

## In Conversation with Sun Dew: A Metaphysics of Invocation

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Rosmarin

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What do you think the next big book will be, I ask Sun Dew one day, as we are sitting on a boulder a little distance from the foot of our granite mountain, Birrabimurra, drinking green tea. What do you mean, “big book”, she asks, her bird-brown gaze resting on me as she hesitates, about to take a sip of tea. Oh, I mean the kind of book that makes a breakthrough in the history of ideas—that shifts the whole big freight-train of human thought onto a new track. Examples? she asks. The sun is still quite hot, though it is late afternoon. We have fallen into the pattern that is usual with us out here, of saying only as much as is necessary. Well, I mused, Plato’s *Republic*, Laozi and Zhuangzi, Descartes’ *Meditations*, Newton’s *Principia*, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* . . . hmm, maybe something of Schelling’s . . . umm, it does get harder to say what they are after that . . . but I guess I mean metaphysics, books that shift our metaphysical thinking—which at this point in history means shifting it out of the groove of science . . . expanding our metaphysical horizons . . . understanding that the world is alive with a life and subjectivity of its own and is not mere mindless matter . . .

Sun Dew pours some more tea for both of us from our thermos flask and stares across the coiled granite mounds that lie between our boulder and the rock walls of Birrabimurra. I’m not sure I can answer your question, she murmurs. We have already had many, many big books, reiterating and elaborating metaphysical truths far larger than the truths encompassed by science. The problem is that these metaphysical ideas

have not been taken up. She pauses. I wait, as I so often do with Sun Dew. Sometimes she answers my questions, sometimes she doesn't. Never does she answer them completely. I follow her gaze and notice several hawks gliding in the air currents above Birrabimurra. There are numerous hawks, and eagles too, here at the moment because of the alarming numbers of rabbits. But Sun Dew is not looking at the hawks—I can see her gaze is focussed on a far, fissured shoulder of the mountain. She is watching intently, with a faintly anxious expression in her eyes. I scan the mountain-side but can make out nothing other than the usual granite slabs and acacia scrub and rice flowers, though there is at that spot a deep cleft in the rock face—wide enough for a person to enter. Otherwise there is nothing to remark. I am, however, used to Sun Dew seeing things I can't see.

More books will not solve the problem, Sun Dew sighs. Books are themselves part of a metaphysical attitude. Books are *about* things. Metaphysical books are written *about* the world. They are addressed by the human author to the human reader and speak completely over the head of the world, even though that world is the ostensible subject of the book. In this sense there is a kind of ontological discourtesy in the very form of the book! If I wrote a book about you, for instance, I would be speaking *about* you to a reader. Neither the reader nor I would be speaking *to* you. We would be discussing you as a third party, a person not present. It would be very odd, don't you think, Rosmarin, if I wrote a book about you in order to introduce you to my friends, rather than simply arranging for them actually to meet you!

I see what you mean, I concede . . . the very form of the book expresses, and perpetuates, a certain metaphysical distance. I guess that's true. The whole literature of metaphysics is conducted as if the world itself is blind and deaf. Even books that represent the world as living and sentient are, by their very existence, perpetuating this ontological discourtesy, and with it certain metaphysical assumptions—assumptions which, as you say, contradict the ostensible message of the book . . . I pause to ponder, tracing with a fingertip the green and lilac frills of the lichen on which we are sitting. But couldn't this problem be overcome, I look up hopefully, simply by writing books *to* the world and *for* the world rather than merely for the human reader?

Well, yes, perhaps, to an extent, Sun Dew assents. But then we would have to think about the language in which the book was to be written. What is the language that the world speaks? What is the language in which it can respond? And how are we to deliver a text to it? It has no hands into which a book can be placed, no chair in which it can sit to

read. If a book addressed to you were written in a language you could not understand and the book were never delivered into your hands, the problem of address would not be overcome, would it?

True, I concur. But what then *is* the language of the world? How *are* we to address it? And is there a way of including this address in *all* of our literature?

A little breeze has blown up. There is a gleaming furrow in the western sky, a jet stream catching light, like a rain dragon passing by, en route to luckier destinations. It has been a hot day, so hot that Sun Dew and I have now both doffed our grey silk jackets. Wearing grey silk enables us to disappear out here whenever we wish, blending, like the ethereal white-faced heron, or perhaps just like slinky little kangaroos, into the landscape at the first sign of human trouble. Although still hot, the air has turned dark blue and stormy. Beneath the vertical blue however, a white-gold flood of late afternoon sun is pouring horizontally across the drought-desiccated land, picking out turrets and battlements on Birrabimurra and its surrounding granites. Long blond grasses flowing gracefully across the contoured paddocks shine beneath this sombrely impending sky. In the scrub, the little dampiera bush is currently in bloom, and its blue flowers, picking up the storm light, glow like electric scintillations. Sun Dew looks at me and raises her eyebrows. What *is* the language of the world? she repeats, a little incredulously. Two crows perched on a nearby dead tree are regarding us sceptically; they echo Sun Dew's question with flat cries.

Without immediately answering the question, Sun Dew takes up her theme again. It is not the books we lack, she says, it is the sacred context for the books. In ancient times, books were stored in temples and monasteries. Manuscripts were wrapped in beautifully coloured cloths and perfumed with incense. Reading and writing were activities situated within a larger ceremonial framework—a framework of *address*. Ceremony was couched within the language of the world. That language was a language of *things*, things that gained significance by figuring in *stories*. So, to walk into a temple on a sacred mountain in China, for instance, was to walk into a narrative space in three dimensions: there were statues and structures and paintings everywhere, illustrating characters and incidents from stories. These were often local stories—stories of local gods and immortals and legendary beasts, such as giant tortoises and serpents. All this narrative activity in the temples was not mere superstition, an anthropomorphic debasement of the original metaphysical intuition of religion—though this is what many scholars seem to think. Rather, sacred precincts such as these furnished

the originary stories which gave significance to things, to objects, to the basic elements of experience. As such, these sacred precincts were really the engine rooms of meaning in society—they provided the core meanings around which culture was organized.<sup>1</sup> Each culture had its own narrative core and its own spaces dedicated to the depiction or enactment of the stories. The stories, and the ceremonial spaces dedicated to their presentation, formed the sacred context of all knowledge, of all thinking even, in society. But this context was sacred, not merely because it was the framework for interpreting experience, but also because it enabled active engagement with reality. It was through its originary stories that a culture was able not only to interpret the world but to interact with it . . . stories had a fundamental *addressive* function. They functioned as *invocations*, calling reality into conversation with its people.

I ponder this, but I'm not sure that I understand it. I can see why Sun Dew is insisting that all knowledge, all thinking even, should have an addressive dimension and hence should be framed within an invocational context. I can see why such a context, with its crucial metaphysical function, would necessarily be regarded as sacred. But I still don't really see why invocation has to be *narrative*. Why must it be through *story* that we address the world? Why is it only through *story* that the world can respond to us, communicate with us? Why, in other words, I wonder, is Sun Dew insisting on story as the language, the communicative medium, of reality?

Well, Sun Dew explains patiently, firstly, stories, like reality itself, deal in the particular, not in abstraction and generality. If reality is to communicate with us at all it will have to be via particulars, since particulars are all it has—particulars will necessarily form the elements of any “vocabulary” available to it. Secondly, particulars in stories are strung together in patterns of significance, patterns that resonate with what is most important to us as precarious beings living in a beautiful but dangerous world. Indeed, the structure of stories is the existential structure of living things themselves: like living things, stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. The tension that holds the story together as a story—the crucial element of suspense—is, what will happen in the end? Primordially, will the organism live or die? That is the suspense that animates our own lives and also keeps us on the edge of our seats as we listen, biting our nails, to story. And this suspense at the core of our existence as living things—will we, at any given moment, survive the present situation—radiates out into the fabric of our experience generally; will our desires, so deep in our living flesh, be satisfied? Will our fears, born of that same oh-so-vulnerable flesh, be

averted? This is the existential affinity that rivets us to a story till its end is revealed. And . . . here Sun Dew concludes with a little gesture of self-evidence . . . if the world itself is a living thing, unfolding from a beginning through to a potential end, then it too will be internally structured by story. It too will have meaning for itself. So it will be attuned to the existential suspense at the heart of story!

Oh, I see, I murmur thoughtfully. As Sun Dew has been explaining I have been remembering occasions of group story-telling around campfires in the bush. I have been remembering becoming aware, as the stories have gained momentum, of a kind of attention gathering around us, of the world drawing in . . . of trees leaning down, birds and insects falling silent, grass standing up erect, grass-heads inclined in our direction, flies settling quietly on our backs—of everything holding its breath, listening and watching, as the narrative unfolded.

Sun Dew continues. Since story is essentially a pattern of particulars, rather than a set of inferences to abstractions, the world can participate in storying; it can insert new particulars into the narrative or rearrange the original patterns, thereby taking the story in new directions: the world can actively converse with us through story.

And isn't this what was going on in traditional societies, particularly indigenous societies, I chime in, waving at the country around us, still encrypted with many signs of the original inhabitants. Aboriginal people constantly replayed and renewed and elaborated the Dreaming stories, in concert with country. Land and people were constantly conversing, weaving an endlessly unfolding fabric of meaning, through story . . . I fall silent in the wake of this observation. We both sip our tea, and the landscape seems suddenly silent too, steeped in sadness. Birrabimurra now looks lonely, lapsed, its inner lights quenched. I have become accustomed, these past few years, to the fact that the land is giving up its ghost to drought. The acacia scrub is filled with skeletons; even many of the stately old gums are turning into stags. Over-grazed, over-cleared, over-run with rabbits, the once well-knit, supple ground is crumbling into dust. But even granite, I now realize, can die . . . a deeper death, the death of abandonment, of being left to lie alone, without a kind goodnight and a convivial round of campfire tales . . .

Stricken with this thought, I long to rush straight across to Birrabimurra, find a cave, light a little fire and, sitting by it, start telling stories to the mountain. But, perhaps to distract me from my agitation, Sun Dew is speaking again, expanding on what she has just been saying. Of course it doesn't matter, she points out, what the stories are

about. In some societies they may be about pagan gods, in others, transcendent deities; in others again the stories may be about immortals or spirits or elemental beings. It is story itself that is the currency of interaction, of conversation, between people and reality. Reality can manifest the iridescent hues of rainbow serpents in rock pools just as easily as it can the burning bushes and doves-with-olive-branches of the Old Testament. It can even manage fleeting glimpses of Featherfeet and fox fairies and archangels. None of these things—from the God of Abraham to the dakini lighting up the ice-caves of Tibet to the innumerable door gods and kitchen gods of Old China—exist as spirit beings in their own right, since they take their shape so patently from particular cultural frames of reference: spirit phenomena follow cultural expectations. This is not because they are mere cultural projections, as again so many scholars seem to think, but because the ordinary physical world has an extraordinary inner dimension that can respond to invocation: spirit phenomena are simply physical configurations called into specific form by invocation. All the tales of religion and folklore and myth act in the same way on the subjectival depths of our own tangible but nevertheless psychophysical world of matter. Human societies have always been connected to the interiority of things through story, and this connection has been the context for all our knowing. All our knowing has traditionally been situated within the narrative framework of this direct conversation with reality itself. Without this framework there is no such conversation, and without the conversation, the world is always external to us, no matter how we might represent it in our theories.

As Sun Dew has been speaking, I have inwardly regained my composure. I have realized that when the world responds to our narrative overtures, it does not merely *manifest* the stories; it also *elaborates* them. It elaborates them in meaningful ways, taking them in new and often surprising directions. From these meaningful elaborations we can infer that reality is already informed with its own inner order of meanings, meanings that exceed any human saying but glimpses of which can be offered to us through the poetics of the narrative templates we happen to bring to the world. So the granite does not *die* when abandoned by us: the mountain merely sleeps. It is asleep and dreaming, steeped in a profound trance of meaning, until it is awoken into active manifestation by the cadences of our chanting around the campfire, by our dancing feet beating out a narrative pattern . . .

But Sun Dew is concluding her little disquisition: the next Big Book cannot change our relationship with reality, she declares, unless it is

read within a narrative context. And were we to recover the narrative context, our relationship with reality would be transformed anyway, without the need for a Big Book.

After all, it was big books, she adds as an after-thought, that separated meaning from story in the first place. Meaning was originally created within the framework of the core stories of cultures, but then in ancient Greece along came philosophers, who, with their big theories, severed meaning from mythopoetics. Theory was a form of thinking and knowing that dealt not with the particular, as story does, but with the abstract and the general. Theory is informed with the internal structures of abstraction—what we call the principles of reason—but reality cannot participate in conversations about the abstract. Particulars are, as I've remarked already, the only elements available to reality for use in communication with us. And while particulars can convey symbolic truths, they cannot convey the sweepingly abstract truths of the philosophers. So reality cannot converse with us on the abstract matters broached by philosophers. Philosophers ended up speaking exclusively to one another, *about* the world, perhaps, but no longer *to* it.

I feel a little uncomfortable that Sun Dew is regarding me with an air of studied indulgence; I am, after all, a philosopher. To divert her attention from myself, I propose that I recapitulate the sequence of her suggestions. The key to recovering the addressive mode appropriate to an expanded sense of reality, I say to her, is to recover a core of stories, yes? These will have to be foundational stories, stories about origins, about the archetypal challenges of existence, stories that tie us into the dynamics of Creation. To serve their invocational purpose, such stories will need to be told in physical spaces in which the world can respond. That is, they will need to be acted out in dance, song, journey, and not merely held within the pages of a book. This invocational enactment of story is the essence of ceremony, and such narrative ceremonial, and the poetic collaboration with world it entails provides the context for all further knowing. The collaboration is the primary datum. Books will be subsequent to this datum. They cannot usurp it. And they cannot negate it . . . ?

As we have been discoursing, the storm-blue of the atmosphere has deepened. The blond lights in the long grasses have gone out, and the landscape is looking spectral in an altogether more ominous way. It is clear that we really ought to be heading back to our cabin on the ridge. But I am also wondering how, in today's world, Sun Dew's recovery of the foundational stories, of the sacred context of knowledge, which alone would reveal the larger nature of reality to us, could be achieved.

Sun Dew senses my concern. No, it doesn't mean a return to authorized scripture and theocracy, she says gently. In today's world, the recovery of sacred stories can happen only in a de-centred way . . . a democratic way! There are an infinite number of starting points for such stories, and all the story-threads lead inward, towards a centre that no story can ever quite attain, so even if every person has a story of their own, we needn't worry that there will be too many stories.

But how, I wonder, will people know whether a story they have found is truly a sacred one, and hence a fitting context for knowing, rather than simply a fiction, an invention, an affectation?

That's easy, laughs Sun Dew. We will know we have the right story when the world responds to it, when the story starts to manifest poetically all around us and assumes its own momentum! Moreover, we can trust that, when a person has found the right starting point, when she has embarked on an authentic story, that story will connect up, by mysterious axes of affinity, with the stories of other individuals. From an infinite number of starting points on the peripheries of the labyrinth, the stories will start extending hooks and tendrils into one another, intertwining, converging . . . though never solidifying into a fixed canon, but rather collectively morphing, collectively unfolding . . .

Lightning is beginning to flicker above the horizon in the west. The temperature is plummeting, and both of us reach for our jackets. But I am not quite ready to let the topic drop. How could contemporary philosophy, let alone science, I am thinking, be conducted from within a sacred context? It was precisely through escape from such a context that science was originally born. Indeed, modernity is the very condition of being liberated from sacred context. And modern society is not going to disappear. Science is not going to cease. Universities are not going to stop the secular mass-production of knowledge. And in any case, why would we want them to do so? Surely we would not wish to return to the ignorance and tyranny of traditional societies? Even if Sun Dew and I did want this, the majority of people in modern societies would be appalled at the prospect, so how could a movement to recover the narrative context of knowledge ever take hold? I consider how to frame my question to Sun Dew, and eventually ask her whether recovering the narrative context of knowledge would mean that we could no longer pursue knowledge as we currently do. Would it mean that we could no longer perform scientific experiments or devise philosophical theories or continue to develop new technologies? Are you suggesting, I ask her, that we should go back to pre-modern, pre-rational modes of culture?



Not at all! she smiles. Modern civilization is our starting point, it is our given, and the essence of re-engaging with reality is always to honour and cherish the given. In urging that we re-situate the practices of modern civilization within a narrative context, I am suggesting that we subtly contextualize our projects and our presentations to sacred stories. We allow those stories to appoint our ends, orient our quest. The narrative context will redirect our researches and dictate the place and shape of career in our lives. A new poetic dimension will be added to all our productions—to our theoretical investigations, our industrial practices, our technological innovations—to everything we do, in fact. As to where it will all end, that is not our question to answer, dear Rosmarin. It is not ours to know what course events will take when reality begins to participate in human affairs again. “The Dao that can be foretold is not the eternal Dao.” Or, as Laozi says, those who think they can fix the world will only ruin it. In order to fix the world, we would have to know it in its totality. We would have to be able fully to foretell the course of events. But we could only fully foretell the course of events by factoring out the world’s poetic engagement with us. And this is already to treat the world as a dead thing. It is to abandon it, to abdicate the poetry of existence, and in this sense to ruin reality.

Low sheet lightning has now spread from the west and begun to lick the flanks of Birrabimurra. Though keen to continue our discussion, I am, like Sun Dew, distracted by the spectacle of the mountain starting to glow and seemingly emit sparks. I see that Sun Dew’s gaze has returned to the fissured shoulder of granite that had previously interested her. She is gazing intently again, and touching a curiously carved green stone she always wears on a silver cord around her neck. I am astonished to see that the stone seems to be buzzing faintly against her skin. I follow her gaze and stare for a while at the vacant spot on the mountainside. But suddenly it is no longer vacant—I can just make out a slender outline on a rock shelf there. It is tiny from this distance, but there is no mistaking it—it is the figure of a bird. I draw in my breath. I can see, even in the obscurity, that this is no ordinary bird. It is as tall as a man, long-legged, silvery-necked, and in the on-and-off, black-and-white flickering and flashing atmospheric it seems to be bowing from left to right, high-stepping, fluttering, floating—dancing! I give a little gasp. A brolga! I have heard that these great cranes are not entirely extinct hereabouts, but I have only ever seen them in the far north of the continent. I can hardly believe my eyes. Sun Dew is mesmerized, tugging gently at her jade-stone, a strange light of elation on her face.

For a minute or two we watch spellbound as the brolga dances its spectral dance. Then it melts into shadows as suddenly as it had

emerged from them. There is a rushing in the air as the storm advances. For an instant it is as if dark wings are passing over us. We both instinctively bow low as invisible feathers stroke the back of our heads. Then the rustling moment of gust is over. Sun Dew turns to me. Her eyes are sheer lamps of love. Don't I always say, she whispers rapturously, that our task is not to *interpret* the world, as philosophers have, nor to *change* it, as Marxists tried to do, but to *sing* it? Do this, Rosmarin, my dear; demonstrate its possibility, bask in its beauty, emanate its Mystery, and let Dao take care of the consequences!

Later, when the storm has moved south, and Birrabimurra has receded behind a grey veil of cloud cover, we pack up our tea things and make our way, drenched from a welcome squall of rain, back to the cabin on the ridge. Neither of us has spoken since the Witnessing. But now, still wishing to conclude our discussion, I venture a speculation. If our task is to sing the world, I murmur, doesn't this mean that new *books* might be sung through our stories? Sun Dew looks at me through strands of wet hair with a quizzical smile . . . I mean, I persevere, mightn't we sing up beings who author books, books that would in that sense be co-authored by reality itself? Mightn't books, or some books at any rate, emerge that are not merely *about* the world but emanate *from* the world, through the pen of invoked authors? And mightn't such books convey the essential communicativity of reality, and the poetry of that communicativity, better than any of the conventional metaphysical tracts have done?

And why not! laughs Sun Dew. She is in no mood to disagree in any case. She takes my hand as we walk up the track. How better to access the wisdom of the world, dear friend, she exclaims, than through invoked literature! How better to open up the causal order, described by physics, into the poetic order, that inner order of meanings that is so discreetly indicated by our Daoist lore!

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<sup>1</sup> This is a theory developed with great subtlety by an associate of Sun Dew's, Professor Wong, and written up by Professor Wong's colleague, Craig San Roque. See Craig San Roque, "On Tjukurrpa: Painting Up, and Building Thought," *Social Analysis* 50, 2, 2006, pp 148–172.