

Natural Surrender, Spiritual Activism, and Secular Revolt in the American Southwest: the poetic questioning of a profit-oriented society by David Chorlton.

Introduction

David Chorlton's poetry captures snapshots of hidden treasures located in the American Southwest. In this desert of rock and still life, the voice of the poet transcends reality and urges the audience to imagine their personal lives freed from stereotypes, media imprecations and marketing trends.

This essay will try to show to what extent the American Southwest provides room for thought to the secular prophet. It will also assess the many similarities between transcendentalist writings and Chorlton's works. Despite his mistrust of dogma and ideology, Chorlton's poems are a celebration of the imperious need to relate to a creative and spiritual power that challenges man's flaws and misdemeanors. Chorlton's resistance to materialism stems from the desire to reach out to his fellow men and enlighten their spirits. The violence expressed by Chorlton, born in Austria, raised in Manchester, and Phoenix resident since 1978, perpetuates the religious tradition of misunderstood prophets, whose voices sometimes get lost in the desert.

David Chorlton's poetry and the disenchantment of the world.

A powerless praying community in a godless world.

According to Fernand Braudel, we live in a fast-paced godless world where our awe for technology has replaced our inclination towards magic and myths. Science and rationality have smothered our urge to rely on supernatural explanations to figure out what, for decades, seemed out of the mind's reach. However, despite man's pretences, the need to relate to mightier than oneself pervades most of Chorlton's poems.

The thirst for God's presence, the longing to see his face and the kneeling before Him is expressed in a voiceless and almost shapeless world: the desert. There is a reminiscence of Biblical and ascetic traditions. Christ flees to the desert. Pilgrims, monks and nuns paid short or lengthy visits to the desert to rekindle their faith. Spending some time in the desert allows

the solitary man to indulge himself in self-reflection which in turns provides room for thought for the incoming encounter with God. The desert is also the place traditionally chosen by openly spiritual people who decide to leave their past and former identity behind in order to feel free to devote themselves exclusively to God and escape the temptations of the world. Monks, nuns, anchorites, eremites, pillarists use litanies, songs and the rhythm of a full schedule to dominate their bodies.

What about Chorlton's praying men and women? None of them speak to God or divine entities out of choice or joy. The sole reason for man to hunt for a God whose existence he has formerly denied is fear. In the poem "Living with Draught", Chorlton describes how the inhabitants of the desert "beg the passing clouds to stop" and "invoke gods known to be extinct for a miracle."¹ The absence of God does not obliterate man's desire and need to believe in powerful forces that will come to his rescue when propitiated and soothed with the correct surrender and humiliation. Chorlton's believers are not responsible grown-ups. Trapped in a maze of infantile representations of the divine and the worldly, they do not relate to superior forces with confidence and trust. They appeal to God as a last resort, when everything else seems to have failed in granting them their means of subsistence. No matter how hard man has tried to subdue Nature, he is still dependent on it for his survival. Thus, Chorlton describes man's insecurity in "Living with Draught": "Touching the ground each morning to feel for dew reveals our insecurity (...) Wildflower season finds us counting roadside blooms for reassurance."²

The revenge of Nature = proof of the divine's existence.

The absence of God not only nurtures insecurity and the need to recreate the divine out of nothing, but it also leaves man with a feeling of emptiness and despair: "From one kind of void to another, we travel first past the abandoned grandstand west of Phoenix where a dust devil twines around fingers of light crossed for luck in the ghost race of winds through the creosote."³ Since no one answers man's excruciating pleas, forgetting seems the last means to alleviate the pain. The desert, a metaphor for loneliness and death through lack of water and food, is supplanted by a deep slumber. Sleep is the real no man's land where the shameful and the ignored can find solace: "We try sleep as a final refuge, only to wake after an hour, reaching

¹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Living with draught. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 8.

² Ibid.

³ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Emptiness. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 27.

for the glass at our bedside and seeing by the light of the scorpion inside it.”⁴ Sleep is the time and place which gives man some respite from the destructive sun: “The sun burns through them [the storm clouds] daily, digging its claws into rocks and pecking at the spaces between ironwood trees.”⁵

In the desert, Nature is provided with the means to take its revenge upon man’s egotistical / conceited pursuits. In spite of his attempts at harnessing the wilderness, man is faced with the strength of Nature which, by playing tricks on the inhabitants of the desert, shows that it is more than just landscapes, animals or rocks. The divine in Chorlton’s poetry is, thus, pantheistic. It has its own autonomy showing through its various manifestations, which leave man puzzled and bewildered. In “The Porous Desert”, Chorlton mentions “a calcium deity rising behind a peak to survey its last chance to be alone.” In the poem “Listening to the Stars”, Chorlton explains how “mountains approach” them. The sky is the setting for myriads of celestial encounters. Animals and insects pay tribute to the beauty of the universe by tuning in and forming a chorus of disassembled but joyful voices: “We travel along a saguaro-lined road to see Jupiter’s moons (...) nighthawks first soar from the grass and cut the breaking darkness into ribbons (...) the desert sinks into a bed of sounds; insects tuning their voices, a cough from the dry earth.”⁶ Instead of running away from a human presence, animals will defiantly stand their ground while man stares at them: “The eyes of a coyote will turn to water as you look into them.”⁷ Most people who roamed these vast stretches of land were hunters but animals don’t hide anymore. Elusive presences that could be fathomed out through sounds are now visible: “In the tallest firs sound has a shadow. The kinglet’s trill precedes each peal of thunder.”⁸ Seasons follow each other inappropriately and perform ironic pranks on the inhabitants of the desert. The latter have been defeated not only by scorching heat but also by damp monsoons: “The monsoon arrives without warning, knocks down the door, walks in and disengages the evaporate cooler with a sweep of its arm (...) It can’t stop hugging us with its brawny arms, breathing its steam train breath and sitting down in a pool of sweat to talk.”⁹

The figure of the pilgrim is conjured up by Chorlton in many poems to account for the necessity of leaving one’s comfort, certainties and homeland to discover truth and the divine. The pilgrim character is contrasted with the people who will succumb to the ease of illusion. Thus, on

⁴ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Living with draught. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, pages 8-9.

⁵ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Summer Calendar. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 29.

⁶ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Listening to Stars. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 19.

⁷ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « A Desert Primer. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 18.

⁸ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Notes from the White Mountains. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 21.

⁹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Monsoon. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 28.

February 7th, Chorlton notes: “Lawn sprinklers perpetuate the illusion of normality in a season out of tune with an Earth from which everyone is trying to secure their portion with a down payment of stolen water.”¹⁰ The media participates in pathetic hypocritical campaigns meant to cheer up gullible TV viewers ready to believe any lie that may contradict what their eyes contemplate every day: “The weather channel broadcasts reruns from last year’s storms to keep morale alive, and the spines on our books are cracking in dry air.”¹¹

For the rain to come back or the Gods to manifest themselves, man should travel back in time in search of his long-abandoned innocence. By drawing inspiration from former desert dwellers (the indigenous peoples who were skilled at merging with nature), he will regain confidence in the future. Achieving balance won’t be possible unless man realizes that technology mars the beauty of Nature.

Rediscovering Nature: getting rid of technology and human mediation tools and concepts.

Traveling back in time, reclaiming a past inheritance, and changing identity.

Since indigenous people departed from the desert, the western landscape- once the residence of Gods- has become a mere tourist sight replicated in thousands of postcards: “We plant illusory grass beneath our postcard sky.”¹² Chorlton urges its readers and fellow travelers to remember “the world before technology.”¹³ Chorlton mourns a lost paradise when man possessed the ability to communicate with Gods and their multiple embodiments: animals, rocks, meteorological phenomenon... There are no remnants of the former civilizations that flourished in the desert without relying on any of the technological devices used by tourists or desperate TV addicts. On « February 9th», Chorlton remarks that all discussions about the weather are vain. The core of the problem is not lack of water but lack of wisdom. The potter came to that realization decades ago: she left the desert for good as the barbarians arrived with their cheap promises of an incoming civilization: “There will be a meeting to discuss the heat island in our urban region which spreads further and digs deeper by the day, down to the ruin of a past

¹⁰ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. «February 7th. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 36.

¹¹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. «The Gods. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 40.

¹² Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. «February 23rd. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 43.

¹³ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. «Three lies about moths. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 55.

civilization: clay pots still bearing the potter's fingerprints, and the tracks her sandals left behind when she looked into the future, saw us, and walked the other way."¹⁴

As the desert shows its greed by expanding so does man when he obsessively constructs ludicrous homes surrounded by preposterous lawns. What man erects dispossesses the desert of its own identity and true image. Thus, people like Chorlton who are still able to marvel at sunsets, are condemned to invisibility and anonymity: "We are out in the desert, invisible to tourists, who prefer to visit photographs in travel magazines."¹⁵ The poet's call cannot be understood by the common man who, like seasonal visitors, wants the desert to match the fake representation he enjoyed in glossy magazines sold in the city.

In order to fully capture the desert experience, man must merge with Nature. The individual should get rid of human tools that help mediate reflection, perception, feelings, representations and experience. In other words, he has to undergo an ego-loss. His personality must be broken down. Yet, this frightening psychological experience will constitute an epiphany for the traveler ready to let go of everything.

The desert = an epiphany?

The trip to the desert is a one-way journey. There is no going back: "Once you have entered the desert, a lock behind you clicks."¹⁶ The encounter with Nature is an epiphany, a revelation which doesn't allow for regrets or nostalgia towards what was coined as civilization. The desert helps the traveler to find a new identity which summons the end of artificiality and superficiality. What remains is the essence of things, and the poet is bound to bid farewell to embellishments. The truth of his book will lie bare: "The longer you stay, the shorter the book you came to write becomes until the manuscript fits on the wings of a moth."¹⁷ The poet has singled out the moth, a frail insect attracted by light, to carry his work of art on its wings. A sense of urgency permeates the poem: what matters can be said in a few words but they have to be spoken out promptly.

Man must be stripped of all his clothes, belongings and the past beliefs and morals he held to be true. As it has a manipulative power of its own, language must be discarded when trying to

¹⁴ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « February 9th. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 38.

¹⁵ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Christmas Bird Count in the Desert. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 32.

¹⁶ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Writing in the Desert. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 16.

¹⁷ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Writing in the Desert. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 16.

bear testimony to the magnificence of Nature. Man will return to a near-animal state and the poem will become hieroglyphic: “I juggle words into another appeal against the loss of species but on some days the alphabet falls apart. Living without language is a start.”¹⁸ Loss of language and ego-destruction is the path towards elevation. The disintegration of personality is the true road towards, if not holiness, at least, a more spiritual life: “A western tanager in the paloverde is pausing on its journey to higher elevation.”¹⁹

The real predator –man- must learn the language of animals which are the most evolved species: “Once I have mastered the sounds of the doves, I will learn other voices of the wild, walk through the city and let out a cry to ask why we are so few here, we wolves.”²⁰

Chorlton’s poetry also perpetuates the traditional Robinson Crusoe tale. Indeed, the poet who got lost in the wilderness believes that he is “the last of [his] kind in this place.”²¹ The animal is not a predator. He becomes a guide who will provide the hunter with insightful visions. In “Valley of the Jaguar”, the poet cannot resist the compelling power of the disappearing jaguar. By scouring the entire valley in search of the fugacious animal, the poet’s body undergoes a baffling transformation: “Mystery draws you in, replaces your clothes with a pelt, oils your limbs which have stiffened from much walking, and sharpened your senses to a feline point.”²² Getting rid of all social codes like dressing appropriately is an exhilarating experience: “Better to flash like a tanager or wear a lizard’s diamond collar than be heir to the tyranny good taste imposes.”²³ Chorlton reminds his readers that the destructive power of man is born out of fear and greed: “Human fear has the power of thirst.”²⁴ Thus, most of Chorlton’s poems can be considered as a disillusioned appeal to protect Nature. David Chorlton is no eco-terrorist and won’t advocate a libertarian revolt. The poet’s prophetic voice will merely echo in a desert of men who are too blind to see that they are digging their own graves.

Redefining religion: a secular revolt for a divine revolution.

A spiritual atheist: Chorlton as the blind prophet who sees what remains hidden to the eyes of the non-believers.

¹⁸ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Living with Doves. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 53.

¹⁹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Spring Birding. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 14.

²⁰ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Living with Doves. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 53.

²¹ Chorlton, David. « Valley of the jaguar. » <http://www.poetsencyclopedia.com/davidchorlton.shtml#poems>

²² Chorlton, David. « Valley of the jaguar. »

²³ Chorlton, David. « Western Taste »

²⁴ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. “Encounters.” Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 52.

For some people like Chorlton, the desert may constitute a shelter from the crazy, destructive animals of the city. Yet, the consequences of greed are present in the American Southwest: “Rivers soak into the earth, forests thin, and machines grind the desert into submission.”²⁵ Destruction of landscapes can be read as an omen for doomsday. If man continues to unleash his devastating power upon Nature, he’ll soon be lost in an industrial wasteland. Chorlton points out a new topography, different from that of the hiking guide. It indicates that, as years pass by, there is less and less unspoiled land for man’s leisure pursuits: “The map shows trails and altitude. It indicates the rivers and the roads that wind between them (...) We take a yellow marker to remember for next time. Two years pass. Our map is the same, but we can’t find the trail. The forest doesn’t reach the lake anymore. We count fewer larks than the last time. Another year. The map is folded smaller. A lark sings from a fence post.”

The solitude of the lost traveler –equated with that of Christ- doesn’t stem from his being rejected by society but by his knowledge of an upcoming destruction of the Earth: “Even the lost traveler will lie down among the thorns glad to be alive.”²⁶

In “Predictions”, the poet-prophet lists the signs that will announce the end of the world. Wild beasts will show signs of impatience: “There will be ice on the moonlight in the country of wolves when they rush from the cover of the trees.” People will act confused: “There will be blind men asking directions and brides dressed in white selling confessions (...) There will be a time of need and nobody will know the difference.”²⁷ This apocalypse is signified to the world through the uncanny. Innocuous objects normally discarded show up in unexpected places: “There will be (...) old shoes in the road.”²⁸

West of Phoenix, on the highway, the temple merchants provide lost travelers with “a book about the afterlife, and a cassette tape for the road that talks when you’re lonely about Jesus’ coming.”²⁹ Chorlton is no believer. He states in *Prayer Flags*: “I’m not a Buddhist, but I listen to the wind. I don’t meditate but stare out of the window to give my nerves a rest.”³⁰ Everyday experiences must replace spiritual techniques. Chorlton’s dogma can be summed up in one action: to care about the Earth, our mother. The Earth is alive and its description is similar to that of a human body. She is endowed with limbs, sinews (tendons), ribs, femurs, muscles and

²⁵ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Living with Doves. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 53.

²⁶ Chorlton, David. « Predictions. » <http://www.poetsencyclopedia.com/davidchorlton.shtml#poems>

²⁷ Chorlton, David. « Predictions. »

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « Highway religion. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 26.

³⁰ Chorlton, David. « Prayer Flags. » *Places You Can’t Reach*. Pudding House Publications, 2006.

a diaphragm: “The rain is scented creosote here, it gathers in a flash and briefly soaks the ribs and femurs that remain from the parting of muscle and sinew before dripping through the diaphragm of the earth.”³¹

Chorlton’s means of proselytizing will be to use objects from daily life, foreign to any religious use. They will be turned into symbols of his secular but spiritual revolt. Chorlton appeals to his fellowmen to subvert America’s national symbols and advocate a spiritual revolt that will have nothing to do with religious or ideological anthems used by politicians during electoral campaigns. He wants the American citizen to replace the American flag with a purer one, a more natural one: “A string of five colours on the front porch declare a fragile peace in an election year. They talk brightly; green for the forest, yellow for the desert, blue for the sky, red for the sun and white for silent introspection.”³²

Political symbols should stand for a green power and advocate the preservation of Nature. To Chorlton, most political discourses are gibberish. What Chorlton longs for is the rediscovery by Man of a silent meaning in the observation of natural things: “The Flags are a Himalayan breath of snow and occupation in a city in the desert. They have no ambition; they don’t argue; they have nothing to invest in the market. They are the last resort of a stranger tired of hostility, five broken syllables stolen from somebody else’s language to say what can’t be said in English, that power is wanting nothing that takes another’s life.”³³

However, even if the poet cannot avoid the destruction of Nature, he has the power and the duty to give testimony on the beauty of the wilderness to the representatives of the world he loathes so much. Through writing, he will address himself to individuals who are shackled and blinded either by choice or because they were punished: politicians and prisoners. Though he might not halt doomsday, he might at least reveal the true nature of life to some.

Testifying to the world: the poet, a new missionary?

Is the poem an ultimate legacy when everything turns out to be in vain? In an interview, Chorlton states “I find poetry useful in granting an aesthetic in reacting to political events and the sterility encroaching on life in a corporate uniform.” For the time left, Chorlton preaches civil disobedience. He wants to rehabilitate the Western man and claims: we “sweat too much

³¹ Chorlton, David. *The Porous Desert*. « The Porous Desert. » Tallahassee : Florida, 2007, page 5.

³² Chorlton, David. « Prayer Flags. » *Places You Can't Reach*. Pudding House Publications, 2006.

³³ Ibid.

to worry if our appearances offend.”³⁴ He also writes to R.R., a friend at the Adobe Mountain Detention Center, and claims that “power is to want nothing at all.”³⁵ The pacifist revolution led by Chorlton and his followers is doomed to fail, as he writes in the poem “Letter to Pasolini.” The Marxist vision of the world he shares with the great Italian film-maker cannot happen: “Yes, we’d like to see the world turned upside down, have the whole population shaken up and its wealth reallocated but everyone who tried turned into somebody we wouldn’t want to know.”³⁶ However, the poet must not ignore that he is invested with a mission. In ‘Shadow Boxing’, Chorlton describes bums, his “fellow travelers on Earth” who are shouting at invisible presences. Man, unbalanced, cannot avoid litigating with himself or with invisible assailants: “Something he can’t see attacked him, and when he strikes he’s doing it for everyone who hurts with nothing more visible to hit back at than fate.”³⁷ Chorlton reminds the reader that we’re all kin and that the poet’s mission is to defend the voiceless. So, even if his writings may be considered as vain, the poet will continue to walk the tightrope between sanity and insanity, ugly reality and ideal illusions, norms and dreams: “There’s a tightrope stretched between them and we walk across it, every time we talk about more than the weather and Hello. It’s talk. It’s argument. It’s all we’ve got to file a claim for honesty.”³⁸

Conclusion

Eventually, Chorlton’s poetry contributes to the creation of new categories of people. It also paves the way for a new topography of human communities and their geographic distribution based on segregation and discrimination. The poet will seek solace in the desert, fully aware of the hypocrisy and temptations of the world. On the other hand, across the street, but miles away in a complete different galaxy, the industrious man will be trapped in a maze of obligations and social representations. He will never witness the beauty of Nature.

Chorlton’s poetry bears a claim to different labels. It can be considered either as green poetry, the work of a European writer with “an unlikely allegiance to the red flag”, or a new transcendentalist vision. Any interpretations may be correct but in the end, Chorlton’s pacifist

³⁴ Chorlton, David. « Western Taste. »

³⁵ Chorlton, David. « Power. »

³⁶ Chorlton, David. « Letter to Pasolini. » *From the Age of Miracles*. Slipstream Press: 2009.

³⁷ Chorlton, David. « Shadow Boxing. » *From the Age of Miracles*. Slipstream Press: 2009

³⁸ Chorlton, David. « Letter to Pasolini. » *From the Age of Miracles*. Slipstream Press: 2009.

writings celebrate Beauty. Despite their polemical tone, they will spare a senator the boredom of another complaint and present him with a beautiful landscape during the course of reading: “And I put myself in the senator’s place, sit down at his desk and open his mail. Such a bleak landscape, littered with statistics and complaints, so I begin over with (...) the language of a bird whose reflection in the water grows pale like invisible ink.”³⁹

³⁹ Chorlton, David. « The River. » *Waiting for the Quetzal*. March Street Press, 2006.