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Nature Humanised: Nature Respected

RONALD HEPBURN,

8, Albert Terrace,
Edinburgh EH10 5EA
Email: RONALDHEPBURN@compuserve.com

ABSTRACT: How far is it true that the aesthetic appreciation of nature obscures, rather than illuminates, its objects? Do we not humanise nature, read our own subjectivity into it, sentimentally distort it, in our aesthetic – as distinct from scientific – approaches? I argue that not all humanising falsifies, and that we can respect nature as well as annex its forms and expressive qualities in our aesthetic appreciation. Respecting/humanising are explored as two of the chief key concepts for an understanding of the complexity of aesthetic attitudes to nature.

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, nature, anthropomorphic, truth, respect.

At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons
(Jung 1961, 1995: 252.).

Does an aesthetic approach to nature ever come really *close* to its objects of appreciation – as compared, say, with a scientific approach to the same subject-matter? Why should it not? Surely it directly and earnestly contemplates the concrete (or rather the furry, feathery, mossy, muddy, rocky) individual instances of nature's diversity, never losing sight of these behind numbers, graphs, hypotheses, laws and theories. Scientists, responding, however, may remind us that *their* theorising is sensitive to, humble under, the data: that truth is their goal, and in pursuit of it they resolutely strip away all sentimentality, all anthropomorphism, narcissism, self-indulgent emotionality, in a word – subjectivity. In sharp and sad contrast, every one of these features is prominent in the *aesthetic* appreciation of nature: all of them obscuring their real objects.

How should we, as thoughtful aesthetic appreciators of nature, reply? We must allow that the appreciators and their inner life are certainly very often present in aesthetic experience of nature. But we can distinguish between different modes of subjectivising (or, as I shall call it, 'humanising'), only some of which fail to respect their ostensible object of appreciation. Other modes, guiltless of that offence, celebrate their subject-matter truthfully, as it really is:

yet *at the same time* mix our affective life and our images of self with the images of nature in ways that minister innocently to the deepening and diversifying of feeling.

If that is so, what, then, are some of the ‘modes’ of our humanising of nature in aesthetic appreciation? To sift through them may add a little to our understanding of our wonderfully complex aesthetic interactions with nature, and (more particularly) clarify their difference from, not inferiority to, the interactions of science.

I. TRUTH AND THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC

Suppose we tend to see the human where it does not in fact exist – a man in the moon perhaps: or we project human features upon what we see as ‘cuddly’ animals such as rabbits, badgers, squirrels; suppose we see quasi-human features in a landscape (a breast, a great head); suppose we see life-forms in non-living items, or see the whole Earth, or the Cosmos, as a living being, then our vision of nature displays anthropomorphism, the humanising in imagination of what (for the most part) is not human.

It is the most obvious of the ways in which we project *ourselves* into nature: so that what we enjoy may sometimes be what we have indeed heavily modified from how it really is in nature. *Is* that appreciation of nature: is it not nature distorted? Particularly distorted if, at the same time, our interpretation shows *sentimentality*; for the sentimental response is crude and indiscriminating and wilful. Its affective repertoire is meagre and it wallows in easily-aroused, generalised emotion.

Descriptive-appreciative accounts of nature abound in anthropomorphisms: daffodils ‘nod’, crags ‘rear up’, an isolated rock ‘braves the elements’, whirlpools malevolently ‘suck’, winds ‘whisper’ or ‘roar’; a lake is an eye looking up at the heavens; landscapes show benignity or threat; non-human animals display the full range of human emotions, desires, sympathies. Often of course there is a tongue-in-cheek quality. Recently a columnist in *The Times* quoted James Hogg, ‘the Ettrick Shepherd’, in defence of the mole: ‘that innocent and blessed little pioneer who enriches our pastures with the first top dressing, dug with great pains and labour from the fattest of the soil beneath’ (Paul Heiney 8/3/97). It is not hard to find, also, examples of anthropomorphism in ‘high-level’ views of nature. The following examples are all from Thomas Berry’s *The Dream of the Earth*.

‘...the human body took its shape through *some fourteen billion years of effort on the part of the universe...*’ ‘It is clear that *the primordial intention of the universe* is to produce variety in all things ...’ ‘We might consider our intimate and compassionate presence to the earth as originating ultimately in the *curvature of space...*’ ‘The entire

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

earth community is infolded in *this compassionate curve* whereby the universe bends inwardly ... to hold all things together and yet remains sufficiently open *so that compassion does not confine, but fosters, the creative process*' (Berry 1988: 117, 134, 20, emphases mine).

To be sure, we realise that examples like these are far from homogeneous. Some mean to be literal: others obviously metaphorical. Between the extremes lies an unanalysed, vague or indeterminate zone. Most often today we are aware of metaphorical perception: we are not literally attributing personal life to the daffodils or to the brave rock.

So too with cases like those I quoted from Thomas Berry: taken literally they would depend very much on the tenability, or at least seriousness, of an underlying metaphysic. But again a spectrum stretches from ontological claims about a living cosmos, or whatever, down to poetic statements, which we should err in taking as doctrine. They may offer, even so, a memorable, haunting vision. A Romantic poet could speak, metaphysically, of the 'one life of nature'; but again individual images in their poems are aesthetically enjoyable even if one lacks such metaphysic ('And Winter slumbering in the open air, / Wears on her smiling face a dream of Spring' (Coleridge 1825).)

Is this then simply an enjoyable and harmless game we play with the natural world? Not altogether: as I have suggested already, a drawback to the more seriously anthropomorphic, for instance, is that it closes us off from the maximal *diversifying* of our experience, highly desirable as an aesthetic ideal. For the anthropomorphic will let us 'find' in nature no more (or little more) than we project into it – that is to say, features of our own life that we (substantially) know already.

Anthropomorphic stereotyping also screens us from recognition of the epistemic *distance*, never fully bridgeable, between us and the other animals, as well as from the genuine, particular, limited *affinities* we can patiently come to learn. Our knowledge of both distance and affinity can enter creatively our aesthetic enjoyment of other life.

It is surely plausible to claim, as more than one philosopher has recently argued, that only so far as we can introduce elements of a science-based vision into our aesthetic experience of nature can that experience be taken as serious and worthwhile. But this can be done, to some degree at least. Though my chief interest in nature may be aesthetic, that by no means precludes its being also an *instructed* interest. Nor (I venture to say) is aesthetic appreciation obliged to confine itself to the unaided human senses, to ignore the electron microscope and the telescope. On the margin, perhaps, is appreciation of a Hubble telescope picture of colliding galaxies. (I have to say 'on the margin'. We can view that only through photographs, and those colour-coded. But I should be reluctant to *exclude* them!)¹ Whether or not we should (or ever could) *eliminate* anthropomorphic interpretation from aesthetic appreciation of nature, we certainly can

and very often do *reduce* it. In doing so, the felt quality of that experience can be momentarily transformed. Consider for instance, an eclipse of the sun: to the pre-scientific observer, it could have the emotional quality proper to a fearful display of superhuman, quasi-personal powers. An observer today, realising imaginatively something of the sizes and distances and totally impersonal forces involved between moon, earth and sun, may feel a calmer, though still somewhat vertiginous, wonder.

Cases of unwarranted anthropomorphism are not always obvious, nor, once challenged, are they incontestable. We do not, and cannot, fully know ‘what it is like’ to be (say) a thrush or a blackbird in full song – and what felt quality of *joie de vivre*, what enjoyment, to attribute to the singer, as well as functional necessity to the song. Few of us, however, would go as far as Wordsworth, who wrote,

*And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.*

(‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, 1798)

To excise the inappropriately human certainly does not entail a ‘hard-nosed’, reductionist refusal to allow *any* subjectivity, any feelings, affective ties, to non-human living beings. Contemporary studies, for instance, show that, for all their size and outward toughness, elephants are highly sensitive to loss of kin. We can easily distort through allowing too little as well as too much inwardness.

In reminding ourselves that in aesthetic appreciation of nature there is a strong pull to the anthropomorphic, but one that is in some measure correctable, we are not so far from our situation *vis-à-vis* appreciation of the *arts*. There too we often apply simplifying *clichés*, lazy stereotypes of characters, stereotyped expectations in visual art and in music. Sometimes, with feeble art, they work, they fit. But with serious art and master-works, we have to relinquish them, if we are to grasp the work’s individuality and originality. That takes much more effort, sometimes courage. So – not so very differently – with nature: though with nature there will be more to say.

Writing of ‘pathetic fallacy’, John Ruskin saw many instances of it precisely as a weakness in interpretative power. ‘The temperament which admits [it] ... is that of a mind and body ... too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them’ (Ruskin 1904: Vol. III, p.208). On such a basis, we might develop an interesting concept of aesthetic strength and weakness, or degree of assimilating power or resilience. To me, it seems likely, for instance, that in some contexts (particularly high-level ones) we cling to the anthropomorphic today because of fear that fuller imaginative grasp of our cosmic situation would be crushing and demoralising, and so liable to subvert the aesthetic enterprise.²

Against anthropomorphism, it can be argued – most tellingly, I think – that it is not legitimate for us to treat the natural world as if it existed solely for our gratification, material with which to play out *our* fantasies. Our aesthetic concern

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

needs to be seen as continuous with our ecological and conservationist concerns. A key notion here is that of *respect* – for nature, the real nature – and that is appropriate in *every* field of interaction – including the aesthetic. Nature, however approached, is not our ‘oyster’. If we are having any relationship with nature, it should be with nature as it is and not as we selectively, distortingly imagine it might be or might have been. For instance, to project inappropriate human emotional and social life on to a non-human animal – outside the story-book, that is – *is a failure of respect for the actual animal*: a failure to empathise with its own proper way of being. We are failing to give it its due recognition for what it is – for its own nature. We would be using the animal, here, as a prop to our own fantasising. As I have suggested, the alternative is not aesthetically unrewarding – i.e. the recognition of forms of life distinct from our own: with their own zest, contentment, fears and panics.

Now, it may be already clear from what I have been saying so far, that I see *truth* as mattering (as *often* mattering) within aesthetic appreciation of nature itself: that I do not see that appreciative activity as always ‘make-believe’. I cannot go along with aesthetic theorists who claim that all judgement – as to how things really are – is bracketed or held in abeyance in aesthetic experience. Not so. Of course we do play delightful perceptual games with nature (imagining golden palaces in the sunset clouds): but not always. *Within* the aesthetic, we distinguish the less and the more serious. Greater rewards – and some greater *problems* too – arise when we earnestly seek to aesthetically appreciate nature as it is.

On the other hand, we can only *approach* such a goal; nor is truth by any means the only aesthetic goal, the sole criterion of aesthetic value. Important though the ‘cognitive constraint’ must be, aesthetic appreciation essentially bows to other constraints also; and these check and limit truth-concern in several ways. One of those constraints insists that we accord full reality to the experienced qualities of the phenomenal, the ‘life world’ and cherish its diversity and its sensuous impact.

II. HUMANISING AND RESPECTING

It would be absurd to suppose that reducing anthropomorphism in our perception of nature commits us to reducing all expressive-emotional quality in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, or that any other constraint does so. Anthropomorphism in the full sense involves an element of *belief* – most often false belief, and, as we have seen, risks failure in *respect*. That, however, is not the case with a large range of situations where we experience expressive responses to nature. We are aware of innumerable *directly* expressive items, relationships, forms, some of them individual objects, others assemblages in a landscape. We may respond to a savannah as an expansive, exhilarating openness, or enjoy the comforting

enclosedness of an ancient path between high hedges. Without categorising or seeing a mountain animistically as a reclining giant, or enormous lion, we can apprehend it, on our approach, as a majestic, serene presence evoking a solemn joy. Doubtless, this kind of mental disengagement allows all sorts of normally unconscious responses to resonate. Again there need be no illusion here, nor self-deception: rather, an opening to levels of response not often accessible. We are experiencing the dispositional power of the object (the mountain) to evoke human emotion and mood, without the mediation of a falsifyingly anthropomorphic interpretation. We humanise, yes, but without illusion, or loss of respect for nature itself. Doubtless, sources – causes of those dispositional powers – can or could be found in memory, whether individual or genetically imprinted, and in our instinctual needs (Could I survive, hide, here? Is that a friendly or a menacing form?). But beliefs about these are no longer components in the aesthetic experience itself. In his book, *The Artful Universe*, J.D. Barrow argued that our aesthetic responses can derive from

vestigial remnants of adaptations that once served other primary purposes. Many of these adaptations are subtle, [giving rise to] curious by-products, which have played a role in determining our aesthetic sense. ... [The] common factors of human experience ... link us to the universalities of the ancient environments in which the evolution of life occurred over enormous periods of time... (Barrow 1995: 246).

Eliminating the grosser anthropomorphisms and animisms, then, is not to eliminate delight in expressive and emotionally evocative aspects of natural objects. There remain, in Ruskin's fine phrase, 'the grounds of noble emotion which exist in landscape'. Certainly, we humanise still: as we make a more 'truthful' attempt to grasp or realise (still through aesthetic experience) nature as it is, but without seeking to overcome the working of analogies between nature's life and our own, we open ourselves, again, to a *diversifying and deepening of the range of our emotions*. Then we may see the storms of nature as having affinity with our own *internal* storms, nature's stillness as intensifying our potentiality for inner calm; we can be both humbled and exalted by nature. In a word, we move (for truth's sake) away from familiar forms of trivialising and distorting anthropomorphism towards recognition of the otherness of nature in a stronger and more stable sense than before; yet, that done, we still find human enrichment – in self-understanding or self-constructing – in the inward appropriation of nature's sights and sounds.³

III. AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS: SELF AND OTHER

In aesthetic encounters with nature, we do not typically stand before our scene, enjoying its forms and expressive qualities: the self unchanged, a constant dimensionless, observing eye. We can distinguish, at least in analysis, the

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

emotional component in experience from changes in our 'sense of self'. My examples of the savannah and the path between hedges have already implicitly made this point: emotion apart, I sense an expansive self, and a sheltered or a constricted self. Such transformation in sense of self is an all-important part of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Furthermore, the embodiedness, spatio-temporal position, scale, presence of the appreciator among the objects of his appreciation are not experienced as a *threat* to the purity of the aesthetic experience, as having to be discounted, elided or overcome. On the contrary: these are integrated into, and now partly constitute, the experience.

My experience of a waterfall, as I stand close alongside it, not only involves the sound of the constantly thudding, thundering weight of falling water, incessantly smiting the rocks below – but it equally involves my transformed sense of bodily self, the waterfall's weight and energy felt in relation to my own. How very differently I feel my own bodily presence here from how I sense it in my study or on an enclosed woodland path.

Again, lying on a cliff-top, I watch seabirds circling, alighting on their nest on a ledge not far below me, and casting themselves off again into the void above the sea. My complex and somewhat dizzy pleasure in watching and empathising with them is due in part to my realising at the same time my bodily difference from them, incapable as I am of flight, and readily toppled from ledges.

A third example: I come upon a Lake District tarn in late evening, when I emerge from the path that led up the stream that flows out of the lake. There is a sudden wonderful enjoyment of the unbroken level surface of water in contrast to the roughly undulating ground which has been so far pervasive. But there is more to enjoy. The moon reflects on the tarn; and that bright, tiny addition to the scene prompts a momentous further change. When I now take my bearings again as an embodied self, I am not simply a solitary tarn-watcher in a darkening landscape, but one who walks the surface of a planet suspended in a space it shares with other heavenly bodies, planets, satellites and stars... My sense of bodily size and scale, my position, are now determined by my relationships with these.

There are of course other ways in which my personal being as appreciator of nature itself enters my total aesthetic experience and I am far from simply *registering* a wholly independent realm over against me. For instance, the humanising is, in part, a managing of the play of *attention*, a manifestation of personal *freedom*.

In aesthetically enjoying a landscape, we take in (at different moments) more and less of our field of vision as our object of attention: we pay more or less heed to factors of colour, texture, the arrangement of large forms and of small forms, to isolated objects and to objects in groups. The constantly varying content of our experience is *partly* a function of changes in external nature, e.g., lighting, changing position and attitudes of self-moving objects, weather and many other factors. But the variation is no less a function of *our* grouping, of our thinking,

and of what we choose, in our improvisation, to take at any moment as focal, what as peripheral. Mobility of attention must count as one of the main generators of aesthetic diversity in relation to nature.

Once more, we can contrast experience of nature and experience of art. With works of art there is most often some control by the individual art-object and by the habits of expectation built up in the spectator by knowledge of style and idiom. Appreciation of art is not a wholly free improvisation. Again, with a work of visual art, such as a landscape-painting in an art-gallery, my spatial and temporal position and circumstances are not normally those depicted in the painting itself. The light of *its* sun does not shine on me or warm me; *its* wind does not ruffle my hair. But in nature they do: I am immersed in the nature I appreciate as I cannot be with paintings. Nature is continuous with my bodily presence.

Certainly, as aesthetic subjects, we carry into our aesthetic experience of nature human habits by which we identify and individuate items (objects, events) in everyday non-aesthetic activity, as part of *human* life. But aesthetic realisation of nature's otherness can bring home the presence also in the scene of processes on altogether a different scale – the eroding of a valley, the laying down of a beach (the rocks ground to millions of fragments, the fragmented shells), the continuing movement of tectonic plates from whose slow collision and mountain-making the landscape has emerged. So again: the appreciator is strenuously aware (as part of that aesthetic experience) that normal limits of consciousness are being sharply challenged, tested and coaxed into expansion, aroused towards self-transcendence. To wish away that sensed challenge would be to *reduce* the 'truth' and the vitality of the experience.

Could it be coherently argued that, because of the unity, the total interconnectedness of the natural world, it must always bring an increase of truth and respect for nature to widen the context of my aesthetic attention; that all limiting, imaginary framing of items in nature (be they individual mice or mountains) is in a way falsification? Is it perhaps self-indulgently comforting, like drawing the bedclothes higher, so as to exclude the hostile, chill external world? After all, fundamental science leads us in all its probings, all its fields, ultimately to *mystery*, in one direction to the limits of our understanding of elementary particles, in another to the limits of the observable universe. Until it becomes in some way sensitive to those limits and mysteries, aesthetic experience, it may be argued, has not fully reckoned with the de-anthropomorphising programme that could alone make it cognitively adequate.

If, however, we remind ourselves again that there is a *plurality* of basic criteria for aesthetic value, aesthetic concern, we quickly come to see that this is *not* a coherent challenge. For the aesthetic is keenly interested also in the pursuit of highly determinate perceptual quality; and our experience is that when increase in scope or complexity has gone beyond a certain point, grasp of determinate quality – perceptual, emotional-expressive and formal – dwindles. So some narrowing down of attention is justified – is *necessary*, if we are to fulfil

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

the aesthetic concern for particularity of feeling in at least some of its objects. There is a relevant analogy in the fact that for life as such, and *a fortiori* for conscious and reflective life, to be possible and to flourish, partial closing-off from the external environment is indispensable. There has to be a regulated and sifted ingestion of, and protection from, the environment. What is necessary at the biological level is necessary also at the aesthetic. (Section IV will consider some connected topics within theories of the 'sublime'.)

I must first mention yet another mode in which there is meeting and fusion of nature's appreciator and nature itself. As I approach (let us say) a forest, I come to my aesthetic experience already in possession of a complex forest-image, forest-idea (or even myth), of which some components are individual, some learned from culture, tradition, art (with help from, say, Altdorfer or Friedrich); others again may even be genetically programmed. Entering the forest, I bring that forest-idea into active relation with the actual forest in external nature. If I am receptive and imaginatively alert, the outcome is something new. The components – inner and outer – interact and yield endlessly varied experiences.

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, wrote well on this conjunction of 'inner' and 'outer'. As well as the objective (measurable) immensity of the forest, there is its 'inner immensity', – an immensity which 'originates in a body of impressions which ... have little connection with geographical information'. 'Forest peace,' for the poet,⁴ 'is inner peace. It is an inner state'. 'The two kinds of space,' wrote Bachelard, commenting on some words of Rilke's, 'intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth'. Bachelard found congenial expressions of this duality also in Baudelaire. 'It is the principle of "correspondences" to receive the immensity of the world, which they transform into intensity of our intimate being'. 'The exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold' (Bachelard. 1958, 1969: pp. 185, 187, 201, 193, 192)

In cases such as these, I see no failure in respect for nature's otherness; but rather a grateful acceptance of nature's 'co-operation' – to throw in a wild anthropomorphism of my own – in the joint-fashioning of what neither the subjects themselves nor nature left to itself can bring into being.

Despite all this, some of the critics I imagined in my first paragraph, shaking their heads, will argue that the aesthetic remains at best an epiphenomenon – a set of chance-generated quirks or accidents of human perception, scale, positioning, no more, and that in highlighting these I have been amply confirming that its interest and importance are far inferior to the pursuit of science. Now: in the same Part of *Modern Painters* from which I quoted a little way back, Ruskin seeks to check precisely such depressive lines of thought:-

Nor is it ... just to speak of the love of beauty as in all respects unscientific; for there is a science of the aspects of things, as well as of their nature; and it is as much a fact to be noted in their constitution, that they produce such and such an effect upon the

eye or heart ... as that they are made up of certain atoms or vibrations of matter (Ruskin 1843-60; 1904: Vol. 5, p.387).

Ruskin compares and contrasts Bacon ('master of the science of *Essence*') with Turner – 'master of this science of *Aspects*'; then leads into the phrase already quoted – 'the first poet who has, in all their range, understood the grounds of noble emotion which exist in landscape'. I am much less concerned with the questionable claim about a 'science' of aspects, than with Ruskin's insistence on the *full reality* – the place in the real world – of aesthetic features and responses. There he is surely correct; and no peeling away, trivialising, of anthropomorphisms can properly undermine that.

IV. VERSIONS OF SUBLIMITY

Supposing then we turned to the concept of the *sublime*, it would be understandable if we expected that with that concept above all we should be coming very near to the idea of experiencing nature-on-its-own, its vast extent, the galaxies, black holes, deep time, the colossal energy of the 'Big Bang' and its continuing aftermath. In this range of experience, we might seem to be as far as possible from anthropomorphisms and other humanisings of nature, confronting it rather with immediacy and the fullest respect – as very thoroughly 'other' to ourselves and our own subjectivity.⁵ But looking at actual historical theories of sublimity, we find that, for them, that is far from the whole truth. In most of these accounts, the subject has played a vital part – and a variable part. The humanising happens typically through the creating of a special and specially cherished conception of ourselves. Notoriously, the classical theorists of the sublime accounted for this in numerous often conflicting ways. On some accounts, we are relishing *the capaciousness of our soul*. In others, we have an intensified awareness of our *limits*, our *limited grasp* of the nature confronting us – a nature experienced as transcending, eluding our perceptual discriminatory powers. Yet we are exhilarated or made proud by the distinctive features of our own nature – conscious and rational – features that give us a status altogether contrasted with phenomenal nature (though we are that too!), or in finding the courage to confront or contemplate what is ultimately so terrible to us in its indifference to the values necessarily affirmed by such beings as ourselves.

Many versions have sought to describe a balance, an equilibrium between nature and self. If nature dominates, and self is obliterated, the experience ceases to be aesthetic – instead, reducing to bewilderment and perceptual defeat. If, contrariwise, self dominates, then a narcissism or self-intoxication will replace 'respectful' celebration of nature. Individual experience may achieve the balance: theory, however, has seldom, perhaps never, done so! For Kant, whose view I touched on a moment ago, imagination is overwhelmed: we are unable to

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

synthesise the extreme distances and energies of nature. Resurgence comes with the realisation that the subject has the counter-weighting powers of reason and freedom. With that thought, nature is in fact down-valued to the status of mere means through which we can realise (and up-grade) our own moral-intellectual status. Here surely is a very rarefied, but real, offence against our principle of respect for non-human nature. In contrast, central to any more adequate account of sublimity must be the recognition of non-human nature as indeed dauntingly challenging our perceptual and intellectual powers to their limit and beyond, while remaining *an object of respect in its own right*: a response not to be negated by the thought of our rational freedom.⁶

No single story can be fashioned that will apply to every experience that has some claim to be labelled 'sublime'. But I am confident that two fundamental components occur in a great many of them – first again a simple but deep enjoyment of an unusual extension of the range of our conscious awareness, even when the magnitude or power of the object that has elicited it and stretched it also causes it to falter. It is surely possible that, in our recent effort to steer clear of Platonism and Cartesianism, we – some of us – have felt obliged to play down the mystery of consciousness as such (I doubt if the word 'mystery' exaggerates), and the extraordinary range or scope of consciousness at its fullest stretch; and therefore have failed to do justice to (failed to *enjoy!*) still-available forms of the sublime.

The other main component is analogous to the central value of *tragedy* – in drama or poetry – when we see it as enabling the steady recognition of contingency and mortality. Sublime experience also can be a way of coping with, of 'assimilating' the terrible, overwhelming, bleakly indifferent, and whatever makes the imagination 'boggle'. *This* sort of humanising clearly is not at all a matter of reducing, degrading nature to our measure: precisely on the contrary, it marks or celebrates the recognition, the acceptance, and in that way the partial transcendence, of 'our measure'.

V. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF WONDER

If, among other things, we are concerned to identify an aesthetic attitude to nature which is indeed directly and unqualifiedly centred upon nature itself and does not smuggle in the human subject so as to mirror, or metaphysically (or mythologically) transfigure him, then, I think, by far the most likely candidate is *wonder*.

With wonder, the subject is not, as it were, squinting at him- or herself as well as focally contemplating the ostensible object. Although it is elusive to analysis, wonder is an utterly familiar, simple response, seeming surely neither to presuppose nor to generate challengeable theory. In its aesthetic mode, it is related to, but not identical with, surprise, astonishment. It is essentially an appreciative-contemplative delight in its object. It is self-rewarding and self-

perpetuating: a glad and serene inner celebrating of the *actuality* of these items, those processes of nature.

And yet individuals respond, in their aesthetic experience, very differently to the de-animating and de-anthropomorphising of the natural world, to the eliminating of beliefs and half-beliefs in a teleologically managed world. How far can we really exclude all such non-scientific beliefs and yet retain a vivid, wondering response to any of it? I reflect that nobody purposed and intelligently executed the ice-crystals by a mountain stream in winter, or the exquisite gradations of form, texture and colour of a seashell, or the bright feathers of a kingfisher. The laws of crystallography, the impersonal operation of genetic programmes-without-a-programmer, the work of natural selection may well suffice in their explanatory power. Can aesthetic response, in the form of wonder, survive this out-and-out demythologising? For some people, the wonder is in fact *enhanced*: while nothing is lost from the perceived, aesthetically enjoyable objects, it is, for them, *more* of a wonder to find those features arising, in those tiny objects, within the immensities of space and time, unplanned and un-purposed.

For others, however, the wonder evaporates: it cannot coexist with a consistently naturalistic explanatory scheme. Whatever wondering delight we experience (they will say, sadly) must be simply the result of ignorance of, or a turning of attention away from, the operation of those causal laws of nature – laws that (being what they are) could not have produced any other outcome on that material. To these people, that ‘could not be otherwise’ is fatal to wonder.

There is no way that I know of showing that wonder is *entailed* by certain readings of the world and excluded by others. But wonder is by no means unique in that, among aesthetic qualities.

VI. TO CONTEMPLATE? TO PARTICIPATE?

Several writers in aesthetics have recently acknowledged the ‘participatory’ character of aesthetic appreciation of nature – the subject as essentially *in* the landscape, not over-against it. It is possible to make this also an important plank in a general attack on the aesthetics of disinterestedness, detachment, contemplative calm, – in relation to art as well as nature, where these are judged in historical-relativistic fashion to have been features of a distinctively eighteenth-century style of aesthetic theory, but only incongruously persisting even into some theorising today. While having myself much to say about the presence of the appreciator in the nature appreciated, I do want, nevertheless, to retain elements of the theories of disinterest or contemplation – and these in close conceptual relation to wonder. For I think it can be argued that these elements have a claim to be deeply-entrenched, to belong perhaps even to a categorical level, and not only to a historically transient phase of theorising. Being (as

NATURE HUMANISED: NATURE RESPECTED

appreciators or subjects) *in* the landscape does not prevent our aesthetic experience from being contemplative. We may be contemplatively aware of our presence with the other items of nature, and aware of our relationships, of scale, vulnerability, security, insecurity, with these items. There may well be ways in which we are *engulfed* by nature rather than quasi-theatrically *over-against* it, yet there may well remain a calm contemplative, reflective centre to our awareness of it all, self-awareness included.

To retain such concepts as contemplative calm in aesthetic experience of nature is not at all to deny its vitality, its intensities of emotion and mood. It can be *both-and*, not *either-or*; vital *and* still. To describe such experience is constantly to be carried to the brink of paradox or beyond. Elsewhere, I have tried to re-connect this paradox of vitality and stillness with analogous (and analogously paradoxical) *religious* concepts and ideals – most obviously with aspects of deity, understood as both a centre of utter stillness and the infinitely vital source of all creation, all process. But that theme cannot be developed here.

NOTES

¹ See for instance Petersen and Brandt 1995 and Mitton 1996.

² For a sustained and detailed study of anthropomorphism, see Guthrie 1995.

³ See particularly Dufrenne 1976, pp. 38ff.

⁴ Bachelard is referring to Pierre Guéguen, *La Bretagne*, p. 71.

⁵ I am simplifying: such experience may be touched off by *surrogates* for those immensities – e.g., a bare rocky summit plateau which I stand on reminds me not of the human world below but of the Earth's elemental relationships with other heavenly bodies.

⁶ Compare again Mikel Dufrenne: '...au lieu de dire que "le vrai sublime ne se trouve que dans l'esprit de celui qui juge et non dans l'objet naturel qui fait naître cette disposition", nous dirions qu'il se trouve à la fois dans les deux' (Dufrenne 1976: p.45).

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