

Hone Tuwhare's Aroha

Robert Sullivan

This issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* is an appreciation of Hone Tuwhare's poetry containing tributes by some of his friends, fans and fellow writers, as well as scholars outlining different aspects of his widely appreciated oeuvre. It was a privilege to be asked by Murray Edmond to guest-edit this celebration of Tuwhare's work. I use the term *work* for Tuwhare's oeuvre because he was brilliantly and humbly aware of his role as a worker, part of a greater class and cultural struggle. His humility is also deeply Māori, and firmly places him as a rangatira of people and poets. It goes without saying that this tribute acknowledges the passing of a very (which adverb to use here – greatly? hugely? extraordinarily?) significant New Zealand poet, and the first Māori author of a literary collection to be published in English. *No Ordinary Sun* was published by Blackwood and Janet Paul in September 1964. In September 2008, it is an understatement to say that New Zealand Māori literature in English has spread beyond its national boundaries, and that many writers, Māori and non-Māori, stand on Tuwhare's shoulders.

Having the words 'ka mate' and 'ka ora' together in this journal's title, terms borrowed from New Zealand's most famous poem, the *ngeri* by the esteemed leader and composer Te Rauparaha, feels appropriate for New Zealand's most esteemed Māori poet in English. Tuwhare's poetic – regenerative, sexually active, appetitive, pantheistic myth-referencing, choral-solo, light and shade, regional-personal, historical-immediate, high aesthetic registers mixed with popular vocals, class-conscious, ideologically aware, traditional Māori intersecting with contemporary Māori in English – captures the *mauri* or life-force and the dark *duende* of Te Rauparaha's haka composition as it springs from the earth stamped in live performance. To borrow a later Tuwhare line, this issue is 'a haka call of aroha' for his achievements.

Come Rain Hail: Imagery and Water

Modernist poetics is known for concrete imagery (Eagleton 138-42), and in Tuwhare's case I would also invite generous feelings into the mix. By concrete, without denying that any particular word is either more abstract or concrete than another, I mean in Tuwhare's case 'realistic' or 'naturalistic', where nature or reality is always manifold: there are always extra dimensions. Take the opening lines from 'Haiku (1)': 'Stop / your snivelling / creek-bed' (*DRT* 45), first collected in *Come Rain Hail* (the title taken from the haiku's fourth line). Tuwhare addresses the foundation of a stream, its earth and pebbles animated by low water: 'snivelling' actively links the creek bed to an emotional state. The term 'Stop' is a spoken punctuation before the sentence begins, as well as the first imperative verb in the poem (the others are 'come' and 'laugh'). The next line's aural quality sounds like water slipping between blockages in a channel, the long-vowelled 'your' building up like a little dam before slipping between the short vowels of 'snivelling' before long vowels return: 'come rain hail / and flood-water // laugh again.' I also read this poem as moving from a low point to a high point, an exhortation to well up or overcome as in a flood; and also as a *waiata*, a term which could very loosely translate as flow of song, or reflecting water (if *wai* and *ata* are separated into different terms), or most commonly as a song, chant, or psalm¹: terms associated with oral poetry. Moving from its water elements to its earth elements, the stream leaves its bed and lifts beyond its banks. This emotional organization of the poem, where the world is coloured with affective significance, aligns Tuwhare with Christopher Caudwell's aesthetic claims for poetry in his influential work *Illusion and Reality* (241). Michelle Keown discusses the Marxist philosopher-and-poet's influence on Tuwhare in this special issue. The earth and water elements of the poem also link it to the haiku tradition, and to its human possibilities embodied in the poet's culture. Creeks are often near village marae, which are the centres of ceremonial and communal Māori events. The gentle imperative to laugh could be an address to a collective self, to raise oneself up.

The very next poem after 'Haiku (1)' in *Come Rain Hail* is 'Rain,' one of Tuwhare's best-known, consistently anthologized and also most exhibited works (for example by Selwyn Muru and Ralph Hotere, and displayed in Gregory O'Brien and Jenny Bornholdt's poetry exhibition 'Main Trunk Lines' at the National Library in Wellington). The poem's opening lines, 'I can hear you / making small holes / in the silence / rain' and the final stanza, 'you would still / define me / disperse me / wash over me / rain' connects to 'Haiku (1)' in terms of energy flow, moving from a trickle to a flood, the continuation of earth ('when the sun cakes / the ground') and water elements, its personal address to the rain which is acknowledged as 'you,' and again the implied *waiata* with its reflective and highly structured rhythm

(mostly unrhymed quatrains with two or three accents per line excepting the single word lines ‘you’ and ‘rain’). The next poem "Ru-au-moko" has a "...snarled river-bed" while the following poem in Come Rain Hail, ‘Flood’, takes us along a river that ‘bellows fatly,’ like a taniwha perhaps. The latter recalls the flood-water in ‘Haiku [1]’ and points forward to the title of Tuwhare’s collected poems, *Deep River Talk*, with its connection to waiata as well as the rivers and streams near his birthplace of Kokewai, southeast of Kaikohe (Hunt 13). It is possible to find the river, the stream, or the water (including variants such as saliva, sea, fruit juice, tears, hail, snow, lakes, storms, blood, tea, Glenfiddich, ink, or boil-up water) in many Tuwhare poems, and argue for their presence. Take the poem ‘Sun O [2]’ for instance, where the star is likened to a juicy orange, or in ‘Pension day blues’ the poet raises a glass, or in ‘Country Visit’ his sister tells him to boil a medicinal plant to cure an injury to his shin, and there’s a boil-up of doughboys, kamokamo, meat and puha as well (*DRT* 176; 72; 70). There are few Tuwhare poems that do not contain a reference to liquid. ‘Deliver us...’ (*DRT* 54) is one of them, although he does use the word ‘absorbing’ in line 12. I’ll leave it to Tuwhare’s ‘Wind Song and Rain’ for a poetry-definition: ‘A poem is / a ripple of words / on water wind-huffed’ (*DRT* 61). If one associates the definition of waiata with a reflecting pool used as a mirror – the literally correct term wai whakaatanga is used in at least one moteatea or poem (Grey 178), I offer wai ata as a poetic variant – then it is no surprise that Tuwhare’s poem includes these lines: ‘But still water / is a poem winded: a / mirrored distortion / of sky / and mountain / trees and a drowned // face waiting...’ and that its title includes the English term for waiata, ‘song.’

The Body

Tuwhare’s recourse to bodily functions at poetic moments which might invite epiphanies and angelic euphonies by others (myself included) was always a master-stroke combination of taking the piss and reminding our heads of our bodies (‘A positive feeling I get in my water’ *SS* 45), and just how vulnerable (or humble) and delightful we are as people meeting *kanohi ki te kanohi*, relating face to face and not dealing in abstractions, eschewing the ‘laconically canonical’ (*PBM* 54) and playing with other poetics, for Tuwhare knows that all words are abstractions, signifiers. Each Tuwhare text is composed of touch: it feels the rain, shakes with laughter at Dame Whina Cooper’s speeches, gives up a smile to the sun; Tuwhare’s poetry has so much *skin*.

These enduring emotions are relational ones; they have a social aspect that cues in individuals to their greater communal values. Tuwhare’s poetic aligns with Christopher Caudwell’s in foregrounding a material reality where an artist or poet attaches emotions and relationships to everything; Caudwell points out that is how human beings perceive the world (165-77). So Tuwhare relies on emotions as integral to

human experience, which also strongly connects to traditional Māori conceptions of the world made up of multiple atua or deities once responsive to the whole matrix of Māori existence in the natural world. The poet communicates with these atua constantly as guides, and as media – Tangaroa provides the water for the poem, Tāne Mahuta provides the wood for word-carving – and as poetic companions who he can joke about and admire. For instance, in her essay discussing solar metaphors and the propaganda value of ‘naturalizing’ nuclear testing, Elizabeth DeLoughrey makes a convincing connection between the tree of ‘No Ordinary Sun’ and the tree deity Tāne Mahuta. Similarly, Tāne appears in Jon Battista’s evocative essay on Tuwhare’s treatment of death, this time in a discussion of his celebrated poem ‘On a Theme by Hone Taiapa’ (*DRT* 87) which discusses a Māori world view pervasively divided into tapu (sacred) and noa (profane) categories by comparing the art of Māori carving and its ancestral customs to the art of poetry and its ancestral material connections. ‘Waste words’ are likened to the carver’s chips, and to fortune. I imagine the poet is given a wero stick, in challenge perhaps, by the carver and told to ‘bite hard’ on it. A carver was expected to discard the chips to prevent a highly tapu mirror image of the ancestor or atua from remaining, and perhaps an image of the self. There is a sense in the poem that art, at least traditional art, has the power to embody the maker’s soul – even the waste words are characterized as having this capacity. The term wairua is usually glossed in English as spirit, or soul², but might also be glossed as ‘deep waters’ (wai = water, rua = hole, or a deep place, or possibly ‘two’), which brings us closer to the title of Tuwhare’s collected poems, *Deep River Talk*. Psychologist and author James Hillman says this about water in response to Heraclitus’s idea that ‘It is delight...to souls to become wet’:

Water is the special element of reverie, the element of reflective images
and their ceaseless, ungraspable flow. (qtd. in Hirsch 23-24)

The connection to ‘On a Theme by Hone Taiapa,’ with its hard wooden and fire elements (‘If I put them to fire / do I die with them?’) is entirely spiritual: ‘my soul’s spark spiraling.’ So Tuwhare’s poems are physical and emotive (wairua infused into the word-carvings): there is breath in each line, and a pressing into the mind conjuring a Tuwhare hongī[3]. He will greet the whole ocean as Tangaroa: ‘Presently, I shall hold / rhetorical hands with it: kia ora, Ancestor’ (‘The Sun is a Truant’ *SS* 83). He will greet a season: ‘well, i’ve just been felled / (on my hands and knees) by your green / beauty, your fur – wet and shiny – / your scents’ (‘A Hongī for you too, Spring’ *SS* 80), or salute a delicious muttonbird: ‘eat well – and mate well – so that your woolly, roly- / poly progeny will thrive in their thousands for us: / and Amine, to all that’ (‘Kākā Point’ *SS* 79). These quotations also reveal a joyful religious communication enlarged by greater beings (ocean, the earth in season, a bird begetting bounty), and each speech act is ritualized (holding hands, kneeling and hongī’ing, ending the poem as in a prayer with ‘Amine’).

Mythology and Carving

When I think about carvings I am drawn back to the meeting house and its ancient representation of the skyfather, Ranginui, resting in embrace over the earthmother, Papatūānuku, with their children between[4]. It also draws me to the poem ‘We, Who Live in Darkness’, where the deities are locked between their earth and sky parents. I have written elsewhere about the political referents of the poem, the ostensible family-struggle of brothers against their father, and the possibly larger civil rights and property struggles that the poem taps for at least some of its energy (Sullivan 2008). The poem’s imagery also touches on the Polynesian nights, or pō, that fecund space out of which the universe springs: ‘Black intensities / of black on black on black feeding on itself’ (*DRT* 158). I do not know whether Tuwhare wrote the footnote for *Deep River Talk*, which says: ‘This poem refers to the rebellion by the children of Rangi and Papa.’ It sounds apolitical enough, except for the word ‘rebellion’ although admittedly it is a term used in early translations of the Māori cosmogony. The blackness is transformed by light ‘infiltrated past / the armpit hairs of the father.’ The glimmer in the poem reveals the ‘good earth’ but then the sky-father moves and blocks out the sight once again. The last line, ‘Brothers, let us kill him – push him off’ is overtly militant. Although Tuwhare is a poet of the sun and rain, he always has a ‘burning patience’ for justice which Pablo Neruda describes in concluding his 1971 Nobel Lecture, ‘Towards the Splendid City’:

Lastly, I wish to say to the people of good will, to the workers, the poets,
that the whole future has been expressed in this line by Rimbaud: only
with a *burning patience* can we conquer the splendid City which will
give light, justice and dignity to all. (qtd in Brown et al 106)

Mana

Other features of this special issue include Cassie Ringland-Stewart’s essay about Tuwhare’s ekphrastic poetry (the most famous example is ‘Hotere’), underlining the collaborative nature of the poet’s work, and Peter Marsden’s essay concerning Tuwhare’s memorable visits to Germany and the impact he made there. Dieter Riemenschneider provides two German language translations of ‘Kākā Point’ and ‘No Ordinary Sun’ in our tributes section. Tuwhare’s influence on other art forms such as music is spelled out by poet Hinemoana Baker’s discussion of her role in the celebratory *Tuwhare* album in which leading New Zealand musicians recorded songs with his poems as lyrics. William Farrimond’s photographs of

Tuwhare at James K Baxter's tangi in Jerusalem in 1972 are a valuable addition to the issue, as are John Miller's evocative photo portraits and Jan Kemp's photographic record of the 4 New Zealand Poets Tour of 1979. We are also very pleased to reprint a 1969 interview between Hone Tuwhare and his friend Bill Manhire which reflects some of the themes Tuwhare covers in other interviews.

Janet Hunt's contribution traces the Tuwhare odyssey from his days writing sonnets in chalk on the sides of railway wagons to the influence of his friend the poet R.A.K. Mason and to his final period of writing at Kākā Point in Dunedin. Hunt also briefly historicizes the desires of some literary anthologists from the 1950s to the 1980s and David Eggleton draws us back to Tuwhare's symbolic uses for rain over the fifty years of his published writing.

It is unusual for *Ka Mate Ka Ora* to publish poetry but the first responses we received to our call for papers were poems and memoirs. Some tributes are reprinted with permission from original sources on the web; in particular from work gathered by Michele Leggott on the New Zealand Poet Laureate site. Hana O'Regan's outstanding Māori language composition 'He tīfī me te waihoka pōhutukawa / Mutton birds and red wine' supplies a section heading for the rich diversity of essay materials presented. Among many fine tributes I would like to mention 'With Hone in Las Vegas,' a poem by Tuwhare's friend Albert Wendt which is part of a forthcoming series of poetic meditations on indigenous issues. Wendt quotes from Tuwhare's poem 'Heemi,' written on the death of James K Baxter. I have called this editorial 'Hone Tuwhare's Aroha' partly from the poem's line, 'Heemi, your mana is love'. As a young man, I had the privilege of meeting Tuwhare several times, and spending one brilliant evening with him which I will always remember with great aroha. I regard the many tributes to him as a remarkable consequence of that mana. He is my rangatira; he is our rangatira.

Tuwhare's attractiveness is the full-blooded praise and great delight he has for the world's life-flows, whether in quieter contemplation or to record a public occasion such as the 1975 Land March (notably in 'Papatūānuku' and 'Rainmaker's Song for Whina' *MFI* 29; 31). Among his many literary awards, Tuwhare earned the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement, an Arts Foundation Icon award, the Te Mata New Zealand Poet Laureateship, and Honorary Doctorates of Literature from Otago and Auckland Universities. In short, he was loved by many people, near and far. This great artist has left behind a magnificent house that we may gather in to marvel at the skill and passion, recall the stories, the great mana and dreams, the life-force mauri he breathed into his carvings, and feel the well-being and the joy he continues to bring us.

E tā Hone, te tau o ngā tau, te iho Maori o te ao ‘reta’, kāore e kore ka mau koe ki ngā whakaaro ki te ngakau. Esteemed Hone, passionate lover, the essence of Maori in the literary world, without doubt our thoughts of you are held in our hearts.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this special issue for their poetry, warm memories and scholarly insights. Ki a koutou katoa, kia ora rā! Thanks also to *Ka Mate Ka Ora* editor Murray Edmond, as well as to Michele Leggott and Hilary Chung for their editorial and scholarly expertise, and to Brian Flaherty for his web-design excellence.

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Ngā Puhi Nui Tonu (Ngāti Manu/Ngāti Hau), Ngāti Raukawa, Kāi Tahu, Galway Irish.

End Notes

1. I am grateful to Dr Mary Boyce for discussions about possible variant meanings of waiata, and for checking on the correctness of the Māori language used in this essay. I also briefly discussed the possibility of waiata's reflective meaning with Professor Tīmoti Kāretu, who agreed.
2. The Māori Language Commission's online Māori dictionary *He Pātaka Kupu* glosses the term wairua as an adjective and a noun. 'Te taha kiko kore o te tangata e mau ana ngā kare ā-roto, te taha e kore e mate ahakoa mate atu te tinana.' I take this to mean, 'The immaterial [fleshless] dimension of a person carrying the inner longings (kare also means ripples, 'kare ā-roto' refers to the whole range of emotions), the dimension that never dies in spite of physical death.'
<http://www.korero.maori.nz/forspeakers/patakakupu>
3. For those unfamiliar with the term, a hongī is a pressing of noses in greeting so that breath and the other's presence is shared. Some people also press foreheads at the same time. It is used often when a person has not seen someone for a long time, and always at the conclusion of a ceremonial welcome (pōwhiri) which invokes ancestral connections, spiritual and physical dimensions, and reasons for gathering.
4. Cleve Barlow's *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Māori Culture* discusses this further in Māori and English. Hirini Melbourne's essay 'Whare Whakairo: Māori "Literary" Traditions' discusses the meeting house as an all-embracing force for literary revival in *Dirty Silence: Aspects of Language and Literature in New Zealand* (129-41).

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