

Strange Brew: A Personal Reflection on the Poetry of Hone Tuwhare

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In the early 1990s, when I was first starting out as a poet, the New Zealand poets I most admired were usually the ones who were not only exciting on the page but were also larger than life characters in performance and in the flesh. My reading list at the time included James K. Baxter, Denis Glover, Sam Hunt, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, A.R.D. Fairburn, Louis Johnson and Hone Tuwhare (the latter I discovered in 1994 through Bill Manhire's undergraduate New Zealand literature course at Victoria University). Looking back on that time in my early development as a writer I can now see that Tuwhare (like the others mentioned above) had a marked influence on my choice of diction and expression, as he did with a number of other younger New Zealand poets of the 90s, such as Robert Sullivan, Simon Williamson and Glenn Colquhoun. After that course had finished, I posted a poem I had just written in a letter to Bill Manhire, showing my use of Tuwhare's expressions. The poem, 'On Upland Road, Kelburn: One Heart of Anger Surrendered to the Sky' (Pirie 134) included the expression 'Bloody marvellous!' Bill kindly replied in a note: 'Very Tuwharean, if that's the adjective!'

In 1964, Hone Tuwhare became the first Māori poet to publish a poetry book in English. His collection, *No Ordinary Sun*, was an instant success in New Zealand in much the same way as Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* made him an overnight sensation in England. After *No Ordinary Sun* he wrote numerous collections and had two editions of his *Collected Poems* published. Some would say Tuwhare is closer to establishing a truer New Zealand identity than many of his past and present contemporaries. His poetry mixes a strange brew (to borrow a term from the rock group Cream) of Māori, honey-tongued English and colloquial expressions to create his own unique style. On one level, there is the warmth and natural delight in his use of the Māori language and on a different level there is the delight in using the classical and Biblical eloquence of his English. Yet, as well as this, Tuwhare constantly introduces colloquial (and crude) expressions into his poems: 'bloody good', 'Hell no', 'bullshit', 'piss off', etc. This unusual mix of diction often provides the reader with an accessible quality not often seen in New Zealand poetry, or

indeed, world poetry. Tuwhare's choice of diction, then, makes him often seem free of classical and 'highbrow' erudition (especially in his later work) and, like Sam Hunt, he is also widely accessible to younger readers in schools, in a way that Shakespeare and the older English canon are not.

Tuwhare will take a complex idea, whether it is death, love or a landscape and transform it into a seemingly light-hearted chat or conversation. Tuwhare's task as he said in an interview with Bill Manhire is '[to] please, to praise, to highlight, to flatter' (280). This becomes evident after reading a number of Tuwhare's poems, and although this idea is not new in English language poetry, it does offer us a fresh insight into New Zealand life as well as a different 'way of saying'. In the words of Dylan Thomas, poems 'with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God'. Thomas's famous Note is worth bearing in mind throughout this discussion of Tuwhare's poetry.

Tuwhare's poems on landscapes, rivers and mountains, in particular, are very popular, and it is through his style and techniques that they give the reader his/her pleasure. Tuwhare uses his mix of languages to praise the landscapes, rivers and mountains in an unpretentious manner and through this light-hearted treatment of his subjects, readers become immediately drawn to his poetry.

In poems like 'Deep River Talk', 'The River is an Island' or 'Bus Journey, South' we can find elements these techniques. In 'Deep River Talk' Tuwhare imagines a confrontation between river and sea, as if the two were companies and the bigger company, the sea, was trying to take over the smaller company, the river. There is 'talk of a merger' as the river flows out to the sea. Tuwhare exclaims (194):

The river's pushy, 'Back off! Thus far
and NO further –'

'I'll see YOU outside, mate,' says
the sea, turning...

Later, Tuwhare suggests a sense of the sublimity of nature in which the death of an insect (devoured by a trout) has almost gone unnoticed due to the great pulchritude of the river and the sea. But on another level the insect devoured might also be an employee axed by the corporate mergers of the late 80s and early 90s, as Tuwhare concludes: 'Happens to people too nowadays – with sharks hangin' round a lot'.

Tuwhare, implicitly though, is treating both the river and the sea here as divine creatures, which gives his poetry its animistic quality and originality.

'Bus Journey, South' is a further example of Tuwhare's treatment of the New Zealand landscape. In this poem it is the sublimity of the mountains which provides the subject and its animistic quality (74):

Distantly the mountains stand away
radar-like tracking, cutting my ego
down to a pocket size Gulliver-pebble.

Then, at the end of the poem: 'I suck my Gulliver-pebble: spit it out / again. Too much' (74). This again shows Tuwhare's amazement at what surrounds him, the colloquial expression 'Too much' says it all.

Other poems such as 'Rain', 'Sun O (2)', 'Snowfall', 'Prodigal City' and 'Toroa: Albatross', also show Tuwhare's praise of nature. In the much celebrated 'Rain', Tuwhare addresses the rain as if it were a lover. There is an intimate connection between poet and rain (46):

If I were deaf
the pores of my skin
would open to you
and shut

And I
should know you
by the lick of you
if I were blind

the something
special smell of you
when the sun cakes
the ground

This relationship between poet and rain is often seen as a Māori custom, the idea of addressing inanimate objects as persons – a kind of personification of the natural world. Yet this poem also shows the closeness between Tuwhare and the rain. It is a relationship where Tuwhare is humbled by the rain's presence. This

relationship is similar to Ancient Greek culture, where Greeks flattered their Gods and maintained great humility, so as not to provoke their Gods' wrath.

'Sun O (2)' is a fun chat between Tuwhare and the sun. It shows an almost child-like treatment of the sun's presence: 'Gissa smile Sun, giss yr best / good mawnin' one, fresh n' cool...' (176). Note the original use of language and spelling, an ability to write his voice the way it actually sounds. 'Sun O (2)' is a poem that revels in the celebration of the sun's presence over the land and poet.

'Snowfall' also suggests celebration. Tuwhare seems to be savouring fresh snowfall as if it were a lover (149):

... Came without hesitation
right inside my opened window licking my neck
my arms my nose as I leaned far out to embrace
a phantom sky above the house-tops
and over the sea: *'Hey, where's the horizon?
I shall require a boat you know – two strong arms?'*
... and snow, kissing and lipping my face

Later, towards the end of the poem, Tuwhare is again in celebratory mood (this time using Italian):
"“Bravo,” I whisper, “Bravissimo”. Standing ovation' (149). 'Prodigal City' celebrates a walk in the city:
'I walked the city last night / stopping to take everything in... And the city seemed / the same lovely woman I used to know...' (57). Elsewhere, in 'Toroa: Albatross', we find a different sense of celebration. Here Tuwhare lends his sympathetic voice as ignorant people have shot at an albatross. Tuwhare celebrates the magnificent flight of the albatross. He sees the creature as a lonely outsider, endeavouring to console it (155):

You are not alone, Toroā. A taniwha once tried to break out
of the harbour for the open sea. He failed.
He is lonely. From the top of the mountain nearby he calls
to you: Haeremai, haeremai, welcome home traveller.

Tuwhare seems to see himself in this poem as the taniwha but also as an outsider. Through his role as a poet and outsider, he expresses a love of all divine creatures, in this case the albatross. This further

emphasizes his desire as a poet to celebrate. In other poems, Tuwhare offers a different form of celebration. This is respect and praise for his Māori tikanga as well as his tangata and his whenua. In 'Papa-tu-a-nuku (Earth Mother)' Tuwhare shows an understanding of Māori myth, and Māori assertiveness embodied in the 'Awakening' march (a hīkoi from Te Hapua in the Far North to Parliament in Wellington, in 1975, to protest over land rights). In this poem, we see Tuwhare expressing the Māori love (and celebration) of their land, their earth mother (126):

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.

In 'Rain-maker's Song for Whina', we see Tuwhare praising Dame Whina Cooper's speech during their protest march (127):

E, kui! What a way to bring the 'House' down. You could not
have lobbed a sweeter grenade. I'm all eared-in to you,
baby... *Kia ora tonu koe.*

Tuwhare again shows sympathy and understanding for Māori grievances. This sense of understanding of his culture also appears in an early poem, 'Not by Wind Ravaged', where Tuwhare celebrates and gives thanks to his marae (25):

You shall bear all and not heed.
In your huge compassion embrace

those who know no feeling other
than greed:
of this I lament my satisfaction
for it is as full as a beggar's cup:
no less shall the dust of avaricious men
succour exquisite blooms with
moist lips parting
to the morning sun.

Other Tuwhare poems celebrate human love (aroha) and innocence: 'Thine Own Hands Have Fashioned' and 'Child Coming Home in the Rain from the Store'. The Biblical 'Thine Own Hands Have Fashioned' (34) is a love poem for two voices: Samson and Delilah. In this poem Tuwhare celebrates the love the two characters have for each other, in which a sense of divine love develops (incidentally, this poem is referred to by Tuwhare as his first real poem). The poem shows right from the outset his poetic intent to paint a sense of divine celebration of the world around him. 'Child Coming Home in the Rain from the Store' looks at a child who stops and innocently talks to a stone on her way home from the store. Tuwhare delights in the child's innocence and is full of admiration for her: 'And I child-delighting share / your long walk and talk to things' (56). Tuwhare notes at the end of the poem the other adults' disinterest in the child's conversation: 'impatiently / others wait for the damp bread / you bring' (56).

In 'Love Pome', Tuwhare very originally celebrates not the body parts of his lover, but her habits such as nose-picking and farting. These habits usually considered vulgar are seen in a different light in this poem, as they become areas of intimacy between the lovers (80):

How beautifully
your fingers interlock: how
decorously decorative.
Must you pick your nose like that?

But how uncommonly comely.

How uncrucially crucial:
shuddering balls! Woman
you unsex me farting glib and

gustily.

O, but how utterly homely.

As with this love poem, we can see throughout Tuwhare's poetry a great love for and celebration of the life around him, whether it be the sublimity of mountains or just a lover picking her nose; Tuwhare seizes his chance for a poem, and inevitably tends it with voluptuous approval. It is this quality and expressive warmth which welcomes all people from different walks of life into his language, which for Tuwhare is a strange brew of Māori, English and colloquial expression.

This highly original mix inevitably marks Tuwhare's work as free of pretentiousness (especially his later work), which makes his poems often the most accessible of all New Zealand poetry in English. Tuwhare's work is also remarkably devoid of ego, arrogance and over-romanticism, by expressing a sense of great humility in the face of the beauty he celebrates. In doing so Tuwhare stays remarkably true to the task of being a poet, and will remain a refreshing voice in New Zealand poetry for years to come, as an inspiration not just to his people but also to future generations of poets.

Author's Note: This essay was originally written in 1994, and has been revised for publication here. It focuses on Hone Tuwhare's work up to the publication of *Deep River Talk* in 1993 and carries with it a context of New Zealand poetry in the 1990s, particularly Tuwhare's influence on younger and emerging New Zealand poets at that time. The Cream term and song-title 'Strange Brew' used as the title of this essay was used to describe the band's emerging and innovative sound with its psychedelic rock effects in the 1960s. I like to think Tuwhare's diction similarly has its own kind of innovation and/or technical effects as a unique voice in New Zealand poetry.

Works Cited

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