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The Navel of the World

Te Pito O Te Henua, the Navel of the World, is the most isolated inhabited island there is, thirty-six hundred kilometers from the South American coast, two thousand kilometers from the nearest inhabited island—tiny Pitcairn, where the mutineers from the *Bounty* settled with their Tahitian women. It is thirteen miles long and at its widest point seven and eight tenths, a pebble in the vast Pacific. Its low rhythmic profile is the result of three volcanic rises from the ocean floor—three million, one million, and six hundred thousand years ago—connected by secondary volcanic cones. There are no rivers, no bays, and no coral reefs about the island. Three volcanic craters contain lakes of rain water. Most of the surface is strewn with black chunks of jagged lava. Here and there are expanses of built-up topsoil a few feet thick. Once mantled with tropical forest, the island has long been treeless, and today only a few planted eucalyptus groves stand here and there to ripple the trade winds that constantly blow eastward. The entire population of the island—two thousand five hundred, half Chilean, half now mostly mestizo natives—have been settled in the one village, Hanga Roa. In this season, the rains are beginning with intermittent drizzle and so the island is green. Tourists come—only some four thousand a year—in the dry season and for the “Easter Island Week,” when the locals put on a “native” show. There descended from our Tahiti-bound plane the inevitable group of Japanese tourists I would occasionally see in the days that followed, seated in their bus with their Japanese guide, and a few stragglers as solitary as I:



when we happened to arrive at the same site, one turned away to contemplate the horizon until the other left. I stayed in a room in the house of a very old couple who spoke hardly any Spanish.

A living organism is a dense and self-maintaining plenum. Out of the energies it assimilates from its environment it generates forces in excess of what it needs to adjust to that environment and compensate for the intermittent and superficial lacks produced by evaporation and fuel consumption. The discharges of these superabundant forces are felt in passions. But the environment itself is full of free and nonteleological energies—trade winds and storms, oceans streaming over three-fourths of the planet, drifting continental plates, cordilleras of the deep that erupt in volcanic explosions, and miles-deep glaciers piled up on Antarctica that flow into the sea and break off in bobbling icemountains. How can the passions of penguins, albatrosses, jaguars, and humans not lift their eyes beyond the nests and the lairs and the horizons? How can these passions not sink into volcanic rock and the oceanic deserts?

When you are there you have the impression you will stay indefinitely. The extinct volcanoes have settled into a placid harmony of low, grass-covered cones in the balmy mist. Along its edges the island drops in sharp lava shards whipped by the waves; beyond there is the shimmering blue. From the top of any of its rises, you see the ocean all around and the curvature of Earth. Above, the clouds thin out and the sun illuminates limitless depths of sky. There are two hundred forty long, low stone altars spaced all along the edges of the island, a thousand giant stone statues, and some fifteen thousand other archaeological sites—remains of dwellings, petroglyphs, caves.

But it is nothing like visiting a vast, open-air museum, inspecting the details and decoding the signifi-

cance of a thousand works of art. All the giant statues have been hurled from their altars since that Easter Day in 1722. All the smaller statues and carvings have been removed by collectors and tourists; the tiny museum has only copies. Thor Heyerdahl's account of his plunder is in *Aku-Aku*, a sickening book. Only in four sites have the statues, mostly broken, been re-erected in recent times. Called *moai*, the monolithic statues were carved over a fourteen-hundred-year period. They are remarkably uniform, all very stylized busts of legendary ancestors. Out of a thousand, three are vaguely female.

Mostly you walk, led on by the grassy harmony of the island, and at a site you rest and enter a kind of empty reverie over the crumbled altars and the broken moai fallen face forward over the rubble.

When you come upon one of the four restored sites, you find five or seven moai, cemented back together where possible, very worn by the wind and the elements and the centuries. The head of a moai is as big as its chest, and it has no feet; the thin arms and long fingers are traced in relief over the abdomen, always in the same position. The head, very flat, is really just a face, with low forehead, sharp, square jaw, thin, tight lips, a strong nose with wide-open nostrils carved in a spiral, and huge empty eyes. The face is turned upward somewhat; the eyes do not, like the eyes of the Buddha, look compassionately on the people below. They look inward to the island, and over the low grassy width of the island to the ocean beyond. They are the depersonalized faces of the legendary chiefs who fifteen hundred years ago sailed four thousand kilometers and disembarked on this volcanic crust. Stern, hieratic, rigid, uniform, these figures certainly impose a severe order on the inhabitants, and anthropologists indeed say that early Polynesian society was very structured. But surely their great size—twelve

to thirty feet high—and their eyes fixed expressionless and unbenevolent on remoteness beyond the horizon, demanded and commanded their passions. To the wanderer among them today, these huge empty eyes fixed on horizons beyond this island, beyond any visible horizon, rule one's every, increasingly aimless, step. With their jaws designed by geometry, their thin, tight lips, the only animation on these faces is in their strong splayed nostrils, pulling in the forces of the winds.

The "mystery" of this island, kept up by anthropologists applying for funding, by travel writers and tourist brochures, was created by the Westerners who came upon the island, saw the statues, looked at the islanders, and concluded that the present inhabitants could not have created the statues, that they were the work of a lost civilization colonized from Egypt, Greece, India, the lost continent of Mu, or outer space. How were the statues transported on this island that had neither trees nor vines that could serve as ropes? There were no pack animals, indeed no mammals at all on the island, nor wheels. The islanders had no metallurgy, no pottery, no weaving. They lived on the edge of the sea and fished and cultivated gardens of sweet potato, taro, and bananas. They wore no clothing and instead covered their bodies with tattoos. Missionaries labeled the people cannibals. Thor Heyerdahl was struck by how the altars are made of separately carved and polished stones fitted together into jigsaw walls as perfect as those of Qosqo, and he sailed the Kon-Tiki to prove that the island was colonized by people from Inca Peru. By the islanders' own account, Hotu Matu'a had set sail with three hundred of his people fleeing volcanic eruptions in their homeland, the islands those who live there call Te Fenua Enata—"The Land of Men," which we today call the Marquesas. It has only been in the past thirty years that archaeologists got

around to determining that the island had been settled around A.D. 300 by a people who began carving statues almost at once. When the Europeans first came upon them, there were hundreds of enormous statues being carved in the quarry, one sixty-five feet tall weighing three hundred tons. The language of the islanders has been found to be akin to that of the Marquesas, four thousand kilometers to the west, and blood and gene sampling has shown no evidence of migrations from other places. The islanders clearly had very advanced navigational science, steered by the stars, had knowledge of sea currents, observed the flight patterns of birds, and must subsequently have gone on to the South American continent, since their staple food, the sweet potato, has never been found growing wild anywhere outside South America. They alone, of all the peoples of the Pacific, invented writing, *rongo-rongo*, partly phonetic and partly ideographic, and inscribed it on wood tablets. Every house had such tablets, and each year there were two competitions in which learned scholars chanted the contents of their tablets before the king and the whole people. The history, cosmology, and science of the islanders became a mystery in the nineteenth century, when the population was enslaved and decimated, the few survivors were Christianized, and the surviving twenty-one pieces of this writing, taken by collectors to Rome, Venice, and Petrograd, became undecipherable.

The volcano Rano Raraku rises out of a flat landscape near the edge of the sea. Virtually all of the thousand giant moai of the island were quarried out of the yellow stone of its crater wall. In that crater wall today there are three hundred ninety-four statues in all stages of completion. First the face, then the abdomen were carved and polished, with stones of lapilli, until the statue was attached only by the rib of the spine. Recent experiments

have shown it would take at least a year for a team of men to carve a small moai. When a moai was finished—save for the eyes—it was cut free, slid down the mountain, and set upright. Those carved inside the crater were moved out through a passage cut in one side of the crater wall. Some seventy-five moai lie fully completed at the base of the volcano; these have been covered up to the neck by the erosion from the mountain over the last two hundred years. A half-dozen lie face down on the way to their final locations.

Recent experiments to move them with sledges or fulcrums only showed that the moai would have been ground down by the rubble on the way. It is possible that they were actually carried on the backs of hundreds of assembled people, then somehow set upright.

The red topknots were quarried inside the Puna Pau volcano, then somehow rolled out of the crater, and finally somehow hoisted up onto the statues; many weigh ten tons. When the statues were erected on their altars on the edge of the sea, the eyes were carved and their gaze directed into distances beyond all things to see or messages to capture.

Heyerdahl dug out the buildup of dirt from the completed statues at the base of the volcano to expose them; they have since been covered back up to preserve them. In Cairo ten years ago, in the museum, I saw all the mummies, torn out of their tombs, stripped of their flowers and gods, and laid out in plain wood cases under glass with their blackened faces exposed; on the walls an American scientist had put his X-ray photos of their skeletons, and the urn containing the entrails of Queen Hapshetshut was split open and brightly illuminated. Rano Raraku is a quarry of works in progress. Should we now dig out these moai and erect them on rebuilt altars? Philosophy too consists of works in progress, cut short by

the death of innumerable philosophers. Should we, using Merleau-Ponty's working notes, write the rest of *The Visible and the Invisible* for him? Should we complete Mahler's Tenth Symphony?

The crater walls are very steep; from the top you see the blue ocean beyond extending to the sky, which you then find reflected on the lake within. Only one side of the crater was being carved, but there moai were emerging head up, head down—not a foot of rock that was not taking on form. The sea is eroding its way toward this side of the crater, but if the carving had continued the volcano would have been carved away before the waves of the ocean arrived. At the base of the volcano, only the heads of the completed moai are seen, bent over and blind, their bodies covered to the neck by the mountain that has eroded from above upon them. I spent two long afternoons among them, alone save for one hawk soaring above. It understood, perhaps, that I was waiting for my death.

After apparently living for fourteen hundred years on the Navel of the World unknown to the world, God, or themselves, the islanders were discovered by the Dutch captain Jacob Roggeveen on Easter Day in 1722. Captain Roggeveen named the island Easter Island, shot dead thirteen and wounded many more of the inhabitants who welcomed him, and left the next day stocked up with foodstuffs. In 1770 Captain Don Felipe González came upon the island, disembarked with two priests and a battalion of soldiers, who advanced in formation to the center of the island. He named it Isla de San Carlos, forced some natives to sign in their rongo-rongo script a Spanish document addressed to King Carlos III beseeching to be annexed by Spain, and left. In 1774 Captain Cook arrived, and stayed three days. He sent his men to search the whole island; they found only a hundred men

and no women or children, shot one native for touching an officer's bag, forced the others to load up baskets with potatoes for the scurvy-infected ship, and set sail again. On the ship the sailors found the baskets filled with stones under a covering of potatoes. In 1786 a French warship under le Comte de la Pérouse stopped at the island for eleven hours; the cove where the warship anchored is "honored" today with his name. An unrecorded number of pirates, whalers, and sealers also came upon the island; one whose visit was recorded was the American sealer *Nancy*, whose captain set out in 1805 to capture the natives for slavery on his Juan Fernandez island base. He was able to capture only twelve men and ten women. After three days at sea, he untied them; they all leapt overboard and drowned. He returned to the island to round up more. In 1822 the men of an American whaler, the *Pindos*, rounded up island women to take with them; they later threw them into the sea and shot at them. On the island syphilis and leprosy spread. Starting in 1859 slave traders regularly raided the island. In 1862 an armada of seven Peruvian ships commanded by Captain Aiguirre was able to capture two hundred men for slavery in the guano mines of Peru. Eighteen more slave ships came in the following year. Under pressure from the French administrators of Tahiti and the English, the Peruvian authorities ultimately agreed to repatriate these slaves. Only a hundred were still alive; of these eighty-five died on the return voyage, and the fifteen who disembarked were infected with smallpox which decimated the island. All the giant statues of the island were hurled from their altars between 1722 and 1864. A Catholic missionary was brought in, the people were converted, the rongo-rongo tablets burnt, and family collections of heirlooms, statues, and wood carvings, said now to be the work of demons, were destroyed. The mission-

ary also brought in tuberculosis. In 1888 Chile annexed the island, rounded up the remaining population of one hundred eleven, put them in a barbed-wire corral at Hanga Roa, and allotted the rest of the island to sheep ranchers. Few Chileans were interested; it was British who bought the ranching concessions and turned the island over to seventy thousand sheep, which denuded the island of its shrubbery and chewed the grass to the roots. Too distant for economically feasible transportation, the sheep were eliminated in recent years and replaced by horses and cattle owned by two Chilean corporations. In 1934 the French anthropologist Alfred Métraux made the first cultural exploration of the island; the Chilean government was persuaded of its tourist possibilities and in 1935 made most of the coastline a national park. In 1986, after the explosion of the Challenger, the American space program NASA built an airstrip on the island for the recovery of satellites falling into the Pacific.

About halfway through grade school I brought up a linguistic problem to the teacher. She—and the textbook—called the Roman civilization a great civilization. It was said to be at its greatest when its military dominated the greatest number of lands and peoples. When its empire shrank, it was said to be in decline. This terminology persisted in history class after history class throughout my schooling, and in museum after museum I have visited since. The great religions are the world religions. Civilization advances with military and economic expansionism. A euphemism is competition: without competition there is no artistic, literary, or religious advance. (Without grades, prizes, honors, there is no philosophical achievement.) My first trip was to Florence, where I was beset by the evidence that its grand artistic, literary, and musical achievements coincided with its richest and most rapacious century; as soon as

that century was over, Florence could only sigh on in mannerism. Today Florence is rich through tourism, but without political expansionism its artistic and literary culture is comparable to that of Oklahoma City. Culture is the glory of a civilization that rises in the glint of advancing swords and cannon. The frantic theories of Thor Heyerdahl and the others striving to prove that the sculpture and the altar walls on Te Pito O Te Henua show cultural imports from Inca Peru, from Egypt, Greece, India, or China are based on the conviction that an isolated culture always declines.

I crisscrossed Te Pito O Te Henua many times, exploring this crust of volcanic cinders covered with grass, ending up inevitably at the featureless sea and the curvature of Earth beneath the unending flow of wind and sky. The small flowers in the grass you see everywhere: the island has but thirty species of indigenous plantlife. There are no coral reefs swarming with fish to attract sea birds and sea mammals. The few sparrows and small hawks you see are recent imports. No rodents or lizards scurry through the chunks of lava. There are no cliff fortresses—only the harmonious low cones of volcanos extinct a million years ago. The population of the island stabilized at about fifteen thousand; for fourteen hundred years the rulers continued the hereditary line unbroken from the founder Hotu Matu'a. The statues had already reached gigantic size in the seventh century, and the evolution of their stylization was gradual over the next thousand years. Though the now mute rongo-rongo books can no longer tell the wanderer of the history, cosmology, and science of this civilization, the statues' great eyes and splayed nostrils tell him of its passion. An obsessive drive, nowise economic or rational, erected these depersonalized stone faces with eyes looking out into the featureless emptiness. The force of this

passion was the force of volcanos and the wind and the ocean and the sky.

The southwest end of the island, called Rano Kau, is a four-mile walk up slow-rising, rolling grassland, with many pauses to contemplate the sea and the island. Only when you step over a grassy rim at the top do you suddenly realize that Rano Kau is an extinct volcano: below is a rocky bowl containing a circular lake a mile wide. You walk along the crater rim; the land is a high plateau to your right. When you reach the far side the plateau drops a thousand feet into the ocean; the outer wall of the crater here is a vertical cliff. Below, a few miles away you see three small islands, the first a stalagmite rising abruptly out of the ocean, then two rocky outcroppings. Near the volcano rim on the edge of the cliff, there are boulders covered with petroglyphs—images in high relief of men with bird heads, of vulvas, of faces of the god Makemake. This is the place called Orongo.

Down a short slope from the boulders, along the very edge of the cliff there are fifty-three small buildings. Seen from above they form clusters of grass-covered ovals. When you descend among them, you see that their walls are made of uncemented sheets of slate laid flat and corbeled. The entrances, all facing the ocean, are at ground level, two feet high and so narrow you have to lift one side of your torso to crawl inside. It is the sacred precinct of Mata Ngarau. These are the residences of the priests of the birds. The islands below were the nesting places of the migratory terns, the manu-tara.

Each year when the manu-tara returned, the tangatamanu, the birdmen chosen in dreams by the priests in the sacred precinct, descended the cliff. They swam across the straits to the island called Motu Nui among sharks racing through the wild currents. All the birdmen were strong and brave; chance determined which of

them would find the first egg laid. The birdman who was able to return to Mata Ngarau with that first egg had his hair, brows, and eyelashes shaven, carved his birdman image into a boulder, and, as the new king, descended to cross the island to the crater of Rano Raraku, where he would live in complete seclusion among the silent and eyeless moai for the year of his reign. Under his crown of plumage his hair grew, and he did not cut his nails. His food was brought by a servant who took pains not to be seen. On the islands thousands of terns jostled and hatched their eggs; on the cliff above, the people performed entranced orgiastic rites. The reign of the birdman kings was recent, beginning in 1780. During the year, the other birdmen and the priests at Mata Ngarau were paramount throughout the island, not so much ruling as descending upon its settlements in orgiastic raids. It was they Western historians were describing when they wrote that the last period of Easter Island civilization was a time of decadence and anarchy.

The bird culture is the late dominance of an aboriginal stream of this civilization. The founding king Hotu Matu'a who had set sail with the original colonizers in the third century was surely led to this minuscule island by birds. The colonists brought with them poultry, which remained their only domestic animal. They also brought their Marquesas deities, among whom Makemake, the god of the bird culture, gradually became dominant. But for fourteen hundred years the culture was structured, hieratic, under hereditary rulers.

It was in the eighteenth century, when the island became prey to plunderers from the outside, when the thousand-year-old temples were overturned, when the people hid in closed volcanic caves at the first sight of any foreign ship on the horizon, that the period called anarchy by Western writers came about. The ancient

hereditary kings, the last of whom died in slavery in Peru, were replaced by men whose prowess naked in the raging sea marked them to be temporary sovereigns. But their sovereignty was not an administration of a structured society, which now existed no more; he who brought the first egg of the manu-tara was king, and his sovereignty was as pervasive as he was invisible, until the terns returned to the sea. What he presided over was not a panicky totalitarian culture bent on preserving its sedentary economy from the depredations of yet more rapacious agents of the mercantile societies of the Dutch, English, French, Russians, and Peruvians, but, in its ruins, the liberation of a totally different kind of culture—a culture of pride, daring and chance, violence and eroticism. A culture of birds.

The last birdman reigned in 1866; his name was Rokunga. By 1868 the last pagan on the island had been baptized by the Picpus missionary Eugène Eyraud.

The migratory terns called manu-tara, of the species *Sterna lunata*, no longer return to the island called Motu Nui.

Historians go back to the individual initiatives and collective enterprises that were undertaken by those now dead—more exactly, to the texts that recorded those things and to the monuments, artifacts, and ruins which are not only described in texts but can be read as texts. When historians write the text of history, their work is not so much to inscribe those initiatives and enterprises, triumphs and defeats themselves, as it is to reinscribe their meaning. When scholars take a text of Euclid or Herodotus and set out to determine what it meant, their first task is to recycle in their brains the thoughts of a man long dead. Writing exists to make that possible. A text has surely the meaning it had for the author as he

composed its sentences, but the scholar also sets out to determine the meaning it had for the readers to whom the author addressed it, and for the readers whose conditions, concerns, and values the author could not envision with clarity or certainty, as well as for readers he did not envision at all. The historian's text inscribes not only the meaning the individual initiatives and collective enterprises had for those who launched them, but also the meaning they had for those who celebrated them or defeated them, and the meaning they had for the generations that came later and built and destroyed in the world which those initiatives and enterprises had shaped. And the historian formulates the meaning of the past for his own generation and their descendants. History presumes that we must learn from the deeds, triumphs, and defeats of the past.

From time immemorial people gathered about the fire and told tales of the great deeds, great triumphs, and great defeats of their heroes. In listening to the tales and in reading the chronicles of their people, men and women found their hearts pounding and their brains fevered with the audacities, hopes, loves, and hatreds of heroes and heroines who were dead. The historian may decipher those emotions on the texts, monuments, artifacts, and ruins he finds.

But the modern historian writes dispassionately, neither exulting in the victory of Cortéz nor weeping over the defeat of Moctezoma. He is not writing in order to feel again and make his reader feel again the torrential emotions of men and women long dead. He is not writing to crowd his soul with all the loves and hatreds, despairs and exultations of those who wrought great deeds and those who suffered terrible defeats. He thinks that his contemporaries and their descendants should learn

from the lessons of history before launching enterprises and unleashing the passions that will drive them; and he thinks that the lessons are not yet in, the data are fragmentary and so often ambiguous. He knows well that the Spanish and the Mexica drew contradictory conclusions from the fall of Tenochtitlán. And he thinks that if emotions focus the mind, they also limit it. There is an opacity to emotions; they cloud the mind such that it does not see things in their whole context.

Emotions color the line drawings with which cognition represents reality. The philosophical distinction between the cognitive senses and private feelings can be traced back to Aristotle; it continues to our day in the concept of objective scientific knowledge. We take emotions to be distinctively human phenomena. Outside the crystal ball of the human psyche, there are only grass that does not wince when we tread on it, trees that are impassive as the chain-saw slashes them, water that does not shiver with pleasure when we stroke it, atoms drifting through the void without anxiety and colliding without pleasure or pain. If these things move us, it is because we are moved by the colors we project onto them. All colors, according to John Locke and seventeenth-century epistemology, including the "color" of emotion, are subjective effects within the psyche of the viewer.¹

For Nietzsche, man's glory is to be not the contemplative mirror in which nature is represented but the Dionysian artist who in giving style to his movements makes an artwork out of the most precious clay and oil, his own flesh and blood—and the Apollonian dreamer who gives form to the waters above and the waters below, to the stars and the dry land, to the creeping and crawling things about him. Nietzsche praised as old masters the dancer and dreamer in us whose emotions are a pot of colors.

Emotions are also forces. The grand colors come from strong surges of prodigal energies within a life. For Nietzsche emotions are excess energies the organism produces that overflow those operations with which the organism adjusts to its environment. Strong surges of energies in the environment itself, disintegrating the placid order of settled things, are not part of the explanation for emotional forces. After all, Nietzsche would point out, a weak, contented or resentful, human and one of exalted, frenzied vitality view the same spectacle—a thunderstorm over the mountains or the ocean waves breaking against the cliffs—differently, and a scientist can view a flood in Bangladesh or on the Mississippi plain with dispassionate composure.

The modern philosophy of mind took emotions to be inner states, experiences with only one witness. One infers, on the basis of perceived behaviors, that there are feeling states in others analogous to those one knows within oneself. No dentist feels his patient's toothache; everyone can agree on the size and shape of the Mona Lisa's smile but there is no agreement about whether that smile is mellifluous or irritatingly priggish.

Yet what is more evident than the pain of an accident victim, than the agony of the mother of that victim? At ten days, a newborn infant recognizes with a smile the smile of his mother. What is more visible than the glee of an infant playing with a kitten, and if that infant toddles off into the woods, can there be any doubt about the joy of the mother when he is found?

The hilarity, the fear, the rage, the relief, the agony, the desperation, the supplication are what are most visible about those we look at. At a glance we see that the cop or the office manager is incensed, even though we

find we cannot say later what color his eyes are and had not noticed that she had dyed her hair.

Indeed, the mirth and the despondency, the irritability and the enthusiasm, the rapture and the rage are the very visibility of a body. A body's shape and contours are the way that it is held in a space that excludes other bodies and us; a body's colors are opaque expanses behind which the life-processes are hidden. It is through its feelings, drawing our eyes into their fields of force, that a body emerges out of its self-contained closure and becomes visible. Through the windshield the hitchhiker sees the distrust of the driver of the car. As we walk by trees and figures in the park, it is the pleasure radiating out of the smiling face and the exposed arms and fingers of an old woman feeding pigeons that make us see her. Walking through crowds in the street, we see mortification or heartbreak outlining in relief a middle-aged woman clad in a sensible and ordinary coat.

People poke at mountain goats and reptiles in the zoo; they throw stones at lions. The irritation, the fear, or the anger of the animal are not behind its opaque skin or in its skull; the molester feels the irritation or the anger against his eyes, against the mean smirk on his face. The passerby who sees the irritation, fear, or anger that make the python, fox, or tiger visible—when that emotion is directed against the zookeeper or against another animal—at once feels himself caught up in the range of that passion.

The elations, gaities, lusts, rancors, miseries, apathies, and despairs of living organisms catch the eyes and hold the attention of passersby. They intrude into the perceptual fields and practical concerns of others. Our emotions reorient others, disturb their trains of

thought, seep into the blueprints of their projects, contest them, and afflict them with misgivings and self-doubt. Power among humans is not simply the physical force with which one material body may move another; it is the force to distract, detour, maneuver, and command. Every pleasure we indulge in and every pain we suffer exerts power over others.

We do feel that people who live in flat lands tend to have flat minds and flat feelings, that people who live in cubicles in public housing developments tend to have narrow, constricted feelings. We feel that the objects and landscapes upon which emotions are released can limit the range of emotions that run up against them and eventually cause those feelings to aim at only nearby things.

Not only do emotions discharge their forces on the outside environment; they have their source in it. Was it not the mists and the driving sleet, the blossoming prairies, and the swallows rhapsodic in the tides of summer that opened our hearts to ever more vast expanses of reality, beyond all that is made to content and satisfy us? Rage does not come from nowhere, nor does it come only from the overheating of the organism itself. Love is not a passion felt in human beings alone, nor does it derive from inner needs and wants. Strength and super-abundant energies are not generated simply by an inner psychic will that is a will to power. Emotions get their force from the outside, from the swirling winds over the rotating planet, the troubled ocean currents, the clouds hovering over depths of empty outer space, the continental plates shifting and creaking, the volcanos rising from the oceanic abyss, and the nonsensical compositions of mockingbirds, the whimsical fluttering of butterflies in the racket of a wallow of elephant seals. Their

free mobility and energies surge through us; their disquietudes, torments, and outbursts channel through us as emotions.

People who shut themselves off from the universe shut themselves up not in themselves but within the walls of their private property. They do not feel volcanic, oceanic, hyperborean, and celestial feelings, but only the torpor closed behind the doors of their apartment or suburban ranch house, the hysteria of the traffic, and the agitations of the currency on the stretch of turf they find for themselves on the twentieth floor of some multinational corporation building.

If one person regards a thunderstorm over the mountains or the ocean waves breaking against the cliffs as dangerous and another as sublime, the reason is not, as Immanuel Kant wrote, that the first clings to feeling the vulnerability of his small body, while the second initially verifies that his vantage point is safe and then forms the intellectual concept of infinity, which concept exalts his mind. And it is not simply, as Nietzsche wrote, that the first cramps his weak emotional energies back upon himself, resenting what threatens his security, while the second has a vitality whose excessive energies have to be released outside. It is that the first draws his emotional energies from the forces that hold walls together and closed. A scientist, paid enough to have a mansion in the suburbs, views the storm from the confines of a laboratory in an earthquake-proof building where the fluorescent lights never go off during a thunderstorm. And the second sails the open seas and the winds, driven by some volcanic eruption in his Marquesas homeland.

Alone, wandering around Te Pito O Te Henua, I learned very little. For all its fame, there are not many

books about "Easter Island"—those by Alfred Métraux, Thor Heyerdahl, Jo Anne Van Tilburg, and a few dozen monographs by archaeologists. The few remaining rongo-rongo books are indecipherable; the giant statues are nameless figures of unknown cults. What the islanders believed, what cosmology and myths were the framework within which they carved and transported the giant statues, what cosmogony and epics gave meaning to the recent bird cult, are almost completely lost to us.

Garrulous researchers, who get funded to come to the island to produce a text, set themselves tasks: how many statues are there, how big are they, how much do they weigh? They set out to carbon-date them, classify them according to style, and then try to correlate the statues with kings or gods mentioned in the sparse eighteenth-century sea-captains' logs or with the demons mentioned in the journals of nineteenth-century missionaries.

Yet how one is struck by the depersonalization and repetitiveness of the moai! In Wat Pô, in Bangkok, there is a colonnade that contains a thousand statues, each of the Buddha larger than life size. In Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Tibet I had seen whole walls of caves carved into statues—all statues of the Buddha, in the same position, genderless, depersonalized. What to make of a whole cave lined with Buddha images all alike?

You do not view the Buddha image as an artwork; you meditate. Your body must be in equilibrium, without any tensions that would produce cramps or shifts. The mind must be empty, so that all thinking, imagining, remembering, speculating will have faded out, leaving you centered on the task of intoning a mantra across the length of a diaphragmic breath. The sacred mantra "OM"

means "the Jewel in the Lotus." But the meditator does not think of the meaning or its referent, or if he does, he does so only for the effect it produces. He will intone it again and again, each time more inwardly. Finally the mantra does not resonate outwardly at all. With its simplicity, its sustained purity and endurance, the mantra has become the inner state of his vitality, the still surface of a summer lake so undisturbed that the remote clouds and the shadows of transparent insects can play on it without the least distortion.

The Buddha image is not intended to represent that particular man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born in the Nepalese Himalayas about five hundred years before the Christian era. It is the image of a soul in equilibrium, centered, available for a compassion that is cosmic. The Buddha image is not an icon but a means of meditation, of composing one's forces. Down the corridors of temples and on the walls of caves it is repeated like a mantra.

There is on the giant statues on the rim of the island of Te Pito O Te Henua no trace of the idealized anatomy of Greek anthropomorphized gods, of the haughty sovereignty of Roman emperors, of the sacrificial pathos of Jesus. The moai succeed one another along the edge of the sea and deep in our hearts like mantras. They do not direct us to be on the lookout for another island or for stray ships full of Peruvian gold. They lift our eyes from the surface of the island, and direct our gaze beyond the horizon. Their strong nostrils take in the wind.

I had read all the texts that recent researchers and scholars have written about the statues. But as I wandered from one statue to another, each so like the rest, all these texts faded away. The people who carved them also had put a subtext on them, long ago effaced. I was sure

that what I felt, as our texts faded from consciousness, as had theirs long ago, was what, under their subtext, the people who carved the statues and lived among them felt. Walking the volcanic rises of this island and contemplating these broken statues, what these vanished people had felt was clear, palpable, as though I were walking among their very ghosts, as though those ghosts had come to inhabit my nervous circuitry and sensibility. The statues, the very earth, the ocean, the sky, the winds convey what they felt. It was inconceivable that this kind of work, these giant stone statues, could have been erected in the rain forests, or in the temperate latitudes in the middle of continents.

I felt in the vast restlessness of the ocean the profound resolve of these people as they left their Marquesas Islands homeland exploding in volcanic eruptions. I felt in the winds their terror, their bravado, their anxieties during the four thousand kilometers of steering in the uncharted Pacific. I felt in the sea birds' tacking in the trade winds their insomniac trust in the flight of the sea birds that led them here. I felt in the drumming and flash of the surf their exultation at setting foot on the crust of this island. In this navel to which all Earth was reduced, before this vacant ocean, under this empty sky, in the midst of these never-ending east winds, I felt their appetite for life and for reality. In the low grass-covered cones in the balmy mist, I felt the placid harmony of the fourteen hundred years of their work and repose. In the huge eyes of a thousand moai of volcanic stone turned to fathomless distances, I felt their taste for the impossible.

On Te Pito O Te Henua it was clear to me that the passions turned to fathomless distances that raised those stones into giant statues were drawn from the upsurge

of the volcanos themselves, that those vacant eyes reflected the radiance of the skies, that the song of the winds and the seas was on those lips, and that those great stone faces and their raiment held the color of the ardent lava and of the restless oceanic depths.