

Solar Metaphors: 'No Ordinary Sun'

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Out of his prodigious body of poetry, Hone Tuwhare's 'No Ordinary Sun' is perhaps the best-known poem from a lifetime of creative work. First published in *Northland* (1959), and reprinted in both *Te Ao Hou* (1959) and as the titular poem of his first volume of poetry (1964), 'No Ordinary Sun' is a vital critique of the ways in which nuclear discourse is naturalized through the use of solar metaphors.¹ It is the first poem Tuwhare ever recorded (for New Zealand radio), and one that has inspired countless other poets, artists, activists, and musicians.² Tuwhare biographer Janet Hunt has referred to the poem as 'one of the emblems of the peace movement through the late sixties, the seventies, and eighties' (48). Given the international reach of this poem and its remarkable rhetorical power, it's surprising that it has elicited so little analysis.³ In early reviews, poet R.A.K. Mason noted Tuwhare's stance 'against atomic evils' in a poem that 'draws so profoundly from Maoridom that the source can be felt to lie in the depths common to all mankind' (quoted in Wilson 193). Reviewer Martin G. Wilson similarly emphasized Tuwhare's universal political stance, writing 'one does not have to be a poet or a socialist – Hone Tuwhare is both – to be violently opposed to the lunacy of further nuclear explosions in a world where too many have already taken place. This poem then, speaks for us all' (194).

Although this poem does not once mention nuclear weaponry, 'No Ordinary Sun' is universally interpreted as an allegory of atomic apocalypse. Barry Mitcalfe's early review of the poetry collection noted Tuwhare's adept use of 'elemental' motifs such as the sea, sun, moon, wind, and rain to communicate a 'social realist' critique of modernity (18). Ken Arvidson notes that the poem does not reference 'more predictable urban or technological sources' but rather 'naturalistic' ones that provide the poem with 'unusual strength' (26). Readers have often assumed that the poem reflects Tuwhare's vision of the destruction caused by the two atomic weapons, 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man,' dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States in 1945. This is understandable because barely a year later, Tuwhare was stationed in Japan with the New Zealand division of the British Commonwealth Occupational Force and travelled through Hiroshima, witnessing first-hand the ongoing devastation of the city (see Hunt 49).

Certainly the global memory of atomic holocaust has been centered on the irradiation of at least 200,000 Japanese (and Korean) people, most of them civilians, than on other trajectories of nuclearization in the Pacific and elsewhere. Here I'd like to pose a reading of Tuwhare's poem that foregrounds his concerns about the development of the hydrogen bomb in the early 1950s and its frightening capacity for total planetary radiation. In his commentary on 'No Ordinary Sun' Tuwhare explained that 'the main theme is [...] the horror and desolation that an H-bomb would bring, something I feel very strongly[...] I am aware all the time of the threat that is hanging over our world' (Hunt 49).

This focus on the hydrogen (thermonuclear) weapon is not to detract from the human devastation of the nuclear attacks on Japan but rather to place these early detonations in a more visible historical trajectory that links them to the hundreds that followed. In fact, by the time Tuwhare first published 'No Ordinary Sun' in 1959, the US, UK and USSR had detonated over 250 nuclear weapons in the Pacific Islands and around the broader Pacific Rim, including the American West. Thousands more would follow, rapidly increasing in force from the 15-and 21-kiloton atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945 to the 10,400 kiloton weapon 'Mike,' the planet's first hydrogen weapon detonated on Enewetak Atoll in 1952.⁴ Radioactive elements produced by these weapons were spread through the global atmosphere, deposited into water supplies and soils, absorbed by plants and subsequently absorbed into the bone tissue of all humans on the globe, directly contributing to countless miscarriages and hundreds of thousands of cancer deaths. The body of every human on the planet now contains strontium90, a man-made byproduct of nuclear detonations (Caufield 132). In fact, forensic scientists are now using the traces of militarized radioactive carbon in our teeth to date human remains ('Forensics' 33-34).

Robert Oppenheimer described the July 1945 explosion of Trinity, the world's first nuclear detonation, as 'the radiance of a thousand suns' (qtd in Jungk 201). Atomic (fission) and hydrogen (fusion) weapons are often described as harnessing the power of the sun, or of releasing the 'universal' and generative power of the Big Bang and therefore replicating the origin of our universe. As Jeff Smith observes, 'such language begins to imply that the [bomb] actually partakes in the cosmos's forces of creation' (1). The use of this supernatural and often religious discourse, including the use of names such as 'Trinity' for a weapon of mass destruction, naturalized these weapons, Robert Jungk explains, and therefore created a public 'helplessness in the face of natural forces' (247).

The naturalization of the hydrogen bomb was conducted on at least two levels: first, by associating *man*-made radiation with its solar counterpart, and second, by likening nuclear detonations on earth as harnessing the power of the sun. This was effected by repeated connection between a military lab product,

a nuclear weapon, and its cosmic figure, the sun. This idea of the ‘natural’ nuclear bomb, or the inevitability of nuclearization, seems to have also helped *eclipse* recognition of the hundreds of nuclear detonations set off in the Pacific Islands between 1946 and 1996. Although nuclear detonations are some of the most heavily documented and photographed events in history, they continue to be erased from public discourse. In fact hundreds of Hollywood photographers and filmmakers were hired by the US military to produce a visual archive of nuclearization that was distributed worldwide and is ubiquitous on the internet.⁵ Yet even expansive thinkers such as Hardt and Negri determine that ‘from no other standpoint is the passage from [...] modern sovereignty to Empire more evident than it is from the standpoint of the bomb’ (345), but they define this as the ‘*capacity* for destruction’ (my italics 346), a vision of a nuclear future, rather than a recognition of nuclearization’s ongoing presence. While the full tally of nuclear explosions may never be known, to date the Oklahoma Geological Survey Observatory records over 2,000 nuclear explosions on earth between 1945 and 2006.

As Peggy Rosenthal has documented, the nuclear bomb has been associated with a tremendous range of metaphors, from the organic mushroom to the scientific brain. Most importantly, commentators of the 1950s consistently aligned the bomb with the trope of a new dawn, a rising sun, and the birth of a new world. Tuwhare’s ‘No Ordinary Sun,’ a five-stanza poem written in this context, repeatedly negates the natural metaphors accorded to the nuclear bomb that have so successfully normalized state violence. It is this association of the sun, a supernatural metaphor of radiance and (nuclear) radiation, that is key to understanding Tuwhare’s poem, which pairs it with the tree, a natural metaphor of human presence on the planet.

The title of the poem, ‘No Ordinary Sun,’ references the simultaneous creation and destruction of metaphor. On the one hand, the sun can never be ‘ordinary’ because it is our source of life on the planet. There is no such thing as an ‘ordinary sun,’ the poem declares, and it refuses any attempts to normalize the uniqueness of our solar center. To make the life-generating center of our heliotropic system an ‘*ordinary* sun’ demands a comparison to something that is not ordinary. To be ‘ordinary’ would place the sun in a lesser relation to another object. In turn, this process of solar comparison or metaphor demands two spatial moves. First, we can see the sun as ‘ordinary’ by turning to other galaxies, pressing the very limits of our ideas of belonging in place, expanding from the earthly to the truly universal. The second way to understand the comparison of being ‘ordinary’ is to compare the sun with its presumed likeness on our planet, that other figure of the sun on earth: the nuclear bomb. The opening ‘No,’ the negation of ordinariness that allows the nuclear bomb to become a natural figure like the sun is rejected, even as the poet necessarily relies on a metaphor of the bomb as a sun to narrate an allegory about the sun and tree.

In the first line of the poem, the unnamed speaker begins with an imperative: 'Tree let your arms fall.' The personification of the tree's limbs doubles as man-made military 'arms,' foregrounding the role of military metaphors and nature. The rest of this opening stanza depicts a personified tree and a supernatural sun, placing the two in unequal relation. The speaker presumes intimacy with the tree and warns it not to raise its arms 'in supplication / to the bright enhaloed cloud,' highlighting a spatial hierarchy between earth and sky. This also foregrounds the vitality of the human voice as a mediator between realms. While some scholars have suggested the allegorical mode is too heavily determined by tradition, Tuwhare's poem suggests a dangerous break with the past. This is not the *known* violence of the 'axe' or 'fire,' the speaker cautions the tree/reader. The tree is warned to break from tradition, to resist its innate reverence for this 'bright enhaloed cloud.' The poem pinpoints a new historical problem in interpreting the relationship between the natural (tree/human) and supernatural (sun/bomb), even as this gap is necessarily mediated by the function of metaphor, the poet, and language. The second and third stanzas again signal a break in the mediative function between the natural and the supernatural. The tree's 'sap shall not rise again / to the moon's pull,' marks the end of the gravitational relation between earth and larger cosmos, much like the break in relations between the tree and sun. Developing the analogy of the tree as human body, the speaker advises against our shared heliotropism (solar turning): we should 'no more incline a deferential head' as we had in the past. Moreover, the figures of mediation between the earth and atmosphere such as gravity, the wind, and birds, are 'no more,' called to a halt by the poet's voice, by language.

Only in the third stanza is the life-ending 'monstrous sun' finally named. This key figure of alterity is placed in the center of the poem, deemed 'monstrous,' a word closely associated with irregularity of form, with the unnatural, and often with the unacceptable product of the merger between humans and nature. This introduction of the sun generates a new role for the tree, which shifts from an anthropomorphic figure to an arboreal one. This 'tree-like' tree becomes a protective but failed intermediary between the sun and the 'unheeding' human 'lovers' below whose 'ardour,' literally a term for burning, needs cooling. The poet makes an interesting choice here, and perhaps a critique, of the failure of these 'unheeding' humans to apprehend their own inevitable demise. In this failure of communication between poet and unheeding lovers, we also see the failure of metaphor. Here the tree is no longer a trope for the human, but simply a tree. To trope is to turn one figure into another. These unheeding human figures are heliotropic, turning to the sun yet oblivious to their burning under its 'monstrous' power. In the poet's turning of figures of trees into humans (who do not heed warnings) he suggests a breakdown in the mediative function, in terms of space (upper and lower realms) as well as language.

The appearance of the unheeding lovers in the poem marks an important shift in the subsequent (and longest) stanza. While the speaker continues to address the tree in the imperative, the diction becomes self-conscious and even archaic. The poem increases its use of assonance and alliteration, and introduces the first and only full rhyme (fall/ball). This section seems to parody the kind of Romantic nature poetry that draws upon bucolic imagery to represent human illumination. Tuwhare's use of adjectives such as 'gallant' and 'dashing' to describe natural processes are personifications of nature that call attention to their own artifice. Thus a 'gallant monsoon' is as incongruous as the nuclear metaphor it is made to bear, its 'flash.' Similarly, the antiquated language of the 'dashing trade wind' jars against the modern warfare 'blast.' This language calls attention to the *unnaturalness* of the nuclear as well as the failure of language to represent natural phenomena. When Tuwhare writes that the 'magic emanations' of the tree will no longer 'make pure again / these polluted skies,' he juxtaposes a utopian language of nature ('magic') against a dystopian modernity ('polluted'). The ellipses after 'polluted skies...' inscribe the gap between knowledge and representation. In turn, this demonstrates how metaphorical relations are always incomplete; metaphor highlights connections between certain objects while it diverts attention from other relations. Ultimately, the poet suggests the limits of metaphor (and language itself) through his use of negation. The repeated negations of this stanza ('nor extend entreaties,' 'no dashing trade wind,' 'not make pure again') suggest the metaphor-negating title of the poem and indeed this particular stanza ends: 'this / is no ordinary sun.'

The fifth and final stanza of the poem literally destroys its own metaphors and leaves the poet with no earthly landscape to transform. The stanza begins with a Romantic call, 'O tree,' turning to the geography of the earth that refuses to yield the metaphors so desperately needed by the poet. As such, the very process by which human language gains its meaning – through its rootedness in natural, earthly metaphor – is eradicated. The speaker turns to the mountains and finds they are now 'shadowless.' Similarly, the 'plains' are now 'white' and the sea floor is 'drab.' Here nuclearization leads not to a planet determined by darkness, a lack of light, but total radiation. The sea floor, representing the farthest depths of earthly existence but also the space that is completely *unfathomable* to human knowledge, is not 'revealed' or 'illuminated' by the atomic sun, it is simply 'drab.' These last five lines of the poem also lack color, contrast, and personification of nature – the vehicles that kept this poem in narrative tension.

Lawrence Buell has argued that 'apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal' (285). Given its nuclear topic, the structure of Tuwhare's poem is oddly anti-apocalyptic. Unlike almost every other account of nuclear detonations,

which capitalize on the stunning visual effects of nuclear explosions and produce an aesthetic of violence, Tuwhare recounts a nuclear apocalypse in which the actual detonation and blast are not inscribed. Incredibly, this is a poem of witness that does not relate the act of violence itself. The poem uses the very figures most associated with apocalypse, yet this is not a narrative of sacrifice or of renewal. This is a world of total light, but illumination does not follow – it is ‘shadowless’ and ‘drab.’ Tuwhare ends his poem with the ongoing presence of total radiation, an unrecognizable landscape that resists our domesticating metaphors.

In this poem, Tuwhare draws from at least two cultural traditions that allow us to read the sun/tree relationship as an allegory. First, a childhood in which he grew up speaking Māori and exposed to the formal oratory of a tradition in which one addresses non-human sentients such as trees, animals, and features of the landscape, utilizing language to establish humanity’s genealogical connections to the earth (see Gadd 85; Mane-Wheoki 235). Secondly, the influence of the Christian Bible, another formal oral tradition that Tuwhare’s father read to him as a child to help develop his English.⁶ In its first book printing, ‘No Ordinary Sun’ was juxtaposed with a poem entitled ‘A Disciple Dreams’ which questioned the leadership of the church in an era of perpetual war (Wilson 194). Given Tuwhare’s concern with the mediative function of language and light, we might read this poem as an allegory of Christ, a narrative about the sacrifice of the tree/cross as an attempt to rescue humanity from its sin of scientific hubris. This, it might seem, is no ‘ordinary son’ for sacrifice, but one that does not lead to humanity’s redemption.

To position this work closer to Māori cosmology, we might consider the narratives of Tāne-Mahuta, the deity of the forest represented by the tree who creates Te Ao Marama, the world of light, by separating the sky deity Rangi and the earth mother Papatūānuku, bringing light (and life) to the earth. Tāne, like the figures of rain, wind, and birds of this poem, is an emissary between earth and sky; the poet’s call to cease this intermediary function might be considered within the history of these founding narratives of Aotearoa. In fact this would be in keeping with the larger cosmographic landscape the collection *No Ordinary Sun* inscribes as a whole, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the tree is configured as a mediator and signifier of human loss.⁷ The poet’s call to cease this intermediary function thus focuses on the failure of mediation itself. The ‘wa’ – the space between – in Māori epistemology represents the potent space of becoming, the space of language, and the mediating function of metaphor. As such, the poet suggests a rupture in the mediating role of language and light in indigenous and Christian cosmologies.

The tree's 'magic / emanations shall not make pure again / these polluted skies.' The power of transmutation that lies in the natural and figurative use of the tree has failed, just as the poet's ability to illuminate the earth after nuclear devastation results in merely a 'drab' and 'shadowless' landscape. The last words of the poem, the staccato, 'your end at last is written,' represent one of the few lines that do not assert a negation; these words are a positive assertion and an epitaph. The doubling of the 'end at last' underlines the limited powers of the poet and the process of inscription itself. In other words, the demise of the tree is simultaneous with the emergence of writing. The poet's elegiac powers emerge only through the *loss* of the landscape from which language gains meaning. This is a small triumph of metaphor in the wake of our earthly radiation.

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Endnotes

¹ The *Te Ao Hou* text is available online:

<http://teaohou.natlib.govt.nz/journals/teaohou/issue/Mao28TeA/c7.html#c7-2>

² See Hunt 52 for a list of music inspired by Tuwhare. A bibliography of Tuwhare's work and critical reception can be found in the New Zealand Literature File at the University of Auckland:

http://www.nzlf.auckland.ac.nz/author/?a_id=162.

³ One useful online teaching guide can be found here:

http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/units/nzpoetry/no_ordinary_sun.html

⁴ See the Catalogue of Nuclear Explosions maintained by the Oklahoma Geological Survey Observatory at

<http://www.okgeosurvey1.gov/level2/nuke.cat.html>. For Pacific tests, see Firth.

Due to lack of disclosure from many governments, this listing has some gaps.

⁵ See Kuran, *Hollywood's Top Secret Film Studio* and Light, *100 Suns*. Photos and films of the tests are available widely. See <http://www.vce.com/> and <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org>.

⁶ See Manhire interview and Hunt's biography.

⁷ See especially the poems 'Song' and 'Friend.'