

### **Auditing the editing: an editor's notes**

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#### **Te wā mo he aromatawai/Time for an assessment**

*Ka Mate Ka Ora: A New Zealand Journal of Poetry and Poetics* has been going now for 15 years and this latest issue is our 18<sup>th</sup>. What it meant to be starting out, in 2005, is not what it has meant putting this latest issue together. As Heraclitus is said to have said, 'Change is the only constant.' Each issue, a new river. The terms of reference we created, articulated in the magazine's subtitle, were 'Aotearoa/New Zealand' and 'Poetry and Poetics'.

I am conscious of the complexities that accumulate in the past and present and the future around that possessive pronoun 'our' – 'our 18<sup>th</sup> issue' – because who we were then, as readers and as writers, is not who we are now.

In the first issue of *Landfall* editor Charles Brasch wrote: 'We cannot remain in an isolation like that of Icelanders or the Maoris'.<sup>1</sup> You can see, now, that any reader must ask, 'Who was we?' I do not quote this in order to scold Brasch; rather to remind myself I will never have any idea how my use of 'our' might sound if anyone reads it 73 years from now. The most successful lies are the lies we tell ourselves, because they sound the least like lies to us. This is where critique begins, because it allows *other* voices to interrupt us, as we negotiate the dialectic of poetry and poetics. Perhaps the magazine's subtitle always lacked an extra word: 'A *Critical* Journal of Poetry and Poetics'.

Brasch used to write 'Notes' for the opening pages of each issue of *Landfall*. I've decided to adopt this strategy here. What follows is an accumulation of notes, from my position as the journal's editor. Perhaps this amounts to 'he aromatawai/an assessment', the editor auditing the editing. But there's also an element of 'jubilee/hākari' – pausing to raise a glass to what *Ka Mate Ka Ora* has grown to be; as the work in this issue exemplifies. A moment for critique. He wā mo te arotakenga.

## **Te Mātāwai/The Source**

Charles Brasch, in those first *Landfall* 'Notes', declared that the central theme of the arts (and *Landfall* described itself as a 'magazine of arts and letters') was 'human life as such'.<sup>ii</sup> *Ka Mate Ka Ora* did not begin with such high-flown thoughts. The Board of the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre decided to create a local magazine that would provide an outlet for the critique of poetry. No similar magazine existed. *The Journal of New Zealand Literature's* scope required that it cover all fields subsumed under the heading 'literature'.

The magazine would be electronic. In 2005 that was still something of a no-no in academic publishing. At best, electronic platforms were regarded as being inferior to print. We decided that there would not be a print version. This decision has become increasingly consequential.

We wanted an outlet for academic writing that would deal with the challenge of the recently introduced Performance-Based Research Fund (the 'PBRF'). As a tool the PBRF was like a slide-rule once was or an algorithm had become in an academic's life: a measuring stick to produce numbers for crunching by university managements who set out to use their public funding to forge profit-focused semi-corporations. Each university teacher would be graded A, B, C, or 'R' ('research dormant') on the basis, primarily, of their publications.

We constructed an editorial team, with myself as Editor, Michele Leggott and Hilary Chung as Assistant Editors, and an Editorial Board. (Lisa Samuels became a third Assistant Editor soon after taking up an appointment in English at Auckland University.) We sought the support of the Department of English at the University of Auckland, where Michele and I worked (Hilary was teaching in Chinese). We sought the support of the Auckland University Press, where Elizabeth Caffin was Managing Editor, Anna Hodge was Literary Editor and Christine O'Brien's marketing and publicity strengths were invaluable. And we sought the support of the Auckland University Library, where Janet Copsey was Chief Librarian and poet Brian Flaherty was working in an IT systems role. Thus, with NZEPC at the centre and the English Department, the University Press and the Library as three supporting legs we had a steady structure on which to begin.

Since then, the Arts Faculty has been re-structured into schools and all the departments in the Faculty have been abolished. The Auckland University Press is run largely by contracted staff and so there is no longer any involvement with them. The Library has also suffered re-structuring, with several significant individual libraries (Music, Fine Arts, Audio-Visual) going to the wall, but, mercifully, we retain our very important connection with the Library.

My first experience of an editorial role had been in 1970, when I was a student at Auckland University. That year I edited the third issue of *The Word is FREED* and became the Arts Editor for the Auckland University student newspaper, *Craccum*. These were two quite different kinds of editorship: one as avant-garde disruptor and the other as community servant. Not all things were better in the past. The growth of the University's research, publication and library capacities through the last decades of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first were advances on what I had experienced as a student. Therefore, the recent degradation of these fundamental aspects (research, libraries, publishing) of the University (no matter how much part of a 'global trend') has been infuriating. The river flows. But it also dries up.

So, in 2005, I began again to make a poetry magazine, this time one that did not publish poetry or short reviews of poetry books. What were we on about?

### **Ngā mahi/Contributions**

Established scholars such as Paul Millar and John Newton and Dougal McNeill have contributed substantial work about three pivotal figures of New Zealand poetry, Allen Curnow, James K. Baxter and Hone Tūwhare, each of whom have entered the 'up for reconsideration' phase of their literary after-lives.

In contrast, in the last three or four issues, we have been fortunate to publish work from a number of emerging scholars and critics: Makyla Curtis, Chris Holdaway, Hannah Lees, Erena Shingade, Brianna Vincent and Susannah Whaley; and, in this issue, Tru Paraha. Scholarship was at the heart of the *KMKO* project.

The 18 issues of *Ka Mate ka Ora*, spanning the years 2005 to 2020, have served as a memorial stone for passing poets: we have published obituaries for Dennis List, Mahmoud Darwish, Hone Tūwhare, Leigh Davis, Jacqui Baxter, Martyn Sanderson, Alistair Campbell, Trevor Reeves, Rowley Habib, Russell Haley, John Dickson, Gordon Challis and Heather McPherson. Haere, haere, haere! Ka nui te aroha me te pōuri ki a koutou. Our ghosts are also part of us.

Though there have been themed issues (the Tūwhare issue, #6, for example), we have tended, in ad-hoc fashion, to shape each issue from the publishable material that arrives. Nevertheless, certain topics emerge – the web and digital poetics, publishing, translation, and social action. This list puts its focus on the business and marketing of poetry, which is as much part of 'poetics' as cities are part of nature. The business of poetry was also part of the journal's central concern.

We have tried to keep a somewhat regular, somewhat haphazard eye on what is happening in other niches round the globe. In this present issue, Vaughan Rapatahana reports from global poetry events he attended; in earlier issues, Pam Brown has brought news from Australia, Anne Kennedy from Hawai'i, Anna Smaill from London, Lisa Samuels from Spain, Erena Shingade from Mumbai, Richard von Sturmer from the provinces of Aotearoa, and myself from China.

Though 'our' magazine was to be local, yet the wide world and its innumerable borders have also been our business.

The few poets from outside Aotearoa, who have been given in-depth critical attention, have predominantly been from the USA: Robert Creeley, Ezra Pound, Helen Adam, and Ron Silliman. There is a category of poets partially of Aotearoa, but predominantly from beyond – Elizabeth Riddell is mostly Australian, Lola Ridge is mostly American, and Yang Lian is mostly 'Chinese Exile.'

Leaving aside the Curnow, Baxter, Tūwhare triumvirate already mentioned, the list of Aotearoa poets whose work has been given critical consideration in *Ka Mate Ka Ora* includes Te Rauparaha, Matthew Fitzpatrick, Elsdon Best, Robin Hyde, Kendrick Smithyman, Charles Spear, Alistair Campbell, Bub Bridger, Hubert Witheford, David Mitchell, Alan Brunton, Cilla McQueen, Vaughan Rapatahana, David Karena-Holmes, and David Merritt; and Dinah Hawken and Michael Harlow in the present issue. What do they all have in common? One is cheerfully encouraged to admit, 'Very little!'

### **Te whakatika hou/Modern editing practices**

Editing practice is subject to Heraclitean flux. Magazines have agendas and obligations to fulfill. And these change, which may be why journals with agendas on a polemic or manifesto level tend to have short lives.

I like to respond directly to a contribution as soon after it has been received as possible, to acknowledge receipt and promise a follow-up response before long. Next, again as quickly as possible, to read the contribution myself and make my own notes. And to ask at least one Assistant Editor to read also and give me some response. I might then respond that we are not interested – and reasons given. Or, as sometimes happens, that, apart from copy-editing and/or fact-checking, we like it exactly as it is. We would still send such a contribution to a reader for confirmation. Thirdly, I might say that we are interested and would like to suggest some extensive re-writing. This contribution would then go to at least one reader outside the editorial team, perhaps from our editorial

board, or perhaps someone with specialist knowledge. This process sits within standard peer-reviewing processes.

For me, response is key. Response is in relation to the contribution itself, regardless of other contributions. When extensive re-writing is in progress, the dialogue, over email, between the contributor and myself is often an exciting process of discovery. At best, this can be improvisation undertaken together, in which I try to follow what seems to be the heart, the core, the point of the contribution, and, by provocation and interrogation, to advance the cutting edge of the work. I don't hesitate to be interventionist in the sense of making suggestions. I don't put any store by my suggestions and, truth is, I'm always hoping (and that hope is often rewarded) that the author will respond with a much better suggestion. I'm also proactive in approaching people when I hear that they are working on something – would they like to try out the work in *Ka Mate Ka Ora?* Magazine publication has long provided an intermediate opportunity for the development of critical ideas. *KMKO* published an early take on John Newton's book on Baxter, *The Double Rainbow*.

Apart from being the Editor of *KMKO*, I am also a contributor of my own work to other magazines, and therefore I have recent experience in dealing with other editors. In this capacity – and this phenomenon applies to the submission of 'creative' work and also critical writing – I have received a number of similar editorial responses that seem to be part of a recent approach to editing: 'Thank you for your contribution. You can expect to hear from us by' – and the date given may well be some months hence. Eventually, those months having passed, another email: 'Thank you for your contribution. Unfortunately, we have not been able to include it in this issue. We received many contributions. It was a very difficult task for us to choose.' Words to such effect. This approach to editing is marked by a curious *absence*. Not only is the editor not present. But we have been alerted to the difficulty caused by the imposition of our contribution on the absent editor. A strange lacuna in which we see the ghostly figure of a burdened editor. Should we say sorry?

This approach to editing – in which there is no dialogue with contributors – might have two sources. It is uncannily close to the response one gets when applying for grants from arts funding bodies. But, in that case, the point of the absence of the people making those decisions is at least theoretically soundly based in the idea that 'no communication with the judges will be entered into' – a just principle. But is this what editing is?

A more positive spin to this practice can be obtained if one credits the editor/s with the intention to create a designed and unified whole that excludes non-belonging elements and adds up to more than its parts. They are looking for the items that will fulfill their vision – and yours did or did not belong. Maybe we could name this the Gestalt method of editing. The idea of Gestalt (literally meaning 'form,

pattern, configuration') is to create an organised whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Well-known magazine titles in the history of Modernism, such as *Blast* or *Black Mountain Review* and *Freed* in Aotearoa, have adopted a gestalt approach.

But the evidence that this is the case needs to be clearly laid down, or else one, as a contributor, is left with nothing but an absence of response.

My first experience of sending poems to a magazine was to Charles Brasch, at *Landfall*, when I was still at school in Hamilton. I received from him detailed and respectful analyses and encouragement with his compassionate rejections. His responses were quick, and full and demanding. Then, at the end of 1966, a good friend gave me Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* as a Christmas present. The poems I was then 'inspired' to write and post to Brasch veered wildly from the ambit of his aesthetic. He was graceful in saying exactly that in response to this new work, with-holding any judgmental, 'what the hell do you think this is?' He responded fully to this demanding little schoolboy. His high seriousness, his deep generosity and his wish that the world he lived in might be otherwise were qualities to cherish.

### **Te ao hurihuri, engari ka huri te ahurea? The world changes, but does the culture change?**

In those 'Notes' for the first *Landfall* Charles Brasch, despite the achievement of some astonishing figures (Samuel Butler, Katherine Mansfield, Frances Hodgkins, Ngaio Marsh) describes Aotearoa/New Zealand as 'a mere province'.<sup>iii</sup> Brasch's nationalist desire (manifested in founding his magazine) tussled with his admonishing super-ego when he declared that 'we speak a European tongue; we think thoughts that are European . . . but we look out on the Pacific'<sup>iv</sup> and 'No Pacific country is ever half as real to us . . . as the British Isles'.<sup>v</sup> It's too easy to subject Brasch to a punitive presentism; his cultured puzzlement about coming home to a home that was not home was real enough to him. Had he understood te reo Māori, he might have found useful to his project the distinction between mātou and tātou embedded in that language. We is not always the same as we. An other we lay beyond his we.

Brasch's first set of *Landfall* 'Notes' ends with obituary mentions for three significant New Zealand writers who had died within the past decade, as *Landfall* was born under the shadow still cast by the Second World War: Robin Hyde, John Mulgan and Ursula Bethell. One is struck by how, as we have found in *KMKO*, where-ever one begins, there is always an obituary occasion to accompany that beginning. And in this issue of *KMKO*, we farewell Hilary Chung, part of our editorial team from the beginning – haere, haere, haere, e hoa.

Words are born and die, too. Sometime around the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the word ‘robust’ in English took on a highly positive value that had begun its life in the flourishing world of Managerial Speak. Problems had to be dealt with robustly. Creative New Zealand desired a robust world of the arts in New Zealand. Robust’s slightly pejorative, ironic use as understatement – as applied in the phrase ‘a robust discussion’ indicating a bloody screaming match – seemed to get lost. Instead the market place needed to be full for its own sake: a lot of young writers writing a lot of poetry and reading a lot of poems at a lot of poetry readings and publishing as many poetry books as possible would make for a robust poetry scene. It’s not hard to notice that the productive ethos of the neoliberal world has taken control in poetry as elsewhere. One feels something of a rat to even wonder what could be wrong with so many positives.

When I was still employed by the University of Auckland, I, quite belatedly, discovered the University had established a ‘Centre for Creativity’, and its signed-up patron was one Bob Dylan. Because I was in charge of the Drama programmes in the Faculty of Arts, I quickly rang the Centre for Creativity to apologise for my careless absence and express a desire to join the fun. Oh no, I was told, this Creativity has nothing to do with you. I hadn’t realised they were spelling creativity with a capital C. I guess it was a new incarnation of Capital-ism. Into a different river the same word gets thrown many times. Robust creativity. Robust critique. How can we know if our creativity is robust? Could critique tell us?

### **Te auahatanga me te arotakenga: creativity and critique**

In an essay in *The Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Nicholas Wright addresses the awkward and poignant absence that exists in the relationship between poetry and critique in Aotearoa, which he calls ‘critical silence’.<sup>vi</sup> ‘Where are the critical essays?’ Wright laments.<sup>vii</sup> I agree. It was to address this very ‘critical silence’ that *Ka Mate Ka Ora* was born in 2005. Wright’s essay is useful in pinpointing how the ideology of romanticism, which underlies a great swathe of poetry and poetics in Aotearoa, is complicit in this critical silence and in ‘a refusal to “generate a complex and critical writing”’.<sup>viii</sup> The essay identifies how the ‘pleasures’ of poetry ‘are related to the relinquishment of thought’ under this dispensation.<sup>ix</sup> But I wonder why Wright was completely unaware of where the critical essays are. At the time his essay was published (2016), he could have read more than 20 substantial essays on poetry and poetics in Aotearoa published in *Ka Mate Ka Ora* between 2005 and 2015, all of them subscribing to Wright’s description of complex critical writing as ‘the sort of peer-reviewed scholarship that goes beyond the demand of reviewing’.<sup>x</sup> A couple of them were even written by the very poet, John Newton, that Wright’s *JNZL* essay had taken as subject!

Instead of this, Wright says that Paula Green and Harry Ricketts's *99 Ways into New Zealand Poetry* (Vintage, 2010) 'stands alone in this field',<sup>xi</sup> a quite unsustainable claim. This unsustainability is evident not only from a decade's quantity of critique in *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, but I should mention also *KMKO's* Assistant Editor, Lisa Samuels' *Over Hear: six types of poetry experiment in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Kane'ohe, Hawai'i: Tinfish, 2015). The disconnect between creativity and critique may be constructed by ideology; but I wonder about the critical disconnect that emerges from Wright's claim. Are there 'silos of reading' that relate, not to romanticism so much, rather to the politics of reading, the presumptions of academia, the production of culture, and the consumption of cultural product?

When we set up *Ka Mate Ka Ora* we were aware that the online format would face an entrenched negativity from a tradition of academic publishing in print journals. And I was certainly aware that making a magazine about the business of poetry, rather than a group of essays followed by a section of reviews, would also face opposition from the habits of academic endorsement; and a magazine without poems and short reviews would not appeal to many writing 'creatively'. The very proposition of leaking a creative element into critique, and a critique into the 'creative' perhaps has made us invisible to some readers. Our audience was intended to include academics, but also poets, and poetry readers, here in Aotearoa, and also around the world, hoping to leverage the connectedness of the internet to our project. That connectedness is presently costumed in the haunting motley of a pandemic.

### **Tēnei wā whakararuraru /In the time of Covid19**

John Keats was not a very robust poet, dying at 25 in 1821 from one of the nineteenth century's endemic diseases, tuberculosis. There's an uncanny echo from the period of Keats' brief writing life with our own world of tyrannous regimes, climate change and pandemics. The year in which Keats first published a poem, 1816, has come to be called 'the year without a summer' in Europe. The severe climate disruption of that summer and the next, caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in the Indonesia archipelago (the largest volcanic eruption in recorded human history), led to failed harvests and widespread hunger. In post-Napoleon Europe there was extensive social unrest. The city of one million, London, in which Keats trained to be a doctor suffered from typhus, yellow fever, influenza, small-pox (from which the beginnings of vaccination were being developed), and, of course, the slow pandemic of TB. This mix of social and natural crises (familiar to us again now) is noted by Keats in his 'Ode to a Nightingale' when he names the 'hungry generations' and 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret/Here where men sit and hear each other groan'.

One hundred years after Keats wrote the ‘Ode,’ another doctor-poet, William Carlos Williams, was dealing with another pandemic for which there was no cure or treatment, what one might cheekily call, in fairness to the poor Spaniards, the American Flu, since it was first recorded in Kansas, USA. Williams wrote: ‘We doctors were making up to sixty calls a day. Several of us were knocked out, one of the younger of us died, others caught the thing and we hadn’t a thing that was effective in checking that potent poison that was sweeping the world’.<sup>xii</sup>

Now we have arrived at another time of disturbance/he wā whakararuraru with a similar confluence: climate disruption (into the long future), demagogues strutting hatred and violence, and a pandemic. Difficult not to experience the desire to ‘Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget’ that drives Keats’ nightingale ode. But our borders are closed. Nowhere to go. Does this mean that New Zealand’s ‘famously self-petted distance’ (as Lisa Samuels expressed it to me) as a trope in our literature has returned, in some kind of repetition? In Wright’s essay, referred to earlier, he points out that ‘the romantic ideology describes a process of repetition’.<sup>xiii</sup> Brasch was the poet whose lines linger and repeat as the enduring exemplars of our literature’s trope of distance: ‘The mountains are empty’ and ‘The plains are nameless’ from his aptly titled poem ‘The Silent Land’; and ‘distance looks our way’ from the second sonnet in his ‘Islands’ sequence.

And yet this river is not the same. We spread around the world, connected and entwined. Choosing to use the open access of the web as our publisher and to make *Ka Mate Ka Ora* an exclusively on-line journal means that we are not trapped in the trope of distance. Te ao hurihuri. We have gained a togetherness that makes us part of both the connectedness as well as the toxicity of on-line living. We are obliged to explain ourselves, to name ourselves, to stop being silent and cute about it. It would be possible to summarise *Ka Mate Ka Ora* as a grab-bag of fascinations rather than a theme-honed unity. That choice was with us from the beginning, that, ideally, a sea of islands of gathered otherness might be possible.

But there has been a theme as well. We wanted to promote the idea of what it means to think about poetry. Not to get trapped in the silence that results from declaring that birds don’t make the best ornithologists. If we could get them to speak, then surely we would listen to the birds! Critique, thinking and writing about poetry, can and will bring changes – changes to the kind of poetry, changes to the ways poems are made. A dialectical relationship between critique and the energies that poetry scatters makes for good poetics – dare one say, ‘robust poetics’?! We have, in actuality, done more than simply publishing the best things that come in issue by issue. I stand by the river, watch it flow, raise a glass.

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- <sup>i</sup> Charles Brasch, 'Notes,' *Landfall*, Vol. One, No. 1, March 1947, p.7.
- <sup>ii</sup> Brasch, p.3.
- <sup>iii</sup> Brasch, p.6.
- <sup>iv</sup> Brasch, p.7.
- <sup>v</sup> Brasch, p.7.
- <sup>vi</sup> Nicholas Wright, 'Traversing "The Same River": John Newton's Unforbidden Romanticism,' *The Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 34:1, 2016, pp.123-142, p.124.
- <sup>vii</sup> Wright, p.124.
- <sup>viii</sup> Wright, p.125.
- <sup>ix</sup> Wright, p.125 and p.127.
- <sup>x</sup> Wright, p.141.
- <sup>xi</sup> Wright, p.124.
- <sup>xii</sup> Gavin Francis, 'The Untreatable,' *London Review of Books*, 25 Jan., 2018.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wright, p.126.