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Meeting, Moving, Mastering - A Text Analysis of the Aesthetic Attractions of 'Wild Swimming'

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Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Richard Davie, Canterbury Christ Church University, for helping with the language.

Abstract

Why are people fascinated by swimming in nature? This article addresses the aesthetic experiences of wild swimming as expressed by five wild swimming authors in their books. Drawing from aesthetic philosophy, we analyze the ways in which the appeal of wild swimming is described on three levels: the allure of water in the environment, the sensory encounter between water and the body, and the experience of moving in water. Furthermore, with reference to Seel's concept of nature aesthetics (1996), the experience of wild swimming is analyzed in terms of contemplation, correspondence, and imagination. We can conclude that the special intensity of the sensory experience of moving in water allows a closer connectedness to the surrounding natural world than land-based activities or swimming in artificial outdoor pools. This leads to a stronger ethical awareness, both regarding protection of natural water as well as the necessity of developing 'water competency' amongst humans.

Keywords: wild swimming, aesthetics, nature, ethics, water competency

Introduction

As researchers and teachers in sports science from the perspectives of cultural studies and philosophy, with a particular interest in the experiences of the moving body in various contexts, we have both noticed an increasing societal interest in outdoor swimming alongside a decreasing interest in swimming indoors. These tendencies became more apparent as lockdown regulations were implemented due to the Covid 19 pandemic which included closing swimming pools in many countries. A few years prior to these events our observations sparked an interest in investigating the attraction of outdoor swimming from an aesthetic perspective, a perspective we share though from distinct but related empirical and theoretical standpoints. In the process of writing this text we, like everybody else, experienced the pandemic unfolding and created a new form of everyday life. In our different geographical contexts in the Northern hemisphere, outdoor swimming grew in popularity during the first year. In the news we read the 'hype' about the new 'trend' of outdoor swimming, even in the midst of snow and ice. The expansion of this activity occasions the timeliness of this text. In the following, we have combined our expertise and worked with literary texts in order to shed light on the allure of outdoor swimming.

We begin our journey into the literature of wild water by letting one of the organizations promoting this activity lay out the landscape. In 2006, Kate Rew founded the Outdoor Swimming Society (OSS). This community is thriving in water, but also in social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Between September 2018 and May 2021, it saw an increase in members from 27,000 to over 80,000 (i.e., including the time of the pandemic), and now to over 111,000 in spring

2023. OSS, based in Great Britain, describe themselves as “a worldwide collective of swimmers that share the joy, adventure and experience of swimming under an open sky” (<https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/the-outdoor-swimming-society-team/>, 2018-09-26). They also have published a manifesto:

We believe swimming enlarges and celebrates the beauty of each day
We believe in sharing the joy and adventure of swimming
We believe all have a right to swim under an open sky
We believe in open access to lakes and rivers and in keeping lidos open
We believe clean water in our lakes and rivers is a fundamental right
We embrace the delight of cold water and it’s rejuvenating effects
We promise to strip and dip wherever we can (ibid.)

Drawing from the above ideas of OSS and from their suggested readings, we plunge into the literary worlds of open water swimmers in order to understand what is nurturing this trend. Why did people before the pandemic already want to go outside again and leave the security of ‘indoors’ behind? In other words, our overall aim is to understand the aesthetic appeal of outdoor waters. More specifically, we analyze the ways in which outdoor swimming is described through text and images in five books which profusely extol the benefits of swimming in rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, and the sea. We focus on what has been labelled as ‘wild swimming,’ (i.e. swimming in a natural environment as opposed to outdoor swimming in man-made swimming pools which also could be situated outdoors). Furthermore, wild swimming in our understanding is the common expression for non-competitive and not necessarily organized swimming outdoors. In comparison, ‘open water swimming’ is a term often used to describe swimming outdoors as part of a competitive context. We have used ‘outdoor,’ ‘open water,’ and ‘wild’ as synonyms throughout the text for simplicity and legibility, while being aware of their distinctive connotations.

Through our analysis we provide an outline of the aesthetic attractions of outdoor water which offers an analytical basis to better understand the aesthetic experiences of swimming beyond the measured and measurable elements scrutinized by biomechanics, nutritionists, and physiologists. From a societal perspective and in terms of a sense of place, this understanding is valuable for recognizing the aesthetic aspects of space related to public health promotion and urban planning. Furthermore, it has profound educational implications which are yet to be fully developed.

From Measurable Water Encounters to Immersion in Therapeutic Blue Space
Swimming was one of the first sports to develop particular indoor forms. With the exception of ancient baths, which did not prioritize the physical activity of swimming, public baths appeared in Europe at the beginning of the last century as

a way to provide a more weather-proof setting (A chronology of English swimming, 1747-1918, 2007; McLauchlan, 2017; Pussard, 2007). These milieus have since fostered generations of able swimmers. Indeed, decreasing fatalities have been a strong argument for the continuing and even expanded existence of these facilities as aquatic sites.

Moreover, indoor swimming pools have fostered certain types of swimming. Consistent facilities with similar tiles, temperature, and water quality also have made the conditions for swimming more equal and consistent. Consequently, swimming became a competitive sport with reliable and comparable results. With valid results, competition and improvements in performance became important. Before and after the Second World War, pioneering scientific studies in stroke mechanics and swimming physiology paved the way for later in-depth analyses of kinematics, velocity, lactate production, hydrodynamics, metabolism, biomechanics, and nutrition among other areas of study (Pelayo & Alberty, 2011). Contemporary research on the physiology of swimming aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to provide results for evidence-based coaching, for instance, to improve the athletes' "bodyroll in front crawl swimming" (Payton & Sanders, 2011) or consider the "swimming economy (energy cost) and efficiency" (Pampero et al., 2011). Parallel to improved technologies, both in terms of material settings and in terms of practice, there has been an ironic tendency for some swimmers to move out of safe indoor waters and back into the wild.

Drawing from early ideas of water as therapeutic, healthy, and sometimes sacred (Gesler, 2003; Kearns & Gesler, 1998), recent cultural geography has been concerned with continuing this strand of thinking through (re-)establishing the idea of therapeutic 'blue space' (Bell et al., 2015; Coleman & Kearns, 2015; Foley, 2015; Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Völker & Kistemann, 2011). Interactions with oceans, lakes, and rivers influence perceived physical, mental, and social health in a positive way among older adults (i.e., those over 65 years old) (Finlay et al., 2015). Even repeated winter swimming in ice-cold water has been experienced as comfortable to healthy middle-aged women (Smolander et al., 2004). Overall, the benefits of cold water swimming seem to balance the possible risks in a positive way (Knechtle et al., 2020).

Exploring swimming as body–water engagement in blue space, Foley (2015; 2017) has discussed the idea of immersion. Similar to surfers, swimmers experience water relationally including, for instance, the kinetic energy of waves and swell. This immersion nourishes a relational sensibility which may be discussed along theoretical lines drawn from non-representational theory (NRT) (Thrift, 2008). NRT allows for the exploration of person–environment interactions particularly focusing on the body's affective responses beyond mere

representational expression the representational (Cadman, 2009; Anderson, 2014). For example, an experience such as immersion in outdoor waters is often difficult for participants to verbalize. Through the use of metaphors like freshness, and through context and experience, we are able to achieve a deeper understanding of immersion. As Foley has argued, swimming as a therapeutic activity central to blue space, and ‘as a wellbeing component of everyday life’ has ‘a co-productive geography from and of blue space’ (Foley, 2015, p. 224). Expanding on the notion of blue space as important for well-being, Olive and Wheaton (2021) together with a number of authors in the special issue ‘Understanding Blue Spaces’ in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* on the subject, discussed localized experiences of blue space from across the globe. They provided an overview of blue space encounters by different categories of people, in diverse geographical contexts, and with varied purposes. The cross-disciplinary approach of the *JSSI* explores how diverse factors impact how blue spaces are used and experienced, both for swimming and for other forms of physical activity. For instance, the experience of wayfaring and the social dimensions of wild swimming are stressed by a Tasmanian swimmer’s collective known as the Bicheno Coffee Club (Gould et al., 2021). Although some salutogenic perspectives promote the positive properties of blue space to the extent that a ‘hydrophilic turn’ in health promotion has been suggested (Foley et al., 2019), engaging in blue space activities is sometimes also less healthy. Based on his case study which explores surfing in post-tsunami Fukushima, Japan, Evers (2019) reminds us that leisure in water may also be a question of negotiating risk in relation to sewage, toxic waste, and plastic.

Water and Human Existence – A Theoretical and Aesthetic Framework

So why do humans *want* to swim outside in the wild, even in cold water? In order to understand this phenomenon and how swimming in general is more than just a sport, it would be useful to give a short introduction on water itself, both as an element seen from the perspective of natural science as well as of philosophy. Water is an existential element; without water no human being or other mammal could survive more than a few days. From conception, life itself is closely connected to water: the first human movement in utero is actually a form of swimming, and in evolutionary terms, human long ago developed from water-based animals, and we still have anatomical vestiges from this period. But why is our sojourn in water so special for us?

An important element to consider is the physics of water and certain hydrodynamic facts which we will briefly outline here. Water has 800-1000 times greater density than air (i.e., water = 1kg/m^3 vs air = 0.0001kg/m^3); this causes certain physical and physiological effects: the greater density produces: a) buoyancy (i.e., upward force) and increased pressure on our body when submerged in water; b) increased resistance when trying to move in the water; and c) the higher

specific heat conduction which is why we chill so much more rapidly in water than on land. The buoyancy of a body in water is described by the Archimedes principle which means that when a body is submerged in water, the buoyant force equals the weight of the displaced water. If we are totally submerged in water, the buoyant force will be larger than that exerted by our body weight and thus we float. In terms of our bodily experience in water, it seems that floating makes 'flow' easier (i.e., due to buoyancy we can experience ourselves as 'weightless' in water). On the precondition that a person feels comfortable in water and demonstrates a sufficient degree of 'water-competency,' this fact can also account for the psychological experience of 'flow.' This state of well-being was first explicitly studied and described by the American-Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. "Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is the kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: 'that was fun,' or 'that was enjoyable'" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p.137).

Furthermore, water density also has physiological effects on the body which make being in water a different experience than on land. For example, it is harder to inhale but easier to exhale, as the water compresses our torso, and the heat loss mentioned above has an impact on the cardiovascular system.

All these physical qualities have influenced how humans use and handle water. Water is the basis for much cultural development. Human settlements were close to water sources, both rivers, big lakes, and the sea, which served as both sources of drinking water but also as a means of transport and source of food. The first 'streets' were on water; culture and political power expanded along waterways. It was necessary to find out how to survive when being in and on water, therefore swimming as a movement competence was already important in ancient times.

As humans were so closely connected and dependent on water, it is unsurprising that this element was also interpreted and reflected on in metaphysical terms. Water has been important as a symbol in many religions: in Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, among others, water is revered as a powerful symbol of cleansing, birth, and renewal. The rituals of Christian baptism and Islamic washing are two examples related to the spiritual meaning of water. In Zen Buddhism a well-known metaphor for human existence is the ocean wave: water is described as the source of wisdom, and swimming teaches us to live properly. In the Manuals of the Shinden School of Samurai Swimming from Japanese Zen Buddhism, we can even find the following description:

Swim with the flow without strain, resistance, confusion, or unnatural movement. Diving fosters bravery; submerging, patience, floating, serenity; distance swimming, fortitude; racing, a fighting spirit; swimming in frigid water, perseverance. A swimmer should practice in all matter of water –

seas, lakes, marshes, and rivers – and under all types of conditions – currents, waves, muddy water, and whirlpools. (Stevens, 2001, p.61f.).

Cultural reflection on water and human existence has also occupied philosophers. For example, the ancient Greek, Thales, concluded that water is the first principle, the basis for knowledge and insight, and the true reality (cf. Scholtz, 2016), a viewpoint not so far from those of the religions. Naturally, in the beginning humans practiced swimming in the open water which surrounded them, but already in ancient Rome the first indoor facilities for bathing and swimming had been built. Over the centuries, due to moral, cultural, environmental, and technological developments, and not least when practiced as a modern sport, swimming has become another indoor activity like many others. Undoubtedly, the perspective of natural science on water as an element is important for the experience of swimming. Given this and given that water has been crucial for societal development, how may we understand swimming and encounters with water from a philosophical perspective?

Philosophical Aesthetics and Nature

Philosophical Aesthetics is often associated solely with understanding art or as a theory of beauty. By going back to its original meaning in ancient Greek philosophy, the 18th century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten extended this conception (Baumgarten as referenced in Böhme, 2001) by defining philosophical aesthetics as a theory of sensory knowledge and experience. Reicher (2015) goes further in her explanation of philosophical aesthetics by regarding aesthetic experiences as a combination of sensory perception and the emotions we feel (e.g., like/dislike). These emotions depend on other psychological phenomena (e.g., imagination). Aesthetic experiences can be understood from the perspective of the object or/and the perspective of the subject, (i.e., in our case both the swimmer and the natural surroundings are encompassed). Reicher (2015, p. 38) further defined what distinguishes a solely sensory experience from becoming an aesthetic one by relating it to emotions: “An aesthetic experience is a sensory experience precisely when the nature and intensity of the aesthetic feeling depend on sensually perceptible properties of a perceived object.” This may explain why some merely perceive the physical fact of ‘cold sea water,’ while others speak of the ‘beauty of the ocean’ when experiencing precisely the same phenomenon. Discussion of the interconnection between aesthetic, sensory, and emotional-affective components related to how human experience of nature has mainly focused on the psychological aspects of health and well-being in accordance with Ulrich’s aesthetic-affective theory as well as the ‘biophilia hypothesis’ (cf., Ulrich, 1983; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Völker & Kistemann, 2011; Meidenbauer et al. 2020).

Scrutinizing the aesthetics of wild swimming therefore requires a focus on nature as the arena of aesthetic experience. One recent more general concept of nature and aesthetics is given by the German philosopher, Martin Seel (1996). Seel (1996, p.18) described three basic models for illuminating humans' appreciation of nature. Three leading terms in this regard are: 1) contemplation, 2) correspondence, and 3) imagination. The first, the contemplative approach, characterizes our encounter with natural beauty without attaching any significance to it: we are simply viewing a landscape or a lake without interpreting, similar to other potentially spiritual moments. The second reason for our enjoyment of natural beauty relates to our experiences in life, the correspondence of nature to our lifeworld. In this case nature is experienced as 'beautiful' because it corresponds with one's view of a good life. Imagination as the third of these explanations describes our relationship to nature as art, as an idea and an image of beauty. The landscape or the lake seen in relaxation and without further consideration in the contemplative situation can now be addressed using meaningful metaphors from art and seen as an enjoyable picture painted by nature (cf., Seel 1999). Seel makes the useful distinction between the term 'nature' in this philosophical-aesthetic context, and the theoretical concept of nature used in sciences like biology or medicine. The nature we encounter in terms of aesthetic experience can be characterized by three different aspects: its powerful independence despite human attempts at controlling it ('Eigenmächtigkeit der Natur,' i.e., its autonomous power); second, this nature offers the possibility of sensuous perception—we can sense its qualities just as we are ('Sinnliche Wahrnehmbarkeit'); and third, this concept of nature is part of our lifeworld ('lebensweltliche Anwesenheit'). It is nature in its entirety that we relate to when talking about aesthetics: we are experiencing and seeing the lake, not a collection of molecules (cf., Seel 1996, p.20f.). That means, for the purposes of our paper, when attempting to understand the urge to swim outside in natural water, we are not looking for an answer by measuring the temperature or color of the water, or swimmers' blood-pressure, or hormones, or brain activity. For the latter, the neurophysiological and psychological approach of Nichols (2014) provides valuable scientific insights which can contribute useful aspects to the discussion. In contrast, if one understands nature as an integral part of one's lifeworld, considering swimming in nature as an activity merely in terms of its medical or physical aspects is insufficient.

Method and Material

To analyze the ways in which outdoor swimming is expressed by its advocates and discern the aesthetic components and appeal of outdoor waters, we have systematically worked through five selected books (see Table 1). We chose four of the books as representative of *recent* outdoor swimming literature. They were published in the years 2017-2018 and are all mentioned by OSS on their website.

Lynn Roper's *Wild Women Swimming* is more than just mentioned by the organisation. On the cover, Roper is described as 'at the heart of OSS,' dedicated to wild swimming. The remaining book, Deakin's *Waterlog* (1999), is included as a classic in this category and is the predecessor of Minihane's book, *Floating* (2017). Indeed, this is not the only intertextual example as the authors recurrently quote each other. The authors are all passionate about wild swimming for various reasons and with subtly different swimming experiences. All of them alternate between personal narrative and statements about the experience of swimmers in general. Four of the books have biographical content in diary form with the exception of Wardley's *Mindful Art of Wild Swimming*. As a genre, biography is common in wild swimming literature. Deakin (1999) paved the way in narrating personal water experiences. The books range between 143 and 340 pages. The covers of the five books encapsulate their contents into joyful experiences with water and nature, but also as journeys beyond the waters and into oneself (see Table 1). Given the fact that wild swimming has increased rapidly as a permissible outdoor activity during the pandemic, a surge of literature on the topic has emerged in its wake. We have, however, chosen to remain with our original selection of literature all published before the pandemic as the more recent books do not differ significantly from our selection in terms of form and content.

Table 1

Selected literature used in the aesthetic analysis

Author	Title	# of pages	Publ. year	Content as announced on cover & comments
Roger Deakin writer, filmmaker and environmentalist. founder of Friends of the Earth, cofounder of Common Ground	Waterlog. A swimmer's journey through Britain.	340	1999	Author swims through the British Isles. "A personal journey and a bold assertion of the native swimmer's right to roam, he shares an unforgettable celebration of the magic of the water" (outside cover) The first of this kind, now a classic of the nature writing canon.
Joe Minihane journalist, copywriter, specializing in travel and adventure pieces	Floating. A life regained.	270	2017	"...swimming is both a joyous activity and a voyage into oneself"... a remarkable memoir about, on the surface, a passion for swimming and nature", "...a love letter to different wild stretches of water" (inside cover) Follows the armstrokes of Deakin.

Jessica J. Lee doctorate in environmental history and aesthetics	Turning. A swimming memoir.	284	2017	“This book is for everyone who loves swimming, who wishes they could push themselves beyond caution, who understands the deep pleasures of using their body’s strengths, who knows what it is to abandon all thought and float home to the surface” (inside cover)
Tessa Wardley global environmental consultant, river lover and mini adventurer	The mindful art of wild swimming. Reflections for Zen Seekers.	143	2017	“When we master the art of swimming, we discover the liberation that comes with weightlessness and enter an intensely private world where a meditative state of mind is easily achieved. Swimming in wild waters takes this experience to an even more intense level where self-discovery and fulfilment reside, producing profound effects on the mind and spirit.”
Lynne Roper paramedic (1961- 2016)	Wild Woman Swimming	191	2018	“Devon paramedic Lynne Roper began swimming outdoors in 2011(...) warm, funny and fearless, she was soon at the heart of The Outdoor Swimming Society, inspiring others to swim wild, ‘read water’ and take educated risks as she did. For five years, until a brain tumour made swimming and writing impossibly hard, Lynne recorded her adventures in over sixty wild waters. (...) her diaries are a celebration of Dartmoor, the Devon coats and the close-knit communities that grow from shared endeavour.”

The methodological approach we have chosen is primarily based on phenomenological-hermeneutical considerations. Inspired by sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), we have interpreted the selected material as sensory texts. These texts are produced by the authors, but are arguably ‘evocative of the sensoriality, and thus of the embodied, emplaced ways of knowing’ (Pink, 2015, p. 144). Sensory ethnography has inspired the way we have structured our analytical section and informed the way we interpret and discuss perception as multisensorial. Our readings of the chosen literature were guided by the following analytical questions: What are the descriptions of water in the environment? How are water and the body described? How is the moving body in the water described?

As we will show in the findings section, descriptions of water in the environment are mainly based on the sensory perception of vision, what the swimmer can see and observe with his or her eyes of the surrounding nature and

environment. As indicated by a subsequent heading, water is alluring. Answering the second question refers to the narrations concerning sensuous perceptions via the swimmer's sense of touch, taste or smell—in other words, sensuous experiences with a direct impact on and contact with the body. In line with a multisensorial understanding, those sensory categories are meant as guidelines, not as strict divisions, with evident overlapping between them. These are encounters with the water as highlighted by the heading. The last analytical question captures descriptions of the moving body and subsumes all reports of kinesthetic experiences (i.e., descriptions of the swimming motions themselves). We have summed these under the heading 'engagements with the water.'

In the previous theoretical section, we described the philosophical aesthetics informing our analytical work. We have used Seel's model to analyze the appreciation of nature. In the discussion, we further develop our analysis in relation to philosophical aesthetics. The sensory ways of encountering the water in our chosen wild swimming literature are addressed in relation to the experience of nature's autonomous power and as a challenge. There are skills required which must be mastered or at least taken into consideration when swimming outdoors exposed to the forces of wild water. The relationship to one's lifeworld is described in the texts where attention is paid to the surroundings and the integration of the swimming experience in the larger context of one's existence. There are other aspects in the narratives which contribute further specifics to the descriptions, and add interesting facets to our analysis, and ultimately to our answer to the research question. These include specific physical challenges, competitions, or achievements; health related issues; references to or metaphors concerning the arts, music or beauty; environmental issues such as pollution; and aspects of spirituality or some existential dimension. They may differ in terms of impact in the individual narrative; however, to understand the phenomenon of the attractiveness of wild swimming more fully, these aspects need to be taken into consideration.

Findings

In this section we will present our findings along three lines structured the analytical questions which both informed and were informed by our readings (i.e., 'What are the descriptions of water in the environment? How is water and the body described? How is the moving body in the water described?'). They may be regarded as different levels of approach to water as a swimmer and for clarity they are presented below in that order. As stated above, however, the descriptions are often entangled in the authors' own narratives. Another common characteristic of the writing is the use of poetic language adding to the understanding of wild swimming as something pleasurable and beautiful as part of aesthetics.

The Allure of Water in the Environment

No matter what kind of water, the way to it is often described in terms of longing and from a distance. The landscape in which this wild water exists provides a backdrop for descriptions of both the water itself and the desire for it. Lee (2017) contemplates accordingly on the silent attraction of a lake near Berlin:

[...] there is something about this lake, the clarity of the water, the way it sits silently, unassumingly, on the edge of the city, that has convinced me that I love it. I scan the horizon, looking for reasons or signs, but see only the thick reeds at the lake's edge – golden highlights on a dull brown background – and the grey of the water. There is nothing exceptional about the day or the place, but it holds itself stoically, a silent shore, and I have respect for it (Lee, 2017, p. 207).

Roper (2018) animates the water and gives voice to it: the water itself is calling for the swimmer:

... but just a little way upstream is a lovely dipping pool sheltered by oaks, one of which appears to be executing a theatrical bow: Come in, come in, it seems to say. (...) The water glistens amber and green and feels like satin (Roper, 2018, p. 72).

Less silent, but otherwise similar, Wardley (2017) describes the attractive forces of water as a mesmerizing, absorbing, enticing multi-sensory experience: “Water is mesmerizing. We are drawn to the water's edge and if we take time to sit and watch we become absorbed” (Wardley, 2017, p. 103). A waterfall seems to have a powerful attraction.

A waterfall is the ultimate rush. Ribbons of molten glass stream down the rock face, bouncing and exploding into shards of spray, catching and sparkling light. A maelstrom of sight and sound, invigorating and exciting the senses until you are organically involved in the scene (Wardley, 2017, p. 86).

Not as turbulent but equally poetic are the descriptions prevalent in Roper; for example: “The pool is black, and the currents are patterned with fine foam like paisley fabric” (Roper, 2018, p. 68). Deakin (1999) too describes water, in his case a river, in an aesthetically pleasing way that encompasses the surrounding natural environment: “I heard the brimming river before I saw it, pouring and dancing more like mountain water beside a grassy path that bordered a marshy wood” (Deakin, 1999, p.197). Water in the environment is something seen and heard, identified as part of nature. Minihane (2017, p.38) describes the urge to go swimming as a desire to be part of a place, part of the spectacle of nature: “I was now reserving my preferred head-out breaststroke for ponds, rivers and bays, places where I wanted to observe nature and feel part of the scene”.

Throughout the literature, attraction to the water exists regardless of the season. All seasons and waters seem to have their own allure: “[e]very stretch of water in each season and every time of day has its own signature tune” (Wardley 2017, p. 114). For example, summer landscapes are often pictured with splashing and joy, such as in Lee (2017):

I can hear the water now, too, splashing and laughter streaming in from somewhere just out of sight. I step out in front and forge a path through the branches, emerging dazed and temporarily blinded on to a well-trodden field path. There’s the lake at its end (Lee, 2017, p. 27).

Although the allure of water and Nature (with capital N) is expressed mainly in aesthetically positive, even romantic terms, some authors like Minihane (2017) also reveal the negatives: the human impacts on the natural environments

As with most hidden river holes I’d visited, this faraway pool was blighted with litter: burnt cans, empty cigarette packets, floating water bottles, discarded chocolate wrappers. This was something I had been happy to overlook until now, something that annoyed me but which I tried not to take notice of as I attempted to get into Roger’s romantic mindset about the English countryside (Minihane, 2017, p. 101).

The Sensuous Encounter with Water

If anticipation and excitement pervade the descriptions of water in the environment, reaching and meeting the water in one’s skin may be characterized as a sensory encounter in the books that we have analyzed. The swimming coach’s imperatives in Wardley’s text go straight to this encounter.

As you first start to immerse yourself, don’t worry about swimming. Just lower yourself into the water and see how it feels on the skin. Water has many temperatures and textures, but the pressure it exerts on the skin is an all-over body massage (Wardley, 2017, p. 32).

Wardley’s instructions are precise, teaching the reader not to hurry, to stay in the moment, and be mindful of every aspect.

Watery environments are a feast for the senses; the synthesized blue and yellow lights of indoors are replaced by the full color spectrum of light; sounds and smells are subtle and natural, soothing and calming to body and mind – a gift in the pursuit of mindfulness (Wardley, 2017 p.113).

Lee, less imperative but still focusing on the sensory experience, tells how swimmers ‘know’ their waters: “A swimmer knows a lake through sensation; through moving from the shoreline to the center, through the feeling of the water. Warm, thick. Cold, sharp” (Lee, 2017, p. 18).

The diverse characters of different waters recur throughout the books, and consequently how these are sensed. Several times Roper (2018) makes the comparison with fizzy drinks of different kinds and stages: “I feel the tickle of the water and the amplified echoes of the falls in my underwater ears. Rachel says it’s like bathing in Champagne’ (pp. 115) and “It’s like swimming in a mixture of Guinness, Jail Ale, and ice in a pub’s drip tray at the end of a busy night“ (p. 132). The encounter may be sparking and colorful but may also be experienced as flat and mirky. Encountering this type of water involves sensations of the skin both beneath and above the surface, which may even be discerned visually as tiny spheres.

So many sensations and far more subtle than a jacuzzi: cold currents that push and pummel; effervescence like birds’ wings brushing on skin, fizzing louder than the roar of the cascade. Each bubble oscillates and atomizes on our faces. Our eyes are level with the surface, so we see tiny spheres meld and grow before scating across the pool in the wind (Roper, 2018, p. 147).

Despite the comparison with drinks, Roper does not mention taste, though it can be imagined as either agreeable or unpleasant. In another excerpt, however, both taste and density is made explicit.

I taste a tang of salt, then feel the chill on my feet and hands where the denser seawater has sunk beneath the warm blanket of the river. The underwater landscape is pocked with coiled ragworm casts like tiny Inca temples (Roper, 2018, p. 74).

One particular characteristic of the water which is often described is temperature. In the above excerpt it was like “a warm blanket.” By contrast, Minihane (2017) describes the water as “sluggish” and “cold.” His encounter goes beyond the water and includes other aspects of nature.

The poplar trees on the far bank sang in the light breeze as I swam off against the sluggish current and let the cold take hold of me. The water was thick with weeds which wrapped themselves around my arms and legs. I swam on regardless (Minihane, 2017, p.74).

All the authors, in different ways, pay particular attention to cold water encounters. Deakin describes meeting cold water as being stung by nettles. The first shocking sensation, however, is replaced by a more pleasant one.

I stripped and dived in. It was so cold, I might have flung myself into a bed of nettles. Then came the heady rush of the endorphins, or ‘endorphins’ as a friend once called them, the natural opiates with which the body anaesthetizes itself against the cold, and the adrenaline. As the *Oxford Textbook of Medicine* cautiously says, the mood changes they induce ‘are difficult to validate scientifically, although feelings of well-being seem to

occur.’ For swimmers, my friend’s inspired malapropism goes straight to the point: you come up feeling like a dolphin. (Deakin, 1999, p.211)

Lee (2017) too writes about the shock and the endorphin rush, but also includes its dangers– how it can cause you to drown. Later in her text, Lee reassures the reader that the cold is something one can become accustomed to and that this expectation can induce a stillness:

When you swim in the cold, the pain triggers an endorphin rush that hits you moments after leaving the water. Initially, there’s just shock. It can be incredibly dangerous – it can leave you gasping for breath. You risk swallowing water and drowning. But once the shock passes – and with it, the initial pain – there’s space for something else. I feel it on my body when I step out of the cold and into the air: the sudden tightening of the skin as the water evaporates, the rush of sensation working its way across my body. There’s the rush, the elation. It’s an inexplicable lightness (Lee, p. 164). (...)

But repeatedly exposing the body to the cold changes things: the water doesn’t seem so bad after a few weeks. You come to expect it. There’s no shock, but rather a stillness, an ability to observe the sensation of ice on the body (Lee, p. 177).

Certain characteristics, like bubbling water, influence the experience of cold; Roper (2018) “... love[s] the feeling of sinking through the bubbles, which soften even cold water, so it resembles a feather bed. We bob around, sink, and swim up and down enjoying the sensation” (p. 50).

Also influencing the experience of encountering the waters and of swimming is using a wetsuit. It is commonplace for contemporary wild swimmers, particularly in cold temperatures, to use a wetsuit. Deakin (1999), however, notes how this inhibits sensory experience.

The problem about wearing a wetsuit is sensory deprivation; it is a species of whole-body condom. Of course, there are people who like rubber. They enjoy the feel of it; they may even find it aesthetically pleasing. But there is no getting away from the fact that a wetsuit is an anaesthetic to prevent you experiencing the full force of your physical encounter with cold water, and in that sense, it is against nature and something of a killjoy. [...] It can make a long swim in cold water bearable, even comfortable, but it cannot approach the sensuality of swimming in your own skin (p.8-9).

The shift in element, from land into water, sharply accentuates the sensory encounter. Previous sensory experience fuels the imagination for further sensations.

After Minihane has broken his arm and the cast makes it impossible to enter water just the sight of water triggers the sensory memory of previous encounters. “I could sense the water without fully immersing myself, and I could access its joys without having to get in. For now, looking at the scene was as good as being in it” (Minihane 2017, p. 111-112). Imagination cannot fully replace the sense of immersion though: “I was desperate for the cold slap of the sea, something to deepen that sense of happiness I’d felt while staring at the water on my past two journeys (Minihane, 2017, p. 118).

These encounters with the water are nonetheless a constant part of the experience of swimming and the following section discusses how the authors describe these sensations as an integral part of swimming, or rather swimming as the driving force of these sensations.

Moving in the Water

If the first analytical level, the allure of water, highlights the visual sense, how the authors look at and see water in the environment, the second level, the body’s encounter with water, is multisensorial. Similarly, this third level describes experiences where all senses are brought together, and a moving body is center stage or moving in the water grants “the liberation that comes with weightlessness” (Wardley 2017, p.7). Swimming is described as a combination of corporeal lightness and rhythm and of engagement with water. Lee compares how the rhythm of moving certain body parts in certain ways resembles dance. “Limbs stretched wide and then tight to my body again, my strike as concise as a water strider dancing at the lake’s surface” (Lee, 2017, p. xvii). Rhythmic strokes encourage regular breathing and “[o]nce the water has their full attention and they start swimming, most swimmers talk about how they focus on the rhythm of the strokes and marry them to their breathing” (Wardley 2017, p. 19). The rhythmic movement of swimming and the balanced sensation of floating may allow for experiences of elation beyond the ordinary arguing that the words “swimmingly” and “ekstasis” derive from such out-of-body moments, Deakin describes his experience when the prerequisites are just right:

I swam through the cold, polished water, each stroke cutting a perfect arc of tiny bubbles, everything in equilibrium. When swimmers talk of fast or slow water, this is the sort of thing they mean. The absence of wavelets, or other bathers, means you can breathe and move in perfect rhythm, so the music takes over. Mind and body go off somewhere together in unselfconscious bliss, and the lengths seem to swim themselves. The blood sings, the water yields; you are in a state of grace, and every breath gets deeper and more satisfying. You hunker down and bury yourself in the water as though you have lived in it all your life, as though you were born

to it, and thoughts come lightly and easily as you swing up and down in the blue (Deakin 1999, p. 307).

Losing the rhythm is also noted in the literature, as in this example from Roper: “The waves are mostly with us, and we should be able to swim easily but it’s a struggle. I’ve lost my rhythm, am very tired” (Roper 2018, p.82). Loss of rhythm turns the experience of swimming into a tiring struggle. Moving in the water is in other words described in various ways. Sometimes the same moment occasions two quite different moods or modes of movement: “As Jools smashed out an absurdly powerful front crawl, actually managing to swim upstream, I lay on my back in the shallows. I could feel the winter’s gloom lifting from me” (Minihane 2017, p.48). Swimming is not confined to the peaceful and mindful but is also an experience of force and speed. Wardley describes the sensation of using muscular force to move fast through water.

You should start to feel the heat in your muscles as they work hard – this is the burn [...] Feel the unbridled joy at the strength in your body as you work smoothly and efficiently, powering through the water (Wardley 2017, p. 85).

In the previous excerpt, moving in the water is a strenuous experience, but in contrast to “losing the rhythm,” it is a joyous one. Moreover, force is present in the water and engaging with the water means engaging with its force, be it waves, currents, tide, streams, or rapids. Deakin describes being seized and lifted by the tide.

The tide seized me as I swam out past the line of boats, like a thermal lifting a glider, and I instinctively lengthened my stroke to swim with as much power and economy as I could summon. [...] I just kept on gazing at the power station chimney, [...] and swimming somewhat crabwise across the current (Deakin, 1999, p. 271).

Similarly, Roper vividly describes how “[w]aves surge up the narrowing fissure and carry us in before sucking us back, cradled by the sea” (Roper 2018, p.39), and: “We’re pulled in and shooshed back; it’s like being caught in the windpipe of a living creature” (Roper 2018, p.67). Deakin writes about the water as both turbulent and tasty, and engaging with more of nature than just the water. Most often in the chosen literature, the force of the water cannot not be conquered. Again, Deakin describes how “surrendering your body to the current, it is surprising how easily and naturally you are swept down, like the translucent leaves you see dancing underwater in the sunlight” (Deakin 1999, p.128). It is surrender to the water that ultimately permits the most profound experience.

I found I was moving at exhilarating speed, in big striding strokes, like a fell runner on the downhill lap. It was like dream swimming, going so

effortlessly fast, and feeling locked in by the current, with no obvious means of escape. I was borne along faster and faster as the rising tide approached the funnel of the river's mouth until it shot me into a muddy, steep-sided mooring channel by some old stone limekilns on the beach. I had to strike out with all my strength to escape the flood and reach the eddy in the shallows. I swam back up to the limekilns and crawled out on the beach like a turtle but couldn't resist dropping back into the muscular current for a second ride down the channel (Deakin 1999, p.131).

Analytical Discussion

In the previous section, we have shown how the authors of our chosen wild swimming literature have described the allure of water in the environment regardless of season or landscape. At a distance it is the visual sense that comes to the fore. The direct encounter with the water is a multisensory experience, often but not always a pleasant one, its intensity highlighted through poetic language. The engagement encompasses force, corporeal lightness and rhythm. Similar to previous research, the accounts show how the immersive experience in waters of all kinds creates a relational sensibility to its particularities (cf. Anderson, 2014; Foley, 2015). When interviewees in previous research have trouble expressing these engagements, our data given its literary character overflows with an abundance of lively comparisons. Moreover, the therapeutic power of blue space, as argued by Finlay et al. (2015) and Foley (2015) is amply evidenced in our data. Indeed, the literature we have analyzed are all accounts of personal journeys beyond swimming and beyond the water into oneself. These journeys arise from emotional and/or spiritual search and have differing outcomes, yet they all testify to a greater or lesser extent to an intimate relation with the natural world and the waters within it. Water is emphasized as crucial for health, but water is not necessarily healthy per se. Our data show how human impact may result in polluted water to be negotiated, much like the surfing waters outside Fukushima in Evers (2019).

Contemplation, Correspondence, and Imagination

In this next section we analyze our findings in relation to philosophical aesthetics, in particular, Seel's model for explaining appreciation of nature. Subsequently, his three levels — correspondence and imagination — are further developed in relation to our findings.

According to Nichols (2014, p. 12), a landscape's desirability increases if it includes water. The assumption behind this is that it gathers 'all the elements needed for human survival: grasses and trees for food (and to attract edible animal life); the ability to see approaching danger (human or animal) before it arrives; trees to climb if you need to escape predators; and the presence of an accessible source of water nearby' (Nichols, 2014, p. 12). Furthermore, the view of seacoasts,

lakeshores or riverbanks are closely connected to ‘positive mood, preference, and perceived restorativeness.’ In Nichols’ biological explanations, ‘land-based predators rarely came from the water, and most marine-based predators couldn’t emerge from the water or survive on land’ (Nichols, 2014, p. 12).

Contemplation as Aesthetic Attractiveness

Serenity and beauty may certainly draw on biological needs, but these requirements also have an aesthetic dimension. Seel (1996) describes human desire for the beauty of nature with three leading terms: contemplation, correspondence, and imagination. Contemplation in Seel’s terms includes distancing from the stress of everyday life as a kind of time out. Immersed in an element which is different from our normal existence provides literal physical support to this distancing in the experience of weightlessness, the touch on our skin and pressure on the body. Deakin expresses this kind of contemplation in the following: ‘The great thing about an aimless swim is that everything about it is concentrated in the here and now; none of its essence or intensity can escape into the past or future [... The swimmer] is a leaf on the stream, free at last from his petty little purposes in life’ (Deakin, 2014, p. 86). In other words, Seel’s discussion of aesthetics is on an existential level and should not be confused with the perceptual approaches to water which we have used as a guiding structure in the findings section; in Seel’s terms “(...) to contemplate the lake, i.e. to meet it with disinterested attention” (Seel, 1996, p.38). In the case of the swimmers’ aesthetic encounter with a lake, sea, or river, several senses are unified in an even more intensive contemplative experience. However, in order to approach this “disinterested attention” it is necessary that the swimmer feels confidence in her/his own water competency otherwise the fear of drowning or at least discomfort would dominate the experience.

In a contemplative attitude, the lake is neither classified as a symbol for something nor as being of such and such a nature; we follow its nature in the abundance and play of appearances in which it gives itself for the time of this contemplation. (...) Contemplative perception dwells on the appearances that its object exhibits, it indulges in the distinctions that it extracts from its object, without aiming beyond that at an interpretation. Its meaning with the phenomenon disregards its significance (Seel, 1996, p.39).

In this regard we may understand the authors’ descriptions of the visual allure of water in its environment with its metaphoric expression of their experience and emotions as contemplative, a kind of aesthetic ‘flow’. This flow may be understood as a *leitmotif* running through Seel’s theory which can underline the aesthetic potential of swimming in nature. Due to hydromechanics, humans (and other living beings) float in water. This floating, the feeling of weightlessness, intensifies the experience of flow.

Correspondence as Motif for Aesthetic Attractiveness

Correspondence integrates the experience of nature as being part of one's lifeworld. Previous experiences are important here. Through correspondence nature (i.e., water) becomes a possible place of mastering, of successful human practice, and overcoming challenges (cf. Seel, 1996, p. 89). The descriptions of challenging swims in the excerpts above are examples of this. Similarly, descriptions of beauty and pleasure are examples of correspondence as these descriptions point towards our ideas of enjoyment and gratification. The beauty in the sight of a lake for example is experienced as “an expression of my participation in the things of life”, and as a ‘place of life’ (Seel, 1996, p.89). Seel assumes that we regard a natural landscape as beautiful or attractive because of the correspondence with our life interests. We experience nature as an *aesthetic* experience, when it corresponds with our idea of what we regard as a good life, for instance a life situation where we are able to master challenges. Moreover, we consider the advantages of being in that specific landscape, in our cases in water, as greater than the disadvantages. Moving in water underlines this aspect as shown in our data above. Explicitly, Minihane writes: ‘I was now reserving my preferred head-out breaststroke for ponds, rivers and bays, places where I wanted to observe nature and feel part of the scene’ (Minihane, 2017, p. 38).

Imagination as Individual Reasons for Experiencing the Aesthetics of Nature

According to Seel’s aesthetic theory, imagination uses nature as a mirror of the world. On an aesthetic and existential level imagination allows us to interpret life and our being from a new perspective. Comparing the swimming experience with other experiences allows us to make new interpretations of our everyday life. In our chosen data, mastering wild swimming was deeply intertwined with mastering other struggles in life. For Minihane, swimming in the armstrokes of Deakin is directly linked to him ‘swimming free’ from depression, thus imagining and finding a better way of life for himself. The aspect of imagination as emphasized by Seel not only connects human existence with nature, it connects human existence with art and culture. Indeed, our authors use multiple metaphors to compare their impressions of being in water with objects or sensory experiences from art and culture. Because metaphors can contain meaning which otherwise is difficult to express, the imaginative aspect of the aesthetic experience of nature helps us to understand our being in the world.

Aesthetics, Ethics, and Intensity

Our overall aim for this article was to understand the aesthetic appeal of outdoor waters. We analyzed the ways in which outdoor swimming was expressed through the text in five books. Our aim arose from our curiosity and subsequent reflections on our experiences of swimming ourselves, both indoors and ‘in the wild’. We wondered why people describe swimming in the natural environment as a special

aesthetic experience and what characterizes its aesthetic appeal? We wondered why wild swimming has become popular when there is no need for training and practicing swimming outdoors anymore thanks to indoor artificial pools? As we have shown above, the intensity of the sensory experience is crucial and coincides with the tactile sense. Direct bodily contact with the element of water is itself powerful. In accordance with Reicher's previous definition of sensory experience (2015, p.38) the aesthetic component is linked to "the nature and intensity of the aesthetic feeling" and this again depends on the "sensually perceptible properties of a perceived object." In other words, our emotional reactions to the situation experienced are crucial. This aesthetic feeling cannot be detached from the general feeling of a good life. Accordingly, we now turn to consider this sense of an ethically good life.

Aesthetics and Ethics Are Intertwined

The quest for aesthetics in activities in nature entails consideration of its ethical aspects. "The natural beauty is not only a corrective of art and other aesthetic practice, as part of a good life, it is a corrective of individual and collective ideals of existence" (Seel, 1996, p.288). Nature can offer an intrinsic beauty which guides us in our ethical decisions. The ideal beauty of, for example, an untouched white sand beach, green palm trees by a turquoise blue ocean in sunlight triggers an aesthetic feeling which at the same time presents an ethical demand: take care of this beach! In this regard, aesthetic experiences can remind us to interact ethically with the natural world around us. As mentioned above, the sensory aesthetic experience is linked to aesthetic feelings, to emotions and as a consequence to motivation for acting and caring. Seel (1996) proposes that the moral significance of the beauty of nature entails that the aesthetic approach to experiences in nature has ethical value.

Ethically good situations and actions are those that are in themselves states or processes of flourishing life. Our assumption is therefore that the aesthetic interest in nature includes a possible ethical interest because it applies to non-arbitrary situations of good life (p.290).

This includes both a kind of 'narrow ethic' towards yourself, as well as 'ethic to the other' to the natural world around us of which we are a part of. Immersed in a lake, this 'being part of nature' is so clear and concrete that an ethical responsibility seems obvious.

The esthetic experience of nature as beautiful provides an example for the good life (cf., Seel, 1996), and without respect for nature we lose possibility for creating this meaningful good life. In the case of swimming *in* open, natural waters this seems obvious: the pollution of water and destruction of animal and plant life self-evidently jeopardize a good and healthy (in the broad sense) life. Although

there is no space to go further into detail here in this paper, there are a number of environmental observations in our material, either in the form of descriptions of surrounding plant- and animal life as well as reports of pollution or other human intrusion on nature:

Now the river can often rise very sharply in the space of a few hours (...) Streams have been straightened into concrete culverts; old flood meadows have been developed by supermarkets and even housing, so the water has nowhere to go except the river and a flood can soon build up (Deakin, 2014, p. 115).

It is not solely the state of the natural environment, which is ethically relevant, but also the mental health of the swimmer; thus Minihane (2017, p. 15) for example: “I swam to fix myself, to cure myself and to make myself a better person in my own eyes”. For this purpose, the direct encounter with animals, plants and the landscape around the location for swimming seems to be crucial. In accordance with mental health and well-being Seel’s theory of nature aesthetics with its explanations of “correspondence” offers another link to the ethical component of our inquiry.

(...) I experience the landscape as the presence of promising modes of existence that surpass the other disadvantages. To find it beautiful in a corresponding sense means to experience it as an expression and part of the possibility of a good life opened up by it (Seel, 1996, p.90)

The authors’ experiences of swimming are what may draw them to environmental education and related occupations. The narrow ethics, in teleological terms of the quest of the good life, are closely linked to the ethics for the other: Swimming in dirty, polluted water affects both “the other”, i.e. nature and the swimmer’s own well-being.

Concluding Remarks and Consequences for Swimming, Society, and Culture

As we wanted to focus on the relation between ‘swimming’ and ‘experience of nature’, it is important to note that we derived our data from narratives dealing with the physical activity of swimming as a leisure sport in contrast to bathing or swimming in a broader sense in professional contexts. Not unexpectedly, the selection of texts chosen concentrate mostly on descriptions of swimming in natural environments and open, natural water, even though swimming in outdoor – artificial – swimming pools can lead to some similar experiences, depending on the surroundings. Swimming in natural waters offers a dimension which goes far beyond swimming in an artificial indoor swimming pool. Some of the sensory aspects mentioned in the study may be experienced in an outdoor artificial pool, but not the immediate encounter with nature. This immediacy, the undisturbed experience of the beauty of nature, implies an ethical interest. Seel (1996, p.290)

assumes that in this respect: “i. Natural beauty is not just any good, but ethically good, (i.e., a general situation of successful life). ii. Natural beauty is not just any ethical good, but a paradigmatic situation for the form of such success in general.” We can find similar forms of close encounter with nature which may also afford experience of natural beauty, such as ‘Shinrin Yoku’ - “forest bathing” (Miyazaki, 2018) or gardening therapy (Stuart-Smith, 2020). However, none of the latter offer the same intensity and quality as immersion in natural waters. Being in water increases this experience immensely. Thrown back in a kind of ‘original state,’ like the first nine months of existence in our mother’s womb, we are more vulnerable and insecure as water is not our usual habitat. As a result, we are forced to build a stronger trust in the surrounding environment but also in ourselves. The pedagogical consequences of this, as these experiences indicate, relate to how we learn and know – the physical activity of swimming – but also how we understand ourselves as living beings within an intricately interwoven wider living context consisting of both nature and culture. The need for teaching and learning swimming in natural waters as the primary step becomes clearer. We cannot experience the aesthetics of wild swimming if we are not able to experience mastery of the waters in which swim; as the result will be fatal: drowning. The second step that follows from this – as important as the first – namely appreciating and protecting the beauty of nature, challenges us to greater responsibility towards nature. A responsibility that is needed more than ever in the face of rising pollution and climate change.

Go out and swim!

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