

The Aesthetics of Nature

We can approach Nature in several different ways, beginning with natural science. In recent times, alongside the scientists there have been the great naturalists: in nineteenth-century America Ralph Waldo Emerson¹ and Henry David Thoreau² appreciatively lived in, thought, and wrote about the natural world. In the twentieth century, there was John Muir who spent most of his time in the wild, plodding through forests and scaling mountains, and writing about it in such a way as to persuade Theodore Roosevelt to set aside various natural parks to protect them from exploitation by businesses and by homesteaders.³ Later there was Aldo Leopold, author of *Sand County Almanac*. Leopold, an exemplary fusion of naturalist and scientist each informing the other,⁴ is a perfect example of the importance for biologists of becoming naturalists. Since biologists, and thus also medical students, deal mostly with parts of dead animals or human cadavers or live creatures under unnatural conditions within the discipline of *bio-logy*, a discipline given to the understanding

¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

²Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (New York: Doubleday, n.d.).

³See James Mitchell Clark, *The Life and Adventures of John Muir* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980).

⁴*Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).



Fig. 2.1 David Wood, *Swirling waters*

of life, they should learn to attend to natural things as they *live* and behave in their native habitats (Fig. 2.1).⁵

Those who write on aesthetics have most recently expanded the scope of their considerations from art forms to the natural environment. The movement had its origin in Ronald Hepburn's 1966 "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,"⁶ and in this volume we shall consider works that have appeared since then. But I want to begin with reflections upon our place as human beings in Nature.

⁵See Leon Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

⁶Ronald Hepburn (1966), "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," eds. Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berneat, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*. (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 43–62. (henceforth ANE.) The work within which it now appears contains a significant bibliography in the notes to the introductory essay, 27–42.

Before there were human beings, there was Nature. Then human beings came on the scene, having, just like other animals, the kind of organs that allow the manifestation of the environment within the limited thresholds set up by the perceptual organs and in the service of biological need. This appearance, however, is only a relatively superficial show, hiding the vast complexity and hidden powers that lie beneath the sensory surface; getting to know more and more of these can lead to the expansion of our aesthetic sensibility.

Animals are monopolar in their awareness, whereas humans are, like a magnet, bipolar. As we have already noted, in the human case, sensory experience occurs in a field of consciousness that is oriented towards the Whole of what is. Such orientation pries each of us loose from immersion in the environment and gives each of us over to ourselves to understand ourselves and the world in which we live and take responsibility for our actions. This situation produces a constant tension between the two poles. Within that tension culture is constituted and human beings live their peculiar lives. There is thus a dialectic, a reciprocal conditioning, not only between Nature and culture, but also between culture and the freely self-disposing individuals living within it. The latter are inevitably the carriers of the culture, but can also contribute creatively to it or lead to its degeneration. One form of degeneration is the lack of reverence for the Nature from which we have emerged and in which we remain rooted that leads us to consider it only as material for our projects.⁷

Early humans not only strove to maintain themselves in relation to the manifest environment, they also learned to transform that environment by abstracting the notions of things from their individual instances and re-arranging things to suit human purposes. But this was only an extension of the coping intelligence of high-order primates. Distinctive humanness involves some conception of the hidden Whole behind the sensory surface. This adds depth to the essential and literal “superficiality,” that is, surface character, of animal awareness. Human aesthetic

⁷See Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, W. Lovitt, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). For an approach to his “aesthetics” within the larger framework of his work in general, see the chapter on Heidegger in my *Placing Aesthetics: Reflections on the Philosophic Tradition* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999). So also for the other major thinkers cited.

appreciation brings more than sensory awareness to what is presented sensorily.⁸

This does not preclude acute sensitivity on the part of the animal to the nuances of what appears in the environment relevant to animal survival. But all of that takes place within the display of a kind of dashboard, a surface that animals, driven by biological need, learn to manipulate in order to get the desired output, while being completely unaware that there is anything beyond that surface or “under the hood.”⁹ We might express their situation metaphorically: they live wholly within the luminous bubble blown by the nervous system.

Emptily aware of the wholeness beyond the sensory dashboard and of the encompassing Whole that is the cosmos, humans produced mythic cosmologies centered upon notions of the gods who were linked with the origins of things. And in addition, they learned to step back from coping in order to appreciate the display of things with which they felt as one. They further learned to transform the surface and to play with harmonious forms, decorating their bodies and their implements, and transforming the sounds they made through the discovery and production of diachronic and eventually also synchronic harmonies. The emergence of music from the cacophony of sounds generated in the environment involved the “lived” discovery of *the harmonic series* which, in the West, was eventually thematized and used as the basis for the development of the harpsichord, the organ, and the piano.

Music may have had its rhythmic origin in a mother rocking her child and humming softly to it; or it may have been associated with the regularity involved in chipping stone, paddling a canoe, or working together to haul heavy objects. Melody may have arisen in the attempt to imitate birdsong. Early drawings of the prey or the totem of a tribe may have had magical implications. Early art forms included tattooing, utensil design, ornamentation (headdresses, necklaces, bracelets and the like), decorative clothing and rugs, and visually rhythmic elaboration of weapons and vehicles of conveyance. Much of the art centered upon the decoration of temples and the huts of chieftains in order to underscore the

⁸For the ways in which metaphysical sensibility transcends sensory presence in and through sensory presence, see Ronald Hepburn’s “Landscape and Metaphysical Imagination,” ANE, 127–40.

⁹The felicitous metaphor of “dashboard knowledge” comes from Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: An Essay in Idolatry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, n.d.), 55–6.

importance of what took place within them. In any case, art arose out of an interchange between the organically situated human being and the environment upon which it depends. Art functioned within the overall life of a people, rooted in the earth, in closeness to Nature.¹⁰

As we noted in the Introduction, Aristotle pointed to the twin origins of art: imitation and delight in rhythms and harmonies.¹¹ Our bodies are rhythmic: inhaling and exhaling, walking and running, waking and sleeping, being hungry and finding satiety, experiencing the beat of the heart accelerating and slowing down. Our environment is also rhythmic: the lapping of the waves, the alternation of day and night, the seasons, with living forms becoming dormant, awakening, and putting forth new shoots, dropping their seed, and slipping back into dormancy or death. And we live in the interplay of those rhythms by reason of the harmonic functioning of our own organisms in tune with what is given in the environment.

Eighteenth-century aesthetics focused upon gardens and scenic views of Nature as well as upon works of art.¹² The latter became separated from their original public sites and were relocated to museums and private collections.¹³ Hegel, in his massive *Lectures on Fine Art*, deflected attention away from Nature and concentrated upon what he called “The System of the Arts”: architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. At the highest level of artistic functioning, architecture formed the temple; sculpture presented the god; painting, music, and poetry celebrated the divine.¹⁴ Hegel gave special attention to what he called “the highest vocation of art”: to display the Absolute in sensuous form, that is,

¹⁰This is one of the central themes of John Dewey, developed in the very first chapter of *Art as Experience*, “The Live Creature,” 3–19. For an approach to Dewey’s aesthetics within the general conceptual framework of his thought, see the chapter on Dewey in my *Placing Aesthetics*.

¹¹*Poetics*, 1448b7.

¹²Eugene Hargrove, “The Historical Foundations of American Environmental Attitudes,” Allen, Carlson and Sheila Lintott, eds. *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 29–48 (Henceforth NAE.).

¹³Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1934), 8–10 (Henceforth AE.).

¹⁴Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, T. Knox, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) vol. 1, 83–7. (Henceforth LEA.) For an approach to Hegel’s aesthetics within the overall framework of his System, see the chapter on Hegel in my *Placing Aesthetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

to be the expression of religious sensibility.¹⁵ Following upon Christianity and its proclamation of the identity of God and Man announced in Jesus Christ, everything in which humans take an interest was included in the function of art. This led to a secularization of aesthetics where the relation between people established through production and experience of art becomes a new “holy of holies.”¹⁶ Philosophical treatments of aesthetics followed Hegel’s focus upon the arts. But Hegel also pointed out that art is nourished by attention to Nature, and to Nature it periodically returns for refreshment when it has grown stale.¹⁷ As we said in the Introduction, in very recent times there has been a movement within philosophical aesthetics to refocus attention upon Nature. And that is paralleled in art by the development of earthworks of various types.

Of course, one significant question is: just what is Nature? Observable exteriority? But observation itself is part of Nature, and there is more to Nature than its observability and our observing. Is Nature that which is simply there for our transformation of it, an Other in relation to deliberate action? Is Nature a reality independent of human action? Or is human action also part of Nature? Do we intervene in Nature arbitrarily or is it our nature to intervene and the nature of what we transform to be so transformable? Do not all organisms “intervene” in what is other than themselves? Do they not all violate what they assimilate? Prior to the complex gymnastics Heidegger exercises about the single sentence extant from Anaximander that all things have to pay restitution by their death for violating other things in order to live, does it not give us a reason why all living things have to die?¹⁸ Natures can be and are regularly violated so that other natures may flourish. Nature, Nietzsche said, is the exhibition of the Will to Power, each organism subsuming other forms to gather its own power to transcend itself in growth and reproduction.¹⁹ Death is a giving back of what we took from Nature, returning our bodies to the earth in a kind of cosmic justice.

¹⁵LFA, I, 9–11, 94.

¹⁶LFA, I, 60–1.

¹⁷LFA, I, 45.

¹⁸*The Presocratics*, G. Kirk and J. Raven, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), §112, 117. See Martin Heidegger, “The Anaximander Fragment,” *Early Greek Thinking*, D. Krell and F. Capuzzi trans. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984). 13–58.

¹⁹Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage.

Nature in one sense is the enduring matrix for everything distinctively human, including Nature in us. It is our nature to step back and venture out into what is other than our knowing-choosing center which Hegel terms “Spirit.” Spirit in us, that is, our conscious knowing-controlling center, emerges out of Nature and faces it both in us and outside us.²⁰ Nature in this sense is what goes its own way without the intervention of human consciousness, even in human beings, as in the case of our metabolism and the functioning of our sensory systems.

What is the relation between Nature as a whole and the natures within it? Since Newton, Nature has been regarded as a single matrix within which the ultimate particles are embedded. All superficial appearances are to be explained in terms of the laws of combination and separation of the particles. Even though plants and animals and human beings appear as single wholes which define themselves against the background of their environments, seeking to develop, sustain, and reproduce themselves, yet for science in the wake of Newton, this is just like froth thrown up by the waves. The real causes lie in the underlying matrix of atomic, and then subatomic, particles, and what we observe is a superficial show. Things cannot succeed or fail: as a temporary conjunction of the elements, re-arrangement is the work of Nature. And so we, as parts of Nature, cannot violate Nature. The real things, the elements, are only re-arranged, still according to invariant laws—and we with our peculiar awareness are part of the surface froth.

This certainly has the effect of turning us away from attention to holistically functioning forms in order to focus upon the units of which they are composed. That is why we said that biology, in its study of the various organs, cells, and chemical cycles, needs to remain in contact with field biology, the study of animal behavior in its natural setting, in order not to lose touch with Nature as it presents itself prior to our analytical dissection.

And since we can only obtain the kind of knowledge physics is able to get us by constructing ever more elaborate mechanisms that allow us to take things apart and are able to use the technological skill this entails to annex Nature or natures to our purposes by refashioning it/

²⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, W. Wallace, trans. (Oxford University Press, 1977). See also my *Hegel's Introduction to the System* as a way of situating and mining the Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit/Mind (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

them, natures are forgotten and regularly violated in a way that goes way beyond those violations necessary for our own sustenance. Those who still appreciate natures are “tree-huggers” who stand in the way of “progress.”

But there is another way of viewing nature. With relativity and quantum physics, there is a single space–time–energy matrix within which particles are peculiar nodal enfoldings. Taking a Hegelian theme, for physics: “The truth is the Whole.” But for ecology, the relevant wholes are ecosystems. One basic question is whether the ultimate explanation lies in physics or whether each evolutionary level above the subject-matter of physics—life, sensory awareness, and reflective awareness as levels of holistic functioning—each has its own type or types of explanation. Physics is the ground floor whose integral functioning is presupposed in its being subsumed by the emergent levels, and so on for each higher level. One of the functions of the highest level, reflective awareness, is to learn the proper modes of theoretical integration of the Whole.

There are different ways of attending to Nature. In one dominant strain of contemporary life, Nature is simply what provides resources for our projects. In another dominant strain, Nature is a set of problems for theoretical mastery. In still another, as recovery from the first two, Nature provides a refuge into which we enter in order to recover, from our dominant activities which involve a detachment from Nature, a certain appreciation of, and union with Nature. Environmentalists still argue for “pristine Nature” in forest preserves which are currently off-base for businesses eager to find raw materials for their clients’ projects and their own profit.

Aesthetic appreciation of Nature can occur in significantly different ways. One typical way is to attend to scenic views. Nature is full of scenes for our enjoyment: when we approach it aesthetically—it is *picturesque*.²¹ The latter term is odd: Nature is “pretty as a picture.” One would have thought the opposite. But it suggests that we learn to appreciate Nature from the artists who have taught us ways of seeing.²²

²¹Uvidale Price, *A Dialogue on the Distinct Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful: In Answer to the Objection of Mr. Knight* (London: Hereford, 1801).

²²In one of the oddities of the history of aesthetic awareness, people used to turn their backs to natural scenery in order to view it through the frame provided by a “Claude glass,” named after the scenic paintings of Claude Lorrain. See J. Baird Callicott, in “Leopold’s Land Aesthetic,” NAE, 108.

Now, scenic appreciation of Nature has a history. Prior to the rise of Romanticism, mountains, for example—those paradigms of scenic beauty—were viewed as God’s slag heap, the leftovers from creation, ugly, irregular, or just “in the way” when you want to cross the Alps to conquer Gaul. The Romans spoke of *taeditas alpium*, the boring character of the Alps. Wincklemann, who turned classicists’ attention from the Romans back to the Greeks through studying their art (or at least, Roman copies of their art), en route from his German home to view the treasures of the Vatican, pulled down the shades on his carriage when crossing the Alps so he did not have to look at their ugliness. Astonishing!²³ Among the New England Puritans, the forests, though beautiful, were wild, dark, and threatening.²⁴ Now the mountains and the forests with their streams and rivers are the places where we go to recover from city life. It was the poets who taught us to look appreciatively and to expand our notion of beauty from the ordered and regular to the irregular, something especially cultivated in the Oriental garden. But in the scenic approach, we are apart from what we observe in the remotest sense: we merely view it from afar.²⁵

As children we were no doubt taken by butterflies during the day and fireflies at night. Birds and squirrels and rabbits, fish and frogs also drew our attention. As adults we may take to feeding the pigeons, the ducks, or the fish in the ponds, just to enjoy their presence. We might stop to admire the changing beauty of a sunset, or the way the features of the landscape stand out in the late afternoon when the shadows begin to lengthen. We might stop to look out over the sea to the unlimited horizon. At night I might gaze up at the stars and exclaim, “I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed if their glory exceeds that of ours.”

We might also consider the character of weather: a bright day in spring with the fresh green of new growth; the splashes of spring color, especially cherry blossoms; the strong contrasts between shade and full sun; late afternoon with the setting sun creating long shadows which makes that upon which it shines stand out all the more; morning fog

²³See Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 1959).

²⁴See, e.g., Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown and Other Short Stories* (New York: Dover, 1992).

²⁵J. Baird Callicott, calls scenic viewing “superficial and narcissistic,” NAE, 109a. In his lectures he provocatively refers to it as “eco-porn.”

across a pond that allows only the tops of some of the trees to show through on the other side; fresh winter snow inches deep that blankets all and allows the fir trees especially to stand out; the power of a spring storm, with dark clouds, some particularly threatening, showing an ominous green, gathering and swirling on the horizon, periodically split by a jagged bolt of lightning, followed by the thunder that makes the windows rattle. Japanese poetry in particular is full of appreciation for differing types of weather.²⁶

But paying specific attention to features of Nature is not the only mode of appreciation. There is also an appreciation gained through engagement in and with Nature,²⁷ such as that gained by the farmer whom Henry David Thoreau describes as catching sight of Nature out of the corner of his eye, as it were, while he works in his fields.²⁸ But more explicitly, the farmer might deliberately leave wild spaces to support animal life, for example, uncultivated woods or hedgerows for small animals and birds. His wife might typically plant flowers and a small vegetable garden near the farmhouse. They live in Nature, cultivated and wild. A former colleague of mine, raised with fourteen siblings on a tobacco farm, could never understand why someone, even someone poor, gave up the beauty of rural existence for the urban slum or the suburban sprawl.²⁹

Back-packing is another such engaged mode. In this case, all of the senses are involved, not simply seeing, as in the appreciation of scenic beauty. We see the various life forms and their differing, changing shapes, colors, and textures. We hear the moaning of the mourning dove, the howling of the wolf, the trickling of a brook, the roar of the ocean, the wind singing through the trees, the leaves crunching beneath one's feet, the sound of deer running through the brush. While we are moving through the terrain, we smell the scent of flowers, pine trees, moldering leaves, the pungent odor of a skunk, or the freshness of an ocean breeze. We feel the hardness of the rock beneath our feet, the sponginess

²⁶See Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Weather," AEL, 156–76.

²⁷See Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997).

²⁸*Walden*, 136–7.

²⁹In his several works, Wendell Barry has underscored the significance of rural community. See, for example, *Life is a Miracle* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2000) which culminates in the family farm.

of the forest floor that gives way under our steps, or the sliding of the sand through which we plod. When we pitch camp there is the smell of the campfire, of coffee brewing and fish frying. If one lives off the land, there is the taste of berries and roots, of fish and game. One picks up and handles pine cones, oddly shaped rocks, animal skeletons, or sea shells and smooth stones on the beach. But such a relation to Nature typically occurs as a vacation from city life and not as the constant presence enjoyed in its own way by the farm family prior to the rise of agribusiness.

Being out in Nature, participating in it with all our senses, can terminate in a feeling of oneness with it.³⁰ Even when working with it, we may be brought up short by the startled deer who dashes away into the brush, or by the hawk circling above, or by the peculiar way the rays of the sun come through a clearing in a dense forest. One might be struck by the profusion of life as one observes its absence above the timberline on a high mountain. A friend of mine—the one raised on the tobacco farm—told me of one of his most powerful aesthetic experiences: that of the sun shining upon a spider's web against the background of a metal shed.

One might also bring to the encounter with Nature some understanding of the natural processes involved in the things we encounter, be it the terrain, the flora or the fauna in a region, or the geological layers that lie under the observed surface.³¹ How was the terrain shaped over millennia by the forces of Nature—earthquakes, winds, glaciers, and rivers? The raw force of Nature can be seen in earthquakes, the tsunamis that follow, the floods, the hurricanes and tornados, the forest fires. Such extraordinary interruptions in the way humans cling to the earth force us to confront the balances in the four traditional elements—fire, air, earth, and water—requisite for our ordinary routines. One can come to realize how the earth's crust floats on a lava core which pushes up through the great cracks in the ocean floor to move the tectonic plates upon which

³⁰Arnold Berneat, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," ANE, 82–3.

³¹Allan Carlson has been in the forefront of such an approach to nature. His approach tends to derogate other approaches, especially the scenic one. He claims that scientific understanding of nature is to things in nature as art history is to particular works. In both cases, he finds aesthetic appreciation without such knowledge to be superficial. See his "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," ANE, 63–75. Many of the papers selected in ANE are rejoinders to this approach.

we too float. The pressure exerted along the cracks in turn pushes the plates against one another with such force that they not only create the mountain ranges, but occasionally slip along fault lines producing earthquakes which send out ripples of the earth's crust parallel to the way in which the shock waves of a tsunami move across the water surface at the speed of a jet plane. One might appreciate the magnetic field generated by the earth's core and the ozone layer which shields us from much of the harmful rays generated by the sun. One might also come to appreciate the precise distance from the sun required for life as we know it to survive: too close and the earth would be too hot for life to appear and flourish, too far and it would be too cold. One could meditate on the fact that someday the sun will reach a red giant phase, expanding to encompass the solar system and destroy our planet along with the others in our system. All of this can evoke a sense of contingency in all our everyday security.

When it comes to particular creatures, what is the typical life cycle and behavior of the bear we spot in the forest? We might experience even greater amazement if we are aware of the developmental cycles of the specimen we are observing. Understanding such things might serve to mediate and deepen the immediate sensory relationship. We might know that the bristle-cone pine tree we are observing on a California mountainside had its origin about the time of Moses—that is, over 3000 years ago. It stood by as the history of humankind unfolded and generation upon generation rose and fell, like waves on a beach, back into the earth. Here it is not only a matter of a beautiful surface presentation: the sense of temporal and sub-surface depth one brings to bear upon it deepens one's appreciation.

But, on the other hand, objective knowledge is not the same as aesthetic appreciation. For the former to effect the latter we must return from reflection to immediacy, learning to mediate our immediate relation to the sensory surface by bringing to bear upon it what we know from other sources. Directly parallel to this is the certain knowledge of our own mortality which might sit in our minds alongside other objective facts, but which can also transform our immediate encounter into a "vision" in which we "realize" or make real—or are *made* to realize what we otherwise only know in a purely objective mode. It is meditation, "emotion recollected in tranquility," that furnishes the basis for our being *present* to what we know only in an objective mode. It is the invoking of such presence that is the special task of poetic awareness. It

helps to make what is simply other to “draw near,” to “touch” us, to “grab hold” of us, to address our hearts, and possibly transform us.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist, in the Foreword to his best-known work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, a Foreword simply named “On Seeing,” called for an expanded sensibility developed in and through scientific knowledge: a sense of the vastness of space and time provided by astronomy, of cellular and chemical complexity as well as of evolutionary history and ecological interrelatedness in biology, of the most minute level of particles in physics. Our knowledge of time, space, complexity, and interrelation has been breathtakingly expanded by patient scientific work. But scientific knowing abstracts from our participative relation to what we know. It creates a split in consciousness between what we know objectively and our “sense of Being.”³² De Chardin argues that all this should be contemplatively exploited to expand human sensibility.³³ Indeed, he claims that we need to gain a sense of the “within” of Nature as well as of the “without” gained by observation.³⁴ Along similar lines, Whitehead asked in effect what Newton missed when he looked at Nature. It was what Wordsworth saw: Nature is akin to feeling. In fact, for Whitehead, Clerk Maxwell’s vector equations describe from the outside what Wordsworth divined: that the elementary particles are more feelings than particles. And here he is moving in the direction of Leibniz for whom the elementary units or monads are characterized by analogues to our own perception and appetite.³⁵

³²Heidegger speaks of things in the world of scientific technology as having “lost their being” to become mere data on hand for our manipulation. *Introduction to Metaphysics*, G. Fried and R. Polt, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 66. Gabriel Marcel speaks of restoring to things their “ontological weight.” *Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 63, 74, 79.

³³*The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959), 31–6.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 53–66.

³⁵*Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 75–94. Whitehead was following in the direction indicated by Leibniz that things considered “from within” are unconscious perceptions and appetitions. *Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*. Robert Latta, Introduction and trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), §§14–21, 224–31. For a presentation of the basic conceptual scheme of these two thinkers, see the chapters dedicated to Leibniz and to Whitehead in my *A Path into Metaphysics: Phenomenological, Hermeneutic, and Dialogical Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

De Chardin, Whitehead, and Leibniz conceptualize what for some is a live experience: a sense of participation in Nature as a whole which led Emerson to speak of an “Oversoul,” hearkening back to what Neoplatonists called the “world soul.” The naming of the “object” which is not an object, since it is experienced as encompassing us, is giving a verbal tag and developing a concept of what is essentially a matter of individual experience. This path might lead one to identify Nature speculatively with the divine as Spinoza did. We then have a speculatively grounded stand-in for the experience of an encompassing Nature.

One might also gain a sense of the world as theophany, as the manifestation of divine indwelling, as an encompassing and transcending Source. One might speak here, not of Pantheism but of *Panentheism*: all revealed *in*, not *as* God. Martin Buber centered his thought upon the extraordinary way in which a particular aspect of Nature seems to address us. This, he claims, is the origin of what he calls “moment gods”: the god of the brook, the grove, the mountain. Hebrew revelation speaks from an experience of all these addresses as spoken by a single Voice Who, in the beginning, said “Let there be...and so it was.”³⁶ Converted from his early mystical life, Buber came to see that “What is greater for us than all enigmatic webs at the margins of being is the central actuality of an everyday hour on earth, with a streak of sunshine on a maple leaf and an intimation of the Eternal Thou.”³⁷

The appreciation of Nature may involve a focus upon one particular aspect. Paul Weiss said that sculptors typically appreciate trees in winter when their foliage does not hide their shape.³⁸ As an amateur sculptor, I can appreciate that. In the life process of the tree, life itself stretches out in ways that give us a sense of the whole process. The trunk and branches are like the iron filings which make visible on paper the otherwise invisible lines of force of the magnet below. The overall structure is exposed when the leafy cover falls away.³⁹

³⁶Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, R. Smith trans. (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 15.

³⁷*I and Thou*, W. Kaufmann trans. (New York: Scribners, 1970), 136–7.

³⁸Personal communication. Weiss wrote three books on the arts: *Nine Basic Arts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961); *The World of Art* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961); *Cinematics* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1975).

³⁹For those interested, my own sculptural work is presented and discussed in an appendix to my *Placing Aesthetics*.

One might have a particular fondness for flowers, which one can observe not only in their natural surroundings, but also in an arboretum or in one's own garden. One learns to arrange them as cut flowers to enhance a room. The Japanese are especially adept at floral arrangement. One might have a particular fondness for birds that leads one to search them out in their various habitats, following their migratory patterns, watching their development from eggs to egg-laying adults, and observing them foraging, preening, mating, and caring for their young.

The naturalist studies the behavior of various animals, eager to understand how they do the things they do and zealous in protecting their habitat. They learn to track the movements of animals by radio transmitters, both in order to understand them better, and to learn how to preserve them in their habitat.

The fisherman loves to be on the water. As Ishmael noted in *Moby-Dick*, "Water and meditation are inextricably wed."⁴⁰ And as Thoreau elaborated, a lake "is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."⁴¹ The lake or the pond or the ocean is a symbol of human life: it has a surface and a hidden depth. It has the mystery of what might be the largest fish within it.

My sons and I used to fish a gravel pit at different times of day and under different conditions. The water surface changed frequently, through the lapping of its waves in the breezes and the frothing up of its waves in higher winds, through its glassy reflection of the environment on a calm day, but also its changing moods in different states of darkness and light, or when shrouded in mist that allowed glimpses of the trees on the other shores. My youngest son and I used to play a catch-and-release game to see who could catch the most bluegills in a local pond. Many fishermen catch and release even some of their larger catches, since they learn to appreciate the fish apart from the fish fry.

The hunter also goes into Nature. But whereas in earlier times hunting was the source of daily fare and winter provisions, now it exists for the sake of entertainment, or trophies, or just delight in wanton slaughter. But a hunter may also occupy a kind of in-between position, not killing beyond the legal limit, but also learning to appreciate the stateliness

⁴⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

⁴¹ *Walden*, 160.

of the stag and the quality of the woods within which he hunts, like the deer hunter played by Robert de Niro in the movie of that name.⁴²

However, Holmes Rolston III said:

Those who go out and kill for fun may have failed to grow up morally; sometimes those who object to any killing in nature and in human encounter with nature have not grown up either biologically or morally.... The hunter feels not 'perfect evil' (Krutch), but 'perfect identification' with the tragic drama of creation....Hunting, a seeming sport, has sacramental value because it unfolds the contradictions of the universe.⁴³

I am more inclined to say that, if a hunter really learned to appreciate the stateliness of the stag, he would learn to hunt with the camera and let the proud creatures be.

As Henry David Thoreau noted:

Such is oftenest the young man's introduction to the forest, and the most original part of himself. He goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind.⁴⁴

When I was a young man we used to run rabbits in the snow and chase them down with clubs. We would clean them and cook them; but that was not a reason, only a rationalization. When we captured one, we would twist its head off to let the blood drain out. We were told that was better for the meat. But one time when I took my nephews with me and we caught and killed a rabbit, I asked myself why I wanted to destroy such a beautiful little creature. That was the last time I hunted. Two of my sons have learned to hunt with the camera.

The appreciation of Nature might also occur through gardening: getting to work in the soil, entrusting the seeds to the darkness of the earth, watching the amazing development of plants and trees from small beginnings, observing the cycles whereby each living thing articulates itself,

⁴² *The Deer Hunter* (1978).

⁴³ *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 91–3. For the view of hunting as sacramental, see José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting* (New York: Scribners, 1972), 110–11.

⁴⁴ *Walden*, 181.

blossoms, and bears its seed, only to give way to the next generation. Care for one's lawn, for shrubs, for trees, and for gardens with vegetables and flowers, might bring one into a participative relation with natural processes and might lead one to consider the human life cycle. Observing Nature over longer periods of time gives us an image of our own lifetime: growing, flourishing, reproducing, dying, and living on in our offspring. This sets up a kind of reciprocity, each analogue enhancing the other.

Considering Nature as an analogue to our life cycle is a metaphoric approach that enriches the experience. I remember being on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, seeing the rhythmic swells of the waves rising, hitting the shore, and slipping back into the sea, and was reminded of the breathing of some great monster that could awaken and turn violent. That experience could have been the basis for a piece of lyric poetry, if I had the ability to develop one. Notice that one is not distracted by turning to something else—the sleeping monster—but is in fact tuned in more carefully to the sea by the metaphoric parallel. This mode of metaphorical “seeing as” deepens one’s appreciation of the object that evokes it.⁴⁵

Such experience with living processes might make one exasperated, as I am, at imitation plants and flowers. People want the surface look, but not the appreciation of the observable processes and underlying functions, hidden in darkness, and not the work it takes to care for the plants. The gardener, like Hegel’s slave, advances well beyond the capacity for power and pleasure that belong to the master in order to better appreciate our insertion into Nature by working with it.⁴⁶

Photography can be a tremendous aid in learning to focus appreciatively upon the world around us, natural as well as man-made. From the indeterminate possibilities afforded by a given subject, it selects an angle and a framing that maximize an ordered appearance. Eric Fromm used to complain that taking a camera along when sight-seeing tends to alienate you from being immersed in what you see, and that you tend to think in terms of how you might show others the trophies you accumulate.⁴⁷ Though there is a point to this caveat, bringing real photographic competence to a trip can enhance attentiveness and yield a

⁴⁵See Emily Brady, “Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,” ANE, 162–3.

⁴⁶*Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, A. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§194–6, 117–9.

⁴⁷Eric Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955).

hypomneme, “an external memory,” a term which Plato applied to writing.⁴⁸ This allows you to re-visit what you originally saw and continue your appreciation into the indefinite future, in a direct parallel to the way photographs of family and friends allow us to gain a deeper appreciation of them and of the time of human existence.

The camera also allows for creative framing of color and pattern that one can select, especially up close, the equivalent of abstract painting. Though writers like Carlson or Callicott might find this superficial, they miss an essential aspect that the original abstractionists, Kandinsky and Mondrian, were after: a sense of the Encompassing shining through that surface.⁴⁹ Following Plato, Plotinus noted that a beautiful object not only has harmonious properties, but indicates Beauty Itself in which it participates shining through.⁵⁰ As we have frequently pointed out, here and in previous works, the human being is bipolar, such that the sensory is always related to Totality via the notion of Being. Though one might rest content with the appreciation of aesthetic surface (and the detached appreciation of that surface is a privilege of the human being), one might also learn to be sensitized to the Beyond shining through the surface that conventional associations might smother. And the awakening of that awareness through art might spill over and suffuse one’s attention to any existent—person, thing, or artifact—as participating in the Ground of Being.

Time-lapse photography provides a look at otherwise inaccessible natural processes. We have to remember what a plant was like when it first poked through the earth, spread out, sent up a central shoot, then leaves, a bud, a flower and fruit, only eventually to die back in late fall. Time-lapse photography presents the whole process in a couple of minutes. Our sense of living process is enhanced by such a compressed experience.

In the city, relation to Nature comes in the provision of green spaces. Good city planning insists upon parks, trees along public roads, the development of rivers and town lakes, arboreta, major landscaping around public buildings, flower beds in strategic places. New York’s

⁴⁸ *Phaedrus*, 275A. H. Fowler trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁴⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, M. Sadler, trans. (New York: Dover, 1977); Piet Mondrian, “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality 1919-20,” *The New Art—The New Life: Collective Writings of Piet Mondrian*, H. Holtzman and M. James ed. and trans. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 82–123.

⁵⁰ *Enneads*, I, 6, 1. For an approach to Plotinus see my PA, “Plotinus and the Latin Middle Ages,” and the appendix to the Plato chapter in my *A Path into Metaphysics*.

Central Park, occupying land of an astronomical value in real-estate terms, was preserved for the city dwellers by the genius of Fredrick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux in 1853, inspired by the poet William Cullen Bryant. It comprises 843 acres with a walking path around it of six miles. While it looks like a nature preserve, it is all actually the result of a master plan. The Nature preserved, like the English countryside, is one that has been planted by human beings.⁵¹ Without such a park, New York City, with its population concentrated in high-rise buildings and its traffic jams, would be oppressive.

Finally, good domestic architecture plans in relation to the environment and attends to the relation between the interior and exterior, in both of which there are spaces for plantings. We will consider this further in the chapters dealing with landscaping and architecture.

One contemporary artist intent upon re-introducing us to Nature is Andy Goldsworthy who works in Nature with the materials at hand at the spot where he works. In one particularly notable case, having gathered driftwood along the ocean shore while the tide was out, he built a kind of beaver's lodge with a hole on top, one of his characteristic forms. When the tide came in, the lodge floated, then rotated and began slowly to disintegrate, giving back to the ocean the wood he harvested from its shores. Captured on film, this is a direct exhibition of the way the built environment is related to nature: it comes from nature and eventually returns back to it.

Goldsworthy has emphasized the theme of the hole in many works, some of them with stones, some with brush, some with sticks, some with branches, some with slate or brick or sandstone, also with earth and with leaves of various colors. In one piece, he pressed pieces of moss around an opening at the base of a tree between two roots that made it look like a vaginal opening—suggesting that the hole has to do with the mystery of human origins.⁵²

⁵¹Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," a paper read before the American Social Science Association at the Lowell Institute, Boston, February 25, 1870, *The Public Papers of Frederick Law Olmstead* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 171–205.

⁵²The DVD *Rivers and Tides* gives a good sample of Goldsworthy's work. There are several books dealing with his work, one of the best being Andy Goldsworthy, *Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture, 1976–1990* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).

Another dominant Goldsworthy motif is the serpentine line that underscores the flow in nature. In one piece, he stitched together a long string of leaves by using spines from a bush, coiled it at the center of a pool in the forest, and then filmed it gradually uncoiling and, fully stretched out, snaking its way down the brook that flowed out of the pool. The serpentine line was the motif for an impressive dry-stack stone wall and also for a most impressive clay surface on a large wall from which the serpentine line emerged as the clay dried.

Goldsworthy sees the flow in the birth and death of generations of living beings and even in the stones that have undergone millennia of development. For several of his works, he crushes red rock into a powder and places it in small, still pools inside rocks that jut out from a cascading stream, or he pours the powder directly into one of the rapids flowing through the rock area, or he throws it into the air and lets the flow of the air send it back to the flow of the river—again, captured on film.

His work in general emphasizes transience. In one very simple work, he lay down on dry ground just as the rain began. After a while he got up and left the dry silhouette of his body which soon disappeared under the raindrops; a simple work, but, again, underscoring the transience of human existence.

No other artist has been so ingenious at transforming Nature in such a way as to give back the results of his work to it and thereby provide us with a view of its processes. If we are sufficiently reflective, it brings to mind the way in which every form that we introduce into Nature eventually succumbs to its processes as do we who emerged out of it. Goldsworthy's work makes a powerful case for the metaphoric use of Nature.

Emergent from Nature, we belong in Nature, and yet, because we are projected toward the cosmic Whole, we are gifted with the ability to transform Nature in the light of our ability to detachedly understand the types and patterns of behavior of the world around us and, indeed, of our own selves as members of the human species. Our refashioning should take place in such a way as to let pre-human Nature show itself within our transformations as we preserve the places where it can show on its own in pristine wilderness. Cities of steel, brick, concrete, and glass all too often throw out Nature; but in so doing they alienate human existence from the place of its own birth and continuing rootage. The built environment should set itself appreciatively upon the earth, under the sky, open to the Mystery that surrounds us and to which we



Fig. 2.2 Andy Goldsworthy, *Rowan leaves with hole*. Japanese maple leaves stitched together to make a floating chain the next day it became a hole supported underneath by a woven briar ring Ouchiyama-Mura, Japan, 21–22 November 1987

are peculiarly directed, preparing for the next generation to follow our inevitable demise (Fig. 2.2).⁵³

⁵³See Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling and Thinking,” *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, A. Hofstadter, trans. (New York: Harper, 1971), 49–51; cf. also, in the same collection, “The Thing,” 172–82. We will look at the built environment, other than architecture, in Chap. 10.

Japanese maple
leaves stitched together to make a floating chain
the next day it became a hole
supported underneath by a woven briar ring

OUCHIYAMA-MURA, JAPAN

21–22 November 1987

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