

# SCRATCH THE SURFACE

Text of creative writing lecture  
at Auckland University

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1. Thank you for the chance to address you, on a wonderful topic – poetry. It’s a staple of any high culture. It’s ubiquitous but it lies hidden. To some extent, I want to insert myself in your path as a problem and open up fields of thought and desire whose shape I did not best get until I was over 40 years of age.
2. In many respects this lecture contains what I would want to say to my now teenage kids. But it is difficult. There is much to learn but little that’s effectively teachable. There is no reason known to them that they should be interested in poetry. Schools know no reason either, effectively. My hope is that one day they will get to an edge of language and something will click for them. They will remember there is a name for such an experience – poetry – that has been culturally celebrated forever. My son calls this thing hip-hop: same thing, change of name. If I could further awaken this garrulousness of the gods...
3. With the present course: you have to double back on your education to date. Mastery requires that you interrogate again all the placeholder conceptions that you may have obtained for art knowledge. You are at a critical point, this turning around. Don’t minimise it. You are confronting two immensely difficult things. The first are the profound challenges of English as a discipline, of which I shall speak more later. The second is the need to internalise art knowledge well enough to reproduce it.
4. What is a poem? It is a kind of rare representation. That is, a rare kind of language-game, full of risk. It is not limited to a verbal language-game but for now I will assume it is. And if it is a *kind* of something, then it has boundaries, so there is a not-poetry at the borders of it. The only thing you want to do as students is achieve this simple knowledge of categories, of what is and what is not poetry.

5. We are trying to avoid a kind of autism with respect to rare representation. Commonly, autistics have a kind of mind-blindness that reveals itself in an inability to normally isolate and read the faces of people, for example. While faces anchor meaning for most of us an autistic person may find a light switch does that. With respect to sensitivity to the presence of poetry, we need to learn to limit the mind-blindness, the basic categorical mistakes, that allocates the fascination reserved for this art across a too-wide landscape of cultural objects, mistaking, say, faces and light-switches.
6. During your education you want to gain a sharper sense of poetry's treacherous landscape of fakes. Meditate on *Listener* poems in this regard. Why do they not satisfy? In order to write poetry we need such an horizon line to apply to our own work. We need to be able to make poetry - not poems, any more - an object of thought so that we can have it anchor writing. By training a particular mechanics of attention your unconscious can start to be your guide, which is what needs to happen. You cant think a poem into life.
7. How have you been taught this rare representation to date? Mostly, through a 19<sup>th</sup> century pedagogical construct, even now, for instance, in the way, say, the category *NZ poetry* is isolated out and presented to you. English is such a primitive discipline still. It doesn't solidify. It endlessly fragments into partial insight, and that limits your capacity to do any different. This archaic construct has many tell-tales. In state-funded institutions with liberal, state-funded social investment foundations you are led to study national identity and its colonial and post-colonial images (although Dr Calder, with his focus on the priority and cunning of representations does this authentically). You are implicitly pushed to modes of interpretation that eliminate equivocation, to grasp the meaning of texts as symbolic sets of various kinds, to be decoded to the point of stable and singular grasp by the student. There is no art history in English, a tell-tale of which

is the frenzy of attention paid to Modernism, in many ways that light-switch for autistics which most reveals the story-telling problem of English. Shakespeare dominates instruction at all levels and cements the reification of English as SFX of characterization and narrative, and verbal facility. English as it is commonly taught jealously guards its connection to humanism still, a central aspect of which is the continued focus on a canon of writers to which learning attempts to attach, but can only do so poorly because each work is held up as complete, and torn from its many contexts including its underpinning of quotation. Meta-levels of textual knowledge struggle to form. One can still do whole courses of English study with little or no connection to philosophy, and so little or no connection to traditional skills of thought and traditional contemplation of how meaning is constituted in its depth. The discipline struggles to move centrifugally into the domains of other disciplines to widen its boundaries of knowledge. It most naturally moves centripetally rather, again over-attaching to the study of verbal dexterity or criteria of textual correctness. The tips of English's icebergs are so pressed in upon your eyes that their profound depths are invisible. The one thing you most want from the study of English, which in the context of this course is the study of art in written language, is kept curiously defocused or vague. By which I mean, it is the presence of the gods that is repressed, that abstract presence at the root of writing's ambition and glory, and the cause of your desire to study how to make them. So this may be your experience: that you are held distant from giants by dwarf forms of instruction. Where do you want to take your creativity? What do you want to make, entertainments or art?

8. As an aside, one of the symptoms of this poverty, and in the English department here, is the way in which Wylan's cross-media knowledge is not incorporated into the curriculum. It does appear that the unwritten assumptions of English instruction cannot connect with visual art knowledge, as though no linkage existed. .

9. I have always feared the word poet because it is over-determined by lyric convention. It is killed in the drift nets of narrowly represented experience. I have even more fear of the word creative, as in “creative writing”. It is too improving, like finger painting. What I want to talk about has a perfectly good word: art. That is what a Master’s level trade school in a university should direct itself at.
10. The topic of art and craft comes up here. Let’s look at why we have these two words. They are supposed to name two different things, which commonly overlap of course. You hear people say, of a poem, that it is “well-crafted”. Or that so-and-so really knows her craft. We have Editors of local presses celebrating how good the book feels in the hand, the typographic skill that is evident, the quality of the paper stock. We see something laid out like a poem on the page and we say, that is a poem, when it is not. We celebrate the World of Wearable Art, and thereby stimulate our dopamine sensors, open them up, warm our art expectations, needlessly. Ridiculous the waste, sad time afterwards. They’re a one liner, not art at all. Likewise, we note the terminological tensions in areas like fashion and ceramics.
11. The distinction is obviously not based on utility, with craft being useful and art not. Basically, what is missing with craft is the discourse of art. Art is a distinctive language our mind recognizes, however lightly or obliquely this language – register, set of concerns, theatre - is touched.
12. But it is crucial you are not so confused, because you wish to be a producer. Refine your focus further: you are setting out, maybe, to write a poem. It is a confusing business, and more confusing if you cannot simultaneously know your own work as a skilled reader, as that necessary hermaphrodite, writer and critic. Seeking the refuge of something simple, a place to settle upon and stop in this task of writing, your thought might cling to the matter of vocabulary choice, looking for

the dead right word; the dead right image, or other figures of cunning word-play. You might even direct your thinking to first isolate what it is you want to say, then how to say that thing? You might seek out unusual angles in the presentation of people and situations. That is, what comes most readily to hand are craft's criteria of correctness.

- 13.** How is art different?
- 14.** I experienced, yesterday, the following ceremony: at a new Manson building on Shortland St a sculpture by Lionel Grant was first presented to its public. It was a fresh cold spring morning, with rush hour traffic gaining to our backs. The site was still a construction site, with builders and engineers moving around the stacks of timber and other building materials sheeted in white plastic covers. The floors of the building were covered in cardboard and sawdust. There were signs spraypainted on disposable materials: "this stone is not fastened and could fall", "go the other way", and so on.
- 15.** The ceremony commenced with a karanga from women standing beside the covered sculpture, and we gathered as a group at a certain distance from it. A kaumatua led us towards the singing women and the work. He was from Orakei, his name was Takutai, and, when he had reached the right position, he turned and spoke to us and to the work.
- 16.** The work was draped in a flag and this was withdrawn and caused an involuntary crowd murmur of astonishment and excitement.
- 17.** Then the kaumatua changed his mode of speech seamlessly and recited a public prayer.

18. The group then followed Takutai away from the sculpture to the entrance of the foyer, where women who had entered first called us toward the door to enter. Takutai moved to the door and stopped and again commenced speaking. After this he entered and we followed. Inside Takutai turned and addressed us further, then prayed once more, then we sang.
19. The ceremony ended.
20. What was Takutai doing, so naturally, smoothly, and potentially endlessly? He was tracing the shape of a figure of greatness in his culture, in a register of high occasion, naming invisible delineations of place, of thresholds and processions: paying homage and speaking effectively lines written before he took them up. He was in a language-game. It was like a poem.
21. I prefer to say, Takutai became the *guida intercessor*, the angel of a picture's annunciation. It was not Takutai talking. He made of himself an agent of a space-bound conception. Takutai naturalised the absolute strangeness of a being without teeth, palate, or throat, and one without lungs, who was present in speech without boundaries that seamlessly shifted and confused speaker and spoken to, public and private occasions, prayer and public address, in a rhythmic, textured gregariousness. What was the characteristic resonance of this being-present of Takutai's? It was warmly powerful performance. It commanded love and affection. Spectators gathered on a delicately observed but undrawn edge, neither distant from nor tight in on Takutai. As I have repeated, it was a being-present that solicited and was registered in speech. The concrete facts of the urban construction site were made to disappear and their place was taken by a conjured Auckland colonial foreshore. Likewise the tradesman's entrance to the unfinished foyer became a threshold between two inside and outside ceremonial spaces. Takutai entered the doorway as though entering a whareniui.

22. And all of this was behaviour appropriate in the presence of the sculpture that was unveiled, a work that put a traditional carved Maori figure with his back to a vertical column that pierced into the ceiling of the building's forecourt: it was carved richly, an insertion, and assertion.
23. And thinking on this, I caught the re-enactment of a traditional Western thing. It concerned Takutai's role in the ceremony I had just witnessed. He was a *figura-guida*, a painted figure in a painting I will talk further about below, one who in a curious drama mediates between audience and action and interprets it to each on behalf of the other, guiding the audience to a proper assessment of what is seen. The clue, of Takutai? He was talking into the middle distance, to no-one in particular, through public introspective prayer and normal public address. He was bringing messages, causing a structure of discourse to appear, and was thus a kind of angel.
24. One of the things that Takutai illustrates about poetry: the speaker is always listening.
25. I quote Georges Didi-Huberman, from his book on Fra Angelico:
26. "We know the advice Alberti gave the painter: include nella storia "a character-guide," well placed among the other characters, who "invites you to cry with them or laugh," in short, to form a relay between what he sees in the story and we who, watching him see, understand the meaning of the painting. Let us say this figura-guida constitutes an exact replica – at the desacralized level of history painting – of what the tropological element of a figure represented in the Middle Ages. The tropologia, we have seen, designates

the mode through which sacred meaning arrives at every moment in the pious consciousness of the believer, at the everyday level of a practice of reading or of the gaze. In Fra Bartolomeo's Annunciation – and in those by many others, if not all, painters – it seems quite obvious that the tropological sense uses the angel as an intercessor..”

(p144)

27. As an aside, we know *tropologia* in NZ through the painting of Colin McCahon. It is the classical term for strange devices in painting that double it and most directly connect it with the viewer, literalised objects that jar in context, like blinds and doors and writing. These types of things have also been called metaphysical.

28. Another example: in Roland Barthes' **A Lover's Discourse** there is :

“The necessity for this book is to be found in the following consideration: that the lover's discourse is today of an extreme solitude. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the “unreal”, exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an affirmation. That affirmation is, in short, the subject of the book which begins here...”

29. Then in his chapter “How this book is constructed” Barthes writes:
30. “Everything follows from this principle: that the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in his voice what is “unreal”, i.e., intractable. Whence the choice of a “dramatic” method which renounces examples and rests on the single action of a primary language (no metalanguage). The description of the lover’s discourse has been replaced by its simulation, and to that discourse has been restored its fundamental person, the I, in order to stage an utterance, not an analysis. What is proposed, then, is a portrait – but not a psychological portrait: instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved subject), who does not speak.”

31. For "*A Lover's* Discourse", substitute *Poetry's* Discourse: for "lover", "poet". Re-read both quotes this way.
32. There is the Herald article that I read yesterday, too, announcing a new C Fu CD, *Beneath the Radar*.
33.       "..we're after next. We want next. So next, to me, is like that thing that you don't know what it is but it's better than what is happening now."
34.       " There's no shape or form to it but I want it to be on that next shit where I get the listener thinking, 'Wow. What was that?' And that was the drive for making this album". And later in the article C Fu comments (on hip hop), likening the genre to the Renaissance:.."You know, that period of time when Michelangelo and all those other cats were trying to outdo each other, and some of the greatest art known to man came out of that. It was just guys trying to outdo each other. That's like this hip-hop thing. Its like a modern Renaissance".
35. So: from "next" to Modernism. Modernism is a common form of art near-knowledge. It emerges as the name for a large field of study. It is curious how it works, like a haematoma, a giant concentration of blood in the flesh of art history as it attaches to an actual 30-year period of time. It gave rise to the discussion of post-Modernism, too, which attached to another period of time, but later. How much discussion of art can proceed without these terms rising to the surface? The term is a magnet. But is it knowledge that is thus produced?

36. But all of this is capable of being looked at another way. Modernism seems to over-celebrate and narrowly date something which always happens in culture and in art history: the dialectic of development whereby something both generates and preserves itself through rupture. “The modern” is a relative statement. In an enthusiasm that seems giddy discussions of Modernism rush to register something new, which it was. But they forget what the something was, and focus on the new. The category isn’t Modernism, it’s art. Modernism is a type of it. And the rupture that we call Modern is a very old one. Dante was a Modernist: Cervantes, too. And in reverse: I am always struck by how Medieval the great modernist documents like *The Cantos*, *The Four Quartets*, *Ulysses*, are, or rather, how strongly they can be read under that aspect.
37. Is C Fu being a modernist when he talks of *next*? Is *next* still hip-hop? Was the new All Black haka, when the All Blacks played the Springboks at Carisbrook in August for the return Tri Nations a Modernist moment, shown by the rush of noise from the crowd, as of an explosion of excitement? Again, Modernism is simply a making-prurient of something art has always done, rupturing or contemporizing itself in order to refresh its excitement, or more accurately, to prove its ongoing presence. My counter-insistence becomes, don’t regard Modernism as categorically new, but old. Your excited discovery? That this making-strange has always been there, undated.



41. How does *The Cantos* constitute a reader? Through intertextual paths. Here are some of the features of this: it
- (a) **removes totalisation**, each page landing the reader in the same labyrinth
  - (b) **encourages thin-slicing** by layering fragments of action upon the big idea of Homer's, being circumnavigation. The poem appears as an insight puzzle, causing the reader to hunt for gestalts that never entirely come, never entirely prove fruitless
  - (c) **paralyses time**, by cycling together historic and present references and references to diverse cultural and political actors and their works, and encourages reader sampling
  - (d) **mixes experiences**, moving from filler sections to do with cranky economics and political diatribe, through the rapid bringing-on and exiting of characters, to moments of intense lyrical beauty before which the reader falls with confirmation and relief; the messy and the neat, etc. These are all dialects, spliced in bits.
  - (e) **the writing merges with the reading**, as the reader makes connections of memory and interpretation thereby organising the poem off the page, from pieces set out on it. Therefore the reader is a dancing partner with the writing. In a gliding motion the reader both follows the lead and knows where it is going.
  - (f) **foregrounds sound and the experience of listening**, through an astonishing wealth of different voices and rhythms.
  - (g) **the reader is willing in the seduction**
42. But a language-game can make use of all of these rhetorical devices but not be a poem. Actually, I want to say, *The Cantos* is a poem because, like Takutai, it is a stately invocation. It relays a classic content-stream, providing a spacious representation of divine presence that yields a profound comfort of cultural recognition, in this



44. In the middle of all the component parts of the preceding cantos, where one is pushed by heterogeneous juxtaposition back from the text and into an unfamiliar, partial mode of reading, *Canto LXXV* appears. Before coming upon it a space has been opened up, across which the reader regards the text's binary oscillation of starts and stops, as from an edge, arrested, intent, not intimately familiar, not reading in a normal manner, but gazing at the written depiction. *This space is Pound's contribution to the history of poetics.* We have to invent the manner of discussing the experience of the Pound text. Here the working parts of representation's labyrinth are highlighted, activated, and offered to the reader in stacks, in overlapping trains of material pierced with associative echoes. There is no progression of action in *The Cantos*. Narrative is withdrawn but intelligibility isn't. On any page the reader peers across a distance into the text's accumulation. It is hard going at first, when orderly sequence and clear signposts are withdrawn, and with it an intuitive, customary logic of sense. The near- or queer-opacity of words and phrases rises in this process. Displaced, the reader regards *The Cantos'* changing bits, its poly-lingual quotations, its jokes, as occurring in new complexes that preserve the curiosity and strangeness –the uncanny- of verbal expression. It is not words that we are dealing with here, nor sentences, but something else. The composition has altered the componentry.
45. And then, with the turning of a page *Canto LXXV* appears, and the abstract potential in the surrounding Cantos rushes to the surface. By that time the reader has found her way to a perfect distance, and the near-detachment of signs becomes complete, and there is a horizonless gain of speed regarded from a vantage point. The poem is revealed to have been more than its words. The half-struggles of close reading prior to *Canto LXXV* come to an end. Confronted by the simple opacity of music transcription that follows, one experiences a release. This joyful experience can only occur because the transcription supports a double take. It seems immensely different and strange on first glance, to find

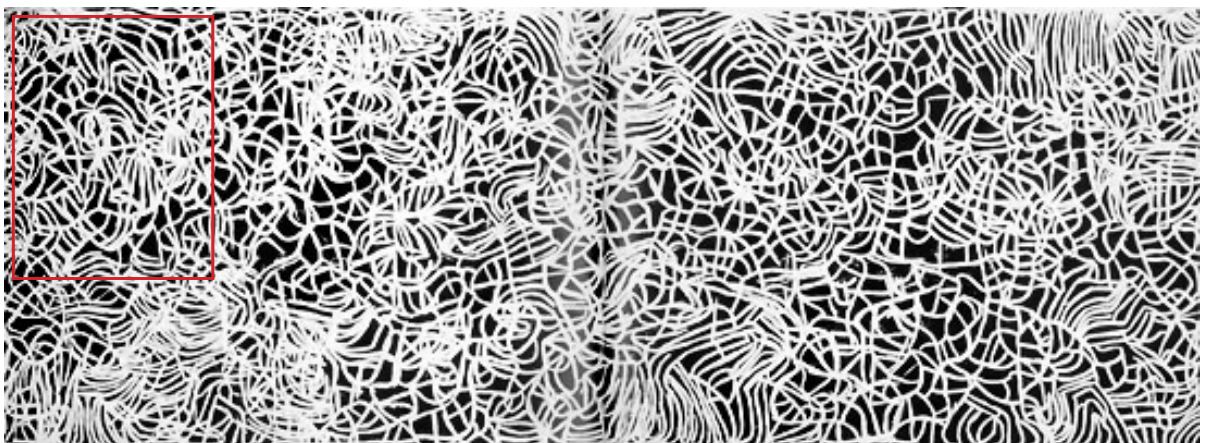
this representation in a poem. But our comfort with the discovery reveals its deep underlying continuity. The transcription of music has come to be only different in degree, and not in kind, from the preceding text. It is a passage that reaches back and extracts a ground from what we have been reading prior to fetching up at this section of *The Cantos*, a river of music, representing the singing of birds.

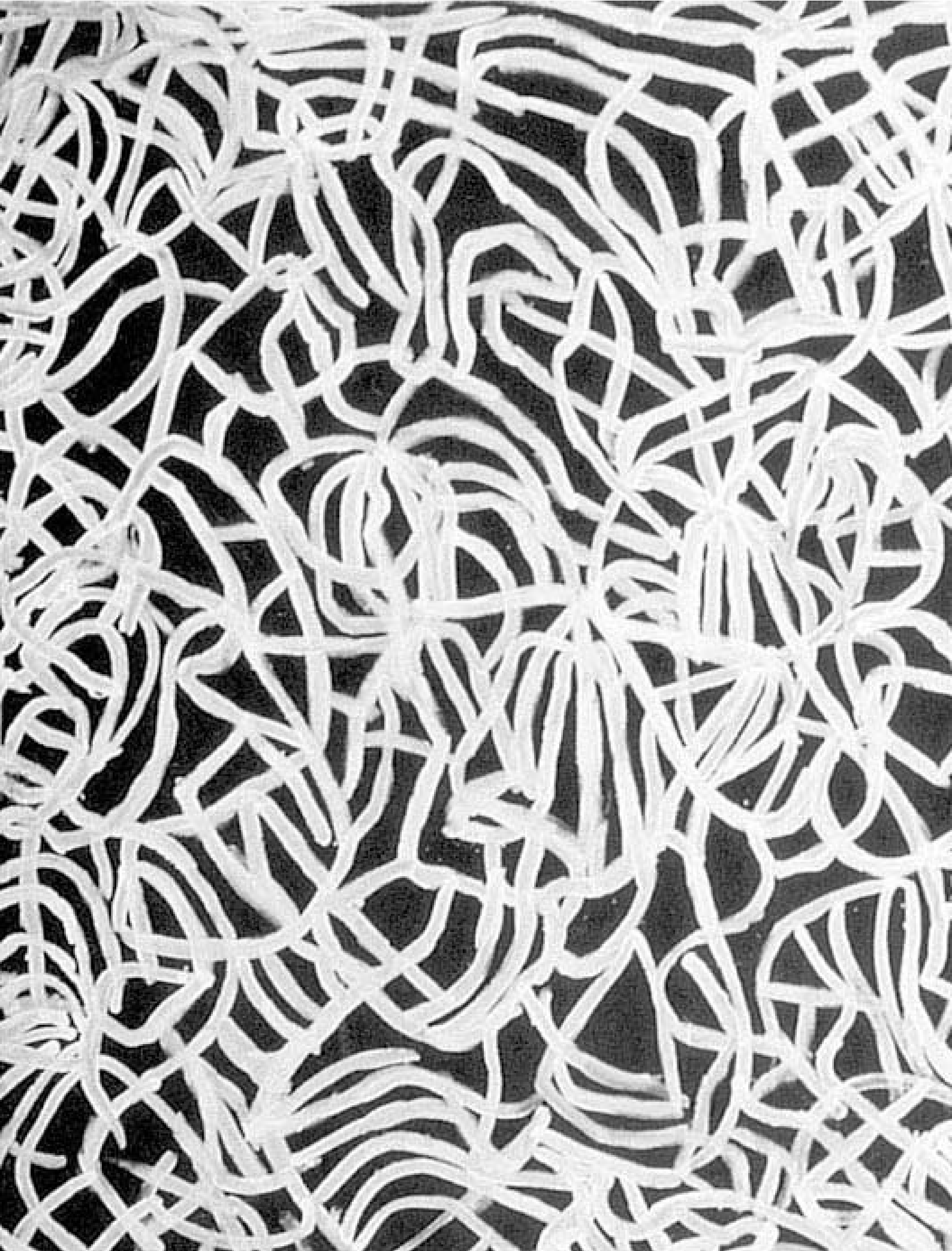


46. This distinctive reader distance and objectification Pound called an *ideogram*. It is a question of ideal viewing distance. Pound's thought here was so original that it has been politely tolerated by scholarship, as a museum curiosity, not embraced as a recovered staple of art knowledge, since. In *Canto LXXV* we come to realise

that what is most distinctive about Pound is that his great *Cantos* transform us from readers to audience-of-one. That we respond to the massive hybridity of this language game by withdrawing, seeking integrating context across a wider than customary distance and area, seeking to hold the *wall* in focus and not attach too closely to its *bricks*, and that as this happens writing is defamiliarised as marks, voices, and other sounds, and in this, appears as more itself. But we do not find this a detached experience. It supports a positive emotional override. There is an intimacy of exchange too across this space that has opened up. In this concert chamber of Pounds', lucidity draws us and opacity holds us back. In *The Cantos* we are paralysed with sensation pleasure. It is a hovering of abstract emotion. Thus we are in the distinctive phenomenology of a poem's performance.

47. Pound renders us speechless, in the manner of audience. It is not that we are struck dumb but that we attend to his poem as we do a picture or a musical performance. There is no thought that we should be able to translate, albeit silently. We watch, or we listen, but do not maintain a parallel murmur of interpretation. The thought is too capillarised. *The Cantos* limits verbal overshadowing.
48. *The Cantos* is called a long poem. It should be called a big poem. These are interesting things. They are epics of the everyday. They are big in the sense that Emily Kame Ngawarrye's Big Yam Dreaming, uses big :





*Emily Kame Kngawarrey, detail, **Big Yam Dreaming**, 1995*

## Critical Reading for Art Students

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Martin Heidegger, *What is Thinking?* and *Introduction to Metaphysics*

T S Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

Malcom Gladwell, *Blink*

Mihalyi Ckzentmihalyi, *Flow*