The University of Canberra

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Strange directions for future research (cultural studies as creative writing)

The following three short pieces constitute policy interventions into my other disciplinary home, which is Australian cultural studies. I write and teach poetry, but otherwise am located there. As for the three texts, their aim is to open that discipline up to more creative research modalities, on the grounds that cultural studies should capitalise on its sometime role as the experimental wing of humanities and social sciences research, and make it central. While initially geared to a cultural studies audience, I think that these three interventions can be usefully read in dialogue with Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien's recent call in TEXT *10:1 for writing academics to contribute to the large and growing body of scholarship on the topics of creativity and innovation (Webb and Brien 2006). I fully concur with this strategy, though I'd like to put a little spin on it, as follows: I would like to see writing academics taking the current research imperative as an opportunity to address traditional intellectual questions, whether in cultural studies or elsewhere, precisely as writers; i.e., with the same sorts of freedoms and licences we allow ourselves in our creative work. Jen and Donna's suggestion that we turn to theorists such as de Certeau, Deleuze, Derrida, Adorno, Barthes and Blanchot to further the design of our research projects is heartening in this regard. These are all writers who push the formal possibilities of academic prose to the extreme. Obviously there are pragmatic problems with trying to mount ARC and similar supported research in such terms, and we will always need to engage in a more formal style of research, not just out of pragmatic considerations but out of the inherent interest of its results. But there are also ways of getting such projects through. I discuss some of them below. What most excites me is the possibility that we take the spaces that are opening up here and use them to write with the same freedom as Derrida, as de Certeau, as Kierkegaard. In sum, creative writing research (just like cultural studies, and even in alliance with it) could be a space for people to write philosophy.*

1 Kierkegaard - The Movie

Of Grammatology is a very strange book. An even stranger one is Soren Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, which in fact covers similar ground. Only on foot. For Kierkegaard has long been concerned with 'the problem whether a repetition is possible and what significance it has' (Kierkegaard 1943: 3). And it suddenly occurs to him to go to Berlin, where he has already been, and to see whether he manages to repeat himself in the process. The

resultant 'essay in experimental psychology' takes Kierkegaard by steamer and then stagecoach back to his old lodgings, his old coffee house and even his old theatre, where he witnesses a repetition of the same farce he saw acted last time. As I said, it's a very odd book. The reason I am invoking it is that Kierkegaard's is precisely the sort of project - a trip back to Berlin, to see if repetition is possible - that a contemporary philosophy department would not fund. And that, to my mind, is precisely the sort of issue that needs to be tabled in a paper on the politics of theory.

What is the politics of theory?

> Words acquire a fixed meaning solely from their use; if in accordance with this usage they are so arranged that readers are moved to devotion, then these words will be sacred, and likewise the book containing this arrangement of words.
> (Spinoza cited in Montag 1999: 20)

That is Spinoza on biblical interpretation. Warren Montag, who cites this passage, claims that the same standard applies for politics as for sacredness: you judge the political value of a theory not by whether it is inherently good or bad, but rather by its power to move people to the conduct you desire. Now on these pragmatic grounds, the political status of contemporary theory is dubious. From such a perspective you would have trouble calling theory either left- or right-wing, unless you could prove that it has left- or right-wing effects upon the world. I'm not sure it does.

Or rather, what I am sure of is a much more obvious connection between theory and power. The undeniable effect of 'Theory Wars' is that certain people gain ascendancy and power within the university. Others lose position and power. That, speaking pragmatically, is the real politics of theory: the power plays and manoeuvrings internal to the institution itself. It's also why I worry about suggestions that theorists might need to 'defend their turf a little more vigilantly' (Anonymous 2001). Defending one's turf usually means homogenising the forces within your camp. Someone committed to the politics of difference, for instance, will want a bit of proof that you support the same cause if he or she is going to give you a job, publish your work, promote your interests. That is how one effectively empowers a given politics and guarantees it a place in the world of the university, particularly during a 'Theory War'. My problem with such practices is that, even when conducted in the name of difference, they don't seem likely to promote anything that really is different. For me, the political question needs to be posed otherwise:

What do you do when someone says they want to go to Berlin to see if there's such a thing as repetition? Do you support their application for a postdoctoral fellowship? An ARC grant?

It seems to have been a valuable experiment for Kierkegaard, back in 1843. For the very failure of his journey (the host of his lodgings is a different man, the farce does not amuse him this time, even his favourite coffee tastes bland) leads him to a striking critique of the Hegelian philosophy then dominant in Northern Europe. 'It is repetition,' Kierkegaard wrote, 'which by mistake has been called mediation' (1943: 33). In placing Hegel's pre-eminent category - mediation, the *aufhebung* itself - on the level of repetition, Kierkegaard invalidates the whole progressivist, Eurocentric and colonial narrative of Hegelian world history. He equates its major ideological term with something that in truth does not

exist. For just as during his journey 'the only thing repeated was the impossibility of repetition,' so in reality the only thing you find is difference (1943: 70). There is a surprisingly Derridean air to the non-progressivist theory arising from Kierkegaard's journey, a strange presaging of *iteration* and *differance* in sentences like the following: 'what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty' (1943: 34). One could think of categories like the uncanny, of *déjà vu*, the poetic, or even Kierkegaard's own coining: the absurd. Or even of the category of theory; can it be opened to facilitate experiments like Kierkegaard's, and to finance them, even before the results are known?

I just want to go to Cornwall to learn how to surf in Europe.

As I said, a philosophy department is not going to support such a project. They're too conservative. This brings me to the second form of repetition which Kierkegaard discovers in the course of his research, one rather more concerned with institutional --

But first I want to take a slight digression, to show why travelling to Berlin to see if repetition is possible is in fact such an appropriate methodological device for generating original ideas. For it might still just seem like a weird thing to do. Well, it is. There are sound reasons why weird things to do often lead to new readings of the world of symbols we inhabit. Let me express this via Charles Sanders Peirce's critique of Descartes' methodology. For Peirce, the idea of beginning a philosophical system by doubting everything is absurd. 'We cannot begin with complete doubt' for there 'are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned' (Peirce 1992: 29). There is a whole set of premises and assumptions built into any utterance. The very meaning of the words in which you couch your doubt must be largely taken as given. In Descartes' case, his writing accepts as given the entire Latin language, not to mention a sixteenth-century audience capable of understanding it. The institutional setting of discourse is for Peirce as integral to its meaning as the words themselves. There is, he writes 'no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference in practice … what a thing means is simply what habits it involves' (1992: 131).

This is the very hallmark of Peirce's pragmatism, which could be taken as a theory of ideology as much as anything else. For when Peirce writes that 'belief is of the nature of a habit,' he intends us to understand that it involves physical actions as much as mental ones (1992: 115). Your beliefs are expressed not merely in your ideas, but in the typical practices that occur in relation to them. Which is why someone like Descartes might not even know what his actual beliefs are. Your habits may not enter your thoughts at all, but they are the effective meaning - and indeed belief - of your thoughts. This is quite an estranging notion: for if the utterance of the word 'post-structuralism' habitually occurs in a university department, then that is also the meaning of the word 'post-structuralism'. What is more, that association of a word and its institutional setting is, for Peirce, a belief, one you hold regardless of your actual conscious beliefs. Your actions believe for you (note 1). This being the case, it has to be seen that a prime way to perceiving, and indeed challenging, one's own beliefs is not via thought at all. The process needs to run in reverse. If you want a new understanding of things, change the set of rituals and practices connected to your habitual knowledge production: get on a coach to Berlin and see what happens. The ideas will follow. The more dramatic the change of practice, the better.

You see I want to think about the role of the body in nineteenth-century German philosophy and this will involve learning how to surf. Yes, in Cornwall. You know the movie Apocalypse Now?

If you change the habitual way you approach knowledge - if you approach repetition by travelling to Berlin, like Kierkegaard, rather than through reading another commentary on Hegel - you'll invariably find that you read things very differently. Indeed, it seems to me that it is attachment to apparently meaningless habitual practices that, more than anything else, calcifies thought. If you shake those practices up, new thoughts will often flow in the wake. Act first, the thoughts will come later - I think that could be an interesting methodological protocol for cultural studies. I don't mean everyone should fly to Berlin by the way; when Einstein conducted his mathematical 'thought experiments' he was as much involved in a change of practice as Kierkegaard himself (Einstein cited in Brent 1993: 44). After all, Peirce's definition of habit applies to one's thoughts too. If a given word (say the word 'post-structuralism') habitually gives rise to another word as its meaning (for instance, 'theory'), then that habitual association in fact constitutes a belief. Needless to say this makes Peirce's definition of belief even more counter-intuitive, for even as regards ideas, it does not necessarily refer to consciousness, but rather one's typical chains of associations. Which is why the mechanical intervention of a thought experiment is far more likely to lead to new associations than any conscious attempt to discover them. By taking repetition as something to do first, and then theorise later, Kierkegaard engages in a similarly mechanical, and similarly revolutionary, process.

That's why I want you to fund me to go and learn surfing in Cornwall. I will need to buy a waterproof walkman too. Something that can handle the bass arias. You see, my family is from Cornwall too, like Tristan's.

Taking ideas as things to do first, and then theorise later - that could be a mini-definition of revolution in itself. This brings me to the second form of repetition Kierkegaard discovers in the course of his voyage, one rather more directly concerned with --

For this is why I want to go to Cornwall - to learn how to surf in the place where Wagner set Tristan and Isolde. *You see, I want to write about the cinematic art of Wagnerian opera and the way it embodies key currents in Idealist philosophy. I want to write about the embodiment of philosophy in general. I can't think of a better way of theorising the body's role in such waves of ideas than while learning to surf in Cornwall.*

I've been testing this project over the last week, while backpacking around Tasmania. And this is what I've discovered, talking to other travellers, looking at their itineraries and reasons for being here: Europeans come to Australia to experience the bush, to look at the reef, to hike, to surf. We go to Europe to look at museums, to visit theatre, to observe 'culture.' A thoroughly colonial exchange. I want to disrupt it. With a Wagnerian soundtrack. Rather than studying philosophy at Oxford, I want to head to Cornwall to learn the ancient English art of surfing. Remember 'The Ride of the Walkyries,' which the American Imperialists play during their helicopter raids on the Vietcong in Apocalypse Now? *Well, this research project is called* Act First, the Thoughts Will Come Later. *Rather than defending our colonial turf, it will involve an attack upon ethnocentric Europe. Through a work of high low culture. Which is why this ARC application has been couched in the form of a TV advertisement.*

Cultural studies is at an interesting point at this moment, as I think is shown by the title of the conference - *What's Left of Theory?* - that sparked this writing. In this conjuncture, I think that the anxiety about theory becoming 'an empty signifier, a hollow term able to absorb without differentiation any meaning we choose' is an anxiety worth holding onto (Anonymous 2001). The possibility I am trying to table here is that cultural studies become the experimental, which is to say radical, wing of the humanities. It is in a rare position to do so, precisely because its methodological core is so overtly - rather than just actually - hollow. That's not such a bad thing. Indeed, there is a Kierkegaardian possibility here. For the extraordinary thing about his *Repetition* is that it shows a way out of the repetition of authority, precisely by way of repetition itself. What are we to do with the emptiness of the empty signifier of theory, other than to put it into practice? By treating cultural studies as a constitutively empty discipline, one that opens an institutional space for people to try out new knowledge practices. While surfing.

Change channels. For another example of the sort of habit-breaking praxis such a discipline could support, one could return to Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, focussing this time on the way the text serves to perform the question 'what is an author?' For the purposes of this paper, I have ignored the fact that *Repetition* is attributed not to Soren Kierkegaard, but rather to his pseudonym, Constantine Constantinus. Nor is Constantine the only author. His first-person experimental trip to Berlin is juxtaposed, in the second part of the work, with a series of letters from a young friend of his, a poet, whose love affair back in Copenhagen flounders, or perhaps sublimates, around this same question of repetition. So there are really two authors of *Repetition*: Constantine, and the poet. What is more, Kierkegaard clearly favoured the latter. As he stated in a later pamphlet, Constantine's trip to Berlin was intended as a parody or a jest, and designed to underline, by contrast, the truly religious nature of the repetition his younger friend experiences at home in Copenhagen. Of this strategy, Kierkegaard commented in the pamphlet: 'the most inward problem is here expressed in an outward way, as though repetition, if it were possible, might be found outside the individual, since it is within the individual it must be found, and hence the young man does exactly the opposite, he keeps perfectly still' (Kierkegaard 1943: xxxvii). The reason I raise this evidence of Kierkegaard's authorial intentions is not to invalidate my argument about the value of such a trip, which I have emblematised above as *taking ideas as things to do first and then theorise later*. Actually I don't find Kierkegaard's critique of himself - that is, of Constantine - convincing. I don't accept his distinction between 'inward' and 'outward', nor even his definition of the individual. What is more, I think Kierkegaard's own authorial praxis is as radical as the performance (the trip to Berlin) one of its authors describes. For the bizarre strategy of dividing his voice between two pseudonymous and mutually exclusive authors - in a text on repetition, no less! - constitutes yet another of the kind of experimental practices (a *gedankenexperiment*, or 'thought experiment', to repeat Einstein's term) which I am claiming cultural studies should be used to promote.

Nor does Kierkegaard's questioning - or rather putting into question - of authorship end here. For Kierkegaard may well intend *Repetition* to serve as a critique of Constantine Constantinus' irreligious views, but Constantine gets his own back. Defining the concept of repetition, he cites, and goes on to critique, the views of 'an author who, so far as I am acquainted with him, is sometimes rather deceitful.' Constantine is referring to Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous author of the first part of

Kierkegaard's 1841 text *Either/Or*. That is to say, he is critiquing Kierkegaard himself. I think. *Repetition* is a very strange book. It's not alone in that. Turn to Kierkegaard's 1845 work, *Stages on Life's Way*, written two years after *Repetition*. It opens with a Platonic symposium conducted by Constantine Constantinus, Victor Eremita and John the Seducer (John was another of the authors of *Either/Or*. Part one, that is. Part two was authored throughout by Judge William) and others. So Kierkegaard's idea of a philosophical symposium is a debate among some, by no means all, of his erstwhile pseudonyms, each in flagrant disagreement with the other. That is an author! And maybe it's the truth of Plato too, not to mention Derrida, whose *Of Grammatology* could well be read, in all its polemic, as a debate Derrida is conducting with himself - himself, playing Levi-Strauss, Rousseau, Jakobson, Derrida again. In 'Idea of the Method in the Composition of a Book,' Rousseau once suggested that philosophers should look to Greek tragedy for models of how to deploy the various antagonistic and protagonistic positions that go to make up the narrative of a factual argument (Rousseau 1997). The split subject speaks right through the works of Rousseau, the supposed champion of presence…

2 The Nullarbor Actually Has Trees In It

Frederic Jameson's 'The Politics of Utopia' was published in the January/February 2004 issue of the *New Left Review*. You could actually retitle it 'The Politics of Boredom', because that is what it's all about. The following is also about boredom. I'm taking Jameson as my guide.

Jameson begins his consideration of Utopias with reference to the parlous state of present-day thinking on the subject. In the wake of what Perry Anderson has described as 'three decades of nearly unbroken political defeat for every force that once fought against the established order', it is hard to imagine any viable alternatives to the *status quo* (Anderson 2004: 71). As Jameson has elsewhere remarked, 'people find it easier today to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Jameson cited in Anderson 2004: 75).

What is to be done? Jameson's strategy is two-fold. The first thing he does is to articulate his own Utopian programme, one that undermines the valorisation mechanism of capitalism precisely by taking it seriously. He proposes, as 'the most radical demand to make upon our present system - that demand which could not be fulfilled or satisfied without transforming the system beyond recognition', that we clamour for full employment across the globe. This is a beautiful call, because full employment, while satisfying all the requirements of right-wing rhetoric, would actually amount to the end of capitalism itself, which, as Jameson proceeds to remind us, requires 'a reserve army of the unemployed in order to function' (Jameson 2004: 37, 38). This, incidentally, is a nice argument to run at present in Australia, a country that can't even imagine the end of John Howard, to say nothing of capitalism. Mind, an even better argument would clamour for fully salaried *unemployment* for all, for that is what is needed if we are ever to bring a halt to the rampant overproduction that characterises capitalism. Why? Because the means of access to civic rights and power is, for most all of us, having a job. We don't work to create things that are necessary. We work so as to have a job. That is why people feel so compelled to vote for governments that create more jobs, even if those jobs involve destroying things we like, such as nature. That is why

Marx's son-in-law published a book entitled *The Right to be Lazy* (Lafargue 1999). For the real way to work for the revolution is, as André Gorz reminds us, not to work at all (Gorz 2000). Work is bad for the planet. Don't do it. Of course, Jameson knows all this, for his demand effectively amounts to the same thing: an end to wage-labour as our means of access to social power; letting the machines do it for us.

Now for some people, and this includes Jameson, unemployment is a terrible prospect (imagine 'the demoralisation, the morbid effects of boredom, the waste of vital energies' (2004: 39)). Then again, some people think the Nullarbor doesn't have any trees. Like most Australian academics of my generation, I've spent years unemployed and I have to say that the view from there was really not so bad. You just had to learn to deal with the boredom.

Now we turn to the second strategy Jameson takes to the contemporary question of Utopia, and the prime concern of this text: boredom. Having articulated his own personal Utopia, Jameson now attempts to understand the way we respond to Utopian texts more generally. The reason this involves boredom is that one of the main reactions to works such as Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia* is: it would be so boring to live there. Constructed to eradicate the evils of pride and wealth, More's *Utopia* offers compulsory employment for all, towns of uniform size and custom, collective eating halls, clothing of uniform appearance, taboos against make-up, gambling, hunting and hawking, no opportunities for the display of difference other than through virtue or intellect and - my own personal favourite, because it reminds me of Canberra - suburbs 'of equal size, each with its own shopping centre in the middle of it' (More 1961: 80). You just go there and they give you whatever you want when you ask for it - which is rather like how it feels to have an income all of a sudden. But that's by the by. The point is that once you flesh out the Utopian vision with some details as to what life looks like there, it begins to sound very boring. After all, it's all been settled, well in advance. In Utopia, 'politics is supposed to be over, along with history' (Jameson 2004: 42). There's nothing to live for any more, other than life itself.

Jameson's next move is striking. What if, he suddenly asks us, 'the boredom or dryness that has been attributed to the Utopian text is … not a literary drawback, nor a serious objection, but a very central strength of the Utopian process in general?' (2004: 40). What if these texts challenge us precisely by making the object of desire so thoroughly boring?

The Utopian text does this by presenting us with characters we simply cannot identify with. More's account of the Utopians 'never tempts us for one minute to try to imagine ourselves in their place' (Jameson 2004: 39). They lack all the pleasures we rely upon to make life liveable. They bore us. In as much as we make the effort of imagination anyway - perhaps without even being aware of doing so - the Utopian text pushes us towards an encounter with 'our desubjectification in the Utopian political process, the loss of psychic privileges and spiritual private property, the reduction of all of us to that psychic gap or lack in which we as subjects consist, that we all spend a good deal of our energy trying to conceal from ourselves' (Jameson 2004: 40). The Utopian text bores us to death - and yet reminds us that in such a world we'd still be living.

As I said, this is a striking move. In what follows, I am going to argue that it has implications far beyond the Utopian text *per se*. Or maybe it's that Utopian literature is a far broader category than we imagine. To introduce

this argument, let me start by saying how funny it is to be writing this paper while driving across the Nullarbor on the way to Perth. I keep thinking of how bored I would be if I had to sell petrol at one of these roadhouses like Madura Pass, 1256 kilometres from Perth, 1450 from Adelaide, 200 kilometres from the nearest roadhouse in either direction. And now we're on the road from Caiguna to Balladonia, 'one of the world's straightest roads', 145 kilometres without a bend. Mind, if I asked, some of these people might find the prospect of living in Canberra, where I do now, pretty boring too.

As far as life in Utopia goes, Jameson argues that what we find so lacking there is not merely pleasure, but pain too: 'what we call our personality is made up of these very things, of the miseries and deformations, fully as much as the pleasures and fulfilments' (Jameson 2004: 52). He locates this pleasure/pain nexus in two realms, the first being that of addiction. According to Jameson, addiction is not merely a private matter; indeed, commodity culture has raised it to a whole new level (think of Benjamin's collector (Benjamin 1968), of 'retail therapy' (Jameson 2004: 52), of the way people work so as to pay for holidays, alcohol, dining out and other diversions to take their minds off work). The second is sexuality which, by Foucault's thesis (Foucault 1978), has been so thoroughly invested with meanings and problematisations in the modern world: 'what would it mean, then, from within our sexualised existentiality, to imagine a human sexuality that was so unrepressed, yet so utterly divested of the multiple satisfactions of meaning as such?' (Jameson 2004: 53). Doubtless that is why More's *Utopia*, where everyone dresses the same, where make-up is close to forbidden and jewellery simply incomprehensible, presents us with such an existential challenge. It rips us out of our historical moorings and forces us to see that there's next to nothing left. That's why it is political. It opens our eyes to the possibility that we - on the other side of our boredom - could be completely and utterly different.

Now I want to ask the question this all evokes for me. What's so specific to Utopian literature in all this? Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* bored me too - until I found my way into its twelfth-century characters, which changed me in turn (Murasaki 1970). So did the Nullarbor. So did the city of Canberra, which was built with such Utopian design, which bores people stupid, though I have to say I'm starting to like it. And what of the Roebuck Plains, up near Broome, in far Western Australia, which Stephen Muecke approaches through the rubric of boredom too, and one of Roland Barthes' loveliest quotes:

> *Boredom is not that far from ecstasy, it is ecstasy viewed*
> *from the shores of pleasure.*
>
> The quotation from Roland Barthes suggests that boredom
> has an intimate relationship with pleasure. In fact, there is
> no need to see boredom as an unfortunate experience or a
> waste of time. Each time the reader says that there is no
> pleasure to be found in one text, he or she is assuming that
> it will be found elsewhere, in another text about to come
> into view.
>
> 'Boredom' thus labels an extremely important category for
> any theory of reading. It says that you have read in a certain
> way, and demands that you take note of *how* you have been
> reading things (because it is always possible to find a new

way of reading a 'boring' text so that there is a sudden rush
of pleasure).

> For the Aboriginal inhabitant the Plains are a moving text:
> an eruption of life as a lizard scuttles for safety. Your whole
> attention is concentrated for a moment, then released in
> laughter. How can it be that the lizard is both there and not
> there, and all you are left with is a surprise? And perhaps a
> flash of memory, a story, because that *djalubardju* (the
> lizard) is really a little boy, as we shall discover later.
> (Muecke in Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, 1996: 101)

In other words, and to table the thesis I'm trying to rip from Jameson's text:

Boredom is an indispensable moment in the experience of difference. It
announces the presence of a way of being we do not, indeed cannot, know
- at least for the moment. For boredom also signals the possibility of
learning. It's the only way we will ever learn to celebrate unemployment,
or, for that matter, new art. There are Utopias all around us.

To put this polemically:

There's been much discussion of the ideological aspects of aesthetics in
post-structuralist writing, and even a general rejection of aesthetics itself.
It's the general rejection I want to question. For isn't that also a rejection of
just how we encounter difference?

3 19th Century Canberra

1 Bureaucracy, planning, size
The knowledge field I wish to contribute to is the growing field that seeks
- in economics, cultural studies, psychology and now the creative
industries - to map the conditions of possibility for creative activity. I want
to explore the notion of the creative city. Canberra is a prime site for such
exploration because this small, bureaucratic and thoroughly planned city is
so frequently reviled for its lack of creativity. 'Without a soul', 'too
manicured', 'cold and chemical': these are the phrases Frank Moorhouse
found he had to deal with when attempting, in early 2005, to take the
unusual step of praising the city and its cultural life (Moorhouse 2005). I
prefer to work out why the phrases stick. Canberra's uncreative status
becomes quite intriguing when you try to investigate its causes. For it's by
no means clear what is so wrong with the place.

To underline this point, I am going to start by comparing present-day
Canberra with nineteenth-century Petersburg. The latter's status as a site
for extraordinary creative activity cannot be doubted. In 'the span of barely
two generations,' Petersburg, as Marshall Berman reminds us, 'produced
one of the world's great literatures' (Berman 1983: 175). The city went on
to produce, with the help of that same literature, one of the world's great
revolutions. I'm speaking in terms of impact which, as Mihaly
Csikszentmihalyi points out, is the only real way we can assess creative
achievement (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 28-31). In other words, I'm
comparing Canberra with one of the giants.

The striking thing about such a comparison is that it leads you to realise
just how little we know about the preconditions for creativity. Who says
you need a 'free' market to foment creativity? Petersburg, as the imperial

capital of nineteenth-century Russia, was a city of bureaucrats. Judging by that experience, a bureaucratic city can become a creative powerhouse. Why not? In fact - and this, as a Canberran, is startling to realise - a great deal of the Russian literature of the 'golden era' was concerned precisely with the lives of bureaucrats. The theme of the 'superfluous man' or 'little man' (as the phrase in Russian is variously translated) amounts to a fully-fledged genre. Gogol's 'The overcoat' is perhaps the most famous example in the West. Pushkin's 'The bronze horseman' is probably the most famous example for Russians themselves. Written in 1833, 'The bronze horseman' tells the story of Yevgennii, a poor bureaucrat whose pathetic dreams of marriage, happy family life and an easy death, are torn from him in the Petersburg Flood of 1824. The widow he is saving money to marry drowns in the flood, and Yevgennii finds himself trampled down by fate, nature and the grim figure of Peter the Great, the autocrat who brought the city into being. Yevgenii goes insane, and wanders the streets of the Petersburg till his death (Pushkin 1964).

The reason 'The bronze horseman' is not well known in the West is that Pushkin, as the cliché has it, cannot be translated. We're getting to the theme of my research. I'm going to translate this poem, and to set it in Canberra. I will explain why below. But first, let me evoke for you a few more of the Canberran dimensions of nineteenth-century Petersburg.

Turning from the bureaucracy to the streets it walks down, the similarities between the two cities become even more striking. The soulless, overly manicured, cold and chemical images Moorhouse mentions would seem to be a function of the fact that Canberra is such a thoroughly planned environment. That's why people find it so uncreative. Now compare Petersburg, that 'geometric and rectilinear' city, which Berman describes as 'probably the most dramatic instance in world history of modernisation conceived and imposed from above' (Berman 1983: 177, 176). There's none of Moscow's maze of little streets or alleys in Petersburg, none of the things we usually find so charming about European cities. I'll give one example of how rigid and inorganic Petersburg's development was:

> Standard Western facades were required for all construction (traditional Russian styles, with wooden walls and onion domes, were explicitly forbidden), and 2:1 or 4:1 ratios of street width to building height prescribed, so as to give the cityscape a look of infinite horizontal expanse. (Berman 1983: 179)

This is just one reason why Dostoyevsky's 'Underground man' described Petersburg as 'the most abstract and premeditated city in the world' (Berman 1983: 183). It didn't stop Dostoyevsky from writing, nor Lenin from proselytising. Who says a rigorously, and impersonally, planned city can't produce a creative culture?

Then there is the question of population, which again seems to militate against Canberra's capacity to support a fully-fledged creative community. With such a small population, how could it? Actually, the 1833 Petersburg which Pushkin's 'Bronze horseman,' describes in such adulatory, awe-ful and conflicting tones, had a population of about 400,000 (Egorov 1969: xxvi), which is only 100,000 more than the present-day Canberra in which I am going to set it. Who says a population of 300,000 is too small to support creativity?

2 A scientific comparison

The basic idea behind my laying Petersburg over Canberra in this fashion is to jolt us out of our preconceived ways of seeing the place. 'Usually we are not even aware of them,' Paul Feyerabend writes of prejudices, like our prejudice that bureaucracy and creativity are mutually exclusive phenomena:

> Usually we are not even aware of them and we recognise their effects only when we encounter an entirely different cosmology: prejudices are found by contrast, not by analysis. (Feyerabend 1975: 31)

I am quoting from Feyerabend's *Against method*, a text in the philosophy of science that argues in favour of radically counter-inductive hypotheses, e.g. Canberra is Petersburg. The humanities and social sciences have much to learn from this. By Feyerabend's argument, you can stare as long as you like at Canberra trying to work out how the city functions in relation to the question of creativity. You will basically find what you have been trained to look for. Whereas if you approach the city through a completely different ideology, a completely different frame of vision from your own - e.g. Pushkin's - new features will suddenly come into view. This, note, is Feyerabend's prescription for how we, as scientists, can increase our knowledge of whatever we are studying. Use foreign eyes.

Now we turn to my research. As I said, I am translating Pushkin's famous poem of a St Petersburg bureaucrat, and I'm setting that translation in Canberra. This involves finding specific Canberran equivalents to all of Pushkin's Petersburg references. The reason that this is a valuable research tool for the social science project I've outlined above is that literature - modern literature in particular - has a pronounced tendency to produce quite detailed mappings of the social landscapes, cities in the main, in which its plots are set (Bakhtin 1986: 42). By transposing Pushkin's map of Petersburg onto Canberra, I can effectively supercharge the sort of comparative process I performed in the first part of this paper.

I need to add that this investigation into civic creativity relies upon a basic assumption. I start with the assumption that Petersburg basically got it right. From that perspective, whatever features of Petersburg that I cannot find in Canberra (that is to say, whatever passages of Pushkin's poem I cannot translate into local terms) will provide diagnostic possibilities for working out whatever is so wrong with our capital in contrast. Most notable in this regard is the absence in Canberra of anything like Petersburg's Nevsky Prospect. In Gogol's words, this central thoroughfare provided 'the common meeting ground and communications line of St Petersburg,' the place where people come 'to see and be seen' (Berman 1983: 196). Berman analogises the nineteenth-century Nevsky Prospect to a theatre, a place where representations converge and have power, both on and off stage. A place where artists want to gather. Whereas Canberra has no centre at all. (Civic, which might be thought to perform this function, is really just a series of shopping malls designed to service those who work and live in the immediate vicinity. In this respect it is no different from suburban Belconnen or Woden. Nor is Parliament House a place 'to see and be seen' for any but the people who work there. There is no central station in Canberra, no 'common meeting ground and communications line' in that sense either.) Canberra is a perfectly postmodern city, with no real central space, and that seems to go some way toward explaining why it hasn't become Australia's creative capital. There is no central stage for recognition, nothing for a representation, or revolution, to fight over. I plan

to expand on this argument as the research progresses, and also to consider the alternate possibility, that the future of a Canberran aesthetic might lie in embracing this very emptiness. What happens when a city loses its head?

However that might be, the point to note here is that the whole problem suggested itself to me because I'd found something in my Russian materials that I literally couldn't translate into local terms. In effect, the assumption that 'Petersburg got it right' is really just a heuristic fiction, designed to spark further inquiry, whether intellectual or creative.

3 A window to where?

I'll give an example from my translation to show what I mean. The preface to 'The bronze horseman' describes Peter the Great standing on the shores of the Neva, round about 1700, some 100 years before the poem proper begins. Peter stands on the marshy banks, and suddenly expresses his violent desire 'to smash a window to Europe through here' (Pushkin 1964: 234). Trying to think how to translate this line to a Canberran setting I immediately had to confront the problem that the window the Burley Griffins' design created in the Australian landscape did not open onto Europe. Rather, it opened a window onto the North American Prairie School of architecture; it brought to Australia the idea of integrating nature and geometry that distinguished the work of Walter and Marion's erstwhile employer, Frank Lloyd Wright. Of course 'to smash a window to North America' wouldn't capture what the translation needed to be adequate to Canberra. So I had to look further.

Searching for an equivalent to that famous Pushkin line I remembered some interesting things I had read from the Griffins' initial submission to the design competition for Canberra. In that submission, one finds that the distinctive form of our Parliament House was intended to offer 'a suggestion of stepped pinnacle treatment,' the style which constituted 'the last word of all the longest civilizations hereto whether that be of Egypt, Babylonia, Syria, India, Indo-China, China, East Indies, Mexico or Peru' (Burley-Griffin cited in Reid 2002: 69). In other words, our Parliament was modelled on a ziggurat, a Babylonian pyramid, the sort of thing we now blow up in Iraq. Canberra is also the site of one of the most racist practices in recent Australian history, the indefinite incarceration of some one to three thousand people exercising their legitimate right to seek political asylum on these shores, per year, all of which is approved and processed in offices just one kilometre away from where I now sit and write, by people who look just like us. The moment you start trying to work out how Canberra can be a window to elsewhere you start finding all these curious things, such as - another example - when planning historian Paul Reid comments upon the Burley-Griffins' 'boldness in bringing the wider landscape into the city,' a strategy which 'recalls ancient Greece and the pre-Columbian cities of Central America' (Reid 2002: 81). All of this adds up to the fact that Canberra has foreign experience at its very centre. It's a profoundly Unaustralian city.

How do we manage to forget this? Is it our forgetting - one might even say repressing - of the city's constituent otherness that which makes it seem so uninspiring a place? Or is it this, rather, which explains the intensity of people's antipathy? At any rate, I've translated the line as:

> to smash a window to Unaustralia through here

Needless to say, the research method I have been tabling here could never offer a conclusive mapping of Canberra. Nor would I wish it too. All I'm trying to do is find ways to bring new words, language, analyses, plotlines to a place that lacks them. The main thing is to make it speak. This, in conclusion, is basically what I think artists have to offer as researchers, whether in the study of the creative city or any other phenomenon. Our vocation is to find and elicit significance from objects that currently seem mute and meaningless. That's basically what modern art does. Australia today, after ten years of the Howard government, and with nothing but more promised on the horizon, is in a state of mute crisis. No one knows how this happened. We have no real analytic language for comprehending contemporary politics in Australia other than art, old and new art.

I've offered three strange directions for future research, above. Any of these texts can be taken as an example of the possibilities of creative writing research. As I said in my introduction, we're in a rare position to start addressing traditional intellectual questions as writers, with the same sorts of freedoms and licences we allow ourselves in our creative work. Another such freedom would be the uneasy conjunction of these three pieces, which do not make for a singular thesis.

Let me suggest, in conclusion and in relation to both cultural studies and creative writing research, that we stop using the word fictocriticism as our label for this sort of writing. I say this in part because of my misgivings about the word fiction. I'm not sure there is such a thing (Wittgenstein: 'It is clear that however different from the real one an imagined world may be, it must have something - a form - in common with the real world' [Wittgenstein 1981]). But maybe that's just a personal gripe. The real problem with the 'ficto' in fictocriticism is the way it serves to undermine the writing. Fiction may well be just a different realm of factuality, but works so called suffer an image problem all the same. They're easily dismissed as decorative. I think we should start challenging both ourselves, and others, by labelling what we do philosophy. That may be a strange direction, but I think it's a strategic one too.

Notes

1. Compare Althusser: 'We are indebted to Pascal's defensive "dialectic" for the wonderful formula which will enable us to invert the order of the notional schema of ideology. Pascal says, more or less: "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe"' (Althusser 1994: 127). Which may be fine for a Christian, but why does Althusser stop at this point? Why doesn't he say anything about what happens when you stop kneeling? I am suggesting, as regards the university, that if one intervenes at the level of ritual conduct, such an intervention could well serve to shift those beliefs more than any actual 'notes toward an investigation.' After all, the real investigation involves seeing what happens when you do. Return to text

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