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Vale Val: In Memory of Val Plumwood

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On 29 February 2008, Val Plumwood died of stroke at the age of 68. She was not only a seminal environmental thinker, whose book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* has become a classic of environmental philosophy; she was also a woman who fearlessly lived life on her own deeply considered terms, often in opposition to prevailing norms.

In the 1970s a radical critique of traditional Western conceptions of nature emerged simultaneously at opposite ends of the Western world, in Australia and in Norway. The Norwegian critique emanated from philosopher, Arne Naess, who, as readers of this journal will be well aware, became the founder of the deep ecology movement. The less well-known but just as trenchant Australian critique emanated from a small group of philosophers centred on the Australian National University in Canberra. Val, who was then known as Val Routley, and her partner, Richard Routley (later to become Richard Sylvan) were key members of this group. They, like Arne Naess, recognised that the environmental problems that were coming into view at that time were the upshot not merely of faulty policies and technologies but of underlying attitudes to the natural world that were built into the very foundations of Western thought. According to the Routleys, these attitudes were the expression of *human chauvinism*, the groundless belief, amounting to nothing more than prejudice, that only human beings mattered, morally speaking; to the extent that anything else mattered at all, according to this attitude, it mattered only because it had some kind of utility for us. Together the Routleys challenged this assumption; together they posed the seminal question, 'is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethic', an ethic of nature?¹

The questions the Routleys and their colleagues unearthed and tackled in the 1970s were questions that would set the agenda for environmental philosophy. In those early days they were mainly writing for other philosophers, and being logicians as well as environmental thinkers, their papers drew heavily on the vocabulary of logical and semantic theory. This background in logic gave both the Routleys prodigious intellectual muscle, and later, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val was to turn her training in logical theory to advantage with her impressive analysis of the logic of dualistic thinking. But the technical register of the early writing also meant that, unlike Naess's deep ecology,

the Routleys' version of radical environmentalism failed to gain the currency it deserved outside the academy.

However, the Routleys were forest activists as well as philosophers, and in 1975 they published a seminal activist book which did reach a more general audience. This was *The Fight for the Forests*, a comprehensive economic, scientific, sociopolitical and philosophical critique of the Australian forestry industry. As David Orton pointed out in a memorial essay on Richard Sylvan after Sylvan's death in 1996, the book was pioneering not only in its comprehensive approach to an environmental issue, but in its insistence that the most fundamental conflicts in forestry were over values, not facts.²

During the 1970s, Val and Richard built a remote stone house in a rainforest on a mountain – Plumwood Mountain – south of Canberra. This phase of Val's life was, apparently, a very happy one. They constructed the house themselves, out of stones found on the property. A friend, author Jackie French, describes how 'slowly, very slowly, the walls went up. Val lugged most of [the stones] on her back, in a pack, up from the escarpment. Richard was in charge of shaping them, putting up the forms. Val, to her surprise, had found a talent – even genius – for laying stonework. Each rock in the house [was] placed exactly as she wished, often after two days or even three of looking and studying, of making sure the lichened side was outward, to preserve both the lichen and the integrity of the wall. And while they worked they talked. A day's work on the house, garden, track would lead to another paper scrawled by lantern light that night.' Jackie goes on to describe how she and her own partner shared a mail box with the Routleys; they would take mail out to Val and Richard during this period, and return with 'reams of paper – often yellowed by the rainforest damp, and frequently illegible – containing the astounding amount of work they had jointly written that week, for a secretary [at ANU] to decipher and type out'.³ It remained important to Val to live the ecological values she was dedicated to theorising, the 'thinking' flowing naturally from 'building' and 'dwelling' in the heart of her mountain, as Heidegger might have put it.

The amazingly creative Routley partnership broke up in the early 1980s, and divorce followed. Val stayed on at the mountain, taking the name of the magnificent plumwood tree that was the signature species of the local rainforest ecosystem. (It was at this time that Richard also changed his name to Sylvan.) Most of Val's published work to that point had been co-authored with Richard, and she had held no formal academic post of her own, nor even yet obtained a doctorate. There followed many years of temporary stints of teaching, in Australia, USA and Canada, with long intervals of intense writing and researching at Plumwood Mountain.

The question that continued to preoccupy Val throughout this period was that of anthropocentrism. Along with others, she saw that anthropocentrism, as a value system, rests on the assumption that there is a categorical distinction between humanity and nature: human beings are endowed with something the

rest of nature lacks. This ‘something’ is of course assumed to be mind. Just like plants and animals and rocks, we are made of matter, but in addition to our material bodies, we possess minds, and minds are somehow categorically different from bodies and superior to them. Underlying the conceptual division between humanity and nature then, is a deep conceptual opposition between mind and matter, which becomes refined, in the Western tradition, into an opposition between reason and nature. In her doctoral thesis, which was published in 1992 as *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val provided a comprehensive analysis of how this division between reason and nature had historically been constructed and how it informs many of the ongoing foundational categories of Western thought. Hers was by no means the first analysis of such *dualism*, or binary thinking; but it was the most comprehensive within the environmental literature. She showed brilliantly how this dualistic system of thought created value hierarchies that systematically rendered inferior all the terms that came to be associated with nature rather than reason: women, the working class, the colonised, the indigenous, as well as the other-than-human world. She thereby demonstrated that the ideology underpinning the domination of nature in the contemporary West is simultaneously an ideology legitimating and naturalising the domination of many subjugated social groups. The implication was that environmentalism and struggles for social justice cannot be separated out from one another. Moreover, as long as the assumptions underlying our social and environmental thinking remain unexamined, these pervasive patterns of oppression will remain inescapable. We need new understandings of the human and of nature that close the conceptual gulf between them. This means putting mind back into matter: restoring intelligence to body – female body, animal body, the colonised body – and agency to nature.

In her 2002 book, *Environmental Culture*, Val elaborated her original analysis of dualism, and especially of reason, and applied this analytical framework in an up-to-the-minute way to questions of science, politics, economics, ethics, spirituality and ecology itself. She argued for a form of ecological rationality that would replace the instrumentalising rationalism that has characterised the Western tradition and that has reached its apogee in the modernity of the contemporary global market.

No adequate tribute to Val could possibly omit mention of the famous crocodile attack that occurred in 1985. While kayaking alone in Kakadu National Park in northern Australia at the onset of the Wet season, she was seized by a large crocodile, and death-rolled not once, but three times. (Crocodiles drown their prey by holding them under water.) Unaccountably released from the croc’s jaws after the third roll, she crawled for hours, with appalling injuries and stunning courage, through tropical swamps, never far from further crocodiles, in search of safety. Eventually, somewhat miraculously, she was rescued, by a park ranger. This epic experience of course made her uniquely credentialed, as an environmental thinker, to write about death and its place in nature, and she

proceeded to do this in a series of beautiful and widely read essays, on the human as prey and as food for nature. She was much preoccupied in latter years with re-visioning death and revising, in appropriately ecological terms, the rituals that accompany it in our society.

This visionary preoccupation was honoured after her own death by the impromptu circle of friends and associates who spontaneously came together into a kind of informal 'friends of Val' group to arrange her funeral and put her affairs in order. Overcoming huge bureaucratic and practical obstacles, members of this little group managed to obtain a permit for a home burial on Plumwood Mountain. Val was duly and reverently laid to rest, with full-flight ecological poetics, in the beautiful garden she had established around the house she had built with her own hands out of the rock of the mountain. Even in her death then, she led by her ecological example.⁴

Throughout her life, Val's philosophical energy and output was prodigious. The downside of this intensity was perhaps that despite her theoretical penchant for feminist dialogical and relational perspectives, her actual orientation to the work of others was, as is well known, basically critical – if you disagreed with her you could expect to be flatly contradicted and roundly, even harshly, critiqued. However, this sometimes aggressive energy was unfailingly and creatively channelled to the cause of nature, and it is above all for this, supremely worthy, fight, that her life will surely be remembered.

Speaking personally, as a long-time colleague and friend, it is perhaps the memory of her indifference to convention in pursuing her activist goals that I most cherish. In this respect I think of her as more like a philosopher of the ancient world than the nine-to-five professional of the contemporary academy. I imagine her, not as a roving Cynic or Sceptic exactly, but as a forest-dwelling recluse, railing at the artifice, the conformism and moral failings of society. Prior to the fall of the Roman Empire, philosophy was of course understood not merely as discourse but as a way of life. Stoics and Epicureans, for instance, lived in colonies dedicated to reflection and debate, yes, but also to spiritual exercises designed to inculcate in participants a feeling for the cosmos, a sense of a reference-frame larger than the parochially human.⁵ It wasn't until the advent of Christendom, in the Dark Ages after the fall of Rome, that philosophy was split between theory, which became the province of the universities, and spiritual exercises, which became the province of the monasteries.⁶ In this sense the dualism that Val spent her life analysing was historically played out in philosophy itself, and in her life she showed not only how philosophy could help discursively to diagnose the world's ills, but how it might also heal itself and become again something more than discourse, more than a charade of words. In her, philosophy attained the status of an existential modality.

NOTES

¹ See Richard Routley, 'Is there a need for new, an environmental, ethic?' in *Proceedings of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Sophia: Sophia Press, 1973). Although the original paper was published in Richard's name, it was greatly elaborated by Richard and Val jointly, and re-published several years later, as 'Human chauvinism and environmental ethics' in Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie and Richard Routley (eds.), *Environmental Philosophy* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982).

² David Orton, 'In memory of Richard Sylvan', *The Trumpeter*, **14**,1 (1997).

³ Jackie French, private communication.

⁴ Accounts of the burial, as well as tributes and discussions, can be found on a web site that has been set up to honour Val's memory, <http://valplumwood.com>.

⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁶ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1991).

