

**AUGUSTO ANGEL MAYA:  
Poet-philosopher of Latin American Environmental Thought**

**Ana Patricia Noguera de Echeverri, PhD<sup>1</sup>\***

**Prelude in minor tone  
Emergences of environmental thought**

Environmental Thought arises from the complex and increasingly icy tensions between nature and modern culture. This emergence began to manifest itself as a discourse on June 15, 16 and 17, 1968 at the first world conference of the Club of Rome. The conference emphasized the future of humanity, and proposed to identify humanity as the number one priority in the scientific and technological development of the world. They proposed making all educative efforts to focus all human activity on favoring the wellbeing of humanity above any other value. To that extent, there was nothing new or distinct from the ideals of Modernity. The tasks put forward at this first conference once again consecrated Man and Humanity as the center and ultimate aim of science, technology and development. But something new began to emerge with great intensity in the Club of Rome's academic discussions on this historical date in 1968: that the wellbeing of humans, or better, the "comfort" (untranslatable word of the typical United States dream and ideal) that middle and upper class North Americans and Europeans were enjoying, was an illusion if unlimited development of one society were to continue. That society was Northern American and European, which was growing economically, technologically and industrially without taking into account the limits of ecosystems.

The concern continued to be for the future of humanity, but from that concern emerged a concern for the environment, which was taking its place in a beautifully tragic way in romanticism and its extraordinary extensions: impressionism, expressionism, and modern art itself. Neither the "environmental" nor the environment (a word specifically used by ecologists since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe) were discussed in these aesthetic configurations of European art. Yet the poetry of Hölderlin, the music of Beethoven, the poetry of the Damned Poets such as Rimbaud or Baudelaire, or the painting of Edward Munch already expressed the anxiety, the anguish, the *ennui*, the boredom, and the nausea of existence in a disenchanted world. As Walter Benjamin explained around 1925, that disenchantment was not only produced by the rupture the Enlightenment had made with the gods. Benjamin said that after living the horrors of the first world war—*world* precisely for the high technological development that had been spent on it, since weapons were more

---

<sup>1</sup> Tenured and Emeritus Professor at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Manizales; coordinator of the Grupo del Investigación en Pensamiento Ambiental (Research Group on Environmental Thinking) since 1996, currently accredited by COLCIENCIAS (Science and Technology Program) in "A," a group belonging to the Instituto de Estudios Ambientales (IDEA) (Institute of Environmental Studies) and the Department of Human Sciences at the Universidad Nacional Sede Manizales. Founder and Coordinator of the Web of Environmental Thinking, Colombian, Latin American and European Nodes (1999).

\* Translated by Charmayne Palomba and Ricardo Rozzi.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

efficient as apparatuses for the destruction of life—that it must not have been the case that man renounced the gods, the holy, the mythical and the enigmatic during the Enlightenment, but that the gods had abandoned men. And in those nearly 200 years of abandonment, the gods observed that men, left to their own devices, had not known what to do with their freedom, and that the only thing that had come of it was the institutionalization of war with the excuse of defending their identity and autonomy.

And another Enlightenment idea—that of Autonomy—held and continues to hold today in neoliberalism, which is again strengthening the most dangerous and terrible wars. It is a great political and cultural power—above all in regard to what has been called the “autonomy of nations.” This autonomy has not been possible precisely because in order for modern nations to establish themselves, they must construct borders in a context of inequality, exploitation and power of some nations over others. Or, to put it another way, in the very configuration of the word “nation” in Modernity, there is the necessity of control, Eurocentrism and discrimination. What was a nation for Napoleonic France? What does “nation” mean in the discourse of the United Nations? What is considered a nation and what is not? And what do we say about the cultures that have never been concerned with having constitutions, declarations of rights and duties, citizens? And on the other hand, are there cultures where respect, responsibility, the enjoyment of life and the admiration of nature, for their image of nature, the earth, and other relational values constitute the fabric of their society? If one of the basic definitions of a nation is autonomy—which is achieved with modern democracy and economic, scientific, and technological development—world conferences on the “environment,” stemming from the first Club of Rome meeting, have among others the idea that the *model* of development must be changed, but that development itself is fundamental to the construction of man, society, region and nation. Hence, it is impossible to think outside of Development, to think of alternative trajectories to Development, or to think of communities.

**Atonal adagio****Ecosystem-Culture: ethical-aesthetic potentialities of Environmental Thought**

During the 1970s, trends of European thought resonated with those of Latin American thought that flourished in Colombia with the philosopher, historian and poet Carlos Augusto Angel Maya.

Born in Manizales in 1932, around 1977 this thinker began to investigate the concepts of nature, life, humanity, society, culture and god, delving into their tracks, the footsteps and the presence of these images from the philosophy of Greek Antiquity through today. He did this in order to understand the distressing environmental problem that had become visible to European and Latin American intellectuals thanks to the Club of Rome.

And so was the large scale impact of the fifty eminent academics, artists, scientists, businessmen, industrialists and members of civil society from diverse areas of the earth that were members of the nascent Club of Rome led by Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King. At the historic conference in June of 1968, they declared the existence of a deep global

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

problem, which was no longer only a social problem, but an environmental problem as well, because “society has a relationship of independence” with nature, seen as a finite “resource.” “This means that from its inception, the debates and Reports of the Club of Rome have focused on the analysis of that global problem, in response to which the Club of Rome coined this felicitous phrase in the 1970’s: the only option that remains is to think globally and act locally.”<sup>2</sup>

From the first Conference of the Club of Rome arose the need to draw up a document that took into account the main problems of an unlimited growing economy faced with a limited nature-resource. Experts on systems theory and scientists from MIT drafted this document, and it was published in 1972 under the title of “The Limits to Growth.” This document, which has been considered the Big Bang of environmental thought, has been translated into 30 languages and has sold more than 12 million copies.

That was the first environmental report Augusto had in his hands, and as a historian, a researcher, and above all as the environmental poet that he is, it began to change his life. Like Marx, Augusto understood that “it is not social consciousness that determines the social and economic relations of production; rather, it is economic relations of production that determine social being.”<sup>3</sup> Then, starting from a deep and rigorous study of Systems Theory and Ecology, Augusto began to develop an interesting environmental take on Marx’s thought. In his book *Toward an Environmental Society*<sup>4</sup>, published only in 1990, Augusto looked upon the economic interdependence discussed in the Club of Rome report as a radical interdependence. It was an interdependence not only because a society addicted to production and limitless consumption was faced with limited natural resources, but that with our culture as an intricate web of symbols, we humans were part of nature as a complex sub-system of that even more complex system called nature.

But it is in his book *The Challenge of Life*<sup>5</sup> that Augusto Angel suggests that a change in the model of development is not sufficient; an environmental society will only be possible if we radically transform the entirety of culture as an intricate web of symbols. In this book, August says that it is not enough to turn the decisions about planet Earth over to Economy because by doing so economic capitalism, the homogenizer/logic of the global market—the denier of biodiversity and diversity—reduces nature to available resources.

The wonderful and powerful (in the Spinozist sense) key to this undoubtedly aesthetic proposal for environmental studies, which Augusto calls the Ecosystem-Culture “model,” is that for the first time in the history of the young environmental thought emerging from the

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.clubofrome.org/eng/about/4/>

<sup>3</sup> Marx in Augusto Angel (1998) *La razón de la vida. La filosofía moderna. Spinoza, Hegel, Marx y Nietzsche (The Reason of Life: Modern Philosophy: Spinoza, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche.)* Cuadernos de Epistemología Ambiental No. 4. Manizales: Universidad Nacional Sede.

<sup>4</sup> Angel, Augusto (1990) *Hacia una sociedad ambiental (Toward an Environmental Society)*. Bogotá: Editorial Labrador

<sup>5</sup> Angel, Augusto (1996) *El reto de la vida. Ecosistema y Cultura: Una introducción al estudio del medio ambiente (The Challenge of Life, Ecosystem and Culture: An Introduction to the Study of the Environment)*. Bogotá: Ecofondo. Serie Construyendo el Futuro (Series Constructing the Future) No. 4.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

Club of Rome, it places a neo-Marxist discourse that installed environmental problems and the environmental as thought, as a proposal, as a trajectory and even as a teleology in the transformations of culture, which Augusto defines as an adaptive instrumental and symbolic platform. What needs to be transformed in order for the ecosystem-culture relations to be increasingly environmental, are the culture's forms and ways of being.

With the "ocean ecosystem-culture" proposal, an alternative system of environmental thought began in Colombia and in Latin America. Actually, it does not only correspond to the concern of developed countries facing the finitude of natural resources, but suggests a departure from the oppressing and reductionist logics of science, technology and even modern philosophy. A profound transformation of the symbols of modern culture, which encompasses a radical transformation of the economy, of the ways of constructing knowledge, of school as a continuer and sustainer of a mechanist understanding of life, of education, of industrial practices, of daily life, of language, of myths and mindsets...

In the arena of conferences and international politics, the emerging thought of the Club of Rome, unfortunately turned—as was expected—into sustainable development. The emphasis that was initially placed on the modification of human practices was progressively moved to conservationist politics by means of technologies and the idea that the environment was the ecosystem, thus reducing nature to a mere available resource for an egocentric, discriminatory, and competitive man, society and culture. In the sphere of academic reflection, the thought of the Club of Rome started to emerge slowly and painfully, but progressively thanks to Augusto Angel in Colombia and Enrique Leff in Mexico. These two thinkers opened different paths and invited their disciples not necessarily to follow in the footsteps of the paths they had opened, but to open paths toward Latin American thinking whose primary task would be to decolonize itself. If for almost 500 years Latin American thought had largely been a bad replica of European thought, Latin American environmental thought would not have to follow the European canons, models or paradigms.

But, what is Augusto Angel's proposal like? How does Augusto think about nature? How does he think about the ecosystem and culture?

There is a profound tension in his proposal between ecosystem and culture. Augusto describes this tension in terms of *A*, *B*, and *C*.<sup>6</sup> *A* summarizes the relationships between Culture and Ecosystem, where the Ecosystem offers to culture, as a technological-aesthetic adaptation, how its processes of adaptation can be. *B* expresses the transformations that culture carries out over ecosystems, and *C* represents the reaction of ecosystems in response to the adaptive transformations of culture. Until Augusto is describing it in his *Challenge of Life*, that profound tension does not differ in any way from the classic relationships between culture and nature. But here there emerges a distinction that opens an important breach, which has allowed us to continue building an aesthetic-environmental thought: both the ecosystem and culture are natural emergences. This demands a profound

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 96

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

transformation of the idea of *environment*; what an environmental problem is like, what its place is...and what are the projections of environmental thought.

Augusto gradually distances himself with respect to the sustainable development scheme outlined in the Big Bang text, “The Limits of Growth,” by experts from MIT, and published in 1972.

In *The Challenge of Life*, Augusto—like the poet that he is—spends a lot of time on life as well as the environment. But what is that life like? That life is not something finished, completed, or on pause. Life is poetic flourishing, constant emergence of dense relationships, of physical, biotic and symbolic flows; life is ecological—that is to say, it follows the logic of *oikós*. Its order is relational and the only possibility for human life, or life of any kind, is the weave of life. Outside of this weave, of biodiversity—that is to say, outside of life as diversity—life is impossible, because life *is* bio-diverse. It is thanks to biodiversity that life is possible; but at the same time, it is thanks to life as the lasting creator of itself, as an autopoietic system, that biodiversity is possible. And, what are those flows, those interconnections like? How have the almost infinite number of life forms been created over the course of approximately 2.8 billion years? They have been created on the basis of difference, solidarity, cooperation and communication; not as human values applied to living systems, in an anthropologization of the living (which ends up being a reduction). Instead, they have emerged as forms of the life itself, which have been building a kind of alphabet of ecological ethics, thanks to the emergences of processes in which living systems do not need to be taught to be solidarious, because solidarity is one of their strongest threads as a niche.

The maestro Augusto Angel says “...living systems have changed on many occasions through sudden variations in external conditions...”<sup>7</sup> but life, as an intricate web of relationships, has been strengthened many times over millions of years, thanks to the fact that life is a cooperative community. Thus has it been possible that on many occasions sudden changes in external conditions have driven a displacement of life zones,<sup>8</sup> looking for a new space to build and become a place, starting from the emergence of complex relationships. So life is a community of relationships, a web of relationships...

Thus, according to the maestro, the catastrophes that occurred before the emergence of humans are not environmental problems. Environmental problems, the environment, and environmental thought emerge from the tension (relationships) between humans and ecosystems. And in this conceptual place-web, there is something that we have considered fundamental to aesthetic-environmental thought: that the modifications humans have made to ecosystems are modifications we have made to ourselves, as the nature that we are, because both cultures and ecosystems are nature in their ongoing processes of creation.

In the book *The Environmental Fragility of Culture* (1995),<sup>9</sup> Augusto composes his Ecosystem-Culture concept in historical terms, demonstrating that in most occasions, the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 42

<sup>8</sup> Cfr: Ibid p. 43

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

end of great empires and cultures has been characterized by profound environmental crises: wars where a large human population has been sacrificed, suffered famines, exploitation of human beings by other human beings, relationships of domination and humiliation amongst human beings and between humans and ecosystems. The novelty of this book stems from its attempt to show that one of the tensions between the ecosystem and culture is history. For Augusto Angel, history is not metaphysical, although Modernity has wanted to emphasize the idea of history as universal. History is impossible outside of spaces, geography, geology, the weaves of life...history is environmental; it is one of the tightest threads between ways of inhabiting the earth and the weaves of life, as we say.

But Western humanity, the heir of Judaism, Platonism, and Christianity, has tried to break away from (ecosystemic) nature, in order to keep with the teleology of salvation in another world. They have tried to free themselves from the ties to the world, to sin, and to guilt, and to return to the promised land, after drifting around where guilt has denied the possibility of enjoyment of life and the body. That denial of the world, of being earth, of being nature, has had a notable influence on the contempt of the earthly, the body and life, and has emphasized the metaphysical and universal character of history. Augusto shows that this image of history has made modern culture too fragile, a place where the concept of history has been radically metaphysical, because it has been focused society, as the unfolding of society, and as society-unfolding...and society is a category of modernity that is characterized by being universal...something like the transcendental subject of sociology.

*The Environmental Fragility of Culture* emerges then, as a work of aesthetic-environmental thought. According to Augusto Angel, if it is in culture (that emergence of nature as an adaptive human process) where the (aesthetic) ways of relating to ecosystems are constructed and created (as life that we are), then the more metaphysical a culture is, the less possibilities it has for being environmentally sustainable. A culture separated from nature is a fragile culture, because it is not interested in understanding the life in which it is immersed and from which it emerges: an unacceptable paradox rising from our “sly race which thinks it knows what it is doing” (Hölderlin).

*The Enigma of Parmenides*<sup>10</sup> and *The Return of Icarus*<sup>11</sup> are the works that open a philosophical path toward Augusto Angel’s environmental thought.

*The Enigma of Parmenides* (published by the Group of Environmental Thought of the Sede Manizales National University as the 11<sup>th</sup> in the *Reason of Life* series in 2004) emphasizes that the Parmenidian decision of two worlds takes hold of Western philosophy up until that crucial moment in which Descartes establishes what Augusto would intelligently and tragically call “the cultural schizophrenia of the West”: the world of metaphysics that is constructed in a stable world, which does not allow for the ambiguity of the muddy world of *physis*, of nature, of sensibility. The latter is an unstable and changing world, while the

<sup>9</sup> Angel Maya, Augusto (1995) *La fragilidad ambiental de la cultura (The Environmental Fragility of Culture)*. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Nacional – Instituto de Estudios Ambientales IDEA.

<sup>10</sup> Angel Maya, Augusto. 2004. Manizales: Universidad Nacional Sede.

<sup>11</sup> Angel Maya, Augusto. 2002. Bogotá: PNUMA – PAL, Universidad Nacional Sede Bogotá, ASOCARS, PNUD.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

world of metaphysics is one of stable truths. The contempt for the world of *physis* takes on a new form with the idea of the object in Descartes and Kant. The object is known by the subject, who—thanks to his ability to know—takes control and power over the object, with the aim of ordering that chaotic world. We must not forget that it is precisely this that is the key to scientific and industrial revolutions, from which emerges the global environmental problem we are living.

*The Return of Icarus: The Reason of Life: Death and Life of Philosophy: An Environmental Proposal* (published in Bogotá in 2002 by PNUMA PAL Number 3, with the support of the Institute of Environmental Studies IDEA, the Association of Regional Autonomous Corporations of Colombia ASOCARS and PNUD) is the environmental philosophical proposal of Maestro Augusto Angel. It is here that Augusto develops his own proposal, starting from five themes that have been presented—over the centuries and across the earth in the collective memory of humans—as questions, as presences, as footprints: Nature, Life, Man, Society, and Gods. These themes have been developed, Augusto says, by all philosophies because they are fundamental questions of thinking itself. In accordance with these questions and the emerging answers from various cultures, interpretations, explanation, images, myths and theories have been forged that have made up the cultural fabric. This symbolic weave determines whether or not a culture is environmental.

In a recent interview with members of our Group of Environmental Thought on occasion of ten years of our Master Program in Environment and Development, Augusto says: “If the environmental hopes to remain in Culture, it must return to admiration for nature.” This means admiration for life, for the Universe, for a ray of sunlight, for our existence. He continues by saying that “Life, without flourishing in poetry, is not worth it.” This is the aesthetic dimension, and it is what makes Augusto Angel’s environmental philosophical proposal beautiful and unique. It is in no way a denial of technology, but the emphasis, the strength of the aesthetic—that is to say, of the poetic—of life as a work of art, of existence as tragedy (from the Dionysian perspective, which Augusto promotes in his poetic work *The World of Dionysus*<sup>12</sup>), puts technology at the service of life and not life at the service of technology, as has been the case in scientific and technological Modernity.

The five questions, with a prelude that would question what philosophy is, are the threads that Augusto follows in *Icarus*, in order to show that an environmental philosophy must be outside all metaphysics and all physicalism. An environmental philosophy would have to be a philosophy of life as a highly complex system, and as such it would have to call the entire structure of Western philosophy into question, especially the philosophy that during more than 2500 years, justified the separation between man and nature.

Environmental Thought (which has a historical place of emergence in the Club of Rome, not because before that event there were no deep questioners of modern humans’ ways of inhabiting the earth, but by the political and economic significance that this event had) had affective origin, by means of influencing, as forms of influence—that is to say as culture,

---

<sup>12</sup> Angel Maya, Augusto. 2005. Manizales: Universidad Nacional Sede Manizales.

and as the way culture can transform those ways of human habitation, in the beautiful, deep, brilliant and poetic Environmental Thought of Augusto Angel Maya.

### **Inconclusive coda**

#### **Ecosystem-Culture: emergences of Environmental Ethics with Spinozist Resonance**

In *The Challenge of Life*, Augusto Angel shows how the Ecosystem and Culture emerge from Nature. This immense concept opens the possibility for a decentralization and extension of ethics, in the sense of Baruch Spinoza. If freedom for this 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Sephardic Jewish philosopher is the extension of the body, and the body is nature, then freedom is the extension of nature-life, and not, as Kant and the philosophy of two worlds claimed, of breaking ties with nature. Environmental ethics, then, will imply a breaking away from the structure of metaphysical values that gave sustenance to a society and a culture that thought of itself as outside of *physis*; now, according to Spinoza, ethics will be within nature itself. Of course, it is not a deterministic nature, but culture as a way of being nature, whose primary characteristic is the rupture of the laws of the niche. “Man does not have a niche,” says Augusto in *The Challenge of Life*. Thus, man constructs the technological and symbolic platform of culture in order to be able to adapt to ecosystems. According to Augusto, man moves between the laws of nature and those of culture; that tension between *physis* and *polis*, between ecosystem and culture, between the biotic world and symbolic bodies, and forms the weave, the fabric, where the plot is the laws and the web, the way life emerges in that plot.

The environmental ethics that Augusto proposes is tied to aesthetics—in other words, to the creation of that weave, to the sensibility facing that weave; to the possibility of understanding that weave of life. It is not, then, an ethics of sustainability, in which the fundamental value is the “resource.” It is an ethics that decentralizes man, takes him down from his imperial throne—power over nature thanks to reason—and places him in nature, as one more thread in the weave of life.