Greek Heroes and New Zealand Poetry

An important aspect of the ancient world's cultural impact on modern Europe is the on-going exploration of classical mythology. The Greeks passed their corpus of myth on to the Romans, teaching them how to exploit it in visual art and literature, and the Romans repeated the process vis-à-vis their successors. Of crucial importance to the developing tradition has been that group of heroes whose exploits and suffering reflect the sorrows and aspirations of humanity. Illuminating modern studies such as those by Stanford¹ and Galinsky² have greatly enhanced our appreciation of how the European mind has adapted those heroes to suit the changing literary fashions and social and religious concerns of different centuries.

The European mind is not, of course, confined within the geographical boundaries of Europe. Thus the Greek heroes have found new homes throughout the world, sometimes in the most unlikely places. The present paper briefly discusses some of the manifestations of these heroes, especially Theseus, Perseus and Odysseus, in twentieth century New Zealand poetry. Such a seemingly esoteric subject in fact not only constitutes an intriguing footnote to the mainstream European tradition, but also demonstrates the specific adaptation of that tradition which has occurred in the context of the South Pacific.

New Zealand is perhaps the most distant outpost of Europeanism and one of the last countries to be largely included

within the European ambit. Although the planned settlement of the nineteenth century, as in the case of earlier European colonization in other parts of the world, to some extent represented a new beginning and an attempt to break free from the shackles of the past, the European cultural basis was naturally retained. At the time of first settlement, this cultural basis was still strongly influenced by the classical tradition.

What is perhaps at first sight more surprising is the fact that an ancient and geographically alien mythology still makes its presence felt in the period after the First World War when New Zealand literature began to come of age, breaking away from its highly derivative phase and finding a distinctive identity as nationhood developed. But in fact this is readily explicable. Many twentieth century New Zealand poets of European extraction, conscious of belonging to a 'young', isolated country, have felt a particularly strong need to upgrade the significance of their own experience. Heroes from European mythology, especially Graeco-Roman mythology, have provided the sort of universal exempipla which were not obvious locally.

Let us begin our study with Herakles, the greatest of the Greek heroes and an apparently complex amalgam of both Indo-European and other cultural elements. The material here is actually very disappointing, but there is good reason for this. Herakles has made many and varied appearances in European literature, admirably chronicled by Galinsky, from Homer to the twentieth century, and motifs associated with him range from cross-dressing to insanity. However, he has tended to become stereotyped in the modern popular imagination simply as the strongman, and this is certainly the image of Herakles which has predominated in New Zealand.

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3 For a penetrating yet concise account of Herakles' possible antecedents and connections, ranging from the Mesopotamian Ninurta to the Indic Indra, see W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1979) 78-98.
Now it might be thought that a strongman symbol would be most appropriate in the literature of a country of farmers noted for its success in sports like rowing and rugby football in which sheer physical strength plays such a central role. However, such sports and the participants whom they attract tend to be belittled by the literary establishment. Thus the ridicule directed against the ‘typical’ All Black whose undoubted physical prowess is not felt to be matched by a corresponding mental acuteness has easily been redirected against the Herakles figure. Even references to an incident such as the hero’s death in the poisoned garment of the centaur Nessus has tended to be confined to contexts of parody.4

Only occasionally is a place found for the superhero in a more sensitive context. In a poem entitled ‘Herakles’ (Poems of a Decade [Dunedin 1983] 6-8) C.K. Stead presents brief episodes from an extra-marital relationship through which the poet imagines himself to have brought his lover back to life as a woman:

A man of affairs?  
No, I’m Herakles  
Wrestler with Death  
Who restores to Admetus  
A living wife  
And keeps in payment  
Only his unspeakable pride.

There is, in fact, an interesting ambivalence in Stead’s choice of imagery for such a serious, personal situation, given the quasi-comic aspect of Herakles' involvement in this particular myth, at least as it was presented by Euripides in his drama Alcestis. At all events, such references, not directly based on the characteristically flippant New Zealand literary understanding of the Herakles figure, are comparatively rare.

4 Cf. e.g. Kevin Ireland’s ‘The Shirt of Nessus’ (Face to Face, Christchurch 1963) 21.
The Athenian hero Theseus has fared somewhat better than his Dorian counterpart. This is not on account of any particular quality which he has come to possess in the tradition, so much as because his encounter with the minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth and his abandonment of Ariadne are incidents rich in poetic potential. There are many poems in which Ariadne's fate is seen in some sense as a parallel to the personal concerns of the poet or the poet's persona, and a few poems where the focus is on the minotaur itself. Here we shall consider a selection only of those passages where the myth is evoked primarily from the perspective of Theseus.

'Interview with Theseus' by Vincent O'Sullivan (Bearings [Wellington 1973] 32-4) takes the form of a transcript of a radio or television interview. O'Sullivan uses the Theseus legend as a means of exploring a man's attitude towards his fiancée after he has successfully extricated himself from a dangerous situation, the precise nature of which is left unclear. The poet is primarily concerned with the effect which the symbolic monster-slaying has had on his hero. In the legend, the minotaur's demise is a clean kill, so to speak. The reality for O'Sullivan is that the 'monster' can never be killed but rather becomes a permanent part of one's life, and that an experience in the 'labyrinth' merely creates doubts and uncertainties:

It would have sat all day
and even yawned when I yawned,
slept beside me, snorted me in
to truffle at its trough.
The minotaur's too devious for fear.

Then how escape?
I came away on terms.
I brought it with me
I beg your pardon?
That great beast I'm said
to be so smart with—
you needn't move aside—
it's here between us.
A rather different application of the Theseus legend is made by James K. Baxter (1926-72), New Zealand’s best-known poet who has made the greatest use of classical mythology in general, especially as one facet of his technique of mythologising his own life in order to find meaning in it. Baxter saw his role as poet as an attempt to impose some kind of order on the chaos of existence. Thus the Greek heroes were useful symbols for him because one of their achievements was to eliminate the threat to civilised order posed by their tyrant and monster adversaries. For Baxter, the figure of Theseus inching his way through the winding paths of the labyrinth towards the minotaur was a model both for mankind’s quest through the maze of the world and for his own personal pilgrimage for which the Biblical doctrine of the Fall was the precondition.

Baxter’s attitude to the world and humanity’s fallen state is clearly seen in ‘Letter to the World’ (Collected Poems [Wellington 1979] 149):

Beloved monster O maternal maze
Where the innumerable dying tread
Sighing for sleep and for the womb denied
Too long I deny you, you are my own voice.
. . . Now I bleed from love’s scar.
At the heart of your maze man’s heart is Minotaur.

A strong preoccupation with death characterizes much of Baxter’s prolific poetic output. It was death alone, in Baxter’s view, which ultimately provided life with meaning. In ‘The Labyrinth’ (Collected Poems 488-89) presented through the persona of Theseus, the hero’s prospective, climactic meeting with the minotaur at the centre of the maze is seen in these terms:

. . . Mind fixed on the Minotaur
I plugged onward like a camel that first night,

Thinking—‘Not long, brother, not long now!’—
But now so many nights have passed
The problem is to think of him at all
... Now I am a child
Frightened by falling water, by each nerve-pricking memory
Of things ill done,—but I do not forget
One thing, the thread, the invisible silk I hold
And shall hold till I die.

I tell you, brother,
When I throw my arms around the Minotaur
Our silence will be pure as gold.

A very different application of the Theseus motif is found in Peggy Dunstan’s poem ‘World’s Ending’ (Patterns on Glass [Christchurch 1968] 37) which considers the vulnerability even of a remote country in the nuclear age:

Till now all safety lay
  In these, the sea girt islands;
Their very insularity
Was our protection.
Theseus in the labyrinth
Could have been no harder pressed
Than the enemy,
Plotting his charts by the Southern Cross,
Seeking us down under the world’s edge

Now all is changed.

The fact that it is felt appropriate, even in a context which is specifically concerned with New Zealand, to turn to Theseus’ labyrinth experience as a symbol of a dangerous journey well illustrates the universal appeal which the Greek myths have held.

We turn now to Perseus whose killing of Medusa is rich in symbolic value both on account of the petrifying potential of the gorgon herself and because of the reflective function of the hero’s
shield. In Vincent O'Sullivan's 'Medusa' (Revenants [Wellington 1969] 17), the situation of a man arriving home late to face his waiting wife in the death throes of their relationship is seen in terms of the Greek legend.

And when he comes, how talk moves like a mirror, a polished shield, in shadows, then in light, always his care to stay behind its hurt. Talks of her greatest gift—to deck out men in stone: stone heart, stone limbs, the lot. Turns men to stone, turns them to herself. "The only way to end, for both our good".

There is nothing distinctively 'New Zealand' about this, of course, any more than about many of the other examples. The Perseus/Medusa situation is simply being used as a convenient overriding metaphor within which the poet organises his thought around the key concepts of mirror and stone.

One aspect of the Greek stories which has particularly intrigued modern writers world wide is the question of the aftermath of the heroic exploit. This concern is reflected, for example, in Kendrick Smithyman's 'Perseus' (Flying to Palmerston) [Auckland 1968] 72), in which a man proves unable to cope with social relationships after an initial triumph seen in terms of the decapitation of Medusa.

Later he found life in the public eyes too much for him, seeing himself refracted meeting medusae too often at any soirée.

Being somehow sorry for those improbable Gorgons, he was unable to reduce a murmuring thought of weakness, his own.

The problem of life 'after the event' is also touched on in Baxter's 'Perseus' (Collected Poems 129-30). In his critical writings, Baxter frequently used Medusa as a symbol of the materialism in modern New Zealand society which, in his view,
led to spiritual death and the loss of individual identity. In the poem, this aspect of the gorgon becomes united with the monster who more generally symbolized the meaningless of existence. Medusa is ‘image of the soul’s despair’ and ‘child of derisive Chaos and hateful Night’. The poet himself is the hero who has the power to liberate society provided that as an individual he can first make sense of his own life.

Baxter’s poem describes Perseus’ journey to ‘the stone kingdom’ where he accomplishes his task and returns homeward, ‘the pouched Depair at his girdle hanging’. This is, in fact, the poet using his art like a mirror to show the Chaos of existence reflected and consequently brought under control. But the hero returns at the very end of the poem:

To earth, Andromeda, the palace garden
His parents bickered in, plainsong of harvest—
To the lawgiver’s boredom, rendering
(The task accomplished) back to benignant Hermes
And holy Athene goods not his own, the borrowed
Sandals of courage and the shield of art.

The coda thus leaves the reader with the further problem which the poet faces as an individual in a new ‘stone kingdom’ of boredom and isolation when his public role is completed.

This dilemma with which Baxter wrestled leads us finally to the figure of Odysseus. Now although Odysseus is a universal type of folk hero, it so happens that his role of wanderer makes him in theory anyway a most suitable model for a people whose consciousness is significantly directed towards travel, both historically in terms of the opening up of the country and, in more recent times, in connection with the ‘overseas experience’ phenomenon. And Odysseus indeed duly finds a place in New

6 See e.g. Autumn Testament (Wellington 1972) 6.

Zealand poetry, although for the most part simply as the focus of one-off parallels or images.8

One recent, more comprehensive use of the Odysseus figure is found in Alistair Paterson's poem sequence with the arresting title *Odysseus Rex* (Auckland 1986). In this sequence, the travel experiences of the narrator persona in North America are sensitively interwoven with glimpses of the tribulations of the storm-tossed Homeric Odysseus:

Odysseus drifts
towards the shoreline
is lifted by the seawaves
slides into troughs
    half crazed and almost blind
from the salt
    he fights against the tide rip
...

This battering by forces unleashed by Poseidon is offered as a mythical equivalent of the assault on the modern traveller of such phenomena as sophisticated technology and the advertising industry. The whole sequence becomes a kaleidoscope of images as past and present, myth and reality, rub shoulders, coalesce and separate. Indeed, it emerges as one of the most successful extended explorations in our literature of the relationship between the mythical and contemporary worlds.

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8 For a selection of these see John Davidson, 'Odysseus, Baxter and New Zealand Poetry', *Landfall* 134 (June 1980) 107-119, in particular 117 note 3. It is well worth adding:

One eye Cyclopean squinting up against the sun

...I sleep with one eye open,
    waiting
    for Odysseus to come. A burning brand-oblivion:
    anything. Quite maddening.

Hone Tuwhare, 'Insomniac', *Year of the Dog* (Dunedin 1982) 38.
An interesting feature of Paterson’s sequence is that the destination of the Odysseus figure is not his home of Ithaca but the island of Ogygia:

exhausted, he struggles
towards Calypso’s island
towards a rock-bound coast ...

The implication here is that journey’s end is just the start of a further period of temporary imprisonment and spiritual isolation

Baxter, the poet who has most extensively exploited the potential of the Odysseus figure, concentrates on the negative aspect of the homecoming itself. In this he had been anticipated by A.R.D. Fairburn (1904-57) who evoked something of the spirit of Tennyson’s famous poem ‘Ulysses’, especially in the second of his two poems entitled ‘Odysseus’ (Collected Poems [Christchurch 1966] 188-91):

too much droning of bees in summer grass ...
too many mumbling women about the castle ...
even Penelope ...

And so Fairburn’s Odysseus is made to sail away one day to a destination which is given an extremely artificial New Zealand landscape dominated by the pohutukawa:

And I have seen Odysseus and his men ...
lying...
taking their ease beneath the gnarled black boughs of giant pohutukawas, bursting red
for joy and honour ... I have seen them bind
the red blooms in their hair, and walk like gods,
laughing, upon this shore ...

9 See Davidson (n. 8 above) and further references there, also Rob Jackaman, ‘Ways of Failing: Some Comments on the Odyssean Journey Motif in the Poetry of James K. Baxter’, Landfall 147 (September 1983) 335-47.
Baxter, in developing still further the motif of homecoming as disillusionment, is much more successful than Fairburn in marrying Greek mythology with a specifically New Zealand setting. This is well illustrated by his early poem ‘The Homecoming’ (Collected Poems 121) in which the identification Baxter/Odysseus is made immediately:

Odysseus has come home, to the gully farm
Where the macrocarpa windbreak shields a house
Heavy with time’s reliques —

The poet somehow makes Odysseus seem a natural resident in a New Zealand landscape dominated this time by the ubiquitous macrocarpa. Odysseus, however, feels home to be a restrictive place and at the end of the poem ‘hears beyond sparse fields/On reef and cave the sea’s hexameter beating’, words that recall the final couplet of Andrew Lang’s poem ‘The Odyssey’.10 Throughout Baxter’s poem, imagery associated with the Trojan War and Odysseus’ particular role is blended sensitively with details of the humdrum routine of a New Zealand farm house.

The anti-climactic boredom of Ithaca and the resultant longing for death are the subject of a series of other poems punctuating Baxter’s work.11 Baxter identified with Odysseus as the figure transcending his origins and fulfilling his heroic destiny, mastering Circe, negotiating Scylla and Charybdis, experiencing yet surviving the voices of the Sirens. He perceived in what he imagined to be the returning Odysseus’ inevitable discontent with his island home a reflection of his own abhorrence of domestic imprisonment. For Baxter, the only true homecoming was not so

10 See The Poetical Works of Andrew Lang Vol. 2 (London 1923) 7. The couplet runs as follows:

They hear like ocean on a western beach
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.

11 E.g. Collected Poems 42, 130-33 and 384-5. And see further in Davidson (n. 8 above).
much the arrival at Ithaca as the entry into the world of the dead. It was this entry which alone could make sense of the life of the wandering individual who in the end is isolated even in the presence of human companions.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to talk in terms of a Greek hero motif in modern New Zealand poetry. Of course, this motif has never been more than a persistent undercurrent, and in the early 1990s may even be in danger of drying up altogether. Thus in the approximately 500 pages of the recent *Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* (Auckland 1989) it is represented solely by excerpts from Paterson's *Odysseus Rex*. Poets of earlier generations had intended to have at least some exposure to the Classics in the course of their education and even in some cases to have studied the subject extensively. This is not the case with many younger poets who, like pakeha New Zealanders in general, are also being made increasingly aware of the living, native Polynesian mythological tradition. There is thus a possibility that classical allusions may for many become incomprehensible or at least be felt to be irrelevant and artificial. On the other hand, the dramatic growth of the subject Classical Studies at senior secondary school and university levels in New Zealand may well produce a new readership and a proportion of new poetic practitioners for which this is anything but the case.

In conclusion, it needs to be re-emphasised that where New Zealand poets introduce the Greek heroes Theseus, Perseus and Odysseus into their work they generally do so without giving them a specifically New Zealand identity. It is simply that some aspect or aspects of the lore surrounding the heroes is felt to be relevant to the situation of modern westerners.\(^\text{12}\) The *quid pro*
quo is that this specific situation is then offered a more universal significance by association with the Greek archetypes.

The prospect of blending the Greek heroes into a distinctively New Zealand setting offers a challenge which has only occasionally been taken up. In the case of Fairburn, the result has been a screeching dissonance. In Baxter's 'The Homecoming', on the other hand, the arrival of an Odysseus protagonist at a New Zealand farm seems the most natural thing in the world. Baxter's case, of course, is a highly unusual one, inasmuch as the poet over a long period of time has equated his own restless spirit and the destiny to which this leads with the spirit and destiny of Odysseus. It is something of a paradox that although Baxter was in many ways anything but a typical New Zealander it is in his poetry that the classical European mythological tradition becomes most closely attuned to a distinctively New Zealand tone of voice. Such a distinctive tone of voice can also be seen, finally, in Vincent O'Sullivan's 'A good joker's Homer' (The Butcher Papers [Auckland 1982] 31) where Homeric heroes in catalogue are given vivid counterparts in figures from New Zealand everyday life:

when out jumped small as life
coolgloss Ulysses
Achilles the All Black skipper
with his taste for scrums
chattering Cassandra (could be Sheila's mum)
dream-laden Helen we close our fists on
even sad outsmarted Ajax
hacked off as the Works' foreman
at a secret ballot.

Thersites chalking his words on the grandstand wall

Elmer Andrews, The Poetry of Seamus Heaney [London 1988] 100-101). The passage of time, incidentally, has somewhat undermined the overall effectiveness of Louis MacNeice's poem, written in 1934, when we read in one couplet: 'Ever to meet me comes, in sun or dull,/ The gay hero swinging the Gordon's head'!
As long as such identification remains possible, the Greek heroes will live on in New Zealand or wherever else they have been bequeathed as a cultural legacy.

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