

Reinhabiting the Body, Decolonising Australia

Poetry, Meditation and Place in *The Moving World*

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*THE world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.*

-William Wordsworth

1 Introduction

*The Moving World*², my most recent book of poems which appeared in 2011, is mainly focused on the experience of meditation. This is a field of experience whose nature, and whose relationship to other spheres of human activity and thought is complex, often contested, and often subject to popular misconceptions. In this essay I would like to clarify a little my own approach to such issues in *The Moving World*. In particular, I would like to comment on the mind/body dichotomy as seen from a meditator's perspective; the relationship between meditation's way of knowing, via meditative concentration (*samadhi*), as against art's usual way of knowing via the imagination; the problem of communication and language in relation to meditation experience; meditation's perspective on the self, and the way that this relates to dominant cultural moods and narratives; and finally, the way that all of this specifically relates to the Australian scene, particularly with regard to the tensions between Indigenous and settler culture.

It is for others, of course, to speak about what the poems do or do not achieve. I can only outline what my principles and aspirations are. And I do so more in the mode of a personal reflection than an academic essay, in order to give a sense of how experience, ideas and artistic practice converged in my case. Furthermore, I am not anatomizing a program that I had when composing the poems of *The Moving World*. Rather, I am making observations with the benefit of hindsight, and also with the benefit of reading I have done since the book was finished, particularly in the areas of ecology, animism and panpsychism. The poems themselves are the result, as I take it most poems are, of the attempt to give expression to experience which has struck me with extraordinary force, and I brought to bear whatever artistic and intellectual resources I had at my disposal at the time of composition.

2 Vipassana

The poems in *The Moving World* are almost all the product of the last ten years of my life, since I learnt how to sit in Vipassana meditation. Vipassana is a word from the Pali language meaning “insight”. In the Vipassana meditation tradition (the lineage of U Ba Khin) it also refers specifically to the meditation technique taught by Siddattha Gotama, who later became known as a Buddha, or fully enlightened person, in India around 2,500 years ago. Vipassana is therefore connected with the Buddha, but Vipassana practitioners do not necessarily identify as Buddhists. In fact any hint of sectarianism is anathema to Vipassana meditators, whose concern lies with universal qualities of the human mind and condition. I too would avoid the label “Buddhist” as far as it carries those religious and sectarian overtones, though the term seems almost impossible to avoid, and in many ways not much to worry about. This situation would obviously need to be approached differently if one were living in a country, such as India, in which there was actual conflict between organized Buddhism and other organized religions.

The meditation technique of Vipassana involves focusing the mind on the sensations, or physical feelings, continually occurring in the body, ordinary sensations such as heat, pressure, tingling, and so on. The aim is to develop one’s concentration to the point where it is so steady and penetrating, that the substancelessness of the sensations, their continual state of arising and passing away, becomes evident and palpable. This involves an effort to keep the mind on the sensations, and bring it back to them whenever it wanders away. It also involves an effort to remain equanimous towards the sensations: if they are pleasant, one tries not to crave them, and if unpleasant, not to hate them. The aim is to observe, to experience, non-judgmentally, in order to get beyond the knee-

jerk reactions to and conventional perceptions of sensations, so that their more subtle quality of impermanence can be apprehended.

Why take bodily sensations as the meditation object? There are two main answers to this, one more specific and one more general. Firstly, according to observations, attributed to Gotama, about the causal links in the process of perception and cognition, sensations play the role of a kind of “missing link”. That is, whenever our minds encounter an experience, either from within as a thought or memory, or from outside as a sensory perception, a sensation arises somewhere in the body *before* we process the encounter in any other way. We then initially react to this sensation, rather than directly to the event itself. If the sensation is unpleasant, we react with aversion towards it and the event, and vice-versa. But we have probably been unaware of the role the sensation has played in our reaction. The sensations can be very subtle, we are not on the lookout for them, and yet at a deep and early stage our minds have registered them and we have reacted accordingly.

To give a couple of rudimentary examples: if we miss the tram, we may experience a rush of unpleasant sensations, such as pressure in the head, heat, and so on. Such sensations may give us, even if temporarily, an over-inflated sense of the event's importance. A more serious case might be when a person acts towards us in a way which we perceive as wrong, and harmful not only to ourselves but also to other people close to us. If in this case we react strongly to the unpleasant sensations, we may in fact create more harm all round, by further exacerbating and exposing conflict. Beyond the personal, sensations also occur, though perhaps on a more subtle level, in relation to ideas. So that one's whole world-view may to some extent be held in place by a complex of binary, sensation-originated responses.

The focus on becoming more aware of, and equanimous towards sensations, then, is aimed at achieving greater understanding and control of our reactions. Connecting this to the broader buddhistic project with which many have at least a passing familiarity - that of alleviating suffering - brings in the more general answer. Obviously, having greater awareness of and control over reactions will help in avoiding the suffering brought about by ill-judged, or knee-jerk reactions. But beyond this, the realization of impermanence, experienced via the sensations, is a way to the realization of the impermanence and substancelessness of the self as a whole, and of the entire field of mind and matter. Once the self is experienced in this way, then the suffering to which the self is generally subject begins to be ameliorated. When the self conceives of itself as solid and the only ground, it craves experiences which are pleasant to it, and hates those which are not. This puts it in a constant state of craving and aversion – a constant state of

discomfort, unsatisfactoriness, suffering, generally known as *dukkha* in Pali. This situation is radically altered when one is in possession of the realization that both the self, and what it craves or hates, are ephemeral and substanceless. Suffering is addressed at its root.

3 Meditation

I have given only a very brief sketch of Vipassana, and have no doubt provoked more questions than I have answered. A fuller account can of course be found elsewhere. I would like, however, to elaborate a little on meditation in general terms, and try to address some common misconceptions about it.

Meditation is sometimes viewed as being somehow against the body, against the life of the senses, and against a participatory orientation in general. Even though one of the major events in the story of Gotama is his *rejection* of ascetic extremes as an effective path, this misconception is very tenacious. It is aided by the stubborn old dualism of mind / body. That is, if there is only mind over against body, then meditators, in their practice, must be trying to move from body into mind, since there is nowhere else to go, to escape from all of the physical realities of life. By this thinking, meditative practice can be disparaged as utopian and ascetic and nay-saying, and so on. But if the dualistic premise is removed, the meditator can be viewed as exploring connections and expansions of life, both mental and physical. Rather than the meditative project being considered as an attempt to deny or avoid life's material conditions, it becomes one of recognizing, acknowledging and exploring them, of integrating one's conscious being with the reality of transience, including death. It is in this way that suffering may be alleviated - by reducing one's perpetual denial of and resistance to physical conditions, and gaining some insight into those conditions, rather than by somehow contriving to avoid them.

Meditation, at least as I know and practice it, is not a journey away from the world or other people or nature. It is a journey into the heart of nature, and into the reality and source of one's own connectedness. And meditation is not a rejection of the senses, but a re-perception of sensory experience (Vipassana meditation, for example, as I have said, concentrates on the sense of touch, as it attends to bodily sensation). Nor is meditation "detachment" from the world, in the way that a negative understanding of that word would suggest, as an indifference, a coldness or unresponsiveness. It is only detachment from the narrow version of the world, the superficial perception, which the small self gives us, of a world which is composed of static discrete objects and creatures which are outside of us, and which are to be judged according to how they gratify or do not gratify the small self's preferences. Meditation enables

detachment from this in order to allow a re-engagement on a deeper level, a deeper sense of being and connectedness. Meditation is not a retreat into self, but a way out of it via this route of one's own connectivities. And meditation is not anti-intuitive, going against "natural" knowledge with contrived disciplines of perception: it is, rather, a practice to forestall and restrain preconception and habit – to return to the freshness of perception rather than persist in the staleness of habitual reaction.

4 *Samadhi* and Imagination

The raft of preconceptions which can limit and distort a person's view of the meditative project may also be at work in artistic apprehensions of it. In a recent essay dealing with Judith Beveridge's poem-sequence about the Buddha's life "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree"³, I argue that Beveridge's treatment of Gotama tends to invert his story, so that he becomes a figure who embodies the elusiveness and implausibility of transcendence, rather than its achievability.⁴ This, I argue, occurs because Beveridge uses the imagination to apprehend the story, rather than the meditative faculty of *samadhi*, or concentration. The imagination operates with the fundamental ground of self and its situation unrevised by the alternative perspective afforded by *samadhi*. This produces a notion of transcendence as a utopia constructed by the imagining self's perfecting of the supposedly given world's imperfections. The poetic question has therefore been begged, in the sense of presuming what one is meant to be establishing. Gotama's pursuit of a utopian transcendence, in Beveridge's version of the story, is intrinsically futile, and the loyalties of the narrating self imagining the story remain, on an implicit level, firmly with the "imperfect" world.

In discussing Beveridge's poems, my concluding remarks are that imaginative portrayals are not to be derided or dismissed. They complement traditional, *samadhi*-informed versions, though it should be recognized that by themselves they are radically inadequate. The way that I view my own, *samadhi*-influenced poetry in *The Moving World* in relation to other poetry is similar. I do feel that the perspective afforded by *samadhi* is vital to a fuller picture of the human condition, but that this does not devalue non *samadhi*- based poetry: they are complementary. This does not prevent the observation, however, that a great deal of poetry, for all of its technical skill and undeniable beauty and insight, does adhere to an ontological and epistemological story-line of sorts very much similar to Beveridge's in "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree". One knows what is going happen from the outset: the world of the "senses" is going to win out over what is conceived as the ultimately empty, illusory attractions of the

“mind” or “spirit”. Here is Tracy Ryan’s description, for example, of the Heloise and Abelard story, which features in her recent collection *The Argument*:⁵

I was reading the letters of Heloise and Abelard, who were real-life lovers in the 12th century and horribly separated, eventually becoming a nun and a monk. He urges her to renounce their former love, a very physical affair; she argues for hanging on to every detail! The argument between them seemed very much a tussle between an earthy zest for life and a resigned, spiritual death-wish.⁶

That strange phrase “spiritual death-wish” is a sign of the problem. If the “spiritual” were credited with any reality and validity, the phrase would become oxymoronic. But it isn’t, from the outset, and so the phrase proceeds without embarrassment. While this familiar, binaristic story is certainly of interest and value on certain levels, it does tend to rehearse the standpoints of a particular, dominant philosophical / aesthetic culture, and yet may be heard as claiming to represent a comprehensive, rather than what I would see as a radically partial, view.

The use of meditative concentration rather than imagination in *The Moving World*, then, as the source of its experience and its way of knowing, I would see as its most important distinguishing feature, and the characteristic which most confers the potential for its poems to be innovative in a genuinely radical sense. I think that one of the many debates which *The Moving World* can thereby be seen as entering, is that which asks what is meant by “innovative” and “radical”. To what extent should newness, the “radical”, for example, be a matter of technique, ideology, or of experiential discovery?

It may be objected that the distinction I am drawing here between imaginative insight and meditative insight, or *samadhi*, is itself tending towards the dualistic. That is not my intention. I don't claim to know fully how these two faculties operate and relate to each other. I suspect that they are on some kind of continuum, as most things are. My intention is only to draw attention to *samadhi*'s particular aptitude for seeing beyond conventional experiences of the self, though I don't necessarily deny that in some cases the imagination may share this aptitude. I certainly do not, then, wish to create yet another adversarial dualism, or to disparage the imagination.

To draw upon meditative concentration, however, does mean that many perspectives dictated by the self, its dualisms and its preconceptions, are open to revision, and that new experiential possibilities are opened up. For example, as I have alluded to earlier, the inevitability of the “tragic” view may be challenged. Conventional ideas about the limits and possibilities of the human condition may break down. Similarly, major poetic orientations may be investigated from a new

perspective. Romanticism, classicism and postmodernism, for example, may all be thrown into a different relief. The exploration of such issues in depth is the province of other essays than this. To give a very brief example, however, we could take Wordsworth's "Mutability", in which he refers to "the unimaginable touch of time". Well, time's touch may be *unimaginable*, but is it *unperceivable*?

The poems of *The Moving World* attempt, precisely, to express the wonder of having experienced, via the faculty of samadhi, just that - the profound stirrings of impermanence. In fact, in the first part of my poem "Presence" (18) -

The way you can feel your body
though it is not being touched: like the hand
of existence resting on you.

the "hand" could well be read as a refutation of Wordsworth's assertion in "Mutability", though I did not have it specifically in mind. Meditative concentration, then, provides an alternate source of poetic experience. In this way, the poetry of *The Moving World* does not exhibit what the critic Stephen Burt has called, in relation to some postmodern poetry, "the pathos of uncertain epistemologies"⁷. Whilst not claiming certainty, it tends to celebrate epistemologies found, rather than lament those lost. I will return to the subject of postmodernism a little later.

5 Mind, Matter and Reinhabitation

One of the most important revisions afforded by the faculty of samadhi, then, is that mind / body dualism does not hold, nor block the way towards an adequate apprehension of the human condition. I am not asserting that meditators are the only ones who can know this, but that it is a pivotal and powerfully direct experience in Vipassana meditation. I would like now to bring into my discussion the work of Freya Mathews, whose philosophical writings are focused on the implications of overcoming the mind / body, or more broadly, the mind / matter dichotomy. Mathews's most recent book *Reinhabiting Reality*⁸ explores the process of "reinhabitation", a radically different way of being in and relating to one's surroundings, both human-made and natural. This becomes possible, according to Mathews, when "the great - dualistic - premise of modern civilization: there is nothing akin to mind in basic matter" is put aside. That is, when we stop dividing the world into the living and the non-living. Making such a move, says Mathews, is to reject the view that we "and other beings like us in respect of rationality or perhaps sentience, are the sole locus of mentality", and that "the rest of the colorful, variegated, teeming world that we see and hear, taste and touch around us is nothing but empty matter or physicality, conceptually drained of any meaning-giving principle."⁹

The philosophical term which Mathews uses to name the alternative to this modern dualistic materialism is “panpsychism”, the view which restores to matter a “psychist or mentalistic dimension.”¹⁰ Mathews explains that although such a view may be caricatured as the proposition that “material objects, such as chairs and dinner plates and tennis balls, are also subjects, or centers of subjectivity”, in reality it “ascribe[s] mentality to these objects as an aspect of their materiality per se rather than characterizing these objects as necessarily individual subjects in their own right.”¹¹ No talking lamp-posts, then, but a material world whose presence and dynamics and powers we attend to without having already disqualified them from that phenomenon we call “life”.

The panpsychist, then, experiences the universe as both “One, a field of subjectivity, which also differentiates into a Many, a manifold of individual subjects. The subjectival dimension of this universe renders it an arena not merely for causality but for communication”.¹² Once panpsychism is embraced, one may inhabit the world in the very different manner of participating in its life, rather than being excluded by the assumption that one’s mental being is isolated in its otherness from the inert, oblivious materiality of one’s surroundings. A dialogue with “physical” place becomes possible, and the relationship with land and locale, both natural and built, is radically changed, deepened and enlivened.

Immediately that I encountered Mathews's work, a little while after the completion of *The Moving World*, I recognised a conceptual explication of my own experience, and Mathews’ confirmation of this was just as immediately forthcoming. Under the steadied observation of meditation, the mind / body dichotomy dissolves, and the very move which Mathews portrays in conceptual form occurs on a deeply experiential level. Materialism is given the lie, and one begins to “reinhabit” that closest of material places, the body, which is soon apprehended as being far from the dead opposite of one’s sentient being, but strangely continuous with it. It is the journey to this wondrous realization that Tim Parks’s book about his own discovery of Vipassana, *Teach Us to Sit Still*¹³, also recounts.

Furthermore, the observation of the body in meditation, in cultivating a suspension of habitual reactions and preconceptions towards it, thereby allows the kind of dialogue to which Mathews refers, allows an attending which is receptive to what our flesh begins to tell us about the mysterious nature of our embodied being. Thus a dialogue begins with our own flesh, just as Mathews says that a dialogue can begin with the flesh of the world, to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty.

The dissolution of the mind / matter dichotomy, then, in meditation, is achieved not by means of ratiocination, but through a physico-mental

experience, a coming to know in which one's whole being participates. It is to this kind of knowing, and the radical though natural-seeming alterations to one's perspective, that the poems of *The Moving World* endeavour to bear witness. They want to affirm, with exhilaration and gratitude, the participation of mind in matter, or to use more poetic terms, and to invoke the image on the cover of my previous book *Focusing Saturn*, the reunion of the soul and the body (though meditators, of course, have plenty of problems with that word 'soul'...)

6 "Singing up"

After recently reading Deborah Bird Rose's very powerful *Wild Dog Dreaming*¹⁴, I became strongly drawn to the phrase "singing up", as a way of describing, in hindsight, what my poems in *The Moving World* are doing: singing up the body. This is because it seems to refer to a calling into consciousness, an acknowledgment and reminder of connectedness, a votary, joyful and deeply respectful celebration of sacred sources of human existence and well-being. I acknowledge, of course, that my understanding of the term is from the distance of my very different cultural background. I also recognize that my mentioning the term is prompted by a desire to voice a recognition of, and to declare a solidarity with, Indigenous culture. Furthermore, there is little explicit reference in *The Moving World* to Indigenous culture (one exception is "Flag" p50), because the book is fully occupied in articulating responses to meditative experience itself. In my previous books, Indigenous issues are the central concern of poems such as "The Abos are so Hopeless", "The Rainmaker", and "Apology of the Ten Pound Tourist from Grimsby", in *Body-flame*¹⁵, and "Hanging Rock", "In the Shack", "At Ubirr", "Poster", and "At Oenpelli" in *Focusing Saturn*¹⁶. Yet the connection of the work in *The Moving World* to Indigenous culture is, I believe, real and important. This connection consists in the way that the dissolution of the mind / matter dichotomy leads directly to the orientation of animist and totemic cultures, such as that of indigenous Australians. Once the "cornerstone", as Mathews calls it, of modern materialism is removed, the way is opened to a radical reconstruction of one's world-view, and a genuine understanding of animism. It becomes possible to step out of a world divided into creatures and mere objects.

The characters, creatures and events of the animist, mythic world have always exercised a fascination over me, yet had nevertheless remained a little grainy, shadowy, seen as they inevitably were through the filters of my empiricist-rationalist education. I remember looking at a recent painting of Namarrgon the "lightning man", for example, in a gallery in Gunbalanya, before I had learned to meditate and before I had done much reading about animism and panpsychism.

I was struck by the utter authenticity and vitality of the figure, and I thought: this is not the depiction of a figure from a past, dead mythology, this is alive, powerful and significant: but how is such reality to be classified and integrated, both on a personal and a cultural level? (I refer to this picture in the poem "At Gunbalanya" in *Focusing Saturn*).

Subsequently, meditation gave me first hand experience of the mind-matter continuum, and overturned many of my former cultural assumptions. Yet these insights at first seemed at something of a remove, and difficult to reconcile with other areas of my interest and experience. Finally, the lucid explications of writers like Mathews, Plumwood and Bird-Rose, helped to facilitate a synthesis of my various investigations and interests on the conceptual level.

A little further back in Australia's settler intellectual history, we find the great anthropologist WEH Stanner writing as follows:

In our modern understanding, we tend to see "mind" and "body", "body" and "spirit" ...as in some sense separate, even opposed, entities though we manage to connect them up in some fashion into the unity or oneness of "person" or "individual". The blackfellow does not seem to think this way. The distinctiveness we give to "mind", "spirit" and "body", and our contrast of "body" *versus* "spirit" are not there, and the whole notion of the person is enlarged.¹⁷

7 Self

The enlargement of the "person", as Stanner puts it, is a central concern of my work. As I say in my prefatory remarks in *Focusing Saturn*, for example, the poems aim "at facilitating a kind of disentanglement where the ego may be distinguished from its circumstances. The desired outcome is not separateness but the disclosure of a differently energised participation." Nearly all of our culture's conclusions about the human condition are predicated on the limited self, the individual who has only a short while to live, a short while to ransack the world for as much consolation for his isolated and doomed existence as possible. It is my view that, despite all of the benefits which modern civilization has conferred, along with the comforts has come a great diminution, withering, contraction of our being into the small self. It is not my intention, however, to rehearse the truisms of modern alienation - my particular point is that meditation provides such an incisive approach to it. Yet it is generally an approach which is pigeon-holed as "new age", and escapist in the ways I have already outlined. Recent scientific research, chiefly in the fields of cognitive science and neuroscience, are no doubt beginning to provide empirical evidence that

meditative states are real. Yet on the whole, both the modern mainstream, and also the counter-culture which is critical of it, remain massively truncated: ignorant and dismissive of meditative culture respectively, and thereby closing off vast areas of human experience.

In the poems of *The Moving World* I seek to speak of how our everyday experience of the self, which so conditions our experience of ourselves and our situation, is not nearly the full story. As Deborah Bird-Rose puts it, "the self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its worldview."¹⁸ And she goes on to say that the "consequence of unmaking narcissistic singularity is that we embrace noisy and unruly processes capable of finding dialogue with other people and with the world itself."¹⁹ Meditation is not, on the face of it, a noisy process! But it does exactly what Rose describes, opening dialogue with the "noise" which the mind and body are constantly making. Thereby, what one had previously thought to be oneself suddenly expands into strange realms formerly conceived of as merely the self's bodily, material vessel. Yet now, the self does not end, in this way, where the body begins, but is experienced as an ever-expanding field of mysterious being, to whose "speaking", to whose strange "utterances", one is eager to attend.

The recognitions of animism and panpsychism, it need hardly be pointed out, are discernible in many poetic traditions, especially where they trace their roots into shamanism. Stanner makes the comment that white Australians have no adequate term to evoke how indigenous people feel towards their place of origin, their "country" or territory, saying that our word "land" "is too spare and meagre" and that we "can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets."²⁰ For myself, a poetic predisposition, together with meditation and the radical philosophical clarity of writers like Mathews, Val Plumwood²¹ and Deborah Bird Rose, have enabled me to understand how the enlargement of the person to which Stanner refers is diametrically opposed to the colonizing expansions of the small self, or ego. Far from being a symptom of anthropomorphic projection, it is, rather, the result of the lucid recognition that the small self and its separateness is itself the projection of a personhood constructed by a narrowly rationalistic deploying of dualistic mind / matter preconceptions.

Once this conception and experience of the self is breached, and the blinkers of western rationalistic empiricism fall away, the world becomes infinitely larger, life brims over, floods out of its former narrow ego confines, a flow both from and into all that is around. Life is no longer confined to the small human self, but

is continuous with the land and its creatures. One consequence of gaining such an awareness of animist culture is that the atrocity of settler destruction of indigenous cultures hits home with an intensified impact, this time even deeper than a recognition of sheer human cruelty. One is staggered by the recognition that a whole nexus of connection to cosmic unfolding has been trampled on and in many cases lost. And one's desire to salvage, and to bend the course of our culture towards reconciliation becomes primary, urgent. And now, on a personal level, you feel you must know, as fully as possible, what it is to be alive in this infinitely richer way, just as the beginnings of meditative insight resonate with further possibility, and inspire you to deepen your practice, to journey further.

In composing this reflection, then, it has seemed natural that I look to indigenous culture for descriptive terms such as "singing up", though I acknowledge that I am using the term as an "outsider", and as a way to describe my own work, rather than to provide an analysis of the phenomenon in its original context. I certainly don't, however, subscribe to attitudes which would forbid non-indigenous people from interpreting and participating in Indigenous culture. Understanding may be difficult, but degrees of understanding are possible, and may be of great benefit. David Tacey speaks of connecting to Indigenous Australian "country" via the Celtic route. He says it is natural that the spiritual response of white settlers would draw upon their "own deep cultural memory", so that "a descendant of the Celtic world is likely to discover that a version of ancient Celtic spirituality is awakened and stirred to new life in this country."²² I agree with that view. Nevertheless, it would seem a circuitous route for me, as not only a white settler (without the intention to settle, I might add, since I was only a child) but a migrant, to approach Aboriginal culture via an Indian meditative tradition. Yet that is my story.

The poems of *The Moving World*, then, in speaking out of a careful attentiveness to the body, as it reveals itself as mind, and vice-versa, attempt what David Abram describes as Merleau-Ponty's enabling approach to our investigations of our own reality, which is "not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand."²³ In the poems of *The Moving World* I have tried to let my mind-body speak, as it were. The sequence "Vedana" (28), for example, proceeds through a series of analogies for the way that sensations manifest to the concentrated attentiveness of meditation. It attempts a microcosmic approach, in order to open the moment's experience into wider fields of understanding:

The way all things first

touch you.

The fire in the engine
of every blind act,

core of every mood.

And in "Anatta" (22), the mind-body's altering perception of itself, as the observation of meditative concentration develops, is rendered. I attempt to convey both the mystery, and yet also the power, of such experience:

My jaw
is extraordinarily present,
as if I watched
from my torso:

I do not know why
the terrain of the mindbody
discloses it from here.

8 Communication

Meditative experience is difficult for language to deal with because most language has a metaphoric base originating in conventional, or "mundane" sensory experience (that is, experience which the senses provide when meditative concentration is not operative) and also utilizes many conceptual dualisms. In meditation, the containments and logics of those two procedures tend not to apply. For example, the physical and mental domains, during meditation, become more difficult to distinguish from each other.

It is important to be aware, however, that I am not trying to recreate my meditative experience in the reader, as the prefatory poems "Speaking" and "Listening" make clear. I say that this is not possible. I am, rather, attempting to articulate my own *response* to that experience. This renders the linguistic challenge more manageable, and is also the way in which I reconcile my act of writing with the principle, which I fully endorse, that meditative experience must be had at first hand.

That being said, I do inevitably need to evoke something of the quality of meditative experience in expressing a response to it, and so the linguistic dilemma is not entirely avoided. However, to my mind, the articulation of experience to some extent beyond conceptual classification has always been a major part of the endeavor of poetry. And so I feel that the challenge here is perhaps different in degree, but not in kind, from that which most poets face. I

also believe that one of the most valuable aspects of poetic language is to serve as a reminder that our namings are always to some extent provisional and inadequate, rather than being a sure basis on which to understand and manipulate the world.

It is evident that I have not chosen, in *The Moving World*, those postmodern responses to the problem of language which involve a refusal of referentiality, or a rejection of conventional grammar and syntax, even though I often sympathize with the motivations of such writing. These are obviously quite complex issues, but here it is perhaps most appropriate for me to focus on my particular purpose, in explaining my approach. In *The Moving World*, my aim is to convey, indeed refer to, a very specific set of experiences (those arising from meditative concentration). In doing so, I hope that I have built in the humility of language in the face of its task.

With regard to language in general, I agree with David Abram's perspective, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and in particular the section "Animism and the Alphabet"²⁴, that the invention of the alphabet and of writing served to disrupt our sense of continuity with the natural environment, generating an abstract, human-constructed world into which we have wound deeper and deeper, an artificialized reality, an echo-chamber of our own ideas and words. In this sense, I sympathize with many of the motivations of postmodern writing, which seek to avoid and challenge complicity in the various ideologies and world-views which certain forms of language can reinforce. However, my own solution to the problem of abstraction, and of language in particular, is also consonant with Abram's view, that "traditional" elements of poetic language can be effective: "We have forgotten the poise", he says, "that comes from living in storied relation and reciprocity with the myriad things, the myriad beings, that perceptually surround us."²⁵ "Only if we can renew that reciprocity" he goes on, "- grounding our newfound capacity for literate abstraction in those older, oral forms of experience – only then will the abstract intellect find its true value."²⁶ For me, meditation is a crucial one of those "older" forms of experience, which traditional poetic language-use, its musicality and imagery, turned towards such experience, can evoke, and find some lost ground beyond abstraction.

Some of the poems in *The Moving World* seek to explicitly challenge the language often used to indicate meditative experience, and the abstract dualisms on which such language is founded. Often, the terms which are used to indicate meditative experience are negations: "emptiness", "detachment", "non-self", and so on. These terms are highly inadequate, misleading, and of course off-putting. They are often the result of poor translation, and / or a lack of actual meditative practice. In this book I am hoping to breathe some life back into such terms, and

thereby change the linguistic image of meditation: to shed some “actual light” on the experience, the phrase I use in the poem “Speaking” and which forms the title of the book’s fourth section. The poem “Detachment” (39) for example, tries to speak of how detaching, in the meditative sense, is to embrace, rather than reject, the world:

Unclenching
you feel
the strange embrace
of what is.

Another frame of reference I could use to describe my work in *TMW* in terms of poetic practice is Vernon Shetley’s application of Charles Altieri’s proposed distinction between lyrical and skeptical impulses. Shetley says that

Altieri uses these terms to name a persistent conflict in our ways of understanding the world: the demystifying power of Enlightenment reason produces a division between (at least apparently) objective, impersonal, scientific discourses whose goal is the formation of general laws. And subjective, value-laden discourses which resist the translation of experience into generality or abstraction. In most intellectual disciplines the Enlightenment heritage prevails; arguments from individual experience are devalued as anecdotal or impressionistic, and a ruthless skepticism towards the self-understandings of subjects is the norm...lyricism [on the other hand] attempts to resist the reduction of experience to general laws, attempts to assert the value of the personal and particular against the abstractions of skeptical consciousness.²⁷

Shetley goes on to propose, in what he acknowledges is “a deliberately reductive and simplified scheme”, that “one might say that literature departments embody the values of lucidity, and writing departments embody the values of lyricism.”²⁸

I believe that my work may to some extent constitute one possible transcendence (pun unavoidable) of this dichotomy, felt as “oppressive” by Altieri²⁹ between the lucid-skeptical and the lyrical. This is because meditation is, in a way, the quintessential skeptical practice. It sets aside the most foundational of received ideas - self, emotion, mind and matter - in order to try to watch with a highly disciplined attention what is happening. Yet at the same time, the fruits of this watching, the dynamic and wondrous shiftings and metamorphoses of being, inspire a lyrical response. One way in which I image what is witnessed is “the stunning serene dis-integration of daylight” (“Listening” 13). The implicit figure here is that of the rainbow, in which ordinary white light, “daylight”, dis-integrates into the colours of the spectrum. “Stunning”, because what had

appeared entirely true and normal is altered in spectacular fashion. "Serene" because, just as the rainbow arches its wondrous, multi-coloured back lazily and "naturally" in the rainy sky, so the being-altering insights of meditation occur as if they too are entirely natural. In one part of the sequence "Vedana", I image the naturalness of this process as possessing "the cosmic propriety / of a waning season" (30) In my view, then, both the lucid and the lyrical impulses are operative in a complementary way.

Poetry, meditation, panpsychism: I have tried to speak of how all of these have come together in my experience, and yielded the poems of *The Moving World*. Whether the poems achieve my aspirations must, as I have said, be left to the judgment of the reader. What I have tried to achieve in this essay is not only to clarify my perspective on meditation, but to explain how I see this ancient, and perhaps withdrawn-seeming practice, as vitally involved in Australia's present cultural moment. As Deborah Bird-Rose says, "the dismantling of the warlike theory of 'self' is a necessary step in moving towards decolonization."³⁰ I would like to see my work as a whole as making a contribution to the decolonization process, the process whereby the colonizing culture's prevailing blindness to the life beyond the small self, and therefore to the wonderfully rich and profound culture of the indigenous people, is gradually rectified. The lyric, though meditatively-lucid (I hope!) exclamations of *The Moving World*, therefore, resonate with and have arisen out of some of the fundamental tones of response to the Australian situation. They can be heard, for example, as one modulation of the sense of shame and spiritual smallness, and yet also the concurrent sense of possibility, that inhabiting this continent has evoked. They attempt to be one form of the reconciliation of these dilemmas: one form, dare I say it, of transcending them and inching our cultural story forward.

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² M. Heald (2011), *The Moving World*, Fremantle Press, South Fremantle.

³ J. Beveridge (2003), *Wolf Notes*, Giramondo, Artarmon NSW.

⁴ M. Heald (2011), "Putting Words in the Buddha's Mouth", *Westerly* 55:1, pp. 43-65.

⁵ T. Ryan (2011), *The Argument*, Fremantle Press, South Fremantle.

- ⁶ See the Fremantle Press website at <http://www.fremantlepress.com.au/news/230>
- ⁷ See the Poetry Society of America's panel discussion "Poetry Criticism: What is it for?", chaired by Susan Wheeler in 2000, reproduced in *Jacket*: <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/12/psa-panel.html>
- ⁸ F. Mathews (2005), *Reinhabiting Reality. Towards a Recovery of Culture*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p.8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.14.
- ¹¹ *Ditto*.
- ¹² *Ditto*.
- ¹³ T. Parks (2010), *Teach Us to Sit Still. A Sceptic's Search for Health and Healing*, Harvill Secker, London.
- ¹⁴ D. Bird Rose (2011), *Wild Dog Dreaming. Love and Extinction*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London.
- ¹⁵ M. Heald (1999), *Body-flame*, Fremantle Press, South Fremantle.
- ¹⁶ M. Heald (2004), *Focusing Saturn*, Fremantle Press, South Fremantle.
- ¹⁷ W.E.H. Stanner (2009), *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, Black Inc. Publishing. Collingwood, pp58-9.
- ¹⁸ D. Bird Rose (2004), *Reports from a Wild Country. Ethics for Decolonisation*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, p.20
- ¹⁹ *Ibid* p.21
- ²⁰ WEH Stanner (2009), *Op Cit*, p206.
- ²¹ See especially V. Plumwood (2002), *Environmental Culture. The Ecological Crisis of Reason*,. Routledge, London and New York.
- ²² D. Tacey (2000), *Re-Enchantment. The New Australian Spirituality*, Harper Collins, Sydney, p.
- ²³ D. Abram (1997), *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage Books, New York, p.47.
- ²⁴ *Op Cit*, D. Abram (1997).
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p.270.
- ²⁶ *Ditto*.
- ²⁷ V. Shetley (1993), *After the Death of Poetry. Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, p.18.
- ²⁸ *Ditto*
- ²⁹ Charles Altieri (2006) *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry. Modernism and After*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford and Carlton, p.12.
- ³⁰ D. Bird Rose (2004), *Op Cit*, p.21