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Hone Tuwhare 1922–2008: An extraordinary poet

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Abstract
My connection to Hone Tuwhare is mainly literary and through the broad kinship of our Ngā Puhi tribe. While working on my first poetry book, I had a copy of Mihi next to me so Tuwhare was guiding the longhand. I have very fond memories of the three readings which he very generously included me in while he was the Literary Fellow at Auckland University, and an evening spent on the town with Tuwhare still ranks as the best night of my life. Yet, as I say, my relationship with him was as a member of his reading fan-club. As well as being invited to write this memorial piece, I was privileged to be asked to edit an issue of the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre online scholarly journal Ka Mate Ka Ora dedicated to Tuwhare to celebrate his many artistic and literary contributions to the region. So far, most of the contributions to the journal have been poems of celebration which is the most fitting tribute of course, given the immensely uplifting and tender nature of his œuvre.
Hone Tuwhare 1922–2008:
An Extraordinary Poet

My connection to Hone Tuwhare is mainly literary and through the broad kinship of our Ngā Puhi tribe. While working on my first poetry book, I had a copy of Mihi next to me so Tuwhare was guiding the longhand. I have very fond memories of the three readings which he very generously included me in while he was the Literary Fellow at Auckland University, and an evening spent on the town with Tuwhare still ranks as the best night of my life. Yet, as I say, my relationship with him was as a member of his reading fan-club. As well as being invited to write this memorial piece, I was privileged to be asked to edit an issue of the new zealand electronic poetry centre online scholarly journal Ka Mate Ka Ora dedicated to Tuwhare to celebrate his many artistic and literary contributions to the region. So far, most of the contributions to the journal have been poems of celebration which is the most fitting tribute of course, given the immensely uplifting and tender nature of his oeuvre. This essay is part of my own preparation for editing that issue where I will write an extended meditation on Tuwhare’s massive contribution to Maori, New Zealand and Pacific letters.

My first encounter with Hone Tuwhare was through a first year university assignment about his poem ‘We Who Live in Darkness’; a gem of a poem, it combines political and mythological themes that speak to a brotherhood wanting to overthrow a patriarchy. In my assignment I equated this with a call for sovereignty. Its footnote in Deep River Talk: Collected Poems says it is about the rebellion of the children of Rangi (the skyfather) and Papa (the earthmother) as if to dissuade us from its political referent. I strayed into that debating chamber with my stage one English lecturer who I am still grateful to for teaching us the text. I might have added that the poem is part of the cosmogonic cycle where the fecund nights, or ‘po’, are giving way to the world of light via the deity of the forest and humanity, Tâne Mahuta, who lies on his back and pushes his feet upwards against the skyfather thus separating the earth and sky. The mention of that deity reminds me of a great kauri tree bearing that name in Waipoua Forest in the South Hokianga, not far from our ancestral mountain Whiria, one of the pillars of Ngā Puhi Nui Tonu which is close to Tuwhare’s birthplace. A great tree has fallen.

To stay with the political scope, Tuwhare’s fifth book, Making a Fist of It, published in 1978, foregrounds the Matakite Maori political movement through his involvement in the 1975 Maori Land March on Parliament, where the poet quotes one of revered leader Dame Whina Cooper’s speeches in ‘Rain-maker’s Song for Whina’, and one of his many enduring poems ‘Papa-tu-a-nuku (Earth Mother)’: 
Hone Tuwhare (1922–2008)
Silver gelatin print
Photographer Reg Graham, fl 1999
Reg Graham Collection,
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.
We are stroking, caressing the spine of the land.

We are massaging the ricked back of the land

with our sore but ever-loving feet:

hell, she loves it!

Squirming, the land wriggles in delight.

We love her.

(‘Papa-tu-a-nuku [Earth Mother]’ 29)

Making a Fist of It assertively packs in the politics: the title poem is set in Apartheid South Africa and puts one of the foulest Dutch swearwords, *Godverdamme*, in the mouths of white diamond mine owners. ‘After 151 Days of Rain...’ empathises with New Zealand’s red letter 1951 waterside workers’ lockout (37); a Dunedin street march and demonstration in October 1977 is celebrated, referring to Prime Minister Robert Muldoon’s pillorying of Polynesian ‘overstayers’ while a monumental poet — like the Maori warrior cast in bronze discussed later in this essay — Robert Burns, looks on (‘Street March and Demonstration, Dunedin 14 October 1977’ 36); there is a communist dialogue that refers obliquely to the aluminium company Comalco (‘Pigeons’ 38); a class conscious poem talks about social life in the capital, Wellington (‘Social Notes on Wellington’ 20); and Tuwhare makes an uncharacteristically blunt call for privateers to leave the land (‘Warawara, Pureora, Okarito’ 35), ‘Bastards:/ Stop your raping of the land. / Fuck off’. He achieves the political tone with characteristic good humour though, which I will discuss later in terms of Tuwhare’s panegyrical sensibility.

I might still be rewriting the assignment I worked on in 1986, as if to prove to my lecturer that Tuwhare was indeed political, and not just suitably mythological. His very presence as an indigenous poet was political in the racially charged, homophobic, gender-split, British-leaning New Zealand of the 1960s and ’70s. He was a Maori in a Pakeha literary world. His great Polynesian contemporary, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, made identity-yearning a central theme of his work, whereas Tuwhare revelled in voicing, à la Bakhtin, the diverse identities in New Zealand’s social chorus, or as Bill Manhire said in his essay, ‘Dirty Silence’, he was an expert ‘code shimmerer’, able to negotiate different New Zealand and Maori Englishes within a poem. Code-shifting is also a linguistic feature of endangered languages; Tuwhare stopped speaking Maori when nine years old after shifting to South Auckland, like many Maori who migrated to the cities. Our Ngā Puhi tribal dialect too is mixed with the language of late eighteenth century, and early nineteenth century whalers and missionaries, as well as the high rhetoric of chiefly oratory embellished by song-poetry and chant, and the vernacular.
Until recently Tuwhare’s predominant political mode always seemed oblique to me. I had read *No Ordinary Sun*, and his selected and collected poems, and his later books such as *Shape-Shifter*, *Short Back and Sideways*, and *Oooooo.....!!!* I knew politics were there, but I always imagined they were a thing to be unearthed from his poetic. His first book’s title poem, ‘No Ordinary Sun’, mourns the death of a tree as it meets a ‘gallant monsoon’s flash’ of an atomic test in the Pacific. Tuwhare was a member of the Allied occupation force in Japan just after World War II, and even spent a brief time in Hiroshima in 1946, and so was well aware of nuclear devastation (Hunt 49). ‘No Ordinary Sun’ is also an environmentalist poem, which can be read politically. Yet the politics I was looking for referred to indigenous peoples’ struggles in Aotearoa and elsewhere.

To pick up the environmentalist thread first, though: this might be an ingenious reading of his many myth-centered pieces, where a natural symbol such as the tree in ‘No Ordinary Sun’, or a deity such as oceanic Tangaroa, or the sun itself as a benign alter-ego, embodies another voice in the poem allowing a textual chorus to hop from stanza to stanza like birds in a tree. It is as if Tuwhare had an unwritten manifesto, where each poem needed to contain at least one reference to a natural thing. I suggest it comes from a Maori world-view where the natural world is mediated by a greater set of conscious beings (the many deities) and each natural sign comes to represent that multi-layered consciousness.

A famous early example of this code shifting is the poem ‘To a Maori Figure Cast in Bronze Outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland’, published in his third book *Sapwood and Milk*:

I hate being stuck up here, glaciated, hard all over
and with my guts removed: my old lady is not going
to like it.

I’ve seen more efficient scarecrows in seedbed nurseries. Hell, I can’t even shoo the pigeons off

Me: all hollow inside with longing for the marae on the cliff at Kohimarama, where you can watch the ships come in curling their white moustaches

Why didn’t they stick me next to Mickey Savage?
‘Now then,’ he was a good bloke
Maybe it was a Tory City Council that put me here

They never consulted me about naming the square
It’s a wonder they never called it: Hori-in-gorge-at-bottom-of-hill. Because it is like that: a gorge, with the sun blocked out, the wind whistling around your balls (your balls mate) And at night, how I feel for the beatle-girls with their long-haired boyfriends licking their frozen finger-chippy lips hopefully. And me again beetling
Robert Sullivan

my tent eyebrows forever, like a brass monkey with real worries: I mean, how the hell can you welcome the Overseas Dollar, if you can’t open your mouth to poke your tongue out, eh?

If I could only move from this bloody pedestal I’d show the long-hairs how to knock out a tune on the souped-up guitar, my mere quivering, my taiaha held at the high port. And I’d fix the ripe kotiro too with their mini-piupiu-ed bums twinkling: yeah!

Somebody give me a drink: I can’t stand it.

‘If I could only move from this bloody pedestal I’d show the long-hairs how to knock out a tune on the souped-up guitar, my mere [club] quivering, my taiaha [spear] held/ at the high port’. The poem literally appears to be stamping its feet and holding its arms in an effort to stay warm just like the statue who stands on a plinth with ‘… the wind whistling/ around your balls (your balls, mate)’. There is political irony in the title word ‘Chief’, and the statue’s officially cultured silence ‘… how the hell can you welcome / the Overseas Dollar, if you can’t open your mouth/ to poke your tongue out, eh?’ Tuwhare was probably familiar with Mao’s writing on the role of the artist, as he had visited China in 1973 sponsored by the New Zealand communist party (Hunt 117). He was even a party member until 1956. The ideological stance of his poetry, reflected in the working class voice of mateship, emphasised accessibility and egalitarianism right until the end. The choral range of this particular poem is characteristic Tuwhare: working class, masculine, loving romantic, Maori, Maoist, activist, nurturing environmentalist, comedic. The Maori activist in the poem has ‘tent eyebrows forever’, alluding to the tent embassy camped in front of parliament after the 1975 Land March, while the poet himself makes a veiled appearance reading from a pedestal to a mainly Pakeha literary audience, but he feels compromised by his audience and so is silenced. The shifting of language reflects a double consciousness where words deploy several messages for several audiences. It would be entirely possible, for instance, to read this particular poem as a humorous meditation on a cold day, or as political or artistic or cultural satire, either entirely singly or in a number of combinations. Few members of the poem’s audience would have immediate access to all the necessary information to appreciate its themes. For instance, the reference to the cliff at Kohimarama would only be familiar to Aucklanders who know the story of Bastion Point and the many struggles of Ngati Whatua there, and of the obelisk which is Labour Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage’s tomb that literally embodies a governing relationship, an expectation of Treaty equivalence in setting and dignity, rather than being placed as ‘Hori-in-gorge-at-/ bottom-of-hill …’. Yet the poem appeals to all New Zealanders by calling the beloved Prime Minister ‘Mickey Savage’. The self-deprecating term ‘Hori’ invites laughter, while the clownish ‘Hell, I can’t even shoo the pigeons off …’
speaks of powerlessness. Despite the glossary, which feels correct and reverent and even misleading (for example Kohimarama is glossed in Sap-wood & Milk as ‘a formerly fortified Maori village associated with Bean Rock and the Ngati Paoa tribe’ [41]), there is an expectation that the audience needs to be familiar with the references; that is, they need to belong to the society of heterogeneous voices that the narrator comes from. The text positively shimmers with polyphony: the extraordinarily adept juggling of registers into exuberantly lusty, cathartically heightened, savvy and mordant, cheerily vernacular, mock aristocratic; political, social, historical, geographical, personable, and cultural references; and the nearly casual line-lengths — a far cry from the high rhetoric of No Ordinary Sun more than a decade earlier — owes as much to prose as to public poetry, and also to an artist’s flair. The prosaic layout of the poem also contrasts with others in the publication such as the minimalist opening poem ‘Wind Song and Rain’:

A poem is
a ripple of words
on water wind-huffed

But still water
is a poem winded: a
mirrored distortion
of sky
and mountain
trees: and a drowned

face waiting
for a second wind
(a second coming?)
rain
oblivion

Ripple of words
on water

The cadence is far from minimal, echoing some of the cadences of the King James Bible — one of the few books Tuwhare had access to as a child. The register is not as highly charged as the Song of Solomon, or the Psalms, but the lyric could easily be sung. His much loved poem, ‘Rain’, which has a similar movement, was sung by musician Don McGlashan on the recently released audio compilation, Tuwhare. The ripples in ‘Wind Song and Rain’ speak of delicate connections, and of Ralph Hotere’s visual lines included in the book that ripple in colour and monochrome, as if waiting for the poet’s breath to move them. It also reminds me of Tuwhare’s humble and much anthologised praise-poem celebrating Hotere’s art, simply named ‘Hotere’:

When you offer only three
vertical lines precisely drawn
and set into a dark pool of lacquer
it is a visual kind of starvation:
and even though my eyeballs
roll up and over to peer inside
myself, when I reach the beginning
of our eternity I say instead: hell
let’s have another feed of mussels

*Like, I have to think about it, man*

When you stack horizontal lines
into vertical columns which appear
to advance, recede, shimmer and wave
like exploding packs of cards
I merely grunt and say: well if it
is not a famine, it’s a feast

*I have to roll another smoke, man*

But when you score a superb orange
circle on a purple thought-base
I shake my head and say: hell, what
is this thing called love

*Like, I’m euchred, man, I’m eclipsed?*

Hotere and Tuwhare share a close artistic friendship. With the rich relationship between visual and verbal arts in mind, I include this poem dedicated to Tuwhare that I wrote while on a visit to Italy researching some of the sites of the Maori Battalion. This poem comes from a new sequence, in honour of my late grandfather Massey Turi Sullivan who was a battalion member and of Tuwhare’s generation, entitled ‘Cassino: Città Martire’:

Rawiri/David  
*for the late Hone Tuwhare*

I returned to Florence still on my own.  
Sunday morning at the Accademia seated  
next to David, writing into the tapa:

amazing or as Tuwhare said of Hotere:
speechless/euchred/eclipsed. David’s enlarged  
hand which killed a giant holds the stone by his right  
thigh. I cannot believe in the hair up top  
or down below, but veins in his arms,  
creases in his belly button, nipples and strength  

I believe in. Even his testicles wield  
believable sacks — like rocks ready to be thrown.  
Pow! He stands next to a phallic stump. His belly  

juts with mana: Michelangelo’s strut post-haka.  
The thighs fetch slightly chubby hints  
of a boy whose knees wear youthful caps.
Yet visitors play with the digital David next to the real one. His ribs are visible on his left — I count five — but don’t see any on his right except muscle. Adam? After moving I see one on the right. His face shows intent but also a reflected fear cut there facing Goliath.

The forehead slightly creases, eyebrows furrow. Again the cheeks get chubby. He holds the sling strap like a microphone to his closed mouth. Sinews in that hand ridge like a scallop shell for a Venus. The veins from his stone holding hand run all the way up his right arm to the neck. From here the strap looks like a regal sash — his only clothing which slips down his back. From the right there’s no fear in the face — just rugged courage. I can only admire this man.

I also promised in this brief essay about Tuwhare’s poetry that I would discuss his celebratory qualities. The sheer zest in his final book’s title, Oooooo....!!!, with its suggestive cover picture of a green-lipped mussel in an open shell, speaks of sexual appetite and life. Another autographed ‘oooh!’ is in the front-matter of his biography by Janet Hunt (perhaps it’s only in my copy) so the exclamation is life-affirming rather than haunting! It would be interesting to count the number of appearances by Tangaroa, lord of the ocean, or the sun, or Maui, or unnamed deities embodied in forests, rains, creeks and rivers in his poetry. Still I find it hard to keep this promise as his passing is indeed a loss, and so forgive me. He was the first Maori writer to have a literary book published in English, and he belongs to a pioneering generation of Oceanic writers that includes Kath Walker, and Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, before the next expansive generation of Albert Wendt, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Russell Soaba, John Kasaipwalova, Vincent Eri, Konae Helu Thaman, Jack Gilbert, Henri Hiro, Keri Hulme, Alan Duff, John Dominis Holt and many unsung others. In 1975 Ken Arvidson identified Tuwhare as a leading figure in the establishment of an oceanic literature with centres in Aotearoa, Papua New Guinea, and Suva. He confirmed that by publishing thirteen books of poetry, many with multiple editions, and receiving numerous literary honours. Through sheer talent and aroha he became a central figure in most discussions of oceanic writing, quite an achievement in a critical New Zealand environment which has strong scholarly biases toward narrative-based and non-indigenous literature. Eric Schwimmer’s recent article in the Journal of the Polynesian Society strengthens the case for Tuwhare’s centrality through an extended Bakhtinian reading of the poem ‘On a Theme by Hone Taiapa’ which was already analyzed by Chadwick Allen in Blood Narrative.
In the end, I feel like finishing with a late Tuwhare poem in that exuberantly named last book that is humble and beautiful, and very simply political, about an earth-fortress or pā (83), noting an imperialist history yet still including ‘all’ New Zealanders into the earth-mother’s embrace:

I feel like a vulnerable
pā-site, sacked, by
an unforgiving enemy
force & razed to a level
unbecoming, to a warrior-force,
but—freed at last,
to accept—with humility—
the earth-smelling pungency
of that Grand Dame—mother,
of us all: Papa-tu-a-Nuku:
our Earth-mum.
[Lie in peace great chief. Sleep on, sleep on. You have become a star. You will shine forever.]

Robert Sullivan
Ngâ Puhi Nui Tonu, Kâi Tahu, Ngâti Raukawa, Galway Irish.

NOTES
¹ Ralph Hotere has, like Tuwhare, an iconic status, being recognised as New Zealand’s greatest living visual artist.

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