



Paul Kavanagh

FIESTAS OF LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK O'CONNOR

Paul: Mark, you have published three books of poetry, I wonder if you would say something about each of them?

Mark: The first was written about the Barrier Reef. I went out there in 1972, not having previously been a poet, and worked as a diver for the Australian Museum on One Tree Island and collected information about this amazing wonderland from the scientists there. After a while I started to transmute it into poems. They eventually developed into a book called *Reef Poems*, which the University of Queensland published in 1975. I wanted it to be a colour-photo book because, writing about the Barrier Reef which Australians really don't know much about, I wanted both words and photos, but eventually that was cut down to a colour photo on the cover. The second book is called *The Eating Tree*. At that stage I was in Europe. I had had a Marten Bequest Scholarship to live and write poetry on the Mediterranean islands, as I had written about the Barrier Reef islands. In fact some of the poems were the old Queensland poems about the Barrier Reef and the other half were about Europe. That collection was published by Angus and Robertson in 1980, when I was out of the country. The most recent book is a very big one of 124 pages, and covers the last five years, about half the period I have been writing for. It is called *The Fiesta of Men* and was published by Hale and Iremonger last year.

Paul: Could you say a bit more, Mark, about how you started writing poetry?

Mark: I suppose the Barrier Reef was what made me a poet. It sounds unusual, but the oddity is that no-one had done it before. At the time it seemed inevitable. I went to the reef. It was fascinating. There were any number of things to say and they were all, in a sense, poetic. They came out of an immensely complex world which the scientists

were just beginning to understand. I followed them. I learnt from them how all those things interacted; how every creature there not merely ate, but was parasitic upon, or symbiotic with, or ate the larvae of something else. The whole balance was dynamic and far more complex than anything that English poetry, at least in England, had ever had to wrestle with. I became a new kind of nature poet simply because I was in a new environment, one to which the English language was not adapted.

Paul: This fits into the notion you have of a modern evolutionary myth, doesn't it? Could you say something about the advantages you see in this approach, and whether it has any limitations?

Mark: A myth is an enormous advantage to a poet. In antiquity there were myths about the gods and what they did with various nymphs and mortals. These were familiar stories and they had an emotional charge attached to them, which meant that the poet did not have to tell the whole story from beginning to end. The Greek and Roman myths are gone now, essentially. We can't quite take over Aboriginal myths because we're not continuous with Aboriginal culture. After that poets were really a bit stuck with Australia. The early Australian poets found themselves in this strange country that didn't fit their language or their assumptions about life, and they tended to create myths from the beginning. The first myth was that it was topsy-turvy land; or else it was a hellish country — the country God had forsaken. We now understand a little about how the continent Australia fits together, how complex it is, and that in itself is a myth. It may be true, of course, just as some of the older myths were once thought to be true; but for the poet the importance is not so much that it is absolute literal truth, as that it is a way of understanding and appreciating what you see.

Paul: The scientific approach is about the objects in themselves, and there is a demand for objectivity, whereas poetry has traditionally been concerned with the poet's response. Is there a danger that the myth you are using might imply that a spiritual dimension is left out?

Mark: The actual scientific method is very dry – you keep all emotion out – and real, hard-core scientific journals are anything but poetic. On the other hand, there are responses in the human psyche, and not entirely things peculiar to one poet – things that an awful lot of people feel, including some scientists – that you could roughly categorise as poetic. It may be that science doesn't explain why we feel as we do about a rain forest, but there's no doubt that the more you understand about the rain forest, and the more it's not just a mess or a 'jungle', the more it seems to feed in and enrich your own subjective or personal poetic response. But a purely personal response, I think, never makes really good poetry.

Paul: In the context of nature and nature poets, it seems to me that you come back from nature rather as Gulliver came back from the Houyhnhnms – a misanthrope. And your poems, although they assert humane values, are for me not enough about people and relationships. I suppose nature poetry and pastoral poetry are similar in that both tend to be about withdrawal from contact, and that the nature poet trying to come back into contact with people feels a certain reluctance, a certain repulsion from it.

Mark: The different types of literature have differing preferred subject matter. The novel tends to be about people. It can be to some degree about landscape, but usually there are people at the centre, and its subject is human interactions of the sort you were mentioning. Drama, even more so. Drama is the most human-chauvinistic of the three. It exists in a world where there is nothing but people; and the great prose dramatists like Bernard Shaw create a world in which you clean forget that there are in fact a million other species. Poetry is the one literary genre that regularly deals with the other million-odd species. It can do that better than any other medium except film. Of course with modern high-quality colour film we've had a technological break-through, and now there's a sense in which even the most fugitive species is a common property of the human race via the skill of the cameramen. But poets have always, in a sense, been nature poets, though there are exceptions. You can get someone like Bruce Dawe, whose poetic

imagination is actually inflamed by suburbia and every day human interactions, and of course he has had to devise a whole new style of poetry to do that.

Paul: Your poem called 'Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens' has a lot of people in it, and rather lovely sketches they are, with a satirical edge. Also in that poem you have explored syntax in a way I don't think you have done elsewhere, using a Miltonic sort of periphrasis — where you have enormous amounts of material to get over, the names of plants and so on — and you might give the name of a plant and then a circular epithet, which brings you back, and these loop the poem together. Was Milton one of the influences on that poem?

Mark: Not consciously, but I suppose, yes, he could be there, because Milton is an author who structures a long poem, a poem with a lot of material, and who argued that the felicity of verse lay in the sense's being ingeniously 'drawn out from line to line,' and I suppose I was writing something close to prose, because I wanted to tell a long, true story of how I got involved in setting up the botanic garden, and of the people involved and all the complications.

And there were all those rich, evocative things to describe. I had all those plants which I had procured and planted on Dunk. What I often did, granted that many of them have no common names, was to pick a Latin name that was evocative and had a certain potency, and then add adjectives that would precipitate out the meaning and suggest something of the richness. Someone called it a hymn to the power of DNA. I don't believe in local gods and deities or such notions as Wordsworth played with. I think if there are forces they are, if you like, the genetic spirals that make one organism do one thing and another another.

Paul: I want to ask you about art, because in *Fiesta of Men* you have a movement to Europe. It was there in *The Eating Tree*, but it is stronger in *Fiesta*, and with it comes a sense of the artistic potential of man. In the poem called 'Marble Gods' you muse on definitions of art, ranging from Aristotle's mimesis, that art is an imitation of life, to its being wisdom. Then finally you say it is a reflection of the god in us, sometimes of our

peculiar choices in the things we decide to be. But also of the highest possibilities, the things we could be.

Mark: That is a poem I wrote after visiting Naples Museum, which has a magnificent collection of statues from Greek and Roman villas. They are statues of gods. Obviously they had a religious power then, but you wonder what they meant to the cynical Romans, who were not naive or literal believers. They were not devotional objects or icons in the modern sense, but vast amounts of money and skill were expended on them. So I looked at these great statues and tried to work out what they said. Certainly they're clever, and you can put a plaque saying: 'Fine work of the 5th Century, B.C.'; but I don't think that explains artistic greatness. You can say that they are mimesis, and that the skill lies in capturing something; and obviously for a sculptor, that is a great problem. But again, that is not enough to explain artistic greatness.

I argue that these marbles possess 'wisdom', that there is a depth of meaning in them, and I describe various examples. Then I suggest, as you say, that great works of art have the god within them, or the gods, but of course in the context of the classical world where you had many gods, each representing something, usually a higher power, or some human power raised to a higher level. At the end you have the lines: "I am inside you", says Athene, tweaking her cap. "Once you know that, let gods and marble go" – which of course you really have to say, because you're dealing with a vanished form of religious art. We don't have those gods, and those statues are still essentially inert marble to us. The point is that the gods can live on in our hearts.

Paul: In *The Fiesta of Men* a lot of the poems are concerned with time, with layers of time upon one another. Human time, geological time, and the contrast – this is an old theme with you, which goes right back to *Reef Poems* – the obvious shortness of human time compared with the millennia of nature. 'Tour of Atlantis' is probably the most suggestive of these poems. In a way they are full of the sensations of a historical culture as the nature poems are of their objects, so they are very, very sensuous poems. They are colourful and rich, and yet there is in each type of poem the danger of becoming

a set piece, of being about its subject as material object, rather than about something else, a theme, or a human concern.

Mark: I have changed from being, as it were, a nature poet, to being a poet of art and culture and archaeology. The reason is quite simple. A jet plane took me to Europe. I am, as yet, essentially a poet who responds to an environment, and in this case it was an environment of people. It was no use looking for nature on the Greek Islands. The soil has all been washed away centuries back, and you've got what naive tourists think is a very beautiful white bare rock-face shining in the summer sun. And so you look at the archaeology – the history of the people living there now, and of those people who lived in the past, and whose achievements have affected everything that's happened in human history since. Of course time comes in. Time is part of the modern myth that we were speaking of. The older myths were much more human-centred. They put man at the centre of the world, and even made the world a kind of moral gymnasium for human powers to be exerted upon. Whereas, the modern myth, something we've all got from programmes like David Attenborough's *Life on Earth* and Professor Bronowski's *Ascent of Man*, is one that extends much further back in time. We no longer believe that the world was created in 4000 B.C. We know that we live in a small part of a long time-scale on a small planet in a minor corner of the universe; and yet that knowledge, in a way, is a vast and imaginatively satisfying myth. It is one that makes human beings small, but by God! it makes the world infinite and fascinating! Of course, in Greece you're always looking backwards at least two or three thousand years when you wander through the Islands. The classic example is the poem you mentioned on Santorini, where you can see the layers of volcanic ash as you go down the side of the cliff, and recognise that twelve feet down was the Minoan period, and then you go down another thousand feet and you see all those other layers.

Paul: It is a marvellous sense. But what about the risk of these poems, as it were, becoming set pieces?

Mark: I do write about being in a particular place. I don't say, 'I will use this place as a symbol of what I want to write

about!' Not consciously. It may happen that way. The poem that I think is the best example of that is the one called 'To Kill an Olive'. It is about how it is impossible to kill an olive tree, how they always come back, and only the goats, by constant grazing can destroy them. At the time I wrote that I put in a lot of details that I got from a book about olives, and from knowledge of olive trees, and they were all literal details. Believe it or not, I was interested in olive trees and in goats. I found that a lot of readers who are interested almost purely in the human world, ignored that. They took the poem as symbolic all the way through. So that when I read it at the Struga Festival and unwisely dedicated it to my Macedonian friends, it was taken to be a rather dangerous political poem, expressing the impossibility of Macedonia ever being absorbed into a larger nation — like the olive it would always come up again. And when I read it at the 1980 Westminster Abbey poetry reading, it was taken to be about the power of poetry, that always comes back. I suppose far more people would take it simply as being about the power of civilisation and the fertile olive, the symbol of peace, triumphing. None of these are wrong interpretations, the more symbolic ones. But I got to them by starting with the literal concrete one.

Paul: Another question about art, and this seems to imply an ambiguity. You see art as a threat when it is used under pressure to enforce an ideology of faith. The danger of that kind of art is that men lost touch with reality in their frenzy — your phrase is, 'a fancy to expel the world' — and your own love, as we have been saying, is dedicated to the material world, to that sort of objective reality. So it is not just art, but inturned subjective art that is at fault, whereas your poetry intends to draw attention to the objective world and exclude the art of the icon.

Mark: Once again, I would just draw attention to the particular topic of the poem and not generalise it quite so much. I was speaking, in the poem you quote, of a Greek Orthodox church, St Titus's, and the way that those churches seem built, as I said, like a psychic pressure-box, to crush imagination into faith. And when you enter them, by definition, the outside world is excluded and a new

world is built inside, closer to the dogmas of the religion than the outside world can ever be made to appear. I don't object to icons as such, and I have certain mystical tendencies of my own. What I was commenting on was the way religious art, on which immense amounts of time and treasure were expended, was used to create a selective picture of the world. It was like a circular argument. You began with your dogmas and, as you couldn't make the world fit them, you created a church. St Titus's, of course, is that gloomy Greek Orthodox cathedral, where you feel the sun is being held out, and I finished with an image of Christianity as a Roman or a Greek might have seen it in the classical period, as an underground sect, a thing of the darkness fighting against Apollo, the god of light. I think all that is absolutely true for the specific context in which it comes.

Paul: You have an elegy to Auden, and I see some similarity between your poems and the later Auden, say, his landscapes. He also pioneered, for many, the 'essay poem, such as you've written in 'Marble Gods'. How important is he to you?

Mark: Auden is an influence. Auden of course, moved in his later years, just as A.D. Hope did, into what I call the modern world-myth. Of course, Auden did it more eccentrically. He can be silly, too, as in his piece on the moon-landing. I think he often says things that ought to be true, for the purposes of the poem, and aren't; but I do like his urbanity, his unclouded obliquity, his eloquence and his knowledge.

Paul: Quite often poets who write about nature don't strike one as being comic. However, there is a rather lovely poem in your new book called 'Riding a Hired Lambretta in the Fifth Lane of the Autostrada to Visit the Underworld' which has comic parts in it.

Mark: Yes, it is, of course, about going to visit the entrance to the Underworld, which in classical times was a quite definite place, the Sybil's Cave at Cumae. And that is very near Naples, one of the great beauty spots of the world, and of course one of the places in Europe most conspicuously destroyed by gross overpopulation,

together with poverty, crime, social disorganisation, and everything that goes with it. And I described myself blundering through this once sacred landscape. I initially had a line: 'In the age of increase the sacred survives like a lettuce patch in a rabbit plague,' but I found the poem had said all that, anyway, so I removed that summary line.

Yes, it is comic. I have a strong tendency towards the comic. It is beginning to show more in my poetry, as I become more confident of being able to hit the right tone, to be relaxed, without being simply prosaic. The encouraging comments I have had on the Dunk Island poem will probably cause me to move more in the direction of comic freedom.

Paul: One poem in your latest book, called 'The Lake-Island at St Naum,' is a beautiful evocation of the calm and wonder of nature which is threatened at the interface of national rivalries by the insanity of nuclear weaponry, although only a grenade pin is mentioned. It strikes me that you may have been reading Heaney, and wanted to do his beautifully downplayed final image suggestive of threat, such as in his poem 'The Constable Calls'. Could you talk about your strong final images, and whether you have difficulty with the endings of poems.

Mark: No, I haven't read that particular poem of Seamus Heaney. Oddly enough, though, he was with me there because we were both at the Struga Festival and, as guests, we were taken around that lake together. But I could well have picked up that feeling which you get in contemporary writing about Belfast, that prickle of knowledge that the rifles are trained and cocked, and who knows when some tiny thing will set them off.

Yes, it is always a problem to end a poem well, and sometimes you are lucky that somewhere in what you've drafted is an ending. You just have to structure the poem to lead to it. I revise poems endlessly for sound and effect, and how they'll flow. The ending you are speaking of runs like this. It describes the lake:

My ear holds an image, that background of water
dashing its smoothness on rocks below.

The safeness of stone.

With that I could sleep, a noise as secure

as the roar of arteries – recalling
how lake-water holds the sun
like a great rippling pupil, even
here by this slash, this pin
of the grenade still rolling.

I can no longer recall how I got those final lines together in that order. I suppose, as I was standing by the lake, I saw that image of the waterfall falling into it, feeding it, and connected that with the roar of arteries, and thus a suggestion of a human body. I saw it as a pupil holding the sun, a great rippling pupil, and I saw the slash through the trees that marks the Albanian border; and somehow, perhaps at a late revision, I realised I could simply put that against the image of the pin of a grenade, not in any quite visual sense, but simply because it made a kind of cadenza.

Paul: There is a poem in the new book called ‘Stromboli’, which is about nature, but it also has references to sexuality and to other emotional compulsions. Now, this is really quite rare in your poems, I think.

Mark: Well, it isn’t really, because there are a few love poems in each book. There’s one called ‘Two Shores’ in *Fiesta*, which has been one of the more successful poems, I think. It’s a love poem to a girl friend on the other side of the world. It uses dream imagery and a set of referents that are not the objective realities of the modern myth, or anything else. There is also –

Paul: One called ‘Arriving’ in *The Eating Tree* –

Mark: So titled because there was already a poem called ‘Coming’ in that volume, and it covers the more mechanical side of orgasm well enough. There’s lots of implied love and other emotions running through, but I am not, as yet at least, a novelist, or not a novelist of intense private emotions, in my poetry. I may be at some future date. I keep changing according to where I go and what happens to me.

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