

Sensible Spectators: Agape at the Mouth of the Cave

SUSAN PYKE

University of Melbourne

A heartfelt part of my effort to live better in the world is to seek new ways to understand how I can sensibly go beyond my own skin. Here I build on this audacious desire, thinking through perceptions and significations specific to my own experience, to make sense with them, critically and creatively. It is an inconclusive sense-making, oriented to suggestion, not argument, forming part of a project much bigger than my words, experiences or aspirations. I begin with a story of listening, of attending, of being with the unfolding world, honouring a spectacle, a moment where texts and the physical world worked together in a way I do not fully understand. It silenced me, and now it makes me sing.

My critical response to this spectacle is grounded in Freya Mathews's neologism, onto-poetics. Mathews's onto-poeticism emerges from out of the 'numinous streaming and meaning' of the nonhuman world (71, 73). Humans help bring it into being, by listening, then telling stories; there is human making in this practice, but an onto-poetic encounter cannot be humanly manipulated or created. These encounters only emerge when the nonhuman steps in and offers 'poetic comments or denouements' that exceed anything humanly devised (65). Onto-poetics is then, for me, attentively listening to the world, discerning when an occurrence emerges that is not constructed by my own makings, yet has specific meaning to my very self, and then—and this is the hardest part—putting it in words, or even better, singing it out loud.

My response is further influenced by Val Plumwood's critical ecofeminism, which enacts the shift from human/nonhuman boundaries to the more-than [and this is *with* the]-human (Plumwood, 'Journey' 19). I will also employ Karen Barad's refusal of these delineations in her posthumanist material ecocriticism. I follow the intent in Barad's insistent inverted commas used to critique the terms 'human' and 'nonhuman' (126) as I write to the possibility of becoming more productive in my earthiness.

I will also draw on Jacques Rancière's critical theory, testing his argument that artworks can nurture the possibility of more generative social relations (*Emancipated* and *Politics*). With Rancière, I explore how text meets the world. This particular story began when I read Rancière's fleeting but intriguing reference to Gustave Flaubert's 'impersonal aesthetics of the earth' (*Emancipated* 73). I took down the citation, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, not knowing a year later I would be taken to the ground by a cave. The fact that Flaubert's character, and the cave that moved me, shared the same name did not signify to me, at that time. I did not seek out this cave. In fact, I felt it found me.

I spent a number of evening walks trying to find my way to Ayia Triada, a highly visible Greek Orthodox Church, on the hilltop of Old Karlovasi, a village on the island of Samos, in the deep east of the Aegean Sea. Ayia Triada connotes ‘Trinity’, the protectorate of Father, Son and only thirdly, the less gendered Holy Spirit. Positioned on high, it is fortress more than refuge, built to protect a church-based nation from the infidels. Samos is swimming distance from Turkey, at least as a desperate measure in desperate times, or so the stories go. I wasn’t sure why I was so determined to find my way to this church, above all others, but it felt it held the promise of Mecca, though it was some months before Dhu al-Hijjah.

There are no obvious roads to Ayia Triada, and no signs, or at least, no signs I can read with my pre-school Greek. I only got there after a number of evenings where unguided turns took me to all sorts of unexpectedly rewarding spaces. My familiarity with the foot of the hill supporting Ayia Triada grew each time I set out for that church penetrating the sky. I started looking for a number of the garden-active homes and their gardeners, older people on well-worn chairs, watching the world go by, a world which, once the heat of the day had gone, was increasingly including a skinny walker in sensible shoes and an orange hat. Our nods shifted from politeness to recognition to greeting. I also began saying hello to a decrepit hotel that, apart from showing me I was not so far from finding my way back home, revealed its drooping struts, rotting shutters, and, sometimes, cobwebs preened by late sun highlights. It hadn’t seen a profit for decades and maintenance for just about as long. I was prickingly aware of my complicity. Last time I had been to Karlovasi was in the eighties. The island, like Australia, had hurtled along the drive of global economic imperatives, banking on a future of exclusivities that had now bulldozed most of this island’s population back to subsistence.

During my last visit I had seen the shadows in the eyes of older people who had lost their families to war and migration in the fifties and sixties. Now similar grief was darkening the eyes of their children, people my age, as they watched their young speeding, ‘running’, in small cars and trail bikes, searching for a way out of the homes of their



parents, and into the worlds of the island’s tourists, now few enough to have hotels to themselves. As fast as the hotels were fading, home gardens were flourishing. Tourist dollars were no longer a way of life, so other older ways of living were re-emerging, home by home. I found my way to Ayia Triada two nights before the end of my visit (Fig. 1). The exterior was unusually well-maintained. It was the only church I had visited with tightly closed doors. I headed down the hill, unimpressed, feeling no different at all.

Fig. 1 Birds of a feather flocking at Ayia Triada, Old Karlovasi, 2012 (Author)

Then a sign stopped me. The hand-painted hieroglyphics, fading into the cracking concrete of a wall, could have been another indecipherable graffiti message, but I spelled out the Cave of Ayios Adonios. The arrow pointed away from Old Karlovasi, up a hill far higher than that which hosts Ayia Triada. This, I felt, was what I had been walking to find.

Some days ago I had heard of this cave, from Marco, the carer of Thea Xrisoula, my partner's aunt who was caring for me. Marco had come to call me cousin, *ksathelfi*, as we shared rich lunches cooked by Thea, using a life of experience, the feel of her hands, her taste-buds and the ten percent that remained of her sight. My body was becoming part of Samos, through bouquets of vegetables Marco presented to his mother, grown on the family's small patch of land. 'Ksathelfi,' Marco had said, 'There's a saint's cave up past Paleo Karlovasi. You'd like it.'

I had asked questions, found something had moved him, awed him. No words, just a shake of his head and a wry smile. It was hard to find, he told me, without a local guide. Marco's days were long and full of finding daily bread on an island where crumbs were hard to come by. Petrol money came from Thea's pension. I would no more ask him to take me to a ghostly cave than I would request a lift to Ayia Triada, a place he'd also said was too far to walk. I wondered if I could find it by foot, then did not think of it again until I saw the sign, looped around with the wild vine that makes Old (Paleo) Karlovasi so green. A local sign, not a manufactured steel sheeting, with the Greek and Roman script that defined the destination as tourist driven. I would go there on my last evening walk.

It is usual, around Karlovasi, to find churches with nothing near them but olive trees, grapevines and goats, so the increasing quiet of the road toward Ayios Adonios felt comfortable. It was a vibrant evening, with cats, cats, cats, observing me at the entrances to the churches I passed. The path narrowed to one lane, to a footpath, to increasingly quiet churches, gentle churches, rusting and cobwebbed churches. None, yet, a church built around a cave. The attitudes of the cats changed as I climbed upward, from sentinel, to companion, then to guide (Fig. 2). It felt like I was no longer looking, that I was being led. Angels, so the stories sing, take many forms.



Fig. 2 Cats attending places of worship, Old Karlovasi, 2012 (Author)

After visiting a thickly treed church, where I was shown about by a cat, I lost the company of felines. There were occasional sheep and bedding birds. I was close to returning, defeated, when I saw another sign, more institutionalised than the first (Fig. 3). I stood, corrected. This was no hidden place, locatable only to locals. I hastened on,

hungry. I had walked a long way, Thea would be readying our watermelon supper. I would light a candle and hurry home.

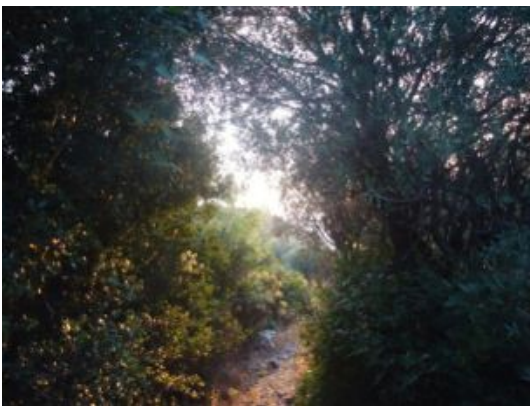
The paved path became gravel, the gravel became dirt. There were no sheep, fewer trees, barely a bird, a fainter track. The sun was very low. I took notes as I went, with my eyes.



Easy to become a lost sheep in this lightly touched country. The last olive grove was well behind me, its untended fat trunks evidencing centuries of feasting on the hilltop's soil and more than a few decades of freedom from harvesting and pruning. The sheep trail grew fainter, more disordered; I was past the heights of sweet grass, on rocky ground. The side of the hill was in deep shadow. It was not a path to walk by night.

Fig. 3 The upper path to Ayios Adonios, above Old Karlovasi, 2012 (Author)

At the point of giving up, leg-sore and empty-bellied, a gap opened, to the right of the just-feasible rocky path I'd chosen. I saw, within, a haphazard trail of white splashed rocks. Painted rocks mark an order I recognised. My heart leapt with relief. The trees of Karlovasi's churches are often painted from their feet to their shins in whitewash. The churches are also marked by the world, stone white, domed in blue.



A childhood in the Stony Rises has taught me to move through rocky ground without difficulty. Perhaps it was fatigue or low sugar that caused me to stumble my way between these markers. Stones, as Plumwood has written, are 'perfect beings', sacred for the time embedded in their form ('Journey' 21). At the moment of slippage I would stop, sit, feel the day's warmth, regain my balance, then look towards the next marker picked out by someone who had walked before me, readying my path.

Fig. 4 The opening to Ayios Adonios, above Old Karlovasi, 2012 (Author)

My breath left me at the top of the hill. The sun had not set, the seascape revealed itself, and all was gold. I had arrived at the time of worship. It was more-than-human gilt, the golden moment lacing the cave's rounded pale unpainted stones under an immense sky of soft evening blue (Fig. 5). The cave, with me, was agape at the distant yellow-misted ocean. I turned in circles of devotion, a slow-moving dervish, eyes wide-open, mouth-awed ajar, pores open to the haze. Spaces were passing from the sea through what was no longer all me, to the cave. My inner voice, my panting breath, my hunger, all my human selfing was gone.

I slowed, stood, stilled, and was drawn to the ground. In the dust, made up of the trodden dirt and the beauty-pierced tread of my body, I seeped with gratitude and tears. In the glow of cave stone, under a sacramental frame of trees, I was being filled with the dark and light of agape, that generous love beyond the self. I no longer felt the throb of time. Plumwood tells that rocks, the ‘Old Ones’, make non-sense of the epochs humans imagine (‘Journey’ 30). That she thought so far suggests to me that time had made new sense to her. When the world lets you under its skin, human measures make no sense at all.

When I came together, again, only human, the sun gone, I looked into the interior of the cave. A gentle repulsion met the query sent by my mindful eyes. It might have been the cave’s darkening corners and the cold uninviting smell that stopped me. Unless it was the settled interior, the hand-painted cross, dirt swept smooth by the small broom resting against the wall of solid rock, candles on a wire bobbin on its side, seating formed by a plank of grey wood on flat topped stones. Perhaps it was because I was too human. Perhaps it was because all needs of the time and space had been met.

An Australian singer who performs, now and then, in caves, has told me she never works with a cave before she feels welcomed. She makes her request and waits for the signal she has learned to recognise through practice. If she has no felt invitation she leaves the cave alone. This ushering in, or holding without, are not of her making. She attends and submits. She has watched others, who do not give this pause to hear the refusal she has felt, slip over, break their skin, retreat in pain. There may have been something of this dynamic in my decision not to enter the cave, to stay in the warmth of stones soaked in a day’s sun. Had I been able to articulate this moment to Marco, my ksathelfos, his eyes would have twinkled and he would have told me it was fear of a young boy’s ghosts.

I don’t remember walking back to my hosts. I might have flown, certainly I flowed. My feet barely trod the ground. The matter of that hilltop had joined me with awe-ful agape. I was sensible to an unfolding, with and beyond my time and space, that had nothing at all—and everything—to do with me.



Fig. 5 The cave above Old Karlovasi, 2012 (Author)

Months later, thinking about spectators, I read through my notes on Rancière and rediscovered his reference to Flaubert’s book. My French is not much better than my Greek, so it took me a while to recall the other Saint Anthony, Ayios Adonios, the saint Samos associates with a cave. Feeling subject to what Mathews calls the ‘logic of synchronicities’ (59), I read Flaubert’s text. It is written in the form of a play, and it dances to the ‘impersonal aesthetics of the earth’s song’, as Rancière suggests (*Emancipated* 73).

Flaubert's Saint Antoine is a hermit monk who dreams his way through worldliness toward new devotions, navigated, finally, through visions of merging with earth's matter.

The subtitle of Flaubert's text, *A Revelation of a Soul*, speaks to Plumwood's entreaty for humans to gather 'earth knowledge as revelation' ('Journey' 19). Flaubert's book, published in 1875, thirty years in the making, has a delirious penultimate movement where the saint cries out, 'O joy! O bliss! I have beheld the birth of life! I have seen the beginning of motion! My pulses throb even to the point of bursting!' If I had Flaubert's words, I might have written, in Plumwood's terms, of a revelation of earth knowledge at the cave. Certainly I approached this monk's thanksgiving. The pulse of bliss was present when the cave came upon me. Sinking into the earth, lit by the golden haze of sunset, I shared Saint Antoine's readiness for metamorphosis. 'I long to fly, to swim, to bark, to bellow, to howl! Would that I had wings.' My body gave way to the body of the mountain to create a being of shared dirt. The monk's vision is open to such more-than-human joinings, he desires to 'be in everything' (272).

Reading Flaubert had led me both back to the cave, and forward, to critically reflect on what had been encountered. This unexpected more-than-human moment was, surely, ontopeoetic, worthy of a song, of words. Such moments require the gaze to work with other senses. To look, sensibly, is to let in more than the eye beholds. Such are the complexities needed to stream the human self into or 'under the psychic skin of the world' (Mathews 68). My readiness to feel such beauty took a long hard walk beyond what I knew, and it would not have happened without the intervention of my surrounds. Encouraged by cats, my footsteps led by flocks that went before me, given rest and guidance through the accumulated time of rocks, I was able to respond to the cave.

While this ontopeoetic encounter was made possible through a more-than-human body that included mine, this song has been brought into being through the text. As I write, telling my way back to this early evening encounter, my thinking is filtered through Flaubert and Rancière, Plumwood and Mathews. These strong singular thinkers come to me through other words I have experienced and taken into my senses. This practices Rancière's point that reading a text is as serendipitous and experience-driven as stumbling towards a cave swathed in evening gold. My story is contingent on all that is carried by my body; the textual as well as the experiential. It was the ontopeoetic encounter, however, that allowed me, as Rancière phrases it, to put 'one expression in the place of another' (*Emancipated* 121). Rancière's work focuses on artwork reception, but at the cave of agape, a new expression was made available to me through the more-than-human body, with all its perceptions, including mine. I was emancipated, free to understand the world differently, hosted by the aesthetics of the earth. Rancière's thinking, read through Mathews's ontopeoetic theory, encourages me to tell of my encounter with the cave, no matter that it can only partially be put into words.

Sharing this felt co-affectivity might help other ontopeoetic stories to be told. These stories are not, as Rancière puts it, part of the 'factory of the sensible', where ways of seeing are manufactured to support keeping the world as it is (*Politics* 42). This is not to say my song is a new one, but it is a marginalised perspective in Western thought. When

Flaubert's monk envisions himself as beyond human matter, he is well outside the factory, in a changeable and difficult space. He fears for his veins, they might explode with the impact of his body being revealed as a more than-human confusion of matter. Attentively, faithfully, he puts this fear aside to feel his way towards his more-than-humanness. He is ready to grow 'like the plants,—flow like water,—vibrate like sound—shine like light'; he is ready to become more-than-human (272). The desire in his rapturous words resonates with the joy that sank me to the ground at the end of my long path. Flaubert's aesthetic of the earth, my moment at the cave, Mathews's attentiveness to the onto-poetic encounter, such thinking is open to a revelation of nonhuman knowledge. When the earth reveals the unexpected, as it did for Flaubert's Antoine, and, perhaps Karlovasi's Adonios, and certainly, for me, the world is revealed, differently seen. I sense my song is shared. Other humans, over the centuries, surely have been included in that golden light. Certainly some human remains are present around that unlocked shrine.

This is not to suggest onto-poetic encounters are limited to graced locales of colour in a world of grey stasis. In Flaubert's final scene, 'Antoine makes the sign of the cross and resumes his devotions' (273). This need not be read as a return to orthodoxy. In my reading, through my body, the monk has opened into a more-than-human way of seeing, and this movement has drawn him into a new liturgy. He signs the cross from a different space, bare-souled by the earth's revelation. His routine returns, but his sense of the more-than-human in the everyday has become more accessible. Antoine's devotions continue, but his veins, his blood, his very being, is newly connected with the rest of the earth. I claim this through my own experience. Becoming part of the earth at the open mouth of the cave above Old Karlovasi has allowed me to differently become more-than-human matter in other spaces.

Barad makes an ecological argument for the participatory exchanges between the human and nonhuman, explaining that the intra-actions of phenomena involve a 'dialectic of resistance and accommodation' (134). Taking as given the Darwinian view that self-directed interaction is a requirement for every living thing, Barad writes to inclusions and exclusions, accommodations and resistances, using physics to show that when matter meets matter there are always indeterminate constraints and opportunities which allow for 'ongoing topological dynamics' (142-3). This mutual choice was at play, no matter to what extent I felt it, when I stood, all agape with the cave. In this co-affective world, that cave belongs to Ayios Adonios only in name. The church is no owner either, despite the white cross, paint, broom, table, seat. Nor me, even after my adulatory photographs and these words. Nothing, certainly not possession, will outlast those Samosian stones, except the setting of the sun. It would take more than my lifetime, more than is humanly possible—even, dare I say, for a visionary saint – to understand why it was not my place to enter and alter the space of this cave. I also do not know why I was so determined to scramble up that dark rocky path towards its entrance.

Barad would describe the moment between me, the cave, the distant sea, and the setting sun as so much 'phenomena', busily 'intra-acting' with other phenomena. I would add that accepting these dynamics, or even, actively seeking them out, opened my awareness to occurrences moving through and with the molecules I call my skin. It is possible to

create circumstances favorable to the onto-poetic encounter; to being ‘inside the world’ (Mathews 68) but it does take a leap of faith.

The perceptual eco-psychology of Laura Sewall encourages a more responsive attention to the world, showing how it is possible to nurture a reflectivity that seeks patterns in the earth’s unfolding (212). She begins with William Blake’s work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). Blake’s speaker yearns for a new way of seeing: ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite’ (xxii). Once these smirched ‘doors of perception’ are burned clean, it would be clear that ‘every thing that lives is Holy’ (xviii). This is the earthy revelation to which Plumwood writes.

Building on Blake’s powerful poem, Sewall details the way the world can be better understood through a more sensible human eye, arguing that if humans wish to engage more constructively with the nonhuman world, if they are ready to see beyond that opaque door, they can open their imagination to better take in what they are seeing and hearing. Sewall suggests humans need to imagine the meanings being made by the world filtering through their senses. She calls for discerning perception, a mindfulness activated by imaginative play, and goes on to argue this form of reflective awareness can be practiced into habit. Barad’s work shows phenomena are always ready, always interacting. What Sewall adds, in the context of the cave’s spectacle, is that, through a process of intent inclusion, I readied myself to sink into the earth.

Sewall’s thinking is present in the philosophy of the phenomenological magician David Abram. Abram argues, or perhaps, incants, that when speaking bodies become detached from sensing bodies, ‘perceptual reciprocity’ becomes weaker (56). Habitual attention may allow this always-ready more-than-human reciprocity to re-attach to human comprehension. Approaching this reciprocity is part of Mathews’s onto-poetics. Attention invites in the new.

Sewall’s position suggests that telling stories that emerge from onto-poetic encounters (Mathews), keeping in mind human/nonhuman reciprocity (Abram), and accepting the inevitability of physical intra-actions (Barad) might strengthen human synapses to invoke the world’s unexpected patterns. If the more I walk attentively, the more I attend as I walk, then it follows that the more I write and/or read onto-poetic encounters, the more they might occur for me. This much is apparent.

The potential for change, brought about by the onto-poetic encounter, does not stop at my body. Robyn Warhol, a genre specialist in literary theory, explains: ‘reading always happens in and to a body’ through the repetitive impact of ‘textual machinery’; texts shape bodies, they write on readers ‘over and over again’ (ix, 10). If this is the case, and further, if the aesthetic of the earth can also be read in such ways, then onto-poetic writing and reading must impact on the body of the human. If, as Barad points out, the human is more-than-human, then it is plausible that the onto-poetic narrative may be able to change the more-than-human world.

This supports the suggestion in Blake's prophetic book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that trying to 'cleanse' my perceptions is important. Barad's 'mutual entailment' (140) gives scientific credence to the thought that my experience involved something more-than-human, and the worth of telling such experiences is suggested theoretically by Mathews, and practically by Sewell. I find further support in the work done by political theorist, Jane Bennett, in her investigations into vibrant matter. Barad speaks of intra-action between phenomena to avoid the humanist step of attributing intentionality to the nonhuman. Bennett is equally materialist, but she points to 'entelechy', a 'self moving and self-altering power' as the 'driving force', beyond matter or energy (71). This concept, coined after the turn of the twentieth-century, develops, in different terms, Kantian notions of a divine force behind the causality in matter. Bennett's work with the vibrancy of matter has been poetically expanded by another materialist ecocritic, Serenella Iovino. Iovino, reading Bennett, celebrates the eloquent responsiveness of matter. Thinking of entelechy as a form of eloquence returns me to Mathews's onto-poetics, those invoked stories, where mutually communicated encounters between humans and the nonhuman invite a human sung response. These dynamics (Barad's mutual entailments, driven by Bennett's and Iovino's eloquent entelechy) involve, from a human perspective, a meaning-making that operates in conjunction with matter. In this felt world, separations such as human/nonhuman or living/non-living no longer have relevance. The perceptual door is cleansed of muddy anthropocentric logic and the obfuscations of humanist reason.. Blake's storied faith that the (ontopoetic) world, can be better perceived through broadening human perceptions, begins to become possible when humans become open to richer moments of participative exchange, offered, or revealed by the earth, then, in a spirit of song, offer stories that reform the harmonics of perception.

This is not to suggest that the sensible human spectator can move beyond human awareness. Human representations can never be more-than-human. While I am post-Enlightened enough to challenge the Kantian presumption that all outside human awareness is divinely preordained, this does not mean, however, that I cannot feel the agape at the cave as numinous. This noumena is, however, of an always unfolding revelatory earth, as suggested by Plumwood. With Barad, I see nothing of the human-centred Kantian divine presence here, and everything of her dynamic becoming (150 ff). Let it also be said, I have no way of knowing if the immanence I sensed at the cave spoke only to humans. The evening's insects, for instance, may well have spun in circles with me (or rather, in circles of their own).

Be aware, this is me, as I am, telling stories. The potential that Mathews describes, for humans to slip under the skin of the world's psyche, is contingent, even while it involves all phenomena, including humans (71). Her call for meaning-making narratives is personal, giving direction to Barad's discursive materialism. Only *I* can respond to the eloquent entelechy I find in my surrounds. My onto-poetic stories have to be specific. My moment with the cave was 'uniquely salient' to the coded experiences that have meaning for me (Mathews 71). This salience is the crux for Rancière's emancipated spectator. Through life and art, text and encounter, the reader is guided into new 'relations between saying, seeing and doing' that go beyond 'the structure of domination and subjection'

(*Emancipated* 13). Many texts and spaces have contributed to what is salient to me, and I can draw on these layerings as I work to form the habit of imaginative framing suggested by Sewell. My onto-poeticism is dependent on my singular fields of interpretation. I see through a continually changing strata of experience and make my own stories through this coding. It is, as Rancière puts it, an ‘unpredictive interplay of associations and disassociations’ (*Emancipated* 17). Physical surroundings and written texts that enter me contribute meaning in playful ways that are beyond me to predict.

These interchanges have political and embodied significance. When an artwork disturbs or reconfigures the reader’s interpretive field, a change happens in the sensible body, and this change occurs through the imagination. As Rancière suggests, in the context of artworks, the possible resides in the imagination, because this space is not colonised by fixed ways of understanding the world. The imagination fosters the ‘direct relationship between the potential of works and the potential of bodies’ (*Politics* 57). The onto-poetic encounter hosts this human potential for new ways of imagining the world. As the human and the nonhuman become more-than-human, the body’s relation to the world is reframed. Singing up this bodily disruption creates new topographies of the possible, and, as sensible spectators read their way into differently practiced attention, through their physical surroundings, new opportunities open for further onto-poetic encounters to occur. This is my suggestion. If more is written of moments where human boundaries are called into question, then the more humans might reinforce the mutual entailment (Barad) that comes from being inside the world (Mathews). That is, if humans attend to the eloquence Iovino finds in Bennett’s entelechy, these unfolding stories might make more than personal sense. Stories can open, if not cleanse the doors of perception from singular humanity, towards more-than-human vistas. As I have found, however, through cats and sheep and the setting sun, the onto-poetic encounter involves more than the writer or reader. Stories, such as my walk to the cave above Old Karlovasi, cannot be formulated by human expectations or plans. I needed what was there of Samos.

Need is pivotal. I was welcomed to the home of Thea and Marco because I needed somewhere to stay. My moment with the cave was also created by a need as physical as food and shelter. It might be that when I admit my neediness, generosity beyond me becomes apparent. This is not to claim a divine benevolence, where all matter gravitates toward my desire. The world can be toxic, confronting and exclusive and there are more needs out there than mine. Dynamic intra-action of phenomena is, by definition, unpredictable. However, hospitality can be found by seeking it. Ask and perhaps I might perceive.

In Samos, as I write, need is front and centre. On this island, nothing has ever been more uncertain. Gardeners like Marco, and the people who nodded as I passed in Old Karlovasi, are living on what they can create with the earth’s help. They know, generationally, that much more than their efforts are required to create the growth they need. Norman Wirzba’s eco-theology puts it very simply. Soil is the ‘breath of life’ and perceiving the world in this way is a necessary act of embodied faith (‘Art’). In the Christ centred context he speaks through, embodied faith gravitates around action in the physical world. It is necessary to dirty one’s hands to draw closer to ‘ongoing and

unfolding' (not pre-determined) creation (*Paradise* 26). Wirzba's eco-theology does away with old divisions between the sacred and the secular. He argues the necessity of tending the earth, faithfully, if humans are to become aware, imaginatively and physically, of their limits. As gardeners know, their efforts are only part of the contribution to a garden's growth. All it takes is a flood or drought to put these efforts to scale.

Wirzba's position broadens ontoepoetical material ecocriticism, through his specific ethical perspective. Noting that 'science has established our biological interconnectedness' he reminds readers that the human response to this interconnection is 'a moral and spiritual matter' (13). If morality and spirituality can be considered as personal stories, then Wirzba's responsive ethic joins with ontoepoetic invocations. Actions tell a story, as much as do words. To recognise fragile human materiality as part of a greater earthy fragility leaves no time for human hubris. Creation is ongoing and involves all matter. When I understand my 'self' as constantly forming and being formed by my surrounds, I cannot hide from the fact that any harm I cause, any good I do, goes well beyond what I call my own body. My faith is that more-than-human ontoepoetic encounters will keep me attentive to the needs in my own patch of dirt, as well as reminding me of the part my dust plays in the world of interconnected needs it gathers or repulses. By witnessing my needs, met by a cave I cannot forget, I invoke new perceptions, as well as adding my story to other ontoepoetics. With the fervour of a dreaming monk, spectating and doing at the same time, I sing toward new perceptions in this telling of a singular contingent encounter with a more-than-human part of a body that makes sense to me. I look forward to more harmonics, attune my ears, feel it coming, can smell it, almost taste it in my mouth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge the University of Melbourne's Felix Myer scholarship. My opportunity to respond to the cave began there. I am indebted to the *AJE* readers who reviewed this essay and saw enough in its earlier version to encourage me to tell my story with greater clarity. With agape, I dedicate these words to my hosts, Marco, Thea, and the cave.

WORKS CITED

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More than Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. Print.
- Barad, Karen. 'Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter comes to Matter'. *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2008. Print.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 1790. Paris: Oxford UP, 1975. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. 1874. Trans. Lafcadio Hearn. New York: Coni and Liveright, 1911. Print.
- Iovino, Serenella. 'Narrative Agency and Storied Matter: Material Ecocriticism and the Speech of Things'. 'Natura Loquens': Fifth Biennial Conference EASLCE, University of Laguna, July 2012. Conference paper.
- Mathews, Freya. 'The World Hidden within the World: a Conversation on Ontopoetics'. *The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy* 23. 1 (2007) 64-84. <http://www.freymathews.net/downloads/WorldHiddenWithinWorld.pdf>. Accessed 20 December 2011.
- Plumwood, Val. 'Journey to the Heart of Stone'. *Nature, Culture and Literature* 5. (2007) 17-21. Print.
- . *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. Verso: London, 2011. Print.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004. Print.
- Sewall, Laura. 'The Skill of Ecological Perception'. *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Eds. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner. Sierra Club Books, 1995. Print.
- Warhol, Robyn. *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2003. Print.
- Wirzba, Norman. 'The Art of Creaturely Life: Considering Human Propriety'. *Creation, Creatureliness, and Creativity: The Human Place in the Natural World*. The 2012 Meeting of the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology. Los Angeles, April 2012. Conference paper.
- . *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.