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CULTURE REVIEW

Exercise

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Preamble

In late 2009, I made an artwork. ‘Mt Noorat Exercise.’ A performance.

A long while afterwards, I found I was constantly reflecting on the work. I realised it had been a kind of turning-point. For I had ceased to care much about the decoding of events or the elimination of ambiguities. I realised I had begun to value what Mallarme espoused: the process—call it ‘poetics’—whereby some aspect of the given world is caressed and honed and parlayed verbally in such a way that explanations drop away till a convincing kind of *mystery* glows at the work’s centre and draws the reader ever deeper into it. Such mystery, when it works poetically, is generative rather than baffling.

So I decided to turn ‘Mt Noorat Exercise’ into words. To make a ‘score’ for it, to write a generative code that evokes such extra-verbal phenomena as country, tragedy, aspiration, memory, multi-modality. Thus I found that the score is suffused with and draws forth the themes that all my old *Cultural Studies Review* pieces addressed, but not in an explanatory way.

[Note_1: The score uses the present tense, evoking the state of Mt Noorat and its community at the time when I first enacted the work]

[Note_2: Please see the Postscript for the sad and sobering future that was to arrive in 2012]

[Note_3: Special thanks to UWAP who will publish this piece as part of my poetry collection *reDACT* in late 2019]

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Background

Mt Noorat is a sizable volcanic crater in the Stony Rises country in the Western District of Victoria in southern Australia.

It is owned by local historian and farmer, Niel Black, whose great-grandfather, also named Niel (1804-1880), first took up and brought European farming to the land of the Kirrae Wuurong people in 1840. This was after earlier parties of Europeans had been involved in often bloody campaigns to wrest control of the country from the traditional inhabitants throughout the 1830s. For the past 170 years, livestock (displacing the marsupials which used to predominate) have grazed the outside slopes of the crater.

Modern-day Niel regularly patrols the slopes—checking feed, water conditions and the health of his animals, rounding up the dairy cows for milking. He is remarkably generous in the way he grants visitors access to this wondrous place.

The internal crater of Mt Noorat is like an enormous eye looking directly up to the sky. When you get down into the conical pit of the crater, you feel as if you have dropped into a capacious pupil, through a great lens, to lodge on a retinal surface of the earth where vast draughts of light pour in from the heavens.

The Exercise—in ten parts

- 1) Secure entry permission from Niel Black. Give him ample time to make his decision. Be aware of his generosity. Don't apply pressure. Don't give him any worry. Be patient awaiting a response.
- 2) Once you get the go-ahead, buy 120 metres of medium-gauge natural rope. Get it from a local hardware shop. Lug it up there. Secure the rope to the base of a substantial tree growing at the rim of the crater.
- 3) Holding the rope, walk in a straight line backwards down into the cone of the crater, laying the rope down in the immediate past as you go so that it will be available to you when you will haul yourself back out of the crater at the end of your session.
- 4) Once you have reached the base of the crater, clear the ground (a 2 meter x 1 metre rectangle) of gibbers and tussocks.
- 5) Lie flat on your back on this cleared ground and gaze up at the sky orbiting above. Stay supine like that until you begin to feel the vast heavens pulling you upwards. Enjoy the odd sense that you could hurtle out into the immeasurable light, as if powered by an irrational, anti-gravitational urge that is bigger than the sum of you and the ground.
- 6) Develop your own psychic control over this inverted vertigo. It is a contest between panic and bliss. Enjoy, for at least fifteen minutes, the sense that you are flying, not in the realm of physics so much as in the realm of your own psychic potential.
- 7) Stand up and find the rope.
- 8) Haul yourself back up to the tether-tree.
- 9) Leave the rope in place for everyone who comes after.
- 10) Inform Niel that you have left the rope there and offer to remove it immediately if that's what he prefers.

Postscript

One afternoon in November 2012, while conducting a routine patrol of the outside slopes of Mt Noorat—an exercise he must have done several thousand times over the decades—77-year-old Niel Black lost control of his vehicle and hurtled two hundred metres downhill, finishing in an old quarry adjoining his property. Distraught neighbours witnessed the accident and saw Niel being thrown from the utility as it cartwheeled into the quarry.

Despite the neighbours' frantic efforts to stabilise him as ambulance officers arrived, Niel died there at the base of the mountain.

For more details, see: <http://www.standard.net.au/story/572060/noorat-mourns-farming-identity-niel-black/>