

**Gifts, Ghosts and Guests: Editorial Notes**

**Murray Edmond**

Robert Sullivan's editorial in the first issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* addressed the title and the title poem of the magazine. Joel Harrison's lead article in this, the second issue, looks from the title and its meaning to the form of the magazine—an e-journal—and the implications that form has for poetry, especially its distribution and accessibility, its economy. Harrison proposes the possibility of the 'potential sharing of poetry on an unheard-of scale.' His gift economy is a little like McLuhan's famous mixture of old and new in 'the global village,' a living arrangement which is now a reality: the village is the ghost of the future: 'each project forms a member of the growing subject village.' The gift economy uses a new mode, the www of the world wide web, to reactivate a form of economic relationship which is older than the dominant capitalism of the new global village. The inhabitants of Harrison's village-in-becoming seem to be a mixture of generous peasant-communards and hard-riding cowboys with something of the spirit of Robin Hood dedicated to 'the continuous dissemination of texts.' Harrison's essay is a meta-discussion of the site he is in; an analytic act of being who you imagine you are.

This second issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* differs from the first in that the poets who were subjects of essays in the first issue, Baxter, Hyde, Campbell, might be thought of as coming from the heartland of New Zealand poetry (though Robert Creeley and Te Rauparaha proffered more marginal possibilities), whereas the poets written about in this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, Yang Lian, Elsdon Best and Ern Malley (and Laurie Duggan, who writes a memoir) all have a distinctly peripheral existence in relation to the standard map. *Ka Mate Ka Ora* is determined to sustain distant, peripheral, strange, unlikely, or off-shore presences in each issue. In the first issue Pam Brown brought news from Australia; in the third issue we will be featuring Anne Kennedy

writing about the literary scene in Hawai'i. Our guest in this issue, the Australian poet Laurie Duggan, brings us the text of a talk he delivered in Auckland in April 2006.

In 'Amaze your Friends!' Duggan uses his experience of a decision to stop writing for six years to interrogate the value of poetry: will society 'go limp' as Ezra Pound proclaimed if poetry fails? Duggan writes about his coming to the point of feeling poetry to be a 'peripheral endeavour.' Curiously it is through this crisis that he refinds a value for himself, one free of the constraints of nationalist hierarchies and centralities. His memoir makes clear that the place he reached for his new start in writing was one which had long been on the horizon: 'Even before I left high school I had developed a mistrust of literature that paraded its Australianness.' His modest appraisal of himself as a 'rootless cosmopolitan' hides a serious intent which is close in spirit to Harrison's vision of the 'growing subject village.'

Rootless cosmopolitanism for the Swiss-born Chinese poet Yang Lian has come as a by-product of exile, itself a consequence of the politics of the People's Republic of China. Yang's New Zealand residence was comparatively short (1989 – 1992), but it was, for him, the decisive time of exile from national roots and a home language environment, which created a transformation in his work. He was caught in Auckland at the time of the Tiananmen massacre, unable to return to China. His time in Auckland produced a significant number of poems which explored the exilic moment. He continues to write in Mandarin, though now living in London as a New Zealand citizen. Hilary Chung's essay 'translates' two of Yang's Auckland poems, 'Winter Garden' and 'Sea of Dead Lambs,' from the dense fabric of their language as documents of the condition of exile. For Yang the idea of the ghost is at the heart of the experience of exile. The dilapidated wooden boarding house where he lived in Grafton Road in Auckland is haunted by its resident Chinese modernist poet:

Footsteps echo in an unoccupied room. Who's to know if it's someone's poems being read. They're all a pack of lies – of ghost talk. They say the place is haunted. ('Ghost Talk' in Yang Lian, *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland*, eds. Jacob Edmond and Hilary Chung, Auckland UP, 2006, p. 80)

In his drama, Yang is his own ghost ('Every day as you climb the stairs you think: "so this is exile".' 'Ghost Talk,' p. 75); but he is also a recent ghost haunting our literature. He reminds us of the fragility of our map of a heartland and our tender vulnerability to new language and new presences.

Eldson Best is not known as a poet and Jeffrey Paparoa Holman has unearthed a small treasure in bringing three of his poems, one an unpublished manuscript, to our attention and reading them in the light of Best's better known incarnation as our first home-grown anthropologist-in-the-field, gatherer of a 'trove' of what he might have called 'lore' from Māori informants and from first hand observation. Best was specifically asked to preserve 'the vanishing knowledge of the old ways, in the best 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of salvage anthropology,' though Holman shows how little the myth of the 'dying race' applied to Māori and how much better it fitted 'the coloniser's tendency to domesticate their literary inheritance in a land teeming with Māori spirits and their stories.' Best's poems record his sense of his own impending disappearance. His poems can be read to record the passing of his own kind, projected into the Māori world he knew well. Yet Best left a huge collector's legacy, which continues to be drawn on by Māori and Pākehā. Holman identifies Best as a ghost – 'The auto-didact was somehow the ghost in the machine at such a moment' – who, long thought laid to rest, has returned to remind us of ourselves. After watching an item on the television news magazine 'Campbell Live' on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2006 about the recent, widespread celebration of Matariki, the Māori New Year, the occasion of the heliacal rising of the constellation of the Pleiades in the north-eastern sky in Aotearoa, which has only gained popularity in the last five years, I went to my 1972 editions from the Dominion Museum of Best's monographs, *The Astronomical Knowledge of the Maori* and *The Maori Division of Time*. I found a plethora of fact and anecdote about Matariki throughout the Pacific: 'in Maoriland . . . Parties of women faced the famous star group and greeted it with song and dance.' (Best, *Astronomical Knowledge*, 1972, p. 54) I had just seen the same thing, in revival mode, on the TV news. As Holman writes: 'creative syncretisms are the often-unacknowledged literary offspring of colonial cultural exchanges, and continue to defy the efforts of linguistic purists and ethnic essentialists to control the meanings of the past, the present or the future.'

The most spectacular literary ghost on display in this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* is Ern Malley. As Pam Brown wrote in our first issue: ‘Central to contemporary Australian poetry is the work of a poet who didn’t exist.’ Martin Edmond titillates us with the possibility that Ern Malley owes the inception of his literary inspiration to a chance encounter with New Zealand literature in a graveyard in Sydney. It is difficult to comment on ‘Strangers in the House of the Mind’ without oneself being sucked into the vortex (maelstrom?) of Malley-ana. So I shall refrain, and instead note that the epigraph Edmond uses, ‘To see something new, we must make something new,’ is taken from the 18<sup>th</sup> century German physicist and aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. In itself this is disturbing: not only does Lichtenberg have a crater on the moon named after him, but his posthumously published notebooks were called ‘wastebooks’ (a term borrowed from book-keeping). If this were not enough, it was Lichtenberg who invented the standardised paper size system (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5) which we use to write on. One of Lichtenberg’s aphorisms reads: ‘a person reveals his character by nothing so clearly as the joke he resents.’