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LIST DO REDAKCJI / LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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We Can Choose to Live in a World that Makes Sense to Us

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Twenty-five years ago, when I worked with Bert Terpstra to compile the post-humous **Conquest of Abundance**, I was in doubt about whether Paul would have liked to see the book in print.¹ I knew it was very dear to him, surely a “labor of love”. He had kept working on it for years, reading an immense variety of materials, weaving stories and arguments, paying attention to form and style. He very much wanted the book to be pleasant to read, more a piece of craft than an intellectual product. Before dying, he did not ask me to publish the book, nor did he work at it during his stay in the hospital (except for some notes on the third version of the introduction). I had asked him what he wanted me to do about the manuscript, and he had said: “keep it”.

While going through Paul’s unanswered mail, after his death, I found a long and thoughtful letter written to him by Bert Terpstra. The letter dealt with the very subjects Paul was writing about in **Conquest of Abundance** and struck me as having been written with sincerity, intelligence, and care. I replied to the letter, mentioning the manuscript of the book. After a correspondence that lasted some months and after Bert read part of the original manuscript, I realized that the

¹ Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being**, Bert TERPSTRA (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999. This letter is based on the text of the Preface and Acknowledgements included in the original version of that volume.



book was potentially useful, and pleasant to read, to some individuals. In fact, its very incompleteness and fragmentary nature added a layer of ambiguity to the text and openness to its meaning — qualities that Paul was far from despising and are treated somehow in the text. Bert offered to work on compiling the book out of the various materials left by Paul. He mentioned that he was going to enjoy doing it (a fact that would have been essential for Paul) and that he was going to treat the material “as the fragments of an ancient vase” (a fact that was essential to me).

I accepted Bert’s offer and soon became immensely grateful to him. As he was otherwise fully employed, he worked on the book in his free time. I may only imagine the care and constancy that it must have taken, as he dealt with a large amount of material, sometimes not available simultaneously and indeed with the attention and selflessness of a restorer of an ancient vase. The result, beautifully set to print by Chicago University Press, was an “unfinished product” — something inevitably far from what Paul would have liked to see. But we could enrich the work with a collection of many of the short pieces, reviews and commentaries that Paul enjoyed preparing in his last years. We compiled them hoping that his writings would give a special reading pleasure to some readers, that they may take them through a journey not unlike a music narrative, or a wondrous walk in the woods.

Conquest of Abundance recounts some particular moments of the evolving Western culture, times when complex worldviews, overflowing with an abundance of possible interpretations of Being — and thus realities — gave way to a few abstract concepts and stereotypical accounts. One of the main consequences of this “conquest of abundance”, this coming to power of crude and monolithic ideas, is the drab world some of us live in today, a world obedient only to scientific dicta and economic imperatives.

Paul does not argue for any favored interpretation of “reality”, nor does he aim at convincing anyone. Rather, the reader may feel taken, through detailed pathways, to a high vista. From there, a large and wondrous landscape opens up. Our sensory and culturally cast patterns of interpretation, which provide us with habitual and usually convenient ways of understanding and living with “reality”, are perceived as the filters they actually are. The humane ebullience of Homeric Gods, the stochastic regularity of elementary particles and the devoted craftsmanship of Renaissance artists, all elements of the landscape, appear as entry points of

holograms. The elements create different realities while being part of them, and offering them a reading key.

As an observer of the landscape, I felt a sense of spontaneous tolerance toward all cultures and worldviews, and an appreciation of their open, changeable, ambiguous borders and distinctions. Exploring such cultural openness and ambiguity, I believe, is an aspect of the book that empowers the reader. If “potentially every culture is all cultures”, then “efforts to achieve peace need no longer respect some alleged cultural integrity that [may be] nothing but the rule of one or another tyrant”.² And such awareness does not lead to detachment or cynicism, but rather, in unison with Paul, to passionate engagement. The second empowering aspect of the book is an ontological consideration. If worldviews interact with Being in a mutually creating fashion, we do affect and shape “reality”. We can choose to live in a world that makes sense to us.

Readers familiar with Paul’s previous writings may find in his later work a quieter, more wondering attitude. They will also recognize, however, his bold connections, his impulsive remarks, and the usual stretching of any point of view away from comfortable positions. Paul was the first to subject himself to such gymnastics of the mind. He constantly revisited and challenged his own previous work. (Authors often write the same book several times under different titles. It has been said that Paul wrote three different books under the same title — the three published editions of **Against Method**).³ In the last decade of his life, for instance, Paul was not at all pleased with **Science in a Free Society**, which he did not want to see reprinted.⁴ Even the detailed treatment of relativism found in **Farewell to Reason** is further extended and, shall I say, overcome by the later writings.⁵

This, in fact, is the main motivation that convinced me that Paul would have liked to see his last book in print. He liked to let in some fresh air often, in the living room of our home as in any sort of intellectual construction. **Conquest of Abundance** — unorthodox, “ambiguous”, open, unfinished — lets in some of that

² See FEYERABEND, **Conquest of Abundance...**, note 25.

³ See Ian HACKING, “Paul Feyerabend, Humanist”, *Common Knowledge* 1994, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 23–28.

⁴ See Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Science in a Free Society**, NLB, London 1978.

⁵ See Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Farewell to Reason**, Verso, London 1988.

fresh air.⁶ Even less than ever before, Paul is there not arguing nor striving to explain. By taking us through some questions and some stories, he just points at the abundance of Being, at the human openness and tolerance of ambiguity that allow us to savor it, and at the sensory and cultural filters that mediate our relation with it. As the poet Maulana Jajal al-Din gracefully expressed nearly eight centuries ago, those filters may be lived, studied, and enjoyed.⁷ As Paul hints in his later work, those filters may also be compared in terms of how they reduce the richness and complexity of Being, how they support, or demean, a life that makes sense to us.

A story is like water
that you heat for your bath.
It takes messages between the fire
and your skin. It lets them meet
and it cleans you!

Very few can sit down
in the middle of the fire itself,
like a salamander or Abraham.
We need intermediaries.

A feeling of fullness comes,
but usually it takes some bread to bring it.

Beauty surrounds us,
but usually we need to be walking
in a garden to know it.

⁶ See FEYERABEND, *Conquest of Abundance...*

⁷ The poem "Story Water" was composed in the thirteenth century A.D. by the Sufi Persian poet Maulana Jajal al-Din, better known as Rumi. The translation I quote comes from Coleman BARKS, *The Essential — Rumi Reissue: A Poetry Anthology*, trans. Coleman Barks, J. Moyne, A. J. Arberry, and R. Nicholson, Harper San Francisco, New York 1995.

The body itself is a screen
To shield and partially reveal
the light. that's blazing
inside your presence.

Water, stories, the body,
all the things we do, are mediums
that hide and show what's hidden.

Study them, and enjoy this being washed
with a secret we sometimes know,
and then not.

Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

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