

BOOK REVIEW: *By the Torch of Chaos and Doubt: Consciousness, Culture, Poiesis and Religion in the Opening Global Millennium* by Guy Burneko (2003) Hampton Press

I want to say at the outset that Dr. Burneko was a professor of mine at Antioch University Seattle; thus my evaluation of t/his book may be influenced by prior association.

Recently, upon initiating a study of “epistemology,” I asked my old mentor if he’d recommend some especially vital texts. He responded with a list of works by some of the usual philosophers, including some favorites that were often quoted in seminars, but for some (modest) reason he didn’t mention his own book. Now that my (current) study of “epistemology” is nearing its end, I can say that Dr. Burneko’s book was the most useful of the lot for organizing my thoughts and developing a language to describe the epistemological insights I want to convey in my own work.

We are alerted right from the opening lines that “[t]his is an odd sort of book.” The book is odd because the author takes the bold, uninhibited liberty of “linguaging in radical *poiesis*” (p. 169). “[The book] makes use of numerous neologisms, curious spellings, and some deconstructionist language tricks and...word-formations” (p. ix). I interpreted this “radical *poiesis*” not as mere poetry for poetry’s sake but as a purposive effort to shatter the usual conventional, habituated, divide-and-conquer, dualistic/atomistic/reductionistic way of thinking and knowing by an energetic intervention of thoughtful, masterful linguaging.

Complementing Wittgenstein, Burneko gives primacy to language not only in the construction of knowledge but in the ongoing continual emergence of the universe itself: “language is a continuation, enactment and mediation of the patterns and processes that are the ecology of natural systems and of cosmos in general...language is the setting of the world; it is worlding” (p. xiii). And “worlding” is an action verb – an active, co-participatory process, whereas our usual noun “world” is a static, pre-given, objectified and objectifiable “thing.”

I’ve always thought of language as an emergent property of complex systems far from equilibrium but now I’m starting to understand it as a co-inherence to “the ever-present origin” of Gebser (from whom Burneko draws freely). In this sense, the language that is used literally creates the/our/a world as it goes along; so choose your wor(l)ding carefully! Transformation of consciousness, then, and the bringing forth of a new or better world, *begins with* a re-patterning of language – and this is the author’s project.

Burneko relates how the patterning of the Indo-European family of languages – including the English in which this report is being written – continually and unselfconsciously reinforces the segregation of (an originally unitary) reality into first, second, and third persons while simultaneously organizing experience into past, present, and future. Could it be that the

very use of this sort of languaging was causal to an epistemology postulating separate ego-selves attempting to come to terms with a perceived external objective reality seemingly moving uniformly as a linear vector? Of course “it” “was!”

Language de-coupled from an ego-utilitarian venue, speaking for itself, speaking prior to the separation of speaker from that which is spoken, much less spoken “about,” is more likely to transduce consciousness. Manifesting as conscious Mind, it would be not *about* a world, but rather the very making of the world: *world-poiesis*. Or, stated differently, Consciousness itself is obstructive and dual where it is coded as *techne* in the service of an Ego that reinforces its own separateness thereby. Such an unfortunate Ego is the “technical protocol, artifact, and condition of an entitative, dualized, perspectivalized, fixed and conventionalized world/consciousness reinforced by certain language habits” (p. 188). Yes, of course “it” “is.”

Here’s a good illustration of the maestro’s “languaging in radical poiesis,” dialoguing on page 176 about thinking being recyclic and recursive: “It is the speeching of the universe; it is what the big bang/*creation continua*”/this is it”/ *tat tvam asi* has to say “now.” And where non-dual co-implication (in paradox), processual autopoiesis (in stochastic self-organizingly entrancing patterns-that-connect), and liberation (from the conviction of oneself as a (separate) self), comply, t/here does an apposite postmodern ecobiohumansim – even a dissipative anthropocosmology – come to its senses.

We/This (non)does it/(s)elf with/as no mind.”

I must say, I’ve already read the book two or three times – not in separate sittings – just that each sentence and paragraph (often) required two or three perusals for meaning to adhere. The seminars were never as good as the book. (Are they ever?)

The reading affected in me a pronounced shift in my way of perceiving and thinking, of knowing and being-in-the-world; or, more accurately, it succeeded in augmenting or enhancing a shift already underway. This shifting is none other than the emerging out of an isolated, separated, crystallized, culturally indoctrinated, practically disembodied ego-identity, trying to make sense of a world of “things” “out there,” toward the co-participatory, co-evolving, co-inherent sense of lived and shared “hermeneutic ontology” – of a nondual, nontwoed, not-a-what “me” enacting in/as the autopoietic wonderment of a universe coming to self-conscious awareness.

Reading this book was a little like ingesting entheogens: there were profound realizations as “it” was happening but now that “it” has passed there’s some difficulty searching for the right words/concepts/phrases to effectively (much less rationally) communicate what was (en)visioned – and that’s the author’s whole point!: **Language must evolve to accommodate the evolution of consciousness**, otherwise we’re going to keep on (re)creating the same old dysfunctional, outworn, divisive world. Apparently, we’ve got to make it/us up as we go along; and that is a very liberating kind of knowing. Thank you for that.

There are lots of juicy tidbits of primordial wisdom in this book worth quoting (many distilled from a deep study of Daoism, apparently) and they all seem to revolve around a recurring central theme: “We are the universe process; it is nowhere else than, or as much as, among us and in our relations with one another and with/as the patterns of natural becoming as far as the mind can see” (p. 53).

“We are, it seems, not a what” (p. 160).

I have just one parting question for Dr. Burneko: While practicing radical *poiesis*, is there no place for single emphasis marks (‘) to contrast in some meaningful way with double quotation marks (“)?