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The Book, the Poet, the Translator, the Reader, and Maybe The Cook: Thoughts on Translation, Reading, Exile

review by Barry Westburg

The Book

Thomas Shapcott, *Cities in Exile/Orase in Exil*
 Trans. into Romanian and Introduction by Irina Grigorescu Pana.
 Bucharest, 1998: Editura Integral. 228pp.
 Publication assisted by the Literature Board of the Australia Council.
 ISBN 973-98139-3-3.

Plain (understated, "serious") cover in only three colours, with small and very faint inset illustration from DeChirico. English and Romanian on facing pages. The bulk of this dual-language book is a selection of Shapcott's life-work, poetry division, from *Selected Poems 1956-1988* (1989) and *The City of Home* (1995). This volume apparently means to introduce the Australian poet to the Romanian-speaking audience spread throughout the world. Having no access to the original English texts, I have no idea how many of the "selected" poems were selected for inclusion here, nor how few of the "City of Home" poems might have been left out. However, I don't intend to discuss the poetry as such (much as I admire the poems), nor is this meant to be a "review" or evaluation. My Daco-Romanian has grown pretty rusty lately.

I rarely encounter a dual-language text that is not meant to open up a foreign text to an Anglophone reader/consumer. There is usually (understandably) a pro-English bias immediately visible in dual-language texts, especially where the publisher is located in a predominantly English-speaking country. As one might expect, matters like format, cover design, and so on are mediated by tried and true assumptions about local Anglophone consumer taste. Such a book (I remember my first copy of Goethe's *Faust* in its handsome Anchor paperback edition) invariably *faces in our direction*, as if it has turned its back on the culture of origin.

Well, through some accident of transmission, *Cities in Exile* arrived on the desk of the *Text* editors and via an equally obscure process has come to me. It strikes me as a curious object, out of context. Unlike most translations, this supposedly two-way, doubled object, *Cities in Exile* has its back to me. It *faces the other way*, and I am peering over the shoulder of the Translator, trying to see good old Tom Shapcott, as well as what she sees in him, and what she will help other Romanians to see in him.

What do I see when a book is looking the other way? What I see is the process of translation qua process, and thus in a new light. And as for the underlying theme of these poems, which the Translator tells us/them is (broadly speaking) Exile - that is demonstrated to me in a quite graphic way. Further consideration of this process of seeing might - if we had time and space to explore it in depth - prove useful to writers who rely on or intend to embark on translations. Furthermore, the theme of Exile, whether you think it is meant for you or not, will appear in a new and fascinating garb. You might discover you are really a poet of exile without having explicitly addressed the theme, given that the world is becoming a place where exile is common experience. This Romanian book and others like it, so rarely encountered out of their own national sphere, could even be said to *produce* an exile-effect in the reader. (Comparable to the dislocation I felt in Japan, where I could neither read, nor speak the language, not to mention the street signs, and found few locals who knew mine in turn). And an ironic supplement is that *Cities in Exile* also explains to me, better than my own past reading has done, the work of one of our "own" poets, a contemporary Australian.

The Poet

Tom Shapcott is presented here as a "New Australian Poet" of the post '60s generation. Like so many of his kind, an inveterate traveller - through many lands, through languages, through "literature." The cumulative image of the persona is not that of the familiar "cultural" tourist, out trawling for new images and allusions. No, his is the "gaze" of the wanderer, seeker, eternal exile, boundary-crosser - serious, perhaps a little sad as he measures personal loss and gain in time and space. As Professor Thomas Shapcott, he heads the postgraduate creative writing program at the University of Adelaide. Born Ipswich, Queensland, 1935. Founding member of Literature Board, Australia Council. "He has travelled extensively and lived in Europe and the United States." Has also published "extensively" in a wide variety of literary genres: short stories, novels, children's books, essays, anthologies. As some of his novel titles

suggest (*The White Stag of Exile*, *The Search for Galina*), the theme of Exile runs through Shapcott's work and perhaps (as Pana's selection and deep-digging discussion attest) this is the main "figure in the carpet."

The Translator

While I know Tom Shapcott personally and through his other works, I know nothing at all about Irina G. Pana. (My apologies, by the way, for the absence of accurate Romanian typography: another instance of word processor imperialism-effects.) And while wondering if this mattered, I found myself bumping up against other questions and soon was immersed in the curious virtual geometry (one thinks of a verbal Mobius Strip, or a linguistic Kline Bottle) that a hybrid imaginary construction - perhaps a dual-language book is an extreme case - calls into being. The apparently two-dimensional line connecting Author and Reader has here become a plane: the triangle of Author-Translator-Reader. But it takes only a moment's further reflection to realise that a 2-D figure is itself a far too simplistic construct. Clearly there can be no purity of the text in this environment. To relay the text is to alter ("contaminate") it at each node of reception. Even the "original" poem on the left-hand page is altered by the translation on the right. But I also discovered that the process worked in reverse. Sometimes I could not quite understand a Shapcott line of verse and, turning to the Romanian (even though I must here confess my innocence regarding the Romanian language) I could, with a little sleuthing, correct my misreading of the English. Somebody who knew Romanian better than I do and English better than I know Romanian would find that, criss-crossing from one language to the other, they would construct a better reading of Shapcott than would any reader confined to English alone. A language "barrier" would therefore be an aid to understanding. If this insight, if that's not too big a word for this effect, were applied to the whole question of Exile and its effects, then we as readers might understand at a deeper level why, among other things, Shapcott himself might have authorised this translation project.

Evidence of authorisation or even collaboration bears on what has always been an obvious question - possibly vexatious when considered closely - about "spiritual" ownership of the text (authority). Is there a hierarchy here, with the author placed above the translator, with the Translator to be effaced, to assume the cloak of invisibility? Or does the translator, with her role as disseminator, take a kind of precedence? Or none of the above? And if we cared about this aspect of the politics of texts (I'm not sure we do very much) we might go on to ask about collaboration. These details are not provided with this text - can we assume there was no collaboration (which would be a rare case) between Australian author and the presumably Romanian translator. Would it make a difference if we discovered that there was close collaboration but that it was felt by both parties as not worth mentioning? Did Shapcott translate himself, write the introductory analysis himself and invent his own Translator? (I've not had a chance to ask Tom if he is fluent in Romanian). On the other hand, has Tom repudiated this translation and its introductory reading? Is there an angry page in, say, a Bucharest literary journal expressing dismay, outrage at the mistranslation, at the terrorism against his oeuvre, at the reductive "reading" in the introduction?

The Reader

If Irina G. Pana does make a claim for visibility, it is in her introduction. But there she appears as another self: the Critic, the Reader. But what about us, the other Readers, the Outsiders? Neither do we translate nor do we introduce. Or, noting my experience already mentioned in cross-reading this dual language text, do we not also produce a reading ourselves? The Shapcott poems, and the translation becoming tools rather than objects of contemplation. Tools perhaps for exploiting the differentials between cultures and thus tools for managing, mediating the effects of Exile. If that were the case, then we might suppose that it would be nice to have all poems (especially the many about exile) appear in dual-language editions.

Sometimes, usually in the mornings, rarely at night, I forget that I too am an exile. Maybe it was something that could be called part of a post-Vietnam diaspora from the USA. Whatever, I moved from New York to Adelaide. (Shapcott has New York poems for me, and even an "Adelaide".) I began writing poetry, stories, novels, about how I missed Iowa, where I was born, California where I first got laid... I had initially grossly underestimated the force of what I had at the outset airily thought to be a mere spatial relocation. "You are just moving a little farther from home. There is the telephone, the post office...." Now, after years of unresolved exilic tremors, I think I know why those many dispersed Romanians might want to read Shapcott via Pana. Even though I had to acquire a whole new map (even of the overhead stars) and a new vocabulary when I arrived in Australia, I did not have to learn a new language. In *Cities in Exile*, as I read left to right across the page from Shapcott verse to parallel Pana verse I seem to penetrate deeper into the effects of exile and deeper into a kind of compensation for differences. Compensation even at the higher levels of sensation-music. Such poems as "The City of Home" seem to roll on and resound better in a Romance-language like Romanian than in Shapcott's less inflected English. Perhaps habit has dulled my ear for English. Perhaps, too, I am inventing my own system of Romanian accents.

The Cook

"Miss Norah Kerrin Writes to her Betrothed" is an epistolary monologue in which Shapcott traces over many years

the effects of exile in the life of a woman who has journeyed from "the Crystal Palace" (would the Romanian need a footnote here?) to end up in Australia. Reading this poem with the Romanian reader in mind, it struck me anew just how important this genre of narrative is on Australian literature. I got worried in behalf of the Romanian reader when I got to these lines:

The familiar is wrong in this continent.
We should be garbed in strangeness; ashes and clay.
I burned your embroidered bodice, sending Cook out
On some pretext.

The cook?
Mr (or Miss, or Mrs) Cook?
Captain Cook?

Scanning across the page I see that Pana, given several choices, has evidently opted for the latter, just the household cook. Not the historical figure. Not the body-servant named Cook. I deduce this because there are no capital letters there, in the Romanian lines, thus no proper names.

Bucharest proofreaders have also added new words to Shapcott's English lexicon: "crumling reliefs" (p.126) "hatbad" (p. 214). I won't go into some of the syntactical effects created by the inability of Romanians to reproduce exactly a foreign text. But in some cases the errors make for possibly more interesting readings than the correct version. Creativity is everywhere, even in the form of happenstance. Happenstance, in Pana's introduction, has even supplied Australia with a new Tasmanian poet, "Andrew Slant." All of this suggests that the Romanian readers need the English as much as we need the Romanian.

Let us continue to support funding for translations.

Barry Westburg's most recent volume of short fiction is Rage of Angels (Wakefield Press). He lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide.

TEXT

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Rebel Yell: A Short Guide to Fiction Writing

review by Inez Baranay

Rebel Yell: A Short Guide to Fiction Writing

Lance Olsen

Cambrian Publications, San Jose, California, 1998

ISBN 1-878914-50-2 rrp US\$18.95

"Carefully follow what most handbooks on writing fiction tell you and chances are you'll end up producing a nice, tight, well-crafted story that could have been produced just as easily in 1830." (Lance Olsen, *Rebel Yell*)

That is the first paragraph of *Rebel Yell* but you already know that this handbook is of the moment and about the moment. The chapter titles and interview questions are in that font that makes the letters look as if they had been beaten out by two fingers on a battered manual typewriter - that font that became so fashionable right at the time when all writing is done on computers and hypertext is where writing is (supposedly) going. This book's size, its cover, its layout, the look and feel of it, the language it uses, the attention to new genres - all say: this one is hip.

Rebel Yell acknowledges that it's a "high-tech, increasingly global, hugely un-stable, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, multi-genred pluriverse [that] our fluid selves inhabit" and sets about to encourage the kind of writing that comes out of this knowledge.

This all probably reflects the different, um, market in students of writing these days. Most of the books that have been offered as guides have a safe, conventional, middle-aged feel about them. But the writing course these days is less often the one night a week at the local TAFE or community centre, less the weekend workshop for the hobbyist. These days writing courses are increasingly an option for the young student starting out to be a writer, and you have to understand some of them are quite serious about this and some of them will make it, and the way they go about it these days is to take it as a subject at university. A chapter is devoted to the uses for a new writer of university writing programs.

I look at guide-to-writing books as both a writer and teacher of writing and mostly they make my heart sink and I know I'm better off doing what I tell my students to do and go read something wonderful. Really, that's what will teach you best. One exception is Natalie Goldberg's books, which usually I don't find on university reading lists. Her process-oriented stimulations to writing remind this long-time practitioner to get right back to the fundamentals in which authentic voice, thought and desire are found.

Rebel Yell provides back-up to my contention that the only universally good advice to a writer or wannabe, the only thing that you can't do without or ignore, is to read. (Why even mention it? Because we all experience the jaw-dropping phenomenon with every new group of students who intend to be writers that they do not read. Why don't the young believe us? We, the generation that invented don't trust the old, didn't mean us.)

Rebel Yell uncompromisingly promotes reading as a necessary "daily addiction". Each chapter has a reading list and it's an exciting one - I value this book for its reading lists alone. Heavy dead white males and queer new voices, essays, novels and websites are seductively recommended.

So, what about *Rebel Yell*? It's really good. I used it last week to help me prepare a lecture for first-year creative writing students. It covers all the usual considerations in the planning, writing and editing of fiction. The book reminds me of my own practice, and the practice of writers I know, and so I am stimulated to be able to talk to students about, for example, developing an idea. Its voice is energetic and engaging as it reminds you or reveals to you many sources of ideas about story, character, structure, form, dialogue and so on.

The most attractive, and I think important, aspect of this book, however, is its (to me most informative) attention to a realm it calls "alternative" fiction. That is, anything not part of the mainstream. The changing culture of mainstream publishing increasingly limits what - and what kind of thing - can be read in the mainstream. But it is the mainstream, too often I think, that is held up to students as the goal and the norm of publishing. Yet the possibilities of online publishing, for example, are a new territory still being explored and invented.

Interspersed among chapters addressing specific writing issues are short interviews with a range of writers, most unknown to me, but quite likely better known to the young Americans this book considers its main or only audience.

Rebel Yell makes no explicit acknowledgment that its voice, examples and audience are USA-based. Some people will mind, I don't. But could it be worth discussing the desirability, possibility and parameters of producing an Australian (or, better, Commonwealth?) book of this kind?

Can we discuss what success in writing programs is? I suggest that it be not only measured by winners in short story competitions and short-lists of the Vogel, but, as *Rebel Yell* suggests, in the creation of something that should not be predicted and will surprise us.

Inez Baranay is a well known novelist who tutors at Griffith University and is reading for her PhD.

Rebel Yell is available via direct order from www.cambrianpubs.com or by emailing rebelyell@cambrianpubs.com

Lance Olsen's article, [Revolution](#), [Revelation](#), & [Rock'n'Roll](#), is published in this edition of TEXT.

TEXT

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Spiritual Task

review by Moya Costello

Everything Holy

M.T.C. Cronin

Balcones International Press, Temple, Texas, 1999

the world beyond the fig

M.T.C. Cronin

Five Island Press, Wollongong University, 1999

If you have been, like me, not closely following a myriad of individual careers in poetry, but coming across individual poems in journals and anthologies and/or names of authors whom you begin to see on a regular basis in those journals and anthologies, then you will, like me, have come across the name M.T.C. Cronin.

Everything Holy and *the world beyond the fig* are in fact this poet's second and third books. *Everything Holy* is, as I write this review, in *The Age* Book of the Year poetry shortlist.

It's probably the better book of the two, in the sense that *the world beyond the fig* seems, generally speaking, a lighter collection. Works in *Everything Holy* are dense, abstract, intellectual. The *world* - perhaps more popularist and an easier read by comparison.

Naturally it becomes clear what kind of poet Cronin is when read in book form. The poem 'Eating Paint', written 'after Anthony Lawrence', in a kind of serious praise, settled me down into my views.

He...cut his paint not only with valium, but imagination

It's a poetry taking seriously the mystery of poetry, leaning toward the high plain of poetic creativity, invoking the act of writing poetry as an almost spiritual task. The titles of the collections tell you this too.

Possibly my favourite poem is in *Everything Holy*, 'The Way People's Bodies Mean the Word': a prose poem, a literary form I'm inclined to delight in, of fluid image and narrative:

...unexpectedly, at the end of a long pregnancy my hips slide out the earth and birthed it lands
on the head of an unwary man and the girls on the balcony all laugh as beautiful as Sophia
Loren in green and blue scarves eating watermelon...

Cronin can also incline to the list: for example, a series of images that seem startlingly 'true' in 'The Wept': 'the hidden under the skin of my face', 'the great gift of significance', 'the deepness of technique'. And in the poem 'Units', the 'alienation' of the city coupled with an urbane love story is captured in a series of abstract yet wistful images:

Out on the footpath
I bumped into my neighbour
With his handsome eyes... How about dinner
Sometime he asked with a smile
And tilted his head...I eat out
I said and ran laughing all the way down the street.

Her bio notes tell us that Cronin is a solicitor and a number of poems show this infiltration, as in 'Notorious Facts 1':

...it is unnecessary to call evidence
to show/that a fortnight is too short
a period for human gestation...

Cronin seems to have the volubility of the law; another book is forthcoming, and she's previously published most of the poems collected here in an array of poetry outlets. But, as well, she has the quality of the mystic, the new-ager,

the highly subjective, the emotional, the imagistic, perhaps that, on the other hand, we wouldn't associate with the law.

Moya Costello is a writer of short fiction and a well known reviewer. She is employed as an editor by the University of South Australia.

M.T.C. Cronnin's *poem in a hot day (mrangalli, february 1998)* is published in this issue of TEXT.

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*Explorations in Nonfiction***review by Caron Krauth**

Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Vol 1 No 1, Spring 1999.

Michael Steinberg (ed.)

Michigan State University Press

As a result of the recent burgeoning in popularity of the memoir and personal essay forms, new journals are emerging from the USA that are solely devoted to publishing short works in what is currently termed 'creative nonfiction'. The first issue of *Fourth Genre*, a stylishly produced journal edited by Michael Steinberg, of Michigan State University, contains a selection of memoirs and essays which provide some good examples of the fluidity and blurring of boundaries that is occurring in this field of writing.

Fourth Genre is impressive in the balance and variety of content it maintains, keeping reader interest throughout and preventing any 'nonfiction overload'. In keeping with the fluidity of the writing it includes interviews, roundtable discussion, a photo essay, full-length reviews, reader to reader capsule reviews and plans to include reader response in later editions. In his introductory notes, the editor explains that the policy of the journal is to actively encourage essays, memoirs, commentary and reviews from poets, fiction writers and editors as well as from current practitioners of nonfiction, and this approach is reflected in the writing backgrounds of the contributors to this issue, many of whom are also fiction writers, editors and/or poets. The journal would appeal equally to readers of short fiction as to those interested in memoir and essay.

Along with other areas of contemporary writing such as fictocriticism and paraliterature, creative nonfiction can be wonderfully subversive and transgressive of traditional notions relating to genre, with its shifting and stretching of traditional boundaries and hybridisation of form. Thus contributors to *Fourth Genre* utilise narrative, analysis, reportage, blend these with scenes, dialogue, or explore their subjects in lyrical, poetic and discursive ways which have traditionally been unavailable to nonfiction.

Without denying the value of narrative, creative nonfiction has taken advantage of postmodern/feminist theory to free nonfiction from meta-narrative and the idea of 'fixed' histories, has freed the ordinary person to write her or his own stories without the notions that previously ensured the genre was dominated by 'great' or 'famous' men writing about their 'great lives and deeds' (traditionally only one out of eight autobiographies has been written by women). Jocelyn Bartkevicius, in her meditation on the tradition of memoir in this issue, points out that the genres of essay and memoir have also had a subversive history, as they refuse 'to be silent about ideas, experiences, and perceptions that the larger culture would prefer to suppress'. *Fourth Genre* contains stories by women and men which revel in the personal and intimate, small details and ordinary occurrences, that can give unexpected and delightful impact or insights into the larger world. In these writings, it is not the events that are necessarily important, but the meanings that the writer and reader derive from them - the 'how', rather than the 'who'. Writers such as Woolf, Thoreau, Whitman, E.B. White are cited as revered predecessors of the genre.

Though some of the included memoirs are not cutting edge material, there are innovative pieces, stories that resonate in the reader's mind, evoke moods and experiences of place and time, that show sensitive appreciation of how words can be handled in non-fiction genres and that are also 'plain good stories'. Within this variety, ranging from micro-memoir to nature diary, are recurring themes of place and landscape, identity, belonging and not belonging, of the frailty of the physical body and of family and relationships. The more personal memoirs, in keeping with the best examples of the genre, are intimate without being sentimental or self-absorbed. Many of the pieces also consciously examine the importance of memory and the need to reinvent/discover our own stories and connect to those who are close to us. As a non-American reader, I also enjoyed the occasional excursion out of the United States by several of the fifteen contributors.

Being one of the baby boomer generation currently experiencing the trauma and frustrations of having to confront the reality of the aging and deaths of loved parents, I particularly related to the beautifully crafted pieces by Robin Hemley and Rasma Haidri.

Haidri's story is an excellent example of writing that is intimate, touching and poetic without a trace of schmaltz. In 'What the End Is For', the breaking in half of a two inch coca cola glass is an event which serves to preserve and

renew her and her mother's shared recall of the world they had together, in 'the green-lawn days' of childhood.

Robin Hemley's richly woven memoir, 'Reading History to My Mother', breaks down preconceptions of 'male' writing as being abstract and distant and 'female' writing as being personal and intimate. In this story of secret histories and disclosures, Hemley shows tremendous personal delight in his young daughter and compassion, empathy and insight in the tender portrayal of his mother, who is deteriorating both physically and mentally. When Hemley gives his mother, a gifted writer whose sight is failing, a box of macadamia nuts, he continues to hear echoes of the disappointment and fear in her reply: 'Oh, I thought it was a book'.

Phyllis Barber, in her meditation on place, culture and memory, speaks of the importance of reverie not just to re-examine our own lives, but also to find the universals common to Other. She feels that the challenge for writers of memoir and autobiography is to find 'new imaginative stories about the old stories, new ways of experiencing what we've concluded is "real".'

Other pieces contain surreal imagery, wry and humorous observations, lustful ruminations on the relationship between the writer and his/her muse in the writing process, insightful cultural investigations, dreams and longings, crisp and innovative prose styles and thoughtful explorations of the self and of the 'bigger picture'.

In the second half of the issue, where examples of creative nonfiction give way to discourse and reviews, essayist and teacher Scott Russell Saunders discusses the 'fourth genre' in the context of his own work, particularly the personal essay genre. In keeping with Australian fictocriticism, he encourages his students not to suppress the first person singular in academic writing and urges them to risk-take, to explore 'out from familiar territory into the blank places on their maps'. Saunders also makes a valid point when questioning the label 'creative nonfiction', pointing out that the term 'Nonfiction' implies fiction is the norm against which everything else must be measured, and that putting 'creative' in front of nonfiction is pretentious in its implication that other forms of nonfiction are not creative works of intellect and imagination.

Over the last several years, American critics have been blaming memoir for blurring reality by appropriating traditional fiction techniques, for not sticking to 'facts', and have accused the genre of springing from 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' in its characterisation of whining and indulgence. In the 'Roundtable' section of *Fourth Genre*, these issues are faced head-on by Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Steven Harvey, Michael Steinberg and Peter M. Ives, who contribute informed, stimulating and intelligent discussions on the subject.

The history of memoir is discussed, with the personal essay being traced back to Montaigne, St. Augustine and the ancient Greek orators. It is pointed out that the self-indulgence spoken of by critics is not characteristic of the genre, and that 'interiority - story-telling, confession, metaphor, a bit of dialogue, and even moments of imagination - has long been crucial to memoir'.

The shifting nature of memory is explored and challenged - Bartkevicius saying that St. Augustine 'views memory as not just a storehouse, but a creative faculty, in constant development and transformation'. Steinberg and Ives feel that memory is part invention but not necessarily untruthful, and that the storyteller must use whatever tools are at hand. Ives suggests that what people have always wanted is to be told stories - the real issue for him is not whether nonfiction writers 'appropriate' fictional devices, but is with the quality of the storytelling. I agree, as I have no interest in reading boring or poorly written stories whether 'factual' or 'fictional'. Certainly, writers working in the many sub-genres of creative nonfiction (the Centre for Autobiographic Studies discusses more than twenty kinds of memoir on its website) will continue to have different approaches and needs in regard to their use of fictional devices, but to me, good creative nonfiction has much in common with good fiction - it tells stories in which I can become totally immersed due to the quality of the writing and the insights/illuminations revealed. Creative nonfiction also offers the added bonus of a more personal writer/reader relationship.

Australian memoirist and academic, Jill Ker Conway, writes in her essay 'Points of Departure' (in *Inventing the Truth*, edited by William Zinsser), 'There are stories that we tell from our history, and we tell them well or we tell them ill'. Memoirists and essayists must continue to strive towards achieving the enormous creative potential inherent in these forms of writing. Hopefully, journals such as *Fourth Genre* will continue to help both creative nonfiction writers and readers by publishing quality work that will offer us more paths through the dark woods of this life, for as Saunders points out in his talk, 'we need all the paths we can find'.

Manuscript submissions for *Fourth Genre* should be sent to: Michael Steinberg, Editor, Fourth Genre, Department of American Thought and Language, 229 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Caron Krauth is particularly interested in the blurring of boundaries and creative potential of nonfiction and hopes to complete a higher research degree in the field.

TEXT

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Trust me, I am God, I am Universal Education, I am the Media

review by Kominos Zervos

CD ROM

Planet of Noise

Miller and Wark 1997

Publisher: Miller and Wark 1997

Conceptualisation: Brad Miller and McKenzie Wark

Realisations: Brad Miller

Aphorisms and Additional Sound: McKenzie Wark

Original Sound Design: Jason Gee and Derek Krekler

Additional Sound Design: Brenden Palmer

Original Voice: Khym Lam

Additional 3D Models: Horst Kiechle

Additional System Support: Lloyd Sharp

Additional Hardware and Vision: Jeffrey Cook and Sam De Silva

Project Officers: Michael Hill and Andrew Trauki

Print Design: Glenn Stace

ISBN 1 098346874

Print Publication - Paperback Book

celebrities, culture and cyberspace: the light on the hill in a postmodern world

McKenzie Wark

Pluto Press and Comerford and Miller 1999

ISBN 1 8640 3045 (Aus)

ISBN 1 871204 15 1 (UK)

AU\$24.95

I am reviewing a CD ROM and book that have in common McKenzie Wark.

One is interactive multimedia, the other is an analysis of the last forty years of Australian cultural, political and media history. One is viewed on a screen and the other is read from a book. One uses vivid background images, illuminated texts, cinematic video sequences, three-dimensional objects, hyperlinked text, noises, quotations, speech, spoken texts, artificially intelligent objects, and, of course, Wark's aphorisms and fabulous one-liners.

...men will tell you that fucking is a science, take it from me being fucked is an art. (woman's voice) (zone 4)

The book contains references from academics in literature, media studies, cultural studies, sociology, etc, as well as analysis of, and philosophies from, popular culture, television shows and newspapers, rock music and the movies, talk-back radio and just-plain-gossip.

Lumby is interested in what I would call a 'virtual' practice of media feminism. "We're all media producers", she says. (p 73)

The CD ROM utilizes the metaphor of space exploration for the space it chooses to tell its story, present its theories and thoughts. The graphics conjure exotic alien terrains, brightly coloured and bump-mapped surfaces, each window that opens a new visual experience, even before the text begins to appear. The CD ROM invites you into its world, its cyberspace, with interesting visuals and a rather cheeky little orbiting sphere that changes texture in every window. How can a sphere be cheeky you ask? Well, it hides some of the text, and as you move your mouse towards it the sphere runs away. You begin to read the text and the sphere re-enters from the opposite side from which it exited. You start to chase it with your mouse and a voice reads some of the text on screen. As your mouse scrolls over the text the text glows, and that pesky sphere comes again. Gradually you notice that if you keep your mouse over the text the sphere does not move but as soon as the mouse leaves the text the sphere returns, and by this time you've

read that text fairly thoroughly, and have even heard it being spoken in a woman's voice, you figure out that clicking on the sphere is the navigation to the next window.

As you progress through the various zones of *Planet of Noise* the interactivity alters slightly, the rotating sphere actually becomes your guide, the games you played with it earlier having trained you to navigate this piece. Certain words in some blocks of text begin to highlight in red; and mouse clicking these takes you off the linear progression through zones to another zone. Text begins to appear differently, instead of appearing all at once it comes line by line or word by word or from the bottom line first to the first line last. This variety kept the interactivity interesting and unpredictable, more like a thing with human intelligence than a robot, which added an extra edge to the experience. In some windows no text appears at all but a vortex in the landscape opens a view into rotating 3D objects which quickly fade. As you get deeper into zones you hear other voices apart from the main woman's voice, in some parts the spoken text is repeated in the next window.

...who would sell their soul - in such a buyers market? (zone 4)

celebrities, culture and cyberspace - the light on the hill in a postmodern world is itself a multi media work (now that should have read work but...). The book draws from the media that informs us, entertains us and sells to us, so that we begin to see the extent of our own relationship with media. It speaks in a language of popular culture, an accessible language with recognisable Australian icons and voices, political figures, pop stars, poets. And it speaks about concepts equally easy to understand, philosophy in suburbia, cultural theory in Canberra, politics in the pub, history at home in front of the telly, literary criticism at the bus stop, Kylie as art. But the book does not cry gloom and doom, no way. The book is a hopeful experience, trying to open up new spaces for thought on how we do go forward, since forward is the only direction we can go.

The dream of a place outside communication where a pure self resides is a fantasy. Feminist talking heads have no more access to the truth of 'woman' than Marxists had to the truth of the 'working class' - or for that matter, priests do to the 'Soul of Man'. (p 74)

For me the book presented itself as hypermedia and I began to conceive spaces; the skepsispace, that space inside your head where you consider ideas; the fantaspace, that part of your internal headspace that imagines; the iconospace, the tv screen which conjures talking heads and stereotypes that come packaged with slogans and attitudes which seemed to add weight to the arguments being presented in the text. The navigation through these spaces was sometimes linear, certain triggers teleported me to different spaces, even though I took a linear path through the text.

Structurally the two media reviewed were basically similar, in *Planet of Noise* there are ten zones, and within each zone there are about ten to fifteen windows, consisting of an aphorism per window. The book had eleven chapters, with about ten to fifteen subcategories in each. One was created by a team of individuals, specialists in their own fields, to produce a product that looks, feels and sounds good, works properly and navigates easily, the other was created by a usually transparent team of individuals and the author of the text.

Yet the two seemingly different media are essentially saying the same thing. And that, I believe, is that a third way can always be extracted from situations that are seemingly in direct contrast, and in fact this is the way we, as individuals and as a people, progress through life into the future. We select from the many conflicting realities society/the media offers and own those that we choose to build our beliefs on, rejecting those that we do not want to see or experience.

In the *Planet of Noise* the noise is the elements we have to choose from to construct our realities - the text, the spoken words, the possible meanings of those words, the animated space-objects. We are bombarded by these things whilst we are attaching a human personality to the rotating globe, because our main push is to move forward, to navigate life, to confront conflicts and opposed positions, good/bad, rich/poor, kind/mean, capitalism/communism, afl/rugby league, and find a third path as we go. When we leave we leave with flashes of what we have read and heard, some being absorbed more than others, reinforced by repetition or signification.

In the book the media tells us what the media is, and we see that celebrity, culture and cyberspace do not have to be the dualities we mainly conceive them as being. At present there is a perception that literature and publishing are at crossroads, do we choose the information superhighway or go down more familiar print based roads? It seems Wark has found his third way in exploiting all media as a forum for his writing. McKenzie Wark is an important Australian and International thinker and artist. His texts are always challenging and entertaining, whether he writes for the newspaper, online email discussion groups, multimedia, book publication or live conference appearances.

What is of enduring significance about Horne is that he tried to develop concepts out of Australian experience, rather than importing concepts and sticking them on top of that experience. (p36)

Wark is attempting, and I believe has succeeded, in each medium to do what he praises Donald Horne of having done in his day as a prominent Australian intellectual.

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