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Baudelaire's Aesthetic

This paper will take up the work of Charles Baudelaire, poetic and critical, in order to present the Baudelairean aesthetic and to make a case for its relevance in our judgments about art today. Baudelaire was the first poet of the modern built environment and is known as the Father of modern poetry. While his poetry is still admired his aesthetic has been historicized: deemed to belong to that time and place in which Baudelaire wrote. This paper will argue that this historicization by subsequent aesthetic theory and philosophy is a suppression of something integral to art and artists, without which art is liable to lose what is true about it and sink into a morass of irrelevance and triviality; or (as will be argued has partly happened) may become devoid of any value beyond the business interests that control it. In this regard, it will be suggested, Baudelaire's aesthetic has important redeeming qualities.

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Spinozistic Pantheism, the Environment and Christianity

The traditional problem of faith and reason goes something like this. The pre-reflective (intuitive and emotion-influenced) judgements support religion X. Critical reflection tends to undermine Religion X. How do we adjudicate? The details of religious beliefs and practices are not my present concern. Here I merely assert that theism has considerable intellectual support, where theism is here understood as belief in an agent that creates the physical universe, provided and all that it strictly entails is to be predicated univocally of human beings and of God. My present topic is a shift in the pre-reflective support from straightforward theism towards pantheism and neo-Paganism. In this paper I distinguish Spinozistic pantheism from Absolute Idealism and from Impersonal Pantheism, and argue that once it is de-coupled from Spinoza's Necessity Thesis the former coheres well both with deep ecology and Christianity.

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Creation, Evolution and "First Sight": The Spirit of Centralia

Theo Price had an extraordinary admiration for the Aborigines of Central Australia. Infinitely more respectful of their character and way of life than was common in the 1930s, he was in awe of their power to connect with the unseen world ("first sight") and find harmony with the One Good, the primal cause of all things. His little known 1935 mystical romance, *God in the Sand* (publisher's title forced on the author) is an elaborate romance that grows out of a realistic journey in Central Australia. But at its heart is a series of beautifully told creation and other mythic stories related to the hero, Errol, by the heroine, Luma. The earliest stories tell of the creation of human kind, of many geographic features, plants and animals and the origins of the totemic system. Neither a conventional Christian nor a rationalist, Price does not discount Aboriginal totemism as pre-religious or sub-rational "magic." On the contrary, he elevates Aboriginal religion as impressively spiritual. The novel concludes with the hero and heroine exploring in dream the world of the spirit and learning wisdom from the fount of truth and knowledge.

God in the Sand is a unique creation of day-to-day actuality, mystic romance and an apparently authoritative re-telling of Central Australian Dream Time stories. A desperately poor and ill man, Price published the work through P. R. "Inky" Stephensen, who imposed massive cuts and changes of style as a condition of publication. The harrowing story of how the novel found its way into print is perhaps the most extraordinary in Australian publishing history.

CREATION, EVOLUTION AND “FIRST SIGHT”

ARUNTA CREATION STORIES IN THEO PRICE’S *GOD IN THE SAND*

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Let me begin with a full and frank admission. I am not an anthropologist. Like everyone else who once studied T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as part of “Modern Literature,” I dutifully revered Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*; but even that small fig leaf has been torn away by recent anthropologists who, to my astonishment, demote *The Golden Bough* to the “The Gilded Twig.”¹ Research in other areas has taken me briefly into Malinowski. But all I can promise is to report what an atypical Australian novelist, Theo Price, writing in the early 1930s, in an Australian mystical romance titled *God in the Sand*,² has to say about the creation stories and the spirituality of the Arunta people of Central Australia. I will ask whether Price’s version of the stories is influenced by his predilection for spiritualism and Darwin, and where the stories fit within the debates surrounding Aboriginal creation mythology.

Theo Price and his daughter Rima (named after the heroine of W. H. Hudson’s mystical romance *Green Mansions*) lived on an invalid pension of 20 shillings a week in a cheap Townsville hotel in the depths of the Depression. An educated man, Price had fallen out with his family and lived and worked “beyond the fences” in Central and Northern Australia, much of the time among Aborigines, for whom he developed an

¹ Edmund Leach, “Golden Bough or Gilded Twig,” *Daedalus* (1991), 371-87, qtd in Max Charlesworth et al. eds, *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: An Anthology of Recent Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 31.

² Theo Price, *God in the Sand: An Australian Mystical Romance* (Sydney: P. R. Stephensen and Company, 1934).

exceptionally high regard and whose religion he “took seriously.”³ In 1933 Price sent Endeavour Press the manuscript of a novel, “Moongooloonga,” or Everlasting Waters. It was accepted, subject to massive cuts and changes, including an insistence on a puzzling new title, *God in the Sand*. When Price’s editor, P. R. (“Inky”) Stephensen, began his own firm, Price had to move with him. This led to indefinite deferrals of the publication date, and hence to delays in the advances which Price needed to repay debts incurred in having the manuscript typed. Harrowing problems and near suicide ensued.

Mystical romance always requires willing suspension of disbelief, but hearing it described at second hand *really* strains credulity. May I nevertheless say that, as in the case of W. H. Hudson’s *Green Mansions*, it is possible to combine visionary narrative with profound themes. The original “Moongooloonga” encompassed four large books. In Book I, Inca victims of the Conquistadores flee to Australia from Peru in the 1500s with some Spaniards and an English knight, Sir Errol Courtenay. Soon they are ruling over a impressively fierce tribe called the Barsoojuja, or Red Star, who inhabit a mountain fastness in the Centre. The Barsoojuja are breakaways from the very large, very diverse Central Australian Aboriginal people whom Theo Price and Baldwin Spenser call “**Arunta**,” but who are also called “**Aranda**” (T. G. H. Strehlow), “**Arunndta**” (Herbert Basedow⁴) and “**Arriernte**” (the modern convention). Living in a mountain climate, the Barsoojuja remain “light skinned” (114), in accordance with Dr Basedow’s theory that in

³ Errol, the hero of *God in the Sand*, “had spent over a year with the Luritja tribe [Central Australia], as one of themselves. He knew the meaning and ritual of many of their ceremonies . . . possibly more than any other white man. Being an advanced psychologist, he had studied the beliefs and customs of the Aborigines almost entirely from the psychic viewpoint. . . . Errol took the native religion seriously” (39). See also pp. 278-79 where Errol is revealed as “the authority on the Aborigines,” whose life-work has been “the study of the Aborigines and their relation to the solution of the mystery of creation.”

⁴ “There are only a handful [of Australian scientists who study the Aborigines] . . . One especially, Dr Herbert Basedow, is a recognized authority . . . and a reliable one too” (278-79).

the distant past the Australian Aboriginals were white.⁵ In Book II, Errol, a reincarnation of Sir Errol Courtenay, is living in 1930s Townsville and Magnetic Island. Stephensen insisted that Parts I and II of the novel be dropped entirely. The published text, *God in the Sand*, is a condensed version of Books III and IV.

Errol and Terry travel to Central Australia. Errol is in search of the mysterious Barsoojuja, about whom he had heard whispers on earlier trips, and of the mountain range they inhabit. A philosopher-psychic, he hopes to learn “the long guarded secret of the beginning of life” (48). Terry is frankly in search of gold, a reminder that Central Australia inspired several gold rushes. Camped out under the night sky, the two old friends talk about the Aborigines. The down-to-earth Terry observes: “The Australian Abo is supposed to be a low type of man” (15). Errol replies: “He is nothing of the kind! I have seen groups of Australian Luritjas, Aruntas . . . exactly resembling Zulu Impis”—which accords with the observations made by many Europeans on early contact.⁶ “What about intellectually? “The Australian Aboriginal,” says Errol quoting the anthropologist Dr W. Lloyd Turner, “is endowed with an intelligence equal to that of the whites . . . they are nearer the whites than the members of any other dark race.” “But,” Terry persists, “the Abo is backward in his development. You can’t deny that!”

Granted, long ages ago, when other races began the progressive march of evolution [says Errol] the Australian Aborigines apparently stood still; but

⁵ Herbert Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* (Adelaide: Preece, 1925), 49. The attribution of light skin is not a revelation of latent white supremacy. Basedow believed that “the dark colour of the Australian’s skin (and hair) is entirely a secondary development due to climatic influences. The superficial nature of pigmentation of the aboriginal’s skin is in support of such a reasoning.” Basedow presumed “the great antiquity of man in Australia” and thought that the Aborigines had been light coloured when they lived in a cold climate, where there was no need for heavy pigmentation.

⁶ E.g. W. Robertson, *Coo-ee Talks: A Collection of [broadcast] Lecturettes upon early Experiences among the Aborigines of Australia*, edited with a Foreword by Herbert Basedow (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1928), 53, recalls “old warriors of splendid physique and dignified bearing.”

whatever they may have missed by not progressing, as it's called, at least they retained something which *we* have lost forever—a memory of the beginning of things—the power to see, hear and communicate with what we call the unseen . . .

“You mean they have second sight?” “No, *first* sight I call it. In the lore of the Australian Aborigines those who seek will find the secret of the world's creation, the secret of the genesis and evolution of man . . . (16-17)

This long conversation (here ruthlessly cut), establishes the nature of Price's admiration for the “Stone-Age” Australian Aborigines. Darwinian anthropologists like Baldwin Spenser gave the Aborigines “a low place in the scale of human values” and thought them “utterly incapable of grasping . . . abstract ideas.” As Spenser's Darwinian friend R. R. Marret put it: “Just as the platypus . . . reveals a mammal in the making, so does the Aboriginal show us . . . what early man must have been like . . .”⁷ Price, by contrast, admires the “Stone-Age” Aborigines precisely because their “instinctive memories reach back to the world's very beginnings; they *know*, where Christians only *believe*” (17). Unlike the “learned scientists,” for whom the Aborigines were still in the pre-religious stage, Errol believes that “Australian Aborigines [have] long since reached the point of spiritual perfection. The Buddhist priest scarifying . . . his body that the soul may live is only doing consciously what Nature [and one might add, their own extraordinarily strict self-discipline] has done for the Aboriginal tribesman” (39-40).⁸

The two men set off for the mountains. The Central Australian landscape and the life on cattle stations “beyond the fences” are brought fully alive, the sense of actuality

⁷ Qtd in D. J. Mulvaney and J. H. Calaby, “*So Much That Is New*”: Baldwin Spenser, 1860-1929 (Melbourne: MUP, 1985), 125-26.

⁸ “The Australian Aboriginal medicine-man has never left . . . the point where stands revealed the secret of Creation, the Buddhist's ‘Rose of Life’ . . . called by the Aborigines ‘Winaroo’” (40).

arising from these chapters usefully complementing the novel's mysticism. But when the travellers eventually reach the foot of the mountains, a sandstorm panics the camels. Everything is lost, including most of the water. Errol, ill with malaria, cannot move; but Terry bravely sets off back to the base camp on foot. In these desperate conditions, Errol is found by Luma, a Spirit Girl:

There was a figure standing on the edge of the precipice, facing him, incarnadined by the sundown glory. It was . . . a girl's form . . . Very small and fragilely slender . . . except that the contour of her small breasts was visible beneath the texture of what seemed to be the only garment she wore . . . a filmy, sleeveless, simple garment reaching just below her knees, yet revealing the childlike curves of her sylph-like body . . . Very wonderful was her hair . . . (76-77)⁹

Two pages in the same vein follow; and there are no prizes for guessing that Errol and Luma (who are also "affinities" and reincarnations respectively of Luma's father and mother) will become passionate lovers. But, more to the point, Luma will instruct Errol in the ancient wisdom of the Arunta people, and then accompany him on a journey into the spirit world where, after a kaleidoscopic series of experiences, he will attain a clearer vision of the "Mystery Eternal . . . the Ultimate Sublimity . . . Infinitude" (246).

Luma rules as Queen /Goddess in a palace hewn out of a mountain of almost pure gold (a metal, innocent for the Barsooja, but in Errol's mind the evil destroyer of civilization). The principal treasure of this fabulous palace is a giant **Churinga** (today normally spelled *tjuringa* or *tjurunga*). "Churinga" may refer to a physical object or to the ceremonies and beliefs connected with them. Suffice to say here that the Aboriginals

⁹ See W. H. Hudson, *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest*, 1904 (London: Dent, 1923), 67-69. Luma is an obvious allusion to Rima, with many explicit correspondences. Price needed the name Rima because of this obvious allusion, but Stephensen insisted on a change.

venerated wood or stone slabs, covered in carvings, which recorded their traditions in symbolic form; and that these Churinga were central to their religion. Of many different kinds, and having many different functions, they were stored together in secret caves and brought out for rare ceremonies. (Many early ethnographers robbed, or connived at the robbing of, these storehouses and sold the Churinga all over Europe, where Australian ethnography had become a “hot” topic.¹⁰) T. G. H. [Theodore] Strehlow gives a beautiful description of a Churinga ceremony and of the chanting of the traditions that accompanied the ceremonies; he also analysed the antique vocabulary and metrical complexities that made the chants intelligible only to the instructed. Participants hold a Churinga to the body in order to receive its power.¹¹

Luma reveals to Errol the Arunta people’s sacred Churinga, a large piece of polished hardwood covered in carvings (Ch. 13, 111-23). She explains that its timbers were secured from one of the first trees to mature on the earth, and that it “records the complete history of the Arunta tribe and its offshoots . . .” It also has power: “A living breath of every man, woman and child who has ever lived in all the millions of years, since the Arunta tribe began, has been breathed into . . . the Churinga to vitalize it with the spiritual entity of the Arunta tribe” (112). The Churinga (which is closely associated with the bullroarer) then revolves, and the sound created is so overwhelming that Errol has an out-of-body experience. In his “released” state he sees a panorama of the history of the Arunta. The Australoids begin in a land of Ice and Snow, but fierce competitors expel them. They seek refuge in the tropical jungles; from there they are driven further

¹⁰ Mulvaney and Calaby, 126-27, describe the depredations carried out by associates of Spenser and Gillen; Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T. G. H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (Sydney: Knopf, 2002), 162-65, gives a much wider picture of the problem.

¹¹ T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: MUP, 1947), 1-5.

south into volcanic Java, and so on, until they settle in peaceful Australia. Next, earthquakes separate Australia from the northern lands and divide Australia down the middle. But another upheaval reunites Australia into one continent. Rivers, lakes, dense vegetation and an inland sea cover the centre until, eventually, the centre dries up and becomes desert.¹² Baldwin Spenser points out with some astonishment that these “tradition[s] reflect geological evidence.”¹³

Following the Churinga revelations comes what I think of as the heart of the novel: Luma relates to Errol, in poetic detail, “[ten] stories of these people of mine . . . which go back . . . to the Dream Times of the Alcheringa” (121). The first three stories are directly about creation and evolution. Later stories use mythology to tell, for example, of crucial geographic changes: “The Battle of Kwatcha Alia” relates the disappearance of the inland sea in terms of a battle between the Arunta and a breakaway tribe, the Warramunga, who steal it from them; “Flickering Fires” accounts for the desertification of the Centre as a victory of the fire spirits over the water spirits. In other stories, young lovers defy the laws separating them, or resist the demands of powerful men who lust after the young woman. “The Cannibal Tree,” which depicts a society run by evil religious rulers, reads like a parable about organized religion—which suggests to me that Price at times inserts his personal preoccupations into what purport to be purely Aboriginal legends.

By way of preparation for the creation stories, let me say that Aboriginal myths,

¹² In very broad outline, this story is consistent with what is known of Australia’s pre-history. See for example Josephine Flood, *The Riches of Ancient Australia: A Journey into Prehistory* (Brisbane: UQP, 1990), 12-27; D. J. Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga *Prehistory of Australia* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

¹³ Baldwin Spenser and Francis J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1927), 307: “Though it is scarcely credible that there can be a tradition relating to a time so far past, yet it is a remarkable coincidence that this tradition reflects what geological evidence shows to have been the case . . .”

if told in an Aboriginal language to someone who knows that language and has a good command of English, show a high level of imagination and sophistication. (Conversely, tales told in cattle-station Pidgin will appear primitive.) Theodore Strehlow's analysis of the Arunta language, and his sensitive rendering of a myth into English, demonstrate that "the Arunta [language] used by skilful story-tellers and in . . . the [Churinga] chants . . . is an instrument of . . . strength and beauty . . . which can rise to great heights of feeling."¹⁴

The first creation story, "The Wind, the Water and the Sand," could be more informatively titled, "The Beginning of All Things: Sand, Wind, Water and Vegetation." It tells of the creation of the earth and of vegetation. In the Jewish counterpart, "when God creates the heavens and the earth," He begins with a "formless void and darkness [covering] the face of the deep, while a wind from God [sweeps] over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light . . .'" The Aranda story, as told by Price, begins: "In the beginning was sand . . . there was only day and night, light and darkness, heat and cold." After a long time, "weary of sameness, Sand, breaking the eternal silence, cried loudly to the twin Gods, Ungambikula, to send him a mate." Fearful of having offended, the formless Sand ripples. Thunder and lightning create hills and valleys. And now, in answer to the prayer for a mate, comes a "breath, strong and mighty," at first frightening, which later reveals itself as "the Wind—I am thy friend." Sand and Wind eventually tire of each other's company, and Wind goes north to find "new friends." He returns with "great black and grey masses, through which scintillated shades of crimson, gold, orange and green." And suddenly "round drops of a clear liquid . . . fell upon Sand, cooling his hot surface . . ." Water filled rivers and lakes, shapeless sand turned into hard rock. But again, "change is the law of Nature," and again Wind flies away "in search of

¹⁴ T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, xvii.

something new.” The “something new” is seeds that grow into trees and bushes, making the “one-time desert a thing of beauty.”

The second creation story, “The Dream Times” (Chap. 16, 133-35), describes the origins of vegetable and animal life and of “incomplete human beings”:

In the Dream Times of the Alcheringa, far way in the Western sky lived two beings—Ungambikula—Twin Gods, made from nothing, self existing, omniscient and omnipresent. It was these beings who created life on the shores of Kwatcha Alia [the Salt Water Inland Sea]. First Ungambikula created vegetable life, trees, flowers . . . Followed the lower animal life—kangaroos, emus, lizards . . . But dissatisfied, [the Twin Gods] determined on the creation of something more interesting still, so from animals and plants they made incomplete human beings, half animal or tree, and half man. These were the Injurara¹⁵ creatures. Some of the Injurara arose even from the rocks, sand, air or the water, and took unto themselves the characteristics of these elemental substances, of which they were the incarnation. (133)

Two elements in the story require a brief comment. (1) “**The Dream Times of the Alcheringa**” refers, of course, to the “sacred” period, or mythic past, beyond historical time when the natural world and the human race came to be. The popular expression, “the Dream Time,” introduced by Spenser and Gillen, has passed into the language. But Carl Strehlow (of Hermannsburg mission fame) and many similarly minded observers thought the phrase demeaned the significance of the creation stories. Ronald and Catherine Berndt found “Dreaming . . . a rather unfortunate choice” and recommended

¹⁵ Price seems to be the only writer to use this word. Spenser, *Arunta*, 308, uses *Inapatua*. Earlier he had used *Inapertwa*.

“Creative Period” instead.¹⁶ The dispute arises from differing conceptions of **Alchera** / **Alcheringa** / **Altjira**, which in turn seem to arise from the different starting points of the disputants. In brief and very crude summary, Baldwin Spencer was a Darwinian evolutionist and collaborator with Sir James Frazer, who held that the Aborigines were still living in the realm of “magic,” i.e. in a pre-religious phase.¹⁷ “Religion” does not appear in the index to any of Spencer’s books about Aborigines. He translated the Arunta word “Alchera” as “dream,” and “Alcheringa” as “having to do with dreams”; and lengthy passages in his books, as well as vituperative private letters, insist that “Dream Times” is their only possible translation.¹⁸ Carl Strehlow, other Christian missionaries and many independent observers understood “Altjira” to refer to “him who has no beginning, who did not issue from another,” which suggests some notion of “eternity.”¹⁹ Carl’s son Theodore Strehlow admits that “Altjira” is a “very difficult word,” but, rejecting Spencer, states its basic meaning as “eternal, uncreated and sprung out of itself.”²⁰

Debate over a “Creative Period” must prompt questions about the nature of the creator, in this case about **“Ungambikula—Twin Gods, made from nothing, self**

¹⁶ Ronald and Catherine Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, 1964 (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1977), 229.

¹⁷ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd Ed., Pt I, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, 2 Vols (London: Macmillan, 1932), 106-08, adopts an aggressively anti-religion tone. “[The totemic rites] are magical ceremonies intended to secure the reemodiment of the spirits of edible animals and plants. [They] are in no sense a religion, unless we are prepared to bestow the name of religion on the business of the grazier and the market gardener. [They are] magical rites performed by the Australians for the maintenance of the food supply . . . a crude, almost childlike attempt to satisfy the primary wants of man.

¹⁸ Spencer and Gillen, *The Arunta*, I, Chap. XII, “The Alchera and Alchera Ancestors,” 304-54; II, Appendix D, “The Alchera Belief and Traditions,” 589-96. Re controversy and correspondence see Mulvaney and Calaby, 125-27; Gill, 99-103. See also

¹⁹ See Lambert Ehrlich, D.D., *Origin of Australian Beliefs* (Vienna: Francis Chamra, 1922), 12: “An original, definite belief in a Supreme Being has been observed among the natives of Australia by Eyre, Henderson and others from 1854 onwards . . . east of the line Murray-Darling River-Moreton Bay a Supreme Being is recognized as All Father . . . a single, ruling, creative, eternal, anthropomorphic Being, resembling a monotheistic God; in other parts of the Continent this belief exists in a less definite form.”

²⁰ T. G. H. Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), 614. See also Gill, pp.98-108, for an excellent guide to the complexities of this argument.

existing, omniscient and omnipresent.” In *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), Spenser named the creator “Ungambikula”; but in *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (1927), he substituted “Numbakulla.”²¹ Price describes the Twin Gods as “made from nothing, self existing, omniscient and omnipresent,” but Spenser and Gillen merely say that Ungambikula “means ‘out of nothing,’ or ‘self-existing.’”²² Price gives Ungambikula a much more active role than does Spenser. For Price, Ungambikula creates “vegetable life” and “animal life,” and then from plants, animals or earth, goes on to create “incomplete human beings” viz. the “Injurara creatures.” Spenser (1927) tersely says that “the creation of men and women is ascribed to the action of certain superhuman Beings called Numbakulla.”

Did Price then believe that in Ungambikula the Arunta recognized a Supreme Being comparable to the Christian God? Perhaps a clue may be gained from the opinion of Price’s mentor, Dr Herbert Basedow, a highly intelligent observer. Basedow reports in *The Australian Aboriginal* that native Australians admit the existence of a Supreme Being,²³ and he later comes down on Strehlow’s side of the Strehlow-Spenser debate:

I am pleased that Mr Robertson [author of *Coo-ee Talks*, which Basedow edited] has frequently mentioned the aboriginal’s belief in a deity. This is a subject about which a great deal more will be heard. Strong exception has been taken in certain

²¹ Baldwin Spenser and Francis J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 388; *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 306-07.

²² Spenser and Gillen, *Arunta*, 306-07.

²³ Basedow, *Australian Aboriginal* p. xi: “It is difficult at times to distinguish between an original spirit ancestor and a deity, but a Supreme Spirit or Deity is believed to exist and to rule over all creation”; pp. 294-95: “Although a spiritual Evil Being is feared more than a Good is revered, the existence of the latter is faithfully admitted. . . . The belief is original and not in any way due to missionary influence.”

quarters to the conclusion—arrived at by a number of observers—that the Australian tribes recognize such a thing as a Supreme Being.²⁴

Unlike David Unaipon and some other mission-oriented Aboriginals, Price did not configure the Great Spirit as a personal God.²⁵ But his description of Ungambikula—“made from nothing, self existing, omniscient and omnipresent”—suggests that he shares Basedow’s conviction that the Aboriginals “recognize . . . a Supreme Being.”

The **Injurara** [created by the Twin Gods] were indeed incomplete, unfinished and imperfect. They had no distinct limbs; but they vaguely resembled human beings, doubled or curled up into more or less round formation—similar to that of the human embryo . . . but covered . . . with a hairy skin so that dim outlines only of various portions of the body could be discerned. . . . So, Ungambikula . . . after the lapse of long ages . . . were wearied by the slowness of the evolution of the Injurara; and at last in their impatience they descended to earth. Seizing the helpless . . . Injurara, they tore at their hairy covering . . . As the original covering disappeared, arms and legs emerged . . . from the rest of rest of the bodies. . . . Fingers and toes appeared. Two slits were the eye-lids, underneath which the eyes were discerned, retreating from the glare of the sun These original groups of human beings were the ancestors of the natives of Australia. They [the natives of Australia] wandered over the country around the Salt Water, each on a different track, according to their totem, or descent; kangaroo people on one track, lizard people along another, frog people on a different one, and so on. (133-35)

²⁴ Herbert Basedow, ed., “Foreword” to Robertson, *Coo-ee Talks*, x.

²⁵ David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, ed. Stephen Mueke and Adam Shoemaker (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 20010), 12-13: “There is a Great Spirit above . . . It has been My pleasure to give you the privilege to sojourn awhile in the flesh . . . conduct yourself as part of Myself. Live as children of your Great Father.”

In this passage Price is doing two things. First, he describes the “evolution” (his word) of formless life into an approximation of the human (which will further evolve in the next chapter). Then, he outlines the origins of the totemic system,²⁶ an essential and pervasive element in traditional Aboriginal belief and living: “Ever afterwards [the] descendants [of the Injurara would be] associated with the animals or plants from which they [the Injurara] arose” (133). Thus, a descendant of the Injurara that arose from a kangaroo or eagle belongs to the kangaroo or eagle totem. I wish to make only one point related to this complex subject of totemism. Aboriginal notions of a Supreme Being, or high god, do not normally include personal concern for humans. The “Sky dwellers” have human shapes and many wives, but do not meddle with the world. By sharp contrast the totemic “ancestors” maintain a real and living connection with the earth and with the members of the totem. In that way, the Creative Period / the mythic past / the Dreaming, remains part of the present and the “ancestors” remain a living force, being “eternal” in this sense: “They had shaped [the earth’s] surface. Each of them maintains . . . limited control over Man and Nature. Animals and plants, winds and rain clouds, still issue from the sacred sites where the totemistic ancestors sleep their eternal sleep; and all human beings owe their very existence to them.”²⁷

In the third creation story, “Boro the Bear” (Chap.17, 136-42), the peaceful “Ape-Man,” Atavoro, confronts the murderous Boro. A series of dramatic incidents leads to the dawning of human intelligence in Atavoro, the first stirrings of love and hate, the creation of the first weapon, the victory of intelligence and reason over brute strength, the

²⁶ Totemism in its commonest, North American, meaning is not a perfect fit with the Aboriginal tradition; but Australian anthropologists use it in a qualified sense. See Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1995), 64.

²⁷ Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*, 614-15. Past tense has been changed to present.

formation of human society and man's first awareness of himself as the master of creation. Each advance is prompted by vivid necessity of the moment. Atavoro develops reason when struggling to survive the ferocious attacks of Boro; and reason prepares him to feel the emotion of desire; love for Vistamara and hate for Boro develop when Bora tries to steal Vistamara . . . That Price describes Atavoro as an "Ape-Man" suggests some affinity between his approach and that of Freud in the last essay of *Totem and Taboo*, in that both seek to trace the progress from ape to full humanity.²⁸ I can find no parallel in Aboriginal legend with this story of the primal evolving into the human, and must therefore assume, until I learn better, that Price is using Darwin and Freud to extend the Aboriginal mythology of Ungambikula's creating human being from the Injurara.

What then are we to make of Theo Price's *God in the Sand*? Is it just a curiosity because written in Townsville? In the first place, Price hugely respects the Aboriginal people, not only for splendid physique and superior intelligence, but above all for the ability to connect with the "unseen world." He "takes their religion seriously." For him it is not a quaint set of superstitions and rituals belonging to a people in a pre-religious state. On the contrary, he places the spiritual achievements of Aboriginal religion on a par with those of the Buddhist ascetics. European Australians have much to learn from them.

As for the creation myths, some are immediately recognizable as Aboriginal, some seem unique to Price. The substance of the story of the "incomplete creatures" that become the "ancestors" of the human race is found in both Spenser and Gillen and Carl Strehlow. But whether the details come from other anthropologists, or from Price's own researches or imagination, is not clear. Price knew Darwin and Freud, if only in their

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strauchey (New York: Norton, 1913.)

myriad popularizers, and it seems likely that he incorporated their thinking into *Boro the Bear*. But do the legends as presented by Price speak to a modern consciousness? Of course they reveal highly imaginative Aboriginal engagement with questions about the origins of the world and humankind that from antiquity have tantalized enquiring minds. And there are those like Eugene Stockton who conceive aboriginal spirituality as a “gift for the Australian nation,” perhaps because, like Matthew Fox, he believes that “we need to live both in Dreamtime and in clock time,”²⁹ where past and the present are felt as one. Finally, a creation story inevitably poses questions about the creator. Spenser and his fellow Darwinians vigorously rejected any notion that the Aboriginal people recognized a Supreme Being; Strehlow and his followers took an opposite view. Price agreed with Spenser in detesting Christian missions to the Aboriginals; but he accepted that the Aboriginals revered a Deity. More importantly, he transcended and sidelined that debate by celebrating the Aboriginals’ “first sight,” their close communication with the unseen world and with the beginning of things. After Luma instructs him in Aboriginal lore, Errol emulates their achievement in the final chapters of the novel.

²⁹ Matthew Fox, “Creation Spirituality and the Dreamtime,” in Catherine Hammond, ed., *Creation Spirituality & the Dreamtime* (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1991), 3.