

A responsive world: Personal reflections

I grew up surrounded by gentle animals on what today would be described as a 'hobby farm', a three-acre property situated on the rural outskirts of Melbourne in south-eastern Australia. These animals included dogs and cats, ducks, geese, hens and, at one stage, a pet turkey. The main focus of my entire childhood, however, was my ponies. My first pony, Trotty, and those who came after her, Nola and Kazan, were my day-long playmates and confidants. It was to them that I recited my earliest poems, and to them that I ran when I was troubled or excited. They nuzzled me in the same soft, considerate way whatever the occasion. I chose their company not for want of family and friends, but for its own sake. The form of intimacy that grew up between us was qualitatively different from anything that could have developed between myself and human persons. It was a kind of uncluttered closeness, or being-with, which existed despite the fact that our subjectivities were, in terms of content, mutually unknowable. We took it for granted, on either side, that this unknowability did not matter, that our psyches could touch and pervade each other, without need for explanations or self-disclosures, such as those conveyable by language. These horses were, for me, 'primary others' in the psychoanalytic sense; they were not substitutes for, but additional to, significant humans, nor could humans substitute for them. I learned from them, and from the rest of my animal family, that sociality greatly exceeds the human, and that one is always in the presence of potentially communicative and companionable others, even when one is supposedly 'alone'. By them I was also opened up to alternative, non-human ways of seeing things, and, on horseback, I was carried into dimensions of landscape not

otherwise discoverable – into a country beyond roads, beyond fences and beyond human limits. When I try to imagine my childhood now, one image recurs – a kind of distillation of all that those early years meant and still mean to me: it is an image of myself astride my pony in a huge, high, luminous, rapturous, slightly shimmering (and now totally lost) land- and sky-scape.

Domestic animals were not the only non-human influences shaping my sense of self and world in those days. There were also kindly ancient manna gums (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) on our land. We knew they dated from before colonization because they bore canoe scars in their trunks. Birdlife was abundant. I was particularly aware of the herons that stood sentinel on the white stag trees that littered the paddocks. Interestingly dangerous reptiles occasionally turned up under bits of scrap metal or in one's path. Large wetlands nearby often wreathed our house in mist. But the greatest of these varied joys was the creek – our very own, steeped in irresistible mystery for me, yet at the same time busy and loquacious, swirling with news of other unknown yet connected places. All these palpably purposeful elementals contributed to my sense of a world of communicative presences beyond the circle of human congress.

Nor was my childhood home the only place that turned my psyche outward in this way. There was also an old sheep station, Daisy Plains, located in the vast arid hinterland of New South Wales, where I occasionally spent school holidays. Daisy Plains was the home of a friend of mine, Sheila, who boarded during term time in Melbourne. Named for the little white everlastings that, in rare wet seasons, carpeted the plains, it was no ordinary sheep station, but, even in those days, a relic of an earlier era. Sheila's

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father, an old-timer with a gaze as blue and far as the desert sky, had been born and raised on the property, and he ran the place in the pre-mechanical style, with the aid of stock ponies, dogs and horse-drawn buggies. We children were out all day in the searing sun on the saltbush plains, lurching out of battered tuckerboxes, riding in stockmen's saddles, racing our ponies, chasing kangaroos, emus and wild pigs with delirious excitement. Back at the homestead, animals filled our every waking moment: there were sheep and lambs, pigs, a flock of diminutive long-haired bush goats, an army of dogs, legions of chooks, ducks and geese, and, at different times, tame emus and kangaroos. An old white goat named Snowy and a cocoa-coloured, hand-reared filly clattered about on the wide back veranda. A sack containing a recently orphaned joey usually hung from the clothes line over the enormous wood-fired stove in the kitchen.

The animal-centredness of life at Daisy Plains did not preclude unabashed slaughter and brutality as part of the daily round. From my saddle I witnessed mother kangaroos being torn to shreds by the station's dogs; emus, in flight from our young stockman friends, failing to clear a fence, becoming entangled in the wire instead, only to be bludgeoned to death with a fence-post; and in the stock yards, young pigs uttering torture-chamber screams as their throats were cut and their still-convulsing bodies dumped into troughs of scalding water. I sat with the other kids in the back of a jeep on a nocturnal kangaroo-shooting excursion, and as the bodies piled up under our feet, I remember the blood of the kangaroos soaking my green felt boots dark red. The cruelty shocked me to the core – in fact, it was this which first made me aware of my core, a still, silent, inner place of watching, beyond speech. But it did not diminish the overwhelming sense of enchantment that this place awakened in me. For the enchantment, and the heightened feeling of being alive that accompanied it, arose from the fact that animals, and the uncompromising land which decided their fate, were the almost exclusive focus of everyone's life there, and the carnage,

for all its horror, was part of that visceral involvement.

When I was fifteen, my family moved into the city, and both my rural life and my visits to Daisy Plains ceased. But the sense of inner affinity with the natural world I had experienced till then continued. It did not give rise to a scientific interest in the details of living systems and how their components fitted together. Nor was I even a proto-naturalist, identifying species, totting up observations, assembling a solid body of empirical knowledge. The affinity was always more emotionally charged than that, more immersive – indeed, more metaphysical. In my teenage years it found expression in a great outpouring of drawings, stories and poetry. If I had known about Aboriginal Dreamings at that time, I would have recognized my own proto-consciousness in them. But this was still the era of the Great Australian Silence about all things Aboriginal, and as far as I was concerned Aborigines belonged to a past as remote as Captain Cook and the dinosaurs. Nonetheless, something in my experience – something still inchoate, inarticulate, but informed with that astonishing unconscious fore-knowledge that adolescents often have of their adult lives – was pulling me towards the notion of the indigenous: at the age of sixteen I took a journey, on my own, to Rabaul in New Guinea. This was the 1960s, and New Guinea was still an Australian protectorate. For two months I worked for board and lodging in missions deep in the jungle, travelling in the back of crowded trucks to gatherings where men would dance barefoot on burning coals; eating python meat by the light of fireflies; exploring the simmering, sulphurous craters of active volcanoes; encountering a people still embedded in a pre-industrial tradition of exuberant ecological prosperity, despite ominous overlays of colonialism. I realized then with great clarity that this was where I, as a young writer, belonged, at the interface of the modern and the indigenous.

But, unfortunately, life took a different turn. At the age of eighteen, I found myself, incongruously, in “swinging London”. I moved in with friends who leased a top-

storey studio in the grand old Pheasantry Club on the King's Road in Chelsea, and soon I was trapped in the life that circumstances had led me, reluctantly, to embark upon there. The apartment was without a garden, without the slightest glimpse of green from its high windows. The Pheasantry was legendary as one of the nerve-centres of the London 'underground'. Artists, writers and rock musicians congregated in our apartment, and every night till dawn the entire building was shaken with musical reverberations from the nightclub in the basement. People were embarked on what were for them exciting adventures with sex and drugs. With comings and goings at all hours, residents and visitors alike were charged to the eyeballs with the fizz of glamour, the intoxication of notoriety and celebrity.

I alone, it seemed, languished. I felt deadened. Without any trees in sight, with all presence and memory of animals expunged from this world, without even a proper sky above me (the London sky appearing more like a low ceiling than the soaring invitation to infinity to which I was accustomed in Australia), I felt truly 'underground', buried alive. My spirit, with its lifelong habit of expansiveness, had to submit for the first time to grey urban confinement, to a world built exclusively to human specifications, in which no court of appeal existed beyond socially prescribed perceptions and perspectives. There was here no turning out to a wider world of subtle voices and signals, a world of myriad – at first indiscernible, but with patient attention increasingly differentiated – responsive presences. Rather, there was a turning-in, and a turning-up of the volume of human-generated and human-directed self-infatuated cacophony and chatter. This turning-in found its ultimate expression in the essential project of the counter-culture: to transform reality into an inner picture show, a spectacle of hallucinatory images and sexually induced sensations orchestrated for our private entertainment. This project was, in fact, nothing more than a hip rendition of the old transcendental idealism or solipsistic anthropocentrism of

the Western tradition, which places reality in us rather than us in reality.

I had no words, at the time, to name this human introjection of reality, or to justify my sense of exile from a world that was truly alive, and, unlike the one in which I found myself, a source of true enlivenment. I especially had no words to challenge the high claims of Art on which the counter-culture rested. Instead, I kept some snails and bare twigs in a jar in my study, and gazed at them for months. I retreated into a state of fantasy and intense creativity, writing and drawing obsessively, calling up from my own deep unconscious the images and motifs I needed to survive. I composed song cycles and stories of origins, though I was only just beginning to learn about Aboriginal Dreamings. I hung around antique stores and antiquarian book shops, seeking out illustrations, old paintings, fairy and folk tales, that could be threaded into my nascent mythologies. I haunted the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, with its layer upon layer, colonnade after colonnade, of magical animal statuary. Whenever I found a numinous image – an old French engraving of a lone seal, for instance, or a Chinese painting of wild geese – I enshrined it, hanging it as an icon in the gallery of my mind. Out of such gathered fragments, and out of my own memory, imagination and dreams, I tried to recreate the sense of enchantment that had always been the essence of my experience of the world, and without which I found life scarcely worth living.

From the viewpoint of Western psychoanalysis, this sense of enchantment is regressive, and signals a failure of individuation in infancy. But to adopt this point of view is surely to beg the metaphysical question. Looking back on my early years now, it seems more plausible to assume that the ample opportunities for close communion with animals and elemental aspects of landscape that were available to me as a child had opened me to a larger world, a world astir with presence or presences that vastly exceeded the human.

After a year or so in the UK I enrolled in a philosophy degree at the University of

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London, more for the purpose of renewing my visa than out of any enthusiasm for the cold analytical philosophy that reigned supreme in Britain (and Australia) at that time. At Bedford College I was a wayward student, eschewing lectures but voraciously reading the old anthropology books I found in the library stacks. It was in those old books, particularly Levy Bruhl and a swathe of out-of-date ethnographies of Australian Aborigines, that I at last found hints of what I had unconsciously been looking for: the notion of *participation mystique*, for instance, and views of the world as suffused with a meaning dimension – a Dreaming dimension. Eventually a kindly tutor, Doreen Tulloch, the only woman amongst the Bedford College Philosophy staff, understood me and led me back to the 17th century, to metaphysics, viewed through the visionary lenses of Spinoza and Leibniz. I embraced Spinoza like a lost lover from the depths of time, a philosopher who holds up a lantern to show the deserted path the West did not but could have travelled. I must say my immersion in the mind of Spinoza, at the age of 21, felt like an experience of direct transmission, and I have remained a faithful and lovingly grateful Spinozist ever since.

Long before this encounter with Spinoza, however, or the first tentative steps in my lifelong, still unfinished journey towards the Aboriginal cosmos, it was, as I have explained, my intimate communion as a child with animals that opened me to pervasive presence and purpose. Once one was attuned to such presence, it was natural to expect it not merely from animals but from all the elements of the natural environment. There was no obvious reason to portion it out or draw hard-and-fast boundaries around its instances. There was therefore every reason to anticipate a certain diffuse responsiveness from reality at large. It was this presumption that the world, when invoked in good faith, would respond, that defined for me then the sense of enchantment. And this presumption has not been disappointed in my later life, though I have learnt that things will not necessarily respond in the manner one anticipates or

with the results for which one hopes. One should certainly not, in my view, rely on the world to fulfil requests or afford protection. But if one entreats it simply to reveal itself, to engage in an act of communication, then, in my experience, it will generally do so, though in its own ever-unpredictable way. This assurance has always filled my whole being with a sense of being accompanied, of never being alone, a sense of background love, akin to the background radiation of which physicists speak. This is a love which has nothing to do with saving us from death and suffering, or with making us happy. From the viewpoint of reality at large, death and suffering are just inevitable concomitants of individual life. The point for individuals, from this perspective, is not to seek to evade these inevitabilities, but to reach beyond them – to call into the silence beyond human selfhood in search of a reply. This is the moment for which the world has been waiting, and in which it will rejoice: the moment when we ask it to speak. To receive its reply is to enter a love far greater than the kind of protection and indulgence that our traditional importunate forms of prayer expect, for that reply signifies that we belong to an animate order, a pattern of meaning, from which neither death nor any other form of personal obliteration can separate us.

One might describe such an outlook as panpsychist rather than merely ecocentric – and as a cosmological form of panpsychism at that. It construes our existence as part of a larger normative pattern that sustains not only the biosphere but the cosmos itself. Much later in life I did begin to acquire a more literally ecological consciousness by way of an on-the-ground conservation project that required me to get down on all fours, so to speak, and make the acquaintance of a particular stone mountain in all its floral and faunal – ecological – detail. This is an ongoing adventure, and has opened up for me new orders of revelation. But the more eco-empirical registers of consciousness that are resulting from it remain, in my case, nested within that earlier affective cosmocentrism, which has totally shaped and infused every aspect of my life. ■

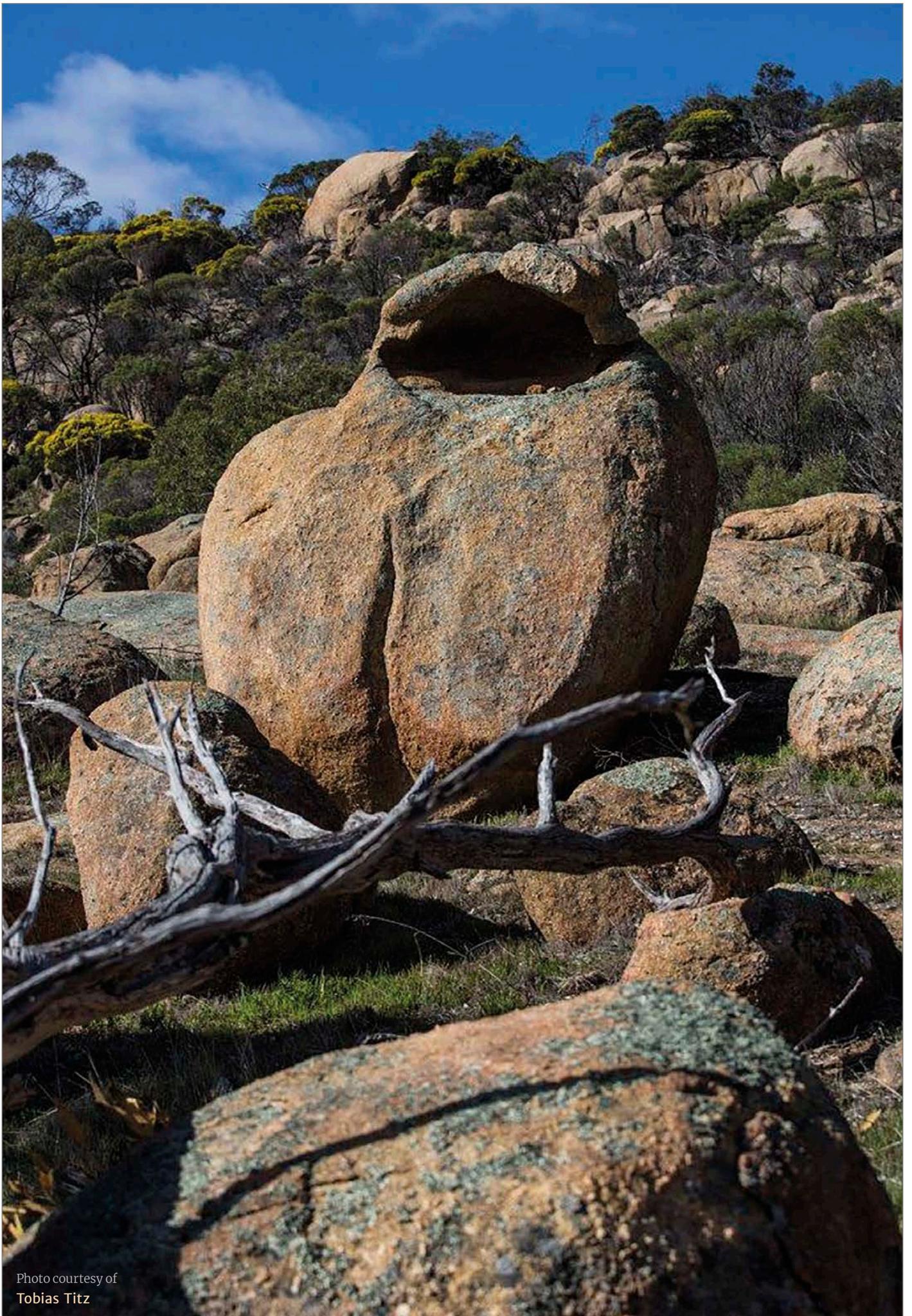


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