

**'I can hear you making small holes in the silence, Hone'**

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I guess we all chose to memorialise Tuwhare in our own ways.

Memorialisation is an important part of the business of being a settler colony. There's no 'natural' history because simply shooting a timeline back into the past from the present moment could fix the national gaze too firmly on Māori: too clearly compelling reflection on the process by which a small collection of islands might be entirely peopled by one group and then, 200 years later, be peopled mostly by another. And so the colony, hamstrung by its own history, needs to create small bubbles of history: moments towards which we might earnestly point so that the bits beyond, between and outside those moments are out of focus, detracted from, blurred.

Tuwhare's passing in a specific moment in 2008 was paid scant attention by the bland mainstream media because that media – and the 'middle New Zealand' for which it works – was more interested in producing a spectacular historical moment which derived its spectacle from the alignment of two apparently disparate historical moments on which this settler colony has hung not only its hat but its coat as well: Sir Edmund Hillary and the military history encoded in the theft of medals from Waiouru. A widely-distributed newspaper had a huge colour photo on the front page: three fair-skinned young men draped in a New Zealand flag, perched on the Auckland Domain, War Memorial Museum in the background, listening to the outdoor broadcast of the funeral service for Hillary. On page 8 of the same paper, a small photo and brief story about Tuwhare's burial in Northland.

But this isn't about that.

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It's about Tuwhare.

My friend Helen Potter arrived at my work to pick me up for a nite on the town in late January 2008. Seeing the small display of Tuwhare books I'd erected on a bookshelf in my office since his passing,

she sat down and recalled a visit he had made to her secondary school in Northland. In response, I told her about the visit he made to my school when I was in sixth form. The poems I'd gone and written in the back row of some other class, and had rushed out to the front gate to press into his hands as he got into his car. Hone Tuwhare: the first reader of my poetry who wasn't me. Helen and I sat on swinging office chairs and talked about Tuwhare from the late afternoon until the early evening. We remembered his visits to our own schools and reflected on the thousands of Māori kids he must have affected through his journeys to hundreds of classrooms. Helen and I also talked with each other, for the first time, about some of our experiences of secondary school. The space to grieve for our own sixteen year old selves was opened by our grieving for Tuwhare.

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With David O'Donnell, a Pakeha theatre practitioner and scholar, I co-convene the stage one 'NZ Lit and Theatre' course at Victoria University of Wellington. This, January 2008, was the beginning of my fourth year at VUW, and each year I have been involved in the course. For some reason I love teaching stage one. I know it's supposed to feel like a barely-tolerable distraction from the *real* parts of my job (research, teaching advanced students, supervision) but I enjoy the class I co-teach with David. I joke around about the students being brainwash-able at that level, and maybe that's part of it even if it's crassly put.

The soul-destroying part of teaching at that level is the sense I get each year of how much the students (especially the ones who have just come through high school) *don't* know about New Zealand literature. And if they know it, it's likely to be something useful or interesting to read, entertainment. It's not challenging, and it's certainly not 'high literature.' Where do they get these ideas from? How is it that a first-year student can look me straight in the eye and say with confidence that New Zealand literature isn't 'great' literature, isn't Shakespeare, perhaps isn't properly literature at all? Who told them this?

Or is there the reverse problem: not a matter of what's been said but what's been unsaid. Another culprit: silence?

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I had a talk with David and he agreed that Hone's passing was too important a milestone to let slip by. Some re-juggling of the syllabus and we found room for three lectures on Hone: one on his work alongside that of new fabulous Māori/Kuki playwright and poet Miria George; one on his poems about rain, and one that looked at the way he wrote about death including a peek at his play *In the*

*Wilderness without a Hat.* He was to be the second writer of our class, after Miria, and after him we would move on to Renee's *Jeannie Once*. He fitted in our course, and I duly picked some poems and put them alongside David's selection of relevant sections from the play and took them to be made into a course reader for our students. We wrote him into the course outline and sent that off to be copied as well. Tuwhare was going to be taught at Victoria this year.

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Another classroom, another year, and I am watching someone else teach Hone Tuwhare. I try to pay attention but am distracted by the way that teacher speaks. Each battered and bleeding vowel, as this teacher thrashes an unthinking way through the language for which grandparents were whipped, reminds me and all the other Māori in the room of how little we matter.

I write a poem as a way to deflect the literary bloodshed that spurts a hot sticky stain onto the walls of the lecture theatre and soaks into the floors and aisles. I'm so angry and so silenced at the same time.

**hone.**

i didn't recognise you  
when i heard it,  
your name.

honny toofoorry, he said  
and started to talk about you.

i think i know a guy  
whose life was like that  
i think i've read a poem  
like that  
but it was by someone with a different name.

how could he read your poems,  
honny,  
hone,  
and not feel challenged, chastened,  
wrong?

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My story of teaching Tuwhare. In our first session on Tuwhare, I had the students brainstorm what they already knew about him. They talked in small groups first, and then it was time to pool our collective knowledge. About six vague comments to be written on the board, and three poems dimly-

recalled. The students had heard of him, sure, but had nothing more to say. Someone called out ‘isn’t he dead?’ – nervous laugh from the class – and I wrote it on the board.

We started ENGL/THEA112 with *And What Remains*, a very recent play in which Miria George presents an airport departure lounge in 2011: the last Māori person is about to leave New Zealand. It was a risky play to start with, but David and I wanted to open with a text about which the students would have opinions. We wanted them to identify their own stakes in the conversation about New Zealand and we wanted them to have the opportunity to think about what those stakes might be by engaging with creative work. Miria’s play is future-oriented, global, controversial and compelling. It dares us as audiences and readers to respond: what better pairing for Miria than Hone Tuwhare? The first lecture we talked about the global, political, nuanced, edgy perspective of Māori creative production. The poem we started with, of course, was ‘No Ordinary Sun.’

In our second session, we looked at Tuwhare’s poems about rain. We try to introduce our students to the idea that no text is an island: writers read each other and re-read themselves, and it’s useful to find ways to talk about these connections. Intertextuality, allusion, whakapapa, rewriting, trope, writing back, return, reworking. To this end, a single theme or motif – rain – was selected and in preparation for the lecture students read all of these poems alongside each other. I started the lecture with a 20 second recording that’s included on a PM Dawn CD: the clip sounds like silence, and students chatter away waiting for the ‘thing I’m going to play them’ to begin. Second time, they listen and find it’s silence. Third time, they strain and start to hear things. Before the fourth time, I explain that the recording is indeed silence: but it’s silence recorded at the graveside of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. We listen again, and the silence sounds different. And again. And again. It’s a bit of a cheap trick, my use of this twenty second track, but it gives students a way into reading a poem. I explain that listening for the shape of silences in a poem is also like playing rugby: from the sideline, you see a game in which people kick and throw a ball to each other. When you’re on the field playing, though, you are actually looking for the gaps: the gaps are where you run and you figure out which gaps your team mates will be able to get to if you throw the ball into the space. We spend twenty minutes together – 130 of us peering at an overhead transparency – reading and re-reading ‘Rain.’

Third session, and David has half a lecture about Tuwhare’s play. I start with half a lecture about the way he writes death: walking the fine line between gesturing towards possible readings of a poem within specific cultural, geographic, iwi, gender and generational contexts, and being a revelatory reliable Native informant. The line is made more fine by the anxieties some students have about talking about ‘Māori things’ and the confidence some students have about the specifics of highly symbolic and deeply spiritual – as well as irrevocably human – practices.

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‘A talk with my cousin, alone.’ The next session after we finished the sequence of lectures on Tuwhare, we had them sit a test: a short test, in which students wrote either about an extract from Miria’s play or a poem by Tuwhare. Far more students wrote about the play than about the poem. This isn’t so surprising: we’d covered the general narrative of the play in some detail, whereas the poem required a completely new reading. Some students attempted the poem, though, and in the case of a few their insights demonstrated the thing that happens when a text and a reader interact in the very best and most productive way.

One student wrote about the way Tuwhare describes the ownership of the beach in the 1982 poem and misrecognised it as being about the 2004 Seabed and Foreshore legislation. This anachronistic reading produced something more generative than wrong. The anachronism was only ‘wrong’ if we insisted on a singular linear historical reading of a text: if the text, like the Māori lecturer, is limited to being a reliable Native informant. This wasn’t at all like the wrongness of mispronunciation about which I had written at another time: it was, instead, the small moment of literary bliss when a student recognises something in a poem beyond what the writer could have imagined: something meaningful, urgent, relevant and complex.

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I get angry about lots of things in my job: angry at my institution, angry at my discipline, angry at the schooling system and sometimes – although I know we’re not supposed to admit to such things – sometimes angry at my students. The only possible antidote to all of that anger is to return to the basics of what this is all about: students, writers, texts, and one young man who decides to pick up a pen and write something down who became one older man who travels around reading to students in high schools and universities and everywhere else, and finally became one very old man who writes up until his last year.

One day, a few years from now, I’d like to talk with a student from ENGL/THEA112, alone. Perhaps I’d like to talk to the student who misrecognised the timing of the poem, or perhaps I’d like to talk to a student who didn’t write about Tuwhare in the test at all. I’d like to ask them whether they remember reading Tuwhare in July 2008, and if they do: why did we teach him in our course? What did it mean then? What does it mean now?

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I can hear you making small holes in the silence, Hone. My challenge and aspiration is to ensure that my students – and their students and their students and their students – can hear it too.