

A Trip to New Norfolk

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A lot of cities have a word like this, the name of a place, but carrying a terrible freight of pain and fear and misery. A scare word, and a swear word too, a bogie man of a word...New Norfolk...what a weight of sadness and humiliation and hopelessness those place names carried.

Marion Halligan, 'A Family Bible', 2007.

I stop in at the petrol station to fill up. The petrol attendant asks what I'm up to this afternoon and I tell him I'm taking a trip to New Norfolk. 'Not a bad place,' he replies politely. Less than twenty years ago, a trip to New Norfolk meant something very different. It was a trip to the mad house, the funny farm. Being only recently closed, the life of 'New Norfolk' is still within living memory. Mention the name and someone will tell you a story of someone in there or of someone who knew someone...

The abandoned site of the Royal Derwent Hospital – once Tasmania's only institution for the mentally ill – is inescapable as you enter New Norfolk from Hobart. An unruly collection of dilapidated, lacklustre buildings, the Royal Derwent is an arresting sight/site. As a kind of suburb in itself, the site occupies the fringes of the small and

economically depressed town of New Norfolk, 35km north-west of Hobart. The asylum once served the entire state, housing up to 1000 patients in its sprawling complex. Patients included those with both mental illness and intellectual disabilities as well as those with a litany of other social problems; from schizophrenics to depressives, alcoholics to epileptics, psycho-geriatrics to the 'criminally insane'. In its working days, the Royal Derwent was simply known as 'New Norfolk', a site so mythic that its own boundaries seemed to expand to take in the whole town. Here, the entire town of New Norfolk came to stand for the institution and, by extension, madness. "'To go to New Norfolk'", writes Peter Conrad, 'meant, I knew, to go a bit funny; to lose your reason' (84). The Royal Derwent is the oldest asylum in Australia on its original site, but has remained neglected both physically and in public discourse since being shut down in 2001. In an article on the hospital's closure in Hobart's daily newspaper, *The Mercury*, the site was described as a 'huge open sore' that could only be 'healed' through re-development (Wood 37). However, the numerous attempts to re-develop the site have been thwarted due to lack of funds. Abandoned and derelict, the site straddles apparent divisions between public and private, interior and exterior, disgust and delight – the twin poles of abjection.

Going back there necessitates the sensuous and dynamic discourse of the journey, a subjective excursion which acts as a textual incursion throughout this piece. The journey works in the nexus between narrative and experience, illustration and interpretation, memory and affect, place and space. And, following Giuliana Bruno, the journey might be thought of as 'emotion', a conjunction of motion and emotion which combines the affective interior landscapes of the mind

with those of the geographic (*Atlas 6*). Bruno's meditation on this chiasmic intertwining, via the technologies of spatio-visual art, evidences that 'motion, indeed, produces emotion and that, correlatively, emotion contains a movement' (6). It seems such emotion cannot be limited to the (mobile) subject, but extends to the site of the abandoned Royal Derwent, a boundary that, itself, 'moves'.

This is not my first trip to New Norfolk; it is a return. And, like all returns, it mobilises a temporality that is cyclical. I was brought here, as a child, to visit my grandfather, who was 'in' for Alzheimer's disease. I write as if he was imprisoned for committing a crime because the image that remains with me from this visit is carceral. I remember seeing him in his cell through the door's fishbowl glass window. My emotional response seemed to overwhelm what intellectual capacity I had at that young age to comprehend this place. I was compelled to be on my best behaviour. Dumb, I could only sense badness. It seems as though the place has instilled in me a generalised fear of badness that was fused with my parents' threats of punishment for 'bad children': the little black van that would collect naughty children...and take them to places like this. A place where bad people vanish. I hadn't thought of the place again, as many don't, until over ten years later when I passed it while on a family trip to the west coast. I hadn't thought of the place again, as many don't, until over ten years later when I passed it whilst on a family trip to the west coast. As we passed by, my mother commented that it was closing down. In silence, I looked out the window, relieved we weren't staying this time. So the place is vanishing. And yet, nothing seems to justify the pace or finality that 'vanishing' seems to suggest. Stuff remains. And so I return to what

is left of this place, now derelict. I have been compelled to return to 'New Norfolk' again and again; it is possessing and I am possessed. Once infected by the place, it never leaves you, just as you can never entirely leave it.

The mental asylum serves as a potent reminder of the possible degeneration of the mind, acting as a border through which definitions of sanity and insanity are produced and maintained. The hospital is instrumental in discursively constructing 'madness' through the power implicit in its spatial organisation and its institutional practices of assessment. The asylum becomes a mode of representing madness through which we can 'fantasise about our potential loss of control, perhaps even revel in the fear it generates within us, but we always believe that this fear exists separate from us' (Gilman 2). The anxiety that this loss of control produces enacts a fantasy of pre-oedipal wholeness where the categories of 'self' and 'other' collapse, and identity fissured. Such anxieties are heightened in the *derelict* asylum. As Kathleen Stewart notes, 'ruined objects take on a meaningfulness or presence more compelling than the original' (93). Whilst the asylum might have once separated the insane from the sane, the derelict Royal Derwent represents the 'breakdown' of the asylum itself. In a state of ruin, the system and order implicit in the foundations of the Royal Derwent is arrested, disrupted, and exposed. Like madness itself, the abject ruin evidences decay, the fragmentation and disordering of things.

A visit to the Royal Derwent engenders an acute, sensuous mode of experience which harnesses all of the senses, where movement 'is rough, disrupted and potentially perilous' (Edensor 95). The

contemporary, 'industrial', or even 'modernist' ruin (Bruno *Public* 79) provokes the 'unpredictable immanence of impression and sensation' through its diversity of textures, sounds, and smells (Edensor 13, 145). A visit to the site is a kinetic and haptic experience, one that conjoins motion with emotion; moving through these wards, one is moved. Here, the abject is particularly pertinent for its intertwining and disruption of the psychological and the bodily, the interior and exterior, and its focus on the affective response to matter, which involves an ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion.

One way of getting to New Norfolk from Hobart is to take the Brooker Highway out of town, and then the picturesque 'The Rivers Run' tourist route which follows the Derwent River as it winds its way north-west. Another way of arriving there is to take the back road where you must first pass through the northern welfare suburbs of Moonah and Glenorchy. At Berridale, the road forks and you take the left, a road which winds around the mountain hamlets of Glenlusk, Collinsvale, and Molesworth. New Norfolk is just ahead.

Travelling on the back road out of Berridale, the landscape browns and the vegetation peters out into scrub and some scraggly eucalypts. Some houses are abandoned; many more have the appearance of abandonment but are still lived in, evoking an uncanny presence. Going round these bends, you wind up paranoid, scared. Taking a turn for the worse seems almost inevitable here. You start to see things you haven't seen before. The paddocks demand constant attention. Strewn with ruined huts, rudimentary outhouses, some rusted-out farm machinery, broken trampolines, upturned car bodies. This is the province of disorder. And yet, many of these

locals – Vietnam vets, ex-‘crims’ – have taken to these hills in search of a quieter life. Asylum.

The road forks and I take the left. More derelict houses. Ahead, a red sign reads ‘no entry’ and a big black dog runs out barking. I reverse over my tracks, turn the car around and drive away, looking all the while in the rear view mirror. I see a man in reverse as he steps out from behind a green panel van to watch. The dog follows alongside me till I’m off their turf. The Tasmanian legend of the ‘Dog Boy’ creeps into my head. Was it not here that a boy was chained to a post like a dog for his entire childhood?

The ruin of the Royal Derwent embodies a sense of death and decay. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes of the abject as ‘something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us’ (4). The abject works as a means of separating the fully formed subject from that which is only partially formed. The abject is a more ‘violent’ experience than the Freudian uncanny, where ‘nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory’ (5). Kristeva draws attention to waste objects, excess matter which is out of place, threatening the border between subject and object. ‘We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger’ (9). In this, the abject disturbs ‘identity, system, order’ (Kristeva 4).

Ward 5. The arrival. 'Please ring', instructs the label on the doorbell. Mockingly, the door next to it stands wide open. There is no inside bolt to deter the stray visitor, rather its bolt is on the outside, locking in...what? I enter with trepidation, my breath quickens and becomes shallow. Entry into this space emptied of its utilitarian value is like entering the void, the barren landscapes of the mind. Here, you re-encounter yourself and risk entrapment, loss, death. The passageways are cool and dark; the rooms are bathed in a light too bright. A thin mattress lies folded on the dirtied chequerboard lino floor in the middle of the corridor, its plastic cover peeling away from the foam and covered in dirt. Evidently, it is not just me who is compelled to return to New Norfolk time and time again; an entire culture of trespass explores this space of ruination. The floor is littered with detritus from recent Goth camp outs and other 'juvenile delinquents' who stage nightly rituals here – a packet of Peter Jacksons, Jim Beam and Coke in a can, an empty ice-cream bucket, empty wine bottles. I come to what looks to be a common room. An assortment of vinyl furniture is strewn throughout the room – a recliner with its foot rest flung out as if couching a vanished body, a beige padded wheelchair which recalls the recurring scene of the empty wheelchair in the pop-cult 2001 thriller, *Session 9* (Brad Anderson), filmed on location at Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts. Straightjackets strangle walking frames and other unidentifiable equipment. An artificial Christmas tree stands on a ledge against the wall, a melancholic reminder of a carnival long-since vanished. I think of Dickens' observations of Windmill Hill Asylum in 1852, where the Christmas tree marks the ushering in of a new, civilized and humane era of the asylum, where patients are freed from chains and cages: In 'A Curious Dance around a Curious Tree,

Dickens writes, 'The moment the dance was over, away the porter ran, not in the least out of breath, to help light up the tree. Presently it stood in the centre of its room...a blaze of light and glitter; blossoming in that place...for the first time in a hundred years' (390) The unadorned Christmas tree against the wall signals a 'blaze of light and glitter', a carnival, too excessive to be sustained. Fizzled out.

Like a corpse, which Kristeva notes as being the most abject of all matter (3), the Royal Derwent now stands emptied of its former, 'proper' life. As a body without a soul, a common Gothic motif, the Royal Derwent is imbued with a deathliness that corrodes boundaries and threatens coherent meaning. 'The jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva 2). The ruined asylum is that site which has lost its control, indeed is out of control. In the context of the Royal Derwent, the 'death' of the institution and its failed promise of either a scientific cure for, or containment of 'madness', becomes perversely sinister. In Kristeva's discussion of the juxtaposition of death and science at the museum at Auschwitz the abject would seem to reach its apex 'when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things' (4). The abject ruin of the psychiatric institution comes to embody the failure of the 'scientific' to contain 'madness' within its walls.

Ward 4. A sign handwritten in felt pen on pink cartridge paper is stuck to the wall with sticky tape, marking the entrance to the 'Dining Room'. A hand-made transparent sticker is fastened to the glass of

the door, the sun from inside the room picking up its blue wave design and rolling with it. Name cards are fixed to the doors of small padded cells. All that remains of past occupants are these material remnants, a string of anonymous names detached from their signified bodies. Signifiers that matter, that haunt. With all the care of a primary school exercise, the name 'Pat' is calligraphed on pale green card. My thoughts linger on Pat as the card now sits on my bookshelf amidst my own clutter. Other names attempt to reclaim these spaces with their elaborate graffiti tags, most of which are illegible.

The asylum, that Foucauldian heterotopia where 'madness' was produced by, and required for, the definition of the proper, 'sane' subject, became abject after its closure. Herein, the hospital is, somewhat paradoxically, opened. The closure of the Royal Derwent is in line with international deinstitutionalisation, where 'doors opened, railings and gates came down. Patients left...leaving unclear boundaries between madness and sanity, safety and danger, them and us, inside and outside' (Gittins 57-8). Many of the older buildings are dilapidated with age; they are leaking and rotting, and surfaces such as paint and roofing are peeled back. Organised criminals have hacked into the walls of the newer buildings on the eastern side for their valuable copper piping, leaving significant water damage in many buildings as well as disturbance to asbestos walls, marking many buildings as hazardous zones.

Unable to contain the madness it once housed, the abject ruin magnifies the already challenging experience of visiting a mental institution. As Kathleen Stewart notes, 'ruined objects take on a meaningfulness or presence more compelling than the original' (93).

Once closed off to everyone except its residents and guests, the site now renders all visitors as trespassers. Rather than being entirely 'other' into which one would 'disappear', the site now exists as a series of thresholds in itself. This ensures that the site is paradoxically and indeterminately both open and closed. Whilst being legally out of bounds to the general public, there are no visual markers, at least on the eastern side, to signal this propriety, nor to deter the visitor from entering the buildings. Threshold markers such as windows and doors are either smashed in or flung wide open. As such, the grounds have the appearance of being accessible to the general public, an impression which is enhanced by the public's use of the Ring Road that surrounds the Royal Derwent as an open means of accessing New Norfolk's town centre.

Outside. Feral cats play a cunning game of hide and seek in the drain pipes, dancing in and out amongst the concrete rubble as if in attempt to lure me into their sinister pit. Out of the corner of my eye, I see an old man shuffling past Ward 2, hunchbacked. I take out my camera and take a photo as some kind of an attempt to verify his reality. A former resident returning to reclaim old terrain? A ghost? As he disappears behind the building, I think of the 1987 slasher film, Doom Asylum (Richard Friedman), where a group of teenagers trespassing on an abandoned asylum are met by a mad coroner who then kills them with autopsy equipment. As I approach a window to look inside a building, I notice a small tub on the window sill: 'military grade camouflage face paint.' Presumably a remnant of a recent stake out. I turn and run.

A *locus horribilis*, the abject site of the ruined Royal Derwent presents a dilemma for Tasmania's identity work. Through an encounter with this site, Tasmanian identity is revealed to be 'unhinged' or schizoid. That Tasmania is populated with inbred degenerates and driven to madness by isolation is a common stereotype that persists in the contemporary milieu in films such as *Dying Breed* (Jody Dwyer, 2008). The ruined site of the Royal Derwent within Tasmania is a site that signals a fissuring of Tasmania. 'Madness in its name' (Castro).

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