

EDITORIAL NOTES: I WRITER BECAUSE I PISS OFF

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There is a tension between what poetry is (or what it is thought to be, variously), what it does (or fails to do) and how it might be read, in terms of context, accessibility and occasion. These are some of the wider questions broached in this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*. These questions are raised in relation to poems in manuscript, poems in translation and poems which propose social action.

I am delighted that we are able to print seven previously unpublished poems by James K. Baxter. These poems are a valuable addition to Baxter's body of published work. The poems are all from his 1958 trip to India, and accompany Paul Millar's essay, 'Return to Exile.' Millar argues that the Indian visit is pivotal in reading Baxter's work and highlights 'the significance of the transformation India worked on him' in bringing about a shift of allegiance to 'a bigger rougher family.' Millar argues that this shift is complex in that it revived Baxter's early adolescent impulses to write poetry at the same time as beginning the integration of poetry and social action which would become the ideal of the Jerusalem period.¹

Helen Sword's analysis of Alistair Campbell's poem illustrates how the teaching of poetry is part of poetry's life. In semiotic terms all poems are tokens of one type – but that type is defined by its tokens. Are all tokens the same? Will any poem do the job of teaching what poetry does? This is not a question Sword answers directly, but her account of teaching Campbell's 'Burning the Rubbish' not only makes general points about poetry, but demonstrates the individual strength of Campbell's poem.

Her account of teaching this poem in a General Education Science course at the University of Auckland may not have been approved of by Baxter. He wrote out his opinion of that university in his final poem, 'Ode to Auckland' from October 1972:

The Auckland Varsity gives me a pain in the rectum.
I am waiting for the day
When its wedding cake tower goes down in a pile of rubble
From a bomb planted by an intelligent boobhead
Or not-so-intelligent Varsity radical.²

One might easily think of Baxter's 'waiting for the day' as the action of a dreamer, but it was potentially real enough, as Auckland had been subjected to a bombing campaign not long before 1972: in 1969 'within twelve months there were thirteen bombing attacks on military bases and conservative establishments.'³ The majority of these attacks were in Auckland, including one on the Supreme Court, a few hundred metres from the university's 'wedding cake tower' and another, further afield, on the flagstaff at Kororaraka, the famous target of Hone Heke's choppings down in 1844-45. Baxter says he is 'waiting for the day,' but one might ask if he saw his words as having the invocatory power to summon action. Baxter's contemplation of a bombing contains no intention of injuring or taking human life; rather he idealistically contemplates the destruction of the inauthentic, aspiritual, unaesthetic edifice of Auckland University's ersatz gothic with a grim irony, while championing the dispossessed against wanky intellectuals.

Ezra Pound's Canto LXXIII, one of the two notorious fascist cantos written in Italian, tells the story of a bombing with a self-congratulatory pride which amounts to 'hymning the casual slaughter of the Canadian soldiers' as Jack Ross puts it, and, indeed, hymning the planned self-slaughter of 'that big-boned girl' (Pound) who leads the soldiers to their deaths. Jack Ross outlines the history of his translation of these poems (leading to his acquisition of 'Antipodean rights') and of the checkered history of their emergence from Italian into English to take their place in the uneven totality of *The Cantos*. Ross argues that these two poems, abhorrent as they are, especially

Canto LXXIII, 'are much more of a piece with the rest of the poem than readers have hitherto felt comfortable admitting.'

Pound was arrested for treason and, as Ross writes, 'he was surprised to be told that he was regarded as a war criminal.' It was for his broadcasts rather than his poetry that he was arrested. However both contained the same 'tone of ill-digested rant,' racist and pro-fascist. Perhaps it is surprising in itself that Pound, who had such hope for how poetry might affect the world, was surprised when it actually did. Poetry takes its place in the world and, to indulge a pun, carries its burden.

In Anne Kennedy's tour of poetry in Hawai'i she quotes Sarah Daniels quoting 'a visionary Hawaiian writer': 'E, I no writer because I like "become a better writer," I writer because I piss off.' This is perhaps one step back from trying to affect the world to simply letting the world know what you think of it. Kennedy's tour takes us across a range of impulses in surveying poetry in Hawai'i. Implicit in her quotations from and evocations of Hawaiian Creole English (HCE) is that language, in all its paroles, is one of these impulses. More than simply being 'piss off,' poetry might begin when someone shows how it sounds to be 'piss off' in HCE. 'Hawai'i poetry: a tour' is another in *Ka Mate Ka Ora's* series of articles bringing poetry 'news.'

¹ See John Newton, 'By Writing and Example: The Baxter Effect,' *Ka Mate Ka Ora* 1 (Dec 2005) www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/index01.asp

² James K. Baxter, *New and Selected Poems*, ed. Paul Millar (Auckland: Oxford UP, 2001) p. 155.

³ Tim Shadbolt, *Bullshit and Jellybeans* (Wellington: Alister Taylor, 1971) p. 128.