

# The Australian Bushfires: Listening with Freud



*It is feared 80% of the world heritage-listed Blue Mountain region west of Sydney was burnt. In this photo taken in the Blue Mountains, smoke fills the valley behind and below. The vegetation ekes out a tenuous existence on this outcrop, which itself sits precariously balanced above the valley. While the transience of nature fills our viewpoint, the humans below carry on seemingly blissfully, unaware.*

At this time of year Sydney is usually at its best. Apart from the fireworks on New Year's Eve showing the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Opera House and the harbour itself at their most spectacular, there is a more relaxed mood in the air. It is summer: traffic eases, the sky is a mesmerising blue, the sun shines most days and a few hours at the beach a great way to relax the mind.

Not so this year. Fires did not penetrate the confines of the city but dust particles and smoke from fires to the north and south blanketed the city and for a number of days in December, Sydney was the most polluted city on the planet. At 4.00pm on 3rd January Western Sydney, at 48.9 Celsius was the hottest place on earth.

And beyond Sydney, as the world watched, fires of a size and ferocity never before experienced raged. Flames reached 40 meters in height, the heat so intense it melted the paint from cars, wind-driven flames speedier than the fastest man on earth.

The extent of the devastation is hard to comprehend. Dozens of lives and thousands of homes were lost and businesses destroyed. The estimates of wild animals, insect and bird life are numbered in hundreds of thousands, either burned alive, or maimed, or their habitat destroyed and soon to die. Upwards of 10 million hectares of land was burnt. My home country, Ireland, covers an area of 6.9 million hectares. That amount of land burned in the state of New South Wales alone. And the world has seen people returning to find their homes and all their belongings turned to ash.

By coincidence, when the bushfires began, I was reading Freud's essay *On Transience*. Written in 1915 for an anthology called *Goethe's Land*, a project to raise money for public libraries, it sits in the Standard Edition beside *Mourning and Melancholia*. Reading it, aside from the content, one realises why, in 1930, Freud was awarded the Goethe Prize for Literature.

*On Transience* begins thus:

*Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated for extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom.*

The young poet was Rilke. The taciturn friend the future analyst, Lou Andreas-Salome.

As a piece of writing today it might be described as creative non-fiction. Freud talked with Rilke a number of times. It was not in the countryside and most likely in Vienna and Munich.

*On Transience* is packed with meaning. Re-reading it as I have done many times reveals new angles and insights on nature, art, literature and of course loss and mourning. It is not alongside *Mourning and Melancholia* by accident.

But when the recent bushfires occurred the essay took on new dimensions; as if the soft violins of a quiet, almost silently meditative piece, was replaced by trumpets, drum rolls and screaming. The loudest was this phrase which occurs late in the essay.

*A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire to-day will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon the earth ceases.*

In previous bushfires seasons, after the fire has passed through, I have walked through blackened landscapes where it seemed all animate life had ceased. There was an eerie silence. No wind among the trees. No birdsong. Had Freud been at my side in that very un-smiling countryside, no doubt his words about the cessation of all animate life upon the earth would have echoed through the silence.

In 1962 the environmentalist Rachel Carson revealed the destructive effects of indiscriminate use of pesticides in her book, *Silent Spring*. Freud, like all great thinkers taught us to listen to silences. Rachel Carson's spring was silent because all the birds were dead.

The silence in the wake of bushfire destruction should be screaming at us. Australians are, per capita one of the largest emitters in the world and we export vast quantities of coal. Climate change policy has been stagnant for ten years. There have been five prime ministers in that period, the climate wars a factor in the downfall of each one. The present prime minister Scott Morrison, displays little enthusiasm in tackling climate change. Last year he demonstrated his support for the coal industry by taking a lump of coal into parliament and holding it up as if it was a venerated object.

The Freud who wrote *On Transience* was the Freud who loved the countryside, the Freud who appreciated the beauty of life and living things. He also, in this, his most poetic piece of writing, shows us the delicacy, the fragility of our natural world.

Because the present damage to the environment is unprecedented, many observers are concerned that large sections may never recover, and some species may face extinction.

But in about two months you might walk through our blackened landscapes and see extraordinary sights: the crusted ashen surface at your feet broken by new growth; eucalyptus trees store buds under protective bark, so at the base of a burnt snow gum, red and green growth would catch the eye; a white sulphur crested cockatoo in a black tree eats food the fire has missed; parrots, crimson rosellas and rainbow lorikeets sing.

There are times when those who refuse to face reality are shocked into opening their eyes. Many in Australia appreciate the interest and concern of the world as it looks upon the devastation in this beautiful country. Our hold on the land is a precious one. We are on a delicate, fragile piece of earth. Maybe someone could read sections from *On Transience* in the Australian Parliament? Maybe it would facilitate the emergence of some green political shoots?

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