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George Alexander: A Heterographic Profile

Writing is travelling,
and we change currencies,
religions, languages, passports
of our several identities.
(from *The Book of The Dead*, 1985)

Profile No 1: The man with two names

As a proper name, George Alexander exists only by an act of deed poll and by the hegemonic grace of 1950s Anglo-Australian political deafness. In Alexander's book *Mortal Divide: The Autobiography of Yorgos Alexandroglou*, George is christened Yorgos Alexandroglou after his grandfather, as is the Greek custom. The name Yorgos Alexandroglou provoked in the minds of most 1950s Anglo-Australians an image of "someone with thick hair on the soles of their feet". All those "dago-guttural 'g's', came up like phlegm from deep in the throat" and terrified the nasal-centred Aussie logos:

You are Yorgos, Jorge, Georges, George
Alexander, Alexandroglou, Alessandro, Iskander.
Loosing the mooring rope from the pierced stone
we turn the eyes of the boat east for Levkas,
hard by Albania, to Igouminitsa.

Yorgos Alexandroglou now exists only in the text, yet he lives to transform and reveal us to ourselves.

Having two names begs two selves and two selves demand separate apartments. George and Yorgos fight over who is going to get the mind and who is left holding the body: "already my body feels like it is doing his mind's dirty work". The preoccupation with proper names foregrounds the cultural as well as the personal realisation that we are as much spectators as participants in the properness of our own name. Embedded in this politics of naming, the cultural otherness of one's name leads to a certain disbelief—"is my name a proper one?" In this meta-fiction, the schizocultural split between George and Yorgos forces us (readers) to recognise our active participation in the

construction of the sense or nonsense of our own ideological and political point-of-view.

Profile No 2: A silhouette using scissors and black paper.

My pleasurable memories of a trip to the Mullumbimby rodeo were annually preserved in the form of a tiny portrait profile, cut out of black paper by an artist using nothing more than a pair of small silver scissors. I remember his scissors worked as fast as his mouth. The resulting profile was both a record of someone you only half recognised and a projection, or more literally, a shadow play between the imaginary me caught in the blackness of the solid positive trace and the symbolic social I that forms the boundary horizon line where paper meets illusionary background fair. Now, some thirty years later, and charged with my digital literary scissors, I hand you, by turn, my tiny cut-out profile of George Alexander.

George Alexander is an expert at producing brilliant literary sketches of any subject that commissions his attention. He processes the gift of the story teller shaped with a cutting wit, and an uncanny ability to grasp illusive critical details of the social and cultural subjects he trains his sharp eye upon.

Alexander is well known in the art world as a leading critical voice, teacher, curator, occasional performance artist and tireless promoter of innovative and challenging approaches to writing and art. Over the last two decades Alexander's contribution has been formidable: his work can be found in numerous anthologies, magazines and catalogue essays. He is a regular speaker at Arts Festivals, academic conferences and makes tactical forays into the press.

He was Australian editor of the international journals *Semiotext(e)*, and *Switch* (New York) and was an editor, along with Meaghan Morris, Paul Foss and Liz Gross, of the influential Australian journal *Working Papers/Feral Press* that introduced during the mid to late 1970s, through translation and critical debate, the work of Foucault, Baudrillard and Lyotard, amongst other European philosophers, to an audience hungry for a less doctrinaire approach to critical theory, politics and philosophy.

Somewhat ironically, Alexander's writing is better known in Europe and the USA than in Australia. Translations of his writing into French and Italian and a recent post graduate thesis by Susanna Barzanti from the University of Venice testify to a

growing interest in literary liaisons that seek to redraw conventional multicultural identity maps of a post-colonial Australia from a post-structural theoretical perspective.

In sympathy with many other artists and writers in Australia, George Alexander has survived by nomadically lecturing around the country's universities and art colleges, while enjoying the occasional writer-in-residence appointment and the odd Literature Board fellowship. Currently, he is editor of *Photofile* magazine while lecturing in Art Theory and Writing at The University of Western Sydney and the University of Sydney.

Profile No 3: Unassisted readymade

The unveiling on the literary stage of *The Book of the Dead* (Switch, 1985), *Sparagmos* (Experimental Art Foundation, 1990) and excerpts from *Mortal Divide: The Autobiography of Yorgos Alexandroglou* were confined to an inner circle of small press publications who quickly grasped the power of Alexander's writing in both critical and literary terms. These three books explore complex, provocative and often comic issues as he addresses questions of cultural and political repression; polyglot idioms of "mashed quotations"; dilemmas of Eros and Thanatos; competing histories and para-biographies. Each book builds on the foundations of the last, internally passing through shifting states of intensities; fluid, amorphous, combustible or rock hard.

George Alexander slides across, in and through media, working in collaboration with sound and visual artists, dancers, sculptors and other writers to produce new forms of writing in the Deleuzian sense of a "disjunctive synthesis". Such hybrid outcomes help us recognise that it is the reader, not the author, who is the point at which the traces of any text attain some sense of unity. Alexander has explored the flexibility of working with collage (images), mixage (sound) and bricolage (text) over the last twenty years and has watched with a wry smile as the digital interactive multimedia marketing machine has rumbled into town. Suddenly the pioneering work of the earlier wave of multimedia artists and writers (Fluxus, Post-Object, Conceptual) during the sixties and seventies is being dusted off and re-examined. Such heterographic work is starting to make more sense than nonsense to the general public who now surf the Internet as a matter of course.

Our information media-saturated lives are increasingly composed of the intertextual tissue of echoes from high art and

popular culture, philosophy and street advertising: "we change cultures like TV stations". Our identities are pieced together by bricolage.

Alexander's writing has been variously dubbed experimental, post-modern, off-the-wall and hip-hop depending on the discursive context. Often seen as a radical eclectic, a loose (anti) canon amongst disciplines, Alexander is a wandering minstrel who speaks five languages and crosses the borders of philosophy, art, theory, criticism and fiction as a tactical imperative to shifting circumstances: "the two threads of the critical and creative have been synchronic in my life rather than dialectical".

Alexander's writing is a polyphonic, heteroglossia of the carnivalesque embedded in what Mikhail Bakhtin termed the "interanimation of languages". Heterological fiction combines psychoanalytic categories of desire and transgression with critical and philosophical concepts. Alexander brings out the bliss in the *glissement* (sliding) forcing the reader into a libidinal game of flows, washes and surges of Eros and Thanatos. We feel love in death and death in love—one makes the other comprehensible. Death is incorporated into life and celebrated rather than feared and hidden away. Desire is based on production rather than lack.

We are pitched into Orphic underworlds of reverse mirroring and anti-language, that give rise to satirical fast forward replays, pastiches, analogies and sensual sunny puns only to find ourselves bouncing around pin-ball-like amongst inward self-reflexive eschatological references and mock-mimesis. There is no inside or outside of Alexander's writing, no escape from parody. The myth of some authentic site of pure presence is collapsed as is the utopic desire to find some real or buried meaning in the text. There are no easy categorised phenomena and no novelist devices to lean on.

Under the impact of cultural differences Alexander's languages centrifugally spin off into ludic subversive elements that promise some form of renewal in their boomeranging motion. Texts accrete, overlap, compost and lay the mulch for a new hybrid of writing that speaks of an Australia that is polymorphic rather than monocultural; is five dishes on one plate rather than beef pie 'n sauce.

Profile No. 4: Anagraph (anatomy of the text)

Alexander deals frequently in literary images since images intimately provoke the imaginary backward motion of our

contemporary world. In Alexander's images we can surrender ourselves, reflect upon then awaken ourselves to the possibility of some ecstatic transformation—"nothing changes, everything is transformed". We feel the depth of our passions trailing along, lead astray, brilliantly exposed to the sweet and sour lashings of rhetorical tropes that only let up when we have agreed to discard our restricting social and cultural uniforms.

In 1973, Alexander wrote *Novel* while living in London. Reacting against the prevailing trend towards literary realism or the academic high cholesterol, cognitive density school of New Criticism, Alexander wrote a novel that wasn't a novel. Nourished by the ideas of the contemporary Tel Quel group in France (Barthes, Kristeva, Sollers amongst others) and a backpack full of his favourite against the grain writers (Sterne, Melville, Joyce, Carroll, Beckett and Burroughs), Alexander poured out with the raw energy of an early release prisoner (from Australian maximum security theory) and the bold enthusiasm of a wide-eyed 20 year old in tight pants and no academic responsibilities:

A page before him. Two opposed profiles quiesce. I/I: an eye dividing:

kiss (diaeresis) caress

the kiss read (lip to lip tip to tip type to paper

and taking up the image from the mould)

has the breadth and contour of the carnal kiss

The smile is the kiss around the lips and the
memory of a simile of a memory

Profile No. 5: Carbon rubbings (afterimages)

"Death is more repressed in our culture than sex. . .all the metadiscourses are next to useless, the hospitals provide a kind of therapeutic obstacle race and so the individual experience goes down the tubes. . .so where do our feelings go?" declares Alexander in an interview for the magazine *Paper Burns*. By way of a personal response to witnessing the death of a number of close friends in succession, *The Book of the Dead* was published in 1985. Searching for a way out of the ontological quagmire of Western logocentricism, Alexander turned to the land of his conception, Egypt, and the myths of Osiris (god of Death), Thoth

(god of writing), Isis (sister-wife and Love) and the Phoenix (rebirth). The resulting text sets off a running battle between speech and writing, father and son, body and mind and sun and moon. This genealogical struggle for Alexander is not to start to form things in order to make possible the approach toward true death, but to start from the deep of death in order to turn toward the intimacy of things:

We turn away from and towards each other.
In this double movement
we never return the full echo
of what we mean
Death calls and the Book responds

Death is an abyss, the ultimate absence, the loss of all foundation. Death is the ungraspable—the absolute indeterminacy. Writing is also a form of dying:

Writing separates me, separates itself from life,
enacts dying
in its velocity

Death is when the past catches up with the future and oversteps the present. You can only write when you have found some peace with death, when you can:

feel its sweet edge
divide me
through heart and marrow and
happily conclude
my mortal career

In the world of the social, things are transformed into objects so that they can be grasped more easily and understood. In the world of the imaginary, things are transformed so that they can not be gripped by the reasonable and so release us to move into a more intimate space where such things as the death of others (ourselves) can be rendered more (in)visible. The way into this space of dying is through the word: "death calls and the Book responds".

Profile No. 6: Writer Descending a Staircase

In 1989, *Sparagmos* was selected for publication by the writer, editor and promoter of new talent, Ken Bolton of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. It was short listed for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for New Writing in 1990. *Sparagmos* is actually two books in one. The first, *Ringling the Bell Backwards* is an account of an artist friend's suicide (Piotr Olszanski) and the second, *Roses for the Cutting*, is an analysis of love withdrawn—"love remembered, cauterized and remembered again". The result is a bitter sweet meditation grounded in the head spinning bubble bursting days of hysterical art auctions, inflated egos where "art is a hard habit to support and a harder one to quit", starving artist friends are caught in the cross fire of Art Museum politics and social security rhetoric. The survival of intimacy is strained in a world where "art is sentenced to a stiff rope and short jump aesthetic". The writer is abandoned at once by his ambitious long sighted lover in search of fame and artistic fortune and by the suicide of a quiet genius crushed by an indifferent art bureaucracy and pre-occupied colleagues trying to cover their own arses. Stopping for breath, Alexander feels himself hugged by a "furious power and fierce fate". One arm is the "pessimism of the intellect" (theory) and the other the "optimism of the will" (artistic practice). Writing in this unfriendly climate amounts to "cold armistice". The title *Sparagmos* comes from the ecstatic Greek ritual of dismemberment. Writing the book was a means of stopping the vertigo, righting the nausea (nostalgia) of Calvin Klein ad politics where people get "fried in the cross-circuits of Fad Tribalism" and "gossip becomes the only means of being able to say, 'I am part of this society'". *Sparagmos* is an antidote to complacency, to glib tokenism and dogmatic barking at life.

Profile No 7: In-flight semiogram (20,000 feet above the Nullarbor)

The extract from *Mortal Divide* that appears in this issue of *Southerly* brings together a number of disparate filiform sections concerning fathers (Neptune, Dionysius, Apollo, Robert Menzies, Professors, Doctors) patriarchal rituals (of writing, eating, drinking, loving and dying) and the role of the son (George/Yorgos) in trying to make sense (of feeling lost in the symbolic order), then nonsense of being caught in the divide between two cultures, languages, value systems and career paths.

A moonscan reading of *Mortal Divide* speaks of a Sydney-bound son trying to stitch together the vagrant memories of an estranged father who loomed large, wild and exotic on the other side of the Australian desert (constantly trekking through the son's unconscious).

The theme of the father and son within *Mortal Divide* demonstrates more than the fear that nature has been left behind or replaced. Both father and son bound within a logocentric duality are decentred and shaken up in the *trans* of by being transported, transfigured then transplanted into a foreign soil. The 'divide' is also a metaphor for the language barrier, psychological bridge, geographical red heart, bodies of cool, tepid or hot water, temporal slipzones and cultural gulfs. George/Yorgos (the son named and hence bound to the order of the grandfather) undergoes a metamorphosis from swimming "finless fish clamped in a dream of flight" (imaginary self umbilically connected to the mother) to walking terrestrial animal (social symbolic self roughly bolted to the father). Across the great dividing range of differences that fester and seep within nationalism, multiculturalism, sexism and racism, comes the writer morphing from emigrant to immigrant, from son to father and intimate lover to just-good-friends.

The great geographical divides of time and space only ferment the potency of separation and the desire to immerse himself in the intoxicating sensorial world of *rembetika*, Cuban cigars and Greek *mangas*. The language and psychology of food and music serve as metaphorical sleepers carrying the son across the deserts of despair towards some promise of a heterogeneous world where difference would be celebrated rather than shut down. The other-worldliness of sub-cultural languages, gambling cafes and Hellenic clubs, contrast graphically with the comparatively static bourgeois home life of Sydney and mother. The yearly visits to Perth are relayed and overlaid into Homeristic (humouristic) tales. The adolescent Odysseys carried by Qantas through the looking glass of 4 time zones and three cultures. This fascinating (*fascinum*—seeking nearness within distance) yearly migration ritual across the symbolic and imaginary divides of a vast metaphysical as much as geographical continent, became an uncanny (at once homely and foreign) model for later political and critical methodologies—a nomadic means of writing, production and consumption that Deleuze and Guattari termed

schitzoculture—where desire is a positive force employed by the writer to subvert the Law: “he [the subversive father] put a spin on the capitalist instinct, real estate, class codes and language, for which I love him”. The writer is a migrator like one of the Dionysian priests who wandered from country to country.

Another psychoanalytic infrared satellite reading of *Mortal Divide* (identifying different symptoms, complexes and causes) might lead to Oedipus. We could identify various states of alienation as causes for disjunctive narrative form and a reliance on repetitious tropes: from academic institution, patriarchal family or art-publishing scene. A couch session would also cast the doctor figure (in the expanded version of *Mortal Divide*) as the site of reconciliation through transference of conflict—the impossible cure consisting in the son assuming the father’s persona and forming his own family in turn. The figure of the doctor (analyst) acts not as a dispenser of medical information, as does, Dr Georgiakis in George Johnson’s *The Verdict*, to cite another Australian author cast adrift on a Greek Island, but rather as a paternal authority figure who comments on the moral and philosophical actions of the abandoned son, uncommitted but loving husband or self-doubting writer:

Each one of us lives but one life, the Doctor says.
We choose it deliberately, he says, along the ways, and
those excluded I’s we abandon come back sometime to
haunt us with their repudiated possibilities. But we can’t
parlay our bets on different prongs, he says.

To cite these emotional incidents of head-butting against the septic tiled walls of authority as psychological attempts to, for example, symbolically murder the father would be to oversimplify the complex weaving of vibrating fluxing social, economic, cultural and historical forces at play in *Mortal Divide*. Alexander isn’t looking for some Oedipal home, some return or reconciliation. The bricoleur has no need of a mortgage. Home is simply where you plug your laptop Powerbook in.

Profile No. 8: Deathmask (heirograph).

We write, says Blanchot in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, because in the depths of language we hear the work of death as it prepares living beings for the truth of their name. For the child (son) who

remains next to the dying parent (father) in hospital, death comes as a death to be died still more. The child must carry the dying, preserve and prolong it until the moment when, time being at an end, everyone can die joyfully together. Joined together by a mobius strip of desire: "Desire desires death as well as life". Death is, after all, the mockery of immortality.

Throughout *Mortal Divide*, the text is fuelled by collisions, couplings and foldings that release libidinal flows of water, of money, and language which in turn produce intensities of pleasure, pain and anxiety. Such intensities form and transform what Alphonso Lingis, in *Libido* (1985), calls "transverse connections, inclusive disjunctions, and polyvocal conjunctions". Rather than lean on the crutch of narrative resolutions, moral outcomes or novel foreclosures, Alexander seeks to maintain something of the vibrating resonances of events through the signifiers (words) themselves in the first degree. We are acutely conscious, for example, that the image of the father held in photographs, in the mind's eye, in writing, draws progressively away from reality until it ceases to bear any relation to reality. The phases of the father image (according to Baudrillard's schema) move from reflection to perversion, and from absence to final simulation. When images get too close or too far away from us they lose their sense of reality. Yorgos holds a photo of himself with his Dad—a photo-memory fabricated from the seductive rhetoric (the masks) of family album truths. Such images are the mortal remains of nature and Yorgos Alexandroglou, like the rest of us, is both made and unmade according to his images that survive him.

Yet as Alexander stresses, it is death that makes life possible just as death gives words their full meaning:

Remembering forwards
Death reads me back to you
Showing off its power to write me,
here, brimfully alive

Without the intoxication of death and the life it quickens, writing would not be possible. And by the same token, without the poetry of writers like George Alexander, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness.