

'AND THE MEEK SHALL ...': DISABLING THE LIFE WORLD

ENTER THE MISSIONARY: A FANTASIA IN 5 PARTS

A PROLOGUE

'It is important to be mad and crazy' (Pierrot Bidon, 1954-2010) (founder and leading light of Archaos)

We don't need to agree with anything. We can question everything. Everything is available to question.

'Normal ain't normal'.

Is this text necessary? No, it is not necessary.

Tell me I want him. No, I don't want him. No, I don't want him at all. What's the point? There is no point. Tell me I want him. Yes, if you have further absurdities up you sleeve then speak them now.

To create, to create him, anything, out of the simplest clues. No, not so much a puzzle as an enigma. The mystery is born in conditions of the most ordinary scrutiny. It may be useful to talk of a 'sight unseen'.

The other is always unknown; yet we know the other absolutely.

Brutishness is an odd phenomenon. It's in our face. The brute is always right, the brute exists in a space of non-doubting, the brute exists in a state of self-appointed certainty. Challenge him this way: Do you doubt, where is your doubt? Yet the brute, the brutish, refuses all challenge. At the same time all is challenge.

Conditions of certainty, yes, they assure us, that's what we mean by certainty. Certainty is at the heart of certainty. Yet whatever those conditions are they must constitute within themselves conditions of viability. If certainty is not certainty but appears in another guise, as non-assuring, it is instantly something else, a cage, an impossibility, a closed shop. Certainty, yes, is a refuge, a sanctuary of sorts. When challenged it can appear violent, as violation itself.

The impossibility of the cage? It appears suddenly, out of nowhere. What makes the cage impossible? We talk about freedom, but from what? What do we seek freedom from? Must we always suspect the presence of a towards – a towards that is thwarted?

Touchy, touchiness, quick on the trigger. The hunter will calculate, lay out his traps, his snares, his decoys. But it is the capacity to act swiftly, decisively, that is at stake. This involves prediction, anticipation, for that thing constituted as the target will flee. Almost certainly, it will seek to flee, to escape. The hunter must encompass that movement. The unexpected cannot be unexpected. Otherwise it will prevail.

In the wallaby (dog) dance (*munka ku'a*) the tables are turned. This is the way of the social. The pursuing dog, the hunter's dog, becomes the pursued. The tables can always be turned. This time it is the wallaby that prevails. Tomorrow it is business as usual: the dog operates in advance of the hunter, it expresses the will and the hopes of the hunter even in advance of himself. It defrays the intensity of the hunter. It provides an excuse. Yes, the failure can be located elsewhere. The hunter is off the hook.

He shot his dog by accident. It was a terrible error.

The hunter must know how to kill. Killing must not be a stranger to him.

He discovers them coupled in the grass. He pulls the grass aside. He parts the grasses in order to show me what he has observed. Even so he does not hesitate to spear them both; with a single action - just like that. How unfair, I think to myself, is there not being enacted some gross impropriety, some offense? I'm repelled. My repulsion is vague yet it is present, it operates just below the surface like a refusal. It objects but not tellingly. The sense of injustice is strong, the sense of something perverse. An unstated law is being flaunted, put to one side. The whole scene borders on the sinful. Yet I say nothing. Thus we endure.

ENTER THE MISSIONARY: A FANTASY

*We grieve for the past but we demand the future
Remember the beast is never far from the door*

I.

Don't ask my name
You know my name already
I am the missionary

We are well aware of your condemnations
Yet you come, your presence here is because we are here We provide the conditions
of your possibility
You do not
Let us say this again
You do not provide the conditions of your own possibility

You are implausible therefore

We built this place piece by piece
Not from the virgin bush for there is no virgin anything
But out of the accumulated ideas of our past
The steady accretion of things we have learnt
From a profound sense of a need to act
Out of necessity even

Our pride is our guide
It is the greatest surety of our goodness
Our pride in ourselves and the pride of the people
It is this that guides us

We do not herd people into a little pen
We are wolves
We are wolves that bare our fangs in guardianship of our own
Blood drips from our jaws
Our Eden is adorned with thorns and thistles
Our order stands for here
Our order stands for here and against the disorder of elsewhere

Q: Explain your dormitories to us, explain your system of rationing?

We will explain nothing
We offer a choice, of stone and stone, a ruthless and necessary conviction
We are obdurate
We shield
We wield our axe
We savage those who cast a shadow on us
We take our stockwhip to those who offend us
We do not bow to offense
We do not anoint with oil, we do not bless
We burn with a constant flame

Greed deafens the world
It renders it mute, incapable of mouthed utterance
Do not steal, I said to them in my sermon
I fired my revolver
Do not steal
Ask and it shall be given
Do not steal

The other certainties I shall offer up
No, not offer
I shall provide

II.

I came to save them, that's the line
I came as their father-protector
I opened the verandah of my soul to them
They knelt at my feet
They knelt at the base of the mission house steps

(Whoever says this is a liar!)

I operated in good humour
I was pleasing to them
I absolved myself of all sin
I calculated the consequences of all action
I got it right

Yes, my house has many rooms
I made a room for them, each one
I decided their fate
I married them each to each
I called them by their proper names
I was their father, *piip*
I amused them, I kept myself aloof
I knew their movements, I recorded them
I recorded them in scrupulous entries, made daily
I held myself apart

My companions, there were none
I was the Solitary of the Lord
I brooked no disagreement
I did what was proper, I left things alone
Language (for I never spoke it)
Ceremony (for I never participated in it)
The business of grief
The business of fighting
These were their business and theirs alone

I rewarded their follies with shame and cruelty
They were my sons, my daughters
I was their manifest

There is one rule, the rule of action and defiance
There is one rule: the rule of action

III.

As men have a song I have a song
My song is the song of ...

No one has said, no one has identified my song

Manthayan

Manthayan, they said

Manthayan, big man, proper big man

Kempathiy

They chased me from the village, I fled into the river
I swam where you would not, to Long Island
I swam for my life
They pursued me with spears
They chased my thick crocodile hide into the river
They chased my thick lascivious hide
Yes, into the river

Ha!

One of the old men came to me
He sat cross-legged and wordless before me
I too said nothing

I returned, it was a galling moment
No doubt it was that but the reason forgot
Forgot almost instantly
Forgot because it had to be forgotten

Simple, simple as that

We survive by forgetting

This is not forgiveness

IV.

How handsome our people are, how handsome
I will not diminish them therefore
I will contain them but only as people are to be contained
Sheep and goats, that is your affair
I am not here to tame
(Ku'a nhekanam, ku'a ma'a pamam)
The bushfire can burn, the bushfire can rage
The grasses can surge in fiery tongues
The feeding falcon hover and dart on the uprush of air

Angels, celestial bodies, these lure us not for this is the world of the non-pareil

V.

Difference is always on the side of the other
Do not reduce us to difference, we are elsewhere, we are apart
Our paths are narrow, precise, wavering
We walk with great delicacy, step after step
Each footfall delicately delayed
Each planting of the foot poised and considered
We stand, we walk with our arms loose falling and never swinging to the gait
Wet or dry the path receives us precisely
Lightly we step over fallen logs
Lightly we step round the trees that have fallen
Lightly we avoid the things that bite or itch or seek to cling
We never stand as agents of correction
We progress precisely
We proceed with exactitude through the nature of things

And if I, and if I am not as that, yet I know it
In my heaviness yet I stand in recognition of it

And if I am not oblique, if, as you say, I am too forward
They know that is my manner
And they judge it not

I leave the resolution of things to them
It is their affair
History and hatred speak through them
And if, as it happens, I appear as the final resort, the supreme arbiter
It is merely, it is by way of demonstration:
I am shown, I am party to a revelation
I am brought into the field of a general knowing

From the height of the verandah, from the height of the steps that lead down to that
great central axis and the whole way down to the Landing, to the point of arrivals
and to the place of departures, I look down
From that height where I acknowledge every name

I know

VI.

Spare us your Beatitudes
The evil of the hour
Spare us your meekness, your 'weak in spirit', your 'inherit the earth'
Yes, you will inherit it completely
The Beatitudes are dead
There is never more that is not more of the same

I came I saw I conquered
I am the Caesar of my little hour
My time is short yet I claim eternity
As if my little hour is eternity itself

The boat stuck in the river
The boat stuck on a sand bank, a bank of mud
There we stuck as if I would never leave
The boat stuck as if we would remain as curses to all those who remained
A great death beetle
Minh wongbe, they call him, *yuku wongbe*
A stinking rotting thing, they say
Somewhere between death and fertility, this hornèd thing
Desire and offspring casually strewn across the careless landscape

For death always has a name
An avid careless creature full of fixed ideas

Anxiety constructs itself thus
Determined to remain in the certainty of the known

We are overrun by the most trivial things
The invention of toothpaste, for example
Some innocuous message heard on the radio
The poet heard on the radio, the blood of the poet
Dermit speaking to us from an invisible New York, from the front seat of a yellow taxi
One two three four
Speaking of infinity
Speaking to us from afar
Speaking from the tall towers of the elsewhere

Reciting syllables, a recitation of numbers
As if meaning resides in certainty, the certainty of sure numbers
As if reality is a matter of counting
As if reality is a matter of steady counting, a matter of steady recitation

As if!

VII.

I see the full flare of your face
Cheekbones ablaze with the sheen of heavy brass

Walu walu

You knock him down with the fierceness of your breath
I see the force of your sudden spirit
Ngangk thayan
I see you turn from him
I see you speak indifferently, in tones of extreme deference and condescension

You turn your shoulder
You look away from him
You say with great deliberation and contempt:
'That is all very well but we all have that, we've all had that from the start, *agu mu'ama*
Someone, someone with new idea must think something
Some new idea, perhaps
Some great and glorious song of praise
The chant of the great flapping crow, hungry for the sugar from the packet now
overturned and spilled
Apey! My mistake, my mistake
How could I forget, how could anyone apart from someone afflicted with an extreme
and unprecedented silliness, forget
Excuse, excuse my dreadful carelessness
What can I have been thinking of:
There are people who do not sing
They sing
They sing not at all!
Dear me, dear me, the song has eluded them!'

And now the man from the east, the man sitting beneath the bloodwoods sets to
singing
Cross-legged and secure in his posture of self-imposed constraint
And still he sings:
Pidhal, pidhalam
Amusement hinting at the corners of the mouth

He sings *sotto voce*, his head dipped in mock deference
His eyes glancing upward:
'Oh they dance so fine, those man of the sand beach
Yi'i minim
I see them singing from here, I see them darting this way and that like demons
against the setting sun
So flash, so fine
They dance like the very devil
And I, here I am, reclining on the ground
Beneath the thin-leaved bloodwoods ...'

VIII.

Such things are said:

Statement: He chained a woman to the frangipani tree outside the church. All day she was chained there, to the sweet-smelling frangipanni. There was a pineapple hanging round her neck and a sign: Thou shalt not steal

I should have been buried there. They should have witnessed our final decline, the death of the big man, the death of the saint!

No, saintliness was not my bag. Saintliness is feeble!

Statement: This is no place for saints, as Father Saanz said of Brother O'Donovan. Yes, Daniel is a saint – but this is no place for saints. That's what he said. We don't need saints.

The ship sailed away. The whole community stood on the shore, waving. There it goes, the old "Reliance". Off to TI, off to Thursday Island, stage one of the departure. But the tide was out, the boat was stuck, stuck on a sand bank. So much for the glorious departure. There is the "Reliance" stuck, stuck on the sand bank. And everyone waving. Hour after hour. They stand on the shore, waving. The ship is stuck fast.

I should not have left. It was an error.

Statement: You had to leave. How would the new missionary have ever coped? How would he ever have coped in the shadow of the patriarch? You had to leave. No one can operate in the shadow of the past, no one.

No, you are wrong. We all operate in the shadow of the past. There is nothing new in that, nothing unusual, nothing strange. We are bound to the past, we are shored up by it. Do not dismiss the past too readily. Are you certain that what you will create in its place will be to the good? Do you have any knowledge of what you are creating, what the consequences will be? You exist in the myth of endless improvability. You

call that progress. Your progress is merely disruption, a careless unmotivated revolution.

Statement: *'Must be big war down south'. That's what the old man said on hearing of the changes: 'Must be they fight with each other. Must be big war la Brisbane.'*

He's right, it's a simple view but it's right. All change is revolutionary and all change comes out of conflict. They understand this well.

Statement: *All change is revolution. Do not disrupt, therefore, more than is necessary. Caution, exercise it. Adaptation will come in its own good time.*

IX.

It is true, I fired my revolver in the church
BANG BANG
I fired
You are not to sleep on my watch
Wuty waa wun, you're dead and buried
Sleep and laziness

No one sleeps on my watch

The Taipan can bite at any time

No one sleeps on my watch.

X.

Word came
Women arrived, their bodies mutilated
News came down the river like a trickle of blood

I went, I rode, I rode without halting once
I rode alone
I carried my stockwhip
I lashed that man
(I call him a man!)
I lashed that man

And then
And then I rode back!

(Hard man but fair, hard man but fair)

We went to the Holroyd, *thampenty*
I carved my initials in the tree
1928

The Holroyd mob

They came to me bearing fish
They came to me bearing fish on sheets of ti-tree bark
Kity
Cooked fish
The skin blackened

They spoke to me
They called out something in my name
They gave me water, they presented me with water in a little container my hands
were not to touch
They blew in my hair
They rubbed me with underarm smell
They said things in their languages
They sang

We understood little

They carried bodies
They carried bodies in bark bundles
They called our clothing 'The clothes of the dead, *mimpa pam uthuma*'

Yes, he was there then, a little boy
He looked at me with large eyes, eyes that never deviated
He knew me, I knew him
He was already

I asked his name
No one said anything
I wrote his name in a book
I recorded his birth: 1 July

I preached a sermon, there near *thupidyi*
The wide belly of the lagoon

They showed me barbed wire, wire in rolls
I smashed it
I hacked it to pieces with an axe
My fury knew no bounds

(*Pama kulindya, pama kulindja*)

They saw my fury, they witnessed my fury
They said nothing, they knew well that I was a man of fury

I was young then
I travelled the lengths of these lands
I preached my sermons
I made my undertakings
To the Holroyd people: I will build your mission here
To the Kendall people: I shall build your mission here

I was still a young man
Where I trod my imprint remained

(We did not ask you to come, you can leave any time)
(We never asked you to come, you can leave, any time!)

XI.

You may hear things, you may not
Things fall into silence
Even the most salacious, even the most garbled account

We step into the snow of our final act

See, someone has lit a fire
See, the smoke drifts through the trees
Drifting through the middle branches of the bloodwoods and the stringy barks

It comforts us
It comforts us curiously
We ease to the east
We ease to the north-east
We ease in a most unusual direction

We know the meaning of this fire
We know this one meaning anyway
And not a song of regret, not at this moment

Apow apow apow

The vehicle fast on the track
The vehicle that is yet to appear
And then the rain
And then the new berries on the branch
May mipa may mipa
Plants that pretend to a status they will never achieve

Sour wild grapes
Things with coiled ligatures
Things that climb

Apow apow apow

The wallabies may come, they may
The plum on the ground, *yuk po'al*
The smell of slow-burning timbers
The taste of smoke-tainted tea
The predacious emu on cautious foot

Apow apow apow

The trip to Yaaneng was not a success
Maybe not
They spoke of crocodiles sent to do their master's bidding
The eager mouthing of desire

(The jaws have it, the jaws have it)

We caught a rock cod there once
Spotted stingray and *angkerratan*, rock cod
It is not a word you forget

Not so big but there we caught it and the water edging the slithering curve of white
fine sand

Yaaneng

My, the mosquitoes were in abundance, even then in the middle of the day
And the well ruined by the tide

Even with the mud on their hides the pigs suffered
The clouds of mosquitoes shooting skyward at every step out of the disturbed grass

And the salt water in our mouths

By now you might think we had learnt something
The sag of flesh
The failingness of our animal passions
(See how they have grown, see how they have grown enormous)

As we approach knowingness
The squatter's chair taken to the Landing
The squatter's chair taken on an excursion to the place where the coconuts grow

Where we planted them, and the rancid waters of that well where you pump for
water
Water full of rust and the sour taste of stagnancy

They will say things later, the girls
The girls who were with us
Clasped to our bosom
Each assigned a part of our body corporate

They will say things and they will laugh, without rancour

Apow apow apow

And the sounds of laughter silent among the straggling palms

Yuk ngutya yuk ngutya

We speak in monosyllables, we speak without speaking
We tuck the pipe in our mouth
I look to my ancient partner
I look at the awkwardness of her shoulders
Her spare necessity

It is better to be judged than forgotten
It is better to be spared than to be judged

The moon is silent
The tide is more or less risen
The tide is more or less risen or fallen, it makes no difference
If you walk to the point you can look north and south
It makes no difference

The water slides along the curve of the sand

The crocodile is dead, the rock cod has slipped away
The foolish wallaby attempts to cross from island to shore
It succeeds
A sudden sadness in those of us who witness it
Swimming from the island that bears its name

There are two islands that bear that name
They make a final home to no one!

THE TEXT ENDS AT THIS POINT

REMARKS AFTER THE FACT

Anthropology has placed itself under confinement, as a science of the attested. This means that it constitutes itself as history – as a history of the encounter. It is dominated, whether it likes it or not, by the event – thus by the compulsion to report. To record and to report. It places itself on the side of consumption, it ignores the possibility of production. Reproduction but not production, that is its secret terrain – to such a degree that it is secretly complicit in strategies of self-administration and self-normalising.

Mackenzie existed. There are diaries. I have refused to be tempted by them. Mackenzie will soon not exist. He only exists if we continue to invent him.

I never met him. He left Aurukun 2 years before I arrived. It was still Mackenzie time. The spectre persisted. Maybe Aurukun has now entered some other time yet no one has asserted their presence the way he asserted his presence. It is now a time of erasure, not at the hand of the locals, not at the hands of the blackfellas but at the hands of the whitefellas. For it is the whitefellas who are the jealous people, fly by night but ruthless in their demand to create the world in their image. I don't imagine that Mackenzie was exempt in this respect. I think of him as murderous.

The missionary as murderer is a tantalising thought. Not to put oneself on the side of angels but to align with the forces, not of evil but the primordial. A propriety not of niceness but something hard, implacable, good-humoured, wilful, playful

He did not appear among the dancers but he danced. There are images of him dancing to old ladies, not mocking them but a strange identification, maybe. He smiles – but thaadyam is a dance of complaint, announcement, arousal. As if tearing your hair out and dancing on the spot, hopping up and down in extreme rage.

It goes with mourning.

Mackenzie danced with a smile. He laughed.

It is rare to see missionaries laugh.

I rely on verbal testimony – from 'the natives'. Not things solicited or enquired after (I was in fact not all that interested) but volunteered, let slip. I was in fact not all that interested in the inquiry. It was not a topic.

At Pormpuraaw, one old man, *pama thump*: 'When you came we thought you were Mackenzie'. In the photos I could not see any resemblance. 'Proper big man', he said. *Pama kempadhiy*, a man with a big body. What I saw was a rather roly-poly affable figure.

They remembered him from when he was young. Solid, solid body. He grew up with them; he grew old with them.

The casual remark is not all that casual. The technique is to let it reverberate, for the song and the chant of it finally to be heard, heard as we hear it, no doubt, but heard nonetheless. Literalism is the death of art and the death of meaning. The face value of things is a treacherous terrain. It is not models we seek, it's a frame of sorts. There is always an armature, a strange intention to make admissions, an oblique (or not so oblique) confession of self. We all engage in it. Sometimes we call it interest.

Both McConnel and Thomson attacked him. Thomson, as I seem to remember, had channels through the church. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland, based in Melbourne.

The mission regime still operated at the time of my arrival. It continued until 1976. The takeover by the Queensland Government under Bjelke-Peterson was undoubtedly provoked by the Church's support for land rights, the outstation movement, the Koowarta Case (over Archer Bend), a successful appeal to the Privy Council, and fierce opposition to mining on the lands immediately to the north of Aurukun.

Mission practice is astonishingly variable. At Weipa languages and other cultural practices were severely repressed. At Aurukun MacKenzie endorsed language maintenance and ceremonial practice. As I have written elsewhere his efforts to unify the community under the umbrella of winchinam was itself fiercely resisted by the coastal practitioners of apalacha and further south, of wanam and related ceremonies. The debate was about being 'all-in-one'. The resurgence of traditionalism in the early 1970s – a movement that coincided with my presence – went the other way, towards differentiation and the assertion of local affiliations. This worked against an emergent class structure based on historical ties with the mission regime. This favoured people from the north. There were endless reminders of the missionaries' promises to the more southern mobs – and the outstation movement was, in this sense, a calling-to-account.

The utilitarian tends to ignore the aesthetic and sensual bases of social action. Mackenzie might be thought of as approaching the bestial – and there is some evidence of this. His profoundly confrontational style, endlessly commented on by Wik people, matches a local valuing of the capacity to fire up: to challenge. According to reports he himself never shied away from confrontation – and refused to hide behind his whitefly status, as a protected species, we might say. He was admired for his capacity to stand up to station owners and to engage in the rough-and-tumble of ordinary engagement.

Meekness was not in his nature. And despite the continuous scandal that now surrounds Aurukun in the press – a site of riot and mayhem, according to newspaper reports – it is now a much 'quieter' place than during the Mackenzie years. Alcohol is the first of the tranquiliser guns, and the immediate appearance of European police in its aftermath is the next step in denying people direct access to redress. Or, to put it simply, to their own modes of inciting dispute and resolving it. Aurukun was always

a site of conflict. The ethic of self-representation is now converted into style, not performance.

Ethos is not a popular topic. Yet it interests me. It interests me for the ways in which it combines morality with aesthetics. This might be a way to think about art: as an effort to re-moralise the life world. Secretly it approaches the bestial: not 'pretty flowers' but the actual history of murderous change. It is not a politics of quietude, no matter how it is presented. The history of civilisation is not a history of containment.

John von Sturmer

26 March 2010