

4 Time and Space in Hiruharama – James K. Baxter’s Vivid Culture of Images

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The New Zealand poet, James K Baxter (1926-1972) was a most professional poet who maintained meticulous records and fair copies. He sought and gained social recognition and international publication. Towards the end of his life he turned away from his professional artistic way of life and literally walked into the wilderness. Where he ended up was a small Maori community at Hiruharama (a transliteration of Jerusalem). Here Baxter attempted a spiritual, social and poetic experiment: he attempted to make his life vivid. The first record of this experiment is to be found in the sequence, *Jerusalem Sonnets*, consisting of thirty-nine meditative and diary-like poems. The poet announces in the final sonnet, thirty-nine, that he had “hoped for fifty sonnets”, such was his formal temperament even in the mode of mystic voyager. In the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, Baxter seeks to make explicit (vivid) the spiritual dimension of culture in the everyday life he set out to follow. In his effort to ground the experiment, he moves closer and closer to a direct alignment of the poet, his poetry and the world of the spirit. Images arise with a rapidity and strength that infuse the poetry with a vitality that is undeniable. The downside to this rush of images is clearly recognised by Baxter. He is in danger of establishing a body of work that will defeat his larger purpose by becoming a thing in itself. Worse, the sheer strength of the images that arise is such that the poet is establishing his own images of God. This fundamental tension is announced in the final sonnet:

But I say, 'If' – one thing, how can the image come
At all to the centre where the mind is silent

Without being false? . . .
(Baxter, 1980, p. 474)

The interplay between vivid artistic possibility and personal spiritual falsity, elevates this sequence from the mere ramblings of a reformed alcoholic hippie to the meditations of an everyman, even if it is an everyman with both eyes turned to the camera.

1 Going Wild

It must be handy for a poet-as-prophet to walk into a landscape (and in a landscape) that has already had a symbolic order established. Hiruharama, a small Maori village on the north island of New Zealand is not only picturesque it is also the site of a Catholic mission:

Jerusalem, also known as Hiruharama, was once the largest kainga (village) on the Whanganui River in the middle of a populous district. It was known as a meeting place for korero (discussion). The Catholic Mission was first

established in the area in 1854. Jerusalem is where Suzanne Aubert founded the congregation of the Sisters of Compassion in 1892. (Jerusalem, 2002)

Here, in the late part of 1969, James K. Baxter set about the self-established task of a poetic journey. Throwing off the trappings of father, husband and recent Burns Fellow at Otago University, Baxter flirted in dangerous ways with life and language. Much like the fantail, that in Maori mythology is the foreteller of a visitor who might also be death, Baxter made himself obvious, vivid and vulnerable (Baxter 1980, p. 586). Living on the edges of a small community, that is itself on the edges of “civilisation” (“it was not too remote – simply hard to get to” (Oliver, 1983, p. 132)), Baxter starts his journey in an advanced stage of conflation and inflation; the matching of the self of the poet as image and the world of the poetry as images had begun.

This issue is taken up from the very opening sonnet to the *Jerusalem Sonnets*. In line five we find the poet/prophet wandering in the night:

... when the lights are still on
In the houses in the pa, to go across thick grass

Wet with rain, feet cold, to kneel
(Baxter, 1980, p. 455)

What has set him on his journey is “The small grey cloudy lice that nests in my beard.” And, where he kneels, for “an hour or two”, is “in front of the red flickering // Tabernacle light.” Between these two states of religious control (he does not have to do either, put up with lice, or kneel), we observe the vivid poet making doubly real the everyday, if unusual events of just walking in wet grass with bare feet. The symbolic posture of humility (kneeling for hours) is balanced by the gesture of poverty (living with lice). Each of these has its potential vividness such that the Tabernacle light is now made real through the gesture of poverty and the gesture of poverty is made real through the posture of humility.

This preparation, by the poet, is aimed at the reader. We are here being taught how to find the elemental and real through a series of concentrated and deliberate experiences. The title page to the original publication of the *Jerusalem Sonnets* carries this question:

If that Jerusalem which is unshakeable friendship
With God has not been established first in the heart,
How can the objective Jerusalem of communal charity
Be built so as not to fall?

The sonnets are the record of the experiment in grounding the poet’s friendship with God. The ‘objective Jerusalem’ is the space in which the vitality of the religious experience is found as vivid encounters with the everyday. The structuring of this material meditation is found in the mediation of language such that outright imagistic moments are held in tension

with religious symbolism, the one being asked to forgive, explain and sustain the other. In sonnet two the reader is invited into the game of conflation:

At the centre of the paddock – there's an old springcart,
Or at least two wheels and the shafts, upended

Below the tree – Elijah's chariot it could be . . .

This sonnet starts with a direct imagistic account of a beehive:

The bees that have been hiving above the church porch
Are some of them killed by the rain –

I see their dark bodies on the step
As I go in – but later on I hear

Plenty of them singing with what seems a virile joy
In the apple tree whose reddish blossoms fall

At the centre of the paddock – there's an old springcart
(Baxter, 1980, p. 455)

2 At the Centre

“At the centre of the paddock” is at the centre of the poem and at the centre of the poem's time and space world. The double location of tree and springcart bridges between the two realms of a natural mysticism where God is found in nature (the bees and apple flowers) and prophetic obligation where the world, in its potential as the human building according to God's will, presents itself in the quixotic vision of possibility (“Elijah's chariot it could be”). This is, of course, nothing but play and playfulness as the poet raises images in the reader's mind that are generally quite appealing in their hint of transcendence: by my act, as a reader, of imaginative achievement (I see a bee in a tree) so I am taken into the realm of imaginative possibilities where old carts might be chariots and where visions of human community might be, for the imagined moment, real in their being vivid (carried by an image which is itself vital). We are being taught to vision.

The final sonnet in the Jerusalem sequence offers further reader instructions in terms of the time and space locations of the vivid components of the individual poems. Just as the “thick grass // Wet with rain” bridges lines six and seven in sonnet one, so the “reddish blossoms fall // At the centre of the paddock” bridges lines six and seven in sonnet two. This deliberate centring is the mediation of the negative theology of perception that instructs the sequence: what we see and where we stand in time and space exist as they exist, but in the experience of the experience we apprehend (take hold of and are taken hold of by) the falsity (or abstractness) of experience as an image of itself; in spite of the vitality achieved, there is no permanence in immanence. In the final sonnet, thirty-nine, the poet announces the emptiness of it all: “how can the image come / At all to the centre where the mind is silent // Without being false?” (Baxter, 1980, p. 474). That is, no image can be

ultimately consoling, no matter how precisely located; no place can be ultimately sacred, regardless of the continuing investment of significance, disclosure of meaning and quest for transcendent experience; no spiritual experience will be ultimately fixed, no matter how well defined and mapped the life of the individual. Indeed, the images, as they accumulate and the significances, as they replicate and reveal conscious authorial focus, all add to a narrative within and beyond the sonnet sequence that expands to defeat the narrator.

In terms of time and space, the vivid images of wet grass and old springcart are held in tension within the dynamics of the sonnet structure. The form and the formalization are both inherently meditative in that they allow the holding up of the experience, as a structure, to contemplation. However, this experience is, itself, also part of time and space. The consolation of the momentary, the lyric constellation of self as place in time, acquires the concreteness of symbolic elevation only to be defeated by this very concreteness. It is not simply that time will take all matters forward (and it does), nor that place will not remain stationary (and it does and does not); rather it is that the symbolic order of things will itself take the narrative over and in taking over the narrative, the symbolic will appropriate the experience as significance and reconstellate the lyric moment as yet another moment in the starry sky of moments. The poet's meditations will all become part of a larger history as biography that evidences the transcendence of experience rather than the experience of transcendence: try as he might, the poet's quest is doomed to failure in its very success.

3 Simplicity and Mythopoesis

The Jerusalem sonnets stand out in their simplicity and clarity. Simplicity may well be an achievement but time and space and the symbolic order of Baxter's mythopoetic world surround the sonnets with a sophistication that does not diminish as the images clarify immediate experience: Baxter was never "out of it"; he was always within a community of ideas and memories and cultural significances. There is a sense of historical density along with personal destiny about all his work. Each new poem builds on his body of poetry, even when the poet seeks renewal in the purity of lyrical meditation. In "The Tiredness of Me and Herakles" (Baxter, 1980, p. 595), the penultimate poem in the *Collected Poems*, Baxter clearly articulates the impact of this accretion: "Five labours still to go / I am tired already." Each image has its place, each place has its time. The yearned-for sacred in real time and space is somewhere else in the sanctified Maori past:

At another time in another place
Among the Ngati-Whatua
When they brought the dead child into the meeting house

She opened her eyes and smiled
(Baxter, 1980, p. 600)

These are the concluding lines to the concluding poem in the *Collected Poems* ("Ode to Auckland"). Here the modern city is vilified as: "Auckland, you great arsehole" (Baxter, 1980, p. 597). Among the tribes there once was magic: there once was a sense of the sacred in the immediate and present world. Throughout Baxter's life and poetic career,

the conflict between the poetic urge to resolve reality as a sacred image and the human urge to find that sacredness in the everyday shows up. Where does this conflict find its source? Was there ever a time in Baxter's life when place was sanctified, when experience was natural?

4 Dun-Edin and Jerusalem

Returning, as an adult, to the Otago hills (Dunedin) of his childhood and family, Baxter proposed a way to go through the physical life and know the spirit in time and place. This way was the tribal way. Beyond what the Church could offer through care and “her gift of sacramental life” there was “what the Maori call *aroha*, the powerful bond of love that springs from a tribal matrix” (‘Conversation with an Ancestor’, Baxter 1967, p. 28).

As I have done time after time in imagination, looking for some fragment of the lost unity . . . I go along the river track towards that gully where the clan built their houses, washed their linen, made their music, harvested their crops, bore their children and watched over their dead. It is half way towards night. The gully is choked with broom and gorse. The sods of their houses have vanished. I do not recognize the man who meets me there, beside the river where the sandflies are gathering in clouds, but his eyes hold my attention ... When he speaks to me his language is the Gaelic; I understand the meaning of the words but not the words spoken. (Baxter, 1967, p. 28)

It is this tribal matrix that Baxter sought to found at his Jerusalem community; his own spiritual work he described, in Jerusalem sonnet thirty-five, as “The trap I am setting to catch a tribe” (Baxter, 1980, p. 472). Beyond Gaelic, there was Maori; beyond Western culture there was Maoritanga; beyond the individual was the tribe. In simple terms, Jimmy becomes Hemi and Jerusalem becomes Hiruharama. In more complex terms the imagination is allowed to inhabit the everyday world so that events and places take on a mythopoetic and spiritual quality. In this sense, Baxter is attempting to establish a new myth and a new tribe, one that includes the Gaelic and the Maori traditions:

“Kaore te taima, kaore te moni, kaore nga pukapuka” - no time, no money, no books. It is an ideal, no doubt. Yet how can nga moki [the fatherless] learn Maori oral tradition if their noses are continually stuck in pakeha [white New Zealander] books? (Baxter, 1971, p. 44)

It is these features of Baxter's poetry that attract most readers: the simple mystical, the natural invested, enrobed, made sacred through a language that appears to be direct. As Oliver points out, there are very real dangers associated with this posture:

There is more than humility, though there is humility, in all of this. There is also vanity, a vanity that found its satisfactions in a display of raggedness, infestation, bodily functions, uncleanness and disorders. Decay is celebrated with a distinct relish: we know as much about his bowel movements as about his prayers. (Oliver, 1983, p. 136)

Balanced with poems about excrement we find poems that image the everyday in a gentler light. This high contrast is part of the vividness.

Last night a grey nimbus round the moon,
Today the rain comes from the west;

The leaves on all the trees look greener,
Rangimotu is burning piles of dry grass in his garden,

The flames go up to the low heaven,
And Wehe shouts to him from the door of her kitchen,

“You, come in out of the rain!” he only smiles
And goes on raking ... (Baxter, 1980, p. 559)

This style of waiting, in its excited lyrical purity, indicates a very real poetic shift for Baxter. The younger poet often wrote at a distance, in a formal almost academic style, with one eye on the British publishing houses and the other on the long tradition of Romantic poets. The easy familiar style went along with a radical shift in habit, habitat and humanity. The shift towards this new mystical style has about it both the quality of reflecting a change and a quality of urging towards a change. That is, the language underwrites a reality just as it also attempts to create the reality it is underwritten by. At the same time, Baxter the moralist/essayist lingers - sometimes to the benefit of the project.

In earlier times Baxter wrote:

... meantime the prodigies of nature continue. I describe the sheaves of
water bowing as if to the sickle, an image of the obedience of nature that
does not resist death ... (Baxter, 1967, p. 24)

later this becomes:

Earlier today I cut thistles
Under the trees in the graveyard,
And washed my hands afterwards,
Sprinkling the sickle with water.

That's the life I lead,
Simple as a stone . . .
(Baxter, 1980, p. 540)

The ‘notes’ that follow this poem in *Autumn Testament*, expand on the significance of this new sickle event. That is, Baxter has shifted the various languages of moralist and poet apart so that now the lyrical seems to stand on its own. He still needs, however, to make the point in the manner of a lecture: the moral has to be drawn - perhaps in uncertainty of the

link between the expression and the achievement: images are not enough. The fear of the poet is that what comes so easily to the tongue/pen may indeed exist nowhere else. Baxter the prodigy poet and prophet becomes Baxter the apologist:

Wahi Ngaro: the void out of which all things come. That is my point of beginning. That is where I find my peace.

When prayers, thoughts, desires, are bundled away in their necessary grave, it might seem that one has become an atheist. Trees are trees, hills are hills, men are men. There is no supernatural nimbus to tell us that God is present with and within his creation. Yet it is precisely then that the right thought, the right response, springs out of the void of the heart, and it is a “prayer” to clean a drain or swear at some good friend. We do not create God by thinking about him. (Baxter, 1972, p. 5)

5 Kenosis

There seems to be a genuine agony in these words, especially when we as readers bridge the two styles. Here is the poet fellow trying to find in language that which language tells him cannot be found. The task seems impossible: neither thinking about God nor not thinking about him. Baxter embraces the negative aspects of this theology: God is somehow located in the absence of the poet:

The night sky is full of stars. The stars are made by God. He sustains them in existence by a continual act of creation, from the Now which is his only dimension. My soul wants to go into God, into the night sky, and be lost there. It cannot happen yet. One cannot yet be entirely poor. That is where the pain lies. (Baxter, 1971, p. 23)

Such ponderings follow the Kenotic aspects of Baxter's late faith:

Through a theology of kenosis Buddhist and catholic stand on the same ground. Kenosis means self-emptying, always with the proviso that one hopes to make room for God and one's neighbour.

....

I walk on a cold muddy track between the cottages, meditating as usual on his union with our haphazard calamities, and butchered by my longing for the apparently impossible harmony which will come at the end of all things. We know it now as a naked seed in the ground. (Baxter 1971, p. 40)

These elements are finally constructed, as a practice, as an active theology:

Hard, heavy, slow, dark,
Or so I find them, the hands of Te Whaea

Teaching me to die. Some lightness will come later

When the heart has lost its unjust hope
For special treatment. Today I go with a bucket
Over the paddocks of young grass ...
(Baxter, 1971, p. 23)

“Language is not enough” (Baxter, 1980, p. 588); action cannot be sustained; and while the landscape offers such dreams as in “Pig Island Letters” where “the downward swimmer / Finds fresh water rising up, / A mounded water breast, a fountain, / An invisible tree whose roots cannot be found . . . (Baxter, 1980, p. 285) such dreams are just that: dreams. The fact that there are ocean springs of fresh water off the New Zealand coast only adds to this agony of real and imaginary; it is possible to drink fresh water in salt; it is another matter to establish action in the world where the mediation is meditation.

And the dreams keep coming. The commitments to fellow humans that Baxter took on at his community in Jerusalem, all urge towards a tribal matrix, a spiritual trap that will require of the individual spirit without then being able to demand the tribal outcome. There is a very definite formula with a very definite experimental methodology, there is a very definite time and place. The poet who seeks the presence of God in the everyday is also the poet caught up in the mythos:

... the terrible aspect of our lack of freedom is the fact that we are not free to act communally, when communities are everywhere ceasing to exist, and only a desacralised, depersonalised, centralized Goliath remains to demand our collective obedience.

I do not relish the role of David, in confronting that Goliath, who numbs the soul wherever he touches it. But I find myself curiously, perhaps absurdly, cast in that role. And the five water-worn stones I choose from the river, to put in my sling, are five spiritual aspects of Maori communal life -
arohanui: the Love of the Many;
manuhiritanga: hospitality to the guest and the stranger;
kerero: speech that begets peace and understanding;
matewa: the night life of the soul;
mahi: work undertaken from communal love.
(Baxter, 1971, p. 54)

Baxter then goes on to give a prayer, in Maori, “the prayer of kenosis”:

Jesus is my water
Jesus is my food
Jesus is my prestige
Jesus is my money
Jesus is my love
Jesus is my sickness and my death

Baxter accepts that this prayer “signifies” in English: he asserts that in Maori “it means

more than that. It means what it is” (Baxter, 1971, p.54). Earlier, Baxter had attempted to learn Church Latin thinking that the language of the ancient religious fathers would, of its connection, be transcendent in some way.

6 Conflation and the Virgin

This over-reaching and over-expectation appears in the *Jerusalem Sonnets* as an excited illumination: the vivid becomes manifest through a transference of desire. In sonnet two, following on the “revelation” of Elijah's chariot, the poet takes fire from his own imagination and names, without name “the woman who is like a tree.” This radically ambiguous woman appears in different guises throughout the sonnets. Her appropriation, by the envisioned poet, is a murky attempt to align the world of the poem with the world of the biographical poet. What we see here goes beyond conflation (the alignment of self with the experiences of the self) and enters the darker dimension of inflation (the alignment of the self and other within a larger Self). The female figure is further inflated, within her presentation. Where the poet seeks to hold his own conflation in tension through vulgarity and contact with the abject (dirt and vermin and excrement: he talks a lot about shit) he seeks to collapse the female into a composite of Virgin Mary, mother and wife. The female is elevated, decontaminated and revered in a perverse form of displacement: the more the poet is abjected the more the female is elevated.

We see this in very subtle ways. In sonnet twenty-three Sister Aquinas emanates as an innocent, but potentially knowing encourager of the poet on his spiritual journey towards the achievement of poverty.

... – Sister Aquinas in her

Dark blue dress hoeing beside the cowshed
Tells me – The couch grass seems to grow the more,

The more you cultivate – ...
(Baxter, 1980, p. 466)

The availability of such innocent guidance is further extended, and aligned with the larger powers of the Virgin Mary. Sonnet twenty-nine opens with an account of “Our Lady” shifting “demons.” It then proceeds to look for an epitaph for the poet. The suggestions are: “He was too much troubled / By his own absurdity” and, just plain “Hemi.” While each of these poses of death seems humble enough, both are forms of conflation. The first, that “He was too much troubled” suggests a self-knowledge that has been achieved, with the help of the Virgin. Such a claim is anything but humble. The second, just plain “Hemi”, is an even larger claim to knowledge. In the case of the pose of humble absurdity, the knowledge had come via the “miraculous” aspects of the Virgin and hence it is grounded in the poet's role of searcher after knowledge. In the case of the pose of “Hemi”, the poet is claiming the totem of knowledge as bodily knowledge. Such bodily knowledge is then grounded in his membership of the Maori tribe. This last pose is one of grandeur, of a final coming home, of an achievement of a personal state of Jerusalem. The fact that Baxter was buried as a

member of the local tribe of Jerusalem, (Oliver, 1983, pp. 155-157) at Jerusalem, is the full space and time realisation of the happy gesture in this simple sonnet. His tombstone reads:

HEMI

James Keir Baxter

The words for 'birth' and 'death' are given in their Maori forms while the dates are Christian.

The self-fulfilling prophet has become obvious rather than vivid. The poet as cultural hero has entered the myth of his own creation and dared to inscribe his own cultural achievement as his testament. In the sonnet (twenty-nine) things get worse. Having disposed of the bad thoughts and the pondering of his death, the poet has opened up a space, at the centre of the poem where he may engage in the real-world task which is now his burden. This elected task is to "disentangle the roots of the fourteen small // Green cabbage plants Sister Aquinas gave me / Wrapped in damp paper" (Baxter, 1980, p. 469). The woman in the dark blue dress is now setting the poet to his own business, the untangling of the roots of the pride evident in his attachment to the very object he is holding and cannot let go of: the sonnet (14 lines and 14 cabbages). Here the poet starts to cross over into the dimension of magic, even if only in a little and harmless form. The general appropriation of the other, as woman and as virgin, is not so little or harmless. The small green cabbages might well be eaten and in this sense disposed of, but the vivid image and achievement of the poet in raising the image is not so readily disposed of. Sister Aquinas remains outside the poem but the image of her is retained. The techniques of making vivid fix the image as a photograph is fixed.

7 Conclusion – Language as Paradox

This paradox (or inability to undo language through language) is raised as an art. In sonnet thirty-seven the poet complains that "The bright coat of art He has taken away from me." The "He" is God in some form; the conflation is now fully inflation and the inflation is fleshed out through a series of vivid images. Now these images, having been called un-art, are to be viewed as vivid in a new kind of way. Somehow the poet is singing, in his "stupidity" (without art) in a new kind of poem:

Like an old horse turned to grass I lift my head
Biting at the blossoms of the thorn tree
(Baxter 1980, p. 473)

The poet goes on to claim a kind of immersion "Rule over myself He has taken from me". We may reflect that the sonnet here is giving an account of the religious experience or the experience of religion. We may also counter that these are the highly structured outpourings of a very gifted and facile poet prone to self-aggrandisement.

Baxter went on to write *Jerusalem Day Book* and *Autumn Testament* which offer further accounts of his time at Jerusalem, especially accounts of the community he established. The themes are extended and occasionally there are moments of extraordinary achievement where the formal structures and the vagrant mysticism combine. Mostly the

work slips towards the pretend vivid or what might be called, unkindly, “Jerusalem Letters.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this account:

Jerusalem letters, letters or symbols tattooed on the arm or body, such as pilgrims or visitors to Jerusalem sometimes bore, in testimony or memory of their visit.

Baxter was certainly a pilgrim but he was also, frequently merely a visitor, with pencil and pad ready at hand for the next hurried outpouring of vivid normality. His body bore the obvious marks of his journey but this too was all part of the conflation and inflation and the searching for community writ large.

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