

# The World Hidden within the World: A Conversation on Ontopoetics

Freya Mathews

## PRELUDE

Some years ago an extraordinary event occurred at an old cattle station named Hamilton Downs in outback Central Australia, about 80 km to the northwest of Alice Springs.<sup>1</sup> The event was a gathering, one in a series of “sense of place” colloquia that were held in various interesting venues over a number of years. The principal organizer and animateur that year was Craig San Roque, a cultural psychoanalyst then resident in Alice Springs.<sup>2</sup> Described as a “coming into country,” the gathering was intended to introduce the Hamilton Downs country to various scholars and academics interested in the idea of place. Participants had written and circulated their papers beforehand, so there was no need for formal presentations at the event. This left people in a prepared and receptive state of mind but free to engage with one another and with the place itself.

The site was utterly beautiful. It consisted of an old stone homestead set way out in the rangelands overlooking a dry riverbed lined with large rocks and ancient white gums. An Aboriginal flag flew at the gate; a huge palm tree dominated the grounds; in the distance a range of arid pink cliffs guarded the horizon.

The event was to last five days. Craig San Roque had invited many local identities – artists and musicians and environmentalists, and, most importantly, Aboriginal custodians – to be with us for the first couple of days.

Those first few days were spent basically just milling around, with talking circles, dream circles, walks into country, an excursion to a numinous local site called Fish Hole. Stories were told: these included Dreaming stories for that country, offered by one of the Indigenous custodians, and a walking tour of the local ecology led by a local ethnobotanist, who spoke intimately of each plant he pointed out, as if it had a personal story to tell. Amidst all this creative ferment, people bonded, wondered what they were doing there, felt disoriented, argued, sorted themselves out, and gradually woke up to the huge and majestic presence of country all around them.

It wasn't until the second last day that the real work was ready to begin. We broke up into separate male and female groups and each group spent the day working out a “story of place” that expressed their own responses, and their address, to this shimmering country. In the evening the two groups came together in a series of explosive performances in the dry riverbed by the light of a monumental campfire.

Overall, what was most astonishing, to my mind, about this “colloquium” was that it seemed to unfold via a logic of synchronicities. A set of initial conditions had been put in place to provide the framework or container for the event, but the event was, within

---

<sup>1</sup> The event at Hamilton Downs has been discussed in other publications, including: C. San Roque & J. Cameron (2002), “Coming into Country: Catalyzing the process of social ecology,” *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 2; and, F. Mathews (2005), “Hamilton Downs: Philosophy in the field ... of being,” in *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a recovery of culture*, SUNY Press, Albany.

<sup>2</sup> The originator and co-ordinator of the series of Sense of Place colloquia as a whole was John Cameron of the Social Ecology Program at the University of Western Sydney.

that container, largely self-determining: what happened at one moment suggested what should happen at the next, and the structure of the entire event was highly recursive: each happening or offering fed back into, and inflected, everything else that was happening. On account of this extreme openness, skilfully preserved by Craig as amateur, there was plenty of opportunity – plenty of gaps in the “script” – for serendipity.

The upshot was that a complex and elaborate poetic invocation took shape organically in the course of the five days, and this seemed to elicit a complex and elaborate poetic response from the world. Many of the participants found themselves called into, or caught up in, incidents or circumstances that symbolically played out central themes of their lives, or challenged them to take steps they had not till then been able to take. Different individuals, acting independently, found their activities meshing to form poetic scenarios or narratives that they could not have imagined, yet which were perfectly apposite for the circumstances. Each time we came to a gap in the proceedings, it was if the land, or the world, stepped in, and offered poetic comments or denouements that exceeded anything we could have devised. There was a breathtaking display of lightning, for instance, just at a particular “flat spot” in the women’s final performance of place; multitudes of actual frogs gathered on the slope leading down to the river bed just after the men had performed a frog dance; crucial conversations were punctuated, at just the right moments, with expressive bird calls; three participants who had become lost temporarily at Fish Hole were about to sit on a strange rock when a loud report mysteriously emanated from it; indeed, seat-shaped rocks seemed to offer themselves in the riverbed whenever one turned, tired, looking for a place to rest...

The response of this country to our call consisted of different but cross-referenced responses to different individuals, together with common responses for the collective. It felt like a coming alive of the world, a flow of configurations of circumstances along axes of meaning.

At the end of the event, one was left wondering how to make sense of it. The logic of its unfolding was so different from the tenor of everyday life – in modern societies, at any rate – in which events occur as a result of human intentions intersecting with causal conditions, but without any kind of internal thread of meaning supplied by the world itself. How then to explain this inner thread of meaning that was so much in evidence at Hamilton Downs, this responsiveness of the world to our call?

## **THE CAMPFIRE CONVERSATION**

To help us discuss this question, let’s now shift forward in time but stay at Hamilton Downs. What I would like to do is to conjure a follow-up gathering here, attended by some of my colleagues who think about such matters. The Jungian organizer of the colloquium, Craig San Roque is one of these colleagues, of course. Kimberley Lawman, Frans Hoogland, is another. Legendary anthropologist and essayist, Deborah Bird Rose is also here with us at the campfire. There is an elderly Chinese gentleman, a colleague of Craig’s, who goes by the name of Professor Wong, and a close associate of Professor Wong’s, Sun Dew, a practitioner of Chinese medicine from Perth. There are others up at the bunkhouse, including some PhD students, who might join us later.

So, here we are, somehow magically sitting in the sandy riverbed below the old stone homestead, a small campfire burning in the centre of our circle. Craig and Professor Wong are seated on a convenient pile of old timbers; the rest of us are perched on rocks

or nestled cross-legged in the sand. The morning is already very warm. There is a billy on the fire. We are drinking tea from tin mugs. Once again I ask the question, how are we to make sense of the event that occurred here years ago at Hamilton Downs? I follow up the question with a comment. At the time, I say, it felt to me as if I were riding something alive out here, a dragon, a great serpent, a current of energy. It was not necessarily carrying me to where I thought I wanted to go, but with a little steering, a little reining in, it was keeping me moving, in process, evolving. To my mind it had seemed like the Dao. Out in this archaic world, it had seemed as if the Dao were still a bucking, plunging presence, wild but trustworthy, as real as a desert river in full flood...<sup>3</sup>

I look across the fire to Sun Dew. She is dressed in a simple silk kimono, feathery grey and very light. What do you think, Sun Dew, I ask her. I know that she is highly trained in Daoist medical arts. Do you think Daoism can help us to make sense of the experience? Is it a useful point of entry into the mystery that an event like the sense of place colloquium represents for modern sensibilities? How tenable do you think the terms of Daoism are today?

Sun Dew is silent for a few moments. She looks across at Professor Wong. Their eyes meet, then she begins. The world in which the first texts of Daoism were written down – by Laozi and Zhuangzi – was of course a world of magic, she says. We know today that this magic was largely a matter of superstition, of magicians or sorcerers or Daoist practitioners importuning the supernatural on behalf of themselves or their clients, seeking to manipulate reality by means of symbolic instruments. Most people in the modern world no longer take this aspect of Daoism seriously. With the vast apparatus of modern science at our disposal, we have no need of instrumental magic, and even less belief in it.

Sun Dew folds her knees up under her chin in a single, birdlike gesture, then continues to speak. Although this old world – this world of enchantment – was undoubtedly in part a figment of superstitious imagination, it may not have been entirely so. Daoism identified a movement in things, a directedness in their unfolding. The elements of nature (the “Ten Thousand Things,” as Daoists say) are really, according to Laozi and Zhuangzi, patterns in an underlying flow. These patterns form and re-form under the influence of the patterns forming and re-forming around them. This is, in other words, an order of mutual arising, a symbiosis in which no particular form or pattern can emerge independently of the forms or patterns resolving and dissolving all around it. Moreover, when the Ten Thousand Things are left to arise spontaneously in this way, under the mutual influences of one another, the universe assumes *its* own proper pattern or form – it follows *its* proper course.

This movement in things, or directedness in their unfolding, was presumably not merely imaginary, because Daoist practitioners who had received appropriate training – through the various Daoist arts – could reliably detect it and adapt their activity to it. But nor was this movement in things, this directedness, merely the working of the laws of physics. Yes, it was a kind of energy (*qi*, in Chinese), but this was not the energy of  $e=mc^2$ . There were external indicators of it – pulses in the human body, for instance, and

---

<sup>3</sup> F. Mathews (2005), *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a recovery of culture*, SUNY Press, Albany, p. 111.

“dragon veins” (detectable pathways of energy flow) in the landscape.<sup>4</sup> But it was not a purely external energy.<sup>5</sup> This was because it emanated from a cosmology that did not distinguish, in an absolute way, between an internal and external aspect of things. According to this cosmology, reality was irreducibly psychophysical in character, a forever changing and unfolding pattern of movement that was as much psychic as physical. The external appearances could be described by physics, but the psychic interiority was the province of Dao.

Sun Dew stops, and thoughtfully stirs the fire with the point of a stick. I ask her what it is like to experience the world under this interior, psychic aspect. The classical Daoist texts are of course not explicit about this and Sun Dew does not immediately reply. So I go on. Could we perhaps spell out the kind of experiences to which these texts are (admittedly rather cryptically) alluding as follows: if one somehow managed to slip under the psychic skin of the world, and “enter” its subjectivity, would one experience the “outside” as “inside”? If one stepped inside the world, in this sense, might the trees and grass and rivers no longer appear as external to oneself? Might they – along with oneself – now be experienced as internal to the psyche of the world? Would one be experiencing them, and oneself, from inside the world, rather than from outside it, from whence they appear as an object-manifold? As soon as one slipped under the subject-object membrane in this way, wouldn’t one feel the psychic streaming with which things, as emanations of psychic process, are charged? Wouldn’t one feel the directed energy of psychic arising that belongs to all psychic process? Viewed from within the subjectivity of the world, are not the Ten Thousand Things charged with this psychic streaming? But when they are viewed from the outside in the normal way, as objects, isn’t this psychic streaming non-manifest?

Yes, says Sun Dew, that puts it well. This streaming that animates things when they are viewed under the world’s interior psychic aspect does, I think, correspond to the directed movement in things that Laozi and Zhuangzi called Dao. Once one slips inside the world and begins to experience things from within its psychic interior, one can be drawn deeper into this interior. One has only to surrender one’s subject/object mind-set – where this encompasses all discursive thinking – and relinquish one’s discursive goals and ends, in order to be borne along on its fast current. When this occurs, a path begins to open up in the midst of the phenomena. Although the phenomena, under their external aspect, are describable by physics, the path that opens up when the phenomena are perceived under their internal aspect is not plotted by the laws of physics. It is plotted by this inner principle of psychic process. Being psychic, this process is not only energetic but essentially imbued with *meaning*. The path, in fact, is plotted by meaning. That is to say, the path that opens for me amongst the phenomena is a path appointed by meaning, meaning which is uniquely apposite for me; it is a meaning uniquely referenced to the key significances of my own life.

---

<sup>4</sup> See S.L. Field (2001), “In Search of Dragons: The folk ecology of fengshui,” in N.J. Girardot, J. Miller & Liu Xiaogan (eds), *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a cosmic landscape*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. pp. 185–200.

<sup>5</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan defines *ch’i* as “material force,” meaning both energy and matter. However, the term also denotes psychophysical power associated with blood and breath. As such, it is translated as “vital force” or “vital power,” See Wing-Tsit Chan (1963), *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 784.

Sun Dew falls silent again, and looks inquiringly at Professor Wong, who is nodding approvingly. Everyone drinks some tea. I make the point that if the world is indeed a psychophysical reality, and if things, viewed from within its psychic dimension, are indeed charged with a psychic streaming, then we would expect to find intimations of this inner aspect in a range of traditions – not only in Daoism. Frans responds. Frans is Dutch-born, but has lived for decades out bush with Aboriginal people in the remote north-west of the continent and is a trusted Lawman for the region. He wants to tell us about the experience of *le-an*. *Le-an* is, it seems, exactly what we might expect from a psychophysical reality once we have ceased perceiving it from the outside, under its object aspect, and have begun to experience it from the inside, under its subjectual aspect. Here is what Frans says:

In order to experience [this feeling], we have to walk the land. At a certain time for everybody, the land will take over. The land will take that person. You think you're following something, but the land is actually pulling you. When the land starts pulling you, you're not even aware you're walking – you're off, you're gone. When you experience this, it's like a shift in your reality. You start seeing things you never seen before ... all of a sudden [the training process you have acquired through your upbringing] doesn't fit anything. Then something comes out of the land, guides you. It can be a tree, a rock, a face in the sand, or a bird.

You might follow the eagle flying, and the eagle might go somewhere. Through the eagle, you can see the red cliffs. Then another thing might grab your attention, and before you know it there's a path created that is connected to you. It belongs to you, and that is the way you start to communicate with the land, through your path experiences. And that path brings you right back to yourself. You become very aware about yourself. You start to tune finer and finer. Then you become aware that when you're walking the path, it's coming out of you – you are connected to it...

Country is underneath us all the time, but it's all covered up and we in our minds are all covered up. So when we walk in the land, we can't see anything for a while. We got all our possessions with us, and through these things we look at the land. Do you feel the sand you walk on? Are you aware of where your feet step? Are you aware of the trees you just passed, the birds that just landed? How much do you see? That has to shift and as soon as it does, we get a shift in mind that drops down to a feeling. Then we wake up to feeling, what we call *le-an* here, and we become more alive, we start feeling, we become more sensitive. You start to read the country. Then all of a sudden there's an opening down there. Before there was only a wall, but now that tree has meaning, now that rock has meaning and all of a sudden that thing takes you. You just follow. Then you wake up, and you see a lot of things and the country starts living for you. Everything is based on that feeling *le-an*, seeing through that feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Frans proceeds to offer an illustration of *le-an*. He tells a story of waking up in his camp one morning near the sea at Coconut Wells and being aware of the feeling and, without even waiting for his usual cup of tea, taking off. Without knowing why, he heads straight for the reef. The reef cuts his bare feet but he walks right out onto it. There he finds a large turtle wedged in a rock pool, unable to regain the sea. The turtle is unafraid of him and seems to be summoning him. Frans struggles to help the turtle out of the pool and eventually, after much flailing and heaving, succeeds. Before it swims away, the turtle lifts its head out of the water and turns to look at him one last time. Then it's gone. Seemingly in a single step, the pain in his feet vanished, Frans finds himself back in his camp, having a cup of tea. And that, as he says, is *le-an*.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> F. Hoogland in J. Sinatra & P. Murphy (1999), *Listen to the People, Listen to the Land*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Now Professor Wong chimes in. *Le-an*, as you have described it, he says to Frans, is the experience of being called by world into world, but into world as people usually never experience it, because, as Professor Mathews says – he nods to me – they normally view it from the outside, as a manifold of objects. To experience the world from within, in the way she has explained, is to experience it as a field of communicative meaning, meaning that draws us from one encounter to another. This seems to match the “world hidden within the world,” that Zhuangzi cryptically indicates:

A boat may be hidden in a creek, or in a bog, safe enough. But at midnight a strong man may come and carry away the boat on his back. The dull of vision do not perceive that however you conceal things, small ones in larger ones, there will always be a chance of losing them. But if you conceal the whole universe in the whole universe, there will be no place left wherein it may be lost.<sup>8</sup>

As he has been speaking, Professor Wong has been tapping the little mound of timbers on which he and Craig are sitting, striking them with the flat of his hand occasionally for emphasis. We all notice that they emit a rather hollow sound. Craig is now staring down at the mound with a rather strange expression. At more or less the same instant it dawns on all of us, following Craig’s gaze, that the pile of timbers is actually the upturned hull of a rotting rowboat, almost submerged in sand. Wong exclaims excitedly, and while the rest of us catch our breath, he starts drawing Chinese characters in the sand. He translates them for Craig, but the rest of us cannot hear these muttered asides.

I take up the conversation. Are you suggesting, I venture to the distracted professor, that the only thing of true worth, according to Zhuangzi – the only thing worth trying to hold onto – is the world itself, under its “hidden” aspect, which is to say, its inner aspect, the psychic aspect of our psychophysical universe? And is Zhuangzi saying that this is the only thing of true worth because it is the thing that brings us to life, that ushers us into a state of numinous streaming and meaning? And this is a thing that, once found, cannot be lost? It is there under everyone’s nose, but no one can take it from me once I have found it, because this “hidden” world, as revealed to me or my community, belongs exclusively to us and can’t belong to anyone else: its meaning is referenced to meanings that are uniquely salient to us? In other words, to find the world hidden within the world is to experience it nondualistically – not, as in meditational traditions, as “emptiness,” but as an opening of the ordinary world into poetic significance?

But Professor Wong is now deep in private conversation with Craig. “Ah yes,” I hear Craig exclaim, “of course! The philosopher’s stone! The world hidden within the world!” And he draws a cryptic symbol in the sand. But then the whispered conversation becomes inaudible again.

I persevere. It would seem, I say, that Dao emanates from the unmanifest dimension of the ordinary, manifest world. It is not an occult force, like forces posited in sorcery, that exist in addition to the forces posited by physics, and that are, like them, discovered from the outside. Rather, Dao indicates a way that opens within the already

---

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Giles (1889), Translation of *Zhuangzi*, ch. 6, part 6. Available online.

existing landscape<sup>9</sup> – like the famous portals that opened up, for Daoist initiates and immortals, into sacred mountains.

Yes! exclaims Professor Wong, suddenly snapping back into the discussion. In Daoist lore, mountains harboured vast inner labyrinths, residences for presiding gods and spirits. These labyrinths could be accessed by the adept only via special maps and guidebooks. In particular, there were “Hidden Periods,” times when a given mountain was open or closed. Without knowledge of these Hidden Periods, the adept would not be able to overcome the resistance of the mountain and this inner world would remain closed to him forever; the primordial universe of the mountain would end up rejecting him as a foreign body. With knowledge of the Hidden Periods however, the adept would be able to find the opening in the mountain’s shield, slip inside, and be totally absorbed into the landscape.<sup>10</sup>

Sun Dew points out that the portals and pathways indicated in Daoism are revealed through ritual protocols, but she warmly agrees that these portals and pathways might be understood in terms of *le-an*, as a kind of call from within the psychic interiority of the world. When the call comes and the path opens one must follow it unquestioningly, even hurrying to do so, lest it should close up again.

We all stare into the fire for a while. Frans adds some sticks to it. Deborah starts plaiting the cascade of her long white hair. One of the PhD students from the bunkhouse, Caresse Cranwell, has ambled down to join us. Okay, I say, so those experiences some of us had years ago here at Hamilton Downs – experiences of the world’s poetic responsiveness – make sense if the world is viewed not merely as a physical manifold but as a psychophysical reality. (I am tempted to launch into a little lecture here, with a view to outlining the main elements of my own theory of panpsychism, according to which all self-realizing systems, or selves, are intrinsically psychophysical in nature, and the universe itself is a self-realizing system, hence possessed of a psychoactive as well as a physical dimension. I would like to make the point that reality may be psychoactive, and in that sense potentially communicative and responsive to us, while also conforming externally to the laws of physics – or, to put it in other words, that a poetic order may coexist with the causal order, without contradicting it.<sup>11</sup> I take some tentative steps

---

<sup>9</sup> The centrality of this image of ways opening up in the midst of appearances is evident in the very title of *op. cit.*, N.J. Girardot, J. Miller & Liu Xiaogan (eds) (2001): *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a cosmic landscape*.

<sup>10</sup> K. Schipper (1993), *Taoist Body*, translated by K. Duval, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 173. The latter two sentences are an almost direct quote from Schipper.

<sup>11</sup> **Contents of Sealed Envelope** (these are the notes that I had in my pocket):

“In my book, *For Love of Matter: a contemporary panpsychism*, I try to show that reality can be psychoactive, and in that sense potentially communicative and responsive to us, while also conforming externally to the laws of physics. I call this kind of view of reality, ‘panpsychism’: ‘pan’ meaning everything, ‘psyche’ meaning soul or subjectivity or mentality. ‘Panpsychism’ then is an old philosophical term denoting the view that there is a psychic or mentalistic dimension to everything; that mentality – whether in the form of spirit, subjectivity, soul, purpose, agency or conativity – is as primitive an aspect of reality as materiality is. Although panpsychism has been very much a minority tradition in the history of Western philosophy, serious accounts of it have been advanced from time to time (by Spinoza, for example; some of the Romantics, especially Schelling; and the process philosophers, most notably Whitehead). My own account of panpsychism represents the manifest world, as described by physics, as the outward appearance of an inner field of ‘subjectivity,’ in an expanded sense of subjectivity. Reality is, from this

towards this explanation, but I notice that everyone glazes over as soon as I wax theoretical. So I change tack.) The question is, I say forcefully to recapture their attention, what is it that activates the poetic order? What is it that activates the transition in which one slips from awareness of the world as externality to awareness of the streaming that opens up in the midst of the phenomena and carries one from one poetic conjunction to another?

Professor Wong inscribes some more characters in the sand and whispers to Craig. Craig relays to us the gist of what Wong is saying. He is talking about someone by the name of the Master-Who-Embraces-Simplicity, Craig says. The Master-Who-Embraces-Simplicity apparently tells us that one must *dance* along the path leading from the *yang* world to the realm of *yin* inside the world: hop from the left foot to the right, one time *yin*, one time *yang*. Professor Wong jumps up and, making a show of holding his breath, performs the steps. He points behind him: we see in the sand tracks that look like two trigrams: *li* and *k'an*, he exclaims triumphantly. The powers of Heaven and Earth, Sun Dew explains.<sup>12</sup>

We are all non-plussed for a moment. Professor Wong sits down, erases the trigrams, and rolling up the sleeves of his loose-fitting grey silk shirt, he busily starts drawing new characters in the sand. I thank him for the demonstration, and generalize his point: there are traditional arts – such as the ritual dance we have just witnessed, together with other Daoist arts perhaps, such as feng shui, tai chi and calligraphy – that might help the practitioner “cross over” by training them in the surrender of discursive thinking and alignment with the flow of energetic streaming. But judging from experiences like those that occurred during the colloquium here at Hamilton Downs – and other experiences that many of us could probably cite – individuals might activate the poetic order without engaging in any of these traditional practices. And – I hurry on, because I want to put forward a suggestion before anyone objects to what I have just said – perhaps the way we do so, the way we intentionally or unintentionally activate the poetic order, is by *invocation*, particularly invocation in narrative form. The poetic order seems able to be activated by *story*, told, or better still enacted, with invocational intent. I pause to let my suggestion hang in the warm air. Perhaps, I continue, this is what happened here at Hamilton Downs: out of the storytelling that occurred in the early phases of the event, by Indigenous and non-indigenous custodians and by the colloquium participants themselves, a rich narrative context was created. This provided a poetic frame of reference for the world to offer its own poetic interjections.

I look across at Frans. Such invocations may be one-off affairs, as at Hamilton Downs, I say to him. But mightn't they also be systematically integrated into the daily praxis of an entire community, with the result, perhaps, that members of that community

---

point of view, both a unity and a manifold of differentia, a One and a Many. Viewed from within, it is a field of subjectivity, with a conativity (that is to say, a will to realize itself and increase its own existence) of its own and a capacity for communication; from the viewpoint of its finite modes, or those of them that are capable of acting as observers, it is an order of extension, as represented by physics. As a locus of subjectivity and conativity in its own right, the universe is capable of and actively seeks communicative engagement with its finite modes, the Many, or, again, with those of them that are capable of such engagement. Wherever this communicative engagement is actualized, it is manifest in a *poetic* order – an order of poetic revelation – that unfolds alongside the *causal* order. This poetic order, or order of meaning, exceeds the causal order but in no way contradicts it.”

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, K. Schipper (1993), pp. 173–174.

slip routinely between awareness of the world under its external, uncommunicative aspect and awareness of it under its interior, communicative, poetic aspect? In such communities mightn't awareness of the world under its poetic aspect direct individual action and collective affairs as routinely as practical thinking does? Is this how it is in Aboriginal communities, Frans? I ask. Might the whole culture of such communities be built on a ground of poetic/storied invocation, which serves to "sing up" the world in which that community dwells and make that world an active participant in their communal life? Is this what *Dreaming* is? Is it the interior, psycho-active aspect of reality, which is called forth into narrative communicativeness by narrative overtures which provide it with the poetic elements by means of which it can speak?

Frans is noncommittal. These are not his terms of reference. But Craig intervenes. *Why*, he asks, might *story* be efficacious in activating the poetic order? Or, to push the argument along a bit, why might story be the lingua franca of reality?

I know that Craig has interesting views of his own about the relation between meaning and story, but his theory is not really addressed to this matter of the lingua franca of reality itself. So, in order to address this matter, I backtrack a bit, and start with a cosmological question: why does the observable world – the world under its external aspect, as represented by physics – hang together in the way that it does? Why is the universe a *universe*, a unity? Why is space – the frame of physics – unbounded yet unbroken, an indivisible wholeness, a field-like manifold? Why doesn't it break up, granulate, fragment, and hence cease to be the field that it is, the ground for physical existence?<sup>13</sup> Physics has no answer to this question. It cannot explain why there are laws that hold physical structures together and thereby guarantee the overall cohering of things. From the viewpoint of physics, this cohering is ad hoc, contingent; there is nothing in the nature of physicality per se that appears to underpin it.

If an inner, subjectival dimension is seen as integral to the nature of physicality however, then the necessity of this cohering of physical existence is explained. Why? Because subjectivity is by its very nature field-like, holistic, internally interpermeating, indivisible, unbounded. My subjectivity – or call it my psyche – cannot be constituted atomistically, as an aggregate of discrete units of experience, nor even as a continuum of point-like experiences. Why is this so? Why is psyche necessarily field-like? One answer is that this field-like nature of psyche is a function of *meaning* – of the intrinsically interleaving and over-layering and interpermeating nature of meaning – and of the constitution of experience through meaning. The kind of holistic continuity that confers unity on psyche, in other words, is a continuity of meaning. Subjectivity is the medium for a tissue of meanings that cannot be pulled apart without ceasing to be meanings – and without subjectivity thereby ceasing to exist. In other words, it is to the extent that psyche finds meaning in its experience that that experience coheres as the unity that *is* subjectivity. This is not of course to say, I add, that we might not identify individual experiences by abstracting them from the field of experience – as this sense datum or that itch or this moment of elation. I am just pointing out that such experiences cannot

---

<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are theories in physics which do ascribe a sub-particle foam-like or granular structure to space. But these are not inconsistent with the perfect macro-level cohering of space as the frame for physical process.

actually exist in isolation from the entire field of the subject's experience, and this field-like structure of subjectivity is a function of meaning.

But what, Craig asks, do you mean by "meaning"?

Well, I reply, I'm using the word "meaning" to indicate the basic feeling of things mattering – of things having relevance, significance, importance. In other words, I'm using "meaning" in the sense of meaningfulness. And meaningfulness, I add, is clearly the province of *self*. And self? What do I mean by self? I mean not merely the human self but any self-realizing system – any system that maintains itself in existence by its own intentional efforts. Selves are defined by interests: they have a constitutive interest in self-maintenance and self-increase. It is relative to the interests of selves that things – particular objects, circumstances – assume significance, relevance, importance. If there were no selves in the world, everything would just be what it is – nothing that occurred would matter more or less than anything else, so nothing would have any meaning. But selves, we might notice, are intrinsically structured as *story*: a self has a beginning, middle and end. It also has a goal, a purpose – its existence has a point, and a very compelling one, namely to survive, to thrive, to postpone its death for as long as possible. The quest of the self is continually beset with dangers and difficulties. This gives existence for the self the element of suspense that is essential to story.

I add that this is presumably why stories are compelling only in the telling. It explains, in other words, why stories crumple like punctured balloons and lose their charge as soon as they are ended. The listener brings the huge suspense of their own existential uncertainty to the story as long as it is being told and while its outcome is as yet unknown, but this investment is lost as soon as the story is finished.

So meaning, understood as this basic sense of meaningfulness, is, I conclude, tied at its root to story. And story is the province of self.

If *world* is also "self," in the sense that it is a psychophysical system with its own project of self-realization and self-increase, then it too will have story as its inner structure and thus it will be resonant to story. World stories itself, in other words, and in that sense one might say that world is the original field of Dreaming: Dreaming is the inside of the world, its subjectival dimension.

I add, turning back to Craig, that the further development of meaning, as instanced in human conceptualization and cognition, may then indeed be built via ceremony on a ground of Dreaming stories, as his theory prescribes.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> In his paper, "On Tjukurrpa: Painting up, and building thought," *Social Analysis* 50 (2), 2006, pp. 148–172, Craig San Roque argues that all the foundational categories of Aboriginal thought come into being in the context of Dreaming stories: it is Dreaming stories which transmute the terrain of the as-yet uninterpreted and hence undifferentiated world into terrains of meaning. (Indeed – though Craig does not point this out – Dreaming stories themselves recapitulate, in their narratives, this meaning-making process: the world is represented as featureless and undifferentiated until the Dreaming Ancestors begin the journey-stories that will inscribe the landscape with the features that it has today.) When the world is storied in this way, a conceptual frame of meaning is created through which human life more generally can be thought about. (This is the point that Craig wants to make: if an object or state of affairs has not been storied, it cannot be thought about. This means that objects or states of affairs introduced into Aboriginal culture from other cultures need to be storied – in ways consonant with the existing canon of Dreaming stories – before they can be thought about and hence problems involving them solved.) Craig's theory thus explains how and why cultures generally create and rest on a repertoire of Dreaming stories – myths – that serve as primordial templates for concepts and hence for thought/intelligibility. It

I want to bring this phase of the discussion to conclusion, so I try to sum up. If Dreaming is the subjectival dimension of the world then it seems that we can engage this Dreaming dimension by creating a narrative context in which it can express itself to us. This is our invocational task, the task of *singing up*. Our invocations will of course have to be phrased in the poetic language of *things* as opposed to the conceptual language of words, since the world does not think, at least in any literal way, in the conceptual language of words. This poetic language is, however, familiar to us from dreams, where meaning is conveyed predominately through objects and circumstances rather than through discourse. Our narrative address will accordingly best be mediated by things – it will best be physically enacted or performed, preferably in situ, at the actual sites that figure in the narrative.

I notice that Cresse is looking restless. Her doctoral thesis is on ecocosmology, with particular reference to the work of Ken Wilber, who does not share the sensibility I have just summarized. I look at her expectantly. Granted that reality has a subjectival aspect, she begins, tentatively, cupping her chin in her hands, is it, under that aspect, evolving towards ends of its own? If it is, what is our role as human beings in this unfolding? Are there higher states that we can attain, higher faculties that we can actualize, in order the better to fulfil our appointed role? She pauses, then adds more forcefully, isn't there an *evolutionary* momentum in this metaphysical project?

Frans and Craig and Professor Wong and Sun Dew all look slightly taken aback. Daoists of old, Professor Wong observes obliquely, did not look forward; they sought to *return to the origins* of things. The magic bronze mirrors they employed to negotiate their way through the inner realms had intricate relief designs on their backs that showed the labyrinthine hidden structures of the natural universe. In these mirrors, the light was reflected, the mirrors reversed the flow of energies, giving *fan-kuang*.<sup>15</sup> Wong jumps up and pronounces this word with a martial-arts-like flourish. Sun Dew translates for us; *fan-kuang*: “returned view,” she whispers. She adds that Daoists found immortality *not* by looking towards the future but by turning their gaze back until they could see deeply enough into actuality to become absorbed into the generative sources of the present.

Deborah, who has long been silent, listening patiently, now leans forward. I think you are so right, she says emphatically, addressing Professor Wong and Sun Dew.<sup>16</sup> It is Western civilization which has invested time with this forward vector, so that things are seen to increase in complexity and significance in the course of history. This construction goes back to Christianity, which divided time into two epochs, each with its own directionality, namely the epoch before Christ, which was leading up to the year zero, and the epoch after Christ, which was leading up to the resurrection. This construction sets up an irreversible sequence of events within a teleological frame. Within this frame Western

---

details the process whereby the raw human experience of world, still entangled with the particularity of geography and topography, becomes transmuted, via ceremony, into story and thence into concept. However, it doesn't explain from whence the original feeling for story emanates, nor does it explain the fact that while people do indeed sing the world in ceremony, the world in turn sings back, offering poetic responses that open up new possibilities of meaning, new moments of poetic engagement. It is this feeling for story at the deeper level, in both human self and world, that the appeal to selfhood in the present text is intended to explain.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, K. Schipper (1993).

<sup>16</sup> For the account of time that follows, see D. Bird Rose (2005), *Reports from a Wild Country*, UNSW Press, Sydney, chapters 1, 3, 8.

history assumes a teleological and apocalyptic structure and content: the final goal for both individuals and societies is a post-historical heaven on earth. And of course this structuring of time continues to shape Western civilization as it enters its post-Christian phase – the phase of modernity. For this teleological structuring of time gives rise to the presumption of progress, progress being the central axis of modernity. Within the paradigm of progress, the present emerges out of, and is differentiated from, the past, and the future will emerge from, and be differentiated from, the present. Our lives have an “end,” a future point towards which they are directed, where conflict and contradiction will be resolved.<sup>17</sup>

Deborah pauses, deep in thought, then adds sadly that making time disjunctive in this way has absolved us, as children of modernity, from responsibility for “now,” since “now” is, from this modern point of view, just a means to an end; at the same time it has left us with nowhere to stand. We find ourselves suspended in a web of time concepts “that hold us always about to be that which we would believe we truly are... The “now” becomes a site of such alienation it hardly bears thinking about.”<sup>18</sup>

But – and here Deborah brightens up – time is structured quite differently in Aboriginal thought. Two dimensions of existence are distinguished: Dreaming and ordinary. Dreaming is the enduring, generative or originary dimension of existence. Ordinary life is the province of past, present and future and hence of ephemerality, of passing away. People seek escape from the sense of meaninglessness that inevitably attends ephemerality by orienting themselves towards Dreaming, which is to say, towards immanent origins. “Westerners face the future, the past is behind; the image is of generations of people marching into the future. Aboriginal people face the source; the image is of generations of people returning into Dreaming.”<sup>19</sup>

Deb leans back. Professor Wong is looking pleased. Frans has long since wandered off. I try to process what has just been said. If Dreaming is the source, and the source is located in the psychoactive dimension of the manifest world, then our metaphysical task, as humans, may simply be to sing up that psychoactive dimension, and allow ourselves to be drawn into story with it. Actively engaging in the poetics of reality in this way, providing opportunities for the articulation and elaboration of the meanings that are the fabric of its subjectivity, we might indeed be helping reality to realize itself. At the same time, we might thereby be inscribing ourselves into Dreaming – the narrative dimension of being – achieving a state of self-realization and even of immortality that has nothing to do with future existence.

Caresse is looking slightly crestfallen, though determined nonetheless. But what about science, she ventures again; what about evolution? Within the terms of Dreaming cosmology, the ephemera melt into a vast sea of interiority in which only what is truly generative endures. But hasn't the earth existed objectively and concretely for millions of years, and hasn't life been evolving, growing progressively more complex and sentient throughout those aeons? Isn't evolution a *fact*, not to be discounted merely as a Western memory of Christian teleology or an ideological correlate of progress? Surely evolution is in this sense on a par with, say, cosmological space, which, though a Western

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

“construction,” has so far turned out to be fact, inasmuch as humans have actually sent space ships to the moon and other planets?

I look over at Deborah. Evolution surely is a fact. There is too much evidence to discount it. But Craig interjects. Yes, evolution of consciousness has undoubtedly taken place, he says, but now there has been *enough!* Craig pronounces “enough” most emphatically. Enough for what? Caresse asks in a puzzled tone. Enough to do the job! Craig cries. We all look at him expectantly. The job of identification, he continues, of enabling us to identify with the wider universe, of detaching our identifications from the ego or personal self and extending them to the wider world. Maybe it’s *possible* for humanity genetically to evolve higher levels of consciousness, but who needs such higher levels? We already have everything we need for spiritual purposes!

Sun Dew laughs. Self-consciousness! she exclaims. When a being becomes aware of its own subjectivity, when it individuates and understands its own boundedness, its distinctness from the wider field of existence, that being closes. Here she holds her arms in an upright, prayer-like pose in front of her, forearm to forearm, wrist to wrist, and her hands snap shut. But, she continues, by the very same token – by recognition of its own distinct selfhood – the being who has taken possession of itself in this way can recognize the distinct selfhood of others and of the world around it, so it can for the first time truly meet them, truly encounter them, truly know them for what they are, subjects as vast and starry-skied as itself. Her hands open. This is why in our tradition – she nods to Professor Wong – we call self-consciousness the *hinge*. It can shut us in, she says, her hands, still held upright, closing, or it can open us up to reality, her palms parting, lotus-like, again. She smiles cryptically. The hinge closes the door but at the same time creates the possibility of opening it. It connects, potentially, because it divides...

Yes, Professor Wong chimes in excitedly, the attainment of self-consciousness is the epochal moment! He springs to his feet and begins once again to dance out a large character in the sand, hopping and dragging his foot and holding his breath. Sun Dew takes up a stick and draws another character beside the one Wong is stamping out. *Jiao lian*, she says, pointing to the two characters, side by side. *Jiao* means connect, intercourse, also metal; *lian* means connect, metal and joining, as in love. Together: *hinge!* she beams.

*Lian*, I gasp. Yes, *lian*, she assents, with blushing pleasure.

Caresse joins in the general appreciative laughter. But, she says, taking up her point, evolution need not be understood only in genetic terms. Most of the evolutionary thinkers in the tradition to which Wilber belongs envisage the further evolution of humanity in *cultural* terms.<sup>20</sup> Surely you wouldn’t disagree – she looks around the circle at each of us – that in order for the hinge to *open*, some radically new cultural conditions are required?

None of us can disagree. But I want to go back to the question of origins. Wasn’t there an impasse, I remark, earlier in our conversation, between orientation to an evolutionary end-point and orientation to origins? Orientation to origins is not merely an ethical matter of respecting the subjectivity of others and of the world at large, of opening to them in an ethical stance of identification. Orientation to origins is, at least according

---

<sup>20</sup> This tradition, which might be described as broadly panentheist, includes thinkers such as Hegel, Schelling, Gebser, Barfield and Aurobindo, for instance.

to our previous understanding, a matter of invoking the psycho-active interior of reality and actively singing the world into subtle, poetic manifestation. True, in order to return to origins in this sense, we in the modern world would have to go forward, we would have to effect large-scale cultural transformation that would involve investing all our praxis – our industry and technology, for instance, our science, economics and education – with an invocational, poetic dimension quite inconsistent with the instrumentalist tenor of our current – modern – phase of civilization. But to describe this movement as *evolutionary* doesn't seem quite right.

I pause, and rest my head in my hands. I am struggling for words. To describe it as evolutionary, I continue tentatively, suggests that it occurs on the same linear axis as physical causation – that it follows the same temporal groove into the future as does physical evolution. But surely this is a mistake. To return to origins in the sense that I, at least, am envisaging it is to enter a different geometry altogether, a *narrative* geometry, with a correlative narrative causation. From this narrative point of view the line leading into the future is not already laid down, like train-tracks heading into a tunnel. No, in a narrative universe, a universe ordered according to the poetic logic of story, we have to *sing* the future. We have to allow the future to grow out of our storied engagement with the present. When, rejecting poetic collaboration with reality, we attempt to take charge of our future, as in industrial modernity, but as too in deterministic evolutionary schemas, then the future will essentially be the same as the past. So although there is change, it is one-dimensional change, change within the same register. In this sense, nothing *really* changes. To achieve real change, movement into new dimensions of reality, involves, once again, a kind of *le-an*: the path to the real future, in the sense of the truly unknown, has to open for us. There has to be an opening in the midst of the phenomena, a gateway into a new terrain of meaning, into a new theatre of interiority. Unless and until that occurs, we are still in the present, treading the same water, trapped in a sameness that is essentially atemporal, despite our modern sense of increasing acceleration. The future, in other words, has to be *invoked*, not caused. It is invocation, leading to the successive revelation of layers of the world-hidden-within-the-world, that is the vector of true movement. This, rather than the mere passage of physical time or the mere unwinding of a never-ending chain of causes, is the path of discovery. Time-and-cause constitute an internal axis, a parameter of structuration, but are not the true determinants of change. True change occurs along the multiple potential axes of narrative incarnation, to each of which the time-and-cause axis is merely internal. I pause, and gulp some water from a bottle. As I have been speaking I have been imagining a whole octopus of narrative axes waving like tendrils from their point of origin in the present, each axis drawing us towards a different narrative incarnation, a world differently narratively incarnated to match the poetic particularities of our narrative address. Isn't *this*, I ask, concluding my little speech, the treasure hunt that the world, hiding itself within the mundane externalities manifest to the literal-minded, has prepared for us, its seekers?

A gong sounds from the camp kitchen. We notice that people are streaming from the bunkhouse towards tables laid for lunch in front of the homestead. Our discussion breaks off, but we all agree to resume it on a future occasion. Deb and Craig rise to their feet, smiling broadly. Sun Dew looks for the walking stick that Professor Wong affects but does not seem actually to use. She takes his arm, but before the two of them depart, she turns to me. There is, she says, an ancient Chinese women's language called *Nushu* –

now mostly forgotten – that includes a word for the concept you have just described. The characters translate as “story way,” but I think the word implies that the kinds of poetic meanings that structure psyche also structure the inner life of the universe, the universe under its psychophysical aspect. Sun Dew pauses, and thinks a bit. In today’s terms, she resumes, one might say that this word refers to the way the inner aspect of reality is expressed via a poetic order which coexists with, but does not override, the causal order of reality under its outer aspect. I’m not sure that the full sense of “story way” can be captured in a single English word, she adds, hesitantly. “Poetic way through world” is the best I can manage, I think... Sun Dew’s voice trails off and Deborah offers a suggestion. Is this poetic way through world a *songline*? she asks. Well, yes, it’s like a songline, Sun Dew replies, but it is a way through time and into manifestation, as Freya has described, and is not merely a way through space, as the songline is.

As Sun Dew has been speaking I have been struck with an idea. What about this! I interject excitedly. *Ontopoetics*! If physics is the study of the causal order, perhaps we can say *ontopoetics* is the study of the poetic order, the poetic meanings that structure the core of things and that will, if we choose to engage with those meanings, structure the successive incarnations that make up our own passage into the future! Yes! Yes! everyone exclaims enthusiastically. *Ontopoetics*! *Ontopoetics* it is! And amidst general laughter, we all get ready to depart.

As Sun Dew and Professor Wong set off, arm in arm, up the riverbank, they both beam back at us. We shall return, they cry gaily, both making the sign of the hinge, but I feel a strange pang, a presentiment that they are in fact about to disappear...