Here the immensity, the emptiness, feeds the spirit, and leaves it with no hunger for anything but more space, more light . . .

David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*

Night and water
Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats
In the air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.

Kenneth Slessor, “Five Bells”

One could speak of the Tyranny of the Void, not external distance but a vast emptiness within the continent down under. I mean something more than the Red Desert, though. I mean the metaphysical Void with its lure, peril, and promise, lure of self-annihilation, yes, but also promise of renewal. In any case, some Australian artists, thinking they were painting a Continent, may have ended by painting Nothing.

Why not? The metaphysical Void is an old spiritual concept, central to many religions – Buddhism especially – and crucial to various mystical traditions of the *via negativa*. At 3 am in the soul, mysticism and nihilism stroll hand in hand; at dawn, their struggles with art begin. No one knows who shall win. But from this encounter, art retains an intuition of zero in the bone. “The last interior is darkness,” the Australian poet Les Murray says, resonating to a painting by Rover Thomas.

Nothing, the Void, the Abyss, Self-Emptying (or Kenosis as theologians say) cluster in the marrow of an indefinable reality. But Emily Dickinson, as always metaphysically pert, won’t leave it at that:

By lonely gift and hindered Words
The human heart is told
Of Nothing –
“Nothing” is the force
That renovates the World
Simply said, the Void, though it terrifies us all, can be generative. It can charm, like the Amish wedding pastry called Nothings, all sugar and air (alright, a whiff of egg and cream too). It can fascinate, like that absent Mona Lisa: when Leonardo’s masterpiece vanished for a while from the Louvre in 1911 (stolen by one Vicenzo Perugia), thousands came to stare at the blank spot on the wall, thousands including Franz Kafka. Above all, the Void can “speak truth” in whispers and parables: the truth of self-dispossession, for instance, a term that will recur in this essay. Actually, the Void does not speak at all: its relation to language, you might say, is Nil. Hence, as sages agree, it remains supremely indifferent to the personal or social self. But it can turn sages and mystics, artists and poets, into ventriloquists who taunt and tease. “I am Nobody. Who are you?” (That’s Emily again.)

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Now, you may wonder, what has all this to do with Australian art? A good deal, I have discovered. Where’s the surprise? It is a truism that Australia is the continent of emptiness, not just bush or desert or outback, but also the “Never, Never, Back of Beyond” in slang. A character (Blount) in Christina Stead’s Seven Poor Men in Sydney calls it “the ghost land”; another character (Laura) in Patrick White’s Voss invokes “this land of nothingness”; and Malouf’s Ovid tells it all, in the epigraph from An Imaginary Life, because his Dacia doubles as Oz.

I am aware of ideological perils in desocializing Australian space, the specter of terra nullius, a land “cleansed” of its Aborigines. But I hope we can view the issue with double vision, the “eye of flesh” (worldly) and the “eye of fire” (spiritual), as Sufi say. I am also aware that the Antipodean painters I invoke may not actively seek the metaphysical Void in their work, but the Void may nonetheless surprise them. In short, though the Void may fail to define all forms of Australian – let alone human – spirituality, it is the horizon, like the edge of a black hole in space, toward which spirit ultimately tends.

That, at least, is a plausible idea – this symbolic nexus of Australian art and the Void – a proposition worth the temporary suspension of our disbelief. It finds expression in a story, if not an art history, of a continent thirsting for paint.

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I have always favored the eye; I look more than I listen. I read, and like to watch movies in airplanes without headphones clutching my skull.