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Correspondence - Who's Ignatius, Whose Loyola?

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Abstract

In his review of my book *Ethnic Radio* ('Boeotian and Loyolan Art', *Kunapipi* 1/1) Mark O'Connor has some flattering things to say, and does my verse considerable honour. I am grateful to him; poets reviewing other poets aren't always so generous. At the same time, there are a number of inaccuracies and strange interpretations in this article, so many in fact that I feel obliged to break a convention and make some reply, lest people new to my work be misled.

Correspondence

WHO'S IGNATIUS, WHOSE LOYOLA?

In his review of my book *Ethnic Radio* ('Boeotian and Loyolan Art', *Kunapipi* 1/1) Mark O'Connor has some flattering things to say, and does my verse considerable honour. I am grateful to him; poets reviewing other poets aren't always so generous. At the same time, there are a number of inaccuracies and strange interpretations in the article, so many in fact that I feel obliged to break a convention and make some reply, lest people new to my work be misled.

For some days after first reading the review, I agonised over some of the aberrant readings, asking myself whether I'd really written so loosely and equivocally as to justify them. In the end, I couldn't agree that I had. And then there is the ideological dimension of the article, the prevailing inquisitorial tone; often, it seems as if my work and my attitudes were being judged before the bar of a vaguely adumbrated but allegedly triumphant modern world view which admits of no deviation, no argument, and rewards the independent minded with the Siberia of artistic failure. I don't know which of us the Jesuits had till the age of seven, but I don't think it was me. As a child, I was a Free Kirk Presbyterian, but I turned away from that and had no religious affiliation until I was received into the Catholic Church at the age of twenty-four. I missed, or was spared, a proper Catholic education in my adolescence.

To save space and long explanations, during this gentle rebuttal of some things in Mark's review, I will assume that readers have the piece beside them for reference. That way, points can be dealt with in order of their occurrence.

I am not really a social conservative. In looser connections, and for convenience, I've been prepared in the past to allow this shorthand description, but when it's used as a stick to beat me with, I have to refuse it. What I really am is a historicist or cultural relativist, in the sense that I bear it in mind that there have been and will be other times, and other opinions than those prevailing at the moment. I do very little of my thinking in terms such as Conservative, Progressive, Radical and the like, because they tend to be loose terms open to rhetorical and coercive misuse. They are more the stuff of the journalistic sketch or the secret police dossier than the proper currency of poets and reviewers. As servants of ideology, they divide up the world and human experience in ways which are highly questionable. I don't accept that system of dividing up

the phenomena. I've gone on at some length about this misrepresentation, as it colours and distorts the whole article.

I don't advocate an Australian republic 'less for what it might change than for what it might conserve'. I advocate it as a means by which we might shake off remnant colonial blindnesses, and discern what is *there* in our experience as a people. Only when we learn to love ourselves will we know what to conserve both for our own cultural sustenance and as a source for distinctive contributions to human civilization.

Mark comes from an ancient Gaelic family himself, and so should understand about Gaelic pride of family.

I live in the city most of the time, ten months out of twelve, because my father and I own a small farm jointly, and it's hard to fit two strong-headed bosses on one forty-acre farmlet. It's his territory, his retirement farm, and he hasn't much else to occupy him now that he's left the timber business. We will move there eventually, when he is older and needs care, or when fellowships cease and we have to go there to survive financially; the latter could happen anytime.

Unfortunately, I don't really speak most of the languages of Europe, not at all fluently anyhow. I speak some, and read most of the Western European ones. I used to be a science translator, which helped.

I don't think I ever conducted an adolescent rebellion against universities. I attended a university in my late adolescence, and resisted some of its requirements in the interests of getting an education in my own dreamy, groping fashion. Quite a few years later, I had a number of hard things to say about universities for several reasons; most importantly, I deplored their serving as the powerhouses of a certain social style which for a time threatened to become dominant. This was a style which made intellect, fashion, and certain received opinions into the 'new money' of an incipient privileged caste, and incidentally converted socialism from being a movement and an ideal to being a *class*. And a privileged class at that. I thought this a betrayal, and a tragedy, to see socialists joining with the other colonial elites to resist the triumph of the proletariat, a triumph which is felt to be close to the surface in our country and a looming threat to imported civilization.

Evolving a truly populist style of verse has never really been an aim of mine, so perhaps I may be excused the charge of failing at it. I do regret the exile of poetry from a broad readership, but I don't despair about it, and I decline to consider any effort to secure a mass readership which would involve a lessening of poets' freedom to use the full range of their instrument. Or any condescending simplification. So would Mark himself, of course. I don't think the matter is by any means simply one of metre, if that is what he's suggesting.

I don't write free verse, and rarely have. I write blank verse a good deal,

unrhymed but with a strong metrical base on which to build variations.

Nothing about Alec Hope galls me, and I don't remember ever decrying him as an 'Athenian' poet, in my terms. He isn't. I don't agree that he has found a solution to the twentieth-century problem of metre; Augustan metre and rhyme with modern content doesn't equal a solution to that problem – if it is that *sort* of problem at all, at bottom.

Since I can't assume that readers who haven't seen me will know that I am a fat man, I didn't intend 'flat food round the midriff, long food up your sleeves' (in 'Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil') to refer to my surplus fat, but rather to the techniques of shoplifting from supermarkets. A long time ago, in our non-welfare state, I got down about as far as you can go, economically, and I have no shame about the devices by which I survived certain hungry weeks. I don't assume a heavily intellectual reader, but I guess I expect reasonable shrewdness. Which is a dry form of human sympathy, in part.

I deny that I go in for implausibly cyclic views of social history. I see history more as a vast field of experience in which myriad suggestive metaphors are mixed.

Mark is, I think, a bit naïve about the power of fashion. It is a restless and seductive force, and one which is apt to turn upon people who try to harness it. Even as he damns me for non-adherence to a certain set of received ideas, they are shifting under his feet.

Even as he decries me as a conservative thinker, Mark is constrained by the terms of his argument to turn me around 180 degrees and make me into an extreme radical. He is not the first commentator to have landed in this paradox, but I regret his landing there. It comes about because his terminology is not up to the quality of his thought. Or of his mind.

The poem 'Impulse Resisted on the Manly Ferry' (somebody had to take advantage of the place-name Manly!) probably offends because it talks about sex in a dispassionate, phenomenological way, refusing it worship. That's my gross prejudice, something of a Christian one admittedly. Christianity is an off-the-wheel religion, opposed to all idolatries, though even *our* inquisitors have tragically forgotten this at times.

The 'humanist mainstream of Australian debate'? Wait a minute! I thought it was still a pluralist mainstream.

Yes, I'm a Christian, in my thinking and, however unsteadily, in my life. I don't slink around trying to sneak it in, though. It is the subsumed basis of my thinking, as it is of Western civilization.

I deny ever having asserted that an unwanted pregnancy should be accepted as a divine summons to experience. It may be, but it sounds like a very presumptuous thing for a man to say categorically. I also have nothing against contraception (the world will be relieved to hear!) though I do think that it is unreal to ignore, and dangerous to deny, what Judith Wright calls 'the third

who lay in our embrace', the child.

My opposition to abortion is no secret. I can't agree that it is impossible to argue in human terms that destroying a foetus (jargon term for an unborn child) is the same as killing an adult. Many people *have* argued that way, very convincingly. What Mark is really asserting, I think, is that it's not possible to argue such a case in *humanist* terms. And yet some humanists have done so. My own contention, of course, would be that the term *human* is incomplete without the religious dimension, since religion is part of us, and its exclusion is a highly artificial, ideological thing. Rationalism, so called, is *willed*, a sort of art-form in which the challenge is to construct an account of the world without admitting any religious explanations. The effort has gone on for about three centuries now, and the result is enormous, imposing and subtly ramified, a tall, hierarchical, snobbish tower of glass and elegant steel and fine cement, in which many people go mad and seek after strange gods, reaching back into the prehistory of religion in order to satisfy needs and resolve dilemmas which have already been satisfied and resolved in developed religion.

Mark is probably justified in taking umbrage at my poem 'The Cwdeitar', as I wrote it partly as an affectionate tilt at his passionate advocacy of spelling reform in English. He's wrong on a few points, though. The poem is perfectly pronounceable; it quotes a number of phrases in a new, admittedly ugly but perfectly phonetic English orthography, and gives broad clues whereby the system can be quickly mastered. Any phonetic spelling system for English would look excessively queer when it first came in – and would of course carry the shock and dislocation of cultural amnesia. We would lose the perspicuous etymology of our words, their history and individual flavour, surely a disaster for poets. I think any thoroughgoing reform would have to be imposed; people are quite resistant even to so mild a change as SR1. The question then arises, who would impose it, and for what purposes? I posit the thing as being done by a mad Australian chauvinist dictator who is out to relieve foreign cultural pressure on his country by making books and magazines from abroad literally inaccessible and unreadable. The new spelling could only be introduced in one country at a time, of the English-speaking countries; English is polycentric, and has too many standard forms by now for one to be imposed over its whole range. Phonetic spelling would mean the end of English as a world language, as it would quickly break up into a number of diverging dialects; the present rich agreement-to-differ would have been broken. He's wrong, too, about the two million adult illiterates in Britain. In a population of fifty million, that's four per cent, which is pretty well the standard proportion everywhere, in countries with phonetic spelling systems and with idiosyncratic ones. It represents the unfortunates whom teachers call ineducable, the subnormal, the severely dyslexic, certain of the severely handicapped, etc. The village schoolmistress rests

her case, pleading that the poem was a joke, albeit a serious joke, and as much about cultural chauvinism as about spelling.

I have talked about my differences with the universities, so I won't labour my disagreement with Mark's interpretation of my poem 'A Sixties Future'. It is enough to say that he has got it so strangely arse-up that he bewilders me! I was positing a future-scenario in which universities became so dominant in society that their jargon and hierarchical organisation was extended to the whole of society, and factories became Faculties of Production and the like. It was never a likely future, as such, but the poem refers to a certain atmosphere which was around in the sixties, and satirically exaggerates it. Mark understood my main point, in the serious poem 'The Future', which was that since the real future cannot be foreseen – 'all our projections fail to curve where it curves' – any future-scenarios which we set up are to be understood, and maybe even enjoyed, as *fictions*. Fictions which come and go.

There hasn't been any rain forest on our farmlet for nearly a hundred years; we certainly didn't buy it and cut it down. Mark, having knocked about the country, should surely know that in farming areas the term 'brush land' refers to a soil type. Heavens, the poem even speaks of the chainsaw dropping *dead* timber. As well as to re-roofing a bare pole barn; no barn is likely to have stood, and stood long enough to have lost its roof, in virgin rain forest. Even the list of previous owners should have been suggestive. He has been carried away here by his laudable passion to promote a much-needed spirit of conservation among Australians. A passion which I share; that made his mistake here a rather hurtful one. I thought he knew me better.

The assertion that machine translation hasn't yet been a success is justified by my researches into the matter. Computers still can't handle real translation, as distinct from matching up words and simple phrases, and I believe that the effort to produce a translation machine has run into the sand. We still don't know the deep structure of language, but whatever it is, it doesn't seem to fit the either-or mathematics on which computers are based. Idiom, emotional colouring, most of the effects of poetry, these seem still to lie in a realm beyond the machine. Perhaps they won't always, but while they do, the fact is a covert and little-discussed threat to the tall glass tower I spoke about above.

Finally, I'm rather horrified to see a reviewer warning readers not to buy my book, especially after he has praised parts of it generously. Perhaps that is a personal thing, though. He at least does recommend that people get my *Selected Poems*, which he erroneously calls my *Selected Works*.

Mark O'Connor is a good poet and will be a better one yet; he is a man of deeply held convictions and considerable toughness of mind. I only wish he had not let his preoccupations get in the way of his reading of my work. It is

perfectly legitimate to argue with and even denounce a writer's opinions, but surely it is desirable to get them right first. I'm still reeling from the wind of blows directed at heads to the left and right of my own.

LES A. MURRAY



Les A. Murray at the Australian Arts Festival, Aarhus, 1978.
Photograph by Jørgen Therkildsen.