

## THE POETRY OF MARK O'CONNOR --DETAILED EXPLANATION OF SIX POEMS

[GENERAL ISSUE: The use of biological detail in literature.]

### A Study Guide by Rachel Turner

Today most of us are aware, thanks in part to the film documentaries of David Attenborough and others, that the world of living things is stunningly complex. Every creature, from lyrebird to sequoia to Aids virus, seems to have its own special structure and life history. As well, humans are no longer automatically the summit or centre of the biological world, any more than the earth is necessarily the centre of the universe.

The literary world has been slow to catch up with this change in world view. Just as it took centuries for our culture to absorb the fact that the Earth is not the centre of the world, many people still do not accept that the 5 million other species on this planet have any importance or value in themselves.

Until the C20th many readers and critics felt that if the natural world was the work of God, and if God's omnipotent power was beyond human understanding, then there was no point in a writer's looking in too much detail at other species. An educated person would be interested to know only enough about them to get a general understanding of God's purposes ("metaphysics") and a proper awe for His power. The C18th English poet Alexander Pope contemptuously remarked of persons interested in biology that "The mind in metaphysics at a loss /May wander in a wilderness of moss." The famous critic Samuel Johnson was even more trenchant. It is not the purpose of the poet, he said, "to count the streaks on the tulip" but to offer "just representations [i.e. correct images] of general nature."

By contrast O'Connor argues in a poem called "Wordsworth's House at Rydal" that without the modern understanding of nature's details it is impossible to think usefully about larger or more metaphysical questions. O'Connor depicts the great C19th nature poet Wordsworth as "an eighty year-old /starving for information". He suggests that Wordsworth spent his old age endlessly revising his earlier poems about nature and marking time, because it was difficult for him to make any further progress without the more detailed understandings of nature that Charles Darwin and others would one day bring. Even today some people whose education has been narrowly humanities-based will wonder why O'Connor is so interested in the details of the natural world; and some may jump to the conclusion that it can only be because he is "not interested in people".

In fact, of course, each of his poems, even when emphasizing the complexity of nature, offers only a relatively small group of natural details that are carefully selected for literary impact. It should also be remembered that while O'Connor is clearly fascinated with natural environments, very many of the poems in his Selected Poems are on human subjects. Indeed the writer and historian Manning Clark praised O'Connor's book *Firestick Farming: Selected Poems 1972-1990* primarily for quite other qualities, saying "It is the voice of a man who can create people, and create them in memorable words. It's a very serene voice --that I think is very important. It's the voice of a man whose eye is single and undistracted. . . . Happily it's the voice of a man who is an enlarger of life,

and not a straightener and not a frowner." For examples of the qualities Manning Clark was describing, see Firestick Farming pp. 50-54, or O'Connor's more recent A New Ballad of the Man from Snowy River in the book Tilting at Snowgums. You might also like to look at some of some of his more explicitly personal poems like "Revisiting Home Town" on page 115, or "The Fourteen Syllogisms of the Cross" page 118, or "In the Gardiner Valley" page 160.

It might be better to say that the most obvious part of O'Connor's poetic personality is his objectivity --his willingness to feel and care about the world outside himself. The compassion he shows for other creatures is interesting in that at the same time he is reluctant to misrepresent them by humanising (anthropomorphising) them. It is of course more difficult for a poet to write about other species, especially those that have no traditional literary or cultural "meanings", because language is a human construction and works best for talking about human concerns. At the same time, O'Connor does not make an obvious parade of his own emotions. By contrast, many poets are more consciously concerned to display their own personalities. O'Connor's personality may seem to be revealed in the course of his poems, but it happens almost accidentally, in the course of talking about things that he seems to think more important than himself.]

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## 1. "THE BEGINNING"

Mark O'Connor talks about this poem:

"'The Beginning' was one of the first poems I wrote when I hitchhiked up to the Great Barrier Reef in 1972, playing truant from an earlier career as a playwright. I was staying at the Scientific Research Station on Heron Island, where I used to meet the different scientific experts as they came through. Most of them would take me out on the Reef and we'd see this extraordinary complex web of life, but as yet there was no pattern or story with which I could make a poem out of the scientific information. Yet to those scientists the Reef was the most poetic and engrossing thing in the world.

"Then one day I met the person who was given a grant to work on the Crown of Thorns starfish. He was a parasitologist called Lester Cannon, and I said "I presume you are trying to identify its predators?" "Predators?" he said. "Who cares about predators? It wasn't Sabre Tooth tigers and lions that kept us humans in order in the past. It was cholera and malaria, etc. It's parasites that hold the whole beautiful system in balance." Somehow or other, through that, and through other conversations I had with scientists about the limitations of the original creation story, I evolved the notion of writing a new version of the Bible's creation story (as told in Genesis).

"In the bible the Garden of Eden, the most beautiful place on earth, is seen very much as a Persian walled garden, such as you can still see in the Middle East and right across to India. It has a wall around it, and outside is the "wilderness" (probably a stony desert with goats) and inside are such exotic fruit trees as --apples. That didn't strike me as very exciting. Instead, this time God would do the thing with a real swing and gusto. He would do it underwater with only a tiny piece of land in the shape of coral atoll. He would do it in the tropics, not in the temperate zone, and he would do it in the Southern Hemisphere, in fact on the Barrier Reef.

So I described the creation of a coral atoll (rather like Heron Island) and of its surrounding reef. The creation still takes seven days, but this time God wastes one day on the original walled-garden idea, then puts in five and a half days on the far more complex coral atoll idea. So it is not until late on the seventh day that he is able to relax and admire his week's work."

NOTE: END OF QUOTES. REST IS IN THE 3RD PERSON.

O'Connor's "The Beginning" uses two different types of language, one biblical and one scientific. The biblical is drawn from the story told in Genesis in the following words:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.  
etc.

The other language comes from modern scientific understanding. It refers to more subtle things, which were unknown to the ancient Hebrews but have been revealed by modern science. For instance: the enormous complexity of molecules within a living cell, which are all held together in

what is called a colloid. (A colloid is a kind of semi-solid solution, much denser than pure water: it is what largely makes up the flesh of animal and plants). Hence God now says, "Let species swarm like solutes in a colloid." God, in this story, is a little like a mad ecologist, one who insists on filling the world with five million species (as indeed he has), and all of them wonderfully and beautifully made, however deadly or bizarre or destructive in their habits. Hence, there is a mix of biblical language --like "God himself, having that day planted a garden" --and on the other hand there is the language of scientific descriptions of the chain of life. The poem refers to how the chain of life (which is also the chain of predation) begins with plankton (that is, tiny microscopic plants in the ocean that use nutrients in the water) and how upon the plankton feed the zooplankton, which are tiny shrimps and other small animals, on which in turn feed the larger predators like the reef-building corals (and finally still larger predators like sharks and humans).

Then of course, there is the reference to the phylum (a name for a major division of the animal kingdom) of "finned vertebrates" --in other words, the fishes. These include everything from "white-tipped reef shark" to "long-beaked coralfish". Like any good ecologist, God designs each species to fill a "niche," that is a particular place for which the length of its beak or the shape of its fins, or whatever else, is adapted. He calls to his aid the archangel, Raphael, one of the major assistants and supporters of God in the war against Satan and in the creation of the earth. But in this story, God does not create the world directly, but in a rather hierarchical way he commands that Raphael do the donkey work. There may be a side reference also to Raphael as the name of a famous creative artist of the Renaissance.

So complex is the world God demands that he himself either forgets some of the detail, or becomes impatient with it. Hence his voice dies away in the middle "And now for parasites ... let ...." And then, as if like an old man, he has forgotten where he is, he comes out a shade angrily saying "...In conclusion, I want ten thousand mixed chains of predation --none of your simple rabbit and coyote stuff!" At the same time, God's "forgetfulness" helps the poem stay brief. Like a "cut" or a "fade-out" in a film, it comes just at the stage where have already got the point about how immensely complex the biological world is, and simply don't need the full details (which of course would take thousands of volumes of biology books).

And there is a further purpose served by the pause where God seems to forget his place. Apart from helping establish the character of God, this pause is unexpectedly ambiguous when the poem is recited in public. The audience will grow quieter, wondering if the author (or whoever is reciting the poem) has forgotten their lines, and if so, what will happen next. This kind of uncertainty about where things are heading is part of the conscious technique of many "performance poets". They use it to create a kind of suspense that helps to focus the audience's attention. Here too there is a moment of uncertainty before the audience collectively realise that it is not the author/reciter but "God" (the "character" in the story) who has become confused by the sheer vastness and complexity of living things. At the same time, some members of the audience may be reflecting

that it sounds as though God is getting confused because he has done this sort of thing before, with different variations, perhaps on other planets or in other universes --an idea which opens up further suspense as to which way the poem may develop.

Though "The Beginning" is far denser and richer in ideas than most performance poems, it does work surprisingly well in performance, partly because of the interplay of voices within it. You have God's voice talking to the archangel Raphael in a slightly hectoring tone, and the more neutral voice of the narrator coming back at the end to tot up the days of creation. It turns out that, having spent only one day on the original walled Garden of Eden, God next puts in a full five and a half days to create a coral reef. Then on the seventh day, he dons mask and snorkel and a pair of bright yellow flippers to fin over his creation, where as in the biblical story "He looked upon it and saw that it was good". Some readers might prefer to do without the last line and to end simply with the line "In the eternal shape of a grey nurse shark." This may depend on whether or not the Bible's version of the story has emotional echoes for you.

The ambiguity of the shark --it is the climax predator helping to keep the whole pattern in balance with no species overrunning the others --is brought out in the oddly ambiguous name "grey nurse". This is the name of a man-eating shark, and yet it contains the word "nurse" which suggests a kindly and nurturing role. The poem is clearly a celebration of creation. As Manning Clark remarked in his introduction to O'Connor's book quoted elsewhere, "This is a man who is singing for those who have ears to hear, a song of praise". Yet the poem does not shirk any of the darker elements of creation.

The creator is happy to use not only predation, but even parasitism --things being eaten out from the inside by other species --as a way to keep his beautiful system in balance. The poem can be taken very light-heartedly, as a humorous or satirical piece on the notion of creating a world, but there are more serious elements within it. Ultimately, it refers to the theological puzzle which is known as the Problem of Evil: the question of how a benign creator could use predation, cancer, parasitism, and painful diseases as part of his plan for the universe.

On this theme, "The Beginning" echoes another striking poem in O'Connor's Collected Poems called "The Amiable Inquisition of the Surgeon" --in which O'Connor describes the marvellous methods and techniques devised by surgeons to defeat diseases. Yet this poem have an abrupt change of tone at the end, when it tells how the surgeons for all their tricks failed to save the life of the poet's father. The darker side of suffering and death comes more clearly to the fore; yet it is also present by implication, even in "The Beginning's" celebration or hymn to the Barrier Reef.

Various interpretations of the poem are possible, just as in performing it there would be different ways in which to read the voice of God. Some people might make God a sort of white-shoe

property-developing character; others, as a kindly, tweedy ecologist. Some would take the poem as very light; others as more serious. Of course it need not be the poet's purpose to make a confident philosophical or religious statement, but merely to open up some of the ambiguities of creation.

Interviewed on the ABC program 'The Words to Say It' by Florence Spurling about his own views on whether there was a creator behind the universe, O'Connor remarked that he did not particularly believe in a benign creator, or at least in one who took a personal interest in him and other human beings, but he did have a strong sense that the universe had been "designed to be interesting".

This poem's creation story differs from most traditional ones in that it emphasises the enormous complexity of the creation. Most creation stories depict the creator as creating just a few key species. The other interesting difference is that this poem omits the creation of humanity. Instead of being the culmination and climax of creation, it is simply forgotten. There was an earlier version of the poem in which human beings were created at the end of the process, but in the final version they do not appear at all.

Traditional stories and myths were once a great part of the subject of poetry - particularly in the classical Greek and Latin texts. Many modern poets lament the disappearance of these traditional myths which once acted as a kind of store-house or cache of powerful meanings upon which each new poet could create variations. This poem might be considered as an attempt to re-work the legends or stories in Genesis.

In the ABC video, Voyage on my Dreams, the poet is shown exploring Heron and One Tree Islands, walking among the seabirds and on the reef-flat, composing poetry there, and talking about the problems of writing in English --a North-European language that has no traditional relationship to these places, and few common names for their species.

## TURTLES HATCHING

This poem tells a more straightforward story that is based on the poet's own experiences on the Barrier Reef islands. Some of the themes are similar to those in "The Beginning". It depicts the complexity of nature and the way in which every species produces far more offspring than could possibly survive without destroying the balance and beauty of the world. It also shows how each species is pruned back by various forms of predation, some of them quite horrifying.

The poet describes, in quite practical detail, the way in which the turtles fill the sands of the coral islets of the Barrier Reef with their huge egg clutches, and how the young turtles have to hatch from these eggs and run the gauntlet of predators, of which the worst are seagulls and crabs. To defeat these predators they have learnt to make their break simultaneously, so that the eggs that hatch earlier wait until all the eggs in the clutch have hatched and, like prison escapees, they can make a simultaneously break. Apart from this, the young turtles show little sign of intelligence. They are simply programmed to run, or to half-run, half-waddle as fast as they can downhill over the sands, for which their bodies are not designed, to reach the water in which they will be able to swim freely. Unlike "The Beginning" there is no attempt to create a particular myth or story or to decorate the plain narrative. The poet seems sufficiently awed (and horrified) by the principle that (as he puts it in a later poem) "By the many eggs /of the few survivors /a species lives, eternal."

Great attention is shown to the sounds. If you recite the poem aloud you will find it needs a lot of "breath" and that there are many emphatic sound effects in it as well as many changes in rhythm to express the different types of motion and the different emotions of the human observer.

The poem keeps the narrator out of the foreground and yet he is clearly there and at the end is highly tempted to intervene and save a young turtle which would have reached the water had it not capsized onto its back. He interferes in the pattern of creation, giving the turtle extra help against its enemies; yet he is rebuked, it seems, when the natural world eliminates the young turtle whose life he had saved --and does so in an unusual way. It disappears, seemingly eaten by one of its own kin, a giant adult turtle coming in to lay.

The story is based upon scenes which the poet knew well and observed many times during the months he spent on Heron Island. Implicit in the poem is the principle by which most biologists work, whereby one does not take sides or interfere with nature, but merely observes the processes going on. Only at the end, the poet sins or breaks the scientific code by intervening. Much of the drama of the poem is in fact to do with the long holding out of the narrator against the impulse to intervene. Dense masses of descriptive language, showing the plight of the helpless young turtles, is flung up against the narrator's hard-headed principle of non-interference --until "in pity" he weakens.

It is an interesting exercise for a class to look closely at particular lines in stanzas 2 to 7, asking how the rhythm in them changes and how the change of rhythm enacts or corresponds to the differing types of motion and emotion described. Some readers have complained about the differing levels of tones in this and other poems by O'Connor. The use of words like "high revving" or the comment that "their limbs have no setting but go" (as if they were wind up toys)

strikes some readers as "not serious". This may be partly a difference of taste between British and Australian poets. British poets, even today, seem to maintain certain "class differences" in tone as in other matters, so that a poem that contains lyrical lines should not also contain cynical or deflating lines. Yet O'Connor seems to feel that the poetry of the real world lies precisely in its diversity and variety. His poetry deliberately enacts and describes the variety of tones and feelings. The poem uses bold metaphors like that in which a crab's legs are compared to those of an amoured tarantula. The crab itself is described, in a way reminiscent of an Icelandic kenning or riddle-line, as a "hairy scuttler with lobe-stalked eyes". Yet despite the occasional splash of spectacular metaphor, the main aim of the poem seems to be to tell a plain story with cumulative force. The poet has commented that part of the challenge in free-verse is to find "worm holes" and short cuts through syntactical space --that is, to find a way to say things in fewer words than one would have to use in prose.

The poem deals in part with the problem of compassion --and when compassion has to be withheld --an issue the poet sometimes discussed with his friend A.D. Hope. The poem also questions the extent to which it is proper to project our emotions and feelings into the lives of other creatures. Vegetarianism and other issues may come to mind here as well as general conservationist issues and problems of balancing the values of human life against that of other species. It should be noted that O'Connor was for ten years National Vice-president of the conservation group Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population (one of whose founders was Judith Wright). This group argues that the continual growth of human numbers is perhaps the greatest single menace to Australia's environment.

Note: the turtles that lay on Heron Island and the cays of the Southern Barrier Reef are mainly Green Turtles. On Heron Island in the nesting season, they nest so thickly that many turtles in digging their own nests will dig up the eggs of previous nests. There is waste in this concentration, but also a certain safety in numbers since the "aim" of the turtles is to satiate the predators so that some of the young turtles may escape to the water.

Task - Write a similar poem or short story about some scene in the natural world in which you are tempted to intervene after observing it closely - but find your intervention pointless or ineffective. It can be something as trivial as a trail of ants being crushed on a footpath, a wounded lizard or snake, a dog or cat that has been hit by a car.

## THE PAIRING OF TERNS

"The Pairing of Terns" is another of those poems that came out of the poet's observation of nature on the coral cays of the Great Barrier Reef.

Terns are sharp-winged birds that fly much more swiftly and with much more agile turns of speed than gulls. (Despite the nonsense written about seagull's flight in Jonathon Livingstone Seagull, the seagull is a relatively clumsily round-winged hoverer.) Terns tend to be divers or skimmers that live by taking fish directly from the ocean. They tend to have sharp sickle-shaped wings and they are swift fliers. When one sees them they are normally just idling along slowly, but each year when they form into their mating flocks they put on spectacular displays. The principle is that even as they join in these enormous flocks that seem to have a single will, each individual is showing off to others. (As they lack language and cocktails, this is their way of forming mating pairs!)

Gradually, over weeks of acrobatics, the flocks seem to sort out into pairs. When two terns have become bonded, their movements are simultaneous. They turn --'like jet fighters in love' as the poet said in an earlier draft --so swiftly that you can't tell which of the two has led and which has followed the change in direction. At this stage you know that they have become a pair which will soon descend to the land in the relatively clumsily way of sea birds, copulate, create a sort of scrape for a nest and proceed to rear their young. These terns may have come from the other end of the earth, from Siberia or Alaska. The most common species on the Barrier Reef Islands are Noddy Terns and Crested Terns.

Terns were once far more common in Australia, but unlike seagulls, they are timid birds which take off and are readily put to flight, thus abandoning their eggs. Most beaches are now becoming impossible for them because of the constant movement of humans and dogs which forces them to leave their eggs long enough for the seagulls to slip in and steal them. On the Barrier Reef Islands, however, there are still large flocks of terns which are numerous enough to defeat the seagulls and which are kept sufficiently free from human intrusion to do so. The species which the poet had most in mind were Crested and Rosiette Terns.

This poem, like several others, questions to what extent it is proper to project human emotions upon the activities of other species. This poem is far bolder than any of the others and far less inhibited in attributing to the terns something analogous to the ecstatic emotions of human love. Their mating flights resemble human dancing. However, with the exception of top ballet-dancers or ice-skating pair-champions (and some figures on video-clips) no human can imitate the physical freedom and agility of the birds. Not only are we flightless, but even among the mammals we are heavy and fairly clumsy beside, say, a squirrel or a mongoose. The poet proves that humans can at least match the birds in imagination. Indeed the ecstatic emotions of first love may make us feel as if we are "flying"; though the fact remains that we cannot literally do so. In that sense, human love remains a pale imitation of the extreme freedom and (seeming) ecstasy that the seabirds can express in their mating flights.

The poem can be seen as an exercise in finding metaphors for love. Those who have no interest in the natural world will tend to read it in this way. Yet for those who have a direct interest in the other species described, the poem also works on the level of literal truth. It is one of the most unusual collection of fresh metaphors for love in recent literature in English. The first stanza announces the theme that human lovers could know only in dreams the extraordinary plight of the terns who are described as 'riding the weird and unguessable surf of the air'. They are described as being 'locked in pairs by invisible steel' - a reference to the way in which they synchronise their movements.

Then the different types of the flight are described when they 'criss-cross moon-high in an evening sky' or in an onomatopoeic line that seems to mimic the up and down movement of the waves 'outskimming the wind on the waves of a twilit bay'. At other times, they soar as if competitively as high as they can, then dive 'cackling their random delirious laughter'. It also describes a typical seabird manoeuvre in which they hover facing into an oncoming stiff breeze and are 'unmoved yet sustained by the stream that surrounds them'. It also describes the slightly more laboured motion when they have to come back against the wind in an onomatopoeic line of mainly monosyllables: 'low against wind they row back hard'. It then describes the sudden access of freedom when they turn to 'take the gale under their wings' and run down wind. The poet then summarises the terns' superiority over the problems of weight and the physical world by saying that they are unworried 'they know there is nothing they cannot do'. An earlier version of the line ran 'like Gods, there is nothing they cannot do'.

The final stanza explicitly states that 'Their love is everything for which we have only metaphors'. There is some interesting onomatopoeic effect on the third line in which the phrase 'feathertip closenesses' mimics in its tightness of pronunciation, the closeness with which the lovers are able to move without however, interfering with each other's freedom. The final line refers to the migratory flights of the terns who were able to fly to the other end of the earth in days when humans rarely moved beyond the village in which they were born.

In the first version of this poem as it appeared in the early book "Reef Poems" (1976), there was an additional stanza which drew a moral, comparing the freedom of the terns in the air with the way in which they would become bound to their nests and a single mate after they descended. The poem made an explicit comparison with 'the squall of infants echoing through the blocked suburban sprawl'. Deleting this stanza has removed any reference to the selfishness of people who have too many children thus creating demands that may push other species to extinction. Yet by avoiding any risk of seeming to preach, the poem retains a simpler and more lyrical movement.

## TO KILL AN OLIVE

The positioning of this poem in the anthology Fire-Stick Farming is significant. It follows a sequence of poems about the Balkan areas, including ones about ethnic tensions near the lake-island of Saint Naum (between Greece, Macedonia, and Albania). Like many other poems by O'Connor, it seems at one level to deal with actual information about the physical world; but this time there are a great range of spiritual or metaphorical meanings.

At the literal level, the poem describes the longevity of olive trees. These live for thousands of years. For instance, the ones in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ suffered the passion, or "the Agony in the Garden" before resolving to accept the crucifixion, are thought to be the original trees. Actually, it is the root-stock rather than the branches which is immortal. In frost-prone climates the trunks are regularly split and torn apart by heavy frosts, only for the roots to push up fresh trunks in due course.

Note that the olive in Europe is an introduced tree, and often needs human help to deal with Europe's frosts. The poem is not about nature versus human interference, but much more about what this tree has meant to human beings. Of course the resilience that enables it to produce sweet oil out of barren soil is part of its natural toughness; but the olive in Europe is as much a domesticated species as the hen or the donkey.

The olive is a traditional symbol of peace, prosperity, fertility. In ancient Athens the story is that the founders, or the early citizens, were offered a choice between the god Poseidon, who offered them his gift of a sterile spring of salt symbolising the ocean, and the goddess Athena, who provided an olive tree. They chose Athena as their patron. She was also the Goddess of Wisdom.

Olives are a tree with a remarkable ability to grow in the absence of top-soil, and to produce rich oil out of fairly barren sub-soil. A good tree can sometimes produce up to 400 kilos of bitter fruit, from which 80 kilos of a delicious scented oil can be pressed --enough for a family if they also have wheat and wine, the traditional Mediterranean trinity of foods. Thus, the olive is not merely an arbitrary symbol for peace and prosperity. Like all the best symbols in poetry, it stands for certain qualities precisely because it is in reality closely connected to those qualities.

The poem describes how in times of war the olive trees would be hewn down and destroyed, but how they come back. Many different symbolic meanings have been attached by readers to this poem. Once when the poet read it at an international poetry festival in Struga in Macedonia (at that time part of Yugoslavia), the poet was warned that he had made a dangerous statement about the resurgence of nationalistic sentiment. In the US the poem has been turned into an Episcopalian hymn --presumably seen as being about the reviving power of goodness. Other more literary readers have assumed it must be about the eternal power of poetry, or of peace, or of civilisation. The poet suggests that it is also quite largely about olive trees.

The poem takes its place in a sequence of poems written in the years (1977-80) when O'Connor lived in Europe, often minding villas in the off-season in Greece and Italy. These villas were surrounded by olive groves. The last two lines expand the implications of the poem by mentioning Socrates, who like many Greek philosophers disputed in the shade of an olive grove ("the grove of Akademe") which provided Athenians at once with summer shelter and with the food they needed for survival. The last line adds a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane. (Socrates and Christ were often associated by later writers, as being both martyrs who died for insisting upon unpopular truths. Note in the last line the multiple ambiguities of the adjective 'withered' and the strong stress upon the final word 'yet'.

The poem might symbolise many different things, but perhaps at the emotional/symbolic level it is about the battle between depression and optimism, faith and despair. At the level of human survival it is perhaps about the way each generation of human beings, like the olive root, puts forth new buds, new offspring, themselves to be crippled and twisted by the various disasters and disintegrating forces of nature and civilisation, and yet the root goes on immortal.

The goat, of course, is a typical biblical symbol for the devil and the forces of destruction. In mentioning Socrates and the great intellectual civilisation of the Greeks, and connecting it to the olive tree, the poem may be making the point that even spiritual civilisations are built upon material sufficiency, and that a nation has to have a basic ecologically sustainable supply of food before it

can build permanent achievements of the mind. The loss of most of Greece's soil by the end of the classical period probably led to its descent into poverty and captivity.

The poem has a stop-start syntax, in which full stops often defy line-endings. For instance, 'A great frost can leave the trees leafless for years' is answered in the mere two words 'they revive'. As if for variation, a shorter statement of the forces of disaster and disintegration in the clause 'Invading armies will fell them' is answered at more length with the words 'they return through the burnt-out ribs of siege machines'. This is a longer answer, but itself a strongly compressed summary of the realities of war from which the peaceful olive recovers.

A poem to contrast with this one might well be Yeats' lines about 'things fall apart the centre cannot hold'.<sup>\*</sup> The point of the olive seems to be that it is something which does hold together against almost unimaginable abuse.

Note from Mark O'Connor Re the olive tree in the photo on the front cover of *The Olive Tree: Collected Poems of Mark O'Connor*, Hale and Iremonger 2000 :

I lived for 4 years in Europe on next to no money by looking after holiday houses in the off-season. In the winter I minded houses in an Italian village called Montisi in Tuscany, and in the summer holidays I looked after houses in Denmark or England. The house in Italy was surrounded by an olive grove. The one in the photo was about 30 metres from my front door, so I didn't have to go far to take the photo. Olive trees don't like heavy frosts--their sap freezes and the trunks twist and split. But fresh shoots come up from the almost immortal roots, and in time become new trunks.

In this tree you can see right through the holes in the base of its trunk --on to the bare hoed field behind it. The flowers (self-sown weeds) around the base are the famous wild red-poppies of Europe--the ones that seemed to the poets of World War One as if colored by the blood of those who died in France. The sapling on the left will in time become the new trunk.

#### "POZIERES CEMETERY"

Pozieres is a battlefield of the First World War. It is a town in flat country in Northern France near the Somme. The British and Australians set themselves to take it and did in fact take it with appalling casualties. It was a great pyrrhic victory. The poet's own notes on this poem, as well as a short essay by him on Australian war poetry, can be found in the anthology Two Centuries of Australian Poetry which he edited for Oxford university Press (see pages 131-141).

In 1977, O'Connor first went to Europe, travelling at the time with two other poets, Alan Gould and Kevin Hart, both of whom wrote poems titled "Pozieres". Gould's poem contains the lines 'For

several months much iron fell here. Nowhere was safe.' He offers a terse Icelandic saga-style account of what went on. Hart characteristically produces a largely internal poem, with little reference to the realities of the battle field. O'Connor shows a detailed interest in the nature of the battles here, which were so horrendous that it was recorded that people in the trenches peering out could see bodies lying in No Man's Land where the whole ground was turned over and over by the shells. Hence in a day or two a body might be buried, then unburied, then buried and then unburied again by successive shells. There were in fact no trenches for much of the battle. You simply fought from the last shell hole, hoping that another shell would not soon land on it.

The horror of the First World War is, in everyone's imagination, bound up with the mud. It was a war in a sense fought as much against the weather as against the murderous machine guns and the enemy. Hence the lines 'Like Caesar's men/ these knew that all wars worth the game/ are won in lousy weather.' It was on these battlefields that Australian soldiers learnt the futility of military glory. They seemed simply statistics, numbers, cannon fodder to exhaust the enemy's supply of shells or machine gun bullets in the hope of making a break-through. The poem lingers a little on the details of the mud --an ironic enemy for soldiers from a dry country who had expected a little dust but not this clogging mud on their glory.

The poem begins with what the poet actually saw in 1977: the well-kept cemeteries in which the thin grass over the muddy surface had been cropped as short 'as a mis-shaved skull on a winter's day'. Hammered into this soft, muddy turf are the endless small headstones with the names of the dead. O'Connor begins by noting that we take comfort in creating these organised cemeteries for the dead in which rotting bodies are hidden by green lawn. Nature is given a role, and grass and live flowers like roses are used, perhaps because of a distant memory of ancient resurrection myths in which bodies would be transmuted back into vegetation and life. (see for instance Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, especially re the Cult of Tammuz).

The poet also mentions a slightly more macabre detail: how 'The earth for centuries will show dark greasiness' in the spot where a body decayed. He visualises the skeletons, which he refers to as the 'grinners underground', and how they dance in a horizontal frieze two feet below ground water. The saying "Dust to dust" is hardly appropriate in these wet climates --burial is more a case of "mud to mud". The poem uses quotations in italics from the various headstones and memorials there. The quotation 'Rest on lads!' interested the poet with its mix of the colloquial and monumental styles. Similarly, "Known unto God/ their name liveth forever" is contrasted with the reality that their name is actually many names and these names are common names 'Johnson, Hagan, Brown-Jones,...'. The names are listed as they might have been barked out by a drill sergeant marking a roll, and end with the name 'Worth' with a slight irony.

The poem does not tell any single story of any day's battle, and yet it moves briskly through the events and the issues, sometimes meditating, sometimes describing. There is a lyrical or elegiac war-weary tone in the reflection 'They had enough of mud in life', and then it goes on to reflect on the irony that they are now literally preserved in mud like fossil ammonites in shale (a rock which is a form of mud-stone). He also comments on the enormous compactness of these vast World War I battle grounds, where one can scarcely believe so many bodies could fit: "Scarce weeping-room/ between one's toe-bones and the next row's crowns'. The crowns in context may bring echoes of some Shakespearean reflections on mortality from Richard II, Richard III, etc. Of course, to the individual their "crown" or skull is as unique and as essential as the crown of a king.

In the third-last stanza, the poem moves again to a different tone, as the poet this time moves away from the reality that can be observed today and visualises a kind of timeless scene in which at dusk the grey phantoms of the dead arise. There is also a strange welling up of emotion in the description of the 'Great-coated bodies tumbling others into holes.'

The poem avoids sentimentality and it does not make the now-obvious reflections found in poems of the period like Siegried Sassoon's "It seemed that out of battle I escaped": reflections on the futility of war, and on how the horrors fell equally upon the innocent soldiers of both sides. Those points, however, are made by implication through the emphasis on the common enemy that is still visible today --the weather. There is momentum in the description of how the cloak is snatched back from the body that is sent spinning into the mass grave where 'they fall, lie crumpled like shot grouse.' Just as birds which have been shot or had their necks snapped have a strange lolling motion of the head, so were the bodies that went 'warm' into that wet grave.

The poem then reflects on the dead, not merely as they were in the war but simultaneously as 'Our fathers' (i.e. ancestors) and also as they had been only a few years earlier: 'yabbying boys on/ their farms in Deniliquin, Horsham, Scotshead, Yass.' The names of these country towns are chosen with deliberate randomness, though they remind us that Australia in those days was still a country nation, whose population had not yet migrated massively into the cities leaving the country to be worked by a skeleton labour force with huge machines.

The poem then asks the rhetorical question, did these boys dream 'of so deep a subsoil waiting for their bones?'. We know well enough from the literature of the time, and from more recent books like David Malouf's Fly Away Peter that most of the time their heads were full of quite other images of war. Yet no doubt by the end they were having such dreams.

The elegiac tone becomes more pronounced as the poet reflects on the number of 'lads they planted in those weeks' - picking up the opening idea about cemeteries offering a false consolation via a

kind of compost-heap resurrection-myth. Describing the region which another Australian poet, David Malouf, once called "black pudding country", O'Connor refers to the magical trees in Virgil's Aeneid (Book 3, lines 19 to 68) which were in fact the bodies of murdered men, so that when a bough was broken by one of their comrades it shed not sap, but black blood and tears. If that fantasy were true, this land would be a thicket.

Then there is a surprise. The poem breaks aside from these reflections, in which an emotion that can only be called grief has been welling up. (Indeed, the poet's voice has been known to break when attempting to read this second-last stanza). Then in a somewhat distancing move, as if a camera had been pulled back to pan over the scene from some great distance in time and space, we are shown just the image of two old men (presumably survivors of that war) hobbling down the paths 'dreaming of young men whom they knew; while/ honour and folly hold the ground' (with a double-meaning in the notion of 'hold the ground') and then a strange last line - "under the gently piddling skies of France".

This line again shows O'Connor's willingness to mix different levels of tone and language. The reference to the sky as 'piddling' would be typical vernacular Australian of that period and of today. Yet, as so often the vernacular phrase catches deeper reverberations from more ancient phrases and times. It suggests both the modern folksong about the gentle rain that goes on falling forever and also the earlier reference to the fact that real soldiers know that all wars are won in lousy weather. There is also once again the sense of the pathos of people who came from a sunny climate and whose real problem may have been boredom and too little to do when they enlisted, dying in the wet unpleasant weather of Europe. The last line oddly mixes a slightly formal-English, 'skies of France' with the vernacular term 'piddling'. There is also of course, an obvious contrast between the piddling showers of today and the deadly rain of shells which fell so heavily on these fields in 1917.\* (The poet in 1977 observed rows of unexploded shells cast up at the end of fields along the fences. The ploughs, even then, were striking new shells in that iron-rich ground.

Notes on references in the poem:

Ammonites are extinct molluscs whose shells are found in vast numbers in sedimentary rocks.

The companion poems might include Adrian Henry's poem \*about 'at the going down of the sun I try to remember them but their names are common names and their bones are thigh bones tugged excitedly from the soil by French children on picnics'. Also Geoff Page's poem \* about how every town, however small, has a war memorial. Those for the Second World War were done in different materials, 'but something in that first demanded stone'.

Note: re the reference to 'bubbled gnats'. Some forms of aquatic mosquito and gnat tumblers are forced to come to the water-surface where the skin of the pupa splits and the adult insect delicately steps out onto the surface (at risk of being drowned by a ripple). In other species, however, the transformation takes place underwater inside a bubble of air that has been created by the insect. Afterwards the bubble bursts free and flashes to the top, carrying the insect directly into the air, where it flies away freely. The irony of this supposition applied to those buried in the mud is obvious. David Malouf's novel *Fly Away Peter* was later to use a similarly ironic fantasy in its title. The word "bubbled" may also remind us that it was quite difficult to bury bodies in mud that was too liquid, since their buoyancy could cause them to bob straight up like corks.

## THE SUN HUNTERS.

Once again the positioning is interesting. This poem comes from a later period when the poet was working more in the rainforests of Queensland and New South Wales. It follows the poem "A Queenslander Remembers the Twentieth Century", which finds another way of talking about the rainforest. The poet's problem, as with the Barrier Reef, was the lack of common names for so many of the creatures in this extraordinary varied ecosystem. O'Connor has written about the difficulties of 'getting the spade into the ground' when writing about a region with which the English language has no traditional relationship --which means there are few everyday words to describe it. This poem also seems to sum up much of what he has to say about rainforests. However, for companion poems one would look beyond the anthology *Fire-Stick Farming* and particularly towards his book *The Great Forest*, which combines a large number of poems about rainforests with colour photos by Cliff and Dawn Frith, published by Hale and Ironmonger.

The way this poem finds of getting the spade into the ground is to begin with a reference to the sort of jungle films, about Tarzan for instance, which many people remember from childhood. As the poet says, 'In old stories the jungle was busy/ breeding monsters to attack/ your intrepid explorers.' In our culture attitudes to jungle (which we now call "rainforest") have improved, but the old tradition of fearing the forest is still very strong in, for instance, modern Chinese popular films. In them jungles are still places of sexual excess, of danger, excitement and villainy.

It is noteworthy that the poet avoids the slightly pompous technical term 'liane', which most scientists now favor, and goes back to the popular three-syllable word 'liana', which the learned have abandoned because of its "incorrect" associations with old romantic adventure-stories about jungles. (The two words are related, liane being drawn from the French, liana from the Spanish).

The reference to Spanish Conquistadors reminds us that our early view of "jungles" was one which scarcely focused on this continent. The calling up of this older notion of "the jungle", as full of monsters, peccaries, pythons and 'giant wife-seizing apes', enables us to see more clearly the newer concept we have created with the term "rainforest", a word which once seemed very pretentious and technical, but which has now become a quite common and evocative term for this type of forest.

The poet then remarks that in fact, rainforest is very much the opposite of the adventure-story image of "jungle". A rainforest is a forest where there is no scarcity of water, and therefore the limiting factor (for which all trees must compete) is sunlight. Though they seem lush, rainforests offer little food for mammals. Hence few large mammals are found there, and even the smaller ones play a relatively minor role in the forest's ecology --as the poet remarks, they 'are harmless hangers-on', though he then goes on to reflect on the way in which wild pigs have gone feral in the Australian forests. He points out, however, that the real struggle in the forest is the fight for light and that this is a fight carried out between plants. In a proper, mature rainforest, which has not been damaged by cyclones or logging, there is almost no undergrowth. The sensation at ground level is like being in some vast cathedral with just buttress-like trunks emerging at intervals from bare soil. There is simply not enough light on most of the forest-floor for ground-covers to grow, which is one reason there are few wallabies or other grazing animals. It is this quality of course, which means that there are relatively few mammals found, and especially few large mammals found in rainforests.

On the top of page 106 (in the book *Firestick Farming: Selected Poems 1972-1990*, hereafter abbreviated to FF) he begins to explain the real way in which the jungle operates. 'The bright spot of light' that comes through at a certain angle among the emergent boughs and actually reaches the floor for half an hour 'most mornings' (depending on cloud and weather --since it often rains in a rainforest) 'is some sapling's hope/ of becoming a tree.' He remarks that 'From above you see only the glorious/ Upper Circle' as in the better seats at a theatre, 'not the slums beneath'. And to judge a forest only by this is 'like judging a country by its brochure'. Note that this analogy with the human world does not involve any false anthropomorphism, that is, it does not involve the projection of human emotions onto quite different creatures. Rather it is two types of human naivety that are being compared --about countries and about forests. In a further rebuke to those who misread his poetry as being about the moral superiority of nature, he remarks epigrammatically that 'Rainforest is envy visible and justified'. Note, though, how the addition of 'and justified' makes the implied comparison with human societies more subtle.

In this poem then, he does not entirely go along with the common conservationist view of the rainforest as a rich and perfect society of species. Instead, he sees it as a place where plants strangle each other and force rivals back into 'the gloom of green knives'. The poem takes for granted the co-operative aspect of a rainforest --that the green trees collectively keep out the forest

fires and the hot dry air that their saplings are not adapted to cope with. Instead it emphasizes the forest's internal struggles. He describes how the creepers, which are such prominent members of the rainforest, 'fling lassoes'. Even the breathtakingly beautiful Ulysses butterfly, which in another poem (FF p. 53) he calls 'blue as a flake of heaven', comes from a giant caterpillar that usually means death to the sapling it eats. Looking at a crowded thicket of saplings that have started in some well-lit place and knowing they will eventually thin down to one survivor, he is reminded of 'wrestlers waiting for neck bones to crack'. Yet he celebrates the magnificent Strangler Fig that 'sends out cathedral flanks, vast in its leafless underworld'.

Yet the real hero of the poem is a liana - one called Aristolochia. This is the same genus as the domestic plant called Dutchman's Pipe. It is also the food-plant of the largest of all Australian butterflies, the spectacular Cairns birdwing. The poem from here on takes shape by actually tracing through space the movement of the trunk of one such liana. This movement, of course, is also a movement through time. It shows how the liana began 'spiralling up sheer through thirty dark metres', typical of the way in which lianas seem to rise straight from the forest floor. However, looking in this vision that includes time, he realises that the spirals were in fact once loops wound round a vanished and strangled tree: 'the Indian-rope-trick speaks of a host-tree, rotted and gone'.

He then describes how the creeper breaks through to the light near the river and actually roams over the mangroves that fringe the rainforest. (The actual liana described was on Dunk Island where the poet in 1976-77 was the gardener at the resort. See the poem "Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens" (FF, p. 45).

He describes how the stem actually descends to the soil at some points and then forms further roots and sends up other suckers, some of these 'missing their hold on the canopy hang a giddy way down.' Others find themselves stranded at the end of bare stumps that have been broken off by a cyclone.

But the 'main stalk', as he calls it (since it is as thick as a tree) 'straddled a dying white-cedar and fifty years later fell down in spirals', hanging 'like the bowels of a gutted pig.' He then describes how the heavy liana sprawls on the ground, 'waist-thick, where a sapling has snapped' under its weight. Then in an amazing last three lines, the lichenened creeper turns around. It strikes roots yet again on the ground, then

..... rises sheer  
as a bell-pull, the rope of a cathedral bell,  
up into the light to smother a hectare.

There are analogies here to the end of the poem that precedes this one, "A Queenslander Remembers the Twentieth Century" (FF, p. 104-105) which describes how 'you could pull on ropes of knotted wood, telegraph a message through stiff cords to the flowering tree tops out of sight and set the sleepy fruit-bats fluttering.' In the ABC video, Voyage on my Dreams, the poet is shown "telegraphing" a message by pulling on the huge wooden coils of just such a liana. This video also shows him composing poetry in the rainforest, and talking about the problems of doing so.

Note: The "blue quandong" referred to is a giant rainforest tree that produces a blue fruit. It is not to be confused with the unrelated red-fruited "quandong" tree of central Australia. The blue quandong is one of the rainforest giants and typically has a flanged buttress.

The dominant emotion in "The Sun Hunters" is awe or wonder. The poem does not preach any obvious conservation message. It confines itself to naming and describing what is there. O'Connor has argued in several articles that this not only makes better poetry but is actually a more effective way to recommend conservation than preaching. He says, "If you need to get up on a soapbox at the end of the poem and say And therefore you must not chop this forest down then you can't have given a very positive impression of the forest in the first place. Poetry is the opposite of preaching: it should not be predictable."

Note: the connection to the lines in FF page 127 from North Head Quarantine Station about the problem of finding names or common names for Australian species and plants.

"The Sun Hunters" seems to be one of those climactic poems like Love in the Blue Mountains (which pulls together a vision of heathlands in the same way The Sun Hunters does of rainforests) or Dot Paintings which pulls together the vision expressed initially in many shorter poems of the Central Australian deserts. Similarly, Cream of Earth, FF page 172, seems to be O'Connor's culminating statement on mangrove regions.

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#### ACTIVITIES --DRAFT

Another possible activity might run:

In an essay called One Writer's Credo, O'Connor advises intending writers "Don't set out to reveal yourself. But know that whatever you write about, you will reveal yourself." To what extent is he revealed in the poems?

A companion poem to "The Sun Hunters", also written on Dunk Island during his time there as resort gardener, might be "Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens" page 45. Note that this contains a great deal of material about the human inhabitants of the island.

Compare the poems in Fire-Stick Farming that deal with European scenes to those that deal with Australian rainforests or Barrier Reef scenes. To what extent do the subjects of interest change when the poet moves to a different continent?

Les Murray, in an article in *Kunapipi* magazine\* on "Athenian and Boeotian Art", suggested that writers could be divided into two types. "Athenian authors" were those who wrote about the city, its fashions and its more human-centred concerns. Murray contrasted this with an older, wider and wiser tradition (as he saw it) which he called "Boeotian", after Boeotia, a rural region of ancient Greece. Boeotian writers like the poet Hesiod integrated their human figures more into a landscape. Commenting on this article, O'Connor remarked that for Australia one might need a third category, which perhaps in terms of ancient Greek geography might be called Thracian. In other words, a poetry that deals with wild or at least relatively untouched nature as opposed to the rural, humanised, farming landscape in which Murray is especially interested.

\*See "The Boeotian Strain", Les Murray, *Kunapipi* II, no. 1, 1980 pp. 45 ff., with rejoinder by O'Connor in the same issue.

Appendix:

Extract from Speech by MANNING CLARK

LAUNCHING the book

Firestick Farming: Selected Poems 1972-1990  
by Mark O'Connor

AT THE A.N.U. CO-OP. BOOKSHOP,  
Canberra 26 September 1990.

MANNING CLARK:

Every book is in a sense a child of the heart. I believe, Mark, that you have every reason to be proud of this child of your heart --the poems you wrote between 1972 and 1990....

What I find most pleasing in this book is the voice of the poet himself. It is not, thank God, the voice of a smart alec - and my God there are a hell of a lot of those around! - it is not a show-off.

It's not the voice of one who is making any special claims for the role of the poet. That can be very nauseating. It's not the voice of a man who sees the poet as a provider of special things to special people, or who claims that the poet, unlike other human beings, is beyond good and evil.

It is the voice of a man who can create people, and create them in memorable words. It's a very serene voice --that I think is very important. It's the voice of a man whose eye is single and undistracted.

Happily it's the voice of a man who is an enlarger of life, and not a straightener and not a frowner. It is the voice of a man whose voice obviously has already gone further than college walls. (And that is most important --that the voice must go further than college walls).

In that way you've joined that band in Australia of people like Les Murray, Bruce Dawe, Judith Wright, Alec Hope - and of course there would be others that you could mention. I must apologise for making a minimal selection.

But above all, it is not the voice of a mocker or a sneerer; it is the voice of a man who is singing to those who have ears to hear, a hymn of praise to life.

So let me conclude by thanking you Mark for sharing this vision with us and giving us the hope to go on. It is with great pleasure that I launch this volume.

Recorded by Bill Tully (w. 262 1276) for Radio 2XX, typed by Dee Mitchell.