

Word Art: a blog on reading poetry and fiction

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Mark O'Connor, "The Beginning"



God himself
having that day planted a garden
walked through it at evening and knew
that Eden was not nearly complex enough.
And he said:
"Let species swarm like solutes in a colloid.
Let there be ten thousand species of plankton
and to eat them a thousand zooplankton.
Let there be ten phyla of siphoning animals,
one phylum of finned vertebrates, from
white-tipped reef shark to long-beaked coralfish,
and to each his proper niche,
and — no Raphael, I'm not quite finished yet —
you can add seals and sea-turtles & cone-shells & penguins
(if they care) and all the good seabirds your team can devise —
oh yes, and I nearly forgot it, I want a special place
for the crabs! And now for parasites to keep
the whole system in balance, let . . ."
". . . In conclusion, I want," he said
"ten thousand mixed chains of predation —
none of your simple rabbit and coyote stuff!
This ocean shall have many mouths, many palates,
many means of ingestion. I want
say, a hundred ways of death, and three thousand of regeneration —
all in technicolour naturally. And oh yes, I nearly forgot,
we can use Eden again for the small coral cay in the centre.
"So now Raphael, if you please,
just draw out and marshall these species,
and we'll plant them all out in a twelve-hectare patch."
For five and a half days God laboured
and on the seventh he donned mask and snorkel
and a pair of bright yellow flippers.
And, later, the host all peered wistfully down
through the high safety fence around Heaven
and saw God with his favourites finning slowly over the coral
in the eternal shape of a grey nurse shark,
and they saw that it was very good indeed. (1976)

See over for analysis of this poem

WordArt: Analysis of Mark O'Connor, "The Beginning"

Mark O'Connor (b. 1945) is an Australian poet with a special interest in the natural environment. He is an environmental activist, and his collections of poetry often focus on particular regions of Australia such as the Great Barrier Reef and the Blue Mountains. His work is widely admired in Australia and internationally, and he has received many distinguished awards. That other great Australian poet, Les Murray, said: "O'Connor is a conservationist with a scientific muse, yet has the polished verbal gold of a classicist." Murray is referring here to O'Connor's scientific precision in his nature poetry (as well as his meticulous attention to traditional poetic form). Unlike much lyric nature poetry which tends to avoid technical language in favour of 'romantic' imagery, O'Connor successfully embodies contemporary scientific understanding about eco-systems and biodiversity in his poetry.

In "The Beginning" O'Connor give us a somewhat whimsical account of the creation of the Great Barrier Reef. He models his story on the account of the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis in the Christian Old Testament. Here is an edited transcript of the opening verses from Genesis:

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 said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.
And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.
And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.
. . . And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. . . Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.
And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

O'Connor adapts this account by imagining that God is somewhat less than satisfied with his labours, so he decides to create something special—the Great Barrier Reef. As in the biblical account an abundance of living creatures are created ("let species swarm like solutes in a colloid"), and God and the angels see 'that it is very good'. God creates profusion from the microscopic level of "ten thousand species of plankton" to the level of large creatures like sharks, and these are interrelated according to modern ecological thinking, in chains of predation, reproduction, death, and rebirth. O'Connor conveys the contemporary understanding that these eco-systems are 'good', for although there may be "a hundred ways of death" there are also "three thousand of regeneration". While the archangel Raphael seems impatient to complete the job, God insists on adding the perhaps less 'likeable' creatures: "I want a special place / for the crabs! And now for parasites to keep / the whole system in balance".

Mark O'Connor has commented: "I was staying at the Scientific Research Station on Heron Island, where I used to meet the different scientific experts. 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 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'. 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 traditional biblical account when the job of creation was complete in six days, on the seventh day God rested. However, in O'Connor's surprise ending, God decides to descend from the heavens and swim around in his creation "in the eternal shape of a grey nurse shark". The implication is that the earthly creation is more alluring than Heaven, as the angels "peered wistfully down / through the high safety fence around Heaven" to see "God with his favourites finning slowly over the coral", and they "saw that it was very good indeed".