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# Poetry, Trees, and Hope

## *Twelve Propositions*

1. Our words *inspiration*, *respiration* and *spirit* all have a common origin in the Latin verb *spirare* 'to breathe'.
2. We breathe involuntarily and necessarily. The air we depend on for life itself surrounds the earth like a mantle. As it covers and protects the earth and all life on earth, so equally the air belongs to the earth and all of earth's creatures, including humans. The air is both ours and not ours. My air and your air are one.
3. Trees enable us to breathe. Because our air has constantly renewed itself for millions of years, until very recently we have assumed that it is limitless. But now the great forests are in great danger of being killed off, and we know that our supply of oxygen may itself be threatened. Half of this supply depends on the photosynthesis performed by trees, shrubs, grasses, and other plants. Our mantle of air, which should be inalienable from our earth, is polluted, worn, fragile.
4. Some trees may live for hundreds, even thousands of years. To plant and care for trees, therefore, helps to secure (safeguard, insure, guarantee, conserve) the supply and flow of oxygen that we need for our breath(ing) now and in future, for the breath(ing) of our children and our children's children, and for our descendants down through multiple generations.
5. To plant and care for trees presupposes both a belief and an investment in futurity. Which is to say: to plant and care for trees is *action rooted in hope*. Whoever protects, nurtures and nourishes trees is a guardian of the future. The job of a guardian is to guard and guide. Tree-planters and tree-tenders are guardians of our future gardens, our future's gardens.
6. As for poems, they are born, rooted, and routed in and through inspiration. A poet's inspiration is both personal, because it is his or her very own, and transpersonal, because inspiration itself flows to, into and through the poet from sources that are transpersonal. A poet is a maker (Scots, *makar*) who marks personal speech with his or her inner inspiration. A true poem, then, is personal speech marked by inspiration, which renders it both personal and transpersonal at once. Hence, also: a poem is speech that transfers (transmits, transports) its maker's (makar's) inner inspiration to a reader or listener on and through a thread of words that are inspired.

7. A poem may live as long as a tree, and often much longer. Once made, a living poem may transmit inspiration to multiple generations of readers, many of whom may be alive centuries after its maker has died. A poem and its meanings may travel (unravel, unroll, unscroll) across time and past many individual deaths, including that of the poet in, through and from whom it originated.
8. No true poet would write for his or her generation alone. A poet necessarily makes poems for an unknown reader who may or may not be alive now – and if not now, who will be alive one day, in a time and place unknown. The claim of any true poet is necessarily that of Shakespeare, that his/her own poem will live as “long as men can breathe or eyes can see”.<sup>1</sup> This is also the claim staked by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, in slightly different terms: “Maybe, for these lines to reach their addressee, it will take the same hundreds of years that it does for the light of a planet to reach another planet.” And he adds, “[P]oetry as a whole is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee, in whose existence the poet may not doubt without doubting himself.”<sup>2</sup>
9. Thus, making and reading poetry, like the planting and care of trees, necessarily invokes both futurity and hope. Anthony Rudolf reminds us: “Poetry presupposes future, presupposes continuity.” And in amplifying this idea, he adds: “The poem is an implicit guarantor of the good life; it insists upon the life beyond itself.”<sup>3</sup> Consisting of language, made in (a) language, and inhabiting (a) language, a poem, then, *looks forward* in both meanings of this phrase. And here, the phrase “the life beyond itself” can scarcely mean (signify, indicate, point to, denote, want to say) anything or anyone other than *the life of an other, of the other*: the perpetual *you*. The poem looks out *to* and *for you*—out-there, whoever you are or may be, to bring you *here, into here, into now*.
10. Nature, with its infinite variety and distribution of life-forms and patterns, is an ever-brimming (over-brimming, self-replenishing) fountain of inspiration for poetry. Or so we believe and hope, and so we aim to keep making true. Conversely, poems that inspire us most simply and immediately, most directly and deeply, are often those that connect us to the natural world – that is to say, to *the isness* of what is. So, not only does our caring for the natural world guard the source of our future inspiration, but poetry reciprocally guards the natural world by encouraging humans to love, respect and protect it.
11. Our poetic (mythopoeic) way of perceiving and knowing the world, and our ecological advocacy and defence of the green world, are one and the same: connected, wise, old, and ever-young. What we recognise as ecological necessity must (necessarily) include poetry. For just as certain species of trees

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Sonnet 18’.

<sup>2</sup> Osip Mandelstam, ‘About an Interlocutor’, in *Selected Essays*, tr. Sidney Monas, Austin, Tx: University of Texas Press, 1977, 63 and 64.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Rudolf, *Wine from two Glasses (Poetry and Politics: Trust and Mistrust in Language)*, Adam Archive Publications, Kings College, London, 1991: 45 and 48.

belong in all countries of the world, so certain species of poems belong in all languages. And just as trees that are native to a particular terrain may be transplanted (translated), to thrive in other soils, so the many-branched paths of poetry must include translation too.

12. The guardianship of trees and the making and receiving of poems intertwine along the paths we follow as we make our way, whether gradually and gracefully, or in jumps and starts, towards cosmic consciousness. As trees are the mothers of our breath, inspiration is the mother of hope.

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