

La grotte où nage la sirène” – The cave where the mermaid swims:

Editorial Notes

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Three essays from new contributors in this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* each look at very different kinds of poetry. Jillian Sullivan reads across three collections of New Zealand poet Vivienne Plumb, which focus on the tragic, early death of her son. The essay is a study of the nature and changing fate of the lament and how Plumb’s adoption of it sits within the Modernist tradition of “anti-consolation.” Arna McGuinness has unearthed two mid-nineteenth century women poets, whom we know only by their pseudonyms Beth and Zoila, who, for a short period at the beginning of the 1860s in the Nelson region of New Zealand, seem to have been publishing poems in tandem. This publication includes an anthology of some of Beth and Zoila’s poems, several of which involve the death of children, and also hint at the inadequacy of poetry as means of consolation. Erena Johnson’s essay discusses the last published book of the American poet Leslie Scalapino (1944-2010) within a framework of Buddhist thought. Scalapino’s intense relationship with Buddhism was important for her writing. *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom* represents that ‘difficult’ end of the Modernist spectrum, but shares with Plumb and with Beth and Zoila, an approach to the presence and nature of death through the practice of writing. In this area of coincidence, these very different kinds of poetry under consideration find a surprising commonality.

Michele Leggott, with assistance from Fredrika Van Elburg, has compiled a dossier on the letters and diaries of Emily Harris (better known for her work as a botanical artist and illustrator in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) as they relate to the period of the war over mana whenua between iwi and settlers in Taranaki in 1860 and 1861. The discovery of Harris’s poems provides an important example that complements Arna McGuinness’s presentation of the work of Beth and Zoila. This archival material complements Leggott’s essay in the previous issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, which considered the work of soldier-poet Matthew Fitzpatrick written during the fighting in Taranaki in 1860.

Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-1781), a combo of critical biography and literary criticism, written in the knowledge that “a man writes much better than he lives,” to quote the

good Doctor, set up an enduring relationship between biography and literature. Paul Millar and Miranda Wilson's account of the affair between poet James K. Baxter and composer Dorothy Freed in 1945 is a tale worth reading in itself, and it also throws light on some of Baxter's subsequent poetry and on aspects of Freed's musical composition. Dr Johnson said that his work was written with "the honest intention of giving pleasure" and the same can be said for this essay, which headlines this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*.

Did the award of the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan signal that poetry had busted out of its ivory tower and claimed the populist vote at last? Or did it mean that 'serious' poetry had really ceased to matter? Bob is known to have said: "I'm just a song and dance man." I'm sure he meant it – both literally and with defensive irony. During its glory days (through the 1960s with some moments in the early 1970s) Dylan's work reconciled one of Modernism's essential paradoxes – to be both difficult and obscure and also popular and democratic. When Romanticism began to fracture and Modernism was born, it was born out of the fracture. One of the broken halves declared its allegiance to its heuristic/hermeneutic mission of experimentation and its cabbalistic signs of obscurity, and its hermetic cults of grandeur and persecution: "Je suis le ténébreux" – "I am the shadow." The poet will be the one who "has dreamed the cave where the mermaid swims" – is how Gérard de Nerval captured the idea in his sonnet 'El Desdichado.' And the other half of the fracture produced a poetry that dreamed of great and popular song, a 'Song of Myself' that would "contain multitudes" as Whitman sang, a poetry of the nation of humanity, the 'Nation' newborn as it threw over the chains of oppression and imposed identities and spoke in its true, universal voice. Dylan's songs were once, for a time, the healing of the fracture - and now he's gone to heaven in Sweden.

Dylan's interface with Modernism's project was there for all to see at the time, as he evoked it in his song 'Desolation Row':

Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot
Fighting in the captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers
Between the windows of the sea
Where lovely mermaids flow

Towers were always big in Modernism (we call them silos now). In that sonnet of de Nerval's, he describes his tower as "abolie" – ruined. Browning's dark tower was "without a counterpart." And T.S.Eliot's wasted landscape featured "falling towers." And that other Nobel Laureate, W.B.Yeats was known to "pace upon the battlements" of his tower. The rhyme in English (and French) with 'flower' cannot be hid. De Nerval's Disconsolate One asks to be given back the flower that had pleased his heart

so much, while those fishermen from Desolation Row hold out flowers (not hope) – and calypso singers laugh at the scuffling gods of poetry.

Finally we note the passing of Russell Haley in 2016. Russell became best known as a fiction writer, but he was an exciting and emergent poet in the late 1960s and 1970s in New Zealand. Russell was fond of those lines of Bob Dylan's from his song 'The Gates of Eden':

. . . friends and other strangers
From their fates try to resign
Leaving men wholly, totally free
To do anything they wish to do but die

For me his passing means the loss of a close personal and literary friend – the issue closes with my own poem in memory of Russell.