

DOES POETRY MATTER?

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Dedicated to Leigh Davis, and to his wife Susan and their children Greer, Henry, India, and Betty

I ran into Murray Edmond the day before yesterday and he suggested some alternative titles for this talk, such as 'Does poetry metre,' 'Does poetry mutter,' and a German one, 'Does poetry Mutter,' but I'm afraid we're stuck with the rather unprepossessing question, 'Does poetry matter?' For which I take complete responsibility, it was my idea.

Some time back the *Dominion Post* columnist Karl Du Fresne, who writes under the faux-ominous byline 'Curmudgeon', wrote an opinion piece about the uselessness of poetry or more specifically of poets, in the course of which he asserted that if he wanted to get his plumbing fixed he wouldn't be asking a bloody poet would he, so what good were they?

There are quite a few possible responses to this statement, one of them being to point out the collapse of logic within his sentence; and another that I, and no doubt other poets, have often attended to the plumbing in our homes, with about as much success, or failure, as any other non-professional plumber, probably including Du Fresne himself.

Is it a waste of time responding defensively to statements of this sort, which might be described as the practical handyman's reply to the question, 'Does poetry matter?'? Maybe it's not a waste of time. The 'No it doesn't,' answer might equally, on the basis of Du Fresne's logic, be extended to nuclear physicists, professional basketball players, or the council employees who blow leaves off the road with motorised puffers, since none of them has any professional connection with plumbing either. But of course, inside Du Fresne's illogical statement lurks another a-logical rather than illogical premise, which is that poetry and poets are useless in a more comprehensive or pernicious way than nuclear scientists or leaf-blowers. In a little while I want to argue that this comprehensive rather than

pragmatic uselessness is one of poetry's great virtues, and one of the reasons it does matter – so thanks, Karl, for helping me get on track with this aspect. But more on this soon.

Some of you will have read another columnist recently, in last weekend's *Sunday Star Times*, where the mayor of Whanganui, Michael Laws, pulled out all the stops in a tirade against 'arties, writers, and culture vultures' and, a paragraph or two later, against 'arties, feminists, and way too many academics' who, Laws asserted, 'perceive rugby as an oafish display of mindless macho.' Leaving aside the fact that I and a number of friends who are writers of various stripes, including my wife Donna Malane who is the author of a rather successful book called *The Girl's Guide to Rugby*, regularly gather around television screens to watch sport of many kinds – leaving aside these mundane responses to the mayor of Whanganui, it's worth noting the counterintuitive ubiquity of references to poetry in the language of sports commentators, not least the husky-voiced bard of television rugby coverage, the louche Murray Mexted, who frequently draws the viewer's attention to the 'pure poetry' of a well-executed line-break, or the 'poetry in motion' of an audacious play by Cory Jane. Again, I'll return in a little while to this incorporation of references to poetry in such vernaculars as sports commentaries. Little known marginal fact: Pierre de Frédy, Baron de Coubertin (1 January 1863 – 2 September 1937), the founder of the International Olympic Committee, proposed poetry as a contest (which it was, and is, in many cultures) in the Olympics.

The point here, surely, is not so much the obvious one that it's banal and pointless to respond defensively or even derisively (which amounts to the same thing) to the curmudgeon's or the mayor's responses of 'No, it doesn't', but rather to see the opportunities that their negative responses open up.

These will often be opportunities that neither the nay-sayers nor their opposing yea-sayers will want to engage with – any more than will publishers, for example, contemplating their print runs in literary markets such as our English-language one here in New Zealand where the artefact of the poetry book is in general not widely sought.

On the part of those who think, for various reasons, that poetry does matter, this disinclination to engage with discussion opportunities opened up by the likes of the curmudgeon and the mayor will often take the form of a sorting or prioritising process – a categorising of what's judged to be worthy of consideration and what's merely trivial. This categorising process is one of canon-building and as such is a complex cultural phenomenon in which judgements of 'excellence' have an inescapably political tincture.

Those of us who do enjoy poetry and consider ourselves serious about it – who will want to answer 'Yes' to the question 'Does poetry matter?' – will have varieties of motives for being affirmative, and

we may wish to distinguish *our* affirmative motives from those of other affirmers. The ways in which we categorise what we believe to be significant or trivial in our responses to the question ‘Does poetry matter?’ will also be ways in which we distinguish our positions not only from the nay-saying curmudgeon and mayor, but also from other, let’s call them ‘poetry lovers’ – though I suspect that term itself may already make some members of this audience flinch.

The point is, though, that by categorising what we consider time-wasting, or boring, or banal, or trivial, or intellectually or aesthetically minor, or dated, we are also identifying social and professional markers of distinction – *distinguishing* brands of cultural capital, if you like, with which we’d rather not be associated. Teams not wearing our preferred team colours. Furthermore, by identifying these things that we wish to exclude from our discussion, we’ll be identifying not only those aspects of poetry that we consider minor in some way, but also identifying *ourselves* because, as ethnographers and sociologists of culture have been fond of pointing out to us for some years, cultural artefacts of all kinds, including language artefacts such as poems and novels, are not only material *objects* – which is to say *matter* – they are also *subjects*: they are actors who perform their societies, and they are agents which link up and network their societies – if you subscribe to the Actor Network Theory associated with the French sociologist Bruno Latour. We can also say, following the cultural fetish and related social distinction theories of Durkheim or the later materialist analyses of Bourdieu, that cultural artefacts – cultural *matter* or stuff – brands its consumers as socially distinct. That ‘shoe-of-the-week’ thing.

Here, we have to include some by-now well rehearsed links to evolutionary psychology that suggest uselessness and excess in cultural artefacts are sexual selection indicators – in other words, our displayed or flaunted preferences for what kinds of poetry (or shoe) we think matter are really about mate selection; and the fairly common avant gardist anxiety about being *au courant* with recent developments arises from the fear of falling behind in the evolutionary footrace. Argument continues over the evolutionary psychologists’ position; my view is that it’s relevant in a common-sense kind of way.

The contradictory behaviour involved in denying the significance of categories or positions in respect of poetry – that is, naming a category in order to exclude it from consideration, uttering something in order to silence it, asserting one thing but doing another – also draws us deeper into the mesh of one of poetry’s more exquisite and inescapable traps, the very one that the curmudgeon of the *Dominion Post* and the mayor of Whanganui got tangled up in when they drew attention to the ubiquity of poetry by asserting that it didn’t matter.

One of the most enjoyable ways in which *poems* can be useless involves disobedience, the trap of expecting the poem to do or mean what it's told to. Often half the pleasure of reading poems involves a kind of somatic or language-nervous-system malfunction in which the poet may be more or less complicit. Often we seem to be in a situation where the poet is asserting one thing while the poem appears to be doing another, or where the poet is ordering language to mean one thing while the language has a contrary mind of its own about what it wants the poem to mean.

When Shakespeare asked, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' he was writing as much about this critical unreliability in the rhetorical apparatus and language of poetry – in this case the artifice of metaphor – as about the person addressed in his sonnet. He was disclosing his awareness of the metaphor's tendency to disobey its master's or mistress's wishes – even to make those wishes appear ridiculous. The booby-trap of the word 'like'. He was turning the whole of his sonnet's rhetorical structure around the issue of the poem's unreliability, its potential for disobedience, the possibility of its uselessness in performing the metaphorical task its master wanted to accomplish. It is Shakespeare's rhetorical hesitation, his critical awareness of the instability of language, that make his poem matter – more, I would suggest, than its apparent task of courting and flattering a lover. Does this poem matter? We don't know if it did the pragmatic job of successfully courting a lover – if it fixed a dripping tap, so to speak, *pace* Karl Du Fresne – and really, who cares whether it mattered or matters in that pragmatic sense? Whether it was *successful* or effective as an act of courtship? But it still does matter – and I would say matters more – because of the way it identifies and plays with one of poetry's oldest traps, its potentially subversive uselessness as the docile tradesperson of the commanding poet.

A reverse kind of disobedience may occur in poems that seem highly refined and effortless as artefacts, when in fact they have been made to appear that way at the expense of huge effort on the part of the poet. The poet Virgil famously only managed to write a couple of lines a day and on his deathbed pleaded for his *Aeneid* to be burned because he was sick to death of it, yet over some ten thousand lines of craftily compacted hexameters in the *Aeneid* there is little sense of the *poet's* struggle, only of an internal struggle *in the language itself* between its natural stresses as a kind of speech, and the length of syllables in the prosody. This tension has been noted recently by the scholar-poet Sarah Ruden in the Preface to her extraordinary, to-weep-for translation of Virgil's great poem.

Poetry can also be very good at wasting time and subverting intentions, just as it can be good at making something out of the banal and the trivial, or launching itself into a series of digressions. The veteran artificer John Ashbery is one of my treasured digressers, as in his poem *The Leopard and the Lemur*, which begins with a kind of droll classical echo or pastiche, perhaps of Ovid in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in the *Metamorphoses*:

The voice is stilled, that once
Spoke out of a crack in the wall:
The origins of the earth are eroded;
We don't know at what point history begins
And the speech of the sky is clouded.

And so on, very charmingly, with quite a few of those elbow-slipping-off-the-edge-of-the-bar slapstick rhymes, making inconsequentiality appear just as effortless as Virgil's rigorous consequentiality does.

Meanwhile, of course, in the midst of all this talk of uselessness, excess, and inconsequentiality, we need to remember that a great deal of poetry gets written to be effective, for example to be a call to arms, a focus for meditation, a way of retaining and transmitting knowledge, and so on. More on this later.

Let's push this discussion in the direction of the word 'poetry' itself.

What might be a use of the word 'poetry' that people who are 'serious' about it would prefer to be distanced from? 'Poetry' is a word that's used widely in the vernacular, for example when Johnny Tillotson in 1961 sang of a girl that she was 'poetry in motion/ walking by my side.' Here, 'poetry' conveniently describes the indescribable, it's the word the lyricist falls back on when he's at a loss for words or when events render him speechless. It's the word for an ineffable phenomenon, for a kind of beauty or loveliness too classy to describe in terms of actual body parts, for a fine aesthetic that idealises without getting specific. 'Poetry' here describes or rather signifies a quality, in fact a 'quality' quality. Poetry flatters by association.

Used in this way, 'poetry' also has a certain air of wistfulness – the implication is that the girl may now be a little out of reach, that the singer's admiration for and pride in the poetry of his girl's motion is also the measure of a certain distance: a girl with such classy poetry of motion may be by his side, but is she within reach? He can be touched by her poetry, but can he be touched by her – can he ever be closer than by her side?

'I, too, dislike it.' Marianne Moore's famous opening line in her poem 'Poetry,' seems by implication at least to be directed also against the kind of poetry that merely flatters its object or occasion – an outflanking of Du Fresne and Laws. Moore's line has been appropriated by the on-line blog and comment site SLATE for its series (headed up by Robert Pinsky) on 'poets who don't like poetry.'

The famous final line in Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy' ('Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through') reads not only like an enraged assault on a fascist vampire patriarchy, but also perhaps on the kind of overbearing male poet by whose side Plath felt lock-stepped into minor compliance.

A slightly different set of speculations emerges when we listen to the husky-voiced rugby commentator Murray Mexted, a poet of the television sports channels, who is famous for what's referred to as his 'poetic' turn of phrase. I've often heard him use the word 'poetry' to describe an otherwise indescribable event in a game of rugby, usually, like the Johnny Tillotson song, involving motion. In fact, on several occasions I heard him refer to Carlos Spencer as 'poetry in motion.' Most often, though, I've heard Murray use the familiar phrase 'pure poetry.' In the case of a gigantic South African lock forward being lifted high in the air at lineout, the work being done by the phrase 'pure poetry' isn't quite the same as Johnny Tillotson's. 'Pure,' here, describes exemplary physical rather than aesthetic qualities, but in doing so it associates exemplary physical action with moral quality. It allows us to read physical prowess through a filter of higher being.

I'm not suggesting that Murray Mexted is subscribing to the kind of Nazification of physical prowess associated with higher moral being, but there is a hint of awe in his commentary when he enthuses warmly about the 'pure poetry' of a particularly bone-shattering tackle, and this awe, which is familiar to us in combination with terror, is of course the sign of the Sublime. The 'pure poetry' that Murray is huskily invoking is in fact the Sublime, that inspirer of awe and terror so often associated also with Romantic poetry (and excoriated by Sylvia Plath).

In these contexts, where the word 'poetry' does the job of expressing some otherwise inarticulate feelings of awe, its companion term 'poetic' is also likely to make an appearance. By 'poetic' here I mean the adjective used to describe a condition or affect, not the noun used for the practice and theory of writing poetry. Rather like the word 'artistic' uttered as a pejorative by artists, the adjective 'poetic' is frequently used ironically by 'poets who don't like poetry' to describe minor or sentimental qualities they dislike or don't want to be associated with – Marianne Moore again. The word 'poetic' has come to be seen as devalued or even degraded, to belong in the languages of caption writers in travel magazines or marketing copywriters describing new lines in Laura Ashley home furnishing fabrics. And unlike the neo-fascist moral superiority undertones of 'pure poetry' used to describe exemplary physical action, 'a poetic turn of phrase' often hints at deviousness, at a faintly immoral way with the truth. The word 'poetic' is uttered with a shudder or a sneer by poets wishing to dissociate themselves from sentimentality or amateurism, or from the language of marketing copywriters; but it is also uttered somewhat sceptically by non-poets who want to suggest that someone is lying. Or if not exactly lying, then coming up with some unusually creative kinds of truth. Hence the term 'poetic licence.'

Movement and truth-telling; or walking and knowledge of the world: I find it interesting that the vernaculars of ‘poetry’ and ‘poetic’ so often sheet back to these fundamental and probably archaic concepts of movement and knowledge. I think it’s also likely that there’s a connection between the two, that there’s a cognitive link or bridge between movement and knowledge, or between physical movement and the recognition of kinds of truth. Poetry somehow reminds us of this connection, and almost certainly articulates it. I suspect, partly on the basis of my own experience, that many of us think best when we have settled into a rhythm of walking, that the bridge created between walking and thinking is built with language, and that what crosses that language bridge between walking and thinking is knowledge or understanding. Sounds like poetry to me, at a complex level most often associated with oral traditions such as the spatial geographies and genealogies of Aboriginal ‘song-lines,’ or the combinations of whakapapa and rahui in Māori tauparapara, whose rhythms may often be those of canoe voyaging and portage. This is not to deny that we may accomplish something similar by dancing, swimming, driving the car or, in the case of John Ashbery and his fluid digressions, by consuming excellent cocktails. Nor does it rule out the kinds of cognitive patterning produced by the visual rhythms of the printed page, the typewriter or computer keyboard, or the interconnections and cross-currents of diverse digital domains. I recently travelled on the London underground with a rush-hour crowd most of whom were listening to i-Pods while reading or texting, and there was one strap-hanging woman who involuntarily uttered ethereal fragments of the song she was listening to, with a slightly unnerving, off-key, trance-like timbre to her voice – another kind of ‘poetry in motion.’ Nor should we overlook the obvious importance of rhythm and performance in hip-hop and rap, something the fast-talking PI Selina Tusitala Marsh and the ‘fast talker’ David Eggleton have brought to the poetry scene here in New Zealand.

But to return to the older model of walking. It’s no accident that our word for the basic measure of prosody, of poetic structure, is ‘foot.’ I don’t think it’s fanciful to suggest that the rocking motion as we move our weight forward from the heel of one of our feet to its toes is one basic measure of articulated thought. The rhythms of our thought are, after all, residually or if you like *primitively* the rhythms of on-foot nomads. We may associate the evolved forms of human culture, including poetry, with post-nomadic settlement and the life of cities – with the *polis* and with metropolitan sophistication – but *how we know stuff*, how we access and structure our knowledge and understanding of *what matters*, may very well involve archaic modes of cognition activated and produced through complex interactions of walking, perceiving, thinking, and talking. While you are walking, perceiving, thinking, and talking, you are also breathing – in fact, you may be measuring your breaths with some regularity and care, and fitting your talking into their interstices. The ‘foot’, then, in poetry, is not just a measure of length or extent, but also of duration or time measured by how

long it takes to breathe in and out, how long to swing one leg forward while the foot on the other rocks your body's weight forward.

Dante Alighieri famously composed his vernacular masterpiece the *Divina Commedia* while walking in the hills of Umbria during the bitter years of his exile. The *terza rima* form that he used may have derived from the *sirventes* genre of Occitan poetry used by the troubadours, notably Bertran de Born, the favourite of Ezra Pound. But it is also, in its pace and in the way in which its rhymes catch breath, the simple rhythm of walking, thinking, and talking:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Another famous walking poet, Robert Frost, used *terza rima* in his poem 'Acquainted with the Night':

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

And yet another *terza rima*-ist and obsessive walker, Shelley, in 'Ode to the West Wind':

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

And so on. And then of course there's Wordsworth, who didn't use *terza rima*, walking all over the Lake District off his face on laudanum, and his succinct Japanese counterpart Matsuo Basho walking along the route of his 'Narrow Road to the Interior.'

Yes, this is a very simplistic and reductive account of poetry. And I don't want to promote a hokey prescription for poetry as language-got-rhythm; the complex cognitive rhythms or patterns we are talking about here are not, or are not just, of the tum-ti-tum variety. But I hope I've been able to make the point that our vernacular expressions, such as 'poetry in motion,' 'pure poetry,' and 'poetic licence,' are evidence of just how saturated everyday language and usage are in some of the archaic fundamentals of poetry – such as its cognitive and language links between movement and knowledge, its tendency to perform competitive evolutionary cultural categories and canons, and its connection to

truth telling (or lying) – and how, on this evidence, poetry demonstrably does matter, whether the nay-sayers or the variously squeamish yea-sayers like it (or dislike it) or not.

It's possible, of course, that these traces in our English-language culture are merely fossils and represent a time when poetry *did* matter, rather than evidence that it *does*. I personally doubt this, though to have any weight my doubt would need to be tested by substantial comparative research into historical and contemporary conditions. However, it seems to me that cultures are rich and diverse ecologies made up of many interconnected components both small and large, which grow and diminish in cycles over time according to the equivalents of natural laws involving economies of production and distribution, the permeability or not of specialist enclaves and environments, the enrichment or depletion of food-chains, and the shifting tastes of consumers. For example, to return to a couple of the examples already cited, Dryden's 1697 translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* made it a durable component of the English-language poetic canon, and did so initially by putting it into circulation beyond the walled scholarly enclave where fluency in Greek and Latin was a basic access requirement. Dante's decision to write his *Commedia* in a vernacular that would come to be known as 'Italian,' rather than in Latin, was a political act whose significance was subsequently obscured or repositioned by the work's apotheosis to the higher canon of Modernism, what TS Eliot called the 'mind of Europe' with its attendant condescension of individual subjectivity and its elevation of an 'ideal order.' There is a kind of cyclic eco-rhythm in such examples, whereby poetry and its 'legitimising discourses' seem to move back and forth across variously 'popular' and 'privileged' domains whose relationships are of course more dialectical than antithetical, however hard their champions try to defend their perceived points of difference, significance, or value.

There *are* cultures where poetry obviously does have a dominant or overarching role in cultural ecologies, and I want to finish this talk by looking briefly at three of these under the heading 'Does poetry matter?' The question, after all, can only have comparative, not absolute, answers.

In India, the *Mahabharata* began to be composed in Sanskrit some time before 300 BCE or about two thousand three hundred-odd years ago, with multiple tributaries of vernacular dialect as well as additional Sanskrit being added over the next six hundred or so years. The poem contains about three million words and is about seven times the length of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* combined. In the late 1980s it was televised in 94 episodes based on a comic book version – towns and cities practically shut down during broadcast hours on Sunday mornings. There are numerous Bollywood versions, and, most recently, as reported in the *London Review of Books*, Chindu Sreedharan has begun to post a Twitter version called 'Epicretold' at the rate of one 140-character tweet at a time. The *Mahabharata's* vast scale of episode and theme in a sense boils down to the issue of dharma, how to do the right thing, and what happens when you don't. It's inconceivable that the *Mahabharata* could ever

cease to be contemporary; it's impossible to imagine that Hindu society in all its complexity could cease to be performed by the *Mahabharata*, that it could cease to be the agent that networks that society, or that it could cease to *matter* as an artefact.

In 2005 I spent a month in Bangladesh looking for traces of my childhood there between 1954 and 1958. I was also interested in the Baul poets of Bengal. The national anthem of Bangladesh is based on lyrics by Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu, and a melody by the Bangladeshi Baul poet, Lalon Shah (Tagore also wrote the national anthem of India). Bangladeshi nationalism is deeply rooted in language – Bangla – and the founding moment of Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan was the student revolt of 21 February 1952 during which five ‘language martyrs’ were killed by police near the Dhaka Medical College hospital. The students were demonstrating against the decree by the Central Pakistan Government that minority Urdu would be the official language of both East and West Pakistan. I attended Language Martyr’s Day demonstrations at the Shaheed Minar memorial in Dhaka on 21 February 2005, during which a couple of bombs concealed in empty potato chip packets went off; these did not deter the enormous crowd of perhaps a million people that brought flowers to the monument, or quell its enthusiasm for the poets who became the voices of the people in the lead-up to the war of liberation in 1971: Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Mohammed Iqbal. Each of these came to represent a political faction, less because of their own beliefs as because without poets and the legitimisation of their language no political leader could expect to win credibility. When I went from the guest house where I was staying down to the nearby traffic island to get a rickshaw across to the demonstrations, I passed a guy with a little bicycle-tyre repair shop. He’d made a *papier maché* model of the Shaheed Minar memorial using a copy of the newspaper with Kazi Nazrul Islam’s famous poem ‘Rebel’ on it, a rallying-cry in the 1971 war of liberation – this was partly out of respect for the language martyrs, but also as insurance against the Awami League enforcers who were policing the general strike. As the Bangladeshi historian Rafiuddin Ahmed put it, Bangladesh never believes anything until there is a poet to articulate it.

An analogous claim can be made for the roles of Arab poets such as the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish or the late Fadwa Tuqan whom he addressed as ‘Sister’ in his famous poem ‘Diary of a Palestinian Wound’. When I lived in Amman, Jordan, in 1969 and 1970, I used to walk down to the central souk in the mornings to go to a job in an outlying town called Russeifeh. I often noticed groups of early morning breakfasters clustered around radios in the coffee shops, listening to broadcasts. I found out that these were broadcasts of new poems by poets such as Fadwa Tuqan, Darwish, Samir al Quasim, and others.

Mahmoud Darwish died on Saturday 9 August 2008. News of his death was widely reported in the international media, but sadly not here in New Zealand. The great Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif

said Darwish was the last poet who could fill a football stadium for a poetry reading. This was literally true: 25,000 people filled a stadium in Beirut early in 2008 to listen to him; many more attended his funeral ceremonies in Amman and Ramallah. At his funeral in Ramallah, tens of thousands of black-clad mourners held aloft portraits of Darwish in streets draped with 5,000 flags printed with images of the poet and one word in Arabic: 'Farewell.'

Darwish's poetry doesn't contain a marked divide between the popular outcries of resistance broadcast on the radio and the metaphysical poems, love poems and poems about history that he also wrote. One of the clear signs of the continuum within which he wrote was that its cultural extent and continuities were recognised by a sophisticated metropolitan elite including Palestinian intellectuals such as Edward Said, as well as by the mass of dispossessed living in refugee camps. The great Egyptian diva Oum Kalsoum transposed Darwish's poems into songs whose many reprises often lasted up to an hour; performed to huge, delirious audiences, they recalled the intricately linked rubaiyyat of classical Arabic poetry, the high-coloured rhetoric of political harangue, and the sounds of the prayer-caller or imam (Oum Kalsoum's father was the imam of a Nile Delta mosque).

This complex public role distinguishes what Darwish's audiences expected of him from the expectations of the small, literary audience that reads poetry in New Zealand. In 1985, after researching a bi-lingual anthology of New Zealand poetry, I encountered, in the arguments that broke out over the inclusion of Māori texts in the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, a comparable disjunction between poetry as public rhetoric and the conventions of a primarily literary, salon, or academic culture. What seemed interesting to me and my co-editor Harvey McQueen was that there were, indeed, different modalities involved: it was the *differences* between the English-language and the Māori that made their inclusion together in a book worthwhile, not any similar claims they might have had to be included in such an anthology, such as the hegemonising agency of a shared definition of 'poetry.' No more fluent in Māori than I had been in the Arabic with which Darwish spoke to radio-listeners in the souk in Amman, I could still figure out that the modes of address and reception for a composition by Ngōi Pēwhairangi or Pita Sharples before a large audience at the Tomoana showgrounds in Hastings were more like those I encountered in Amman than, even, in my own experience, the modest theatrics of 'Young New Zealand Poets' reading to enlarged audiences for poetry during the 1970s.

I raise these issues not in order to take the moral high ground, but because I have been lucky to have had encounters that have allowed me to measure the distance between the expectations of my own literary culture, and other, different ones.

At any rate, I can hardly finish without stating my position. I do believe that poetry matters in complex and contradictory ways across diverse cultural situations and in response to diverse and sometimes incompatible or even incomprehensible expectations. It matters that there isn't a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question, 'Does poetry matter?' Elation – that poetic condition in which thought, emotion, and perception are fused – is about immersion rather than the dissociation of sensibility – or, as Donna Haraway memorably quipped in *When Species Meet*, 'My endorphins are at high tide.'

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