

Introduction: Invitation to Ontopoetics

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In this special issue of *PAN*, I would like to take up a conversation which began at an extraordinary event that occurred a decade ago in Central Australia at a place called Hamilton Downs. I have written about that event, and continued the conversation begun there, in a paper entitled “The World Hidden within the World”, which I reproduce here. Some of the contributors to the present issue, such as Craig San Roque, Veronica Brady and Robert Bosnak, were present at the original event. Others amongst the contributors belong to the conversation by virtue of multiple ties of affinity. It is my hope that as the conversation unfolds, in this issue and in future issues of *PAN*, this web of affinities will proliferate and expand.

The event at Hamilton Downs was seminal because it provided a recognizably collective experience of a kind of phenomenon that many of us experience individually, but fold away into the privacy of our own psyches because we have no way of cognitively processing it or grafting it onto the discourse we happen to share in the current historical moment. It is thus an experience which is at once familiar but, in modern societies, relatively culturally unacknowledged and hence obscure. In ancient societies such experiences may have been read, religiously or superstitiously, as omens or signs. In indigenous societies they may be received as references to old or new Dreaming stories. Jung spoke of synchronicities. Yet taken together these descriptors point towards something more generic for which there is really no satisfactory term in the context of contemporary modernity. There is no term for these experiences because there is no accepted frame of reference into which they can be effectively integrated.

I would like to offer a simple discursive expedient in this connection, a neutral term by which such phenomena may be denoted: *ontopoetics*. It is not intended that this term designate a new theory but only that it function as a descriptor. What *ontopoetics* is intended to describe is the communicative engagement of self with world and world with self. Such engagement can take many forms, and the contributors to the present issue of *PAN* detail some of these. What is common to the different instances is that they involve interactions between self and world that are not merely causal but meaningful. The meaningfulness of these interactions may, again, be conceived in different ways, but in each instance this meaningfulness emanates not merely from our side but from the world’s side as well: the world is not restricted to cause-and-effect interactions with us but is capable of engaging with us in recognizably meaningful ways. In this sense the term *ontopoetics* also serves to distinguish what we might call veridical experiences of meaningfulness from delusionary ones. In other words, the term signals that such experiences may indeed

be veridical and are not always necessarily, as is commonly assumed in the modern West, merely symptoms of delusional psychopathology (though in some circumstances they may be this).

Although the term *ontopoetics*, as it is used here, is not intended to denote a theory, the kind of engagement it picks out is possible only to the extent that the world is understood as in some sense a communicative presence, a presence with a psycho-active dimension of its own and a capacity and inclination to create and share meaning with us. Ontopoetics then, while not itself a metaphysical theory, does take effect against a broad metaphysical backdrop, a view of reality as *in some sense* subject as much as object, mind as much as matter.

Anything I might say here about such a broad metaphysical backdrop would be contentious, because it would be unlikely to meet with the approval even of all the contributors to the present volume, let alone all those who might be prepared to acknowledge the validity of ontopoetics as a modality. Nevertheless, let me venture a few thoughts in this connection, just to give flavour to the idea of a metaphysical backdrop to ontopoetics. From the viewpoint of such a backdrop, we might say that mind is intrinsic to matter and matter to mind, though this does not take us very far since the notion of “mind” invoked here is clearly not the one we are familiar with from our own mental experience. We might put the point less categorically by saying that reality, even in its largest outlines, is moved by an inner principle not reducible to the “laws of physics”, as these are currently conceived, though it is presumably consistent with them. Yet another way of characterizing this metaphysical backdrop might be in terms of *panpsychism*, though there are, again, alternative terminologies, and panpsychism itself may be figured in many different ways. Moreover, even if we were to opt for the terminology of panpsychism, ontopoetics is by no means synonymous with panpsychism: it would be possible for the world to unfold along panpsychist lines without its necessarily engaging ontopoetically – which is to say, in a meaningful way – with us. To speak of ontopoetics is to imply not only that the world is psycho-active, as panpsychism implies, but also that it is responsive to us, that we bring to it – or can bring to it, if we choose – something that calls it forth on a new expressive plane, a plane of meaning and not merely of causation.

That the world is responsive to us in this way is a very ancient assumption; indeed as a modality ontopoetics is as old as humanity though without being exactly coincident with any of the relevant traditional departments of human affairs, such as magic, religion or the occult. It is precisely because ontopoetics is not identical with such traditional formations – where these are the very formations that have been so deeply shaken by the European Enlightenment – that ontopoetics is perhaps recoverable in the post-Enlightenment climate of today. And it is no coincidence that ontopoetics as a post-Enlightenment modality is coming into view at a time of global ecological collapse, when the consequences of the Enlightenment are threatening the fabric of our planetary life system. The ecological crisis is demanding an integrative thought-shift no less profound in its existential consequences than the presocratic shift towards reason and away from naïve animism that occurred in the cradle of Ionia two and a half thousand years ago.

I suspect that as humans we are in ontopoetic mode most of the time, even when we don’t know we are and don’t intend to be. I suspect that reality responds to the metaphysical presuppositions and belief systems that inform our address to the world even when these presuppositions and belief systems deny the possibility of the world’s response. In other words, even when our “address” to the world is negative, discounting its communicative potential, the world will respond in kind: if we turn

our backs on it, treating it as nothing but an object, as modern science does, then it will turn its back on us, revealing to us only the hard carapace of its nuts-and-bolts aspect. If we approach it with purely utilitarian intent, it will reveal to us only its predictable, humdrum, utilitarian aspects. I am not saying here merely that our presuppositions and beliefs limit and shape what we can see, although this also is true, indeed a truism. I am suggesting that the presuppositions and beliefs we bring to our encounter with the world act as a kind of *invocation* – they call up reality under a particular aspect or aspects, so that this is the aspect that reality will reveal to us in the course of the encounter. Of course, there are beliefs that are simply false, that have no purchase on reality at all, under any of its aspects. These will elicit no response from the world. Reality is after all, even from a broadly onto-poetic viewpoint, determinate: there are ways it is and ways it isn't, even though these are very far from being exhaustively determinable by us. But one of the ways it is, from the present point of view, is communicative: it can arrange itself meaningfully in response to our – witting or unwitting – invocations. The scope of this communicativity will be limited by other aspects of the way reality is, notably those aspects encoded by modern physics. Communiqués emanating from reality will, in other words, have to be formulated within the conditions set by physics. But the conditions set by physics will, in turn, have to serve the purposes of communication, since communicativity is, from the perspective of onto-poetics, as fundamental an aspect of reality as the aspect encoded by physics is: physics is, we might say, merely the exoskeletal aspect of a reality which is internally structured by a communicative impulse and hence by ever-unfolding meaning. (This is perhaps the deeper, noncircular truth behind the frustratingly circular “anthropic principle” in physics.) At the same time, however, it is understood that even those purely materialist aspects of reality catalogued by science are, to a certain degree, “poetic” responses of the world to the “invocation” that science represents: science itself provides an invocational idiom for the world's self-revelation, an idiom which the world, in its ultimate determinacy, can indeed match, but which does not in any literal way capture the noumenality of things. In its pre-invoked noumenality, the world escapes all our idioms.

To say all this is probably to have said too much, inasmuch as these are not terms of reference shared by all who speak and write about what I am here calling the onto-poetic experience. As I have been at pains to remark, the metaphysical assumption that underpins the onto-poetic mode – that the world is intrinsically psycho-active and disposed towards communicative engagement with us – can be conceptualised in all manner of ways: mythic, intuitive, imaginative as well as theoretical. This means that by adopting the onto-poetic mode, we can hope to go beyond the particularities and reifications of religion, science and philosophy: the gods and spirits of religion, the laws and entities of science and the metaphysical posits of philosophy can all be seen not merely as cultural lenses through which different societies have viewed the world, as cultural theorists standardly aver, but as ways in which the world has actually manifested to different societies in response to the terms of their “invocation”. It is this fact that the world does manifest, as far as possible, in accordance with the terms of our invocation that is salient, from the perspective of onto-poetics, rather than any of the particular manifestations that happen to have historically occurred – be they of gods, spirits, physical laws and entities, or metaphysical posits. In other words, reality reveals its ultimate nature as much via the fact that its manifestations are tuned to the terms of reference of our invocations as via the particular content of its manifestations.

The significance of onto-poetics however lies as much in its implications for our own existential situation as in its implications for our understanding of reality. For just as the nature of reality is, from this point of view, determinate but never fully discursively determinable, because its manifestation is responsive to the terms of our address, so our own way-forward can be revealed to us under different aspects, depending on the terms of our address. Our lives harbour possibilities of poetic manifestation far larger than those defined by the materialist terms of modern societies. These possibilities derive from our inviting reality to use us as opportunity for new stories, new meanings, meanings that story landscapes, earthscapes, at the same time as they story ourselves. To invite reality to use us as terrain for stories in this way is clearly to make an epistemic shift from “knowledge”, in some objectivist sense, to *imagination* as our primary epistemic modality. By this I mean not that we will come to inhabit a world of fantasy but that through imagination we will create narrative contexts for our lives. Via the force of onto-poetics, these contexts may, if they succeed in engaging reality, become subtly actualized, opening up new, narratively determined pathways for us. Of course, to offer ourselves up as terrain for poetic inscription in this way, rather than insisting on sole authorship of our lives – which is to say, rather than insisting on life as autobiography – need not be altogether to eschew the rational-utilitarian modality in favour of imagination. The rational-utilitarian approach remains important to us as individuals for practical purposes just as it remains important to societies for practical purposes. But to rely exclusively on this approach in plotting our course, as modern civilization does, is, from an onto-poetic perspective, entirely to miss the larger possibilities of existence which emanate from poetic collaboration with reality.

Having made these prefatory remarks, let me now draw back a little from the vocabulary of onto-poetics and introduce you, dear reader, to the authors who are here exploring in their own intriguingly various terms the kinds of experiences or intimations of reality that I have been indicating via this vocabulary.

It is Dante – Dante Dioniso Dileusis – who first takes us by the hand and leads us straight into an intimate landscape explicitly announced by him as one of “imagination”. The very premise of Dante’s existence is the active, albeit elusive, role of imagination in the structuring of reality. Full of the “unknowing knowing” of which Robert Bosnak later speaks, Dante gently helps each of his kinswomen to excavate, from the mythic depths of the world, the mysterious poetic image that is the unique contribution her existence will make to a larger, pre-storied but at the same time open-ended pattern of meaning.

In “‘The Footsteps of Nature’: Onto-poetics in the Light of Owen Barfield’s *Poetic Diction*”, Frederick Amrine, distinguished scholar of German Romanticism and of several of its later offshoots, takes up the theme of imagination via an excursion into the thought of visionary twentieth-century thinker, Owen Barfield. For Barfield, poetics, far from being a late flowering of language, is its very origin, and this original poetics testifies to a poetic experience of reality itself, an experience of reality in which the “physical” is not carefully segregated from the “psychological”, as it is in modern thought. This mutual inextricability of the psychological and the physical in archaic experience is not, according to Barfield, a result of the archaic knower projecting her own “psychological” into the “physical”, but rather of her appreciation that nature is activated by the same kind of principle that activates human psyche. Following Barfield however, Amrine distinguishes between a pre and post version of this unity, an “original onto-poetics” which, after passing through the lens of rational reflexiveness, with its accompanying disenchantment, transforms at

last into a “final onto-poetics”, in which we express in our own self-articulation the inner dynamics of nature.

The next paper, by Goethe scholar and environmental philosopher, Isis Hazel Brook (whose name seems to conjure just the kind of poetic template that Dante was helping each of his nieces to discover) takes up, like Amrine, the question of how to construe the ultimate unity of the psychic and the physical. Brook introduces Goethe into the conversation, explaining that Goethe, like Dante Diléusis and Barfield, sees imagination as our key to understanding. Imagination is, in Goethe, disciplined to decipher in matter the impulse towards unfolding wholeness that brings each particular living thing into the distinctive “mystery” of its own being, to use Dante’s terms again. Imagination can intuit this “mystery” because this mystery is the expression, in the different context of another’s existence, of the impulse towards wholeness that is at work in ourselves as well. Brook warns us against cutting and pasting mind and matter into a facile because still dualistic panpsychism, and, like Dante Diléusis and Amrine, gestures towards an animating principle which is neither mind nor matter but in some way subtends both. Once discovered, she promises, it will transform the way we experience both the world and ourselves.

In “On Tjukurrpa: Painting Up, and Building Thought”, Craig San Roque slips out from behind the Dante Diléusis persona into his professional role as psychoanalyst working at the cutting edge of psychocultural theory and offers an analytical perspective – highly original but also resonant with Barfield’s – on the origins of conceptual thought in narrative. He 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. 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: if an object or state of affairs has not been storied, it cannot be thought about. This is a theory which 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 details the process whereby the raw human experience of the world, still entangled with the particularity of geography and topography, becomes transmuted, via ceremony, into story and thence into concept.

So, once again, it is imagination – as evinced in story – that is fundamental to cognition. Far from merely being the fanciful rearrangement of prior, literal, empirical elements, as classical Western philosophers have supposed, imagination is the very *condition* for cognition. There is no pre-given, purely empirical world which antedates imagination. Imagination itself provides the meaning which gives us access to reality.

In the next contribution Aboriginal thinker, social researcher and advocate, Mary Graham, explains that place is the fundamental category in Aboriginal understandings of reality and identity: “place precedes inquiry”. All things originate in place. However, place is not merely physical but narrative in its determination; place, as she puts it, equates with Dreaming. “Place, as an Aboriginal category, implies that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no ‘external world’ to inhabit.....the whole repertoire of what is possible continually presents or is expressed as an infinite range of Dreamings.” Graham references Craig San Roque’s therapeutic work with Indigenous communities in her discussion of the role of place in Aboriginal thinking, and her own research in a

northern Australian Indigenous community provides powerful confirmation of his findings with regard to the origins of thought in story, specifically place-story.

Veronica Brady, literary scholar and courageous social critic, turns to poetry itself as vehicle for onto-poetic consciousness. Engaging in particular with the poetry of Judith Wright, she tracks the custodial responsibilities for Creation that flow from such consciousness, and the catastrophic consequences that the historic fall from such consciousness – into dualism – entrains for Creation. Poets, Brady suggests, are the present-day seers beyond dualism. As such they are perhaps trying to recover, through their work, the imaginative pre-conditions for cognition that Amrine and San Roque outline.

Eco-psychotherapist Caresse Cranwell takes a rather different tack in her paper. Appointing Ken Wilber as her guide, she considers the “problem” of suffering in the context of an onto-poetic universe. If the world is capable of engaging communicatively with us, and is disposed to do so, why does it visit so many afflictions upon our heads? This is, of course, an updating of the traditional theological problem of evil, applied to the onto-poetic context. Cranwell argues that affliction provides an opportunity for us to examine, and bring to consciousness, the structuring of our own being, thereby to find a better balance between our separateness, as selves, and our implicatedness in the wider psychophysical field of existence. Finding such balance is necessary, she argues, if we are to achieve a healthy kind of communicative engagement with the world.

Two reflective narratives follow. In the first, psychoanalyst and renowned dreamwork practitioner, Robert Bosnak, steps delicately into a zone between human consciousness and nature which, at times, takes charge of him without yielding to out-there/in-here demonstrations of truth. These are moments, he explains, of a knowing that can’t demonstrate that it knows. With such “unknowing knowing” we are perhaps back again in that space of felt meaning, of imagination, to which Dante’s bird flew at the end of each day, to re-weave the intimate patterns within which, and only within which, the world can daily re-articulate and re-manifest itself.

In the final narrative, writer Carol Birrell tracks environmental philosopher Val Plumwood on her famous journey up the Alligator River. Plumwood has of course written her own riveting account of this journey, and it is laden with an atmosphere of menace arising from just the kind of “unknowing knowing” that Robert Bosnak describes. Birrell explores this alternative way of knowing in more explicitly Aboriginal terms than either Plumwood or Robert Bosnak did. And, like Mary Graham, she ties this knowing to the mindedness of place itself.

The final paper is the one I mentioned at the start of this Introduction – it is my own account of an actual event, the afore-described gathering at Hamilton Downs, and of a fictional conversation that grew out of it, a conversation that foreshadows the one I am presenting in this Special Issue. I reprint this paper here both for the record and because in it I coined the term onto-poetics to serve as a point of reference for a prospective discourse which would take the kind of phenomena I have indicated in this Introduction as its focus. For although it is a fact, as I remarked earlier, that such phenomena have never been systematically named in the West, there has nevertheless been a golden vein of thought running through a range of disciplines in which phenomena of this kind – pertaining to the poetic structure of reality – have been addressed. Thinkers and scholars who have mined this vein of gold have hailed from philosophy, religious studies, history of ideas (in particular Romanticism), literature, anthropology, Indigenous studies and psychoanalysis (especially Jungian psychoanalysis). By addressing themselves to the poetic or meaning structure of

reality, however, such thinkers, already so widely dispersed, have often found themselves either relegated to the fringes of their academic disciplines or cast outside of academic disciplines altogether. Their findings have accordingly not been brought together and the threads and themes joining them have not been identified and examined. (One instance of such a joining thread, which has already become visible in the course of this Introduction, is the centrality of imagination to cognition.) It is my hope that in the conversation that unfolds in the following pages a coherent field of inquiry, or at any rate a field of further conversation, may begin to take shape.