

# Soft Constraints

or

Why I think Karl Weick's *Sensemaking in Organizations* is a great big polychromed gee-whiz  
pacifier sputtering facts and unfacts like a wobbly Roman candle

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[The put-on artist] doesn't deal in isolated little tricks; rather, he has developed a pervasive style of relating to others that perpetually casts what he says into doubt. The put-on is an *open-end* form. That is to say, it is rarely climaxed by having the truth set straight—when a truth, indeed, exists. “Straight” discussion, when one of the participants is putting the others on, is soon subverted and eventually sabotaged by uncertainty. His intentions, and his opinions, remain cloudy.

*Jacob Brackman*

## **Introduction**

In her article on style in the *Oxford Handbook of Organization Theory*, Barbara Czarniawska has suggested that we categorize Karl Weick's work as “poetic” (2003: 244). Weick acknowledges this epithet in his contribution to *Organization Studies*' autobiographical “Vita Contemplativa” series: “It is true,” he says, “that some of the more popular parts of the organizational behaviour books I've written have been the poems I *cite*” (2004: 654, his emphasis). With this in mind, I want here to take a close look at two instances of poetry that are cited in Weick's influential *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995). “How I work and who I am,” Weick tells us, “may be reflected in those choices [of poems to cite] more candidly than I realized or intended.” I think this is quite true, and it is how he works and who he is that I want to understand. Or rather, I want to indicate, as a warning to management scholars, how one might come to work and who one might become if one allows Weick's poetic style to inspire one's research.

Weick is generally considered one of the great stylists of organization theory. He even takes this view himself: he apologizes in advance for not being able to provide more than a “plausible” account of his scholarly practices because, as Czarniawska has noted, “poetic stylists

‘need not know how they are doing what they are doing in order to do it brilliantly’”. He may even be outright “inimitable”, he suggests, because his “uniqueness forms part of what is perceived as elegant” (Weick 2004:654, quoting Czarniawska 2003:255). His estimation of his own work is in fact refreshingly unreserved; looking for a way to “demystify” his unique poetic gifts, Weick turns to Harold Bloom’s book *Genius*. Here he finds a quote by Paul Valéry that might shed some light on the secret of his stylistic success. Originality, says Valéry, depends on our inability “to trace the hidden transformations that [other authors] underwent in his mind.” Weick clearly identifies with this description of literary originality. Listing a few of his progenitors, Weick explains that his inter-textual dependence is “complex, irregular, intricate, and filled with ‘hidden transformations’.” To help us get a sense of his situation as a writer, he presents us with an image of his research involving “books spread out on the desk”, “notes and marginalia”, “aspirations” and “improvisations”. “It’s all pretty chaotic,” he says. In fact, as must be expected of attempts to see through the workings of all great minds, Weick is not at all optimistic about making sense of how he accomplishes what he does. “Hidden means hidden” (Weick 2004: 654). As I will try to show in this paper, however, while Weick does sometimes *hide* his inter-textual relations, their transformation is often hard to spot. In the case of at least two poems he cites in *Sensemaking in Organizations*, there isn’t much of a mystery at all. In one case he simply quotes Pablo Neruda’s “We Are Many” in full without interpretation and, in another, he straightforwardly plagiarizes Miroslav Holub’s “Brief Thoughts of Maps”.

## **1. Breaching the Standards of Scholarship**

The questions I want to raise go to the scholarship that underpins the “poetic style” of Weick’s sensemaking approach. After all, when Barbara Czarniawska associated Weick’s reputation as an “impressive” stylist with the “much bemoaned lack of clear standards” in organization theory

(2005: 273) she was no doubt being intentionally ironic. She was not trying to suggest that his peers are just easily impressed. Like John van Maanen (1995), she sees Weick's scholarship as a serious alternative to standard academic or 'scientific' writing. Czarniawska and Van Maanen agree to count *style* as a legitimate site of *theoretical* innovation, and Czarniawska rightly takes the consequences of this to be that style is "relevant in the methodological reflections over organization theory" (ibid.). For Weick, writing is very much part of research, indeed, like Czarniawska, he sees his own writing as a contribution to a literary genre rather than a scientific one. Our first task, then, is to understand how the 'literary' is presented as a method, and how this method can be assessed.

Following Van Maanen (1995), Czarniawska calls Weick's approach "allegoric breaching", which invents "interesting verbal patterns" (Czarniawska 2005). She seems mainly to see the lamentable scholarly standards of organization theory as a boon in this regard, allowing researchers the necessary freedom to engage in the linguistic experimentation that just *is* theorising. While she agrees that Weick does not write in a "recommended style", she nevertheless seems to recommend that we imitate him in "finding [our] own voice" (274). Weick's influence on the field is beyond dispute (Van Maanen 1995: 135) and his reputation is no doubt founded on the "virtuous cycle" that Czarniawska identifies. Based on his reputation, his experiments cause people to see organizations differently; this confirms his reputation and the cycle can repeat (Czarniawska 2005: 274). Weick himself puts it as follows when talking about his progenitors, i.e., those "other authors" that have undergone "hidden transformations" in his mind.

These teachers had their impact largely through the contexts created by their writing. In order to make myself more open to these contexts, I read, imagine, connect, practice virtual ethnography in the armchair, write, and edit. Those are moves of the imagination working within soft constraints. (Weick 2004: 654)

Calling his imagination “softly constrained” is putting it rather mildly, as we will see. In *Sensemaking in Organizations*, however, he gestures at a somewhat higher standard when he says that his account of sensemaking is to foster “disciplined imagination” in the reader (Weick 1995: 18; he refers us also to Weick 1989; see also Czarniawska 2003: 244, 2005: 275). There is, of course, a plausible sense in which a theory’s purpose is to discipline imagination, but Weick leaves the task of gaining this discipline entirely to the reader, proposing only to provide a “rough guideline” or some “raw materials”, and suggesting that “readers should begin to notice subtleties and patterns in their own efforts to makes sense” instead of thinking of his work as a theory to be tested (Weick 1995:18). This is essentially a suggestion to let yourself be inspired by his ‘poetry’, going on to do your own thing, developing an intuitive sense of the sensemaking style and engaging in Lave and Wenger’s “legitimate peripheral participation” (see Weick 1995: xi) until you finally earn your own reputation as an impressive stylist in the sensemaking tradition.<sup>1</sup> It is the suggestion to imitate Weick, i.e., to attempt to be brilliant without really knowing what you are doing, that is the focus of my concern.

As an editor of academic texts, I want to caution against imitating Weick’s style of scholarship, especially its most characteristic feature: its intertextuality. Far from establishing the virtuous cycle promised by Czarniawska, students who follow Weick’s approach are likely to fall prey to the vicious cycle of poor scholarship practices, which are then likely to end in ridicule and even dismissal. One of the main problems with the reception of Weick’s work is its ‘love him or ignore him’ attitude, one that he has even encouraged a co-author of mine and I to adopt. “While this style of using stories as allegories may displease people who favor other forms of evidence,” he

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<sup>1</sup> In many ways, *Sensemaking in Organizations* is less a statement of Weick’s theory of organization than an anthology or “reader” of the sensemaking tradition. In fact, it is caught midway between an anthology and an annotated bibliography: it is a series of extensive quotations from and superficial references to work that Weick associates with. It is an eclectic mix, and he doesn’t himself always specify the differences in genre. Novelists, philosophers, sociologists and management scholars are often cited on the same level, by last name only, and often as though they are specifically talking about “sensemaking” (i.e., making claims about sensemaking), when they in fact are talking about something *Weick would call* sensemaking.

says in response to our charges of plagiarism, “the stories themselves are available for comparison, refutation, extension, coupling with other illustrations to exemplify a quite different concept, or for being ignored” (Weick 2006: 193). In other words: if you are not going to do something constructive with his stories, by all means ignore them. Indeed, because Weick regards himself more as a writer than a scholar or researcher, he seems to conclude that any criticism of his view must be rooted in an aesthetic reaction to the writing (which “may displease people”), not an intellectual objection. In fact, it is the foregrounding of the “sensemaking style”, i.e., its aesthetic, that makes Weick’s writing so frustrating to read. Since one often finds oneself making all the necessary connections oneself, Weick’s readers may simply enjoy the intellectual company he offers. It works in part because Weick either quotes so extensively that you can actually read along with him or draws so superficially on his sources that you *feel* like you *have* read the text he mentions—you “get it”. But this should immediately put us on our guard.

My approach here is inspired by a review of *The Random House Encyclopedia* that Hugh Kenner wrote in 1977 (Kenner 1989: 127-135). The encyclopedia was divided into an “Alphapedia” and a “Colorpedia”, and was organized around the illustrations in the latter. He called his review piece “Images at Random” and I had indeed been tempted call this paper “Sense at Random” or something of that sort because Weick’s soft constraints often amount to the rules of free association. Part of Kenner’s approach used a method that underscores, for me, the connection between *Sensemaking in Organizations* and an encyclopaedia: there’s a little bit of everything in it, so no single ‘expert’ is capable of assessing the totality of its claims (or the *overall* quality of its scholarship). “The little time I spent spot-checking things I happen to know already,” Kenner informs us however, “makes me wonder if the Alphapedia isn’t punctuated with catastrophe” (131). He then lists a series of striking errors (dates, book titles, etc.) and notes that, while “most of the facts are ... correct”, “you may feel you’d need another encyclopedia to be sure which ones.” This

is exactly the feeling one gets when reading *Sensemaking in Organizations*. While Weick does seem to string together his citations in a plausible way, you often get the feeling you will need to read his sources before you understand what he means. There is reason to think, however, that he doesn't expect his readers actually to do that. Though Weick depends entirely on his readers to make sense of what he says, there are important cases where he depends on his reader's ignorance of the specific content of a text he cites (coupled with a generalized respect for it, of course). We pass from one superficial citation to the next, across who knows how many false ones. There is also no telling how many citations, as in the case of Holub, he leaves out. This is really quite serious. Kenner concludes his review as follows:

If you say "So what?" you don't want an encyclopedia. You want a great big polychromed gee-whiz pacifier spouting facts and unfacts like a wobbly roman candle. And this is just your book if you're willing to lift it. It has least 1,000 good pages too. (Kenner 1989: 135)

In the same sense, you don't want a theory of organization (or even a manual for a "disciplined imagination" about organizations) if you don't care about the standards of scholarship that underpin Weick's work. All the good pages he writes notwithstanding.

## **2. Miroslav Holub's "Brief Thoughts on Maps"**

I want to begin with the clearest case of a "hidden transformation" and one that on closer inspection turns out to be simply deceptive. I first became aware of it when a PhD student at our department, Henrik Graham, used one of Weick's anecdotes in a chapter he was writing, and I asked him whether there was anything to the story, i.e., whether it was empirically accurate. It is perhaps the

most famous of his anecdotes<sup>2</sup>, and is indeed singled out by Czarniawska among “the images that remain with the reader” (2005: 274). What Henrik discovered surprised me and we looked into it more closely together in order to be sure. The following passage of prose will be familiar to most.

This incident, related by the Hungarian Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyorti [sic] and preserved in a poem by Holub (1977), happened during military maneuvers in Switzerland. The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps sent a reconnaissance unit out into the icy wilderness. It began to snow immediately, snowed for two days, and the unit did not return. The lieutenant suffered, fearing that he had dispatched his own people to death. But the third day the unit came back. Where had they been? How had they made their way? Yes, they said, we considered ourselves lost and waited for the end. And then one of us found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down. We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm, and then with the map we discovered our bearings. And here we are. The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map and had a good look at it. He discovered to his astonishment that it was not a map of the Alps but of the Pyrenees. (Weick 1995: 54)

Now, as Czarniawska would have it, this piece of “allegoric breaching” was brought about by Weick’s bold experimentation, “permitted” by his “reputation as a stylist” (2005: 274). Weick might add that his “transformation” of this story, as it passed from Szent-Gyorgyi, through Holub, to his own pen, has been “hidden”. In fact, the extent of his experimentation can be seen by comparing it to the poem by Miroslav Holub that Weick cites. Before I present it, however, notice that, while he does provide the citation, he does not use quotation marks or a block indent to set off any portion of the text. Moreover, he does not say that *his* source for the story is the poem, only that Holub “preserved” the story. Thus, in his way of referencing the story, Weick allows his reader to

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<sup>2</sup> In his “Vita Comtemplativa” piece, Weick mentions this as an occasion that validates his views on “double interacts” (2004: 665). Interestingly, he lists it along with his study of the Mann Gulch incident, making it look like something he has studied in detail. But the Mann Gulch study is at least more detailed than the mere anecdote he offers here (see Weick 2007 for an account of the “richness” of his Mann Gulch study).



believe that Weick has verified Albert Szent-Gyorgyi's story<sup>3</sup> and that he now offers Holub as an additional piece of scholarship, much as one might say that Shakespeare 'preserved' the dying words of Julius Caesar. Such a reader would be mildly shocked to see the poem, "Brief Thoughts on Maps", which reads as follows:

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who knew a lot about maps  
according to which life is on its way somewhere or other,  
told us this story from the war  
due to which history is on its way somewhere or other:

The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps  
sent a reconnaissance unit out into the icy wasteland.  
It began to snow  
immediately, snowed for two days and the unit  
did not return. The lieutenant suffered: he had dispatched  
his own people to death.

But the third day the unit came back.  
Where had they been? How had they made their way?  
Yes, they said, we considered ourselves  
lost and waited for the end. And then one of us  
found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down.  
We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm and then with the map  
we discovered our bearings.  
And here we are.

The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map  
and had a good look at it. It was not a map of the Alps  
but of the Pyrenees.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, as we will see, Weick presents the story as a much more historically factual account than Holub does.

Goodbye now. (Holub 1977)

Weick has changed half a dozen words and removed the line breaks.<sup>4</sup> That is, he has plagiarized the poem in order to present the story in his prose. Those who would defend him by appeal to his having cited the source should consult any standard definition of plagiarism. In this paper, I will rely on Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams' influential manual, *The Craft of Research*, for statements about standard research practices. Here's what they say about plagiarism, but any number of similar statements can be found throughout the academic world.

You plagiarize when, intentionally or not, you use someone else's words or ideas but fail to credit that person. *You plagiarize even when you do credit the author but use his exact words without so indicating with quotation marks or block indentation.*  
(Booth et al. 1995: 167, emphasis added)

Moreover, Holub is given no credit at all for the story as it appears in four other cases (Swieringa and Weick 1982; Weick 1983, 1987, 2001<sup>5</sup>). In fact, to be precise, he has plagiarized Holub's translators (Jarmila and Ian Milner), by offering their translation as his paraphrase.

When we published our account in *ephemera* (Basbøll and Graham 2006) the editors contacted Weick for comment, which was printed in the same issue (Weick 2006). Booth et al. uncannily anticipate his reply when they say,

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<sup>4</sup> He has also misspelled Szent-Gyorgyi's name and subtly changed the status of the story. Holub says that "Albert Szent-Gyorgyi told us this story from the war" (i.e., it is a story that circulated among the troops during the war). Weick confidently tells us that "this incident ... happened during military maneuvers in Switzerland", suggesting that it may be recorded in a historical document. He of course provides no additional source for these suggestions, nor for the more precise location (Holub does not say it was the *Swiss Alps*); he appears simply to have made this up.

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, the 2001 instance is a reprint of the 1987 piece, i.e., it is the same text. But it should be noted that the 1990 case, which seems to be the occasion on which the connection to the poem was remembered, as well as the 1995 case, come in between these two printings of the text. The 2001 instance could therefore have been corrected with, at the very least, a footnote. This is not an uncommon thing to do in such cases.

You also plagiarize when you use words so close to those in your source, that if you placed your work next to the source, you would see that you could not have written what you did without the source at your elbow. When accused of plagiarism, some writers claim *I must have somehow memorized the passage. When I wrote it, I certainly thought it was my own.* That excuse convinces very few. (Booth et al. 1995: 167)

Here is Weick's account of how the story made it into his own writing:

By the time I began to see the Alps story as an example of cognition in the path of the action, I had lost the original article containing Holub's poem and I was not even sure where I had read the story. This occurred in the early 1980's which was quite some time before internet search was a common form of inquiry. I reconstructed the story as best I could. I obviously had no idea whether the reconstruction was close to the original or not since I had no original in hand for comparison. (Weick 2006)

As Booth et al. point out, this will not convince you if you have both Weick's version and Holub's "at your elbow". It is far more likely that what has happened here is that a word-for-word transcription has found its way into Weick's prose because he forgot to mark it properly. That's the more common excuse, and it is one that the American Historical Association has apparently grown tired of hearing. Their standards now clearly say that:

The first line of defense against plagiarism is the formation of work habits that protect a scholar from plagiarism. The plagiarist's standard defense—that he or she was misled by hastily taken and imperfect notes—is plausible only in the context of a wider tolerance of shoddy work. A basic rule of good note-taking requires every researcher to distinguish scrupulously between exact quotation and paraphrase.

Indeed, the most disturbing thing about Weick's response to our charges of plagiarism is that he doesn't take the problem at all seriously in terms of a breach of scholarly standards.

In 1990, at roughly the time when a "helpful colleague"<sup>6</sup> pointed out his mistake to him, Weick won the Academy of Management's Irwin Award for "contributions to scholarship". And yet, this distinguished member of the academic community, when confronted (for at least the second time) with his mistake, boldly declares that, "Other than to insert a footnote saying 'source unknown', I would not have done anything different were I in the same position today." Many students would no doubt be grateful for the introduction of this new rule of citation. Given the close match of the two texts, however, it would look today like he had been lying when he wrote "source unknown". Indeed, Booth et al. recall that one of them held back a paper from publication precisely because he was unable, for a time, to locate the source of a particular statement (Booth et al. 1995: ???). But, instead of recognizing his practice as seriously flawed, Weick goes on to make the absurd claim that "I took no credit for inventing or discovering the story, and instead, used it as one among many examples to illustrate [a] general idea." The truth is that that he in most cases *gave* no credit for the story (and thus implicitly, by all standards, *took* it) and in the two cases where he made some acknowledgement, mentions (but does not cite) Albert Szent-Gyorgyi as its "discoverer" or "inventor", Miroslav Holub as its "preserver", but no one (other than himself, by implication) as the

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<sup>6</sup> There is reason to believe he is referring to Anne Huff, who edited the volume in which Weick's 1990 use of the anecdote appeared. Besides being the first time Weick cites Holub, it also displays a very superficial attempt to paraphrase the story based on the poem (now at his elbow, it would seem). The paraphrase is by no means far enough removed from the original to avoid the charge of plagiarism, but Weick seems here to be reacting to demands made by an editor in order to avoid simply quoting Holub in full as he then should have done in the 1995 version. Perhaps the most curious case of a colleague who noticed Weick's plagiarism but did not draw attention to it is that of Charles A. Schwartz, a librarian at the University of Massachusetts, who quotes Holub more or less correctly, line breaks and all, and provides both the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Sensemaking in Organizations* as his source. His endnote says that Holub's poem is "reprinted" in Weick's book (Schwartz 1998: n3). A more recent example of a similar transformation, is that of David Starr-Glass (2005). In fact, this version is likely based on Schwartz's: it uses the simplified lineation (compares to the TLS layout) and reproduces a typographical error ("onto" instead of "into") not found in Weick's version and renders "wasteland" correctly (not "wilderness" as in Weick). Starr-Glass does not say Weick "reprints" it, but he does claim to present the poem "as quoted in Weick 1995, p. 54" (where it is not lineated). Interestingly, he provides the original title for the poem in Czech, namely, "*Stručá úvaha o mapách*" (neither Weick nor Schwartz do this).

story-teller, i.e., the crafter of the particular wording that appears in his text. Interestingly, it is precisely that credit, i.e., for mastery of the art of making “interesting verbal patterns”, that Barbara Czarniawska (2005: 274) has given to Weick. That is his lasting contribution to organization theory and when this anecdote is subsequently cited in the literature on organization, Holub’s name almost never comes up. It gives a particular sense to Weick’s words when he says, “some of the more popular parts of the organizational behaviour books I’ve written have been the poems I *cite*” (2004: 654, his emphasis).

Unaware of the depth of the deception, Michael Rowlinson has used the story to illustrate “the deceptive appeal of Weick’s style”:

I have to say that the more often I read the map story, the less I believe it. But Weick does not provide historical references to verify it. Instead he invokes intellectual credibility by reference to a Nobel Laureate and a poem in the *Times Literary Supplement*. On the following pages we get an impression of the type of reader that Weick is most anxious to flatter with this type of intellectual credibility. (2004: 617)

That reader is Bob Engel, a former J.P. Morgan & Company executive (and therefore someone who knows what he’s talking about, as it were) who died in 1993. By extension, this type of reader also includes organization theorists who measure success mainly in terms of how well their work is received by practitioners, especially top executives of major banks. But here the practitioner’s interest in the theorist’s potential *scholarly* contribution is entirely ignored by Weick. Engel says the story “would have been really neat if the leader out with the lost troops had known it was the wrong map and still been able to lead them back” (Weick 1995: 55). Indeed, it would. And someone with the time available to do actual research might track down the source of the story and find out, not only if what Engel suggests happened, but whether *anything* like the “incident” described in Holub’s (second-hand) “story from the war” ever actually “happened”, which as Weick (going quite

a bit further than Holub) assures us it did. Even Henry Mintzberg, who happens to like the moral of the story, but is familiar with the challenges of mountaineering, doubts that it can be true (Mintzberg et al., 1998: 160n). If we wanted to find out, the obvious place to begin would be Holub, who says that “Albert Szent-Gyorgyi ... told us this story”. Well, who are *they*? When were they told? What, exactly, did he say? And how, of course, had Szent-Gyorgyi heard it? Answering these questions are a fitting task for a scholar who “hauls out” this story “almost every chance I get” (Weick 1995: 54). In researching these questions, I have discovered many interesting things (mainly about Szent-Gyorgyi, Holub, and his translators), but I have not yet been able to confirm the story or any further details about it. Since Holub is our *only* source of the story, for example, I have no idea where Weick got the idea that this happened in the *Swiss* Alps. This is perhaps a minor point, but since it gives the “incident” increased specificity, and therefore increases its credibility, it is worth noting. Had we known from the beginning that all Weick had to go on was a poet’s recollection of what is ultimately a ‘war story’, its effect on people like Bob Engel would no doubt have been different, as would its status in the organization theory literature.

Weick suggests that our complaint about his scholarship, “this style of using stories”, as he puts, indicates that we simply “favor other forms of evidence”. On the contrary, I very much prefer the literary approach to organization studies and hope that it has a brilliant future in store. If it is to have any future in management science, however, we must, minimally, insist on conventional forms of citation, ordinary standards of scholarship. At the level typography, in any case, Weick (or his publisher) does know how to quote directly and at length. For example, when he cites Pablo Neruda’s “We Are Many”, to which we now turn, the poem is properly indented as a direct quotation and the line breaks are preserved. More tellingly, perhaps, because of the relatively strict copyright restrictions for the use of poetry, the reference provided in the text even includes the

words “reprinted by permission”<sup>7</sup>. None of this has been done in the case of Holub’s poem, making it a clear-cut case of plagiarism—“source unknown” or otherwise. His students are ill-advised to imitate their master on this point.

### 3. Pablo Neruda’s “We Are Many”

Weick often passes from one quotation to the next without explicating the connection he wants to draw between them, nor the differences between the kinds of texts he uses. Noting that he does not follow the “strange logic” of distinguishing various kinds of sources such as scientific papers, newspaper articles, field notes and interview transcripts using categories like ‘empirical’ and ‘theoretical’, Czarniawska simply calls him a “master of collage” (2005: 275). In the preface to *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick himself comments on “the many quotations used throughout the book” (1995: xii) and justifies this approach in forceful terms: “A book that is about interpretation would be a sham if it were grounded in paraphrase that rubbed the nuance off an author’s remarks, discouraged reader exegesis, and squelched diverse readings” (ibid.). This is actually an ambiguous way of putting it. Does he mean that paraphrasing *always* rubs nuances off the sources, discourages exegesis, or squelches diversity? Or does he mean that there are successful and unsuccessful kinds of paraphrase, and that he isn’t generally very good at it? It is certainly incorrect to suggest the former, i.e., that by paraphrasing we *necessarily* rub nuances off other people’s ideas. What we actually do is to fit them precisely in among our own, minimizing friction, as it were. Quoting large passages is more likely to come at a cost of nuances because we do not take account of the very different context in which they were originally written. In any case, as Booth et al. point out,

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that seeking such permission means that his publisher has determined that Weick’s use of the poem (since it offers no analysis or criticism) does not constitute “fair use”.

Quotations rarely speak for themselves; most have to be “unpacked.” If you offer only evidence without interpretation, your report will seem to be a pastiche of quotations and numbers, *suggesting that your data has never passed through the critical analysis of a working mind*. (103-4, my emphasis)

Our responsibility as readers and, as Weick insists, *interpreters*, is to present the meaning that we have extracted from the text we cite, not just to pass that responsibility on to our readers. Weick ultimately simply takes a great many passages of prose *out of context* and inserts them into his own.

The opening of the first section of chapter 2 (Weick 1995: 18-20), offers an instructive example. Its thesis is that sensemaking is “grounded in identity construction” and begins with an (uncited) quotation from Graham Wallas (who is cited in the preceding chapter): “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?”<sup>8</sup> It then cites G. H. Mead’s image of the individual as “a parliament of selves”, without elaboration, and devotes the next page and a half to quoting Pablo Neruda’s poem “We Are Many” in full because it “portrays” (better than anything else) the “truth about human beings” that Mead was talking about (Weick 1995: 18). Like Holub’s poem, it consists of ordinary prose sentences interrupted by line breaks. Neruda notes that he is having difficulty finding his true self or, in any case, the self he would prefer to be. Instead, he discovers himself to be foolish when he would have liked to be intelligent, cowardly when he would have liked to be brave, and lazy when he would have liked to be heroic. In fact, the idea of having “many selves” seems to be presented in a self-deprecating, even ironic, sort of way, as the poet’s acknowledgement that it is really an excuse for not being what he thinks he could be. It may not be that he really *is* many different selves but, rather, that his lack of resoluteness sometimes makes him feel that way. The poem isn’t really about being many different people at the same time, but about not being who

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<sup>8</sup> The source of this quotation is itself a bit obscure. While it can indeed be found in Wallas (1926), it also appears in E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), where he credits it to André Gide. It has also been attributed to Lewis Carroll. Indeed, in an earlier presentation of this point, I accused Weick of “unwittingly” quoting Carroll, but I have not been able to locate the sentence anywhere in Carroll’s work so far.



you would like to be. It concludes with a suggestion that “the problem” can be solved by “studying” how other people see themselves, an operation that would turn autobiography into “geography”. Given the importance of maps later on, this would have been a nice thing to emphasize. But in lieu of such an analysis—in lieu of *any* analysis—Weick offers only the following: “A more prosaic way to say the same thing is to assert that ‘the’ individual ‘is a typified discursive construction’ (Knorr-Cetina, 1981, p. 10)” (Weick 1995: 20). I am not sure how either Neruda or Karin Knorr-Cetina would take that, but surely the claim that these are two ways of “saying the same thing” rubs some of the nuances of their work, along with Mead’s ideas about the individual.

Weick continues by unpacking the discursive construction of identity in terms of the “continual redefinition” of self in the process of interaction. What he in fact offers is a very loose reinterpretation of the passage in Knorr-Cetina’s text that he cites, but which he does not cite again after quoting it (Weick 1995: 20).<sup>9</sup> Since Knorr-Cetina and Neruda are “saying the same thing”, however, we might think that he is providing an analysis of Neruda at the same time. But there are two things to notice here. First, unlike Weick, Neruda makes nothing at all of the process of interaction, i.e., the involvement of others in the constitution of the parliament of selves. In fact, Neruda is arguably making the opposite point that Weick wants to make: when others are ready to see him as intelligent, and he knows this to be the case, he makes a fool of himself. Except for the introduction of “geography” and how other people see *themselves*, not the individual whose sense of self is a parliament, Neruda’s poem is essentially a statement of *personal* failing and spiritual confusion, not *public* embeddedness. But isn’t there *some* sense in which Weick is here bringing three interesting insights together: Mead’s “parliament of selves”, Neruda’s “many men whom I am”, and Knorr-Cetina’s (actually Aaron Cicourel’s)<sup>10</sup> “typified discursive construction”? Indeed,

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<sup>9</sup> Those who want to know why Weick cites exactly this part of Knorr-Cetina’s work, may be interested to know that he is himself cited on that page.

<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps nit-picking. But it seems clear that the “discursive” view of “typified constructions” is represented in the Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981) volume by the latter. Weick is quoting from the former’s introduction.

since his elaboration on Knorr-Cetina jibes nicely with Mead (to anyone who has read the latter), it might be argued that he has used Neruda to establish the connection between the two (albeit only if we do an important bit of somewhat questionable interpretative work in regards to the closing remark about “geography” for him). But even this minor insight cannot be credited to Weick. As it turns out, when we look at Knorr-Cetina’s text, *Mead’s parliament of selves is already mentioned there* and, yes, precisely to establish the interactionist thesis<sup>11</sup>. Knorr-Cetina uses a much more illuminating passage from Georg Simmel to do this, which, at bottom, Weick simply replaces with Neruda. But, and this is the second thing to notice, unlike Neruda, Weick does not emphasize, nor even draw any attention to the powerlessness to carry out such definitions, which is what Neruda takes as his central theme. In bringing in Neruda, Weick is not trying to complicate matters with the geography of cowardice and laziness (though wouldn’t that make truly interesting reading for organization theorists?). So if he is not really using Neruda to help us to understand either interactionist definitions of self, nor Mead’s parliament of selves, what is the poem doing there?

The answer is probably that already suggested by Rowlinson in the case Holub’s poem. The claim that Neruda and Knorr-Cetina are “saying the same thing”, allows Weick to choose the relatively easy task of interpreting a sociologist (whose work he has himself influenced), over that of interpreting a poet, while making his point appear as a deep “truth about human beings” (Weick 1995: 18), fit for poetry (and not subject to debate). The trouble is simply that Weick has, for all we know, made no effort whatsoever to understand Neruda. It is simply “collaged” (cf. Czarniawska 2005: 275) into what is already a collage of sociological theory. There is no indication here that Neruda’s poem has ever been exposed to the critical apparatus of a working mind.

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<sup>11</sup> In a student paper this would be a borderline case of plagiarism. Neruda’s poem has been snuck in between Mead and Knorr-Cetina to avoid crediting the latter with the reference to the former. In Weick’s case, however, since he has been working with social psychology for at least as long as Knorr-Cetina, we can assume that Mead is a natural reference to make at this point. The point then is that Neruda’s poem is not needed to join interactionism with the “parliament of selves”; the connection between these two notions is well-established in the literature.

## Conclusion

The only public response to the piece Henrik Graham and I originally published in *ephemera*, besides that solicited from Weick, was a brief post on a blog calling our charges “ambitious” and Weick’s response “sensible”. A comment to this post suggested that it would be interesting only if we “had showed that Weick had plagiarized the stuff that we all read him for (i.e. the idea of loose coupling) rather than some obscure example from an equally obscure poem.”<sup>12</sup> Our work has so far had no repercussions in the mainstream sensemaking literature.<sup>13</sup> In essence, the response has been, “So what?” This suggests to me that organization theorists who pursue “sensemaking”, even those who are taking a “literary approach”, are not interested in critical scholarship. They are, as Rowlinson notes, interested in impressing each other, and especially top managers<sup>14</sup>, with their erudition. To call this a “sham” might be a bit strong, but keep in mind that this is Weick’s own word for alternative approaches “grounded in paraphrase” (1995: xii). It may be more accurate to call it a “put-on”: “a pervasive style of relating to others [i.e., other people’s writing] that perpetually casts what he says into doubt” (Brackman 1967)<sup>15</sup>. My greatest concern (painfully sincere and naïve as it is) is that a whole generation of students is being raised to put each other on in this way. First, their teachers put them on, then they put their teachers on (who smile

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://orgtheory.wordpress.com/2006/07/22/charges-of-plagiarism-in-org-theory/>. In my view, they are wrong about the obscurity of this example. As noted above, both Weick and Czarniawska have repeatedly emphasized its importance.

<sup>13</sup> There is one positive thing to note. At the time of this writing, a Google search on “Weick” and “Alps” (without quotation marks in the query field), which is a likely first attempt by anyone interested in the story, turns up a blog post I wrote about the story as the first hit and our *ephemera* piece as the fifth.

<sup>14</sup> Rowlinson is right to notice this function of bringing Bob Engel on board in the text. It is confirmed by Weick when he says that “what managers are asking for” is a sufficient critical standard (2003: 381). Czarniawska concurs (2005: 277).

<sup>15</sup> See the epigraph for a more complete quote of this classic definition. I originally found it in Norman Mailer’s essay on Norman Podhoretz’s controversial book *Making It*. (Mailer’s point was not that he Podhoretz was putting us on, but that “the Family”, “the Establishment”, the New York intelligentsia centred on the *Partisan Review* (where Mailer’s piece was also originally published), has been putting everyone on for generations and Podhoretz’s scandal was simply to expose this. Wayne Booth (1974: 48, note 3) also offers a very useful summary of Brackman’s article: a put-on is “an ‘ironic’ statement that the ironist does not expect to be reconstructed (and may not himself even understand).” Weick’s use of citation, to my mind, is very often a put-on of this kind: a reference that he does not expect the reader to follow back to the source (though he may truly not understand why he should blush if the reader does).

approvingly, of course), and then they turn their attention to top managers reading practitioner journals like the *Harvard Business Review* and *AOM Perspectives* (and who know they are being put on). These managers then go on put each other on about their knowledge of the latest “theory”; more importantly, however, they put on the researchers about how “really neat” their stories might be, and how impressed they are with their “wisdom” (once again Weick’s word). All this is then called “sensemaking” or a “poetic style of organization theorizing”.

There are really two problems with Weick’s style. The first has to do with the simplemindedness that business studies generally displays in dealing with basic questions of scholarship and research ethics, or what the American Historical Association might call our “wider tolerance for shoddy work”. We simply don’t know enough about how to do things properly. Students learn their bad habits *from their teachers* and are not taken seriously outside the narrow networks in which they are legitimate peripheral participants. Here we have to start from the beginning, learning basic research and writing skills, perhaps drawing expertise in from fields that are more used to citing properly and to interpreting sources critically. Literary studies is no doubt an excellent place to go for such upgrading (Wayne Booth is an influential literary theorist), as might other areas of the humanities (like history). If we want to take organization studies in a more humanities-inspired direction, why not begin by becoming good at what scholars in the humanities are good at?

The second problem has to do with avoiding Kenner’s “wobbly Roman candle”. It is about getting the facts straight, which is something Weick explicitly doesn’t care very much about (Weick 2003: 381; quoted in Czarniawska 2005: 276-7). One reason to take great care when citing sources is that your sources tell your reader something about the quality of the information you are presenting. If you don’t read your sources closely to discover what they mean, you also won’t be able to understand how they know, or whether they even do. And you won’t allow your reader to

assess your source if you aren't up front about the relationship that obtains between your source and your own text. Weick's stance here increasingly puzzles me. "I obviously had no idea whether the reconstruction was close to the original or not since I had no original in hand for comparison," he tells us (Weick 2006: 193). In defending himself (implausibly) against the charge of plagiarism he admits to the shoddiness of his scholarship: what he "obviously had no idea" about was whether or not his reconstruction was *true*. But surely whether or not "any old map will do" (or has ever done) is really quite important, at least in the case of his famous interest in the organization of fire fighters (see Weick 1993, 2007). If we let him bring Miroslav Holub and Bob Engel together in the "softly constrained" manner that he does, we end up with what must at least sometimes be a very dangerous piece of normative advice. It would apply, in the first place, to *mountaineers*: if you are leading a group of people and *know* that you don't have the right map then you should *lie* to them. We can then extrapolate this in leading a group of fire fighters into, say, Mann Gulch. Finally, thinking perhaps especially of Bob Engel's position at J. P. Morgan, we can extend this advice to the leader of a team of investment bankers working with financial records that are perhaps a year out of date. "Any old annual report will do," we might say. It is important to stress that neither Bob Engel's off-the-cuff remark, nor Holub's original story, imply this conclusion. It is Weick who suggests it by bringing them together, using only their juxtaposition as an argument.

Finally, this advice applies reflexively to sensemaking research: any old story will do. But, given the consequences of making a mistake, management researchers and managers themselves need a better argument than that it makes sense to Karl Weick's poetically disciplined imagination. The anecdote of the map itself is likely apocryphal, or false in some essential detail. The map may coincidentally have been of similar terrain; they may have used it only to calm them down (the effect may have been wholly motivational, not cognitive)<sup>16</sup>. Surely we can't just proceed

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<sup>16</sup> Weick does consider these suggestions (Weick 1987/2001). What he doesn't notice is that he slowly erodes the effect of the anecdote. If a map of the Pyrenees in effect *is* a map of the Alps (though one may doubt he is right to suggest

from “any old” representation of the terrain we are trying to move around in? But Weick does not do any scholarship to develop the anecdote. Likewise, in the case of Neruda’s poem, Weick seems simply to leave the details, and difficulties, of identity construction open. Unlike Neruda, who seems at least to see his “many selves” as a lamentable source of moral weaknesses, Weick presents this “truth about human beings” as a source of continuous, unavoidable uncertainty. Like the false map of the Alps, foolishness, cowardice, and laziness are just possible ways of “making sense” of what is going on. Here, again, Weick’s work look likes a put-on: “Not holding any real position [the put-on] is itself invulnerable to attack” (Brackman 1967). There is simply no basis for drawing his normative conclusions into doubt, nor even a basis even for discussing them; nor, therefore, was there ever a basis for drawing them in the first place. Weick, of course, does not have access to “other forms of evidence” to support his “illustration of a general idea”; he doesn’t want such corroboration because it would harden the constraints of his style. This sort of pastiche is all he ever does—“read, imagine, connect, practice virtual ethnography in the armchair, write, and edit”—making “moves of the imagination working within soft constraints”. Any old source will do; facts are no better than unfacts. Gee whiz!

## Postscript

At the end of his “Vita Contemplativa” essay, Weick (2004) deploys a characteristic piece of sleight of hand with citations. He mentions that William James has quoted Fitz James Stephen in a way that “captures” the point he wants to make. He offers a quick summary of this point, namely, that

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they are essentially similar) then “any old map” *won’t* do. The story only shows that a *similar* map will do. Likewise, if it is a matter of motivating (or calming) a group of people to get out of tight spot, the false map is not a *substitute* for knowledge of the terrain. The map was not being used as a map. Weick’s suggestion that we look for “substitutes for strategy” is therefore not supported once the story is made plausible. Certainly, he must be wrong to say that “once you’ve seen one organization [or mountain range!] you’ve seen them all”, i.e., that all routes lead down from the mountains (Weick 1987/2001).

“what I do and how I do it is not all that different from what you do” (665). Then he says, “Here’s what I mean by that,” and what follows is a thirteen-line quotation from James. He then writes five sentences of his own: “People do that. Organizations do that. Poetic stylists do that. It’s mundane. But it’s also wise” (666). We have been given a chance to interpret Stephen and James on our own, but what *Weick* here means remains, to say the least, cloudy (cf. Brackman 1967, quoted in the epigraph).

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