

ON NOVELISTS

THE EMPTINESS WITHIN

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In this paper I want to explore what it is like to live with an 'empty centre'. I will do this by first of all summarising how Australia has been seen as an empty place in the European imagination, and then by interpreting the journeys of European Australians to the outback as a metaphor for the 'journey within'.

But first some personal background. When I was a small boy I slept with a huge map of Australia on the wall beside my bed. On it I noticed a dotted line curving across northern Australia. I looked to see what was written above it. The only two words I could find were 'Disappointment' and 'McDonald'. It was only years later, when we moved house and I put up the map again, that I saw the words 'Tropic of Capricorn' in small print right on the sides of the map, and noticed that above the words 'Disappointment' and 'McDonald' hovered the word 'Lake'. I grew up wondering who McDonald was, and why he was disappointed, and how come his disappointment was so important that it gave rise to this arc across the continent.

I only remembered this vignette quite recently. It is one of those 'acorns' that James Hillman writes about in *The Soul's Code* - one of those early experiences that comes to have a major influence later in life. Certainly, disappointment is something I've had my fair share of, and it looms large in my family myth: frustrated ambition, unrequited love, betrayal... So too with emptiness, which in my case has meant a geographic but also spiritual rootlessness. Part of the postmodern condition, I am told, but no less painful for that.

But as Hillman would say, instead of concluding that the formative family environment causes our adult obsessions, we could equally see (with the Platonists, too) that background as the catalyst, the spark, the first sign of the particular *daimon* that will manifest in later life in our guiding myths and our recurrent fantasies. So in this paper I want to treat my personal experiences of disappointment and emptiness as sensitising me to similar experiences in the collective psyche of white Australia, rather than as projections of a personal neurosis.

Australia and its outback have appeared empty to a particular imagination - European, mostly male, and often heroic. The *quest* is a theme dear to the

heart of this imagination, and it is close to the ideology of conquest. The hero's quest is a rite of passage: as Joseph Campbell puts it,

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.¹

For at least three thousand years, it has been through such quests that boys have become men in Western cultures. They are also how these cultures have defined and extended themselves, from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, through the Crusades to Neil Armstrong on the moon and medical science's quests for cures to cancer, AIDS, the common cold. Essential to the quest is the idea of a goal to be reached, an enemy to be conquered, or a treasure to be attained: an object to be overcome, in other words. But what happens when there is no such object; no savages noble enough to fight, no great mountain to plant an imperial flag on top of, no reefs of gold or lands of milk and honey to possess? The failure of the heroic quest has, I argue, been a critical part of the European experience of Australia.

To explore this idea, we can begin long before white settlement. *Terra Australis*, the Great South Land, was conceived in the Greek imagination in a fantasy of emptiness and the need to fill it up. Early Greek geographers recognised three continents in the northern hemisphere - Europe, Asia, and Libia - and reasoned that there must be a large landmass in the southern hemisphere to balance the weight of the other three; otherwise the earth would lurch on its axis.

As we now know, the Greeks were half right, but in the centuries between Magellan and Cook, the European experience of the South Land was one of what Ross Gibson calls a 'diminishing paradise':² the continent proved mysteriously elusive, and succeeding explorers were forced to shrink the boundaries within which it might be found. This made it an emotional as well as mental place, for Europeans were constantly disappointed in their heroic and paradisaical expectations. Numerous sailors like de Quiros and Torres, who set out from Callao in Peru specifically in search of the South Land, skirted it or turned back just before they got here. Abel Tasman had to clearly defy his orders in order to avoid sailing up the east coast. This happened so often that I imagine that this was a place that didn't want to be found. But those who found this land were often no less disappointed than those who sought it in vain. The first recorded report on Australia by a European comes from the captain of a Dutch ship which touched on the

Western side of what is now Cape York in 1606, who commented brusquely when he returned to Bantam (Java), 'There is no good to be done there.' He was wrong, of course, but what a curse to put on a new land.

Or was he right? The Dutch sought profit, and could see none. These days there are profits aplenty dug out of the ground, but maybe the good that is to be done here comes from mining the disappointment of expectations, whether material, heroic or even spiritual. The real value of Australia, I suggest, is in its unrelenting otherness to the European imagination. What could be more disconcerting to this imagination than the not unique experience of Cook, who when entering what is now Botany Bay in his tall dark ships, found that the natives were neither restless nor friendly, but simply *ignored* the newcomers, as if they either did not exist, or were so commonplace as to not warrant a second look.

The early European experience of Australia as a place of disappointment was repeated in the period of inland exploration between the 1820s and 1860s. Time and again the heroic explorers set out from the coast in search of gold, farming land or - most evocatively of all - an inland sea, only come come back (if they came back at all) empty-handed. This experience has had a profound impact on the white Australian psyche, producing a deeply antiheroic culture with a strong tragic vein. Think of our national icons - Ned Kelly, Waltzing Matilda, Gallipoli. Or the tall poppy syndrome, which ensures tht anyone who rises above the ordinary is quickly cut down. So unlike America, say, which was settled in a spirit of optimism that infects the country even today.

The quintessential literary portrayal of the explorer as antihero is Patrick White's *Voss*. As David Tacey has pointed out, it is ironic - and telling - that a novel of 'ritual suicide' should have been lauded as the great Australian novel. The question here, as so often in heroic narratives, is whether or not the hero is not just humbled but learns from his mistakes, so that his death is not mere tragedy. David Marr and others think so; Tacey demurs, and I tend to side with him, wondering whether we need to see evidence of transformation, or self-awareness at least, in order to rationalise our need for national heroes.

Since *Voss*, there have been numerous other narratives of outback journeys, from Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* to Stephan Elliot's *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. I want to mention three themes that emerge in these narratives. The first is the idea of the death of the hero or antihero is (as Tacey suggests of Laura Trevelyan in *Voss*) at the hands or the behest of feminine powers (Dal Stivens' *A Horse of Air*, Rodney Hall's *The Second*

Bridegroom, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*). Second, there have been female heroes, like Robin Davidson in *Tracks*, for whom the outback is less a devouring feminine place than a brutal masculine one, her overcoming of which is symbolised by being guided for a time by an old Aboriginal man, a kind of good father cum wise old man figure who makes her trip meaningful. Similarly, in Helen Garner's script for Gillian Armstrong's film *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, the middle-aged main character takes her dad on a trip to the desert in the hope of healing their relationship. For men the association is primarily mother-desert, and for women father-desert. So while Tacey argues that 'the interior life of this country... is governed by matriarchal forces and chthonic-feminine contents',³ I suggest that this is true mainly from a male, European and perhaps heroic perspective. While I don't believe that nature is a blank slate on which we ascribe meaning, I do think that nature speaks to us in many voices, and we hear the ones we are closest to. For European Australians the desert functions as a radical other, and we associate it with whatever else is radically other yet perhaps powerfully close.

The third theme I want to touch on is the emergence of non-heroic narratives of journeys to the outback. For instance, the three drag queens in *Priscilla* were as far as one can imagine from heroic explorers; members of a small and extreme inner-city subculture exposed to a totally alien environment. Instead of long soliloquys about the wonders of nature and the spiritual quest, or a triumph-over-odds plot, the film ends (almost) with them climbing to the top of King's Canyon (a surrogate for Ayer's Rock), looking at the view and concluding, 'Let's finish the shows and go home.' Another example: in comparing *Tracks*, *An Imaginary Life* and Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*, Peter Bishop observes a common interest in details, in the immediacy of the surrounding environment rather than in heroic questings after far horizons.⁴

But the outback has in any case become less dominant in the Australian imagination over the past generation. There are practical reasons for this: a greater awareness of Aboriginal culture and its relationship to the land, together with the impact of mining, tourism and environmentalism, have made the outback seem much more appealing to urban Australians. It is now seldom seen as the 'dead heart' of Australia, rather as rich, beautiful, sacred; and the locus of what White disparagingly referred to as 'the Great Australian Emptiness' has moved, probably to the suburbs. At the same time we are more aware of other sources for our cultural myths: the cities; Asia; and the coast.

Robert Drewe recently argued that the preoccupation until recently of writers and intellectuals with the 'dry, asexual, pragmatic myth of the bush and inland desert'⁵ has been at the expense of recognising the more sensual mythologising of the coast, where most of us live, play and have our first sexual experiences. I quite agree with Drewe. While I find the outback fascinating, I don't actually *like* it much: give me the sensuality of the coast anyday in preference to the arid, ascetic spirituality of the desert - especially if the land has been degraded by overstocking and invaded by weeds and feral animals. But it's the very lack of sensory stimulation and nourishment in the desert that bring us close to our own 'hearts of darkness'. Surely the fact that Australian literature, art and now film have been fascinated by an area few of us live in suggests an enduring mythic power that we need to at least acknowledge.

The passing of the idea of the outback as an empty place is nowhere better illustrated than in the recent elevation of Uluru to the status of Australia's sacred centre, our *axis mundi*. Call me nostalgic or just a chronic depressive but, while I can see the positive effects of this move for black-white relations and for the process of non-indigenous Australians mythologising their attachment to this land, I am ambivalent about it. It makes sense to me that around the same time as Uluru was ostensibly being handed back to its Aboriginal owners, it became the focus of a bizarre national obsession with death, religion, a devouring mother figure and a dingo - all dominated by the brooding presence of a place we have embraced but do not yet understand. From a Jungian point of view, that's what happens when there's too much holiness around: the shadow has to find a way in.

More importantly, I have the feeling that all these recent moves, which are so valuable in many ways, may have, in effect, filled up the emptiness in the heart of the white Australian psyche. I would not want to reify emptiness, but I certainly feel that it is an apposite metaphor for both the Australian and the postmodern experiences, and that as a culture and as individuals, there is great value in exploring our 'desert places' - which are, in any case, sometimes unavoidable. The Jungian approach to such experiences - which I greatly admire, even if I find it very hard to live - is to let them in, feel them fully, in the belief that the psyche will then move on, producing healing and transforming imagery or events. By facing our emptiness, rather than denying, escaping or filling it up, we allow it to show us its riches. This is an often traumatic process.

Wallace Stevens wrote 'The lion roars at the enraging desert', to which my mentor, the American Jungian James Hillman, adds, 'and the more our desert, the more we must rage, which rage is love.'⁶ This has become like a *koan* for me. I take it to mean that we have deserts *because...* because my father raped me or my mother abandoned me; because I am at the end of my tether and there is no escape and no-one to turn to; because I have wasted my life or hurt others; because I am Australian and live in a desert place; because I am a human being, alive and feeling at the end of this terrible century; because God is dead... Whatever, we must not meekly accept our deserts but must rage and roar against them; then, and only then, we will find that in our rage is love, of self and others.

Whether this love will water the desert or will lead us further into emptiness we cannot tell. Either way, an emotional desert can lead to a spiritual openness. This is close to the Buddhist view of emptiness, not as a negative, an absence, but as an open place; a surrender to what Suzuki Shunryu called 'don't know mind', when we allow things to manifest as they are, without trying to control or manipulate them. But we often have to go through the emotional experience of emptiness before we can understand its spiritual dimensions. Peter Fullerton, a Jungian analyst in Melbourne, gives a nice example of this process. He quotes a client's dream:

Hanna was climbing up a mountain. She came across a circle of stones which had a notable significance about them. A little further on she came to a clear mountain lake. As she looked into the water, a striking man came out and engaged her. He said, 'there is nothing at the centre', and walked off.

Fullerton comments,

'At the time Hanna had this dream it seemed to speak to one of her powerful anxieties, that is, that there was 'nothing' inside her.' However, after several months more therapy, 'She said she had recently come to realise that what was being referred to was 'a no-thing at the centre'. The significance of this change struck us both, in that we were now thinking about a no-thing which had significant potentialities, and that these could be of both a negative and a positive kind.'⁷

This move from nothing to no-thing was no mere intellectual leap; it came as part of the opus, the hard work, that is psychotherapy. That's why I feel ambivalent about the speed with which we seem to have filled up the outback emptiness. For one thing, whether we like the myths we have inherited or not, they are an important part of our psyches, and we should at least acknowledge their importance in making us who we are today. More than this, all the emotions and experiences that we previously put in the

'dead heart' - our collective feelings of disappointment, frustration, loss and grief - where do they go when the outback is paved and air-conditioned, mined and catered, snapped and videoed down to the last termite mound? And finally, when we fill up the emptiness, whether inside or outback, we lose the opportunity to develop a postheroic Australian spirituality based on openness, a spaciousness of mind and heart that the cloisters and battlefields of Europe could never understand. For we are a people made by space, lots of it. This is a rare and a precious and a difficult thing.

If I had time, I'd look more closely at some recent narratives of outback journeys, to explore how well they honour, or deny, the experience of emptiness. I've done a lot of this, perhaps in order to help find the way out of my own desert places. However, if we're really going to embrace the emptiness within, then at some point we have to go there without guides or maps, and without the expectation that the journey will save or redeem us, that it will be inherently meaningful. That would be to demand that there always be gold in our shit, an Uluru at the end of every road, a pool of life rather than a shimmering mirage. There are times when it seems that everything we have and are have been stripped away (for whatever reason), and we are left utterly alone, helpless and hopeless. We can rush to fill up the empty place, or surrender to its inevitability and see what might emerge from it. (How did Eliot put it: 'And hope would be hope for the wrong thing...') In a goal-oriented culture, this looks like failure, but it can also be an existential or spiritual openness, as we admit that we do not really know *anything* for sure. I am reminded of an address to this conference last year by Karen Armstrong, in which she argued that 'you can only come to apprehend the Divine by saying you know nothing whatsoever about God.' No road, or map, or compass; no faith, or hope, or tricks: just open space and a beating heart.

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