

Chapter 1

Love and Metaphysics

One night, the spring before last, I drove down to my retreat in the Otway Ranges to resume work on this book. It was late by the time I left town, and I found myself driving into the teeth of a truly wild storm. The ranges were engulfed in a muddy-looking brew as I approached, and my little car lurched under the blows of the wind. The road into the hills was strewn with bark, twigs and larger branches. I reached our cavernous, semi-derelict house just after dark, and unpacked the car in tumultuous rain. All the firewood on the veranda was wet. After arranging things as cozily as I could in the unheated house, which was gasping and pitching like a sailing ship of old on black and mountainous seas, I settled down with my dog and cat at my feet, and took out a book on Schopenhauer. It was a book I remembered from my undergraduate days, not because of what it contained, but because of the picture of Schopenhauer on the cover. I had come across it again, a few days earlier, on a library shelf. Now, with the storm ranting outside, I gazed again at Schopenhauer's gnomish but fierce face. How clearly I remembered the circumstances in which, as a young woman, I had first read *The World as Will and Idea*.

With my young partner, I was staying in a tiny two-up, two-down cottage in Wiltshire, on the edge of the Black Dog woods and within sight of a prehistoric White Horse carved into the chalk of a nearby hillside. It was springtime. There were bluebells in the woods. It was on the other side of the world and more than half a lifetime ago. I was luminously in love, happy, dwelling in the heart of the enchantment zone. During the day I sat on the bed upstairs, with pine trees and ravens at the windows, and embarked on Schopenhauer's great tome. Strangely, although the memory of reading the

book is so clear and nostalgic, I have never remembered anything at all about its content, except what was conveyed by the title, which is still, as it happens, my favorite philosophy title. I can't even remember how I felt about the book, though it has remained one to which I have perennially intended to return. And now, ensconced in another rural retreat, happy again, though alone this time, I opened up the book with the familiar cover.

There, to my astonishment, I found the very argument that I develop in the second chapter of the present book! What a bittersweet surprise! So I had not invented this wonderful "argument from realism," on which I here rest so much of the case for a reanimation of the world, myself—or at any rate I had not invented it altogether from scratch.¹ The seed must have been lying there in my subconscious for more than twenty years, and then, in the context of a quite different mind-set and philosophical agenda, it had resurfaced via the moment of epiphany that I describe in chapter 2. But why, if the argument had made such an impression on me, had I forgotten it so completely? After all, I had also studied Leibniz and Spinoza as an undergraduate, and I had not forgotten their ideas. Spinoza, in particular, had remained a principal mentor. But Schopenhauer had sunken into my subconscious leaving not a trace—apart from my attachment to that proud title.

I don't know why this occurred, but I do know that those days spent on the edge of the Black Dog woods, within sight of the enigmatic White Horse, were amongst the most enchanted of my adult life, and that in all my philosophical work since, I have been trying to recapture the fusion of love and metaphysics that occurred then. Not that this was an accidental cathexis. Being in love has always, for me, involved an intimation of the metaphysical, and engagement with the metaphysical has always felt like being in love. I have been in love, in some sense, and engaged with the metaphysical, in some sense, since earliest childhood. It was just that this confluence of love and metaphysics broke the surface of experience in a particularly pure fount of enchantment in that interlude in the bluebell cottage with Schopenhauer. The fount then hid itself deep in my psyche as an underground spring, watering the roots of my thought.

So this is a book about love and metaphysics, about how it is possible truly to love reality. I do not discuss Schopenhauer's ideas as such, although perhaps the time *is* ripe for a return to some aspects of this philosopher's thought. For it is now possible to see why the idea that the world has an inner life of its own is important in a way that Schopenhauer himself appears not to have imagined, though others of his period, or a little later, such as William Morris, did. At around the time I was reading *The World as Will and Idea* I was also working my way through Morris' long-forgotten prose romances, collected volumes of which were gathering dust in the stacks of the Bedford College library. These had titles as thrilling to the imagination as Schopen-

hauer's *The Well at the World's End*, for instance, and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Morris intuited poetically, in advance, the deteriorating state of the world that would be described a century later as the "environmental crisis." However, although the writing that poured out of his anguish expressed love, it did not articulate a metaphysics. He looked back to a premodern time when Europeans had still been in-relation to their world, enmeshed in its mysterious purposes, but he offered no credible epistemological route back to this condition, only aching escapist fantasy.

I try, in this book, to bring together the philosophical and poetic influences personified in Schopenhauer and Morris respectively, to show how it is possible rationally to transcend the metaphysical presuppositions of modern civilization and arrive at the threshold of a new, poetic, relation to the world. To establish this relation is, I contend, to discover an erotic attitude to reality, to experience the kind of "expanded erotics"² that are exemplified in the adventures of Ralph and Ursula, or Birdalone, in Morris' romances. This experience, though counter to all the definitive phenomenological tendencies of modernity, is not entirely foreign to contemporary Westerners. Though it is banished from our philosophical and practical culture, a memory of it survives in the great store of archaic stories that still circulate in modern societies, stories that provide templates for romances like those written by William Morris. Foremost amongst these stories are fairy tales. Fairy tales represent a surprisingly vital residue of archaic consciousness in the modern episteme. We are all brought up on fairy tales or the echoes thereof in other fiction. These stories have been relegated to the domestic sphere where they lead an underground but enduring life as children's lore, handed from one generation to the next primarily by mothers and other female carers.³ The consciousness expressed in fairy tales is thus deeply familiar to us even while it is roundly contradicted and repudiated by every tenet, every founding principle, of modern life.

What is this consciousness? What are the hallmarks of the fairy tale? The classic such tale revolves around a quest for love. Not the indiscriminate sexual dalliances of the gods of classical myths, but a marriage of hearts and minds.⁴ The youngest son leaves home to win the hand of the princess; the cast-out stepdaughter sets off to capture the affections of the prince. But it is not simply the motif of the quest for love that distinguishes the fairy tale; there are, after all, many other genres of narrative with romantic love as their theme. In the fairy tale, the quest for love takes place in the context of a certain terrain: it is ultimately this terrain that marks a story as a fairy tale. To enter the terrain of faerie is to step through the veil of everyday appearances into a realm in which everything holds the possibility of transformation and transfiguration. This is a realm in which essences interpermeate. Things manifest now in this guise, now in that. Human protagonists routinely find

themselves transformed into deer, swans, white doves, serpents, and the like. Animals and even inanimate entities, such as rocks or streams, offer advice and assistance to hero and heroine. While there are innumerable ways of reading such exchanges and metamorphoses, and while psychoanalytic readings have prevailed in recent literatures,⁵ a *metaphysical* reading surely cannot be excluded: “shape-shifting” occurs because the world of the fairy tale is already a world suffused with a subjectival dimension.

To walk in a fairy tale then is to walk through a landscape filled with cryptic presences: faces are decipherable in the trunks of trees; beings dwell under every toadstool; ants are helpful; grottoes speak. To enter this landscape is to enter a field of subjectivity, in which everything is already alive with a life of its own or charged with the psychic life of the world at large. The form of any entity in this scenario is the outward manifestation of an inner subjectivity. But subjectivity is fluid, mutable, protean. The subjectivity of self is permeable to the subjectivity of other. When the subjectivity of self *is* permeated by the subjectivity of other, it is transformed, and this transformation will manifest outwardly in a change of material aspect. In a world in which human subjectivity is permeated with the subjectivity of woods and wildfolk, rocks and pools and craggy towers, “shape-shifting” is the figurative representation of the regime of subjectival transmutation that will inevitably ensue. Little wonder then that a lad, subject to influences emanating from such an environment, may undergo metamorphosis into a stag, or a lass find herself rooted to the spot in a circle of standing stones. Shape-shifting is only the symptom, in this scenario, of a deeper metaphysics, a *pan psychist* metaphysics of reanimation.

We have a word for the panpsychist ambience of the fairy tale: enchantment. The landscape of the fairy tale is enchanted and to broach this landscape is to fall under its enchantment. To live in communicative exchange, erotic engagement, with one’s own immediate environment is to abide in an enchanted state.

But what does it mean to be “enchanted”? Literally it means to have been wrapped in chant or song or incantation. A land or place is enchanted if it has been called up, its subjectivity rendered responsive to self by self’s invocation of it. Similar expressions exist in indigenous parlance: in Aboriginal English, for instance, one speaks of “singing up” country, awakening it to the presence of its people. World is experienced as enchanted when it has been invoked, awoken, by self in this way; and self is in turn enchanted by its engagement with such an awakened world.⁶

It has become a commonplace of ecological and even of sociological discourse that we in the West inhabit a disenchanting world. But the real depth of loss that disenchantment entails is, I think, as yet far from understood. A key to the significance of this loss is perhaps hidden in that first-

mentioned characteristic of the fairy tale: the motif of the quest for love. Is there some kind of internal relation between the experience of enchantment and that of falling in love?

What happens when we fall in love? We become permeable to another subjectivity. Our own subjectivity is cracked open by contact with an other, or even by the prospect of such contact. With astonishment we begin to plumb the other's unsuspected enormity. We become susceptible to transformation by influences emanating from the other, by the very contact with their otherness. In modern societies this experience is a rare and special one, destabilizing, but also, paradoxically, redemptive—it is an experience of “coming home,” becoming at home in the world. When we fall in love, the world comes alive, and we come alive with it. Things start to happen of themselves, without our having to make them happen. A drumbeat starts to roll. We begin to see things again as we have not seen them since early childhood. Suddenly we are sensitive to beauty, to the sufficiency and depth, the plenitudinousness, of the moment, to the haecceity and dearness of objects, even mundane or tedious objects. We feel like hugging lamp-posts, “singing in the rain.”

It is arguably only when we fall in love that we are inducted into the essence of the life experience, if this essence is understood as a function of participation in an infinitely responsive, infinitely animate world. But for us the experience of being in love soon tends either to become fraught with pain or simply to fade. Pain sets in when the self grasps that the beloved, through whom the unimagined possibilities of dwelling in the moment have been revealed, can be lost. Will the beloved leave? Love becomes a state of siege rather than a delicious expansion into an intimate infinite. Alternatively, the enchantment fades, as the initially unknowable beloved becomes familiar, finite, and encompassable. The boundaries of self begin to reform and reclose. We cease to be permeable, open to participation and transformation; our subjectivity settles back into its old fixed grooves. Love degenerates into a merely proprietorial sentiment, an impulse to *possess* the other who has been the occasion for momentary metaphysical illumination.

When our world is our beloved, however, which is to say, when we are erotically engaged with world via its local modality of land or place, then the state of being-in-love is relatively enduring, for world necessarily retains its unknowability, its inexhaustibility, its mystery.⁷ Once opened to its subjectivity, we remain open—permeable, transmutable, alive to the call of life. On the other hand, while world as our beloved may never be *encompassed*, it can be lost. The place that one has made one's own can be destroyed. One's homeland can be violated. And one can oneself be removed, forcibly or by circumstances, from the place, the land, one loves. This causes pain, acute grief. But as cultures organized around an erotic attitude to reality, cultures such as

those of Aboriginal Australians, seem to testify, we are never betrayed by land. As long as the integrity of land or place is maintained, that land or place will remember and acknowledge the footprint of its own people. The in-loveness between self and land or self and place then persists, even if self is separated from the land or place in question. As long as the in-loveness endures, the self remains open-eyed, cradled in its primal enchantment.

So, “falling in love,” as it is understood in the modern context, can be viewed as a *vestigial* phenomenon, a residue of an archaic modality that once encompassed the human experience of life per se, and still does so in cultures that have retained their rapport with the subjectival dimension of reality.

Is this why fairy tales, and stories derived from them, such as the prose romances of William Morris, retain their power? When the youngest son sets out on his quest to win the hand of the princess, with the assistance of animal and other nonhuman allies, he is, according to endless commentaries, negotiating the psychodynamics of maturation into love. His quest is a metaphor for a psychological journey. But what if the tale can also be read the other way around? What if the quest for the princess is a metaphor for another kind of quest, another kind of love? Is this a quest to win through to the inner presence, the nurturing, luminous, poetic “soul,” of reality? To win through to this inner presence is to be blessed with an encompassing, a protean, fertility. In this sense the princess may simply be the world itself, encountered at the level of its inner principle; the bride with the kiss that brings the self to life, she is “the beautiful” incarnate, the ultimate object of desire.

Or take the tale that Morris tells in *The Well at the World's End*. In search of the waters of life, young Ralph and Ursula travel great tracts of country as yet unknown to humankind: a world of rocky plains, barren mountain ranges, wildwoods, with here and there hidden dales, in which sweetwater streams and fruiting trees replenish the pair. They are in love, of course, and their journey is invariably read as a quest for the kind of fulfilment through romantic love that ever eluded Morris himself. Interpreted in this way, the journey is nothing but a big cliché. But the metaphor can be turned around: the story of the love affair can be read as an account of the heart's journey into the enchanted depths of the world. As one journeys deeper and deeper into the landscape—rendered in the tale with ardent luminosity, hyperreal focus—one's heart grows increasingly full of desire. It is as if one passes through a succession of metaphysical double doors, each time throwing them open onto ever less populous, ever more expansive and entrancing terrain, until one's heart can contain no more. There is no room in it now for lesser desires. It has surrendered itself entirely to the spell of the real. It rests in perfect fulfilment; it has drunk of the Well and attained an inexhaustible plenitude.

However, archaic tales remind us that the princess, or the prince, or the waters of the wondrous well, have to be *won*. They are not ours by right. To win through to the inner presence of the world, we need to venture into the world itself. We have to face enigmas, difficulties, mortal perils. We have to risk ourselves. It is only by walking out into the world alone, facing the elements in all their ferocity, the wild animals, the stalkings and hauntings that attend our solitude, that we can turn to the world and truly ask, “who are you?” What in the end can we give, as tokens of our fidelity, our devotion, but the very gift that this same veiled presence, our “princess,” has bestowed on us—our existence? She creates us, she opens her hand and lets us free into the world. If we wish to invoke the originary presence once again, and enter it, then we have to offer ourselves back to her, in acts of courage and endurance. This explains not only the motif of tasks and ordeals in fairy tales but also perhaps the impulse behind ascetic practices that have generally been central to mystical disciplines and initiation rituals.

To interpret these tasks and ordeals in purely psychological terms then may be to miss the point in an important respect. The fairy tale calls us to a metaphysical encounter which requires sacrifice. We must surrender something if we are to answer the call, and this something is, as it turns out, nothing less than the many means at our disposal to control the world, to keep at bay the threats it harbors for us. Yet if we relinquish these means of control, while yet hoping to survive the quest, we clearly need other means of negotiating reality. We might find that in fairy tales and other archaic stories such as that of Eros and Psyche, which is examined in chapter 6, clues to such means are secreted.

In short then, while the experience of “falling in love” betokens, for us moderns, a necessarily transient moment of awakening to the possibility of liberation from the confines of an essentially solipsistic condition, this liberative experience can, as our heritage of fairy tales and other folk lore attests, itself serve as a metaphor for a more encompassing phenomenology, a permanent way of being in the world and relating to it. In light of this we might begin to fathom just what we moderns, in denying the subjectival dimension of world, are missing. Are we indeed unawoken, in some sense, for the major part of our lives? Is the modern condition basically one of anesthetization to the true pulse of existence?

If this is the case, no wonder that in modern societies we have become invested in sexuality in ways that are perhaps historically and culturally unprecedented. Estranged from world, from animating contact with its inexhaustible subjectivity—a contact that would deliver to us the vividness of the moment—we look to our sexual relations with one another to supply this contact, this indispensable intersubjectivity. As the vehicle for the tantalizing experience of “falling in love,” sex becomes invested with an immense glamor, a glamor that

we might now recognize as an afterglow left from a much larger but long-forgotten experience of intersubjectivity. We sexualize our bodies, our personalities, our occupations, our cars and household appliances, in an increasingly desperate bid to recapture the existential essence we have lost. But this investment, as it turns out, does nothing to lighten us up. On the contrary, laden with sexual consequence as all aspects of our interactions are, spontaneous self-expression is increasingly checked. In flight from this unbearable heaviness, this necessity always to calculate our effects, we engage, self-defeatingly, in yet more sexualization—of ourselves, of our very culture. But sex cannot and never will satisfy the metaphysical yearning, the desire for world, that is, I shall suggest in later chapters, innate to subjectivity per se, and hence core to our being.

To reawaken this desire, and so to reenter the terrain of enchantment, is the promise of panpsychism. However, if panpsychism is to be for us, collectively, anything more than an atavistic fantasy, we need, as I remarked in the Introduction, to render it intelligible in terms that already make sense for Western cultures. There is, in other words, much work to be done, both of rational analysis and of exegesis of archaic sources, before we can in good conscience enjoy the erotic modality, the daily poetics, prefigured in this chapter. Only when this work is undertaken can the blend of love and metaphysics that I experienced, momentarily, in the bluebell cottage with Schopenhauer come to fruition; dwelling in the house of enchantment may then become a cultural reality rather than a wish-fulfilling fantasy. This is the work that I attempt in the present book.