

Against One Model Alone

“Life is a sexually transmitted disease and the mortality rate is one hundred percent.” –R. D. Laing

What do you expect we poets are going to say about the environment? Shall we reiterate, in a charming way, the nightly news about eco-disasters or describe its eco-beauties ad nauseam? Will natural pietism, where we love nature and think it does no wrong, usher in an eco-commodity polemical wave? Or can poetry enhance our correspondence with the non-human components of the biosphere, giving us a chance to adapt our culture to new conditions?

The environmental movement runs a great risk if it adheres to a moral or other single model of human interaction with the biosphere. If, for example, we only focus on blame and redress of grievances, we lose sight of the fact that the root cause of global warming is desire. Not that you can't say it's a lot of other things, too, but we lose sight of the fact that we expect to develop a society that includes not only all the people and their interests, but the interests of the non-human components as well; it is what it is, from bacteria to redwoods. We seek restorative, not retributive justice.

If, as another example, environmentalism focuses on a problem and solution model alone, we may fix a few things, move, as the saying goes, the deck chairs around, but recreate similar problems with our new solutions, an example might be biofuels. The large scale concern remains our energy expenditure and its resultant heat, so a problem and solution model without cultural change drives competition among various interest groups—who gets to be hot?

From an essential point of view, human activity around the environment is often conditioned by a single myth about nature. Most writing around nature emphasizes either of two polarized and irreconcilable points of view. One is competition, “nature red in tooth and claw,” the Tennysonian model. On the other end of the spectrum is a kind of number two, natural pietism that suggests nature is ultimately good and good for you. Don’t panic, it’s organic. You know the pitches. Rethink it for a minute.

We have a strong science around global warming. We can repair most of the damage with existing methods; we can arrest climate change, not a future ideal but, with a little extra cash, do it today. And it will become increasingly cost effective. We also have aggressive political systems that can implement solutions; both totalitarian and democratic governments can achieve results. The difficulty lies in convincing people to change. Our culture, our will seems limited to a tired residue of 19th century imperialism on one side, the competitive view, and various Daoisms on the other.

Such polarity hovers in denial because neither of the points of view includes enough of the biosphere or of society to amend them or to address the emotional maelstrom that the desperate information we already know about climate change provokes. Environmental culture can take a range of forms from representing a problem in order to increase awareness as the Canary Project photographs show or elucidating how to reposition humanity as part of nature as I suggest here. Each person and group formation possesses many insights and connections.

Based on this range of forms, one might draw a matrix of perspectives and interests that reflect our ecosystems as a set of embodied relationships rather than an array of things in a container where conveniently we can throw our unwanted. To support that matrix, multiple models can be made available and applied relevantly. But we lack the will

to change. Culture supports our will to act in an organized and coherent way rather than just act to survive. Poetry provides images for our aspirations.

But rather than use poetry as a metaphor machine, producing as many and varied images as possible, in an environmental poetry, metaphor might be engaged as an alternative practice, used when the logic of language and thought break down; or become unhelpful. (see Frederic C. Bartlett's essay "Imagery in Thought," 1932) In science, metaphor represents mathematical concepts that need translation to be understood in English. The context is different but the tactic is similar; use metaphor as needed rather than fabricate as much as the market will bear. But what tools are available to modify our manufacturing model of poetry and culture in general? Let's talk about three of them.

Social Structure

As we see every few months in the news, the world as constituted by a competing set of essential views is collapsing around us. To quote Michael Thompson, "When people argue from different premises they will, in all probability, fail to agree.... Attention is focused not on the facts of the matter but on the facts of the disagreement.... In other words the discerning spectator begins by granting legitimacy to all these sets of contradictory premises. Nor does the fact that they are contradictory cause him any dismay. On the contrary, he sees social life as a process that depends for its very existence on the perpetual contention between these different sets of convictions about how the world is."

A physicist's world, for example, has resources in abundance, since matter is neither created nor destroyed, whereas an ecologist's world has limited resources, and a poet's world, well, you know yourselves. The planet does not contain only one or two perspectives. We can build conflict into our creations, and as poets we know how to

do that already. We can also build in association and productive interactions that show the many and simultaneous facets of the biosphere.

Canterbury Tales provides a clear model of contemporary society. In Chaucer, the pilgrims and their relationships represent civil society in the fourteenth century—knights, managers, householders, priests—each with a unique point of view, story and set of interests concerning their venture. Their identities are based on their jobs, what they do. They are, however, united by a common purpose. Now imagine an environmentally-oriented social structure.

As the environmental model of the planet begins to take hold as a result of climate change, a new set of social classes emerges based on the individual’s view of her surroundings. Thompson hypothesizes “five distinct cultural biases each of which has associated with it a different idea of nature.”

Social Being / Voice	View of Nature	Example
hierarchical	isomorphic nature	government, law
egalitarian	accountable nature	activism, sects
individualist	skill-controlled cornucopia	entrepreneur, markets
fatalist	lottery controlled	ineffectual, victim
autonomous	freely available cornucopia	hermit

Based on Michael Thompson’s environmental social structure:
<http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/cyber/douglas4.pdf>

No single consistent point of view is likely to work for all conditions or metabolisms. Each of these social beings links to a part that you might take as your role in society changes from a worker on the job where you see nature as a threat, to your projects as a writer where you hope to conserve the virtues you perceive in nature, to your conflicts as a citizen voting for laws about conservation and then having live by them. I’m so busy, what shall I do with my candy wrapper?

If we view culture not as a set of habits of mind but as a continually renegotiated ecosystem of social relationships, we can establish a construction of nature that makes sense and sustains our focus while disruptive conditions persist. This can be true for us at any scale, for poets even between disruptive thoughts.

Thompson proposes, and I support this approach for poetry, that the new models resist the urge to remove conditions such as complexity, goal ambiguity, contradictory certainties, conflict, institutional inertia and temporal change. All the issues addressed by innovative writing. The conceptions of policies preserve their “historical contingency.” Thus the arts and sciences can represent their processes as evolving with, perhaps even invoking, the “imperfections inherent in any cultural unit.”

While we cannot make much progress in specialized knowledge without a rigorous taxonomy, we cannot make much progress in our relationships in society or the biosphere without art and science that accommodate both peripheral beliefs: value and fact.

The implications of this concept for social policy and for integration with the sciences and poetry show us an approach that moderates “specific debates so as to not erode general consent.” Environmental change drives social change. That fragile edifice of difference that we use to buttress our egos must be reinforced by accepting commonality and interdependence into our repertoire or it will all collapse around our pages.

Hierarchy

Another tool to help adjust our human self-image is the addition of inclusive hierarchies to the evaluative hierarchies that start with oneself, differentiated from all else in the universe. If we don't distinguish ourselves from

the world, of course, we would not be able to continue. Eating, drinking, even breathing are called into question.

Culture, on the other hand, carries this good thing too far by establishing countless isomorphs of this fundamental creature dichotomy between oneself and the world. Defenses of specialization that attack obvious common ground between disciplines of thought reflect the creature dichotomy. Group formations of identity politics, while establishing a necessary buttress against centralized control, often transform into echoes of these defense mechanisms.

And cultural output reinforces those correspondences. My poetry is better than yours; our poetry is more important to the canon than yours; Alfred E. Newman is the best poet; Neo-gringo poetics breaks better eggs... You've been in these conversations overtly and in the more indirect but equally top heavy forms of one-uppsmanship. Or even the milder pressure of I like this poet and that poet, don't you? These evaluative hierarchies, while relevant to survival, ignore the countless interactions, relationships and inclusions that are also mandatory for an individual's continued existence.

Rather than continue to focus solely on evaluative hierarchies in culture—like/don't like, good for me/bad for me, or even subtly good/better/best—environment presents us with an additional tool: inclusive hierarchy.

Inclusion has far more applications than evaluation and occurs readily throughout the biosphere and society extending to the entire physical and energetic world. A garden can be used as a simple example. In the garden we see flowers, shrubs, and ground cover. The flower is neither better than the shrub, nor is the garden somehow superior to the flower by virtue of including it.

An inclusive hierarchy is easily represented:

garden
^ ^ ^ ^

flowers, shrubs, ground cover

Or as another example:

human genders
^ ^ ^ ^

male, female, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transsexual, queer

In this kind of hierarchy, no gender of homo sapiens is superior. The species is not better just at a higher level of abstraction. Or as a third example:

Contemporary Writing
^ ^ ^ ^

Poetry (essay, novel, etc.)
^ ^ ^ ^

speech-oriented, language-oriented, chance, appropriation

In a hierarchy based on form, poems, essays and novels are varieties of writing. We might list another level below to show different presentations of poems, essays and so on:

Inclusive Hierarchy of Poems

N-5: marks on the page, letters, punctuation, and numbers.

N-4: phonemes and morphemes

N-3: words

N-2: phrases and sentences

N-1: stanzas, sonnets, and thematic forms

N: Poems

N+1: books, MP3 and other audio files, readings, broadsides, and other media for presenting single and multiple poems. It may include criticism of single authors.

N+2: anthologies and other definitions of poetry. This dimension also includes criticism of multiple authors.

N+3: reading interpretation and meta-theories about poetry, models of what creativity means and how poems are created.

N+4: notions of creativity, the mind, and poetry's place in society and the world exist for groups of people each in their own culture.

N+5: In the eleventh dimension environmental poetics links poetry beyond human social structure to the non-human world, and defines a way for poetry to act as an environmental model.

Many more complex hierarchies can be demonstrated with this tool called q-analysis, introduced by the physicist Ron Atkin. Atkin even goes so far as to describe physical dimensions in terms of q-analysis, inclusive rather than parallel dimensions. He claims that physicists accept this as a fair representation of mathematical dimensionality in the universe. Q-analysis supports models of physics, population studies and poetry.

But lest we misuse this tool, keep in mind that while inclusive hierarchy tends to value things and relationships more equally, it is more difficult to communicate from lower to higher levels of abstraction than from higher to lower. We see that difficulty frequently in social constructs. Within the garden, understanding the flower or the shrub, its form and function, is fairly easy. Among other things the flower provides color and the shrub provides shape. But if you're a flower, your understanding must travel much farther to grasp the function of the garden as a whole.

In this example, travelling from lower to higher levels of abstraction, inclusive hierarchy appears to work like evaluative hierarchy (higher as better) but only if we establish simplicity of execution as preferable in every case to a more complex routing. The point is that to produce non-entropic results, we use imagination; we make poetry, and we need to travel from lower to higher levels of abstraction.

Normally, to survive as biomass we need to use as little energy as possible to execute a task such as acquiring food or writing a poem; such preference improves our chances of survival during periods of scarcity. Hence we tend to look downward in a hierarchy at those who must work harder for their keep. But when the problem before us can only be addressed by using more energy, in this case understanding the garden from the perspective of the flower or understanding a new poetic strategy from the perspective of our prior reading, we should not shirk from the effort involved in writing or reading such complex routing. In fact the extra mental effort provides significant reduction in overall energy output as we'll see in the next item in our cultural toolkit. In fact to change we must choose the more complex routing, and in this case we temporarily exercise a flow of energy contrary to the expected flow of biomass. I hope that is a product of rationality.

The tools of poetry can be immensely helpful with change. Besides metaphor that allows us to bridge logical gaps more readily, paratactic and juxtapositional strategies provide other ways of jumping upward in the inclusive hierarchy from one level or image to another. The tools of poetry cool climate change. A thorough analysis of the tools available to solve problems arising from inclusive hierarchy is beyond the scope this discussion, but the grid of problems and solutions referred to at the start of this talk isn't all that difficult to imagine.

Nevertheless, there continues to be a fundamental conflict between the biosphere taken as a whole and the survival and flourishing of any one species or group and further any group's survival versus the individual. Without such analytic tools as Thompson and Atkin provide, we cannot manage our civilized successes. Writing environmentally comprehensible poetry that adequately represents or furthers the methods and protocols of the biosphere

becomes less likely if we continue to look at ourselves and our surroundings only through the lenses from the past. The great irony of our age appears as soon as humanity grasps the possibility of getting out from under nature's boots—plague and privation. At this very moment, we see the results of our having gone too far.

Thompson asks a fundamental question: How do we treat humanity and nature together as a single complex system? Only culture, our poetry, for example, can provide the will to change, to push against our heredity toward a commensal relationship with the rest of the planet.

External Cognition

The separation of each individual from the rest of the universe, that structure of survival for each organism, infers an internalized thinking process that further separates each of us from the rest of the planet. Contrary to reductivist Cartesian notions of cognition, our interactions prove our existence as much as our thought process.

In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes sought to achieve certainty about his existence, “that from the mere fact that I thought about doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed.” But Cartesian cognition does not deal either with ways of thinking that extend beyond the mind or that are less than certain such as any thinking about complex systems like our environmental considerations. So while we infer from Descartes' work and Bishop Berkeley's subsequent dissing of the senses that thinking takes place only in the mind, we can look beyond the *cogito*, especially as we realize how certainty is no longer in the cards.

Environmentalism can only become effective throughout our culture if we develop a model of cognition to add to the Cartesian metaphor and its personalized vision that sequesters valuable thought within the individual. If we develop the notion of external cognition, the individual is

no longer conceived as a monadic mental state surrounded by a feeble body.

In his article “Environmental Epistemology” (*Ethics & the Environment*, 10(2), 2005), Mark Rowlands, professor of philosophy at the University of Miami, redefines cognition as taking place both inside the body and “also in the manipulation and transformation of external information-bearing structures.” Several functions take place externally, especially the function of memory, like an external disk array on your computer. “In certain circumstances, acting upon external structures is a form of information processing.”

Many organisms exploit external resources in order to reduce their energy consumption and increase survival rates. Rowlands cites how a beaver’s dam-building skills make food more accessible with less effort and less risk. The beaver might have developed longer legs and bigger muscles to run from the pond to the tree to eat its bark before the wolf could catch him. As an adaptation such a strategy would use far more energy than one that manipulates the environment. Taking fewer risks and using less energy, the beaver, who adapts through manipulation of the environment, survives more often than the physically enhanced beaver.

Recent conceptual and found poetry for example uses a related strategy, appropriating prior texts, recontextualizing them and publishing them largely unchanged. An example of this strategy occurs in *Oops!* in the essay “How Language Poetry Got Its Period” written in 1995 where I take a biology text and make minor word changes to create a credible poetry text.

The success of new conceptual poetry, from the environmental point of view, must correlate low energy input to many pages output and the strong reader response that conceptual poets attain. Ironically, with little work

applied conceptual poetry achieves a great amount of consideration compared to poets laboring diligently on the page. And predictably many writers flock to this low effort poetics. Reusing the same information seems academic on the surface, but changing how we look at productivity, recycling, may be an important alternative to the labor-based theory of production. It cuts both ways.

Beavers aside, language also represents a demonstration of external cognition. Let's say a cook is looking for spices in the rack. Rather than memorize the location of thyme on the shelf, the cook runs her forefinger across the bottles, reading the label on each bottle in turn until she finds the word thyme. Recognizing the position of the bottle that she wants takes place both inside and outside the mind, creating an environmental link where cognition takes place.

The cognitive operations used to acquire information about and to represent the world are themselves processes *of* the world. They possess, quite literally, worldly constituents, not just personal ones. And even those organs that legitimately can be regarded as located inside the skin of cognizing organisms cannot easily be identified independently of the world. Such vehicles will, in many instances, have been designed to operate only in conjunction with the "manipulation of environmental structures."

Such low cost strategies, even when they require more mental energy, make it more likely that organisms survive in conditions of reduced resources like the amount of money paid for poetry. Language helps account for human success. The drive toward social structure in towns is a good example although recently developed balance sheets of energy consumption raise questions about the efficacy of cities' economies of scale. Our social organizations like cities and governments exemplify external cognition, and the fact that we build cities proves the inadequacy of an

internal-only model of cognition to account for existing conditions.

Rowlands cites the case of the adolescent sea squirt that has developed a brain that allows it to move about collecting food. In adulthood, to enable reproduction, totally unlike adult humans, it affixes itself to a rock and proceeds to eat its own brain as an energy-saving method when the food passing by becomes insufficient. How often in my life have I applied only certain things that I know in order to get a job done and not confuse thinking with execution of the task at hand!

External cognition helps explain how our self-image is concerned with the condition of the environment. Establishing that self-interest includes the ecosystem extends the idea of environment to the mind itself., not as an abstract, impersonal value that we *ought* to support or a moral imperative that might not be shared by workers in natural resources. If we think of our surroundings and ourselves as composite, integrated entities then we might stop using our environs as trash bins and develop increased respect for other people.

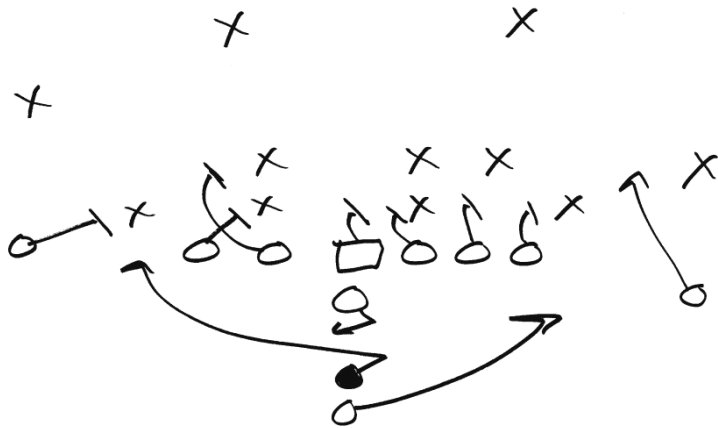
Exemplary Texts

Externalized cognition represents a vital step toward environmental perspectives. Writing looked at this way becomes an example of such externalization. Interestingly, poetry dealing with the materials of writing, from Mallarme's *Le Livre* to Silliman's *The New Sentence*, includes a great range of external subjects and materials, expanding poetry from a few monolithic subjects like love and war to complex and simultaneous concerns. Writing strategies that use diverse materials and practices open the door to an extended poetry that addresses real-world problems. Such Environmental writing practice reestablishes poetry as a valid knowledge-creating process. Focusing on culture this way also reduces the limitations

of innovative culture's narrowing focus on the materials of construction in a tantalizingly dialectic manner.

In *Cheerleader's Guide to the World: Council Book*, Stacy Doris constructs her work from internal *and* external components rather than by analyzing a core event or idea through internally consistent logic. The book "...sandwiches Popul Vuh Patterson/Tibetan Dead Jigme Linpa Pindar//Rah rah." (The quotation is followed by a chart of a football play as if drawn for a sports team.)

"The good old idea//
was that corn growth//
+ tax cuts make leisure."



(Roof, 2007, p10)

By juxtaposing these elements, Doris relates them physically on the page and establishes a variety of connections between internal and external components of varying strength and usefulness. Some of these associate subconsciously, some through our knowledge of history and some through their inherent connections such as common content. In all cases, the exercise establishes a

cognitive/cognizing link between a person and external components in an ecosystem. These links reach out from the mind to the page and back. We read them again and they change; we are thinking outside as we read.

Compare Doris' lines with Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" where, emanating from god "...thousands at his bidding speed / and post o'er land and ocean without rest..." all with the same interest, passively waiting to execute His will. While each differs, they agree on a common master. People operate within the mind linking only through God's will. The poem reifies the notion of internalized cognition. The world is within the mind of God and thought is within the mind of each person mirroring the family, the household, the clan.

But even in Milton's case the material of language focuses the reader on the words on the page as much as what is already in the reader's mind. Milton's poem talks about internal cognition but is read using a combined process evident of external cognition.

Doris' synthesis reveals another kind of agreement. Greater than the sum of its parts, her synthetic poetry requires more than the components of its construction to be read and absorbed. In this sense, poetry is externally understood. Meaning goes beyond the poem on the page to the experience and assumptions of the reader.

Like the beaver dam, Doris' synthetic poetry expands our access to resources that common usage would exclude. By juxtaposing the different texts, *Popul Vuh*, "Patterson," etc. they arrive together in the present in the poem. Collapsing time represents one tool Doris uses to deliver cultural change and expand the possible solutions to our climate problem. By showing readers past, present and future together, new correspondences develop. But synthetic poetry requires more than juxtaposition to operate as an ecosystem.

Working synthesis also means matching solutions to the complexity of the problems they are intended to address. For example, matching a multi-dimensional poetry or environment to a one-dimensional value solution, such as the facebookian like/don't like, makes a mockery of the difficulty of any poetry even the simplest verse. Yet how often for convenience do we suggest that a poem is good or bad. How often to convince do we play emotional tunes when we know the problem of climate change requires far more than moral outrage. While simplification helps reduce energy output, does symmetry help assure that the problem gets solved?

Thinking anew we often infer from sparse, noisy data:

Asymmetry provides the centrality/peripherality
Criteria that serve to separate the prescribing
Entrepreneur from the prescribed ineffectual.
A personal strategy aimed at the deliberate
Avoidance of all three types of order in nature—
Randomness, chaos, and order—
Resisting, unresting, complicit—
Can viably conjoin
Social context and cultural bias.
The author need not take it literally,
But reading materializes.