

The Editor,
Overland

93, St Vincent Street
 Albert Park 3206

15 May 1987

Dear Sir,

I recently sent you a piece of work which came back to me after a month, commentless. I'm beginning to find this sort of thing a little disturbing. It is not that I'm suggesting that work submitted to your magazine should be non-returnable. But that it should be sent back without the grace of accompanying words is unfortunate.

I suppose it will be said that there are many such submissions, and that there is simply no time to comment upon each of them. Well, Sir, in that case it seems to me that the ethical choice would be that of employing more editorial staff, or closing down the publication in question. I am entirely serious about this. When a magazine such as yours becomes established, it exercises influence, which, you will agree I think, entails responsibility. The minimum responsibility to be exercised in such a case is surely to declare those canons of taste, preference, and exclusion which seem at present to be applied as it were in absentia. To declare them on each occasion, and generally.

What, Sir, are your criteria, for example? What do you suppose good taste to be? By what stars do you sail, what are your fundamental principles? Are these, in fact, unarguable, being simply dependent on what you happen to prefer? All the more reason, then, for providing careful detail concerning your reasons for selecting, or not selecting, in each case.

Anything less, I suggest to you, falls short of the minimum standards of happy communication one would expect from the average street corner dialogue or a seminar discussion, where questions of influence and power are not so explicit, let alone the more rigorous standards to be expected in matters of publication. To extend discrimination on behalf of an audience without, as a matter of course, in every case, showing the bases of that discrimination, is to presume a superiority of sensibility which must always mean that this very audience is presumed upon. Such an alliance of speaker and reader/listener may, I suggest, never be other than élitist. Whatever the declared bias under the masthead of the publication in question, such an engagement will always be, in essence, authoritarian.

What do you reply, for example, to Orwell's opinion that " an aesthetic preference is either something inexplicable or it is so corrupted by non-aesthetic motives as to make one wonder whether the whole of literary criticism is not a huge network of humbug?"² Do you have an argument to bring against this? What is that argument? How does it inform the selections you make, *month by month, for your magazine? Why are those who submit work to you, and the public in general, not privy to

this rationale? It is the ready assumption of a superiority of discrimination implied by editorial silence on such basic points, the almost total absence of engagement from the arbiters of taste, which is so disturbing, because it has such serious implications for the culture--any culture--in which it occurs.

There are indications, you see, that the unmarked choices of people such as yourself (or selves) are quite often out of phase with what the reading public (that arresting abstraction) might choose, or at least find interesting. One of the two pieces I sent you, for example, had been seen by fifty or so people before I submitted it, including a well-known journalist and a teacher who used it as part of a classroom exercise. The response, including the reaction of the students, was overwhelmingly positive, even laudatory. I am not, you understand, using this background as evidence that the thing should have been published. I am, however, suggesting to you, by a quick head count of largely accidental readers, that it deserved considerably better than the off-hand and impersonal treatment you gave it. And so--this is my central point--does all work sent to you, from whatever source, whenever.

In your place I should certainly feel bound to defend that influence you seem to exercise at present off-stage, obscurely. I should certainly feel impelled to respond to such a letter, to enter, for once, into the process of communication.

But perhaps, as I suspect, the 'pressures' of the marketplace have now, at last, imposed themselves altogether upon the centre of our culture, upon its heart, that place where the humanities once supposed themselves to be. To the extent that such a comment seems risible, the game is indeed already lost, I think. Obviously, in such a circumstance, even the lack of a reply from you would be an answer.

I wish you well for the future, with many remembrances of that past from which we have all recently emerged.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert Lumsden". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'R' and a long, sweeping underline.

Robert Lumsden

OVERLAND

EDITORIAL ADDRESS:

P.O. BOX 249, MOUNT ELIZA,
VICTORIA, 3930, AUSTRALIA

EDITOR: STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

PRIVATE PHONE: (03) 787 1545

Bo
return

19 May 1987

Dear Mr Lumsden:

I understand your feelings but from the point of view of an editor several points have to be made. Overland is run entirely by spare time labor, as it happens by writers desperate for time to get on with their own writing, but sacrificing an undue amount of it to servicing other writers. That is one point. We receive over 100 MSS a week; to spent ten minutes on each (in fact much more than this is spent) means someone has to put their own work aside means about 16 hours voluntary labor.

A further point is that when we did try to say what we honestly thought (a) we were threatened with the law, and (b) subscribers cancelled their subscriptions.

For all that, when we think well of a story and see real possibilities for its development we do comment, and take the risk. As far as our standards and values are concerned, these can not be adequately put down on some kind of tablets of the Law, but best emerge in the magazine itself. We want, I suppose, to put it simply, good writing on good topics, preferably with new ideas and new ways of saying things. Not that all good writing is accepted; I sent back a good story, but hard porn, the other day. The other thing we ask for from all Overland writers, and I have made this point many times in the magazine, is that our writers write for the hospital matron at Port Hedland, not for their mates or an in-group. Of course all editors and magazine have their own in-built and often unconscious prejudices or, if you like, opinions. This is the argument for having as many editors and magazines as possible, and for advising writers -- as we constantly do -- to study the magazine first. If writers did this many disappointments would be avoided.

I am sure that injustices are often perpetrated. These would be largely overcome by a grant of \$100,000 a year, the approximate value of the free time given the magazine by the many who work for it.

It was good of you to write such an intelligent letter, which of course raises issues any editor should think about.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Murray-Smith

Mr. Stephen Murray-Smith,
Overland,
PO Box 249,
Mt. Eliza

93, St. Vincent Street
Albert Park 3206

24 May 1987

Dear Mr. Murray-Smith,

Thank you for your thoughtful, and prompt, letter. I do take the point of a good deal of what you say, particularly your insistence that would-be contributors put themselves in tune with the temper, and tempo, of your magazine, before offering you anything.

I also sympathize to a certain extent with your reluctance to come out and say what you think in each case, on account of the threats and cancellations you've experienced in the past when you do. To a certain extent. Those who threaten to sue, in such circumstances, surely, do no more than make themselves ridiculous, though they may make life a little uglier for those who have to put up with them. They wouldn't have, in other words, a cat in hell's chance of succeeding if they did sue, and they must know it. Or you must. I'm afraid I think that the ugliness, being there, has to be borne, however reluctantly, for the sake of the greater good which would come from letting people know, directly, where they, and you, stand. The other part to your reluctance, that subscribers drop away, I'll admit, I find a good deal harder to wave ^{aside} ~~away~~. I realize that it's all very well to say that this isn't very important, when one is not directly involved with the survival of the publication, always a tenuous matter, in the best of times. I don't know what the answer might be to this one, but I am convinced that the answer is not to remain close-mouthed for fear of giving offence.

It's a good idea I think to use writers as editors. Why not simply employ more of them? A great many more? Since the labour is, as you say, voluntary, no extra expense would be incurred, and the time taken from these scrutineers' other labours ^{would seem less damaging} Sixteen hours at ten minutes a pop over a hundred mss is at once rendered less formidable divided sixteen ways rather than two or three, isn't it? It seems to me in fact that the difficulties I mentioned last time might all but vanish if this were done. Readers might even begin to enjoy saying what they think of the material that comes their way, rather than feeling threatened by having to commit opinion to paper.

It was good of you to say that my letter raises issues an editor should think about. I hope you won't think me ungracious if I press my point and say that it hardly seems sufficient to admit that such things should be thought about, only to pass them by. There is much that should be done about them, no less. In particular, my central point of last time was left quite untouched by your

response. " We want, I suppose, to put it simply, good writing on good topics", But this begs the question altogether of what you believe to be good writing (and "good topics"), and why. And this was the question I asked. Your hospital matron at Port Headland is certainly some sort of attempt to locate your own sense of what is required, but does it really provide anyone else with a clearer idea of what this sense might be? Any more, for instance, than the archetypal, and risible, ' man on the Clapham omnibus'? I mean no offence at all in saying this, but ~~the~~ thinking behind such prescriptions does seem awfully loose to me. I cannot see that it is at all a good thing that literary magazines should be run according to critical principles which should not pass muster in a university.

You might want to take your stand with Orwell and say that there is no such thing as a critical principle, only literary preferences. That is an argument which you seem to embrace in referring to your habit of using a number of editors, and advising people to take the measure of your magazine before contributing. And it is, or at least may be, a defensible point of view. But it is not one, I think, which sits well with your hospital matron who, surely, appears as a common reader of robust good sense whose literary preferences, being well understood by all who will take the trouble to fall into sympathy with her, amount to a set of principles, so plain it does not need to be stated. (How do you prevent this good lady from becoming a kind of internalized literary-critical Mrs. Grundy, by the way? A sort of middling common denominator Superconscious?) Your hospital matron, you see, virtually undermines the pluralist strategy. And what remains, as it was prior to my writing at first, is a kind of gaping hole, an absence of consideration in which definition goes begging, and self-assertion occupies the 'comfortable' (or self-comforting) middle ground.

Really, the whole thing is the most appalling mess. So much swept under the carpet, so many fundamental issues 'blinked' for so long, ~~by~~ so many. And it was not always so, in the history of little magazine publication, as a glance at the Rambler, Criterion, or the Egoist, for example, will show. It is not that I select your publication, Mr. Murray-Smith, as especially deserving of such strictures. You were decent enough to reply to my letter, and you did attempt to sketch your position, as well as letting me know of some difficulties of which I was ignorant. I thank you for that. But perhaps you begin to take my point fully? If there is no such thing as a critical principle which informs our idea of 'culture', then our custodians of culture, whoever they may be, and wherever, should bloody well say so. If they think that there is, they should state it, and be prepared to defend their statement with reasons. Time should be given to these issues, and space. They are, after all, quite fundamental.

What we have instead, I'm afraid, is a complacent pluralism on all sides in which a nod and a wink passes for the articulation of an idea, in which appeals to

good taste or common sense divert us from direct connection with our particular feelings, and the responsibility to confront our preferences on each occasion. Our best novelist has described this as a country where "mind is the least of possessions". It seems to me that an essential part of the occupation of those who present or represent culture is to try to refute this frightening (but, from my experience, largely accurate) observation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert Lumsden". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent capital 'R' and 'L'.

Robert Lumsden

OVERLAND

EDITORIAL ADDRESS:

P.O. BOX 249, MOUNT ELIZA,
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EDITOR: STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

PRIVATE PHONE: (03) 787 1545

6 June 1987

Dear Robert:

We are about to start going round in circles, I fear. Thanks for your letter. I suspect your fundamental misapprehension is that editors are, and should be, critics. Nothing is further from the truth. Editors should steer clear of criticism. Critics have in mind literary values above all. Editors have in mind their readers above all. Critics I should imagine would make appalling editors, and editors poor critics. It would be a fundamental mistake for one to intrude on the other.

Editors of course have values and standards but it is their responsibility to make these apparent in the pages of their works and not in editorials, pontifications or bullyragging writers.

Your proposal for utilising writers as editors is of course well-intentioned but utterly impracticable. Of course we do employ the services of readers who are also successful writers; except for poetry I make the final decisions: that is what I am (not) paid to do. If I make enough wrong decisions over a long enough period of time I should go. The problem with Overland and probably all magazines is not the absence of talent or advice, but the sheer organisational problem of getting things done. To have to deal with dozens of advisers rather than a few would simply mean that the magazine would fail to appear, that the organisation would be fabulous but the product non-existent. It's time that is the problem, not ideas. There are plenty of them, just as there are plenty of writers. The real problem in starting a magazine is not to find writers, who come up like mushrooms, but to find someone clearheaded, patient, diplomatic and self-sacrificing enough to handle the customers' accounts efficiently. That of course means my wife.

We do more towards announcing a critical principle than any other magazine, by printing Temper democratic, bias Australian on our title page from issue no. 1. The moment we started to dissect that and analyse it the more people would define themselves out. Often we get material we like which no critical principles we enunciated could have foreseen. We are, if you like, looking at life and not formulas. Ideologies, including critical ideologies, are dangerous, malevolent, appalling and inhuman things. "Noboby ever did anything foolish except for some strong principle," said Lord Melbourne. "Have you ever seen anything so dreadful, murderous and nonsensical that an intellectual wouldn't want to save the world with it?" says Karel Capek in War with the newts. The ruthless hegemony of self-interested espousers of 'critical principles' in English departments have seen that discipline become increasingly peripheral to human affairs and to literature.

So you see we shall never meet. Yours sincerely,

Stephen Murray-Smith

93, St Vincent St.,

Albert Park 3206

10 June '87

Dear Stephen,

I do appreciate your letters! It is precisely this kind of response which is, to me, what it should be all about--whatever "it" may be.

Actually, the fundamental misapprehension was there, and is still to an extent, I suppose. Because I don't believe it is possible to separate out (like fine cream from poor quality milk?) the editorial faculty from the critical, you see. That does seem to me to be a mistake--imagining that one may to any considerable extent, become disinterested, or uncritical, or uncritically disinterested (or any permutation of those three!) simply by aiming to be so. I think the only way to get onto nodding terms with one's first principles is to have a go at spreading them out in the sun for inspection. But I'm repeating myself, too.

It occurs to me that in our brief exchange, you have indeed done something of this sort--when both letters are put together--but particularly in your last. Clearly, your position is of one who doesn't much care for critics as a bunch, and especially not academicised (ie, psychologically institutionalized) critics. You might be surprised to learn that I have a lot of sympathy for this point of view. (My quarrel, really, is only that it needed to be set out plainly.) Although, in the end, I suppose I'd find myself ^{prepared} to put up with the narcissistic, overly-intricate and often obsessive balderdash which academics often produce, for the sake of the infrequent real éclaircissements their methods offer. But they can, often, be frightful readers and not terribly attractive people, I agree--ungenerous readers and unfeeling, because their sensibilities tend to be tied to whatever particular barrow they happen to be pushing at the moment. Howsomever, I still reckon they pull their weight, overall, for all their spirit-killing ' weightiness'. (To match your Capek quote, for which I thank you-- it goes instantly into the mental file I keep for such matters--what about this, from Conrad: " A man in ^{the} possession of a fixed idea is insane". From Nostromo, I think.)

Well, what it comes down to for me, I suppose, is that I do still firmly believe that a way has to be found for the editors of magazines such as yours to comment upon the spores being shed by all these mushrooms which keep popping up--as to size & shape & general colouration, whether or not in comparison with the productions of other mushrooms in other times & places. I'm pleased to feel that we're not actually as far apart in other matters as I might have feared. I don't enjoy being quarrelsome, though I find myself doing it not infrequently. I'll have to put it down to advancing years and the trying times we live in, I suppose.

Why don't you take your several letters to me, re-shape them and publish them, addressed to an invisible correspondent, as smmething like that statement of

intent I was after? Your point about the legend under the masthead is well taken, by the way. It is something which had dimly registered with me in the past as, at least, a gesture towards the kind of thing I'd been finding lacking in little mags. Which, I suppose, makes it a bit unfair that I should round upon you, rather than some of the others.

Allow me finally to wish you--and your wife--and the magazine, all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Lunden

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14 July 1987

Dear Robert:

Sorry not to have replied before: have been very busy. Yes, it occurred to me too that the exchange might be worth publishing. I'll try it out on one or two people.

You're right, of course: the editorial and critical faculties can't really be separated. Every editor is, whether he likes it or not, a de facto critic, and that of course is what you're saying. Yet he needs to keep his critical interests wide-ranging and liberated, and should, I feel, beware of painting himself into a corner, or occupying a position he feels he has to defend for ever. I like your phrase -- the "psychologically institutionalized" critic. I must admit, however, that I do think we need good critics and good criticism right now: O for an Edmund Wilson! I hope John McLaren can pull off a broad and unified critical statement in the book he's now writing.

Was it ever easy to pick the great writers while they were in full production? Sometimes, I suppose. Kipling and Lawson, Chekhov and Tolstoy. But always much interference; how apparent to contemporaries was it that Conrad was a much greater writer than Hugh Walpole or Arnold Bennett? It sometimes seems to me that today in this country, with the startling expansion of the numbers of writers and the increasing competence of their levels, there's a hell of a lot of 'interference' which makes the discrimination issue very hard. Of course we have to wait for enlightenment, but good critics could surely help us peer through.

So I'm cautious. And no doubt lazy. And have the old man's sense of detachment. My daughter's writing a play based in part on the Ern Malley case. She's got me worried about 'modernism'. Scripsi, for instance, seems right into it. Should we all be? And, if we were, where does that leave the 'common reader'?

I'll go and have a bath and read Wilfred Thesiger -- not a very nice bloke, I think. And thanks for the Conrad quotation. Give me some Oz ones for the next edition of the Dictionary of Quotations. And drop in if you're down this way.

Best wishes

*And do send us a
story some time, marked
for my attention.*

Stephen.