

**POEM AND COMMENTS**  
**About the recent conference:**  
**Writing and the Contemplative Mind Conference**  
**At George Mason University this weekend (October 21-22, 2011)**  
**by**  
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A few people after the conference on asked me to share my poem about contemplative technology. This is not an occasional poem. It was finished in 1989 after a long preparation, described in another review entitled "Tracking Contemplations," on my book's website, <http://frameshiftsnotes.org> A vision of the future in which poets are given direct access to their readers' brains, whereon they use subvocal management to perform morphemic operations, the poem does not, as far as I know, describe a new app. For this technical shortcoming, we should ask Dr. Francl and the Augustinians to sing a *Te Deum*.

**Patch this to his midbrain.**

In a six foot line that one must read as five  
by somewhere stealing stress, more briefly to arrive,  
the Morphemic Operator designated  
contrived (uneasily) to write a pattern slated  
for another operator from the pool.  
Tedium, praise for the end of the shift, or the Rule  
itself a challenge (confining duty to directives):  
though she was only to abbreviate connectives --  
for whatever reason -- she had tired of this  
and pulled up a readout problem none would miss.  
It came from the bench of a Particle Counter  
like a meditation upon emptiness.  
This Scintillator on his early morning stints  
(shift same as hers; as tedious, on evidence)  
was wasting costly beta cocktails on restarts;  
his overruns required excuses and new parts.  
The screen's left margin stealing a space each line,  
zero untrue and shifting, he could not assign  
corrections fast enough to track the slight advances  
and declines; the rubato robot ruined chances  
of his ever keeping error five percent:  
Just the problem for subvocal management.  
She produced a ponder program to improve his dwell  
on noise and static and give him peace with the erratic:

*Come, Oh come, Oh sweet and careless feast of lips and hands  
and breasts and tongues and catching, spilling,  
wasting, reaching, tasting, drinking, stretching;*

*Come and come again, droop and rise increased; dwindle,  
dally, strum the belly of desire; swim the medley --mound  
and cave, brook and pyre, reach within reach settling  
only to reach higher, slowing to heaviness and subtler, bluer fire;*

*Come, blue-green and slippery from slumbering eddies: lie  
slyly on my thoughts, you fingering, shallow roots;  
drench me, seize my gentle flowers, crush my shoots with  
swelling softness, salt me in your shuddering breeze.*

This the Morphemic Operator for the Counter  
whose quench curve flagged and error rose unsated,  
prepared: a sutra, subvocal and subzero,  
to conduct him, as a pilgrim on a saunter  
through emptiness and cool expanses of unstated  
uselessness, to dwell in secret warmth of snow.

## COMMENTS

Returning to the GMU campus after 24 years, I found that the discussion about Ways of Knowing, or what Phil Phenix called *Realms of Meaning*, had floated free of its disciplinary moorings. As Jane Hirshfield reminded us: *Everything changes. Everything is connected. Pay attention.* I simply hadn't been paying attention.

But then, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. How similar the discussion was to the arguments about epistemology and the logics of our disciplines into which we doctoral students were prodded by Professors Beyer and Fletcher. Despite the apparent demise of epistemology, and Richard Rorty's logical decision to leave philosophy for the English Department—the discussion is still alive.

How do we know? What can we know? With whom or what do we have to do? All the great old questions are still alive because every student must answer them anew.

Of course, not everyone wants to be a student. Inquiry is something you *need* to do. Whether it is inquiry into the nature of things, like the poem of Lucretius about atomism, or the inquiry about this present, exquisite, best moment of our lives, this beauty—

*And those who are beautiful,  
Oh, who can retain them? Appearance ceaselessly rises  
in their face, and is gone. Like dew from the morning grass,  
what is ours floats into the air, like steam from a dish  
of hot food. O smile, where are you going? O upturned glance:  
new warm receding wave on the sea of the heart—  
Alas, but that is what we are. Does the infinite space  
we dissolve into, taste of us then? . . .*

*(Rilke, Duino Elegies)*

Is it the taste of our own tongue in our mouths? This nectar that we taste—  
whatever it is—is “sweet only when shared” (Adam Miciewicz); this shared discussion  
about the divine life continues, even as the ground drifts and storms shift around us and  
the Earth inexorably takes on seven billion humans this year—and all their multipliers—  
and:

*All things on earth shall wholly pass away  
as grazing aphids from the milkweed green,  
obsidian beetles from the dark,  
ten-legged lines from ever-fingering touch,  
or icon from belief, or firefly swim of stars  
from awe or hope or love . . .*

*(Rose, Frameshifts)*

We still know that the stories we tell each other can imprison us or free us from  
delusion by “widening our circle of compassion.” (Einstein) And part of the discussion is  
knowing and accepting our limitations. To go into our monasteries or writing studios or  
laboratories is to share our lonely practice with a host of witnesses. There we accomplish  
the soul work for which we are suited or called. There we are refreshed and spent. And as  
breath comes in and goes out, we enter our studios of imagination and we return as  
witnesses to the world, our vision scrubbed, our frames of reference shifted. What can we  
know? How can we take any more from this world than we make of it?

*What's given simply is too vast  
For us to take more than we make.  
The universe has us outclassed.*

*A witness wants to be believed,  
But in passage to the report  
Intention frames what is conceived;*

*Though truth may always be our aim,  
It is embedded in belief.  
Someone must work to clear its name,*

*A partner for the passage through the dark:  
A Krishna, Enkidu, Nestor, or Clark . . .*

*(Rose, Frameshifts)*

We need partners. Much as we might want to believe that poetry and all the other makings, the other inquiries, are our personal, sullen arts, we are linked to partners. *Everything is connected.* But only in *communities* are people connected by a common love. As W.H. Auden explained in his lecture on *Julius Caesar (1946)*, the other kinds of connections between people are *societies* and *crowds*, the former a functional relationship in which “an individual is irreplaceable in his function,” the latter a mass whose members “neither belong to nor join it, but merely add to it. The members of the crowd have nothing in common except togetherness. The individual is a contradiction in a crowd. The ‘we’ precedes the ‘I.’ In itself the crowd has no function. . .”

To go into the monastic cell, the studio, or lab is to enter communion with those who share one’s love and *need* for the practice, the craft, the process. This creative engagement is a dynamo that may, in fact, power contemplative technologies, but it has its own intention, its own direction, its own work. It is entirely proper to speak, as Dr. Francl did, of **prayer** as labwork, writing, and imaginative inquiry. While one works in the studio of the imagination, the community is present—in peer review, in tradition, in documents, in an ensemble, in memory, or even on the internet.

*“Men work together,” I told him from the heart,  
“Whether they work together or apart.”* (Frost, “*The Tuft of Flowers*”)

But the prayer continues when we leave our studios and communities—when we breathe out. We discover whether we have become any wiser. How has our practice equipped us to see, to feel, to choose, to act? Here I return to the old arguments about epistemology. How zealously Philosophy sought to demonstrate herself the foundation of other disciplines! How certain the sciences were of positive knowledge! How easily the writers and artists disposed of certainty and knowledge itself! Has our practice merely confirmed the rhetoric of a position?

Much as we try to swallow the ocean, it remains the ocean. One kind of practice does not suffice. In the larger community of creative engagement and understanding, we must utterly rely on the practices of others. The physicist and the theologian, the painter and the writer, must shift their frames of reference to grasp the truths revealed by other practices. This is more difficult than denial of different truths or contempt for different disciplines. It is, in fact a work of prayer, which is *sustained attention and creative engagement leading to a cognitive procession from fate to will, ignorance to understanding, grasping to acceptance, waste to salvage, fear to hope, opportunism to compassion, exclusion to inclusion, and partial work to soul work.* In this work, we are all engaged, together and apart.