A New Romanticism for the Twenty-first Century

by Sean Arthur Joyce

1: Reigniting Poetry's Visionary Past

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for?
> — Robert Browning, "Andrea del Sarto"

I'm going to make a bold assertion: it's time for a New Romanticism—or Gaianism, if you will—not just in poetry, but the world. (The term "Gaianism" is based on James Lovelock's Gaia Theory, the idea that the Earth is a self-regulating, living organism.) Such New Romanticism does not mean succumbing to naïveté or sentimentalism. A mature adult is well aware that nothing in this world will ever be ideal, that life is full of trade-offs, disappointments and heartbreak. This essay is not a utopian tract. Even so, I would agree with Browning[1] that it's better to reach for utopian ideals and fail than to assume our fundamental nature is self-serving and vicious. That merely becomes a sad, self-fulfilling prophecy—a self-justifying strategy of looters and pillagers, whether they come in army fatigues or pinstripe suits. It's a model we've watched play out in market collapse, governmental corruption, corporate bailouts with public money, and global climate upheaval. If anything, it's proven that capitalism's childish insistence on free reign without constraint is no more mature or realistic than Romantic idealism. The monomaniacal focus on the bottom line has reached the logical end of its excesses. A new model must be built that places the need for profit in tandem with responsibility to the community and the planet. No one ever died because they made a little less profit this year than last. By contrast, plenty have died in the unprincipled pursuit of obscene profits, as this (or any) year's catastrophic climate events make abundantly clear.

What does this have to do with poetry? Everything. Poets too in this age may need to focus less on what profits their careers and more on community. "The state of the world calls out for poetry to save it," writes Lawrence Ferlinghetti in *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (3). "Save the world?" you laugh. Poets aren't what P. B. Shelley called the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" in a literal sense. By nature they are probably the least capable of the mundane, repetitive dirty work of governance. But Shelley

was suggesting that poets almost invariably are idealists, looking toward William Blake's spiritual New Jerusalem. Perhaps Shelley today might have written, "the unacknowledged *ethical* legislators of the world." This is not the monomania of the religious fanatic or the priest charged with preserving community morals but the poet holding up the light of our higher selves—the *Prometheus Unbound* of the human spirit: a priest of transcendence, not dogma.

Irving Layton refined Ferlinghetti's point when he said that poetry "enables us to hope, makes compassion reasonable" (Sherman). Given Layton's bleak view of human nature this is no glib statement. In the "nature red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson) doctrine of social evolution hijacked by nineteenth century industrial capitalists, compassion was *not* reasonable, because it hindered them from crawling over broken bodies on their way to the top of the pyramid. Arch-capitalist Andrew Carnegie summed it up: "We accept and welcome therefore, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment, the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few, and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential for the future progress of the race."[2]

But if we're to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, then compassion is a good place to start. As Eric Michael Johnson has written in *Scientific American*:

> Fairness is the basis of the social contract. As citizens we expect that when we contribute our fair share we should receive our just reward. When social benefits are handed out unequally or when prior agreements are not honored it represents a breach of trust. Based on this, Americans were justifiably outraged when, not just one, but two administrations bailed out the wealthiest institutions in the country while tens of thousands of homeowners (many of whom were victims of these same institutions) were evicted and left stranded.[3]

From an evolutionary point of view, the ethos of cooperation is far more adapted to survival of the species than pure self-interest, especially at this late date. The Russian evolutionary theorist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin made this argument effectively over a century ago. "We maintain that under any circumstances *sociability* is the greatest advantage in the struggle for life," Kropotkin wrote in his defining work, *Mutual Aid* (xxvi). "Those species which willingly or unwillingly abandon it are doomed to decay…" Or as evolutionary biologists E. O. Wilson and Bert Hölldobler put it: "Social organization has been one of the most consistently success-

ful strategies in all of evolutionary history," though of course this doesn't necessarily imply an egalitarian social structure, at least not as Carnegie saw it (8). Still, now that sufficient time has passed for industrial capitalism's excesses to reach the critical mass of sociological and environmental crises we face today, Kropotkin's thesis is well supported. Darwin himself wrote: "Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring."[4] This is supported by current evolutionary research.[5]

A New Romanticism—a literary Gaianism—for the twenty-first century, then. If this seems like an exercise in merely reviving nineteenth-century Romanticism, it's not. There is much discussion of late about the need to "write a new story," a new mythology, an understanding that our traditional narratives no longer serve us. This point is arguable, since from a Jungian point of view the basic template of stories across all cultures remains the same from the time we began telling stories. Only the forms and cultural norms used to express these basic stories change. But origin stories such as the Old Testament's linking of ancient Israel's destiny with a divine mandate and grand political visions like nineteenth-century American "manifest destiny" have only ever been about serving a national power agenda. Arguably much of mainstream religion has served the same purpose during the past two millennia particularly. (Which makes Pope Francis' new encyclical all the more startling and hopeful.) "We may be living in an intellectual building site, where a new story is being constructed," explains the Australian professor of history David Christian. "It's vastly more powerful than the previous stories because it's the first one that is global. It's not anchored in a particular culture or a particular society. This is an origin story that works for humans in Beijing as well as in Buenos Aires" (Farrell).

Clearly the great religious allegories no longer serve humanity in the face of twenty-first century social and environmental crises. Nor is the postmodern aesthetic that has held sway over most writing academies over the past forty years the place to look for inspiration. Tom Wayman's essay "Avant-garde or Lost Platoon: Postmodernism as Social Control" thoroughly debunks the notion that postmodernism functions as any kind of sociopolitical critique or rallying cry for social or environmental justice. "Today, with postmodernism a significant mode of thought in many humanities and social science disciplines, English-speaking universities and colleges have become placid degree mills where students meekly undergo training in accepting a lifetime of personal debt *and in accepting*

the immutability of existing economic and social arrangements" (italics mine) (19).

Meanwhile, Pope Francis hits all the right notes, according to cognitive linguist George Lakoff. As with Professor Christian's idea of a new global origin story so necessary in a time of climate change, the Pope writes of "a growing conviction that *our planet is a homeland* and that humanity is one people living in a common home"[6] (italics mine). A short but necessary step from there is Lovelock's concept of the planet as a living organism, not merely a tenement for human use. As Lakoff explains, cognitive linguistics demonstrates how essential it is to get the framing right in order to trigger responsive action. "Beginning with my book *Moral Politics* in 1996, I have been arguing that environmental issues are moral issues. There I reviewed and critiqued conservative metaphors of nature as a resource, as property, as an adversary to be conquered … I suggested alternative metaphors of nature as mother, as a divine being, as a living organism, as a home, as a victim to be cared for, and a whole with us as parts inseparable from nature and from each other … The title of the (Pope's) encyclical is 'On Care for our Common Home.' This simple phrase establishes the most important frame right from the start. Using the metaphor of the 'Earth as Home,' he triggers a frame in which all the people of the world are a family, living in a common home."[7]

This is a far cry from the bleak pessimism of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," that quasi-apocalyptic modernist vision of civilization, where the jaded narrator wanders "through certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels … Streets that follow like a tedious argument / of insidious intent …"(9). Contained in this early modernism were the seeds of postmodernism, with its insistence on jettisoning meaning and morality altogether. Based on the now disproven premise that language structures are arbitrary and random, postmodernism took Eliot's modernist despair and turned it into the white noise of gibberish, which left us with precisely nothing to hold onto. (To be fair, as D. M. R. Bentley has noted, Eliot's poetic outlook wasn't entirely bleak. Even *The Waste Land*, often seen as the quintessential summary of the jaded modernist outlook, "is not without hope and not entirely defeatist … the Fisher King asks, 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?'")[8]

Still, with twentieth-century poets abandoning Romanticism for moral relativism, it's no wonder the masses gravitated in the millions to popular songwriters, starting in the 1960s with Bob Dylan. Even if the popular song failed to aspire to high art, it offered clarity of language and message

in a way most people could relate to. In *Voltaire's Bastards*, John Ralston Saul explains: "Readers have refused to abandon the story and so for decades have been embracing new means of communication that offer clear narrative" (565). The popular song was one such narrative.

As I've repeatedly said, poets have only themselves to blame for their current lack of audience or social relevance. As Wayman asserts, much of the blame for this irrelevance lies at the feet of postmodernism. Compare that to the mass popularity of Shelley and Tennyson in the nineteenth century. In the 1950s, Dylan Thomas could fill lecture halls across America and Yevgeny Yevtushenko filled stadiums in Russia. Today the only living poet who comes close to being loved and recited by millions would be Leonard Cohen, now as much a popular songwriter as a poet. What are the odds that the cryptic verses of any postmodernist poet will be on the masses' lips a century from now? Saul ties this social irrelevance to poets' deepening ties to academic institutions and career paths over the past century. "The worst of all possible combinations is to be out of the world as a writer and yet bound to its structures as a writer … This is a prison constructed of the poets' own language in their own minds … an imprisonment of the imagination by heightened self-consciousness" (547–48). As in postmodernism, it shifts the focus from the art to the artist. The world's great works of art may well commend us to the genius of their creators, but in the end artists are merely the conduit, not the content.

The missing element we're talking about here is *vision*, a much ballyhooed quality in poetry during the past half-century or more. Poets historically served as visionaries for society, whether in a cautionary sense—Isaiah crying out in the wilderness—or in the sense of formulating grand narratives cast in utopian hues. "The wordsmith—prophet, singer, poet, essayist, novelist—has always been either the catalyst of change or, inversely, the servant of established power," writes Saul. "He breaks up the old formulas of wisdom and truth and thus frees the human imagination so that individuals can begin thinking of themselves and their society in new ways, which the writer must then express in new language" (536–37). And occasionally, they seem to have the visionary foresight to predict what certain wrong choices will lead to years or decades hence. This includes writers of visionary prose such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, though like Eliot theirs were dystopic visions. There are hints of an even more discredited term here—prophetic—in such writing. Yet if "predictive" is a synonym for "prophetic," then prophetic they were. Orwell's 24/7 surveillance society is upon us. Huxley's genetically engineered society is now a genuine scientific possibility. Meanwhile, Blake's vision of the Industrial

Revolution's "dark satanic mills"[9] was seen from the *outset* of the phenomenon, not from the endpoint, where we are now. As Alfred Kazin has written, "Blake was only one of many Englishmen who felt himself being slowly ground to death, in a world of such brutal exploitation and amid such inhuman ugliness, that the fires of the new industrial furnaces and the cries of the child laborers are always in his work"(31). To counter this apocalyptic ugliness Blake drew upon the visionary, prophetic tradition of poetry that stretched back to ancient Greece, with its Oracle of Delphi. In *Songs of Experience* (99) he writes:

> Hear the voice of the Bard
> Who Present, Past and Future sees
> Whose ears have heard the Holy Word
> That walked among the ancient trees.

In the ancient Celtic bardic tradition—with a provenance nearly as old as the Greek—poetry is often visionary or prophetic. Layton once said poets are the descendants of prophets, an idea that came to be mocked in modern academia. "These days," Layton wrote presciently in 1967, "when the poet's revolutionary and prophetic vocation is either misunderstood or questioned, it is more exigent than ever to burn it into the consciousness of everyone…" (*Periods of the Moon* 11). As one of our living elder poets, Ferlinghetti reconnects with the bardic, oracular tradition when he says, "great poets are the antennae of the race" (*Poetry as Insurgent Art* 56). In the Celtic story of the Salmon of Knowledge, the aspiring young poet who accidentally touches the roasting salmon's skin is granted not only the master poet's gift for poetry, but also the gift of visionary insight. He becomes a poet *and* a seer. Why this is far from trite will become clear shortly.

These days it doesn't take a prophet to read the writing on the wall. It *does* take someone willing to risk ridicule and ostracism for pointing it out. Layton again: "The alert and sensitive poet seizes that moment of significant change when old values and institutions are crumbling into hypocrisy and cowardice and new impulses are beginning to reveal themselves. The tide sweeps out, leaving the strand dotted with pretty shells; *the poet's vocation is to look beyond* the lifeless carapaces a pallid aestheticism or conventional piety would wish to preserve ..."(*The Covenant* xiv) (italics mine). Not a great career strategy at a time when Poetry, capital P, has been professionalized the same as a proctologist or a plumber, as Saul explains in *Voltaire's Bastards*. Citing the ancient concept of the poet as the "faithful witness," Saul explains how the establishment of the French Academy was

the leading edge of the attempt to disempower the revolutionary power of the poetic word. "(Cardinal Richilieu's) use of the Academy to honour writers is still not generally understood to be a fine method for disarming dangerous language. … The gradual marginalization of poetry and drama as the principal means of public communication can be attributed in part to such public ties" (547). In part this distancing from the public audience was accomplished by the increasingly self-referential nature—both in solipsistic and psychological terms—of modern poetry. "The growth of literary studies encouraged this, as did the growth of academies and prizes. What to intellectuals seemed revolutionary, to the outer world seemed elitism" (547). The public narrative of the epic or Romantic poem had become the private world of the poet and the academy. The best way to de-fang a revolutionary is to make him a member of the inner circle, the elite.

In aboriginal and other pre-literate societies, bards weren't just walking history books for the clan. They acted as a kind of societal reality check, or sanity valve as I like to call it—Saul's "faithful witness." Somehow the poet is in touch with the dark forces brewing within the human shadow and isn't afraid of exploring these for the benefit of all those with whom we share the biosphere. As the oft-quoted aphorism of Che Guevara aptly puts it: "… the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love." Often this first requires a visionary bold enough to point out that the emperor has no clothes, a poet unafraid to expose the dark recesses of human depravity. One has only to read almost any collection of poems by Layton to find an example. He was, after all, a Jew, and his race had nearly been expunged from the face of the Earth. So my vision of a New Romanticism or Gaianism has nothing to do with the sentimentality and whitebread "Puritanism" Layton so effectively skewered throughout his career. Perhaps singlehandedly, he sounds the death-knell of nineteenth-century Romanticism:

> I submit that a new element was ushered into the human situation with World War II, with the slave camps of Communist Russia and the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. With the terroristic bombings of Hamburg and Cologne, Hiroshima. Consider these: genocide, the systematic use of terror to cow entire regions into submission or surrender, mass exterminations carried out with all the refinements a fiendish imagination could devise, the atrocities done to helpless victims for no other purpose but the gratification of sadistic impulse. The almost complete apathy human suffering and misfortune nowadays encounter … *It is this new and terrifying fact that utterly invalidates ninety-nine percent of the world's literature of the past and rolls a stone over it that nothing will ever again remove*, at least over that part of it that sought to humanize people by trying to make them conscious of the evils of injustice

and misery. *The poet today labours under the constraint of finding other means*. (*The Shattered Plinths* 13; italics mine)

Thus, a New Romanticism or Gaianism has its bloodied eyes wide open to humanity's capacity for atrocity and its daily enactment in world headlines. Ironically, the occasional sentimentality of Romantic poetry that sometimes glossed over this fundamental truth of the human condition has been replaced by the equally bleary-eyed obfuscations of postmodernism. So instead of burying our heads in the sand of W. B. Yeats's folk and fairy tales, wonderful as they are, postmodernists buried our heads in aesthetic abstraction—art about art. One can hardly blame the Romantic poets for being on the wrong side of history—the bloodbath that soaked the twentieth century as none had ever quite done before. Yet their impulse was toward social justice, and their prophetic vision was clear. The factories, steam engines, and metal gears of industrial capitalism they were staring at were the early form of the beast taking shape and they were not afraid to name it the Devil. Or at very least, warn us to proceed with extreme caution.

Professor Christopher Rowland of the faculty of Theology at the University of Oxford downplays the prophetic element in favour of Blake's social justice inclination and its implicit political imperatives: "Prophecy for Blake, however, was not a prediction of the end of the world, but telling the truth as best a person can about what he or she sees, fortified by insight and an "honest persuasion" that with personal struggle, things could be improved. A human being observes, is indignant and speaks out: it's a basic political maxim which is necessary for any age."[10] Rowland, in other words, is saying that Blake fulfilled the role of "faithful witness."

2: A New Way to Inhabit the Earth

> Your life is your poetry. If you have no heart, you'll write heartless poetry.
> —Ferlinghetti[11]

According to the mytho-historian Seumas MacManus in *The Story of the Irish Race*, Celtic kings lived in fear of displeasing poets for fear of being satirized in the most blistering terms. In a pre-literate age they were the walking editorial pages. This is as it should be in any society built upon social justice. If we are to survive the twenty-first century as a species, we need to *reverse* the dictums of Machiavelli and Sun Tzu: the rulers ought to fear the people. A Celtic *ollam* or master poet used a blend of passionate intensity and twelve years of study in poetic craft to write satires. (To be

considered an *ollam* they had to be capable of memorizing and then composing spontaneously in hundreds of different kinds of meters.) (MacManus 179–80) Under the ancient Celtic system of kingship and the Brehon Laws, poets were supported by kings and held a position of honour in their courts, often seated next to them at high table (MacManus 176). If a king's hospitality was sub-par, or worse—miserly and disrespectful—bards had the right to compose and recite satires lampooning him. Such satires would then be recited or sung wherever the poet travelled in Ireland. Few kings would risk such a blow to their political stock at a time when bards were looked to as the sole disseminators and preservers of the culture. Given the lack of a written language at this point in ancient Celtic history, did such a society truly exist? Does it matter? Whether such a regime is historically verifiable is far less important than the values it enshrines using mythopoetic techniques. Browning's aphorism once again resonates here.

President Kennedy once said in honour of Robert Frost, "When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses."[12] If poetry only reinforces the status quo of accepted reality, then it serves ultimately to oppress our spirit, and plays right into the hands of the socio-political elite, as Saul and Wayman suggest. Ditto if it fails to register the social justice concerns of society at a given moment. "Postmodernism's vaunted ambiguity and lack of closure along with its abandonment of linear narrative structure and clear referentiality," writes Wayman, "fit in well with globalism's insistence that any narrative of its impairment of the quality of daily life must be blurred or otherwise obscured" (Wayman, "Avant-garde" 52). By contrast, Ferlinghetti has said both that poets ought to be the "antennae" of the race and "the conscience of the race" (*Poetry as Insurgent Art* 21).

The Romantics revived the bardic sense of *noblesse oblige* in response to the attack on Nature they perceived arising from the Industrial Revolution. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his *On Poesy or Art,* goes so far as to proclaim art as "the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human."[13] Such higher purpose required the courage to plumb the dark depths of the human shadow. In the Romantic spirit, the poet—like Prometheus—must make what Joseph Campbell called "the hero's journey" to return with a boon for humanity. But what is the key to this bardic power? Wordsworth gives us a clue: Poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquility"[14] and rendered, he made clear in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, with consummate skill. Wordsworth's aphorism has often

been dismissed as reducing poetry to sentimentality. One wonders if such critics have ever actually read the "Preface," in which he makes clear his attention both to subject matter and poetic diction: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, *had also thought long and deeply*."[15] Sentimentality is the resort of the mentally lazy, the easy, shop-worn metaphor standing in for pondering the poem's subject and craft "long and deeply," as Wordsworth suggests.

Individuality is largely about perception, and perhaps more than anything, it is *emotion* that colours perception, makes one's perception distinct from anyone else's. As the Irish poet-philosopher John O'Donohue said, "A world lives within you" (xv). It follows that there are as many worlds in a room as there are people. Modern creative writing instruction often implies that the poet must never intrude into the poem with her presence but maintain a strict objective distance. To thus intrude is to muddy the water for the reader with one's point of view. Yet anyone who has worked as a journalist or historian can tell you the notion of objectivity is itself a fiction. We all come loaded with our points of view. In journalism this does indeed present problems, prejudicing a report in a certain direction. But in poetry emotional subjectivity is the curvature of the lens through which we perceive. Technical skill then polishes that lens to better reflect the image. The important distinction here is between subjectivity and narcissism.

Imagist poets soon found they had nowhere left to go with a purely objectively rendered image. The same goes for what much of current poetry adopts as objective distance. We are not mere cameras. We are flesh and heart and soul. We are human, capital H. That means we not only think, we feel. If we are afraid to feel, we are afraid of our own shadow. If we fear and run from our shadow, as Jung taught us, it overtakes us. And then *becomes* us. Just take a look at the U.S. under the Bush regime. Emotions are for healing, and for fully sensing the world. The parts of the world that hurt us, that we want to shut off, have something to teach us. And it may not be pretty or the least bit fun. But that's the purpose of the shadow. Only by facing down fear can we get past it. We are subjective beings. Why pretend otherwise? Why not celebrate our subjectivity, that multi-faceted lens of perception? If we only touch the mind and not the spirit of our readers, then both end up empty.

Twentieth-century poetic developments like sound poetry, language poetry and concrete poetry, which used words purely for sonic or visual

rather than denotative effect, have had their day. They remain historical curiosities of the poetic tradition but little more. The mind is intrigued but the heart is left unengaged, unless you "invent a new language *anyone* can understand" (Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art* 6). As the Canadian poet Kate Braid has so aptly said: "In my naïve and foolish adolescence and young adulthood, I was often misled by intellect; I was easily dazzled by language and for a long time figured that to be incomprehensible was to be wise… Now I find that for words to be merely pretty or merely clever is not enough. *The reason we talk to each other—all those exchanges that make up culture and community—is connection*"[16] (italics mine).

Ultimately, as Braid explains, writing is communication for connection. If we fail to connect with our reader on anything more than a superficial or abstruse level, then our writing has failed. *How* we communicate toward that end is infinitely varied. But in my view, poetic movements that centre on language experiments, or on rendering an image as 'objectively' as possible, communicate little. The Celtic tradition of bardic poetry required poets to combine both sound and sense, to dazzling effect on a total scale. Orwell once wrote that he wrote best when he was angered by injustice. Here again we come back to Wordsworth's dictum—emotion is the motive power that moves us to act. If passion is lacking in both the motivation to write and its final result, then too often the result is a dry intellectual exercise. As Bentley has observed, "Blake called it 'laying abstract eggs.'"[17] Layton spent a good part of his career railing against poets and theorists whose language was stripped of passion, while his own work fairly crackles with it. Ferlinghetti revisits and slightly recasts Wordsworth: "Poetry should be emotion recollected in *emotion*." Why? Because such poetry is the "shortest distance between two humans," the "primary conductor of emotion."[18]

A New Romanticism or Gaianism calls for a testimonial of the spirit, not idealized in its disembodied state as the Christians would have it, but integral to the body. As O'Donohue explains in *Anam Cara*, ancient Celtic spirituality saw the body as *in* the soul, not vice versa, that the spirit extended far beyond the body and was thus merged with everything around it. "Your soul reaches out farther than your body, and it simultaneously suffuses your body and your mind" (98). As Saul suggests in *Voltaire's Bastards*, the ultimate irony of the Age of Reason is that we have become emotionally severed from the soul. Our estrangement from Nature thus naturally follows. To some extent that is the logical outcome of any urban-based culture throughout history, but under the rubric of science that separation has led us to extremes previously unimaginable. The apotheosis of

this separation from Nature is perfectly characterized by J. Robert Oppenheimer's quotation from the Bhagavad-Gita upon watching the first nuclear bomb test: "I am become death, destroyer of worlds."

If poets are to have any relevance in a technological society struggling under the weight of its excesses, we will need to help with the process of reconnection. Aligning the spirit again with Nature will require articulating, as Blake said, "The Holy Word / That walked among the ancient trees" (*Songs* 99). Trees are an ideal signifier of spirit, as much beings of air as of earth, with their ability to respire and purify the atmosphere. O'Donohue merely echoes the ancient sages, from Krishna to Buddha to Mohammed to Christ, when he says that we as spirit are made up of the timeless building blocks of the universe. From a scientific perspective, our cells are suffused with elements that originated with the Big Bang. So that no one can truly say, I am 30 years old, or 40, or 80, but that we are all—at the most fundamental level—timeless. The Buddha said separation is the illusion that is at the root of all suffering. Science, religion, politics and economics have had to rely on this separation in order to advance themselves. But with the arrival of global climate change, we are finally at the point where our ability to reconnect with the planet may mean our very survival.

So the New Romanticism or Gaianism that I propose becomes far more than merely another of humanity's aesthetic obsessions. It takes on the status of an ethical imperative. I say ethical rather than moral or religious because as the British folksinger Roy Harper has said, religious dogma is a luxury we can no longer afford. Escalating tensions between Islam and the West, Israel and Palestine, are proof of that. Poets, Ferlinghetti advises, need to "discover a new way for mortals to inhabit the Earth" through poetry that is fully engaged with spirit and Nature. A rigid, separatist worldview has served its purpose and it's time to move on. And the days of art for art's sake and postmodernism were fine, but they're not *now*. We've had enough of the 'objective' and we've certainly had enough of self-absorption in poetry. Somewhere between the poles of dispassion and narcissism lies Wordsworth's impassioned, "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," carefully crafted and wedded to "our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow."[19] And a deepened consciousness of all the creatures with whom we share the biosphere.

Gaianism or New Romanticism calls on poets to enshrine the spirit—the heart—again in the temple of the mind. Rather than being doctrinaire, I see it as more of a twofold principle: 1) it enshrines respect for all life. The poet is not called upon merely to speak from his/her own *reaction* to the natural world, but to seek to *become* it, as it were, combining the powers of imagination and empathy to allow it to speak *through* us; and 2) it moves us as poets to a sense of responsibility to community and Nature in the way we use our art, in the spirit of the Japanese *shokunin* or master whose art is dedicated to returning a boon to the community and carried out to a high standard of excellence. This is Blake's New Jerusalem writ large across the human spirit. Riffing on Blake, Ferlinghetti wrote in *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, "Poems are burning bows, poems are arrows of desire" (35) aimed straight at the heart—the seat of the spirit that moves us to act or change. "Express the vast clarity of the outside world, the sun that sees us all, the moon that strews its shadows on us, quiet garden ponds, willows where the hidden thrush sings, dusk falling along the riverrun, and the great spaces that open out upon the sea … And the people, the people, yes, all around the Earth, speaking Babel tongues. Give voice to them all" (5, 6).

And, in the spirit of Browning's observation, what matters is not how realistic this is, but that we make the attempt in good faith.

3: Planting in Well-Cultivated Ground

> The times they are changing, and one would hope for a revival of truly lyric verse, aspiring to poetic highs somewhere between speech and song. And that doesn't mean they're going to rhyme moon with June. —Ferlinghetti[20]

In fact, the New Romantics have long been with us, though never acknowledged as such. Not as a discrete movement, but in individual poems arguably as far back as the Beat poets, especially Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg. The Beats were Romantic in the sense of having captured the social justice impulse whose outlines were in place with the nineteenth-century Romantics. Unsurprisingly, this countercultural aesthetic arose at the very height of American postwar triumphalism and the origins of modern consumerism with Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, which was about as far from the whitewashed *Leave it to Beaver* America as you could get. Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg were outspoken critics of U.S. foreign and domestic policy, not least in their poetry, and in many ways were the advance guard to the protest movements of the 1960s. The mantle was not taken up as a movement by the poets of the day, as I've said, so it was left to popular songwriters

like Bob Dylan to carry it forward. Already on January 6, 1961, Ginsberg is writing:

> The Revolution in America
> already begun not bombs but sit
> down strikes on top submarines
> on sidewalks nearby City Hall—
> How many families control the States?[21]

Ferlinghetti, who has remained an activist poet all his life, lets us know in the opening lines of *A Coney Island of the Mind* (9) that his heart lies with the Romantic sensibility of social justice:

> In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see
> the people of the world
> exactly at the moment when
> they first attained the title of
> 'suffering humanity'

And right up to the present, at the ripe old age of 96, Ferlinghetti continues to see not merely a political but a transformational role for poetry. In his 1999 essay, *Can Poetry Really Change the World?* he makes this argument. No fool, he opens by anticipating the criticism such an assertion will likely engender: "Isn't it a romantic illusion to think that poetry can really change anything? Isn't the poet really powerless in today's dog-eat-cat world of power-players, power-plays, and super-powers? Today in the United States, the poet has no real place or status."[22] Certainly, as Wayman has argued, the power brokers have done their best to sideline the role of the poet as an agent of social change through strategies such as postmodernism, which for some decades now has sidelined university campuses as the locus for progressivism. Writers can be surprisingly naïve about such hidden political agendas. But as Saul points out, those who hold power will always seek to control the language for their own ends (536). Yet Ferlinghetti clings to the optimism implied in Browning's dictum even as he lives through one of the bloodiest centuries in history. Citing another celebrated Beat author, he writes:

> Still there are those, including myself, who believe in poets as the antennae of the race, as the conscience of society, or at least as Jack Kerouac said, "the great rememberer redeeming life from darkness." The greatest poets' greatest lines have entered mass consciousness, and they are great precisely because they have continued to resonate in our lives today. Thus we arrive at the point

> at which the poet not only articulates the consciousness of his time but also becomes its conscience, and we come full circle to the poet's prophetic or vatic role, with contemporaries like Allen Ginsberg (who so many have attested changed their consciousness) and Bob Dylan…[23]

If one were to write a manifesto of New Romanticism, this would do nicely.

And although Layton would have bristled sharply at being labeled a New Romantic, like the Beats he was unabashed in his criticism of the elite, whether literary or political. Being a bardic Jew he could hardly do otherwise, as in poems like "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," where he rails against "the syphilitic whore called Europe / smelling of charnel houses and museums…" (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 199). Yet Layton realized that his gut instinct for social justice was reinvigorated by Nature, though one would never have called him a Nature poet:

> And me happiest when I compose poems.
>   Love, power, the huzza of battle
>   are something, are much;
> yet a poem includes them like a pool
>   water and reflection.
> In me, nature's divided things—
>   tree, mould on tree—
>   have their fruition;
> I am their core. Let them swap,
> bandy, like a flame swerve.
> I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve.[24]

Layton, Wayman and 'people's poet' Milton Acorn have all been consistent voices for social justice even if their ecological consciousness was subsumed somewhat by what they saw as more pressing sociopolitical concerns. When Acorn was passed over for the 1970 Governor General's Award, Layton and Eli Mandel created the People's Poet award to honour his book *I've Tasted My Blood*, in which Acorn states in the frontispiece: "I have called myself many things; but I guess the one that sticks is 'Revolutionary Poet'—that is revolutionary in the political sense, not the poetic sense."[25] This is what Saul is writing about when he discusses the subsuming of the revolutionary *message* for revolutionary *technique* in poetry that characterized much late twentieth-century poetry. "… in its moments of freedom, language seeks clarity and communication; when imprisoned, the word instead becomes a complex and obscure shield for those who master it.… The workings of power have never been so shielded by professional verbal obscurantism" (547, 538). Saul no doubt would approve

of Acorn's spurning of the academy with the help of Layton and company—a consistency of message and action that amounts to integrity. Acorn in *I've Tasted My Blood* cuts right through the miasma of poetic obscurantism, echoing Guevara's insistence that the "true revolutionary is motivated by love":

> I shout Love even tho it might deafen you
> and never say that Love's a mild thing
> for it's hard, a violation
> of all laws for the shrinking of people.
> I *shout* Love, counting on the hope
> that you'll sing and not shatter in Love's vibration.
> …
> I shout Love in those four-letter words
> contrived to smudge and put it in a harmless place,
> for Love today's a curse and defiance.
> Listen you money-plated bastards
> puffing to blow back the rolling Earth with your propaganda
> bellows and oh-so-reasoned negations of Creation:
> When I shout Love I mean your destruction.[26]

Wayman from the beginning has been an uncompromising voice for social justice, being at the forefront of bringing the working lives of Canadians into literary poetry. Somehow the 'work poetry' genre that arose from his defining anthology, *A Government Job At Last* (1975), persisted amidst a field veering increasingly toward abstraction and urban self-absorption. Nearly twenty-five years of living in the remote, pristine Slocan Valley of southeastern British Columbia has tempered his democratic socialist ethos with a greater awareness of its connection with ecological consciousness. In his 2012 collection *Dirty Snow*, he collapses the distance between the war in Afghanistan and the daily lives of Canadians, scribing the glacial mountain ridges with the very atrocities the media would insulate us against:

> A loss thrums in the soil here,
> vibrates in the cold alpine wind.
>
> Here the Pashtuns blown apart, or maimed
> by bullets released in the name of this country
>
> now dwell…[27]

Thus the circle of New Romanticism is completed, encompassing both the social justice impulse as well as the more recent stream of ecopoetics, which of course goes beyond simply Nature poetry. Still, it's unsurprising that a nation such as Canada, born of the wilderness, has a long tradition of Nature poetry, as captured nicely in the anthology *Open Wide a Wilderness* and spanning poets from pre-Confederation to the present. Don McKay, often cited as Canada's preeminent living Nature poet, defies an easy dismissal of the genre with a complex examination of its history in Canadian poetry. Discussing the now-politically incorrect Duncan Campbell Scott, McKay writes in the Introduction: "Scott is … making two modifications to the standard Romantic view of nature: he steps away from the practice of understanding nature through human categories (as, especially, in Wordsworth) while dramatizing instead an acceptance of linguistic limits; and he suggests that this Something comes on its own and is not to be 'called' to human use … ever available for exploitation" (Holmes 3).

McKay makes it clear that the sheer enormity of the wilderness confronted by early poets like Scott forced not only a fresh perception but a fresh approach to rendering it in language. A new poetics would need to be forged for a New Romanticism—the staid classical verse forms would gradually give way to new voicings. As McKay explains:

> It's not as though poetry, passing through modernism and shedding Victorian conventions, had suddenly become congruent with the landscape; in large measure it turned away from the natural world to cultivate urban concerns, replacing Romantic sentiment with urbane irony. The root of the inadequacy lies not with stanzas and regular metre, but with language itself and the ontological assumptions embedded invisibly within it. One of the most widespread of those assumptions, stemming from the pastoral and the Romantic traditions, is the moral differentiation of natural phenomena into good and bad. (Holmes 6)

While I agree with McKay that Nature defies such easy categories, it's easy to fall into the trap of the postmodernists here, with their assertion that language is a blunt, clumsy tool freighted with cultural biases and therefore not to be trusted. This card has been overplayed in literature for far too long now. For my purposes in articulating a New Romanticism, the *intent* of the poet is far more important than the perceived biases or weaknesses of language or poetic form. That is, does the poet seek to colonize Nature with primarily human concerns or is an attempt made to see through the lens of the creatures that inhabit it? It's too easy to argue such a goal is doomed to failure due to the yawning gap that divides us from animal perception—

once again, I refer to Browning's dictum. Surely the attempt at such empathic perception alone is worth the effort. We already accept that language is not the thing but the representation of the thing, so insisting upon this as defeating the purpose is pointless.

Equally pointless is the anthropomorphism argument, that attempting to "put words in the mouth" of Nature is, at best, impossible, and at worst, yet another act of hubris. In this regard I refer to aboriginal belief systems the world over, which rely on both mythic archetypes and participation mystique. Does it matter whether it's "true" or not that the Manitou spirit lives in every rock, tree, stream and mountain? Does it matter whether or not their creation stories, such as the Haida mythology of 'Raven Steals the Light,' are "true"? Or is the effect these tales and rituals had on members of the culture in question more important? For my money, if it cultivated an ethos of respect for all living creatures and an ability to live sustainably on the land, that's good enough. Though it has been quoted so often as to become a cliché, taken at face value the words of Chief Seattle continue to resound in this context:

> Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks that seem to lie dumb … thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people, and the very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred. (Blaisdell 119)

Surely such a consciousness is worthy of striving for in poetry no matter what the obstacles.

4: New Romantic Voices: Seeing the Trees in the Forest

> Irresistible, on this atmospheric planet, where
> there's a blue to carry the heart home and a blue
> for virgins and a blue to call
> the spider from the drain.
>
> —Don McKay[28]

I have no intention of trying to create a 'canon' of New Romantic poets. For one thing, some won't want to be categorized this way. For another, I've always hated Who's Who lists and their implied elitism so I hardly want to start making my own. The truth is, poems by many living poets

have struck within me what I call a sense of *transcendence*. Call it New Romanticism if you want. Call it gauche or naïve if you want, I really don't care. I've wondered sometimes if what I'm up against with critics of Romanticism is really the urban/rural divide. There seems to be a fundamental difference of worldview. For the first time in human history, humanity is now primarily an urban species. As young Canadian poet Jordan Mounteer said in a recent interview, though proud to be from a rural community in the beautiful Slocan Valley, he found he was a minority at university. "When I was studying poetry, and even the young poets I'm still in contact with, a lot of them come from an urban environment. So a lot of my poetry is trying to convey a balance of making the wilderness experience accessible to those who don't have a lot of context for it, because most people don't live out in the bush anymore."[29]

Meanwhile there are faint echoes of disdain for Nature poetry even in the Poetry Foundation's biography of Gary Snyder: "While Snyder has gained attention as a spokesman for the preservation of the natural world and its earth-conscious cultures, he is not simply a 'back-to-nature' poet with a facile message."[30] Why is a "back-to-nature" message inherently facile? The loosely defined rubric of ecopoetics has to some degree also succumbed to the postmodernism conceit regarding language. Jonathan Skinner, founder of the journal *ecopoetics*, explains the form as not only the study and writing of pastoral poetry, the poetry of wilderness and deep ecology, but as "poetry that explores the human capacity for becoming animal, as well as humanity's ethically challenged relation to other animals," and can include "poetry that confronts disasters and environmental injustices." All very well. But then we also have in ecopoetics "poetic experimentation (that) complements scientific methods in extending a more reciprocal relation to alterity…"[31] Exactly what that means is unclear, but it has uncomfortable echoes of the pseudo-scientism of postmodernism debunked by Wayman, resulting in 'ecopoetry' that is every bit as opaque and unreadable. Missing the point, surely.

Meanwhile through the use of language cut with gemlike precision, simultaneously transparent and multi-faceted, Mary Oliver gets us as close to her experience of Nature as any human being can ever hope to do using only words:

From the time of snow-melt,
        when the creek roared
        and the mud slid
        and the seeds cracked,

I listened to the earth-talk,
the root-wrangle,
the arguments of energy,
the dreams lying

just under the surface,
then rising,
becoming
at the last moment

flaring and luminous—
the patient parable
of every spring and hillside
year after difficult year.[32]

I could cite another half-dozen poems by Oliver. Cutting out a mere fragment does her poetry an injustice. Nature's potential as an agent of transcendence is rendered in the simplest of language, as in probably her most famous poem, *Wild Geese*:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.[33]

Oliver reminds us that as animals we too have a place in Nature, if only we can overcome our urge to 'master' it. I could cite any number of poems from Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder or Don McKay here as well. Their approach to language is similarly precise—uncluttered by notions of its unreliability. During the 1970s such poets had their international counterpart in the little known but equally eloquent South African poet Jeni Couzyn, whose poem "There Are Some Creatures Living in My Body" deserves quoting in full:

There are some creatures living in my body. I bid them
welcome. Let them feed off me, as I off wild creatures
that run free.
Let my veins and bones be to them rivers and baobabs let
cells be huge rich valleys, let gigantic landscapes
roll and change as I flex my nerves.
O I wish them an excellent universe, such a one
as I inhabit, mountains and wind and

a lot of stars. Nor let them
pollute and destroy what they find—let my rivers of blood
flow clean, my flesh be fertile and multiply, nor cloud
with stale chemicals
The clear windows of my eyes.[34]

Couzyn uses the native baobab trees of South Africa as part of her lexicon, linking the microcosm of her own body with the macrocosm outside it, aware that it's all built of one and the same substance. This has always been my goal as a poet, to approach the natural world with as close to childlike wonder as possible, to link the particular to the universal. It's only when we look up that we begin to transcend. This is about as far from an urban attitude as you can get.

Coming to our own Canadian poets, P. K. Page could be said to have written the definitive eco-poem, as fine a candidate for New Romanticism as any I can think of, with "Planet Earth," now the name of a reading series in her adoptive hometown, Victoria, B.C. Written as part of her series of glosas published in the collection *Hologram*, it has since been taken up as an ecological anthem by Ecospheric Ethics and was chosen in a United Nations program using poetry to foster international dialogue on the environment.[35] It's appropriate that this poem uses a verse for its glosa structure from the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whose political and ecological themes certainly make him another candidate for New Romanticism. Again I must apologize for doing violence to the poem by only a partial quotation, but once again Page demonstrates how clear, eloquent language leaps far beyond its own limitations:

It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.
It has to be loved as if it were embroidered
with flowers and birds and two joined hearts upon it.
It has to be stretched and stroked.
It has to be celebrated.
O this great beloved world and all the creatures in it.
It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet.[36]

There's a quality of transcendence here that echoes all the way from Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge. Far from being merely a form of dreamy Romanticism, transcendence is rooted in the Earth; it begins from there and lifts us effortlessly above the ego to a state not unlike that

achieved by meditation or other spiritual practices. Who better to articulate this if not poets?

As I said, it isn't my intent to create a canon of New Romantic poets, since any such canon is necessarily arbitrary and endlessly arguable. To me, New Romanticism exists in the spirit, not the letter, of the law. I'm far more interested in *transcendence*—moving beyond ego toward communion. As George Bernard Shaw so aptly put it, "without art, the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable."[37] Yet poetry makes life more than bearable; it offers moments of transcendence amidst the chaos. Or, to put it another way, to quote Thomas Merton: "Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."[38] And transcendence is nothing if not an attempt to rise above our own ignorance of Nature and our capacity for social injustice.

Which brings us full circle, back to Ferlinghetti and his assertion that poetry does indeed change the world—even if it's one individual's world at a time. Certainly the presence in culture of a Shakespeare, Monet, Mozart, McKay, Beatles or a Bob Dylan changes it profoundly if it offers the possibility of transcendence—for one or for millions. At either level, something has entered the collective consciousness that didn't exist before. "Thus we realize how the greatest poets not only change the way we see the world but also cause us to question our perception and interpretation of everyday reality," writes Ferlinghetti. "And we realize that the greatest poetry 'subverts the dominant paradigm,' ultimately challenges the status quo of the world, and transforms it into something new and strange."[39] While 'saving the world' is probably far too grand a goal for mere poets, as U2 lyricist Bono wrote, "I can't change the world / but I can change the world in me."[40] At least, it's a good place to start.

And that, to paraphrase Robert Browning again, is surely a reach worth aiming for, no matter how far beyond us it might seem.

Notes

1 Browning's verse here refers more to artistic creation; in the poem he is discussing more the challenges of painting than of political ideals. But as an axiom, the principle applies equally.
2 Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth*, quoted by Johnson in "The Gospel of Wealth Fails the Inequity Test in Primates."
3 Johnson, "The Gospel of Wealth Fails the Inequity Test in Primates."
4 Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.
5 See Brosnan, et al., "Mechanisms underlying responses to inequitable outcomes in chimpanzees, Pan troglodytes."

6 Lakoff, “Pope Francis Gets the Moral Framing Right.”

7 Ibid.

8 Bentley, correspondence with the author.

9 Though some interpreters of this phrase see it as representative of the Church of England, there is support for its interpretation as representative of the new industrial machinery being installed in Blake’s day. Wikipedia, citing John H. Lienhard in *Poets in the Industrial Revolution: The Engines of Our Ingenuity* (1999), notes: “This view has been linked to the fate of the Albion Flour Mills, which was the first major factory in London. Designed by John Rennie and Samuel Wyatt, it was built on land purchased by Wyatt in Southwark. This rotary steam-powered flour mill by Matthew Boulton and James Watt used grinding gears by Rennie to produce 6,000 bushels of flour per week. The factory could have driven independent traditional millers out of business, but it was destroyed in 1791 by fire, perhaps deliberately.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/And_-did_those_feet_in_ancient_time#cite_note-8>) *The Guardian*, commenting on the phrase, notes: “William Blake did see a dark and satanic mill. At one time he lived in ‘lovely Lambeth’ and every time he walked into the City of London he would have passed by the blackened and roofless shell of the Albion Flour Mills that stood for 18 years after being burned down in 1791.” (Butt)

10 Rowland, “Blake: A Visionary for Our Time.”

11 Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, 16.

12 National Endowment for the Arts website, from President Kennedy’s remarks at Amherst College, 26 October 1963.

13 Coleridge, *On Poesy or Art*.

14 Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.

15 Ibid.

16 Braid, email to the author.

17 Bentley, correspondence with the author.

18 Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, 51, 40, 42.

19 Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.

20 Ferlinghetti, *Why Is So Much Modern Poetry Really Prose*? 2006 online essay no longer extant (copied to author’s files) but various versions of the essay have been published, including *Modern Poetry is Prose* (1978) in *Poetry as Insurgent Art*,85.

21 Ginsberg, *Planet News*, 7.

22 Ferlinghetti, *Can Poetry Really Change the World?*.

23 Ibid.

24 Layton, “The Birth of Tragedy,” *A Wild Peculiar Joy: Selected Poems 1945–82*, 15.

25 Acorn, *I’ve Tasted My Blood: Poems 1956 to 1968*, frontispiece.

26 Acorn, “I Shout Love,” *I’ve Tasted My Blood: Poems 1956 to 1968*, 65, 69.

27 Wayman, “Mt. Gimli Pashtun,” *Dirty Snow*, 15.

28 McKay, “Meditation on Blue,” *Camber: Selected Poems*, 70.

29 Interview with Jordan Mounteer.

30 Snyder, Poetry Foundation website.

31 Skinner, *What is Ecopoetics?*

32 Oliver, “Trilliums,” *Dream Work*, 10, 11.

33 Oliver, “Wild Geese,” *Dream Work*, 14.

34 Couzyn, “There Are Some Creatures Living in My Body,” *Monkey’s Wedding*, 61.

35 Ecospheric Ethics, founded by Canadian ecologists Stan Rowe and Ted Mosquin.

36 Page, “Planet Earth,” *Hologram*, 14.

37 Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*.

38 Merton, *No Man Is an Island*.

39 Ferlinghetti, *Can Poetry Really Change the World?*

40 U2, “Rejoice,” from the album *October*.

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