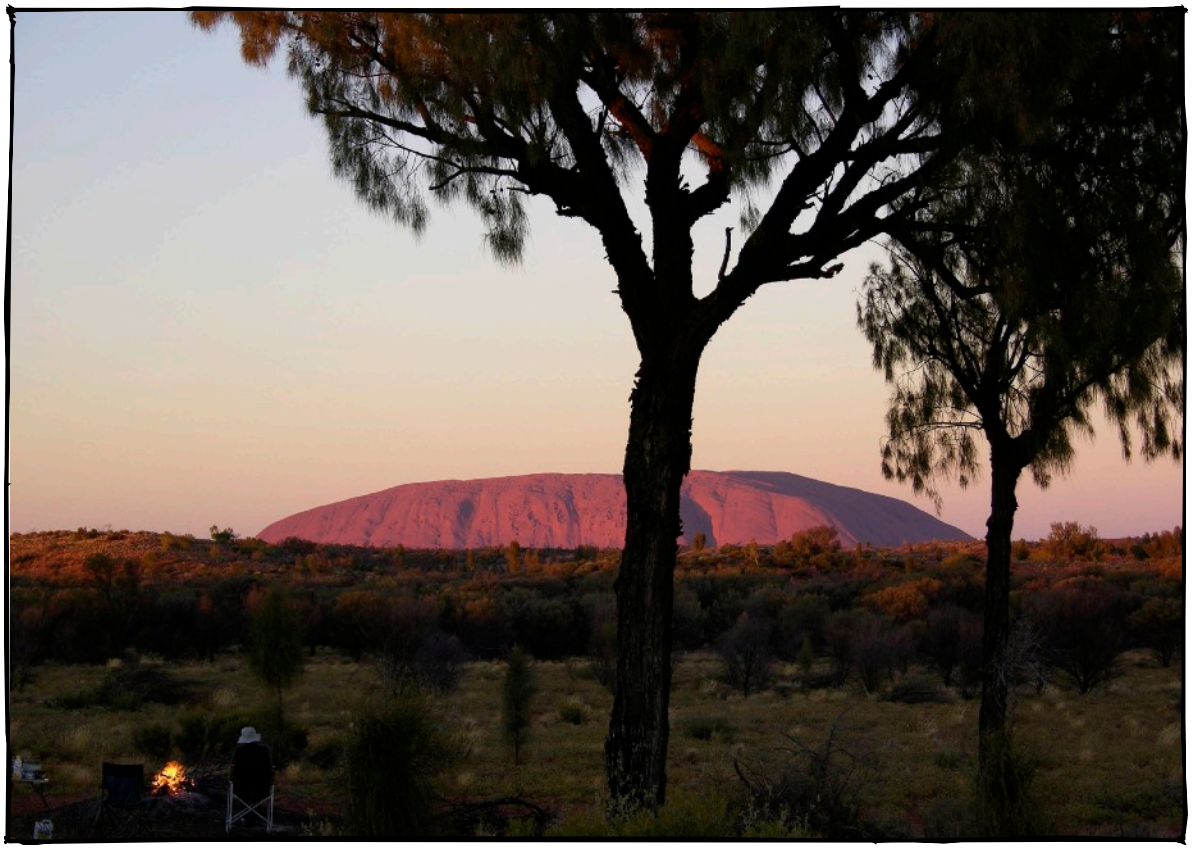
On First Seeing Ayers Rock

Like most initial visitors to Uluru, I was drawn by its reputation – but really, it's a little difficult to say exactly what that is. The oddity of a dome of coloured rock in the middle of a desert doesn't explain all the attention given to it – so, again like many others, I was curious to know what would fascinate me. But before that, there were a few surprises.

The first is that the Rock, although big and alone, isn't revealed until you are fairly close. Its country is a region of red sand hills mostly covered with Spinifex and many other desert plants. Approaching from the east, you see it on and off for twenty minutes before it comes into full view, and at each revelation it is a bit nearer, a bit bigger, and a new shape. When you are a little way off, you see that it does, after all, occupy a flat place of its own, just as if a large animal had smoothed itself a nest before settling down. But by then you are less interested in its environment than its substance. And that is the second surprise.



Neither the form nor the surface persuades you that this is a thing of the Earth, and the weakness of this conviction persists no matter how close you get. What you can see of the texture, the behaviour of the light, its look of detachment,

and readiness to assume new forms, suggest that it is an artefact. The Rock turns out to be a sculpture – so plastic and rhythmical, so poignant and so satisfying, that you are never free of the feeling that it has been placed here at the centre of the continent like a talisman – embodying something, and communicating something. Though what that is, the traveller must discover for themselves.

A third surprise – at least for those who arrive unbriefed – is that the Rock is not alone. It is in fact the middle member of a trio of remarkable objects. Mt Connor, 90km to the east, in the words of Ernest Giles, the first European to visit it in June 1874, is "many hundreds of feet high, and for half its height its sides sloped; the crown rested on a perpendicular wall. It was almost circular, and perfectly flat upon the top, apparently having the same kind of vegetation upon its summit as upon the ground below."

Thirty kilometres to the west is Kata Tjuta – the Olgas – which Giles, like countless visitors since, found deeply fascinating and haunting. I suppose he anticipated many subsequent judgements by writing that "Mount Olga is the more wonderful and grotesque; Mt Ayers the more ancient and sublime."

And then there's the unexpected beauty of the desert itself. The sand ridges are low, and permanently clothed in an astonishing variety of plants. Wherever sand

is exposed near the crests, its colour is a stunning contrast to the foliage and flowers – this rusty bright hue varies infinitely like the colours of the Rock. In spring, swathes of acacia bushes are covered in gold; annual plants produce delicate blue, violet and yellow flowers, and the dry Spinifex stalks glow like ripe wheat. Young desert oaks, graceful and shady when fully grown, stand about on the sand hills like so many hairy soldiers.

If the Rock and its two companions surprise and delight us – and they certainly do, for they draw enough visitors to fill a large resort and campground for half the year – it is because of their effects on our imaginations. Some of these are due to the stimulus of those sensory paradoxes – the conflict between perception and interpretation. But more powerful than this is the demand to understand the rocky trio as symbols. The sheer improbability of them, each, and all together, and their clustering at the heart of the continent, their sculptural quality, and their peculiar transformations under the light of day, puts a direct teleological question – a 'why?' and a 'what for?', rather than a 'how?'

You experience this as a kind of ambivalence. Sometimes you believe that what confronts your senses is a merely wonderful production of ordinary earthy processes; but, just as often, this is undermined by a sort of whispered dissent – 'more like ivory … lit from within … soft, like wax … moving shadows, like the living … surface like old ruined skin … carved, but by whom and for whom … stuck on the desert sand and left behind …'

There are, I suppose, other flat-topped mountains like Mt Connor, but surely none so solitary, or that turns the sunlight into soft mutable colours, or asserts its symmetry and abruptness in quite the same way. There can be nothing like the other two. The profile of the Olgas from the east is so unlikely you find yourself looking again to make sure it is real. Passing around to the south as you approach, the demented outline resolves into a decayed and fissured form like an old loaf, sliced with a blunt axe. And then, oddly enough, the mass acquires a sense of repose by the time you reach its western side and come up close. There are impossible chasms and leaning domes, but there are solidifying shadows and graceful curves enclosing rhythmical and stable forms.

None of this tension, this hint of madness, worries you at the Rock. Just as Giles observed, one's main impression is of sublimity and its suggestion of both duration and constancy. Not so much that it is old, but that it has always been. Giles evidently felt this too – and therein lies one of its fascinations. For there is tension here after all. You are carrying the incompatible convictions – that the Rock is ageless; that it is worn and yet unchanged – a created thing and a decayed thing – all at the same time. How else to understand the infinite

plasticity, the freedom to reveal new forms and contrasts, its vitality; and also its interface with the air and light – that fretted surface, a boundary equally organic and earthy.

You can walk around the Rock on a nice level path. Whatever is going on between the monolith and the elements, there's no sloping rubble at its foot. Nearly everywhere you could walk up and touch the rising face in front of you, and look up at the receding, bending rock, and always you would find those uncanny spatial rhythms, clothed in the same weathered pattern. Now and then, hidden by the crooked bloodwoods and grasses, where water has been shed, there are beautiful little rock holes. Here and there at ground level, graceful caves; and high up on the north face, a fantastic pattern of cavities, as if the sculptor had left something unfinished. An unfledged peregrine called from somewhere up there, its parent patiently silhouetted on the summit.

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You can sometimes experience a rock as something else. For example – the piece of polished granite in your kitchen on which you cut up the onions; or the sphere of rock we call the moon. It is curious that Ayers Rock belongs with instances like these. There it is, alone in the desert, except for its distant companions. Well and truly lost in the sand hills. Still, what else could it be but stone? What is odd is that our intuitions require the same kind of proof as the

other two – some kind of geologist's test. We don't doubt that it would pass – it is just that so many impressions remind us of other classes of object, that we feel it would pass tests for them too. Actually, we are being taunted in a particular way by the problem that preoccupied Plato – the existence of natural entities - and it's not clear that we are terribly much further than where he left us. What we have understood better, through changing the frame from metaphysics to cognition, is our habit of making symbols.

Language is a social practice – both a consequence and a condition of being a human creature. We use it, among other things, to locate significance for ourselves and each other. Formulating experience this way, our talk carries with it uncoded, but shared evaluations of its referents – and in some way like this we exchange what we call 'meaning'. We make no distinction (unless we are being deliberately analytical) between what is apprehended, what inferred, and what interpreted – so we can readily experience Ayers Rock as containing all its apparent contradictions. It must be the richness and suggestiveness of this that keeps visitors coming. And yet, undeniably, although we can value the experience, it's not easy to communicate it. Why?

Sometimes it can be remarkably difficult to imagine something we know to be real – say, the distance from here to the sun; what it's like to be a whale or a

rabbit; or the thoughts of a fanatic. If something perceived fails to make the right sort of associations, searches in vain for its place in our cognitive universe, it will be orphaned, as it were, in some antechamber of the mind – not rejected defensively, but isolated - being too strange or novel, or too unbelievable, having too few of the elements that compel belief and too many contradictions to uphold it. Instances of this remind us of our constant need to assimilate new experience, rather than merely record it – and how this is basic to generating meaning. Exploring the difficulty, when it happens, can teach us something about how we accomplish this.

Giles was a man of his times. He believed the aborigines represented a low form of human (or perhaps pre-human) life, incapable of complex thought or expression, ignorant of contemplative reflection or religious feeling, superstitious, violent, and necessarily doomed by their historical encounter with the Europeans. He appears to have been unseeing and indifferent to the culture that was all around him, and we have no reason to think he had any idea that the Rock had been venerated for long ages before he came. So it is interesting that the original European responses to it contained a core of veneration too. Even the prosaic Gosse, who was there shortly before Giles, thought it "the most wonderful natural feature I have ever seen". Neither man tried to account for the imaginative effect of the Rock, yet they shared with the ancient custodians that very human disposition to discover sanctity in special places.

Why should certain natural phenomena – objects and events – excite our imaginations this way? Or perhaps, like Blake, we ought to ask: why don't they all? Language allows us all to travel with poets – skimming, weightless, along those associative paths connecting words and ideas – explorers of the semantic unknown. Apparently, Giles didn't care to do this. He appears to have put a limit on his admiration, speculating, not on the meaning of the Rock, but on its origins. It is curious that in the chronicle he published fifteen years later, when he could have revised his views, he included the oddly misguided geological account that first occurred to him in the desert.

For example, he believed the Rock to be granite, when in fact it is a metamorphosed sandstone; he completely overlooked the rather rapid weathering taking place, speaking as if the Rock had always had its present form; and he thought Mt Olga to be volcanic – "belched out of the bowels", whereas it is nothing of the kind. It is as if the man of imagination required an answer from the scientist, ignorance notwithstanding – as if a lyrical discovery should be verified by a physical – the poetic grounded in fact (or surmise). Perhaps in both his certainty and his confusion, the first articulate European witness is telling us something both about the power of this symbol - the

Central Australian Trinity - and our peculiar European handicap in apprehending it.

For the Pitjantjatjara, the Rock located various local myths – but we are not in a good position to speak about the larger significance of the three monoliths. The tradition that carried it was alien to us at its roots – alien enough to challenge the very possibility of translation. On the other hand, Europeans have been engrossed in a revision of their imaginative competence for a long time. The world of the aborigines, of Homer, and the Old Testament had this in common – divinity and agency could be the same. If you wanted to understand the world you had to know the will of the Gods. There wasn't much left of this voluntarist feeling by the time the explorer wrote.

And so Giles speaks for us too, in his insistence that marvels are made of clay. Yet he was moved. Physically very tough, he was tough-minded too when he wanted. So his claim that the Rock was no bigger than it seemed leaves us feeling that he turned his back on the most significant experience – that something in his tradition left him empty-handed just when he needed special tools to open the magic door he had discovered.

About the time Giles published his memoir the American logician C S Peirce first proposed that the various ways we use signs to refer to things amount to three categorically different modes of reference and interpretation. To take an example – one of those blue and white signs on the highway showing a picnic table and an overhanging tree. We are able to interpret this, Peirce said, because of a critical likeness of some kind between the figure and something we might expect beside a highway. So the sign elicits two things – recognition (shady place to sit), and expectation (where there's a sign there'll be a table). It can do this, according to Peirce, because there are two quite different sorts of association happening.

Further, he showed that, while both these – call them representational and indicative – are properties of human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, the really characteristic relationship between language and thought, and the source of power for both, is due to a special elaboration which turns signs into symbols. Whereas a wordless sign gets its force from learned associations

of similarity and contiguity, semantic signs get theirs from membership of a vast network – a symbolic system. Their direct association with objects is arbitrary, but their function inside the system is both regular (syntactic) and promiscuous – because the effect of experience is not reinforcement, but enrichment. Peirce believed that the structural features of a symbolic system were the same in thought and language – that ideas, images and feelings are associated meaningfully in essentially the same way as words, phrases, and sentences – the units of semantic meaning.

So when we confront a real tree (or table, or rock) a lifetime's input of salient associations are potentially available to cognition and speech – a virtually limitless web of meaning. This idea can be used to account for the conservative character of imagination – our habit of finding new things to be somehow like the old – and also for the stimulus of novelty – the odd disjunction caused by something which resists association. At Uluru, the visitor experiences a special case of this – being asked to imagine an object providing so many contradictory signs that it must either be avoided or treated as a freak.

But of course, there is a third option. The Rock could remind us that the perceptible universe owes us no duty of conformation. On the contrary, when we can't be surprised, we have ceased to see. And there is an appropriate response to this wonder – so much the worse if we have become unpractised at it. Fortunately the Rocky Trinity still has custodians who knew very well how to domesticate large and unruly symbols. It might be just as well to learn the trick from them.