

CHANCE, PROVIDENCE, AND IMPERIAL ENNUI IN ALFRED DOMETT'S *RANOLF AND AMOHIA: A SOUTH-SEA DAY-DREAM*

By Hugh Roberts

“I HAVE READ YOUR POEMS – you can do anything” wrote Robert Browning to his close friend Alfred Domett on May 22, 1842, shortly after the latter had emigrated to New Zealand (Browning, Domett and Arnould 35). If this was in part friendly overpraise of Domett’s verse, it was also a prognostication as to the effect of emigration. The idea (which also underlies Browning’s poetic treatment of Domett’s departure in the figure of Waring who “gave us all the slip”¹) was that “partial retirement and stopping the ears against the noise outside” would open up the possibility of something startlingly new: the little I, or anybody, can do as it is, comes of them *going to New Zealand*. . . . What I meant to say was – that only in your present condition of life, so far as I can see, is there any chance of your being able to find out . . . (sic) what is wanted, and how to supply the want when you precisely find it (35).

For Browning “going to New Zealand” meant stepping beyond the world so as to gain an outsider’s perspective on it. Only from that neutral space, that geographical and historical blank, could one see “what is wanted.” A year later (May 15, 1843), Browning resumed the theme: “We are dead asleep in literary things and in great want of a ‘rousing word’ (as the old puritans phrase it) from New Zealand or any place *out* of this snoring dormitory” (54). Few have thought, however, that *Ranolf and Amohia: A South-Sea Day-Dream* (1872), the philosophical epic that Domett finally did produce on his return to England after a long career in New Zealand politics did much credit to Browning’s prophetic powers.

1: Domett and Imperial Nostalgia

THIS ESSAY IS NOT AN EXERCISE in the reclamation of an unjustly overlooked masterpiece; rather, it is an attempt to think anew about the relationship of this poem to the historical circumstances in which it was produced, and to do so by taking the poem more seriously as a poem than critics have hitherto been willing to do. To take Domett’s poem seriously is to discover in it a far more troubled attitude than previous criticism of the poem would suggest towards the very imperialist and colonial project to which Domett’s professional life was dedicated. It is, moreover, to help us discern a faultline that runs through Victorian attitudes towards history and the imperial mission more broadly. Domett’s ambitious philosophical

epic was recognized by contemporary critics as a *summum bonum* of Victorian debates, and anxieties, over chance and design in history; the poem's suggestions that the racial constructs and technological capacities that undergirded the Victorian imperial project might be nothing more than happenstance outcomes of the chaotic storm of history imply, in turn, that what looks, from the outside, like fierce ideological commitment to the imperial project could in fact be an almost arbitrarily chosen, *faute de mieux*, port in that storm.

Analysis of Domett's poem has chiefly focused on solving the puzzle of reconciling Domett as public figure with Domett as poet.² As Helen Blythe puts it:

On the surface, *Ranolf and Amohia* idealizes Maori as noble and worthy of epic treatment, while Domett's thirty years of journalistic and political work condemns them to extinction as ignoble savages. Domett's administrative approach to Maori is autocratic and deterministic; his poetic arguments advocate anti-despotism and free-will. (114–15)

How can we reconcile this basic contradiction? There is a consensus among recent critics of the poem that Domett's politics must be assumed to trump his poetry. "Apparent" contradiction is resolved to hermeneutic reconciliation. Blythe continues from the quotation above:

Closer study of Domett's romanticization of Maori reveals it to be nostalgic, however, a thin disguise of his underlying desire to eliminate Maori from the new colonial nation. (115)

Most recently, and comprehensively, Jane Stafford and Mark Williams have placed Domett at the head of a line of early New Zealand writers who are supposed to have constructed a mythical "Maoriland": a literary construct that served to mask a grim reality of "incomprehensible tragedy" with a "mysterious, intricate, romantic and exotically seductive realm" of myth (37). Like other scholars cited here, they acknowledge that "Domett's poem . . . has a contradictory relation to his public life" (38), but the "contradiction" dissolves when we understand that the poem is a "self-justifying myth," "a fantasy alternative version of New Zealand" (35–36).³

This is a familiar gesture in contemporary postcolonial criticism. One of the canonical statements of the theme (alluded to directly by Blythe) is Renato Rosaldo's 1989 essay on "Imperialist Nostalgia." Rosaldo is struck by a persistent contradiction in "imperialist" accounts of the passing of indigenous cultures: writers who "at once yearn for the old ways and acknowledge their warrior role in destroying them" (120). Rosaldo frames this "imperialist nostalgia" – a nostalgia for the very ways of life that the imperialist project is destroying – as a way of deflecting responsibility for that destruction: "nostalgia at play with domination . . . uses compelling tenderness to draw attention away from the relation's fundamental inequality" (120).

There is no question that Rosaldo's essay deserves its high reputation and wide influence. Nonetheless, Rosaldo ends his argument with a warning which he himself might have heeded more closely and which subsequent writers have often heeded not at all:

Similarly, efforts to produce seamless identities – the celebration of Turnbull as valiant hero or his vilification as imperialist monster – usually produce carbon copies or inverted images of the ideologies

they are meant to combat. It is in their inconsistent plentitude that memories eventually unravel the ideologies they so vividly animate. (121)

The problem with reading Domett through the lens of “imperialist nostalgia” – the problem with viewing his poem as being “not about New Zealand” (Stafford and Williams 35) and being solely about a mythical “Maoriland” – is that it begs every possible question about the “inconsistent plentitude” that is *Ranolf and Amohia*. This is both a local interpretive problem of rather minor importance (getting Domett right) and a wider theoretical problem of somewhat greater significance: how do we understand the relationship between a literary text and the broader social and political context in which it is produced? The danger that lies in the type of analysis typified in the above approaches is that it sacrifices the “literary” to a political and ideological reality which is understood to be entirely determinative of (and impervious to) literary “unraveling.”

A telling example of the problem inherent in this approach can be found if we return to the paper by Blythe. She identifies *Ranolf and Amohia* as an exemplar of that hoariest of “imperialist nostalgia” clichés, the doomed interracial romance:

Ranolf wants to return to Europe but, convinced that Victorians and Maori are as mutually exclusive in romance as they are in the colony, Amohia cannot travel to England, nor can she return to a pre-colonial Maori world after contact with her European lover. . . . Amohia has little alternative but to die, fulfilling the role of Maori in the discourse of colonial extinction. (125)

While it is true that Amohia is feared dead, that fear turns out to be mistaken. Blythe would have us read everything that happens after the erroneous report of Amohia’s death as a kind of ghostly afterlife which the reader can safely discount as pure fantasy. But what is striking is that readings which do not choose to grant what is, after all, only a mistaken belief about the character’s death this heavy symbolic weight are effectively identical with regard to the “imperial nostalgia” argument. While Blythe offers us Amohia’s symbolic sacrifice as the crowning evidence of Domett’s refusal to imagine a relationship of equality between Māori and *pakeha*,⁴ Day, Stafford and Williams just as easily offer us the poem’s actual ending (Ranolf’s return to England with Amohia as “Husband-lover and the lover-Wife” [478]) as itself the most startling proof that the work is a mere fantasy. The “imperial nostalgia” argument appears to be immune, once posited, to the actual contents of the poem.

And yet, surely, for a Victorian author to write a romance in which the “happy ending” is the marriage of a white man and a Māori woman is indeed remarkable: Blythe’s “symbolic” version of the plot is not only what we expect to happen as we read the story, it is clear that Domett is consciously confounding his contemporary audience’s expectations. Robert Tilton notes in his study of the Pocahontas legend in nineteenth century American fiction, for example, that “when intermarriages are allowed to be consummated, the characters, particularly the Indian involved, have usually taken the first step on the road to disaster” (64).⁵ By the same token, Hsu-Ming Teo argues in “Romancing the Raj” that miscegenation, as anything but a prelude to disaster, was all but unthinkable in nineteenth century colonial novels from India. Before the false news of Amohia’s drowning reaches Ranolf, he is in an agony of indecision about whether he can take his “savage wife” back to England with him: “What a startling shock / To prejudices like a wall of rock / Sense-based or senseless – piled on every hand!” (424). Her apparent death arrives exactly as if it were the conventional

solution to this intractable problem; its effect, however, is to fill him with disgust for that “Contemptible and coward care / Of what ‘the World’ might think or say – / That blatant – brainless – soul-less World!” (458) and prepare him to steal away with Amohia as soon as he rediscovers her. It seems hard to explain how such a widely observed convention – one marked within the poem itself as “like a wall of rock” – could ever have emerged if the act of flouting the convention has, in the end, exactly the same ideological implications as following it.

1.1: Might Makes Right

LET ME BE CLEAR THAT I AM not attempting to alter our view of the unhappy contribution that Domett made to New Zealand’s history. Jumping opportunistically onto the heightened sense of racial discord and paranoia that followed in the wake of the Wairau Affray of 1843, Domett brought a nasty eliminationist edge to New Zealand’s public racial discourse:

the settlers of Connecticut and Massachusetts (oh for the spirit of the olden time!) gathered their forces together, attacked and defeated the natives with great slaughter. . . . Let the executed vengeance of the law secure us protection. (Qtd. in Domett, *Diary* 18)

He rode that sentiment to a seat in the Legislature, and ultimately to his improbable Premiership in 1862–63 (Figure 8). As Premier, Domett made a dark chapter in New Zealand’s history darker. As his political opponent Henry Sewell put it only shortly after the end of Domett’s administration, “from the moment the Ministry of Mr. Fox was displaced by that of Mr. Domett, the hope of a peaceful settlement of our native difficulties was at an end” (Sewell 15). In particular, Sewell excoriated what was to be the most long-reaching policy of the Domett administration, an extraordinarily expansive scheme of land confiscations that would make little distinction between “friendly” and “hostile” tribes.⁶

To Sewell, such a scheme was both “a proposal founded on wrong” and one utterly at odds with the reality of New Zealand’s history and geography (44). Domett’s desire was to force a kind of frontier clarity – civilization on one side, savagery on the other – onto a country where, in Sewell’s words, “the Natives are within our own borders” and where “three-fourths of the Natives are clear of this quarrel – many of them . . . in actual alliance with us” (44). Presciently, Sewell noted that this policy “cannot, I am sure, be carried into effect without throwing the country into a chronic state of war” (44).

What shocked Sewell most of all, however, was the near amorality of Domett’s justification for his scheme. In a memorandum published in the *New Zealand Appendices* of 1863, Domett anticipated that his plans would meet with the objection “that they are based solely on the idea of force” a charge he largely conceded: “it is true that physical power is the main element of the conception” (Domett, *Diary* 35). In mitigation he offered only the weak claim that the plan did not “preclude the employment of moral methods for acquiring influence over the Natives” on other fronts (35). Sewell translates Domett’s “somewhat florid language” into the blunt admission “that we must thrash the natives into submission before we can hope to civilize them,” urging the deplorable condition of the American Indians as evidence of the foolishness of this idea (Sewell 13).

Domett’s primary ideological inspiration for his assertion of a naked right of conquest over the Māori was Carlyle:

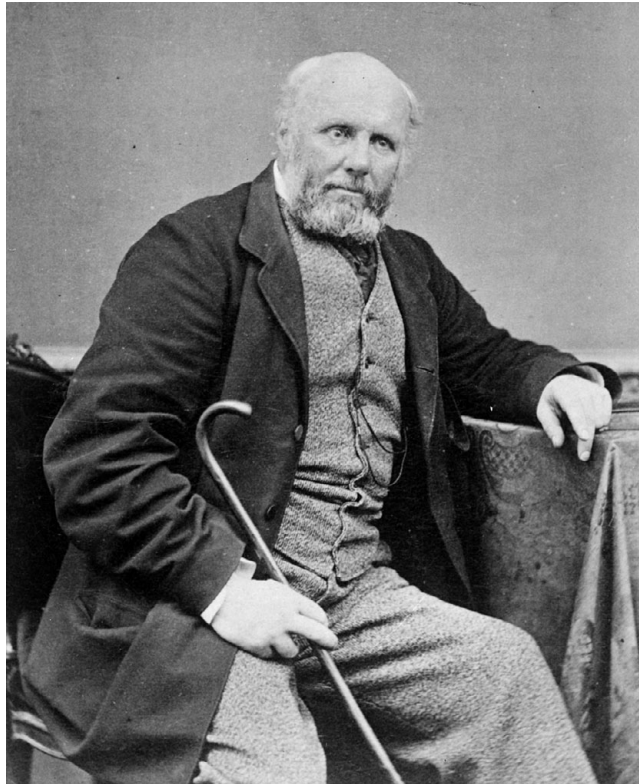


Figure 8. Portrait of Alfred Domett taken by an unidentified photographer before 1888. Ref: 1/4-003114-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

The abstract right is little worth. ‘Rights,’ says the deepest thinker of the age (Carlyle on Chartism), ‘you will everywhere find to be properly articulated *mights*.’ . . . The land is, first, God’s, who made it, next, theirs to whom he has given skill to use it best and strength to hold it fastest. . . . So that might is the test of right after all. . . . The right to use it best shown by the power to take and keep it, is the only real right. (Domett, *Diary* 18)

Domett slightly misquotes Carlyle here (Carlyle speaks of “correctly-articulated might” in *Chartism* [76]) but more significantly, he creatively misreads Carlyle’s essentially providential argument that the right will in time prove mightiest into a strikingly blunt statement of positivist amorality: might makes right.⁷ Domett, of course, was steeped in Carlyle’s political philosophy and his fiercely jingoistic defense of Britain’s imperial mission. The Browning circle to which the young Domett had belonged were all keen devotees of Carlyle and the letters of both Browning and Arnould to Domett are full of updates on the latest developments in Carlyle’s life and thought (see e.g., Browning, Domett and Arnould 67–70). This idolization of Carlyle amounted to a kind of fan-club idolatry; in a letter of the late 1850s⁸ to Walter Mantell, a fellow New Zealand civil servant on business in England,

we find Domett thanking him for the gift of a “medallion portrait” of Carlyle which he adds to his current collection of three other portraits “at different ages” and anxiously inquiring if he has managed to obtain his autograph. “The great good fellow!” says Domett, “I love the very soul of him” (MS letter). In the intellectual life of New Zealand’s capital city, Domett himself was known as a kind of colonial Carlyle, as we can see in Constantine Dillon’s 1850 account:

Domett lives quietly here, and we have long discussions. He is certainly very entertaining and full of generous and noble sentiment. In fact between him and Fox [William Fox, who would go on to hold the premiership four times between 1856 and 1881] there is a great conflict in my mind between Benthamism and Carlyleism. The first [Fox] speaks to the head, the latter to the heart. . . . Domett is all for inspiration, old prophets, and Carlyle. (John Miller 170)

1.2: Domett and the Ennui of Empire Building

THERE IS SOMETHING INHERENTLY IMPROBABLE about Domett’s outsized impact on New Zealand history. At every step of Domett’s career he seems to have been more a plaything of fortune than captain of his destiny. Scion of a ship-owning family, Domett left Cambridge without taking a degree and travelled, rather aimlessly, for two years in the US, Canada, and the West Indies. In his private journal he noted his motive for travel was “to destroy ennui rather than ignorance” – a motive that met with mixed success as he discovered that “There is ennui in the backwoods as well as everywhere else” (*Diary* 6). Upon returning to England, Domett studied to become a lawyer, but after being called to the bar made no attempt to practice. Instead, he took to the sea again, giving England and his literary friends “the slip.” Browning’s “Waring” famously captures his friends’ surprise at the suddenness of this decision. For Domett, “going to New Zealand” was what Browning’s earlier letter had suggested it was, a stepping out of the world, a surrender to the “watery waste” of a time and space outside Europe’s cramped, history-laden world. And, like his hero Ranolf, Domett would find himself the plaything of chance in this world outside the world.

While Domett was en route to New Zealand, his cousin William Young, with whom he had intended to join forces, drowned (the fate so narrowly escaped by Ranolf on his arrival). “The whole place seemed to turn *black* and lifeless when they told me of this shocking event,” wrote Domett upon arrival in New Zealand (qtd. in Stafford and Williams 26). A short while later, Domett himself broke his leg. His letters home to his friends painted such a bleak and disaffected portrait that they clearly expected him to return shortly. And yet, one more accident of history was about to thrust Domett into the active political life that he would lead for the remainder of his long New Zealand career. The so-called “Wairau Massacre” of June 1843, a brief and bloody fracas prompted by local settlers attempting to survey land to which local Māori laid claim, threw the young colony into an uproar and, as news trickled back to England, threatened the New Zealand Company’s settlement projects. Had Domett not been hampered by his injured leg, it is conceivable that he might have been amongst the killed or wounded. As it was, he became the chief spokesman in the local newspaper for the settler perspective on the affair, a perspective that became increasingly bitter and aggrieved when the new Governor FitzRoy determined that the settlers had been in the wrong and that no attempt would be made to punish the Maori for their actions.

Domett's happenstance role as community spokesperson in the wake of an entirely avoidable tragedy lead in turn to a political career, as first Governor FitzRoy, unsuccessfully, and then his replacement, Governor Grey, successfully, maneuvered to neutralize Domett's power to channel settler discontent by bringing him into the colony's Legislative Council.⁹ With the startlingly public exception of his brief stint as Premier, Domett became from that time on a ubiquitous if somewhat unheralded presence in New Zealand's government and civil service. Holding jobs that ranged from colonial secretary, commissioner for crown lands, member of parliament, land claims commissioner, to registrar general of land, Domett toiled honorably, effectively and, for the most part, unmemorably in the slow grind of colonial nation-building.

From a sufficient distance, Domett's career looks precisely like what one might imagine the devoted colonialist, taking up the great task of empire building, would wish it to be. Indeed, from that perspective, Domett's brief but turbulent stint as Premier in 1862–63 would seem to be a glorious, and timely, capstone to this career. From the late 1850s onwards, starting with the great shock of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, there was a steady rise in Imperialist ardor in British public sentiment. Domett's punitive land confiscation policy was of a piece with a range of harsh colonial reprisals against native and otherwise subject populations in the 1860s that, perhaps paradoxically, swung public opinion in Britain from seeing the colonies as largely a drain on British resources to seeing them as a vital component of a nascent Imperial identity (Eldridge 39–44). Chief among these was the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica. Governor Eyre, a former Lieutenant-Governor of New Zealand with whom Domett had, at times, worked closely (Domett, *Diary* 23), declared martial law and initiated a series of brutal reprisals with hundreds killed, more flogged and over a thousand houses burned (Evans 136). Although Eyre was removed from his role as Governor and reprimanded for some of his actions by the British Government, liberal British opinion, given eloquent voice by John Stuart Mill's Jamaica committee, demanded a criminal trial (J. Joseph Miller 155–56). In turn, an Eyre Defence Committee was established and soon boasted Carlyle, Arnold, Dickens, and Tennyson among its members. Carlyle's impassioned defense of Eyre would unleash his most towering scorn against the "Nigger-Philanthropists" (Carlyle, *Niagara* 15) and help decisively turn wider public opinion against Mill's liberal position and towards an increasingly jingoistic imperialism underpinned by an ideology of racial superiority.¹⁰

It is easy to imagine, then, a Domett who publishes his epic poem in 1872 as a happy culmination of a successful colonial career. If it were the straightforwardly colonialist text its critics take it to be it would have hit its moment perfectly, marking the steady evolution of British public opinion towards the Carlylean imperialist ideals that Domett had publicly espoused throughout his political career.

But Domett himself, for all his fiery Carlylean rhetoric, arrived at an altogether bleak assessment of his time in New Zealand. Hoping to win the support of his former Governor, George Grey, in a campaign for a knighthood in 1878, he wrote "My life has been, God knows, at best but a failure – but it would not be so manifestly so to the world and my friends – if I succeeded in what I am now proposing" (Belich 340).¹¹ Throughout Domett's New Zealand career we find him reaffirming his Canadian discovery that "there is ennui in the backwoods as well as everywhere else." Colonial disorder keeps trumping Imperial providentialism. In the very letter cited earlier in which he waxes so eagerly enthusiastic about his love for the "very soul" of Carlyle, we find him plunged into despair by the idea of Carlyle's greatness because it: "brings home to us (I speak for yourself [Mantell]) as well

as myself) the worthlessness & waste of our own do-nothing and nothing-meriting lives” (MS letter). Carlyle’s imperial mission was all very well in theory, but its actual practice seemed hollow and meaningless. In 1864, just a year after resigning as Premier, he writes to Browning that his (Browning’s) poetry illuminates the “far off obscure death-hole” that is New Zealand with “occasional flashings” (Blythe 118). The blank space outside of history that Browning had seen as potentially transformative was, for Domett, at least in this mood, a mere blank, an historical, cultural, and personal dead end.

1.3: Theism versus Positivism: Right and Might in Ranolf and Amohia

ONE OF THE FIRST (and most enthusiastic) British reviews of Domett’s poem, an unsigned review in the *Spectator* in October 1872, asserted that its major “claim to be read” lay in its “masterly grasp of the conditions of the modern problem as between Theism and Positivism” (qtd. in Gisborne 322). The dauntingly extensive philosophical ruminations of Domett’s poem are usually mentioned by recent critics merely as the deadliest of the poem’s longueurs, but they deserve closer examination. Any reader of Browning’s “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” or Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* will recognize the intellectual territory that Domett is traversing: can a belief in providential order be sustained in the light of evolutionary theory?; do we live in a world of mere chance, or of hidden order? The question is, in particular, central to Carlyle’s philosophy of history; for Carlyle, Might always bends towards the arc of Right, allowing a providential order to emerge from the ostensibly chaotic forces of individual human struggle. “Power first” (Domett, *Diary* 35) is also Domett-the-politician’s motto in the memorandum published in the *New Zealand Appendices* of 1863, and this is consistent with the uncompromisingly eliminationist edge that Domett brought to New Zealand racial politics going back to his first *Nelson Examiner* reports on the Wairau Affray. Our first intimation, though, that Domett is doing something in his poem that doesn’t easily square with his Carlylean imperial politics emerges from a closer look at his treatment of the relationship between chance and history’s putatively providential order.

1.4: Chance and Providence in the National Tale

AS IT DID FOR DOMETT, chance marks, and deforms, Ranolf’s New Zealand experience from the outset. Sailing to New Zealand not as an immigrant but as a rather unspecific participant in a trading venture with an eye on New Zealand’s vast timber reserves, Ranolf finds his vessel destroyed in a sudden storm that kills all his companions but, thanks to the happenstance intervention of a passing Māori canoe, spares himself. Reborn from the ocean, Ranolf leaves the world of *negotium* behind and passes, almost as in a dream, to one of pure *otium*.¹² He becomes a tourist, a (barely) participant observer in the life of pre-colonial New Zealand. He is, in fact, in the typical position of the chief protagonist of that characteristic late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century genre, the national tale: a displaced representative of the colonial metropolis finding himself cast adrift in what Katie Trumpener describes as a “regionalist chronotope so strong that it pulls cosmopolitan modern travelers back into it” (151).

It is illuminating to read *Ranolf and Amohia* as a late example of the national-tale genre – a genre that readily lends itself to Domett’s Carlylean problem of reconciling

historical providentialism (European *negotium*) with the world of “chance and change” (New Zealand *otium*). Much of what Stafford and Williams excoriate in the poem as evidence of Domett’s participation in the ahistorical “Maoriland” mythos comes into a rather different focus in this light. The Brigadoon-like self-containment of the peripheral cultural world begins to seem less a matter of politically motivated occultation, or Imperial Nostalgia, and more one of generic constraint. It is, after all, entirely typical of the national tale and, as Trumpener argues, its defining difference from the Scottish historical novel, to present the world of the colonial margins as a refuge from the deforming stresses of modernity (149–51; 247). Trumpener’s widely influential argument gives us pause, again, in uncomplicatedly accepting Stafford’s and William’s analysis of the conservative political implications of Domett’s “Maoriland” dreamscape; certainly Trumpener makes a strong case for the potentially “radical” implications of the national tale’s resistance to history (see e.g. 137). For Trumpener, what is gained in the national tale’s historical hermeticism is a bulwark for the peripheral culture’s genuine alterity which the historical novel must always sacrifice on the altar of a vision of modernization determined by the metropolitan center.

Not only can we read *Ranolf and Amohia* as national tale, but indeed it is possible to trace in it some of the key features of the earliest, and defining, exemplars of the genre: the national tales of the Celtic periphery produced by the likes of Sydney Owenson and Charles Maturin – a comparison one suspects is deliberately invited by Domett’s tendency to refer to the Māori tribesmen as “clansmen,” Amohia’s short grass skirt as a “kilt,” and his use of the term “chieftain” rather than the far more common “chief” for Māori tribal leaders. Like theirs, Domett’s tale moves towards “cross-cultural marriage as a form of countercolonization” taking readers through a story in which “English characters are forced to see their own country from the perspective of its victims” (Trumpener 137). When Ranolf first confronts the prospect of openly avowing his marriage to Amohia in England, his spirit quails. Europe is the home of “men who . . . head the onslaught of the human Mind / Against the strongholds of dim Destiny” (421). Māori New Zealand, the home of his “Wonder of the Wilderness” Amohia, “That land so rich in Beauty’s sensuous smile, / Seem[s] for the Soul, only a desert Isle” (421). But the contrast between historical, progressive Europe and “savage” timeless New Zealand never remains stably in Europe’s favor. The thought of Amohia in England becomes an opportunity for satiric reflection on the costs of England’s super-civilized condition. Could Amohia

Give up bright careless ease and breathing pure
In azure liberty of Sun and Air,
To choke in some fine atmosphere, of nice
Punctilios and proprieties precise?
Be drilled into the trite and tedious round
Of petty duties, poor amusements, found
In formal life by strict conventions bound? (425)

“Nailed and trained / Espalier-wise against the rigid Wall / Of civilised existence” the transplanted native tree would be “shorn of all . . . shoots of natural beauty . . . :” (425):

“Ah! what a sin to screw a shape like this
Into some flaunting wire-and-whalebone screen

Of beauty-blighting frippery, that combines
 In dull extravagance discordant lines
 ...
 In hideous freaks of fashionable dress! (426)

In the space of two pages, Ranolf has imagined Amohia “drilled,” “nailed,” and “screwed” by the oppressive force of English civilization, providential order forcibly imprinted upon Amohia’s “careless ease.” Domett seems to be evoking that familiar anticolonialist trope of imperialism as a form of rape, suggesting that the wellspring of imperialist violence lies at the very heart of “civilization’s” codes of refinement and restraint.

1.5: Ranolf: The Peripheral Metropolitan

THE CLASSIC ARC OF THE NATIONALIST TALE is for the hero to undergo a kind of conversion experience; he comes into the novel a confirmed believer in the superiority of the metropolitan culture and only his exposure to the unexpected coherence of the subaltern cultural world opens up the possibility of a critical reevaluation of that belief. Ranolf’s catastrophic diversion from the earnest business of the timber trade into his New Zealand idyll might seem to conform to this basic pattern. But Ranolf brings to his New Zealand adventure anything but a straightforward relationship to metropolitan culture. To begin with, Ranolf himself is Scottish, not English, and, as such, is the inheritor of a history of imperial victimization:

His father, last of a long race decayed
 Of pastoral chiefs, when all their land was gone
 Had manlike set himself to humbler trade (21)

But perhaps more importantly, Ranolf cannot find a comfortable relationship to the metropolitan culture we might suppose him to “represent” in the poem. If chance shapes and deforms Ranolf’s New Zealand career, it has also left its mark on his life before New Zealand. A beloved youngest son, he badgers his father into letting him go to sea from the age of 12 onwards, where he encounters “glimpses of strange lands and men as strange” becoming something of a cultural relativist as he sees “with each clime their minds and manners change” (26). By the age of sixteen, however, he has lost his two older brothers to the vicissitudes of the global trade in which his father prospers: one to yellow fever and the other, notably, to shipwreck. His “anguish-smitten” father urges him to leave the seagoing life he loves to be “his age’s staff and stay” at home (28). Thus begins an extraordinary two-canto sequence in which the young Ranolf imbibes almost the entire history of Western philosophy culminating with Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel heroically, if awkwardly, rendered into verse. Once again – or, rather, prophetically – it is a shipwreck that renders Ranolf a bemused external observer of a culture he cannot quite accept as his own:

Behold, then, three-and-twenty centuries passed,
 The stately Ship of Western Thought at last,
 Striking and stranded on the barren shore
 Where struck that Buddhist bark so long before,
 Left high and dry with all its phantom freight;

Thither impelled by that satiric fate
That dogs our intellectual pride, and brings
Shipwreck with its conviction shallow and vain,
That 'tis a storm-charmed cruiser, this poor brain,
Built, rigged, and manned to circumnavigate
The mighty round of all existing things.
So Schelling digs where Kásyapa had dug;
Magniloquent, yet microscopic elf,
So makes all Nature but the high-plumed hearse
Of God gone dead. (44–45)

Having followed Western intellectual history to this pre-Nietzschean revelation of the death of god, Ranolf ends up seeing it as simply one more of the various cultural frames to which his travels have introduced him. The only philosophical question that remains alive to him is his perennial one of the relationship between a world of Darwinian chance and a divine regime of providential order.

Resolving to abandon abstract study and take up an active career instead, he finds himself “puzzled sore to name / Church – Physic – Law – which most attractive seemed, / Or rather least repulsive should be deemed” (63). Once again, it is chance that saves him, and chance to which he gives himself over. Before he can make up his mind to the “least repulsive” of these unpromising options, his father dies and leaves him an independently wealthy young man. At this, Ranolf simply gives up on the hopeless problem of integrating himself into a modern world whose institutions seem so incorrigibly compromised to him:

To rove from clime to clime,
At least would gratify his ruling taste:
At least, he knew upon the watery waste
His buoyant spirits kept in play would be –
His soul unfettered still, his fancy free. (68)

This quintessentially modern figure – the restless young rebel without a cause – is recognizably a self-portrait of the younger Domett (Figure 9).

2: Ranolf and Amohia: *Satire, Idyll, and the Storm of History*

WHAT, THEN, WAS DOMETT trying to accomplish in *Ranolf and Amohia*? One word we might propose as an answer to that question is “idyll,” although that immediately smacks of Stafford and Williams’s Maoriland hypothesis. But the idyll I have in mind here is the Romantic idyll described in Friedrich Schiller’s seminal essay “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry”:

The concept of this idyll is the concept of a conflict fully reconciled not only in the individual, but in society, of a free uniting of inclination with the law, of a nature illuminated by the highest moral dignity, briefly, none other than the ideal of beauty applied to actual life. Its character thus subsists in the complete reconciliation of *all opposition between actuality and the ideal* which has supplied material for satirical and elegiac poetry, and therewith of all conflict in the feelings likewise. (213)



Figure 9. “Alfred Domett.” From the watercolour drawing by George Lance, R. A., 1836. Photogravure by Emery Walker in F. G. Kenyon, *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett* (London, Smith, Elder, 1906). Ref: PUBL-0154–032. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

The key to this conception of idyll is not that it represents a utopian escape from a conflicted and dystopian reality; rather, it is precisely a dialectical, and above all an aesthetic, resolution of the conflicts that render our reality dystopian. In the case of Domett’s poem, these conflicts are those highlighted in its “national tale” generic concerns: the apparently purposeless *otium* of the periphery against the inhuman and destructive *negotium* of the metropolis. “Utopia” is precisely what Domett feared New Zealand might have been for him: a “no-place,” a somewhat damp Shangri-La from which he had observed the real world merely pass him by. In *Ranolf and Amohia*, he tries to find a viable alternative to that debilitating vision by positing a New Zealand in which order and disorder, providence and chance, the purposeful

and the purposeless are reconciled, just as they are in that defining principle of the Kantian aesthetic: *Zweckmassigkeit ohne Zweck* or purposiveness without purpose.

2.1: *The Satirical Mode*

THE FIRST STEP IN THIS DIALECTIC is the one we've already seen as part of the standard national tale plot: to move Ranolf from his outsider status as a mere tourist to an insider position from which he can develop a critical distance from the metropolitan center. I suggest that we should read this "satiric" moment as satiric in the specific sense in which Schiller uses the term: in which "ideal" and "actual" are held in opposition before finding reconciliation in idyll. To find such a trajectory in Ranolf's character flies in the face of the modern consensus that, as Patrick Day puts it:

The real mission is to raise Amohia to Ranolf's higher level. The great worth of Amohia is that she realizes this necessity and is ready to repudiate her people and culture to achieve it. (116)

But Ranolf is not only learning from the Māori, he is in many ways learning to be Māori. In fact, the reciprocal pedagogical relationship between Amohia and Ranolf is made explicit. When Amohia begs to be taught to write, Ranolf does so in exchange for lessons in the Māori language: "the learner with her loving smile / Was teaching to the Teacher all the while" (344).¹³

When Ranolf first encounters Māori myths and Māori cosmology he is amused but dismissive (129–30). This attitude changes markedly after he has spent some time with the Māori and hears the story of Maui and Hine-Nui-Te-Po: "Well, these are genuine Myths at last" (198) he says. Later, after Ranolf and Amohia have fled into the wilderness, Amohia playfully suggests that if Ranolf were Tane himself (the god of the forest) he could not love the forest more (258). In response, Ranolf launches into an extended dithyramb in the persona of Tane (261–62). For the first time in the poem, Ranolf's own voice falls into the trochaic tetrameter form – Longfellow's *Hiawatha* meter – which has hitherto been the exclusive province of "native" voices (prior to this, when Ranolf has paraphrased the myths that have been related to him he has done so in iambic pentameter):

I am TANE – the Tree-God!
Mine are forests not a few –
Forests, and I love them greatly,
Moss-encrusted, ancient, stately –
Lusty, lightly-clad, and new. (258)

Just before Ranolf launches into this remarkable performance Amohia spontaneously calls Ranolf by a new, Māori version of his name: Rano (263) – a name she will only use during the interlude of their wilderness honeymoon.

The distance from Ranolf to Rano – from the amused outsider to the impassioned insider – is the satiric distance between actual and ideal. A discussion between Ranolf and Amohia about the technological marvels, such as the railroad, that Europeans have developed, which Patrick Day cites as evidence of Ranolf's and Domett's contempt for the "worthless" Māori (116), is, in fact, an occasion for satirical reflection upon the disorienting pace of modernity:

More speed – more speed! and shriller cries!
 The panting road begins to rise,
 And like a whirling grindstone flies!
 The fields close by can scarce be seen,
 A swift continuous stream of green! –
 . . .
 The riot of our wild career
 Seems rushing through a land asleep
 Where all things rapt – entranced, appear,
 Or if they move, can only creep; (286)

The critical contrast of the frenzied pace of the railway with the timeless rural landscape is of course Carlylean but the context, in which Amohia has asked to be told of the wonders of European modernity only to have those “wonders” twist into a nightmare vision, makes the satirical intent explicit.

But perhaps the most telling satirical passage in the poem centers around another key example of Ranolf’s European technological superiority: his revolver.¹⁴ After Ranolf and Amohia return to Amohia’s tribe from their edenic elopement, Ranolf becomes embroiled in an intertribal battle. Ranolf’s all-conquering revolver becomes so deeply identified with Ranolf himself that in a crucial episode he signs a note he leaves for the enemy tribe simply with the image of the gun.

This identification is fraught with problematic significance, however. What distinguishes Ranolf’s approach to combat from those around him is solely the revolver – and the distinction is an invidious one. The tribesmen Ranolf fights alongside are described as being akin to “Theseian heroes old, / But darkly eyed, of kindred race,” they appear to be “Some crowded Phigaleian frieze / Or Parthenaic miracle / Of Art, awaked to sudden life” (387). Ranolf’s gun does turn the tide of the battle (saving the Chief Tangi, Amohia’s father, from imminent death and routing the opposing forces), but Tangi is “half-disposed to take it ill” (394) when Ranolf shoots the man who was about to kill him and Ranolf’s gun is called, grimly and unglamorously, a “life-devouring weapon” shortly thereafter. When Tangi receives a fatal shot from a lone sniper in the moment of victory he is led from the field of battle

Cursing the coward tools that gave
 Such easy power to every slave
 To slay the foe he durst not face! (396)

The ability to deal out death mechanically and, with Ranolf’s revolver, on an increasingly industrial scale makes Ranolf’s European technological “marvels” anything but marks of an inherently superior society.

2.2: *Idyll, and After*

THE POEM’S SATIRICAL MODE is rooted in that “*opposition between actuality and the ideal*” that Schiller speaks of as the foundation of both satire and elegy. But far more important to the poem’s overall purpose is the attempt at idyllic reconciliation of actual and ideal. The conflicts that plagued Ranolf (and Domett) in the Old World – chance vs. providence,

freedom vs. law, nature vs. culture – are reconciled, or appear to be, in the explicitly Edenic union of Ranolf and Amohia. From the moment that Ranolf “marries” Amohia “by all the law the land supplied” (222) and they flee together into the wilderness, Domett insistently returns to his central theme of an aesthetic reconciliation of the purposive and the non-purposive. Indeed, the very “marriage” of his hero and heroine is itself the prime exemplar of his theme: they are “married” but their union is sanctioned by no rite, is “lawful” without a “law.” The allusion to Kant’s aesthetic “lawfulness without a law” becomes explicit in this passage that marks the close of Ranolf and Amohia’s Edenic wilderness adventure and their return to Amohia’s tribe:

revelling so
In Eden-scenes as lovely-strange
As to the lover’s power to change
All scenes to Edens, ever yet displayed
An Eden ready-made:
So, custom-licensed to be blest and bless
In luxury of lawful lawlessness,
Did our unbridled bridal pair
Pass their wild-honeymoon no moon
Restricted . . . (352–53)

Domett artfully, and explicitly, arrays the paradoxes that his couple at once evokes and resolves. The term “custom-licensed” is particularly on point here, evoking both freedom (the “license” to act as they wish) and restraint (the presumed authority of the body that grants the “license”): here, the “licensing” authority is simply praxis itself, or the Edenic self-authorizing of “custom.” Other deliberate oxymorons in the passage mark the same paradoxical point of resolution: “unbridled bridal,” a “honeymoon” no “moon / Restricted” and which is, in any case, a moon of “wild-honey.”

But this passage is itself simply a summation of a vein of imagery that has insistently returned throughout this long interlude. When Ranolf first finds Amohia after she has escaped from her family to find him she is naked save for the “natural drapery” (219) of her hair, the “natural” performing the task of clothing, that “cultural” marker *par excellence*. Similarly, having set his story in the geothermally active region near Lake Rotorua, Domett manages to collapse that other fundamental culture/nature opposition, the Raw and the Cooked: “No need have they of fuel or fire / To cook their morning meal to their desire” simply placing it in the ground gets it cooked “In style as wholesome quickly drest / As Savarin’s choicest, Soyer’s best” (276).

When Ranolf declares his love of “loitering” (281) to Amohia, that “loitering” no longer seems fraught with potential moral danger. Their travels are “except for pleasure, purposeless” (303) but – and again, the point seems deliberately Kantian – they are both “purposeless” and “pleasurable” in the same way that nature itself is. Amohia is “Free as the winds and as the waters wild” (309); together they are “Free as nature, free as birds are, / Free as infants’ thoughts and words are” (252).

But the central aesthetic reconciliation towards which Ranolf and Amohia’s idyll moves is that of racial difference, “white” and “black,” itself. Far from inventing a “Maoriland” that operates simply without reference to the rules of the real New Zealand, Domett faces the

problem of racial difference directly as a troubled and troubling opposition which needs to be worked through just like these others. We see this most clearly in a remarkable sequence of symbolic negotiations around the figure of the Greek sculptor Phidias. When we are told, for example, that Amohia's beauty would have "made / A Phidias turn admiring" (237) we might be tempted to dismiss the comment as noting a purely animal and bodily excellence; but what, then, to make of Domett's (Kantian) insistence that that body, a "perfect mould of Beauty," exemplifies "wise Nature's so conspicuous Art" working towards "fairest moral end" (238)? What, further, to make of the fact that it is again Phidias he turns to when trying to capture the aura of divinity that Ranolf's white skin and golden hair gives him in Amohia's eyes?

To her he well might seem,
As you perchance would deem
Some Phidian Temple must have looked of old (295)

If we associate Ranolf with the "high cultural" connotations of the "Phidian temple" can we deny those connotations to Amohia and her "Phidian" beauty? Domett confirms, in fact, that it is the very difference of Māori and Pakeha, black and white, that is being aesthetically reconciled in this "Phidian" imagery. In their "purposeless" wanderings Ranolf and Amohia have, at this point in the poem, and by an aesthetic logic which shouldn't need any further explication, fulfilled the highest purpose of nineteenth century New Zealand tourism and brought themselves to the Pink and White Terraces, silica pools descending in tiers from the mouths of geysers which perpetually replenished the pools with warm, blue-dyed water (Figure 10). Largely destroyed in a volcanic eruption a few years after the publication of Domett's poem, they were New Zealand's "Eighth Wonder of the World" and a prime example of "wise Nature's . . . conspicuous Art": "Anything so fairy-like I should never have dreamt of seeing in nature" wrote one mid-nineteenth century traveller (Meade 46).

It is as the two lovers stand at the top of one of these two terraces, watching the ever-renewed cloud of steam that hovers above the geyser's mouth, that the comparison of Ranolf's godlike "full and white" brow (294) to Phidian marble arises. But Domett finds himself increasingly uncertain in his imagery. Aware that Greek marbles were originally painted he somewhat pedantically insists that the Phidian temple he was comparing Ranolf to is one as it would have looked "when bare / Its snowy grace and lovely grandeur first / Upon the shouting people burst!" with "marble dust of recent working" still clinging to the just-completed figures (295). And yet this "snowy" vision is described, in the same breath, as "delicately tinted here and there / With rainbow colours pure and fair" (295). Turning away, at last, from this epic simile he turns back to the White Terraces, but he cannot let go of this confusion of "tinged" and "coloured" whiteness:

But fair as Phidian Temple tinged so purely,
That pure untinged white-terraced Fount coralline
Showed
...
Then, as they watched the huge Steam-cloud that whitely
O'er the main pool, like some nest-brooding mother,
Spread swanlike wings the brilliant water shading –



Figure 10. (Color online) Charles Heaphy, *Crater of White Terrace*. Watercolor. [1849?] Ref: C-025-017. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

...
They saw how richly, though from surface duller,
That still, suspended Mist reflected duly
The bubbling basin's amethystine colour:
Returning tint for lovely tint as truly
As in their mirrored eyes, fond, deep, untroubled,
They marked, upwelling ever freshly, newly,
Their mutual Love reflected and redoubled! (295–96)

“Fair as Phidian temple tinged so purely”: at this point confusion gives way to direct oxymoron: the White Terraces are as “fair” as the “tinged” – but “purely” tinged – Phidian temple. And they achieve this parity of “fairness” by being, “pure,” “untinged” and “white” – but also “coralline.” And this (un)tinged “whiteness” is, in turn, hovered over “whitely” by the “Steam cloud” which, nonetheless, mirrors the “amethystine” colour of the crater’s pool, “returning tint for lovely tint.” And this asymmetrical mirroring (the white becoming a mirror for the blue) in turn mirrors the mirroring relationship between Ranolf and Amohia.

There is a deep sense in which this passage is unreadable; its figurative logic is essentially unstable, like the geothermic land on which its metaphoric structure is built. The rapid sequence of parallelisms that become contrasts and contrasts that become parallelisms is profoundly baffling. At least one path through the tropological maze, equating the New Zealand landscape with the New Zealand people in general and Amohia in particular, would

have the “tinged” Ranolf actually less “pure” than the “untinged” Amohia. But at least some of the paths lead, ineluctably, to an essential equivalence between the white Ranolf and the brown Amohia: the final aesthetic reconciliation of opposites that Ranolf and Amohia’s edenic sojourn has wrought.

The unreadability of this moment is programmatic, reflecting the unthinkability of the equation to which the symbolic logic of Domett’s poem has lead him. Once before, indeed, Domett had suggested that there was something inexpressible in Ranolf and Amohia’s love. At the point, cited earlier, where he declares that they are “Free as Nature – free as birds are, / Free as infants’ thoughts and words are!” he continues:

Ah! Too rich for our rude treating,
Too exalted for our story
That intense absorbing passion – (252)

The lovers are “free as nature” and “free as infants’ . . . words”; the one-sidedly artificial and decidedly adult language of Domett’s poem simply cannot capture their category-transcending aesthetic perfection. This passage gives us several hints as to how to read the later one. “Nature,” in particular, plays an extremely complex role, acting both as an oppositional term to “art” or “culture” and as the higher principle that subsumes both “art” and “nature.” They are “Free as Nature” but not sheer nature. In the Pink and White Terraces sequence the comparison that sets the “Phidian” Ranolf at a disadvantage to the “untinged” Amohia is the comparison between the temple-as-work-of-art and the crater of the White Terraces as work-of-nature. But the feature that brings the lovers back into harmonious unity is the reflecting cloud that hovers above the crater itself.

This cloud, this formless form, clearly fascinates Domett, although it seems at first glance an inadequate “objective correlative” for the emotions it stirs in him. Reminiscent in some respects of the symbolically charged “bog” in the Irish national tale the cloud can be read as the ultimate “blank space” beyond any possibility of cultural or even empirical mapping. Indeed, where the bog in Trumpener’s account is two-sided, at first appearing as a trackless waste that defies cultural memory but ultimately revealing its ability to “memorialize[] what is dead and lost” (66), the cloud is pure process, defying any movement toward memorialization. To understand how this cloud, endlessly evanescent and recrudescing, allows Domett to envision, or at least to gesture towards, a post-racial equivalence between white Ranolf and Māori Amohia is to understand why, ultimately, the colonial project is so unsatisfying for Domett and why he cannot finally arrive at a conclusion for his work’s “great theme” of Religion versus Darwinian chance.

The cloud is, in a way, utopian, at least in the etymological sense of belonging to no place, but it does not seem to hold out the promise of any stable or enduring access to that utopian condition. It does not itself participate in the aesthetic resolution of opposites that structures so much of Ranolf and Amohia’s romance but it makes the most startling of these reconciliations thinkable – however tenuously. It represents a realm of ordered disorder that lies teasingly beyond the possibility of representation: “too exalted for our story.” It seems to occupy a position something akin to Coleridge’s Primary Imagination which underlies and makes possible the synthetic activity of the poet’s Secondary Imagination, but where the Primary Imagination emerges from the ontological bedrock of the “infinite I AM” the cloud is nothing but “chance and change” made visible (304).

At least two romantic trajectories (Ranolf's with Amohia, the "civilized" European's with the "natural" New Zealand wilderness) arrive at an equivocal pitch at this point, and the lessons for Domett are disquieting. Shortly after this encounter with the cloud Domett comes as close as he will anywhere in the poem to settling his poem's protracted struggle with "the modern problem" of "Theism and Positivism," but ultimately fails to do so. Domett makes the connection of this failure to the scene at the Pink and White Terraces quite clear. The sequence begins with Amohia asking Ranolf to explain, in essence, the meaning of life to her. Reviving the symbolic equivocation over "whiteness" and "tingedness" that marks the encounter with the crater cloud, Ranolf hesitates:

On this unlettered Soul so white
What characters am I to write?
What truths in sooth have I to tell
To one whose native instincts might,
For aught I know, teach me as well? (329)

Just as at the crater-scene, the culturally "high" (Phidian temple, written language) is transmuted – at least potentially – into a defacing or marring of the "white" and implicitly pure character of the "native." Ranolf, nonetheless, girds his loins and proceeds to silently review, for ten pages, his thoughts on god, nature, chance and providence while Amohia dozes by his side. At last he cries "Enough – enough!" (338) and gives Amohia a condensed version of his lucubrations. His account begins with "one Spirit" that is "ever / Unknown: invisible – intangible – / Inaudible" which is "yet never / To be disproved." This not-disproven "Spirit" may be posited as the creator of mankind, and that creation would be "A palpable abortion and confusion . . . If not in some serener Sphere perfected" (339–40). He assumes, therefore, that

they who most their Souls may nourish
On Love . . .
Must be the least unlike that Power supernal –
Most with that Will in their poor way agreeing;
Must be the fittest to survive and flourish
In that transcendent Sphere of Life eternal –
Of ever blest and beatific Being. (340)

This highly unstable Darwinian theodicy (an "unknown" God rewards the surviving "fittest" with an unknowable heaven) leaves Amohia unimpressed:

Poor, vague, and disappointing merely
These reasonings to the listening Maid appeared;
Scarce lighting up that shadowy Life more clearly
That the rude faith wherein she had been reared.
Some simple tale of pathos and pure wonder
. . .
Her mental clouds had sooner rent asunder – (340)

We end, once again, with “clouds” – which would seem to be very close to where we began, with Amohia’s “soul so white.” And if at first glance these clouds would seem to be merely adventitious, the claim that they would be “sooner rent asunder” by a “simple tale of pathos and pure wonder” calls that into question. That “simple tale” would, after all, simply be new clouds for Amohia’s mindscape; cloudiness itself is inescapable. Ranolf’s (and Domett’s) best efforts to solve this problem finds its implacable limit, its heart of whiteness, in these irreducible clouds.

Ranolf’s failure to solve his dilemma, his failure to “write” convincingly on the “white” soul of Amohia repeats Domett’s failure to discover anything of lasting significance in that blank space that Browning envisaged him entering by “going to New Zealand.” It repeats, too, the failure of the colonial project, at least as Domett imagines it, to take root in New Zealand as anything other than sheer force devoid of moral content: a writing onto the blank page of history than can only be read as a violation. The aesthetic *concordia discors* that Domett had struggled to achieve in Ranolf and Amohia’s idyllic escape founders on the rock of racial difference, which Domett can neither accept as naturally determinative nor idealistically dismiss as irrelevant. Shipwreck is, of course, the appropriate metaphor here. It is shipwreck, both real and metaphorical, that brings Ranolf to New Zealand, a shipwreck that stands for the irruption of the stubbornly materialist “chequered world of chance and change” into our designs.

2.3: *The Storm of History*

AND THIS, FINALLY, RETURNS US to the point where we began. Domett explicitly thematizes the relationship to Ranolf’s shipwreck in the failure of his “Maoriland” idyll when Amohia is “hurried out of conscious life” by the “wild tide” of the “swollen river” (446, 445). The mysterious “chance and change” of brute nature scatters the deck that the lovers had thought they were playing with; as one “chance” shipwreck brought Ranolf to New Zealand, this second one determines that he will leave. But the “blank space” he discovered in New Zealand will go with him, an external limit that his grief for the (apparent) death of Amohia has internalized: the “pangs and tortures” of grief, we learn, are the “Sharp chisel-strokes . . . / Wherewith the grand Soul-Sculptor” transforms “possibilities” into “Heroic white Existences” (453).

Ranolf’s “heroic white existence,” like Amohia’s “soul so white” or the white cloud that hovers over the White Terraces suggests a sublime counterpoint to the idyllic resolution he has failed to achieve in the New Zealand interior. This is a Burkean sublime rather than a Kantian one, a sublime of “astonishment” rather than of noumenal intimation (Burke 95) (Figure 11). What the shipwreck of grief teaches Ranolf is that chance and change cannot be transmuted into providential order: or at least that that transmutation, if it occurs at all, can never be perceived as such. It is this new perception of the stubborn blankness of sheer material “event” that makes possible the extraordinary denouement of Domett’s story. Prior to Amohia’s death, prior to Ranolf’s “heroic white existence,” Ranolf has agonized over the problem of bringing Amohia back to England with him. Afterwards, the problem no longer seems meaningful.

When Ranolf chances upon Amohia’s “wan pale face” (462) in the anonymous “Northwest harbor” (455) town to which he has come seeking passage home both he and his author abandon the hope that some definitive moral can be drawn from the wreckage



Figure 11. Burton Brothers, "The hot water basins - White Terrace." Photograph. Circa 1880. Ref: BB-3899-1/1-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

of his New Zealand romance. Like Keats's lovers in "The Eve of St. Agnes" Ranolf and Amohia seem to steal away not just from New Zealand itself, but from the very narrative and symbolic structure they have hitherto inhabited. They cease at this point to be the "representative" characters (the Māori Maiden and the European Seeker) of a national tale; they are both blank like the cloud above the White Terraces. Ranolf has entered his "heroic white existence" and "pale" Amohia is compared to the "lovely moulded snow" of Clematis or Azalea blossoms (476). Both have surrendered to "chance": the force that has saved Amohia (the "chance Traveller" [469]) and reunited the lovers.

But before striking his sets and dismissing, Prospero like, his "too protracted dream" (488) Domett returns one last time to his "great theme" of materialistic chance and providential order. Now, however, he defers any possible solution to the problem into an indefinite future when a "Science grand / Of Circumstance" might finally reveal "clear purpose, conscious Cause" (484) underlying the "chequered days" of "chance and change" (483). For now, such a discovery remains stubbornly unreachable. Domett compares "the infinite whirl and play / Of ever-rolling restless Circumstance" in human life to the weather, both terrestrial ("the very Winds of heaven that rise / and sink and run their seeming reckless round" [484]) and celestial ("that shifting swift Aurora-dance, / Those phantom revels round

the secret Poles” [484–85]). Ostensibly, the comparison is optimistic: just as we shall one day find the “Law of Storms” (485) that governs “every Storm that tears the limitless seas” (484) so, too, surely, the “infinite whirl and play / Of ever-rolling restless Circumstance” that is human life will be shown to be more than “chaotic Force – the child of Chance?” (485). But all the energy and specificity of these lines is devoted to the concrete power of “Circumstance” – the chaotic power of uncontrollable storms to shipwreck our destinies. The discovery of the “Law of Storms” – let alone any corresponding law of human circumstance – remains hypothetical.

As the fabric of Domett’s vision tatters and frays his lovers flee away into the storm of time – a storm they dare not hope to master or to comprehend. Domett conjures a vision of “Life’s rich Harmonium” on whose “ebon-ivory range / Of chequered days of chance and change” our heroes will learn, at best, to “Draw symphonies serene and strange, / Melodious Music of Content” (483). If this is a striking image of cross-racial harmony, it is also an admission of surrender to the forces of “chance.” By the same token, Domett must abandon any aspiration he might have had of shaping his poem into a national tale that would successfully weave New Zealand’s colonial destiny back into the grand narrative of metropolitan history. “Might” – the essence, as Domett the politician had argued so strenuously, of the colonial project (*Diary* 35) – has been revealed to be merely “chaotic.” The colonial venture itself becomes, as Domett came to think of his own colonial career, merely another blank space across which the nihilistic storms of history can blow.

We began with the question of what it means that Domett can allow his “Husband-lover and . . . lover-Wife” (*RA* 478) to set sail for England as the “happy ending” of a poem by an author so willing to propagate racist and imperialist ideology in the political sphere. The answer that has emerged is not the old New Critical saw that authorial intent is irrelevant to understanding a poem which exists as a timeless and contextless aesthetic structure. Rather, it is that every speaker operates in multiple contexts with equally multiple motivations. To reduce Domett’s poem by simply identifying it with his anti-Māori diatribes is to monumentalize his political utterances in a way which his poetic and autobiographical statements prove to be profoundly misguided. The extraordinary implication of Domett’s poem is that his political speeches derive their absolutism not from fervid conviction but from something almost the opposite, the “tourist” or “loiterer’s” easy adoption of a role in a context to which they feel at best a marginal attachment. Rather than using his political life to expose his poem’s “imperial nostalgia,” I would suggest that we use his poem to expose an “imperial ennui” underlying the political life. The Domett we find in the diaries of his post colonial life is not a disappointed ideologue but an actor who has put aside a role and seen it dissolve like an “insubstantial pageant faded.” Having failed to find a way to reconcile his colonial self and his metropolitan self via Ranolf’s adventures Domett’s radical conclusion – a conclusion that I suspect would resonate for many more of the seemingly loyal servants of the British Empire than we are disposed to believe – is to envision the individual simply as the plaything of history’s inscrutable weather systems. Ranolf can return to Britain with his “natural” bride because he has gained the insouciance that comes from knowing nothing he does on an individual level matters to the “Law of Storms” that defines both his own and the nation’s destiny. If the normal trajectory of the national tale is to expand the range of the hero’s capacity for “representative being” to include the peripheral in addition to the metropolitan culture, Domett’s poem works to spring his hero

and heroine free of both forms of identity, launching them into the blank space of radical self-definition.

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NOTES

1. Browning's "Waring," directly inspired by Domett's departure, was first published in *Dramatic Lyrics in November*, 1842.
2. See, for recent examples, Stafford, Stafford and Williams, Day, and Blythe.
3. Day, similarly, notes that while "some point to an inconsistency" between Domett's political actions and his poetic views, "An examination of the poem's attitude towards Maori shows a consistency amongst Domett's political actions, journalistic writings and poetic expression" (106–07).
4. Pakeha is a Māori word of uncertain origin for New Zealanders of European origin. It is widely used in New Zealand English by both Māori and non-Māori.
5. Pocahontas is certainly one of the models for Domett's Amohia, another native princess who saves the white man from death at the hands of her people. American models of frontier literature echo throughout Domett's poem, perhaps most notably in the "Hiawatha" trochaic tetrameter rhythm that is given to many of the Māori songs.
6. The policy as described below was formulated by Domett "alone and unassisted" (Domett, *Diary* 34) and represented a startling break with precedent. It was never enacted in exactly the form that Domett proposed, but the principle of widespread land confiscation was put into practice by the Weld administration of 1864. See Domett, *Diary* 34–36 for an excellent brief overview of this scheme.
7. A little more than a decade after Carlyle's "Occasional Discourse on the Negro: Question" (1849), it is hard to imagine him objecting too strongly.
8. The year on the MS is, I think, 1860 but it is partially blotted. Mantell was in England from 1855 to 1859. It is telling that the letter urges Mantell not to return to New Zealand but to stay and "make a home" in England.
9. This account of Domett's political career is a conventional one; all the key facts are contained in Domett (1953), 14–22.
10. See Miller, "Chairing" passim, Eldridge 39–44 and Pitts 162.
11. Belich quotes this plaintive *cri-de-coeur* as evidence of a widespread feeling among early New Zealand colonists that they had been "taken in" by the New Zealand company's propaganda, and that the colonial experiment had been a failure.
12. The scene is strongly reminiscent of Maning's account of his own introduction to New Zealand in *Old New Zealand* (23–29).
13. Amohia's role as language teacher makes her somewhat analogous to the figure of the native nurse so central, as Trumpener in particular has shown, to the national tale.
14. Both the trains and the revolver, it should be noted, are anachronistic. Ranolf's adventures are, we assume, occurring sometime in the 1820s when train travel was hardly a common feature of European life and the modern pistol revolver had not yet been invented.

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