

TEXT Review

Productive Difficulties: the Pedagogy of Gerald Murnane

review by Patrick West

Gerald Murnane
Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs: Essays
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The publisher's blurb tucked under the cover of my review copy tells that in 1999 Gerald Murnane 'received the Patrick White Literary Award in recognition of his distinguished contribution to Australian writing'. What is the nature of that contribution? And what's to be gained by seeing White and Murnane as connected other than through this award?

I ask these questions with my lecturer-of-creative-writing hat on, but that's far from the only starting point for interpretation made available to a reader of this collection of non-fiction. Spanning the years 1984 to 2003 - with a heavy clustering of contributions sourced from the mid-to-late 1980s - the thirteen chronologically ordered essays cover the entire range of Murnane's concerns, and yes, it's true to say, of his unique obsessions.

A reader can follow the threads of Murnane the proto-deconstructionist, of Murnane the devotee of the images in his head, of Murnane the aficionado of randomness within patterns, even (more humourously) of Murnane the observer of national identity. 'In general,' he notes of 1949, 'an Australian thought English thoughts indoors and when solemnity was called for. Out of doors one could be Australian, and more light-hearted' (4). Lines like these tend often to send one's thoughts snaking off to re-experience the effects of the counterpart moments they gesture towards within Murnane's actual fiction.

This is one of the ways in which the essays in this collection blur or 'over-write' the non-fiction/fiction distinction. However, the impact of this collection qua collection - as opposed to the effect of a 'diaspora' of individual pieces - is a related factor in forcing a reconsideration of the circumstances of a reader's reception to Murnane's overall output.

Of course, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* is a 'reverse diaspora', bringing together what was once disseminated through a variety of publication forms across Australian literary and writing culture. But even if many of these essays will probably already be familiar to the reader, the fact of their collection is a significant development in Murnane criticism.

Although the back cover teases with its reference to Murnane's 'curious and eccentric imagination', reading these collected essays stimulates quite a different perspective on that mind from which they can be said to have emerged (if it is granted that writing does emerge mainly from minds). Much more than a simple tracing of the 'development' of a writer's ideas, the collection reflects the way in which Murnane's world-view appears always already to be both simple and complicated, and also how the simplicity and the complication are interlocked on many levels. To this extent, the philosophy of writing that these ideas constitute is powerfully internally consistent, and the reader is seduced into close and involving engagement with the detail of Murnane's world-view. The notion of a 'curious and eccentric imagination' withers away as the collection is read start to finish.

An example might be useful at this point. In 'Meetings with Adam Lindsay Gordon', Murnane writes that 'a racecourse is a landscape - and a landscape that is no mere backdrop but an arena where many doubtful issues can be resolved' (7). That simple sentence was published in 1984. Later, in 2003's 'The Angel's Son', the 'stream system' ('I write fiction by following the stream system' (147)) arrives at the following formulation:

The rider of the horse Angel's Son will lower his whip gracefully an instant before the horse reaches the finish-line. What prompts the rider to do this is an event such as could happen only on a racecourse in the mind of such a person as can visualise only a racecourse whenever he looks for a meaning of meanings. (224)

This would seem to indicate the progression - the increasing complexity - of a thought over twenty years, but of course Murnane's first book, *Tamarisk Row*, with its complex furlong-long sentences, was published a good ten years before 'Meetings with Adam Lindsay Gordon', in 1974.

What this collection tends to foreground, therefore, is a complexity of thought that seems always already (from the beginning?) to contain many levels within itself, and which, relatedly, never threatens to collapse under the pressure of its own preoccupations. Each further pass at elaboration complements rather than threatens the internal consistency of Murnane's concerted attempts to describe that site and that moment in which art looks at life only to find that it is looking, in fact, at no more and no less than a version of itself.

So, to return to this issue of the non-fiction/fiction divide, not only do moments in the collection intimate their fictional counterparts in the novels and story/novella collections, but this collection itself - pulling tight the many threads of Murnane's intellect - fosters credulity as a counter-impulse to our stirred-up incredulity at the products of a 'curious and eccentric imagination'. By sending us off to renewed engagements with the fiction, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* also operates to capture the fiction within the sphere of its own non-fictional ideas, which serves to generate a larger sense of Murnane's 'system'.

In 'The Breathing Author', Murnane confesses that 'I have sometimes thought of the whole enterprise of my fiction-writing as an effort to bring to light an underlying order - a vast pattern of connected images - beneath everything that I am able to call to mind' (162). How many other writers (William Blake springs to mind) can claim to have created such an impressive writing cosmography, which (more than ever after the publication of this collection) spans the gamut of both fiction and non-

fiction?

Gerald Murnane's contribution to Australian writing, then, might depend upon the extent to which he is willing, following Robert Bly, 'to trust his obsessions', and in particular his obsessions to document the process of his practice, in both fiction and non-fiction (p. 41, from 1987, and p. 168, from 2001/02). If not necessarily a model for others to follow, his example is, at least, a certain sort of 'eccentric' provocation for the attempts of other writers to 'systematize' their own creative output. The view from the 'outside' of Murnane's 'system', that is, might continue to frame his writing as curious and eccentric, even as the view from the 'inside' - much facilitated with the publication of this collection - makes his oeuvre seem much less recondite or associated with 'eccentricity'.

I asked at the head of this review whether there could be any value in going more deeply into the notion of a connection between Gerald Murnane and Patrick White. On this topic, I want to reference the conclusion to Simon During's Oxford Australian Writers study of Patrick White, in which he suggests that White's impact on our literature, institutions and culture might survive precisely through those aspects of his work that grate with today's sensibilities. Will Murnane, similarly, survive only despite himself, as a provocation to present and future forms of Australian literary and cultural production? 'Where,' During asks in 1996, 'is scandalous, difficult, truly heterodox writing and culture being produced or sought after?' Perhaps it is, after all, the idea of Murnane's eccentricity (the view from 'outside' of his thought) that should require the most careful preservation in the 'softly repressive' (During) cultural climate of present-day Australia.

Indeed, it's only through some version of this same formulation that I can rescue from Murnane's collection anything of direct usefulness to teachers of creative writing. Some of Murnane's comments on his own teaching practices are merely unexceptional. Of the rest, they resist ready translation into generalizable pedagogic principles either for being too general ('[poor] stories by previously unpublished writers most commonly made me suspect that the writers were nervous' [p. 87]) or, at the other end of the spectrum, for being too tied to what could be called the ('eccentric') business of being Gerald Murnane:

Then I used to do in front of the class something that few teachers of fiction-writing can have done in a classroom. Sometimes by writing key words on the whiteboard, and sometimes by miming with my hand in the air the writing of sentences that I spoke at the same time aloud, I tried to show my students how I would have begun an as-yet-unwritten piece of short fiction. (169-70)

There might, in fact, be very good reason why 'few teachers of fiction-writing can have done in a classroom' anything like what Murnane describes here! I can see learning lagging quite a way behind teaching in this example, as there is clearly a sharp distinction to be drawn between doing something as a teacher, and enabling others to do it as well. It's far from an impossible stretch to agree with the observation 'that a person paid to teach others a skill ought to be able to exercise that skill in front of the others and to give a full and clear account of the exercising' (169). But were Murnane's students expected to go home after class and 'exercise' their own skills in exactly the same way?

Writers must, to some degree, be solipsistic so as to write. Certainly Murnane's solipsism is a thread running from start to end of this collection. But teachers need

to be able to turn their solipsism 'inside out' when they step across the threshold of the writing classroom.

A little earlier in the essay just quoted from, 'The Breathing Author', Murnane discusses the 'statements' on fiction writing that he used to draw upon in his university teaching: 'I did not collect only statements that I myself could agree with. I collected a range of statements so that I could usually offer my students not only my own views on fiction-writing but also an opposing view' (167). One part of me would have liked to hear a little more about such tensions facing off Murnane the teacher with Murnane the writer.

Still, precisely for being what it is, Murnane's notion of pedagogy serves up a challenge to those philosophies of learning and teaching that some of us as educationalists have possibly become just a little too comfortable with. At least, we can say that all orthodoxies need regular challenging. Murnane's own experience of tertiary teaching seems to have been unhappy towards the end. He makes dark mutterings about 'the mode of administration' that forced him out (167). As a teacher of creative writing, the very 'difficulty' of reconciling Murnane's ideas on teaching with my current institutional context and its pedagogic practices is perhaps the most salutary aspect of this collection.

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