



University of Copenhagen

WONDER AND EMBODIMENT

On Hoffmeyer's Biosemiotic Aesthetics

Jamin Pelkey

Toronto
Metropolitan
University

Languages,
Literatures & Cultures
Faculty of Arts

31 July 2023



Schenck.



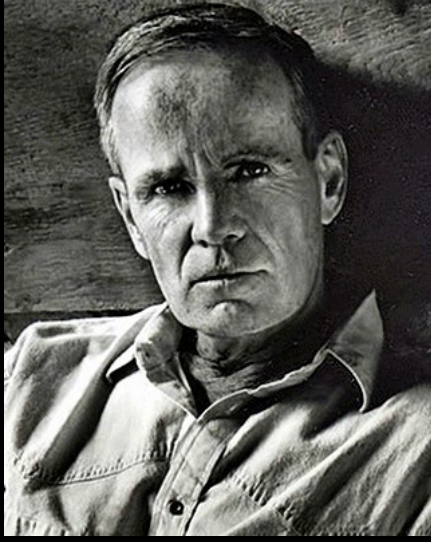
It seems to me, when I am at Fontainebleau, that I sympathize in all my energies with the powerful vitality of the trees which surround me. I am too encrusted in my own form to be able to reproduce their form; yet, on well considering the matter, it does not seem unreasonable to hold that all forms of being sleep more or less deeply buried in the ground of each being. Under the sharp contours of my human form any careful observer could see the vaguer contours of ‘animality’, which veils in turn the even more fluid and incomplete form of simple organic life. Now one of the possible determinations of organic life is tree, which engenders in turn the oak tree. So the “being of an oak tree” is somewhere hidden in the foundations of my being, and may even strive sometimes to emerge and appear in its turn *dias in luminis oras* [in the upper world of light] – but humanity, which has gotten ahead of it, prevents it from doing so and blocks its way.

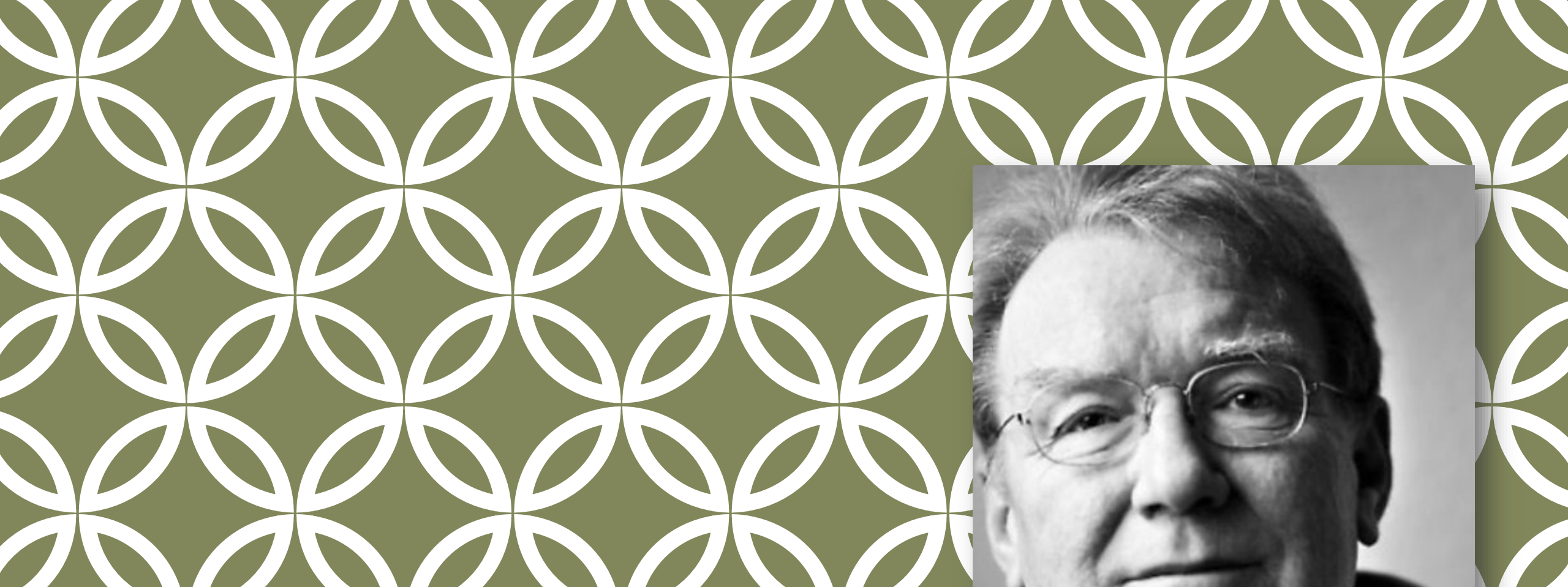
– Jules Lachelier (1933: xviii-xix, qtd. in Deely 2005: 126)



“This text strikes us in our cultural milieu as something idiosyncratic or even bizarre. Yet in truth it is no more than a faithful echo of the older traditions of the Western philosophical mainstream ... until the unique development of modern philosophy effectively shifted concern away from natural being to the universe of human discourse...”

-- Deely (2005: 126)



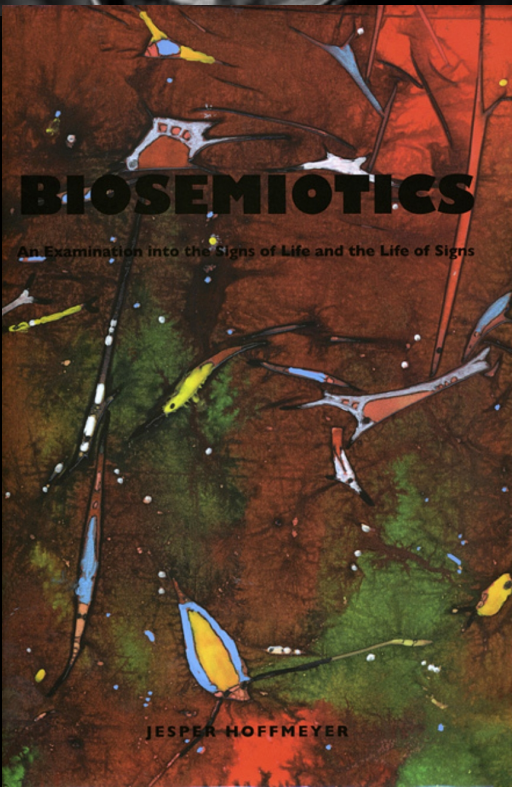


OVERVIEW





Reconstructing and Developing Hoffmeyer's sketches of a **biosemiotic aesthetics** are promising for dispelling pernicious illusions of alienation between human consciousness and the natural world and for healing the untold trauma these illusions have caused.



Reconstructed from three themes in Hoffmeyer (1997, 2008):

- (1) His discussions of the interrelationships between **aesthetics and ethics via inter-species empathy**
- (2) His treatment of **consciousness as narrative and spatial interpretation**
- (3) His embrace of **fallibility and ambiguity** as necessary for the emergence of signs of meaning in the universe.

PURPOSE

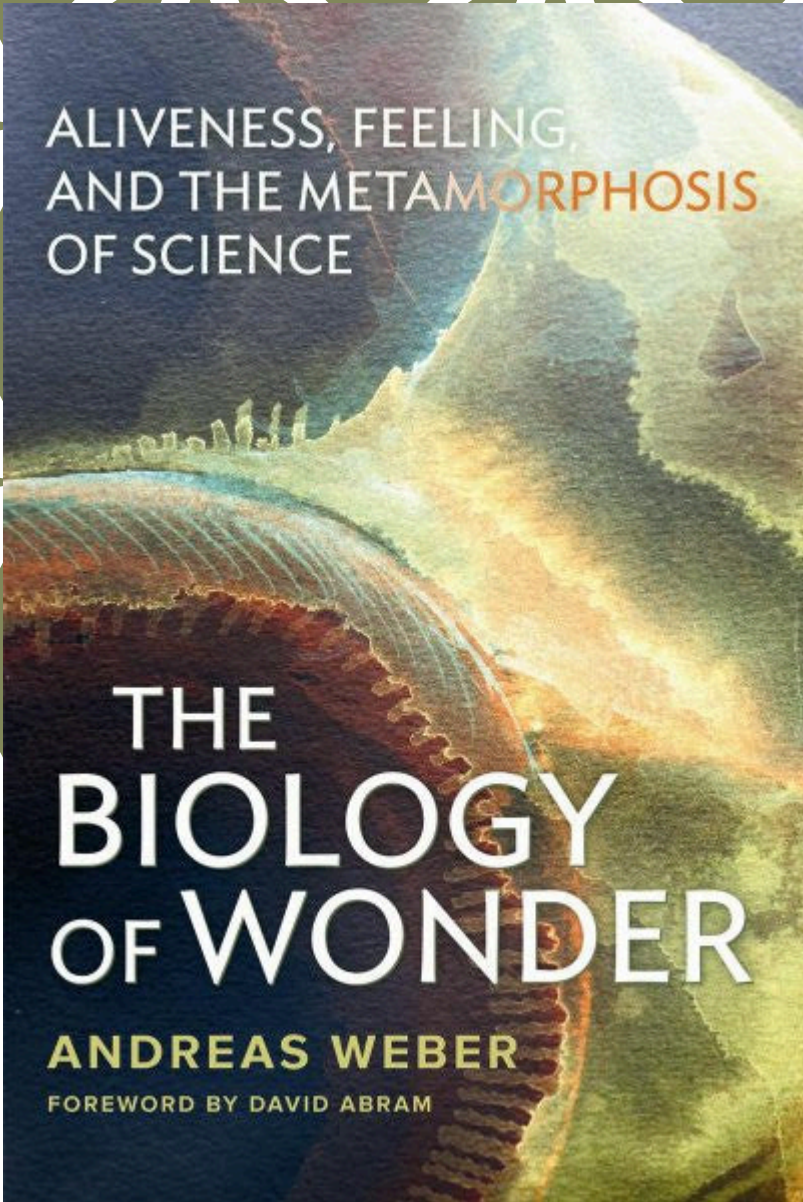
- Begin developing Hoffmeyer's biosemiotics aesthetics in terms of wonder and embodiment
- Apply insights from kinesthetic pattern grammar as a first step.
- Integrate insights with Cognitive Poetics to show how literary artists often express wonder through interspecies mapping and kinesthetic blending

OUTLINE

1. Overview the Presentation
2. Identify Related Approaches
3. Reconstruct Hoffmeyer's Biosemiotic Aesthetics
4. Develop Hoffmeyer's Biosemiotic Aesthetics
5. Integrate Insights with Cognitive Poetics
6. Conclude the Presentation



RELATED APPROACHES



The Study of Wonder

Plato's Socrates: “wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder”
Theaetetus 155d3

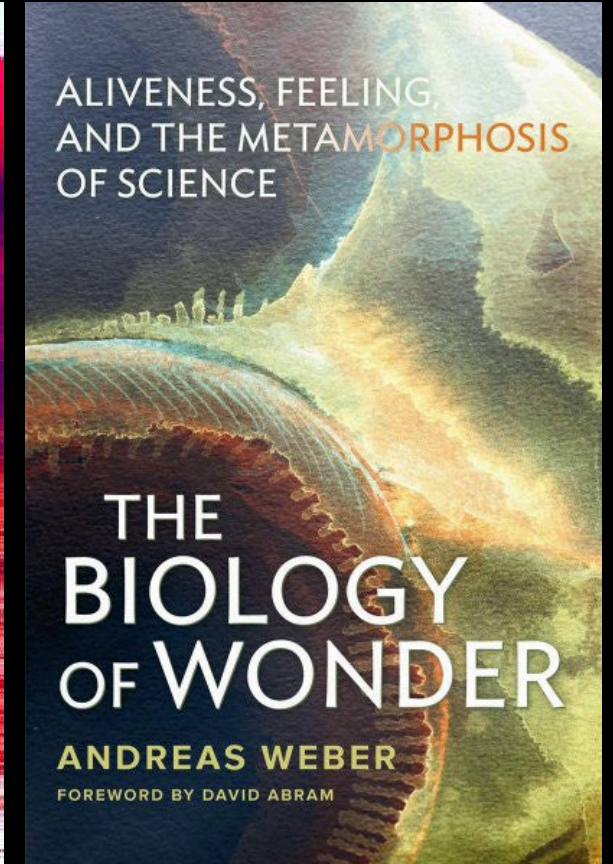
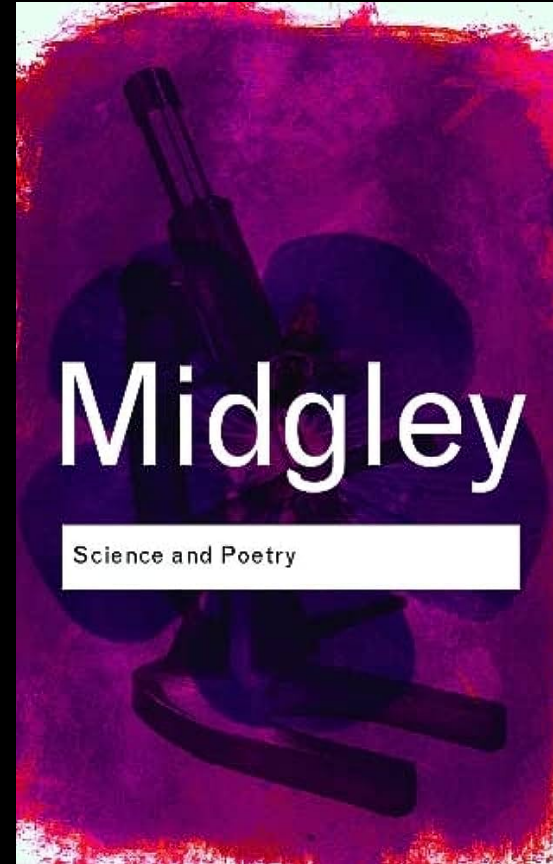
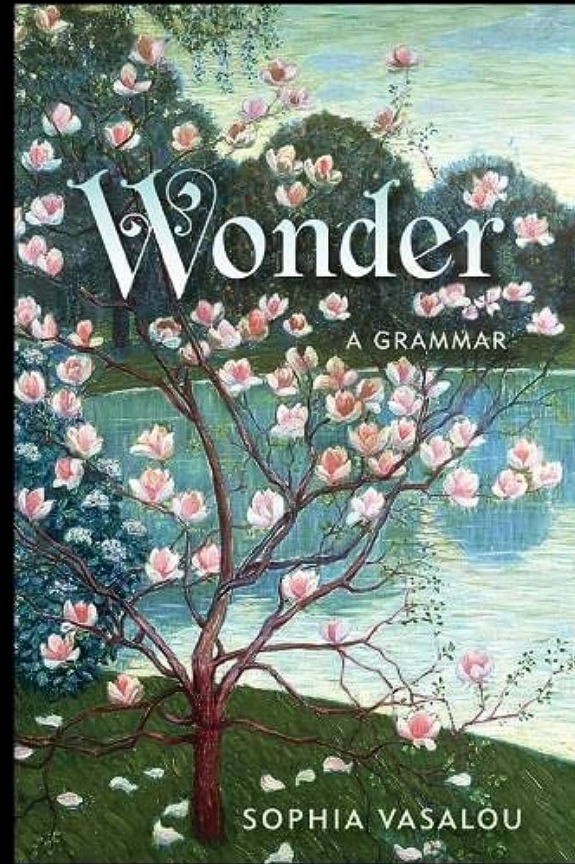
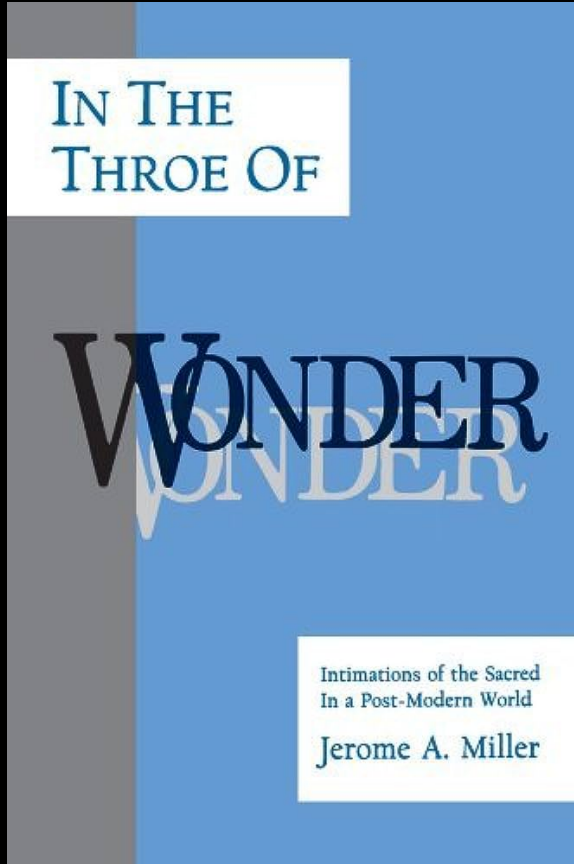
Aristotle: people are “first led to study philosophy ... by wonder.”

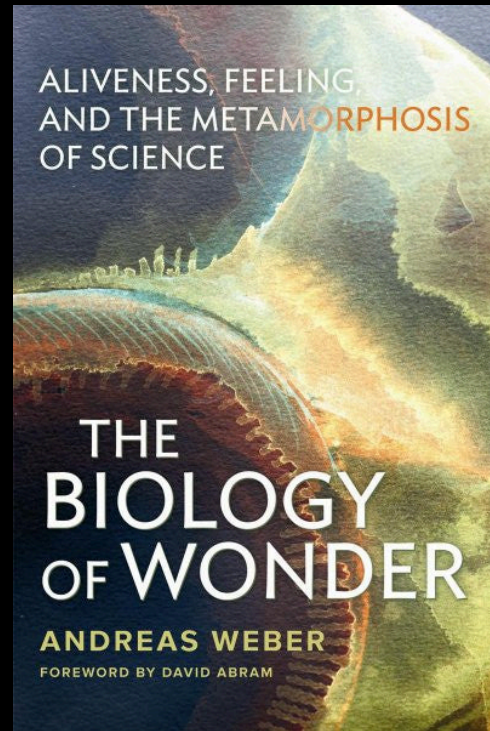
Thauma

(Hunzinger 2015)

- “protean notion”, “ranging from hermeneutical astonishment to stupid amazement” in early Greek and Roman sources
- most closely associated with sight both metaphorically and experientially (and thus potentially leading to either insight or illusion).
- “born of an ‘in-betweenness’” or “emotional vertigo”
- Roman studies following Aristotle also identify the sense of wonder with feelings of the sublime, involving emotions of grandeur and loftiness.

The Study of Wonder





Poetic Ecology

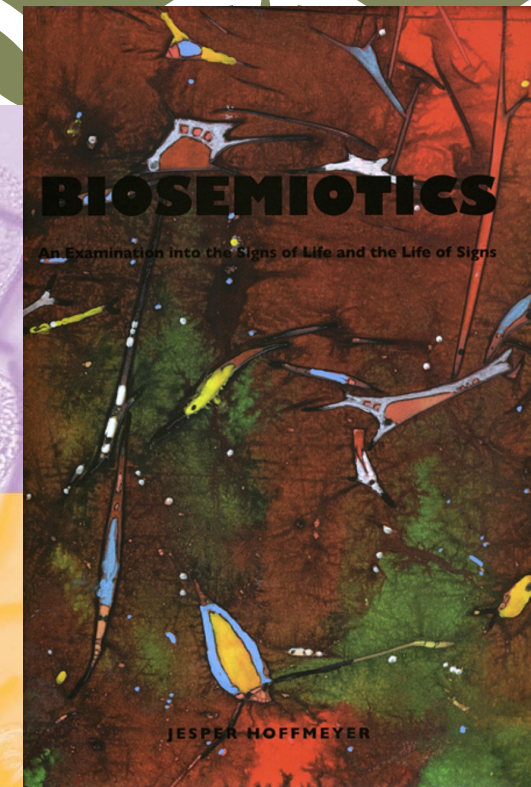
“feeling and expression as necessary dimensions of the existential reality of organisms.

“all life builds on relations and unfolds through mutual transformations.”

“Feeling is never invisible; it takes shape and manifests as form everywhere in nature. Nature can therefore be viewed as feeling unfurled, a living reality in front of and amidst us.”



RECONSTRUCTING HOFFMEYER'S BIOSEMIOTIC AESTHETICS





Aesthetics and ethics via inter-species empathy

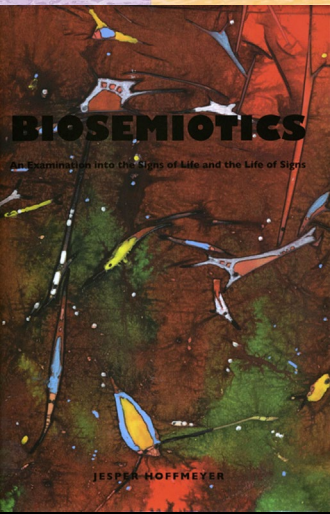
“biosemiotics leads us to consider that [aesthetics and ethics] are inherently bound to one another” (2008: 322) What is Ethics? “our existential need to empathize with other umwelt builders in this weird and wonderful world” (1997: 141)



“the immediate and strong appeal of *life itself* for our emotional life.” ... “calling out of us our gentleness, fear, fascination, awe, confidence, brutality, loathing, and hate. And while the sea, a rainbow, the firmament, the mountains, and the rivers may all raise strong feelings within some people, these feelings rarely elicit the same degree of spontaneous concern. ... they do not, in general appeal to our visceral and emotional life with the same surprising intensity as do the howling of nearby wolves or the peeping of just-hatched birds.” (2008: 325)

“There can be no doubt either that people have no trouble in empathizing with trees” (1997: 140)

“empathy is not just a mental effort, and in particular it is not a duty, for it is a corporeally felt necessity.” (2008: 326)



“profound need for empathy ... with all life forms of the earth in general”
premised on Bateson’s “pattern that connects” (1997: 135)

But what is the nature of this pattern that connects?



consciousness as narrative and spatial interpretation

“Consciousness is the body’s spatial and narrative interpretation of its existential umwelt” (1997: 122)

aesthetics has its roots in “biological universals such as breathing, pulse, movement schemas, digestion, and rhythm” ... behind which “we must suppose a plethora of corporeal-psychological patterns that have become incorporated...” ... “Such corporeal-psychological interleavings open up the potential for an abundance of feelings and expressive forms.” (2008: 324)

Forms?

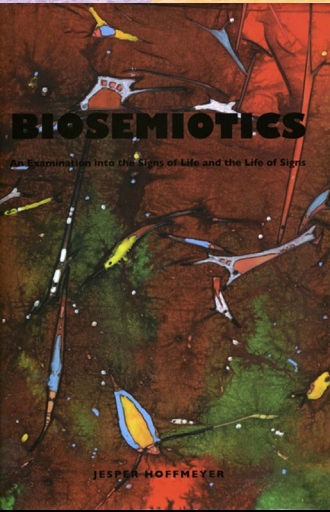
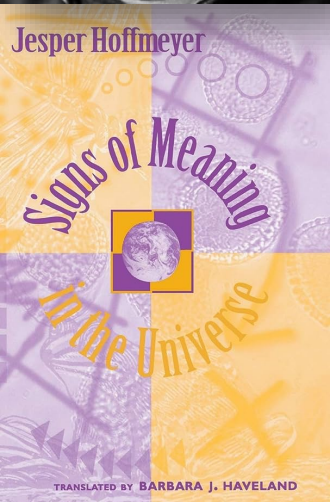
Hoffmeyer often refers to the body in terms of mucousal output and digestive process:

“gurgling, rheumy mire” (1997: 130)

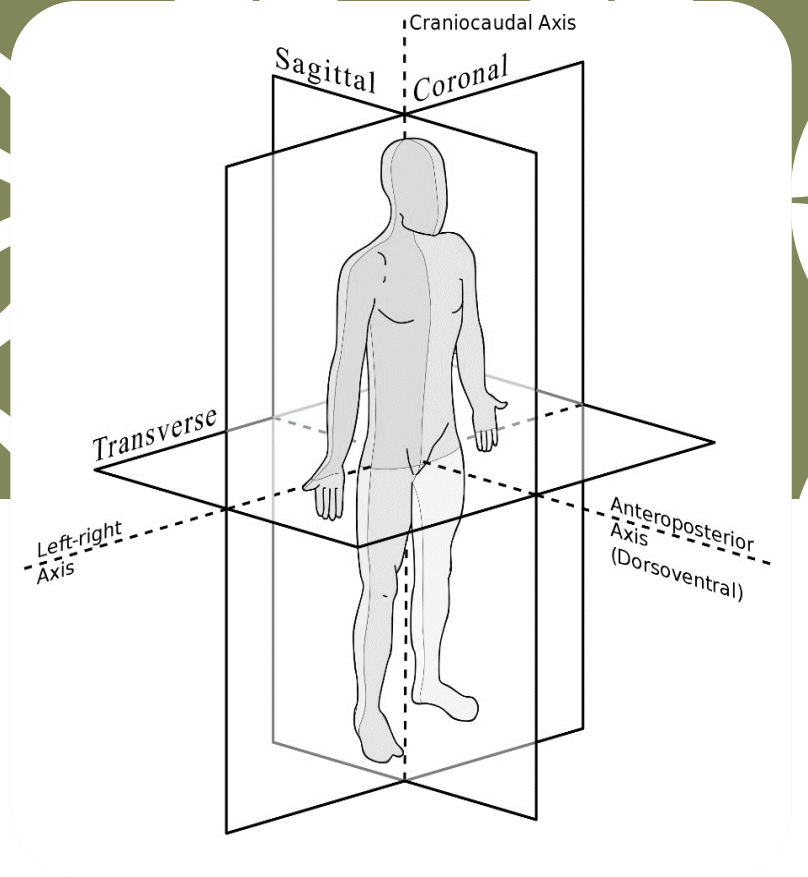
“slimy mollusc trail” (1997: 134)

Elsewhere (2008: 301-303) he develops the thought of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s phenomenology of movement.

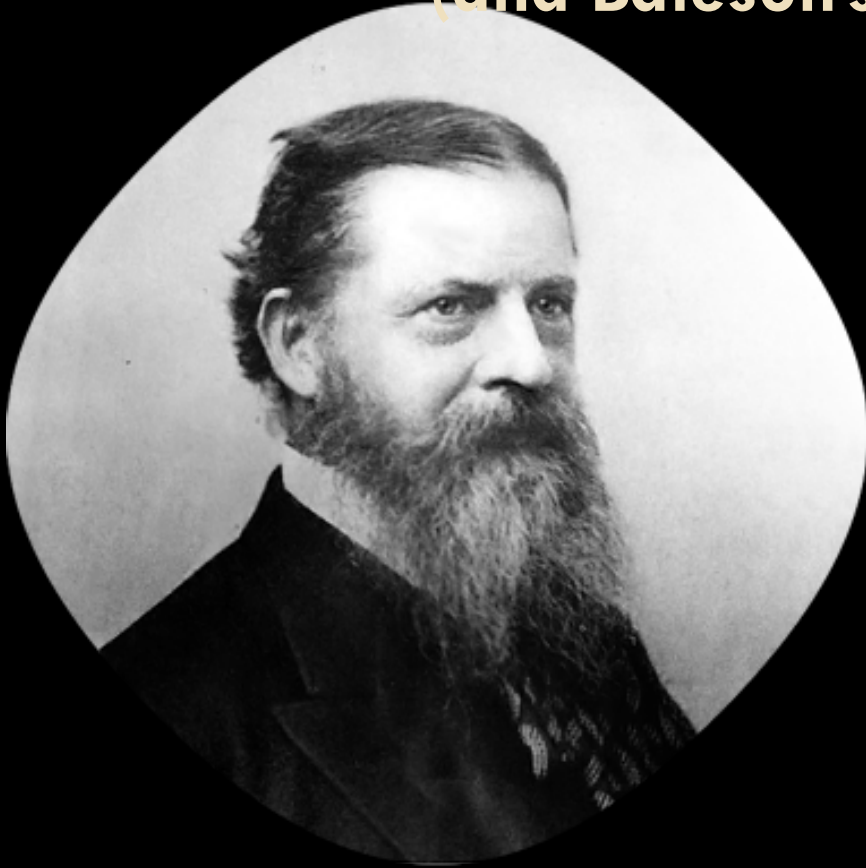
“transcends the ambition of the present work” (2008: 324)



DEVELOPING HOFFMEYER'S BIOSEMIOTIC AESTHETICS



DIAGRAMMATIC ICONICITY (and Bateson's "pattern that connects")



tone

Rhematic Iconic
QUALISIGN

token

Rhematic Iconic
SINSIGN

type

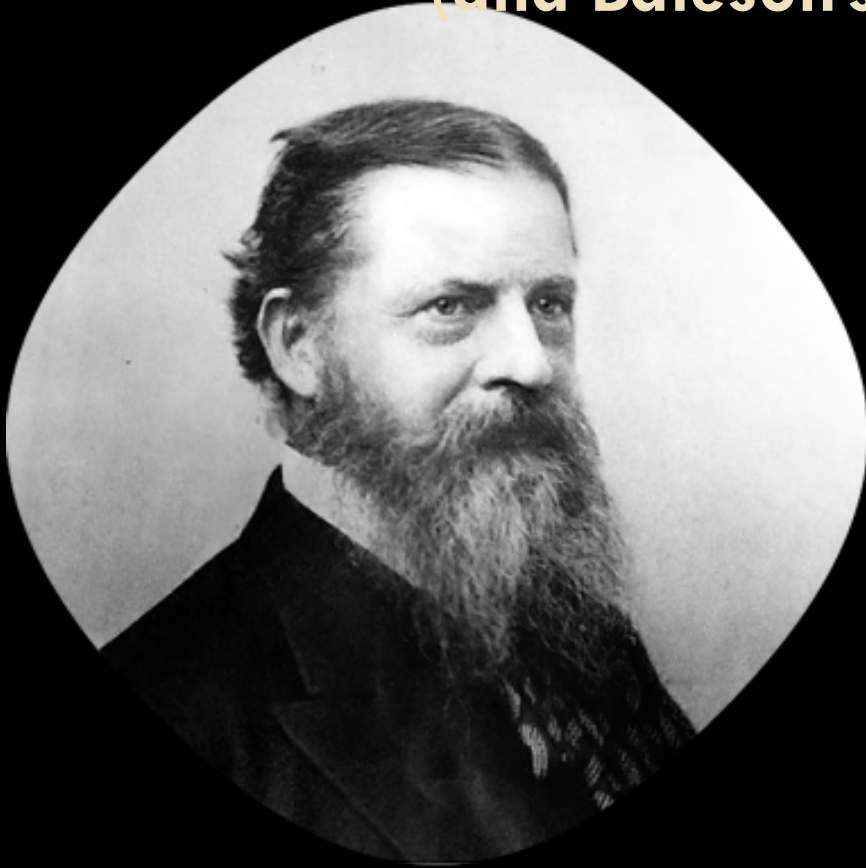
Rhematic Iconic
LEGISIGN

TONAL ICONICITY

"the affective quality of all iconic relations"

(Pelkey 2022)

DIAGRAMMATIC ICONICITY (and Bateson's "pattern that connects")



Tonal Iconicity

Tone:
Rhematic
Iconic
Qualisign

Diagrammatic Iconicity

Token:	Type:
Rhematic	Rhematic
Iconic	Iconic
Sinsign	Legisign

EMBODIMENT?

Kinesthesia

Proprioception

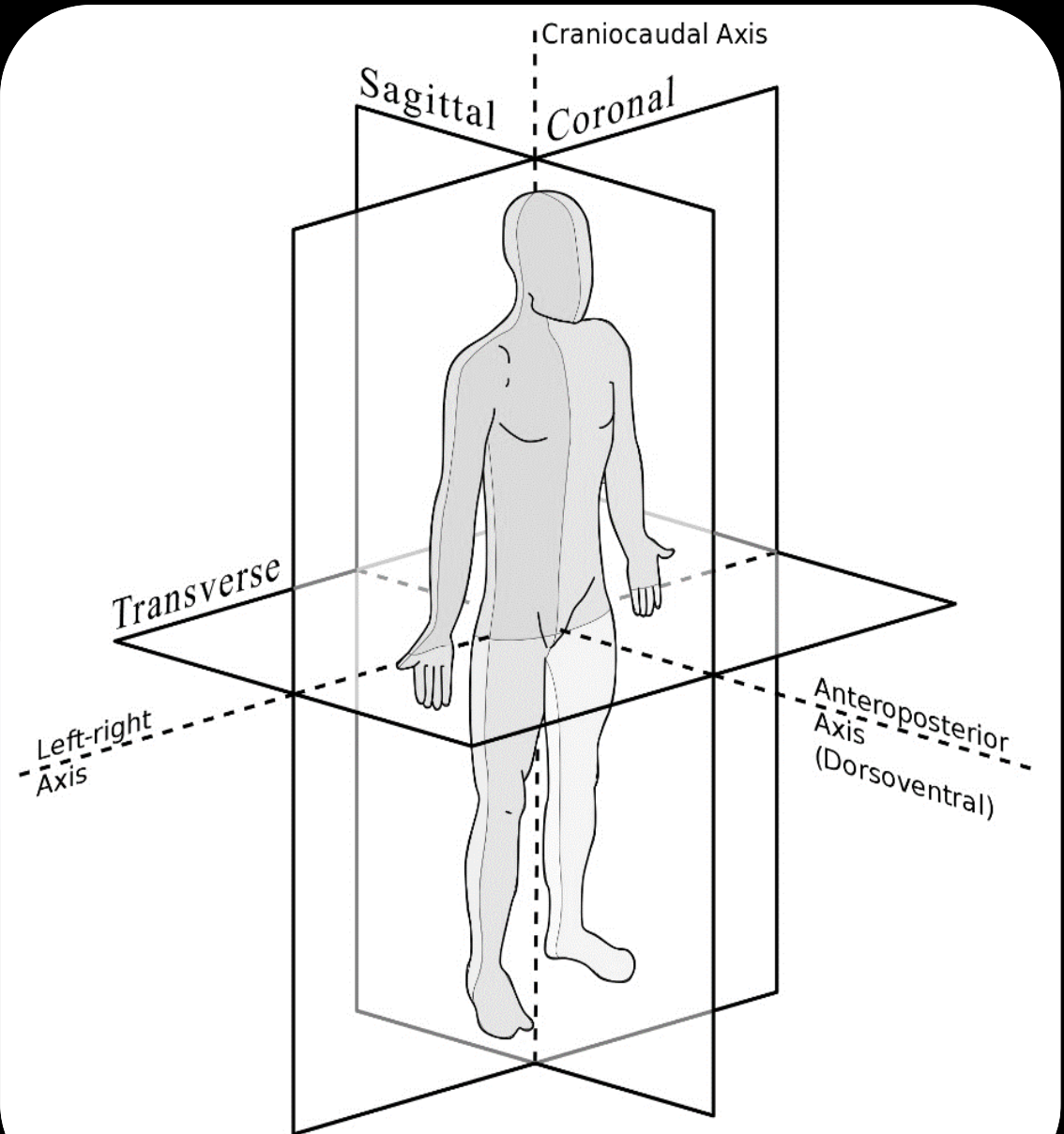
Intersubjectivity

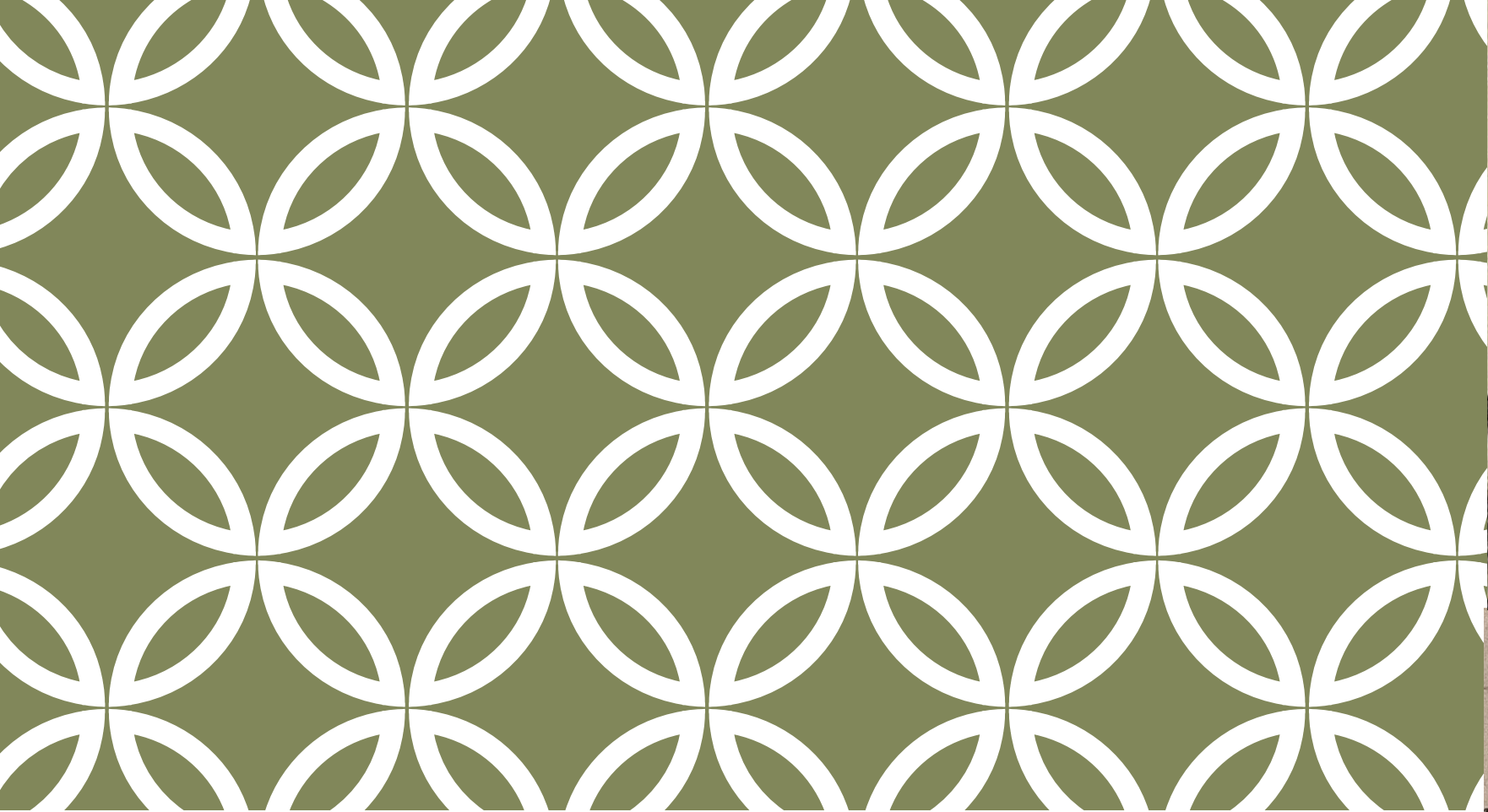
Body Memory

**AXES OF ORIENTATION!
ANATOMICAL PLANES!**

'kinesthetic (blend) spaces'

'kinesthetic pattern grammar'





**INTEGRATING WITH
COGNITIVE POETICS**



Evocation of bodily orientation:
human upright posture

Extension of bodily oppositional relations
to transcendent heights and depths

Interweaving upper-lower body contrasts
to further intensify experiential blending

Juxtaposition of blended antithetical
orientation to focus on a frozen state in-
between

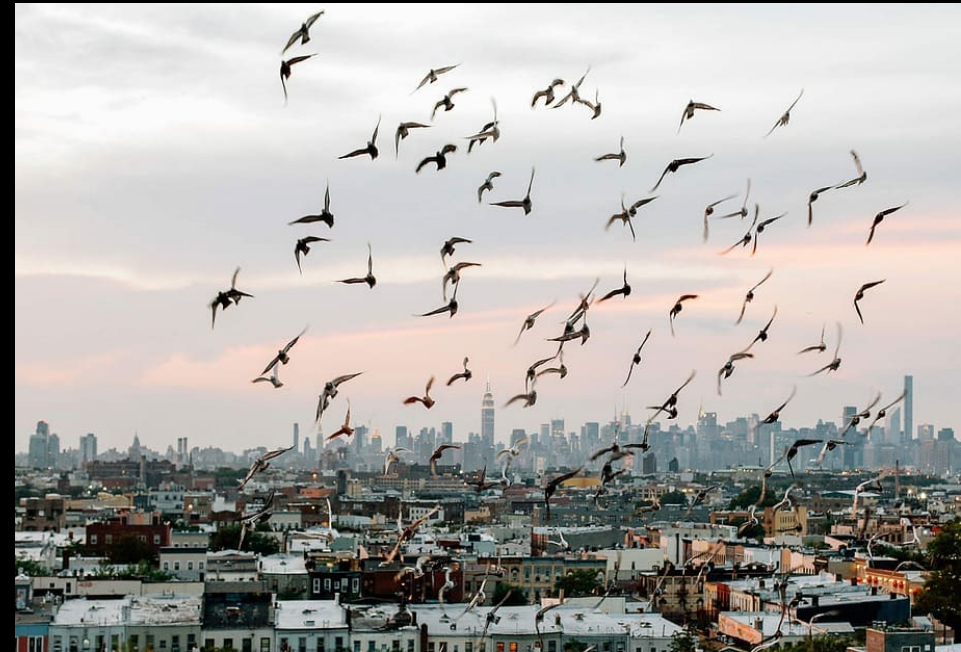
Mapping between transverse and
caudal-rostral bodily templates
(human vs. alloanimal)



Meditations in an Emergency

by Cameron Awkward-Rich (2019)

I wake up & it breaks my heart. I draw the blinds & the thrill of rain breaks my heart. I go outside. I ride the train, walk among the buildings, men in Monday suits. The flight of doves, the city of tents beneath the underpass, the huddled mass, old women hawking roses, & children all of them, break my heart. There's a dream I have in which I love the world. I run from end to end like fingers through her hair. There are no borders, only wind. Like you, I was born. Like you, I was raised in the institution of dreaming. Hand on my heart. Hand on my stupid heart.





(1892-1950)

Assault

Edna St. Vincent Millay

I had forgotten how the frogs must sound
After a year of silence, else I think
I should not so have ventured forth alone
At dusk upon this unfrequented road.

I am waylaid by Beauty. Who will walk
Between me and the crying of the frogs?
Oh, savage Beauty, suffer me to pass,
That am a timid woman, on her way
From one house to another!





From Pierre or The Ambiguities

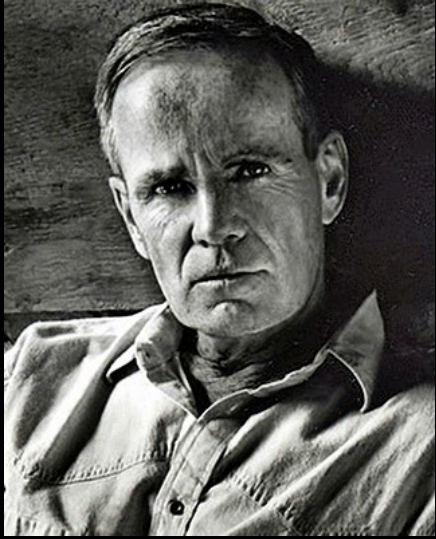
By Herman Melville (1852)

THERE are some strange summer mornings in the country, when he who is but a sojourner from the city shall early walk forth into the fields, and be wonder-smitten with the trance-like aspect of the green and golden world. Not a flower stirs; the trees forget to wave; the grass itself seems to have ceased to grow; and all Nature, as if suddenly become conscious of her own profound mystery, and feeling no refuge from it but silence, sinks into this wonderful and indescribable repose.

Such was the morning in June, when, issuing from the embowered and high-gabled old home of his fathers, Pierre, dewily refreshed and spiritualized by sleep, gayly entered the long, wide, elm-arched street of the village, and half unconsciously bent his steps toward a cottage, which peeped into view near the end of the vista.

The verdant trance lay far and wide; and through it nothing came but the brindled kine, dreamily wandering to their pastures, followed, not driven, by ruddy-cheeked, white-footed boys.





From *The Road*

by Cormac McCarthy

Once there were brook trouts in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.





References available upon request.

THANK YOU

**Toronto
Metropolitan
University**

**Languages,
Literatures & Cultures**
Faculty of Arts