

9a~Michael Magee to Thomas Sayers Ellis.**“these Boston-specific moments”**

February 18, 2000

Dear Tom,

I'm writing to you w/ an eye toward the special “Open Letter” issue of *Open Letter*, edited by Louis Cabri and Nicole Markotic. When they announced the issue, I scanned my brain for people to whom I might write and for subjects I might address, to no avail. The idea of letters to older mentors and favorites seemed willfully self-promotional or – worse – provoked thoughts of receiving no response from her/him, receiving instead a public humbling; yikes! More to the point, I couldn't really think of anything to say. Then I thought of something I wanted to ask you. Hopefully you'll find the subject interesting enough to merit a response.

Here goes: I was wondering if you might say something about your experience with the sonic proximity between Thomas Sayers Ellis and Thomas Stearns Eliot. For starters: was it intentional on your parents' part? Did it result in your reading Eliot earlier and more intensely than you otherwise would have? The analogy which comes immediately to mind for me is Ellison – whose dad named him Ralph Waldo and who subsequently spent a lifetime meditating on “the magic involved in naming” as he details in that great essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate.” Then I think, well, Ellison had a lot of reasons to *like* Emerson – his abolitionism, the democratic fabric of his language – whereas, I say to myself, “Tom's poetry seems, at least on the surface, as close to Eliot's as the British Parliament is to P-Funk” (but then I reverse direction, thinking, well, then too, Ellison prefaced both his novels with epigraphs from Eliot and always insisted that you could hear St. Louis Blues in Old Possum's work – I mean, the nickname alone!).

This topic is all the more resonant for me just now as I've started a new project – a long poem, titled, at the moment, “Black Irish,” which deals w/ Irish-American racism as manifested in such ghastly incidents as the Civil War conscription riots in NYC and the Boston Busing riots of the '70s – things which, when I think too much about them, lead to nausea if not tears (what brings it all home no doubt are my own roots among working-class Irish racists, my wife's too – the absurdity, from a class perspective, of watching chickens in one corner of the coop dissing chickens in another corner, all the while unaware of the fact that *they are in a coop*.) The more buried context involves a historical fact that I only recently learned about: that in the 17th century Oliver Cromwell et al sold thousands of Irish peasants into slavery in the West Indies – Barbados, Montserrat – and that these people were largely integrated, reproductively and otherwise, into the mostly African slave culture there, to the extent that the Barbadian dialect apparently includes more than a hint of Irish brogue. (WC Williams, oddly enough, brings this up in *Paterson* 1.)

Interwoven in this large-print history are my own small-print experiences in the neighborhood – the tiniest of things, often, which seem large to me, such as a black friend of mine recounting how, in the '80s, living in Boston, she rooted quietly but intensely for the Lakers against the Celtics (who, as I'm guessing you know, were so pasty white during those championship battles that even their black point guard had red hair and freckles! In these Boston-specific moments your experience with The Dark Room Collective hovers close by as an unformulated question.) So: for me, Eliot is most often Eliot the Anglican, across the pond and away from the front of American civil rights battles; hence the curiosity, I guess. Just now I thought, there's Eliot, though, nervously in the North End checking out “the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves” in Prufrock.

Lastly: how to write about these “black irish” from my position w/out seeming to claim a “see – us too!” attitude towards the history of American slavery? my problem. Again, the class issue is cathetic – I've mentioned this to two poets in North Carolina, Patrick Herron and Carl Martin, both of whom are keenly aware of how class & race intersect, always, in the South – everywhere, surely, but especially there. Herron recently told me that his experience of the South has made him aware of the prevalence of “Irish denial” –

the number of people who deny the fact that they're Irish – who call themselves most often “Scotch-Irish” but are in fact nothing of the sort but rather converted Irish Catholics. It's all so complicated, buried and yet “in the air” – terms like Scotch-Irish: surely no one really needs to deny that they're Irish anymore in North Carolina; but the term hangs around as a kind of fossil of anti-Catholic prejudice among the KKK-sympathetic. *If it resides in the language does it reside in the culture?* A question, thus, perhaps better dealt with, at least by me, in the poetry.

Martin (who has some incredible stories to tell of his experiences in this area) actually emailed me just now, saying in part, “really strange. It's really embarrassingly shameful where you have a group from South Boston captured on television trying to ‘run through’ a black person with, of all things, an American flag! Jeez. I, haven't given up hope, however.” As I mentioned to him, I'm struck the past couple days, wryly blue, by the fact that the one Irish rap group to ever come to public consciousness is called House of Pain. Ellison, god bless him, found a way to laugh at this American craziness without downplaying, ignoring, or otherwise easily pretending to *solve* or *accept* it: slipping its yoke. That, I suppose, is my benchmark: a complex dialectic of opposition and utopian proposal, dissatisfaction and desire (as the fact that democracy does not and can never exist should not preclude our treatment of it as a possibility). Thanks for answering any and all questions you find in this open letter.

Yours,

Mike Magee

ps – I've attached the first inklings of this project, which is liminal but which I thought you might want to see.

from **Prolegomenon for the Black Irish**

when I was a lad, me mum would
whisper me stories of Robbie Caruso
and the royal wee

on good Friday

especially we
loved the middle passage
about the fishwife of Montserrat (late of Cork) who married a moorcock

birthed a monkey and named him “Burnt Norton”

Alas, although the law is universal, the majority live
as if they had understanding peculiar to themselves

mum said

Well, if you think the Norton anthology is bad, try the Laurence Welk show. I just caught a rerun which featured a very peculiar routine: a group of brightly clad white people on what appeared to be mock bleachers, all holding basketballs, sway gently to the sound of “Sweet Georgia Brown.” Half-way through a black man dribbles on stage, tosses his ball to the bleachers and begins a tap routine. This culminates with the white people bursting into song, carrying the lyrics of Sweet Georgia Brown in four part harmony as the tapper taps up and down the center steps of the mock bleachers. For the grand finale, he dashes down the steps, drops to his knees with his arms spread wide, smiling to the camera, and the chorus behind him begins in

unison to *pelt* him with their basketballs, as he draws in his arms and
 craddles his head, cringing. Then cut to Laurence who says, I swear to God,
 “Well I hope you have enjoyed our colorful show.” -jp

a gd pt you have there, john . member the
 dismembered busing
 tablaturers—

complicit commitments
 riotous conscription—
 the wooden floor’s expansion

can we start at the very beginning (rasa taboo) when it ain’t trane’s favorite?

(before the face)

as if

*Hæc loca, vi quondam et vasta convulsa ruina
 Dissiluisse ferunt, cum protinusutraque tellas
 Una foret*

taint already
 a colonized language . . .

spectral shells run the gamut’s grave stone
 so much for gravitas scaling the majority
*Do you know a quaint, lax reason,
 Fibber? Mira: gestimate family
 tutorials, solve pollution, labile reality,
 sanction John’s tiny hymnal, dodobird.*

Tap the Ballinskelligs at a snail’s pace
 sans cargo. *Segrue* carved in granite,
 subject to Cromwellian erasure, granted
 (or the sea’s shell game + T = analogous
 accomplishment)

the Kinsale gourmet
 butters up history, cleans and seals loose
 indentures. How describe the passage w/
 out conflating the middle, black ire-ish? after
 the Celts game on Causeway, the pub’s bumper
 sticker—*top o’ the mornin’ to yo’ ass*—marks
 the rivalrous anxiety of the bleacher creatures

*Banister, a wild Irishman...a fellow of absolute barb-
 arity...forcibly took Caesar, and had him carried to the same post
 where he was whipped...told him he should die like a dog...*

look kids—big Behn, parliament . what’d you
 say your
 Surinam was, Brutus?

giving it to Caesar, as w/ Cranchal later (bro-love)
 bad blood spread by mosquito (n. ask k gallagher abt
 fishtown fever)

Sample the scampy drivel of court wits in an alienation

Uncle Mike is in the house

“Sir Willful Witwoud, is in the house”

a grievous con brought

to you

by the maker

's of “2 Caliban Sam & the Gang”

and the *naturally tempestuous* flavor of Frosted Humps ð