

“Come with Old Khayyam and Leave the Wise to Talk”¹

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Abstract

In the last thirty years, many ecophilosophies have come and gone. Visions of ecological reform and re-alignment have been rolling plentifully off the presses. Yet the ecological crisis, globally and at home, has only worsened. Why have ecophilosophical ideas failed to change social patterns of behaviour to any significant degree? *Can* theory change behaviour? Or is theory itself the problem? Is it theory which distances us from reality and thereby creates the moral gap between ourselves and the biosphere? If so, what contribution can philosophers and scholars possibly make towards an effective response to the current biosphere emergency?

As an ecological philosopher who has been active in the field for close to thirty years, I have seen many ecophilosophies come and go. When I first entered the scene in the mid-eighties, the early analytical stirrings of environmental philosophy at the Australian National University in the 1970's already seemed to belong to another era. The dense and rigorous outpourings of those pioneering analytical philosophers, particularly Richard and Val Routley, later to become Richard Sylvan and Val Plumwood, were originally read by only a handful of colleagues, but they, along with the work of further colleagues in the USA, such as Holmes Rolston, J. Baird Callicott and John Rodman, established an agenda for inquiry that would carry the discourse for decades: is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethic, an ethic that recognizes the moral considerability of the natural world in its own right; would such a – biocentric as opposed to anthropocentric - ethic rest on recognition of the intrinsic rather than merely utilitarian value of nature; on what basis could such an ascription of intrinsic value be made and what would be its scope: would it include only the higher animals, all sentient beings, all the elements of ecosystems, ecosystems themselves, the biosphere or even the universe at large; what were the metaphysical

¹ I would like to dedicate this paper to my late father, Alwyn Mathews, who taught me large slabs of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam before I was five years old, largely by declaiming it enthusiastically into the bathroom mirror while shaving each morning. With the amorous but nevertheless metaphysically-minded Omar Khayyam indelibly imprinted on my psyche, the bland message of Sunday School never stood a chance. Just to be sure that my brother and I were fully inoculated however, my father, without ever explicitly uttering a word against organized religion, would recite to us contradictory passages from the Old Testament as he drove us (at my mother's command) to church on Sunday. With a restraint that I marvel at in retrospect, he left it to us to draw our own conclusions.

presuppositions on which the anthropocentric mindset rested, and were there credible alternatives to them?

At the same time as the Routleys were firing off philosophical rockets in Australia, Arne Naess was launching the idea of deep ecology in Norway. Although Naess was nothing if not an analytical philosopher, his ecological writings were also animated by a generous philosophical imagination. His expositions of deep ecology may have seemed casual to more conventional thinkers, but those supple, elusive and open-textured texts proved powerfully suggestive, allowing for participatory readings rather than seeking to hammer home a point and conquer a perceived field of disputation, like the writings of more orthodox analytical philosophers.

In the 1980's, ecofeminists also burst onto the scene, harnessing a wave of exciting new feminist insights into the structure of the Western episteme for the purpose of exposing the ideological underpinnings of the anthropocentric mind-set. A major target of ecofeminist critique however, alongside the anthropocentric ethos of Western patriarchy, was rival ecophilosophies, in particular deep ecology. Soon the so-called "green wars" were raging between deep ecologists and their ecofeminist critics, each party approaching, from their own politically charged perspective, a common suite of dizzyingly deep philosophical questions about the relation of self and society to reality. Anarchist ecologists, led by Murray Bookchin, added firebombs to an already incendiary fray, castigating deep ecologists and ecofeminists alike as "new age" featherweights because their leanings were not sufficiently leftist for Bookchin's taste nor did they take his own pioneering ecophilosophical inquiries sufficiently into account. Despite unedifying vitriol, progress was made, via these debates, in excavating and undermining the dogma of scientific materialism and clarifying the paradigm-shifting meaning of relationality and its implications for value and moral considerability.

It was not until relatively late in the day, in the latter years of the 1990's, that theorists working in the poststructuralist tradition derived from so-called "Continental" as opposed to analytical philosophy shifted their attention from the mesmerizing dynamics of gender, race, sexuality and colonialism sufficiently to notice the huge storm clouds of environmental crisis that had by then begun to envelope the globe. A fledgling ecocriticism and cultural studies of ecology began to take shape, for the most part caricaturing or ignoring the ecophilosophical discourse that had preceded it.² Using the tools of its deconstructive heritage, this new stream of ecological thought proceeded to dismantle and proscribe central (if indeed unquestionably problematic) categories of environmentalism, such as that of nature, thereby one-upping, in one fell swoop, all the previous literature that had – however critically – deployed such terms. Ecophilosophers could, as Bookchin had done earlier, protest at such nonchalant erasures of their own pioneering efforts, but my own reaction to all these comings and goings, these one-uppings and turnings of the wheel and reappearances of old wines in new discursive skins, is more melancholic than indignant. For the question is, what has it all availed? What has changed? Ecological thinkers, present and past,³ have

² For an account of the origins of ecocriticism, see Rigby 2002.

³ It is worth noting that the environmental philosophers of the 1970's and 1980's also ignored their predecessors, the philosophers of the Romantic movement, though perhaps they were more justified in doing so since Romanticism had antedated them by more than a hundred years. Their evident lack of

interrogated the philosophical foundations and verities of modern civilization, found them to be woefully environmentally wanting, posted alternatives, then waited for their ideas to be taken up. But nothing has happened. Modern civilization continues on its merry, shockingly anthropocentric way, ignoring the muffled cries of outrage sounding from the margins. Despite a certain modest occurrence of (overwhelmingly anthropocentric) ethical terms in environmental discourse and routine deferrals to the rhetoric of environmental (read economic) sustainability in the discourses of politics and business, the assault on the earth's bio-systems is only increasing in ferocity, scale and pace. As I write, it seems as though all the world's extractive industries are lining up and preparing a final offensive against the last refuges, the last outposts where earth life is still innocently going about its own exquisitely tuned business, not yet deranged by the myriad prongs of human intrusion. Against the arrayed forces of global industry, ecophilosophical arguments melt like ripples of sand before the blade of a bulldozer. (Klare 2012)

Watching all this, I feel like old Omar Khayyam⁴:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint and heard great argument
About it and about
But ever more went out by the same door
As in I went. (Fitzgerald, 1984, verse XXVII)

Philosophical ideas, it seems, do not transform social behaviour. Of course, by exposing and challenging the presuppositions of society, such arguments might help to prepare a receptive climate for change. But in themselves, even in conjunction with all the relevant environmental and ecological science, they seem powerless to effect the changes they announce. One should have known this from one's own case. One only has to ask oneself, have my own philosophical insights – about the enmeshment of self in the relational fabric of reality, for example – changed my material way of living? Have I truly adapted my life to the needs of the biosphere? Have I decided no longer unnecessarily to arrogate to myself resources that other species require for their very existence? Have I opted out of the unsustainable economy – have I rigorously audited my consumer behaviour, including not only my multifarious requirements for food, housing and furnishing, clothing, transport, education, entertainment and leisure activity, communication and pharmaceuticals but also the requirements of my academic occupation? Have I sold my car and foregone opportunities to travel to conferences in far-flung parts of the globe? Or do I think that *my* job, as a professional environmental thinker, is to discover ideas that will inspire other people to change *their* lives? And to do this, do I reason, only half-consciously, that I need to seek influence in society, where this surely involves acting the part of a high-profile professional, despite the alarming levels of ecological debris that such a career leaves in its wake? Do I rationalize the behaviour of myself and my peers by arguing that in order to be effective as environmental communicators we have no alternative but to vie aggressively for the public's attention, where this may require establishing a ubiquitous electronic and physical presence and perhaps even using the

any real acquaintance with the work of these predecessors however did not deter them from also caricaturing and dismissing them. (Passmore 1974)

⁴ All quotations from the Edward Fitzgerald translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, 5th edition, 1889.

sophisticated social and communicative tools of corporations and marketers, seeking to out-compete capitalism itself in the court of popular appeal? Perhaps I do rationalize my choices in these ways. And perhaps my arguments are sound. But if my ideas do not change even my own conduct, why should I expect them to change the lives, the motivations, of others?

So how *are* we to address the escalating earth crisis? It is clear that the problem has shifted since the early days of environmental philosophy, when the relevant sciences were in their infancy and the public was still relatively unaware of emerging trends. The proper task of environmental philosophy then surely was indeed to reorganize thought along ecological lines and in the process articulate new moral visions of self and society, visions of humans living in creative communion and community with nature. But ecological visions of self and society have now been rolling off academic and popular presses for decades, and the sciences on which these visions rest are well developed and easily accessible to a general audience via books, magazines and internet resources. What we lack, in the current historical moment, is not so much ecological vision as the will to act on such vision. Whether under its scientific or philosophical aspect, ecology as a discourse, it seems, is not enough. But what else is needed, and in particular, what else that scholars and writers could possibly supply?

In the short space available to me here I will not of course attempt to offer exclusive or exhaustive answers to this question. What I would like to highlight though, as one reason for the failure of ecological discourse to motivate, is the nature of discourse itself. That is to say, the failure of ecological discourse may be not so much a function of its *ecological* content as of its discursiveness per se. Specifically, it may be a fault of the *representational* nature of discourse. Ecological discourse, like theoretical discourse generally - whether scientific or philosophical - is basically representational in tenor: it offers a *view* of the world (in terms of reciprocal relationships and the responsibilities they are thought to entrain) that, being a *view*, is indeed essentially specular in nature. Through the lens of such discourse we *look* at the world and imagine it as spread out passively for our epistemic gaze. We examine it, survey it, map it, reflect upon it in an effort to work out how its parts and aspects fit together. We construct an abstract simulacrum of reality that *re*-presents, through the lens of theory, the manifold that initially presents itself to us more immediately, though still passively, through visual perception. Vision, in other words, whether understood literally, as perception, or figuratively, as intellectual inquiry, establishes a one-way relationship with reality. Whether the view it offers is the old mechanistic one or the new, relational, ecological one makes little difference, ultimately, in light of this unilateralism. As a one-way relation, such a specular approach to the world leaves us stranded in a hidden solipsism, a subliminal subject-object impasse, that no amount of representational re-vision can alleviate. Stranded in such solipsism, we are not *moved* by the world: as a specular object existing on the wrong side of the subject-object divide, the world necessarily leaves our emotions untouched. Unless we are moved by the world however, we will not be mobilized to act in its defence. The specular character of theory itself then is ultimately conducive to a subtle, even unconscious indifference to the world's fate, regardless of whether that theory is ecological or non-ecological in its representations.⁵

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the specular nature of theory and the roots of subject-object dualism in this specular orientation, see Mathews 2009.

It would follow from this diagnosis of our current failure of motivation that we will only be moved to act decisively in defence of the biosphere when the world rises up from the passive plane of representation and actively joins us in the making of meaning. In other words, only when our relationship with reality becomes two-way, a subject-subject transaction, a call and response, can we possibly escape the solipsism of our epistemic condition and become genuinely engaged with reality. To embark upon this new relation would be to enter into a new epistemic geometry, vacating the old two-dimensionality of representation, as iterated in science, literature, philosophy and the traditional arts, in favour of the three dimensionality of communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it. In this relationship, it is not so much a matter of our making sense of the world as of the world inscribing our lives with meanings of its own that then afford the defining pathways for our agency.

How could such a relationship with reality be established? There may be many answers to this question, and phenomenologists, such as Merleau Ponty and David Abram (1997), have argued that perception itself, when not subordinated to the pre-emptive presuppositions of thought, can be a site of synergy with a pro-active reality. This is not a line of argument I wish to pursue here however. I want rather to emphasize the importance of *practice*, of the transition from theories that represent reality to practices that call it into presence. I have elsewhere described such a form of practice, and the mode of being to which it gives rise, as *ontopoetics*. (Mathews 2007) To engage in ontopoetics it is necessary first to open one's mind to the possibility that reality is not only relational in its structure, in an ecological sense, but also potentially communicative and responsive to us. In this sense there *is* a representational presupposition to ontopoetics, a prior metaphysical assumption on which the entire project is premised. In its larger sense however, ontopoetics has no interest in dwelling on the detail of this assumption. Its intent is not essentially representational: it seeks rather actually to call forth the communicative potential of reality, devising forms of *address* conducive to communicative encounter. One form such address might take is the time-honoured one, prominent in many religious and spiritual traditions, of *invocation*. To invoke the world is to ask it to manifest its self-meanings to us.

Again, there may be a range of ways in which our world might, in response to invocation, manifest its self-meanings for our benefit, but the way on which I wish to focus here is one that is found in many traditions which incorporate practices of invocation in their liturgical repertoires. In these traditions, meaning that emanates from beyond the human self is often manifested through serendipitous conjunctions, synchronistic arrangements of circumstances. From this perspective, the "language" the world speaks, whether on its own behalf or, in more conventionally religious contexts, as the medium of a divine presence, is a concretised and particularized one. It is the language of burning bushes, parting seas, pillars of cloud by day and fire by night, manna falling from heaven like dew. This is the currency of *poetics*, of imagery, of meaning conveyed through the symbolic resonance of *things*. It is in such language then that our invocations may need to be couched, since it is in such language that the world is able to respond: it is able to *speak things*. For *things* to acquire poetic resonance however, they generally need to be framed within a narrative context, which is why religious and spiritual traditions, and the liturgies which

express them, generally rest on and are defined by founding narratives. Such narratives shape and inform the invocations that are core to religious and spiritual liturgies, but the efficacy of invocation is not confined to conventional religious or spiritual contexts.⁶

When I address the world by way of a narrative frame of reference, a story with the kind of poetic undertow that characterized the numinous legends and tales of ancient societies, and when the world responds to me with an emanation of circumstances clearly referenced to that same story, I cannot help but be smitten. The response of the world is unmistakable in its poetic appositeness, an appositeness already familiar and recognizable to us from the night-time realm of dreams, or those dreams at any rate imprinted with the strangeness of a source beyond the circle of ordinary experience. And there is in this appositeness, in the attunement of this response to the particular poetics of our call, a rightness, a directedness to the meanings at our own most personal core, that draws us inescapably into intimacy. Each time the world arranges itself with poetic intent, each time it manifests in the poetic image of our invocation, it is as if it presents itself to us for the very first time. It is as if the veil of the ordinary is drawn aside and a mythic world that exists only for our eyes, pristine and untouched, still dripping with the dew of creation, is vouchsafed to us. There is such intimacy in this revelation, such incomparable largesse in the gift, such breath-taking unexpectedness, we cannot help but surrender to it. Thereafter we will become as infatuated, at some level of function, as a mystic, holding the world as a beloved in our hearts despite the undiminished perils, griefs and trials it will undoubtedly continue to present to us in our everyday transactions.

Invocation in the present sense may be practised privately or collectively. Contemporary examples of collective invocational practices include those involved in bioregional rituals - ceremonies or festivals enacted to celebrate place or landscape or local ecologies. I have written elsewhere about such festivals, including the prototypal Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival in my own neighbourhood, which has inspired similar paens to emblematic species across my home town of Melbourne and further afield. (Mathews 2011) However, many other activities can assume an invocational significance if undertaken with appropriate intent. Pilgrimage, for instance. In China, one of the original and most ancient terrains of pilgrimage, mountains have always been the pilgrim's destination. China's official religions, Daoism and Buddhism, have situated their temples and monasteries, and dreamed up their gods and immortals, to fit in with this tradition. Nevertheless, it was originally the mountains themselves that were the sacred objects. However, the act of pilgrimage can awaken a communicative dimension in any landform. Pilgrimage can, in other words – like many other forms of invocation – “sing up” the world, as indigenous people here in Australia say. Again, I have written elsewhere about my own experiences of pilgrimage – particularly a walk I undertook, with two companions, to the source of our local Merri Creek. The journey to the headwaters took us seven days and along the way we were showered with unexpected synchronicities, poetic interceptions and revelations. The little creek responded to our “singing” like a true goddess, with poetic gifts and graces in abundance that transformed our modest outing into something larger than we could have imagined.

⁶ Several of the paragraphs in the next few pages have been adapted from Mathews 2010.

Walking itself can assume an invocational significance, especially if undertaken as an act of devotion and resistance – a refusal to participate in the environmental abuse occasioned by current regimes of motorized transport. Consider the example of John Francis. As a young African-American man in the 1970's, Francis witnessed an oil spill under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. In the midst of trying to save oil-soaked birds and help clean up the beaches, he simply, suddenly, found it impossible to continue contributing to the industrial desecration of the natural world, and decided to cease using petroleum-powered vehicles. Finding himself in consequence caught up in endless arguments with his community over his radical stand, he eventually took a vow of silence as well. He walked thereafter, in silence, accompanied by his banjo, for 17 years. The account that Francis (please note the name) offers of his odyssey in his book, *Planetwalker*, reads like a book of revelations, as Francis finds his life unfolding literally from beneath his feet, his steps flowing with the unerringness of a stream, the landscape in cahoots with him, filled with vectors invisible to anyone but those who have truly entered it through some kind of votary gesture or act. (Francis 2005) Elsewhere I have identified this phenomenon of the landscape “opening” to the self in response to acts or narratives of invocation as instances of *li-an*, an Indigenous notion from the Kimberley region of Australia's far northwest. *Li-an* is the state of being steered by an inner force that animates both one's own inmost self and the interior dimensions of the land. In the state of *li-an* one finds oneself slipping along in an invisible groove while all around one the landscape pulls one towards its poetic axis. (Mathews 2007)

Traditional cultures, especially indigenous ones, have always understood the efficacy of invocation in “opening” the landscape and eliciting poetic responses from it. This, rather than a wish to manipulate reality by sorcerous means, has probably been the impulse behind much that we in modern civilization regard as “magic”. In modern civilization, magic in its instrumental (sorcerous) sense would appear to have been completely superseded by science, but that should not blind us to the (arguably) reliable efficacy of invocation, nor to the metaphysical implication of this efficacy – that it points to the psychophysical nature of reality. To experience for ourselves the intimately apposite poetic responsiveness of place or landscape to our communicative overtures, of creek or river or mountain to our pilgrimage, is to be shifted on our metaphysical moorings. It is to feel graced, even loved, by world, and flooded with a gratitude, a loyalty, that rearranges in us the deepest wellsprings of desire. This communicativeness that can be called up anywhere, any time, is surely related to the poetic dynamic at the core of reality that Aboriginal people here in Australia call “Dreaming”. Once we have discovered this intimate and responsive core for ourselves, we might begin to feel towards the world the way Aboriginal people feel towards their Dreamings. Psychoanalyst Craig San Roque has poignantly described this feeling:

“‘Dreaming’. You hear them talk about it, this sweet thing. Sometimes they call it ‘The Dreaming’, an approximation for the English language speakers, sometimes in Arrernte they call it 'Altjerre' or in the Western Desert language 'Tjukurrpa', or the Warlpiri, 'Jukurrpa'. What does this really mean, this state of things which brings tears to Paddy Sims' eyes, seated cross legged before a canvas, singing quietly, painting 'The Milky Way Story'. This thing which women depict and men define in sand-drawings, deft fingers moving upon canvasses stretched on the bare ground, or smudged on a backyard cement slab near the Todd River? Tjukurrpa, land claims,

faraway looks, marking this rock and that, casually. Reverence, breaking into song in creek beds, shrugging, walking off. Tjukurrpa, lightly held, with a gravity so exquisite, so solid, so omnipresent. Tjukurrpa, perhaps the most misunderstood, most ignored, most beautiful, most mysterious, most exploited, most obliterated phenomenon in this country.” (San Roque 2006, 148)

Through communicative encounters with a world that seems so readily to entwine its poetics with ours, apparently simply for the joy of wrapping us and itself in layer upon layer of narrative meaning, we might come to share those faraway looks, that dreamy-eyed love that binds Aboriginal people so indissolubly, so unnegotiably, to “country”, to world. This will be the “background love”, akin to the background radiation in physics, that emanates from our contact with source, and within the field of which all our specific day-to-day desires are constellated. But how transformed our day-to-day desires will be when constellated within this field! All desires will now be referenced to this background desire for the poetic attention of our world. Our sense of self will be inflected with desire for this attention; our activities will aim to attract the beam of this great significance into every corner of our lives. Framed by such a larger, essentially erotic, poetics of existence, our day-to-day desires, and with them the entire tenor of our inclination, will become aligned with the intrinsic dynamics of a psycho-active reality.

To be mobilized to act in alignment with reality then, we need more than the science of natural resource management, more than the intellectual titillation of the “new physics” that was so much in vogue in the late twentieth century, more than ecophilosophies (old or new) that offer *representations* of reality as alive and imbued with ends and meanings of its own and in that sense as entitled to moral consideration. We need practices that draw us into actual encounter with a psycho-active reality that reconfigures the meaning of our existence and its own in deepest synergy with us. If we use the term *ontopoetics* to denote both an order of meanings that structure the inner aspect of being at large and the practices by which we engage with this order of meanings, then we might say that while ecological vision has defined the early phase of the current re-negotiation of our relationship with reality in response to environmental crisis, a project of *ontopoetics* (under whatever name) may be integral to the second, upcoming phase. From this point of view, a society that not only admits the validity of a revised, ecological representation of the world but is also capable of acting, readily and passionately, on behalf of that world’s integrity, may need to be one whose ultimate frames of reference are poetic ones; science together with other forms of representation may need to be subsumed under and oriented towards larger poetic and hence potentially invocational narratives.

A key role, in any prospective transition from ecology to *ontopoetics*, would surely be that of the *animateur*, the awakener of slumbering creative and poetic potentials in both ourselves and the larger community of life to which we belong. An *animateur* is traditionally defined as “a practising artist, in any art form, who uses her/his skills, talents and personality to enable others to compose, design, devise, create, perform or engage with works of art of any kind”. (Animarts quoted in Smith 1999) In other words, an *animateur* is one whose role is to awaken others to creative cultural life, through theatre or festival or other participatory arts. In particular, the *animateur* draws forth *stories* from the poetic depths of her community to help that community discover and give expression to its own deepest meanings, thereby bringing it into a

process of self-actualization. The role of the animateur can readily be extended to the environmental context, or at any rate to a context in which “environment” is understood in psycho-active (“animist”) terms: an *environmental* animateur, in this sense, would, like animateurs generally, help communities to constellate and give expression to latent levels of their own self-narratives while at the same time invoking and drawing forth, through appropriate stories, the poetic potentials of the larger life-system. The animateur would, in other words, find ways of engaging others in communicative exchange with local ecologies, with all the expanded possibilities for meaning and hence for expression that would flow from such communication. Ideally an environmental animateur would combine scientific understanding of ecological systems with insight gained from poetic rapport with them. This empirical understanding conjoined with intuitive responsiveness and poetic intelligence would enable her not only to introduce people to their own earth-communities but also to introduce those earth-communities to their people.

Those of us then who long for our thought to reach beyond the self-referential bubble of the academy and help foment genuine cultural transformation may need to become, in some sense and to some degree, animateurs. Or, at the very least, we may need to seek out animateurs as collaborators. We can no longer rely on the purely discursive and representational, and in that sense epistemically two-dimensional, medium of theory to draw people into that dreamy-eyed allegiance with earth that may be a precondition for the thoroughgoing transvaluation of desires required for environmental sustainability. Certainly simply winning arguments or discrediting perceived philosophical rivals is not going to result in the transformation of culture. Hearts and minds will not be won by philosophers arraying themselves into small, competitive academic enclaves; the danger of such traditional academic formations is that they serve, collectively and individually, to re-inscribe ego-patterns that would cancel any prospective liege between self and world. Hearts and minds are much more likely to be won by the ecological animateur who acts on behalf of communities to awaken and bring into poetic dialogue the “dreaming” dimension of both communities themselves and their earth environs.

In calling for an opening of ecophilosophy into onto-poetics, however, I do not mean to imply that ecophilosophy has not been worthwhile as a project or that it should be set aside. Ecophilosophical theories that re-animate or re-enchant the world have discursively paved the way for the animateur. It is via philosophical discourse, formulated under the exacting strictures of academic reason, that onto-poetic practice can provide an account of itself to a wider, sceptical, still semi-Newtonian society. Certainly in advocating a transition to onto-poetics and the practice of the animateur, I am not intending a *retreat* from reason. Such a retreat would usher us from the restrictive but still eminently functional realm of science and philosophy into a dysfunctional new-age realm of relativism and wish-fulfilling fantasy. My intention, in other words, is to advocate moving *beyond* reason rather than stepping back from it. Our poetic practice, as I have indicated, needs to exceed but not contradict the findings of science while also remaining within reach of philosophical rationalization. Prevalent academic critiques of reason in the last several decades – via feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist discourses, for instance – seem to have wildly overshot the mark. Historically speaking, Western reason may indeed have accrued unfortunate gender and race associations, but these cultural overlays can surely be scraped off without the bedrock notions of consistency, validity and evidence being

abandoned. In Western societies we are currently reaping what these recent academic attacks on the Enlightenment sowed: on the one hand, perhaps, a greater degree of cultural inclusivity, as intended, but on the other hand a widespread scorn for reason that has encouraged complacency in many sectors of society. This has led individuals to rank their own untutored, self-serving prejudices as on a par, epistemologically speaking, with the professional views of scientists and other highly-trained researchers (including philosophers). In other words, what the overdrawn critique of reason has delivered in the 21st century is an environmentally dystopic relativism that manifests as widespread “scepticism” with regard to the findings of the environmental sciences, most notably the sciences of climate change.

Discourses of reason then, such as the various ecological, conservation and climate sciences and the ecophilosophies premised on them, have laid down foundations for a responsible poetics. Such a poetics is needed to hook these discourses into the living fabric of culture but it will only prove environmentally efficacious if it is indeed responsible, in the sense of respecting and addressing ecological reality, or the best approximation to ecological reality available to us through the ministrations of reason. In order to prove efficacious as a mode for addressing environmental crisis, onto-poetics furthermore needs to be tied inextricably into the technology of everyday practice: the technologies whereby we negotiate our role in the biosphere must be consistent with the overarching narratives from which our invocations emanate. The way we interface technically with the world needs to be consistent with the story that unfolds from our narrative engagement with it. Our technologies themselves need to figure as tropes within that story, rather than as disruptions of it. In this sense the amateur needs to be grounded not only in environmental science but also in the poetic possibilities of techno-synergy with the biosphere. No sharp distinction can divide the instrumental from the aesthetic in the onto-poetic scenario.

To carve out a path for the prospective ecophilosopher-turned-amateur then would seem to lead us out of the province of the industrialized academy, with its narrow expectations of specialist discursive production. Perhaps we will find ourselves in step again with the venerable but far-from-dated Omar Khayyam. No mere hippie drop-out, Khayyam was one of the towering Persian intellects of the eleventh to twelfth centuries, a major mathematician, astronomer and philosopher of the medieval period. Towards the end of his life, he recognized that no amount of intellection would rescue him from subject-object solipsism and plug him into the reality of the living cosmos. “Come with Old Khayyam,” he says, “and leave the wise to talk”. Philosophical talk – theorizing - is just another way whereby the ego-self seeks exemption from mortality and tries to impose itself on reality. But all such attempts at exemption are deluded. The ego-self is as transient as desert sands. The only redress for the tragic condition of mortality, Khayyam insists, is mystical encounter with earth itself, where earth is figured, in the lush and elaborate detail of her leafy, star-spangled beauty, as the Beloved.⁷ In the moment of this encounter, when the world startles us by revealing itself with an intimacy that is unmistakably for our benefit

⁷ Khayyam’s Rubaiyat is often read as a hedonistic paen to carnal love and inebriation over the comforts of both science and religion. Sometimes his allusions to dalliance and wine are read in terms of Sufi mysticism, in the manner of Rumi. (Dogan 1991) But the mystical tropes of Sufism are combined, in the Rubaiyat, with such a vehement materialism and religious scepticism that the way is open, I think, to read the verses, as I am doing here, as a mystical tribute not to a transcendent God but to the living cosmos itself under its numinous aspect.

only, we are jolted out of subject-object solipsism. This revealed presence, we discover, categorically exceeds any possible representation. As we awaken into the actual presence of the world and find ourselves in turn tangibly observed by it, we recognize that the dream of personal immortality was never anything other than compensation for the self's lack of a sense of its own reality. This lack of a sense of its own reality was the pathological reverse image of the solipsism created by the subject-object lens of discourse. "Awake!", cries Khayaam. This is the whole gist of the Rubaiyat. Awake from the sleep of solipsism, from the objectification of the world effected by theory. Awaken into the actual presence of a living, speaking world that responds to our address and thereby brings us into the actuality of encounter. "Awake, for morning in the bowl of night/ has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight" (Fitzgerald, 1984, verse I). There is urgency in the call. Just as Rumi would a century later, Khayyam pleads with us not to waste time. "One thing is certain, that life flies/ one thing is certain and the rest is lies / the flower that once has blown forever dies" (Fitzgerald, 1984, verse XXVI). Pluck the flower before it blows. To do so is to step through the veil of appearance that keeps us chasing illusions of permanence and substance. It is to step into the expansiveness and sufficiency of an inexhaustibly self-storying reality.

If he were with us today, Old Khayaam would assuredly then not be arguing over the finer points of ecophilosophy. He would instead be inviting us to drink this earth-wine, meet this earth-love in the wild privacy of her bower and join with her in the incomparable poetics of her reciprocal manifestations. There would be no question then of blasting her for profit, carelessly allowing her to choke on our poisonous wastes or betraying her trust for the sake of our careers. Nothing – not the lure of reputation nor the enticements of wealth, let alone mere convenience or expediency – could drag us from her embrace. We would rest content, as besotted as a drunkard on her grassy breast, and fiercely stave off each and every threat to her beauty and integrity.

"Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,
A flask of wine, and book of verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness
And Wilderness is Paradise enow." (Fitzgerald, 1984, verse XI)

In conclusion, with the planet in manifest extremis and our other-than-human kin under relentless and escalating assault all around us, it may no longer be enough merely to philosophize about the ecological crisis. This crisis brings the relevance of academic philosophy itself as a form of cultural expression into question. Certainly we cannot afford to discard the reflexive rationality that has been the special province of philosophy, but something deeper and larger than mere ratiocination may be needed if society is to be turned on its motivational axis. It is worth remembering in this connection though that philosophy was not always mere ratiocination. In its ancient Greek and Hellenistic origins – to which Khayaam, as a student of Avicenna, may well have been harking back – philosophy was an art of living as much as a mere mode of inquiry. To be a philosopher, according to historians of ancient Greek thought - notably Pierre Hadot - was not primarily to be a mere thinker but to live a good and reflective life, supported by a dedicated community and with recourse to a large array of consciousness-expanding exercises. (Hadot 1995) In some schools, such exercises included the oracular arts, and philosophy itself was deemed

inseparable from revelation.⁸ (Addey 2009; Uzdavinys 2008) In other words, philosophy, as the pursuit of wisdom, was originally understood to implicate not only the human faculty of reason but larger transmissions of meaning at play in the cosmos. The philosopher was not merely a thinker but, like the contemporary amateur, a lightning rod for onto-poetic revelation. In this sense, any prospective transition from ecophilosophy to onto-poetics in the present day may lead to, and receive guidance from, a re-examination of the original project of philosophy itself, the goal of which was arguably precisely to furnish a larger, therapeutic poetics of existence within which our day-to-day desires could become re-aligned with the intrinsic dynamics of a psycho-active reality.

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⁸ In her doctoral thesis, *Oracles of the Gods: the Role of Divination and Theurgy in the Philosophy of Porphyry and Iamblichus*, Crystal Addey writes (in the Abstract) that “oracles, ritual and philosophy were conceptualised as inextricably linked phenomena by Neoplatonist philosophers in Late Antiquity.” Focusing on an examination of Porphyry’s *Philosophy from Oracles* and Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries*, Addey argues that “[o]racles and other ‘inspired’ types of divination were seen as an essential element of philosophy, as receptacles of divine wisdom and truth....The reception of oracles ... becomes a form of philosophical initiation, which was considered to encompass ‘divine vision’....The views of divination expressed by both Porphyry and Iamblichus imply a model of divine and human interaction which is subtle and complex: oracles are multivalent utterances which operate as *symbola*, ‘symbols’ of the gods implanted in the mortal world. They require a complex level of ritual interaction between philosopher and oracle, with the potential of allowing the philosopher to gain direct, experiential understanding of Divine Intellect (*Nous*). Oracles become tools for philosophical contemplation at all levels....” Algis Uzdavinys explores similar terrain in *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth*. Philosophy, he writes, begins with “the inspired interpretations of divine oracles, epiphanies and omens.....Such primordial ‘philosophy’ is involved in conversation with the community of hieratic forces which permeate the universe.....’philosophy’ in its purest form is akin to liturgy which enumerates and praises various divine properties or prototypes of human thought and action. The human being wonders at the face of unspeakable divine manifestations, truths and beauties that constitute the complex of the visible and invisible worlds...This wonder shows the primordial unity of devotion, contemplation and intentional ‘erotic’ striving for wisdom (*sophia*), able to reveal the countless possibilities in the sphere of skills, arts, technologies, laws and institutions which are open to different reflections, meditations and explanations.” (p. 66)

Many thanks to Etain Addey for drawing my attention to both these studies of ancient Greek philosophy.

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