

SEEKING THE CENTRE:
PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

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What I would like to do here is to raise some questions and point to some issues that might be addressed in this interdisciplinary gathering. Some of these have emerged from my work on the desert, some have nothing to do with it and some, I suspect, have arisen in contradiction to it. First, I would like to flag some other resonances of the phrase ‘seeking the centre’.

Why centre? When in doubt, start with the dictionary. The trusty *Oxford English Dictionary* gives, as the derivation of our word ‘centre’, the Latin root *centrum*, which in turn comes from the Greek *kentron*, ‘a sharp point, specifically the stationary point of a pair of compasses’. The seventeenth-century English poet John Donne famously employed exactly this connection in his ‘Valediction Forbidding Mourning’, a metaphysical love poem in which the speaker attempts to console his beloved for his imminent departure. Speaking of the souls of the two lovers, Donne writes (with characteristic sexual puns):

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th’other doe.
And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.
Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like th’other foot, obliquely runne;
Thy firmnes drawes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne.

Here Donne aligns the centre with the beloved – love as the centre. This geometrical basis enters into the primary definition of centre, as ‘a point in the middle of something that is equally distant from all of its sides, ends or surfaces’. This can be literally true only of the circle, the sphere and, in architectural terms, the dome. These were the figures that the Greeks considered perfect. So the centre was the point of origin of the perfect plane figure and the perfect solid. Why perfect? Because that most logical and mathematical society, the Ancient Greeks, also attached to the objects of the material world an element of mystery, even transcendence – their link with the perfect, universal Forms of which they were imperfect copies. And I think this desire to access some form of transcendence is a prevalent theme in our conference.

The fascination with circles and particularly the centre of those circles was, of course, not unique to Greek philosophy. It underlay the recurrence of the ancient stone circles like Stonehenge and Avebury, and of labyrinths and mazes. The so-called ‘navel of the world’ was a famous rock at Delphi – allegedly a perfect sphere and positioned so that, for a person standing on it, the sky seemed to circle overhead. The circle forms the basis of mandalas and the ground plans of classical cities whose architects sought to relate them to an archetypal ordered cosmos; it is principle of the Place d’Etoile in Paris, not to mention our very own appointed centre, Canberra. The mosaics of Christos Pantocrator within the domes of Orthodox churches where Christ is positioned at the centre of the creation; the rose windows of Gothic cathedrals; Aboriginal ground mosaics and associated body painting designs: all these emphasise the circle motif. The circle also features in Zen painting where it most commonly represents enlightenment and symbolises human perfection. For Jung the circular or sphere motif recurrent in dreams, so-called primitive art, and the drawings of children, symbolised the psyche, the Self. Thus the symbolic use of the circle transcends individual cultures, periods and disciplines.

In modern Western society the Greeks' fascination with the notion of perfect Forms finds a correlative in the way we grasp at the apparent order and certainty offered by science, with its mathematical formulae purporting to be laws and universal truths, and its sleight-of-hand reductionism and logic. We should note, however, that chaos theory has considerably tarnished that myth and indicated that the so-called laws of science result from a rigorous selection of the facts by those who are seeking regularity and order and are determined to find it at any price. Science, too, has had its obsession with centres: the centre of the solar system, the centre of our galaxy, the centre of the known universe, the centre of the atom and so on.

In this respect, geometry offers a particularly graphic archetype – with its seductive clarity and cleanness, its simultaneous promise of simplicity and profundity. The Swiss playwright Max Frisch explored this allure in his drama *Don Juan oder die Liebe zur Geometrie* (1953). In Frisch's version Don Juan, the notorious libertine, has been translated into a mathematician, who desires only to escape from chaotic emotions and relationships into the pure philosophical abstraction of geometry. Having fled from his clinging fiancée, he tells his friend Roderigo:

I feel freer than I have ever felt before, Roderigo, empty and alert and filled with the masculine need for geometry ... Have you ever experienced the feeling of sober amazement at a science that is correct? ... at the nature of a circle, at the purity of a geometrical locus. I long for the pure, my friend, for the sober, the exact. I have a horror of the morass of our emotions....¹

Here we see encapsulated the Platonic dualism that has underpinned our exploitation of Nature, sexism, and many other psychological hang-ups for more than two millennia: on the one hand, maleness, rationality epitomised in mathematics, precision, perfection, purity, the spirit, abstraction, God; on the other,

¹ Frisch, Max, *Don Juan* (in Bulloch, Michael, *Max Frisch: Four Plays*), London, Methuen, 1969, pp.118-119.

femaleness, emotions, vagueness, imperfection, impurity, matter, softness, Nature. It is a dualism that we may need to consider carefully before embracing this kind of rarefied, abstract seeking and I'll come back to that later.

Returning to our friend the *OED*, we find that centre is defined also as: 'a place or group of buildings where a specified activity is concentrated', and, by extension, 'a point to or from which an activity or process is directed'. Thus it is both the place where the action is, and the place from which action or influence proceeds. We can see these related meanings in such pregnant terms and emotive phrases as: Centre of empire, Centre of culture, Centre of knowledge, Centre of learning, Centre of excellence.

Whether in geometry or in these social extensions of meaning, the word 'centre' is part of an implied binarism; it demands some equivalent of circumference – a periphery. But this is not a relationship of mutual and equal dependency; it has an in-built power imbalance that has traditionally privileged the centre over the periphery. The colonies were not considered equal to the centre of the empire; regional art galleries and theatres are not accorded the status (or the budget) of their metropolitan counterparts.

Given this inherent imbalance, it is not surprising that Western culture engenders a fascination with locating ourselves at the centre of something. George Eliot begins chapter 27 of *Middlemarch* with a homely metaphor which, in serio-comic terms, warns of one of the dangers inherent in seeking the centre: egoism.

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is

only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person – now absent.

And *Middlemarch* presents a whole spectrum of characters afflicted with various forms of egoism, who attempt to bend the universe into concentric circles around themselves and are thereby prevented from anything approaching objectivity.

The history of exploration is littered with examples of men obsessed with reaching the centre of something: Mecca, the North Pole, the South Pole – whether geographical or magnetic. Writers have been equally keen to analyse the motivation of characters possessed by such a metaphysical, even mystical, fixation. In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, Captain Walton is driven by a compulsion to reach the North Pole because he has persuaded himself of the Romantic belief that it will exhibit some magical combination of opposites: 'a land where frost and snow are banished, surpassing in wonders and beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe'. He thus harks back to the classical legend of the Hyperboreans, but the theory of an ice-free pole was still alive and well in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as we see in Jules Verne's *Les Aventures du Capitaine Hatteras* (1864) and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864). Of course Walton's geographical search is paralleled with Victor Frankenstein's scientific search – his obsession with being the first to 'penetrate the secrets of nature', to break through the boundaries between life and death, to 'unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation'. The desire to reach the centre is almost always coupled with the desire be there first.

The notion of geographical travels as a metaphor for a life journey is as old as Homer, if not the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Later it was extended to include a spiritual, ethical or psychological journey – Dante's *Inferno*, Browning's 'Childe Roland', and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the voyage of the narrator,

Marlow, up the Congo to the Inner Station of a European company engaged in the ivory trade, symbolises Marlow's interior journey of understanding to his own inner station.

In Australia nearly seven decades of inland exploratory endeavour during the nineteenth century focussed on traversing the inland and reaching the geographical centre of the continent (even though there was no unanimous agreement as to where that point might be). This was closely associated with politically establishing possession of the whole landmass by the phallocratic act of planting a flag at its centre. For Edward John Eyre, Charles Sturt, Ludwig Leichhardt, Augustus Gregory, and John McDouall Stuart the desire to be the first person (read 'first white person', which to them was the same thing) to stand at the centre of the continent was an obsession. Their motives were more than merely political and economic, though these were doubtless paramount with the funding bodies (and expeditions were phenomenally expensive). The zeal with which an inland sea or some great inland river system was pursued in the face of so many deaths and against all reason suggests that its existence was more than merely an economic advantage: it was also an ideological, even abstract necessity required to align the 'new' southern continent with its northern counterparts. All the best continents had such watering facilities so they must exist here too.² But the impetus for discovery also entailed psychological factors: the quest for fame, for public acknowledgment of manhood and heroism in a time of peace; and the power of inscribing the names of one's choice on the vast blank areas of the map.

Enter the desert as protagonist in this nation's primary cultural narrative. In European culture, the notion of the centre is, almost by definition, aligned with the city. The centre of the empire is the capital city of the colonising power, epitomised by nineteenth-century London – 'that mighty heart', as even Wordsworth, who might have been expected to think differently, called it. Similarly

² See Haynes, Roslynn D., *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.36-41.

Paris, Rome, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Prague – these were the centres of their respective countries in terms of their wealth, importance and culture.

But in Australia, the centre is specifically dissociated from the urban; it is uniquely identified with the most deserted and least resource-rich areas of the continent. Symbolically, therefore, it has come to suggest a very different ethos from the powerful metropolis – one that is potentially closer to the great spiritual traditions of the world yet also carries an inherent ambivalence. It has been repeatedly and radically revisioned throughout the period since European settlement.

Traditionally, the desert is, on the one hand, the place of punishment for those driven from the city, either because they themselves are sinful or because they fulfil a scapegoat function, symbolically bearing the sins of the urban population. Justice demands punishment by expulsion. In the Judeo-Christian tradition this view can be traced back to the myth of the Fall described in *Genesis*. For refusing to acknowledge their proper place and role in the creation, Adam and Eve are expelled from the bounty and diversity of the garden of Eden to a desert wilderness of monotony, deprivation and hardship. The acquisition of wealth and the progress of civilisation, therefore, depended on taming the wilderness, on making the desert bloom like a rose. This view has been linked with a theology of subjugation that emphasises the *Genesis* injunction to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. It was also implicit in the declaration of Australia as *terra nullius*. In the arguments of its proponents there could be no indigenous owners of the land because there was no evident attempt being made to improve it, in a European sense. Moreover, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, European attitudes to the desert were characterised by a strong element of denial, a conspiracy of silence. The very existence of deserts, a threat to fundamental human needs for water and food, appeared as a slur on the wisdom and beneficence of the Creator. So the push to find an inland sea at the centre of the continent and thereby disprove the suggestion of a continuous

desert was motivated in part by a desire to prove that Australia was a pre-industrial and innocent Arcady, an Eden, fresh from the hand of the Creator. In the centuries since European settlement the many and various schemes to transform the centre into fertile plains by science or pseudo-science (from cloud-seeding to towing icebergs from Antarctica), the search for riches of gold, iron, nickel, oil or gas beneath the unprepossessing surface, and finally the development of the tourist industry, can all be seen as attempts to reclaim the desert not only for the economy but for theology and an ideological self-image.

On the other hand, and equally insistent in Judeo-Christian tradition, was the view of the desert as a place of purification from the sins and indulgences that characterise the city. A peculiarly masculine experience, embraced by Old Testament prophets, by the Desert Fathers (one never hears of any Desert Mothers!) and some modern male theologians and writers, it offers self-denial, hardship, abstemiousness, particularly in relation to chastity, poverty, humility and fasting – all forms of mortification of the body – in order to develop the soul. As W.H. Auden put it in *The Enchafèd Flood*:

It is the place where there are no beautiful bodies or comfortable beds or stimulating food and drink or admiration. The temptations of the desert are therefore either sexual mirages raised by the devil to make the hermit nostalgic for his old life or the more subtle temptations of pride when the devil appears in his own form.³

Within this paradigm the desert is constructed as a place of renunciation – of simplicity, solitude, self-denial, stillness, the sacred – with the ulterior motive of obtaining from it purification, forgiveness or grace.

Australian theologian Cavan Brown has pointed out that the three dominant responses recorded by the explorers of the Australian desert were *awe* at its immensity, *terror* at its starkness, and

³ Auden, W.H., *The Enchafèd Flood*, London, Methuen, 1967, p.14.

fascination at its wildness. These, says Brown, align precisely with the sensations of *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans*, associated with the experience of the numinous by the theologian Rudolph Otto. who wrote:

Empty distance, remote vacancy, is, as it were, the sublime in the horizontal. The wide stretching desert, the boundless uniformity of the steppe have real sublimity and even in us Westerners they set vibrating chords of the numinous.⁴

This view continues to offer considerable attractions (not unlike those that geometry offered Frisch's Don Juan), but perhaps we need to consider how much it, too, is a gendered view, that comes freighted with the old Platonic mind-matter dualism. Exploration was a strictly male activity, associated with the demonstration of male courage and stamina and the lionising of these qualities at the expense of others. Until the arrival of Daisy Bates on the edge of the Nullarbor in 1912, there were no documented Australian counterparts of the intrepid British female desert travellers who visited the Middle East between 1821 and 1914 and thus, for that entire period, we have lost the feminine gaze: what it might have seen, and how it might have interpreted the Australian desert and its inhabitants.

So the centre of our continent, Australia, has received the imprint of both these male desert ideologies – punishment and noble renunciation – not to mention other overlaid responses generated by materialism, escapism, tourism and aesthetics. As such, it offers a fascinating sequence of reconstructions of which the following is merely a selection.

Before the arrival of Europeans it was inhabited by groups of indigenous people who regarded the desert, no less than the most fertile rainforest, as sacred – the eternal dwelling place of the Ancestors whose epic journeys and deeds created the landforms and whose power was resident in the land, available to be

⁴ Otto, Rudolph, *The Idea of the Holy* (in Cavan Brown, 'The Language of the Landscape', *Faith and Freedom* 1:2, 1992), p.32.

accessed when the sacred ceremonies were performed according to the law – the *tjukurpa*.

Then the nineteenth-century explorers categorised the uncooperative land as barren, monotonous and featureless. It was seen as an enemy, and not just any enemy but a distinctively female one, hence doubly alien, doubly ‘other’. In justification of their manifest failures to find the fertile acres or the inland sea, they vilified the land in their journals as antagonist, as an old and barren hag, fickle and malicious. Their reports abound with the language of rape – they are forever unveiling, penetrating, besieging and conquering the land. Their contemporaries laid the blame for the suffering and deaths of these national heroes on this hideous land, barren and useless for European purposes. By the end of the nineteenth century the ‘hideous blank’⁵ had become a place best-forgotten, a disgraceful blot on an otherwise promising nation, a ‘futile heart within a fair periphery’ as the poet James McAuley later called it.⁶

Yet, during the twentieth century, this judgement came to be totally reversed. Exit the ‘Dead Heart’, enter ‘The Red Centre’, which now generates megabucks from eager tourists. Overseas, Uluru is the icon of Australia. This volte-face derives from the conjunction of several disparate factors, some physical, even quite mechanical, some cultural, some spiritual.

At the purely mechanical level, there was transport. The Trans-Australian Railway opened in 1915, and air travel across the central desert began to be a possibility in the 1930s. The magazine *Walkabout*, founded in 1934, boosted popular interest in the outback to such a degree that by 1960 it was confidently asserted that this ‘magazine, as much as anything else, discovered outback Australia to the popular imagination’.⁷

⁵ This phrase was first used in print by the editor of the Melbourne newspaper, the *Argus*, 3 September 1858.

⁶ McAuley, James, ‘Envoi for a Book of Poems’ (in McAuley, James, *Selected Poems*), Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1967, p.2.

⁷ Bolton, A.T., ‘Preface’ (in Bolton, A.T., *Walkabout’s Australia: An Anthology*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1964, p.5.

With the advent of four-wheel-drive vehicles, desert travel became individualised, and perpetuated by means of cheap and readily available Kodachrome film, whereupon, although the explorers had failed to find it – not one of them so much as mentions the word – ‘Red’ was now officially discovered at the Centre.

More importantly, perhaps, our view of Central Australia has been powerfully influenced, even shaped by the radical change in cultural norms. For reasons that I have developed in detail in my book, twentieth-century Australian artists discovered, and taught us to see a new thing, namely beauty in landscapes that were rugged and red rather than green and picturesque (or sublime in the narrow way that term had been defined in European art). Influenced by George Lambert’s World War I canvases of Palestine and Gallipoli landscapes, Hans Heysen proceeded to discover the reds of the Flinders ranges, their rugged blocks of colour like a ready made Modernist painting. In no time he had stereotyped such scenes. When he visited the area in 1928 to find new grass springing up after rain he found it ‘most disconcerting and out of harmony’⁸ and refused to paint it. Albert Namatjira, Jessie Traill and Russell Drysdale modified and intensified the landscapes of the inland, teaching us to appreciate a beauty that had previously been invisible to European eyes.

One of the first artists to take advantage of air travel in Central Australia was Sydney Nolan, who became fascinated by the rugged geological structure of the Musgrave and Macdonnell Ranges as seen from above. He presented Australians with the illusion of gazing at their continent spread out like a map, both accessible and mysterious. Another innovation of the time, fast-drying Ripolin enamel, gave his works a glossy brilliance new in the art world, and certainly new in landscape painting. His palette of fiery reds and glowing oranges set off against a monochromatic blue sky transformed the faded image of the Dead

⁸ Heysen, Hans, letter to Lionel Lindsay, 25.4.1927 (in Thiele, Colin, *Heysen of Hahndorf*) Adelaide, Rigby, 1968, p.202.

Heart to the Red Centre. He declared: 'I wanted to deal ironically with the cliché of the 'dead heart', to paint the great purity and implacability of the landscape'⁹. Later painters adopted and modified Nolan's aerial perspective which offers an intriguing parallel to the planar perspective of Aboriginal art, but with strikingly diverse results. Fred Williams, Robert Juniper, John Olsen, and John Coburn presented an increasingly abstract desert in which pattern, colour and simplified spiritual images predominate.

In literature, the Jindyworobak poets of the 1930s and, later, A.D. Hope, Patrick White, Rodney Hall, Judith Wright, Francis Webb, Vincent Buckley, Randolph Stow, Les Murray and others have contributed to our understanding of a spiritual pilgrimage to the desert. And the fascination continues. The nineteenth-century desert explorers have been recycled several times, progressing from national heroes, to tragic victims of the land, to failures, to social statements, to psychologically interesting case studies of monomania, depression or, paranoia, to victims of cynical misjudgment by those who had never been there, to the saints and martyrs of a secular nation. In the poet Randolph Stow's words:

No pilgrims leave, no holy-days are kept
 For those who died of landscape. Who can find
 Even the camp-sites where the saints last slept?
 Out there their place is, where the charts are gapped,
 unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind.¹⁰

Real life modern pilgrims such as Denis Bartell, Warren Bonython and Robyn Davidson have described the psychological effects of their encounters with the desert in terms of a sense of cosmic aloneness from people, but a connectedness to place. As Ken Barratt, one of the Jindyworobak poets, wrote in relation to the explorers:

⁹ Nolan, Sidney (in Lynn Elwyn and Sidney Nolan, *Sidney Nolan – Australia*), Sydney and London, Bay Boks, 1979, p.13.

¹⁰ Stow, Randolph, 'The Singing Bones' (in *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems*), Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1969, p.52.

Whether as they, we explore a continent, or are content
To explore ourselves, we find that mysterious centre,
That vast and utter loneliness, which is the heart of being.¹¹

During the last decades, though, the major change in Australians' perception of both the land and religious experience has come through an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture. From this most ancient of cultures we have come to accept, even if we cannot fully share, an evaluation of the land as personal. We have begun to admit the possibility of a subject-to-subject relationship with the land, an *I-Thou* rather than the exploitative Cartesian *I-it* relationship of colonisation. In Aboriginal culture there is no distinction between physical object and inner spiritual identity and this is as true of the land as of living creatures. The land is the repository of the spiritual power of the Dreaming and provides the vital nexus, the gateway between physical and spiritual, between temporal and eternal. Through the sacred ceremonies the ancestral power buried deep in the earth at the sacred sites is accessed by the living descendants of the Ancestors. This process also acts to re-create the spirituality of the land, just as Aboriginal art is understood to re-create it. Only through the land can this sacred dimension be accessed.

Thus, Aboriginal culture has precipitated a new awareness of the spiritual in a nation where, for more than two centuries, the springs of European religion have nearly always been muddied with sectarianism, materialism and economic rationalism, under whatever name has been ascribed to it.

More recently still, New Age cults have attempted to appropriate the desert-centre, and Uluru, in particular, positioning it at the centre of a hypothetical magnetic grid, reconstructing it as substitute cathedral, mosque or temple, its ambience the predicted scene of spiritual revelation and renewal. There are moves to extend the aura associated with 'The Rock' to the nearby, but

¹¹ Ken Barratt, 'Burke and Wills' (in Elliott, Brian, *The Jindyworobaks*), St Lucia, Qld., University of Queensland Press, 1979, p.177.

formerly less well known, Olgas, now also increasingly called by their Aboriginal name, Kata Tjuta.

And of course we all know what the advertising industry has done in appropriating it to sell everything from Coca-Cola to four-wheel-drives, from coffee to romantic dinners under the stars with a string orchestra playing ‘the sounds of silence’!

Maybe it is time to reassess this now-accepted version of the centre, lest the cultural iconography, with its insistence on the immensity of space, the sublime vision, the existential loneliness, become a cultural strait-jacket, demeaning other spiritual paths – as Elaine Lindsay will assert in the closing session. Arguably even the construction of the desert stereotype is fake, since the parameters that have characterised it – abstinence, difficulty, solitude – are manifestly not applicable to the modern traveller.

Within other spiritual traditions the centre becomes a metaphor for stillness, which is, in turn, a pre-condition for enlightenment. ‘Be still and [with the suggestion of ‘and only then’] know that I am God.’ The whole tradition of meditation and contemplation depends on finding the centre of self and connecting it with a spiritual power beyond the self. The Quakers (the tradition from which I come) sit in a circle and ‘centre down’ in silence as the first stage of the communal Meeting for Worship. For Quakers the central premise is that there is that of God in everyone. But, contingent on that article of faith is a whole raft of moral, social and spiritual consequences that have to be worked through by each generation – its relation to pacifism, simplicity, plain speaking (no oaths, for example, because they would imply two levels of honesty in speech), equality before God (hence no titles, no hierarchy, no clergy), gender equality, social welfare.

I envisage that this conference will be quite a lot like that. We shall be working through the implications of our search in a broad range of issues that may never have occurred to us. We have all come, because, in our various ways we are seeking a centre, a meaning, a focus, a goal, a form of perfection. And we are

SEEKING THE CENTRE

seeking it in community. Or, if we do not quite dare to claim this seeking role for ourselves directly, we are students or scholars of someone else who is, or was, such a seeker. But, try to avoid it as we may, something of that search will certainly rub off: there *will* be consequences.