

## PEN Notes for Lesley U Talk 29-MAR-2024

**BLURB: It was fascinating to open the email from Lesley University and note the title of the Community of Scholars event “We’re Open.” The focus of my own graduate work was “Open Form in North American Poetry.” How does an open poetics differ from conventional poetry, what are its attributes, who are its practitioners, what changes does an open stance lead to in poetics and life in general and what has happened to my own practice since earning an M.A. from Lesley in 2007? Paul E Nelson is the Founding Director of the Cascadia Poetics Lab in Seattle, Washington.**

This non-profit organization I reacted in 1993 started out with a mission of producing public affairs radio programs. From the beginning, I focused on Whole Systems approaches to issues affecting our communities. Soon, the poets I started to interview seemed to have the most potency.

I interviewed Allen Ginsberg in June of 1994: <https://paulenelson.com/allen-ginsberg-june-12-1994/>

<https://paulenelson.com/2013/06/02/allen-ginsberg-interview-part-8/>

& Michael McClure in October 1995: <https://paulenelson.com/2012/10/20/happy-80th-michael-mcclure/>

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/6.-McClure-Oct-95-Projective-Verse.mp3>

Ginsberg talked about Open Form in North American poetry, starting with Whitman and McClure about Projective Verse: <https://paulenelson.com/organic-poetry/projective-verse/>

When McClure read from the poem Dolphin Skull, or maybe when I read his work in preparation for the interview at the top of a peak in Olympic National Park, it was a moment for me like Miles Davis hearing Charlie Parker for the first time on a jukebox in East St. Louis, Illinois. All other poetry, maybe even all other experiences of art have tried to compete with this moment and have fallen short.

Interviews with other poets such as Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, Eileen Miles, Wanda Coleman, Nate Mackey and others have helped me to put a finer point on this stance toward poem making, this poetics.

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/6.-McClure-Oct-95-Projective-Verse.mp3>

Projective: based in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. It favors the concept of Negative Capability [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative\\_capability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_capability) or a: “quality [that forms] a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which [Shakespeare](#) possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—“

This concept was further elaborated by Heidegger’s [gelassenheit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian_terminology#Gelassenheit) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian\\_terminology#Gelassenheit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian_terminology#Gelassenheit) a quality: “which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery.” (Which comes out of Meister Eckhart.)

And refined again by the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, as the great death of the ego, as aimed for in Zen. Nishitani understood that: “human self-centeredness is a permanent fixture in religions of the West. Once negated, it reappears as in the guide of God’s chosen people.” (203)

McClure in the 1995 interview reading from Dolphin Skull:

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/10.-McClure-Oct-95-Dolphin-Skull.mp3>

A few years after I interviewed Eileen Miles, she wrote: “The process of the poem, the performance of it I mentioned, is central to the impression I have that life is a rehearsal for the poem, or the final moment of revelation... I’ve had this feeling before — of going out to get a poem, like hunting... I felt “... erotic, oddly / magnetic...” like photographic paper. As I walked I was recording the details. I was the details. I was the poem...”

<https://paulenelson.com/life-as-rehearsal-for-the-poem/>

In a 2015 NPR interview Myles puts a finer point on how it differs from conventional poetry:

There is still a lot of power built up around mainstream poetry. People are afraid to give America anything but comfort. It's like an ad for guilt. Even poetry is supposed to support it. Last year I was a judge on the National Book Award's poetry panel and I felt there was a weird regard for readability which struck me as a kind of a regard for normality, the regular stuff. And we're living in extraordinary times so our literary culture needs to wake up.

The poetry I first encountered was what people often hear first. You might hear Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Gwendolyn Brooks, but what is really being sold by the culture still is this big house mainstream poetry. Even though they are telling these personal stories, post-Sexton and post-Lowell, the language has an apartness, it's very middle class white language. It doesn't take any risks, doesn't have any vernacular.

— George Quasha in *America: A Prophecy* wrote:

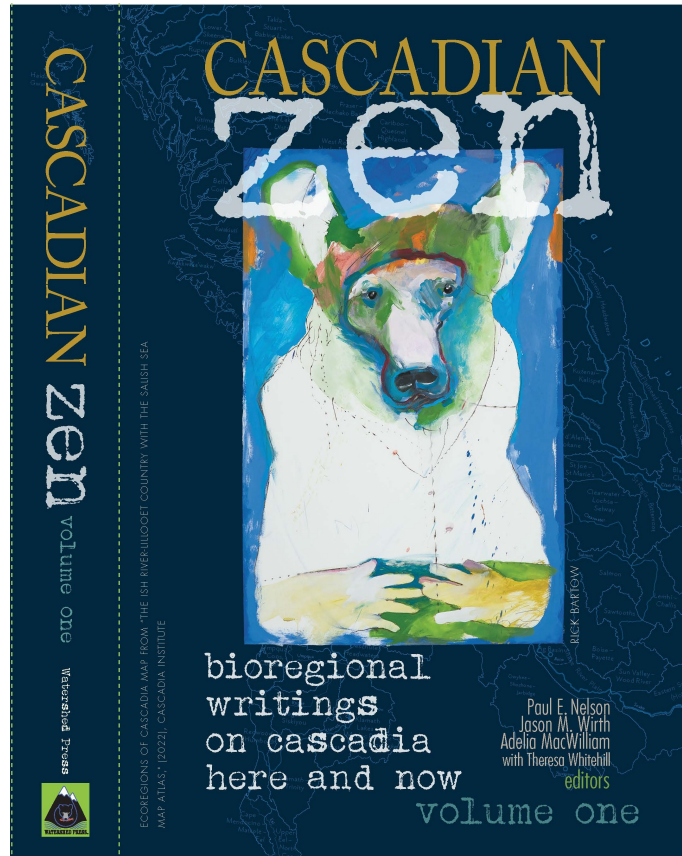
"The prophetic sense is affirming the oldest function of poetry, which is to interrupt the habits of ordinary consciousness by means of more precise and highly charged uses of language and to provide new tools."

<https://paulenelson.com/2015/10/05/eileen-myles-in-seattle/>

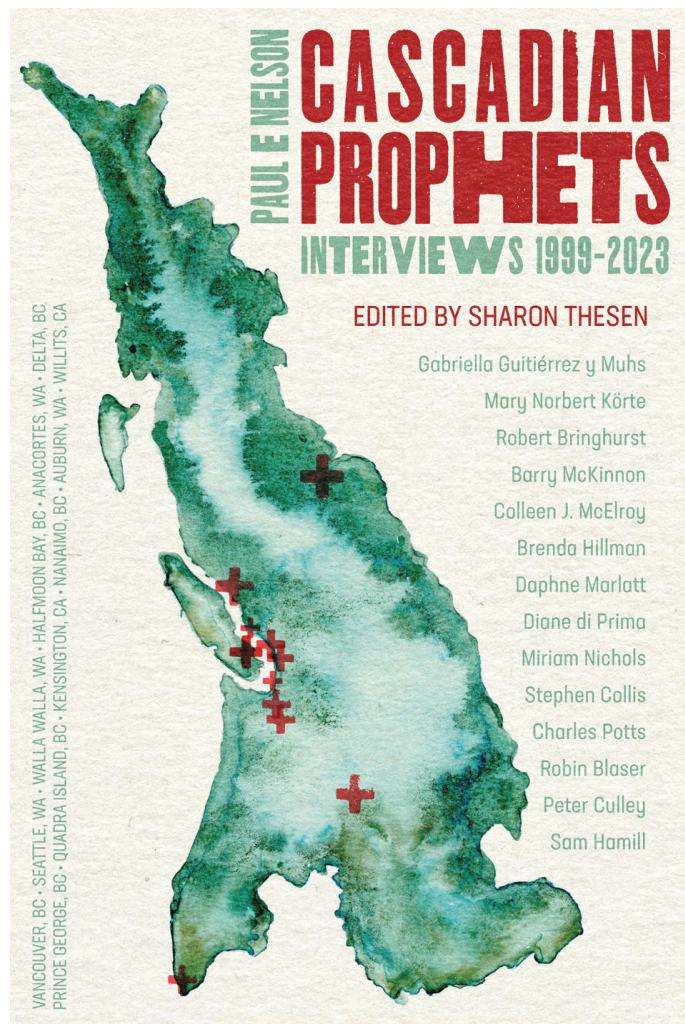
Milk: <https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Track15.mp3>

So from Open Form as articulated by Allen Ginsberg, to Projective Verse as practiced by Michael McClure, Joanne Kyger and others, has led to Zen and that as viewed from a particular bioregion, Cascadia and you

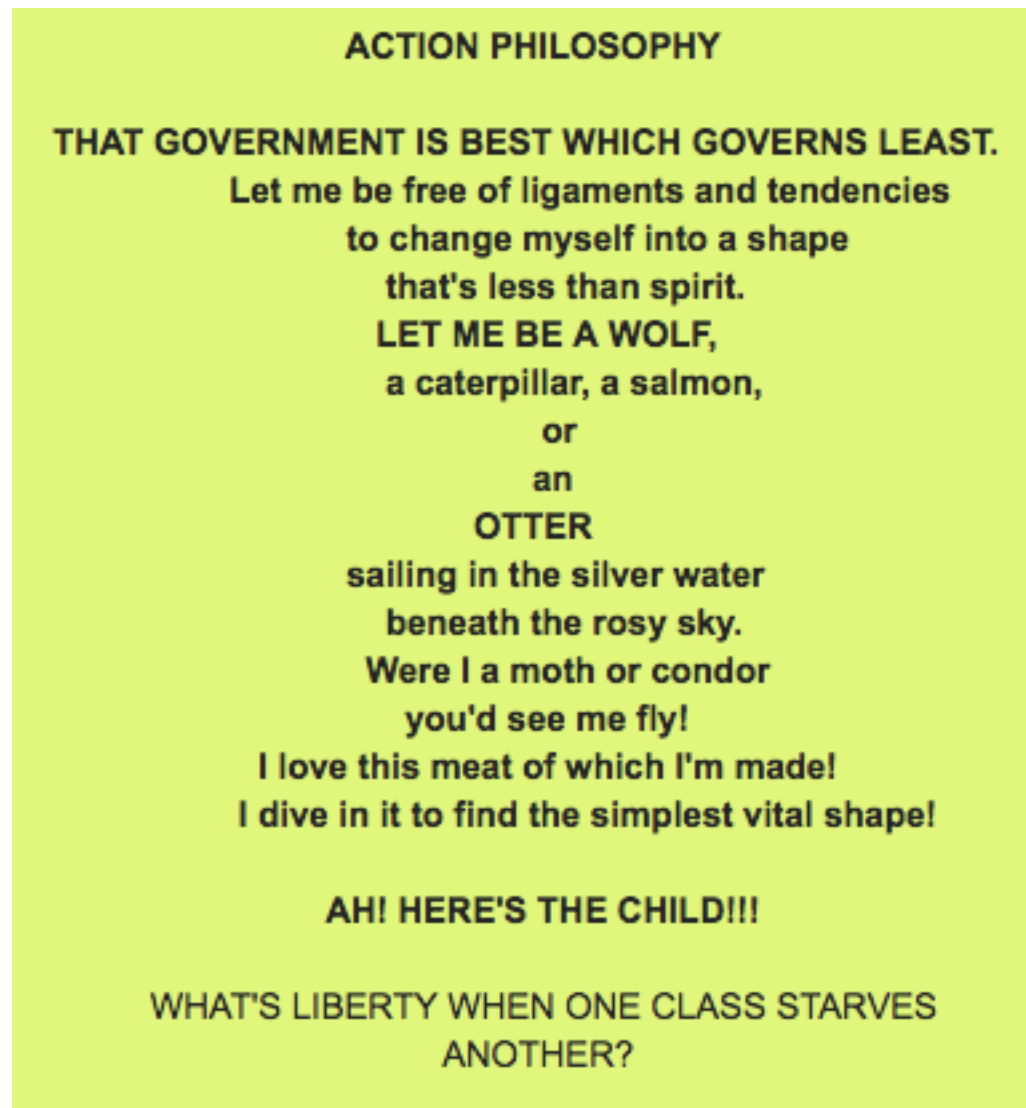
have where my Lesley education has led me. We published this book in October 2023:



And this book in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Cascadia Poetics Lab:



We can leave you with a McClure poem:



Or with a note from a poet from 13th century Japan, Dōgen, which may articulate it best: “When you find the place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point.”

I am grateful to Lesley University, and my advisor Frank Trocco, for leading me this way.

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