovered you—Eternal Comics. Since then you have overseen its expansion into an entertainment empire to rival the Time-Warner group. Forbes magazine has estimated your nett [sic] personal worth at 20 million dollars. Yet your story began in a small town in a tiny country in the South Pacific. Let’s start there, then ... the origin of Dick Burger! Tell me about your hometown. (ch. 3)

Interestingly, then, while Leonard is embarrassed by his own provincial origins, and later finds Hicksville to be “the ass-end of the universe, remote even by local standards” (ch. 5), his prejudice does not extend to Burger, to whom he observes, “A lot of people wonder about the formative years of a great artist, especially when you grew up in such isolation” (ch. 3). For Leonard, Burger’s obscure origins are crucially linked to his artistic identity.

Yet Leonard’s interest is declared off-limits by Burger, who tells him, “There is nothing interesting about Hicksville. We’re not going to talk about it. Now, I suggest we start this interview over” (ibid emphasis original). Burger’s response to Leonard, and the anxiety with which he guards his formative years in Hicksville, point to a character more

aligned with Captain Tomorrow's arch-nemesis, the Nullifier. Whereas Burger has stolen the storyline of Captain Tomorrow from Kupe's library at Hicksville, apparently convinced his crime will not find him out, the Nullifier steals the orb of Captain Tomorrow in a similar move, but one whose Faustian dimensions are even more pronounced. The Nullifier enters into a pact with mystical beings who help him steal Tomorrow's power on the condition that he uses it to destroy all life on earth. As Kupe summarises, "He agrees to this because he thinks he'll be able to use the power to defeat the mystics and thus be freed from their pact. But he's wrong, the power fills him with a lust for destruction and he quickly becomes the mystics' willing tool" (ch. 9). Ironically then, Burger has stolen a story whose own moral warns against the hubris he himself practises.

Burger's crime means he can never return to Hicksville, yet Leonard, researching a book on him is compelled to visit. Hicksville is thus a quest novel in which the desired object—the secret of Burger's origins—is not a material treasure but takes the form of knowledge which is firmly rooted in the local. Thus Leonard can only achieve success by entering the local and understanding it on its own self-prescribed terms, requiring a dramatic revision of the cultural assumptions he has brought with him.

The extent of Leonard's profound dislocation is registered in the novel's first chapter which begins with a series of images rooted in local familiarity. The early frames portraying Leonard reading Captain Tomorrow beside a quiet, country road has any number of local resonances. The rural road or railway line is a motif of the regional which occurs and recurs through New Zealand art. Rata Lovell-Smith and Bill Sutton, for instance, used the empty road to particular effect, underlining the sense of rural

isolation through a minimal human presence. Crucially though, for the regionalists a human presence nonetheless remains, for it is precisely the relatively muted scale of human involvement which best evokes the isolation of the rural. Hence Angus's iconic Cass makes pointed use of its tiny central figure, sitting in a lonely country railway station, both figure and station dwarfed by the Southern Alps behind. Grahame Sydney's paintings of, in particular, the Ida Valley in North Otago suggest a lonely human presence. Sydney's attention to rural intersections, his country roads which are deserted yet marked with lines and signage, point to a place bearing the traces of inhabitation, and thus evoke isolation rather than the utterly unknown. Elsewhere Sam Neill noticed the importance of the country road—especially the empty state highway, on which was “never seen, never heard another car, another soul”—as an organising motif recurrent throughout New Zealand cinema in his documentary, Cinema of Unease. Neill's “lonely road through [the] indifferent landscape” (Unease) seems to speak directly to Horrocks's use of the road as both an organising pictorial motif and a symbol of isolation, inherited from various New Zealand art forms.



Fig. 11. Grahame Sydney, Anderson Lane. Private collection, Dunedin.



Fig. 12. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

The isolation of Horrocks's road—like Neill's, observing its use in Jane Campion's film adaptation of Janet Frame's autobiography, An Angel At My Table—is also imbued with psychological associations, attached to a sense of impending unease and danger. Like Campion, Horrocks's treatment of the landscape is reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield's in stories "The Woman at the Store" and "Millie", where deeply troubled mental states are almost inexorably attached to the isolation of the colonial condition. In these stories, as Vincent O'Sullivan observes, Mansfield "thread[ed] human behaviour with the brooding grimness of landscape" ("Mansfield" 339); in Horrocks's Hicksville, the landscape itself, it seems, thwarts Leonard's attempts to navigate it. Although Leonard is not driven mad—nor to murder—as in Mansfield's grim fictions, his frustrations are imbued with surreal twists: the only shop he finds stands curiously alone in the middle of a paddock, and the only map for sale makes no sense, containing comic frames instead of directions. A curious sheet of paper—which turns out to be an additional page from the nonsensical map-cum-comic—blown on the wind leads him deeper into the rural heartland till he finds himself thoroughly lost, defeated by the strange landscape which grows forbiddingly dark around him. The long shadows cast out behind him as he sits all

alone in an empty paddock, the sky darkening over an otherwise strangely lit landscape, seem to recall Mansfield again when she observed: “There is no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw” (ibid).



Fig. 13. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Leonard is no doubt sneered at, not entirely approved of, by all those he encounters, such as Farmer Dobbs, who seems partly a familiar caricature of a local type, but who nevertheless stands in for the unwelcoming “spirit of the country”. Grace Pekapeka is the first resident of Hicksville to meet Leonard; while he sits at the side of the road reading Captain Tomorrow, apparently waiting for a driver with whom he can hitch a ride, she surprises him in her car, interrupting his reading and offering him a lift. Her gruff “You headed for Hicksville?” (ch. 1) foreshadows the narrative’s ultimate trajectory—and is affectionately, knowingly, repeated towards the end of the novel when Leonard has won her acceptance—yet her initial meeting with Leonard shows the extent of the cultural gulf which Leonard must overcome before Hicksville may be entered and its knowledge attained.

Grace's surname, Pekapeka, indicates her status as tangata whenua—Pekapeka is not only a Maori surname but also the name of a small locality on the Kapiti Coast. It calls to mind the more well-known Ruapekapeka in the Far North, while pekapeka is the indigenous name of New Zealand's lesser short-tailed native bat. Even if Leonard were to learn Grace's last name, it is unlikely he would be able to figure its range of significances, rooted as they are in particularised local knowledge and therefore beyond Leonard's sphere of reference. Either way, although Leonard asks Grace for her name, she, hearing her traveller's accent and supposing it to be American—a detail Leonard complies with—frostily withholds her own details. Though she could help Leonard, her own cultural prejudices prevent this. She asks Leonard if, as a comics journalist, he is visiting Hicksville to talk to Kupe. When Leonard confesses he has never heard of Kupe, Grace does not elaborate, and, worse, when Leonard mentions Burger's name, Leonard is told to get out of the car. Grace, as a local, is an emissary from Leonard's destination, yet her appearance only heightens his sense of unease, foreboding and frustration. Further, her refusal to provide any of the information which, as the narrative unfolds, proves crucial to Leonard—such as Kupe's role as a spiritual guardian of comics or Burger's unauthorised appropriation of Molson's Captain Tomorrow—firmly underlines that Leonard's assimilation of local knowledge, though necessary, will not be easily won.

Nonetheless, having been ejected from Grace's car, Leonard begins the long walk to the East Cape rather than wait for another ride. He is seen, in another locally charged image, wandering up the country highway which disappears into the distant hills. For Neill, contextualising the familiar image in New Zealand film of the wanderer on the country road, the motif's recurrence points to the prevalence, in local story-telling, of characters

who always seem to be “on some journey or other”, but also becomes a metaphor for “the story of New Zealand cinema itself” (Unease). If Neill’s New Zealand cinema spent a long apprenticeship in search of itself, and found imagery to match, so too, it seems has New Zealand literature. Leonard’s long walk to the East Cape recalls the recurrent local image of the traveller on the road, suggesting the determination to engage in a journey of cultural discovery that, more broadly, speaks to local literary traditions.



Fig. 14. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

In New Zealand texts as diverse as John Mulgan’s Man Alone and Hulme’s the bone people, for instance,

there is a journey to the heart of the country by broken individuals who literally fall into the landscape and are subsequently restored, healed by notably similar figures of extreme isolation and priestly authority, and who emerge with a vision of social regeneration and a purified sense of connection to the landscape of New Zealand. (Highway 23-24 emphasis original)

Although he is not “broken” in the same way Mulgan’s and Hulme’s protagonists are, Leonard is “restored” in a sense—having adjusted his view of Burger from hero to

villain—via Kupe, Hicksville's figure of “extreme isolation and priestly authority” living, hidden from view, in the Hicksville lighthouse, guardian of a magical library.



Fig. 15. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Yet whereas the supernatural elements in, for instance, the bone people are, for some critics and commentators, troubling inclusions—such as Lawrence Jones, who found that the “characters cannot stand up under the mythic burden placed on them” (204), or Williams, who observed “that the relation between the supernatural and naturalistic elements in the novel is confusing and lacking in clear demarcating signposts” (Highway 87)—for Horrocks, the “mythic burden” on Leonard, precisely because it is confusing, points out the extent to which Hicksville represents a store of localised knowledge, requiring Leonard to adjust the assumptions he has brought with him. Heke, Cook, and Heaphy appear to Leonard first as characters in Augustus E.’s comic strip, but later,

more threateningly and supernaturally, as ghostly apparitions at a costume party (where, in a fitting frame-breaking moment, characters already represented as cartoons dress up as well-known comics characters). As apparitions Heke, Cook, and Heaphy double as quasi-mythical spirit guides, mystical essences of the land, leading Leonard to Kupe's lighthouse, the symbol of local knowledge, representing the extent to which Leonard must revise his cultural assumptions if he is to make sense of the local. For while Augustus E.'s comic is represented by a holding in Kupe's library, the commercialised product of Burger which has brought Leonard to Hicksville, and which counts for Leonard as the height of comics achievement, pointedly, is not.



Fig. 16. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Throughout Hicksville, when the narrative departs from strict realism—as in Kupe's lighthouse which contains comics by Picasso and Lorca; or during Grace's trip to the fictional Cornucopia—its details are consistently imbricated with the surrounding, more

straightforwardly realist, fiction in self-reflexive terms: Kupe's lighthouse is a Borgesian library, while Grace's trip to Cornucopia is recorded as another internal comic, this time one written, in another frame-breaking elaboration, by a cartoonist whose name might be "Dylan Horrocks". Although Hulme's protagonist, with similarly metafictional overtones, is called Kerewin Holmes, overall, for Williams

in the bone people the supernatural is not consistently treated as fictive. The world of Maori spiritual presences, of gods and visits by the ghosts of ancient Maori people, into which Joe stumbles in Chapter 10 is depicted as real—not 'real' in the sense that the pub scenes and squalid domestic scenes are, but not merely fanciful either. (Highway 87)

For Hulme, the spirituality of the local offers redemption at the site of the local, yet floats free of her fictive devices, whereas for Horrocks such spirituality, similarly grounded in place, is nonetheless intractably bound to a deep love of his chosen aesthetic form. As Horrocks has explained, Hicksville is "a story about comics—their history and poetry—and also about what [. . .] New Zealanders call 'turangawaewae'—having a place to stand in the world—a kind of spiritual home. Hicksville is my way of creating such a home for comics" ("Magic").

Horrocks's "home for comics" implies a concern, then, with how cultural knowledge is stored. Throughout Hicksville storehouses occur and recur—most obviously in the libraries of Mrs. Hicks and Kupe, but also in Grace's greenhouse whose design seems to evoke deliberately the wharehau on a marae. Appropriately, Grace feels a profound bond with the greenhouse underscored by belonging in genealogical terms: "When she was a child, Grace would sometimes sleep in the greenhouse. Her grandmother knew of course, but pretended she didn't..." (ch. 4). Just as a Maori meeting house comprises carvings which not only represent ancestors, but can stand in for them in real terms as

well, Grace, sleeping in the greenhouse, “would close her eyes surrounded by her protectors and in the morning they would all be there, calmly getting on with the business of growing” (ibid).

By doubling a greenhouse as a wharenui, Horrocks updates rather than strictly revises both indigenous and imported cultures, recalling, for instance, the work of Maori artist and carver, Cliff Whiting, whose design for the whare at Te Papa Tongarewa, Te Hono ki Hawaiki acknowledges the combined presence of Maori, European, and Asian cultural influences. Whiting self-consciously applies modernist sensibilities to an aesthetic framework—the wharenui—whose origins pre-date colonial involvement, yet without overlooking the importance of those origins. Dunn’s view that Whiting “retains an underlying understanding for traditional values while being very much aware of the need to bring in qualities that are new and capable of creating interest as contemporary art” (Sculpture 136) acknowledges that modernist Maori art represents a continuation of, if also a stylistic a break from, earlier Maori culture. While Joan Metge esteems Whiting’s work for “what it says about the vitality and adaptability of the Maori people, who hold fast to the treasures of their ancestors by making them at home in the modern world” (288), no doubt Whiting would approve of Heke’s call for “a new way of mapping” (ch. 10), one that takes account of multiple histories, and that, in doing so, thus suggests how new artistic ground may be furrowed.

The cultural knowledge which Whiting’s Te Hono ki Hawaiki is built to contain points to a Maori world that exists in relation to, rather than isolation from, imported traditions and cultures such as European and Asian ones. If critical paradigms must be updated to

account for the new artistic directions,⁴ Whiting's advance on traditional cultural and aesthetic forms recalls the development of nineteenth-century Maori aesthetic practice in the east of the North Island. There, the sudden appearance of figurative painting—unknown to pre-contact Maori culture—shows the direct cultural influence of not only European tastes and styles, but the pervasive spread of European religious beliefs as well; as Neich points out in Painted Histories, figurative painting flourished in association with the Ringatu church. Rongopai even seems to stand as something of a predecessor to Whiting's marae at Te Papa; one of the most intricate examples of a meeting house decorated in the new style of figurative painting, it functioned as a Ringatu church and figured in Ihimaera's The Matriarch as a symbol of the “blending of the old ways with the new and the world of the Maori in the lands of Pharaoh” (190). Similarly, Horrocks continually revisits familiar icons, motifs, aesthetic forms, and media, re-investing in their artistic worth to update the value of the local. Rather than losing the traces of their origins, Horrocks's revised set of local referents mark where the local intersects with the non-local, the past with the future, and culture with seemingly non-culture, the high with the low, or the mandarin with the street.

Horrocks repeats the move of the so-called New Image artists of the 1970s and '80s such as Frizzell who, for Pound, were insistent in their continued referral to “non-art images—comics, posters, labels, camouflages, patterns on lino or cloth—to all sorts of signs symbols” (“New Image”). Frizzell sets a particular example for Horrocks; where Frizzell appropriates the well-known cartoon figure used to advertise the 4 Square chain of New Zealand convenience stores (in works like True Colours) or recreates product packaging (as in Black Geisha), Horrocks uses similar base material with his playful

⁴ Similarly, Horrocks calls for a new artistic paradigm to be developed and deployed in the critical approaches to comics, touched on in the previous chapter, and found in his essay “The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and Word-Building” included in Williams's Writing at the Edge.

version of the corner dairy. Just as Pound says of the New Image painters that “their art is as much about ways of seeing the world as about the world” (ibid), Horrocks refers to the stereotype of the corner dairy commenting on the expressive ends to which such a stereotype has been put, and then extending these. The representation of the local icon points not to an underlying reality, but to the history of representations which have constructed that reality.



Fig. 17. Dick Frizzell, True Colours. Screenprint.

Horrocks’s corner dairy is typical but for its standing mysteriously alone in the middle of a paddock. Neither road nor footpath leads to its front door. The image represents both profound displacement and deep familiarity. The most recognisable of brand names—Marlboro, Tip Top, Lotto, Big Ben, and (ominously for the coffee-addicted Leonard) Bushells—seem dramatically refigured through the seemingly simple, slight change of

register in removing the dairy from the urban footpath or rural roadside and transplanting it to the site of another emblem of local culture, the paddock. Horrocks's tactic resembles the magical realism of Harry Sinclair's 2000 film *The Price of Milk*, in whose opening scenes paddocks of dairy farms were overrun with a single piece of red flowing silk, miles long, metaphorically announcing the arrival of the art-house in the squarely rural. Horrocks pointedly suggests that in New Zealand pop appropriations outline a peculiar tension inherent in a mainly urban society which still nurtures a view of itself as agrarian.

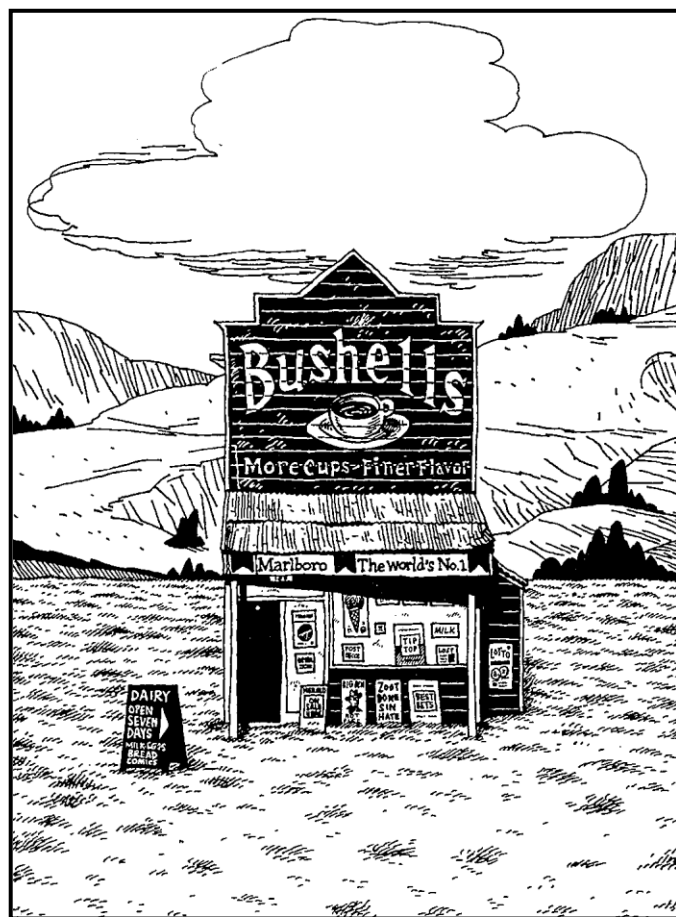


Fig. 18. Dylan Horrocks, from *Hicksville*.

As Pound observed of the New Image painters,

a younger generation of [New Zealand] artists feels perfectly at home in the city.

[. . .] This urbanism relates to the internationalist idiom. There are no dead trees,

Kauris, dark hills, in New York. But like Auckland, New York has strip club facades, ads. TV., neon, etc—a trash conglomerate of image piled upon image: that international idiom of signs. (ibid)

The New Image artists might have been engaged in a newfound international idiom, yet New Zealand's dead trees still find their way into the canvases of Frizzell—as in On the Forest Road to the Headwaters of the Tarawera River—along with the seemingly more straightforward pop imagery. Pound is right that Frizzell's painting reveals an attitude somewhat removed from the tradition of Eric Lee-Johnson's The Slain Tree, with its conservationist overtones, or Perkins's Frozen Flames, concerned for “not just the death of a tree, but the wider issue of the clearing of the bush for pastoral activity, in which the destruction of native trees is a necessary, if sad, event” (“Frozen”). But Frizzell generates a particular force from his imagery precisely through the refusal to partition its pop elements—its advertising slogans and product package reproductions—from the “deadpan realism” (Dunn Painting 172) of his rural landscapes.

So if one of the major shifts in western art history in the twentieth century was, broadly, the emergence and recognition of a fine art which increasingly availed itself of supposedly non-mainstream influences—as in, for instance, pop art's adoption of the kitsch in answer to Greenbergian high modernism—like Frizzell, Horrocks seems to suggest the intrusion of pop art into regionalism articulates a peculiarly New Zealand variation on this shift. Pound's idea that, to the New Image painters, nature was the city (“New Image”) suggests that what might look like pop borrowings could perhaps be more accurately considered a kind of urban regionalism.

Horrocks goes further, allowing a full range of properties associated with various artistic modes to become interchangeable. Thoroughly confusing for Leonard, Horrocks's dairy

becomes a touchstone for local values, rearranging them in a new configuration. Like McCahon's, Horrocks's New Zealand landscape is, though inscrutable, rendered knowable through text. But whereas McCahon's texts tend to be Biblical passages or poetry, Horrocks's is contained in a comic bought for three dollars. Even still, McCahon sanctions Horrocks's comic intrusions; although often associated with a high modernist seriousness, McCahon's oeuvre often makes use of low-brow sources such as advertising and comic books. In The King of the Jews Mary appears part-icon, part-cartoon character, her words attributed by a speech bubble, a device most familiar to readers of comics. To a similar though lesser extent, his landscapes, such as Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury, are often arranged into frames recalling those of cartoon or comic strips. Hence, although echoes of McCahon's sterner New Zealand landscape—at times inhospitable and seemingly unpopulated, at others charged with high religiosity—resound in Hicksville, it is not immune from Frizzell-like satirical visitations; indeed, as Horrocks subtly evokes, it never has been.



Fig. 19. Colin McCahon, The King of the Jews. Te Papa, Wellington.



Fig. 20. Colin McCahon, Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamiki.

For Horrocks, the stereotypes of the local may be regarded as traditions that, when fused with a wider artistic corpus can be given new value to telling effect. In a double-edged play on the most pervasive of stereotypes, Horrocks's dairy owner, guardian of the mysterious map into Hicksville, is an Indian. Paul Cantor spotted a similar occurrence in the animated television series The Simpsons, where Apu, the proprietor of the local convenience store, Kwik-E-Mart, and Homer Simpson, responsible for Apu's recent sacking, are driven to seek spiritual guidance at the world's first convenience store, high in the Himalayas. While for Cantor, "The Simpsons could offer no better image of the bizarre logic of contemporary globalization than a worldwide convenience store empire run by an enlightened guru from the sacred mountains of India" (98), for Horrocks, transplanting the joke to rural New Zealand extends its reach. Cantor's logic recognises globalisation as a "two-way street" (ibid) whereby, Apu, the convenience store worker, enters into the American Dream of hard work, wealth, and prosperity, while also revealing the extent to which the supposedly quintessentially American convenience store is thoroughly integrated into a global economy. Though Horrocks broadly subscribes to this view, he further suggests that the American element—Leonard—is just one factor in a global mix of cultures. As when Leonard reads the Eastern European comic in Mrs. Hicks's guest room, the cultural markers of local knowledge are all the more infuriating for their refusal to behave as totally foreign, as totally other, but rather are allowed to represent an internationalism of truly porous borders, of virtually limitless connections.

While Leonard is a comics expert, when he encounters comics laden with references to New Zealand's heritage, he does not have sufficient cultural knowledge of New Zealand to untangle and make sense of them. Reading Augustus's comic strip, he does not recognise any of the characters, nor can he realise that the maps which appear within them are copies of early historical maps of New Zealand—one drawn by the actual

Captain (then still a Lieutenant) James Cook, and the other by the equally factual and historical Maori men, Tuki Tahua and Ngahuruhuru. Yet Leonard continues to read Augustus's strip, precisely because of his overriding interest in comics. Thus Augustus's comic can be valued partly for the cultural referents it makes use of and partly for the aesthetic vehicle it employs. Because Leonard's inability to engage with the former does not preclude his interest in the latter, it can thus be seen that comics—indeed, art—has a double value. Horrocks, concerned for both the history of, and possibilities available to, not only New Zealand cultural production but also the comic form, allows that an appreciation of the one can be illuminated via an understanding of the other.

Horrocks's subtle but stark reinventions of the local landscape—its histories and characters as well as its representations and stereotypes—not only reinvigorate the cultural heritage attached to that landscape but also demonstrate the complexity of the comic form as an aesthetic vehicle. Hence, for Horrocks, the comic form may be considered a worthwhile artistic avenue of expression not only for the undoubtedly complex imbrication of text with image to produce art which is equal parts narrative and visual composition, but also for the richness and wealth of cultural knowledge on which it is able to draw and which it can reinvent to new expressive ends. The twin marginalisation of the local product and the comic book thus becomes symbiotically productive. Horrocks takes the comic form and uses it to comment on the status of the local; equally he points out the richness of the local for the way its wealth of cultural referents can demonstrate the complexities of the medium itself.

4. Art as Comics as Taonga

As Horrocks notes, “In the past twenty years or so there has emerged a growing body of theory, research and criticism focused on comics” (“Perfect” 198). Among the most pressing of these for Horrocks is Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, at the heart of which, in Horrocks’s view, are to be found “two central questions: ‘What is/ are comics?’ and ‘What is art?’” (“Perfect” 199). Written in comic form, Understanding Comics declares itself to be “a comic book about comics” (Introduction). Similarly, of course, Hicksville is a comic about comics. Further, because both McCloud and Horrocks take up the knotty question of how comics and art are implicated, both Understanding Comics and Hicksville are also comics about comics as art.

In both books, comics are considered worthwhile in their own right, not reliant on their appropriation by, for example, pop artists such as Lichtenstein, to be ushered into the pantheon of artistic greatness. After all, when comic frames are recreated on the vast scale of high modernism, they inevitably lose something of their commonplace origins, origins to which both McCloud and Horrocks remain sentimentally attached. McCloud recalls his introduction to comics in 8th grade as a watershed moment—“A friend of mine ... lent me his collection. Soon, I was hooked!” (2)—while Horrocks recalls a similarly formative childhood: “My dad was always into comics and there were always good comics around the house. I wanted to be a cartoonist as early as I can remember and must have read all the Tintin books about a thousand times, Asterix too, of course—along with dozens of other stuff” (“Magic”).

Perhaps unsurprisingly McCloud and Horrocks share the view that not only are comics long overdue attentive and serious consideration as legitimate art forms, but their marginalisation as such has been the product of widespread misunderstanding. McCloud’s rhetoric becomes especially charged on this point:

Sure, I realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare—but—they don’t have to be! The problem was that for most people, that was what ‘comic book’ meant! ... If people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly! A proper definition, if we could find one, might give lie to the stereotypes—and show that the potential of comics is limitless and exciting! (3)

Horrocks makes a similar point at the end of Hicksville when Kupe, having revealed to Leonard the utterly fantastic collection housed within the library in the lighthouse, declares:

The official history of comics is a history of frustration. Of unrealised potential. Of artists who never got the chance to do that magnum opus. Of stories that never got told—or else were bowdlerised by small-minded editors ... a medium locked into a ghetto and ignored by countless people who could have made it sing. Well, here it is. The other history of comics. The way it should have been. The masterpieces. The great novels. The pure expressions going back hundreds of years. (ch. 10 emphasis original)

But as Gerald Barnett has observed, reviewing Hicksville in Landfall, “Kupe’s library—housed in an East Cape lighthouse—mythologises the great comic books that might have been, had art, not business, been the boss. But then they might not have been comics...” (194-5). So while the uneasy implication in Kupe’s words is that comics, in their most visible and widely available format, are often an inferior art form, the supposed inferiority helps constitute what comics are. In a telling counterpoint, Sabin’s study, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels, does not shy away from admitting the form’s low-brow origins but, rather, relishes them:

[. . .] the first comic agreed to be worthy of the name [was] the curiously titled Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday (Gilbert Dalziel, 1884). This was a cheap (one penny), black-and-white tabloid weekly that mixed strips, cartoons and prose stories, and which boasted a regular starring character, the eponymous Alexander Sloper. Although very few people have heard of the title today, it is undoubtedly one of the most important comics in the history of the medium, not just because it was first, but because it set standards in so many areas, both commercial and artistic. (15 emphasis added)

Sabin prefers to ignore comics' pretensions to high art credibility—as he says, “Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels includes no canvases by Roy Lichtenstein or Philip Guston. Instead, the intention here is to celebrate comics in their own right, to explore their richness and diversity since the end of the nineteenth century to the present day” (7). Yet he cannot overlook such pretensions entirely. Indeed, comics' inferiority complex, bred from the conviction that high-art snootiness is routinely brought to bear upon their form, seems as much a part of their make-up as their supposedly entrenched commercialism. Hence, even as Sabin asserts that his book “is not about making a statement that comics are ‘Art’” (8), he cannot avoid weighing into the debate:

Why comics have not been invited to enter the cosy world conjured up by [the term art] is not difficult to explain. Throughout their history they have been perceived as intrinsically ‘commercial’, mass-produced for a lowest-common denominator audience, and therefore outside notions of artistic credibility. (By the same token, the most successful comics commercially have been those least likely to appeal to a ‘sophisticated’ palette.) This is why comics have been relegated by the hip art world to the status of ‘found objects’ and ‘trash icons’. It is also why comics creators have never been respected as ‘artists’, and have historically been left open to exploitation: not uncommonly they remain anonymous while the characters they have created go on to become household names (everybody knows who Superman is, but how many people can name his creators?). (ibid)

Sabin is as sharply aware as McCloud and Horrocks of how comics' commerciality have contributed to their marginalisation, yet his response points to an attitude distinctly removed from McCloud's and Horrocks's. Although claiming lack of interest in comics' justification as art, he recoils from the snobbery directed at comics from what he

disparagingly and somewhat vapidly calls “the hip art world”. The realm of high art is, for Sabin, both pernicious and not easily ignored.

On the other hand, although allowing comics their low-brow origins, both Horrocks and McCloud claim a common ancestry between comics and fine art. While Kupe’s library contains comics by modernist giants such as Lorca, Picasso and Stein, McCloud points to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican murals, the Bayeux Tapestry, and William Hogarth’s painted sequences—later transcribed into engravings—A Harlot’s Progress and its sequel, A Rake’s Progress as precursors to contemporary comics. For McCloud, “Some of the most inspired and innovative comics of [the twentieth] century have never received recognition as comics” (18). Indeed, he offers the compelling examples of American woodcut artist Lynd Ward, whose “silent ‘Woodcut novels’ [of the 1930s and ’40s] are powerful modern fables, now praised by comics artists, but seldom recognized as comics” (ibid), and Max Ernst, most often known as a Dada and Surrealist painter, but whose collage-novel A Week of Kindness is, as McCloud points out, both “widely considered a masterpiece of 20th century art” (19), and evocative of a comic book on the most widely understood terms: “despite the lack of a conventional story, there is no mistaking the central role which sequence plays in the work” (ibid).

McCloud makes compelling connections between high art and comics, though in presenting his fine-art-as-comics precedents, he also distorts art historical significance. McCloud overlooks the point that as a collage of plundered (largely Victorian) illustrations, Ernst’s Week of Kindness also foretells the advent of pop art, whereby images were removed from their original contexts and put to new expressive purposes. Just as pop’s appropriations spoke partly to the media saturations of the increasingly consumerist society of 1960s America—as in, for instance, Andy Warhol’s Marilyn

Diptych—Ernst’s violent and darkly surreal vision, produced in Italy in 1934, cannot help but evoke something of the rise of European fascism. Although such accounting is clearly beyond McCloud’s declared purpose it is, nonetheless, a symptomatic omission. Adept at pointing to apparent formal similarities between comics and high art, McCloud, whose starting point is “to separate the form of comics from its often inconsistent contents” (199), never reconciles form with content either.

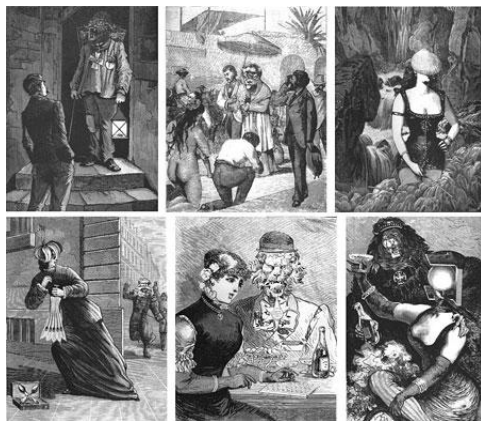


Fig. 21. Max Ernst, from A Week of Kindness. Fig. 22. Andy Warhol, Marilyn Diptych, Tate, London.

Thus, McCloud’s interest in fine art has little to do with the way either cultural politics or socio-cultural trends have been played out in visual culture. Rather more prosaically, McCloud uses examples from fine art to articulate the particular principles of composition that are, for him, the cornerstones of comics illustration. Hence, the widely-noted influence of Japanese ukiyo-e painting on Europe’s modernist artists points to a parallel concern for comics in which the more cinematic approach to story-telling of Asian comics influenced a series of stylistic overhauls in the work of western comics artists (80-82). Similarly Duchamp’s and the futurists’ concerns with movement in the early twentieth century launch McCloud’s discussion of how comics artists have developed simple visual apparatus to impart movement in their static images (108-110). Yet McCloud’s use of fine art precedents does less to justify comics as high art than to

point to a shared baseline of visual expression in the broadest possible terms between comics and fine art.

So while McCloud points to, for instance, Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh as fine art equivalents of how comics creators “express mood and emotion” (124), he limits his understanding of expressionism in the context of fine art to mean “an honest expression of the internal turmoil these artists [Munch and van Gogh] just could not repress” (122). McCloud’s focus does not merely sideline the importance of social and political factors to the European avant-garde, but completely overlooks them. If the charged expressions of Munch and van Gogh represent an “internal turmoil”, they have become lasting for the way they measured the impact of modernity which—embodied by industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as social and technological change—caused a series of related philosophical, spiritual and psychological crises to permeate society.

For McCloud’s purpose, the significance of expressionism is grounded in its formal properties—and even then only in cursory terms—citing the “expressive lines of a Munch or the colors of a van Gogh” (124) for the way these registered a break from the apparently more scientific field of impressionism. Yet his analysis is a brief and oversimplified reading. Casting the impressionists’ concern with light as an “objective study” (122) is to enter into disputed territory. Michael Fried notes that, even from an early date, impressionism’s “idealist propensities, that is, its tendency [. . .] to define the ‘impression’ as an internal, necessarily subjective ‘event’ rather than strictly as the objective record of an external object or scene” had been remarked (16 emphasis added). Richard Shiff has also raised questions around impressionism’s tricky relationship with any supposed objectivity: “Does the light that is observed exist objectively for all to see?

Is the light seen differently by different observers? If light is part of ‘objective reality’, why is impressionism unrelated to a conventional ‘realism?’” (4).

Though such questions are beyond McCloud’s area of study, the simplification of his fine art references to suit his own purpose undermines his project. He alleges that “Art historians have generally held that while painters, musicians and poets have grappled with [. . .] ideas [such as those, he posits, embodied by impressionism and expressionism], practitioners of the ‘low’ art of comics have remained blissfully ignorant of them” (123). Yet McCloud’s own analysis misunderstands art history’s terms. McCloud borrows from art history, incorporating works of fine art into a field defined along the lines of his own theoretical interests, ultimately reducing art history to a superficial and one-dimensional discipline. For McCloud, partitioning form from content allows art to become appreciable solely on grounds of craft, and highlights only those elements of fine art production which resonate with the line drawing of cartoonists. In saying art historians have exhibited a low regard towards comics and their practitioners, he names none who have done so. Ironically, then, he claims comics are misunderstood by art historians while himself taking a false measure of art history.

Whereas McCloud seems to flatten art history to a series of convenient reference points, Horrocks is more concerned to import a fuller, more nuanced, appreciation of the cultural history into which he writes. Acknowledging the applause for McCloud’s book, Horrocks points out that while most critical regard for Understanding Comics welcomed “McCloud’s work as simple, disinterested scientific argument”, perhaps this was “because most [. . .] who have read it share Scott’s agenda. [McCloud] constructs a way of talking about comics that affirms and supports [a] longing for critical respectability and seems to offer an escape from the cultural ghetto” (“Inventing”). For Horrocks,

unlike McCloud, the way out of the “cultural ghetto” is not to separate form from content, elevating comics to art on the basis of craftsmanship. Instead it requires an altogether more complex set of manoeuvres through which form is reconciled with content by importing subject matter whose seriousness befits high art. Just as Spiegelman’s Maus explores the legacy of the Holocaust, Hicksville examines the intersections of globalisation, art, and New Zealand cultural nationalism. Yet Horrocks’s manoeuvring is also connected to an ingrained understanding of the nuance of artistic practice. While Hicksville is a comic concerned with the way comics may be considered art, Horrocks is a comics practitioner whose production values suggest an affinity with the practice of fine artists. Horrocks’s practice, valuing stylistic variations and narrative complexity, holds at its centre a subject matter that has been revised and re-worked in multiple formats. His practice is that of the fine artist whose favourite visual motifs populate and re-populate canvases in variously elaborated forms explored over many years.

If the insistence on aesthetic and narrative experiment and exploration speaks to the wider claims of the artist for critical regard, then Horrocks’s call for comics to be taken seriously distances itself from McCloud’s terms. Where McCloud baldly insists that comics are art because the respective crafts of painting, drawing and comics overlap, Horrocks demonstrates in practice that the ends to which comics’ expressive capabilities are put qualifies them as a serious art form. The same routine often applies for critics ushering new artists into established canons, especially when the artist in question prefers an avenue of expression previously not given its due attention over the span of art history. For instance, David Eggleton enthusiastically finds a home for the tapa-inspired work of artist (and writer) John Pule in the following terms:

Just as Shane Cotton has built an all-encompassing databank of imagery derived from nineteenth-century Maori folk art and Bill Hammond has created panoptic allegories of settlement and Richard Killeen has developed a world-eating visual dictionary, so John Pule has mobilised whole lexicons of imagery: assemblages and scenarios into which you can read explanations almost endlessly. (“Pule”)

Bill Hammond, then, speaks to the politics of settlement through a long-ranging experiment with the forms of his mysterious birdmen, and Richard Killeen with his stencils, cut-outs, and block-coloured shapes explores space via metaphors of local (and wider) contemporary identity. Similarly, Horrocks’s story-space is constantly shifting, reorganised as the creative whims of its author allow, yet its revisions, like those of Hammond’s birdmen or Killeen’s cut-outs, represent a redefining of the local cultural landscape. Horrocks invites the critical engagements with this landscape to strive towards articulating new connections—as between, for instance, local fine art and comics.

Just as Hammond’s or Killeen’s visual vocabularies were explored and developed over time, Horrocks has described the writing of Hicksville as an organic process, explaining that “it started out with Hicksville Press as an imaginary publisher for my mini-comics, when I was living in London and missing home. I invented a fictitious NZ town which represented all the things I missed about NZ and from there it grew into the comics homeland it is now” (“Magic”). A version of Hicksville first appeared in Horrocks’s series of comic books, Pickle, published over ten issues between 1994 and 1997, though it was altered for its 1998 publication in book length form. Further, Horrocks’s more recent series of comic books, Atlas, explains avenues of Hicksville’s back story and continues established narrative trajectories.

Yet the transformation of Pickle into Hicksville represents more than the revision of a first draft into a final manuscript; similarly, Atlas is more than a sequel to its predecessors. The Pickle series comprises the earliest versions of the instalments that went on to form the basis of Hicksville, but also a range of other offerings whose intersections and cross-references with the Hicksville story are complex and at times baffling. The later Atlas series on the other hand, goes on to challenge the closure which Hicksville achieves when read as a single work, revising Hicksville's apparent narrative certainties. While characters such as Sam, Kupe, Tisco, Emil Kopen, and Leonard appear in Pickle, Hicksville, and Atlas, they have been reinvented, to varying degrees, in each. While Sam, for instance, is consistently portrayed across all three as a struggling comics writer, aspects of his character shift as he inhabits new comic terrain. In Atlas No. 3 Sam is a writer struggling to balance the commitments to family with those of deadlines which threaten to engulf him, whereas in Pickle No. 1 he is an unemployed melancholy writer of repeatedly rejected superhero comics—featuring the seemingly embryonic characters Mr. Tomorrow and Captain Justice—who cannot escape a commitment to his true calling: an unmarketable magnum opus, barely readable to those around him, which runs to 312 obdurate pages. In Hicksville, as in Pickle, Sam, creator of Moxie and Toxie, is “broke and unemployed” (ch. 2), prone to career anxieties but apparently unmarried and childless.

Across Pickle, Hicksville, and Atlas, Sam appears as a variation on one over-arching character-type: the struggling artist. If there is a concrete chronological continuity intended over the three comics in which Sam appears, it is not immediately obvious. Narratives are constantly revised rather than settled and Sam's development is representative of how Horrocks's concerns have subtly shifted over time. Horrocks handles characters with something approaching the treatment of mainstream comic

heroes, whose personalities are prone to constant reinvention throughout their long histories. Perhaps the most well-known example occurs in the Batman series, which offered, in the 1980s, a new incarnation of its title hero in a graphic novel called Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. For Sabin, Batman's Dark Knight "was a radical reconceptualization of bat-mythology, and distanced the character as far from his camp 1960s incarnation as it was possible to go" (162). Batman's reinvention as a darker, more morally complex character, "perfectly willing to pass judgement and administer punishment" (ibid), takes liberties with narrative continuity—the character's dramatic personality switch is unaccounted for by the overall storyline—in the interests of creative exploration. Similarly, the character-type which Sam provides offers a vehicle for Horrocks to explore the tensions between art and commercialism in various guises. For Horrocks, characters are virtually artistic motifs, re-visited and reinvented as thoroughly as Hammond's birdmen, Killeen's cut-outs, McCahon's hillsides, or even Miller's Batman.

Horrocks's approach to narrative weaves theme with character-study, though neither theme nor character are developed in the traditional senses. Like those of realist fiction, his characters are neither wholly good nor evil in the manner prescribed by standard action-comic character-templates. As he says of his villain, Burger, "he's complicated—emotionally and morally. I feel a lot of sympathy for him, although in a sense he seems to be the bad guy" ("Magic"). Burger's parting speech to Sam shows the emotional depth of a fully-realised character, whose regret, though complicated and flawed, is delicately evoked:

Look around you, Sam. Of course it was worth it. I mean—shit—of course there are times when I wish I hadn't done it. Sometimes I imagine myself all those years ago... And instead of giving in to temptation, I'm strong... I resist it.

And I'm never rich or famous or even successful. I'm just a nobody—a comics geek no-one really likes or respects, for the rest of my life... But, y'know—I'm a good person. I'm a good person. (ch. 6 emphasis original)

Burger does not deny the crime he has committed though he is too attached to the fruits of his deception to repent. But his awkward attempt at self-redemption is all the more human for its imperfection. Other characters are equally prone to uncertainties, their emotional well-being tied to their own capacity for self-discovery and change. Danton struggles for closure on his romantic involvement with Grace, though eventually it comes through the conversation which Grace has been avoiding. By an equal and opposite measure, the silences between the headstrong Grace and the gruff, wise Kupe point to the difficulty of their own reconciliation.

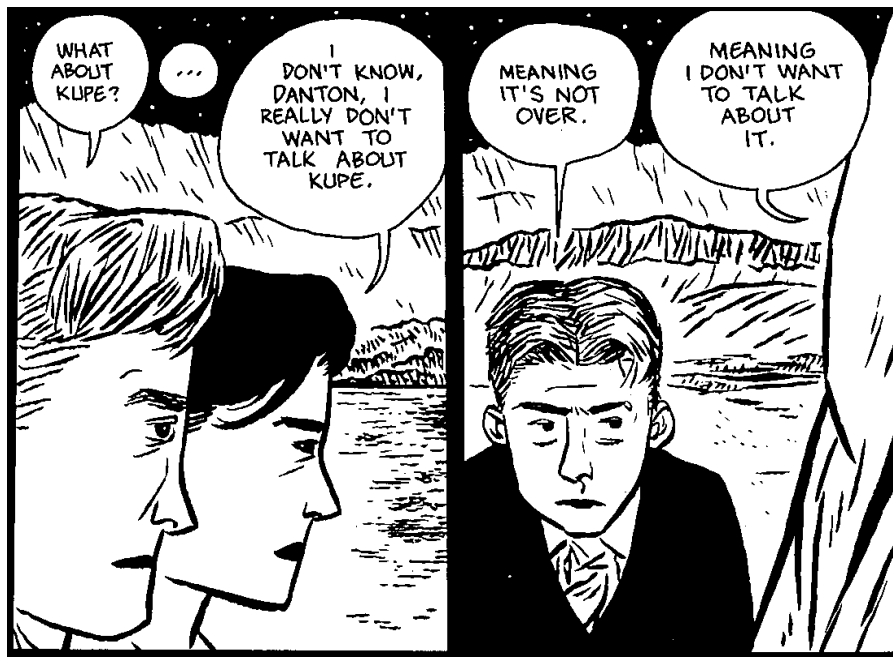


Fig. 23. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

Yet these are characters who never aspire to represent totally human states. Rather, they are situated in relation to the binary oppositions which the text both puts in place and unsettles. In the space of three pages Horrocks quotes the mainstream fare of British

cartoonist H. M. Bateman⁵ and modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe.⁶ Only a few frames later Grace seems to paddle down the same section of river pictured on the cover of the well-known Hergé comic book, *The Broken Ear*, the sixth in the *Tintin* series.⁷



Fig. 24. Dylan Horrocks, from *Hicksville*.



Fig. 25. Dylan Horrocks, from *Hicksville*.



Fig. 26. Dylan Horrocks, from *Hicksville*.

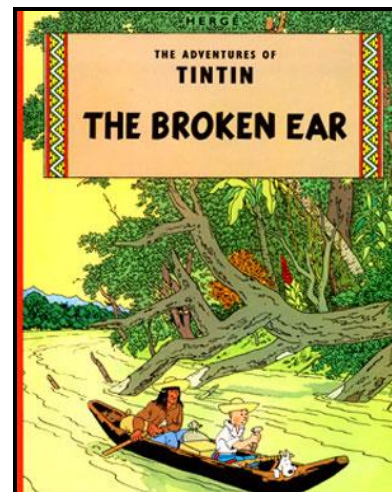


Fig. 27. Hergé, cover image, *The Broken Ear*.

⁵ H. M. Bateman was one of the foremost cartoonists of the twentieth century. His “The Man Who” series, appearing in *The Tatler* through the 1920s and ’30s, characteristically poked fun at those committing social gaffs. Horrocks’s reference to Bateman comes at the end of chapter 3 where Leonard enters the local tearooms, the Rarebit Fiend, and announces publicly his professional interest in Burger. The frame is captioned “The man who mentioned ‘Dick Burger’ in the Rarebit Fiend”, and is drawn in a style deliberately reminiscent of Bateman.

⁶ O’Keeffe was particularly well-known for her flower paintings of the 1920s whose large-scale, meticulously detailed studies seemed to merge the representational and the abstract. At the beginning of *Hicksville*’s chapter 4, Grace moves through her darkened house where a poster reproduction of an O’Keeffe painting, captioned with exhibition information from MoMA, is clearly visible on the wall.

⁷ Grace, however, is recalling her time in Cornucopia, which, though fictional, is situated in Europe, while Tintin’s river journey is made through the fictional South American country, San Theodoros.

Readers are thus required to participate in the text's deconstructions through a sensitivity to Horrocks's playful quotations of visual culture which move from comics to fine art and back again in swift succession. Called upon to activate the deeper meanings within Horrocks's text, readers move back and forth with the characters through a landscape of shifting textual and visual references. If this promotes an unusual reader-character identification, then it is one that reflects Horrocks's reorganisation of cultural markers, and reminds readers that value is reliant on what may be brought to the text as much as what can be taken from it.

Horrocks underscores his textual hyperactivity with the stylistic variation in his drawings. While he has described Hicksville's genesis in organic terms, and while the book's themes are gradually uncovered rather than explicitly stated, its accompanying visual vocabulary progresses similarly. The Sam of the early Pickle bears little visual resemblance to the Sam of the much later Atlas. More dramatically and pointedly, the drawing style through which characters are rendered becomes less caricatured as themes and plot are brought nearer to their dramatic conclusions.



Fig. 28. Dylan Horrocks, "Leonard", from Hicksville, chapter 1.



Fig. 29. Dylan Horrocks, "Leonard", from Hicksville, chapter 10.

The Leonard who is ushered into Kupe's library at the end of the book is literally unrecognisable from the comics fan who began the story not knowing who Kupe was, as

if a stylistic metaphor for the journey which Leonard has undertaken. Earlier in the novel, where Leonard's physiognomy is articulated through spare, thin lines, he is a naïve outsider; later in the book, where Horrocks's outlines are thicker, more heavily inked, and painted rather than drawn, Leonard is rendered far more substantially—suitably, given his character's cultural maturation. The stylistic changes in Horrocks's drawings reflect an artist concerned with exploring the vagaries of style, in the manner of the most interesting fine artists, as well as a finely-tuned regard for the demands of story. The shift in Horrocks's draughtsmanship is equivalent to that of the novelist controlling the register of voice in response to the narrative to be delivered.

The variations in Horrocks's style reflects, too, the span of time taken to compose and complete the Hicksville story. Though Horrocks allows that Hicksville represents a revised version of the story which was first serialised in Pickle—"I did some surgery on it when it was turned into a book" ("Other Comics")—importantly, the whole book has not been revised, re-written and re-drawn, but rather is allowed to bear the traces of its own history. Hicksville thus measures the stylistic variations through which Horrocks's art has moved over time, suggesting an author thoroughly concerned with exploring the nuances governing artistic process.

Similarly, his Pickle series features, in addition to proto-Hicksville material, a cluster of comic projects whose narratives and draughtsmanship might feel unfinished, but whose experimentalism and open-endedness suggest new ways into Horrocks's work. In Pickle No. 3, the narrator of "The Fox Story", a comics writer battling a sudden phobia about his vocation, describes his recovery in terms which seem to outline the template of Pickle itself:

Now I'm back at work, & have finished chapter 1 of a graphic novel (though the mere words still make my stomach twist). I enjoy it again. I'm ready to face publishers & am not overly worried what they'll say. I've even started putting out a mini-comic, mixing up old strips & new work in progress, courtesy of the bookshop's photocopier. (n. pag.)

The same character reflects: "I can't claim to be entirely cured. When someone says a strip of mine has come out, I can't bring myself to go into a shop to see it. Even when the magazine arrives in the post, I flick through it apprehensively & then lay it aside, unable to give it more than a cursory inspection" (ibid). So while an experimental approach to comic-making—mixing old strips with new works-in-progress—underlines a willingness to explore the aesthetic and formal possibilities of the comics medium, the worth of such experiments lies less in the finished results they net than in the processes themselves with which they were implicated.

Hence Hicksville consciously retains the markers of its serialised genealogy, acknowledging its production history and the background of creative processes against which its final version stands. As well as its amalgam of styles, for instance, the first frame of chapter 5 supports a caption bearing the moniker Hicksville, which, though now unnecessary, has been retained from its earlier incarnation in Pickle where it provided the first page of an instalment of the Hicksville story. Bearing surface markers of the history ingrained within it, Hicksville resonates with the same quality Manhire identifies in Hotere's Song Cycle banner series, paintings that

were nailed flat and lived for long periods of time out in the weather on the hill at Port Chalmers. So the paintings are sort of made up of wind and sun and rain and grit, as well as paint. They've got days and nights and the weather in them. [.

. .] What they are is partly what has happened to them—they're not totally deliberate effects of a controlling mind. (O'Brien, Window 60 emphasis original)

Like Hotere and Manhire, Horrocks is an artist whose concerns extend beyond the content of his art to the processes enabling it. Further, for Horrocks, references to the building blocks of local culture point to the dynamic capabilities of the medium itself.

Just as the significance of Hotere's collaboration with Manhire, for example, often rests on the position expounded by O'Brien, who observes that Hotere's use of Manhire's poems heightens the ambiguity of both, allowing "many possible readings" (Window 47), Horrocks's cultural cross-referencing seemingly remains an opaque invitation for readers to find their own meanings while the author necessarily distances himself from each but precludes none. Yet while the Manhire-Hotere collaboration is open to apparently endless interpretation, it seems effete for critical regard to rest with mute acceptance of them all. For O'Brien, Hotere's painting, wavering between the gestural and the minimalist, shares a paradoxical quality with Manhire's enigmatic poetry that seems "at once clearly stated and oblique" (Window 33); just as "Manhire's texts are [. . .] unstable and open to tremors of meaning", Hotere's paintings allow "viewers to reach their own conclusions" (Window 43). Along the same lines but more troublingly, Hall's contention that "Hotere, at least, makes his statement in plain and simple terms—bare—almost to the point of excluding interpretation" (7) confusingly proposes that artistic statements can be made but not interrogated. If one answer to the problem of how to find any meaning at all is to propose that, while the absence of central, stabilised meanings may sanction an endless array of them, then nevertheless it also pushes to the surface a consideration of the way art operates as a series of processes and engagements between artist and subject and subject and audience.

Hotere's appropriations of Manhire's poetry are thus similar to Horrocks's of local cultural referents. For while the collaboration between Manhire and Hotere, based on willing and endless experiment, allows the act of art-making to stand in the significant centre-stage often reserved for meaning, then similarly, for Horrocks, even when references to the surrounding cultural landscape seem deliberately ambiguous, open-ended, or elusive, it is the act itself of making cultural references that points to the work's significance.

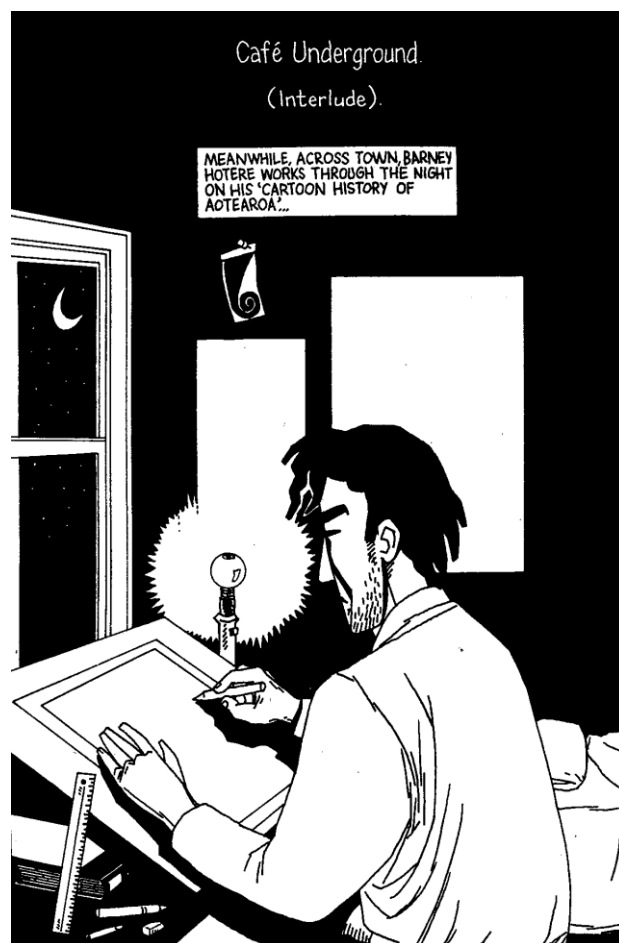


Fig. 30. Dylan Horrocks, from Pickle No. 3.

Horrocks's direct reference to Hotere himself in Pickle is partly homage to the painter, but also evokes something of the lot of the local artist, struggling in isolation to bring an intense personal vision to light which nonetheless acknowledges the vast cultural fabric

from which it is born. Tucked at the end of Pickle No. 3 in an interlude from the “Café Underground” story arc, the reader looks over the shoulder of comics historian, Barney Hotere, as he “works through the night on his ‘Cartoon History of Aotearoa’...”, producing panels which quote historical record, such as Horeta Te Taniwha’s account of Cook: “There was one supreme man in that ship. We knew that he was the lord of the whole by his perfect gentlemanly and noble demeanour. [. . .] His language was a hissing sound, and the words he spoke were not understood by us in the least” (n. pag.). The subsequent frame, captioned, “Ten years before, Halley’s Comet blazes overhead...” features a stylised comet swirling in a mesh of Maori koru and cartoon lightning bolts over a mountain obviously modelled on Heaphy’s famous Mount Egmont from the Southward, but dramatically converted to a nocturnal setting.



Fig. 31. Dylan Horrocks, from Pickle No. 3.



Fig. 32. Charles Heaphy, Mount Egmont from the Southward. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

For Horrocks, then, comics provide a new store of old value; and, having become a treasure box for the nation's cultural capital, comics can become similar cultural artefacts in themselves. If the cultural reinvestment Horrocks makes in his comics echoes the reflexive potential he explores and deploys to lasting effect, in Hicksville but also across his oeuvre including Pickle and Atlas, then not only is form welded firmly to content, but, further, comics are considered both art and taonga, ingrained in wider artistic discourse yet inscribed uniquely on the face of the local.

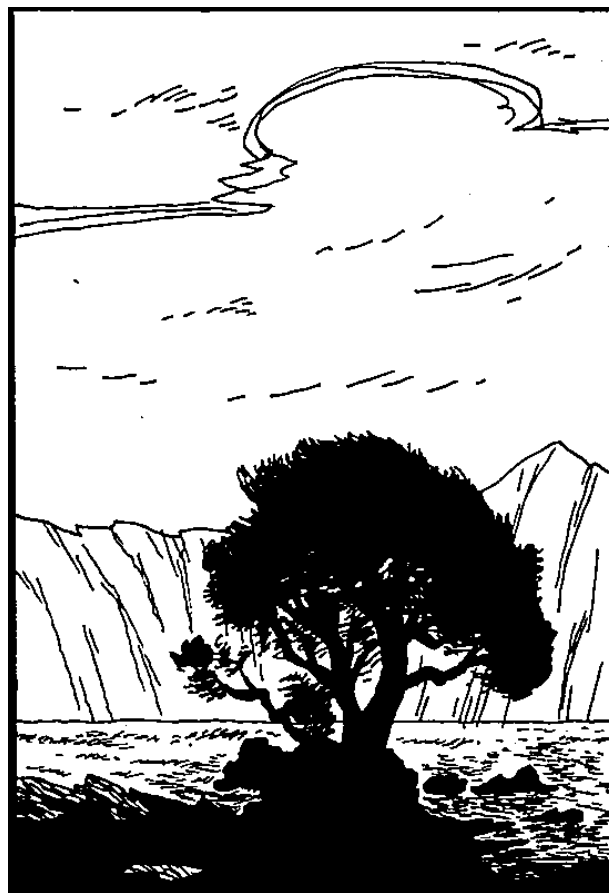


Fig. 33. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

5. Mapping Hicksville

If Horrocks is equally interested in exploring both the formal possibilities available to the comic form and the terrain of local culture, then the self-reflexive qualities he brings to the comic become a resonant metaphor for his positioning in respect to the cultural debates with which he is implicated. The extensive cross-referencing which permeates Hicksville allows Horrocks to maintain an engaged distance with (or from) the range of perspectives it displays. In what is often an unpoised debate—as in Evans’s moralising crusade against globalisation’s infections of the local, or Wystan Curnow’s taut prescriptions for the template of high culture in the provincial—Horrocks remains delicately poised, acknowledging diverse views of New Zealand, investing in them for his own creative ends, yet without privileging any. The narrative shifts Hicksville stages, and

the self-reflexivity such shifts employ, reflect the shifting nature of the tropes of cultural nationalism on which it draws.

Recalling John Berger's maxim from his influential *Ways of Seeing*, that "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (7), the terrain of *Hicksville* is never entirely secured. From the outset, negotiating the text entails confronting a series of devices apparently designed to destabilise the reader. The book's cover bears the image of the road sign alerting motorists to a hazard ahead—an exclamation point contained within a diamond—but without disclosing the hazard. The road stretching into the distance behind the sign thus signifies some hidden danger; it also seems to present a route into the book, literally leading a reader into the pages beyond the cover.

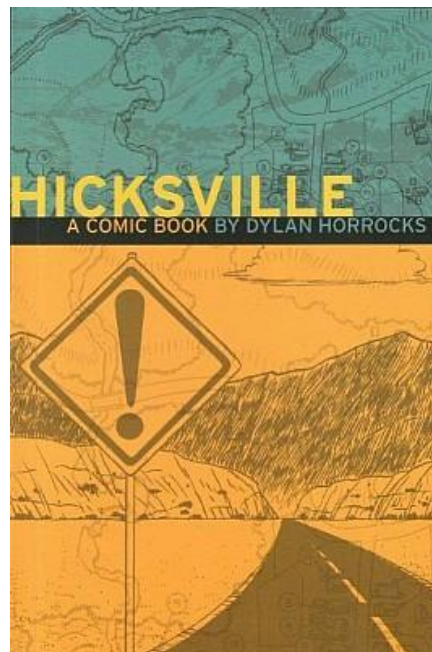


Fig. 34. Dylan Horrocks and Michael Vrána, cover image, *Hicksville*.

Hicksville contains maps of all kinds, yet cross-referencing between them only disconcerts readers, bringing them closer to the limits of their knowledge rather than to a fixed understanding of stable referents. Inside the cover and before the title page, a map

of Hicksville is spread combining the fictional and non-fictional; while Hicksville seems to sit somewhere near Hicks Bay on the East Cape—the road to Te Araroa skirts the township—Hicksville is fictional. Slightly to the north lies Pekapeka Bay, yet the only so-named real-life equivalent lies in the Far North. So while the journey into Hicksville is primarily Leonard's into an unknown heart of the country, it is also a textual journey to a similarly surprising centre for a reader. Imitating the journey that the reader embarks on beside Leonard, the first few pages echo the cover image of the road bending out of sight into a hinterland, playing on the initial metaphor of a journey into text. The map of Hicksville, in a subtle but significant departure from the conventions of orientation, has been rotated clockwise by 90°, allowing the north arrow of the compass rose (the only arrow bearing notation) to point not to the top of the page as custom permits, but rather to the right-hand edge, thus directing a reader's attention to the text following. Over the next page the hazard sign of the cover is repeated in a small moniker, while the foreword written by Canadian comic book artist Seth carries a cautionary note: "Warning—read this after you've read the book" (foreword). As a reader enters the text, then, literal warning signs multiply.

So while Hicksville is fictionalised it also draws on and combines a range of referents, both physical and cultural, some of which will inevitably go unrecognised by readers; for instance, an overseas readership will in all likelihood miss the sly humour underpinning the credentials of the local G. P., Dr. Ropata. In the 1990s the New Zealand soap opera, Shortland Street, featured a Doctor Ropata, renowned for bringing his experience in the sub-standard field hospitals of Guatemala to bear on anyone who would listen; for Leonard, travelling from America, Hicksville might as well be Guatemala. In a sense, Horrocks's tactics resemble those of writer Jeff Noon, whose intricate wordplays, multi-layered and extensive, are likely to leave readers baffled though very much aware that the

text offers a playground of references. Noon's character in Automated Alice, the jazz-trumpeter Long Distance Davis, fairly obviously calls to mind the historical Miles Davis, while a more advanced knowledge of the actual Davis's discography recognises Long Distance Davis's tune "Miles and Miles Behind" as an oblique reference to the 1957 Miles Davis album, Miles Ahead. In both Noon's and Horrocks's worlds, knowledge brought to them from the outside can clarify cross-references, yet equally reveal new layers of obfuscation.

Non-New Zealand readers of Hicksville even share something of the approach of the non-Maori reader to Patricia Grace, in whose novels knowledge peculiar to Maori and Polynesian tradition is extensively drawn upon as a structuring principle. In Grace's novels non-linearity is intended to reflect the ongoing validity of traditional cosmology rather than demonstrate the exemplars of postmodern narrative technique. As Michelle Keown observes in Postcolonial Pacific Writing, the flashbacks in Grace—as in Hulme—embody a view of the world in which the past is always nestled within the present, hence the power of the spiral both as a representation of Pacific cosmogony and as a metaphor for narrative structure (194-5). Grace also extensively incorporates Maori into her novels written in English. Though earlier novels included glossaries—thus inviting readers not conversant in Te Reo to consider the limits of their own knowledge and acquire more—since Potiki in 1986, Grace has “made far fewer concessions to non-Maori-speaking readers”, translating fewer Maori words and dispensing with glossaries (Keown, “Politics” 421). Hicksville does include a glossary, yet it is partly fictionalised. Still, details are laid throughout Hicksville with such care that, to the reader encountering them, they are floated as invitations to extend their own knowledge. Hence, the tearooms in Hicksville, The Rarebit Fiend, seem so deliberately and obscurely named that they must point to some wider significance. With relatively little effort put into an

internet search, a reader finds that “The Rarebit Fiend” was also the title of a Winsor McKay comic strip which appeared in the early part of the twentieth century. Readers are invited, then, to acquire new knowledge of comics as they are encouraged to overcome their cosmopolitan provincialism.

Appropriately, the novel opens by presenting the reader with confusing directions and textual uncertainties, both in the narrative, and surrounding it. Horrocks’s method recalls Manhire’s in his adult pick-a-path book, The Brain of Katherine Mansfield, where a supposedly stable figure of local culture is radically destabilised by presenting the reader with a range of narrative paths, none of which bring them closer to the book’s iconic title character. Though most of its multiple narratives cohere, Hicksville’s opening troublingly relates to the rest of the novel to follow, but introduces the full range of Horrocks’s destabilising tactics. The first frames are bordered by apparently editorial footnotes, “Augustus E” and “—dylan horrocks. London. 10/91” (introductory section). If these can be more meaningfully understood as a title and signature of the first frames, as in fine arts tradition, their presence nonetheless disturb the surface of the text with a metafictional charge—compounded when the narrator is revealed to be called “Dylan Horrocks”. The comic could be autobiographical but for the arrival of a letter (and enclosed comic strip—the first in the Cook, Heke, Heaphy cycle) sent from Augustus E. in Hicksville, bending the reality underlying the textual representations. Augustus E. draws such direct comparison with the historical Augustus Earle that it is hard to figure the former as anything other than a deliberate authorial reference to the latter, while Hicksville is a fictional locality of similarly authorial construction. Yet “Horrocks’s” confusion heightens the blending of fiction with reality—anyone in the real world, would after all, react similarly to the situation “Horrocks” finds himself in: “Who

the hell was Augustus E., I wondered, and why had he sent his strip to me—a complete stranger?” (introductory section).

The familiarity and intrigue of the narrative conspires to heighten the scrambling of fiction and reality: “Dylan Horrocks” is a young New Zealander resident in London, but who receives postcards and phone messages from Kerikeri, imploring him to return. The recognisable markers of the young New Zealander’s O. E. are shot through with the inter-textual. While “Horrocks” tries to ignore the call of home—“Life in general was fairly confused, and I faced a number of unpleasant decisions. Home called, but I was hesitating” (introductory section)—the mysterious comic from Augustus E. exhibits a parallel anxiety about place. “Horrocks” receives three instalments detailing Cook’s meeting with Heke, in which the British naval captain learns from the Maori chief that “The islands are moving”, that “They are riding the sea like a ship, Captain... drifting”, and that “The clouds are wrong”, elaborating, “Wrong hemisphere” (ibid). “Horrocks” cannot make sense of the strips, though the concern they demonstrate seems noticeably, if esoterically, close to his own, as seen in the micro-narrative of his dreams:

That night I dreamt I was Superman. I flew back home, across the thousands of miles of ocean. But home wasn’t where I expected; the islands had drifted some way to the south. When I landed, I looked for the people responsible. It had grown much colder, having drifted closer to the Antarctic. Eventually I found the people apparently in charge, but by now they had frozen solid. I used my super-breath to warm them, and the ice fell away and ran into puddles. As they stood shivering and confused, I tried to reprimand them for letting things get into such a state, but they couldn’t understand what I was saying. In my dream I wept for days. (ibid)

The dream represents an idealised space between reality and text. It is impossible to tell whether the dream has been influenced by the mysterious Augustus E.'s comic strips, or whether the strips have had a more profound effect on "Horrocks" for the way they speak to, and articulate, some deep-held longing for home and the associated moral verities attendant on such yearning: that "home" represents stability even in one's absence from it. If the cause and effect is unclear, then this suits Horrocks's purpose nicely; while both dream and text represent an engagement with the idea of home, they are subjective engagements. If their combined presence can neither settle on nor define "home", together they can articulate a sense of what home as an idea might look like, yet leaving the way open for revisions. As a way of figuring the subjective experience of apparently objective reality, the joint-take of text and dream speaks to Roger Horrocks's view that "Any notion of 'reality' tends to involve a consensus among a particular group of people at a particular time" ("Invention"). While Roger Horrocks believes that consensus must always itself be open to debate on principle, Dylan agrees, but also subtly reminds us that the consensus accommodates highly subjective positions.

The problem Horrocks articulates is how to remain committed to place when any sense of it must be allowed to stay perpetually open to revision. In "Horrocks's" dream, while the passages narrating its events are among the most restrained, poetic, lucid and vivid of the entire novel, the accompanying frames do not illustrate the dream at all. Rather, the drawings develop an increasing level of abstraction: the first frame offers an interior view of a bedroom, the moon and stars visible through a window; the second frame's view of a townscape at night takes the spectator through the window itself; the third frame ascends higher to feature only the crescent moon and stars; and the final fourth panel comprises only stars, by now mere dots on a black field. The four frames, viewed in sequence, thus represent a journey from the detailed, domestic, narrative-laden interior to

the universalising symbol of the sky, but the final frame in itself constitutes almost pure abstraction. While the night sky could be symbolic of a deep-sleep state, equally it points to a narrator floating free of earthly attachments, only able to access home through a surreal, highly subjective, vision of it. Horrocks's dedication to the art form through which he accesses his notions of place and home thus comes to represent his dedication to place and home itself.

Just as Horrocks's narrator, "Horrocks", in the novel's introductory section is distanced from home yet remains deeply attached to it, later, throughout chapter 4, narrated in the first-person, "Horrocks" again seems to appear as a narrator and character. His appearance though is marked by both a curious sense of detachment from the surrounding landscape as well as a disconcerting relationship to the surrounding text. The most logical "I" of chapter 4 is "Horrocks", as the novel's only named first-person narrator to that point; yet whereas "Horrocks" of the novel's introductory section seems to have never heard of either Hicksville or Augustus E., the narrator of chapter 4 is thoroughly familiar with Hicksville and its personages, grasping the complex histories of their interrelationships:

When Leonard Batts came to Hicksville, I was out of town. In Peru, maybe, or Africa. It's hard to keep track after a while. But Grace had just returned. And Sam. The valley was warm with the last of an overlong summer. Slow afternoons, golden light, the rhythms of cicadas. Languid, Grace calls it. The kind of days she'd missed most about home. Me too, I guess. (ch. 4)

Though the narrator seems to be resident, at least some of the time, in Hicksville, he makes no appearance in the township throughout the novel. And yet he is able to narrate events that transpire there from some vaguely accorded distance: "Peru, maybe, or Africa. It's hard to keep track after a while" (ibid).

Though a wandering narrator, equally home in Peru, Africa, or remote areas of New Zealand offers a muted suggestion that the narrator could be Augustus E., whose real-life equivalent roamed as far from England as New Zealand, Mauritius, and Rio de Janeiro, any fixed equation between historical personage and fictional narrator is ironically undercut: “It’s hard to keep track after a while” (ibid). The action which chapter 4 does track is the private trauma of Grace’s return to Hicksville after her time away, part of which was spent with the narrator as a translator in the fictional Cornucopia—“The main reason I was in Cornucopia was to meet their greatest cartoonist, Emil Kopen. Grace’s Cornucopt was better than mine, so I asked her to come along as translator” (ibid). Kopen only refers to the narrator as “the New Zealander”, never by name (ibid). The Atlas series, however, features a story arc in which another “Dylan Horrocks” character travels to Cornucopia to meet with Kopen. Yet the episode as recounted in Hicksville does not appear in any of the three published editions of Atlas, and—as in the case of apparently multiple “Sam Zabel” characters—the various “Dylan Horrocks” characters bear little resemblance to one another as drawn by Horrocks. Horrocks’s complex reference system, in which real-world equivalents are playfully manipulated so as to refuse a smooth coherence with historical record, thus extends to the continuity in his own fictional universe. Just as “Captain Cook” is not necessarily Captain Cook, “Dylan Horrocks” is not necessarily “Dylan Horrocks”.

Horrocks’s plays with narrative continuity and his willingness to manipulate a range of cultural references are metaphorically grounded in the map motif recurrent through Hicksville. Maps do not necessarily corroborate one another in Hicksville. Curiously—tellingly—two such maps are based on historical precedents: one drawn by Cook, and another by Tuki Tahua and Ngahuruhuru. These represent similar topographical

engagements with New Zealand, yet produce results that differ widely. Cook's was based on evidence gathered during his circumnavigations, before many contemporary centres were settled and named by Europeans, while the second, though also produced in the latter half of the eighteenth century, represents a traditional cartographical account incorporating traditionally held spiritual beliefs; as Horrocks points out, their version of the North Island includes "the road taken by the spirits of the dead on their journey to Te Reinga and thence to Hawaiki" (glossary). Despite their differences it is hardly surprising that Leonard cannot make sense of either. These maps point out the temporal and cultural discrepancies between their eighteenth-century authors and Leonard, their contemporary reader. Yet when Leonard consults a contemporary map of the East Cape, although he scans the broadly relevant section, there is no mention of Hicksville either. Though the contemporary map has updated the topography of the historical ones, they have revealed another irreconcilable gulf: one between the fictional Leonard and Hicksville, on the one hand, and, on the other, the non-fictional map of the East Cape of New Zealand which he consults.



Fig. 35. Lt. James Cook, reprod. in [Hicksville](#).

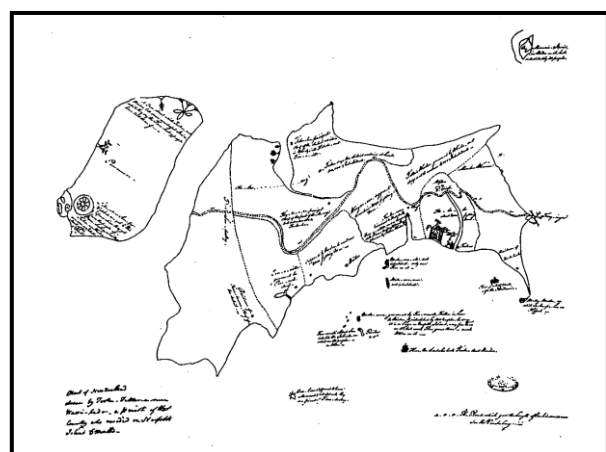


Fig. 36. Tuki Tahua and Ngahuruhuru, reprod. in [Hicksville](#).

The extent to which maps offer no fixed understanding of the land they purport to describe suggests that representations of the land are perpetually unstable and prone to coming into conflict with one another. Yet Horrocks maintains a commitment to the expressive potential of cross-cultural reference; thus, rather than measuring successive views of New Zealand or representations of the land for how they have taken hold or been dismissed by, in Roger Horrocks's words, "a particular group of people at a particular time" ("Invention"), Dylan prefers to value representations on their own terms. Although the maps of Tuki Tahua and Ngahuruhuru and Cook apparently disagree—on for instance, the relative size, shape, and scale of New Zealand's two main islands—they can nonetheless be assessed and valued for what their aesthetic reveals of their cultural biases; the concerns of map makers, surveying companies, or others whose cartographical interest is oriented towards values beyond aesthetic ones are not left aside, but figure as another particular way of engaging with the land. Horrocks's achievement with Hicksville lies in the extent to which apparently particularised engagements—scientific, indigenous, fine art, comics—can be opened to speak directly to one another as embodied in the meeting between Heke, Cook, and Heaphy, an encounter which seemingly takes place outside historical time.

If maps, usually regarded as functional texts and judged accordingly, can be re-valued along aesthetic lines which point to cultural difference, comics undergo a similar but opposite kind of reversal; in Hicksville comics are also functional texts, designed not merely to entertain, but to operate as stores or maps of factual information. Throughout Hicksville characters come to knowledge primarily through texts. When Leonard asks Sam why everyone hates Burger, Sam responds: "Why don't I get you a copy of the mini-comic I did about my time at Dick's mansion? It explains what happened much better

than I could...” (ch. 5). Similarly when Huck asks Sam how he lost his job at Laffs magazine, Danton steps in: “Here—Sam’s latest mini-comic tells all” (ch. 2). The final evidence of Burger’s transgression, for Leonard, rests with Kupe’s provision of the original Captain Tomorrow comic by Mort Molson. As a metaphor for the full capacity of comics Horrocks envisages, Kupe’s magical library is housed within a lighthouse, whose illuminating function optimistically signals the full potential of comics to reside in not only an acquired cultural legitimacy but also in one underlined through an added self-reflexivity.

Kupe’s perfect library declares Hicksville’s full reach towards the metafictional, foreshadowed by earlier inter-textual intrusions. Although “Dylan Horrocks” of the introductory section seems apparently, curiously, detached from the rest of the novel, instalments of the Augustus comic which he receives in the post at his London flat occur and recur throughout Hicksville. Indeed, the Augustus comic is the only consistent “character” in Hicksville, spanning the otherwise unrelated introductory section and novel which follows. As the fifth chapter opens, a sheet of the mysterious strip blows through the frames mimicking its own advance through the wider narrative of Hicksville that supports its presence. Chapter 6 constitutes an entire episode of Pickle written by Sam. Logic suggests chapter 4’s narration takes the form of another internal comic—the unnamed narrator is identified as a cartoonist—though it is one whose narrative borders are porous; its initial frames are narrated in the first-person but give way to panels in which the narrator is present only as a character, before the character leaves the story, seemingly entirely, but for another brief narrative voice-over in chapter 9. Yet if frames are compositional tools the way words are, it remains theoretically possible that the whole narrative of Hicksville is narrated by an internal character, albeit one whose references to himself in the first person are only briefly made.

Such subtle textual deviations import the metafictional narrative strategies typical of Italo Calvino or Vladimir Nabokov; like the opening of Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveller, in which the reader is directly addressed in the most disconcerting terms—"You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, If on a winter's night a traveller" (3)—or Nabokov's Lolita, where a troubling introductory note forces the reader to confront fiction masquerading as reality, it is possible to enter Hicksville not completely sure if the story has started, nor where it does start; the precise moment the text has been begun, fictionally, resists definition. Hicksville's inner stories overlap with a similar restlessness at their borders, and thus the reading experience of Hicksville is never an entirely stable one. Rather like entering an art gallery and finding it is not the line between art and reality, but the line between the contexts of art and reality which can be hardest to draw, readers must negotiate Hicksville with a curious mix of complicity and stealth.

In this way, Horrocks advances the interests of a narrow yet significant vein of recent local fiction which includes Manhire and Knox. Though not as dramatically as Horrocks, Manhire and Knox spin fictions whose metafictional dimensions suggest a peculiarly local variant, or, perhaps more pertinently, the problems in establishing one. Horrocks calls to mind the playful digressions in Manhire's Brain of Katherine Mansfield, where the reader, though exercising a pseudo-control over the unfolding narrative through a familiar but distorted New Zealand, never escapes entirely the domestic "need for great New Zealanders to underwrite the authentic experience of New Zealandness" (Clayton and Williams 70). But Horrocks also speaks to Knox's use of the perfect library in The Vintner's Luck, where New Zealand itself appears as little more than a whispered aside to the central drama unfolding between Napoleonic France and

heaven. Knox's metafictional perfect library is found at a pointed remove from a New Zealand context, as if to suggest the long-held mutual exclusivity of New Zealand and literary theory; indeed, New Zealand's critical climate, even as late as the 1980s, suffered from a distaste for literary theory, partly redressed by magazines such as And, which Jonathan Lamb described as "the first coherent attempt to produce literary and cultural criticism in New Zealand that isn't tied to [either] the defense of nationalist positions or to the evangelising of creeds from overseas" (Williams and Leggott 18-19).

While Horrocks's use of the comic echoes the earlier assimilations of foreign art forms into the local art world, the complex narrative structure of Hicksville points to a similar relationship between local and foreign criticism. Replete with metafictional devices, Hicksville suggests that engagement with texts must be made on the terms of the text itself—as most branches of literary theory strive towards—yet without overlooking the histories into which they are written. Horrocks's attempt to provide a spiritual, if fictional, home for comics in Hicksville represents, then, partly a call equivalent to Williams's for a "criticism attentive to and respectful of the local context, but which is nevertheless open to the methods and perspectives practised elsewhere" (Book 23-24). Equally though, Hicksville could represent no less than the answer to such a call. Undoubtedly sensitive to a range of local cultural contexts, Horrocks is open to the methods and perspectives of elsewhere with dramatic and ironic force; for his aesthetic machinery comes from "elsewhere" not only insofar as the comics heritage on which he draws is non-autochthonous to New Zealand, but also as its natural contemporary habitat lies beyond the supposed bounds of fine art and high literature into which he writes and draws.

In Hicksville references to modernists Lorca, Picasso, and O'Keefe sit alongside not only the colonial presences of Heaphy and Earle, but also comics figures Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Will Eisner and others. Kupe's library represents an idealised collection drawn along such wide-ranging lines, but the full force of Horrocks's cataloguing reaches an apotheosis, oddly, in the glossary provided at the end of Hicksville. When all narrative avenues should have been closed, Horrocks leaves them open; his glossary provides not only a pronunciation guide to Maori words, factual geographical information, and entries on historical personages from comics as well as wider culture, but also profiles of fictional characters and places such as Emil Kopen and Cornucopia.

Reading fiction as fact lies at the heart of Horrocks's interest in map-making. Comics are presented as a medium ideally suited to the mapping of the joint cultural landscape of words and pictures. As Kopen tells the unnamed narrator, via Grace, comics and maps are "the same thing: using all of language—not only words or pictures" (ch. 4 emphasis original). But Horrocks's maps are also fictions, refusing to cohere with the historical record they quote. His glossary is thus a map of how fictions can be laid over reality, and how reality can be spun to new, fictionalised, ends. Although skewing the borders between fact and fiction is playful, it is also pointedly at the heart of all fictional representation.

Horrocks's work acknowledges a debt to a range of influences from Hergé to Tolkien, creators of fictionalised worlds not merely built to contain their fictions, but whose breadth and depth aspired to represent worlds as complex as our own. For Horrocks, cartoonist James Kochalka's definition of comics as "a way of creating a universe and populating it with characters using a secret code that works in the simplest and most direct way possible to enter the 'reader's' brain" ("Perfect" 204) thus not only endorses

Hergé, the Belgian cartoonist and creator of Tintin, “famous for his obsessive commitment to research” which saw him spend weeks drawing a certain locale before cradling his stories within it (“Perfect” 206), but also Tolkien, whose Middle-Earth contained a wealth of histories, languages, dynasties and cultures far in excess of the fictional requirements of even his elaborate rings saga. These, though, are fictions supported by invented worlds that aim at sustaining the reader’s belief in them through a meticulous layering of details whose edges, though elaborate, still meet with a neatness often deliberately elided in Hicksville.

For Horrocks, world-building is not confined to comics or fantasy literature, but rather, every act of story-telling entails the building and furnishing of a fully-realised universe: “We are used to thinking of Tolkien or Raymond Feist as writers who create imaginary worlds, but the same is also true of Elizabeth Knox, Barbara Anderson or Maurice Gee” (“Perfect” 209). The realist-fantasy fusions of Knox in The Vintner’s Luck or Gee in his children’s stories such as Under the Mountain, where historical and geographical specificities provide the foundation for narratives whose plots and devices depend on their departure from reality, resemble Horrocks’s to an extent, yet adding Anderson to the grouping draws attention to the realist writer’s relationship to the invention and handling of fictional worlds.

While Gee’s Plumb trilogy for instance, builds a world which accords with our own—built around such cornerstones of recognised New Zealand history as the Wahine disaster—it is one psychologically wrought from the overlapping perspectives of its characters. As the narrative perspectives shift, so too do the portraits of the characters; the trilogy’s first instalment, narrated by its title character, shows George Plumb as, among other things, a supportive husband, moved by his wife’s devotion to home and

family, whereas the second, narrated by his youngest daughter Meg, evokes Plumb's frighteningly autocratic dimensions, monstrous in his treatment of sons Oliver, the defiant eldest, and Alfred, a homosexual. Gee makes a case for a view of history which pays equal heed to recorded events and impressionistic recall. If Gee's trilogy suggests that art produced in this country can be recognisably 'New Zealand' and yet not strictly reliant on whatever we perceive New Zealand to be, Horrocks mobilises the idea of New Zealand further in a novel which is artistically liberated, yet respectful of the wider heritage of New Zealand's cultural nationalism on whose shifting tropes he draws.

Like Gee's trilogy, Hicksville is thoroughly permeated by literariness, by written texts within its narrative arc. Though Horrocks's inter-textuality is altogether more destabilising than the broadly realist Gee, and though it operates closer to the surface of the narration and thus deliberately undermines narrative linearity, Horrocks's faith in art and texts is founded precisely on the variety of accounts offered of the country from the pre-contact to the postcolonial; it is not confused or compromised by their disagreements. Horrocks's view of New Zealand then is a multi-faceted one, in which variations, though they might point to cultural conflict, can be reconfigured to measure cultural wealth. Of the fictions, again, of Knox, Anderson, and Gee, he says, "The worlds in which their stories take place each have their own history, atmosphere, and sense of time. No matter how much it may resemble the 'real world,' it is actually something else" ("Perfect" 209 emphasis original).

As to what the "something else" might be, Horrocks offers no explicit answers, but perhaps the texts themselves best divulge anyway. The quality he applauds in Michael Ondaatje's writing—in which the "hectic banality of everyday life [is eschewed] for a kind of alternative reality," and where "Events unfold not according to the laws of

nature, but the laws of narrative structure, governed by themes and metaphors, not physics” (“Perfect” 208-09)—is thus also, and perhaps even more aptly, an expression of the principle governing his own fictions. In those, the building blocks of local culture, of comics history, and his own back-catalogue are re-organised not merely to map the face of local culture but also to revise the possibilities of narrative form, in which the comic is recognised as an aesthetic and narrative vehicle as capable as the most highly regarded modern and postmodern texts of performing metafictional literary gymnastics, of galvanising both the high and the low, and of mapping the critiques of the past and speculating on their future. Horrocks’s renovations of the aesthetic forms and languages in which he is highly conversant point to (and are enabled by) a cultural history whose borders are porous, and whose private history has always involved not only the negotiation of a complicated relationship with elsewhere, but also with the terms on which it best understands itself.



Fig. 37. Dylan Horrocks, from Pickle No. 1.

Conclusion: Standing Upright Here

The famous concluding lines, “Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here”, from Allen Curnow’s sonnet “The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch” offer, perhaps, his most lasting and resonant poetic variation on the theme which absorbed him as a critic: what Hugh Roberts, in reference to Curnow’s A Book of New Zealand Verse: 1923-1945, called an “attempt to produce a national literature worthy of a ‘national literary history’” (221). Roberts’s view on those oft-quoted closing lines in particular—“They are vague and open-ended, to be sure, but they do suggest that in some ‘marvellous’ future New Zealand will be a standing place—a turangawaewae, to use the Maori word—for a New Zealand people” (ibid)—chime with Horrocks’s own concern, though with a significant difference: whereas Curnow envisions a turangawaewae for the New Zealand people, Horrocks aspires to provide one for comics itself.

If Curnow's anxieties associated with place spoke to the troubling relationship between New Zealand and Britain throughout the twentieth century—the century in which Britain was regarded firstly as “Home”, and then as an absconding parent—Horrocks's affirmations of New Zealand as home allow Britain a faded yet enduring presence in the national cultural and political psyche. From here, Horrocks's revisions of cultural figures, Heke, Cook, Heaphy and Earle do not ignore the cultural conflict between groups of particular bias or persuasion, but point out the possibilities of reconciliation available when overlapping histories are not held to be mutually exclusive. Consequently, representations or cultural investments in the land need not oppose one another, or strive to correct the other's perceived shortcomings. Rather, they can form a network of expressions, creating the “common inheritance” Roberts supposes Curnow is in search of yet frustrated by (222).

Roberts's assessment of Curnow's influential essay articulate Horrocks's operative strengths. For Roberts, Curnow's “attempt to produce a national literature worthy of a ‘national literary history’ founders on the inherent limitations of that concept” (221); and while “Fairburn called the anthology ‘a landmark in New Zealand literary history,’ [. . .] it may be truer to say that it created the very landscape of New Zealand literature” (222 emphasis original). For Horrocks, Curnow's concern with finding and responding to the country's “peculiar pressures” (Penguin 17) is more interesting for how the direction of the enquiry itself figures a particular engagement with the country: one that voices faith in a stable reality waiting to be articulated by the poet, or painted by the painter with the sufficient clarity of vision, and is preferably unsullied by international influence. Roberts observes, however, that “by stripping away the mediating associations of history and allusion, one strips away the very things that provide the content of a national image”

(226); similarly, Horrocks does not only reinstitute the validity of “the mediating associations of history and allusion” as subject matter, but finds in them the structuring principles of his approach to narrative.



Fig. 38. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

While Horrocks thus answers Curnow’s call for artists and poets to draw on their common inheritance by pointing out the variety within the inheritance, he also calls for the borders of it to be delimited. Demonstrating the artfulness of his favoured form for the way it manages dense narrative, pointed visual puns, and a nuanced handling of voice and craft, Horrocks thus stakes his claim for comics to be regarded with a serious critical measure along lines closer to Spiegelman’s Maus than McCloud’s Understanding Comics. Whereas McCloud’s simplistic insistence on comics as art both limits their potential and simplifies art historical precedents, comics such as Maus and Hicksville prefer to demonstrate that for comics to be taken seriously, they must exhibit serious intent. Even Hicksville’s comic turns are made with a pointed relevance—Moxie and Toxie, the

eponymous characters of Sam's humour strip, voice the familiar struggle for artistic independence in the face of unforgiving economic realities in typically self-deprecating terms; following Toxie's impassioned declaration to Sam's editor—"We're sick of being forced to fit the banal house style you impose on everything! We want to explore the big questions! Life! Death! Truth! Epistemology!"—Moxie deadpans, "I want sex and drugs" (ch. 2).

Horrocks's playful merging of the conventions of the low-brow comic with the dense narrative layering of modernist literature and the subtle quotation of art history represent a working model for a literary and artistic form whose borders are truly open to a range of aesthetic and cultural influences. Similarly, Horrocks makes a case for a New Zealand whose creative borders are wide open; the delimiting of categories Hicksville achieves further underlines how New Zealand has counted as not merely the stage but also the subject of cultural production on the local front. In the face of Evans's protectionist rhetoric and Wystan Curnow's taut prescriptions—both concerned with the creative standards of the local—Horrocks offers the wealth of domestic cultural expression as a shifting, sometimes amorphous but vital body of cultural capital. The depth and breadth of this shifting body points out that if New Zealand is constantly changing, then changes ought to be considered as additions to the pool of knowledge, not attempts to drain and refill it from the bottom up.

When Allen Curnow foresaw future generations mastering the art of standing upright in New Zealand, he prophesied that Baxter's anxiety about true inhabitation of the country, and Frame's about the country ever being thoroughly conceived of as home, would be assuaged. And yet if there is some "trick" to it, then Curnow admits that the knack of approaching and accounting for the local, even if it can be mastered over time, must

seem esoteric to those who are strangers to its technique. Perhaps Curnow would not expect that a comic book produced in Canada at the end of the twentieth century could so competently demonstrate its credentials to stand upright in New Zealand and illuminate what had become a vast cultural and critical landscape. But if Horrocks shows that the trick is to pay equal regard to the various views of New Zealand—all those that have glimmered in some poems and on some canvases—then finding that the authentic New Zealand can take heed of them all is not only a new trick but an affectionate nod to the old as well.



Fig. 39. Dylan Horrocks, from Hicksville.

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