

Pūrōrohū: Hone Tuwhare's Rain Spells

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His poetry tells the story. In the beginning he was the 'Child Coming Home in the Rain from the Store', pausing to study the 'ripple of words on water' ('Wind Song and Rain'). Later, working through drought ('come rain hail / and flood-water // laugh again' ('Haiku [1]'), and through non-stop downpours ('And you rain, raining there, outside, incessantly, – O, and with such a long night to appease' ('Rain-Talk and Fever'), he became one priestly in his rain knowledge – 'lips moving / only to oratorical rhythms of the rain' – a tohunga of rain's effects: 'Simply / by hooking your finger to the sea / rain-squalls swoop like a hawk, suddenly' ('A Fall of Rain at Mitimiti: Hokianga').

As a bard, he wielded a pūrōrohū. This ancient sound-making device, whistling through the air, consisted of a blade-shape piece of wood, or pounamu, or bone, swung through on a piece of woven flax and was traditionally used by certain iwi to summon rain. Tuwhare was not a god-like rainmaker; but he conjured with rain, made spells and charms from its presence; rendered rain visible and memorably metaphoric for us. He heard it 'making small holes in the silence' ('Rain'). And he 'heard the rain applauding' ('That Morning Early'). For, as a surrogate tells us in a poem, he was 'at one with the wind / the cloud's heave and the slapping rain' ('Lament').

He acknowledged its transformative beauty: it was a 'demure leveller / ocean-blessed / cloud-sent / maker of plains' ('Reign Rain'). And he acknowledged its durability, its triumphant finality, its superiority to the merely human: 'hurry rain and trail him / to the bottom of the grave' ('Burial'). He was rain's jester and its mimic, invoking its gurgling, the bass chuckle of its mighty 'river talk'. He told us, too, in his poem entitled '. . . the sea chanting lugubriously / the rain patting me for hidden weapons' of the state of bliss rain could offer: 'people who walk around in the rain naked / don't get wet: they get washed' ('. . . the sea chanting lugubriously').

Tuwhare is arguably the most sensual poet New Zealand has yet produced: the super-liquidity of his imagery, both cross-cultural and site-specific to these islands, was grounded in Māoritanga: ‘Coming out sudden as he did / from an amber glut / of morning clouds . . .’ (‘Sun O [1]’); ‘The taniwha snorts hot dust / and steam. / Golden snot trickles from his nostrils’ (‘Children’s Tale’). He sought out textures, evoked the rough and the smooth, snuffled at elusive scents and aromas, stamped out a haka on ‘the good earth’.

Not for Tuwhare the self-referential confrontation of language with language, or the measured tones of a disembodied voice deep from within a university common-room armchair. He was involved up to his eyebrows in the lyric essence of the moment, his harmonious burblings able to conjure up the poetic immediacy of any given situation. He felt the rain on his skin, breathed in the odour of the sea, and was able to employ the poet’s gift for saying the right thing, the exact thing about that experience, while also gracefully implying more than words could say.

Tuwhare sang the body electric, a powerboard paean to energy circuits running through the land. He had the kind of pipe-organ voice to give a reverberant lift to any chapel choir. And in Tuwhare New Zealand had someone to speak for the whole culture of the tongue-tied in the latter part of the twentieth century: all the evasions and fumbings, the left-unsaid-in-polite-company, the meaningful silences, the twisted strangled vowels, the public bar grunts which speak volumes. For Tuwhare, words were the musical notes of bells, of nose flutes. Words were the rattle of milk bottles in crates, the hiss of tyres on a wet road, the stir of trees creaking in a storm. Above all they were a way of expressing the miracle of hearing and seeing, of taste and touch.

No ideas except in things. Tuwhare, in whom the poetic spirit dwelled and was made manifest, declared ‘define me / disperse me / wash over me / rain’ (‘Rain’). He also declared in ‘A Fall of Rain at Mitimiti’ that rain was holy tears, bringing the land alive, rendering visible the tribal gods who go on inhabiting this land – ‘Ananei ngā roimata o Rangipapa: here are the tears of the Sky-father, falling’. Hurry, then, rain, and trail him to the bottom of the grave.

Poems Cited

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- ‘Rain’. *Come Rain Hail* 8; *DRT* 46.
- ‘That Morning Early’. *No Ordinary Sun* (Hamilton and Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1964). 8; *DRT* 14.
- ‘Lament’. *No Ordinary Sun* 13; *DRT* 20.
- ‘Reign Rain’. *Making a Fist of It* (Dunedin: Jackstraw, 1978). 11; *DRT* 114.
- ‘. . . the sea chanting lugubriously’. *DRT* 196.
- ‘Burial’. /No Ordinary Sun/ 15; /DRT /19.
- ‘Sun O (1)’. *Making a Fist of it* 12; *DRT* 115.
- ‘Children’s Tale’. *Making a Fist of it* 9; *DRT* 113.