

Correspondence

An Exchange with John Beston on Maori Writing and Writers
by Trevor James

Mindful of the gladiatorial spirit which can sometimes characterize exchanges between critics I am indeed reluctant to approach Professor Beston's recent article "Patricia Grace's Fiction" (*ARIEL* 15.2) with anything less than the most eirenic intentions. However, while Professor Beston's work does not need protection it seems to me that Patricia Grace's might: as Professor Beston accurately points out, "New Zealand has produced the most distinguished of the ethnic literatures in English that have burgeoned in the South Pacific during the last fifteen years" (41) but it is small service to this literature to approach one of its leading writers from what seems to be a predetermined and inappropriate critical perspective.

In a nutshell, Professor Beston apparently assumes that in a certain sort of literature, "ethnic literature," certain *a priori* expectations are appropriate. In particular, he expects Maori writing to reflect conflict and tension between Maori and Pakeha. While conflict is a commonplace in the New English literatures, to stipulate this of a writer risks a gratuitous distortion. Since Professor Beston does not find Patricia Grace to comply with his dogma sufficiently, he then attempts to explain why she does not, and does so in terms which are neither complimentary to her as a writer, a woman or a Maori, nor even notably sensitive to what she does provide in her work. It appears to be a case of the doctrine being imposed rather than issuing from the evidence.

First it is claimed that the Pakeha readership is only interested in reading what flatters and that this consideration restricts Grace's presentation: "she must make the Maori attractive to that audience and not alienate it" (42). Instead, I would suggest that not to challenge is to risk not being read at all. There have been many critical books published about New Zealanders which have enjoyed brisk sales. That Grace's success may be due to literary merit and not her alleged pandering to Pakeha vanity is not considered. I think the

contrary may be demonstrated by Ihimaera whose criticism of Pakeha society may even have assisted his literary career.

From this basic position further distortions follow. Professor Beston relates Grace's use of seasonal rhythms to what he considers her desire to "emphasize the similarities of Pakeha and Maori" (43). The point could equally be made that a relationship with the things of the earth is part of Maori cosmology and spirituality. Her way of seeing the world and its rhythms is distinctively Maori and the pastoral elements subtly underscore that distinction. A related point is later made with reference to *Mutuwhenua* when Professor Beston says of Linda and Graeme that their respective Maori and Pakeha qualities have been blurred: "in trying to bring the two cultures closer, Grace has lessened the vitality of the main figures, and with them the novel" (51). The problem is of course that while Grace cuts through racial stereotypes Professor Beston seems determined that she should continue to use them. There are problems with the novel, but Professor Beston's analysis casts little light on the matter.

Worse is to follow. Professor Beston then not only asserts Grace's pliancy to Pakeha susceptibilities but attributes this to her being "part-Maori" and a woman. First he remarks, "Grace is careful to allay Pakeha fears by stressing that the Maori do not threaten the privileges the Pakeha have arrogated unto themselves. Her Maori characters never aspire very high: having learned early in life to make do with second best, they want only a modest slice of the pie" (43). This is grossly unfair. Grace does little more than reflect social facts. The social context of Maori writing has been mainly "working class": there are still few Maoris in the professions; few university graduates. Yet Rose in "A Way of Talking" does challenge stereotypes and does image an assertive Maori identity — something Professor Beston glosses over. As far as Maori spirituality is concerned, he notes that Grace is "only part-Maori" (49), a remark that I consider irrelevant; it applies to virtually all Maori people in New Zealand and is unlikely to have force as a motive. Ihimaera himself is not, as far as I am aware, a "full-blooded Maori" and in any event Maori identity is not guaranteed by notions of ethnic purity. The further claim that "as a woman in nonfeminist New Zealand, she may be thought of as aggressive" (49) is a further unsubstantiated suggestion of influence. While I am sure these were not intended to be so, as they stand the assertions are ill-considered aspersions on a writer's integrity.

When Professor Beston claims that Grace does not show assertiveness in Maoris because of a concern "not to alienate her Pakeha audience" (44) he unduly emphasizes the importance — and I think misunderstands — the sensibilities of this readership. More seriously, he fails to consider that essentially Grace is writing as a

Maori and that there is a substantial, well-informed and highly articulate Maori readership which will judge her. Her writing is an act of recovery, of cultural retrieval, for herself, for other Maoris, and an opportunity for enlarging the experience of any interested reader.

Another detail suggests some confusion on Professor Beston's part. He compares Ihimaera's use of Maori culture with that of Grace: "Unlike Ihimaera, Grace does not deal with Maori ritual like the tangi. The word marae hardly occurs in her writings; and she never mentions the Maori meeting house, Rongopai, a central and indeed living character in Ihimaera's *Whanau*" (48). There may be a syntactical confusion here, but this reads as if Professor Beston is aggrieved that Grace does not mention the meeting house named Rongopai in *Whanau*. I may be wrong, but I suspect that Professor Beston has attributed the name Rongopai to all meeting houses. If so, this is a factual error: meeting houses are usually named after specific ancestors or crucial events in the life of their whanau and it would have been odd for Grace to have borrowed the name Ihimaera had selected for his fictitious community.

The distinction made between Ihimaera and Grace — that Ihimaera "is concerned with establishing a great and special past for the Maori . . . whereas Grace stresses what Maori and Pakeha have in common" (49) is misleading, as is the claim that Grace "contrives to reduce the tension" (49) and that the alleged "desire to avoid offending her audience . . . limits her artistic achievement" (50). Ihimaera has had to learn his Maoritanga and his enthusiasm for it reflects his needs as much as his sense of cultural and literary strategy. On the other hand Grace's restraint may equally well be argued to suggest assurance of identity, while the limitations of her achievement are more plausibly attributed to technical difficulties rather than concern for hypothetical Pakeha readership or her part-Maori and feminine status.