

# The Visionary Moment: On the Work of B. W. Powe

Jerry Harp

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## The Visionary Moment: On the Work of B. W. Powe

Jerry Harp

Lewis and Clark University

[harp@lclark.edu](mailto:harp@lclark.edu)

In the fall of 2016, when B. W. Powe took the stage at a conference honoring the media studies legacy of the University of Toronto, where these events took place, he set aside his prepared remarks and delivered an impromptu lecture on the visionary poetics of Bob Dylan, whose Nobel Prize in Literature had just been announced. It was the first time I encountered Powe, whose lecture was dazzling as he discussed Dylan's experiments with the technologies of musical creation as well as his place in a tradition that included such figures as Dante, Milton, Blake, Shelley, and Whitman.

A former student of Marshall McLuhan, Powe dwells in the realm of the visionary. As he writes in his *Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye: Apocalypse and Alchemy* (2014), "Apocalypse is heightened awareness, the moment of epiphany, where an individual sees into, or acutely apprehends, his or her time and place." (16). A moment of uncovering or unveiling, such apocalypse discloses one's time and place anew, allowing a glimpse into its part in the larger trajectories of history, glimpsed in sparks and flashes and revealing new possibilities. The apocalyptic moment is also a revelation of time and place in their tenuousness, as one comes to see the subterranean forces and the possible disruptions to come, as well as rumblings already underway. For McLuhan, as Powe points out, everything connects to everything else, and parts of the world that we invent—from fire to the steam engine to the Internet—in turn reinvent us in an ongoing process of interwoven influence.

Northrop Frye, the other focus of the book I'm considering here, the work of the imagination is vital to our very survival in a sometimes brutal universe. Further, as Powe, in a visionary moment, sums up one of Frye's central tenets: "All texts interpenetrate, forming one great text that is the way the human spirit fuses with the

great Spirit of creation” (*McLuhan and Frye* 7). In Frye’s reckoning, we are each caught up in a search for identity, the “soul itself wholly realized” (*McLuhan and Frye* 20), so that all must undertake their own exploration. The global intertwining of texts tells a vast story of creaturely striving reaching into the deep past of evolutionary history and continuing into a future that we planetary creatures, in our modest but significant ways, participate in creating. Powe shows how, for all their differences, McLuhan and Frye envision a human struggle for meaning in a complex and entangled world.

In relation to this complex sense of world and self, there is an especially apt moment in Powe’s *Where Seas and Parables Meet* (2015), section 4 in a piece titled “Openings”:

Here’s a new mythic incident:  
at the crest of the road...  
when the bell tolls...  
in the moment’s heat...  
in the confusions and rumours of distant forms and  
shapes...  
You meet the Sphinx. The great beast roars in confrontation.  
But the sphinx doesn’t know what it is.  
It’s a riddle, even to itself. It can’t speak. The Sphinx waits  
for your questions. (5)

The multiple ellipses indicate that, like many a disclosure of wisdom, this one is fragmentary, as it must be, for the holistic coming of wisdom is too much for humans to bear—“human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (176), says the bird in Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*. Humans are limited to fragments, but the fragment will suffice. Something of significance is at hand, as the “crest of the road” and the tolling of the “bell” signal, even though we lack the full significance, for each of the details just mentioned is followed by the uncertainty of an ellipsis; but we’ve reached a shift of some kind, as indicated especially by the bell tolling out that something is at hand, and the crest indicates another kind of change, a shift of movement. What these signal is a

radical unknowing, one wrapped in knowledge that something is there, “distant forms and shapes,” but that so far exists only as “confusions and rumours.” This is the world where we live. Even were the lines above not followed by ellipses, but were rather full sentences, we would merely have longer fragments; a single statement accounting for the whole of what exists would be either trivial or untrue. One helpful function of the fragment is that it reminds us that all our knowledge is fragmentary, on the move.

In the context of these considerations, the Sphinx is an apt mythological figure to appear. Holder of secrets, utterer of riddles, the Sphinx challenges any overarching system. She is the very figure of “confusions and rumours.” The result of a static world is a system that demands mechanized conformity built on principles bereft of both heart and the deeper reaches of the intellect. With her riddles, the Sphinx opens a space for new discourses to emerge, and the risk is no less than everything, for failure to answer the riddle to the Sphinx’s satisfactions means death. But so does remaining in the seeming safety of the same. As an emissary of the new, the Sphinx in this parable works in opposition to what Powe elsewhere calls psychotic Structure: “The Structure turns psychotic when it makes people justify its existence over the respect and love and imagination and dignity and liberty of a person” (*Where Seas and Fables Meet* 58). It is akin to what Kafka refers to with the metaphors of the Castle and the Law (*Where Seas and Fables Meet* 59). These are opposed to the flourishing of human existence. They reduce true mystery—that which surpasses human understanding—for the merely not yet known. It’s fitting, then, that in Powe’s fable, the Sphinx is a mystery to its very self: “But the Sphinx doesn’t know what it is. / It’s a riddle, even to itself. It can’t speak. The Sphinx waits / for your questions” (*Seas and Fables* 5). Not even in control of its own language, The Sphinx awaits the question that unbinds its tongue. Speak to the silent mystery and it will speak back, but what it will speak is a question. This is how we exist in the world with regard to the mysterious cosmos of which we are a part. We speak into what we wish to know, and the answer is further questions and riddles that keep the spirit of inquiry on the in motion, interspersed with moments of silent awe.

Our rapidly changing world brings new opportunities. Many of these changes relate to the emergence of new communications technologies, which disrupt our older ways of understanding and being. I think of a moment in Powe’s book on McLuhan and Frye

where an especially powerful voice breaks through:

Electronic technology represents the significant convergence of mind and matter, spirit and force. The convergence has enlightening effects: people throughout the world appear to be experiencing the *om* (unity) of longing and desire, the omega of destiny (the apogee point) in the communion of common hopes, and the closeness of all hearts and minds in the collective recognition of individual value which we see in the decisive championing of human rights; and it has terrifying, darkening effects—the abyss of suffering and injustice, the overheating of rage, greater opportunities of totalitarian politics, a mass suicidal impulse in the development of the atom bomb and other appalling weapons. (*McLuhan and Frye* 159).

We do ourselves a disservice when we look upon these new phenomena (and in the context of cosmic history, even the atom bomb developed a fraction of a second ago) using a framework of foregone conclusions, especially when those conclusions are either uncomplicated doom or unfettered optimism. It's much better to lead, as Powe does, with a curiosity leaning into the complexity of what we are undergoing—discerning “convergence of mind and matter, spirit and force” as well as “the overheating of rage.” Indeed, our technological advances unleash possibilities of destruction and repression even as they open opportunities for global communion and collaboration. Although these technologies have their own dynamics, we are not helpless before them; we can learn to move with them more creatively and direct their dynamics in the world.

But there is always the task of reflection leading to insight. The speaker of a poem in Powe's *Decoding Dust* (2016), “Sadhaka” (the title means initiate or beginner), insists that he has been unjustly imprisoned. Among the forces of deadly conformity, this figure seeks a way of remaining alive, of tapping into his own deeper energies that can put him into touch with the world's creative sparks. He receives an enigmatic letter from a

“you” to whom he earlier wrote: “Soon I saw between your lines / an open space and a silence // I saw the lines / become a shape like a map” (*Decoding Dust* 6). The emerging map leads him to a place on the floor where he can tunnel to his escape. By night he continues the work of digging while during the day he reads and prays and, thus working, arrives in a new world:

When I came at last into  
the sudden air, the wind

the breath beyond the lines  
the breathing behind the map

I knew the story lived in my hands  
I stood up

What would I do now  
with a soul. (*Decoding Dust* 6)

With its “sudden air,” this new world startles, but the air, the breathing life of the map taking shape becomes the source of new life for the speaker, the confusing growth of a soul.

Again and again in these poems, there are signs in the forms of maps, texts, and proverbial wisdom, but the recipient is always tasked with the difficult work of discerning how to understand them. Meaning does not arrive whole, rounded off, and finished, but must be interpreted. The wisdom that comes with the journey calls forth a further journey of understanding. “Dedication,” for example, discloses that “Some invisible paths dream of you” (*Decoding Dust* 23). I infer that the metaphor of the dream of me implies that the path is somehow distinctively mine, which also means that I must find and walk it on my own. As Powe writes elsewhere, we find ourselves in a “Cloud of knowing / Cloud of unknowing” (*Decoding Dust* 134), meaning that we shift back and

forth between what can be known by common means and what can be discerned in a cloud of uncertainty and trust, and thus we manage our ways into an uncertain future with what fragments of the past we can carry.

I take it that it was in this cloud of knowing unknowing or unknowing knowing, the place of generative ambiguities and restful silences, that Powe wrote *The Charge in the Global Membrane* (2019). What is this metaphor of the membrane? It is akin to Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere, the layer of mind, reflection, and self-reflection that emerges from the biosphere. The image of the global membrane reminds us that what is at stake is not merely a matter of thinking and reflection, as "noosphere" (from the Greek *Nous*, meaning mind) might lead us to believe. "Membrane" is more embodied, tactile, in its implications. Powe's "global membrane" is a powerful image for meditating on, as each of us, an embodied consciousness, makes our complex way into a complicated future.

Generations of Electricity, Emerging World-Consciousness and Light-Dark Energies, the Donald Trump Phenomenon and the Spectacle of His Election, the Threat of Nationalist Movements and Separatism, Refugees, Pilgrimages of the Soul, Teilhard de Chardin's Noosphere and Gaia, Identity Crises, Empathic Conditions and Conflicts in Sensibility, Media Wars.<sup>1</sup>

Published in 2019, the book is as relevant now as it was then. It includes photographs, by Marshall Soules, of street art from different parts of the globe—Toronto to Havana to Barcelona to Rome. One image is of a woman with a cityscape emerging from her head, the buildings light red. She is blue, the space behind her, slate gray. Her right eye gazes straight ahead, vision of the day, vision of planning and reason. Her left eye is a spiral, vision of dream, of the visionary, the inner vision moving outward, emerging into consciousness, carrying the riches of a deep interior.

As Powe writes, "The charge in the membrane initiates an opening time, a new

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<sup>1</sup> This book was published without page numbers.

consciousness that won't be suppressed. It also triggers a closing time of stunned reactions—stress that brings repressions and polarizations, the need to block the flux.” Given parts of the above list—which include refugee crises, political spectacle, and nationalist movements—one could easily be tempted to despair. No matter how dire things might appear, however, this “new consciousness...won't be suppressed.” But we easily forget what he also writes, the “stunned reactions” to the new, the charge, the future. It seems that backlashes will always occur, and we need to bear in mind their presence without taking them for the world.

Whatever the backlashes might be, the times are still a-changin', but the changing doesn't look the same as it used to, even though the changes we are witnessing have grown out of the past. Can anyone, for example, imagine the Black Lives Matter movement taking place without the work of the civil rights struggles of the 50s and 60s, or the Me Too movement without the force of the waves of feminism leading to it? None of this is to deny the toxic entry onto the world stage of nationalism, populism, anti-immigration sentiment, white nationalism, and more, all of which Powe writes about in *The Charge in the Global Membrane* in a multiplicity of modes. Part of what makes this work powerful are the multiple genres that Powe employs, one of which is the journal entry:

June 5<sup>th</sup> around 7 pm

No entries.

This, of course, is an entry, one that says there are no entries. It implies, perhaps, I'm resting, letting the charge do its work. I'm letting you know I showed up and indicating that sometimes it's best to let words go, even if I use words to say so. I take it that the image of the charge here is the confluence of natural, cultural, and political forces that we are experiencing. We are part of them no matter what. Sometimes it's good to step back and observe before deciding to become more actively involved again. The time of rest allows one better to discern what needs to be done.

The image on the following page appears as a smear of blue paint, a little darker than sky blue, dripping along the bottom edge, looking like rain rivulets of dark blue liquid



sky. In the midst of the blue are the following words:

Here are manifestations of the charge  
appearing at the time of this writing.  
Be aware (beware) that all airings are  
subject to change.

Present tense, present tensions.  
We're living out-of-date.

Because our languages for the moment go quickly out of date, it's important to allow some silence, some white space, to allow the membrane's charge to take effect in the depths of one's being. For those of us—such as I—much taken with older styles of discourse—and uneasy with what roils around inside us, this silence brings on great tension. So sometimes it's better to show up and simply to write “No entries,” a sign that more is percolating, more entries are to come, though not yet.

Turn the page, and there is an image of a screaming brain with exposed eyes unable to close, and on the facing page, printed across a band of red: “Expressions of nationalist fervor are about preserving set identities at any cost.” This is a head stuck on the visual, which is of course important for thinking—more than half of the cerebral cortex is dedicated to seeing—but then a way of thinking overly reliant on sight is impoverished, for on its own vision objectifies, distances, registers surfaces alone. We need sound for dialogue, touch for intimacy. We need a mixture of all senses in dynamic interaction for nuanced understanding. This brain stuck on one modality, that of sight, is stuck on distancing, objectifying. No wonder it specializes in “Expressions of nationalist fervor”; nationalism relies largely on favoring those who look like me. One also needs repose to allow the fears activated by this fervor to settle down. “The worldwide membrane is more about ripples of sensibility than it is about ideologically determined positions.” This usage of sensibility registers, I believe, the deep down parts of us where thinking and feeling are part of a functioning whole, not separated, each to its own domain.

We need to find new languages of the kind that can speak into the present moment while facing into the unknown yet to be. One reason we need such speaking is to counter the languages devoted to exploiting our global troubles for the sake of ownership and control. “Outcasts flee across the globe, often bringing a suffering so intense that they move us with their pulses of grief” (*Charge in the Global Membrane*). As Powe also writes, the backlash against the charge—the counter-charge, if you will—is a kind of retrograde populism that tries to stanch the flow of people, information, and energies. There are planetary circulations that come about due to crises in the environment as well as political claims of ownership and control. “Outcasts flee across the globe, often bringing a suffering so intense that they move us with their pulses of grief” (*Charge in the Global Membrane*).

The questions before us are not merely about the free flow of information, but also about the free flow of beings across the planet, seeking refuge and dignity. These questions concern ethics, including the ethics of basic survival; and they are questions of spirit, not that issues of body and spirit are ever really separated. “But the refugees and migrants often find hostility and reaction,” writes Powe: “barbed-wire barriers and the shout for increased border protections. This is the voice of the closing” (*Charge*). When we close in on ourselves, we cut ourselves off from the world in all its beauty and suffering.

Another painting: a deep blue strip bordered by gray spread diagonally across the page. Within the blue, there is a body that is all legs, buttocks, and head. The mouth is open, tongue protruding, eyes closed. Beside it is a skull without a lower jaw. An arm formed by two bones, and a hand holds a chalice to the skull’s mouth. It is not clear whether the legs are functional; they splay out behind the reclining figure. Floating near the skull, as if on its shoulder, as if it had a shoulder, is a corporal’s epaulette. The living though partial body is gagging, perhaps vomiting. The skull is partaking in some kind of communion. Neither is a full body. They are dismembered and seemingly in the act of being remade.

In discussing the Trump phenomenon, Powe takes up the insights of Kafka, who well

knew that before the law, before the powers that be, one is expected to become small. Those working for Trump during his presidency “humbled themselves like Kafka’s tiny creatures who knew they had to squeak and genuflect if they were to survive” (*Charge*). There’s the old chestnut about the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The Trump phenomenon seems to have invented a new genre, something at once more farcical and more tragic, a genre that we perhaps do not yet have a name for. To speak into this phenomenon, Powe leans into the insights of the backlash somehow related to the charge. The internet has the capacity to alienate, to fertilize the ground for “alternative facts,” to lead us into permanent distraction. But Powe holds out for integration:

I submit: print and screen must depend on each other, the complement a marriage of Kabbalah and Alchemy, print and electronic media metamorphosing into renewing configurations of effects. Thus solitude and collectivity may mingle.

Neither a nostalgic longing for pure print nor a naïve vision of progress through pure pixels, Powe’s is the difficult vision of synthesis, updating the old with the new, facing into uncertainty. Where are we going? If we could know, would it be worth going there?

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