

DALE PENDELL'S 'PHENOMENOLOGICAL TAXONOMY'
Artistic Research and the Politics of Language in Psychedelic Pharmacology

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Introduction

Contemporary researchers in psychedelic pharmacology claim the potential of psychedelics in building alternative futures, regarding the often pathological problems of community and subjecthood in modern industrial societies. However, only rarely are these issues linked to discourses on the representative and performative qualities of language. Linguists, philosophers and writers have acknowledged the ways in which language constitutes our reality for a long time. The subject of this essay is to investigate the politics of language in psychedelic research with a particular focus on the work of the American poet and botanist Dale Pendell. In his poetical texts, Pendell offers an example for a non-teleological narrative of encounters with a variety of so-called 'power plants' and as such develops an entangled and interdisciplinary view on the cultural history and the contemporary usage of psychedelics. This means that he enquires into the possibility of writing about psychedelics in a way which is unbiased by Western ideals of the centralization of knowledge. His creative practice in this context can be compared to what has recently been referred to as 'artistic research', especially since philosophers such as Nietzsche, Derrida or Herder – who have all been known for their literary criticism of logocentric science – are referenced in Pendell's texts, which suggests an underlying epistemological kinship. As psychedelics have come to flourish at a moment when societies are in urgent need of change, it is time to ask how to think this change and how to convey it through writing.

The Impossibility of Taxonomy

Dale Pendell's writing on psychoactive plants is contained in the *Pharmako* trilogy (1995–2005) and a few shorter texts which have been published in essay collections such as *Entheogens and the Future of Religion* (Ed. Robert Forte, 1997) and *Breaking Convention: Psychedelic Pharmacology for the 21st Century* (Ed. Ben Sessa et al., 2017). In these collections, Pendell's work stands out because of his distinctive, often lyrical, writing which deviates from the classical format of the essay. The *Pharmako* trilogy consists of three

volumes of lyrical and encyclopaedical remarks on psychoactive substances as well as botanical and pharmacological information: *Pharmako/Poeia* (1995), *Pharmako/Dynamis* (2002), *Pharmako/Gnosis* (2005). The volumes don't follow one another consecutively, i.e., alphabetically or otherwise, but rather constitute one proliferous epic poem. Most chapters are descriptions of singular artificial and natural substances, ordered by what Pendell calls a 'phenomenological taxonomy of psychotropes'.

In his conversations with American philosopher Norbert O. Brown, collected in *Walking with Nobby* (2008), Pendell explains that the conceptual idea for *Pharmako/Poeia* was to "willingly suspend the distinction" between "speaking poetry" and "literal truth", or between "science and non-science".[1] This is why it is not possible to tie the *Pharmako* trilogy entirely back to an epistemological scheme. Any attempt to find a structural basis to the text leaves the reader unsatisfied and is not the intention of the author.[2] While this doesn't mean that there is no way to talk about Pendell's work on a theoretical level, the question remains: what kind of taxonomy is he conceptualizing, and why this is relevant to a broader discourse on psychedelic research?

As a continuation of poststructural criticism of the excluding mechanisms of Western logocentrism, numerous examples have recently appeared of unconventional styles of writing in the academic context. A prominent illustration of this new movement is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom At The End of The World* (2017). The value of Tsing's text in opposition to traditional accounts on ecology, ethnography, and cultural anthropology, among other areas, is that its hybrid composition enables Tsing to describe what would not fit into existing scientific categories, namely the story of ecological destruction via capitalist consumerism, through the diverse facets of ecology, cultural history and contemporary value of the Matsutake mushroom. With his attempt to combine diverse types of writing, Pendell's work can be counted amongst this recent structural shift in academic writing, which allows interdisciplinary knowledge to flourish. His explicitly creative style, which could also be called 'artistic research', attempts to traverse a hegemony of Western rationalism in universities. For Pendell, the connection between knowledge and truth, between what *is* and what is *available* to discourse, is fuzzy and fluctuant; he notes that "[a]ny attempt to force a wild system into the confines of a formal system is inescapably arbitrary",[3] which leads him to the introduction of a 'phenomenological taxonomy of psychotropes' in *Pharmako/Poeia*.

A 'taxonomy of psychotropes' is a classification model for psychotropic substances – often plants or fungi – and their chemical components or artificial analogues, which enquires

into the qualities of psychotropic stimuli. Louis Lewin, a German doctor, toxicologist and pharmacologist, was the first to suggest such a system. In his book *Phantastica* (1924), Lewin differs between five major categories of psychotropes: ‘Euphorica’ (sedatives), ‘Phantastica’ (hallucinogens), ‘Inebriantia’ (drunkenness), ‘Hypnotica’ (soporifics) and ‘Excitantia’ (stimulants). However, in his introduction, Lewin expresses a concern about the comparability of such stimuli, a concern which becomes programmatic in Pendell’s texts; “there are no psychological constants common to all individuals”.^[4] The outlines of a taxonomy of psychotropes are therefore already roughened by the individual’s organisation around habituation and tolerance.^[5] Pendell shows this through the example of opioids:

“Some are entranced by radical stillness, and lie unmoving, without thoughts. Others are so glad to be freed from the rude pushing and shoving of desire that they take advantage of their reprieve and set about finishing some piece of work [...]”.^[6]

He then reacts to Lewin in two ways. First, he removes the category of Hypnotica and introduces Thanatopathia (*thanatos* = gr. ‘death’; for Pendell, “[re-creation] of initiatory sickness”,^[7] a glimpse of death). Second, and more importantly to the subject of this essay, he proposes a network-like, non-hierarchical model in the shape of a pentagon which visualises both the fluent edges of each stimulus and the overlaps between stimuli. For Pendell, a taxonomy is more a metaphor, a construct of human logic, whose interpretation resonates with nature in a way but is not identical with it. The taxonomic model therefore can take many shapes; “[t]he point [...] is to stress the metaphorical – that is, magical – and arbitrary nature of the taxonomic scheme”.^[8] Through comparing metaphor to magic, he insists on a freedom of creation which traverses the confines of logic. He prompts the reader explicitly to participate in developing their own taxonomic shape,^[9] an invitation which requires more attention, especially in the context of recent discussions both in literary sciences, which has been cut off from positive knowledge and meaning, and psychedelic sciences, including ethnopharmacology, as it offers a deeper analysis of the transformative potential that is at stake.

Psychotropes and the Critique of the Other

Especially in the context of ecology, it is worth looking more closely at the ethical implications of logocentric writing styles, in the sense that these often assume accountability towards the existing academic corpus. French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida has been known to criticise the idea of taxonomy too. In his text *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008, orig. *L'animal que donc je suis*, 2006), Derrida calls the Linnean taxonomic model a “fictitious tableau”[10] when writing about an encounter with his cat in his bathroom. The experience of feeling naked while being watched by his cat leads him to the conclusion that the so-called cat is an individual before it is taxonomically classified into a mammal, a cat etc. It is an individual, however, whose perception cannot be deducted and therefore is a phenomenological Other, in the sense that it is “an existence that refuses to be conceptualized”.[11] The title of Derrida’s book is a reference to the famous cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, ‘I think therefore I am’, and introduces a programme of criticism of how “[p]hilosophical ‘logocentrism’, inseparable from a position of mastery, is in the first instance ‘a thesis regarding the animal, the animal deprived of the logos, deprived of the can-have-the-logos’”.[12] René Descartes, who parted the soul from the body and explained that only humans have a soul, turned the body into a machine and the animal into an animal-machine, and the (psychoactive) plant consequently into a plant-machine.[13]

By referring to the phenomenological Other in the context of the *Pharmako* trilogy, Pendell notably stresses Derrida’s critique by referring to plants (or fungi) instead of animals. This extension of Derrida’s criticism might strike us as provocative at first, but the latest accounts of plant or fungal neurobiology provide compelling evidence that plants have an intelligence of their own which challenges our comprehension of consciousness.[14] This condition enables Pendell to call plants “representatives of the Other”.[15] In his framework of the concept of alterity, Derrida refuses the idea that one can effectively *know* and therefore portray the Other through the representation of language, i.e., taxonomic classification. He denies the chance that there is a vocabulary which would enable the writer to talk themselves out of those categories. Reading his work, however, one quickly notices that Pendell goes beyond this denial through the mere act of writing about his experiences with psychoactive plants, for example, *Salvia divinorum*:

“This plant has a sense of humor!”[16]

To bring the concept of the phenomenological Other together with this opposing act of writing, it is helpful to look at Donna Haraway’s proposal for a reconciliation between the autonomy of the Other and the potential conveyance between human and non-human species. In her text *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway highlights the importance of Derrida’s criticism in the philosophical division between humans and non-humans, as he “correctly criticized two kinds of representations, one set from those who observe real animals and write about them but never meet their gaze, and the other set from those who engage animals only as literary and mythological figures”. [17] Through his method of deconstruction, the linguistic structures which define these boundaries became visible. Haraway, however, criticises how Derrida overlooked the “invitation to other-worlding” [18] that his cat offered him:

“[Derrida] did not seriously consider an alternative form of engagement [...], one that risked knowing [...] *how to look back*, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and *therefore* also philosophically and intimately.” [19]

Haraway’s term of “other-worlding”, as a way to critically alter “militarized neoliberal models of world building [which are] not about antiglobalization but about nurturing a more just and peaceful other-globalization”, [20] suggests a strong relationship to what Pendell refers to as “otherworldly exploration” [21] in the context of speaking about the Other as something which can’t be reduced to representation: “[D]espite the sprouting of fractal ferns and algorithmic roses, there are no plants in cyberspace [...]. Nor in the noosphere.” [22] As a consequence of authentic encounterings with “actual” [23] beings, there is a mutual relationship between the writer and their subject. For Haraway, this “intersecting gaze [...] usually has to be teased out from the repressive literary conventions of scientific publishing and descriptions of method”. [24] This resonates with Pendell’s meditative approach on his subject:

“Poetry as a Way: animating the plant is folly, but letting the plant animate you is wisdom [...]” [25]

Haraway would agree with Pendell that there is no such thing as a neutral scientist observing nature, because they are always changed by what they see, how they are seen and how they are enabled to respond. For Haraway, “the flow of entangled meaningful bodies in

time”[26] holds a certain “always tripping [...] truth [which] has a multispecies future”. [27]

Psychedelics, Literature and Deep Ecology

In *Pharmako/Poeia*, Pendell figures the “pharmacological axis” as part of a “multidimensional alliance space” which humans and non-humans inhabit[28] and where a plant can’t be reduced to its functioning as an ally. Instead, it has an agenda and is “a powerful force in its own right”. [29] Such an ‘alliance space’ allows us to “assist each other in the prosecution of some task”, [30] and can therefore be described as ecological. In his essay “Psychedelics, Deep Ecology, and Wild Mind” (2009), Pendell attempts to figure a connection between ecology and psychedelics by suggesting that psychedelics, ‘entheogens’, support the experience of what Haraway calls ‘the flow of entangled meaningful bodies in time’, whilst irritating the abstract head-space and therefore the ability to conceptualise via language. [31] After his LSD trip in California, for example, Michel Foucault noted that it was almost impossible to grasp the state of mind via language once it had passed. [32] This suggests consequences for writing and above all reinforces a deconstructivist approach, where there is ‘disorder’ instead of ‘coherence’. Arne Naess, “who founded the Deep Ecology movement in 1973”, and who “was profoundly influenced by his LSD experience in 1968”, [33] claims with a reference to Michael Zimmermann the importance of the poststructural approach for deep ecology:

“For Derrida, [...] ecological problems cannot be solved by turning the ecosystem into yet another metaphysical absolute, since doing so is motivated by the same control-impulse that animates all centrism, including those responsible for social oppression. He argues that we never encounter nature either in itself or as a whole; instead, nature is a social phenomenon, whose meaning is always contested within particular, local discourses.” [34]

Pendell’s position on ecology becomes more clear in the chapter “Speed Limits” in *Pharmako/Dynamis*, where he reflects on the status of psychotropes in a globalised world; ‘Excitantia’, such as coffee, tea and chocolate, projected “[a] new idea, essentially: time in passage, the quantification of duration”. [35] In the ‘Age of Exploration’, stimulants such as chocolate turned “the meandering looking about of a scout in unmapped territory” into “[s]peed and destination”. Therefore, psychotropes are part of an ecological or multispecies society, playing their role in continuously altering the very conditions of existence.

In his style of writing, Pendell tries to mark the limited perspective of the human individual in a performative style, which he also calls “psychedelic thinking”, [36] by including his own negotiations:

“We keep forgetting. Oh right, I forgot. That grabbing anything (thought, object, insight) out of the stream, freezes it [...]. And that ‘it’ is not the it.” [37]

Every literary solidification of meaning is an exclusion, as well as a sublimation. ‘Pure language’ is a ‘specter’, as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty figures in his thoughts on literature. [38] Every act of writing is political and, implicitly, poetical texts are not free from policy; they too bear the problematics of finding directions and of manifestation. However, “[w]ild systems contain poisons. Formal systems are certainly poisonous, but lack [...] playfulness.” [39] What Pendell calls ‘psychedelic writing’ or ‘poison path praxis’, which means “that through self-experiment and self-examination one can know the taste of water, as they say, for oneself”, [40] can also be understood in an application of Derrida’s term of the ‘pharmakon’. Pendell describes literature as ‘poison’ and his work therefore as performative, in the sense that through writing about poisons, he is opening the possibility for another poison alongside. A possible way to deal with this is what he understands as “autocryptosis”, [41] which means that language should light a spark for its own continuation rather than delivering an unequivocally, but therefore narrowed, knowledge of the experience sensation:

“Books themselves are poisons. [...] A key is indeed necessary to unlock the gate, but anyone is free to just walk around it. I call this technique ‘autocryptosis’. It seems only fitting that a book about poisons ought to be poison itself.” [42]

In referencing Derrida’s *Plato’s Pharmacy* (1981), Pendell notes that psychoactive plants and Western language systemics resemble one another in how they work on consciousness; they are both pharmakoi, both cure and poison, as they alter sensation and shape perception. In order to speak about the nature of a poison, of its material appearances, and to overcome the mere materiality at the same time, it is essential for Pendell to acknowledge that “[t]he primary poison is the Word – the Pharmakos – the one who stands-in-for. All other poisons function through this one, the signifying poison.” [43] As a ‘signifying poison’, language defines and limits the communicability of psychedelic experiences. Like Derrida, Pendell sees the problem of the dialectical approach to the pharmakon, in the sense that it is preconditioned by the idea of ‘immunity’. As Gary Snyder puts it, “[i]n recent

centuries those who knew plants and their powers have often been stigmatized, as though danger and unpredictability were themselves evil. [It is] about human cultures, and how those which demonize death or pain or sickness are thus less able to deal with the bitter side of nature, with intoxications [...].”[44] In that sense, we can neither hope for linguistic nor physical immunity.

Herder and Nietzsche in Pendell’s Texts

Although Derrida’s Deconstructivism offers us important links through which to place Pendell’s writing into a discourse on the linguistic prerequisites of scientific language, there are a few other important references which have influenced Pendell profoundly and would perhaps be equally important when discussing psychedelic writing.

First, in *Pharmako/Dynamis*, Pendell refers to the German romantic philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder, portraying him as a visionary thinker and as having pre-empted by 200 years the revolutionary theories on the “shamanic origin of religion”[45] of the twenty-first century (such as those of Weston La Barre and Gordon Wasson).[46] Herder is important for Pendell because he had a strong interest in intercultural communication. Ahead of his time, he called for transcultural empathy;[47] Pendell remarks that Herder “had a quick and critical eye for the eurocentrism that permeated [traveler’s [sic] reports about shamanism], and deplored it”. [48] Furthermore, Herder was aiming towards a different understanding of the meaning of poetry for the passing of knowledge, rather than viewing it as an ornamental style of writing, providing, according to Pendell, the basis of “modern poetic theory”. [49] To Herder, “thought and sensation, the head and the heart, are codependent. As soon as one thinks, one participates in the practical activity of making ‘abstractions of sensibility’.” [50] In the context of this essay, this is important to mention, since the concept of the phenomenological Other has not only been used to talk about other species, but was first and foremost a tool for antisemitic and decolonial criticism. This is significant when it is considered that there is a richness of information on psychoactive plants which has been collected by other cultures over millennia [51] and which is based on entirely different linguistic systems. Interestingly, Pendell seems to have considered this phenomenological perspective regarding translation, too, since he was involved in workshops on ethnopoetry, [52] a way of exploring alternative translational practices as “most translations of [...] oral traditions [...] failed to capture the power and beauty of the oral performances on the written

page”.^[53] It is important to regard this decolonial dimension of literature on psychedelic science.

Second, throughout the *Pharmako* books, as well as in *Walking with Nobby*, there are frequent references to Friedrich Nietzsche. This becomes clear in Pendell’s approach about a Dionysian epistemology to express his thoughts. For Nietzsche, Dionysus and Apollo provide a pair of metaphors to distinguish between the drives for chaos and order. This is relevant for Pendell as he associates a Dionysian method with the possibility to prevent “scientific reductionism”.^[54] And, indeed, Nietzsche offers literary criticism, also making him a major influence for Derrida. It is in this sense that Nietzsche offers a fruitful approach for Pendell to write about psychedelics; “Dionysus, dismemberment his birth and his death. The madness (i.e., chaos) he brings is not immoral, but pre-moral, a child’s absorbing delight in beauty and wonder.”^[55] So, for Pendell, as it is also for Haraway, it is about re-learning to observe their subject with curiosity, to forget all existing thought models, to undo Western bias. However, as do Nietzsche and Derrida, Pendell rejects the idea of nihilism, i.e., randomness, as a motivation for his writing. When being criticised by Norbert O. Brown for his generation having “abandoned the intellectual question” after Pendell reveals an LSD experience as an “antidote for [nihilism]”, Pendell explains that trying to solve “the intellectual question” (the question of purpose, of humanity) “with disembodied intellect [is] part of the problem”.^[56] The acceptance of the body as being involved in all decision-making and all judgement doesn’t allow for the mere repetition of thought patterns and instead requires a poetical way of expression. To regard perspective, the involvement of the body in time and space is, then, the very definition of the phenomenological method.

Conclusion: ‘And yet the earth moves’

Dale Pendell’s phenomenological taxonomy offers a model for the idea of a non-teleological, decentralised classification of psychotropes, which draws from ‘mythopoetical’ conceptions and philosophical phenomenology. This essay tried to conceptualise a highly abstract and speculative approach on writing on psychoactive substances, which could be seen as a supplement to the canon of the research on psychotropes. However, this is already an interdisciplinary field where people share innovative ideas and approaches. In his conversations with Norbert O. Brown, Pendell describes his outsider position in academia;

“I’m not [anti-academia]. But [...] it would take a revolution [...] to bring my books into academia.” But in his own footnote to his quote he says: “And yet the earth moves, and a large interdisciplinary class at the University of California is currently using *Pharmako/Poeia* and *Pharmako/Dynamis* as required texts.”[57] This revolution in thought and approach is gaining popularity at the moment; in order to face human-made social-ecological catastrophes, it is worth looking at the very structuring technology of our thoughts, which is language.

Notes

- [1] Dale Pendell, *Walking with Nobby. Conversations with Norbert O. Brown*. Mercury House. San Francisco, California, 2008, p. 133.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Dale Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, 2010, p. 42.
- [4] Louis Lewin, *Phantastica*, Park Street Press. Rochester, 1998, p. 9.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 118.
- [7] Ibid., p. 29.
- [8] Ibid., p. 43.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Fordham University Press. New York, 2008, p. 13.
- [11] Ibid., p. 9f.
- [12] Marie-Louise Mallet, introduction to Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 5.
- [13] Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 22.
- [14] See Stefano Mancuso & Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*. Island Press. Washington, DC, 2015.
- [15] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 6.
- [16] Ibid., p. 161.
- [17] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press. Minnesota, 2008, p. 21.
- [18] Ibid., p. 20.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid., p. 3.
- [21] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 6.
- [22] Ibid.
- [23] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 27.
- [24] Ibid., p. 21.
- [25] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 208.
- [26] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 26.
- [27] Ibid., p. 27.
- [28] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 10.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Dale Pendell, “Psychedelics, Deep Ecology and Wild Mind”, *MAPS Bulletin*, 19(1),

- Special Edition: Psychedelics and Ecology*, 2009, pp. 46–7.
- [32] Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California. A True Story – Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death*. Heyday, Berkeley, 2019, p. 63.
- [33] David Jay Brown, “From the Editor”, *MAPS Bulletin*, 19(1), *Special Edition: Psychedelics and Ecology*, 2009, p. 5.
- [34] Arne Naess, “Heidegger, Postmodern Theory and Deep Ecology”, *The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy*, 14(4), 1997, p. 5.
- [35] Dale Pendell, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, 2010, p. 11.
- [36] Dale Pendell, “Lunar Meanders”, in *Breaking Convention: Psychedelic Pharmacology for the 21st Century* (Ed. Ben Sessa et al.). Strange Attractor. London, 2017, p. 232.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*. North Western University Press. Evanston, 1973, p. 4ff.
- [39] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 42.
- [40] Pendell, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, p. 3.
- [41] Ibid., preface, p. ix.
- [42] Ibid.
- [43] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 237.
- [44] Gary Snyder, *Pharmako/Poeia*, preface, p. i.
- [45] Pendell, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, p. 98.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Rowan Bailey, “Herder’s Sculptural Thinking”, *Parallax*, 17(2), 2011, p. 8.
- [48] Pendell, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, p. 99.
- [49] Pendell, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, p. 99.
- [50] Bailey, “Herder’s Sculptural Thinking”, p. 1.
- [51] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 23.
- [52] Robert Forte, *Entheogens and the Future of Religion*. Park Street Press. Rochester, 1997, p. 29.
- [53] Catherine Quick, “Ethnopoetics”, *Folklore Forum*, 30 (1/2), 1999, pp. 95–105.
- [54] Pendell, *Walking with Nobby*, p. 5.
- [55] Pendell, *Pharmako/Poeia*, p. 213.
- [56] Pendell, *Walking with Nobby*, p. 17.
- [57] Ibid., pp. 196–7.

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