

Biosemiotics 14

Andreas Weber

Biopoetics

Towards an Existential Ecology



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Biosemiotics

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Feelings are older than humans.

Gavin Van Horn (2017a)

Le poète n'a pas peur de l'imprédictible.

Edouard Glissant (1996:126)

*Es ist nichts außer uns, was nicht zugleich in
uns wäre.*

Goethe (1998)

*The unfathomable variety
of yellows and browns and oranges,
cadmium, cream, and crimson,
each hue a singular desire
and a singular lifeline,
a detached focus
on ever the same being.*

*I feel transpierced with lives,
lathered and rinsed by
vanilla and chocolate wavelengths
caressing my skin and my self-image.
I feel elevated by light, untethered
by the sun, a billion-fold refracted,
answering itself and smiling back in pieces
from the golden days but shortly past.*

*Brightness in breath,
delicate gravity,
unhinging previous glories without a single
breeze.
Of all the tasty shades so generously
shattered,
of all the dappled things entangled
with each other,
which is the plant's delicious flesh?
Which is a sunbeam's mere reflection?
Which is a dreaming echo in the feast of
ageing
pigments recollecting May?*

*Stroked by nothing but light.
No mirror's reflection,
but the invitation to partake,
to join the mutual exploring.
Gently smiled at by every singular color's
incandescent iris.*

*Greeted all with wonder,
yet softly exiled to remember
by the light-footed glances burning
and fading.
Surrendering in uncensored delight
and acquiescence,
as might a roe deer's eyes
before her final breath.*

A.W.

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“Even in what we don't know there lies a resemblance” – these lines from Szymborska's poem “The Silence of Plants” could also describe the calm and joyful sharing of the Mesa house and its horizons with my fellow writers Lauren Markham and Gavin Van Horn. Thanks are due for your graceful company, inside and outside.

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Chapter 1

Poiesis

“Our scientific theories have failed to explain what matters most to us: the place of meaning, purpose, and value in the physical world.”

Terrence Deacon (2012:22)

In 1976, the Italian writer Italo Calvino published a famous collection of poetic prose, *t zero*. The story “Blood, Sea” recounts a sequence of events narrated from the first-person perspective of a blood cell, alternating with a story about human protagonists, told in the conventional perspective of the third person. In the story, among a lot of other astonishing relations, Calvino explores the fact that the water of the earth’s oceans shows a mineral composition which strikingly resembles that of our body fluids.

The blood plasma is the sea in which life once began. This ocean still fills us, as it fills all other lifeforms. Calvino imagined a narrative told by a blood cell, a cell, which is suspended in this primordial ocean within our bodies. He told a story from the perspective of life itself, or rather from the perspective of the life-giving ability of the primal fluid and its invitation to make intimate connections. He spoke from the standpoint of an outside which is also an inside.

Calvino invented “Biopoetics” *avant la lettre*. He envisioned a first-person-account of what is not human through our shared qualities, through our participation in a vast web of transformations. For Calvino, the poet, it was only evident that we are able to make statements about this network of changes and exchanges because we are a part of it, and we are concerned by it, as we are by our own fate. Poetic creativity is the power to know something through intimate participation. It is the power to know through recognizing which familiar qualities lie in what is totally different, and to find unexpected strangeness in oneself.

When we walk the seashore, the fringe of the “true” ocean, which lies before us and flattens the beach with the incessant caresses of its liquid weight, we involuntarily repeat Calvino’s insight. Humans are drawn to the ocean’s shore, or to a journey across its waves, only to despair at accounting for the character of this yearning, this desire for closeness pulling them to search contact with what is very different to our outwardly dry and tight bodies, but which is nonetheless their central mystery. Why do we love the sea so much? Why are humans so inevitably drawn to what in many respects seems to be their antithesis, blunt contradiction to their dependency on firm land, on the “the green, gentle, and most docile earth” (Herman Melville)?

The sparkling roar which greets the long curves of the pacific shoreline at Point Reyes, north of San Francisco, shining in a blinding white which seems to concentrate the sun's entire energy in the crest of the breaking waves; the cosy algal thickets at the underside of the boulders which are strewn into the trembling froth; the cliffs and rocks steaming with wetness and salt dust against an oblique western sun; the squeaking seagulls, the tiny ducks who relish in their swift dives just when a breaker's crest is about to topple down on them – all these bodies and lifelines are present before our eyes and beyond our skins. But for the secret magic of perception of someone who has been born as a part of the world, and who needs its stuff to still her hunger and its liquids to quench her thirst, the rolling waves crashing on the shore are not outside, but inside.

“Blood, Sea”: the deeper message of Calvino's work is that the ocean is not an outer object, but truly our inside. It is our inside that happens to be able to be touched and smelled, and which can drown us. Here, although not many might have realized it at the time of publication of *t zero*, Calvino is extremely radical. He is no psychologist, nor a scientist, and at the very least he is a cultural criticist catching the weak human imagination projecting details of its cultural heritage to the outer world. Calvino is a poet, and as such he knows about the fact that true novelty in this world, and also true experiences of connection, only arise through the exchange, the breakdown and recreation of what is real.

He understands that our body is the way the sea thinks itself through being folded up into a confined space. He understands that our body is the way the ocean imagines itself having an outside. He knows that the ocean is the way we can experience our inside – not as a symbol, but as an existential reality. The experience of the ocean is a way my body can think its inside to which it otherwise has no access.

In “Blood, Sea”, the ocean is not a *metaphor* for inwardness. It *is* inwardness, seen from the perspective of a body, who is always both, metabolism, proteins and bones, but also concern, feeling and lust. If we connect to the ocean, Calvino suggests, we experience ourselves, but we experience that in us, which is so deeply inside that it is completely unknown. Our inner dimensions are oceanic. When we experience ourselves, in truth we have an experience of the ocean, of its vastness, wildness, bleakness, of its fecundity, desertion, and its unfathomable life-giving potential.

Our body is the fashion in which the ocean thinks its own enfolding into a tiny space. The ocean is the manner in which my body experiences its own inside. When I connect to the ocean, I can make contact to this inside, which is always there, as it is simply the means to make any experiences, but which I still cannot really see, as it is the means through which I am able to see in the first place.

The ocean which carries me on its waves and makes me feel carried, and embraced, and chilled, and rocked, and which makes me taste my salty self on my own lips, is an endless variation of how it is to be, not as a mere body in space, but as a part of that all-encompassing space which is me and the ocean. Floating in sea water means experiencing my inside by being touched by that which is inside and which at the same time totally is the other. It means experiencing myself as ocean by letting meet my inside and the other who is also an inside.

The ocean reveals itself as inwardness, as I connect to it through my body, and experience inwardness, and, in the roar of the waves, and the salty taste of the spray, this inwardness shows itself as being matter, and form. It shows that every being is the constant transformation of one into the other, of inwardness into matter, and of matter into experience. It shows that in experiencing, we are outside, and that we, as bodies with an outside, unfold meaning and existential concern. We see with our bodies. Through the touch of something which is a body outside of our bodies we can see ourselves, not as an outside, but as an inside.

Being an Organism Is Desire

The hypothesis of this book is that Calvino in his idea did not follow only a beautiful, but somewhat idiosyncratic quirk of a poet, but that he rather explained a basal truth. This truth is that reality – and in it explicitly the biosphere – is alive. This aliveness means that it not only shows a physical surface, a causal-mechanic behavior in space and time, but that it is constantly revealing meaning and inwardness. Biology is the sphere of existential relations expressing this inwardness, hence, it is poetic.

The idea which Calvino unfolds is a first-person-analysis of how organisms connect with one another. It is absolutely accurate, particularly because it does not only recount the story of a rupture and a separation, but also an intensification, a mirroring in the play of transformations: the general poiesis of reality translated into the poetics of words.

The biosphere is deeply poetic, not only as a source for romantic storytelling or spiritual nature writing, but as a means and matter of its physical functioning. Being an organism is about constant transformation, about developing a standpoint of concern, about desiring to be a self which yearns for connection with other selves (and this also way below the human needs, as mating, feeding, shelter concern every being), and which takes up chunks of the world as food only to incorporate them into the own physical body.

Only if we understand the poetic dimension of biology we understand ourselves, and reality. What is missing in the description of the world as sum of lifeless processes which for long has dominated our view of reality is the existential reality of inwardness, concern and expression practiced by living bodies. This lack accounts for the strange situation that humanity at present knows incredibly many technical details about life, but at the same time has never been more destructive towards other lives of other species.

We need to understand life as a not only material, but deeply sense-creating phenomenon. Biology is the realm of meaning, starting from the meaning of DNA bases, and unfolding into the behavioral signal cues, facial expressions, musical scores, and biopoetic books. I therefore subscribe to the biosemiotic turn in life sciences (Uexküll 1980; Kull 1999; Hoffmeyer 1997, Weber 2003, Weber 2010a, b; 2016).

I think it is important to understand biochemical processes and behavioural repertoires from a semiotic standpoint, as meaning generation and interpretation. But we still need to explicitly highlight that meaning generation truly means to feel, and hence that organisms live in existential, felt, highly biased realities which they experience through their selves. We need to see that life is an embodied semiotic process, operating on meaning, not only on cause and effect, and that the underlying semiotic processes have a side of inwardness which permeates all biological life, and which we continuously experience as our subjective existence (Weber and Varela 2002; Weber 2016).

These inward experiences are existential, not epiphenomenal, because living beings are subjects concerned with their survival and hence with what is good or bad (“yum” or “yuck”, as Stuart Kauffman (2002) puts it). Meaning generation has a more than technical side. It is about experienced interiority, about true concern, about an absoluteness of the individual’s own existence, which we cannot strip from the picture unless we want to make it inaccurate. It is something that we organisms know from the inside. This knowing must complement our view of what it is like to be alive. The biological world is the deep experience of existential values. It is the experience of feeling – as inwardness, but also as expressivity of the other insides of the endless number of bodies which constitute the living world. Because this living world is an embodied expression of inwardness, we can call it poetic.

Sensuous Selves

This book tries to understand the still enigmatic and much contested reality of this poetic dimension from a novel account of the construction of an embodied biological identity. For this, it follows the explorations of biosemiotics, embodied cognitive science, and existential biophilosophy. From here, I want to develop a different understanding of the dimension of lived experience, which includes body, hence physiology, and perception, hence inwardness.

In this book I propose to understand the current paradigm shift in biology as the origination of a biology of subjects. A description of living beings as experiencing selves has the potential to transform the current mechanistic approach of biology into an embodied-poetic one, culminating in a poetics of nature. We are at the right moment for that: The findings of complex systems research, autopoiesis theory, and evolutionary developmental biology are converging into a picture where life can not longer be described in terms of causal mechanisms. Instead, organisms bring forth themselves physically and thereby generate a poetic standpoint. They interpret external and internal stimuli interfering with their self-creation according to embodied values. This can be observed empirically during embryonic development, where genetic instructions do not act as orders, but rather as weak interferences being interpreted by a self-maintaining developmental centre which foremost strives to maintain its own integrity.