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Hanging the washing between the lines: a glimpse into the backyard of one writer’s work in process

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Athens

We’re struggling with jet lag, especially my daughter. She needs to sleep when she feels like it whereas I can resist and try to fit in with local time. The first morning in Greece, we went to Syntagma Square and bought her a pair of new pink gumboots (one of her old ones was lost in transit at the Charles de Gaulle airport). We travelled onwards, train, foot, to the Acropolis, and sat together on the cool marble steps.

Tonight I’m awake long after she’s gone to sleep and I feel bad for taking her so far from her father and brother, from home.

My depression has been dark and deep over the last few months and for a while now I have been aware of being in a sharply hewn rut of malaise. And it’s not just me. Malaise is all around me in my city back home. Melbourne. A city of malaise? A nation of malaise coming all of the way down from a Ministry of Malaise?

Something’s wrong. Something’s sad.
The sadness

It’s November of 2007. Beyond my city and my backyard, others have also expressed concern about the malaise.


In the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some of us have a feeling of dread. We see headlines about avian flu, impending oil shortages, and horrible terrorism in distant places. We realize that humankind is doing more things, faster, across a greater space than ever before, and that this is producing changes of a size and speed never before seen. Globalization erases our jobs, new technologies inundate our lives with information, waves of migrants push at our borders, and pollution destabilizes our climate. Stupendous changes are converging simultaneously on our societies, on our leaders, and on each one of us – leading many people to feel that things are out of control, and we’re going to crash.

Soon

We will pack up our cases and go back to the airport to leave for Crete.

I’ve come to Greece to research material for a novel and an accompanying academic paper; I am following up a persistent hunch concerning a connection to be made between twenty-first-century Western malaise and the poetic imagining of Minoan Crete as a kind of paradise.

The main character of the novel is going to be a male in his early forties who works in a menial job that he hates but who dreams of being recognised for the paintings he works on at night – when he is not on the internet seeking a partner or dancing at a salsa class or carrying out his latest performance art routine on a street or curled up in the dark in bed crushed by a bout of his chronic depression. I’ve thought of introducing a second character, a female, who is travelling and living in Crete. Or perhaps the main character treats some aspects of Crete in his artworks. Mostly, if it can be reduced to an essence, the novel is to be about contemporary malaise and depression.

And in the academic paper I want to explore similar themes, particularly studying the fascination that Crete has held for modern-day poets and writers perhaps because of its mythologising that relates to the seeking – or creating – of a paradise and the loss of the paradise.

Distant observations

My first glimpses of Crete, long ago, were in poetry and fiction by contemporary Australian authors Dorothy Porter and Rod Jones. In Porter’s *Crete* I saw the octopus for the first time:

Nothing is more passionate
Than a Minoan octopus

whirling from the artist’s heart
with eight arms
to clutch the receding tide (Porter 1996b).

I remembered that octopus. It clutched onto me. Inspired by Porter’s acknowledgement to novelist Rod Jones:

I would like to acknowledge the novel *Prince of the Lilies* by Rod Jones, the inspirational trigger for the ‘Crete’ poems. This book reeks of Minoan magic and led me to the awesome labyrinth of *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, Arthur Evans’s six volume account of his excavations on Crete from 1921 to 1935 (Porter 1996a).

I followed her to *Prince of the Lilies*. And then years later I came back to my interest in Crete, pulled back by the octopus and by the idea of paradise that seemed to rest precariously as ancient pottery over modern imaginings of the ‘Minoans’. In *Prince of the Lilies*, Jones wrote:

The ideology of a Minoan “Golden Age” linked to a particular find of stones with a particular myth, and this was elaborated and reinforced by Evans’ romantic interpretation of the frescoes (1991 p. 57).

But it was September 11 2001 that really returned me to thinking of Crete and the Minoans. A strange mood prevailed in Western locations in the aftermath of the US terrorist attack, a bit like a high pressure system building up to a cracking storm: when the sky turns a weird shade of yellow-grey. It was an apocalyptic mood. Wild West. Mad Max. Many of us feared that we would die very soon: that this really was the end of our world.


...what most of us suspect; that all talk of paradise only starts when something has been lost. Perhaps that is how the whole myth began: way back in prehistoric times when a growing population finally managed to do what mankind has been doing ever since – namely destroy its own environment – then talk of paradise could begin. Perhaps now, as we finally mess up on a far grander scale than previously, that is why the myth seems peculiarly relevant (p. xi).

Murder is committed in the name of paradise. The environment – nature – is destroyed in its name. ‘Human resources’ are exploited and expended, and ‘collateral damage’ enters the vernacular.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that in the face of stress, uncertainty, and catastrophe and mass-scale suffering, people begin looking for paradise in one way or another. A swim underwater. Bare feet in grass. A long walk in a forest. Planting seeds in a garden. It nearly always involves sensual experience. It often seems to involve nature. But it can also involve hedonism. Champagne. Luxury goods. Retail therapy. Decadent sex. It’s the last few that seem most closely related to the apocalyptic mood of the 9/11 aftermath. If your world will end eminently, then what else is there but the body: the material?

**

*What I’ve come to see*

Mostly I’ve come to see the octopus. And the swallows and dolphins. The frescoes. The pottery. The uncannily contemporary-feeling images and shapes dug from the ground, and the ground it was dug from. I’ve long been the kind of writer and scholar who needs to experience material sensually in order to write about it with any kind of conviction. I needed to see Knossos and observe for myself the particular palette of the
sky, the dirt, the foliage. I needed to measure, if not with my hands, then at least with my own eyes, the pitchers and pots and statues and fresco panels that were excavated from the island of Crete.

**

Ecstatic

When I first came across reproductions of images from Minoan art, long before my trip, when I saw the image of the octopus, and dancing women, and jubilant birds and dolphins, I noticed the mood of ecstasy that seemed imbued in the works. That ecstasy probably should not have reminded me of the weird, apocalyptic mood that I had observed all around me in the days immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks. But it did.

The Minoans of Crete died out, of course: they were what some call a lost civilisation:

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Western scientists and historians knew almost nothing about what lay under the ash left behind by the Theraan explosion and therefore almost nothing about ancient Minoan civilization. There was no Acropolis to look upon and remember, no Roman Coliseum as a reminder, no man-made landmark to spur the inquiry. Not one monument was left above the surface of the earth (Barnes 2006, p. 74).

Some scholars and artists infer or imagine that the Minoans amused themselves to death with their material wealth and seemingly joyful, hedonistic rituals, with the ecstasy palpable in their faces, bodies, swirls, spirals, birds and dolphins, and hilariously comical shapes in their surviving artworks. It is too far away in time and philosophy and sensibility to know exactly what their ecstasy meant, now. Modern sense of ecstasy includes a thread of fear, even terror; it is a state that comes complete with its own approaching death, so good that it cannot be sustained and the better because the closer it draws to its end – its crescendo – the more intense it gets and yet the more sad too.

The ecstatic experience is an out-of-body experience, other-worldly, and literally indescribable. It is so uncontrolled, so boundaryless, that it represents a threat to all that has boundaries (Barnes 2006, p. 60).

**

Agia Pelagia, Crete.

I need to wash clothes in the bathroom basin. The humidity is thick. And although the temperature is not terribly high I'm hot all of the time, sweating and thirsty, my clothes reeking. An old clotheshorse has been left on the balcony of the whitewashed apartment where we are staying. I haven't washed my clothes since we'd arrived in Athens a week ago. While my daughter sleeps, I wash our clothes and peg them on the clotheshorse in the warm night air. I sit beside the clothes in a pool of just enough light to make notes in my journal and write a few postcards. My feet are propped on the concrete balcony rail and I look out to a grey mass that I know is the sea even though I can see no detail except that there is a lack of light out there, a more viscous darkness than that over the land. A few stars show between clouds in the sky and in the sea mass there are the sharper stars of fishing boat lights. My daughter sleeps on and I spend my time with the night and the bells and mews of the tabby cats down in the garden, our damp clothes shifting in a rising wind.

I can't help thinking that my reason for being here seems to be all tangled up with clotheslines.

The malaise has started to feel like a crisis by now. And it amounts to a collision
between public and private space. In a sense, here on the balcony on Crete, I'm looking out into my own backyard at home, seeing my clothesline laden to the point of sagging towards the ground, not concrete at home but lush grasses in dark soil, low-temperate rainforest topography, and I am my own pair of eyes, spying. On me. All of a sudden I can't tell what's mine and what's someone else's and what it is all about.

**

On the edge of the sea

I had hoped to begin writing drafts of the novel while I was in Greece, but instead I find myself unable to write anything except reflections on this developing crisis of mine. I called it a creative crisis for a while. But I think it's really an everything crisis.

These nights in the guesthouse, as I try to focus on beginning the novel, I can't find a way in. My main character is hostile. Even the genre of fiction is hostile. I've started questioning my desire to write at all, and certainly to write fiction. I am always drawn to the patterns I observe in real-life people, places, and incidents. I like to write in a novelistic style, and so I usually call my work fiction. But my work leans towards the autobiographical even though that may often be discernible only to me. I write what I see and experience. And in my writing of academic research, what I see and experience also steals in.

Autobiographical fragments. Personal observations. Stories. These pepper the theory that I write. My approach is ontological, no matter what the genre of the writing. It occurs to me that maybe I am trying to write fiction, not just in short stories and novels, but in my construction of my identity as an academic researcher.

Or perhaps I am simply a liar.

This italicised voice of my crisis, my self-doubt, my depression, speaks up loudly, often, while I'm on Crete.

I'm suspended in a place limning between the private and the public. I'm travelling on university business for most of the trip, but as you know I've brought my almost-two-year-old daughter with me. The mother-baby-bond between us is still strong enough that it would have been distressing for her to be separated from me for three weeks. I also knew that I would manage perfectly well with her, knowing her feisty, sociable, yet easygoing nature. So, I'm at work, but I have a toddler strapped to my back during the days. I'm researching a scholarly piece of work, but also a creative one. The public and the private were entwined from the outset of this travel. And as my crisis sets in, the private begins to feel excruciatingly public.

**

Basket-case

At home mostly I peg out my washing at night because that's when my children are sleeping and I get a chance to do it, but it is also a time when I love to slip into the backyard for a while, when it's cool and dark and I can check out the night sky, when I can listen for the night noises. Cats and possums are about. Sometimes, to my chagrin, though, the neighbour over the back turns on his very bright porch-light, spotlighting me in my nightie and bare feet under the line.

The problem with art of any kind is that it nearly always represents a collision of public and private space; it's a hanging out of one's most intimate possessions, no matter what the subject matter and media may ostensibly be. When you create a work of art, and, worse, put it out for public perusal and judgment, you take great personal risks. When an artist chooses to document their process and also offer that up for public perusal, the risk may be no less great. The intimate laundry is still visible, strung
between the lines of a refereed journal article or scholarly book chapter. In the case of my own scholarly work, the laundry is generally not well concealed. I am the kind of artist who finds it hard to pack the mess of my creative work away in a neat wicker basket and turn my hand to presenting scholarly work readily sorted into a second neat wicker basket. What I have to offer is rarely tidy, clean or easily sorted and pressed and put away.

**

*Before Knossos*

Yesterday, if I could have found a way to change my flights and go home early, I would have done so. I told myself that I would still have to complete my research but then I could bypass the short holiday stay in Paris and go directly home. My daughter was a mess of fear, confusion and homesickness. I talked to her, reassuring, loving her, cuddling her to sleep. She’s much better today. But I still feel guilty for bringing her. Not that I couldn’t have not brought her. She has been beautiful, really, overall, but she also hasn’t coped quite as well as I thought she might.

Tomorrow, we go to Knossos.

**

*After Knossos*

Not so good today. I didn’t like Knossos.

Today was also the day of the evil bus driver who made me cry. Now I feel scared to take public transport. The bus station in Iraklio is a dump – seedy and sinister-feeling.

Maybe I will go to the museum tomorrow. Or I will simply walk into the village of Agia Pelagia: it looks pretty from the glimpses I caught today between tears on the bus ride. Strange, though: I do not feel safe in rural places. Here, there is a mix of the urban and rural because of the tourism factor, but outside the village, where I am staying in a guesthouse, there is still the rural feel that can make my skin crawl. Yesterday, late, I walked on the dirt road curving about below the guesthouse, and the surroundings were picturesque but I did not feel quite safe. I admired the quiet yet I was scared of it too.

I feel so much safer in cities, wherever in the world I am.

*I feel so much safer in cities.*

I don’t feel welcome on Crete, but that’s nothing to do with the Minoans; it’s to do with the bus and taxi drivers. It’s to do with that certain quietness that haunts me when I stop and glance around me in rural places. The ground is too dry. I’m too close to the dessert.

I haven’t come to Crete for the rubble of Knossos, not really. I’ve come for the dancing and birds:

> The graphic art of Minoan civilization surprises us with rare and unexpected beauty. It includes flowers, vines and trees as well as swallows kissing, women dancing, and dolphins leaping (Barnes 2006, p. 13).

And I think that in the spiralling way of Minoan imagery and of the ways that I think and feel, it’s also the *blueness* in the Minoans’ art that’s drawn me here. At times I wonder if my life’s work is this: seeking out blueness; discovering blueness. Imagine that: discovering a blue. *Giacotti’s blue. Klein’s blue. Even Brett Whiteley’s blue. My blue.*

Our bedroom at home is painted deep blue in stone-textured paint, except that it has
ended up looking more like velvet than stone. The blueness of depression, too, has
had its part in dragging me to Crete. I'm eking my way through days just as I would at
home. I have my happiness, my delight. But then there's the sadness and darkness.
And a kind of shame, an embarrassment that this is happening to me: that depression
is affecting me.

Writers follow spirals. They swirl together shards and fragments and hints and
rumours. Some say the Minoans didn't grieve because they believed time was circular
so all ends were beginnings. But nobody knows the truth about that. Ecstasy can be
grief. Joy and frenzy and laughter can be all about sadness and grief. Depressed
people like to fantasise, if the depression is at not too debilitating a stage, we like to
create. Make stuff up. To arrange my thoughts about how artists process and transform
responses to mass global suffering, I've come on a spiralling, complicated journey to
Crete.

My personal sadness has brought me here. I don't know what I was looking for.

**

*Heraklion Museum of Art, Crete.*

Yes, I decide at the museum that it is indeed the blue that has tempted me to travel a
line between home and Crete. The now and the then: ecstasy and grief; depression
and the hope to soothe or at least describe it.

Blue was sometimes glaucoaphane, sometimes so-called "Egyptian blue" –
an artificial compound of silicon, copper oxide and calcium oxide. The
 technique for making this pigment was learned from Egypt, as the name
implies. Azurite had been employed as a blue pigment in the Cyclades from
the Early Bronze Age, but its use in frescoes has not yet been analytically
proved (Fitton 2002, p. 148).

Although not blue, the famous octopus pot in the museum wraps its tentacles around
me like a new-old friend, mine now, at least a little bit mine now that I've stood before it
and looked at it, not in a poem, not in a photograph, its real self, albeit behind glass.

![New Palace Period Octopus flask from Palaikastro, photographed at Heraklion Archaeological Museum, by author November 2007](image)

More truthfully, I take the tentacles and arrange them around myself, the octopus
indifferent, maybe bored, like a cat that does not particularly care that a person wants
to hug it.

*I'm not good at being a traveller, too delicate, too thin-skinned.*

It's the shapes of the pots, too, as well as the painted images. It's the fanciful
imagination evident in the shapes. Why does Minoan art feel so familiar? So contemporary? I buy a replica of the octopus pot. It is no quality replica commissioned from a renowned local artisan. It costs seven euro at a trashy souvenir shop, from a hag who gives my daughter a crumbling biscuit and a gnarled orange. The sticker on the base of the pot reads _Handmade in Greece_, but I don’t believe it. I want the replica, though, want a bit of the octopus to take with me.

The crazy pots and pitchers remind me of the character of the novel I’m supposed to be researching, him and his mad antics of performance art. There’s glee in his madness.

**

_Leaving soon_

I’ve been thinking about a short story I’ve started writing _out of the blue_. It’s a story with tentacles: the working title is ‘The octopus’. It’s the story of the bond that I share with my daughter, and also the story of my depression and how it weaves into the relationship with her.

**

_Do not disturb_

I am tempted to fill my Crete journal with writing about her, about my daughter, my love for her, things she does and what she holds on to, like the bag of possessions that she has been adding to throughout this trip. The bag’s contents started with a stuffed toy dog from home and one of her favourite picture books. Now it contains bus tickets and creased boarding pass stubs and sugar packets from breakfast tables and glossy cardboard _Do Not Disturb_ signs from hotels, and new colour pencils and a colouring book that we work on together in the guesthouse as the sunset begins each evening.

I want to write about her growing, in minute increments, as the days of this trip go by. It may be that she’s growing faster than at home or else I am more alert to her growing because it’s just her and I, a long way from home.

**

_Empty vessels_

During the crisis, during the self-doubt that comes with a bout of depression and also sometimes with a bout of creative processing, I think my travel and the work I’m doing on Crete are in danger of coming to nothing.

**

_Not tidy or clean_

Later, afterwards, I no longer see it that way.

This essay I am writing now, this reflection on my time on Crete and subsequent moments, is intended to lay out some of the _particularity of experience_ that feeds into my creative process as both writer and academic. It is not tidy or clean. It is not necessarily coherent or cohesive. (I am yet to see worthwhile art or research that is any of those things when in process.)

My personae of artist (in the genre of writing), academic and person are not separate or separable. What I learn, and the outcomes of that learning, cannot and do not exist in isolation from one another. The whole mess is entangled, and that is what makes it robust and interesting and creative. Ironically, the enmeshing of my public and private
work is what provides its rigour.

**

Micro-climates

Just before I leave Crete, I meet with an academic at the University of Crete. We sit in a café, my daughter colouring in her book. We discuss my project, but it is the small talk around the edges of that which matters the most, which will stay most vividly in my mind. She chats about climate change: about how hot Greece is becoming and how the heat is affecting national tourism and also her university’s capacity to attract international students and scholars. We talk about our children. When we part, she kisses first both my cheeks and then my daughter’s.

Heat. The environment. Catastrophe. Those terms and themes seeping in again, even in the casual part of conversation.

**

Byron Bay

Back in Australia, Greece left behind, and Paris after it. It’s exactly one month since I wrote that journal entry about the story titled ‘The octopus’. I’ve travelled to another humid place but I’m on holidays this time and my whole family is with me. I’m writing in the evening while all of them sleep upstairs since even here in some kind of paradise with beach, mangroves, marine life and exotic birds, I’m not free of depressive insomnia.

I’m listening to rain, a sudden downpour. It is quite divine. I should have guessed this was coming after noticing the stormy, violet sky over The Pass as I bodysurfed late this afternoon.

I haven’t read the Greece journal entries since I flew out of there. What I may write from that material is likely to be pretty dark and I don’t want it to taint this holiday just now. Pretty dark: is that a potential title for something?

What if I wrote something funny instead: joyful, whimsical, ecstatic?

This rain. It’s amazing.

**

Incrementation

I have moved on with this Crete project now, although you may not recognise it if you were to see it. The traces are there, of Crete and the clotheshorse and my daughter on the steps of the Acropolis. Materially they are all there in a piece of work that is growing in its minute increments.

**

The beginning of the Crete novel

Linger ing over the last few items to be pegged out, enjoying the old-mirror shine of the moon through the clouds above the block’s tallest mountain ash, she summoned up the image of a rickety clotheshorse that she’d found on the balcony of the place where she and the little girl had stayed on Crete.

The night the child was born, her mother standing ankle deep in warm water
in a bath, clinging with all her might to the sturdy plumbing running down the walls, a tiny lapse of time passed between contractions, and the child's head hung suspended in the vagina, round and low and heavy as a great perfectly shaped fruit, and she opened and closed her mouth delicate as a goldfish breathing. Her mother felt it and knew it was the baby trying to take her first taste of air and yet it was like speaking, too, like a whispered mother and daughter message.

Back then, Crete, it was night-time, too, and she needed to wash clothes in the bathroom basin. The humidity was thick and although the temperature was not terribly high she was hot all of the time, sweating and thirsty, her clothes reeking. The old clotheshorse had been left on the balcony of the whitewashed apartment where they were staying. She hadn't washed their clothes since they'd arrived in Athens the week before. While her daughter slept she washed the clothes and pegged them on the clotheshorse in the warm night air. She sat beside the clothes in a pool of just enough light to make notes in her travel journal and write a few postcards. Her feet were propped on the concrete balcony rail and she looked out to a grey mass that she knew was the sea even though she could see no detail except that there was a lack of light out there, a more viscous darkness than over the land. A few stars showed between clouds in the sky and in the sea mass there were the sharper stars of fishing boat lights. Her daughter slept on and she spent her time with the night and the bells and mews of the tabby cats down in the garden, the damp clothes beginning to shift in a rising wind.

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