

## Surfing the Absolute: Comments on Volume 22 of the IJTS

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*Here and there in the woods I come across  
such beautiful rocks, covered with such soft green  
mosses that they make me want to lay my face  
against them.*

**John Jerome**

(in *Stone Work*, 1989, p. 143)

Old academics and scholars who once were experimental psychologists and who now live in the bush where they build hand-made houses and stone walls and paddle canoes when not writing fiction are almost certainly not to be trusted in such a journal as the IJTS. Not only do we pretend to have retired and to have slipped away into obscurity, but we sometimes talk cheerfully to water dragons and coaxingly to rosebuds, we secretly read esoteric and even scholarly journals, and some of us continue the hopeless struggle against being opinionated. This is an opinion piece and I suggest that should it be published in “Reader Comments.” I may not be entirely alone as a writer of opinions—this means that I am including the Volume 22 authors as writers of opinions too.

I have been rereading John Jerome’s *Stone Work* because I like the writing and because I, like Jerome, build stone walls too. Building gravity walls from river stones is not a kind of work. As the publisher’s blurb indicates: “it is not so much an account of stacking stones as it is a meditation about mind and matter, obsession and compulsion, and the shifting seasons.” I want to suggest that when we read about a man building stone walls in the country—and written by a writer who is both eloquent and lyrical—we will be compelled to visualise some of what he describes. To “see” what an author has been seeing is to magically derive

something special and something “extra” from the writing. When reading essays that are “academic and scholarly” (and are not memoirs of doing ordinary or even adventurous work) we can expect to visualise less.

Remember Butch and Sundance peering anxiously toward the oncoming posse? “Who *are* those guys?” The approaching riders had this in common: they could all ride and they were all bent on catching the bad guys. When we look at a journal-full of academic and scholarly writers, they *may* all have been intent on achieving publication, and what they all share is *writing*. There are many kinds of writers making many kinds of writing. It takes some doing to write well enough that the reader can “see” what the writer sees. This is not to suggest that scholars should write more vividly or that they emulate the movie scriptwriters—it is to decry scholarly writing that is mindlessly burdened with jargon and is flowery, confusing, and composed of tortured language. Surely these academic and scholarly writers are not as precious as their writings often imply? Surely they are not in the terminal stages of hubris? Or is there a scholarly conspiracy to write impenetrable prose?

In my opinion Volume 22 of the IJTS looks good and even feels good—I measured it—and it not only is about 4 mm shorter than the preceding volume, it seems less likely to flop about when held limply. The design and layout and the subheadings in the text (which succeed in not interrupting the narratives) indicate very good design and editing. While I did like some of what I read, most of the essays were difficult for me to adequately comprehend—perhaps because I was often speed-reading through fear of being overwhelmed by prose that was sometimes dense and

sometimes convoluted. It gives me no pleasure to write that—but then much of the text gave me no pleasure to read. Most of these materials were not entertaining and I see no reason on earth why scholarly essays should not also entertain—whatever else they do. To put this differently: the writings in Volume 22 have been made to look their best through good editing and production processes.

While the quality of references listed at the end of each essay generally is impressive, the quantity of references appears excessive. Academics and scholars (A/Ss) are confident as well as competent researchers and all have opinions. We are all free to state opinions and to argue for points of view without needing so much backup.

Further, the writing styles of some Volume 22 scholars also contain some unnecessary authorial conceits and silly self-indulgences. If it is appropriate for A/Ss to chide, as well as praise, other researchers, it is surely OK for an ex A/S to criticise critical A/Ss. I do so. Some A/Ss have either passed away or will not have read Volume 22 .

For example: “Elaborating somewhat from what we wrote elsewhere, below are some of the elements that would seem to be characteristic of the eidetic cosmology, and hence may serve in differing degrees to pattern the content of various world views around the globe.” (p. 9).

“What Durkheim failed to grasp, however, was that the ritual procedures that produced ‘collective effervescence,’ produced adherence as much to physical reality as to social reality.” (p. 10).

“Our argument is fairly complete and reasonably straightforward. Let us briefly summarize the high points of the theory, and then we can close with some few inferences drawn from it.” (p. 19).

“Inner-worldly mysticism in the modern west has its historical “shadow” in Hellenistic Gnosticism, for Weber the multifaceted spiritual response of disenfranchised educated classes to Roman hegemony.” (p. 27). “From the point of view of the unitive, nondual mysticism of Plotinus, those he called Gnostics were unwittingly enshrining and fixating a spiritual pathology.” (p. 29).

“Of course, a transpersonalist like Ken Wilber (1995), working from the more inclusive spiritual monism of Plotinus and Vedanta, rightly labels all such cognitive and neuropsychological approaches as a ‘subtle reductionism’—or worse—since they falsely

subordinate the primacy of direct experience to materialism.” (p. 36).

“First, let us proceed to the matter of evolution, asking specifically whether psychological ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: does the course of individual psychological development follow a pattern similar to that seen in the history of the human mind?” (p. 52).

“Let us again note, as well, that no matter what state of consciousness, or realm of being, an individual might experience, we can expect that upon returning to ordinary waking consciousness he or she will interpret that experience according to his or her own level of development.” (p. 57).

“Before I begin with this, however, I ought to define exactly what (or who) I mean by ‘primal peoples.’” (p. 63).

“However, I must first say that in some respects I agree with Wilber and Habermas. I believe that it’s justifiable to say that primal peoples were at a ‘pre-rational’ level, or at least did not possess rational-logical powers to the same extent that we do.” (p. 63).

“What we really need, in order to fully substantiate the argument of this essay, are two things. First, we need a different view of spirituality, which could account for the fact that primal peoples are ‘spiritual’ and pre-rational at the same time.” (p. 73).

These excerpts, taken unfairly out of context, are not, in my opinion, dazzling insights into anything. They are, rather, fanciful and pretentious phrases and sentences presumably intended to demonstrate “scholarship.”

Some of these writings were easy to read and were also informative (e.g., Walsh’s essay), and the Valpy quotation from *The Globe and Mail* (in Hunt’s essay) was like a breath of fresh air. The Llabrés description of “Transpersonal” so interested me that I read it a second time.

In studying transpersonal studies I want also to read for pleasure. I want to see A/Ss’ words so arranged, after their having been found, as to afford me more opportunities to see images, to experience something of the pictures that once were in the writers’ minds. All too often when I read scholarly articles, I resort to seeing images “of my own” simply because the scholar’s mode is one that spins words past me in picture-less jumbles. Where is there any pleasure in leaden and twisted prose?

As if that were not bad enough, I caution myself (from habit) when glancing at “About our

Contributors” because I want to know a part or two of the A/S that is human enough to be somewhere beyond ego. Sigh. And I suspect that we have all written inflated and arrogant paragraphs about ourselves that make us seem less like spiritually inclined scholars and more like ambitious gunfighters. Is this one a philosopher who enjoys canoeing? Does she photograph dewed spider’s webs at sunrise? How might I recognise a certain A/S who wrote a particular essay should I meet him or her? What hope do I have when they catalogue, not their loves or attributes or recreations but only their publications? Indicating “many articles” means only that the author is saying, “I wrote this essay and I have written many other essays.” So what? “Several essays and books,” “over 50 articles, chapters and books related to consciousness,” “several essays and some 20 books,” “numerous empirical and theoretical articles,” “written, edited, co-authored, or co-edited over 1,000 articles and 15 books,” “author or co-author of about 140 articles” are ego-level examples of A/S madness. What does “he has been involved in the transpersonal movement in a holistic and integral way” really mean? How exciting or possibly strange might it be to practice “psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with a transpersonal approach”? This makes psychotherapy seem a monster having one foot cemented at the ego level and the other foot seeking purchase somewhere in the transpersonal bands. Less would certainly be more in some of these biographical romances. I would applaud the editors’ presenting just one “About our Contributors” which is entirely free of noted publications. Let us know the authors by other of their qualities, by their quirks and foibles, by anything that is endearing or surprising (“always wears black clothes,” “keeps a pet wolf,” “builds lute-harpsichords,” “glides,” “is a throat singer,” “a sculptor,” “grows Venus fly traps,” “restores vintage motor cycles,” “dances the tango”). Is writing scholarly essays and opinion pieces all that A/Ss do?

Readers familiar with Wilber’s (1979) spectrum of consciousness model and of there being therapies appropriate to the different levels of consciousness will recall that schools and techniques of psychotherapy offer possibilities of effecting change in one’s consciousness. A/Ss, like everybody else, live at one or another of these levels. A/Ss, it seems, do not all dwell at the same level (neither did Freud and Jung). Would it be unreasonable of those attempting to live within the transpersonal bands to expect that our A/Ss live

there too? If those writing about consciousness and that which is transpersonal are going to flit about wordily at different levels when there are expectations of their being steadfast at one level, then those examining transpersonal writings may begin to suspect that some scholars will experience conflicts of interest. This is not to say that “our” A/Ss should always wear flowing robes and emit golden light or that they ought to chant and pray a lot, as respite from the elevated work of scholarship, but that they become more aware of how they present their essays, as well as increasing their awareness of how they describe themselves.

Being an A/S is an honourable profession. Those of us who once were A/Ss and now are simply writers of one kind or another will perhaps want transpersonal studies scholars to be more respectful of that level of identity (and awareness)—and to please treat the English language more lovingly.

There is no special place for writers on the spectrum of consciousness. If there were, then writers, including academics and scholars of transpersonal studies, would, I would hope, take a greater interest in that form of creative writing called literary fiction. In literary fiction there is a kind or a category of writing called “consciousness writing,” of which there are two principal techniques: (1) interior monologue; and (2) free indirect style. Interior monologue enables us to share the “most intimate thoughts represented as silent, spontaneous, unceasing streams of consciousness” of characters (Lodge, 1992, p. 47). The free indirect style “renders thought as reported speech (in the third person, past tense)” (Lodge, 1992, p. 43). These are not only appealing and creative ways in which to write; the writer may become so engrossed as to experience a state of consciousness other than consensus reality or ordinary consciousness. I mention this because I’m inclined to think that some of my A/S colleagues will be attracted to sometimes write differently. We can all learn something from each other. Writing creatively by novelists *and* by academics and scholars may be the experience of appreciating a different state of consciousness. We all have *writing* in common. Are there scholars who might experiment with consciousness writing?

“Golden, golden, the woods are golden now. The days stretch on into Indian summer, the air gone plummy with woodsmoke and windfall apples, Stradivari air” (Jerome, 1989, p 139).

—If you see what I mean.

### References

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- Lodge, D. (1992). *The art of fiction*. London: Penguin.
- Wilber, K. (1979). *No boundary: Eastern and Western approaches to personal growth*. Los Angeles: Center Publications.

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