

Entering the Water at Bondi ***Voyages in Search of Him***

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The mad calculus of your life has driven you here
and continues to drive you, aimless, across landscapes
slathered into blurs, landscapes without details,
under clouds whose shapes suggest nothing to the
naked mind. Only your foot in the cool water carries
any meaning.

Gary Indiana, *Scar Tissue (Games from Other Games)*

In the surf he's a hero
But on the sand he scores a zero (or even less) . . .
Jones & Bowen, *Bondi Song*

Seems he went into the water two years ago
and hasn't come out yet.

Peter Corris, *Empty Beach*

Diving into the sea *he* undergoes a metamorphosis. A natant change is set in motion, from the social 'I' to the mythological 'I'. *He* moves from the land, a signifier of masculinity, into the sea, a signifier of femininity. This route must pass across the politically unstable shoreline, that '/' which forms the edge between land/sea.

How is the masculine subject changed in this passage? What ceremonies are set in motion before, during and after *his* immersion by diving into a drifting text? How is *he* re-stored into the stoical logos, into the 'natural order of things' back on the beach as *he* emerges from the waves? What shifts or displacements are involved in becoming a surfing body? By projecting *himself* into the water as a masculine set-up, does *he* become up-set, cast-away or does *he* choose to 'swallow the anchor' forever?

If the ideology of Bondi Beach with it's order of binary codes (land/sea, masculine/feminine, hero/zero, etc) is to be challenged and it's centricism

disrupted, then it is to the water's fictional edge '/' (which halts any drift within the text), that analysis must travel.

Preparations for Departure

No place on the beach is more visited by myth than the commissual site of the shoreline. Leaving one site for another, the swimmer acts on the water politicising it as 'surf' (from slough: to murmur or sigh as the wind) and is in turn constituted by myth as either '*hero*' or '*zero*'. In his paper on Bondi, Noel Sanders writes that "at the same time that the start of a political narrative is grounded in an appeal to the 'natural' (aural and spectacular), another level is indicated that grounds the 'politicised' myth both maintaining the latter and denying it."¹ The sunbaker, who one minute is 'working flat-out for the country' as a '*zero*', is mythically transformed into a 'gladiator of the surf', an intermediate between supernatural Gods and natural mortals; a '*hero*' occupying a space of silence.

This process of rendering a cultural entrance of the water as *Bodysurfing*, involves *ceremonies of taking possession*. Not so much of controlling the 'endless sea' and its "aquatic demons" that reside amongst the waves, rather the actuation or territorialisation of the surfing body itself within the "unfettered element, the breakers of foaming lips that forever surge"² against concrete restraining walls. The bodysurfer is a double agent, at once naturalising *his* entrance into the water by sub-scribing, re-scribing and in-scribing *himself* into the 'Bonzai Brotherhood'³ through surf language, and at the same time participating in the erosion of his social 'I'. "He enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse."⁴

How then does this doubly perverse (*he*) subject find a way into the 'boiling surf' and how is *he* changed on the journey to the 'dreaming water' — the other country? What is *his* metamorphosis at the water's edge?

The First Terror

The movement of people across the beach is not linear but nomadic. Although this trail appears random it is marked out according to tiny monuments (possessions wrapped in a towel), taboos (outside the flags) and sacred sites (shark tower) that give the beach its texture, its hegemonic standing. This movement is directed by a desire that knows no fixed endpoint or final outcome. An expedition that has as its motivation the pleasure of returning from the "sublime and trackless desert, all-surrounding, unfathomable sea"⁵ to the site of departure, with the 'unreal' evidence of having been there. This return is for desire continually deferred. Every return initiating another departure into the region of

psychic calms, which in turn calls for a report from the edge of consciousness. The first terror of entering the water is logged into the memory.

Port Desire — Port Famine

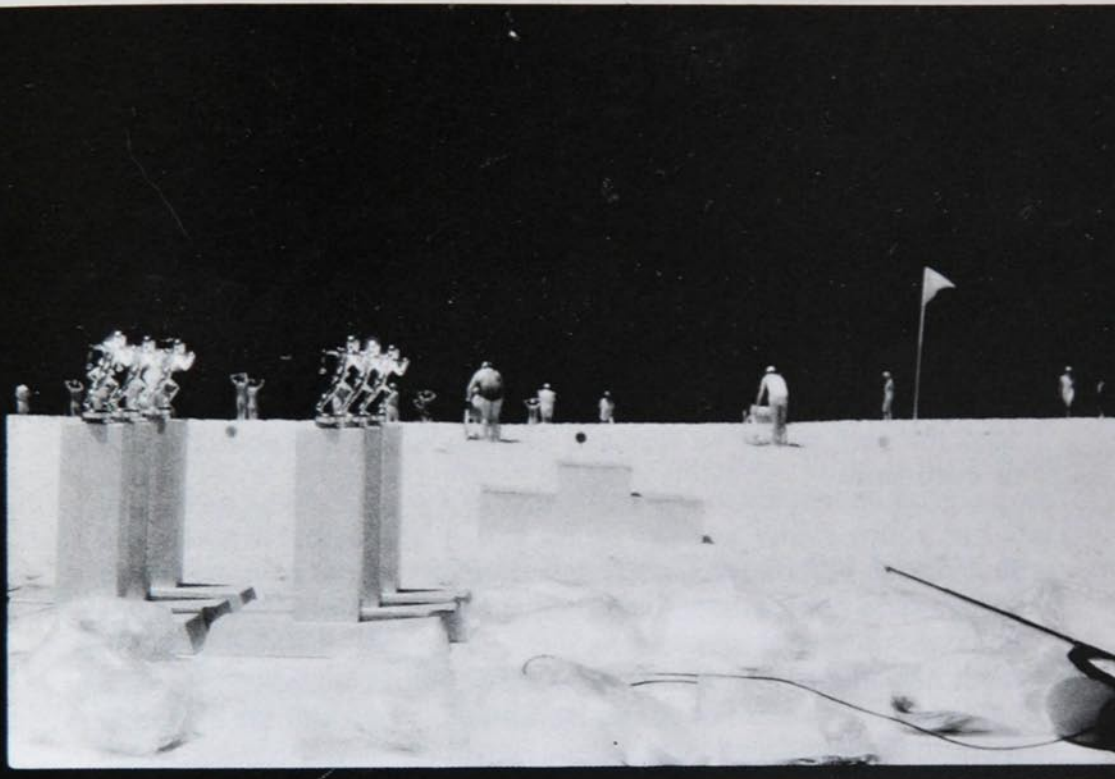
To gaze upon the infinite horizon is to contemplate (look in) upon the horizons of oneself. In practice, the unconscious is spoken of in terms of the external world: the 'sea of the unconscious'. The sea in turn becomes a 'body of water', its coastline the 'shores of consciousness'. In surfing language a wave becomes a woman's body, synecdochic of the ocean as the primal signifier of femininity. The voice of the sea being the sirens' song. "Their song was so unearthly that it forced those who heard it to realise the inhumanness of all human singing. Of a despair almost indistinguishable from rapture."⁶

For surfies (wax-heads with ears full of wax to protect them from the sirens' singing), the wave has a 'face', 'shoulder', 'lip', 'belly', upon which he 'rides', 'carves a line', 'tracks', or 'executes a radical re-entry', 'cutback', or '360°'. The most 'unreal' (bliss) of pleasures for the surfer is to be in the 'green room' or 'tube' or womb as Freud suggests.⁷ Diving into the wave symbolically is interpreted as leaving the water, that is, being born. His reason for saying this seems to be evolutionist (we all come from the sea originally) and significantly because every human being spends its first phase of existence in the amniotic fluid, in the womb. Also, in many ancient myths the heroes were rescued from (born of) water, or wound (bound) up in water (Moses, King Sargon, Odysseus, Orpheus, Narcissus) and in contemporary mythology of T.V. Advertising, countless products emerge from water; from where the perfect song of the product might come. And the sword of Excalibur (the Force) must return to the silent lake where all myths and heroes forever sleep. "The hero is a monster who wages life against life."⁸

*I settle myself into a pre-planned perch of elevated isolation so that I can command my psyche to firstly face myself and then look the lady Pipeline deep in the eye and tell her I will ride and conquer her today . . . she arches her back and explodes her awe-inspiring orgasm.*⁹

All these sexual metaphors of taming the 'unknowable primal signifier' of the sea as woman mysterious, threatening yet sublime, have as their motivation the exclusion of the *feminine* within the 'Bonzai Brotherhood'. Of becoming a "blood brother to a universal order"¹⁰ in and out of the water. This exclusion of the *feminine* from the *ship of mates* does little of course to open men to each other (break the silence) as mateship is maintained by homophobia, laws governing sexual taboos in the water

are even more rigid than on the beach. Subversively, different agents can be more easily mixed together in liquids. In a shifting text the word can drift and occupy new syntactical relationships. For men entering the water as writing, as speech (an *operation* involving their bodies, themselves as political subjects), the same spatial containments of libidinal flows are repeated in pubs, the workplace, sports-ground and home.



His Views of Empire

Libidinal flows are controlled and channelled along ideological chases that keep buoyant an economy of differences that render the Bronzed Aussie an "Aussie cast 'in bronze', statuesque".¹¹ Specific parts of the body are focused on (the genitals), held in check or relegated when entering the water. The body becomes fixed: a missile projected into the waves as a 'knife through water'. Braced against liquidity, *he* is invested into the water with a struggling libido that wants to mix freely with flows around it, with the caresses of the waves. In the market of *Bronzed Aussie Futures* the 'Iron Man Event' is raised as the 'gold standard' of masculine rituals as witnessed by the investment of Foster's, Tooheys, State Bank

and numerous other companies. "Behind every investment of time, interest and capital is an investment of desire and vice versa . . . The flows of capital and interest (political economy) and flows of desire (libidinal economy) are one and the same economy, that is, the economy of flows."¹² When Peter Fox, a well known Sydney business tycoon, was killed in his silver sports car at great speed, his epitaph read:

*He remained a Bondi Boy, a swimmer for whom money was merely a metaphor for water, the element in which he was most himself.*¹³

He was swimming in money and eventually it 'drowned him'. Did he also see the surf as a metaphor for money with the sun reflected in the waves; a gold investment wave? As a hero of the money market he defined his quest by leaving a scar on the map of Bondi Beach, the site of the first surfing investment (investiture) with the biggest cultural dividend to his memory. For Bondi is Australia's oldest beach because it's been mythologised the longest. Here at Bondi the masculine body is most 'natural' and least motivated at the water's edge. Once in the water *he* must be motivated again as a surfing body. A new semiotic contract must be drawn up for his naturalisation into the 'unfettered element'. *He* must 'look the part' or else be classified as drowning or irresponsible, a 'zero or even less'.

A World Without Contradictions

Myth acts to reduce the drifting body to a state of knowable, evident actions, essences and immediately visible, locatable meanings. At Bondi, myth has created a crystal clear world without contradictions, without any depth. So Peter Fox chose Bondi as the best site for his mark. A mark that created two edges along which he placed himself.

*Whence, perhaps a means of evaluating the world of our modernity: their value would proceed from their duplicity. By which it must be understood that they always have two edges. The subversive edge may seem privileged because it is the edge of violence; but it is not violence which affects pleasure, nor is it destruction which interests it; what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss. Culture thus recurs as an edge; in no matter what form.*¹⁴

Fabled Splendors

There is so much to do when entering the water and so much to do when leaving the water. Caught in the lag between meaning and difference, between land and sea, masculine and feminine, culture and

nature, energy is changed, transformed into other texts (ads, films, paintings, etc.), other bodies. Binary codes being dependent on the spacing of (&) or (/) for their logic, their political order within language, serve to keep 'logocentricism' in work as Derrida sets out in his project of 'deconstruction'. Nothing is actually challenged in power terms (of what constitutes the 'true' or 'real') under this system of privileging the first term (male/culture/land/mind) over the second term (female/nature/sea/body).¹⁵

Lyotard boldly states that philosophy is drowning in its own language because it is unable to acknowledge the world of *sense* in which it is *immersed* and from which it *emerges*. This reveals the inherent limitations of language itself, its ultimate powerlessness when confronted with the nonlinguistic. "There is a fact," Lyotard suggests, "which our experience of speech does not permit us to deny, the fact that every discourse is cast in the direction of something which it seeks to *seize hold of*, that it is incomplete and open, somewhat as the visual field is partial, limited and extended by an horizon."¹⁶ The openness of the shifting (/) that is the water's edge, is denied within land/sea discourse.

What is needed is to somehow enter this politically unstable region of the (/) classifications, grids, factors and lines of division so that the terms either side of the (/) can be brought into question. What is their 'state of presence', their presence of state? One way to attempt an escape from the 'closer of knowledge' that is set up by these binary codes, in order to swim beyond this closed world, is to place the word, (/) or term 'under erasure'. To erase the determination of the 'slash'. What is left is the 'trace' of the word, of its presence. For Derrida these third terms (trace, difference, spur, brisure etc) enable an opportunity to effect a gradual change of the structures within which we operate: "little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations."¹⁷ This process involves working from 'inside' a text in order to reach an 'outside' where we can catch the possibility of a language without knowledge, (no-ledge) where truths can accumulate over the years like seagull shit. Sounds great, swimming in a pluralistic sea of possibilities. But what occurs when we 'deconstructively' read a text?

*The text does not speak any longer of its own 'outside'; it does not even speak of itself; it speaks of our own experience in reading (deconstructively) it. There is no more a dialectics of here and there. Everything happens here — and the dialectics takes place, at most, as a further-and-further movement.*¹⁸

Owhyhee

Standing at the water's edge, which is constantly under erasure by the reflexive action of one wave after another, the *bodysurfer's* presence is

most fragile. From here a glimpse from inside the logocentric construction of Bondi Beach Culture is most possible, if only for that instant when the bodysurfer leaves the sureness of the land under foot and is suspended in flight just before meeting the water, as surf. To be outside the text is to occupy a new topology of configurations made possible by the modifying influence of each leap into the 'sea of difference', of refusing a fixed point of arrival into a new copious language. The body becomes a jetty venturing out from the safety of the land into the unpredictable sea. Then body as bridge forms a path, a field across which sensations can travel from sea to sand, sun and air. Until 1905 swimming was termed '*bathing*' in Australia and overseas. Bathing connoted a '*sea cure*', a medication to be *taken* rather than dwelt in as a pleasure. In England from 1735 onward, a radical '*sea cure*' in the '*Dettol waters*' of the English Channel, was made possible with the aid of a '*bathing machine*' which looked like an outside toilet on wheels. These narcissistic machines were equipped with 'dippers' or 'guides' whose job it was to:

seize the bather, who had changed in the machine while a horse had pulled it from the beach to the sea, hold him in the waves and dip him in. After a few seconds, coughing and gasping seawater, the victim was only too glad to escape back to the machine."¹⁹

A baptism by immersion, the 'bather' was purified, the cities disease washed away.

Everyone tastes the Water

The swimmer usually enters the water with caution. Beneath the surface of the water which is often a kinetic mirror, lies the unknown, monsters and treasure, the sublime and the apocalyptic. Historically and mythically, the sea is where retributions for injustices on land are meted out by the Gods. *Social codes, morals and languages are set adrift at the mercy of the currents and the imagination.* Meta Incognita. A dumb man recovers his speech. The Sun disappears. Everyone tastes the Water. The Natives pick their pockets. The insulation is broken and they are cast adrift on Jet-Skis. The loss of the corpse is easily done out here. His death-his four burials. Land! Land! a false alarm. The water again. A report from the edge. He finally abandons the Idea.

Murmurs of the Crew

In the myth of Bacchus, when the crew got sick of rowing demi-gods around the Aegean for a handful of olives and tried to form the first Seaman's Union, the gods handed down this ruling:

The crew were seized with terror as madness; some leaped overboard; others prepared to do the same, beheld their companions



*in the water undergoing a change, their bodies becoming flattened and ending in a crooked tail. One exclaimed, "What miracle is this!" and as he spoke his mouth widened, his nostrils expanded and scales covered his body. Another, endeavouring to pull the oar, felt his hand shrink up and presently to be no longer hands but fins; another, trying to raise his arms to a rope, found he had no arms, and curving his mutilated body, jumped into the sea.*²⁰

Diving into the text is to be involved in a production for or against ideology. As Roland Barthes points out, every text has its shadow, 'a bit of ideology'.²¹ The water's edge is the beach's shadow with its traces, products from the underworlds of the city and ocean floors. Signatures and footnotes and fragments stretched along the high-tide mark. A beach culture can be read by its garbage. Walking across the mirror sands that seem to drop away under foot, *he* is blinded by the sunlight reflecting off all surfaces near and far. In this microwave atmosphere "objects lose their outlines, heading towards a buzzing abstract quality."²² So where does any sense of presence (temporal and spatial) reside on the metaphysical beach with any certainty? For Les Murray, "patches of reality exist only where there is shade," in the shadows literally. Perched on the borderlines of abstraction with an angry sea ripping at your flippers and salt spray misting up your vision, is to be already caught by subversion.

Return to the Scene of Terror

Ideas, events, energies and forces are experienced as waves, pulses, fields and flares. *He* re-enters the text, waves wash over him in an imbrication of sensations. Carried, drifting in a break-dancing sea. Overlapping lips of waves on skin on sand on skin. A meshing of textures is erotic and meaning undecided. Caught in the swell, the bodysurfer is reminded that the presence of *his* masculinity is bound up with a loss; *his* speech with inscription. Beyond one surface lies another: beneath the desert beach lies water, under the sea are mountains, below the skin, tiny rivers and billabongs. Culture is destroyed and restored with each breaking wave which threatens to 'wipe out' the swimmer. In human consciousness says Georges Bataille, eroticism is that within us which calls our being into question. It's not the destruction or restitution of the surfing body which is erotic, it is "the seam between them, the fault, the flaw which becomes so."²³

Re-entries

At the moment of flight when *he* has left the ground and is now bound for the water, temporal and spatial moorings are broken in any 'normal sense'. Every body movement is pressed flat against itself by the force of the social gaze. The space of the private individual is stripped away.

Placed in a 'crush' of binary choices (hero or zero), gestures grow stilted and defensively aggressive. *He* dives with clenched fists and eyes closed tight. If *he* subversively follows another path and allows the water and *his* body to meet as fluids, as flows; if *he* begins to look outside *himself* then the wave inside him will swell. As Freud sets out in his work on the Ego and the Id: "The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body."²⁴ In the daydreaming bodysurfer the 'primal state of distribution of the libido' is partially restored as with the snoozing sunbaker up on the beach. In narcissism the libido and the ego find themselves united and indistinguishable. The libido can find itself struggling more with the ego than the waves. In order to release this dammed up libido, *he* must return to a water-cathexis. Here more parts of the body are set in motion than in any other exercise. Gravity is reduced and the subject feels a sense of weightlessness. A sea-nce in the natatorium.

The Conflict

Of course it must be remembered that the gap between leaping from the sand and diving into the water is mythically rendered ideologically silent and seamless. Slashing into the waves is always therefore a re-entry in the legal sense, that is, to take possession of the water under a historically reserved right. A right established through language as Barthes notes:

*This is because myth is speech stolen and restored. Only, speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen: when it was bought back it was not put exactly in its place. It is this brief act of larceny, this moment taken for a surreptitious faking, which gives mythical speech its benumbed look.*²⁵

In advertising images, photographs, paintings, films and literary works the repeated representation of the diver frozen at the point of entering the water is now a familiar sight. What do these images incite?

Moments of Immobility

Raised as innocent, passive yet intensely significant in their ambiguous purpose (the moving body will penetrate the water and yet, is caught in its petrified state of always becoming these images served to naturalise or fix the politically unstable action. The arrival is slowed down as is the departure. Moments of immobility (the iconic diver) are turned into fetishes and become universal points of attachment; empty signs into which meaning is poured, truths take hold and limits apply. A narcissistic fascination is set in motion under a hierarchy of restraints. The reader must employ a *scratch vision*, projecting back and forth across the image

in an attempt to break the arrested flight of the diver and so break the mirrored surface of the water with its complex graph of traces and the fabric of signifiers that constitute the work of diving. At the same time there is a desire to stop the flow of the falling mortal (Orpheus) for fear of not having a subject (Eurydice) to gaze upon. To lose the secret body. Every dive is a little death d(r)ive.

"Empedocles, by throwing himself into Mount Etna, leaves forever present in the memory of men this symbolic act of his being-for-death. The Hero commits himself to death by reason of the obsessional gaze he casts upon death that has only one face, his own."²⁶

The Return Voyage

Having been driven by the 'mad calculus of your life' to the beach for a bit of 'sanity' amongst the waves, it is now time to turn towards the shore again. It is mid-day and will remain so for hours. Throwing the arms over for the Australian Crawl, the body pivots along it's axis. Face down, eyes and ears lift above the waterline, left side then right side, breathing every four strokes. Together, sea and body are full of noises and sounds. Bubbles burst next to the ear, a high pitched buzz of distant motors, screams of children closer into shore, seagulls overhead and air rushing in and out of the lungs. Every inhalation an inspiration. Alternatively, your attention is turned firstly to the city beach then to the open horizon. Inside and outside oppositions begin to dissolve. No longer is your body closed, opaque and unified against the world. Instead you go with the flow in a heterogeneous sea. A metastatic flow of energies, a series of investments, reverberating through the body, lapping against the unconscious. 'Out the back' listening to the "noise-sound of the involuntary body, the noise-sound of the libido wandering over bodies."²⁷ A metamorphosis has taken place. Up on the beach a bell goes off. A Leviathan is sighted. Suddenly your foot in the cool water takes on a new meaning.



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