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Poetry, Music, and the Sustainability of Language

By Jan Wellington

Recently I took a backpacking trip through a canyon in southern Utah not long after a flood had passed through. Sometimes hiking, sometimes swimming, sometimes not even swimming but being swept along in the current, I seemed to be tracing a speeded-up time-lapse of the canyon’s formation. A song had been playing in my head, and eventually its lyrics surfaced: the lines I’d been singing—by David Byrne, of the group Talking Heads—went like this:

Letting the days go by
Let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by
Water flowing underground...
Same as it ever was
Same as it ever was ("Once in a Lifetime").
What do these lines have to do with language, the subject of my talk? A poetic answer would be, “everything.” For as I hiked, climbed, swam, and swept, sat and slept, the sound of water rushing, gurgling, dripping over, under, and around the rocks persuaded me the canyon was singing—was speaking—and that I (with a little help from Talking Heads) was talking back. I’ll return to the song by and by, but first I should mention that before and after my canyon trip I’d been dipping into a marvelous book called The Spell of the Sensuous. The author is David Abram—an ecologist, philosopher, and sleight-of-hand magician—and what he has to say resonated with what I’d learned (or remembered) in White Canyon. Abram’s thesis, in a very small nutshell, is that the Western world’s progressive withdrawal from a direct, physical, reciprocal relationship with the natural world had led us to conceive of and treat nature as “other,” and consequently, to dominate and plunder it. What is more, Abram demonstrates how this disconnect plays itself out in the realm of language. Drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, as well as his own experience living with tribal peoples, Abram describes how the predominance of Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian worldviews, with their attendant technologies, has shrunk our understanding of language. Language, contends Abram, rather than “a formal system” of abstract, arbitrary signs that sets us “apart from and above the rest of the natural world” (77), is an attribute of all natural beings and forms, and we—rather than “owning” it by virtue of our superior evolution, are participants in a “listening, speaking world” (86).

This connection—one I’ve sensed since the age of seventeen, when I spoke to a flock of migrating geese, and they spoke back—is at the heart of my canyon experience, and of my talk. Now I know some may argue that language is not a “natural resource” the way air is, or water, and further, because it is eminently reproducible, it couldn’t be endangered, but I disagree. While I am not one of those who believes language should be subject to strictures that fix or preserve it in some ideally “correct” state (after all, like any natural system, it evolves), I am pained at how the language techn-
ous constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished (Council of Europe).

Two things disturb me about this definition, and they are related. First, language use is here defined as strictly practical—a set of skills deployed by “persons” conceived of as transmitter/receivers of texts—i.e., machines. What is more, as you have no doubt noticed, such a view produces and fosters language which is vague, abstract, euphemistic, passive—utterly divorced from all that lives and breathes in the world. And it is not only Europe that promulgates this brand of mechanistic pedagogy and language, as anyone familiar with America’s current lurch towards competency-based, market-oriented education will know. I shudder to think that children anywhere should have their “competences” honed and measured in the cold clutches of such a system.

Returning to the song I began with—Talking Heads’ “Once in a Lifetime”—we can imagine the sort of grownup a system like this might produce. The song’s speaker is a man who has become so alienated that one day he fails to even recognize his large automobile, his beautiful house, or his beautiful wife. So radically divorced is he from his own life, the reassuring certainties dissolve into a litany of questions: “How did I get here?” “Am I right or am I wrong?” and “My God, what have I done?” Juxtaposed with and interspersing these verses is the song’s chorus about water flowing, “same as it ever was.” A critic attending to Byrne’s lyrics rightly notes the fragmentary, disconnected nature of the song’s structure and language; symptoms, she maintains, of alienated post-modernity with its doubts about reality’s essence (Albertazzi). While I agree, I’d go on to add that the fluid, repetitive, seemingly unrelated watery chorus can be thought of as an answer to the perplexed voice of the song’s verses. Might not Byrne be offering water—that is, a return to and commun-

ion with nonhuman nature and its motions—as a “solution” (both literal and figurative) to the problem of radical disconnection? In other words, as an alternate voice which must be heard and read not only with the “talking head,” but with the body?

Going back in time, as I did in my fluid traversal of White Canyon, my memory began to dredge up other poets who in various ways both speak to and embody our imbeddedness in nature, even as they lament the tragedy of disconnection. There was Matthew Arnold, for instance, who, a century before David Byrne was born, wrote in “The Buried Life” of the barrenness and futility of the convention-bound language of human intercourse his Victorian milieu required: words which fail to “unlock the heart, and let it speak” (Line 13)—which blind us to the “buried stream” (Line 42) of our essential lives and selves and leave us “eddying...in blind uncertainty” (Line 43). Like David Byrne, Arnold is moved by an “unspeakable desire” (Line 47) to know this essence—our home and source—and proposes love as a solution. Only by gazing into a loved one’s eyes, he suggests, will the alienated one become “aware of his life’s flow” (Line 88), hear “its winding murmur” (Line 89), and see the “meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze” (Line 90), or discover the “hills where his life rose/ And the sea where it goes” (Lines 97-98). The persistence of natural metaphor in Arnold’s poem, I suspect, is not merely the conscious strategy of an accomplished craftsman nurtured on the poetry of that self-styled priest of nature, William Wordsworth. Although Arnold grew up in a culture that worshipped technology and took the mind-body human-nature split for gospel truth, I have a sneaking suspicion that in this poem he recognizes at the level of metaphor that the “loved one” whose eyes we need to be reading is more than a female individual—is nature herself.

Going still further back in time, I recalled yet another stepchild of Wordsworth: Percy Shelley, who, confronted with the sublimity of Mont Blanc in the Alps, was compelled to conduct a poetic experiment—to compose a poem “under the immediate impression of the
deep and powerful feelings excited” by the mountain and the river Arve descending it (Damrosch 2A, 754). His poem, “Mont Blanc,” which he describes as an “overflowing of the soul” (Damrosch 2A, 754) was born, I believe, of a buried desire to reunite nature and poet, body and mind. The result is a miracle of fluid, visceral language that makes us think twice about Shelley’s devotion to Platonic notions: in theory, it may be the idea which is transcendent, but in the poem, it is the mountain that speaks loudest—that has “a voice...to repeal/Large codes of fraud and woe” (Lines 80-81). It was Shelley, after all, who proclaimed poets the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Defence 810) and who, in his poem “Ode to the West Wind,” invokes the wind to “be through my lips” a “trumpet of...prophecy” (Lines 68, 69)—one that will awaken a newly-industrial world from error.

In his great work of literary theory, A Defence of Poetry, Shelley asserts that the “cultivation of the mechanical arts” not only squelches creativity and imagination as it feeds us a diet of linguistic abstractions that bloat rather than nourish, but, by extension, weakens our ability to translate ethics into action (805-06). His solution, of course, is poetry, which, with its richly metaphorical, associative language will exercise our moral imagination, enabling us to mark the “unapprehended relations of things” (803).

Going back even further in time, and at the same time returning to the present, it occurs to me (as it did to David Abrham) that the intimate, reciprocal relationship between humans and nature has been and remains “apprehended” by many aboriginal or tribal peoples. In her essay “We are the Land,” native poet, novelist, and critic Paula Gunn Allen writes,

The land is not really the place (separatc from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs, a resource on which we draw in order to keep our own act functioning. It is not the ever-present “Other” which sup-

plies us with a sense of “I.” It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is ourself...as truly an in-

tegral aspect of our being as we are of its being (315).

This “matter of fact,” as Allen calls it, “is remembered and honored [by Native Americans] at levels of awareness that go beyond consciousness, and that extend long roots deep into primary levels of mind, language, perception...” (316).

I want to end with a poem that taps these roots and, in the process, helps articulate what the other poets I’ve drawn on suggest about how we might rethink language and natural resources to ensure that they—and we—survive and prosper. The poem, by Creek poet and musician Joy Harjo, is titled “For Alva Benson, and for Those Who Have Learned to Speak”:

And the ground spoke when she was born. Her mother heard it. In Navajo she answered as she squatted down against the earth to give birth. It was now when it happened, now giving birth to itself again and again between the legs of women.

Or maybe it was the Indian Hospital in Gallup. The ground still spoke beneath mortar and concrete. She strained against the metal stirrups, and they tied her hands down because she still spoke with them when they muffled her screams. But her body went on talking and the child was born into their hands, and the child learned to speak both voices.

She grew up talking in Navajo, in English and watched the earth around her shift and change
with the people in the towns and in the cities learning not to hear the ground as it spun around beneath them. She learned to speak for the ground, the voice coming through her like roots that have long hungered for water. Her own daughter was born, like she had been, in either place or all places, so she could leave, leap into the sound she had always heard, a voice like water, like the gods weaving against sundown in a scarlet light.

The child now hears names in her sleep. They change into other names, and into others. It is the ground murmuring, and Mt. St. Helens erupts as the harmonic motion of a child turning inside her mother’s belly waiting to be born to begin another time.

And we go on, keep giving birth and watch ourselves die, over and over. And the ground spinning beneath us goes on talking.

Works Cited


—. “Mont Blanc.” Damrosch Vol. 2A. 754-58

—. “Ode to the West Wind.” Damrosch Vol. 2A. 771-73.
