

23 April 1984

Dear Gore Vidal,

This is both a fan letter and a belated apology. Apology first: I have been delighted with your fictions and essays for many years, and in 1973 I took the liberty of using a sentence from Rocking the Boat as an epigraph to the second part of my volume of poems, Hornpipes and Funerals. I suppose I should have consulted you: I don't know if I committed a breach of copyright. But I thought that a very obscure poet in Australia might as well not bother a famous person like you; and anyway, I pinched only one sentence, and acknowledged it.

The second part of my volume consisted of 12 poems, all more or less Funerals. One was a pattern-poem called "Fungi", which used the mushroom image all the way through. Here's the last stanza:

But nature is not mocked.
Those violent whom the gods destroy
They first drive mad: and mysteries unlocked
From the heart of things have turned man's dearest toy.
Jostling for room
May push the proud
To sprout one last mushroom
Of boiling cloud --
For man the fool
Finaâ toadstool.

Other poems were more about personal death. Now, I wouldn't have written to you at present, except for one thing: I was recently in hospital recovering from an operation for a malignant tumour, and I was reading your delightful novel Creation. (I've been lucky with hospital reading: the last time was two years ago, when I was in hospital for asthma, and I read Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker. I was hysterical with delight. Of course, the speed-up drugs may have helped too.) You share one of my great preoccupations: religions (I am a member of the local Buddhist Society, but not really a Buddhist). Then I came to the passage with Confucius fishing, and you described the half-moon in the morning sky as "like the skull of a ghost". You seem to be the only person apart from myself who has noticed this aspect of the daylight moon---I have seen it so pretty well all my life (I am 55), and see the enclosed poem which proves that.

I no longer write poems. Soon after Hornpipes (1973), poetry stopped coming. Instead, I have written 7 or 8 SF/Fantasy novels. I am also a university professor---but I share your dislike of university pedants, and I think most "research" in Eng. Lit, is rubbish. When I did my Ph.D (1973-4) I did it on a point of fact: what plays did Thomas Middleton write? I worked on that like a scientist, and came up with answers which may be useful to anyone who thinks the question worth asking. Anyway, I'm glad that's over. And if I survive this present cancer problem I'm not going to do any more "research" unless I really want to. They won't fire me---there are much weaker members of my department, and they have tenure too. I feel a bit like a Romanharuspex---I have to laugh at my own job---fancy paying me for reading so many books that I just enjoy anyway! At least it's an innocent swindle---unlike making armaments or advertising cigarettes.

Yours sincerely & gratefully,

David Lake
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