The Black or Unfair Image: Reading Ned Kelly's *Babington Letter* as a Sonnet

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Despite having authored the renowned *The Jerilderie Letter*, Ned Kelly, perhaps Australia's best-known colonial figure, is not regarded as a writer. There is, however, another remarkable Ned Kelly text—another letter—known as the *Babington Letter*. It is my contention that the *Babington Letter* can and should read as a poem—as a sonnet—and that doing so suggests ways to rethink the figure and reputation of Ned Kelly.

The *Babington Letter* was written in July 1870 when Ned Kelly was fifteen. It was addressed to Sergeant James Babington, and written shortly after the young Ned had been Babington's prisoner.

James Babington 28th July

I write you those lines hoping
to find you and Mistr Nickilson
in good health as I am my self
at presant I have arived safe
and I would like you would see
what you and Mstr. Nickelson
could do for me I have done
all circomstances would
alow me which you now
try what you con do answer
letter as soon as posabel
direct your letter to Daniel
Kelly gretta post office
that is my name no more at presant

Edward Kelly

every one looks on me like
at black snake send me
an answer me as soon
posable

(http://nedonline.imagineering.net.au/documents/images/KELLY1A.jpg and http://nedonline.imagineering.net.au/documents/images/KELLY2A.jpg)

The letter, or sonnet if you will, was first published in *The Age* on 23 November 1985 (353), and a copy of the original and a transcription of the letter appear in Ian Jones's 1995 biography of Kelly (55-7).

The context for the *Babington Letter* is critical to its content. Ned had got to know Sergeant Babington six weeks previously (Jones 50-2) while on remand for robbing a couple of herdsmen with Harry Power (45). It was the third of three charges that the police managed to get dropped (49-52). There had been no deal as such, but Ned did give them information that eventually helped them to arrest Power (48). Though it was his uncle Jack Lloyd who led the police to Power's hideout (50-4) and who received the police reward of £500 (possibly sharing it with another of Ned's uncles, Jimmy Quinn), it was Ned who had the reputation for betraying Power, and was a convenient scapegoat for his uncles (55). It is this situation to which the 'black snake' image in the letter's postscript refers. A distinction that can be made is that while his uncles may talk to the police, Kelly writes to them. It is the writer in the family who is seen as treacherous.

The *Macquarie Dictionary*'s first definition given for the word 'snake' is reptile, and the second is 'a treacherous person' (1097). Other colloquial usages are given, but 'black snake' isn't one of them. Was Ned aware even then of being associated in various ways with blackness? 'Black' emphasises his dangerousness, his localness (or Indigeneity), and it adds colour to the line and improves the rhythm. For however conscious of it he is, it is a poetic piece of writing, as is the much longer text, *The Jerilderie Letter*, which Ned wrote in collaboration with Joe Byrne some nine years later.

The addressee and date, 'James Babington 28th July', serve as a title. Read as a poem this makes it unusual. Letter-poems conventionally mediate, distance or fictionalise the address, e.g. A. D. Hope's 'An Epistle: Edward Sackville to Venetia Digby' (43), or Bruce Beaver's 'Letters to Live Poets', of which the individual poems are given the titles of Roman numerals. A poem that has a person's name as the title suggests a tribute, for instance Robert Lowell's 'Commander Lowell 1888-1949', about the poet's father, or 'Harriet', about his daughter (61, 117). An alternative is that of pastiche (Gluck, 35-41). In the case of the *Babington Letter* the date gives it the air of a report, while leaving off the year makes it seem current.

Kelly's self-consciousness could be said to apply to his (in)directness: 'I write you those lines hoping'. In the second line we find that the letter has a second addressee, that of Mr Nicolson, the police Superintendent heading the hunt for Power. Apart from the grammatical error of 'those', it seems a conventional

letter beginning. The circumstance of the letter is perhaps surprising—that of a recently released criminal writing to his gaolers. Oscar Wilde would do the same in 1897, writing to both the governor of Reading Prison, and a warder who had been kind to him (862, 871). Ned writes to Babington and Nicolson as a couple, not so unusual in itself, as men have always lived together, though these two did not as far as we know. Addressing Babington and Nicolson as a couple has the effect of emphasising the homosocial nature of the police force. The idea of them as a couple is suggested further by the writing of Nicolson's name as 'Mis Nickilson' (spelling changing with gender): the 'tr' written above, as a form of superscript. This may be a convention, but it is not repeated when Ned refers to him again below. The short, broken lines make the letter read like a contemporary poem, as does the absence of punctuation, which encourages a reading of it as one sentence, predicting the longer sentences of *The Jerilderie Letter.*

A common-sense reading might dismiss the line breaks and other poetic features as being accidents—of small notepaper perhaps, or of illiteracy. But it could be that it is Kelly's consciousness of these factors that contributes to the poetics—besides, 'accidents make art' was something of a cliché in the twentieth century. The grammatical and spelling errors work against the letter's conventional meanings—opening it up to poetry—and it's the short lines that set up the rhythm, draw attention to the rhymes, and create suggestiveness through deferral. The use of 'those' instead of 'these' sets up an immediate ambiguity and undoes the directness of the opening. The phrase 'those lines' could refer to the address—be taken literally to mean 'I write your name and the date'. It slows the rhythm, emphasises the hope—of Ned and the lines—and there is also an effect of assonance between 'those' and 'hoping'. The line break defers the meaning of 'hoping' to line three, leaving Ned (and us, his readers) in a state of hope. The past tense of 'those' indicates that it's already too late. The internal half-rhyme of 'health' and 'myself' may be a coincidence, yet it builds on the assonance of 'those'/'hoping'. The same 'f' half-rhyme ends line 4: 'safe' chimes with 'self': a good combination for a bank robber. The rhymes continue with 'you would see'/'could do for me'; 'alow'/'now'[1]; 'answer'/'letter'; the end rhyme of 'posabel'/'Daniel'; and 'gretta'/'presa[nt]'. This last, with 'nt' written above, seems, after the other rhymes, like conscious artifice. Now going back we can read 'hoping'/'Nickilson' as a near rhyme. Though there's no apparent rhyme scheme, this gives us seven rhymes over fourteen lines, as with a conventional sonnet. And it's the broken lines that make the lines fourteen. There are enough reasons (or too many coincidences) then to consider the letter as being also a sonnet. Traditionally the sonnet is a poem

of love, and in this case a queer reading might easily be made, considering the yearning, homosociality, subterfuge, scapegoating and campness of the text (Gretta Postoffice is a drag name going begging).

It would have taken a daring reader to read this as a sonnet in 1870, but by 1985 when it was first published, American poet Ted Berrigan's 1960s cut-up experiments, 'The Sonnets', had changed the sonnet forever—affecting not just poets wanting to experiment with the sonnet form, but altering reader expectation with regard to the sonnet (105-42). Now any poem of fourteen lines can be read as a sonnet; and a writer of poems in English has read so many sonnets that aspects of the form enter any poem that length. It is not known how much poetry Ned Kelly knew, whether from reading or learning orally. It is, however, known that he was a frequent visitor of James Ingram's bookshop, with his favourite book being *Lorna Doone* (Jones, 82, 85). It is also known that Ned and the other members of the Kelly gang were familiar with the oral tradition of rhyming ballads and bush songs, and that they composed their own verses while on the run (201).

Perhaps it's too much to say that the letter contains a *volte*, but it has several turnabouts: changing from first to second person, back to first, to second, and to first again. This is how it/Ned is; what 'con' you do for me? The 'con' is a reminder of how the police conned the court and witnesses in the Power cases, and the spelling of 'presa[nt]' hides the 'present' of money that Babington made Ned. It was a present intended to be a loan, but perhaps Ned had conned the conners (Jones, 54). Names are a curious theme in the poem. It is headed with 'James Babington', and footed with 'Edward Kelly'. Mr Nicolson appears twice—with different spellings, and Ned's brother's name 'Daniel Kelly' is given as Ned's pseudonym. He doesn't explain this, but there had already been a precedent in Kyneton where Ned was booked into a hotel as 'Dan Kelly' (52). As I've noted, 'Daniel' provides a rhyme with 'posabel'; 'posabel' and 'posable' suggest performativity, but equally accentuate the question Kelly is posing (note that he spells it 'bel' here but 'ble' at the end of the letter): suggesting the possibility of identity change, of escaping 'Edward Kelly' and his fate. He immediately complicates this by ending with 'Edward Kelly'. Another theme of the text is that of 'the half'. There are half-rhymes (in fact the word 'half' offers an absent half-rhyme with the first half-rhyme of 'health'/'self'). The text itself is half letter, half sonnet. In the first half of the poem, Ned refers to himself as 'I' but becomes 'me' in the second half, pointing to the halves of himself: Ned and Edward; also Ned and Daniel. This Jekyll/Hyde splitting applies also perhaps to the two Nicolsons in the letter. Nicolson in the address becomes Babington's

other half: at least as perceived by Ned. Halving suggests the breaking of the lines and the breaking of the poem—albeit the two halves of the poem are unequal. As indeed Ned appears to be to his situation.

The postscript or coda lifts Ned's name into the body of the poem. Alternatively, it transforms 'Edward Kelly' from the signature of the poem into the title of a second poem, fictionalising the 'me'. Who after all is 'Edward' Kelly? The coda literally adds to the experimental nature of the sonnet. Its reference to 'every one' opens the poem out of the homosocial world of police and prisoner, and it continues the more condensed style of the second half of the poem. The second half has half-rhymes in 'one'/'on' and 'like'/'snake,' a repetition of 'me', and the assonance of 'at'/'an'/'as'. The line 'send me an answer me' doubles the work of 'answer', enacting a kind of internal enjambment. It gives a precedent for dropping the second 'as' from the phrase 'as soon as posable' (he uses the second 'as' the first time he uses the phrase). ASAP becomes ASP. The three short 'a' words circle the double (or triple) 'me' of Ned and Edward (and Daniel): 'at me', 'an(d) me', 'as me': the assertive 'I' of 'I write', I would', 'I have', 'I am', has been reduced to the passive, poor, pitiful 'me'.

The phrase 'at black snake' gives the poem what it's been lacking so far—an image stronger than 'post office'. I am departing from precedent in reading the 'a' word as 'at'—Jones simply has 'a', and the Kelly-related website 'ned online' has 'aA'. The double 'a' is an aAttractive reading, both conceptually and rhythmically, but on the evidence (we have no other capital 'A's to compare in the text, and the second letter of the word, despite the gap between the two, resembles Kelly's 't'—especially that of the 'to' of line two) I think 'at' is the more likely, with the gap indicating a pause as Ned conflates 'a' and 'at' (Jones, 56; ned online). The phrase 'at black snake' predicts Kelly's line in *The Jerilderie Letter,* 'in every paper that is printed I am called the blackest and coldest blooded murderer ever on record'. To a reader in 1985 (or 2008) there are three blacks evoked by this phrase: the ink of 'printed', the word 'blackest' and in 'record'. (Long-playing records are anachronistic to Ned's *writing*, but not to the *publication* (or *reading*) context of 1985.)

In most of Sidney Nolan's 'Kelly' paintings, Ned Kelly has become a flat black image. Robert Hughes describes Kelly as a 'billycan poet' (160). Where do these black images come from? It's as if he's taken on the future burning of Glenrowan Inn, of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart. His biographers cite descriptions of him as looking like a 'half-caste' (Jones, 45) and being the 'dark one of the hills' (Molony, 88), and speculate that he's a black agent,

trained at the black camps to fight the boys in blue (Jones, 18). Are these merely variations of Ned's own 'black snake' image that 'every one looks on' him as?

The words 'every one looks on me like/at black snake' have an uncanny resemblance to 'I am still/The black swan of trespass on alien waters', written by James McAuley and published under the name of Ern Malley (Heyward, 243). Michael Heyward quotes Sidney Nolan as saying, 'Without Ern Malley there wouldn't have been any Ned Kelly,'—an uncanny statement, even if he is referring to his own paintings of Kelly, which came after Ern Malley (175). Heyward himself compares Malley with Kelly, saying 'they are both embedded in the national psyche' (234-5). Though much of Kelly's letter is quaint or conventional in its phrasing, 'every one looks on me like/ at black snake' has a direct vernacular quality that makes it more modern than the odd formality of the Malley line.

As well as self-pity and melodrama there's an ambiguity in Ned Kelly's line. The abruptness of 'at' with no 'a' only accentuates this—i.e. that it could be those looking on Ned who are like black snakes—alluding back to the opening of 'those lines'; those black lines. This makes 'every one's' perspective a reversal typical of the oppressor/oppressed relation; the way big business can talk of being marginalised, or someone accused of sexual harassment says they feel like they've been raped. 'Like at black snake', by displacing the word 'a' also displaces the possibility that anyone could like—or be like—a black snake.

Here, in Ned's picture, the community behaves as if Ned is treacherous, yet he feels ganged up on, and his treacherous uncles use him for a scapegoat. It all sounds a bit *Richard III*. But what is it about the black image that is powerful? Is it any more than the white writer taking on a romantic-masochistic vision of themselves as victim? Saying 'I'm a black snake', is equivalent to the colloquial saying 'I'm dead', meaning 'they're going to kill me'.[2] That an Indigenous black snake is treacherous is a white farmer perspective; the use of the black snake as an image of white treachery both aligns Ned with the Indigenous, and displaces their concerns with his own. Aboriginals are not passive in such myth-making of course, and the Yarralin people have claimed Ned as a champion against the police and land thieves (Jones, 340). There is a different ambiguity in the McAuley/Malley poem. The mock-romanticism is accompanied by an inversion: (the narrator as) black swan as trespasser. A doubling—or a split—can be read here. The waters are alien to the narrator-as-landowner, making the native swan a trespasser. However conscious McAuley is of the line's suggestion of Black and White relations, the poem's

previous line encourages such a reading—'But no one warned me that the mind repeats/In its ignorance the vision of others'—pointing to the negative vision of Terra Nullius, or Eden. It continues, 'I am still'; meaning 'I am a vessel through which ideology passes', or 'I am an emblem', or 'I'm hunting/being hunted', or 'I'm dead'. A further reading can be made of the Malley narrator as the treacherous writer.

One of Australia's most famous poems, and one that involves both theft and a black image, is 'Waltzing Matilda' (Paterson, 67-9). Richard Magoffin has argued that the Jolly Swagman represents the militant shearer in the context of the strikes and woolshed burnings of the 1890s (3). (He is also a treacherous balladeer or writer.) This reading interprets the billy as a symbol of violence, as it is in Henry Lawson's earlier poem 'Freedom on the Wallaby' (400-1). This aligns the Swagman with the later non-violent strikes of Aboriginal farm labourers in the 1930s. The billy is the black image in 'Waltzing Matilda', but unlike Kelly's snake and Malley's swan this isn't made explicit, conforming to the codedness of the poem—its context according to Magoffin—and the meaning of jargon words like 'jumbuck'.[3] The billy is explicitly linked with death in 'Waltzing Matilda', of the Swagman and of the jumbuck. They are still; still heard/dead. The treachery—or snakeness—of the billy can be seen in its stillness, its refusal to boil, allowing the sequence of events to occur. The Swagman's Catweazle-like disappearance into the giant billy or billabong, points to another utility of the black image: something to hide in or behind, something that covers or swallows us like armour or night or a big black snake. The Swagman evades the troopers. McAuley and Stewart hide behind 'Ern Malley' and the concept of the hoax—they cloak their ideology in irony and ambiguity. Ned Kelly hopes: to hop like a rabbit into the snake and slide off. Can this at least be claimed for English writing—the black night repertoire? Night is objectively dark, if less so since the advent of electric and neon light. It's not apparently offensive like the black/evil image set. Yet there's an element of white fear in black night imagery—a trace of superstition, of (fear of) the primitive. Black culture and black people are conflated and objectified with this imagery—and this conflation, this objectification is useful—not only in titillating the white reader and excluding the black one, but in incorporating and flattening the Australian Indigenous into the Western poetic repertoire. Perhaps it's a case-by-case thing, to do with tone and with each particular invocation. Or perhaps we've moved on from these types of symbolism, these colonial modernisms.

If Ned as black snake (whether reptile or metal) isn't treacherous, evil, a night-thing, what can the image mean? It's a local yet othering image.

Like any simile it poses, is 'posable', as likening, as similarity, but what's actually happening is differentiation. Ned is pointing out his own difference, or perhaps putting an image on what others are doing to him. What is similar are the 'looks' of 'every one'. How much is projection, paranoia or exaggeration, we can't know.

It's possible to undo the simile, separating 'me' (i.e. Ned) from 'black snake'—reading them together is conventional which means there must be alternatives. The conventional reading favours narrative and image over the letter poem's technical qualities; the lines and the sounds (rhymes), and the ambiguity. The use of 'at' and the elision of 'a' makes for a more dynamic rhythm, as does 'black' added to 'snake'. 'Like' reverses the k-l sounds of 'Kelly', the word that heads the coda and the name of the subject. This suggests that any 'liking' of Kelly, including the likening practice of simile-making, is backwards, perverse. The first line, 'every one looks at me like', indicates the habituation of likening Ned to something or other; no one including Ned looks at him as himself.

'At black snake send me', identifies 'black snake' with place. Which place is ambiguous—a less compressed meaning might be, 'send me something from black snake where you are', or 'at black snake where i am send me something'. 'Send me' has several meanings also. It can mean 'send to me', or 'send me somewhere', with the somewhere being literal or imaginative—or even ecstatic (Cooke). To go just that bit further, towards a word-based reading, we can separate 'black' from 'snake'. Again meanings proliferate. The place of 'at' becomes 'black'—then merely 'at'. The *sending* then becomes snake-related—send me a snake, or may your sending be like a snake—treacherous in the old meaning, or perhaps by winding roads (snake mail). The poetic power, the spell of Ned Kelly, 'every one looks on me like/at black snake', begins to be undone, replaced by a less superstitious power, one that is material or philosophic yet still poetic, lyric even. What is left of Ned, are words.

There is a further ambiguity in the address. The coda is outside the Babington address proper, and if the Babington title indicates address, and 'Edward Kelly' indicates the ending of the preceding—or the beginning of the following—then the coda is addressed to no one, or, to 'Edward Kelly', the other possible, posable Ned, the unknown half of the boy that didn't become a famous criminal. He faces his situation, a last look, a last plea, a last simile; looking on himself as 'at black snake' before he becomes Ned Kelly only, asking who's the unfairest of them all? But Ned is dead—it belongs to the reader to ask, are these questions possible? 'Posable?'

This reading of the *Babington Letter* raises a few issues. It's remarkable that, considering Kelly's general fame, the only text we have in his hand (*The Jerilderie Letter* is in Byrne's) is generally unknown. It's also remarkable that the only text by anyone should resemble or be a sonnet, even more so a poor white son of an Irish convict in colonial Australia. Its existence suggests a disjunction between literariness and literacy. As a written experiment (in form as well as intent—an experiment in persuasion), it challenges the endless revision of the sung ballad. While he is notorious, and even a hero, for being a criminal, the unmentioned side, the black or shadow side of Kelly is his writing. Ned Kelly as writer is much more interesting than Ned Kelly as plot fodder for endless fictions. His fame has the ability to decentre the oral tradition of 'Waltzing Matilda', that paradoxical albatross, a written text that celebrates an oral composer. Singing it mindlessly celebrates someone who sang their *own* song. *The Jerilderie Letter* also (albeit in an *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* kind of way) celebrates orality, though its length would test bush reciters. But in the beginning was the written word, and the word was in the form of a poem.

Notes

1 Jones proposes that 'now' should be 'know'. This has a different rhythmic effect, stopping the line and starting again with 'try'. 'now' is the more productive as it links the lines, puns on 'know' (perhaps more effectively than it works in reverse?) and rhymes with 'alow': the spelling of which is also meaningful: Ned is at 'a low', 55.

2 The use of 'black' or 'dark' as evil has a long tired history: racist appropriation of these words make them metonyms for white theft of black property.

3 Before black swans were known to the rest of the world, 'swan' was a white image, now a swan's colour is ambiguous if not named.

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