



"The false but still conventional iconography of the cone of increasing diversity (left), and the revised model of diversification and decimation (right), suggested by the proper reconstruction of the Burgess Shale"
Wonderful Life by Stephen J. Gould (p.46)

WHICH WAY TO THE BURGESS SHALE?

A talk given by Teri Rueb at the
 Digital Burgess Conference
 The Banff Centre for the Arts
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One of the unique opportunities that the Banff Centre offers is that of dialog and collaboration across disciplines. While this approach to creative fomentation has traditionally meant cross-pollination among and within the fine arts, this conference represents a new direction within that tradition by promoting collaboration among scientists and artists. Even more exciting, this conference represents an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialog at the stage of conceptualization and visualization of future research and practice agendas in both fields. This kind of interdisciplinary approach is all the more rich, fertile and imperative in a time in which new tools and methods of using those tools offer new ways to explore, articulate, communicate and share our work with one another.

While this cross-disciplinary dialog is, to a great degree, prompted by the appearance of new tools that are useful in both fields, I am not so interested in these tools themselves as I am in the human imagination that lies behind and flows through these tools. Imagination is the playful, creative impulse that drives both scientific and artistic inquiry.

In reading Gould's, *Wonderful Life*(1) I was struck by the similarity between sculpting and visualizing the structure of an organism from fossilized impressions in stone. Both processes require the ability to visually project in three dimensions, filling in with the imagination those parts of an object which cannot be seen from a single vantage point. Both endeavors involve the effort to understand a form and it's function or behavior through observation, analysis, imagination, and intuition. Often this process requires that we strive to see beyond what we expect to see in order to see the internal order of what

really lies before us. This leap into the unknown -- this effort to overcome our preconceptions and desire for control and instead see, appreciate, and grapple with multiple and unfamiliar perspectives is a practice that is common in our work as scientists and artists. The Digital Burgess conference holds the potential to engender future interdisciplinary collaborations in research and practice that draw on this common approach.

I have been asked to talk about the way to the Burgess Shale and so I would like to do so on a couple of different levels from my point of view as a sculptor and with respect to my current project.

The other day I was talking with Anne Archambault, of the Banff Centre, about hiking. She was describing the pleasure she gets from viewing peaks from the various vantage points offered by different hiking trails. The pleasure she described was in the ability to visualize more richly and accurately a terrain that can't be seen and comprehended all at once from one viewpoint, like a map.

Mountains are like living sculptures. Like reconstructing an organism from the various perspectives offered by the fossil record, we come to know the form and intricacy of a landscape by walking through it, seeing it from many different perspectives, at different times and in different lighting conditions. The trail to the Burgess Shale offers many such shifting perspectives of peaks and valleys. Michael Peak looks like a matterhorn crag at first viewing coming from the Takakkaw side; Mt. Wapta like a burly knee or half-buried, massive skull. After traversing Yoho Pass these mountains have completely changed in appearance. Wapta becomes a richly textured rock face that rises so steeply it obliterates our view of it's summit, and Michael Peak becomes a vast font filled with, and dappled by the undulations of Emerald glacier, a thin line drawn down its face by the waterfalls of glacial run-off.

But wait. If I describe the way to the Burgess Shale, how can you recover that path as an unmediated landscape and make it your own tomorrow or Tuesday when you see it for yourself? Will it fulfill your expectations? And how can you perceive it beyond your expectations? Will you "shoe-horn" it to fit your expectations? It's the same conundrum that Walcott fell prey to in classifying the fossils of the Burgess Shale, and that we all participate in everyday as we function in and comprehend our environment according to the symbolic conventions that are so deeply entrenched in our cultural being that they become like second nature to us in our thinking. Sometimes this patterned way of functioning is a matter of survival and yet, perhaps our survival lies more in our ability to think beyond these constraints in order to envision and enact alternative paths of evolution.

In his essay *The Loss of the Creature*(2) Walker Percy writes (and I have edited this slightly for brevity sake),

Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon... and see it for what it is-- as one picks up a strange object from one's back yard and gazes directly at it? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. The thing is... that which has already been formulated--by picture postcard,

geography book, tourist folders, and the words Grand Canyon. As a result of this preformulation, the source of the sightseer's pleasure undergoes a shift... now the sightseer measures his satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed complex. If it does so, if it looks just like the postcard, he is pleased; he might even say, "Why it is every bit as beautiful as a picture postcard!" he feels he has not been cheated. But if it does not conform, if the colors are somber, he will not be able to see it directly; he will only be conscious of the disparity between what it is and what it is supposed to be. He will say later that he was unlucky in not being there at the right time. The highest point, the term of the sightseer's satisfaction, is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex.

And so it is that we approach the Burgess Shale just as Walcott did in his meticulous analysis of the Burgess fossils according to pre-existing taxonomies and theories of evolution. But I will persist in framing your experience of the way to the Burgess Shale. After all, you've all read about and studied it. You've seen pictures of it in books and on the conference web site. Perhaps you've seen and spent great lengths of time at another fossil bed or hiking in the Canadian Rockies. And besides, hasn't postmodernism already banished any notion of unmediated access to the subject? We are always-already in a mediated moment. So what is one more filter, one more layer of accretion on the symbolic accumulation that surrounds this mythic site? Perhaps each new layer brings into relief the particularities of those pre-existing layers of belief and understanding such that they now look ever-so-slightly, but forever, different--each layer offering a further clue as to the nature and structure of other layers. Isn't this process of accretion, decomposition, and transformation of meaning also the way to the Burgess Shale?

The talk concluded with a brief description of [Trace](#).

(1) Gould, Steven Jay. *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1989

(2) Percy, Walker. *The Loss of the Creature*. Published in "The Message in the Bottle". 1975

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