

# The Poetics of Wholeness: New Language for Science with Qualities

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*They passed eons living alone in the mountains and forests;  
only then did they unite with the Way and use the mountains and rivers for words,  
raise the wind and the rain for a tongue, and explain the great void.  
- Dogen's Shobogenzo<sup>1</sup>*

Within a dynamic and interconnected world, relationships are the most naturally meaningful points of entry into new understandings of living systems. Exploring and mapping communication, feedback, and expression within the systems we observe, and within ourselves, is central to holistic methodology. Human language, however - our own primary mode of communication and expression - is commonly identified as a profound cerebral barrier between self and world. Apparently abstract and linear, language is generally understood as a defining characteristic of the verbal-intellectual mind and its relentless and often aggressive project of reductionist thinking.

Yet further exploration of the work of Henri Bortoft and David Abram, as well as the discourses of hermeneutics and ecopoetics, reveals good reason to believe that language - specifically *symbolic* language - has a vital role to play in developing a science with qualities. In calling forth complex imagery and opening up space for fertile ambiguity, creative linguistic expression is well equipped to not only describe a world of meaning in science, but also to re-illuminate pathways to embodied humanness for scientists themselves. Arising as it does from practices of deep observation, deep listening, and deep feeling within lived experience, symbolic language offers itself to our minds and imaginations as an expression of the complexity and interconnectivity of the living earth. Potent and sensual, rich in qualities as well as descriptive power, I suggest that poetry and metaphor knit us back into a fully coherent world - drawing us into participation with our processes of inquiry and nurturing a rigorous science of wholeness.

## Living/Language

Gaia has always been speaking. Opening our senses within the web of life, we discover voices more subtle and sensitive than our own filling the world with infinite layers of eloquence. There are hushed languages and howling languages, lyrical languages and clicking languages and languages of growls and huffs. We find patterns of meaning written on the sky with wings and others spoken in scent on the floors of the whispering forests. In every moment a thousand words of wind, of water moving, of animals and

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<sup>1</sup> Badiner, A.H. (1990): xiii.

trees, are being spoken all around us. And just as our complex physical bodies have organized themselves within and from the living earth, so too have our own languages arisen from these profoundly articulate landscapes of expression.

I recall here my friend, a descendant of the Kwakwaka'waka clan of northern Vancouver Island, Canada, laughing when I asked what the totem animal of his people was. "Kwakwaka'waka – *what do you think?*" Then I laughed too. Suddenly I could hear old Raven speaking right through his voice as he spoke the name of his mother's clan. This "intertwining of human speech with the calls and cries of the local earth" (Abram 145) is a common feature of indigenous languages, and it very clearly demonstrates a deeply embodied relationship with the natural world. In engaging such language on a daily basis, speakers and listeners are continually woven back into the fabric of land and water, drawing meaning out of and pouring it back into the greater meaning of the living world itself.

Like many European tongues, however, the one I speak and write through now no longer expresses such aural intimacy with the natural world. Aside from the occasional onomatopoeia, the words I am using seem to bear little resemblance to the lovely, living sounds of my literal surroundings. David Abram elucidates the shift from world-as-reference to word-as-reference:

The participatory proclivity of the senses was simply transferred from the depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet... Our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to those printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens, and the moon. As the hills and the bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words now speak to us (1997: 138).

This, to use the terminology of Henri Bortoft, is the movement of language *downstream*. In other words, alphabetic language very fluidly draws our awareness and preoccupation away from the phenomenon itself – the unfolding of diversity within unity - and towards the word, or *representation* of the phenomenon. Herein lies the gap between the speaker or writer and the world they attempt to convey and participate in. Thus most of us quite unintentionally slip from seeing and absorbing the unique characteristics of, for example, an individual beech tree in space and time, into seeing only the general concept of beech tree (or perhaps, if one really "knows" their trees, *Aesculus hippocastanum*) before confidently moving on. Glazing over the exquisite, unique expression of this life form unfolding within a meaningful spatial and temporal context - more preoccupied with naming than experiencing - we come to dwell increasingly in the realm of ideas. The world is then rendered a collection of so many components or parts, perhaps vaguely related, but studied most commonly in isolation from a stance of supposed objectivity.

In his book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, Leonard Shlain goes further to directly link alphabetic languages to cultural systems of domination and control:

An alphabet by definition consists of fewer than thirty meaningless symbols that do not represent the images of anything in particular; a feature that makes them *abstract*. Although some groupings of words can be grasped in an *all-at-once* manner, in the main, the comprehension of written words emerges in a *one-at-a-time* fashion (1998: 12).

Such a 'one-at-a-time' structure seems to necessarily shift our consciousness, too, into a linear state. The result of this linear state of consciousness, Shlain takes pains to point out, has been historically linked to patriarchy, violence, capitalism, ecological destruction, and religions based on power and control rather than spiritual connection. Sadly, reductive science has been implicated in nearly all of these oppressive institutions.

This is an important insight into the nature of alphabetic language and its potential effect on our cultural psyche, and yet I struggle to come to workable terms with such a damning accusation of the languages that so earnestly and often beautifully encircle and carry our relationships, dreams, loves, inspirations, despairs, and songs, as well as our scientific understandings. An exploration of hermeneutic philosophy in the context of Henri Bortoft's work offers a much more holistic and fruitful exploration of the words we utter forth, and suggests that, like all tools of creation and expression, *how* our languages function depends on the consciousness and imagination we bring to them.

### Circles of Meaning

In his seminal exploration of Goethe's way of science, *The Wholeness of Nature*, Bortoft points out that "there are non-linear, holistic features of language that can easily be missed" (1996: 62). He continues: "We enter in the text as a medium of meaning through the sentences themselves, putting ourselves into the text in a way which makes us *available to meaning*" (1996: 16). In this sense, we are able to move beyond the one-at-a-time linearity of a string of words and enter into a deeper, more subtle flow of meaning itself. He goes on to articulate the essence of the hermeneutic circle:

This dual movement, into the whole through the parts, is demonstrated clearly in the experience of speaking and reading, listening and writing. We can see that in each case there is a dual movement: we move through the parts to enter into the whole, which becomes present within the parts. When we understand, both movements come together (1996: 12).

The reader of a text, in other words, is not a passive receptacle of linearly arranged, pre-existing units of information. Entering into the hermeneutic circle, the reader's consciousness moves in two directions simultaneously to perceive the essence of a text, engaging in a process through which meaning emerges holistically.

Meaning, Bortoft further explained in his final 2010 lecture at Schumacher College, is not produced by language, and yet neither does meaning exist wholly in advance, simply waiting, as it were, to be

expressed. Rather, meaning *comes into being as we speak* - "through the words the meaning comes". This apparently subtle shift in the origin of meaning dramatically reorients us in relation to the words that flow through us, and gives rise to an understanding of language as experience, as a larger-than-self process of becoming. Language, then, is not the means of *self-expression* we generally believe it to be – it is a creative vessel that allows something to come into manifest expression both through and as ourselves.

The flexibility of language is crucial to this new understanding of meaning. We can use these old words of ours – spoken and written countless times by countless others – to express meaning in infinitely new ways at any point in time. Uniqueness springs eternal from the most common sounds and shapes. Language in this sense actively resists institutionalization, embodying as it does the dynamics of being, the 'potency to become otherwise' that Bortoft identifies as an intrinsic feature of wholeness. Symbolic language, then, allows us to engage in a meaningful process by which the richness of lived experience coalesces and resonates in particularly powerful ways. Bortoft's own use of symbolic language to illustrate the expansion and contraction of consciousness is a perfect example. By speaking of consciousness as moving within a flowing river, slipping upstream and downstream, Bortoft's language at once deftly explains a difficult concept and elegantly creates/reveals a very deep level of interconnectivity between ecology and psyche.

#### Poetry of Place

"Ecopoetics" is an evocative term that encapsulates this connection between landscape and language. Composed of the Greek *oikos*, meaning 'home or dwelling place', and *poiesis*, meaning 'making', it urges us to inquire how "a poem may be a making of the dwelling place" (Bate, 2000: 25). Ecopoetics, then, is an exploration of how our languages, flawed and complex and slippery as they are, might once again weave us back into a living world by urging us towards a phenomenological experiencing of life as *lived*, rather than merely as *represented*.

In his groundbreaking work of eco/literary criticism, *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate writes: "it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself" (2000: 75). Here again, we discover the earth's rhythms longing, it would seem, to express themselves through us. Abram carries this further:

More recent research on the echoic and gestural significance of spoken sounds has demonstrated that a subtle sort of onomatopoeia is constantly at work in language: certain meanings invariably gravitate towards certain sounds, and vice versa. Every poet is aware of the primordial depth in language, whereby particular sensations are evoked by the sounds themselves, and whereby the

shape, rhythm, and texture of particular phrases conjure the expressive character of particular phenomena (1997: 45).

Symbolic language, and especially metaphor (*life is a river in which consciousness swims*), places seemingly unrelated images in close proximity, asking us to dwell for a moment within both *at the same time*.

Instantly, intuitively, we awaken to vibrant connections. Metaphors thus give rise to meaning through relationship, to meaning as an emergent property of potent linkages. This linguistic weaving “liberates a power of reference to aspects of our being in the world which cannot be said in a direct, descriptive way, but only alluded to, thanks to the referential values of metaphoric and, in general, symbolic expression” (Ricoeur, 1997: 320). In this sense, poetry is “an *experiencing* of the world, not a *description* of it” (Bate, 2000: 167).

David Abram’s exploration of phenomenology and language, as well as his own richly symbolic writing, offer insight into this process. After acknowledging the abstract qualities of alphabetic language, he writes:

It would be a perilous mistake for any reader to conclude from these pages that he or she should simply relinquish the written word. Indeed, the story sketched out herein suggests that the written word carries a pivotal magic – the same magic that once sparkled for us in the eyes of an owl and the glide of an otter... Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves – to the green uttering forth of leaves from the spring branches (1997: 273).

As Bortoft explained in his recent lecture at the College, “eliminating all concepts would not bring about direct contact with the reality of the world – it would bring about the end of the world.” Far more fruitful than denigrating our languages and wishing them vanished is a full and conscious engagement with them; in celebrating their innate potential for renewal, we participate in a literally *meaning-full* process of reconnection to ourselves and to the world.

### Embracing Both/And

Ronald Gregor Smith, in his Translator’s Preface to Martin Buber’s work, *I and Thou*, writes that “there is *one* world, which is twofold; but this twofoldness cannot be allocated to (let us say) on the one hand the scientist with a world of *It* and (let us say) on the other hand the poet with the world of *Thou*. Rather, this twofoldness runs through the whole world, through each person, and each human activity” (Buber, 1958: ix.). In the same sense, mathematician and holistic scientist Brian Goodwin offers the example of conveying the coherence of photons in a laser beam, suggesting that if “it was described to you both precisely *and* metaphorically in terms of a coherent jazz session, and you were then asked to imagine what it feels like, then you might be more encouraged to enter into a sympathetic relationship with the state [of the laser]...

In order to convey to others something about their understanding of the world, scientists have to use metaphors. This is the only way we can share the meaning of our insights, however they may have been revealed" (2007: 119). As Smith and Goodwin both express in their writing, deconstructing the hierarchical duality of literal and symbolic language within the science liberates the true spirit of inquiry and insight within each of us.

As a living example, let us consider two ways of describing a red fox - the one on the left a typical of classic biology and the one on the right selected from a piece by naturalist and poet Mary Oliver:

*Vulpes vulpes* is a relatively small, slender canid with an elongated muzzle, large pointed ears, and a long, bushy tail, usually as long as the head and body... Length of head and body in adults can range from 455 to 900mm, tail length from 300 to 555mm, body mass from 3 to 14 kg... The skull is long and slender with a flat interorbital and frontal region, slightly inflated frontal sinuses, and a long and narrow rostrum with a slight depression below the frontal region... The outer fur is long and silky; the underfur is long and thick, grey at the base and buff towards the tips. In fully prime pelts the guard hairs are >9 cm and the underfur is approximately 4 cm (Larriere & Patischniak-Arts, 1996: 3).

*The fox  
is so quiet –  
he moves like a red rain –  
even when his  
shoulders tense and then  
snuggle down for an instant  
against the ground  
and the perfect  
gate of his teeth  
slams shut,  
there is nothing  
you can hear  
but the cold creek moving  
over the dark pebbles  
and across the field  
and into the rest of the world –  
(Oliver, 1991: 48)*

What strikes me about these very distinct ways of seeing is not their mutual exclusivity but their inherent complementarity - what one lets slip the other catches, what one holds still the other loosens and lets breathe. In the first passage, for example, the biologists' patient attention to detail lends a measured precision to our body of quantitative knowledge; in the second, the poet offers us a fleeting glimpse of the dynamical essence of Fox as he moves within the life of the world – we sense, in a flash, his vital and wild wholeness. Most importantly, through balanced, holistic expression an *It* is transformed into a *Thou*, worthy of study and also veneration. As we become more comfortable with moving back and forth between two ways of seeing, two ways of experiencing language, we approach an accurate and insightful knowledge of ourselves and of our world. To understand and commune with all members of the ecological community, to practice holistic science, we simply need both.

Practicing a Goethean way of seeing can teach us how to navigate between modes of observation and expression within scientific inquiry. Goethe himself, both scientist and poet, considered rationality

(exact sensorial perception) and intuition (exact sensorial imagination) essential to an elegant and effective scientific process: “Neither one-sided artistic nor one-sided scientific striving lay in Goethe’s nature, but rather the never resting urge to ‘behold all seeds, all active power’ ” (Steiner, 2000: 89). Goethe’s teachings urge us to seek this same active power, touching in on the wholeness of our own nature in order that the wholeness of nature itself may come forth through us.

### Speaking the World

As I’ve contemplated the relationship between these different aspects of language and self, I’ve begun to think of linear, pragmatic language as a kind of will to describe, and experiential/poetic language as an openness to experiencing or meeting the essence of what we observe. The holistic language of a science with qualities, then, may embody both activity and receptivity – it is a hand grasping and simultaneously a hand opening to receive. Buber writes most succinctly and beautifully of this dual flow of consciousness in the process of holistic scientific observation: “It can, however, also come about, if I have both *will* and *grace*, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it” (1958: 7). As we wake from the long and troubled dream of total objectivity, this binding-in-relationship emerges as not only the essence of science with qualities, but also the source of meaning in our lives.

Hermeneutic philosophy and the evocative nature of poetry teach us that language, linear and reductive as it may appear to be, is in essence a process of *meaning-becoming*. As such, our collective flow of words is still intimately connected to the world we speak within, and through the rhythms and images of symbolic language this intimacy continues to express itself with great accuracy and power. While traditional scientific language – practical, meticulous, specialized – is crucial to our ongoing project of gathering precise knowledge of the manifest world, symbolic language carries within it qualities of vitality and resonance that are much greater than the sum of its many parts. As skilled scientists we are called to develop both a capacity to explore and enjoy the experience of dwelling ‘downstream’ in a world of intricate details and information, *and* a capacity to fin our consciousness and expression of consciousness back against the current, moving ‘upstream’ into the spontaneous unfolding of life. Within this two-way movement, this twinning of will and grace, we access and share both knowledge and wisdom. Emerging, finally, into full remembrance that the exquisitely creative and animate earth expresses itself through our very own breath and hands, we find ourselves practicing a truly holistic science.

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