

Ocean Song to Myself

when the soul has been wounded and the sun is keen
to surface in the dark there is one place I go to
that place that fills the earth's land with moisture and
water, that changes the coast in a dream, that place
the ancients call mother of mothers, the ocean

there along the sand soft as illusions, sparkles with
stars, the white shells sculptured by mouths of
myth and minerals, and touches deep whirls of death while
fish fly towards the breaks, and foam collects sadness
of it the horizon perpetuates eternity and a wave
samples marine change, then I baptise myself, sing to
myself, sing to the ocean, and the cold faith
dive into memorial, safe as blood, knotted to
the nakedness, crying to the sea, open to
the glowing extreme, and ecstasy, in a state
of sleep, so nothing solid drifts too far
for queries is the soul's intention.

when I emerge from myself to learn the language
allegorised by twenty-eight years of dreaming, senses
take on the appearance of trees to wind up their
song among the birds for the leaves sing a tune misled
by ships, or whales mating, moving depths to drift
to caves, and watch fossils lost in the legs of
gannets feeding their chicks.

gannets strike a musical chord for traces of religious
visions, to cover wounds that go away briefly
to pray to darkness or grieve, but return
likes waves to eat at united entities, so I stand
in the ocean, recite my whakapapa, first to the north
where I tasted timala and dirt
to the west, the east and the south.

I mix my tears with the salt and the waves, drink a cup
So the veins are fattened with life
When life flees from the body we must sing it back
Rituals and eternal prayers
For the sun's acute dedication to the flower petals
We become humble and embrace, we lose

the knowledge.

I kneel in the surf and trust the ocean to take me
but not take me, to show her wrath by
playing, and then seal the light that escapes
from the wound that lovers call lips
I walk out and the rocks remain quiet as a moon,
Pohutukawa and puriri dance in the noonday sun
pukeko chase my shadow into the mountains
as the clouds that follow the time of never returning
goodbye.

“Important to the Samoan view of reality is the concept of Va or Wa in Maori or Japanese. Va is the space between the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things.” (88).

Pule’s choice of title, *Ocean Song to Myself*, introduces his intricate treatment of this ‘wholism’ which is entwined throughout the poem. He uses “myself” to separate the individual from “united entities” such as the ocean, whilst simultaneously incorporating the individual within that whole. This is manifest in his obscuration of dualities, his treatment of ‘knowing’, and his imagery of wounds and of loss.

Dualities:

Rather than simply deconstructing conventional binaries, Pule juxtaposes differences of tangibility and intangibility to exacerbate the way these ‘oppositions’ are inextricably linked. This is explored through the predominant duality of body and soul, which he fragments into other combinations of material and immaterial things. In the first stanza the *body-and-soul* seeks refuge in the ocean, which encompasses both a physical and spiritual healing. Pule describes the ocean as the place “that fills the earth’s land with moisture” and “that changes the coast in a dream.”

This dichotomous ‘healing’ is evoked in the second stanza through the imagery which aligns the intangible elements of the ocean: “illusions”, “myths”, “death” and “sadness” with the natural and material components: “sand”, “stars”, “shells”, “fish” and “foam”. Although these elements are separate, they are essentially connected through a shared space and experience where everything is affected by everything; the shells are formed by *both* “myth and minerals”.

Pule carries on this idea of unification in the fifth stanza where he produces an exuberant image of merging body, soul and nature:

I mix my tears with the salt and the waves, drink a cup

So the veins are fattened with life

The fact that this exuberance is formulated through “tears” suggests an inversion from something negative to positive. However, the “tears” Pule refers to could be tears of joy as well as tears of sadness. This correlates to Smith’s criticism of the de-colonisation process, which she sees as an attempt to invert the overly idealistic images of indigenous peoples or “savages”. This inversion is not possible because there is no simple binary construct to invert (26). Pule enforces this in the way he produces an idyllic image that doesn’t necessarily confirm the stereotype of “the savage”. Instead he celebrates his alignment with nature, allowing him to be more human and less human at the same time: “veins are fattened with life”. ‘Wholism’ is therefore not about being one or the other, it is about being both and neither at the same.

Knowing memories:

A crucial element in the workings of ‘wholism’ is the fundamental knowledge, values and understanding that fuses the material and immaterial world together. Williams and Henare demonstrate this in their examination of the ‘traditional’ Maori way of knowing. The Maori world-view is generally articulated using metaphor, but this broad and vitalistic conceptual basis has an underlying logic that provides an explanatory power for all things (3). Pule weaves this way of knowing throughout the poem, and it is epitomised in stanza three through the line: “when I emerge from myself to learn the language/ allegorised by twenty-eight years of dreaming”. The “dreaming” encompasses the abstract and metaphoric foundation of knowledge that enables the “senses” to “take on” and interpret the individual entities of the universe.

Because these separate entities are all formulated by ‘twenty-eight years of dreaming’ there is a fundamental sameness that connects everything together. Pule achieves this connectedness in the third stanza through a minimal amount of punctuation and the use of prepositions, which produces a continual flow between each line and “thing”:

[senses] take on the appearance of trees to wind up their

song among the birds for the leaves sing a tune misled
by ships, or whales mating, moving depths to drift
to caves, and watch fossils lost in the legs of
gannets feeding their chicks.

Although separated by space and words, the “gannets feeding their chicks” is an extension of both “the appearance of trees” and the “senses” because it forms one continuous sentence, and is therefore one cohesive entity.

Although ‘wholism’ intimates a fundamental understanding of ‘things’, Pule also addresses the way in which knowledge and meaning can get lost in this entwinement: “...and watch fossils lost in the legs of/ gannets feeding their chicks.” The fossil produces an image of the past, holding memories and “history”, but because the memories are encased in material matter, they run the risk of physically being lost or “drifting” away. When memory is not attached to anything, it is its own entity, and is “safe as blood, knotted to/ the nakedness”. Material things are in actuality less “solid” or fixed than immaterial things, which cannot be physically altered or manipulated: “in a state of sleep...nothing solid drifts too far”.

However, as everything is connected in this wholistic world-view, memory cannot exist purely on its own. Pule therefore elucidates the compromise of encasing memory in “oral tradition” (Smith, 33). Oral tradition has an intermediary function that provides a link between memories of the past, and the remembrance in the present. This is inscribed in the following lines:

[...]so I stand
in the ocean, recite my whakapapa, first to the north
where I tasted timala and dirt
to the west, the east and the south.

Pule ascertains a sense of inclusion and connectedness through the verbalisation of his ancestry to everything around him. This euphoric image supports Smith’s argument that “oral tradition” is a much more boundless way of ‘knowing’ in comparison to the concept of “history” (33). She explains that “history” is a Eurocentric idea that can only come into form with the possession or understanding of literacy (29-39). “History” is bound by time, language and facts,

whereas “oral tradition” provides a range of alternate forms of knowledge stored within genealogies, landscape, weavings and carvings and personal names (33).

In saying this however, Pule’s representation of “oral traditions” also has restrictive implications because language is necessary for his recitation. The lines: “when I emerge from myself to learn the language/ allegorised by twenty-eight years of dreaming...” also addresses the fact that his language is merely producing an allegorical construct of the past. In this process, meaning and knowledge can also be lost. In:

Rituals and eternal prayers
For the sun’s acute dedication to the flower petals
We become humble and embrace, we lose

the knowledge.

This is not to say that in losing “the knowledge” it no longer exists. Like the concept of *Va*, this loss it is not an emptiness, it is an intangible layer of the whole that gives meaning to everything else. This is exemplified in the lines of another of Pule’s poems – ‘9’:

I am a great liar
my thoughts are pure truth
my voice is a liar
I ask for your forgiveness

(Wendt, Whaitiri and Sullivan, 164)

These lines demonstrate that although words can fabricate meaning, the fundamental “truth” of something still exists and is retrievable. It may just be that the truth is adrift in what Wendt describes as “...the space between the betweenness” (88). Thus, whether ascribing memory to something material or immaterial, there is always the risk of its meaning being lost, forgotten or manipulated. Nonetheless, the memory or knowing never ceases to exist in the construct of the whole, because the act of ‘losing’ something implies that it was once ‘possessed’.

In fact, the loss or lack can have positive implications on the whole. In the very first line Pule indicates a resistance to complete enlightenment by aligning

his wounded soul with the sun's keenness to "surface in the dark". Conventionally, the sun's light is representative of the positivity of illumination, but because Pule wants to avoid it, like the pain of his wounded soul, these conventional connotations are undermined. Instead, there is a need for darkness and unknowingness because without these there would be no substance in lightness and in knowing. This incompleteness is particularly evident in stanza six:

I kneel in the surf and trust the ocean to take me
but not take me, to show her wrath by
playing,

If the ocean wasn't "playing" and was to actually "take" him there would be nothing else left to be "taken". The very construct of the whole would be diminished because "queries is the soul's intention." For things to develop and expand in the present and the future there needs to be a time of darkness in the past: "...one's existence is transversal from the beginning when there was nothing" (Williams and Henare, 3). Thus, if the soul has nothing left to query, it ceases to have purpose.

Hope in darkness:

In this 'darkness' Pule also offers the possibility and hope of reclamation and reciprocity. This is achieved through the image of the "wound" established at the beginning, that he attempts to "heal" throughout the rest of the poem. "When the soul has been wounded" he goes: "...to/ that place that fills the earth's land with moisture" in an act of supplication. In the fifth stanza Pule addresses the necessity of rituals and traditions in order to regain whatever has been lost: "when life flees from the body we must sing it back". In the fourth stanza, Pule acknowledges the cyclicity of this:

gannets strike a musical chord for traces of religious
visions, to cover wounds that go away briefly
to pray to darkness or grieve, but return
likes waves to eat at united entities...

Through “rituals and prayers” the wounds disappear briefly and then return again, and so on, in a movement that reiterates the motion of the tides and waves. Pule thus focuses on the repercussions and effects of this wound, rather than the wound itself. The wound forces the individual to strengthen their position in relation to the ‘whole’ through reclaiming the tradition of rituals and prayers, which will consistently “seal the light” whenever it “escapes”.

This movement of reciprocity reverberates in the motion of arrivals and departures. Armstrong explains that these two points of origin and destination are not confined to the boundary of opposites. He claims, “It is not just about where you come from but where you are going.” (21-38). Silafau Sina Va’ai exemplifies this in these lines from her poem *The Returning*:

Last year, this time, our thoughts
actions, words reached out, stretched forth
to look towards returning.

(Somerville and Marsh, 131)

Va’ai exacerbates the inter-connectedness of the past, present and future and the fact that looking backwards in the present is just as important as looking forward. Pule produces a similar sentiment at the end of his poem. Although there is closure in his use of “goodbye”, the goodbye is not forever because the pukeko will continue to “chase my shadow”, as will the clouds “follow the time of never returning”. The fact that this “never returning” can be followed shows that it is a time that still exists in the journey of the whole.

Works Cited:

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