

## Peak Oil and Poetry of Place

*Windfall* depends on cheap oil. We use gasoline and petroleum-based asphalt roads to get *Windfall* edited and printed. We also rely on our computers and the Internet using equipment largely manufactured from oil-based materials. The paper and printing businesses that supply us are themselves dependent on oil. We depend on the US Postal Service for transporting each issue to authors and subscribers, and the Postal Service runs on fossil fuel. We depend on independent bookstores to sell *Windfall*, and these stores have their own power requirements. In short, the production of *Windfall* is just one example of how many taken-for-granted endeavors are dependent on oil.

A realistic view of the immediate future suggests that the world is coming to the end of easily available, cheap fossil fuel. Studies show that the peak of world production of oil will most likely occur before 2010 (US production peaked in 1970). The term “peak of production” implies that we have half the world’s oil reserves yet to draw upon. However, most of the easily extractable oil has already been used, and much of the remainder is of lower quality or difficult to access—or locked in oil shale or oil sands, which are extremely costly to process. “Peak production” means that after the peak is reached, oil becomes much more expensive to produce and consume. Natural gas, which supplies much of our energy, is destined to peak a few years after oil, and is already falling in production in the United States.

What is the connection between the end of cheap oil and the writing of poetry? Most fundamentally, if predictions about the end of cheap oil are accurate, the way we live our daily lives and interact with neighbors and colleagues will change considerably. What we do during a typical day will change. And the poetry we write and the poetry of the past which we value will change, because the personal independence that cheap oil has enabled will begin to be replaced by an increasing reliance on community, cooperation, and closer living.

For the last two hundred years or so, the common assumptions about poetry have been that it is written as the expression of an individual voice. Whether as an individual reading silently or as a member of a listening audience, the receiver of poetry more or less identifies with the concerns

expressed by the poet or with the poet's expressive performance. The most valued poetry reveals the most about contemporary individual life, both uniquely and in terms of shared circumstances and responses. Our point of connection with past literature has been where the individual stands out against the crowd. That is where the distant past of the literature of Rome or the Middle Ages appeals to us—even though it may be a miniscule part of the literature of the time. What sustained populations of most of the past is literature of the group—what would be most helpful for everyone.

It could be argued that these more recently assumed conditions for the writing and reception of poetry have been made possible by a culture founded upon cheap and available energy resources. Only with such a culture would the poet or the reader have the lifestyle, the leisure, and the luxury of sustaining such a radically individualistic art.

A change is coming. Awareness of the fundamental facts of the increasing difficulty and expense of producing oil has spurred interest in alternative sources of energy. Wind, solar, hydrogen, and even nuclear plants are commonly entertained as potential sources if sufficient attention were paid to their development. However, all of these require an oil-driven infrastructure to produce and maintain the necessary equipment, and some, such as nuclear, are subject to the same limitations as oil: uranium is in relatively short supply (about fifty years' worth), aside from the problem of nuclear waste disposal. No alternative source of power will ever replace the abundance, availability, and flexibility the world has enjoyed over the last hundred years of fossil fuel consumption. And even if a "free-energy machine" could be developed, says Richard Heinberg, author of *Powerdown*, the subsequent increase in human population would threaten sustainability, much as we see happening now through global warming, resource depletion, declining food production, political instability, and war.

Heinberg and others maintain that the rapid increase in human population has in fact been made possible by abundant oil. Between 1960 and 1998 the world population rose from 3.5 billion to six billion. Since 1998, we have added another four hundred million, the equivalent of another North America. However, we have not added another North America's worth of resources. Oil consumption and population growth increase together because we are dependent on oil for much more than transportation. Oil is the basis for fertilizers that make large-scale agriculture

possible, and every country's "green revolution" has been followed by an increase in population. Petroleum products are also the basis for many medical applications, which support population. The end of cheap oil means that population will necessarily decline.

Likewise, the end of oil will necessarily limit the way the built world has developed over the last hundred years. Far-flung suburbia—together with attendant structures such as strip malls, chain stores, and parking lots—has been made possible by oil-driven transportation. James Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency* and *The Geography of Nowhere*, emphasizes that suburbia not only homogenizes our culture, but is often built on prime farm land, which we may yet come to value more than suburbia.

The scale of our culture will be reduced as oil becomes scarce and more expensive. The economy will inevitably contract, as globalization and multi-national corporations become untenable when oil supplies are subject to competition, depletion, and war. An economic system that depends on growth and infinite resources will not be sustainable. Big government and big business will give way to their opposite: Regional and local government will become more important, and local economies will become more self-sustaining. Our local places will increase vastly in importance. We must, in short, learn to use less power. As Heinberg puts it, "Powerdown would mean a species-wide effort toward self-limitation." Such a scaling down—from larger, faster and more centralized to smaller, slower, and more locally-based—is likely to be well underway within our lifetimes.

Suppose the poet were integrated into a smaller, more concentrated community based on local supplies of energy and local production of food—indeed, where more people would be involved in the production of food than not. As we have seen from the past, labor-intensive lifestyles lead to a kind of poetry that is less individualistic and more oriented toward group concerns. Poetry may concern itself less with the poet as an individual and more with shared experiences of nature, work, and spirituality—the sources of inspiration drawn from without rather than from within. Poetry would no longer be about itself or about its language, but about human activity and its place in the world. Imagery and narrative might become more important, perhaps assuming a mythic scale. Close observation and accurate detail would make such poetry emotionally satisfying and useful. The poetry of place would assume greater importance.

We have seen poetry go this way before. The Roman poet Virgil was born and raised in the country around Mantua, in northern Italy. In his four-part poem *Georgics*, completed around 30 BCE, Virgil celebrates and interprets life on the farm for his mostly urban readers. In elegant Latin hexameters, Virgil advises the farmer about the care of his field, in terms easily applicable today:

Alternis idem tonsas cessare novalis,  
et segnem patiere situ durescere campum;  
aut ibi flava seres mutato sidere farra,  
unde prius laetum siliqua quassante legumen  
aut tenuis fetus viciae tristisque lupini  
sustuleris fragilis calamos silvamque sonantem.  
Urit enim lini campum seges, urit avenae,  
urunt Lethaeo perfusa papavera somno:  
sed tamen alternis facilis labor, arida tantum  
ne saturare fimo pingui pudeat sola neve  
effetos cinerem immundum iactare per agros.

See, too, that your arable land lies fallow in due rotation,  
And leave the idle field alone to recoup its strength:  
Or else, changing the seasons, put down to yellow spelt  
A field where before you raised the bean with its rattling pods  
Or the small-seeded vetch  
Or the brittle stalk and rustling haulm of the bitter lupin.  
For a crop of flax burns up a field, and so does an oat-crop,  
And poppies drenched in oblivion burn up its energy.  
Still by rotation of crops you lighten your labor, only  
Scruple not to enrich the dried-up soil with dung  
and scatter filthy ashes on fields that are exhausted.

—translated by C. Day Lewis

We find Virgil's admonition echoed by American poet Wendell Berry in 1970 from a first-person perspective more typical of our culture. However, in our age of large-scale agribusiness with field-injected oil-based fertilizers predominating, Berry's declaration of care for the health of fields by the

use of organic fertilizer (especially legumes) seems both archaic and prescient:

To enrich the earth I have sowed clover and grass  
to grow and die. I have plowed in the seeds  
of winter grains and of various legumes,  
their growth to be plowed in to enrich the earth.  
I have stirred into the ground the offal  
and the decay of the growth of past seasons  
and so mended the earth and made its yield increase.

—from “Enriching the Earth”

American culture has long subscribed to the myth of “rugged individualism,” the idea that an American is a resourceful, independent, self-sustaining individual who needs no help from government or friends and neighbors. Our frontier mentality of the nineteenth century and the rebelliousness of teens and twenty-somethings from the 1960s through the present represent the same thinking. Relatively cheap land in the nineteenth-century—and the free-for-the-taking of the resources on the land—and then cheap energy (for easy mobility above all else—gasoline, car, highway) have enabled a sense of independence. Yet not much digging reveals that frontierspeople generally relied on each other even more than those in Eastern cities; neighborly sharing—even if neighbors were twenty miles away—was essential to survival on the frontier. And the relatively inexpensive energy that sustains us now is the result of tremendous cooperation and interdependence on corporate, government, and institutional levels.

After peak oil, we might also find new ideas for poetry and rediscover important traditions of the past. Among ancient sources, we should note the Chinese poets we discussed in the spring 2005 *Windfall* afterword. T’ao Ch’ien (365-427) was the first to write in the persona of farmer and exile from court. Here he celebrates his residence in a country community called South Village:

Spring and Fall offer countless lovely  
days to climb mountains and write new

poems. At each gate, greetings rise,  
and if there's wine, it's ladled out.

After a day's work, we each return home  
alone to relax. Or suddenly friends

coming to mind, we dress up and go out,  
and can't get enough talk or laughter.

There's no better life, and no chance  
I'll leave. Though it's true we can't

live without food and clothes, working  
these fields will never shortchange me.

—translated by David Hinton

In the next-to-last line T'ao Ch'ien acknowledges that country life can be frugal, but the poem also says that the social rewards are great: family and community flourish. And more than that, he finds he is inspired to write new poems! Likewise, after peak oil, life for many of us will be less comfortable, but as Heinberg says, "True individual and family security will come only with community solidarity and interdependence."

Another approach to the poetry of farming life was developed by English poets beginning with Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* of 1579. A shepherd's calendar consisted of a poem for each month of the year, and Spenser took as his model Virgil's *Eclogues*, and well as Virgil's own model in the *Idylls* of the Greek poet Theocritus. Spenser maintained the pastoral conventions of shepherds engaged in casual discourse, while developing resonances to religious and political themes under the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Such conventions aside, the idea of a monthly poem attracted the interest of a later English poet, John Clare, who in 1827 published his own *Shepherd's Calendar*. By now the conventional shepherds had been reduced to one, and he more resembled the prototypical Northamptonshire farm laborer, not otherwise named or identified. The object was the life itself, as in this excerpt from "September":

Anon the fields are nearly clear  
And glad sounds hum in labour's ear,  
When children halloo "Here they come!"  
And run to meet the Harvest Home,  
Stuck thick with boughs and thronged with boys,  
Who mingle loud a merry noise,  
And when they meet the stack-thronged yard  
Cross-buns and pence their shouts reward.  
Then comes the harvest-supper night,  
Which rustics welcome with delight,  
When merry game and tiresome tale  
And songs increasing with the ale  
Their mingled uproar interpose  
To crown the harvest's happy close,  
While rural mirth that there abides  
Laughs till she almost cracks her sides.

What would a shepherd's calendar look like in our time? Shepherds could be replaced by gardeners, perhaps. Could there be an urban calendar in poetry that would signal the essential activities of garden and community in a given region or locale throughout the year? At *Windfall* we await your installments in lines and stanzas for a gardener's (or vintner's or farmer's) calendar for the Pacific Northwest!

In Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's poetry of life in the County Monaghan of the 1940's, we find a sense of community similar to John Clare's, with work in the haggard (farm yard) fully integrated into the social occasion:

On an apple-ripe September morning  
Through the mist-chill fields I went  
With a pitch-fork on my shoulder  
Less for use than for devilment.

The threshing mill was set-up, I know,  
In Cassidy's haggard last night,  
And we owed them a day at the threshing  
Since last year. O it was delight

To be paying bills of laughter  
And chaffy gossip in kind  
with work thrown in to ballast  
The fantasy-soaring mind.  
—from “Tarry Flynn”

Along with the greater focus on place in poetry after peak oil, we can expect closer observation of indigenous plants and animals and identifying them by name, bearing information to the reader, as well as imagery. Gary Snyder places his human family (boys, Masa) in relation to his local watershed ecology:

ALL IN THE FAMILY  
For the first time in memory  
heavy rain in August  
    tuning up the chainsaw  
        begin to cut oak  
Boletus by the dozen  
    fruiting in the woods  
Full moon, warm nights  
    the boys learn to float  
Masa gone off dancing  
    for another thirty days  
Queen Ann’s lace in the meadow  
    a Flicker’s single call  
  
Oregano, lavender, the *salvia* sage  
    wild pennyroyal  
    from the Yuba River bank  
All in the family  
of Mint.

The work of Barbara Drake displays many of the elements we see in these poets in a contemporary vision of life based on a farm—in this case, a farm she and her husband maintain near Yamhill, Oregon. She brings direct experience, observation, and a bit of book learning to bear in her books *Peace*



*at Heart* (prose) and *Small Favors* (poems). Lest we dismiss the shepherd entirely to the eras of Clare, Spenser, and Virgil, we should hear Drake's evocation of the modern caretaker of sheep in "Letting the Sheep Out":

I am letting the sheep out. They stand  
behind the battered door in their August wool,  
six-months growth of it, to go to pasture.  
Training the dogs I tell them,  
Let's go put the sheep out.  
The dogs run with more energy than this  
small flock warrants. The sheep  
would let themselves out, given a chance.

All morning they browse the pasture  
turning grass into wool, lounge  
in the shade of the oaks at midday  
till the sky cools,  
and then go back to mouthing  
wild oats, the vetch drying, sixteen  
kinds of grass I counted in the spring.

.....  
Easy to be popular with sheep—it takes  
just this pan of grain to rattle, then  
watch your feet.  
Toffee and Why, old matrons, ewes,  
Aurora and Amity, ewe lambs.  
Ajax, little black ram, ram lamb,  
on account of them,  
at this age, I am,  
without billowing skirt  
without bonnet or curl  
porcelain or dainty crook,  
incredible, a shepherdess.

While poems of the past and even of the present cannot tell us what the poetry of the future will be, we can find hints of what poetry in a post-fossil

fuel world might look like. At *Windfall* we neither celebrate nor bemoan the drastic changes in culture we see coming, but we try to see them clearly, so that poetry might again assume a prescient and functional role in the context of those changes. Given the fossil-fuel based limitation on the production of *Windfall* described above, we regard *Windfall* as a transitory instrument, a carrier of the resources for change. We hope that poets of the Pacific Northwest will contribute in that spirit to our ongoing project to build a poetry of place, like the new Chinook cedar plankhouse at Cathlapotle, a dwelling that holds us all.

Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

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