

what if
the angel of **history**
were a dog?
DEBORAH ROSE

My title question comes from Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis on the philosophy of history. The answer I explore is that she is howling. I engage with some of the implications of the howling of living beings in a time of death.

The ninth thesis begins with a stanza of poetry by Gerhard Scholem followed by a text that reads:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹

This is one of the great texts of the twentieth century, and the fact that it speaks so directly to us today suggests that it holds its value in this century as well. Every sentence offers ideas for engagement; I work with just one segment—the wreckage that is catastrophe. My proposition is that not only angels and humans, but all other living things are caught up in the wreckage. What is catastrophe from a perspective arising out of the ecological humanities?

My concern is with death, and I must distinguish between two contexts of death. The first is the fact of death that inheres in life. Life, with the exception of some bacteria, involves

death both for individuals and, it now seems, in much longer time frames, for most species. Death, as a corollary to life, happens to all of us complex creatures. It may happen through old age, or illness; it may happen through hunting or killing; it may happen on larger scales through catastrophes such as cyclones, earthquakes or volcanoes. In this context of death I will be working with the idea that living things are bound into ecological communities of life and death, and further that these communities are fields of matter within which life is making and unmaking itself in time and place.

The second context I discuss differs from the first in being a uniquely human invention: the context that we now call man-made mass death.² I am concerned with the desire for destruction that is perhaps best termed the will-to-destruction. Contemporary scholars' interest in this phenomenon arises most vigorously out of the Shoah, but the term is appropriate to all instances of genocide. Man-made mass death is not universal; it seems to be associated primarily with hierarchical societies and state formations. The process involves imagining total destruction, that is, imagining a future emptiness, and then working systematically to accomplish that emptiness. Scholars working in this field contend that the will-to-destruction defiles both life and death. My analysis both amplifies and localises this thesis, but first let us consider some contemporary scientific ideas about the ecological dance between life and death.

— LIFE'S DESIRES

Lynn Margulis's book *What is Life?*, written in conjunction with Dorion Sagan, is a delightful exploration of life on earth from the point of view of biology.³ Each chapter offers a definition of life that captures and expands the definition of the preceding chapter. Margulis and Sagan state that life's aim is to 'preserve vivified matter in the face of adversity and a universal tendency toward disorder'.⁴ A key term in this literature is autopoiesis, developed by the ecologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Autopoiesis depends on processes of self-organisation and self-repair.⁵ The essence of autopoiesis is 'changing to stay the same'. Margulis states that 'mind and body, perceiving and living, are equally self-referring, self-reflexive processes already present in the earliest bacteria. Mind, as well as body, stems from autopoiesis.'⁶

In this context, death is completely central to life as we and many others live it. Margulis and Sagan tell us that accidental death has always been a contingent factor for life. Many bacteria can survive more or less forever as copies are made again and again through cell division. In contrast, 'programmed death', in which cells age and die as part of the life of the individual, came into the world with reproduction.⁷ The link between eros and thanatos is apparently coded into our DNA. Animals and plants have a more tenuous life when compared with bacteria, but also a more complex one. Organisms die, but new non-copy organisms

are brought into being.⁸ Life, therefore, is an extension of itself into new generations and new species.⁹ And from an ecological point of view, death is a return. The body returns to bacteria, and bacteria return the body to the living earth.¹⁰

Margulis and Sagan go on to define life as it works productively with time: life is always ‘preserving the past, making a difference between past and present; life binds time, expanding complexity and creating new problems for itself’. Life in this broader context is ‘a network of cross-kingdom alliances’.¹¹

The issue of life in its process of becoming raises a fundamental question concerning nature’s agency. Does the natural world have its own desires, its own memories, goals and subjectivities? Margulis and Sagan say ‘yes’ to these questions. Perhaps their most comprehensive response is a quote from the biochemist Daniel Koshland who discusses the life of desire experienced by bacteria: “Choice”, “discrimination”, “memory”, “learning”, “instinct”, “judgement”, and “adaptation” are words we normally identify with higher neural processes. Yet, in a sense, a bacterium can be said to have each of these properties.¹²

Life systems are replete with mind and full of unpredictability and uncertainty. Freedom in these systems is part of autopoiesis; it is not the case that absolutely anything can happen and survive, but in its ongoing self-organisation and self-repair, the organism, or the ecosystem, or even the whole biosphere, is making and unmaking itself all the time.¹³ So we can say that life has desires, and we can talk about what these desires are: we can say that life desires complexity, that life wants to join, create, experiment, do more. And we can say that death is part of what enables life to do this.

Distilling much of this knowledge into philosophical language, Freya Mathews develops two main characteristics of life: its desire for its own becoming (*conatus*), and its desire for connectivity (*orexis*). Each desire is implicated in the other: life wants to live, and life wants to live with others. In one sense the desire for connectivity is a statement of the ecological fact that organism and environment permeate each other, are mutually constitutive, and thus mutually necessary and sustaining.¹⁴ A stronger statement involves synergy. If life is always more than the sum of its parts,¹⁵ then living beings and groups of living beings are parts of broader networks of connectivity in which they find their own becoming in time. Life’s desire for its own becoming is actualised through interaction with other living and non-living matter.

— DINGO BAITING

In 1980 I was beginning my research into Aboriginal Australian land and life in a small community by the name of Yarralin in the Northern Territory. White settlers established broad-acre cattle properties across this savannah region about 120 years ago, and in spite of decolonising legislation, many colonial relations of power were and are alive and well.

On 12 September 1980 a light fixed-wing aircraft flew low over the community and dropped dingo bait. The poison is known as 1080 and the chemical compound is sodium fluoroacetate. It is regarded as an extremely dangerous poison because there is no known antidote. It is particularly effective against canines and is widely used in grazing country. The method in broadacre baiting is that chunks of dried meat are laced with 1080 and dropped at regular intervals by plane. The poison is toxic to many animals in high doses, and species other than canines are at risk. Furthermore, any animal that eats the remains of an animal that has been poisoned is at risk—thus animals such as eagles, hawks and crows, as well dingoes, are vulnerable. The poison remains in animal bones for up to two years, so the threat to other animals lingers long after the original poisoning event.¹⁶

The Aboriginal people in Yarralin were outraged that dingo bait had been dropped on their country. They were against dingo baiting in general, and specifically they opposed any use of bait on the land they considered to be theirs under Anglo-Australian law (that land being a much smaller subset of the total land that was theirs under their own land tenure system, almost all of which is now under pastoral tenure). Their concerns covered a range of issues: protection of dingoes and camp dogs, protection of other animals, protection of children, and control over their own land.

My teacher Old Tim Yilngayarri, now deceased, was the oldest of the dingo bosses. Somewhat ominously, he told me a little story: 'There was a man who shot dogs, and he's dead now.'

For clarity, it needs to be stated that the man who shot dogs was reported to have shot eighty or more dogs in what was clearly a canine massacre. Old Tim's story—that the man is now dead—sounded like a threat, but as it turned out in the exploration of the story, it was actually a kind of promise, or statement of causality: if A then B. You kill dogs, you die. That's how it is.

For clarity it also needs to be added that as far as is known, the dingo bait was being dropped by the adjacent pastoralist. Throughout most of the pastoral world of north Australia aerial baiting is standard practice. The pastoralists' position is that dingo control is essential for protecting calves. Scientific evidence indicates that the pastoralists' view is wrong, but this is new knowledge, not readily available in 1980.¹⁷ But whether right or wrong in relation to protecting calves, aerial dingo baiting is premised on imagining a country without dingoes and setting out to accomplish it.

For clarity, it also helps to know that in Aboriginal practice a country is small enough to accommodate face-to-face groups of people, and large enough to sustain their lives; it is politically autonomous in respect of other, structurally equivalent countries, and at the same time interdependent with other countries. Each country is itself the focus and source of Indigenous Law and life practice. Countries come into being through Dreaming creation. Dreamings demarcated a world of difference, and at the same time made the patterns and

connections that crosscut difference. These patterns crosscut human and other species, creating the consubstantial kindreds known as totemic groups.

The point I want to develop is that one of the foundational moral principles of life in country is that a country and its living beings take care of their own. This is to say, the connections between people, other living beings and their country are reflexive and recursive. To be in connection is to take care and to be cared for. I use the terms eco-place or eco-country to get at the fact that country is not just the homeland for humans, but the homeland for all the living things that are there, and I want to emphasise that care moves through country and into and out of species. The care of each part of a given eco-country contributes to other parts and thus to the whole. In contemporary ecological terms, we would say that country is a self-organising system: people are part of the system, and their work contributes to country's organising, but humans are not the only organisers. Not only is organisation shared, but humans get organised by others, as well as doing their own organisational work.

In this system, living beings truly stand or fall together. The process of living powerfully in the world is based on nurturing the relationships in which one's own becoming is enmeshed. Care of one's country, one's people, one's Dreaming sites and one's non-human countrymen are just some of the actions through which people sustain, and are themselves sustained by, interacting life forms.

Dingo stories, like cellular biology, link eros and thanatos. In the paradigmatic story in the Yarralin area, the Dingo and the Moon are arguing. The Moon brags that he can die and return, and he offers the Dingo the opportunity to be like him. The offer is phrased as a coded statement that makes public reference to matters that are part of men's business. Basically, the Moon offers eternal life on condition of becoming part of himself, not unlike cell division or cloning (to put it in completely different terms). The Dingo refuses. The Moon then challenges the Dingo to a contest. He dies and returns, and he dares the Dingo to do likewise. The Dingo tries, and is unable to make the return. There is a lot going on in this and related stories, and the point I want to focus on is that the Moon lives forever but has no differentiated offspring, while the Dingo, who dies, is open to the world of change and flux, and to the continuities and contingencies of procreation across generations. Implicit in the story is the sexual activity for which dogs are so notorious.¹⁸

Dingo lives and dies in connection; and so the stories invite us to ask what it means to be in connection, to have one's interests enmeshed in the interests of others. Dingo stories articulate a quality that I call 'seriously alive'. This is an intersubjectivity of mutually implicated life processes where care is reciprocal, and the work of living is the work of living with, for and through others. Far more than mere survival, living seriously demands encounter and engagement, and is situated in time and place, in the materiality of bodies and country, and in the complexities of encounter.

Dingo stories thus speak to a metaphysics of connectivity within which living beings are always-already enmeshed in a shared moral domain that is dedicated to life's becoming.¹⁹ The dingo baiting episode violated connectivity along numerous parameters. In this area 1080 is used specifically to kill dingoes, so from the perspective of Dingo people, the attack on dingoes was an attack on them as well as on their dingo relations. In a system of mutually interconnected webs of relationships, effects ramify. We should consider that dingoes are important figures in the Law. Baiting was thus an attack on Yarralin people's Law: what becomes of the songs and ceremonies, when the subject of the song is lost? What if dingoes were eradicated? You cannot, as far as I am aware, sing your eradicated brothers and sisters back into life. If the human voice that pours forth in song finds no response, what happens to the relationship?

Equally devastatingly, not only life but also death was under attack. Dingo baiting spread death around the place so that living things who came for sustenance would, instead, be harmed or killed. To the extent that food was disguised as poison mutual care was perverted. This violent intervention perverted life by disguising death as life; it swerved the process of life away from flourishing mutuality and toward indiscriminate death. And death itself was perverted, since an animal that had been poisoned would become food for other animals and poison them as well.

— DEATH NARRATIVES

Recent philosophical literature is marked by a growing interest in death, or, as Joshua Schuster calls it, 'a sort of dawn of the dead'.²⁰ Increasingly, there is an interest in the generative and community qualities of death. James Hatley is my primary source in this analysis.²¹ His concern is with what Edith Wyschogrod calls man-made mass death. Hatley works his way into the analysis through the death narrative concept. A death narrative in human terms situates death and the dead within an historical community. He writes, 'What is important about a death narrative is that one's own passing away becomes a gift for those who follow, as well as an address to them. Death narratives are vocative; they call to one's survivors for some mode of response.'²²

Hatley's use of the death narrative concept is set within time, and the transmission of wisdom, memory and traditions that are passed from generation to generation. A given group, he writes,

can be seen as a wave of memory, insight, and expectation coursing through time, a wave that lifts up and sustains the individuals of each succeeding generation, even as those individuals make their own particular contributions to or modifications of that wave. ...

situated in the difference between death and birth, one is addressed by the lives one inherits. These lives inspire one, literally, breathe into one one's own possibility of existence. Yet the existence one receives in this inspiration does not belong to one's forebears, precisely because the very terms of its inspiration is a transitive crossing-over that generates a new existence characterized in terms of a new responsibility.²³

The concept of death narratives is essential to Hatley's analysis of the catastrophic will-to-destruction that finds fulfilment in the Death World. He is less concerned with aggregated figures than with generational perspectives, and he defines the Death World as a place where entire generations are destroyed.²⁴ On the scale of generations, wisdom, memory and traditions are passed along waves of successive life; and so mass-death seeks to eradicate these gifts and these responsibilities. The will-to-destruction is a will toward totality, and death is the tool. The will-to-destruction refuses the call of others: 'it acts *as if* it were its own creator, *as if* it might never die, *as if* the other's suffering meant nothing at all to it, *as if* everything were possible'.²⁵ This may be an attempt to turn history into a narcissistic mirror, Hatley contends: 'one writes the past and future as a mode of colonisation. All the other times are resources for one's own.'²⁶ And this colonising endeavour is part of the delusional '*as if*: *as if* others don't matter, *as if* there are no limits.

In my context of the angel of history and the wreckage of catastrophe, one of the main lessons to be drawn from this analysis is that the will-to-destruction attacks time and the generative quality of death. The killers use death in their search to collapse all time and all life into their own totalising domain.

Hatley further suggests an ecological dimension to the death narrative concept, but does not develop it as it goes beyond his project.²⁷ I pick up this ecological perspective in order to expand it in two directions—first into conversation with western science and then with an Indigenous metaphysic of connectivity. Where western science seeks to universalise, Aboriginal philosophy situates life, death, gift and responsibility in country, and then develops larger contexts through connectivities. My premise is that for us today both perspectives matter.

— WESTERN SCIENCE AND AN ECOLOGICAL DEATH NARRATIVE

There are interesting convergences. Hatley spoke of groups or species as waves coursing through time. Similarly, Margulis and Sagan speak of life as 'a material process shifting and surfing over matter like a strange slow wave'.²⁸ I am extremely impressed with the fact that in the late twentieth century scientific research has given us one kind of basis for expanding

the idea of ecological death narratives. I will also contend that the concept of death narratives helps us expand scientific thought.

According to Margulis and Sagan, life is a becoming, a process set in time. Life expands complexity through time in the context of a universal kinship such that all living beings are ultimately related to each other through their shared substance, their conjoined histories, and their embeddedness in the aeons of life's time on Earth.²⁹ At the planetary level, they write that 'life's body is a veneer of growing and self-interacting matter encasing Earth'.³⁰

Margulis and Sagan draw out two lessons here: the first is that 'our destiny is joined to that of other species'; the second is that life on Earth is not ours to reject or destroy.³¹ Implicit in this analysis is a critique that would claim that the delusional 'as if' is a fundamental epistemological error. The error involves an unmaking of the world of life, as if there were some other world to be gained. They go on to say that all life has two lives—the one we are given and the one we make.³² In light of Hatley's work, we need to add a third. The third life is the one we bequeath to others. Structurally, the bequeathed life is simply the given for a new generation, but life is set within irreversible time, and we gain a better understanding both of ourselves and of life processes when we consider our participation in three lives: the given, the lived and the bequeathed.

In view of the wreckage of catastrophe, we can begin to see how man-made mass ecological death impairs life's desire: life desires that each living being (perhaps excepting some bacteria) live all three lives—the given, the lived and the bequeathed. This means that life desires that lives become gifts to others.

— INDIGENOUS ECOLOGIES AND AN ECOLOGICAL DEATH NARRATIVE

Science tells a story that is grounded in the particular, often the micro or macroscopic, and at the same time is generalised beyond specific contexts. In contrast, Indigenous ecologies are embedded and embodied. Life is not just life—it is lived in communities that persist through time. In a recent work, I make the case that Australian Aboriginal people bring the gift of an ecological perspective to the death narrative concept.³³ Rather than death narratives emerging solely or primarily from inter-human engagements, my Aboriginal teachers would insist on the participation of country. In their context, the flourishing of life in country is the narrative of the whole country that preceded them—a country that included and was sustained by their ancestors. So flourishing country is the narrative of all the living things that contributed to the life of the country. The ecological narrative embeds death in processes through which it is twisted back into life.

From the perspective of country the death narrative concept encompasses the idea that death binds living beings into an ecological community; this is not just an historical community as in a strictly human context, but rather is a larger living and localised community. It follows that in areas of mass environmental destruction the future of one's death collapses as the future of flourishing ecosystems collapse. I work with a concept of double death: this is the amplification of death, so that the balance between life and death is overrun, and death starts piling up corpses in the land of the living. Dreamings created a world of diversity and connectivity. Contemporary environmental degradation is unmaking this world. The delusional 'as if' is turning living countries into Death Worlds—places where entire generations of living things and connectivities are being destroyed.

My deeper point is that within Indigenous country wreckage always involves connectivities, and thus is immediate and personal. I offer the example of my teacher Jessie Wirrpa who was a great hunter, particularly of fish and turtles. In Jessie's way of life and death, she has joined the other 'dead bodies' in her country, and, like them, is becoming part of the nourishing ecology of the place. In life she was a great hunter, in death she joins the ancestral providers. Double death puts her in double jeopardy. The rivers are rapidly deteriorating from invasions of noxious weeds. It is probable that in the near future riverine ecologies will collapse, and with that collapse the possibility for living people to go fishing and feed their families will be radically impaired, if not completely obliterated. For Jessie, then, there is a doubling up: first, her own death as a living person and, subsequently, her obliteration as a nurturer within a flourishing country.

Such are the recursive and amplifying effects of double death. That ominous story—'there was a man who shot dogs, and he's dead now'—starts to echo as the fate and destiny of those who indiscriminately spread death. What becomes of humans when the partners to their humanity are gone?

— WILL-TO-DESTRUCTION

Thus far I have developed the case that the will-to-destruction defiles life because it intervenes in life processes on the side of death, disrupting the shared work between the two. Further, I have developed the case that the will-to-destruction defiles death because it impedes the capacity of death to turn matter back into life. My larger point is that the will-to-destruction attacks time and connectivity, and thus is unmaking the living world. This point is embedded in specific places, living things, and the relations between them. It is set in time and flux, and thus opens us to processes of forming relationships as well as being always already embedded in them. It is thus particularly salient to those of us who are increasingly disconnected, and who seek change.



The dingo tree An example will ground the analysis back into the world of ongoing death work. This tree is located at the edge of Kosciusko National Park, not far from Canberra. The local landowners here are sheep graziers, and they have a grievance concerning the fact that aerial baiting in the national park has not been sufficiently aggressive, and that wild dogs—dingoes and hybrids—come out onto the flats and kill sheep. This is a widespread story; dingoes are poisoned, trapped and shot in almost all parts of Australia for this kind of reason. The problem is real, but solutions are complex. I am concerned both with the display of death and with the will-to-destruction which is announced so emphatically.

About ten dogs hang from this tree. More skeletons lie in the ground where they have fallen. The breezes here carry putrefaction as well as the glorious mountain air. One is alternately brushed with beauty and revulsion. I found myself experiencing an uneasy fascination even as I felt caught up in waves of shame and fear.

Recall that the death narrative is a gift that binds the dead into their own living community. In this vile perversion death is offered as part of the killer's history and community. In life these creatures were despised by the pastoralist, and now the deaths are displayed in a narrative of total power. The pastoralist wants to destroy the animal, and he wants to display his dominance. And so he tortures the dead body. This dingo, this outlaw, can be defiled with relative impunity. Social power as well as interspecies power is on display here.

This exhibit offers up trophies in the war against the wild and the living world. I am pressed to ask: What power do we think we gain when we steal the future of other living things, perverting their future and their history toward what might be taken to be human purposes?

And are such totalising delusions tipping the balance between making and unmaking in favour of disconnection and disorder?

These questions brings me back to the angel of history. In my view she is howling. And why do dingoes howl? According to people who know them well, dingos howl with grief, but that is one of a number of registers. Their primary motivations are to locate and communicate with other members of the group, and to announce their presence to other groups. Dingoes are reported to have a complex howling vocabulary.³⁴ They howl in harmonies that increase the sound of their voices, and they tell each other who and where they are.

I suggest that the angel is howling to try to locate her companions, not only dingoes and many other living things, but humans as well. She howls because her fellow human creatures have lost themselves in the labyrinths of their own Death World and seem not to know how to find their way out. She may be howling with grief over the deaths and the torture, and the relentlessness of it all, and she may be calling out, offering a voice that could pull us and others back into connectivity.

— CONCLUSION

The Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking wrote an insightful review essay discussing JM Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. He gave particular attention to *The Lives of Animals*, and discussed the comparison Coetzee's novelist Elizabeth Costello draws between animal slaughter and the slaughter of human beings (specifically Jewish human beings under the Nazi regime). He observes, along with characters in the book, that this view causes extreme discomfort. In the book the character Abraham Stern contests this view most vigorously. Hacking writes 'Of course I agree with Abraham Stern: "If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead ..."' Having said that he agrees with this position, Hacking continues: 'Yet I cannot formulate, to my own satisfaction, what is wrong with [the] rhetoric. Coetzee is not being cheap.'³⁵

My analysis offers some way forward in this problem. The issue, it seems to me, may not turn precisely or solely on the specific cruelty of the deaths, so much as it may turn on the complexities of the will-to-destruction. I do not deny that cruelty is immensely important, but it may be too narrowly focused on physical suffering. My argument has been that catastrophe inheres in processes of destructive disconnection, which are unmaking the world of life that has been making itself so beautifully for so long. The world that is bequeathed to us is, in our hands and in our time, being unmade. And more, that in unmaking this gifted world, the will-to-destruction unmakes time, and totalises its grasp of life's future and diversity. And more, the future complexity of life—our potential gift to the future—is being eradicated.

And yet, in the midst of this Death World we are still called to embrace the life forces that bring us into being and nurture us. These are the death narratives that have breathed life into us, narratives that honour both life and death, honour the balance, and honour life's deep desire for connectivities. Finally, our situatedness in time and place suggests that the future, too, may call out to us, seeking the inspiriting force that only we can breathe into it.

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