



2018

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Schwartz, Michael

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## Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Michael (2018) "Sourcing Enchantment: From Elemental Appropriation to Imaginal Symbolics," *CONSCIOUSNESS: Ideas and Research for the Twenty-First Century*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/conscjournal/vol6/iss6/2>

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## *Sourcing Enchantment: From Elemental Appropriation to Imaginal Symbolics*

Michael Schwartz  
Augusta University

**Abstract:** Critical theorists and social commentators agree that modernity and postmodernity suffer from historical pathologies of world disenchantment. What might be done? Drawing on John Sallis' phenomenology of the elemental and Tibetan Buddhist teachings on elemental practices, this paper investigates the imagination in its doubling as imaginal in generating a symbolics of the self, world, and other that is always already enchanted; an aesthetics of existence where the world itself shows forth like a work of art replete with exorbitant logics.

Keywords: Sallis, phenomenology, disenchantment, enchantment, imagination, imaginal, art, poetics, aesthetics of existence, Buddhism, Tibetan, elementals, element

Corresponding author: [mschwart@augusta.edu](mailto:mschwart@augusta.edu)  
Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/conscjournal/vol6/iss6/>  
ISSN 2575-5552

**(Dis)Enchantment Again**

Max Weber, early in the twentieth century, diagnosed what he termed world-disenchantment as due to modern rationalizing processes: a thesis about the loss or displacement of meaning and value, which subsequent philosophers and social theorists have re-framed in various ways - as with Jürgen Habermas's analysis of modern social systems of money and administration that override and "colonize" cultural lifeworlds of shared meaning and compelling life-narratives (Habermas, 1984 and 1987); where to be sure a wide range of critical thinkers touch on this diagnosis of modernity/postmodernity from complementary angles (Schwartz, 2010 and 2016). Yet a Habermasian approach, for all its importance in our moment of fake news and post-validity in discourse, is in part caught within the malaise, through its leanings towards a one-sided discursive-centering of sense and significance, flirting with an alienated form of consciousness in which meaning is coming from the human side alone and no longer has a sense of being "of" nature or the world. Roy Bhaskar's criticism of Habermas indeed centers on the "irrealist" and anthropocentric character of what is construed as the latter's overly language-oriented philosophy (Norrie, 2010).

What then might be a way out of this epochal leveling of values and pervasive disenchantment? In extending several previous papers on phenomenologies of art and experience as conditioned by social deformations (Schwartz, 2010, 2015a, and 2016b), this essay explores a robust way of contemporary enchantment. Drawing on John Sallis' phenomenology of the elemental and Tibetan Buddhist teachings on elemental practices, we shall investigate the imagination in its doubling as imaginal in generating a symbolics of the self, world, and other that is always already enchanted; invigorating an aesthetics of existence where the world itself shows forth like a work of art replete with exorbitant logics.

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Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/conscjournal/vol6/iss6/>

ISSN 2575-5552

In Bhaskar's later non-dual philosophy of meta-reality, there are analyses of the collapse of the semiotic triangle (signifier-signified-referent) through the dissolving of the subject-object divide, such that the world's inherent enchantment comes forth (Bhaskar, 2012). The present essay has elective affinities with this thesis, while making different philosophical and spiritual emphases that allow for more fine-tuned descriptions and analyses of enchanted living.

**Elemental Phenomenology**

In two books – *Force of the Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (2000) and *Logic of the Imagination: the Expanse of the Elemental* (2012) – John Sallis enacts a twisting free of the metaphysical paradigmatics of the intelligible and the sensible, into an immanent field of the senses of sense, exploring in the first study the conditions of the determination of the self-showing thing (Schwartz, forthcoming). The upsurge of presence of the mere image, suspended between own and other, hence "in-different," is gathered into the more determinate sense of a thing with the coming forth of speech as logos. This dynamic determinancy, against a background of the indeterminate, is intensified through three horizons – lateral, peripheral, and operational (and I would add, in part echoing remarks that Sallis himself has made, the systemic). The lateral horizon is the unlimited store of profiles of the thing. The peripheral horizons are the visible surround and background to the focal thing. The operational horizon, in its instrumental moment, is the network of equipment in line with the analysis in Martin Heidegger's 1927 volume *Being and Time*. (The systemic horizon is the patterned iterations of and amongst the operational horizons, constituting system, where the nexi of operational practices and systems are unable to be reduced to one another without significant remainder.) All these horizons, along with speech and the indifferent image, are constitutive moments of the thing's self-showing.

The imagination, marginalized in the tradition, comes forward as tractive, prior to subject and object, like a gift of being itself, drawing the horizons around the focal thing, the retention and pretension of all the prior conditions or moments, in a hovering of determinate self-showing; thing-hood stretched within and against the indeterminate. And beyond the peripheral and systemic horizons lie another constitutive factor of the thing's self-showing: the elementals. As the elementals are the from which of manifestation, encompassing horizons and things as an unfathomable medium that in exceeding the things of nature, also belongs to nature as hyper-natural. The elementals, unlike things, have no profiles; they do not reveal themselves the way things do, drawn as they are around the various horizons by the tractive imagination. All elementals lead back to two that are primary: earth and sky. Earth shelters, supports, and withdraws, a self-closing that resists disclosure. Sky opens as an absolute recession that grants expanse, a pure shining that enables light as condition of the visible. Elementals and things intersect, overlap, and envelope one another in any number of manners. The imagination draws the elementals, as encompassing, into the determination of the self-showing thing.

In the subsequent study, the sense of the imagination deepens with Sallis' advancing of the tradition from a logic of the understanding to a logic of the imagination; such that one can allow for formal logics that adhere to the principle of non-contradiction and exorbitant logics that do not. In its drawing together and holding apart the constitutive moments of self-showing, imagination deploys schemata that are the spacing of things – spacing itself as the ontological event-ing of the space-time of beings (schemata in their specificity inseparable from manifestation, hence neither empty containers nor mere formal dimensions). There are three kinds of schemata: (1) those comprehensive of manifestation (the type that

philosophy addresses); (2) those that are more local or restrictive; and (3) those proper to fantasy and the sensible. Schemata, unlike in the Kantian view, become unhinged from submersion in any kind of transcendental subjectivity, imagination characterized even more strongly than in the first volume as non-subjective; a condition of any modality of what might be termed “subject.”

Sallis expands the senses of the elementals in their encompassing. Not only are there natural elementals such as earth, sky, tempests, and fire, but there are extra natural elementals as well, where these distinctions hinge on the articulation of human finitude centered in the proper: the proper as one's ownmostness. Sallis explores four proper elementals: the (1) natural elements, (2) seclusion as sheltering retreat, (3) birth, and (4) death. The natural elementals indefinitely exceed the human while, but through absorption in our senses, recoil back as constitutive of our being in the world. Seclusion is a depth that exceeds presence without being a subjective interiority (these singular accounts reminiscent of the empty fecundity of “causal voidness” discovered through Buddhist and Vedantic practices). Birth and death are the characterized with regard to corporeity, the latter as lived capacities; life stretching out between these two extremes, neither of which are present but as encompassing elementals bestow and delimit one's ownmost possibilities of existence.

### **Proper Appropriation and Tibetan Buddhist Exercises**

As encompassing, the proper elementals of nature, seclusion, birth and death are not static or constant in the force and logics of the imagination but vary in their respective intensities in co-constituting the field of sense. This differential intensity has been, in various lineages, appropriated and refolded through transformational practice. If lacking in the kind of

Corresponding author: mschwart@augusta.edu

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ISSN 2575-5552

phenomenological analyses and philosophical articulations offered by Sallis, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition abounds with procedures that appropriate and refold each of the proper elementals as he has so carefully articulated them – natural, seclusion, birth, and death – with the effect of reconstituting the field of sense and its “logics” (logoi). For the sake of focus, we shall delimit discussion to the natural elementals.

In the Tibetan tradition, the proper appropriation of the natural elementals has a number of outcomes, including a quality of intensification that precipitates a new order of self-showing -- as if the natural elements, coming forth in excess while always in encompassing withdrawal, show forth as a dimension of the field of sense that we typically refer to as the subtle (in contrast to the gross dimension of nature and human artifacts). While this generative intensification of the natural elementals can burst forward at any time for just about anyone, and in a spontaneous manner, practice of some sort is most often required for this self-showing of the subtle to come forth and do so with increasing depth, force, and stability. We shall thus consider some Tibetan practices, how they work, and what they regularly accomplish, all as philosophically elucidated by an elemental phenomenology, performing a kind of comparative moment not only of philosophy but also of spirituality understood in light of Michael Foucault’s late phase of work on ethics as well as Peter Sloterdijk’s anthropotechnics. Indeed, Foucault’s later research centered on historical practices of self-transformation under the title of an ethics of care (Schwartz, 1999). While more recently German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2013) has unfolded a historical genealogy, seemingly unknown in consciousness studies and self-development circles, of the rise in Western modernity practices of self-transformation, what he calls anthropotechnics. These two decisively philosophical-cum-historical

articulations of human transformation in the Western traditions might well prove valuable to researchers in consciousness studies, disclosing not yet disclosed background social conditions and concerns behind such research projects in the first place. Where one of these conditions, or so is the present argument, is the modern / postmodern disenchantment of the world.

Unlike for Sallis, in which the number of natural elementals is open-ended, in Tibetan Buddhism there are five elements the combinations of which are the from which of gross-dimensional natural phenomena. For Sallis, the natural elementals are human and extra-human. Something similar is the case in Tibetan Buddhism, with the distinction that the properly natural elementals animate emotional energies: when conflicted and contracted, these emotional energies operate as the five poisons; when liberated in and as the non-dual field of sense, they release as the five wisdoms. Great emphasis is placed upon the transmutation of the emotions from dualistic contraction and affliction to non-dualistic wisdom as a path of liberation and as a gathering of skillful means to aid others on the pathless path of freedom.

Tibetan Buddhism practices of the elementals of nature are many. For example, Ngakpa Chogyam and Khandro Dechen, in their manual *Spectrum of Ecstasy: Embracing Emotions as the Path of Inner Tantra* (1997), forward a preliminary practice of dwelling with and attuning to each of the natural elements, so to clarify especially one’s afflictive dualistic energies. As regards water:

*According to the dualistic vision of the water element experiences of our spacious nature are perceived as threatening. From this sensation of fear and illusory lack of security, we fabricate the distorted energy of anger and aggression*

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*According to the non-dual vision of the water element, experiences of our spacious nature are discovered in their natural condition as the energy of clarity and luminosity. This is something that can learnt non-intellectually through experiencing the nature of the water element itself. We only need to look at the ways in which water performs in our world to begin to understand this aspect of what we are.*

*Water can be opaque. It can surge with glittering bubbles as it thrashes against projecting rocks; or it rolls and tumbles at the foot of cliffs. The tremendous power of “white water” has to be treated with considerable caution – its current of aggression is lethal...Water can boil and spit with fury in a cauldron, or in a geo-thermal spring. It can froth and spray with vitriolic disregard, it can display qualities of rage, with no sense of self-control. Water displays the attributes of anger in a variety of ways. (pp. 139-140)*

This pointing out instruction attunes us to water as illuminative of the afflictive side of the emotional spectrum. Other kinds of attunements along with one-pointed meditative practices are further mobilized to transmute anger and aggression into mirror-like clarity and luminosity – akin to a calm and purified lake, perfectly still and clear.

Very common in the Tibetan tradition as starting point are visualizing processes that deploy fabricated images of the imagination. Lama Ken McLeod (2001), in the manual *Wake Up to Your Life*, presents a practice of the five dakinis, each one of the five working with one of the contracted natural elementals of the properly human. To cite water again, one visualizes a translucent white goddess standing in front of oneself, holding a vase, containing

white elemental water; she pours that white light into the crown of the head; it flows into the solar plexus, dissolving contracted emotive-sensations, a white mirror manifesting in this bodily location. There are additional nuances and stages to this practice and its visualization procedures, with the intended outcome the transmutation of contracted water energies of anger and aggression into mirror-like pristine awareness.

More elaborate varjyana practices also center on visualizations. In the generation stage, one dissolves the solid sense of bodily self and arises as a being called a yidam, made up of translucent elemental lights, transmuting the afflictive emotions while seeding wisdom capacities as skillful means. In more advanced stages, the visualization is expanded to the entire field of sense, now arising as a populated mandala of elemental colored light. Each and all arise as shining, elemental luminosity, empty and blissful. In the beginning, such visualizations are mental fabrications. Over time however the fabricated visualizations magnetize, mobilize and intensify the elementals themselves, such that subtle imagery begins to self-arise – first during practice, then during post-mediation; with the subtle dimension coming to take on a life of its own, no longer scripted by the practice. Starting as imaginative fabrications, generation stage exercises end up bringing forth an everyday field of sense that is an intertwining of the gross and subtle dimensions.

### **Cartesian Subtleties at the Limit**

What then about the subtle dimension? In a brave if uneven book *Prometheus and Atlas*, Jordan Jorjani (2016) argues that the subtle domain, what he calls in a more contracted and ambiguous register, the spectral, was excluded and even perhaps expelled from the outset of the Cartesian subject-object ontology. To wit, either subtle imagery and sound is

Corresponding author: mschwartz@augusta.edu

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necessarily a mental projection, a fantasy in the decaying sense of that term - far from what Dante and later in the Renaissance was celebrated as *alta fantasia*, “exalted imagination,” which was so decisive in the elite pictorial and poetic culture which mobilized the radical shift in the Western sense of art and artist (Schwartz, 1997) - or it has some material-objective basis (exhaustively explainable by neural patterns), or is some enacted constellation of these terms. Yet the evidence points to the insufficiency of these variants of mind-matter, subject-object ontologies.

In the Dzogchen teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, there are a number of practices conducted in dark retreat. In the appendix to his celebrated book *The Opening of Vision*, David Michael Levin (1988) recounts that towards the end of a dark retreat, there appeared to him, in the midst of absolute darkness and in the complete absence of photonic light, a visionary image that only later did he discover is a decisive and venerable symbol in the lineage iconography. While the vision itself might be accounted for as a projection of the mind having neural net groundings (and the latter is to be sure part of the mechanisms involved), the semantic element cannot be so readily explained in such terms – and yet throughout much of consciousness studies, this kind of phenomena is regularly and dogmatically explained away or ignored rather than approached with the wonder and curiosity it commands. To give a second case. One of my thogal teachers, Jackson Peterson, recounts his experience during a 24-hour dark retreat proper to the Dozgchen practice of yangti. Several hours into the session, in the absence of photonic light, it was as if a light-switch suddenly got turned on, as the room reappeared as vivid as if in the light of day. For a while he was convinced that there was a skylight above that had been opened; and yet there was none to found – as there was no photonic light in the room.

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ISSN 2575-5552

To explore this experience, he walked over to what was appearing as a radiant wall. He discovered that his sense of touch corresponded to the visual sense of the wall itself. And to the door knob. And to various items of furniture. Despite there being no photonic light to stimulate the optic nerves, the gross room was showing forth as radiant subtle light. After the session, he reported the experience to his teacher, who promptly danced a Tibetan jig of joy, relaying that this was indeed the intended outcome of yangti practice – in other words, that there is a long lineage of human beings who have had this kind of experience during yangti retreat. A Cartesian ontology has trouble accounting in full for such phenomena – there was no objective light input; nor could the subtle-radiant visioning be merely subjective, a mental projection of some sort, since it had “objective” correlation with the gross sense of touch.

What is important here to keep in mind is that the self-showing of the subtle, as intertwining with gross dimensions in the field of sense, can happen spontaneously; yet most often does so through practice. Foucault is important here. In his later work he reminds us that the pre-modern traditions put great stress on prior ascetical training as a pre-condition of truth; in our context, that trainings of specific kinds are the pre-condition for these modes of elemental self-showing coming forth with stability and depth. To the extent that such practices are repeatable and their outcomes more than happenstance -- even if they are esoteric and thus far in humanity’s history somewhat rare – the results of such trainings are akin to the margins of the text pressing our sense of the text itself: here the “margins” of modes of human experience reshaping our sense of the what is properly possible and actual. Such marginal experiences, repeatable if atypical, are like a “supplement” that “deconstructs” pre-given and tacit ontological assumptions and schemas.

## The World of Art

In *Force of the Imagination*, Sallis forwards that the poetic imagination is a doubling of the tractive imagination, the intensification of the latter to the second power. It is poetic because it does not create from nothing nor produce or reproduce a prior paradigm (as with a mental content that is to be “expressed”) but ontologically *brings forth*—echoing Heidegger’s creative retrieval and interpretation of *poiesis*. And what is poetically brought forth is art, where the artwork is composed so to bring forth an imaginative doubling that deepens configuring and intensifies the shining of any content or form - “a moment of the expanse of self-showing with its elemental-horizonal configuration.” Art can show us what has not yet been seen, including a showing of self-showing—hence complementary to Sallis’ recasting of phenomenology as having a moment of monstrosity, the theoretical pointing to the thing’s showing of itself. Through art, in a manner more concrete and singular than with monstrosity, we are instructed to see anew. Where the artwork, as artefactual, entails the casting of a matrix - Sallis here refiguring the inherited notions of the media of art (Schwartz, 2016a).

Likewise, the proper appropriation and refolding of the natural elementals can lead to a doubling in self-showing that is the intertwining of gross and subtle dimensions: the natural elementals as the from which of gross nature and also of its own self-showing as subtle light, imagery, and sound. This doubling of the imagination, in parallel to the poetic imagination, is what we call the *imaginal*. And it is through the force of the imaginal that the world comes forth like a work of art. The flowers sing, the leaves are alive, the grass murmurs a yet to be heard sense. Nature and the world become inherently valuable, inherently “meaningful.” The world comes forth as enchanted.

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ISSN 2575-5552

Perhaps this is what art is always already aspiring towards -- yet in its artefactual distinctiveness, in its spacing from its environs in manners that depend on the specificity of an artistic matrix, art in the end is a kind of failure in its modern and post-modern promise of world-enchantment. Art can point to world-enchantment, art can show us and attune us to the not yet seen and heard, but art remains other than the environs from which it is spaced. Perhaps then, too, we have here clues to a latent impulse of avantgardist and neo-avantgardist works -- like that of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, Alan Kaprow’s Happenings, or Daniel Buren’s early striped canvases -- which attempts to re-integrate art and life in the wake of the modernist differentiation of art from other socio-cultural institutions and value spheres, this modernist differentiation of art as “autonomous” intuited by avantgard and neoavantgard artists as a split between art and everyday life: modernist art sealed off in the museum having only indirect impact in transfiguring the world outside the museum’s walls (Bürger, 1984).

This is not to say that art does not have its place and distinctive importance. I would argue that more than ever we need benefit from great art. It is to say however that there are other ways that may well fulfill the conatus towards enchantment more directly and potently. Not then a poetics of art alone to counter modern technics, but what one contemporary Vipassana teacher calls a “cosmopoetics of being” (Burbea, 2016).

## Imaginal Symbolics

What then of enchantment?

In *Force of the Imagination*, Sallis offers an exacting account of the crossings of mere image and language, that the mere image in and of itself is both indeterminate as regards thinghood and also comes forth, in that thingly indeterminacy, into presence; and then when

folded with language the mere image takes on a determinate sense of thinghood, with presence now differed and deferred - the image as image and language as language each exceeding one another in this thingly determination.

When it comes to the mere images of the imaginal, the sense of presence can be less stable, such mere imagery already harboring a felt-potency of meaning without yet being explicitly meaningful. As such, whereas the gross mere image is mute; the subtle mere image is always already murmuring. In turn, the explicit use of language teases out this potency of meaning in the subtle imagery, generating a greater determinancy of the imaginal imagery, while there always being an explicit sense that the languaging of the sense of the imaginal image never exhausts, in the slightest, the potency of that murmuring.

All languaging of and about the imaginal imagery is however not simply valid or equally resonant. The subtle imagery can, and in group practice does, arise for more than just oneself. In group settings, when a subtle image comes forth, it can be sensed by more than one person, can be pointed to and commented on by the group as regards color, location in the gross environment, and the like, and explored in its meaning in the to and from discussion – all of which demonstrating that it is more than reductively “subjective” (again calling into question assumptions proper to modern ontologies, as we saw with the yangti dark retreat practice).

The enchanted world that arises is often replete with unusual logics. As indeed, in *Logic of the Imagination*, Sallis makes the forceful case that prior to any logic of the understanding are logics of the imagination that involve various spacings, meaning various space-times and tensed-places; inclusive of non-contradictory to dialectical to exorbitant logics, the latter as exemplified through Freud’s

analysis of dreamwork. Such exorbitant logics abound in the imaginal doubling of the natural elementals, involving distinctive schemata with unique spacings and temporalities in the interweaving and interpenetration of gross and subtle dimensions in the field of sense. Such exorbitant logics, it seems to me, is one of the most fascinating arenas of philosophical inquiry as complement to research in consciousness studies.

### Revitalizing an Aesthetics of Existence

Elemental phenomenology, as developed by Sallis, continuously enacts a twisting free of the intelligible as paradigm of the sensible, in lieu of a multi-horizonal productivity of the field of sense. In the wake of this deconstructive reconstruction, aesthetics is seen as tied to a subjectivism based in the feeling and self-feeling of a subject, and as such has been said to have no place in a scheme that is getting-over subject and object ontologies. That said, it can be valuable to revive the senses of aesthetics within an elemental phenomenology, no longer as subjective, but as a term proper to the field of sense in the intensification of the elementals as the doubling of tractive imagination as poetic or imaginal.

Beauty and sublimity reveal themselves as plurals: various *modes of shining*. With the varying of the intensity of the from which of an elemental’s encompassing, along with which elementals are at a given moment principally constellated by the imagination, the field of sense has different modes of shining (where certain “sublimities” can also involve elementals other than those that are natural). Said otherwise, via the imaginal there are various ways in which the gross and subtle become interrelated, entailing an open-ended typology of modes of shining of the field of sense (Schwartz, 2018).

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ISSN 2575-5552

Dwelling in and as a world of imaginal enchantment is to live then an aesthetics of existence. The phrase is from the last phase of Michel Foucault's writings. It has received divergent interpretations. Whatever its significance for Foucault's late work, here we are adapting the phrase for the intensification of elementality in its doubling as imaginal symbolics. This aesthetics of existence is not about I-shining, not about a soul being self-referentially beautiful and lustrously seductive. An upgraded aesthetics of existence need avoid pathological tendencies, proper to modernity and postmodernity, of what Bhaskar (1994), echoing the philosopher Hegel, diagnosed as the syndrome of the "beautiful soul" – one who unwittingly lives a petty moralizing aesthetic that betrays a secreted alienation and disengaged ironizing. Instead, an elementally mature aesthetics of existence intensifies our capacities for the moral and for the true – engendering love and compassion, and joyous comportment, curbing harmful impulses and acts, intensifying spontaneous altruism and mutual celebration - as well as complexifying and clarifying the true sense of exorbitant logics of the enchanted world. Indeed, at the dawn of modernity, the celebrated poet and critic Schiller (1795) looked to art as unifying power to counter the fragmenting tendencies of modern existence: where an enchanted aesthetics of existence, construed in an elemental light, begins to concretize that vision.

With philosophical rigor, elemental phenomenology points out the always already of the natural elementals as proper to human being and the field of sense. A tradition of transformative practice, like that of Tibetan Buddhism, offers us established procedures for folding and intensifying the force of the from which of the natural elementals such that there is a doubling of the tractive imagination as imaginal, the world coming forth like a work

of art, murmuring with the potency of intrinsic meaningfulness, enticing care and adoration, deepening the true sense of the world in its wondrous and often wild dances of exorbitant logics.

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A cosmopoetic path open to all.

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Corresponding author: [mschwart@augusta.edu](mailto:mschwart@augusta.edu)

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Corresponding author: [mschwart@augusta.edu](mailto:mschwart@augusta.edu)  
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ISSN 2575-5552