

Reply to Jonathan Dunk from Jennifer Maiden

Since Mr. Dunk's 'marked dislike' of my book only began halfway through his first reading of it, I am assuming the first half of the book needs no defence. If I am to believe his version of the second half, however, I'm a loathsome creature and well deserve his revulsion. I am used to disapproval from the old men of the tribe, but I do take a profound misunderstanding like this review from one of the younger ones much more seriously, and feel I should answer it.

Firstly and most importantly, my book in no way disparages the magnificent Judith Wright, nor do I describe her as 'frail' insecure, domestic and unquestioning'. My point about her isolating herself in the kitchen and washing up during the literary party was the opposite. She was commenting on her own lack of interest in the occasion, and whiling away her time until she could leave, at the same time making sure that her practical reaction was noted. This fits in with other images in the poem of her slipping the net, including by her secret affair with Dr. Coombs. The theme of the poem is that I have come to agree with her in our early mock-argument in which she thought that poetry should be a political statement, but I end with the proviso for both of us that poetry will still slip the net often and have more to it than just one direct political comment - as she herself had private, unexpected aspects.

My amusement at the word 'successor' was that neither Judith nor I would ever think in those terms, and I certainly have no wish to 'annex her legacy'.

This habit of young male reviewers of setting up fictional friction between older female writers is becoming tiresome.

Also important: I have in no way accused the admirable Peter Skryznecki of 'treating an aged Wright indifferently'. The point is clearly made that he wished to look after her, and was arranging for someone else (me) to do so, because he had to be elsewhere. I was entertained because it was unnecessary, but he didn't know that. Interestingly, he asked me to do the same thing for another aging female writer on another occasion. In both cases, I was amused as I was already friendly with the ladies, and delighted to remain with them, but it was clear that Peter was absolutely genuine in his concern for them.

Another aspect of misunderstanding in the review is in the concept that my work is 'demeaning to the discourse of poetry and to the dead' because the use of the adjective 'flat' somehow equates any 'contrary opinion' with 'rent flesh'. The 'flat' concept has nothing to do with that, and simply reflects the image of that poor flat dissected Danish giraffe, the flatness of turning death into a solved or unsolved puzzle, like an autopsy, and the over-simplicity of criticising some aspects of poetry for being political and praising others as not, as if poetry and life could be divided up in slices. Where 'rent flesh' comes from, I have no idea. I initially assumed Mr. Dunk was referring to sexual trading, but on reflection he may simply mean 'torn', and that I am suggesting the ideas behind the contrary opinions can result in just such damage. Well, yes, that's why they worry me.

In 'My heart has a Deep Water Harbour', the voice is that of Russia, which would be landlocked without the Crimea. There is nothing about plasma, and the process is to avoid being landlocked, not the reverse.

Since the apparently poetically correct first half of my book includes a poem specifically pointing out that Plath's poetry is largely political not personal, I was surprised at the appearance of the quote from Heaney. Plath constantly uses politics to transcend and wryly rhetoricise her personal attitudes, whilst at the same time giving the personal its due.

Whilst my book does not have Plath's particular structure and device, it is designed partly to point out the interdependence of the microcosm and the macrocosm. In the 'Drones and Phantoms' poem, Gillard is clearly linked to drones because of her approval of Obama's use of them. Likewise, my problem with an editor's use of his disarming sheep is that I was unprepared for the reversal which followed, and felt that I should not have let my guard down. I then reflected how universal is the use of animals to lull women, and that more should be written about that in warning. My daughter also thought it a useful idea. There is nothing logically illegitimate in identifying a process in microcosm and then macrocosm, and comparing them, or showing how the thoughts of one particular experience evolve.

The phrases 'a tender young critic reviewing an established poet' seeing my work 'ripple with symbolic threat' are deliberately ironic, but even so, irritating. The power is all on your side, boy. There was never even any reason to suspect that 'Southerly' would have such enormous courtesy as to let me reply. Writers who would be horrified by hierarchical structures in the larger politics often seem to be equally horrified if anyone questions the publisher/editor/ critic / writer or academic hierarchies in their own profession. I have seen many writers destroyed. The only advantage my age gives me is to give me more courage.

There are many other points to correct in the review, but those seem to me the most important. Perhaps I should point out that the 'slipping the net' and 'balancing processes' aren't designed to make the reader more kindly ( I assume the reader already is kindly) but to assure the reader that I'm not an absolute one-track idiot, and that it's okay to treat my politics with respect and use my poems for thinking.

I should also probably reassure Mr. Dunk that none of the three people who wrote his 'collegiate' reviews of my work are actually my colleagues - although I did meet one of them once a few decades ago, and he seemed pleasant.

An odd elaboration in the review, in passing, is the description of the difference between drones. Mr. Dunk is clearly an expert on weaponry, but I had no idea of any of that. I suggested one frightening-looking drone for the cover, and the experienced cover designer substituted another because it looked even better.

I hope that Mr. Dunk's blood is now no longer 'thick with cold', and that enough misunderstandings have been erased for us to continue our positions - he obviously well on his way to the top of the hierarchy, and me where I've always been - below, but I hope no longer demeaning to the discourse of poetry and the dead.

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