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BEYOND THE OBVIOUS LANDSCAPES

Mark O'Connor, *The Eating Tree*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980. Paper \$5.95. 65pp.

Barry O'Donohue, *Addiction to False Landscapes*. Brisbane: Queensland Community Press, 1981. Paper \$5.90. 62 pp.

Mark O'Connor's second volume of collected poems retains the fresh pleasure in nature and the quiet confidence in language that characterize his first collection, *Reef Poems*. *The Eating Tree* offers also a thoughtful appraisal of the history of man and nature, and a more conscious delight in the traditional resources of poetry. Formal rhythms, alliteration and consonance, elliptic and contracted phrases, rhyme, double and single epithets, simile and metaphor are used neither lavishly nor sparingly, but occur usually with unarguable justness.

The Eating Tree collection gives a consistent view of the earth and living things on it, and only indirectly gives access to the poet's mind. Although there is often an observing and experiencing "I", the poet does not invite the reader to contemplate him, except in one or two little *jeux d'esprit*, like "Exorcism for an Old Lover" and the more reflective "Arriving". The poet is usually nearby with traveller's bag, underwater gear or camp-fire, so that the poems do not appear like *ex cathedra* statements from a disembodied hand. Once, in fact, the real hand of the poet, like a shot from a wild-life film, is seen picking up a baby turtle. Overall, *The Eating Tree* presents a very human view of the juxtaposition, rather than the relationship, of man and nature.

In a number of poems, O'Connor uses the risky technique of allowing the natural object to speak directly from the poem, as in most of the poems in *The Rainbow Serpent* and *Island* sequences. *The Rainbow Serpent* poems were written to accompany a photographic exhibition by Jeremy Carew-Reid, and with their original purpose in view, they escape that odd self-

consciousness that such “I” poems sometimes have. “Creek” is a good example of a poem that avoids the unplanned elfishness inherent in asking nature to use human speech:

Mine is the channel, the sluggish vein
through which the heavy fluid flows.
I am the sorter — mud, sand, silt,
I carry Earth’s bones to and fro. Who
wants them back must spread smooth nets
and call me in to rest. My shoalbanks turn to
sandpits, mangroves, islands; yet I give
and take with equal stream.

A consistent attitude to man and nature emerges from the collection, but there is little evidence of the kind of moral pronouncement to which some poetry that contemplates man’s place on earth is prone. The reserve is achieved not so much by authorial detachment, as by a sense that the poet is exercising the discipline of detached expression, but without pretending to distance his observation and response.

There are many possible stances for a poet, and any of them will succeed at certain times and all fail at others, but the reader’s mind is usually open to anything that the poet brings off successfully. There is, for example, the stance, epitomized in D.H. Lawrence’s “Snake”, in which Lawrence throws a stone at a snake slaking its thirst at a drinking-trough in Sicily, and then concludes that he has something to expiate — “a pettiness”. The I-interfered-with-nature-and-aren’t-I-silly stance can be annoying, partly perhaps because anyone who reads poetry has the same experience in real life every few days, and the poet’s *mea culpa*, in which the reader shares, is more effective when it is implicit. For this reason, the reader may wish that O’Connor’s lively and detailed “Turtles Hatching” had omitted the last three words and the ampersand. Taking pity on one of the thousands of tiny creatures wobbling like “non-stop lether wind-up toys” across the beach in their hazardous way to the sea, the poet lifts one down to the shore where it meets an incoming adult:

As the small shadow pedalled and bobbed, the great one
wavered and slid;
Each followed a line and a speed which by chance had a
meeting
When time too was right. Predictable fated concurrence

like the moon and its planet. For a second
the greater occulted the lesser, then as surely
slid on; & the lesser was gone; & my folly rebuked.

Nevertheless, the language and expression of "Turtles Hatching" are so clean and firm and accurate, and the observation so humorously precise that it deserves that highest of accolades, to be included in an anthology for schoolchildren where it would overwhelm the self-conscious, well-meaning verse that often appears there to turn young people off poetry for life.

What place does man have in the landscape of *The Eating Tree*? Clearly, O'Connor wants to encourage man to experience the landscape in a new way; to feel the fig's filaments "wrench the mortar free, and munch/the tiling from the walls" of Hadrian's villa; to experience Venice by diving, like its base-piles, down to where "the Po's rich silt abutts/on a sheet of buoyant clay, the height/of a man with both arms upstretched"; to live like the tick "that crawls and drills/across hot tundras of red milk"; or to feel as the puffin does "the ram of the wind on a darkening sea." Yet the poems do not have the philosophic naiveté that pretends man can be anything but man, or that without man the landscape would exist precisely as it does exist at present in the poet's or man's collective awareness. We can only guess, through our guilty consciousness of ourselves, what the earth thinks of *us*, which, after all, is another kind of human presumption, even when expressed in the words O'Connor gives his Island as it comments, "the Men come my Lastlings, my Toys, full of Qualms."

The reassuring intellectual soundness of *The Eating Tree* poems lies not only in the scientific clarity of its observation of natural fact, but in its inability to dismiss man as a valid participant in the world of the poems. Man's quaint egocentricity may be commented on, as in the neatly executed series of verses, *The Masters*, and in the unusual "Pietà", where the human agony is juxtaposed with the agony of the stone made of "Fire, pressure and a million shellfish":

Only the glued crack on the wrist reveals
how stone at the agony releases its own curves,
finding upon the thousandth blow
its way to be itself.

Nevertheless, even in "To Kill an Olive", which describes the durable olive tree that man, beast and nature may level but never utterly destroy, although the stature of Socrates and Christ is challenged by the olive tree's resurrection, the poem admits that, as a reflection on olive trees, it cannot exist without the referents of man's wisdom and man's faith:

Their shade still lies where Socrates disputed.
Gethsamene's withered groves are bearing yet.

The reader enjoys the confidence of O'Connor's trust in language. Readers must sometimes wonder if poets, not excluding T.S. Eliot, realize how unnerving it is when their poems constantly excuse the inadequacy of language or profess downright distrust of it. If the language cannot support the poem, the reader is perhaps the first person to be aware of it. Although Eliot was more than warning his readers that they were passengers in a non-roadworthy vehicle when he wrote about words that slip, slide, will not stand still, even with Eliot one can have perhaps a little too much of that metaphysical, or possibly simply linguistic, mistrust of speech. And that is a thought that is not too far from the close of O'Connor's poem, "A Fugue for T.S.E."

Recent poetry in English shows that younger poets, without aggressively abusing the language, are beginning to find that they can craft its traditional resources and established syntax into a medium that is not inadequate for the last decades of the twentieth century. (Without Eliot, of course, this may not have come about.) Mark O'Connor is one of these poets. *The Eating Tree* has a lively, sometimes apparently random and yet accurate language, in which alliteration and consonance may occur with the effect of accidental music, assisted by the sway of a marked rhythm:

Evenings on coral clays between Capricorn and Cancer
where the birds come endless as midges on Scottish moors
or snowflakes in winter gales
over Austrian passes; . . .

Hard to guess – in the wind-jostled striving confusion
swept to confetti'd conflagration over island thermals
each flake has its vision of home,
its tape of directions

Bound to a branchlet, a single mate
after quartering the world.

from "Evenings"

Incidentally, what a great help the discovery of thermals has been to poets writing about birds; it is surprising that Wordsworth, Shelley and Hopkins managed without it.

Alliteration is also used in phrases with an irony that does not undercut the poetic effect, and it sometimes becomes an economical means of emphasis:

Some, sighting the canopy,
plunge on closed wings
to the snaring earth;
crazed as lemmings
crash in your camp-fire.
Confused and disgraced
the swift engines of air
must burrow for birth in the soil.

from "Petrels Returning"

Deliberate rhythms seem to mock their own fluency in these poems, without belittling what the poem is saying; just as varying rhyme patterns appear without awkwardness, as in "Cambridge Cathedral Burial, 12th Century," which addresses the effigies of a knight and his lady, who may be wondering

why, since the last aspirant thrust under,
the marble flags have lain an age unprised
with only the murmurous growl of feet above
as if no man desired to sleep with God?

— A sorry thought. Courageous souls, rest on.
Contracts are voted yearly for the day
when all shall be together as you pray.

Overall, the essential craft of poetry is seen in the way some kind of rhythm is sustained throughout a whole poem or sequence; and indeed the collection, with one or two excepted poems, conveys, in all its variety, the feeling of one unified underlying rhythm. If this is true, it can be nothing other that we feel but the rhythm of the poet's mind. There seems not such a strong reason for regretting (since as humans, nature has given us one or two gifts of our own) that, as O'Connor says at the end of "Pacific Puffins", "words are all we've left of wings." They are not such poor compensatory wings for those fortunate enough to have the use of them.

The *Island* sequence is an impressive ending to the collection. The poems describe the birth of an island, its settling into its surrounding ocean, the fertilization and population by birds, plants and forests, and finally man's arrival. Increasingly complex syntax reflects the emergence and consolidation of the island, which is the "i-land" speaker of the poem:

sea bore (me).
tides doused (me) & drained. sun
grayed (me), reef greened (me) around, old
shoal of ded coral they thought (me)
their plaything to move as they bound.

The consummation of the island's growth is embodied in the triumphant rhythmic flow of the fifth section:

Me first knew I then.
& sent up my pinnacle thermal, great furling
trumpet each day of fiery air
where eagles rest.

Am I life, which I soil, make I
Breeze, even rain? Only Ocean
resurgent might murder Me now.

If every poet who now seizes on thermals to explain the cavorting of his birds had as vivid a concept of them as a "great furling trumpet of fiery air," no one would quibble at their constant appearance in bird poems.

The island's solidity is confirmed and secured by the *Pisonia* forest, which also attracts man:

I lie back sound,
Till the Men come, my Lastlings, my Toys, full of Qualms,
Snared by Its Aura, Our Poise, trailing Peacocks and Palms,
Gasping deep for Our Peace; — yet rejected each Year when
It boasts
Out Its Lifehooks, Its Gluseeds unguessed, chokes Its Hosts,
Liming too Minds of Men in the unglibbed Web of Life:

While the poem denies man a pre-eminent place in the "unglibbed Web of Life," it does acknowledge that he has a place in it, and that the web of life would be incomplete without him. *Island* attempts to empathize with the insensate, and, in the first section, to image the emergence of form from chaos. This difficult feat is attempted elsewhere in Australian poetry, for example in Robert D. FitzGerald's "The Face and the Waters" and Chris Wallace-Crabbe's "Chaos". The challenge can

never meet with complete success, perhaps, but the attempt is always worthwhile. In the process FitzGerald achieves some unforgettable, mimetic images:

Once again the scurry of feet – those myriads
crossing the black granite; and again
laughter cruelly in pursuit; and then
the twang like a harpstring or the spring of a trap;
and the swerve on the polished surface: the soft little pads
sidling and skidding and avoiding; but soon caught up
in the hand of laughter and put back

Wallace-Crabbe uses dense, laboured language to express emergence:

Where one cry or one breath or one crayon line would
have been the creation of music and metaphysics, shape
and society, purpose and history and the tame heavy
beasts of the farmer's yard,

The very first word or gesture undoing the uncreation as a
thunderdrum or lightning-lance shatters the fat purple of
the summer night, laying the blest foundation on stone or
starting a sole rusted clock in the ruined mansion of the
world.

And O'Connor evokes the riddle of becoming, or makes what Terry Sturm called when speaking of FitzGerald's poem, "a daring raid on the inarticulate", by tentative yet purposeful phrases, which gradually outgrow their question marks and set themselves more and more firmly on the page:

rain rinsed me, sun seared,
tide swirled men & bled, then sleet rain sluiced
me sweet. somewhere (dream of i) in that night
all my salt things died.

waves beat, storms compacted, rock found me fast.
waves fought i though no one, not yet one; yet no one i
won.

It is perhaps not fortuitous that *Island* is reminiscent at times of Anglo-Saxon riddles which also attempted to reach into the mystery of real, created things. The attempt to do precisely that gives *The Eating Tree* its philosophic weight, and its poetic value lies in its steady, unpretentious, often humorous exercise of high craftsmanship.

Mark O'Connor's collection evokes the hope that somewhere in south Asia a poet waits ready to record the first

growth in a devastated and defoliated landscape he once knew as his patch of jungle. Barry O'Donohue was in south-east Asia on National Service, and although his poetry is not overtly autobiographical, moral, political or patriotic, it is the kind of poetry that chronicles where the poet has been in spirit. Names are used as social and moral symbols in the *Addiction to False Landscape* collection – Kabul, February 1980, Auschwitz, Bel-sen, Hiroshima, My Lai, Moscow, Peking and Washington – but even in the most realistic of the poems these names have more than political and geographical significance. O'Donohue's landscape has no fixed reality for himself, and although this does not mean readers cannot look squarely at the landscape of the poems, it does suggest they would be unwise to expect that any kind of fixed reality is normally the subject.

One of the easiest poems to comprehend in *Addiction to False Landscapes* is a poem about "The Poem", and it gives a vivid idea of the kind of poet who writes the work found in the collection. O'Donohue questions the notion that his contemporaries have reached a comfortable relationship with what he calls "literature", although their actions suggest they believe they have:

We gather as believers
before the divided waters of our contemporaries,
we love with each other's limbs,
speak with each other's words,
such air alive with fire and similes,
metaphors.

O'Donohue, however, finds that words are predators, "circling around and around til you're trapped within the borders of your mind." Literature has always been master and it terrifies the poet:

It rolls
over and over the dark earth smelling
the heavy scent of fear,
rolling across dark skies
of our minds, trailing its heavy claws
behind, with us dangling from
their points
by our broken necks.

The success of these sometimes very difficult poems depends, then, on the poet's hard-won battle with words. Oddly, the greatest weakness of the works are some clichés and second-

hand phrases, not the intractable and evasive images. The poet does have faith in the possibility of using language to express psychological or emotional experience, but the poems admit time and again that he has no fixed idea about what language actually is. In "Narrative to David Campbell" language is related to the "slender piece of doubt" which is mentioned at the beginning of the poem:

There is a slender piece of doubt which forms
a sixth and final finger. It grows with you,
poised and pointed like a shameless stub.

The poem goes on to describe the chaotic experience of personal growth from adolescence, where experience is seen as a changing landscape in which the sky is known only as "The words/of a brain in flight from within swirling/pools of cloud", and in which "birds fall darkly from sky to brain." At this point, the poet's doubt, which is his most essential characteristic, reappears:

The finger which traces the ridiculous form
into grace, the roar of wings into song, the crumbling
window into strength, is language. Knowing doubt
is a slender finger tempting truth, we move always
within a vortex. Here now is a finger which touches
a page

In "The First Australian Hero", the emergence of man is set within the context of this island continent, and the development of language is imagined as a troubled birth:

Communication became a conspiracy of trust and chaos
without guarantee or the sense of direction.

Language is a strong box full of rusting keys.
These people fumble at the latch.

Later, words are said to "sprout from darkness", and the idea that words engage man, expressed earlier in "The Poem", is repeated:

*How much we
are caged within our words
– they pin us to confined meanings
they are of course, yes, or no, indifferent
onlookers at the structure we give them.*

On the other hand, however, language occasionally resembles something clear, pure, but elusive: "Language to him is/a small

bird which glides at the base of chaos.” But the poem ends with a different image from this – perhaps it means that language only became really threatening with the coming of modern civilization:

How he speaks slowly without sound.
His footstep stirs something completely smooth
wandering out for miles.
It rings always like a wind
to the quick touch.
Rubber wheels are
moving close behind
like words.

In the powerful, but much less lucid poem, “Sojourn in Deserted Fields”, the “black raven” which is “our brain” is harboured within man’s tongue, where intellectual gods can reach it and “command it fly”. “Sojourn in Deserted Fields” also suggests that the poet fears the intellectual process, and is “Terrified by the power of its mastery.”

The title poem, “Addiction to False Landscapes” comprises two sections one dedicated to Les Murray and the other to Robert Adamson. The first, dedicated to Murray, misdoubts the value of language and the literature it creates, “Words fragment to timid clowns, drift away/to inaudible death as blank and unreal as time.” Moreover, literature breeds from “Dried leaves of paper” which “flake at the spine” and drift out on apparently undirected currents of air. It is not unexpected, then, that in the second poem the poet sits by a lake that cannot reflect the honest image he seeks. He is empty of all identity, and the wind is silence which he hears as a kind music

howling
from the edge of our creation,
knowing *this* is the beginning
from which all things must grow.

The poems in this collection thus exist despite the poet’s uneasiness about the role and value of language, and in the face of his fear of rational processes. In the pieces in which experience seems densest, like “Narrative to David Campbell”, “Woken Birds”, “The First Australian Hero”, “Sojourn in Deserted Fields” and the final poem, “The Empire Builders”, there is an inescapable feeling that for the poet outer reality has

no assured meaning, and that he does not fully trust any of the senses by which he reached towards outer reality. This idea is imaged in the opening lines of the first section of "Addiction to False Landscapes":

I suspend by a chord in a room of black light.
Odd this feeling of unawareness — senseless
— as though both gravity and the mirror are somehow
defying their own laws, I question my perceptions;
mixed, ambivalent, they've been skulking like
aimless cats, unable to see or feel.

This misdoubting of the instruments of perception and the messages they give is not so positive an attitude as complete mistrust or distrust. The poet seems always to suspect that a painting may in fact be a mirror, or that a window will no longer function as something through which outer reality can be seen, because it is suddenly backed by darkness and reflects only the observer.

The more strongly a poem expresses this kind of doubt, the less logically coherent its images become, so that neither intellectual logic nor aesthetic perception can follow all their turnings. Images like these tend to melt into each other or juxtapose themselves as in a surreal painting, although the syntax usually remains formal. Yet, just as the spectator reads something from a surreal painting, so the poet's audience reads a coherent statement from lines where even similes may be made on doubtful fact, and ambiguities are possibly the result of misspelling. Unnecessary obscurity, however, and ambiguity that arises because the poet's spelling is in doubt, give rise to an anti-poetic uncertainty, and the following lines, though comprehensible to the willing imagination, depend a great deal on the charity of the reader:

The present is pinched somewhere between hope and charity.
Fate or future
is drinking beer along the Queensland coast.
Far off, lights shine in the dark homages we build:
 the spires harden in cities like veins
in an ageing artery.

 All inhabitants
stiffen with
Those survivors huddle beneath television screens.
They feint of domesticity plan no revolutions.

I do not think it is an overstatement to say that the poems in *Addiction to False Landscapes* express an anguish that is both controlled and quiet, and that, at its best, moves fear and compassion. Our compassion is moved because the poet himself is deeply compassionate, especially towards children and the aged, or those of past generations. The short "Children of Nebulae" is one of the briefest and most telling comments yet made in Australian poetry about the social environment of the young:

You've seen the impatience flowing
like venom from the mouths of motorists, or
mothers shoving children into buses, or out of cars.
Just watch the small ones, under six. Get a smile
and what's the catch.

Often a poem may be frightening, not because it cannot be followed by the logical mind, but because it speaks so directly to concealed fears of disintegration. When the lines are perfectly lucid, the meaning is sometimes heartbreakingly sad, as in the lines from "The Empire Builders" which are the last words in the book:

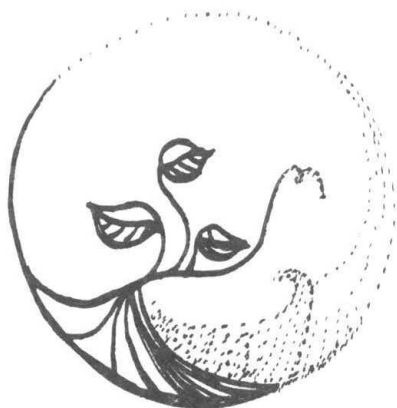
I've woken some mornings
without a single history to fetch me songs.
I've seen in dreams
tired men of decades ago
lifting sad eyes to catch the future
we understand as present,
 each face shaded
the way river rocks grow dark
 in deepening holes
and the hastening water.

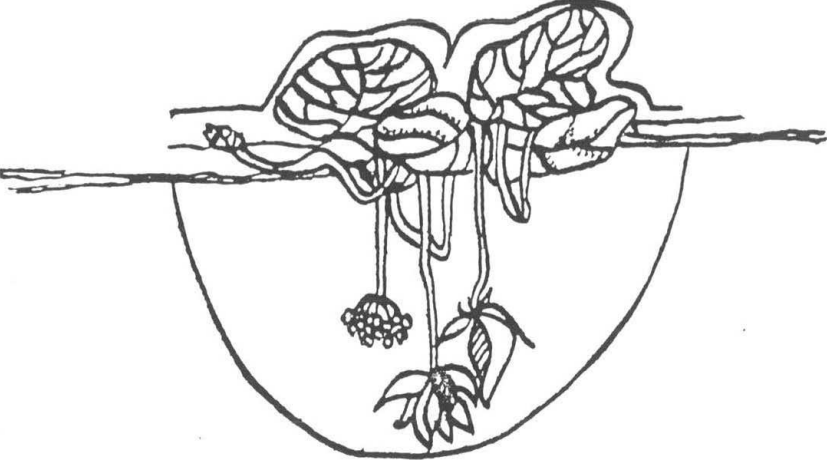
O'Donohue is a comparatively young poet who often seems preoccupied with understanding how the old generation felt in its own time and how it might feel now. That is to say, the sense of mortality is stronger for him than almost any other sense. These poems are not fantasies of the poet's unconscious, however, but the efforts of intellect, itself feared by the poet, to extract meaning from the chaos of perceptions of whose veracity he is unsure. While the process, as it is seen taking place in a poem like "Sea Eagle" for example, disturbs the reader's fear that he may find the steady pattern of his own conscious-

ness begin to fragment, the poet himself does not seem to fear disintegration. Rather, the poems give the impression that they are steps by which the poet is shaping himself out of his own chaos. This does not always make for good poetry, but the seven "Haiku Farewell" pieces prove that clarity and compression can sometimes be perfectly within O'Donohue's control.

This attempt to analyze *Addiction to False Landscapes* in terms of what appears to be the poet's wariness of both perception and expression, should not discourage the reader from expecting an occasional beautifully lucid observation, like the lines that occur in the poem "Sistine", which remind one of a page of Henry James:

Leaving the Chapel, modest women
in dark clothing catch my eye,
signal they've seen the revelation of
the art form. They come daily to sit
in the half light within,
waiting like answers for a question
which is never asked.
Following prayer they look up into
Michelangelo's immortal mind, accept
its strength and move out
into the sunlight, its harsh
rays and craven shadows.





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