

My earliest recollection of Martin is of him cleaning his specs with a twenty dollar note in the Buttery garden at Sydney Uni. I knew who he was by reputation: the polymath and poet who'd suggested to Don Anderson that in view of his standing as the Herald's literary critic he be excused the tedium of submitting some trifling English assignment or other. Crikey. A twenty spot. I was paying nine bucks a week for my room in a share in Camperdown. I was awestruck. I remained awestruck for the rest of the time I knew him.

It must have been not long after that, in 1967, the year the colonels took power in Greece, that I witnessed the power that a mind like Martin's can wield in the public domain. It was Martin Luther King moment, a Mandela moment. There was a protest meeting put on by the Greek community in that wonderful old building on the corner of Oxford and South Dowling Streets that I think at this time was known as the Megaron, a community centre for Sydney's Greek population. The MC was Charmian, who for the obvious reason had a very high standing among Sydney's Greeks. She spoke herself and introduced the speakers to this large, politically progressive audience of anti-fascists.

Politically progressive, but also socially pretty conventional. Conservative dress, and for the men, respectably short haircuts. Speaker after speaker was brought to the stage by Charmian, gave a spirited address and was duly and passionately applauded. Then Charmian introduced Martin – without any mention of his relationship to her, I guess so as not to unduly confer any transferred affection. To let him fend for himself perhaps. If what he had to contribute to the day was not sufficient to it, so be it. Just the next speaker, here to read a poem against the junta.

Martin strode up to the podium, a slender vision in flared jeans and collarless muslin, which may even have been gaily embroidered, hair flowing to his shoulders. An audible ripple of disapproval spread through the congregation. The vibe was palpable. These proud democrats were there for a solemn and secular cause, not to countenance a young hippie, who wasn't even Greek, reading poetry. But Martin, cocooned with his muse, simply commenced to read, in the eloquent Greek which had become his adoptive mother tongue. A few lines in, the mutterings began to die away. It took perhaps two stanzas for the hall to have fallen absolutely silent. Some more lines, and a patriotic Greek somewhere in the hall gives a tentative whistle, signifying his or her provisional acceptance. Perhaps this wispy youth has something worth hearing. Soon there's some desultory clapping, steadily rising in frequency and volume.

By the time Martin is through, the conversion is complete. The experience of being in a congregation won over from sullen hostility to cheering, stamping, tearful admiration, everyone on their feet, by a poem, is still one of my spiritual landmarks.

Years later I came to be living with Martin and Nadia in Nadia's house in Camperdown. There was chess (Martin's kindness in the face of my woodpusher's stumbling), science fiction (Martin looks up from a Zelazny (?) and announces that "Science fiction makes anything else sound silly"), his Olympian learning and profound humanism, his joy when Ali won the Rumble in the Jungle at a tragic time in Martin's life, Nadia's irradiating wryness and astonishing cooking. I can't recall exactly how long I lived with them, but it was a period of revelation more intense than the sum of my entire formal education. But my defining memory remains that night in Darlinghurst when Martin's quiet bravura declared him to be, in his mid-twenties, one of our foremost public intellectuals and greatest poets.

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