

*“When You Are Down and Under”:
A Story and a Justification*

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The Story

Brother Samuel Blundel was at last treading the soil of Australia. All his life he had heard an inner calling to serve as a missionary, and had devoted his best efforts to answer to that calling. At an early age he had entered the Particular Baptist Association for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen (often referred to as the Baptist Missionary Association or BMA for want of breathing) and there he had eventually mastered all the courses to the full satisfaction of his instructors —although there had been some malicious rumours about their being only too happy to let the nutter graduate and journey to the other side of the world; gossipy nonsense all, needless to say. Nevertheless, it was fortunate indeed that a generous if anonymous source had suddenly provided the funding for his mission to Australia on no other condition than his departure at his earliest convenience. So, here he was, finally ready to bestow the benefits of civilization, and with it of the true faith, to the poor heathen souls who still lingered in the remote Australian wastes.

The far Australian Outback, known by the inspiring name of “the land of Never Never” (and let it not be forgotten that the whole of Australia is called “the land Down Under”), was still home to a few thousand Aborigines. Those who avoided the Government-cared-for settlements mostly kept to themselves, spoke their ancient languages and followed their traditional beliefs. The whole body of Aboriginal beliefs, called “Dreamtime” or “Dreaming”, involves a mythology of a time out of time inhabited by ancestors with supernatural abilities. This faith in a static immanent world was contrary to the idea of progress and ultimate salvation, and so the Aborigines found it difficult to accommodate their behaviour to the demands of the civilised world. But Brother Blundel was finally here to put an end to this sorry state of affairs.

Upon arriving in Perth, in Western Australia, he contacted the local representatives of the BMA. He needed a local guide and translator in order to speak with his flock-to-be, the Aborigines with whom he would start his selfless labour. He knew there were hundreds of dialects in Australia, so he thought it would be a waste of effort to try to learn the language before actually meeting the Aborigines. He would learn while working in the field, so to speak. After all, an Aboriginal community was as good as another.

The dean of the BMA in Perth struck him as a rather apathetic fellow. He didn't seem to share his zest for the amelioration of the Aborigines in Never Never. Quite the contrary; in the few words the dean saw fit to address him, he managed to point out several possible flaws in the plans Brother Blundel had previously outlined. Then, in a mumbled undertone, he added something which sounded like "...gainst all missionary metho..."

But feeling his inner drive more compelling than ever, Brother Blundel didn't let this little incongruence damp his enthusiasm. And, as the dean admitted, it was not his place to thwart the efforts of a fully funded missionary just arrived from Jolly Ol' England. So, with renewed energy and with the implicit support of the local BMA, he proceeded to hire the help of a guide, a black Aborigine who answered to the name of Charlie. He had been raised in Perth by the BMA but could still speak his native dialect.

Brother Blundel found Charlie a likeable and talkative character, if somewhat misinformed and possessed of a very strong Australian accent that often confused him. For example, Charlie pronounced "Brother" in a very peculiar way and sometimes said absurd things like "Boss Blundel, we must take with us chocolate and all sorts of food, don't believe what you have read about baubles, bangles and beads for the Aborigines."

Seeing as his guide spoke a dialect called Pintupi, Brother Blundel decided to look for the Pintupi tribe, who were supposed to live somewhere in the desert. But Charlie informed him that he didn't know where to find Pintupi people living in the traditional way, although he could manage to find some small village where the Pintupi lived under the care of the Australian government. That was, by the way, at the furthest Back of Beyond, in the Northern Territory. But that was not Brother Blundel's idea of properly contacting the Aborigines. He wanted them to live isolated, so that they could be appropriately civilised. Those Aborigines living in towns had already received the influence of the Western civilization in a negligent way and would be difficult to convert. Fortunately, it seemed that the Pintupi were only a group of many such forming the Western Desert culture. They spoke different but mutually comprehensible dialects, so any Western Desert group could be taught the advantages of civilization with the help of Charlie's translation.

In the end, they decided to settle for the land of the Ngaatjatjarra, who lived in the Gibson Desert. They could go by railway until Kalgoorlie, and from there it was less than 1,000 Km to the Gibson following the Outback Highway. Their destination was a little settlement of a few hundred inhabitants, Warburton. From there, they would continue on foot until they found an isolated Aboriginal community.

During the journey Brother Blundel and Charlie often talked about Australian anthropology. Brother Blundel considered that he was well versed in both the Aboriginal culture and that of the European settlers:

*Out on the wastes of the Never Never—
That's where the dead men lie!
There where the heat-waves dance forever—
That's where the dead men lie!*

*Out where the grinning skulls bleach whitely
Under the saltbush sparkling brightly;
Out where the wild dogs chorus nightly—
That's where the dead men lie!*

He recited the verses of Boake's 1891 poem or mentioned some passage of Jeannie Gunn's 1908 novel *We of the Never Never* to prove his point —the fact that the novel's background was the semitropical Northern Territory instead of the desertic Red Centre of the continent didn't seem to bother him in the least.

Then he went on to quote the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown and his seminal work about the Aborigines' ubiquitous mythological creature, the Rainbow Serpent, published in 1926. The rainbow serpent was the main figure of the Dreamtime, present in all the Aboriginal cultures across Australia. It appears in many stories and is as many times portrayed in aboriginal paintings. It is said to be descended from the Milky Way and it reveals itself variously as a snake or as a rainbow. It has the power to reshape the land and to name it. It sometimes swallows people or it can strengthen them. It has healing powers and it can bring rain. But it can also bring disease and death.

It was this powerful presence in the Aboriginal Dreaming that Brother Blundel had decided to overthrow, proving that it was not really the all-mighty creature depicted in the Dreaming. If he could just demonstrate that the Rainbow Serpent was a false idol, then he would be ready to present the shocked Aborigines with a new set of beliefs that could provide a renewed sense to their unwholesome existence: the belief in the One True God and in His Son the Saviour would change the way in which they understood reality. And with that, the entire community would be brought to the present world of advanced science and complex thought. There was no Dreamtime, no immutable transcendent world; everything changes. Once the Aborigines accepted the true faith, they would inevitably forsake the Dreaming and would understand that they must work strenuously —to improve their existence in this world and to earn the grace in the Beyond.

Here a terminological confusion arose, because Charlie mentioned that the Beyond was a synonym of the Never Never or the Red Centre, the Australian desert, and he declared himself sceptical that someone could believe that grace was to be found there, where there was nothing but scorched land. This kind of metaphysical discussion was well liked by Brother Blundel and he was getting ready to answer, but the argument was cut short by a definite gesture from Charlie and the following simple statement. "Boss Blundel, we've found them."

In actual fact it was more of a “they’ve found us” situation, since they were surrounded by a group of Aborigines, but the surprise will serve to excuse Charlie’s semantical error.

Be it as it may, after all those years of preparation in England, after a voyage across half the planet and after a journey all through the Never Never, at long last Brother Blundel was where he had always wanted to be. Among the Australian Aborigines. Now, the difficult part of his task began.

The Aborigines are not usually considered the handsomest of the peoples of the Earth. Of course, it was all a matter of opinion, and one must not prejudge, which is against the sacred teachings of the Holy Book. But, without prejudging, just giving his opinion about what he was seeing, Brother Blundel esteemed that a hair stylist would be in deep professional trouble if hired by the same group of Aborigines that now faced him.

He continued the appraisal. They all were scantily clothed. Both men and women wore only rumpled shorts or a loincloth made up of grass and twigs. The breasts of the women sagged on their chests. The faces of the men were severely wrinkled, half hidden by huge unkempt beards. They were a skinny lot, with long tangled matted hair, black or grey or fully white. Not one of them seemed to keep their complete set of teeth. Their bodies were heavily painted. Some of the drawings looked like palm prints, others were more difficult to identify. Their bodily decoration was grey or whitish. Brother Blundel didn’t think they were a hunting party, although the men were armed with spears. Women were unarmed and according to his sources they didn’t hunt. The Aborigines didn’t smile, but he knew they were not automatically hostile to foreigners, so he thought that they were just expectant.

“Tell them we are happy to meet the famous and wise Ngaatjatjarra, still living in their land as did their forefathers since immemorial time.” Charlie spoke a few words. The group of Aborigines looked at him hieratically. Then an old man covered with white hair spoke. He pointed his spear vaguely to the right. A woman added something, she sounded hesitating. Charlie replied. Another member of the group took part in the conversation in disagreeing tones. He pointed to the left. A general conversation ensued, with several Aborigines interrupting each other and pointing out in several different directions. Brother Blundel decided that it was as good a moment as any to establish his position as intellectual guide and counsellor of this people.

“Thank you all, sorry to interrupt, but I need to know what this conversation is about. Charlie, you are my translator, please perform your duties and tell the Ngaatjatjarra to wait until I understand the situation.”

“Yes, Boss Blundel. They aren’t the Ngaatjatjarra. They are trying to help us find them. Birrinbirrin (that’s the old man with white hair) says that last he heard, they are about 10 days walking to the northwest. But Djulibing (that’s the first woman who spoke) thinks his memory is faulty, the Ngaatjatjarra don’t live there. Sorry, I can’t remember the names of all of them. The third man said they are 7 days walking to the southwest, but others say they live to the north or to the east. Anyway, they all agree that they don’t think we can make it on foot. This is a desert, they say, we need water.”

“Damn! I mean, sorry, forgive me Lord. Let me think... Ask them who they are, where they live and where they are going.”

“Already done. They are the Nyanyaantjarra. It’s a different group. Not to be confused with the Ngaanyatjarra either, who also live in the Gibson Desert. Actually, it’s interesting because the Ngaatjatjarra use the word “ngaatja”, which means “this”, and “ngaatjatjarra” is its comitative case. Then again, “ngaanya” in comitative case gives the name to the Ngaanyatjarra. The same applies, obviously, to the Nyanyaantjarra. We Pintupi, on the other hand, use the instrumental case...”

“This is really a captivating topic, but please, may I remind you that we are here with a purpose? What do we know about them?”

“Oh!” answered Charlie in a matter-of-fact tone “Well, of course they are also a Western Desert group. They live near here. They are in a sort of outing. They wanted to inspect a valley where they intend to perform a ceremony. They have invited us to join them to spend the night.”

Brother Blundel eyed Charlie as if he suspected him of purposefully withholding information (an unfair thought, he reprimanded himself, since he had been only too willing to instruct him in the nuances of the syntactical relationships of the Western Desert dialects just a few moments before). Charlie didn’t seem to need a lot of coaching to get information from the Aborigines. Unsurprising, of course, since he was one of them. But then again, he concluded, once everything was accounted for, it was all good news. He had contacted the Aborigines, and if they were not exactly the group he was looking for, damned —sorry, Lord!— if he could tell the difference. The important thing here was that he had an opening into an Aboriginal group, so he decided to join them and to start spreading the benefits of civilization upon this sorry lot, discouraging as the task could look on first sight —a memory of the misgivings of the good old dean back in Perth came unbidden to him, but he forced himself to suppress it at once.

The sun was already low, although it was still hot, when they finally made it to the Nyanyaantjarra tribe’s settlement. Brother Blundel inspected the place with a critical eye. Their abodes were little more than huts crudely made out of intertwined branches and leaves to which patches of dry mud had been applied. The bedraggled look of the adults he already knew was matched and raised by the half dozen scruffy children who ran around or rolled about in the dirt. Another few adults seemed to have remained to care for the children, if sitting cross-legged on dusty branches with half-closed eyes, occasionally waving flies away, could be at all considered to care for the children.

But Brother Blundel was finally here, so the lives of these poor wretched souls were about to radically change for the better.

That evening a welcome celebration of sorts was organized. The party in whose company Brother Blundel had been travelling had been lucky enough to hunt a few medium-sized lizards and some small rodents. Charlie said that the lizards were goannas and the rodent-like mammals were planigales, small marsupials. Brother Blundel was tempted to classify all those names in the same category of incomprehensible Australian concepts as the comitative or the instrumental cases. But the fact was that while being invited to the party,

both Charlie and Brother Blundel were expected to contribute to it too. With food, emphasised Charlie. Brother Blundel's beads wouldn't be especially welcome. Still, not such a big blow. They were heavy, so he hadn't really packed many. Charlie gave the Nyanyaantjarra a jar of marmalade, which was readily accepted. He knew what they liked. But Brother Blundel's contribution was even more appreciated. He carried a bottle of brandy (for medicinal purposes, he explained). The eyes of the Nyanyaantjarra positively shined when they saw it and huge toothless grins flashed on their faces.

"They think we bring them good luck, Boss Blundel," explained Charlie "They were unusually successful hunting before finding us. They think the hunt was a good omen before our meeting. And now you bring them grog. They have invited us to stay with them." "Excellent!" replied Brother Blundel satisfied. "The Divine Providence is marking our way with the Aborigines!"

The Nyanyaantjarra made a big bonfire not far from their huts and there they roasted their meat with herbs and added some edible roots gathered for the occasion. It was a good meal. The Nyanyaantjarra were newly painted, their bodies greyer than ever. After eating, they started to play some tribal music. They had wind instruments, long straight emptied branches, called didgeridoos, and percussion, in the form of short sticks that were beaten one to each other. The musicians beating the clap sticks seemed to be more experienced. They were in charge of choosing the different rhythms of the music.

The man with white hair who had first spoken to them tired soon of beating the sticks and came to sit by Brother Blundel's side. He came with the first woman who spoke.

"Birrinbirrin and Djulibing want to know if you're interested in the meaning of the dance. They can explain," translated Charlie.

"By all means! Ask them to do so, please" replied Brother Blundel.

"Each song tells a mythological story of the Dreaming," Charlie continued the translation.

"With all the songs we sing we could draw a map of Australia during the Dreamtime. There is a relationship between our singing and our painting. Now we are singing and dancing in honour of the Sun-god. It is a powerful god. The next song will be about the Rainbow Serpent. During the Dreamtime, one day the Sun-god felt melancholic and started playing the didgeridoo. Thus the stars were created. The Sun-god kept on playing, and more and more stars appeared. But after a while many recoiled from the music, and the Big White Snake appeared in the sky—that's the Milky Way, Boss Blundel. But the Big Snake was not happy in the sky, and it decided to come down to the earth. The colour of the spirits is grey, but when the Big Snake found itself on the earth, it decided to take all the colours. So, it became the Rainbow Serpent. Having come down from the sky, it was very powerful indeed, and it could make rain and create rivers at will. It could also change its shape and skin, and all the snakes are its descendants. The Rainbow Serpent still lives in the Dreamtime. It is sometimes in the sky and sometimes on the earth, and to communicate with it, and to appease it when needed, we must use the didgeridoo, because it was with the music of the didgeridoo that the Rainbow Serpent was born."

“That is really something fascinating,” commented Brother Blundel, secretly more than pleased. He had come with the specific intention of discrediting the myth of the Rainbow Serpent, and he found that the myth was presented to him openly, no need to inquire about its existence. These primitive people were all but ripe to be made aware of their wrong ways and awakened to true knowledge and the true faith. Indeed, it all looked as the work of the Divine Providence! “Please, ask Birrinbirrin and Djulibing if they can tell us some story about the feats of the great Rainbow Serpent. I find it really intriguing. How can it make rain? How can it create a river at will? How can we communicate with it and ask favours of it?”

“There is a song which explains how the Rainbow Serpent can make rain until a new river is born. When the Rainbow Serpent is tired of the dry weather and the heat, it can change its skin. It does that often. But once during the Dreaming it didn't like the new skin. It had an unsightly colour and it was too tight. It just didn't feel right. So, the Serpent stripped off the new skin too. But after it shed the new skin, another one didn't grow up, and the Serpent ended up skinless and even more displeased than before. The Rainbow Serpent then decided to go back to the sky and remain in darkness, but asked a hero to find a new skin, just the right colour and the right size for the Serpent. The skin had to be completely white, as it was when the Rainbow Serpent was born. And it must be as long as the longest didgeridoo in the tribe, to make it feel comfortable once again. The hero heard the words of the Rainbow Serpent and accepted the task, because his people was distraught and confused without the Rainbow Serpent. Long and far did the hero search, but white snakes are only seldom seen. Five times did the stars go around the vault of the firmament —that means 5 years, Boss Blundel— before the hero found and killed a suitably big white snake. Then he called the Rainbow Serpent with his didgeridoo and offered the white snakeskin, but he begged for a boon in return: ‘you are powerful and immortal, o mighty Serpent, while I am just human. And yet I could render a service to you. Will you not then offer me something in return for all my toil since you sent me away?’ asked the hero, and the Serpent consented to grant him whatever award his heart desired. ‘Then, I will beg this of you: I only wish to see the full measure of your might. Unleash the waters from the firmament. Let it rain as never before. Let a new river be born where you will, and let it be known that you did this to honour the service of a man!’ As the hero asked, so it was done. It rained and rained and all the men knew that the Rainbow Serpent could make a river appear in the desert if begged by a human hero who had previously assisted it.”

Brother Blundel pondered the significance of this story the rest of the night, while around him the Nyanyaantjarra slowly gave up to exhaustion and gradually the music and rhythms of the welcome ceremony faded into the silence of the desert.

The next day, Brother Blundel told Charlie that he had forgotten some very important items in Warburton and that he needed to go back and retrieve them. But Charlie had better stay with the Nyanyaantjarra and strengthen his friendship with them. Perhaps it could be arranged for some Aborigine to help as a guide on condition that he would bring back food and perhaps some more brandy as a token of his appreciation for the Nyanyaantjarra. Upon explaining this to them, a great enthusiasm was awakened, and there was no problem whatsoever to find a guide to accompany him to the town, which was a few days distant.

So, Charlie stayed and Brother Blundel parted. But he was back soon just as he had promised, and from then on both lived with the Nyanyaantjarra and learned of their ways and their culture, while Brother Blundel often made comments about the implications of the Aboriginal myths and its possible significance in relationship with his faith, to which he recommended that the Nyanyaantjarra should adhere. But they had already heard about the White Man's religion, and wouldn't be convinced to change their beliefs for no specific reason, while still maintaining the rest of their culture and customs. It wouldn't make sense, Brother Blundel actually admitted to Charlie. So no change was made there.

One month passed quickly enough, and then Brother Blundel asked again to be guided back to Warburton. As he offered the same conditions than the previous time, a gift of marmalade, chocolate and brandy, once more it was a simple task to find a Nyanyaantjarra volunteer to guide him.

Yet this time the return was different. He brought a camel as a pack animal, and on the camel there was food, but there was also, clearly visible, a big cumbersome parcel. Still, Brother Blundel refused to answer questions and just said that everything would be explained soon enough.

That evening there was again a celebration, because Brother Blundel brought food for everyone on the camel. While the young people played or danced to the music according to their totem animal, Brother Blundel asked to talk to Birrinbirrin and Djulibing. As always, Charlie translated. The gift of eloquence was with Brother Blundel that night.

“You know that I value your conversation and the company of all the Nyanyaantjarra, and that is why I dwell among you and I sincerely thank you for the hospitality you have offered both Charlie and me from the first day;” here the Nyanyaantjarra interrupted him expressing their affection for their visitor, but Brother Blundel didn't admit interruptions. He had something very definite on his mind that he wanted to express it. “But there is more to our presence here than that, as you probably guess. I am a man of God, and it is my duty to talk about true knowledge to all the peoples of the world. Especially to those peoples who live in remote parts of the world, such as the Nyanyaantjarra. You have wisdom, you understand the land. But you need true knowledge. Everyone needs true knowledge in order for the best decisions to be taken, in order for the best options to be chosen. And thus I tell you this: the Nyanyaantjarra did me a service when they gave me hospitality, so in return I offered the best food that I had. It was the appropriate thing to do. Then the Nyanyaantjarra did me another service when they guided me to Warburton, and I offered them my best food in return. And a third time it all happened in the same way. And if it happened a hundred times, my honour would demand that I always repay a service with a service. And if it happened one thousand kilometres hence, or one thousand years hence, it would matter not at all—it would always be the same. Don't you agree with me? Wouldn't you do the same? And yet, I am but a man. We are but mortal men. Even so, our honour demands it.”

“So then, what would happen if a powerful deity, such as the Rainbow Serpent, were in the same situation? Wouldn't its honour be a much more compelling force than ours? Wouldn't it demand to comply, to always remember a service, to repay it with a service—no matter who asked, no matter where, no matter what the circumstances? I believe it would. I believe that is what once was in Dreamtime, if it was, it is. And isn't this exactly

the foundation of the Dreamtime? What it was, it is and it will always be. If there ever was a Dreamtime, this must be so. Now you perform your rituals, you talk to your ancestors and you respect your totem animals. You use your music and your dances to talk to the spirits. And I say all of this is good. Yes, it is good—if there is someone there to listen. But is there really someone there? We need to know. We need knowledge. But we can find proof of the existence of the Dreamtime. Because we can speak to the Rainbow Serpent. The Nyanyaantjarra can call it with your didgeridoos, now, this evening. I can offer it the skin of a snake. Just the right colour and the right size, as the Rainbow Serpent demanded. I brought it on the camel. Then the Rainbow Serpent will make rain, and we will have true knowledge, proof of the Dreaming. Or there will be no rain, and that will prove that there never was a Dreaming. Then I will have counsel for the Nyanyaantjarra.”

There was a hushed silence among all those who had listened to the conversation. Then Birrinbirrin said, “Brother Blundel, fetch your white snakeskin. I will call the Rainbow Serpent with my didgeridoo. It is an old and big didgeridoo. Let us hope you have the skin of an old and big snake. But we must go somewhere else. To higher ground. Rivers are always born on high ground.”

And as Birrinbirrin said, so it came to pass. All the Nyanyaantjarra gathered at the summit of a mountain, and with them were Charlie the translator and Brother Blundel carrying the skin of an enormous white snake. Birrinbirrin produced his didgeridoo. Indeed it was a long one, but not as long as Brother Blundel’s albino python skin. Then Birrinbirrin started to play. And it started to rain.

The next day, Warburton was hit by the flood. The streets were covered by 2 metres of water and the inhabitants had to be rescued and evacuated. Fortunately, it was not a permanent situation. After all, everything had happened in the middle of the desert, and so the river eventually disappeared.

And that is how Brother Blundel finally realized that he should abandon his flawed system of beliefs. His religion could not perform miracles at the request of the faithful. Thus, he embraced the Dreaming. To which, he now understood, he had always felt the call—but had not been able to understand it up to that very special moment of sudden insightful realization, when the rain responded to the call of Birrinbirrin’s music.

When he thought about it, he felt that all his life he had been but dreaming. And then, as he woke up, he entered the Dreaming.

External point of view

I think some justification should be offered about the kind of story that I’ve chosen to tell. Why using an external point of view to talk about the Australian Aboriginal culture? Surely this can increase the difficulties of the reader to identify themselves with the Aboriginal culture. The fact is, though, that when I thought about this story, I soon ruled out the possibility of using an internal point of view. Simply put, I don’t think I am competent enough to try this approach, since I’ve never had any personal contact with an

Aborigine. I don't think I could make an Aboriginal protagonist behave in a realistic way. Having said that, though, I am convinced that there are useful lessons to be learned from an external point of view. That's why I chose the point of view of the colonizer (to whom both me and any likely reader of this text will feel more cultural proximity, although not necessarily ideological affinity), and I sent him on a mission of civilization which turned out to be a journey of self-discovery —with the Aborigines as unexpected teachers.

There is really only one main character in the story, Brother Blundel. He is an outsider at the beginning, a heterodox character, laughed about at his back. But he has a purpose and he is as selfless as devoted to his task. And these turn out to become redeeming traits. He wants to help other people, even if he doesn't really know why or how. So, he ends up in a situation where he is forced to have new experiences. The experiences consist basically of learning about Australia and about the Aborigines. And these experiences change him. An important part of the story is the realization that the Aborigines are real people, and they must have reasons for their behaviour. Brother Blundel starts with a complete disregard for the Aborigines, but in the last part of the story he seems to have gained a good measure of respect for them (“learned from them and their culture”). That is before the final epiphany when, quite unexpectedly for him, he “enters” the Dreaming. He does that in a double way. He realises the Dreaming is real, which is something he could have never believed at the beginning of the story; but also he becomes a mythical character similar to other heroes of the Dreaming. Stories will be told about him, since he has contacted the Rainbow Serpent and it is through his actions that the final rain arrives.

Probably telling a story is a very appropriate way to deal with the topic of the mythological Dreamtime. Any mythology is a collection of stories. Our brain is used to explaining things in a narrative way. Here, though, we have two different narratives: the narrative of the White man is teleological. It believes in the idea of evolution and purpose. The Dreamtime narrative is not teleological (or at least that is how I conceive of it), there is no final reward for those who strive to earn it. Existence is its own reward. Therefore, it is ironic that at the end of the story (a teleological story about a purpose-driven White man) Brother Blundel finds out that the non-teleological narrative is the one which actually gives sense to his existence.

Chronological setting

I would like to mention that a trait of the story is the ambiguity in the chronological setting. One usually assumes that, in the absence of temporal markers, a story is set at the time of the writing. In this case, though, this is not so evident, since it is inspired by another story (see below) written in the late 1960s or early 1970s. The Pintupi are known to have been one of the last Aboriginal groups contacted by the Australian government. They were contacted (and removed from their lands) in the 1960s, apparently on occasion of some military tests in the desert. A group known as the “Pintupi Nine” are considered to be the last Aborigines to have left the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the desert, in 1984. Still, there have been groups who have returned to the traditional ways after living for a while in permanent settlements, so perhaps it is one of these groups that Brother Blundel meets. There is no way to know it from the story, though, and so the story is indeterminably set in a wide temporal arch, from the early 1970s (allowing for a

decade for Charlie to grow up in Perth) up to the present day. Perhaps a romanticised present day, with uncontacted Aboriginal communities would be the best chronological setting—that would be a mythical time, suitable for a story about myths.

Sooner or Later or Never Never

“When You Are Down and Under” (WYDU) is inspired by “Sooner or Later or Never Never” (SLNN) by Gary Jennings (1973). I actually haven’t read it in its original version, but in its Spanish translation (Jennings 1980).

SLNN (which I naturally recommend), is the humorous story of an American missionary who wants to bring the Christian faith to an Australian Aboriginal group. He tries to gain their favour offering them a few tones of beads. The Rainbow Serpent is also important in the story. The missionary and his white hunter friend eventually exhaust the patience of the Aborigines, who curse them with a huge rain (they appeal to demons) while the missionary was performing a ceremonial (unknown to the Aborigines) related to the Rainbow Serpent. In my story I’ve decided to keep a mention to beads as an homage to SLNN although they weren’t really needed. There was an Australian Dean there too, as a very secondary character in the story, just like in WYDU.

After admitting inspiration and similarities, though, I would also like to stress the differences. WYDU has a completely different purpose than SLNN, and therefore a different development. It is a story about the Australian mythological Dreaming. The actions in the first half of the story are blurred, without details, presented in what I hope is a sort of dreamlike way (for example, Blundel and Charlie travel across half Australia, but the reader is only offered some literary references, he knows nothing of what the characters actually do or encounter during the trip). Once the Aborigines appear in the story, more details are given, but the dreamlike quality of the actions never disappears completely. Only Brother Blundel explains some of his motivations, but there’s still much which remains unexplained.

Other sources of inspiration

I think I should equally mention other sources of information and inspiration for this story. As this is narrative fiction, I think I can safely admit that I’ve looked up many terms (such as “Dreamtime”, “Never Never” or “Western Desert cultures”) in Wikipedia and in various webpages found through an Internet search engine, to quickly get some general cultural information. I’ve also seen three Australian films: *The Last Wave* (1977), *The Tracker* (2002) and *Charlie’s Country* (2013), in which Aboriginal culture is depicted and valued. Finally, I’ve watched a documentary available online, *The Men of the Fifth World*, which explains the culture of the Aborigines of the Northern Territory of Australia. A map of Australia, both cartographic and with real photographic images, provided by Google Maps has also been used.

The Aboriginal tribe which the fictitious Brother Blundel and Charlie meet, the “Nyanyaantjarra”, is correspondingly fictitious, but not so the other 3 groups mentioned, the Pintupi, the Ngaatjarra and the Ngaanyatjarra. They are members of the Western Desert culture and speak similar languages or dialects (experts disagree on their exact category), mutually intelligible. Also, the myths depicted in the story to explain the birth of the Rainbow Serpent and the way it can be persuaded to make rain are both the product of my imagination; but it is my understanding that some more or less equivalent stories can be found in the Aboriginal Dreamtime mythology (cf. *The Men of the Fifth World* min. 48:50 – 50:20). Many similar stories depicting the mythical creation of the world or the origin of the gods can be found in other cultures, so I thought that I could write something not too dissimilar from an Aboriginal myth. I hope this is not considered inappropriate in any way. Again, I mention in my defence that we deal here only with literary fiction.

Warburton is a real town in Western Australia, placed in the middle of the Gibson Desert, close to the lands of the Ngaatjarra and the Ngaanyatjarra and inhabited mostly by Aborigines. Some years ago, it was affected by a severe flood.

The *Particular Baptist Society* (not ‘Association’) *for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen* was a real missionary society founded in 1792, known as the *Baptist Missionary Society* until they changed its name to *BMS World Mission* in 2000. I simply don’t know if they have or ever had an educational programme to form future missionaries.

The Aboriginal protagonist of the film *The Tracker* calls “Boss” the white men with whom he has contact. I decided that since Charlie was in a way Brother Blondel’s tracker, he could have a similar habit. Of course, there is a temporal inconsistency: *The Tracker* is set in the 1920s. Still, I thought that the name would add to the atmosphere of the story.

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