

Toward An Ecotropic Poetry

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This is an emergency. Stand Emerson on his head! Waldo, prematurely grand fatherly, set poets about their business backwards, decreeing: "the whole of nature is a metaphor for the human mind." The error is every day compounded in human depredations on the planet. The tyrannical materialism of the military industrialists extends the wasteland, sub-stituting a narrower and poorer metaphor—profit and loss. Toxic pol-lutants permeate the greenhouse. The account is overdrawn, the soil bank bankrupt. The earth comes first.

Science won't save us. Technological solutions to problems caused by technology lead to worse and worse botches. In fact, the problem and solution are cultural. Poets have work to do if reclamation and healing can occur. Life on earth depends on the power to envision and project a myth of balanced, sustainable existence.

But in this dark age poets go unheard. Or worse, seek the approval of the power elite, and validate the dangerous and obsolete myth—dominion over the earth. Now the same force that pushed poetry to the fringe of academic specialization necessitates the restoration of the poet's authority; for the integrative thinking present in poetry (relentlessly persecuted by savage capital formation) appears to be the only thing to save us from the impending eco-cultural disaster.

In another age, trusty blacksmiths would build the framework of the Skambha for us to hang our lays on. But this time around, polluters employ Babel-slaves to incarcerate the spirit in vain containment vessels.

Skambha, a Sanskrit word, means "pillar"; the Finnish correlative is Sampo—the tree that holds up the sky. Knowledge of the celestial body—woman above, man below, tree entering heaven—conceived a living archive for practical intelligence of hunting, planting, and meditation. On this frame the people hung their habitat, symbols, and forms to explain living and dying.

Because the earth wobbles, a new pole is needed every 2,000 years or so, and building the Skambha is the traditional work of wise men and women. The ram followed the bull, the fish followed the ram. Polaris will guide us no longer. Befouled waters overflow. The fish gasps air. We need an ark to carry what can be saved to the yonder shore. But tremble, for we have shrouded the stars in photochemical haze.

From the first salvo of the industrial revolution, the poet's authority as conscience of the age has suffered steady erosion. In England, where the rip-off started early, Blake stood firm, holding to shamanistic roots; Shelley cried out in the face of repression, but already had to acknowledge poets are the UNacknowledged legislators; Keats yearned to lose himself in the egolessness of nature, and his passion measures how much had been Lost. Ego Rampant: the Self became the only subject. Small mind lost sight of big. This paralleled the loss of the planet's vitality. For every plant, animal, mineral, liquid or gas that was polluted, profaned, crippled, or murdered, poets lost one more iota of power, retreated one step from relevance. As the earth has been depleted and diminished, the work of the poet has been corrupted and deranged.

"Free-marketers"—as the slave-owners call their class—promoted the individual, dividing and conquering community. To control the desperate, they employed existing class tensions, racism, religious bigotry, jingoism, sexism, antiintellectualism, further weakening the base of culture.

The damnable freedom promised by profiteers rejects all universals as inherently false. "There are no absolutes," moans the romantic ex-istentialist, staring the absolute profligacy of unmade nature in the face, right there in the poem. Tragic irony: the defiant revolutionaries of Ego support the despots that alienate the spirit and divide humanity. Poets have taken up the banner—boasting of their rule in hell. Alas, the panzer man listens to Wagner. Identification with Nobodaddy unsexes us, negates the dignity of nature, and robs us of the power to discriminate.

Spirit emerges from the earth: wheels within wheels: therefore every-thing we write ought to emanate from and tend toward nature. We don't give a damn how poets feel. Though to their credit, poems that honestly express emotion serve as brave records of opposition to repressive re-gimes. But catastrophe nears. Poetry can prescribe the medicine our sickness needs. Like alchemy, poetry is the work of memory, trans-formation and projection—and has intrinsic value not because a poet is in Love with Self, words, pretty pictures and tamed landscapes, but because it encourages thinking with integrity. Poets must submit, with everybody else, to the test of personal responsibility. The Buddhist concept of right livelihood demands an ecotropic poetic.

Because we can no longer distinguish this from that, constructing the new Skambha requires a new definition of evil. Aldo Leopold made a good start: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Add to that a reminder of the essential, intimate inter-dependence of the bio-, hydro-, atmo-, and litho-spheres: organic/inorganic mutuality. Respiration changes the weather.

Certain ancient renegade Egyptians believed one could rob the energies of the sudden dead before they had re-entered the long cycle back into life: Mummia. Vile priests crudely tapped into the energy trapped in the dead. The globe is strewn with sacrificial corpses. Priest-class control of the masses through sacrifice served as a yoke to keep them working, piling up wealth for the overlords. Life was perceived as a mask worn on the face of death. Poets sang out the party line.

Warfare is an extravagant extension of human sacrifice. We narrow space by accelerating the rip-off of death. To replace Moloch the de-vourer, we invoke Mammon, the god of luxury. From Pluto's rape of Persephone is born Plutocrat with his deadly toy Plutonium. Every-where are signs of collapse. Attempts to short-circuit the cycles of nature to hurry formation of capital up the ante: the planet itself will be stuffed in the mouth of the greedy god. Pour on chemicals and plants grow weak. Deform animals till they're too fat to fuck and so stupid they drown in the rain. Snow crowns high mountains with acid thorns; radiation bleeds into ground waters; soil blows away in a dry wind. Genetic diversity decreases—the biota hang from a shorter chain. But we preserve naive faith in a way-of-life by false accounting methods that pass the costs to somebody else—downstream, downwind, away.

There is no such place. The spoil accumulates; nature can recycle our mess no longer. We are in deep denial. Injecting distilled spirits of dinosaurs, we're hooked. The sky cringes before the assault, but we won't give up driving. Let our children's children fry. Let them wear straw hats and sunglasses. Invest now and cash in on the suntan-lotion boom. We cling to a lifestyle, though we are less free now that the earth is diminished.

Technocrats proceed down ever-narrowing pathways of increasing specialization; they can't see the landscape obscured by profit motive, forests converted to dollars-per-board-foot, mountains undermined in the name of military metallurgy. Publicity flacks disguised as environmentalists temporize and compromise and stall effective action. Gullible journalists report it all with straight-faced credulity, thus serving the interests of the eco-criminals.

Some hopeful signs—scientists here and there awakening to the danger of accumulating toxins, the odd senator calling for clean-up or designating wilderness, even a businessman or two recognizing the eco-nomic impact of ecological overload. But they're all too lacking in perspective to build a frame in which people—and all else!—can live. To counter over-specialized science, we need a Con-Science.

What poetry does best is associate, connect, integrate. Poets can project the dream of ecologically grounded culture. And the only ground is what we stand on.

We inhabit a numinous environment. Do not complain about the weeds in the garden. Every blade in the meadow smolders with in-spiration. We need an earthy mythos. Ecotropic poetry can guide us toward a viable ethic.

The work includes recollection. The map of the sky, held up by the tree, tells how to bring our behavior below into harmony with what is above. If we study how earlier poets steered by the sky-map, perhaps we can learn how to cast a new chart.

Vestiges of old maps litter the ransacked library: the Chakras, the Tree of Knowledge, the Garden of Many Gates, the Kabbalah, Ziggurats, Astrology—like 12 banquet guests, the signs surround a central figure—Yggdrasil, the Mayan World-Tree. For us, the Sampo must be eco- and psychological. The brain spinning on the axis of the spinal column mirrors the great sphere on its pole.

Death the progenitor keeps it turning. In the Popul Vuh, a skull impregnates a woman by spitting in her hand. All life feeds on the dead, roots there in the compost. But our relationship with the dead is in trouble. We must obey but not abuse the form.

The great principle connects life with death: the uroborus. But history and mythology record human attempts to usurp this sacred, biological law. If death is the mother of beauty, well then kill everything. If every body on earth be needed for fuel, souls rendered in the try-works yield unctuous lucre. Poets must speak out against this evil. How can we avoid mistakes?

The earth is alive. Over billions of years, and without our conscious help, Gaia got things right. We assume that this is good.

The brain of the earth is far too complicated to isolate a single thought. The death of a species is not only sad because something beautiful has been obliterated—the death abases us all. Geologic records

prove we are linked. The removal of one keystone species may cause an entire arch to fall. How many arches must fall to bring down the great dome of 50 million? We will not be fooled by the ego-centric claim that if no one hears the tree fall, no sound is made.

We are against divisive thinking, all bought-and-paid for Isms, pre-scripted, self-serving scenarios that drive a wedge between humanity and nature. We insist on knowing the names of things and distinguishing good from evil.

Ecotropic poetry recognizes limits but need not be limited. Poets can sing of love. Political repression and war are still to be opposed, because they are dis-integrative. We can celebrate beauty; ecotropic grounding simply enables us to distinguish what is beautiful from what is ugly. Meter, narrative, metaphor are filled with important purpose. No subject can be excluded. Go on and write about how you feel—as long as you teach us to live.

Some will oppose this because they have secured tenure based on mere aesthetics. The hierarchists of the poetry establishment—such as it is—have vested interest in poetry that shirks responsibility. If poetry were significant, paying positions would erode. Grants might be curtailed by purse string holders who think of poetry as contest.

Do not surrender to the status quo. To have no program is to accept the program of the paid killers. Blissful irrelevance plays into their hands. Irresponsible poetry decorates the border of their cloth-of-gold.

We write this letter in a spirit of healing, to reclaim a sense of family among our sister and brother poets. Difference makes us stronger.

A myth for a planet in peril must reflect accurate knowledge of nature. We must work with precision and a sense of urgency. We cannot predict what the new Skambha will look like; building is the work of many; but in any case it cannot privilege human convenience over ecological health. Human beings can live in the humility of the other species, or die with inherited hubris.

We do this and all things for the continuation of the world.