

IV: Wednesday 7th June, 2000

Roslynn Haynes: Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film;
David Pereira on cello playing Peter Sculthorpe's Requiem: In Memoriam Stuart Challender

Introduction: Carole Cusack

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It's my pleasure to welcome both David Pereira and Roslynn Haynes this evening.

Roslynn is currently Associate Professor of English at the University of New South Wales but in a past life she's been a biochemist; she's very interested therefore in the way in which different subjects: science, the arts, culture, cultural modes like film and literature, particular disciplines of science, like astronomy – she is interested in the way these subjects have interfaces, come together, can be considered in terms of each other, not in simple isolation. And this means she has written some very interesting books again covering a very wide range of material: books including *High Teck, High Cost: Technology, Society and the Environment*; *From Faust to Strangelove*; *Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature*; and of course *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, the book which gives the name to tonight's lecture. Roslynn is presently writing a book on Tasmanian landscape in literature, art and photography which looks more at notions of wilderness rather than desert.

Following Roslynn's lecture we'll be listening to cello works performed by David Pereira. At this point I'd like to welcome Roslynn and commend her talk to you.

Roslynn Haynes

In the context of this lecture series, *Mysticism and the Muse*, I decided to explore what the Australian desert may contribute to our understanding of place in a mystical or spiritually significant sense.

The irony is that it has taken white Australians nearly two hundred years to approach such an understanding: ironical, because that is precisely the kind of relationship that Aboriginal people have had with the land, including the desert, for thousands of years.

Aboriginal understanding of the land was uniquely personal and spiritual – it was an I-Thou relationship. The land was the source of life, creativity, renewal and spiritual power, and this was as true for the desert as for the rainforest. We can see this in the deceptively simple lines by Aboriginal poet, Jack Davis:

Some call it desert
But it is full of life
Pulsating life
If one knows where to find it
In the land I love.

Fundamental to Aboriginal culture and beliefs is an inseparable trinity: the Ancestors (the spiritual beings who created and continue to nurture the land in which they dwell); the biological species, including humans, that they created; and the living, sustaining land itself.

In this unique ideology the land is the vital nexus between the physical and the spiritual, between the temporal and the eternal for, as the continuing dwelling place of supernatural beings, it participates in both realms. Originally, it is believed, the land was flat and featureless, but during the Dreaming, mythical creative spirits came forth from the earth. The 'birth places' where these Ancestors emerged became the first sacred sites, endowed with the life and power of these supernatural entities. During their legendary travels these Beings created the landforms that now exist and remain permeated by their presence. So the physical and spiritual worlds are in continuous communication. It is noteworthy that the Aborigines, possibly alone among indigenous peoples, have no myth of alienation from Nature, equivalent to the *Genesis* account of the Fall in Judaeo-Christian tradition. To them the desert is not a place of punishment, a wilderness for those banished from Eden; on the contrary, like the most fertile

country, it is richly endowed with spiritual meaning and life. However unremarkable to western eyes, every part of the country is semiotic. As the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt have remarked, ‘The whole land is full of signs: a land humanised so that it could be used and read by Aborigines ... read as clearly as if it were bristling with notice boards’. Silas Roberts, Chairman of the Northern Land Council explained in 1977, ‘These great creatures ... are always part of the land and nature – as we are. We cannot change and nor can they. Our connection to all things natural is spiritual.’ That last sentence, ‘Our connection to all things natural is spiritual’ can be applied anywhere, and possibly we all have a special place where we feel such things most clearly, but it resonates especially in relation to the desert precisely because this land seems to have so little else going for it.

But without a spiritual context no one can read the country in this way.

Unlike this *I-Thou* relationship of the Aboriginal people to the land, the European understanding of place was based on a Cartesian dichotomy, an *I-it* or subject-object association. By the time of white settlement in Australia, this was already overlaid by a load of other cultural baggage: the socio-economics of the Industrial Revolution, the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment, the justification for British imperialism, and the artistic and literary fashions of Romanticism. The cumulative effect of this cultural baggage has been to make us think of *place* primarily in terms of ownership.

Hence the first things Europeans did on entering a new place, was to map it and imprint their own place names on it. Only then was it theirs – conquered and owned. They spoke of subduing, taming, conquering, possessing the land.

Even where we have no such claim on a place, we may engage in a form of visual ownership. For people from a western culture, the visual sense is fundamental. The gaze is not only a means of looking at the world and locating ourselves; it is also a means of domination, of claiming possession. The fundamental premise of traditional landscape painting is the organising perspective of the artist who selects, directs and

'owns' the scene. As tourists, also, we are 'monarchs of all we survey'. We came, we saw, we conquered. And we have our home video and our colour slides to prove it.

But for both these goals – the dream of conquest and the depiction of landscape – the desert proved singularly recalcitrant. Shrouded in mystique and speculation, the last *terra incognita*, it lured successive expeditions from the coastal settlements. But instead of the hypothetical oasis of their desires, the expected inland sea, they discovered only a 'hideous blank', as the editor of the Melbourne newspaper, the *Argus*, declared it in 1858.

Paradoxically the best known figures of Australian exploration, Eyre, Sturt, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills, are those who could only be considered failures in terms of their goals: either they returned from their mission impossible without news of the fertile land they had been commissioned to find, or they died in the process. But those who survived to publish reflective accounts of their expeditions exploited the power of the pen to reconstruct their confused struggles as a coherent narrative in which they were the protagonists of a classical, even mythical contest; and Nature, as represented by the desert, was cast as the malignant antagonist. Sturt's *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* was arguably the first great Australian work of fiction. In it Sturt successfully shifted the focus from the failure of an expedition to a story of daring exploits against insuperable odds. The new nation's need to create and lionise its heroes both demanded and perpetuated this vilification of the land in almost personal terms as harsh, treacherous and unrelenting.

The narratives of exploration provided later writers who, with singularly few exceptions, had never been to the desert, with the imagery and vocabulary of a nightmare landscape within which the deepest fears of the colonists – of isolation in an alien land, of drought, thirst and a lonely death far from home – could be encoded, identified and confronted. For these writers the landscape was indelibly inscribed with the figures of the explorers as the saints and martyrs of an increasingly secular age. Randolph Stow writes, in a poem called 'The Singing Bones':

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.

Henry Kendall's poem, 'Leichhardt' is concerned not merely with a daring explorer, but one sanctified even further by his devotion to science and, more intriguingly, his unexplained disappearance. In order to establish the full measure of Leichhardt's heroism, the desert is further condemned. Burke and Wills, leaders of the disastrous Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860–61, who through *hubris* and incompetence died of malnourishment along the highly productive Cooper Creek, were immediately valorised, in literature as in art, as epitomising national heroism in the face of insuperable odds. The power of these images and the stream of tributes that flowed with the nation's grief, derived from their implications for the fragility and transience of European civilisation perched precariously on the rim of this most arid inhabited continent.

By virtue of its great geological age and its supposed silence until the Europeans came the desert was also commonly referred to as a-temporal. Ernest Favenc, one of the few nineteenth-century poets to write from first-hand experience, depicted it as a silent, timeless, female land where 'My footfall first broke stillness that had reigned / For centuries unbroken' (Favenc 1905). From a twentieth-century, post-colonial perspective it is easy to perceive and condemn the racism inherent in such images. Australia was being constructed as a sleeping beauty land where nothing had happened since the Creation until the arrival of the Europeans who, with the kiss of progress, awakened it to life and prosperity. The other side of this strategic, political imagery is the complete absence from it of indigenous peoples, whose activities and culture were never mentioned. Their consistent erasure from the landscape of consciousness and heroism conveniently reinforced the notion of *terra nullius*.

These images were consistent with the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the Fall. In the Eden story, the desert wilderness stands in diagrammatic contrast to the garden, the place of fertility. It was the place outside the pale, where the scapegoat could be dispatched with the symbolic burden of the people's sins upon it. It is the place of savage beasts and evil spirits, the place where God is not.

This attitude, together with the strongly emotive responses by and towards the explorers, have continued to influence our national policies. If the desert is indeed a 'hideous blank' it is clearly an ideal site for nuclear testing, for an international radioactive dump and for the argument that Australia is grossly underpopulated.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the mood had swung against the early inland explorers. For an emerging nation they were too imperialist in their intentions, and their failures came to be regarded, not as sanctification, but as evidence of British effete-ness and stupidity compared with the vigour of native-born Australians. Apart from a rash of adventure stories in the style of S. Rider Haggard, and the legend of Lasseter, dying within sight of his fabulous reef, the desert as a subject for literature and art, virtually disappeared for nearly four decades. When it reappeared in the 1930s it was associated with two diverse impulses: an interest in Aboriginal culture and the development of a uniquely Australian modernism.

The Aboriginal strand was promoted by a group of poets who called themselves the Jindyworobaks from an Aboriginal word meaning 'to annex' or 'join'. They tried to assimilate Aboriginal myths of the Dreamtime or *Alcheringa* as an integral part of such a synthesis. Many of the best known Jindyworobak poems are situated in the desert as the place of last and least European contact. In 'Uluru, An Apostrophe to Ayers Rock', for example, Rex Ingamells celebrates his visionary experience of place:

Arrival is more than physical: it is
the dreaming at the inner shrine,
with sun and star, sun and star,
moon after moon,

message-stick and *tjurunga*,
rock-hole and dune.¹

Although this literary movement foundered, the expression of a spiritual dimension uniquely associated with the desert was to re-emerge in the 1980s and '90s.

The Modernist strand first became influential in art. Throughout the twentieth century artists have begun to 'see' landscape in a different way, and in Australia it was the desert terrain that played the most significant role in that process – just because it refused to deliver under the old terms. Influenced by the war paintings of George Lambert who painted the campaigns in Gallipoli and the Middle East, Hans Heysen discovered that the bare outlines and harsh colours of the Flinders Ranges provided the very essence of Modernism.

In the 1940s and '50s Russell Drysdale suddenly saw the potential of an arid landscape as a source of the stark forms favoured by Modernism and as a blaze of colour. The ox-blood skies, the burnt orange and browns of his canvases revolutionised the way Australians saw the Centre. Drysdale's paintings of drought were to inspire Sidney Nolan, the first artist to paint the desert from the air. This totally different view point revealed the immensity and ancient geological structure of the land in a completely new way. Nolan presented Australians with the illusion of gazing at their continent spread out entire, like a relief map, its eroded mountains, ridged like the bare bones of a dinosaur. His fiery reds and glowing orange, offset by brilliant blue skies, transformed the popular image of the Dead Heart into the Red Centre. He, himself, remarked: 'I wanted to deal ironically with the cliché of the "dead heart"... I wanted to paint the great purity and implacability of the landscape'. These works resonate with a sense of immensity, ancientness and timelessness that suggests a deeply spiritual engagement.

Later painters adopted and modified Nolan's aerial perspective, which became intriguingly close to the planar perspective of Aboriginal art, but with strikingly diverse

¹ Ingamells, 1979.

results. The work of Fred Williams, John Olsen, Robert Juniper, Tim Storrier and John Coburn presents an increasingly abstract desert in which pattern, colour and simplified spiritual images predominate.

Powerful as these landscapes were, they were eclipsed, in terms of iconography, by the startlingly revisionist representations of the explorers. Nolan's Burke and Wills series provoked a new curiosity about the psychological motivation and spiritual state of the once-revered explorers. With few exceptions Nolan's explorers are solitary individuals in a dead land, parodies of the nineteenth-century grand historical canvases that had glorified them. In contrast to Nicholas Chevalier's *Memorandum of the Start of the Exploring Expedition, 1860*, depicting the departure from Royal Park amidst a huge crowd of cheering citizens, Nolan's *Departing from Melbourne* (1950) features a lonely Burke setting out on a camel from a deserted two-dimensional stage set of Melbourne. In *Burke* (1962) the figure of the explorer, naked and alone on an unharnessed camel is neither the conquering heroic leader nor the pathetic dying victim but a man ill-at-ease in Nature, awkward, remote from the landscape and debarred from understanding. David Boyd, Albert Tucker and Brett Whiteley have all been drawn to revision the desert explorers in different ways.

Writers, too, felt a similar need to retell the national myths of exploration. They were recast in terms of the mythical journey, in the tradition of Dante, of Melmoth the Wanderer, or the Ancient Mariner (that fabulous inland sea again!). They became prototypes of the search for self-identity, a goal worth dying for. Re-telling of the explorers' narratives, whether as psychoanalysis of the martyr complex, as satirical contemplation of lost opportunity, or as symbolic *rapprochement* with Aboriginal insights, has been a major focus of twentieth-century Australian literature and art.

In his poem sequence, 'Leichhardt in Theatre' (1952), Francis Webb traces the explorer's spiritual status, plotting it as inversely proportional to his worldly fame. Only when he passes beyond materialism, self-aggrandisement and rhetoric does he find spiritual redemption. Similarly, in his later work, 'Eyre All Alone' (1961), Webb projects Edward Eyre's nightmare crossing of the desert around the Bight, from

Fowler's Bay to King Georges Sound. He interprets it as both the journey of the solitary individual embarked on an archetypal quest of self-discovery, and a universal myth about the progress of the soul through the wilderness of solitude and despair. Arriving at the Sound, Eyre reflects on the multiple significance of his journey:

One year on the march, an epoch, all of my life ...
 the long knotted absurd beard
 That is my conscience grown in the desert country.

Similarly, in Patrick White's superb novel, *Voss* (1957), the desert exists on two parallel planes, the literal and the symbolic, the temporal and the timeless. Overtly it is terrain of Voss' journey as he re-enacts the classic nineteenth-century exploration narrative, inspired by contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions; it acts also as a metaphor for the whole continent, allowing White to critique the processes of imperialism and colonisation; but at the deepest level it provides credible imagery for the individual's spiritual journey – for the transformation of the megalomaniac German explorer with Messianic pretensions, from arrogance to humility. White links this insight not only to the Christian tradition of the Suffering Servant, but also to the Aboriginal belief of entering spiritually into the landscape and being possessed by it. Judd, the demented survivor of the expedition, affirms that Voss is 'still there ... – he is there in the country ... You see, if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there.' White wrote about *Voss*, 'I wanted to give my book the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint, to convey through the theme and characters of *Voss* what Delacroix and Blake might have seen, what Mahler and Liszt might have heard. Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism.'

Can *we* appropriate the processes and insights of these traditions? Can we, in the twenty-first century, find spiritual enlightenment from a brush with the Australian desert? In terms of process, it is difficult – very difficult – to regain the hardships of the pilgrim. In 1977 Robyn Davidson set out to travel alone by camel from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean. But she was not permitted to enjoy such solitude. Her

financial sponsors, *National Geographic*, insisted on regular visits from a camera man; she herself sometimes had recourse to Aboriginal guides and an R & R stopover at a property en route; tourists considered her public property.

Even for us non-newsworthy individuals, it is extraordinarily difficult. Four-wheel-drive vehicles, GPS monitors, Codan radio, the video camera and the Pentax, may record and locate us physically but they *dislocate* us spiritually, distracting us without visionary recompense.

Moreover, *our* response to the desert is far from spontaneous. It has been conditioned by advertising, by the brilliant photographs that leap at us from calendars and posters. Insidiously they predetermine what we select to see – always *see*. Once away from the staggering majesty of the spectacular red landforms that mark out the tourist route – Standley Chasm, Ormiston Gorge, Simpson's Gap, King's Canyon, Uluru, Kata Tjuta, – when we have little or nothing in the way of given cues, we are all too likely to be bored by the monotony and threatened by the loneliness, the immensity and the silence – the nothingness, the 'hideous blank'.

But, if we can train ourselves to bear this sensory deprivation we may access that other Biblical tradition of the desert. The Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Desert Fathers, found it a place of spiritual purification, of preparation for enlightenment and salvation. For the pilgrim the very absences of the desert become virtues. Its hardships are a test of motivation; its silence is an aid to contemplation; its vastness a reminder of eternity. The thirteenth-century German mystic, Meister Eckhart taught: 'Be like a desert as far as self and the things of this world are concerned', in order to 'discover the desert of the Godhead.'

Cavan Brown has pointed out that three of the predominant responses recorded by the explorers of the Australian desert, were: awe at its immensity, terror at its starkness, and 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 said: '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.²

In Francis Webb's poem, 'Poet', the narrator cries out, like a Hebrew prophet who has received the Word from beyond the realm of Man:

I'm from the desert country – O, it's a holy land
With a thousand warm humming stinging virtues.
Masters, my words have edged their way obediently
Through the vast heat and that mystical cold ...
While the wind ...
Gives a word to the sand.

In tribute to one of the earlier speakers in this series of lectures, I'd like to end with some lines from Les Murray's poem, 'Equanimity':

A field all foreground, and equally all background,
Like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent
Like God's attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.³

² Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) quoted in Cavan Brown, 'The Language of the Landscape', 32.

³ Les Murray, 'Equanimity', *Collected Poems*, 180.