

His own true voice

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From a tribute delivered to the Auckland Labour History Group, 19 June 2008, which included recordings of Tuwhare reading.

What any artist does, whose practice is serious and life-long, is steal a feather from the cloaks of the gods: like them they create worlds. And we, by reading, listening and viewing their work, enter those worlds. I have always thought it apt that Tuwhare's eleventh collection was entitled *Shape-Shifter* because it invokes the mythical figure of Maui, supreme mimic, trickster and god. Maui traditionally possessed the ability to take on the form of birds, creatures and other gods and so move among them unnoticed. Tuwhare likewise was enormously socially adept, changing colour like a bush gecko, effortlessly becoming at home with his surroundings. He had many guises: he was a family man, lover, friend, tradesman, communist, community worker, borough councillor and political activist. He inspired and has been inspired by other writers, artists, musicians and academics. He was a performer, bringing his words to life for thousands over the years, in school and community halls, in art galleries, literary festivals, cafés and lecture theatres. In the prime of his writing life he journeyed the length of New Zealand several times a year, and as a worker and writer, he travelled to the Pacific and to Hawaii, Australia, China, Germany and South Africa.

In this, the year of his passing, it is this man, who shared our lives and times and whom we treasured, that we remember. He was colourful, sometimes irascible, occasionally wise, often funny, clever and hugely talented and had a consummate ability to live in the moment. Those of us who were fortunate to have shared time with him miss him enormously. Tuwhare the man was such a presence that it is easy to overlook the reason ultimately, that we honour him: his art. Like the gods, he built a world.

In the course of 40-plus years, in poetry, prose and in dramatic form, he named and shaped a landscape, sometimes rural and sometimes urban, and peopled it with those with whom he worked, those whom he loved, both human and animal, and those with whom he shared his life. His writing was not, of course, static. From the time when he reputedly scrawled sonnets in chalk on the side of railway wagons in the Otahuhu workshops to the publication of his last collection, it changed not only in its matter—in the things that inspired him and fired him up—but also in form and style. That is the remarkable thing and it is this journey that I want to trace in a small way today, Tuwhare’s odyssey.

It began in the 1920s. Many will know the outline of Tuwhare’s childhood and youth—of the death of his mother when he was about five and how, in subsequent years he trailed in the wake of his father Pene who worked in a range of labouring jobs around the Auckland region. Their accommodation was rudimentary much of the time and as he told it, his was a hard, often bare-foot life. Formal schooling was intermittent, but education is more than the instruction that takes place in front of the blackboard; outside the school gates, Tuwhare was a top scholar in that greater classroom, life. The market gardeners, his father’s friends and acquaintances, people he boarded with, his mates, the creeks, streets, fields and nooks that only children would explore and know, Māoritanga, Te Reo, the Bible, comedy and tragedy—it all went into the mix, was hungrily consumed and later vividly recalled and drawn from. His schooling was complemented by access to a series of book clubs and libraries—the London Book Club, the Strand Book Club, Auckland Library. He was clearly a wordsmith in the making from early on. He said:

How can I describe the first stumbling efforts in learning how to trap numbers and make them your slave? The letters of a given alphabet? The secret pride and delight in the magical discovery of being able to write my own name? Hey! I’m seven years old. I’m me. Oh, boy—

Discovering books is a little like discovering sex, though an addiction perhaps more honest and without withdrawal symptoms!

It is like being seduced by the shape and colour of a wave-worn pebble on a beach: crunching ruthlessly over others to another shrilling more loudly for attention; identifying more with one than the other. Finally, leaving the beach with eyes utterly confused and sated with the wave-glint and shadow; the skin wincing to those needling forces of sun and wind and rain, the head crammed with the sound of sea-bird and the sea, seasonal and rhythmic. In one hand, a

bulging assortment of brightly coloured stones and shells and in the other a quarter sugar-bag of hissing pipi and mussels. Dreams and the reality. Sensuous and walking away, hand in hand... (Hunt 32-33)

Shortly after he left school he became an apprentice boilermaker with the railways, and entered another formative period. Working on the railways meant belonging to trade unions and later, the Communist Party. He said:

Marxism gave me a real sense of place, you know—‘Workers of the world unite’. I had a sense of belonging, of being part of a particular class of people. [...] My eyes were opened to all sorts of things—political influences. And political reading. There was the Left Book Club library in Darby Street and the Railway Workshop Library, where there was a much more sophisticated choice of books than I had known. I read Marx and Engels. Russian writers. [...] And [American] novelists—Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe. (Hunt 40-42)

And then came the war. Tuwhare applied to enlist but was turned away: he was only 17 and was colour-blind to boot. He put his energy into the union movement and was among those who protested when the old marae on the flat at Okahu Bay was demolished. He completed his apprenticeship in 1944, was accepted for army training as part of the 16th Māori Battalion, and was therefore somewhat deflated when the war ended without an overseas posting. All was not lost, however, because he then had the opportunity to enlist and travel to Japan with the post-war peace-keeping body known as ‘J Force’. His first published poem was reputedly written and printed on board ship on the way there but it was not until his return that the nascent poet began to show his colours. He had worked with R.A.K. Mason at the railways prior to the war without knowing that Mason was a poet. When his wife-to-be, Jean, showed him Mason’s collection *This Dark will Lighten*, Tuwhare was astonished and delighted. ‘I thought, Gee whiz, is this how you write poetry? Wow.’ Inspired, he tried his hand. He said:

I looked up an instruction book on how to write sonnets, you know: 14 lines, six, eight and with rhyme end schemes and things like that—so I studied it religiously, and timidly. I carried it around for a week, wondering what he’d say, and one day I pulled it out of my pocket and presented it to him. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘Hone, you’re trying to write sonnets. Here,’ he says. ‘Forget it. Just write as if you were writing a letter. Write your thoughts, your best feelings, you know, about things, don’t worry about rhymings, that only holds you up and all the structure of the

sonnet, all that gets in the way, Hone, be free, be free to write freely and express yourself more, without hedging yourself.' (Hunt 42-43)

And that is what he did. Tuwhare published 13 volumes of poetry during his career as a writer. And from volume to volume, so minutely and so slowly that it is discernable most clearly by comparing the later poems with the earliest, he increasingly distilled and refined his voice, following Mason's advice to 'be free to write freely and express yourself more, without hedging yourself'.

Tuwhare wrote largely within the tradition of the short poem or lyric. Within that, however, two styles are broadly discernable, two which largely became one as his confidence in his own voice grew and he more nearly approached Mason's ideal. His longer poems have considerable narrative content and often pursue a progression of ideas from beginning to end, sometimes dramatised with two or more speakers and always serious, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes philosophical, sometimes questioning or protesting. These poems tend to favour the ornate and rhetorical, are in the voice of the lad who discovered words and thought 'oh boy!' This style is most apparent in *No Ordinary Sun*, and never entirely disappears in later collections. It is typically heavy in adjectives, often compound and often metaphorical in effect, fond of devices such as repetition, question and apostrophe. It has the feel of poetry read aloud, of the enacted performance. On the other hand, Tuwhare also writes short, epigrammatic poems that deal with a single thought or idea. These tend towards the colloquial and are comic or cheeky, delighting in punning, word-play, absurdity and incongruity. They draw from the vernacular, the spoken voice of the pub and the workplace and often centre on one image, sometimes presented without comment and with little adornment. I want to now touch on just four of those poems, being very conscious of the many that I cannot include. Two of them are about time, a constant companion and source of fascination for Tuwhare and are universal and philosophical. By contrast, the third is a protest poem and very much grounded in gritty and unpleasant reality whereas the fourth is a retelling of a comic incident that presumably (but not necessarily) happened to him. 'Time and the Child' is the first poem in his first collection, *No Ordinary Sun*, published in 1964. Single poems had been appearing in a range of magazines and periodicals—*The New Zealand Listener*, *Northland Magazine*, *Te Ao Hou*, *WAG* and *Landfall*, among others—since early 1958 but *No Ordinary Sun* delivered them to a wider audience. The collection was an extraordinary hit, a publishing phenomenon in its own right. It sold out in ten days and ultimately, over the course of the poet's career, ran to twelve printings, the last in 1998. It announced Tuwhare's presence and his seriousness in his art, however new and untried, in a way which his singly-published poems had not done. It introduced readers to the things that characteristically concerned him, his songs of the land, of love and lament, his personal poetry as well as public and political protest; it established a setting, a world located

in a particular time and place, in rural and traditional Aotearoa and in the urban and Pakeha New Zealand landscape. The collection was also significant for Māori generally, for as Mason said in his foreword, 'Here—and I think this is for the first time—is a member of the Māori race qualifying as a poet in English'. Without meaning to, Tuwhare was stepping forward as a leader and a voice of his people. *No Ordinary Sun* was to become a touchstone against which subsequent publications would be measured for continuity and divergence, for development, expansion and maturation. 'Time and the child' (*DRT* 13), in the 1967 recording of *No Ordinary Sun* is interesting for a number of reasons but in particular, Tuwhare's delivery, his declamatory, theatrical style and his BBC-influenced pronunciation.

This poem is a small narrative, told in a very grand style right from that almost ponderous title. Tuwhare's writing was very much expressed through the senses—he especially revelled in taste, touch, sound and sight. He spoke and wrote much about eyeballs and used his to gaze with great appreciation on paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs; many of his poems, such as this or the more famous poem 'No Ordinary Sun', create powerful visual images. When I read 'Time and the Child' I see a scene not unlike that famous photo of Whina Cooper and her moko as they commenced the hikoī from Northland to parliament a decade later, with the old man hobbling under the burning sun in a stark, fierce landscape and child running behind. The two are nameless and universal, representing the beginning and the end of life's journey, the child innocent of the fact as he mocks the 'funny old man / funny' that he will one day tread in the old man's shoes. It is characteristic too, that the sun is personified and paces overhead, indifferent to the human drama below.

'Making a fist of it', recorded during a reading at the 1995 Taranaki Arts Festival, is the title poem from his 1978 collection (*DRT* 124). Most memorably, this volume contains poems inspired by specific events such as his participation in the hikoī mentioned above, and in the case of the title poem, his anger at events in apartheid Africa. These poems are interesting because, although dated in some respects by the event they describe, they change in relevance as they age; they have an historical patina derived from the event they describe but are also more universal than they were at the time when they were written. This poem was, I assume, triggered by the events of June 1976, when teargas and bullets were used in Johannesburg against 10,000 students marching in protest at the compulsory use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in schools. Twelve of them were shot and killed and the incident triggered further unrest and disorder. Tuwhare's title both of the collection and the poem, expresses the anger of the repressed and dispossessed, cosily embedding it in the metaphor 'to make a good fist of it', doing a good job. Tuwhare is both more literal and more symbolic: he means making a fist of it and he means uprising and protest, fighting back. The poem operates on two levels: at the most literal, there is an image—

another powerful image—of a girl-child struggling to rise between her dead parents, looking for nourishment, wanting to play with a rattle, the rattle which is the sound of her father’s last breath. Tuwhare is anything but subtle and makes a huge play of the contrast between the loveliness of the ‘girl-baby’ and the ugliness of her parents’ killings as well as his satirising of the mine-owners’ displeasure at the inconvenience of missing their annual holidays. He could easily have left it at that but there is a sting in the tail and the oppressors had better watch out: in the penultimate stanza the girl-child is empowered; she hauls herself up by a rifle, and when she stands, attains heroic stature, a woman warrior at the head of an army of ‘black work-hardened hands [that] fist a forest / of rifles, waving’. And when the ‘black girl-baby is standing up: beautiful’, it is not just the small child he is admiring but what she represents. The end of apartheid means that the immediate relevance of this writing fades with events that are consigned to history, but the poem remains, nevertheless, a reminder both of that struggle as well as of any situation of injustice or repression, anywhere, anytime. By contrast, in the same volume, there is another poem that on the face of it is another protest, ‘Slaughter on Kiwi Avenue’. Here we have a different kind of poem altogether, of the sort that Bill Manhire described in 1973 as:

[approaching] anecdote, where the poet himself figures as amiable participant in a world he never entirely controls. His is a world in which ‘people come together mainly to / say true and surprising things about each other’, a place which welcomes humour and affectionate confusion. (Manhire 210)

This style is utterly unlike the rhetorical and dramatic voice of ‘Time and the Child’ or ‘Making a Fist of it’. Instead, it is the second voice referred to earlier, that taps the argot of the street and the pub: it pokes fun, is anarchic and subversive and loves to play with words, to twist and extend meanings, to invent and circumvent. ‘Slaughter on Kiwi Avenue’ is not just a laugh at someone being caught out by having a car accident when out with another man’s wife, it is a huge romp with language, from the contrast of the title through to the last pun and consciously-used cliché. Finally, returning to the topic of time, let’s consider ‘Time Out’, written 30 years later than ‘Time and the Child’ and included in the *Shape-Shifter* collection, 1998. The recording is from a message left on my phone—a little treat that I know a number of people were lucky to receive. It demonstrates the same gravitas as the earlier poem but is infinitely more focused and personal. Tuwhare no longer embodies his ideas in a situation or in characters as in the earlier poem but writes directly from the heart. The title implies a breather—but in this instance it is ominous that there cannot be one, that there is little or no time left at all. This contemplation is sharpened by the reality of Tuwhare’s own life: at 75, he was looking, like the old man in ‘Time and the Child’ to that distant point ‘where all roads converge’. Like an elder sibling or a parent, Time hurries before him and he will never

catch up. The poem is stripped of rhetoric while the lines themselves are reduced in width, falling down the page to the essential 'my space / my beginnings / my self'. (SS 15)

Throughout the 70s, 80s and to a lesser extent, the 90s, Tuwhare was extraordinarily busy. He was the recipient of a number of fellowships, fell in love many times, was involved in the Māori Artists' and Writers' movement, and toured endlessly, it seemed, through this country and abroad. He flirted with the idea of a return to his Northland turangawaewae. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, he purchased a one-room crib on a small headland on the South Otago coast. His writing began to reflect that change, celebrating, more than in the past, a specific place and time—his home overlooking the rippling, ever-changing ocean, Tangaroa, and his states of mind, alone but not alone, as he entered his last years. Age claimed him and his world and his poetry spiralled slowly inwards. His touring days all but over, his writing was increasingly defined by the physical realities of his cluttered-but-comfortable dwelling with its sometimes-leaky roof, the daily-visiting sparrows and waxeyes, a passing cat, a visiting lover, passing health crises, his needy-greedy body and his achin'-breakin' heart. His last two collections, *Piggy-back Moon* and *Oooooo.....!!!* explored and relished the possibilities of word-play as much as ever, but were more concerned with immediate realities: the sea, and sea-food, love and lust (affectionate and erotic), music and old friends. In *An Anthology of New Zealand Verse* (1956) Robert Chapman asked 'Where are the larger poems, political verse, more poems about rural life, perhaps some poetry of the Maoris?' (Chapman xxviii) He went on to say 'No Maori poet has written in English, and the translations have been inadequate to establish communication between the traditions'. (xxviii) Four years later, in *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960) Allen Curnow took a slightly different slant: New Zealand may still hope for other young poets, who will tackle the difficult orientation of self and art which has to be achieved—in their own land—before they can speak to any purpose before an English-speaking audience at large. They have to learn, one way or another, to name 'those nameless hills' that loom across their inward or outward vision'. (Curnow 66) By the time Ian Wedde introduced *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1985, he was restating Curnow's thoughts in terms of the need for 'the refreshment of language that is alert to its situation, to relation, to location', for freedom from that 'colonial desire to find a European aristocrat to ground that rootless who': it was 'a matter of being clear about where you are [...] the *who* may follow more naturally'. (Wedde 32) Wedde was no doubt thinking primarily of non-Māori writers, but perhaps it is true to say that Tuwhare, in addressing the issues he does, in being the person he was, moved close to making the 'connection between traditions' which Chapman desired (xxviii), to pointing out that the hills Curnow refers to were never in fact nameless, and to answering Wedde's queries about where and who. Bernard Gadd, a long-time admirer of and advocate for

Tuwhare's work spoke for many when he said in 'He Mihi ki Hone Tuwhare', a review in verse of *Mihi*. 'Hone: who else will tell it like this? Man, truly you are our song'.

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