A SYMPOSIUM

MARK O'CONNOR'S *THE FIESTA OF MEN*

Mark O'Connor, *The Fiesta of Men.* Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1983. 124 pp. $5.95 paperbound; $11.95 casebound.

A mild winter evening in Townsville. Faber, Poeta and Magister discuss poetry over a bottle of wine. Conversation turns to Mark O'Connor's latest collection, and a somewhat pompous symposium develops.

"When I think of Australian poets writing now, Mark is one of the people I most want to watch," said Poeta, who writes himself. "There are certainly some outstanding poems in this collection. 'The Pond', to my mind, is an exceptional poem that will stand with his *Island* series and eventually be seen as a major Australian poem."

"There and in 'Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens' I feel he's discovered something. He's using his full power. I feel an involvement of the kind that I don't feel with his European poems. In those, I want to know more about his response which is somehow too understated."

"My worry about a writer today trying to be a full-time poet is that you must be under constant pressure to keep producing, and collections will have a number of fill-up poems where the poet produces pieces because he's had to fill up space," said Magister.

"I thought that before going through *The Fiesta of Men,*" said Faber, "but perhaps here everything not up to standard has already been weeded out."

"I find a few filler pieces here. But when his Collected Poems comes out he'll have a rich volume," said Magister.

"I had a general query," said Poeta, "coming from something John McLaren said in *The Australian Book Review,* that Mark's poems could be seen as a traveller's guide to the external world. That bothers me a little in that I want more than a traveller's guide to the external world. I'm looking for some underlying frame of ideas in the book, something that connects the European and the Queensland poems. McLaren's comment, I thought, was apt. But it raised the point for me that I want more than information."

"A poem that does link Australia and Europe is 'The First Hangings in New Holland', and that links with 'Clingendael Park', about the Hague, through the image of the mixed soil."

"What on earth do you mean?"

" 'The First Hangings' is about the mutiny on the *Batavia* which wrecked on Houtman's Abrolhos in 1629. While Pelsaert sailed to Java for help, the mutineers massacred the rest of the crew and passengers and when Pelsaert returned he hanged the leaders. The poem points out *how great the stench of death/ that clears a continent for men.*"

"I was totally held by that poem until the last line," said Poeta, "but the last line went wrong in its adjective, I think: *where the luminous blue was bent* – good – *to a deadly focus.* Not so good. It's clichéd."

"I'm excited by this poem because it recalls Douglas Stewart's verse play *Shipwreck*, which is his best, I think. Stewart has a powerful image of the massacre when Pelsaert tells the mutineers that they acted as if the island were God's cage in space where beast met beast in fury. Stewart had in mind prison camps like Changi when he wrote, and the sense of claustrophobic confinement and utter insane brutality is very strong. Somehow the poem gets something of that, and the *deadly focus* has the force of Stewart's *cage in space.*"

"When the poem was printed in *LiNQ*, didn't the last line read *to an instant's focus*?" said Faber. "I like that better. It suggests the pin-point of an historical moment."

"But what's the link with The Hague poem?"

"There the mixture of sea sand and land soil is compared to *those deep/soil plots on Batavia's Isle where coral sand/still shows dark greasiness about the bones.* It's not an obvious connection and shows an interesting process in the poet's mind."

"McLaren makes another point," said Poeta, "that much of Mark's language is a non-poetical language, the language of science, maths, history – and again I feel I want more than information."

"I want more *pain*! But perhaps that's a matter of time. Besides Mark says he doesn't use his poetry as therapy."

"Art that comes from the greatest depths of the artist isn't necessarily to be dismissed as therapeutic," said Faber mildly.

"In spite of that, though, you can't miss the mind of the poet at work in this collection," said Poeta.

"I can't see him losing what he has now," said Magister. "The poetry can only grow. Unless he does a Wordsworth," she added gloomily. She takes the collapse of Wordsworth as a personal tragedy, and warily watches poets who show any interest in nature to make sure they are not succumbing to an attack of wordsworthian senectitude.

"*The Fiesta of Men* is definitely a step forward for Mark," said Poeta. "But I feel frustrated at times with his poetry. I feel he's hiding his light under a bushell."

"Is the bushell the poetic mores of his peer group of Australian poets. Or of some rather older, fully acclaimed poets, perhaps?"

"Older poets have obviously nourished him," said Faber judiciously. "But the dominant elements in the work of other Australian poets at present don't seem to be the right elements to dominate in Mark's work. I mean, I suppose, that I feel we are not yet, certainly not all the time, hearing Mark's own voice."

"Even in 'The Pond'?"

" 'The Pond' poem will prove to be one of the most accessible of all contemporary poems, surely. Those first lines are so confident and assured that you know you're looking at real poetry: *I have waded in deep as an old man can/who is a worshipper of ponds and stars/because both are the holes into which the dead things fall to be born again.*"

"I like the way the old scientist is given a personality that doesn't obtrude yet is very important for the perspective on man and nature: *Denied pets, I was king of millions.*"

"The only thing spoiling this poem for me is one of the images in the passage where the pool is likened to several things: *that weeping-glass/where the moon counts her witnesses/on cloudless nights. A signal-dish/for lonely stars?* Those work for me. But the next is *Or a hit-man's polished sunglasses.*"

"Is that kind of anti-climactic image an example of the 'dying fall' Mark talks about?"

"Perhaps it helps to make the poem accessible to children who watch American television. But what's its relevance to the old man's pond? You wouldn't think the old man is even into hit-men?"

"I wish," said Faber gently, "we didn't get so many of those images. There's a more complex one in 'The Triumph of

Death' where the painting *wakes childhood terrors* because *The asi-if world of art occludes the real* and the psychic impact is likened to *the mix as a diesel/piston forces the spark from sheer implosion.* There's no reason why combustion shouldn't provide the poet with an image – "

"Like Shelley using scientific images and Leavis missing the point?"

"Well, yes. But I've seen the painting at Pisa and for me it drove out all thoughts of the twentieth century. Mark seems to have been road conscious when he looked at the picture because there's another image of demons that *fight like tow-trucks for disputed cases.*"

"They do, of course, but tow-trucks aren't exactly evil. The twentieth-century road toll may be a major triumph of death, but tow-trucks don't cause the accidents, and you're very glad of one when you need it." Magister tends to look at images literally.

The matter of images seems to bother them all.

"I could do without the hobo re-checking where he found a cigarette *once*, in 'The Fiesta of Men', and all the food images where landscape is compared to cheese, icing and scones, and coral to vegetables. And the pingpong and golfballs."

"You sure you aren't looking for something too consistently *poetic*? The poet may be hungry. And if food's the first image a thing suggests, why not use it?"

"Perhaps it's in the interests of accessibility," said Faber, who is not interested in the accessibility of art and consequently feels he should make an effort to recognise it.

But Magister is up in her pulpit.

"It's unscientific, unpoetic and condescending. These are extraneous images intruding between the thing discussed and the reader. I doubt mundane images will help people who don't like poetry to get to like it. In any case, this kind of didacticism belongs to the classroom, not to a poem. If you want students to recognise pocillopora you might tell them it looks like golf balls, but it doesn't *heighten* one's perception of the coral."

"All you're saying is that these images don't work for you."

"Humph."

"I enjoyed the title poem," said Faber pacifically, "but it confused me because I didn't know the relationship between the flying ants and the swifts."

"I gathered from the context that on some particular evening the ants swarm, and swifts know this, and come in such fierce numbers that the poet and his friend have to protect themselves from the birds like characters in that Du Maurier-Hitchcock film. It must be the major event in life-cycle of the ants, and so it's their fiesta. And so, as the poet says, although he missed the fiesta of men, he witnessed the fiesta of ants."

"And the title suggests that what happens to the ants is an image of what happens to men? A kind of frenetic celebration of the dramatic meeting of life and death, which is what a true fiesta is?"

"Hence the title of the collection? But talking about life, what did you think of the space-narrative genesis poem?"

"It's hard to follow the sequences of 'Dreams of the Journey' because of its lack of reference. The notes say it's about a psychic journey, but the notes are like T.S. Eliot's, more elusive than helpful." Poeta himself writes particularly lucid poetry.

"I thought it was a genesis or creation poem, a little like the *Islands* poem in *The Eating Tree.* The emergence of being out of chaos."

They discuss the poem at length, enjoying themselves but not getting far.

"There's a lot of Milton and Blake in science fiction verse, but all I ever grasp are a few good images. It must convey more to other sensibilities than it does to me," said Magister.

"They're eleven crunchy pages," said Poeta, "although I don't know what half of it means. I need more signposting, more connections."

"I liked the 'Survivor' episode," said Magister, determined to find certainties where she could. "Where the ovary makes it *past follicle, sorter of joys,/down fallopian, highway of fate* into *sperm's brief promiscuous surf* to the *long monogamy of self.*"

"It's good," said Poeta, who knows his North Queensland poets, "but Noel Macainsh used similar images in a poem about conception. I like the line about *the long clear bell/for that long monogamy, self.*"

"One clear call for ME!"

"Does the poem conclude that man is really some kind of god?" said Faber.

They agree, doubtfully, that it did.

"Someone will explicate it for us, in a book on science fiction poetry," said Faber consolingly.

"Mark commented the other day that his poems are written down to be read by the eye, but when reading aloud he may make slight changes, to simplify. He might read "waits" rather than "awaits" and so on."

"I found that I was reading these poems aloud. And it seems to me that's how they really should be read. Especially the 'Dreams of the Journey', which seems to be written to be read aloud."

"I agree. But I was so angry with 'A Javanese Pietà' that I could hardly finish it."

They are amazed at the gentle Faber, who is given to painting exotic forms of madonnas. But he continues with uncharacteristic vehemence.

"I could be offended by this poem, aesthetically. Not by your broccoli images. It's such a profoundly despairing image and experience that it would take the poet or anybody another forty years to approach it. I don't think it is in good taste to attempt a poem about such a subject as this."

"But it's much more than a stock tourist response to buying a warm bottle of 7-Up from a child mother with a dying baby. I admit it seems a poem despatched from the didactic level of thinking – is that what bothers you?"

"Not didactic," said Magister. "There's a saving irony there: *What will your child do?/At the going down of the sun/and in the morning/we pray to forget.* And those epigrammatic lines sum up the worst of both east and west: *Lacking hope she lacks fear./Hatred subtracts; sufficiency/calculates; but misery/breeds.*"

"I think it's a false situation, and the poem doesn't avoid the trap of playing bleeding heart."

"But in that situation you have to react in some way. There's no way of coming to terms with this aspect of the east. As soon as you saw the mother and the child, already past saving, you'd think 'Pietà'."

"Why the Christian image of the proferred sponge – the Roman soldier to Christ – in the last lines?"

"Doesn't that image our impotence? Our *coward's vacillation*, as the poem says?"

"I think the poem is just part of that vacillation," said Faber quietly.

"Perhaps the poem knows that," said Poeta.

Magister is turning the pages.

"I keep thinking of Wordsworth when I read this collection," she said.

"There's a pretty severe indictment of the poor fellow in 'Wordsworth's House at Rydal'," said Poeta. "It implies that Wordsworth wouldn't have wasted the last thirty-five years of his life if he'd responded to Darwin's new scientific view of nature."

"Well, *Origin of the Species* was published after William died. Still it would have been interesting if Wordsworth had wrestled with Lyell and Chambers the way Tennyson did."

"At least Mark needn't reproach himself for lacking *Darwin's lorgnette for the dance of worms.* If, as he says, *No 'Beagle' came/to Rydalmere's smooth water*, the poet today finds that science and poetry are extremely acceptable bedfellows."

"As Wordsworth prophesied in the 1800 Preface," said Magister. "What poets like Mark have to wrestle with, I gather, is our stubborn refusal to see the earth as anything but centred on the human species."

"This poetry doesn't suggest an 'only man is vile' attitude."

"It can't. If it did these pages would have to stay on the tree as green leaves."

"Looking through the poems, though, I feel there is a division between the heroic image of man and the destructive image of man, and that the division isn't brought into the open."

"Maybe that's partly because many of the poems are occasional or site-specific, written about a particular historic spot and therefore about heroic and shameful parts of human history. The poet's on the spot responding to some visual situation. I keep thinking of 'Ozymandias.' "

"I'd like some Australian poet to come out and call his or her collection *The Australian Poet in Europe.* It sounds too obvious, I know. But I think it would widen and deepen rather than restrict the ambience of the poems. You'd expect them then to be more about the growth of the poet's mind within these situations. That's what I want, I think. There's so much distancing in most of these poems."

"It's interesting that culture is seen through its antiquity so often. 'The Lame Statue' is a good example: *He has known Christ/and Zoroaster too, this sad gray fellow . . . and Mohammed sat some centuries on his chest.*"

"Against that tendency, there's a poem like 'Riding a Hired Lambretta' which I enjoyed particularly for its fluent and consistent modern images. The only post-card touch is the reminder that Aeneas landed on the shores of this beach resort."

"The poems are very spot-on when they refer to contemporary meetings, like 'Meeting a Poet', where you have a mélange of contemporary influences. But I don't think you can look at the European poems to find an overall statement for the collection."

"Perhaps the variety is the statement. And as well as the more obvious historical post-card pieces, there's some enigmatic ones. Like 'The Lake-Island of St Naum' where there's fear and menace and hostility in the men you can't see, and then the innocent image of the hunter going out in the early morning with his ear-flaps on."

"That's not a friendly image for a conservationist."

"I think the hunter is seen, in comparison with the hidden gunmen, as a natural part of the environment. The snipers represent the *madness of powers.*"

"I can't see the hunter as an innocent figure. The snipers at men and the hunter are both seen as evil."

"It's a complex poem, romantic in its images of the leaf-snake, the roo-coo dove and the lake-water, and then with the bursting of the grenade. I think it's deliberately – and effectively – complex."

While Poeta and Magister debate the innocence of the leather-capped hunter and whether the Yeatsian title is an intentional irony, Faber looks for a lost poem.

"There's no doubt about the success of the more sensuous poems," he said. "I very much like this short piece, 'The Island Wife', about the pawpaw. Since the usual breast image of the pawpaw becomes a vagina image, I suppose the thing could seem brutal to a woman reader: *First the knife's keen-bladed toying,/the hairline suddenly slit, and slow/engulfment of the blade.*"

"It's not meant to be sinister, I think. Just a simple image about the sensuousness of fruit seen in terms of a sexual act. So the poet recalls D.H. Lawrence's sensuous appreciation of

figs. It's sexual, but as a woman reader, I couldn't isolate which sex is involved. 'The Diver' is a different matter. A superb poem, I think."

"It's strongly sensuous, not to say sexual."

"Mark said it's about the first contact between man and nature, a kind of passing from innocence to experience."

"I got something stronger than that. An almost Swinburnian fear of women."

"Yes – vagina dentata! *Tigerishly coquettish,/her bright lips still soften/clenched teeth of bone. Air, Air! He pulls wildly, /feels the mantle yield (as the jaws clench tight), and swims to the surface trailing/a bracelet of blood.*"

"The two sister clam shells are definitely seen as predators though it might be going too far to say they're seen as castrators. The idea enters with the Dracula-like manta. I think this is one of the poems only Mark could write."

"He's on home ground most when he's under water."

" 'Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens' isn't exactly under water, but it supports what you say," said Poeta.

"I think it's quite wonderful," said Faber. "It's the embrace of the vernacular in poetic language, and the sense that the poet's absolutely felt and understood the life-style of an island resort. And the image of planting one's own island, of being the perpetrator of a paradise, makes a man almost god-like."

"God-like too in ultimate disappointment with what has happened to his creation: *All was foreseen, and known;/ since gardeners are suspicious patient men; only/the trees go on growing in my mind.*"

"I haven't made up my mind about this poem yet. But there are very few bumpy lines, and it's technically more sustained rhythmically than any of the other poems. Over such a long poem it could only be done if the poet's in full swing of creativity. Irrespective of my personal liking or wariness of the poem, it will certainly be seen as a major poem and enjoyed by a great many people."

"I'm a bit uncertain about the cataloguing of the plants. But it's in a good mediaeval tradition – and a transcendentalist like Whitman does it too. I mean, it has neo-platonic justification in its attempt to evoke the wholeness of nature – tropical nature. It's more than a handbook for the tropical gardener."

"This poem gives me everything that I missed in most of the European poems. A sense of the poet, as in the expression of his feeling about the works-foreman, Simmo: *He cramped my plans,/robbed me not of success but something of the calm/ current joy in it.*"

"If a poet has a series of experiences of the richness of Mark's Dunk Island ones, the poetry will keep coming. It's not a problem of poetry, it's a problem of life."

"I'd like to see Mark stay here a while and make something of the North as a region, in his poetry. Then that sense of a framework of ideas, or a philosophy, must emerge from interaction of poet and place and people."

"Something like Robinson Jeffers who managed a phenomenal output in the locality of Big Sur," said Poeta. "Not that I want to see Mark hanging from an eyrie on Cape Cleveland. But it would be very good to see him giving a lot more poetic energy to North Queensland."

Edited from a taped conversation, July 23rd, 1983.