

## Breathing with the Other: Ethics and Eco-socialist Perspective in the Poetry of Jorge Riechmann

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### Abstract

Jorge Riechmann is the author of more than 25 poetry collections and chapbooks, along with an extensive set of essays on poetry, philosophy, politics and ecology. In his poetry, Riechmann engages an inexhaustible drive towards revelation by combining the fragility of elusive beauty and a deep socio-economic critique of the world. He offers warnings about the ecological crises which have always to be conceived of as socio-ecological crises as well. He thus achieves a balance through a synthesis based on lexical accuracy, declarative clarity, philosophical inquiry and symbolic exemplification of a different prevailing ethics which is based on empathy, the expansion of the moral community to include non-human sentient beings and the awareness of the limits to and vulnerability of all life. This article analyzes the main lines of thought which traverse the poetry of Jorge Riechmann, as well as the transformative perspective that moves him. Ultimately, his verse proposes an ethics and pushes for a form of policy that ultimately can change society for the better.

*Keywords:* critical conscience poetry, english poetry XX-XXIth, ecosocialism, Jorge Riechmann.

### Resumen

Autor de más de 25 poemarios y *plaquettes*, junto con un extenso conjunto de ensayos sobre poética, filosofía, ecología y política (compuesto por casi medio centenar de monografías y libros en colaboración; algunos de ellos materiales de referencia), en la poesía de Jorge Riechmann (Madrid, 1962) se integran de forma armónica una inagotable intención de revelación, consciente de la fragilidad de una belleza inasible, y una profunda crítica socioeconómica del mundo, de alerta sobre la crisis ecológica (que, según señala, hemos de concebir siempre como crisis socio-ecológica, producto de la crisis de civilización en la cual nos hallamos inmersos). Lo lleva a cabo a través de una síntesis basada en la precisión léxica, la claridad enunciativa, la indagación filosófica y la ejemplificación simbólica de una ética distinta a la predominante que se basa en la empatía, la ampliación de la comunidad moral para incluir al resto de seres sintientes y la conciencia de los límites y de la vulnerabilidad de todo lo vivo. En este artículo se analizan las principales líneas de pensamiento que, desde este enfoque, atraviesan toda la poesía de Jorge Riechmann, así como la perspectiva de transformación que lo mueve y las propuestas políticas y éticas que se expresan y que se desarrollan en sus versos para cambiar la sociedad.

*Palabras clave:* poesía de la conciencia crítica, poesía española de los siglos XX y XXI, ecosocialismo, Jorge Riechmann.

### Introduction

We pretend that nothing  
happens, and what is happening  
is the demolition  
of the world. (*Poesía desabrigada* 45)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All poems and quotes from Riechmann have been translated by Ryan Day

In these verses, we find the essence of the work of Jorge Riechmann (Madrid, 1962) who is amongst the key figures in contemporary Spanish poetry. Riechmann is the author of more than 25 poetry collections and chapbooks, along with an extensive set of essays on poetry, philosophy, politics and ecology (he composed almost fifty monographs and books in collaboration, some of them reference books). In his poetry, Riechmann harmoniously engages an inexhaustible drive towards revelation, in which he presents a consciousness of the fragility of an elusive beauty alongside a deep socio-economic critique of the world. He offers warnings about the ecological crises (which have always been conceived of as socio-ecological crises; in other words, products of the crises of the civilization in which we are living). His work does this through a synthesis based on lexical accuracy, declarative clarity, philosophical inquiry and symbolic exemplification of a different prevailing ethic which is based on empathy, the expansion of the moral community to include non-human sentient beings and the awareness of the limits to and vulnerability of all life. This article analyzes the main lines of thought which traverse the poetry of Jorge Riechmann, as well as the transformative perspective that moves him. Ultimately, his verse proposes an ethics and a policy that can work to change society for the better.

### **The Ecological Crisis as a Result of the Crisis of Civilization**

Jorge Riechmann starts from the premise that we are living through a crisis of civilization (in 1987 he already talks about the “crisis of contemporary civilization”) (*Poesía Practicable* 19), of which the ecological crisis is one of its manifestations. Therefore, he does not separate social conflict from ecological problems, but demonstrates that the former causes the latter. This subject is a key aspect in all of his work as well as in his essays (he has edited several volumes of reference material related to social ecology) and poetry.

Therefore, the destruction of the environment is viewed as an extension of the production-dynamic. It is the product of the pursuit of unlimited growth and industrialization in a finite world, of the anthropocentric belief that nature is merely a tool that can be used at will, and the presentist philosophy which evades adverse future consequences. They all assume, for Riechmann, features characteristic of capitalism. From this perspective, he deals with pollution, the loss of biodiversity, climate change and its impacts (desertification, disorders in rainfall cycles, social conflicts), and similarly, the impoverishment of our ethics due to the loss of contact with nature. He understands that it is urgently needed to develop awareness of the physical limits of ecosystems, which clash with the concept of permanent expansion inherent to capitalism. Jorge Riechmann demonstrates in all his work a political, social and ethical vision to be framed within ecosocialism, although reshaped by his own perspective and thinking.

In his verse he reiterates that this economic model is destroying the world and all who live in it. He denounces the essence of capitalism and its derivatives: social and economic inequality, the credit system (which is only possible through an irresponsible mentality that is based on the avoidance of the present) or accumulation (in multiple aspects: capital, goods, waste...). The author identifies the contradictions and irrationalities of the system, he makes them manifest, puts them clearly on exhibit, and then appeals to the reader to complete the meaning of the text and arrive at his or her own conclusions. He investigates the current power structure and tries to dismantle it, to disarm the elements that form the discourse. He untangles the logic of capitalism and tries to demonstrate its true impact (concerning its attack on the dignity and survival of humans and to its environmental impact as well as with regard to the threat it poses to the existence of all life), hoping that once these are exposed, a change will occur in the mind of the reader in whose hands he leaves the questions (Riechmann tries to encourage readers to interrogate themselves and the society that surrounds them, so that they become active readers inside and outside of the text).

In his exploration of the dynamics of capitalism, Riechmann collects and displays the terrible consequences of international trade for the inhabitants of impoverished regions and for the environment. He also signals how capitalism educates the consumer to attend only to the price of products, without asking about social, ecological and economic impacts involving production and without being aware that the purchase is an act of support for a particular company, to the detriment of others, with which they guarantee the survival of a particular company's practices and policies, and in a way, approve of them: "One killer simply buying / in large immaculate warehouses" (*Material* 70). Because of this, he concludes: "To live today, a privilege / to be bought (extraordinary ease of payment) / with the death of others" (*Material* 105). Thus, he stresses that the "normality" of capitalist society involves constant aggression against nature as well as against three-quarters of humanity.

In his work there is a constant opposition between a vitalist impulse and the principles governing the system of domination, competitiveness and individualism, on which capitalism and productivity are based. In this sense, part of "the culture of capitalism is based on the idea—intellectually ruinous—of equal exchange; however, all that makes life valuable has to do with the gift" (VVAA 26). This formulation becomes the precedent of this short, sharp and subsequent prose poem that contains much of the author's ideological system: "Capital wants us to believe that we are what we sell. But we are what we give" (*Conversaciones* 78). So, Riechmann postulates that the real life (not simulacrum or reproduction) escapes from the business relationship. Generosity and love, not the profit motive and selfishness, are what make us human beings; what underpin the social and natural community. With that statement, Riechmann breaks with all of the logic underlying this socioeconomic organization. He leaves the system behind and demonstrates that values that nourish can also be found outside of this system. Therefore, he affirms: "Beyond the capitalist moral to possess and consume, beyond their moral, ours: link and share" (*Socialismo* 34). He summarizes: "The basic

antagonism, for five centuries: those who think that life is measured in money, and those who argue that life is measured in life. The fight is yet to be decided” (Sánchez-Mesa Martínez 168). Riechmann faces the commodification of life, the perception that it is beneath economic parameters: “Men and women are not human resources / trees are not natural capital / animals are not biomaterial” (*Muro* 67). Since “Where the kingdom of goods ends / life begins” (*Poemas Lisiados* 14), he states: “Life is simply / the opposite of marketing” (*Rengo* 33). This contrast between life and its commercialization is constantly present in his verse. Thus, he shows that he is strongly opposed to the annulment of the human through the economy and capitalism. Moreover, he conceives that capitalism works against the self-realization of individuals against the essence of a human existence that is not yet complete, but dignified (*Una Morada* 215), and offers instead the need of suffering and dissatisfaction to ensure the continuous cycle of production, consumption, waste, production, and so on.

Riechmann, in this way, links the end of the exploitation of human beings to the end of the plunder of nature, which is understood at present only as an inexhaustible resource at our disposal. He claims that one cannot respect human life if the natural (and social) environment in which it is inserted, and which enables it, is not cared for. A threat against one is, in turn, a threat against the other, and against the existence of human life present and future. So, it is understood that one can only escape from the ecological crisis by rethinking the way we produce, consume and interact; in short, by rethinking life. Therefore, a radical transformation of society and our mentality is required to overcome the crisis. He refers to our responsibility, to our links and nexuses that interconnect everyone and everything. In this way, he incorporates a fundamental ethical component as a main component in his criticism of productivity. Riechmann says there must be a deep ethical change to our relationships with other animals, nature and, of course, human beings. It states that the principles that should govern our societies if they are to be sustainable are precaution and solidarity both synchronous and diachronic “(among all peoples of the world, and between present and future generations) in close connection with the principle of social equality” (*Biomímesis* 171), the principle of participation of all stakeholders in the decision-making and democratic principle, the sufficiency or self-restraint (“generalized principle of demand management”) (*Biomímesis* 43), biomimesis (“or coherence between human systems and natural systems”) (*La habitación* 22) and eco-efficiency. However, he clarifies that the solutions must be collective, and individuals alone cannot produce a real change in the system: “No amount of change in individual consumption habits can replace structural transformations” (*Socialismo* 68-69). Thus, by insisting on our capacity for action, on the necessity of collective solutions, he mobilizes the principle of hope that exists beyond the mirage of individual advocacy. In turn, he introduces a basic and fundamental concept as an objective of society: the realization of the good life, which cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of basic needs.

Many of his arguments work to dismantle the logic of capitalism, revealing the true consequences and contradictions that are manifest in this terrain. It repeatedly calls

to leave behind the chimera of environmentalist reformism, which has been absorbed by capitalism and that, far from radical changes in the system of thought, production and consumption, has strengthened the status quo only lightly disguised (as “green capitalism” or “sustainable development”). Therefore, he points out not only the existence but the deepening of three negative traits in our society: “The refusal to know (often in the form of what the psychoanalysts and psychiatrists call disavowal); as opposed to assuming the consequences of one’s own acts (irresponsibility); and illusions of omnipotence (often in the form of technolatry)” (*La habitación* 26).

In sum, Riechmann sets out to create models of democratic planning of the economy, and in some of his essays, presents examples of an ecosocialist program as well as strategies to carry out such a program once there is commitment to a transition. Amongst the author’s extensive essays addressing these issues, one in particular should be noted: *El socialismo puede llegar sólo en bicicleta*. This book is an exercise in synthesis, ordering and systematization of the politico-ecological thinking of Jorge Riechmann, of all of the materials with which he previously worked, along with the more developed arguments in his brilliant *Pentalogía de la autocontención* (*Todos, Gente, Un mundo, Biomímesis, La habitación*). These ideas form the basis for a treatment of these issues in his poetry, which offer an approach to lyrical synthesis, resonance and the metaphorical potential of all these themes. In any case, as Niall Binns explains, the author addresses the socio-economic, political and ecological conflict “within poetry and from poetry” (315). That is, Riechmann knows how to articulate and analyze these problems using the resources of poetry, using their skills and potential, attracting those reflections to verse. For example, he communicates through the perspective of the ‘poetic I,’ which is shown as marked by trembling, and an attention towards the living, the interpellation of the reader and an objective intellectual penetration by lexical precision. In that sense, one could say that his poetry puts his theory into practice, which is exposed, contrasted and discussed in his books of essays. His essays unfurl aspects that appear condensed, that have been clarified through the poetic purification, in his poems.

### **We Are Part of the Natural Community**

His critique of society and utilitarian and mercantilist values is based, amongst other things, on denouncing superficiality, which carries an essential falsity, and on denouncing appearances which relegate the elemental (whose exaltation and whose research are essential for him as they unite the values of humanist and naturalist) to the expendable. It also marks the separation, the estrangement, of the essential with nature and with otherness, with everything that is not perceived immediately as one’s self: “You have forgotten the Lichen writing, of the white haired, of the trampling of the birds, of the wolves feces, of the sleeping skin of a friend” (*Cántico* 16).

Not surprisingly, in his verse, Riechmann continually refers to nature and provides a continuous linkage between nature and humans. In fact, the connection with

nature is to be interpreted as an extension of communion with other persons; as a deepening sense of brotherhood. It is, in short, a radicalization of the concept of community, while representing the recognition of other living beings, all of them, as part of the same group. Therefore, in his exaltation of the collective and the community, the author does not limit that fraternity to humans, but extends it to all living things: “We are brothers through suffering and death. But today not only men, but all of nature” (*Cántico* 39), he writes in his first book of poems.

At the same time, he constantly uses natural elements as references in his poetry. Besides illustrating his philosophical and ethical reflections with them, they serve to realize his thinking and grant physical presence. In this way he presents nature as a teacher of the appreciation of the simple, as a model of wholeness and authenticity. In this regard, he pays close attention to small elements. In his approach to the minute natural details, Riechmann manifests special care and thorough admiration, by which he highlights the delicacy and the enormity of their meaning in life. In this sense, animals appear up close and intimate, requiring great attention on the part of the observer. The description of the ‘I’ manifests the same removed gaze, since it extracts a parabolic reading of their habits, their condition, their understandings of life, which has only been possible through patient observation. This interpretation of nature is particularly relevant when developing a political point of view, because it is then raised to the status of a symbol; something Riechmann uses to his advantage in praise of the simple: “Ivy gives example: tying its strength to an inconsolable wall” (*Cántico* 15).

This perspective is not possible without calm, care, silence; all of these are positive characteristics for the poet because they give rise to reflection and allow for inquiry. In this way, he exalts the slow, the morose, care and consciousness in acts and in feelings which make it possible to enjoy them as they aspire to fulfillment. For this reason, he states: “Confronting the dictatorship of ‘real time,’ the delay. // Facing the brutal coercion of the immediate, the articulated delicacy of mediations” (*Un zumbido* 163). In short, he puts his faith in a different rhythm than that which reigns in capitalism and the productivist systems. The leisurely pace is what allows one to look at the nuances, which makes it possible to realize the complexity of things. He applies a purely physical perspective: speed does not allow appreciation of details, the particulars of the observed. He explains: “The world that is rushed is the world of uniformity; differences may only appear slow. In the sinister galleries of late capitalism, slowness is revolutionary” (*Una morada* 18). And, he points out, “The slowness is anti-capitalist” (*Ahí* 20). Therefore, he reveals: “I have the secret. It only consists of stopping. // [...] In this era of uncontrolled acceleration, the secret is slowness” (*Conversaciones* 72). In that sense, Riechmann observes that “to bankrupt the established criminal order / to make it jump into the air without force / it’s enough to just linger, wander, go very slowly” (*Ahí* 20). Seek a change to the rhythm of life, he says, and be attentive; seek “to be able to stop and see / at least once” (*Poema de uno* 35). He advocates a rhythm that will recover from the time economy (production and consumption), the “time of life” (*Anciano* 71). Not surprisingly, he opposes the “ecological culture of slow versus fast capitalist culture” and

explains: “The insane acceleration that we experience in contemporary industrial societies has to do, ultimately, with the speed of movement of capital and eagerness to make profits” (*Tiempo* 90-91). In conclusion, he assigns a political dimension to the different rhythms of living, thinking and grasping life.

### **An Essential Ethical Transformation**

The poetry of Jorge Riechmann presents, in a clear manner, other ways of living, of looking at and understanding reality. His verses incite readers to perceive, feel, and act in different ways; they try to articulate something radically different from the hegemonic ethics in our society. Riechmann offers vital strategies and ethical positions that will allow the desertion of the cruel and unsupportive capitalist way of life, the prevailing structure which leads to ecocide. They are tactics for subversion, not for escape and, although they appeal to personal attitudes, they also, at the same time, point to radical changes in society.

In this way, he explains the need to change our social relations completely, not just in terms of economics. He highlights how essential a radical ethical turn away from excluding and/or using the living will be in allowing people to simply be able to appreciate the living world as it is. Only after this change a new society can be created, one that will not reproduce patriarchy, exploitation, inequality and anthropocentrism.

The starting point lies in the fact that Riechmann reclaims the animal in the human being, in so far as we are part of an ecosystem, to emphasize our ties with other species. The title of one of his books of essays is instructive in this regard: *Todos los animals somos hermanos*. Our lives, he says, are equal to those of the other animals (at least, birds and mammals), “But that life truly so true, all depth intensity and purity / Is not the one lived by our brothers dressed in hair or feather?” (*Ahí* 21). Since 1993, when Riechmann started investigating the relationship between human beings and other animals (at which time he also decided to stop eating meat), this issue has occupied a central place in his thought. The author explains:

We are animals. The first thing is to see ourselves as animals, animals with specific capabilities and vulnerabilities. [...] If we stay close to them they do not cease to teach us things about ourselves continually. We owe a huge debt to them. We have become what we are in large part due to the animals. [...] In relation to the animal, both the wild animal and the domesticated, a profound dimension of human existence is revealed. Through them we receive an area of contact with our own lives and our own experience that are normally hidden, they can often manifest themselves in animals. [...] We lose a lot if we do not attend to the animals and do not seek a different relationship with them, different from the exploitation and torment that today mark the general trend. (Santamaría n.p.)

From the point of view of Jorge Riechmann, empathy is the main aspect of change. This change requires a move away from an absence and contempt of empathy in today’s society, in order to make it the hub of all action. Indeed, Riechmann situates empathy as a key element of coexistence, not only amongst human beings, but also amongst humans and other living species, especially nonhuman animals. Riechmann, in fact, claims that the basic problem of our society lies in misunderstanding that is only made possible by a

lack of empathy: “The basic evil is indifference: indifference to the harm suffered by others” (*Bailar* 608). Awareness of another’s pain is presented as essential to the seeking of justice and the good life for all.

Not surprisingly, for Riechmann, awareness of dependency is what makes us stronger. This is where the (social, moral and political) strength of a community is generated. He stresses that human beings are moral agents, and that therefore we have a responsibility not to harm the other and even to reduce the damage we have already done (and this includes harm done to non-human animals). In such acts resides the essence of our dignity. Therefore, he states that it is essential to try to expand the moral community and concludes that “the only person who truly lives morally gives equal importance to the good life of all sentient beings” (*Todos* 69). Values and acts such as justice, compassion, respect for others, or fraternity should be expanded to all sentient nature. In fact, for Riechmann, the question of the relationship with nonhuman animals becomes a central dimension in the understanding and management of society in that a change in our current system of relations with them will involve a paradigm shift towards ethics that will enable a true social revolution.

In his poetry, he raises this idea through symbols that point to communication. Indeed, in recent publications his use of such symbols deepens and extends towards future living things, to influence the ecological and social legacy that we will leave, modulating a moral responsibility also with them:

Are we able to truly listen  
to the voice of the other?  
Including to marmots  
Ravens chamois newts  
And the skinny thread of a voice that comes  
from the great granddaughter of the great great grandson. (*El común* 35)

## Interdependents and Ecodependents

Riechmann performs a continuous exposure to the other; a projection into it (which may be another man or other animals or nature in general): “Ours is the other / over there where we find it” (*Estación* 14). In that way, he remembers our connection with other human beings and with nature; with all life (in the background one hears the sounds of Buddhism): “If the day forgets it is bone, if the tree forgers it is eagle / if man forgets that he is woman and wolf and patience, / how do you rebuild the honeycomb blue Heart?” (*Ahí* 17). And then: “We are interdependent and ecodependent [...] when I hurt the other, I hurt myself; when I degrade ecosystems, I put my own life at risk” (*Interdependientes* 394-95). In this way, he appeals to the contact amongst humans and also between humans and nature in a way that is neither predatory nor dominant, favoring instead the enrichment that comes from the hodgepodge of the channels of communication that opens from this stance. So, his is a poetry that seeks out a sense of self, a sense of the individuality of the writer, even of egotism: “Try the (impossible) perfection of our works—not our actions—without falling in love with our own works: in this tense effort we play with the dignity or debasement of our actions in the world”



(*Desandar* 51). He advocates for a non-self-absorbed poetic practice, which is based on an encounter with the other: “In poetry you cannot talk just to talk, nor talk for the pleasure of listening to yourself. [...] The soliloquy seems to me essentially non-poetic: in poetry everything is towards the ends of the you” (*Desandar* 48). In this way, he reflects on the possibilities of this project and on strategies to carry it out, being aware that its consummation leads to a full experience of life.

Riechmann exalts links in all spheres of reality, both social and personal, both human and natural, both concrete and metaphysical, for all life and reality are completely connected through them. Riechmann highlights the uniqueness of the world. Everything is connected; everything is also the rest. In everything, in every being, resides totality. Everything affects us, thus everything concerns us, even if it is remote in space and time. In fact, Riechmann concludes: “The work of the human being in the world (being a verb, not a noun) is primarily a work of links. Create links, rebuild links, amplify links, question links, break links” (*Desandar* 77). So he proposes a “poetry of the bond” (*Resistencia* 222): “Poetry / Art of the link” (*Pablo* 63). Moreover, he provides an antagonistic political dimension, which he relates immediately through his poetry: “A poetry of resistance is, above all, a poetic bonding” (*Resistencia* 76-77). Along these lines, Riechmann considers establishing, strengthening and maintaining the links as a political strategy against dehumanization, alienation and the narcissistic individualism that drives capitalism.

Not surprisingly, for this writer, humanity is woven into the ‘between,’ in coexistence, in the consciousness of belonging to a community: “The preposition between the adverb *there*: with just these two particles can articulate a conception of the world” (*Una morada* 397). Although he has not delved into the concept ‘between’ (*entre*) in such extensive and explicit as that of ‘there’ (a fundamental concept in the last decade and a half of his work), the ‘between’ is a concept that crosses all of Riechmann’s books. Contrary to the fallacy of self-reliance, selfishness (it requires awareness of others, of those around one), the ‘between’ highlights coexistence, convergence and integration into a collective framework. In fact, the second volume of his collected poetry is called precisely *Entreser* (being between).

However, Riechmann is aware that we are living in an environment that has been degraded and has broken many of these links. This is why he often uses the metaphor of dislocation to reflect a world of natural relationships that are disrupted, dissociated to the point of irreversibility: “the farmer’s relationship with the seed has been dislocated, the shepherd dog’s with sheep’s, [...] the cotton’s to the spinner’s, the equation’s with the trajectory’s, the miner’s with mining’s, [...] of the worker’s to the marketplace’s” (*Conversaciones* 59). He validates an alteration in the natural bonds which govern respect and collaboration. What is more, in this commitment to cooperation, to a society based on mutual aid, Riechmann shows in his essays that “to cooperate, not compete, made us human” (*La habitación* 240). And that “the good life of the individual cannot be conceived in isolation from the good life of the community to which he belongs” (*Un mundo* 59). For this very reason, he stresses the importance of collaboration, of building

networks of mutual support, and of generosity in the current capitalist context. He urges us to consolidate the cracks in the ideological hegemony in order to widen them, expand them and enable the creation of new ideologies, which aspire to ensure a just and dignified life for all. Between the two conceptions of society, lies the key to building a livable and dignified world. In this way, the author contrasts nature with the urbanized as a counterpoint which shows that which resists and seeks how to recover the displaced space, leaving the discourse of political rebellion to resonate, extrapolated to a human dimension, “cut at ground / some trees sprout” (*Material* 85).

## **We Are All Disabled**

Compassion is one of the primary impulses of his project but his points of departure are empathy and solidarity. Thus, for Riechmann, embracing is one of the foundations of mankind. Embracing involves being aware of vulnerability, respecting the fragility, and living with it, always being preoccupied with the other, for the other—leaving one’s self behind. In fact, Riechmann exalts love, which is life’s impulse: “What matters in life, all that gives meaning and value to it, is love. If there is love, everything else will be extra; if love fails, all else crumbles, vanishes” (*Bailar* 372). He proclaims love in a broad sense, towards the human and the natural, towards everything alive; and he understands that it is the foundation of all fraternity, a collective project that respects everyone and everything. Therefore, he aspires to extend that feeling, to spread the sense that it generates and to reveal the community that is created, consolidated and strengthened around it. And all this despite, or precisely enhanced because of, the current world situation. In his voice, in the focus of his glance, the tenderness with which he approaches people and nonhuman animals is present. Indeed, one of his basic demands is precisely this ability to understand that tenderness to search for a way to access empathy, and, through it, to build a just world; a social project that breaks through hegemonic ideology and selfish cruelty.

Gratitude is another action in which his ethics are based. To give thanks contains a sense of gratitude that shows humility, respect for others, and empathy with the other. Indeed, the author expresses a continuous attitude of gratitude towards others, which may be in part the fruit of his previous call to stay alert to all, to be endlessly open to life. So he says, “we always receive infinitely more than we give” (*Poesía practicable* 63). He specifies that wisdom lies in “only to know how to accept gifts / and pay attention” (*Poesía desabrigada* 190). Riechmann shows an open attitude, which claims to never stop learning, and that recognizes, with humility, that everything in life teaches. Not surprisingly, this applies to his own writing—in a formulation that highlights his own availability to others: “One writes to try to understand, that is, to help oneself. Sometimes, working this way, you get to help others” (*Entre* 136). This expression is extremely important to him, to the point that his web-blog (including an active “diary of work” under continuous construction) is titled *Tratar de entender, tratar de ayudar* (*Trying to understand, trying to help*).

His work performs a constant defense of the vulnerable (of all life, therefore, according to his reasoning). In his radical comprehension lies one of the most important keys to understanding life and engaging it in an authentic way, without building illusions which, being unrealizable, will continually lead to frustration when they prove impossible to attain. Riechmann manifests the importance of awareness of vulnerability, frailty, finitude, mortality and contingency as an essential part of knowing the true and full meaning of existence. Accepting this reality entails a profound exercise in humility. However, in assuming these constraints resides the full power to achieve that fulfillment: “You are mortal / capable of all the inexhaustible splendor / of living” (*Poesía desabrigada* 177).

This awareness of the limits also takes a central importance in ecological terms, in so far as it takes into account the actual physical limits of the planet. From there, he presents a basic argument for dismantling the logic of capitalism, which cannot grow infinitely in a finite world, despite the aspirations of the current economic model. Denial of this finite reality is what has led many to adopt escapist movements which are some of the elements (along with irresponsibility or short-termism, which ultimately are also evasions of reality) that have generated the current ethical crisis which is manifested in ecological crisis: the chimera of the possibility of circumventing the physical limits of the planet (devising an infinite expansion, even conquering new planets, once all known spaces have been exploited) and the illusion of transcending the human being and life in general (by, for example, virtual reality) (*Gente* 35-55).

It is therefore essential to know how to accept this frustration which for perishable beings who inhabitant a particular space is inevitable, and to dismiss the illusion that “everything is possible” which ignores limitations. In fact, Riechmann interprets this as a philosophical position which can help to face life: “Defeat / is not the end of a fight / but the beginning of another learning” (*Muro* 63). In that understanding rests another widely developed pillar of his philosophy and his poetry, especially in volumes of the *Pentalogía de la autocontención*.

Following all this, he sees that “we are all disabled” (*Ahí* 35) because we are all imperfect, tremendously vulnerable, disabled beings: “The enigma of life is not over, it is finished, the full, but imperfect” (*Desandar* 47). We all need help and support, and we help each other and rely one on the other; we all lend help and support because we live in community. Indeed, this functional diversity is what makes it possible to exceed barriers, as it marks the importance of what we may lack as individuals, inciting us to seek, to cope, and to create an anchor to the present through community. This leads him to make a praise of imperfection which, in essence, refers to our ability to mutate and adapt to new circumstances. However, Riechmann is always part of the awareness of the limits:

Much of the art of living  
is learning to set boundaries  
respect boundaries  
take responsibility for the limits. (*Rengo* 95)

For Riechmann, limits constitute the possible: “Accepting limits is not the denial of freedom: it is the condition of freedom” (*Bailar* 625). In this way, he aims to convert constraints into opportunities, moments of creativity, of excellence. Without error, there would not be room for improvement, and only through the presence of a possibility of denial does existence become feasible, “Where it could all be possible, nothing would be” (*Dancing* 627).

He assumes finitude, contingency, erosion, and in so doing, helps to allow for a greater consciousness of life: “The decline and extinction of the old are the conditions of the possibility of the new” (*Desandar* 58). In short, he advocates the need to cast off delusions or be seduced by chimeras. It is a basic need to acquire awareness of finitude, of vulnerability, and of the horror and the beauty of the world. It is also essential that we become responsible for our actions from that perspective.

Moreover, this understanding of gaps requires us to adopt a different rhythm (in living, in resistance), a different ethic, which is also linked to a different political system capable of hosting (not expelling) the functional and ideological diversity. The goal is not to leave anyone helpless. Not surprisingly, Riechmann adds to poetry the adjective “disabled” (*Poemas lisiados*) to alter our understanding of disability, as damaged, on the edge, unable, and at the same time, to emphasize the essentials of love, of care for one and other, of tenderness, of dependency, of empathy. In the face of the prevailing values and ideology, the author is committed to “live against death” (*Poemas lisiados* 88).

Riechmann summarizes: “I believe in a poem accompanying the human being; and that is the poetry that I need” (*Canciones* 12). Along these lines, he reveals: “What I keep coming back to as the ultimate criterion for assessing poetry—or other forms of writing? Offering help. That it lend a hand to the fragile beings, the discontinuous and vulnerable beings we are: a hand or a place to leave the well, the pit of trouble.” And he continues: “Write a poem: not to be admired, but to help” (*Una morada* 297, 330).

## **Transform to Transform the World**

Riechmann writes that “we should be asking frequently: what level of harm—direct, indirect or pre-recorded—am I willing to inflict on another to try to keep a level of material comfort which is already more than enough” (*Entre* 126). In these words, it should be appreciated yet again how Riechmann demands constant self-examination and continuous challenges to our moral standing and our actions. It is a guiding principle of his philosophy that one should avoid inflicting pain and strengthen love for all living things (again formulations of Buddhist resonances). The moral principle that motivates us, according to Riechmann, should be to minimize as much as possible the suffering of all living beings. He aims to invoke this moral principle without asking to escape the awareness of the damage that occurs in the world or of those who cause it; those who are the executioners and torturers.

In that same recognition lies the key to reversing the course of these actions by paying constant attention to suffering in general, and by pointing out how much

complicity there is between the 'poetic I' and the reader if they tolerate it. Once responsibility is known and assumed, one must choose to work to amend the problem and not continue working to inflict pain.

One repeats: avoid damage  
Do not ignore evil  
stroking the back  
of the animal pregnant with words. (*Poema de uno* 33)

Riechmann's work implores readers (not necessarily interpellated in a direct manner) to become aware of their own actions, to analyze their ultimate impact, and finally to advocate abandoning the structure that generates misery in exchange for comfort, to reduce to the maximum possible degree their participation in it: "One of the most essential links is that which binds a person to their actions and the consequences of their actions" (*Desandar* 77). From this base, his work emphasizes that individual action composes our society and its potential for change. His work is a starting point, a moment of intransigence against the destruction that is occurring, and a call to abandon the position of complicity in tolerating injustice: "While someone / still feels ashamed of this world / all is not lost" (*Material* 47). Riechmann, like other authors of the "poetry of critical consciousness," appeals to the inner transformation as a first step towards a social revolution:

So much energy looking  
For the point where the system fractured,  
so much adrenaline, so much intelligence ...

It is in you,  
in you now as you read this sentence,  
it is in you. (*Pablo* 56)

Not surprisingly, he advocates a non delegationist attitude: "No one but yourself / can take care of your own life" (*El común* 44). However, Riechmann knows that these measures are insufficient without a collective transformation. Yet, he notes that they constitute the starting point for just such a transformation.

In short, Jorge Riechmann's writing speaks to the possibility of change. He does not allow himself to drown in resignation or gloom but, on the contrary, there finds the engine of his resistance. And so, despite the desolation, there is the strength of hope, the dignity of persisting, because not giving up is already a breakthrough in the fight. Because of this, he asks "if not to live, at least without rest / continue crashing against death" (*Muro* 105).

## Conclusions

The poetry of Jorge Riechmann manifests a continuous exercise of reflection on the world, which only possible through a rare attention to detail and a great sense of unease with the current state of the world. It consists of an exercise of denunciation and inquiry, of exploration of ways to build a society that is just and respectful towards life,

whose axis is the relationship with others, with the other, as a collective process, a union with nature and with other people. Starting from the premise that “poetry is the opposite of humiliation” (*Pablo* 10), his poems are a celebration of life and love for all living things, where empathy, respect and the proclamation of dignity compose the foundation of both intellectual work and the society to which it aspires. In sum, Riechmann constructs a space with his verses in which all life is dignified; a decisive vitalist resolution against the attacks of capitalism and the productivist anthropocentric mentality:

Perhaps, from a moral point of view, it is our inability to accept otherness, limits and death that is at the heart of the crisis of contemporary civilization. The inability to respect differences and accept their own being, of the other sex, of another ethnicity. [...] Inability to accept the otherness or alterity of nature, and therefore subdue blind impulse. [...] Inability to accept the other in ourselves. (*Canciones* 166)

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