

Hone Tuwhare: At the Interface of Poetic Traditions

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Abstract

Hone Tuwhare was a poet of wide popular appeal and generally beloved of New Zealanders, Maori and Pakeha alike. His poetry combined Maori and English poetic traditions, and gave voice to many of the popular protest moments of the 20th century. Yet his poetry is no longer available in bookshops and most volumes of his poetry are out of print. The essay examines this apparent anomaly, and considers the impact of the rise and fall of print culture on oral poetic traditions.

Keywords

Hone Tuwhare, orature, protest poetry, Maori, New Zealand, print culture

Tree let your arms fall:
raise them not sharply in supplication
to the bright enhaloed cloud.
Let your arms lack toughness and
resilience for this is no mere axe
to blunt nor fire to smother.

(Hone Tuwhare, "No Ordinary Sun," *Deep River Talk* 28)

When Hone Tuwhare reads "No Ordinary Sun," he does so with "oomph"; and talking about the poem after one such performance, he tells his audience that this poem is "an angry poem, a protest poem." Hearing Tuwhare read the poem one is left in no doubt: the poem is clearly part of a long-standing English tradition of protest poetry, thus rendering it part of a popular tradition. But if the poem is read to oneself, uninformed by Tuwhare's large, gruff, powerful body and voice, it can as easily be seen to fit in the literary category of the lyrical lament.

Your former shagginess shall not be

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wreathed with the delightful flight
of birds nor shield
nor cool the ardour of unheeding
lovers form the monstrous sun.

....

O tree
in the shadowless mountains
the white plains and
the drab sea floor
your end at last is written (*Deep River Talk* 28)

It is the latter categorisation (of literary lament), and associated emasculation, against which Tuwhare rails when he claims the poem for the protest tradition of angry young men (and women); and yet Tuwhare delighted in and was strongly influence by an English poetic literary tradition as much as he loved the popular oral poetic tradition of ballad and bawdry. In this essay, I want to think through the historical and social forces at work when Tuwhare was growing into the poet he would become, that encouraged the poetic traditions of Maori and Pakeha, declamatory and lyrical styles, oral and written modes, to merge in the body of Hone Tuwhare's poetic oeuvre; the gains of such a merger, and the losses. Gain might be seen in the breadth of his poetry's appeal that crossed borders of class and race, but loss, possibly tied to a shift from oral to print to e-cultures, is to be found in a poetry that can no longer be found on bookshop shelves.

When Hone Tuwhare's first collection of poetry was published in 1964, a collection that included the title poem "No Ordinary Sun," 700 copies sold out in 10 days; a second run of 2,000 were on the shelves by early 1965 and sold quickly. The book was a runaway success of which Tuwhare recalls: "It had an amazing reaction. The poems were so immediate to people and they had a totally New Zealand flavour. I mean a lot of people read *No Ordinary Sun* who would not have normally bought poetry – ..." (qtd. in Hunt 72). Influential Marxist New Zealand poet, R.A.K. Mason wrote in the foreword to the book: "Here – and I think this is for the first time – is a member of the Maori race qualifying as a poet in English..." (qtd. in Hunt 76). Like Australian indigenous poet, Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal (and the publication of her first book of poetry, *We Are Going*, in the same year), Tuwhare's volume *No Ordinary Sun*, served (and continues to serve) as a cultural interface – poetry that records and participates in the communication and development of relationship between peoples; in this case between Maori and Pakeha. Tuwhare's poetic oeuvre sits at the crossroads where orature meets literature; it is the river in which two currents of English-language poetry – a popular poetic tradition "of the people" and a poetry of an educated literary elite – merge. *No Ordinary Sun* spoke for and now stands as testament to many of the major protest movements of the 1970s

– for Maori Land Rights, the Anti-Apartheid movement, the Peace movement of the Anti-Vietnam war years, and against Nuclear testing in the Pacific and worldwide.

Reprinted ten times during the thirty years after its publication in the mid-60s, *No Ordinary Sun* is claimed as “one of the most widely read individual collections of poems in New Zealand history” by the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (Robinson and Wattie) and was followed up by Tuwhare with some 12 subsequent volumes of poetry, the last, titled, *Oooooo...!!!*, being published in 2005. Hone Tuwhare died in January 2008, and although I was unable to buy his work in bookshops in Sydney, I had assumed that I would be able to buy his work in any “good” bookshop in New Zealand. But on a trip to New Zealand in 2010 I was shocked to discover that Hone Tuwhare’s poetry was out of print. Although single copies of *Oooooo...!!!* could be found in bookshops, I could only find two other volumes of poetry in all the second hand bookshops through which I trawled – the earlier Collected volume, *Mibi* of 1987, and the later Collected volume, *Deep River Talk* of 1994. In both cases, being rare first editions, the price was prohibitive (NZ\$250): I was informed by one bookshop owner that Tuwhare’s work had become much sought after – sought after, I asked myself, because of the value of the poetry itself, or because of a value attached to the rarity of work “on the market”?

Everywhere I went, in both Dunedin and Auckland where Tuwhare had spent extensive periods of his life, he was spoken of with great warmth (I could illustrate with examples from conversations I had with librarians, book sellers, a wildlife tour guide, a cafe waitress, a sales assistant in a wool shop, the ubiquitous man at a bus stop). Not only is “Hone” (the name by which he is familiarly known in New Zealand) a poet popular with the everywo/man, he is also everywhere described as a poet of great significance – one of “New Zealand’s most distinguished Maori poets writing in English” according to the New Zealand Book Council. Hone Tuwhare was awarded the Robert Burns Fellowship from the University of Otago twice (in 1969 and 1974); he was awarded a University of Auckland Literary Fellowship in 1991, and in 1999 was named New Zealand’s second Te Mata Poet Laureate. Tuwhare was among ten of New Zealand’s “greatest living artists” named as Arts Foundation of New Zealand Icon Artists in 2003 – a death sentence if ever I heard one, of which he writes:

Except for a couple of absentee
 Icons, together, we stand –
 all ten of us comically sardonical;
 sartorially
 succeeding only in being
 dark-suited –
 bow-tied & white shirted,

but secretly stretched
 in bowel and
 bladder control

...
 (“On becoming an Icon (!),” *Oooooo.....!!! 79*)

In that same year Tuwhare was awarded one of the inaugural Prime Minister’s Awards for Literary Achievement, an award that recognises New Zealand writers who have made “an outstanding contribution to the nation’s literary and cultural history.” The other winners were novelist Janet Frame and historian Michael King, neither of whose works are currently out of print; but neither is (primarily) a poet and neither is Maori.²

This essay then is an inquiry into the possible reasons for the rapid disappearance of a life’s work to which so much accolade was attached during that life (both within New Zealand and within Commonwealth writing and reading circles that have subsequently acquired a global reach). It asks what Hone Tuwhare’s disappearance from print culture might tell us about the place of poetry, of indigenous or “minority” writers, of publishers, of scholarship, of (postcolonial) literature in a “glocal” and increasingly “e” world. It also asks what the place of orature is in a literary world at the crossroads.

Like many indigenous or “first nations” authors of the postcolonial 20th century, Hone Tuwhare’s writing life was positioned at the interface of oral and literary traditions. Despite having read Janet Hunt’s 1998 biography of Hone³ in which she casts the poet as a traveller who carries two suitcases – one in which he “packs his Maori birthright, the kaupapa, waiata and reo of his whānau and his tūpana,” and the other in which he “hefts an inheritance founded in the English language, the many registers of the schoolroom, streets, pub and workplace, the Christian liturgy, the Bible and Western literature” (“Introduction” 8) – and having read the poetry of Tuwhare’s published oeuvre, it wasn’t until I saw (and heard) the footage of Hone’s return home to Northland in 2002 (*Hone Tuwhare: The Return Home*) that the significance of orature was brought home to me. It caused me to reflect upon the importance

² As a footnote to this story, it might surprise you to discover that I finally found a reasonably-priced copy of *Deep River Talk* at the book stall of the triennial conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies held in Cyprus in 2010. The book was a little “tired” having sat on a bookshelf in Nicosia for some years, and was sold to me for \$10; this does however say something for the value of associations of literature related by a common history and founded out of the desire to create a presence and bring to centre literatures that would otherwise remain on the margins and marginal.

³ The author has deliberately chosen to refer to the poet, Hone Tuwhare, both by his first and surname to indicate that he lives on in academic and in popular circles – as Tuwhare in one, and Hone, as he is known familiarly throughout New Zealand in the other.

of orature and performance to cultural memory and the survival of a poetic practice (one in which poet and audience are engaged in a ritualised practice, or, as in this case, dialogue).

In video footage of Tuwhare's participation in a *marae* welcome and reply, Hone is welcomed onto the *marae* – the sacred meeting area, usually situated in front of the *whare runanga* (communal meeting house). Visitors to the *marae* are expected to advance together, walking at a slow, respectful pace as they are welcomed by the women of the *marae* with the *Te karanga*:

Come forward, visitors from afar, welcome, welcome! (*Haere mai, Haere mai*). Bring with you the spirits of your dead that they may be greeted, that they may be mourned. Ascend onto our Marae, ascend the sacred Marae of our people. Welcome, Welcome. (*Haere mai, Haere mai*).⁴

The visiting party replies and will usually stop briefly to remember those who have died before continuing onto the *marae*.

The *marae* is the *turanga-waewae* of the Maori – literally their “place to stand” – the place of belonging and community. It is on the *marae* that younger generations are taught Maori law and culture by the elders (*Kaumātua*) – here they learn the *whaikōrero* (speeches), the *whakapapa* (genealogy) or the *waiata* (song). It is a predominantly oral and performative culture – a culture of oratory that is allied to the visual, tactile culture of carving and sculpture. Tuwhare makes this connection in his poem, “On a Theme by Hone Taiaapa” [the Maori carver]:

Tell me poet, what happens to my chips
after I have adzed our ancestors
out of wood?

What happens to your waste-words, poet?
do they limp to heaven, or go down easy
to Raro-henga?

And what about my chips, when they're
down – and out? If I put them to fire
do I die with them? (*Deep River Talk* 87)

Tuwhare's poetry speaks at times in the oratorical and metaphoric voice of Maori tradition; it names (respectfully and playfully) Maori peoples and place, keeping a language and culture alive in a literary world dominated by Pakeha traditions and values. Tuwhare spoke Maori during his early childhood, but

⁴ Translation of welcome call from “New Zealand in History,” “The Māori,” 20 May 2012. <http://history-nz.org/maori5.html>.

English became dominant with schooling and the insistence on his father's part that he speak English also at home (although even under this ban on Maori as a language of conversation, Hone would listen to his father tell ghost stories to a friend in Maori). Hone recalls:

He didn't talk Māori with me – because he wanted to encourage my English – but at night he had a Māori crony who would come around, and they'd tell each other yarns. Ghost yarns, you see, at night time. And I'd be listening to them, you know. And then sometimes at night, or early in the morning, he'd start chanting, singing, whole songs in Māori – sounded bloody weird, but I was taking it in.

I understood every word. (Hunt 28-29, from Manhire 179)

Although Tuwhare claims to have lost his fluency in Maori, Maori language and orature would influence how he spoke, read and wrote – how he perceived and represented the world – it could not be otherwise – as he is heard advising in *The Return Home*: “no one can see the way you see things... no one can steal that from you...,” “colourful background... you have to be proud of that... don't give that way... I say to me, ‘don't you lose your Maori...,’ you grow from that, grow in the love of your people for you” (*Hone Tuwhare: The Return Home*). But when Tuwhare speaks of colourful background in relation to himself, he doesn't only speak of Maori, but of Scots – proudly, humorously – “Scotts wha' hae! I'm a Scot, I'm an Anderson” (*Hone Tuwhare: The Return Home*). A Maori childhood is melded increasingly with the cultural influences of the English speaking world in which Hone becomes immersed as an adolescent – at school (in which he is one of only three Maori), church (the Bible – described by Hone as “bloody good stuff,” “It was the King James version, sonorous stuff with wonderful singing cadences” [Hunt 32]), and on the working class streets of Avondale, Panmure and Māngere, Auckland. The poem “Drunk,” published in the volume *Come Rain Hail* (1970), is a good example of Tuwhare's adept use of multiple traditions:

When they hustled him out
 at closing time he had
 forty cents clutched in
 his hand for another drink

 He sensed a sea of receding
 faces picked himself up
 and promptly emptied his guts
 on the footpath fervently calling
 for his bleeding mate Christ
 who was nowhere to be seen

....
 At work the next morning
 he moved with effort in the hollow
 silence of a self-built tomb:
 unaware of the trapped mortal
 crouching there (*Deep River Talk* 48)

The label WORKING CLASS is, in Janet Hunt's words, red-stickered to both Tuwhare's cultural suitcases. With the completion of primary school Hone completed his formal education, being apprenticed at the age of sixteen as a fitter and turner and then a boiler maker with the New Zealand Railways. In 1942 Hone joined the Communist Party. Janet Hunt writes: "For Tuwhare, being Maori automatically meant being among labourers, people who worked with their hands and those who had little beyond the week's earnings to see them through. Maori are 'natural communists,' Tuwhare believes, because of the open and communal lifestyle of marae-centred communities" (40).

Tuwhare was involved in the Communist Party until 1956 (when Russia invaded Hungary) at which point he (among many others) left the party in protest: "I'm not anti the Russian people. I'm simply against the Russian authorities whom I believe impose a brand of 'Big Russian' chauvinism against national minorities in Russia, who comprise 50% of the population. In a political & economic sense, an extension of this policy may be more clearly seen, militarily in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Angola, Yemen, Eritrea, Vietnam and now, Afghanistan" (qtd. in Hunt 62: letter to Lauris Edmond, 1980). Although no longer a member of the Communist party, Tuwhare continued, in fact became more involved, in the Workers' Union and a range of (largely Maori) community groups.

Tuwhare recalls: "Marxism gave me a real sense of place, you know – 'workers of the world unite!' I had a sense of belonging, of being part of a particular class of people" (Hunt 40). "There were some good blokes, good-hearted men there in the railways union. The first Pakeha ever to invite me to dinner at his place was a communist..." (Hunt 40). It is this affiliation with the Communist party and associated Marxism, that encourages Tuwhare, like many working men who would otherwise reside in the primarily oral world of factory, building site, wharf, pub and poorer city streets, to extend a knowledge of literature that began in his father's home with the Bible. Tuwhare talks of The Left Book Club library and the Railway Workshop Library where he read not only Marx and Engels, but Russian writers to start with and then novelists like "Steinbeck, Hemingway, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, an expurgated D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Wolfe – they say he's a second-rate novelist, Thomas Wolfe, but you know, his words *sang* to me. I was a voracious reader" (Hunt 42). It is significant, that even here, when Tuwhare is talking about reading, the effect of words is aural. Janet Hunt writes that for Tuwhare,

“the written word is primarily a script for performance” (79); and Hone confirms this when asked (I presume) about the relationship of an oral tradition to his poetry:

Oral! Fuck sake, yes! ‘Course – Jeez! I suppose that’s the final test for your own poem. You lie back at night and you speak it, and you have the light behind your head, pillow up, and read it – or anybody else’s poetry that you love, you know?

It may be reverberating in your head, but you also should get someone else to read it back to you. Maybe a personal friend, your sister, or your – to read it back to you. See how it sounds, how they interpret it, okay?

In reading aloud, the poet should give weight to the words, care about reading it, see how it sounds, sound the music. It’s far more than just a piece of writing. Give full value to the sound of it – sound the words. Instead of just for the eye and brain... no, *say it, say it!*

And the readings are never the same anyway. There are different variations of your own poems when you come to read them in public. Sometimes you vary it yourself, you know, and it’s always good when you do, because it gives you yet another dimension because you’re doing it. (Hunt 79)

Released in 2004, the DVD of Hone Tuwhare’s “return home” was one of the few items on the shelf of Parson’s bookshop in Auckland that I could purchase on the trip to “find Hone” described at the beginning of this essay. I bought the DVD with a sense of “well, it’s better than nothing” (and there is nothing worse than to return home from a shopping expedition with nothing in hand) – but in fact I found my purchase to be invaluable; for the DVD is not only the filmed story of Hone’s return home to his birthplace and his Maori birthright, it is also a visual and oral record of Hone performing a number of his poems on tour – to school children, to small groups in town halls, to family and friends, in the company of fellow poets, intellectuals and musicians. Tuwhare’s audience is eclectic; what unites them is a love of Hone – the voice, the sentiment, the words, the man, his poetry.

Many of the poems recorded on the DVD are now out of print and very difficult to obtain. How long the DVD remains available is anyone’s guess, but it served to remind me not only of the potential of the DVD but also of the brave new e-world that threatens the life of material culture at the same time that it holds out the promise of freedom from the restrictions of that culture. Poetry is once more at the crossroads. The literary world of the 20th century to which Hone (like Maui) so expertly adapted was a world in which the value of “the literary” was attached to print culture, but it is now, in the 21st century, a world that with the demise of the printing press and the rise of e-technology might see (might already be seeing) the revaluation and re-centring of oral and

performative literary modes that once again allow elite and popular cultures to merge in “Deep River Talk.” I’m not sure however that it solves the problem of archive and the associated loss of literary history: the e of e-world also has a tendency to stand as much for the ephemeral as the electronic – but with the prospect of loss inevitably suffered through print-publishing expense and the withering of an oral poetic tradition that relied upon structures of learning for which few of us have the acquired skill and to which little cultural kudos (in most cases) attaches, we need not only to create an e-longevity but also to revitalise the pleasures and the mechanisms of text recall that once were the hallmark of popular culture because literacy was either irrelevant or unattainable.

Old books, indeed ancient books (some of which record oral histories that would otherwise be forgotten), are finding new life in e-storage and retrieval systems, and I assume those same systems can maintain the life of the u-tube phenomena that has given a global audience access and a greater longevity to film and audio text otherwise disintegrating in public and private archives; but the material world is always “ephemeral” in the long term: books are burned, libraries are burned (take the destruction and looting of the National Museum of Iraq for recent example); so too technology changes and stored LPs (33s and 45s) and cassette tapes rendered useless unless transferred “in time” to a new medium. The material world runs a losing race against Time. The human body, being material (as some of us are becoming increasingly aware), is susceptible to disintegration: witches are burnt, tongues are cut out, people are sent to gulags, gassed in concentration camps, enslaved and removed far from their country of birth to a new world in which attempt is made to eradicate language and shared cultural heritage. But the African diaspora is a history of cultural survival as much as it is a history of destruction because the voice can and does live on despite concerted attempts to silence it; that enforced migration is responsible for a global dispersal and transfer of culture (the proliferation of Anancy stories being a good example, as is the development of Blues, Jazz, Rap, Hip Hop etc).

In some cases oral and print technologies work as a feedback loop; a loop that was sometimes important to the survival of indigenous cultures in the colonised worlds of recent history – like Aotearoa/New Zealand. So where there is a political imperative, a predominantly oral culture like the Maori has survived in part as much through the preservation of that culture in print form as through the voice of those few who recall and pass on the language and culture orally. This preservation can however be purist in form and work to ensure only the continuation/perpetuation of “traditional” forms and readings of cultural text. (Cultural police are at work everywhere, but so too are the guerrilla armies.)

A poem like Tuwhare's "Children's Tale" recited on the Northlands tour to an audience of young school children, ensures the perpetuation of Maori story/mythology in the tradition of the *marae* – the elder passing on cultural knowledge to the younger generation:

The taniwha breathes fire
and hot stones.
The taniwha snorts hot dust
and steam.
Golden snot trickles from
his nostrils.

Deep inside the Earth
the taniwha takes deep-breathing
exercises to keep in good shape
for when he has to remind us all
that we are not as powerful as he.

His name is RU-AU-MAKO.
He is the boss of all the taniwha. (*Deep River Talk* 113)

But my concern is not so much with the survival of Maori culture but with the survival of *Hone Tuwhare's* poetry – the poetry of an original, idiosyncratic voice. When asked by school children "when" he began to write, Hone replies, with characteristic humour and humbleness, but also with intended meaning that is far from superficial: "you have to begin with writing your name... with letters ...," but then he speaks those letters with guttural intonation: "h" "o" "n" "e": "hone" (*Hone Tuwhare: The Return Home*). This fits with advice he gives later to would-be adult poets when he is once again asked about the process of writing: "sometimes you start with a phrase... a phrase that sounds good... you wonder whether you pinched it from Shakespeare... it's so beautiful... but you don't want to copy from anybody... it's got to come from you... original... from your heart..." (*Hone Tuwhare: The Return Home*). A phrase that *sounds* good....

An oral poetic tradition survives in cult pockets (and here I have in mind 21st century events like poetry slams) but I would champion the value of this tradition on a much larger scale – it is a practice I would like to see/hear extended. The recitative is a dying (once popular) art whose remnants survive in Australia in the church and community halls of country (and city) eisteddfods (I don't know if there is an equivalent in New Zealand); but the pleasure of the ability to recite verse when public or private occasion invites is a simple pleasure that can so easily be revived if the experience is valued and nurtured. "Rain," intones Hone:

Rain
 I can hear you
 making small holes
 in the silence
 rain ("Rain," *Deep River Talk* 46)

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