

THE GREEN HORIZON: AN (ENVIRONMENTAL) HERMENEUTICS OF  
IDENTIFICATION WITH NATURE THROUGH LITERATURE

Nathan M. Bell, B.S.

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APPROVED:

J. Baird Callicott, Major Professor and Chair,  
Department of Philosophy and Religion  
Studies

David M. Kaplan, Committee Member

David Taylor, Committee Member

James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Robert

B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

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This thesis is an examination of transformative effects of literature on environmental identity. The work begins by examining and expanding the Deep Ecology concept of identification-with-nature. The potential problems with identification through direct encounters is used to argue for the relevance of the possibility of identification-through-literature. Identification-through-literature is then argued for using the hermeneutic and narrative theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, as well as various examples of nature writing and fiction.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

There are many potential approaches to questions concerning environmental identity and what shapes or changes this identity for a person. In this thesis, I examine some of these questions, taking as my starting point the Deep Ecology notion of identification-with-nature. Identification-with-nature can be thought of as an example of transformative experience, in the sense of transforming a person's views of the environment. My goal is to ask and answer whether identification-with-nature can occur through literature. In Chapter II of this work, I examine the meaning of identification-with-nature, drawing mainly on the work of Arne Naess. Identification-with-nature entails a person having an experience through which he or she experiences connectivity with the nonhuman world to the extent of recognizing that there is an intimate relationship between the self and nonhuman life. This is an event in which a person recognizes how much a nonhuman other is like or connected to his or her own self.

Additionally in Chapter II I will go on to elaborate on identification-with-nature. Looking at the work of Naess and Warwick Fox shows there to be various distinctions, some quite implicit (but nonetheless philosophically undeniable), within identification. Christian Diehm elaborates explicitly on such a distinction. Going beyond Diehm, I draw out a distinction between two particular kinds of identification-with-nature. One kind, which I label identification-as-commonality, is more an expanded ethical relationships that includes nonhuman others. The other kind, which I label identification-as-continuity, is an expansion of the self that incorporates nonhuman others in a form of enlightened self-interest.

In Chapter III I examine the potential difficulties of identification-with-nature. Taking each kind of identification in turn, I set out some of the more specific, and potentially

problematic, requirements for identification that appear both explicitly and implicitly in the work of Naess, Fox, and Diehm. While the specifics between the two vary to a degree, with both identification-as-commonality and identification-as-continuity there appears to be a requirement for some level of “direct” sensory experience. And in both cases this requirement occurs to a degree that makes identification a rare and limited experience for people in the United States. This limitedness means that identification-with-nature is less relevant unless it can occur through a different kind of experience, raising the importance of the question of identification-through-literature.

In Chapter IV I turn more directly toward the question of identification-through-literature. Temporarily suspending the distinction between identification-as-commonality and identification-as-continuity, I examine the question of whether a literary experience can more properly be described as an experience *of nature*. I approach this question using Naess’ gestalt ontology, a relational ontology that will highlight some of the similarities between sensory and literary experiences of nature. I supplement this analysis with phenomenology, particularly the work of Lester Embree, which argues that in regular experience with literature people experience what the words talk about, rather than the words themselves. Further, the work examined argues that the imaginatively experienced object is just as real as the sensory experienced object. The main argument of this chapter is that the literary experience of nature is enough like the sensory experience to be said to be an experience *of nature*, rather than merely an experience of literature.

In Chapter V I turn more directly towards identification-as-commonality through literature. I examine this possibility using the hermeneutic theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. These theories examine interpretation, and argue for a circular relationship between a person’s views and his or her understanding of a text, and ultimately between



interpretation of a text and a person's self-understanding. Through these theories I show how nature writing and literature can change a person's understanding of the world and his or her understanding of the self. I conclude with this chapter that, in the right conditions, through nature writing one can come to view the natural world in a different way, and that this shift is significantly similar to identification-as-commonality.

In Chapter VI I turn towards identification-as-continuity through literature. In this case I make my examination using the narrative theory of Ricoeur. Through the concepts of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration that occur with reading, one's understanding of oneself, which is ultimately narrative, is changed through the text. I argue that through literature with environmental themes a person's view of his or her self as it relates to the natural environment is changed. This change is similar to identification-as-continuity, but different enough to warrant positing a new, slightly different, form of identification.

In Chapter VII, the final chapter of the work, I begin with a concluding summary of the entire work up to that point. I then briefly examine in what ways identification can properly be said to be a form of environmental identity, and argue for the ways in which taking a hermeneutic conception of environmental identity from the start might be more fruitful. A hermeneutic environmental identity, above all, can accommodate various influences on peoples' views of the environment, and, further, is insightful in dealing with environmental problems as conflicts of interpretations. I conclude by briefly looking at some of the main questions that have been and should be facing environmental hermeneutics and concepts of environmental identity.

## CHAPTER II

### IDENTIFICATION-WITH-NATURE

A very particular and interesting example of transformative experience – transformative in the sense of making one more environmentally beneficent – is identification-with-nature, a concept used by many Deep Ecologists.<sup>1</sup> Broadly conceived, identification-with-nature entails a person having an experience through which he or she sees connectivity with the nonhuman world to the extent of recognizing that there is an intimate connection between the self and nonhuman life. This is an event in which a person recognizes how much a nonhuman other is like or connected to his or her own self. Deep Ecology founder Arne Naess, referring to a specific example, states “the children for a moment see and experience spontaneously . . . the insect as themselves, not only as something different but in an important sense *like themselves*.”<sup>2</sup> Identification leads to feelings of empathy beyond just fellow humans and towards nonhuman forms of life. The full experience of identification, however, goes so far as to break down certain distinctions between one’s self and the natural world. According to Naess, a person develops the proper attitude toward the environment when his or her identification is so deep that the ego and the physical body are no longer *adequate* limits for the ‘self,’ for now “one experiences oneself to be a genuine part of all life.” In other words, this identification replaces the typical Western human sense of self – an atomistic self superior to nature – with a sense of the Self that is a connected part of the biospherical community.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of one’s sense of self, which results from identification-with-nature, is referred to by Naess and other Deep Ecologists as Self-realization. Self-realization refers to the

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I use the broad term “Deep Ecology” to refer specifically to the eco-philosophical views of Arne Naess, and “Deep Ecologists” to refer specifically to Naess and philosophers who hold views similar to his.

<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. and rev. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171-173, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 172-174.

fact that, for one who has the expanded or ecological Self, realization of interests has broadened beyond what we would typically refer to as self-interest. Naess compares Self-realization with the ethical ideas of Baruch Spinoza, which state that “[realization of one’s interests] cannot develop far without sharing joys and sorrows with others;” or rather one’s interests cannot be realized without the development of the self with narrow interests into a Self that relates for Spinoza to all humans, and for Naess to all living things.<sup>4</sup> Self-realization ultimately means an expanded sense of self for which the interests of other living things, both human and non-human, are intrinsically considered.

While identification-with-nature is often viewed as one concept, and together with Self-realization one of the unified tenets of Deep Ecology, there appear to be various distinctions to be made regarding identification. Warwick Fox, for one, makes a distinction between “personal” and “transpersonal” identification, which are two different categories of catalysts for identification.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, however, there seems to be an inconsistency in Naess’ ideas, which points to the existence of two distinct forms of identification. This inconsistency will be mirrored by Fox. Christian Diehm explores this division with his concepts of “identification-as-belonging” and “identification-as-kinship,” the similarity between them being a transformation of one’s views regarding the environment, but a difference being that they are two different post-transformation views.<sup>6</sup> Diehm’s distinction will complement a natural distinction created by the inconsistencies in Naess’ language use, and while Diehm’s distinctions are not without flaws, he begins an invaluable clarification of the two distinct kinds of identification and corresponding eco-ethical view.

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<sup>4</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 249-258.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Diehm, “Identification-with-nature: What It Is and Why It Matters,” *Ethics & The Environment* 12, no. 2 (2007): 3-13.

## 1. Identification-as-continuity

First, there is what Diehm labels “identification-as-belonging.” This is the most discussed form of identification, and the one that would most appropriately fall under the label of Deep Ecology. Identification-as-belonging, and the corresponding concept of Self-realization, should be recognized in part as a criticism of the “highly individualistic” concept of the self which is predominant in Western Industrial societies, a view of the self that Deep Ecologists see to be “metaphysically false and ecologically destructive.”<sup>7</sup> The response to this view of the self is Naess’s “relational, total-field image,” the idea that a human being is not an atomistic self fully delimited by the body, but rather a self “whose identity is a product of relationships to, among other things, the non-human environment.”<sup>8</sup> This is to say that a person’s self-identity enlarges such that an adequate view of the self would include “the encompassing natural community.” Diehm puts it rather succinctly in that identification-with-nature means “to recognize that we are a part of nature, and that nature is a part of our selves.”<sup>9</sup>

This realization is referred to as Self-realization – an expanded sense of self, not only in that a person sees his or her self as a part of nature, but correspondingly that the immediate interests of the typical self or even of humanity are likewise no longer an acceptable limit. For the expanded Self, the fulfillment of one’s interests means fulfilling the interests of the biospheric community. This is what prompts Naess to say that when we are defending nature we are “defending our vital interests,” or we are “engaged in self-defense.”<sup>10</sup> For someone who has

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<sup>7</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 3-8.

<sup>8</sup> Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary,” *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature: What It Is and Why It Matters,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 232.

had identification and who experiences Self-realization, the vital interests of the body and the vital interests of the community are no longer distinct.

This view is discussed by J. Baird Callicott as one of several views that fit, in varying degrees, with the “metaphysical implications” of ecology. Certain aspects of ecology have implications for the idea of the self. First of all, in ecology the exchange of energy that occurs between organisms and among the whole system is just as real as material entities – or in other words energy is as real as matter, if not more so. Second of all, every organism in an ecosystem is defined by its relationships to other organisms, to the degree that an organism cannot really be understood apart from its place in the whole system. Every living thing exists more through its relationships than it does through its self. Ultimately, these views have the implication of an expanded sense of the self – the community is now part of the self.<sup>11</sup> The skin is no longer a concrete wall but, to quote Paul Shepard, is more like “a pond surface or a forest soil,”<sup>12</sup> something permeable and in exchange with many other organisms.

Callicott’s analysis, although not focused especially on Deep Ecology, helps to clarify some aspects of Self-realization. Self-realization does not seem to be fully explained by Naess, who even admits in an interview that “Self-realization is also a process . . . but it doesn’t appeal to me to try to find out what I mean by that.”<sup>13</sup> Part of this expanded Self is a realization of the ecological and metaphysical connections among all life forms – but as stated above, it goes beyond this. Despite talk of the community, it seems that Self-realization is more than anything an enlightened self interest, or perhaps Self-interest. Indeed, according to Callicott an

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<sup>11</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology,” in *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 107-111.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Shepard, “Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint,” in *The Subversive Science: Essays toward an Ecology of Man*, ed. Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), 3, quoted in Callicott, “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology,” 112.

<sup>13</sup> David Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?: Conversations with Arne Naess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), 187.

ecologically enlightened self-interest is the moral implication of the metaphysics of ecology.<sup>14</sup>

This is certainly consistent with Naess' terminology of self-defense. As the oft-quoted John Seed says, "I am part of the rain forest protecting *myself*."<sup>15</sup> Despite Naess' preference for other terms, Self-interest is the environmental concern of the ecologically connected person.

While Deep Ecologists argue for an expanded Self, they argue against a certain kind of holism, which Diehm labels as "ontological indistinguishability." Diehm argues that in Naess' work there is "a clear refusal to regard parts as being dispersed into wholes in such a way as to lose their individuality."<sup>16</sup> Naess claims that "The widening and deepening of the individual selves [that occurs with identification and Self-realization] *somehow* never makes [individuals] into one 'mass.'"<sup>17</sup> And yet the idea of a complete fusion has been attributed to Deep Ecology and criticized, notably by many philosophers falling under the broad banner of Ecofeminism.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, it is clear that with Self-realization all the ways in which people typically think and talk about individuals no longer apply. Because of this, a better term than identification-as-belonging may be identification-as-continuity – the *identity* and *interests* of the Self are continuous with, *not* in community or opposition with, the ecological whole of life.

The moral significance of Self-interest is both positive and negative. On the one hand, many criticize Self-realization, perhaps rightfully, for being an enlightened self-interest. The expansion of the self may lead to good things, but it fails to respect the difference and the intrinsic value of nonhuman others, and as such is inferior to ethics which do so.<sup>19</sup> And yet, for

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<sup>14</sup> Callicott, "The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology," 112-114.

<sup>15</sup> John Seed, "Anthropocentrism," in Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 243, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Diehm, "The Self of Stars and Stone: Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self," *The Trumpeter* 19, no. 3 (2003): 35-37.

<sup>17</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 173, original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Diehm, "The Self of Stars and Stone," 36-37. This article provides an outstanding look at Ecofeminist criticisms of Deep Ecology being overly holistic.

<sup>19</sup> Diehm, "Identification-with-nature," 10.

Naess it seems rather that this replacement of ethics is good. Moral maxims are no longer necessary, as right action will simply come naturally. Just as a person will naturally defend their physical body, a person with Self-realization will defend and care for nature with much stronger conviction, as Diehm says, “because of the basic inclination to care for everything that is a part of our extended self.”<sup>20</sup> Fox will likewise say that a person conscious of “the fact that we and all other entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality” will “naturally be inclined to care for the unfolding of the world” and, indeed, “can scarcely *refrain* from responding in this way.”<sup>21</sup> Whatever critics may want to label it, Self-realization ultimately will, according to Deep Ecologists, lead to the strongest acts of protection of the environment by people.

To sum up, one line of thought in Naess’ philosophy, indeed the most celebrated one, would be what is here being called identification-as-continuity: through a process of identification, a person can achieve Self-realization, and will then protect the natural world, not just as if, but as a part of his or her self. The potential problem is that according to some Deep Ecologists, this kind of identification requires a *prolonged* sensory experience with undeveloped or ‘free’ nature.<sup>22</sup> According to Naess there is “a way of life in free nature that is highly efficient in stimulating the sense of oneness, wholeness, and in deepening identification.”<sup>23</sup> While a full examination of “free nature” will be given in Chapter III, what the Deep Ecology literature makes fairly clear from the start is that identification-with-nature results from a special, and perhaps difficult to achieve, kind of *experience* of the natural world.

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<sup>20</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 247, original emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> I am using the phrase ‘sensory’ in place of ‘direct,’ as the phrase ‘direct’ becomes a contentious term once hermeneutics are brought in, as they will be in Chapter V.

<sup>23</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 177.

## 2. Identification-as-commonality

The other kind of identification comes from Diehm's clarification of the fact that one can lead to a sense of commonality with nature based on recognizing the nonhuman struggles for survival. This identification results often from encounters with the suffering of nonhuman life, and is an experience of "others' well-being as intermingled with our own," which leads to the same kind of empathy humans feel for each other.<sup>24</sup> In Naess' account of his own first experience of identification, he recounts watching a flea caught in a chemical drop and how "its fight was so like a human being hit by something, fighting for life."<sup>25</sup> Diehm sees here a form of identification that "does not signify 'interconnectedness' or 'belonging,' but rather something along the lines of 'kinship.'" Thus, this is labeled by Diehm as identification-as-kinship.<sup>26</sup>

As much as Naess and Fox, among others, use clear language of the expanded Self, there are cases where they seem to be concerned with the well-being and rights of nonhuman others as individuals or as groups distinct from the self. Fox at some point clarifies that identification leads "not simply [to] a sense of *similarity* with an entity but a sense of *commonality*," but that identification does *not* mean "*identity* – that I literally *am* that tree over there, for example."<sup>27</sup> This seems to be different from the continuous ecological community. Likewise, Naess refers to every living organism's "equal right to live and blossom."<sup>28</sup> This is inconsistent with speaking of an enlightened self-interest or Self-realization, which would imply that a person only cares about his or her self but realized that much more is incorporated within that self. This is, rather, an experience that gives a person awareness of "kinship with [nonhuman] others . . . which in turn makes it possible for us to feel with them their joys and their sorrows," or rather to "realize that

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<sup>24</sup> Diehm, "Identification-with-nature," 11-13.

<sup>25</sup> Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?*, 178-179.

<sup>26</sup> Diehm, "Identification-with-nature," 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 231, original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements," 152.



others are enough like we are to command the same sort of concern and respect that we have for ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> There is a “genuine concern for entities that are other than ourselves,” or a kind of identification based, as Diehm notes, not on an expansion of the self but on a change in one’s view of others.<sup>30</sup>

While Diehm makes a clear distinction, his choice of the word commonality seems more appropriate than kinship, the latter referring to a kind of bond that may be sufficient but is not necessary for sympathy or empathy. Commonality, being perhaps necessary for sympathy and empathy, would be the better term to focus on. Furthermore, Diehm still seems to be intermingling ideas despite his clarity, as he refers to “commonality or continuity” and “continuity or kinship,” as though these terms might be interchangeable, but continuity seems to be inconsistent with the emphasis on the concern for others.<sup>31</sup> Because of this, a better term for this second form of identification with nature would be identification-as-commonality; a process of identifying in nonhuman others the quality of deserving consideration.

To be clear, this is not the same as arguments for moral extensionism. A typical moral extensionist argument would go along the lines that ‘Humans deserve moral consideration because they have quality X, animals have quality X, therefore animals deserve moral consideration,’ in which ‘quality X’ refers to a distinct and definable quality. By contrast, in identification it is recognizing *something*, although it is not something quite as specific or exact, about nonhuman others that invokes a moral response, that gives others the quality of deserving consideration itself.

There does seem to be an ambiguity regarding the idea of commonality. This ambiguity can perhaps be best seen in Naess’ claim that “if I *feel* that something is alive, I feel that

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<sup>29</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 3-13.

<sup>30</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 16.

<sup>31</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 12-13.

somehow it has a basic resemblance to myself” and Fox’s idea that identification leads not to “a sense of *similarity*” but to “*commonality*.”<sup>32</sup> This concept has something to do with similarity – a basic resemblance to one’s self – but it is more than that. Quoting Naess, Diehm attempts to clarify that “we recognize something of ourselves in the other creature, or something of the other creature in ourselves.”<sup>33</sup> Referring to Naess’ ideas, Diehm says that with this kind of identification we have “an intimation of what [nonhuman living things’] situations are like” and because of this we “feel with them their joys and their sorrows.”<sup>34</sup>

While commonality is somewhat vague, a clear meaning is alluded to. First, there is Naess’ phrase, quoted above, “if I *feel* that something is *alive* . . .”<sup>35</sup> Then there is an interesting phrase from Fox, who says “all that exists seems to *stand out as foreground* from a *background of nonexistence, voidness, or emptiness*—a background from which this foreground arises moment by moment.”<sup>36</sup> This is said in reference to a slightly different kind of identification, but the reference to background and foreground is very interesting. I argue that Deep Ecologists are implicitly drawing a distinction between what is background – non-living things and unimportant living things, and foreground, which is usually meaningful living things – humans and perhaps pets.<sup>37</sup> When applied solely to living things, it becomes a distinction between what is merely a biological living thing and what is alive in a deeper sense. People generally understand that all plants, animals, and other organisms are biologically living things, but the phrase “alive” is often used synonymously with “meaningful” or “thriving” human life, as in when someone is ‘really alive for the first time,’ or ‘fully alive.’ People who have had identification, on the other hand,

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<sup>32</sup> Arne Naess, *Life’s Philosophy: Reason & Feeling in a Deeper World*, trans. Roland Huntford (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 101, emphasis added; Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 231, original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Naess, *Life’s Philosophy*, 114, quoted in Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 13.

<sup>34</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 13.

<sup>35</sup> Naess, *Life’s Philosophy*, 101, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 250-251, emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth reminding here that this paper is intentionally limited to the scope of Western Industrialized society.

seem to view nonhuman life as both meaningful and as flourishing – as being on the near side of the boundary that typically separates humans and nonhumans.

The crucial distinction is between the background of “mere-life” and the foreground that is *alive* in a sense that is imbued with the *value* of ethical significance and which is affectively motivating or *meaningful*.<sup>38</sup> This is the way in which, after identification, nonhuman living organisms are like oneself in the way Deep Ecologists allude to – like oneself they now have the immediate value human life is generally held to have. And now that nonhuman life forms are felt to have the same value as human life, one will understand their struggles and understand their triumphs and failures, joys and sorrows. And so this kind of identification-with-nature causes a shift in a person’s perspective, in which nonhuman life comes from the background of the world to the foreground typically held by humans – from mere-life to what could be called “being-alive.” This is the central transformation in identification-as-commonality.

Identification-as-commonality would seem to be able to occur through both positive and negative encounters, despite Diehm’s corresponding concept being grounded in suffering. Fox speaks of having identification based on personal encounters, qualifying the assumption that “our experience of these entities are generally of a positive kind.” And of course a positive identification-as-commonality would be implied by Diehm’s assertion that, with this kind of identification, one is “pained by [nonhuman others’s] pain and uplifted by their flourishing; . . .”<sup>39</sup> Pain and flourishing implies that this can be a positive or a negative experience. This kind of identification, if I am correct above, is a recognition of nonhuman others as being-alive, as having a meaningful life, as being “imbued with feeling and purpose,”

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<sup>38</sup> “Value” here refers to what is generally referred to as “intrinsic value,” or basically value distinct from instrumental value to others.

<sup>39</sup> Diehm, “Identification-with-nature,” 13.

to quote Diehm.<sup>40</sup> If this is the case, it can be the recognition of nonhuman others as seeking that purpose or having that feeling, as well as recognizing the struggles when a nonhuman other is harmed or denied their purpose, that leads to this kind of identification.

Regarding the negative experience of identification-as-commonality, while Diehm and Naess both use language of hurt and suffering, destruction might be a better term. Language of suffering and hurt, used correctly, is limited to humans and animals, while destruction more easily incorporates all forms of life, which is a clear goal of Deep Ecology. Regarding the flea example, Naess notes that the flea's neurological inability to feel pain did not lessen his identification with it – so it would appear it was the struggle against destruction that Naess identified with.<sup>41</sup> Also, the term destruction may be more consistent with empathy between humans, which is caused not just by physical pain but also death, as well as any major impediment to the full flourishing of a human life. The crucial point of identification-as-commonality is the recognition that other forms of life struggle and flourish in their own ways, and so what matters would be a worsening of or an end to this struggle, more appropriately than purely pain of physical harm.

As with identification-as-continuity, an integral aspect of identification-as-commonality is the resulting turn in ethics. Identification replaces ethical maxims with an inclination for right action, which would make it more relevant than simple environmental awareness. According to Naess, not only is having such inclination better than putting forth ethical maxims, but it is *necessary* for right action to occur:

[a person] *may* also assume a common stance [with nonhuman life] upon the basis of abstract ideas of moral justice, combined with a minimum of identification, but under hard and long-lasting trials the resulting solidarity cannot be expected to hold. The same applies to *loyalty*. When solidarity and loyalty are solidly

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<sup>40</sup> Diehm, "Identification-with-nature," 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?*, 179.

anchored in identification, they are not experienced as moral demands; they come of themselves.<sup>42</sup>

It should be noted that the above, relying on terms of relation between individuals with solidarity and loyalty, supports and naturally fits with identification-as-commonality. The main point, however, is that moral maxims can always be broken and simple environmental awareness may not be strong enough to lead to the necessary actions. However, if right environmental action is an inclination, as it is when achieved through identification, then such action is sure to occur.

While arguably Naess, and to a degree Fox and Diehm, may be correct about the infallibility of inclination, their apparent dismissal of moral maxims and of ethics may seem discomfoting. Perhaps the best way to look at this distinction is Naess' comparison to Kantian ethics. Naess summarizes Kant's distinction between beautiful and moral action, where "moral actions are motivated by acceptance of a moral law and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination," while a beautiful action is "acting benevolently from inclination."<sup>43</sup> It appears that Naess prefers the latter in part because it is more reliable, but also because it is perhaps more consistent with the proper views of nonhuman others and the biospheric community. When environmental actions comes from inclination, according to Naess, the "environment is then not felt to be something strange or hostile which we must unfortunately adapt ourself to, but something valuable which we are *inclined to* treat with joy and respect . . ."<sup>44</sup> Beautiful action, in other words, is appropriate to an emotionally positive view of the environment. Naess appears to align moral maxims and duty with a perhaps hostile view of the environment, or at least a view of the environment that is less than loving or respectful. This is most likely an unfair and incorrect view of environmental *ethics*. It would be best to say that,

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<sup>42</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 172, original emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 85, original emphasis.

in addition to moral maxims and action, beautiful action from inclination can be a powerful catalyst for environmentally beneficent action, and as such is important in fighting the ecological crisis. Then insofar as identification-with-nature results in such action from inclination, this kind of identification seems to be an important aspect of environmental concern overall.

Identification-with-nature, thus, is a transformative environmental experience in which either the view of the self expands to include nature, or in which one comes to view nonhuman others as being like the self enough to warrant consideration. In either case, right environmental action becomes an inclination, which is for Deep Ecologists better than moral maxims. However, identification-with-nature has both been subject to criticism and is at times unclear in the details of its formulations. Nevertheless, it is conceptually very useful in that, first of all, it does seem to be illuminative of real perceptual shifts or real views of environmentalists. Second of all, it provides a fairly good model for examining transformative experience overall. However, there are problematic aspects of the source or catalyst for both major forms of identification, commonality and continuity, which arguably literature can overcome. The next area of focus must be on “free nature” and nonhuman life as causes of identification, and the overall problem that this poses.

## CHAPTER III

### THE REQUIREMENTS AND LIMITS OF IDENTIFICATION

To proceed with the question of identification-with-nature through literature, or identification-through-literature, it must be asked why identification-through-literature is important. The simple answer is that identification-with-nature through a “direct” sensory experience is, given certain constraints to identification, a very rare and limited experience. After examining what is needed to have identification, I will argue that such identification is increasingly unlikely in our increasingly developed world – unless identification through some other source, such as literature, is a possibility.

#### 1. Causes of Identification-as-continuity

Recall, first of all, the distinction between identification-as-commonality and identification-as-continuity, taking the latter for consideration first. Regarding this, Arne Naess states that “there is fortunately a way of life in free nature that is highly efficient in stimulating the sense of *oneness*, *wholeness*, and in deepening identification.”<sup>45</sup> The distinct use of the phrases oneness and wholeness would seem to align this statement with what has been identified above as identification-as-continuity. So it must be made clear what is meant by the term “free nature” and what this way of life is that would cause such identification.

Free nature is loosely defined by Naess in several places. In *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* Naess defines free nature as “land with no settlements or major signs of present human activity.”<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere Naess defines free nature as “a piece of land not dominated by human adult activities,” and gives a negative definition by reference to “areas of asphalt and other forms

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<sup>45</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 177, emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 140.

of complete human domination" in reference to loss and lack of free nature.<sup>47</sup> This is not exactly the same as "wilderness," which is defined as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."<sup>48</sup> The difference comes in part from the definition of wilderness often being interpreted as areas which have *never* been significantly altered or settled by man, while free nature is only presently lacking significant development. Furthermore, wilderness by definition is exclusive of man, while free nature can presumably be inhabited by man so long as it is not settled, if by "settled" we mean developed. Naess also explicitly says that "the term free Nature is not meant to be a substitute for wilderness."<sup>49</sup> All the same, free nature is free of major development, as shown in the definitions above. Free nature is land unscathed by permanent human development.

This definition means that many of the National Parks, National Forests, and nature areas designated as National Monuments in the United States that do not count as wilderness could possibly count as free nature.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, however, the need for a lack of development means that the many camping areas with facilities and with paved roads running through, such as the many parks in the United States designed for the average camper, do not count as free nature. This definition would also seem to imply that very small or tiny spots of land surrounded by development, such as city parks, would not count either. This puts into perspective the availability and expanse of areas that would count as free nature. Naess notes in several places the continuing decrease of free nature, stating that "an increase of the bulk of population . . . will

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<sup>47</sup> Arne Naess, "Access to Free Nature," *Trumpeter*, 21 no. 2 (2005): 48.

<sup>48</sup> "The Wilderness Act of 1964," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 120.

<sup>49</sup> Arne Naess, "Ecosophy, Population, and Free Nature," *Trumpeter*, 5 no. 3 (1988): 113

<sup>50</sup> These are various kinds of areas given certain levels of protection in the United States, but which may or may not be "wilderness." National Park Service, "Designation of National Park System Units," U.S. National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/legacy/nomenclature.html> (accessed July 8, 2009); United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, "Selected Laws Affecting Forest Service Activities," FS Publication, 2004, <http://www.fs.fed.us/publications/laws/selected-laws.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2009).



further reduce the already rapidly dwindling areas of free Nature.” Naess even laments that “[the people] in Europe have destroyed most of the free Nature that was once here.”<sup>51</sup> Free nature is an increasingly limited thing. While this is lamentable, it could be argued that in the United States, given the large number of areas that would count as free nature and have legal protection, identification is not so unlikely. The way of life in free nature that stimulates the deepest identification may be a bit more problematic.

Recalling Naess’ quote above, that there is a “way of life in free nature” that causes or deepens identification, it must be questioned what this “way of life” refers to. Naess clarifies this by contrasting the phrase “‘outdoor’ recreation” with the Norwegian term *friluftsliv*. Naess contends that “true *friluftsliv*” will cause in people, or at least direct them towards, a “paradigm change.” In regards to what *friluftsliv* means, the word literally translates as “free air life.” However, in referring to the “true” *friluftsliv* which causes identification, Naess seems to have a very particular kind of nature-oriented lifestyle in mind, and he mentions “a positive kind of state of mind and body” that goes with this kind of life.<sup>52</sup> For simplicity, I am going to use the term “deep-air-life” to refer to Naess’ particular use of *friluftsliv*, which has strong connotations, and to distinguish from the literal translation of *friluftsliv*.

Naess clarifies what is here called deep-air-life, a particular form of “free air life,” with several principles. The first of these is “Respect for all life. Respect for Landscape,” which includes the exclusion of pleasure hunting and means a “traceless passage” through the land. Naess also clarifies deep-air-life as “Minimal strain upon the natural combined with maximal self-reliance,” which requires the use of local plants and material resources, and “Natural lifestyle,” which requires “the greatest possible elimination of technique and apparatus from the

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<sup>51</sup> Naess, “Ecosophy, Population, and Free Nature,” 116-118.

<sup>52</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 178.

outside.”<sup>53</sup> These principles specify the lack of development of free nature and call for a very living-with, non-damaging, technology-limited way of living in nature.

This type of life is potentially a problem for several reasons. First of all, ‘living off the land’ (to use a common phrase) is a skill beyond the average U.S. citizen at present. Naess notes also that living off local plants and resources “limits the number of people who can be almost self-sufficient within a given landscape,” which is unfortunate given the number of people.<sup>54</sup> Also, the combination of traceless passage and a minimization of technique and apparatus creates a problem as the most available means for people to explore undeveloped nature is, as discussed by James Morton Turner, the technology-heavy Leave No Trace ethic and the range of products that goes with. Additionally the inherent commodification in the Leave No Trace movement is also problematic.<sup>55</sup> The type of lifestyle that Naess equates with the deepest identification is a lifestyle that is not possible for most people as individuals, and impossible for a great number of people to do at the same time, limiting its scope significantly.

The problems with deep-air-life are only made worse by the last point in characterizing it, which is “Time for adjustment.” Naess reiterates the need for distance from technology but also notes that a resulting change requires some time. He says explicitly that “it takes time for the new milieu to work *in depth*. It is quite normal that several weeks must pass before the *sensitivity* for the nature is so developed that it fills the mind.”<sup>56</sup> This is a problem insofar as most people, at least in the United States, do not have the time, even if they have the inclination, to spend several weeks in undeveloped natural areas. Full time jobs in the United States usually allow for only a

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<sup>53</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 178-179.

<sup>54</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 179.

<sup>55</sup> James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America,” in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On*, ed Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 159-162.

<sup>56</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 179, original emphasis.

couple weeks of vacation time per year. The way of life that Naess equates with the deepest form of identification would appear to be out of reach for the average U.S. citizen at least, if not the majority of people in the civilized Western world. This makes identification-as-continuity – an apparently rather strong and dedicated form of environmental concern – less available and less of a source of hope for the environmental movement.

However, a quick look at literature – prior to the full analysis of identification-through-literature – will show how literature can avoid these problems if it can be a source of identification. First, given the tremendously high levels of literacy in the United States and the developed Western world overall, coupled with the rather practical affordability of literature, literature featuring free nature is easily more accessible than is actual free nature.<sup>57</sup> Second of all, reading a book is a rather non-damaging form of communing with nature, and one possible with no real technology other than the book and perhaps a light. One could argue two points against this. The first is that reading a book is damaging to the environment because the book is derived from tree products. This is a rather weak point because the small amount of forest going into a book, especially if one buys used books, is probably about the least-damaging encounter with nature the average person can hope for.

The second anticipated counterpoint is that the author of the text, in his or her narrative experience described in the text, is not meeting the criteria Naess sets. This is an interesting point because it leads to a clarification – identification-through-literature is not, as we will shortly see, a vicarious experience of the author's identification. In other words, the reader does not experience the author's identification or identification-through-the-author; for all the reader

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<sup>57</sup> The United States literacy rate in adults, at least according to one source, is approximately 99%, while the overall world average is 82%. Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook," Literacy, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html?countryName=United%20States&countryCode=US&regionCode=na&#US> (accessed July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

could know or should care the author may not have had identification *per se*. It is rather the reader having his or her own identification through the text, but this will be made clear later. The current point is that literature appears to overcome several of the problems with a “direct” sensory identification-as-continuity, including the temporal problem.

This last problem (regarding the time taken for identification) is the last way in which literature can overcome some of the apparent problems with identification-as-continuity. Remember that Naess said, “it takes time for the new milieu to work *in depth*,” up to “several weeks” in a normal case.<sup>58</sup> When reading literature, a person can and often does take several weeks to read a book. A person may even read several books in a row, many or all of which could be instances of literature that can cause identification. In that case, the reader has an experience of nature that lasts for several weeks, months, or hypothetically, even years. Admittedly this is an on-and-off experience, as people do not read straight through their waking hours, but there is still the overall duration of months or even years. So it would seem that *if* literature can cause identification, then it would seem that literature could get past many of the problems pointed out with the way of life Naess equates with the deepest form of identification-as-continuity.

## 2. Causes of Identification-as-commonality

Having examined identification-as-continuity, we must now turn the focus to identification-as-commonality, the other kind of identification distinguished in Chapter II. Identification-as-commonality does not require the lengthy, non-damaging immersion in free nature like identification-as-continuity does. Identification-as-commonality, however, may fall prey to similar problems. Recall that identification-as-commonality can come from a positive or

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<sup>58</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 179, original emphasis.

a negative experience with nonhuman life. Positive refers to an encounter with healthy or flourishing nonhuman life and negative refers to an encounter with the destruction, suffering, or death of nonhuman life. Distinguishing a little more firmly between the two will show how each kind will face similar problems in the current world.

Taking the negative side first, the question is what it takes to cause identification-as-commonality. Naess recalls, as an example of his first case of identification, seeing a flea struggle for life as it is caught in a chemical drop.<sup>59</sup> In this instance, it seems that even the smallest encounter with the destruction of nonhuman life can cause identification. But elsewhere Naess gives an example in which children tormenting an insect have identification with it after being asked if it might like to live like they do – they see the insect as being “in an important sense like themselves.” This is a case of identification not entirely dissimilar from Naess’ own identification with the flea. And yet, regarding this instance, Naess says “perhaps it has *no effect in the long run*, or perhaps one of the children *slightly* changes an attitude toward small fellow creatures.”<sup>60</sup> Whether there is no effect or a slight change, it would seem as though this case falls short of a truly deep identification. Thus, there seems to be an ambiguity as to what could cause a significant case of identification, at least in the negative sense.

One thing which can be speculated regarding negative identification-as-commonality, at least, is that there is a difference between encountering the *destruction* of nonhuman living organisms and the *absence* of nonhuman living organisms. A person could argue that a city is full of the destruction of nonhuman living things because it is paved and developed. And while a city is undoubtedly full of instances of destruction of nonhuman living things in terms of insects and plants being destroyed, as well as animals to a lesser degree, the presence of nonliving things

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<sup>59</sup> Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?*, 178-179.

<sup>60</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 171-172, emphasis added.

such as pavement or buildings and the absence of living things are not the same as the actual destruction of nonhuman living things, which would have occurred in the original development of a city and continues to occur on the edges of expansion. While the Deep Ecology literature offers no proof for this, all the examples given regarding negative identification – as well as many non-identification examples of profound experiences given in environmental literature – use examples of entities or ecosystems being destroyed, not examples of the absence of nature or of living things. While I cannot draw any proof for this assertion from Deep Ecologists, it is arguable enough to be cautiously asserted: developed cities are not themselves destruction of nature, although the original development of the city was. This means that being in a city is not an encounter with the destruction of nature and cannot cause identification.

Turning to positive identification, recall that positive experiences, like negative ones, can cause identification-as-commonality. Warwick Fox asserts that “we generally tend to *identify most* with those *entities* with which we are most often in contact.” This statement falls under the ambiguous term of identification that Fox shares with Naess, however, the inclusion of different levels of identification varied among different entities, meaning others and perhaps individuals would seem to align better with identification-as-commonality. The interesting point is that, according to Fox, more encounters with nonhuman living organisms lead to a stronger identification. This, taken with Naess’ comments on the example with the children, implies that there are stronger and weaker levels of identification.

Another point that clarifies identification is Fox’s claim that this kind of identification can be with “concrete entities” as well as “abstract kinds of entities with which we have personal involvement.” Fox gives teams as an example, which may have a rotation of individual

members.<sup>61</sup> While Fox does not say so explicitly, this would suggest that significant contact with, for example, a forest could lead to identification with ‘trees’ and ‘forests’ in general, as an abstract entity. More importantly, as the team example may suggest, identification with nonhuman living organisms may lead to an overall identification with nature or nonhuman life *as individuals* – a person sees all nonhuman living things, all members of ‘team nature,’ as having value because they have identified with particular nonhuman living organisms. In other words, identification-as-commonality does not lead to a change in view only of the specific individuals with whom a person has had contact. This seems consistent with other examples, most notably Naess and the flea. This is also significant because it opens up identification-as-commonality, both in the “direct sense” and with regard to literature.

Admittedly, there is a lot of speculation here, but the foregoing points, when not proven by Deep Ecology literature, are at least consistent with that literature. Furthermore, the foregoing points seem to be consistent with some kinds of environmentally transformative human experience. Nevertheless, it seems that identification-as-commonality, at least in the truly deep sense, cannot come from the simple random encounters with nonhuman life that occur in cities, but requires repeated significant encounters. Again, this does not necessarily require the lengthy technology-limited immersion in free nature, but it still requires more contact with nonhuman life than your person actually has in cities and urban areas, particularly regarding negative identification. Thus, identification-as-commonality falls prey to the same problems (although to a lesser degree) as identification-as-continuity. Both kinds of identification are problematic insofar as they are rare and the conditions required for identification are inaccessible for most people.

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<sup>61</sup> Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 249, emphasis added.

The problems with identification-as-commonality, like those with identification-as-continuity, can be overcome by literature *if* identification is possible through literature. Literature can give the reader close encounters with nonhuman living organisms, both in their flourishing and in their destruction. Indeed, literature can give the reader access to nonhuman living things most people could only dream of seeing, or an encounter with a destruction of nonhuman life that exists only in our nightmares. Literature can provide the kind of encounters with nonhuman living things that as a sensory experience could cause identification – the question is whether the literary experience counts.

### 3. The Slow Process of Identification

There is a further issue applicable to both kinds of identification that will both support the foregoing points and raise a new one. In a close look at Deep Ecology and the problem of desire, Jonathon Maskit raises some interesting concerns over identification with nature and Self-realization. Deep Ecology literature seems to treat identification as both a little more solid and simple than it may be. Maskit argues that “the process of Self-realization is presumably a *slow, gradual*, and messy one, replete with *backsliding* . . . . The task of coming to be oneself is – on almost any understanding of the self – not a quick and simple one.”<sup>62</sup> Maskit’s statement is meant to be applied to practice as much as the change in view constituted by identification, but his comments apply to both. There are several interesting points in that statement, the first being the argument that identification, which would be part of the “process of Self-realization,” is both

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<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Maskit, “Deep Ecology and Desire: On Naess and the Problem of Consumption,” in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 224, emphasis added.



slow and gradual.<sup>63</sup> If this is true – and common experience seems to suggest it is – then this reaffirms the need of lengthy immersion in nature and repeated encounters with nonhuman life.

The more interesting point, however, is the idea of backsliding. Deep Ecology literature seems to assume, although again it is never explicitly said, that the change caused by identification is a one time occurrence. Maskit argues that there is backsliding in terms of having environmental actions. But if the connection Deep Ecologists posit between identification, Self-realization, and environmental action is true, then a backsliding in action, which implies a backsliding in conviction, implies a backsliding in the degree of identification. In other words, the extent to which people identify with nature – the extent to which a person may see themselves as a part of nature or see others as having value – can go up or down.

This raises the question then of whether one can have a complete un-identification, or a complete reversal of identification, perhaps best phrased as a re-identification with the narrowly human community or the narrow, selfish ego. Will a one-time identification with nature cause a person to have a different view of nature and proper environmental action throughout their entire life? This is difficult to answer because most people who have had identification with nature seem to enjoy nature and keep returning to the conditions that cause identification. However, experience and common sense suggest that one incident of identification by itself will not cause a life time change and yes, people can un-identify with nature or re-identify with the narrow human ego. This is highly problematic, because if a person needs to keep having instances of identification to maintain Self-realization, then coupled with the problems with having even one case of identification this makes identification that much less relevant, and Self-realization much less probable.

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<sup>63</sup> Maskit, “Deep Ecology and Desire,” 224.

The last point made by Maskit that is relevant here concerns environmental actions. Maskit argues that “the evidence for progress in Self-realization is to be found in transformation in practice.” This is not anything contradictory to what Naess or other Deep Ecologists would say, as argued above there is a necessary link between identification, Self-realization, and changes in action – the change in action being what makes identification a relevant concept. However, Maskit also notes that “the practical effects of Self-realization may lag behind the transformations,” further noting how many self-proclaimed environmentalists still commit daily actions that are lazily environmentally destructive.<sup>64</sup> This is a fair point and seems consistent with Naess’ ideas, although Deep Ecologists would probably argue that lag could only be a limited degree if true transformation were had. The relevant point, however, is that if action can lag behind transformation, then this reaffirms the need for a truly deep identification, the deepest kind possible.

Maskit’s points help articulate the problems with identification, and further the relevance of identification-with-nature through literature. If identification-with-nature through literature is possible, it would be free from many of the problems facing identification. In response specifically to Maskit’s arguments, literature would allow for slow transformation via the lengthy passage through a book, and would allow for repeated identification against backsliding as people read new books and reread their favorites. And through the slow and repeated incidence of identification, literature could provide a truly deep, significant, and long-lasting identification – the true transformation of self or view that Naess sees as leading necessarily to right environmental action. The problems of the typical “direct” identification caused by a sensory experience of nature threaten the relevancy of identification and Deep Ecology. And yet,

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<sup>64</sup> Maskit, “Deep Ecology and Desire,” 224.

literature can overcome these problems, giving a relevancy – if not necessity – to the question to be taken up now: that of identification-with-nature through literature.

## CHAPTER IV

### GESTALT ONTOLOGY AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF NATURE WRITING

Now that it is clear what identification-with-nature is, and why a more traditional or “direct” form of identification is problematic<sup>65</sup>, the overarching question is whether a person can have identification-with-nature through literature. To this end, there are several relevant questions and approaches, the first question being whether a sensory experience of nature and a literary experience of nature are alike or similar at all. Encountering this question will take us briefly outside of the distinction between identification-as-commonality and identification-as-continuity as we attempt to answer a central question applicable to both: is the literary experience of nature really an experience *of nature*?

Nature literature provides the reader with an experience of nature that is similar to a “direct” sensory experience in fundamental aspects – similar enough that nature literature could be said to provide a *kind of* experience with nature. Since the central question regards identification-with-nature, it is valuable to examine what Arne Naess’ views may reveal about this. In his ecological philosophy, Naess argues that in spontaneous (or immediate) experience, what is really experienced – what is real in nature – are the qualities typically labeled as secondary by the Modern philosophers: color, smell, temperature, and other like qualities.<sup>66</sup> An examination of several key works of nature writing shows that such literature describes the environment using similar terms: the color of the trees, the feel of the air, etc. As a person reads a piece of nature writing, he or she spontaneously (or immediately) forms a mental representation of what is read. Therefore, the reader is experiencing the same qualities that make up the reality of the outside environment!

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<sup>65</sup> See Chapter II and Chapter III, respectively.

<sup>66</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 51-57.

Further, a brief look at phenomenology, particularly the work of Lester Embree, applied to nature writing will show the imaginatively experienced object is just as real as the sensory experienced one, and that in reading, people encounter what is talked about, not the words used, and so through literature they experience nature to a degree as it would typically be experienced. This certainly does not mean that reading nature writing is the same as “directly” experiencing nature, but it does mean that the two experiences are significantly alike. To avoid certain implications, we will not say that the literary experience of nature is "real," but rather insofar as it has fundamental similarities to the sensory experience we can say that the literary experience of nature is authentic – rather it is an experience *of nature*.<sup>67</sup>

This approach has three essential aspects to it. First of all, in drawing further on Naess' philosophy we will run the limit of the extent to which Naess' own words take us towards the idea of identification-through-literature. Secondly, the use of phenomenology to augment Naess' philosophy will be a start to the main project: the joining of Naess' eco-philosophy and Continental philosophy as it has manifested in the parallel trends of phenomenology and hermeneutics (particularly the latter). Thirdly, and most important, this pre-emptive step will allow us to argue, in preparation for the hermeneutic analysis of identification-through-literature, that in such a case the reader is not identifying with the literature itself or with a meaningless literary abstraction, but with nature itself – in other words that what we are aiming to achieve is not identification *with* literature but identification-with-nature *through* literature.

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<sup>67</sup> To avoid confusion, particular in light of the use of phenomenology, the use of "authentic" here is not the same as it is in the hermeneutical phenomenology of Martin Heidegger.

## 1. Gestalt Ontology: Relations and Reality

Naess' gestalt ontology must be understood in part as a reaction against Modern metaphysics. This view can be summed up basically as a subject-object relationship based around a division between primary and secondary qualities formulated by Democritus in Ancient Greece and carried forward by people such as John Locke.<sup>68</sup> There are the primary qualities, which include figure, extension, solidity, and motion. These qualities are quantitative and objective, and as such are said to be an actual part of independent external objects, and are thus "real." Secondary qualities, by contrast, consist of color, smell, temperature, and similar qualities. These qualities are qualitative and subjective, and as such are said to exist in the mind of the perceiving subject, who interprets these qualities of the external objects. Such qualities exist only insofar as an object is being perceived, and are thus less "real" than the primary qualities.<sup>69</sup> Basically there are the real primary qualities which exist in objects and the non-real secondary qualities which exist only in the subject, providing a possibly problematic ontology.<sup>70</sup>

The typical Modern categories of subject-object and primary-secondary qualities present a quandary summed up by Naess: "What then remains?" Naess' question is that if the secondary qualities of color, taste, etc. are not really in the actual natural environment, then what is in the environment? The answer must be *only* the primary qualities: figure, extension, solidity, and motion. According to Naess, if this is true, then the environment really consists of nothing more and nothing less than geometrical reference points. This lack of secondary qualities – the qualitative elements of experience – leaves us with a natural world which is "formless. . . .

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<sup>68</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, *The Presocratic tradition from Parmenides to Democritus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 438-439; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 123.

<sup>69</sup> The same is true of tertiary qualities, which consist of value judgments like beautiful, ugly, grand, etc. These qualities, insofar as they vary among perceivers, exist only in the perceiver and hence are not real.

<sup>70</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 52.

without any of the qualities that we know.” Such a reduction of nature to no more and no less than quantitative aspects is often used to support viewpoints that are "hostile to nature and the environment." This is largely because this reduction allows such hostile viewpoints to be "presented as descriptions of the factual objective conditions," while any contrary viewpoints are presented as "manifestations of more or less incidental subjective evaluations." This complements the destruction of nature because views supportive of nonhuman life are often based on qualitative experience, making such views subjective and therefore incorrect by default. Further, under this view, as Naess puts it, “*human reality is severed from nature proper.*” This means that the full human experience, in particular human experience of nature, is simply inconsistent with "reality," as the latter is posited by the sciences. Because of the problems with this view, Naess develops an ontology that is consistent with experienced reality and is supportive of environmentally concerned outlooks.<sup>71</sup>

By bringing reality back to the subjective qualities and by breaking the typical subject-object distinction, Naess shifts the ontological status of qualities. By this move, he intends to explain the experienced reality of humans, particularly the reality of human experience of and interaction with nature. A major part of Naess’ philosophy is the adoption of what is referred to as ‘both-and’ theory. This idea originates with Protagoras the sophist, who used an experiment with water to prove the varying perceptions of people. The experiment involves two people placing their hands in buckets of water with opposing temperatures, and then each placing their hand in a third bucket of neutral temperature water. As a result, two different people claim that the same water, at the same time, is both warm and cold. According to Protagoras, the bucket of water really is warm *and* cold, i.e. actually warm to one person as well as actually cold to the

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<sup>71</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 52-53, original emphasis; Christian Diehm, “Arne Naess and the Task of Gestalt Ontology,” *Environmental Ethics* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 24.

other. While Naess probably does not intend to subscribe to the relativity of Protagoras, he does want to incorporate the ‘both-and’ aspect. The typical Modern model, outlined above, says that the same bucket of water cannot at the same time be both warm and cold. So the warmth and coldness must be interpreted of the water by the individual observers, making the actual bucket itself neither. Naess, on the other hand, brings back the ‘both-and’ in order to argue that because “the water manifests itself for some as cold and for others as warm, it is both.” The coexistence of contrasting qualities means the existence, not the non-existence, of both.<sup>72</sup>

The ‘both-and’ aspect of Naess’ environmental philosophy reconciles the subjectivity of the secondary qualities with ontological reality. The reason why Naess argues for the reality of the secondary qualities is that the secondary are “the only ones present at hand” in experience, if the primary qualities are viewed as "mathematical-physical ideal abstract relations." Naess says, quite distinctly, "the primary properties (in a narrow sense) are *entia rationis* [objects of thought] characteristic of abstract structures, but not contents of reality." So the secondary qualities are the only ones in experienced reality, but it is only the primary qualities which Naess appears to be denying from experienced reality. This leaves certain aspects unaccounted for, namely the subjective experience of figure, extension, solidity, and motion.

I would like to suggest a slight revision to account for the non-mathematical aspects of primary qualities, but which will also make the overall argument here stronger. A distinction must be made. First, in figure a distinction could be made between general forms and proper geometrical figures. Geometrical figure would seem to certainly be a primary quality in the more abstract sense insofar as it is quantitative and missing from spontaneous experience (this last point may seem strange, but think about the difference between seeing something that is more or less circular versus seeing an actual geometric circle – the latter of which only exists in

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<sup>72</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 54-57, original emphasis.



mathematics). However, a general form seems to fall under the character of a secondary quality. Form is more qualitative, and can vary from person to person based on perspective. Most importantly, general forms cannot be separated from spontaneous experience. If there were no form in spontaneous experience, one could not, for example, fully distinguish the bird (the form created by its body and the spread of its wings) from the sky around it. Such forms are described not by geometric shape but, in this example, by typical animal species labels. To say “bird” brings to mind a form. Granted, it is a range of forms, but it is a limited range.

The same is true of motion, if we think of the difference between motion as quantitative velocity and motion as movement. Quantitative velocity is "objective" as a mathematical measurement of speed, and is definitely an abstraction. As such, it is not part of spontaneous experience; a person never spontaneously sees a bird flying at “20 km/h,” for example (although a person could guess the quantitative speed, it would not seem to be the same as experiencing that speed as such). However, motion as movement would seem to fit more as a secondary quality. Certainly people experience things as moving "fast" or "slow," see a bird in a swooping dive or experience something moving past quickly. To feel wind at all is to experience the movement of air; to say that the spontaneous experience of a breeze includes temperature but not movement seems absurd.

We could think likewise of extension and solidity. The difference in size between various objects and things, or even the fact that something has a size and exists as a physically extended object, is certainly experienced spontaneously. Likewise, the difference between solids, liquids, and gasses, as much as they are scientific distinctions, are also experienced. The difference, for example, between walking on solid ice, wading through water, or walking around when the air is foggy and damp is experienced by people often. This distinction helps account for the space left

open by his affirmation of secondary qualities as contents of reality and his denial of primary qualities (as mathematical abstracts) in reality. Certain aspects of the primary qualities exist, along with the secondary qualities, as the actual qualities of spontaneous experience.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, secondary qualities and the less abstract aspects of primary qualities make up the totality of everyday experience. Returning to Naess' denial of the typical subject-object distinction, given with his adoption of both-and theory, this means also the denial of the typical ontological status of secondary qualities, which is that they are interpreted of the object by the subject. For Naess reality is not a separated subject and object; reality exists in relations. An object can be two contradicting qualities at once, i.e. hot and cold, because it is in two different relations at once. Naess speaks of the relational field, which is "the totality of our interrelated experience," and defines material objects as "junctions within the field." When two people experience the same object, they are both in a relation with the same junction/object, but because each is in a different relation, the qualities may be different for each of them.<sup>74</sup>

The different relations, and the qualities that exist in these relations, are equally real. Secondary qualities, as the primary constituents of relations between things, are referred to by Naess as the *concrete contents* of reality. Given the argument above, we would add that the primary qualities, in their less abstract aspects, also exist as concrete contents. If such qualities exist in experienced reality, then they are a part of the relations between things. The concrete contents exist in the world, but the world is, as Christian Diehm puts it, "so full of [instances of concrete contents] that they cannot be experienced all at once."<sup>75</sup> A person cannot at once experience all the contents in a tree, a forest, or a landscape, and so experiences some of them in

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<sup>73</sup> I would be surprised if nobody else had made a similar distinction, or at least questions Naess' simple reversal of primary and secondary qualities. While I suspect that such a work exists, I have not actually found or read it.

<sup>74</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 55-56.

<sup>75</sup> Diehm, "Arne Naess and the Task of Gestalt Ontology," 26. This article provides an excellent overview of Naess' gestalt ontology in general.

a particular relation. This does not mean that these contents exist only in the external world, but that the particular content(s) that a person experiences in a certain encounter with an object arise in that relation between them. Furthermore, the qualities or contents experienced are part of a relation not just between a person and the object, but a relation of a whole experiential field of things; to speak of the object as separate from the relational field makes no sense for Naess, as “speaking of interaction between organisms and the milieu gives rise to the wrong associations, as an *organism is interaction*.”<sup>76</sup> Naess gives a concrete example of this with a grey sea, explaining “the water of the sea is only one part of the constellation.” The grey of the sea is not just an isolated thing, but is determined by “the colour of the heavens... the waves, and the senses of observers . . .”<sup>77</sup> To be clear, it is the sea that is grey, not ourselves or the sky. But the sea is grey in that relation. This is where the concrete content comes from. It is neither in the observer, projected onto the world, nor in a free-from-relation object. The concrete contents exist in the relational field. The reality of experience with nature, then, is the experience of concrete contents, the concrete contents that make up the relations of spontaneous experience.

To elucidate this interaction further, a person’s experience of the relational field is made up of gestalts. A gestalt is a relational set of things; any particular gestalt is often a part of a larger gestalt, and likewise it is often the case that any part of a gestalt is itself a gestalt; basically, there are higher and lower levels of interrelated parts all making up wholes.<sup>78</sup> Naess’ sea example above illustrates a gestalt; the color of the sea depends on the surrounding colors. Naess’ usual example of gestalts comes from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: a note is experienced as high or low in relation to the pattern of notes preceding it.<sup>79</sup> Likewise with all

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<sup>76</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 56, original emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 57.

<sup>78</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 55.

<sup>79</sup> Rothenberg, *Is it Painful to Think?*, 159.

gestalts, a particular part is experienced differently in relation to the other parts. The gestalts that make up a person's spontaneous experience are sets of relations among concrete contents. So a person experiences the world as a gestalt made up of concrete contents, making concrete contents the *foundation of experienced reality*. Naess makes this very clear in two places. The first is when he explicitly states that "the concrete contents are apprehended as genuine qualities of *matter or nature itself*."<sup>80</sup> Naess also makes it clear in another work that "the world we live in spontaneously. . . is the real world we experience. Nothing is more real."<sup>81</sup> To put it more clearly, the world we experience is the real world. Naess is creating a link between the contents of reality and the contents of experience; the contents of experience *are* the contents of reality. And these concrete contents are the secondary qualities and the less abstract primary qualities.

## 2. Gestalt Ontology, Phenomenology, and Literature

A brief examination of the philosophical field known as phenomenology will help to supplement Naess' claims, as well as the arguments regarding literature being made here. Indeed, the similarity between certain aspects of Naess' philosophy and the general pursuit of phenomenology is significant. To be clear, Naess' work does not appear to have been *directly* influenced by phenomenology, although he does briefly address the similarity of beginning with spontaneous experience, and further discusses the interplay between gestalt ontology, gestalt psychology, and phenomenology.<sup>82</sup>

Phenomenology is the study of the human consciousness as it experiences things in uncritical, everyday experience. This everyday experience is distinguished from human

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<sup>80</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 55, emphasis added.

<sup>81</sup> Arne Naess, "Environmental philosophy and Gestalt Ontology," in *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 244.

<sup>82</sup> Arne Naess, "Reflections on Gestalt Ontology," *The Trumpton* 21, no. 1 (2005): 125-127.

consciousness as it shifts attention to look at experience itself, this shifted attention being phenomenological study. According to phenomenology, all human consciousness is a consciousness of something. Put another way, all human experience is *intentional*, or is a relation between subject and things. Further, most phenomenologists would assert that the world as experienced by humans should be the starting point of all knowledge. Phenomenology, then, is a study of the human consciousness as a relational experience of the world.<sup>83</sup>

Naess' philosophy, at least the aspect of gestalt ontology, resembles phenomenology in the emphasis on the everyday experienced appearances of things and the relational nature of experience. Recall that Naess gave an ontological primacy to the concrete contents, or rather to the world as experienced. Phenomenology would usually ascertain likewise that scientific models – which Naess pointed out are based on the Modern prejudice towards primary qualities – are neither epistemologically nor metaphysically superior to the world as experienced.<sup>84</sup> Naess himself suggests that the distancing from science is an explicit aim of phenomenology, while not necessarily an aim of gestalt ontology – although a certain distancing from at least aspects of natural science is present in both.<sup>85</sup> Regardless, the most relevant unifying principle between Naess and phenomenology is, again, the reality or authenticity of the world *as experienced*. In light of these views, an examination of nature writing can attempt to show whether or not the literary experience of nature is an authentic experience of nature.

Returning specifically to Naess' gestalt ontology, a comparison can be made with an experience of nature through literature. The easiest aspect to compare is that it is a *spontaneous*

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<sup>83</sup> For further summaries of phenomenology, see: Irene Klaver, "Continental Environmental Philosophy: Introduction," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et. al (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 282; and Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, "Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xi.

<sup>84</sup> Brown and Toadvine, "Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction," xi.

<sup>85</sup> Naess, "Reflections on Gestalt Ontology," 126.

experience. Based on my own experience, it seems that the reading of literature of any kind provides a spontaneous experience.<sup>86</sup> When a person reads, he or she does not pause at every new description to forcibly create a mental image of what is being described. Neither does the reader read at length, and then construct a mental image of the events read. Rather, as a person is actively reading, he or she spontaneously forms a mental image, or perhaps a mental re-creation, of what is being described. It is easily arguable that reading is similar to a direct experience in that reading results in a spontaneous imaging of what is described, making both experiences spontaneous in a certain sense. As a person reads a piece of nature writing, a mental re-creation of the nature described is spontaneously formed. As a person hikes through the forest, he or she spontaneously perceives the forest. These two kinds of experiences, at least concerning the aspect of spontaneity, are fundamentally similar.

If it can be granted that reading is a spontaneous experience, the next question is to ask *what* is being spontaneously experienced. According to Naess' view, what is experienced in reading nature literature is fundamentally similar to the "direct" sensory experience of nature – gestalts made up of concrete contents. First, it might be helpful to recall what exactly the concrete contents are. The concrete contents consist of all the colors, all sounds, smells and tastes, and temperature. This is the range of what constitutes secondary qualities (concrete contents) as laid out by philosopher John Locke.<sup>87</sup> The distinction made above adds form, motion, extension and solidity to the concrete contents. So the full spectrum of concrete contents is color, sounds, smell, taste, temperature, solidity, extension, form, and movement.

What, on the other hand, is being experienced in nature writing according to phenomenology? Some insight to this can be gained from the work of Lester Embree, who

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<sup>86</sup> Naess is using 'spontaneous' to describe what we would typically refer to as 'immediate.'

<sup>87</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 123.

discusses various kinds of “representational awareness.” One form of this is “linguistic awareness,” where according to Embree, “the normal attitude is an unreflective one in which we focus on *what the words are about*, somehow overlooking the words themselves and how they refer.” Embree further emphasizes that “correlative to the sounds or marks there is either predominantly auditory or predominantly visual perceiving,” marks and visual perceiving referring to literature.<sup>88</sup> What this means is that in average, day-to-day human experience, a person reading is mentally focused on, or really experiencing, the objects described, not the words themselves.

This can be elucidated through an example, such as if a person reads about a tree. This person has an imaginative-visual experience of a tree, or rather, this person has a mental image of a tree. This person is not focused on the words itself, and does not visualize or focus on the actual printed word. It is only in a phenomenological inquiry, stepping back from the regular experience, that one focuses on the words and the experience of the words. In average, uncritical, experience people automatically go past the word to the thing described or talked about. In other words, the experience is of the thing being described, not the words used to describe. Using this phenomenological point in addition to the main application of Naess' gestalt ontology will bear out the authenticity of the experience of nature through literature.

### 3. The Literary Experience of Concrete Contents

Turning to specific examples, many, if not all, of what would be considered great or foundational works in American nature writing focus on the, to use Naess' phrase, concrete contents in their descriptions. There is a passage from *Walden*, for example, in which Thoreau describes “the pitch-pines and shrub-oaks around my house, which had so long drooped,

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<sup>88</sup> Lester Embree, “The Phenomenology of Representational Awareness,” *Human Studies* 15 (1992): 306.

suddenly resumed their several characters, looked brighter, greener, . . . as it grew dark, I was startled by the *honking* of geese flying low over the woods, like weary travelers getting in late . . . I could hear the rush of their wings. . . .”<sup>89</sup> Saying oaks and geese brings certain forms to mind that are spontaneously imagined as the passage is read. That the shrubs are “greener” brings out the vividness in the mental image. The “honking” and the “rush” recall definite sounds, making the mental image more than just an image. It is the concrete contents that make up deep, vivid descriptions of nature. Further, recalling the phenomenological point, what are experienced are the trees, the geese, the woods, all in or as their colors, sounds, and motions. The experience may be imaginative rather than sensory, but is still equally authentic to the consciousness nonetheless. The experience given through this passage is significantly similar, in various ways, to a similar sensory experience of the world.

Regarding concrete contents, American nature writing, or at least many works in the genre, seems to rely on these contents to represent the nature that the author experienced. Color in particular seems to be a primary element of the descriptions in nature writing. Annie Dillard, for example, gives an engaging description, recounting that “when [she] left the woods [she] stepped into a yellow light. The sun beyond a uniform layer of gray had the diffuse shine of a very much rubbed and burnished metal boss.”<sup>90</sup> The specific colors are what give the readers an approximate shade of the sunlight and the sky. Mary Austin likewise describes the scenes of spring as “a mistiness as of incense smoke, a veil of greenness over the whitish stubby shrubs, a web of color on the silver sanded soil.”<sup>91</sup> This is one of the primary ways in which nature writers convey nature to their audience, and do so in a way that authentically gives the reader access to nature. The green, white, and silver cause the reader to have a more vivid image. Another

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<sup>89</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1995), 246.

<sup>90</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 50-51.

<sup>91</sup> Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 36.



example is Gretel Ehrlich describing a Wyoming winter where “white pastures glide overhead and drop themselves like skeins of hair to the earth. . . . winter looks oceanic to me. . . . Tides of white are overtaken by tides of blue, . . .”<sup>92</sup> Ehrlich focuses on the white and the blue, which gives the reader the same thing a person has when directly experiencing winter: a visual field full of white, broken by the bluish look of snow in the dusk and dawn of winter. Overall, use of color gives the reader a vivid experience of nature, which is an experience of the woods, the soil, and snow that is written about.

Other concrete contents are also integral to both sensory nature experience and nature writing, such as movement. Lived experience of nature is full of movement, and this is another way in which nature writing gives an experience of nature to the reader. Austin gives life to the desert with “hawks skimming above the sage,” and with the coyote who “trots or breaks into short gallops,” and the “rabbits . . . taking the trail with long, light leaps . . .”<sup>93</sup> A passage from Ehrlich’s *The Future of Ice* tells of an experience at sea, when “an island slowly comes into being, . . . It is rimmed with ice, swathed by clouds, and ends in purple cliffs where seabirds nest and fledge. A line of ducks flies, a black line against gold sky. . . . A cloud in the northwest throws snow into the sea. As we approach the west side, sunlight breaks on cliffs.”<sup>94</sup> There is motion not just in animals, but also in the snow *pouring* down, in the sunlight *breaking*. This is relating to direct experience, and the reader will imagine, as if seeing it themselves, the flight of ducks and the snow falling into the sea. Even the light is said to break, giving us the light as a foreground object. In another example, Dillard “stared upstream where only the deepest violet remained of the cloud, . . . out of that violet, a sudden enormous black body arced over the water. I saw only a cylindrical sleekness. Head and tail, if there was a head and tail, were both

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<sup>92</sup> Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 72.

<sup>93</sup> Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*, 13-14.

<sup>94</sup> Gretel Ehrlich, *The Future of Ice* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 138.

submerged in cloud. I saw only one ebony fling, a headlong dive to darkness; then the waters closed, and the lights went out.”<sup>95</sup> This is another example where color and motion mix, colors breaking and forming around one another as the wild life of the environment moves. The image portrayed by the writing is full of concrete contents and is more like a movie, full of motion, than a still image. What the written work gives to the reader is very much like a “direct” sensory experience.

The experience given by American nature writing is not merely visual either. Thoreau gives another good example concerning sound, when he tells of the loon, whose “usual note was this demonic laughter, . . . but occasionally, . . . he mutters a long-drawn unearthly howl, probably more like that of a wolf than any bird.”<sup>96</sup> Or when Aldo Leopold tells us that “the wind that makes music in November corn is in a hurry. The stalks hum, the loose husks whisk skyward in half-playful swirls, and the wind hurries on.”<sup>97</sup> Or Dillard’s account that “through the trees I saw the creek run blue under the ledge of ice from the banks; it made a thin, metallic sound like foil beating foil.”<sup>98</sup> This gives the reader more than just a visual experience of nature. Because of the use of sound descriptions, we can hear in our heads the howl, the hum, the metallic beat. Nature writing gives us a mediated experience of the sounds of nature, the sounds which according to Naess’ ontology are concrete contents of the experienced world.

Nature writing, in fact, seems to fill out the full range of human sense perception. Temperature is intermingled with the general feel of the air, as when Austin speaks of the southwest desert, which in the summer “lies hot, still,” and in the winter snow is “steely blue,

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<sup>95</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 23.

<sup>96</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 187.

<sup>97</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 70.

<sup>98</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 50.

two-edged with cold, divinely fresh and still, . . . <sup>99</sup> Experiencing the external world engages, to a certain degree, the full range of human sensory perception. Nature literature does likewise, giving the reader a spontaneous experience of not just the sights, but also the sounds and the feel of nature. By using all the qualities of the environment, nature gives the reader what can be called, in a fuller sense, an experience. And this experience is of the same qualities that make up the direct nature experience, the same qualities that make up the world we experience. Primary qualities come in, such as solidity in the "mistiness" in the Austin quote above or extension in the "tides of blue" in the Ehrlich quote, recalling the vast extent of snow cover. To recall the phenomenological point of Embree once again, the reader automatically goes past the descriptive terms to the qualities or contents themselves, to the being or object these qualities exist in relation with, which is experienced authentically despite the imaginative nature of this experience. Therefore nature writing gives the reader an experience *of nature* – not just of words but of what is nature.

This characteristic of nature literature is not limited to what is more properly called nature writing, but applies to any writing with rich environmental description, including fiction. A potential example is the highly acclaimed *Dune* by Frank Herbert. In the story, which occurs as a series of first person narratives, one of the major characters describes how "the breeze that fingered her robes seared the patches of exposed skin at cheeks and forehead."<sup>100</sup> In another part, a character watched as "the night grew a . . . luminous grey, then seashell opulence that dimmed the stars. There came the long, bell tolling movement of dawn striking a broken horizon. . . . that shattered red horizon and the purple and ochre cliffs."<sup>101</sup> Similar qualities, the concrete contents, make the experience given in these quotes – the searing breeze, the shattered red horizon. It may

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<sup>99</sup> Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*, 4, 98.

<sup>100</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace Books, 1990), 310.

<sup>101</sup> Herbert, *Dune*, 102.

seem strange to say that the literary experience of a fictional place is significantly like an actual experience of nature, but if the fictional place is comparable to actual places, the comparable elements – the concrete contents that make up real experience – will be there. This is not dissimilar from a person reading nature writing about a place to which he or she had never actually been, or reading about a piece of nature that once existed, but has been significantly altered. Embree himself notes, albeit with little elaboration, that “a text can easily represent objects that are merely feigned.” Presumably this means that literature can give us an experience of, or put us in relation to (to use Naess' terms) places or things that do not exist, just as much as it can with places or things we have never experienced with or been in relation to through spontaneous sense experience.<sup>102</sup> So therefore literature with environmental imagery can be a kind of experience of nature, or an experience similar enough to be affective on a person's view of nature.

To sum up, a person who is reading nature literature – this including nature writing and literature with environmental imagery – is having an experience of concrete contents, and these qualities exist as part of a gestalt. This is significant because, again, for Naess reality is the experience of the gestalt, and the fundamental components of the gestalt are the concrete contents. The gestalt of spontaneous experience is a relation between a person and physical object – which is not to say that the object is not "real," but that it is mistaken to think of the object as being knowable or experienced outside of the relationship. The gestalt of the literary experience is a relation between a person and a description of an object, or rather between a person and a representative object. Two different people will experience the same natural object differently. Likewise, two different people will imagine the same description differently. Just as two people will often disagree on what precise shade of color an object is, likewise two different

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<sup>102</sup> Embree, “The Phenomenology of Representational Awareness,” 307.

people will imagine 'blue' differently. Just like the heat of a southwestern desert will feel different to two people, the description of the desert as hot will cause different imaginative feelings of heat in each person. Neither the spontaneous nor the literary experience provides any kind of objective experience of nature. Both kinds of experience are alike in that the objects, whether they are encountered directly or imaginatively through literature, are encountered in a gestalt relation with the person encountering them.

A question that must be dealt with asks whether the descriptions in nature writing are really just literary abstractions, unrelated to the "direct" sensory experience of natural objects. Two immediate answers will have to suffice for the present. One is that Naess unintentionally opens the way for the authenticity of the literary experience by dissolving the Modern subject-object view. Naess' ontology denies the idea of encountering a nonhuman life as a thing-in-itself, because all experiences are relational, which means that this ontology implicitly undermines the claim that literature cannot allow the reader to apprehend any part of nature as a thing-in-itself. Nature literature in fact cannot allow the reader to encounter a nonhuman life as a thing-in-itself, but neither can spontaneous sensory experience. The literary descriptions are a mediating connection in the relation between a person and nature, but the literary experience is still ultimately a kind of relation, albeit different from direct experience, with the objects of the natural world. That differences between direct and literary experiences of nature exist is not being questioned, but the significant similarities between the two are being affirmed.

The other, perhaps more significant, approach to the above question is to say that while the descriptions may, to some degree, be an abstraction of actual nature, the descriptions are still concrete enough and like nature enough to *generate a response to nature itself*. Literary descriptions relying on concrete contents are not so abstract as to be wholly different from the

“direct” sensory experience, because the descriptions contain enough of what is, for Naess, real in nature itself. Also, for Embree it is the things being described that are encountered, not the words used. These latter responses together are more of a different way to phrase the earlier response than a wholly different answer. Regardless, both answers supply the necessary conclusion: that nature writing, on the one hand evoking the same qualities and aspects that make up real nature, and on the other giving (according to Embree) an experience of the things described, provides a kind of nature experience. Both answers also acknowledge that the literary experience of nature is not the same as the spontaneous sensory experience – this is unquestionable. But both sensory and literary experiences of nature are spontaneous and relational experiences of nature, consisting of the concrete contents that make up reality according to Naess. Thus, the reading of nature writing does provide what can be called, in a *deeper sense*, an experience of nature. It is a mediated experience, but can be called authentic insofar as it is an experience *of nature*.

This is another step towards arguing that a person can have identification-with-nature through literature, because a person can have a kind of experience of nature through literature. This step, however, is more of a prerequisite for arguing for identification through literature, and is certainly not a sufficient condition for that conclusion. Another way to put it is to say that, knowing that literature can provide a form of experience that can be said to be an experience *of nature*, opens up the possibility that there can be identification *with nature* through literature, rather than identification *with literature*.

The next question in the overall inquiry then is actually three related questions, all of which have been unaddressed thus far: How might literary experiences affect or change the reader; how is nature portrayed in literature in regard to value; and, based on the first two, in

what specific way might the literary experience of nature change the reader? There are two approaches to these questions, both of which are based in hermeneutics, and will bring back the distinction between identification-as-commonality and identification-as-continuity. The first approach is that of the parallel hermeneutic theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, specifically the notion of the fusing or enlarging of horizons, which will be applied more specifically to what was labeled above as identification-as-commonality. The second will be through the narrative hermeneutics of Ricoeur, applied more specifically to identification-as-continuity. The former will be taken first, as we examine the hermeneutic horizon of identification-as-commonality.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HERMENEUTIC HORIZON OF IDENTIFICATION-AS-COMMONALITY

An examination of Naess' relational ontology, as well as some phenomenology, has allowed me to show that in reading nature literature the reader actually experiences the nature described, not just a literary abstract. While this gets us closer to identification, it remains to be seen how literature can transform a person's identity and specifically cause the shift in view labeled as identification-with-nature. The possibility of identification-as-commonality through literature can be shown by applying the hermeneutic theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. These theories describe what happens when a person interprets and understands beyond his or her desires and intentions. Drawing on these theories I will show that if the reader is open to finding meaning in the text and the writer is open to finding value in nature and able to convey aspects of nature into the written text, then identification-through-literature can occur. If not, then identification is not possible. Although this means that identification-through-literature does not *necessarily* occur, the point is to determine whether identification-with-nature via literature is at least *possible*.

#### 1. Interpretation and Prejudice

To put the entire hermeneutic discussion into the appropriate context, it will be best to begin with a particular comment made by Gadamer: "*all such understanding* [of a text] *is ultimately self-understanding*."<sup>103</sup> This has a double meaning in that the understanding of texts will shape a person's self-understanding and a person's self-understanding will shape the understanding of a text (bearing in mind that a 'text' in many hermeneutic theories is not strictly

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<sup>103</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), 251, emphasis added.



limited to written work, but can include art, objects in nature or anything else that can be "read" like a text). To fully understand hermeneutics as it applies to identification-as-commonality will involve a detailed explanation of this double motion of understanding.

To begin with, there is the idea of prejudice. Any encounter with nature, direct or indirect, will be shaped by a person's existing views about nature. Gadamer, drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, discusses these existing views that a person has when he or she begins the interpretation of a text. There is, first of all, the fact that in interpretation a person is always projecting "a meaning for the whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges," referred to as the fore-projection. There are also the meanings already held by a person, or the fore-meaning, which can be distracting unless the person can work out these fore-meanings in interpretation and thus adjust or confirm them. The overall projections of expectation and already held meanings and concepts are referred to as the fore-structure or fore-understanding, or more simply as a person's prejudices.<sup>104</sup>

Such prejudice is not necessarily bad because it is both unavoidable and necessary – each person is always already projecting his or her prejudice onto the text or encounter, and it is these prejudices which shape a person's view of the world. However, a person's interpretation is limited when he or she has arbitrary prejudices or holds on to prejudices so firmly that the prejudices constrict the meaning of the text or the meaning in the encounter. A person who wants to achieve a suitable interpretation must be aware of his or her prejudices, and must allow the text to speak, working the projections and meanings out as fitting or not with the meaning of the text. This will allow the text to assert its own meanings and values against those already held by the reader, allowing the reader to actually be influenced by the text.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-273.

<sup>105</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-273.

Although this is a preliminary concept in Gadamer's hermeneutics, it already allows for a useful distinction. Beyond the problems with identification discussed in Chapter III of the present work, there is the fact that many people will simply not be open to re-interpreting nature or letting nature "speak for itself" if they do have a sensory experience of nature. There can be many factors: holding on to scientifically reductive and/or anti-environmental concepts and meanings, holding too strongly onto anthropocentric meanings, or simply values of lifestyle that make any kind of more adventurous nature experience unpleasant. Whatever the precise factor, these are the kinds of prejudices that, held too strongly against the meaning nature presents in itself, will prevent a re-interpretation of nature in a sensory experience. The problem put simply is that people, even in the face of what many would consider the most astounding experiences of nature, may simply refuse to be open to any kind of value in that experience.

The kind of people who make up the average nature writer, on the other hand, will often have the proper prejudices to find – or rather allow oneself to find – value in a sensory experience of the natural world. He or she is open to finding meaning in the environment, or open to letting natural phenomena 'speak' and 'assert' its value (potentially ethical value that, while not fully independent of human interpretation, is distinct from instrumental or use value). Nature writers also usually have the time, inclination, and resources to spend time in free nature, thus avoiding some of the problems mentioned in Chapter III of the present work. Nature writing is often done by those who go into nature and are open to having a positive interpretation of nature – who in fact have already had a positive interpretation of nature. This is not to say such people intrinsically had the "right" prejudices, but more likely that at some point they had a re-interpretation of nature. Either way, many nature writers have had a positive interpretation of nature, and convey the meanings of that interpretation into their writing.

Those who would hold their prejudices against a re-interpretation of the environment and those who are unable or unwilling to go into nature (and they are often one and the same) probably greatly outnumber those who go into nature and view nature positively (including nature writers). However, many people (including presumably most people in the industrialized West) have access to texts and are open to finding meaning in them. Their overall fore-structure is more or less open to learning something and letting the written text assert truths to them. In other words any of them, as an individual, will possibly work out his or her projections and meanings in interpretation of written text. A person's openness to interpretation – whether it be of the natural world or of literature – involves examining the meanings of the text against the whole of his or her own meanings. This is a process of interpretation that Gadamer describes as the “hermeneutic circle.”<sup>106</sup>

## 2. Nature, Literature, and the Hermeneutic Circle

A person's prejudices of and experiences with nature will influence one another. Likewise, a person's prejudices about literature and his or her interpretation of nature writing will influence one another. This is the hermeneutic circle; the interpreter has an expectation of what meaning the whole of the text will have, based on his or her prejudices, which influences how the parts of the text appear. However, understanding the parts will change the expectation that one has for the meaning of the whole and likewise change his or her prejudices. This circular shift must go on until the expected meaning of the whole and the interpreted meaning of the parts match up with each other. As Gadamer puts it, “the harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding,” and until this occurs interpretation is incomplete.<sup>107</sup> A

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<sup>106</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 293-295.

<sup>107</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.

person experiencing the natural world projects meaning onto nature, which influences the way that the individual natural phenomena, e.g. the trees and the river and the animals, appear to this person.<sup>108</sup> Then this person's encounters with the individual natural phenomena reshape their expected meaning of a natural whole, such as a forest, or of nature itself. Through this circle, the person encounters the natural world and comes to better understand it. The reader, encountering nature literature, will likewise project meaning onto the text which will influence the meanings and values in parts of the text. The encounter with the parts will change the projected meaning of the whole, and this goes on until there is a unified meaning between parts and whole. This allows the reader to really encounter the text, which is itself shaped by the prejudices, experiences, and understanding of the author.

A person who reads nature writing encounters neither the subjective prejudices of the author nor a purely objective text, but something that is neither subjective nor objective. This person encounters the actual content, the descriptions of nature that make up the writing. To use Gadamer's own words, "understanding means, *primarily*, to understand the content of what is said, and only *secondarily* to isolate and understand another's meaning as such."<sup>109</sup> The meeting of reader and *text* is the heart of interpretation and understanding, not reader and author. It is incorrect to treat interpretation as an attempt to understand the author psychologically or get into the author's mind. When the reader encounters a text he or she does not encounter the mind of the author, but a text which reflects the author's prejudices as reshaped through the author's encounters with the environment.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> This is a particular spot where the language of Deep Ecology and Hermeneutics might clash; "projecting" means the beliefs a person brings to any interpretive encounter, so a person will project their beliefs about an organism's value onto the encounter, but this does not mean that the organism cannot have intrinsic value.

<sup>109</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 294, emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 292-294; Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press), 178.

It is important to emphasize that the content of the text is reflective of the author's views, and to avoid over-extending the hermeneutic de-emphasis of author intention. Ricoeur makes this particular clear. After affirming that interpretation does not mean to understand the author's intentions (in a way not unlike Gadamer) Ricoeur notes that "this de-psychologizing of interpretation does not imply that the notion of authorial meaning has lost all significance." Just as it is fallacious to treat interpretation as getting into the author's mind, for Ricoeur "the opposite fallacy forgets that a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something."<sup>111</sup> So interpreting a text is not simply receiving the author's meaning or understanding the author's intentions, but the content is colored by the author's own prejudices and understandings.

The semi-separation of text and author sets up the potential for identification-through-literature. Because the nature writer presumably had a positive interpretation of nature this will be conveyed in his or her work; the author will say something (positive) about something (nature) to someone (the reader). However, the reader is not trying to understand the author. This means that the reader is *not* encountering the author; if the reader was encountering the author then this would either mean that the reader could not identify with nature, or it would mean the reader was having a vicarious identification, which would require that the author him- or herself had had what could strictly be called identification-with-nature. However, the reader is actually encountering nature, which is being portrayed in a positive or meaningful way, as will be shown below. Really, what is being encountered is a *world* where nature is meaningful and valuable.

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<sup>111</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 30.

### 3. The World of the Work

The text of the nature writer opens up a world which the reader can encounter by following the references of the text. Ricoeur explains that any discourse or text contains the sense, which is the ‘what,’ and reference, which is the ‘about what.’ The text, through its references, creates a world made up of the totality of these references; everything that the text points to exists, in a way, in the *world of the text*. Understanding comes when the reader shifts from the “which,” or the actual words of the text, to the “about which,” giving the reader access to the world thus opened.<sup>112</sup> This is, it should be recalled, similar to what Lester Embree said about literary representations of objects.<sup>113</sup> Applying Ricoeur's ideas to the case of nature writing, we see that when a reader moves from merely reading descriptions to imaginatively experiencing the natural phenomena described, he or she encounters a world, shaped by the author, where nonhuman life stands out as foreground or *being-alive* rather than being just a background.

An example of such writing – and such a world – is Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, where Dillard describes a landscape where

Upstream is a wall of light split into planks by smooth stone sandstone ledges that cross the creek evenly, like steps. Downstream the live water before me stills, dies suddenly as if extinguished, and vanishes around a bend shaded summer and winter by overarching tulips, locusts, and Osage orange. Everywhere I look are creekside trees whose ascending boles against water and grass accent the vertical thrust of the land in this spot.<sup>114</sup>

This is the kind of world opened up by nature writing. It is a world that is colored by the plants, the trees, and even the water, all of which are no longer the background but the center of the world, making them meaningful.<sup>115</sup> In this world, the parts of the natural world are not just

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<sup>112</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 176-178.

<sup>113</sup> Embree, “The Phenomenology of Representational Awareness,” 306; Cited in Chapter IV of the present work.

<sup>114</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 87.

<sup>115</sup> While water is not technically a living thing, it is not unusual for environmental scientists and naturalists to consider water ‘living’ as an integral part of the ecosystem.

biologically living – they are vanishing, arching, and ascending. These parts are expressive and active in a way not unlike humans, but yet not anthropomorphized. These parts are also all in an aesthetic interaction that hints at the ecological interaction, like how the “ascending boles against water” may remind the reader that it is the water in the creek that is making the trees grow.<sup>116</sup> When the reader follows the references of the text, he or she encounters this world where nature is seen as significant, meaningful, and possibly as being-alive.

This is, of course, not limited to plant life. The world opened up by nature writing will often include nonhuman life, one example being in Mary Austin's work where she describes "the rabbits . . . taking the trail with long, light leaps," and how "the bobcat drops down upon [the rabbits] from the black rock, and the red fox picks them up returning in the dark . . ." and "the hawk and eagle overshadow them."<sup>117</sup> This is a world of animals all in the legitimate actions of their lives, leaping, dropping, flying, and overall living and hunting. Again nonhuman nature is seen in deeper actions in a way that shows them as really being alive, in a way that can be interpreted as being meaningful or significant.

The way in which nature writing shows nonhuman life as meaningful, valuable, and fundamentally alive is very relevant in light of another aspect of understanding a text: making the world of the text familiar. In the case of nature writing, it is through this process of becoming familiar with the text that the reader understands the natural world itself. When a reader interprets a text, he or she encounters a world that is in some ways familiar and in other ways unfamiliar. The familiarity and unfamiliarity comes from the text being historically distant in a particular tradition (unfamiliar) which is yet part of the continuous tradition of which the reader is part (familiar). Understanding comes from finding meaning in between the familiar and

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<sup>116</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 87.

<sup>117</sup> Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*, 14-15.

unfamiliar aspects of this world. For Gadamer "*the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.*"<sup>118</sup> For Ricoeur, also, an interpretation is authentic only if the reader takes what is unfamiliar and makes it familiar, or appropriates it. By appropriating the unfamiliar, which is the world of the text itself, the reader then becomes familiar with all aspects of this world, and fully understands it.<sup>119</sup>

This idea of historical distance may seem strange in the context of nature writing, much of which is fairly recent. However, it should be noted that historical distance does not necessarily have to be temporally extensive, there could be only a minor distance between the present of the reader and the past of the text. Historical distance is crucial insofar as every person's consciousness is historically effected, but a relevant aspect is the tension created by the distance between one's own understanding and the context of the text. In this regard, considering nature literature, a tension of historical distance does seem to exist, regardless of the length of strict temporal distance. This is the tension created by the text being familiar insofar as it has certain concepts that are a part of most peoples' worldviews – concepts of meaningfulness, ethical value, or the beauty of life – but yet unfamiliar insofar as such concepts appear in a way uncommon to most peoples' world-views – insofar as these concepts directly apply to nature and nonhuman living things. Thus, it could be said that the world of a text, with nature literature, is unfamiliar because the world of a work of nature writing will likely be one where nature is the center of the world and is alive just as much as people are, and where all life is interconnected rather than separate. The reader will find meaning between his or her expectation of the text and its familiar concepts of meaning and value and the parts of the text which portrays the environment itself as what is meaningful or what is ethically valued.

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<sup>118</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295, original emphasis.

<sup>119</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 178.



Another significant example of such work comes from Henry David Thoreau, who portrays a world of “the withered vegetation which had withstood the winter, – life-everlasting, golden-rods, pinweeds, and graceful wild grasses more obvious and interesting frequently than in summer even, . . . ” and of “the first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and moist fields from the blue-bird, and the song-sparrow, and the red-wing, as if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell!”<sup>120</sup> The reader is expecting something significant in the text. What he or she finds in the text is the graceful wild grasses, the first sparrow of spring, and the silvery warblings over moist fields. Thoreau portrays a world not just containing, but almost entirely made up of nonhuman life. And the plants and birds are coming alive together in reaction to each other and the spring.

A similar example comes from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, in which Leopold describes a mountain morning in Arizona where "every living thing sang, chirped, and burgeoned. Massive pines and firs, storm-tossed these many months, soaked up the sun in towering dignity" and further describes the "tassel-eared squirrels, poker-faced but exuding emotion with voice and tail."<sup>121</sup> Again, the reader finds familiar concepts of meaning – dignity, emotion, an overall exuberance – but this time applied to nonhuman living things, in a way which is only minimally anthropomorphizing. More than anything, it provides a rich description of nonhuman life in the fullness of the way such life lives.

The text, in works like Thoreau's and Leopold's as well as other pieces of nature writing, provides nonhuman life that is *being-alive*, which will be unfamiliar to the reader at first. But the reader expects meaning in the text, which has recognizable concepts of value, and so the reader accepts the nonhuman life as meaningful and ethically valuable. In that moment, the reader

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<sup>120</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 244-245.

<sup>121</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 125.

makes the golden-rods and pinweeds and the silvery warblings his or her own. The reader may have an experience in the text like the one the author had in the natural world, and now sees the environment in the way that the nature writer, through having a fore-structure open to meaning in the environment, saw the natural world. To really understand nature writing, the reader must rework and adjust his or her prejudices and meanings to make the unfamiliar world of the nature text his or her own. In doing this the reader can come to understand his or her own world in a different way.

#### 4. The Fusion of Horizons

When a reader understands and appropriates a piece of nature literature, he or she may understand the real world differently, through what Gadamer terms the “fusion of horizons.” A horizon, for Gadamer, is the limit of everything, whether close or far, that a person can understand; everything must be understood from within a person's horizon. Others have their own horizon, whether this other is a person or a literary work. When a person manages to make his or her expected meaning of a text match the meaning of the parts, then the world of the text is opened up to him or her. When this other world is opened up to a person, or when a person orients him- or herself to the world of the text, there is the “fusion of horizons;” the reader and the text are now encompassed by one horizon. This means that the limit of the reader’s understanding now includes what could be understood in the world of the text.<sup>122</sup>

To explain further, Gadamer's distinction between horizons regards history and historically effected consciousness. The horizon of the reader could be referred to as the "horizon of the present," a horizon of understanding based in the present, and understanding in the context of today. The text could then be referred to as the "horizon of the past." This is the horizon of a

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<sup>122</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301-305; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 177-178.

text/world whose original context was in the past, and so there are two different horizons of understanding. When the reader encounters the text and is open to really interpreting the text – when the reader really interprets, understands, and applies the information of the text – there is a recognition of the tension between the interpreter's own horizon and the horizon of the text. In true understanding, when the reader adjusts his or her prejudices against the text, the two horizons are superimposed or fuse into the new historical horizon, and new self-understanding, of the reader. This is all really to say that the reader now understands the content of the text, not in a way that attempts to put the reader into the past, and not in a way that pulls the content of the text blindly into the reader's world, but rather in a way that is dialogical between the reader and the text. This is when the reader encounters the world opened up by the text; this is the fusion of horizons.<sup>123</sup>

To elaborate on an earlier point, while Gadamer mainly uses temporal terms, such as horizons of past and present, time is not the sole factor regarding different horizons. Gadamer's emphasis is on past and present because all understanding is historically effected, but remember that it is the distance in understanding, any kind of significant difference in views, which causes differences in understanding. So, while the past and present are not necessarily extensive in sheer temporality, the difference could be one of environmental views; the reader's prejudices, the projected meanings and conceptions of the environment (often of the environment as lacking inherent ethical value or meaning) are in tension with a text that is opening a world in which nature is meaningful and ethically valued. This is the distance in understanding when someone who does not have a particularly positive interpretation of the environment encounters nature writing or nature literature. This is the situation – a person with an environmentally apathetic

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<sup>123</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301-305; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 177-178.

attitude encountering nature writing – that is at the heart of our present concern of examining the fusion of horizons in the reading of nature writing.

When the fusion of horizons occurs with a reader and nature literature, he or she understands natural phenomena as it is presented in the text, within a now-environmentally positive historical horizon, as meaningful, as ethically valuable, or as *being-alive*. Everything which could be understood within the horizon of the text – in this case the environment as meaningful and ethically valuable – is now understood within the limits of the reader's own horizon. In the fusion of the reader's (egoistic) horizon and the (ecological) horizon of the text, there is a new environmental identity – and new horizon of understanding for the reader, who now sees nonhuman others in a positive way. This is what Gadamer means by saying that the fusion of horizons is "*complete in application*;" because of understanding the natural world as it is presented in the text, the reader now sees nature in his or her own world differently, which is an application of the meaning from the text.<sup>124</sup> Most importantly, however, insofar as in the fusion of horizons the reader has come to see nonhuman others as being-alive, we can say that the reader, through an encounter with the text, has had identification-with-nature. Therefore, the reader has had identification-with-nature through literature!

It must be remembered that the understanding of interpretation is not the reader going into the author's world or mind, but is rather a dialogue between reader and text. Due to this, identification-with-nature through literature is not something that will happen every time a reader interprets or "correctly interprets" a work of nature writing, for the reader does not see the natural world and nonhuman life exactly as the author did (and even if they did, this still would not necessarily constitute identification). However, all that is being argued is that identification-with-nature through literature is possible, and even likely, to happen. As the reader orients his or her

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<sup>124</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306-310.

self and prejudices to the world of the text and understands the beings and objects of that world in a new way – dialogically between the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text – the reader's new view of nonhuman life may change to see such nature as being meaningful and valuable, potentially in a way deep enough to rightly say that he or she sees nonhuman life as being-alive in the way associated with identification-as-commonality.

Elaborating on a point of Ricoeur's will help us return to the overall picture of hermeneutics and return to Gadamer's point above that all understanding is self-understanding. As Ricoeur elaborates, appropriating and understanding the world of the nature text ultimately results in the reader understanding his or her own world differently and, or really because of, ultimately understanding his or her own *self* differently. In the context of identification, we would say that the reader understands not just nature and nonhuman life differently, but understands his or her self and connection to the environment differently. To fully understand the text is “to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the [individual reader’s] understanding.” This helps understand Gadamer's idea of the historical horizon that results from the fusion of horizons – it is really a new or enlarged understanding. Ricoeur also is more explicit about the idea that the hermeneutic circle is not just that between parts and whole or the familiar and unfamiliar; it is also a circle between an understanding of the text and an understanding of one’s self.<sup>125</sup> This brings us back to the overall picture: as the reader interprets, his or her understanding of the text changes his or her prejudices as he or she works out, against the text, the meanings or values (prejudices) that he or she holds. In the circular motion of understanding, the reader's view of his or her self (self-understanding) and, through the text, view of the world (understanding) will correspondingly change. This is why in front of the world of the text of nature writing, a reader can change so that his or her prejudices now allow him or

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<sup>125</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 177-178.

her to see nonhuman life in the text as significant, as foreground. And so the experience has changed the reader so that, in a new self-understanding, he or she now sees the world as one where natural phenomena are important, are seen as being-alive.

To touch briefly on identification-as-continuity (explained in Chapter II of the present work), this could also mean that the reader now understands his or her self as so intricately connected to the environment that even the basic limits of the self change. The reader experiences the natural world in such a way that he or she now understands the self no longer as an individual and egoistic human self, but more fundamentally as a part of the natural world – the self as an ecological Self. Therefore, Ricoeur's hermeneutics opens up the possibility of identification-as-continuity through literature as well. Although the main focus on identification-as-continuity comes with the application of narrative theory below (Chapter VI of the present work), there is already a preliminary ground for arguing that this kind of identification can come through literature. Insofar as understanding the text leads to a new understanding of the self, this can lead to a view of the self as connected with, or rather continuous with, the ecosystem, thus giving the reader the ecological Self-identity of identification-as-continuity.

## 5. The Possibility of Negative Identification

There is still the possibility for negative identification-with-nature, or identification caused by encountering the destruction of nonhuman life. Again, literature can be relevant. Like the positive examples encountered above, the reader hermeneutically encounters environmental destruction in a world opened up by the text. A particular, if perhaps overused, example is the famous wolf scene from *A Sand County Almanac*. There is a scene where Leopold and his fellows open fire on a small family of wolves, and he describes how, when they finished

shooting, "the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks," whereafter Leopold "reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes."<sup>126</sup> The reader, through Leopold's writing, experiences the wolf going down and the dulling of the eyes which occurs in any death. In short, the reader encounters the death of a creature who seems to want to live. This experience, tinged with remorse by Leopold's lament of the situation, gives the reader an experience of the suffering of nonhuman life. This experience may cause empathy or feelings of commonality with nonhuman living things – identification-with-nature.

There are further examples in works of fiction with environmental imagery or themes. In *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, for example, the main characters find "burnt forests for miles along the slopes . . . No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere. The fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes. . . . a stone bridge where the waters slurred into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam."<sup>127</sup> This provides a literary encounter of the destruction of nonhuman life. In *The Road*, instead of a world where nonhuman life is ethically valuable and alive in a fundamental way, the reader encounters a world where all nonhuman life is dead or dying. The reader encounters the dead, burnt trees – the mass destruction of nonhuman life. Furthermore, the reader encounters graphic signs of the mass destruction of life: the blackened boulders, the gray slurry of the water. Just as the author was not only open to the potential of mass ecological destruction but also saw this as something inherently bad, through the text the reader encounters something similar.

In both examples, the reader encounters a world containing experiences not unlike Naess'<sup>128</sup> – the destruction of nonhuman life, encountered in a way that makes such destruction be seen as wrong. As the reader works out and adjusts his or her meanings and values against a

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<sup>126</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 130.

<sup>127</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 25.

<sup>128</sup> Rothenberg, "Is It Painful to Think?," 178-179; cited in Chapter II of the present work.

world-of-the-text where environmental destruction and death of nonhuman life are vivid and necessarily wrong, he or she has a new understanding which leads to a new self-understanding. Within the prejudices of the new self-understanding, a certain moral empathy for nonhuman others now exists, in a different view of the reader on nonhuman others. The reader now sees the natural world and nonhuman life as something that, like humans, is worth saving from destruction. And so the reader, this time through a different kind of literary experience, once again experiences identification-as-commonality.

A person can have an *experience* through nature writing or through literature that changes his or her view of the natural world, leading to a view of the natural world as being-alive and to a sense of commonality with nonhuman life – identification-with-nature. This change can be explained and argued for drawing on the similar hermeneutic theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Interestingly, their explanations on bridging different views or contexts, although initially applied to text, may help explain the shift that occurs in identification-with-nature – and potentially explain such a shift better than Naess himself explains it (this last idea will be taken up again in Chapter VII of the present work). For now we have seen one way that identification-with-nature can occur through literature. And, recalling Chapter IV, we know that this is identification-with-nature, not with the literature itself.

Ricoeur says in one of his works "in this self-understanding, I would oppose the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to precede it. It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego."<sup>129</sup> Similarly, we see how fundamental text can be in connecting a person with the natural environment, particularly when it is the person's only or best access to the natural world, or perhaps the only experience of the natural world that the reader is truly open to. We now see how crucial nature

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<sup>129</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 94.



literature can be to the development of a person's self understanding, in this case his or her environmental identity, and the corresponding change in his or her prejudices and thus in his or her view of the natural world. In these cases I would say, paraphrasing Ricoeur, that it is the environmental text, with its power of disclosing the natural world, which gives an environmental self to the human ego.

Although we have come a long way in arguing for identification-through-literature, only cursory comments have been made regarding identification-as-continuity, leaving the major question still open: how can the reader have identification-as-continuity through nature literature? The idea of identification-as-continuity through literature has been touched on above, but can best be argued for using narrative theory and narrative identity. This is the issue to which we now turn.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION AND IDENTIFICATION-AS-CONTINUITY

Now that identification-as-commonality through literature has been argued for using the framework of philosophical hermeneutics, the remaining question regards identification-as-continuity. This kind of identification, we will recall, occurs when a person has an experience that causes him or her to now view the self as expanded and encompassing the environment to the extent that to protect the environment is more or less to protect one's self, or in other words a kind of enlightened Self-interest. The case for identification-as-continuity through literature can be made by drawing on the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur, and to a lesser degree the similar narrative theory of Richard Kearney. This will, in large part, be similar to the hermeneutic theories drawn on in Chapter V of the present work, describing how the reader orients his or her self to the world of the work and, in doing so, gains a new self-understanding.

The particular ideas of narrative identity and the three-fold mimesis of narrative relate especially well to the expansion of self that occurs in identification-as-continuity. At the same time, however, this may require changes in the overall idea of identification-as-continuity. Ultimately, I will show that through the refiguration of the narrative self through the configuration of the text, in the case of narratives with environmental themes, the reader's particular sense of self can come to necessarily include consideration of the environment and the human-nature interaction. As with identification-as-commonality so with identification-as-continuity, identification-through-literature is not necessary but is, as I argue, a possibility.

## 1. Self and Narrative: Ricoeur's Threefold Mimesis

To properly explain narrative identity and how the narrative function affects identity, it is worthwhile to briefly repeat the fundamental ideas of hermeneutics from Chapter V of the present work. The hermeneutic circle of understanding and self-understanding is still at the heart of the narrative theories being used here. While Gadamer himself does not look at narrative in the way Kearney and Ricoeur do, the double meaning of the Gadamerian phrase "*all such understanding [of text] is ultimately self-understanding*" is still very much applicable.<sup>130</sup> In understanding the text, the reader's prejudices are changed. In the circles between part and whole, between familiar and alien, and between self and world of the text, "the reader understands [him or herself] in front of the text, in front of the world of the work."<sup>131</sup> As this theory was explained thoroughly in Chapter V, this brief recounting should suffice for now. Nevertheless, this basic understanding must be remembered as we turn to reformulate these ideas in more narrative terms.

To begin the analysis of narrative I will turn to a narrative-specific formulation of what is essentially the hermeneutics of self-understanding above. Ricoeur refers to narrative mainly as mimesis (a term he borrows from Aristotle), which is generally translated as "imitation," but which means something further than that, both for Aristotle and more so for Ricoeur. Narrative fiction "imitates" human action, as Ricoeur says,

Not only in that, before referring to the text, it refers to our own preunderstanding of the meaningful structures of action and of its temporal dimensions but also in that it contributes, beyond the text, to reshaping these structures and dimensions in accordance with the imaginary configuration of the plot. Fiction has the power to "remake" reality and, within the framework of narrative fiction in particular, to remake real praxis to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of a new reality that we may call a world. It is this world of the text that intervenes in

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<sup>130</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 251, emphasis added.

<sup>131</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 178.

the world of action in order to give it a new configuration or, as we might say, in order to transfigure it.<sup>132</sup>

This long quote will help us to move from the hermeneutic circle to Ricoeur's threefold mimesis of narrative. The preunderstanding referred to is essentially what Gadamer and Ricoeur called prejudices, and what in narrative Ricoeur will call prefiguration. Configuration refers basically to the opening up of the world of the text, or the mediating function of narrative. Lastly, the idea of reshaping, new configuration, or transfiguration is essentially the return to the self, which was referred to previously as the change in self-understanding, and is now referred to as refiguration. While the fundamental self-text-self relationship remains, moving into the specific terms and greater details of narrative will allow a full examination of identification-as-continuity through literature.

We must now turn our full attention to Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, drawing occasionally on the narrative theory of Kearney (which is very much like, and often draws explicitly on, Ricoeur's own theory). There is, first of all, mimesis<sub>1</sub>, referring to the prefigurative aspect of narrative. Ricoeur refers to this as the "*pre-narrative quality of human experience*," arguing that "we are justified in speaking of life as a story in its nascent state, and so of life as an *activity and a passion in search of a narrative*."<sup>133</sup> This pre-narrative quality is similar to the prejudices of hermeneutics, and just as understanding requires prejudice, "to imitate or represent action is first to pre-understand what human acting is," in large part in "its symbolic system." A crucial aspect of the prefigurative aspect of narrative is that "a symbolic system thus furnishes a descriptive context for particular actions. . . . In this way, symbolism confers an initial readability on

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<sup>132</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29, original emphasis.

action."<sup>134</sup> Ricoeur refers to prefiguration elsewhere as the notion of constitutive rules, using the example of moving a chess piece. To put the example in my own words: the act of moving the horse-shaped piece from one square to another would be meaningless, except that under the rules of chess the knight is moved within the limits of the moves the knight piece can validly make, and is made with the aim of advancing towards eliminating an opponent's piece or of preventing the knight itself from being eliminated. The point is that under constitutive rules, *which are pre-understood by human agents*, meaningless behaviors are meaningful actions or practices. This is part of the narrative prefiguration of life.<sup>135</sup>

To fully understand prefiguration, we must turn to configuration and then return. Configuration, also referred to as *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, refers to the mediating function of plot. Narrative must be understood as mediation, or really as three related and concurrent mediations. First, narrative functions as mediation between individual events and the story as whole – narrative configures the discrete events into a unified story. Second, narrative mediates between the separate factors of a story and the overall plot. In other words, narrative configures heterogeneous components into the sequence of a story. And last, narrative configures a pure temporal succession into a unity of temporal form. Overall, narrative configures discrete events of action in a linear temporality into the temporally unified, causally related events in a complete story.<sup>136</sup>

This includes the idea of concordant discordance, or namely the way in which significant unexpected events break up the flow of the story, but yet in the end are a fitting part of the whole. The narrative configuration transforms events from being contingent to being necessary:

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:58-64.

<sup>135</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 152-157.

<sup>136</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:64-68; Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 141-143

understood as a complete and related story, even the unexpected and shocking things that happened had to happen, both as a result of what happened before and as a prerequisite for what happens after. This is the ultimate unity of a narrative story, which is similar to the story of a life.<sup>137</sup>

With an understanding of configuration, we can now better understand prefiguration, refiguration (mimesis<sub>3</sub>), and how configuration serves as the critical axis in the move from prefiguration to refiguration. The configurations described above can be applied not just to actions, but also to characters, understood also as people in a narrative life. The singular events, the distinct elements, and the linear progression of a life are all understood, in a narrative manner, as a single unified life. Furthermore, a person's life is ultimately concordant, understood as a single, distinguishable temporal totality. However, a person's life is ultimately discordant insofar as things happen which are unforeseeable, events which interrupt his or her life story or shake up his or her life. This ultimately results in the concordant-discardant thesis: similar to how events in a story are understood as necessary, likewise when viewed retroactively the unforeseeable events in a person's life are a part of who he or she is: this person would not have been the person he or she is if those events had not happened, and so these discordant events are necessary to the unified history of a person's life, to the identity of a character. And thus, as Ricoeur says, "chance becomes fate."<sup>138</sup> The similarity between life and story is present in the pre-understanding of life, and how we view lives themselves as stories. And yet, the full understanding of this connection does not come to us until we arrive at the third step, the refiguration of life through narrative.

In regard to the narrative structure of life, Kearney says that "life is always *on the way* to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story. Which is

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<sup>137</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:64-68; Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 141-143.

<sup>138</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 147-148.

why the latent prefiguring of everyday existence calls out for a more formal configuring . . . by narrative texts."<sup>139</sup> This "more formal configuring" refers to refiguration, which is the last part of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis. Refiguration is, referring back to the hermeneutics discussed in Chapter V, the change in self-understanding that occurs in front of the text. Ricoeur says that refiguration "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the [text] and the world wherein real action occurs. . . ."<sup>140</sup> This is the intersection from which the reader gains a new self-understanding. It is in this intersection that, to cite Kearney once again, "exposure to new possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the-world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important aspects."<sup>141</sup> This gives us a background picture of narrative understanding through Ricoeur's threefold mimesis. With this background, we must turn now to an examination of Ricoeur's narrative identity in order to frame a more in-depth examination of refiguration. The refiguring or change in identity is integral to the current project of identification-as-continuity through environmental narrative.

## 2. The Refiguration of Narrative Identity

As we turn to a deeper examination of the change in self that occurs in refiguration, we must look at another aspect of identity. A proper conception of the self or of identity, for Ricoeur, involves the polarity between two kinds of identity. One is *idem*, which is a kind of "permanence

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<sup>139</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 133.

<sup>140</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:71. It must be noted that in the original text Ricoeur actually says "poem" rather than "text." However, his use of "poem" is presumably due to his constantly referring back to and drawing on Aristotle, while his aim is generally towards application, beyond Aristotle, to various kinds of text. As such, I found it appropriate to change the term to signify the relevance of this idea both to Ricoeur's aims as well as my own project.

<sup>141</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, 132-133.

in time," or basically sameness, the senses in which a person is always the same person his or her entire life. The other kind is *ipse*, which can basically be defined as selfhood, but yet "implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality." In other words, this refers to the changing aspects that are yet somehow crucial to who a person really is. These two poles can also be defined as referents to agents of action, with *idem* referring to the question of "what?" and *ipse* referring to the question of "who?" As Ricoeur finds serious fault with prior conceptions of self, he argues that any proper understanding of the self will lie in the polarity between these opposing ideas of what it means to be a self.<sup>142</sup>

Concerning the other aspects of identity, we have already made note of the pre-narrative or prefigurative aspect of life, including the similarities between life and a narrative story. But there is a discrepancy here for, as Ricoeur notes, "stories are recounted, life is lived."<sup>143</sup> But, this difference, while it cannot be fully overcome,

is partially abolished by our power of applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favourite characters of the stories most dear to us. It is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity.<sup>144</sup>

To understand oneself properly, as a self somewhere between sameness and changing characteristics, a person must understand his or her life as a story. This is accomplished through the threefold mimesis of narrative, through the movement from the prenarrative life to the narrative story and back to the now refigured life. But how exactly is life refigured – in what ways is one now changed? If the refiguration of life is in some way filling out the prefiguration, then this change would most likely include a change in the constitutive rules of action. Further, if

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<sup>142</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 2-3, 115-139.

<sup>143</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 25-29, original emphasis.

<sup>144</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 33.



threefold mimesis partially abolishes the gap between life and story, then the change would occur in the specific factors which separate life and story.

There is one other way in which the self changes through narrative refiguration, this step being one that involves ethics. In the narrative story, the reader tries on different ethical roles through the characters. Ricoeur notes that one function of fiction is "to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspect of human conduct and happiness and misfortune."<sup>145</sup> The narrative story changes the way that the reader connects human conduct to well-being. The change in constitutive rules, the partial bridging of the differences between fiction and life, and the ethical thought experiments will make up the details of the ways in which the world of the text changes the world of the narrative self.

The first aspect of this, again, regards rules for action. It was noted above that part of the prenarrative or prefigurative aspect of narrative is the constitutive rules for action, which give action meaning. Ricoeur refers slightly differently to this elsewhere, saying that a kind of symbolic convention "gives an initial *readability* to action. It makes action a quasi-text for which symbols provides the rules of signification in terms of which a given conduct can be interpreted."<sup>146</sup> The prenarrative aspect, then, contains the rules by which actions are interpreted. Ricoeur uses, across various texts, actions such as a person raising his or her arm or moving a chess piece. But could this not include a second level of action? For example, if someone sits behind a circular wheel in a car and adjusts the wheel with his or her hands, the action is understood as "driving," but also "traveling" or "going somewhere." The act of putting food in one's mouth is understood as "eating," but could it not be differentiated, such as "eating meat,

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<sup>145</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 23, original emphasis.

<sup>146</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 29, original emphasis

which is healthy for you" or "eating meat, which is a practice that is detrimental to the environment"? It seems like a second level of action is defined. The fuller implications of this will be understood when we turn more fully to environmental narratives.

There is, then, the second way in which refiguration changes self-understanding. Regarding the imaginative variations mentioned above, Ricoeur poses the question as to how these can affect self-examination in real life, given the gap between life and story. Focusing on fiction, he goes through several ways in which life and story are different. The first is the issue of character, narrator, and author. The story has an author, narrator, and characters. But in life, I am a character (a rather central one), and the narrator, but can I be the author? Ricoeur, referring back to Aristotle, says in one's own life he or she is coauthor at most. The second difference is that the story has a distinct beginning and end. Even if the story refers to events before or after the actual starting and ending points of the story and/or the first and last pages, there is still a distinct beginning and end – the first and last events explicitly recounted, and the first and last pages of the book. The earliest points of a person's life, such as his or her conception and birth, are part of the history of others, and so also is a person's death part of the history of and stories told by others. This raises questions as to the validity of the narrative unity of a life.<sup>147</sup>

This second point in Ricoeur's analysis leads to a third. A story is a story, or rather the story – one story or narrative being encountered. A person's story, his or her narrative life, is "caught up" or "entangled" in the histories or stories of others, of the people who are a significant part of a person's life. The final point is that the narrative of life contains a "dialectic of remembrance and anticipation," and is in fact made up largely by memories of the past and goals and expectations for the future, while the narrative story has only the reference to the past. Ricoeur does not wish to refute these four points, but rather to correct the misunderstandings on

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<sup>147</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 159-160.

which he believes they rest, and it is in the correction that we see the changes that occur in refiguration.<sup>148</sup>

It is, for Ricoeur, in the meeting of text and reader that these struggles will be solved. Regarding the first difference, Ricoeur says that "by narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning." In other words, in reading the story through the lens of the narrator, I am the narrator but not the author – but insofar as the actual meaning arises in the meeting of reader and text, *I am the coauthor*.<sup>149</sup> In light of the points made in Chapter V regarding the dialectic between text and reader this should be easy to understand – while a distinct person or persons wrote the book, the actual meanings that the reader understands come partly from him or her, so he or she is the coauthor, in a sense, of both his or her own life story and the narrative stories encountered. This particular point serves as a reminder of the way meaning arises between reader and text.

Concerning the second point, Ricoeur says that regarding "the narrative unity of a life, it must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. *It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively.*" This goes back to the earlier points by Ricoeur and Kearney that life is seeking narrative but needs the text to accomplish it. With the help of the narrative model, we find "real beginnings formed by the initiatives (in the strong sense of the term) we take," and further we "fix the outline of these provisional ends."<sup>150</sup> Basically, with the help of narrative, the reader finds the beginnings in the significant parts of his or her life and in the projects taken on and in attainments of convictions. Furthermore, understanding ending through stories the reader is better able to set his or her goals.

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<sup>148</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 161.

<sup>149</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 161-162.

<sup>150</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 162, emphasis added.

Regarding the last two points, Ricoeur notes first of all that in literature we often find the "framing of one narrative within another," giving us "a model of intelligibility." Through the encounter of intertwining narratives within literature, the reader can better understand the entanglements and interactions of life stories. And last of all, although the literary story is always retrospective, this retrospective also contains the "projections, expectations, and anticipations," which in turn help the reader to "articulate narratively retrospection and propection." Ricoeur closes this section noting that "narrative is part of life before being exiled from life in writing; it returns to life along the multiple paths of appropriation and at the price of the unavoidable tensions just mentioned." It is through the appropriation of the text, through the meeting of the text and the reader, that life is fully understood as a narrative.<sup>151</sup> These paths of appropriation will, for the most part, have significant implications for the encounter with environmental narratives.

The last aspect of refiguration is, again, the ethical thought experiments that occur in narrative. Ricoeur argues that "in the unreal sphere of fiction we never tire of exploring new ways of evaluating actions and characters. The thought experiments we conduct . . . are also explorations of good and evil. Transvaluing, even devaluing, is still evaluating."<sup>152</sup> The reader reexamines his or her ethical beliefs through the narrative, and hence reevaluates the relationship between human conduct and the well-being of human life. These, then, are the significant paths of the return from the text to the self in refiguration: the ordering of significant beginnings and ends in life, the understanding of intertwined histories or stories, the articulation of memory and goals, the ethical thought experiments, and the restructuring of the rules for reading the meaning of behavior into actions. Keeping in mind the fundamental aspects of the way in which self-

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<sup>151</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 162-163.

<sup>152</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 164.

understanding is changed in front of the text, these are the points along which we can trace the effect of environmental narratives and see if and how identification-as-continuity through literature can occur.

### 3. Fictional Narrative and Environmental Identity

The application of narrative theory to cases of fictional environmental narratives, a term I use here to refer to any narrative story with strong environmental themes, will show the ways in which narrative can change a person's environmental identity. Ricoeur's narrative theory is not necessarily limited to fiction, but it does focus to a large degree on narrative fiction, and as such this will be the richest ground for application of his theory. As Ricoeur says, "by its mimetic intention, the *world of fiction leads us to the heart of the real world of action.*"<sup>153</sup> In particular, there are three works of fiction I will analyze. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*<sup>154</sup> and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*<sup>155</sup> provide different, but equally rich pictures of an eco-dystopian future. Also, Frank Herbert's famous work *Dune*<sup>156</sup> provides a rather interesting and unusual picture of ecologically sustainable living. Taking them in turn, I will examine them using the framework laid out above.

First, then, is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This is a story of a near-future of complete ecological ruin. A nameless father and son (referred to generally as "the man" and "the boy," respectively) travel down the middle of the road, seeking a better place. There are very few cars, very few people, and very few resources. The man and the boy, as they travel, must be wary of traveling gangs of cannibals, into which many of the remaining people have banded. The signs of

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<sup>153</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 296, original emphasis.

<sup>154</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*.

<sup>155</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

<sup>156</sup> Herbert, *Dune*.

ecological destruction are everywhere. One particularly vivid example is the description of "burnt forests for miles along the slopes . . . No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere."<sup>157</sup> And more importantly, inescapably linked with the ecological destruction, the mass destruction of human life is everywhere. A main sign of this is the overall lack of people, with the exception of a few random encounters and the traveling cannibal gangs. There are also, however, explicit signs, such as when the main characters come "upon a country where firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn. A cake of ash in the roadway inches deep . . ." In this land the characters find "figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling . . . They picked their way among the mummified figures. The black skin stretched upon the bones and their faces split and shrunken on their skulls."<sup>158</sup> There is also the complete lack of resources. Many of the few remaining humans resort to cannibalism. The man and the boy are constantly in search of resources, raiding empty grocery stores, at one point eating rotten apples. There is a continuing conflict between the man and the boy, who disagree about whether to share their meager resources with the few harmless strangers that they meet. The two sleep in the woods every night, terrified of being crushed in a world where the trees, which are all dead, sometimes just fall over. This is the world of *The Road*.

The question is what kind of change this would have on a person's narrative identity. First of all, if I was correct above in speaking about the second level of constitutive rules of action, then this would be greatly affected. In light of the extreme lack of resources in *The Road*, the reader would likely think about the actual finitude of resources in his or her world. Due to this, the reader would come to understand that his or her own life and well being, the life and well being of anyone close to him or her, and the existence of humanity overall is dependent upon the

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<sup>157</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 160-161.

resources, and thus the health of the environment. All human stories are inextricably interwoven with the story of the environment, and anyone who can come to understand this will think of his or her own well being as linked with the environment. Through literature, the reader comes to realize that it is in his or her own interest to protect the environment. This brings us to identification-as-continuity. Recall that the main idea of identification-as-continuity is, as mentioned in Chapter II, is that the *identity* and *interests* of the Self are continuous with, *not* in community or opposition with, the ecological whole of life. But is this really what is occurring through literature?

I must take the time here to fully explore whether this change in self through environmental narrative is the same as identification-as-continuity. The "interests" part is easier to grant. For one to realize that his or her own interests are ultimately dependent upon the environment would mean that the interests of the self and the interests of the ecological whole are now continuous. The "identity" aspect is a little different – can the change in the reader based on fictional environmental narratives be said to result in a continuous identity between self and environment? Yes and no. It is skeptical that people would be in a frame of mind similar to that professed by John Seed, a part of the rainforest defending his or her self.<sup>159</sup> However, if we recall the narrative terms of identity, a self as a life story of past, present, and future, and we recall the idea of interweaving narratives, it could be said that insofar as the past could be a history of good or bad ecological practices, and the future is oriented towards ecological goals, in a way the reader's identity is closely tied to the environment. Perhaps to say "continuous" is a little strong, but it could certainly be said that literature can result in a person's identity and interests being interwoven with the natural environment.

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<sup>159</sup> Seed, "Anthropocentrism," 243.

The ethical aspect of refiguration might also appear to provide some difficulty. If identification-as-continuity is, after all, enlightened Self-interest, then how does this correspond with the ethical dimension of narrative? My first response is that even egoism is an ethic, so an enlightened egoism has an ethical dimension. My second response is that enlightened Self-interest may be, more appropriately, something along the lines of enlightened human interest. Insofar as most people are not ethical egoists, it is likely that ecological realizations would make a person see human interests, as well as self interest, as continuous or interwoven with the environment. If this is the case, there would still be some level of intuitive ethics. Whichever the case, while Naess would seem to say that identification-with-nature is better than and preclusive of moral maxims (see Chapter II), this most likely refers to interhuman deontological and consequentialist moral maxims. There is always some kind of ethical dimension (even if it is intuition or enlightened egoism) to human life, and this would be refigured in the light of narrative.

This modified view of identification-as-continuity is different than what Naess seems to have had in mind. As stated above, it seems more appropriate to say that the identity and interests of the self, humanity, and the ecological whole are "interweaving," rather than "continuous." Also, this interweaving of interests seems to not be quite as deep as the expanded self gained through deep experience with nature. And yet there are fundamental overlaps. This interweaving of the identity and interests of the self, humanity, and the environment seems to be relational in a way similar to Naess' idea of the "*relational, total-field image*," which is a part of identification-as-continuity. Further, if we take at face value the claim by Deep Ecologists that they avoid an ontological fusion of individuals (as mentioned in Chapter II), this seems to erase the critical space between an "interweaving" and a "continuity" of identity (in fact, if we think of



Naess' metaphor for the relational image as "knots in the biospherical net," then the idea of interests being 'woven together' seems highly appropriate).<sup>160</sup>

Finally, we can say that regardless of the differences between the change that occurs through environmental narratives and identification-as-continuity, the change through narrative is fundamentally similar in also being an enlightened self/human-interest informed by ecology – but in this case not ecology as scientific fact, nor as feelings gained from immersion in nature, but ecology as a narrative truth, as a narrative understanding of the connections between humans and nature. Despite these similarities, for clarity I wish to distinguish what specifically happens through narrative from the strict idea of identification-as-continuity, so the former will be referred to as identification-as-connectedness (given that “connect” and “interweave” are rough synonyms). Given this, we can now say that the reader has a change through environmental narrative literature that is fundamentally similar to identification-as-continuity – or rather that the reader can have identification-as-connectedness through literature!

With this in mind, we can move on to further examples of fictional environmental narrative. The next example is *Oryx and Crake*. This is a story of a character named Snowman/Jimmy who is, to the best of his knowledge, the only living human. He lives in the ruins of what was an increasingly technological civilization, among genetically spliced hybrid animals. He spends his days hiding among the trees from the burning sun of an ozone free sky, and serves as a kind of religious leader for a group of created humanoids who are genetically designed for sustainability. The story jumps back and forth between the main character's memories of his life in civilization and his present in the ruins. In a particular passage recounting his past, Jimmy recounts:

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<sup>160</sup> Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements,” 152.

the things his mother rambled on about sometimes, about how everything was being ruined and would never be the same again, like the beach house her family owned when she was little, the one that got washed away with the rest of the beaches and quite a few of the eastern coastal cities when the sea-level rose so quickly. . . . And she used to snivel about her grandfather's Florida grapefruit orchard that had dried up like a giant raisin when the rains had stopped coming, the same year Lake Okeechobee had shrunk to a reeking mud puddle and the Everglades had burned for three weeks straight.<sup>161</sup>

Atwood's story is one where some of the worst fears of environmentalists have come true: the coastal cities have been destroyed by rising sea-levels, which is a potential result of global climate change. Weather patterns have been disrupted, causing droughts. One of the few real wildlife areas left has literally gone up in flames. And much of the destruction has already happened in a double referent to the past, Snowman/Jimmy recalling himself as a child hearing his mother talk about things from her childhood.

By fictionally portraying this destruction, Atwood's work illuminates a crucial aspect of reality, that the natural world can be destroyed. And once again this destruction is linked to human actions. An increasingly technological consumer society has, through a focus on increasing production and hedonistic lifestyles, manipulated and destroyed the planet. The quality of human life, outside of simple hedonistic pleasure, is constantly decreasing, until eventually a brilliant but disturbed scientist unleashes a deadly disease, purposely sparing Snowman/Jimmy for his role as guardian of the humanoids that the same scientist created.<sup>162</sup>

The various effects of reading *Oryx and Crake* on the reader would likely be fairly similar to those of *The Road*, analyzed above, but there are some important differences. In this story the focus is on the destruction of the planet through increasing technology and consumerism. In this framework, the reader may come to view actions under rules that would define them as good or bad insofar as such actions are supporting or not supporting

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<sup>161</sup> Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 63.

<sup>162</sup> Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*.

environmentally destructive practices of technological consumerist society. The reader may also see both his or her past and present as part of the past of *Oryx and Crake*, and thus see his or her future as a future that could potentially be, in reality, something like the story. Or, depending on people's actions, the future may not be like the future in the story. The reader may even see supporting environmentally destructive consumerism as somehow ethically wrong towards other people. Overall, the reader would fundamentally see a link between the well being of nature and human interests. Destruction of nature, and the increasing techno-consumerism that brings it about, leads to worse conditions for humans and could potentially be the downfall of civilization. It is in humanity's interests to not destroy the environment, and thus in the reader's own interests to not support practices that lead to such destruction. Once again, the reader has, through literature, come to see his or her own identity and interests as interwoven with those of the environment. This is, then, another instance of identification-as-connectedness through literature.

The final fiction example being used here comes from Frank Herbert's *Dune*. *Dune* is a rather complex story with many themes, although there is a major one that is of particular interest. The story takes place in a distant future, where inter-galaxy space travel is now possible, where energy shields have resulted in a return to combat with knives and swords, and where a great war has led to the return of a feudal system. Paul Atreides, the central character, is the heir to House Atreides, one of the Great Houses in the feudal system. House Atreides, in the story, has just taken control of Arrakis, also known as Dune, a desert planet which is miserable to live on and yet is invaluable due to its being the one location of *mélange*, a spice that enhances the mental powers, sometimes to the point of prescience, of those who consume it.

The aspect of the story relevant here comes when Paul's family is attacked by a rival House. With his father dead and his father's army scattered into the desert, Paul and his mother

take refuge with the “Fremen,” people who live in tribes in the deep desert. The Fremen follow a man named Kynes, an ecologist who promises plans to make Dune a more livable place. The Fremen live a life of absolute sustainability, as it is their only choice in the desert. They travel at night and take shelter during the heat of day. Their few technologies include “stillsuits,” body suits that reclaim any moisture the body loses through sweat or exhalation, and “windtraps” that force air through a condensation machine in order to get all the water they can from the atmosphere.

The Fremen attitude toward water shows most tellingly in a section where they confront Paul's mother for having "hidden" water from them. Paul's mother defends her ignorance of their ways with water, telling them "Where I was born, water fell from the sky and ran over the land in wide rivers." After she says this, "a sighing gasp arose from the [Fremen] around them: 'Water fell from the sky . . . it ran *over* the land.'"<sup>163</sup> Water is sacred to the Fremen – they even distill the water from the bodies of their dead. The Fremen's life also centers around their interactions with Shai Hulud, giant sandworms that roam the desert of Dune and are the source of *mélange*. The Fremen both use Shai Hulud, riding large worms and sometimes killing baby ones to create special spices for rites, and revere Shai Hulud as their god. The Fremen waste as little as possible – are in fact the ultimate conservationists.

*Dune* is a story of true harmony with the land. To live at all, people must live in a way that results in no waste, and that conserves resources, particularly water, as much as possible. *Dune* has many significant explicit ecological ideas as well as many ecological ideas implicit in the narrative – how would these ideas change the reader? The reader would, again, likely think about the actual finitude of resources in his or her world. In this case actions would be defined, in many cases, as being wasteful or conservative. Thus the reader might also see his or her own life

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<sup>163</sup> Herbert, *Dune*, 299.

in terms of a past of wastefulness or not, of good or bad environmental practices, and orient his or her future towards goals of better environmental practices. And the reader might now view his or her past as being rather fortunate, living in a world of such resource abundance. Likewise the reader might now view his or her future, and more so the future of humanity, as either continuing to live in a world of abundance (if some willing constraint can be shown), or taking things to the point of having to live in absolute sheer necessity – like the Fremen, who live a rather strict, rigid lifestyle. And the reader, somewhat like the Fremen, may see excessive waste or resource hoarding as an ethical wrong. Overall, the reader once again sees the link between environment and human well being, and now sees human interests overall, and his or her own interests and identity in particular, as being interwoven with those of the environment. This is our third and final example of identification-as-connectedness through fiction.

Now we have seen how a reader can have identification-as-connectedness through fiction. Through the configuration of the narrative, the reader's narrative identity is refigured, leading to different rules of action, different understandings of past and future, reevaluated ethics, and ultimately different understandings of the self. The reader comes to see how his or her own interests and own narrative identity of past, present, and future are interwoven with the interests and well being of the ecological whole of nature, and likewise how human interests overall are interwoven with those of nature. This realization of interwoven interests and identity may not be exactly the same as the continuity Naess sees in identification, but it is significantly similar. And it is, more importantly, a significant shift in environmental identity. And it is a shift in environmental identity that is possible, in many cases even probable, due to the accessibility of literature. For a final point regarding identification-as-connectedness, we turn now to an example of non-fiction narrative to see if the same narrative aspects can apply to nature writing.

#### 4. Narrative and Nature Writing

While Ricoeur's narrative theory focuses mainly on fiction, it certainly is not exclusive to fiction. Ricoeur does not seem to discuss nonfiction directly, but his analysis of history might be useful here. Ricoeur argues that history itself is narrative, and in fact shares several crucial characteristics with narrative. History is, as Ricoeur argues, significantly different than the kind of factual explanation found in science or a simple stating of a fact at all, for in history "explanations have no other function than to help the reader to follow further."<sup>164</sup> In other words, the explanations of historical events are not just statements of what happened, but rather a presentation of related events. Histories contain something akin to narrative plot, people akin to narrative characters, and events akin to narrative events. Further, history also contains the configuration aspects of fictional narrative, including the configuration of successive events and heterogeneous elements into a unified and temporal whole.<sup>165</sup>

History also has an imaginative element akin to fiction in it. If we recall the elements of appropriation or the fusion of horizons (explained in Chapter V and recalled above), we will remember the dialectic between the familiar and the unfamiliar or alien. History, in this way, opens the reader up to possibilities, as it "explores the field of the 'imaginative' variations which surround the present and the real that we take for granted in everyday life. . . . by opening us to what is different, history opens us to the possible."<sup>166</sup> History, then, shares with fiction both the hermeneutic aspects and the specific narrative features crucial to the present investigation.

The question then is whether this analysis of history also applies to what would more properly be called, in contrast to history, nonfiction. Such nonfiction can certainly be said to

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<sup>164</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 278, original emphasis.

<sup>165</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:229-230.

<sup>166</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 295-296.

share the hermeneutic aspects of fiction, as this was part of the central investigation of Chapter V. The question is more so whether the narrative elements are also shared. If we look at the proposed example of nonfiction, *A Sand County Almanac*, there seems to be a similar narrative element.<sup>167</sup> *A Sand County Almanac* has, first of all, characters in Leopold and various wild animals. This work also has events, such as Leopold's various encounters with wild animals and nature, and a plot, insofar as we see both Leopold's reflections on nature throughout a year in Wisconsin, and as through various essays we see the changes in Leopold's own environmental identity.<sup>168</sup> It is in this latter element that we most see the configuring element of narrative at work in Leopold's book. *A Sand County Almanac* then, and presumably other nonfiction works, contains the same narrative similarities that Ricoeur describes as being in fiction proper. This opens the way for us to give a proper analysis to *A Sand County Almanac* as we did above with works of fiction.

In *A Sand County Almanac* there are three parts. In the first part, Leopold gives observations on nature, ordering them as a year going from January to December. Along with the actual observations are many assertions of the beauty and value of nature. The second part sees Leopold recounting various episodes in his life, "scattered over the continent and through forty years of time," much of which shows Leopold's transformation in environmental identity from a common conservationist to what he would perhaps call an ecological citizen, but to what many would certainly call a pioneer in environmentalism.<sup>169</sup> The third part, the one perhaps of least

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<sup>167</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*.

<sup>168</sup> For a more adequate account of Leopold's narrative environmental identity, see my paper "A Sand County Self: Eco-Hermeneutics and Leopold's Environmental Identity," (presentation, International Association for Environmental Philosophy, Arlington, VA, November 2009).

<sup>169</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, viii.

interest in the present work, is Leopold's ecological ethic, expounded in the final chapter of *Sand County*, "The Land Ethic."<sup>170</sup>

Throughout this work we see all the elements of a narrative. Beside the elements of plot, character, and event, there are also all the elements relevant to the ways in which the narrative configuration results in the refiguration of the reader. There are, first of all, the ordering of significant ends and beginnings, the most interesting perhaps being Leopold's change in his view of predators as part of the ecological whole, from "Thinking Like a Mountain."<sup>171</sup> There are also intertwining histories, such as the recounting of the environmental history of Wisconsin counted in the rings of an oak tree.<sup>172</sup> There are also memories ("Red Legs Kicking" being a notable one) and goals running throughout the book.<sup>173</sup> Also running throughout the book are the second level constitutive rules for action, mainly centered around good and bad conservation and environmental citizenship. Lastly, there is certainly an ethical element to Leopold's work. While there is the rather explicit "The Land Ethic," perhaps more interesting is the idea of the good life for humans in regard to nature, which would certainly lead to a reevaluating of ethics.

Thus, what kind of refiguration might occur with a reader in the narrative encounter with *A Sand County Almanac*? One is that, in Leopold's own realizations and changes, the reader might see a new beginning in his or her own life with his or her own sudden ecological realizations. Further, the reader might see, intertwined with the history of environmental changes, a history of the changes of the ways of life for people. The reader might also see, in the articulation of Leopold's goals for future generations to have access to a healthy environment, an intertwining of the goals for environmental protection and the goals of a good life for future

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<sup>170</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 201-226.

<sup>171</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 129-133.

<sup>172</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 6-18.

<sup>173</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 120-122.



generations. There is also the restructuring of constitutive rules, as the reader might now see his or her actions, and the actions of others, as being environmentally conservationist or environmentally destructive. Actions might also be seen, in light of the "Land Ethic," as being proper or improper actions of environmental citizenship.

Ultimately, the reader might again see an intertwining of the good life for humans and the well-being of the environment. Leopold himself certainly sees appreciation and protection of nature as the good life for humans. The reader now sees the identity and interests of the self, and the interests of humans overall, as intertwined with the identity and interests of the environment. This gives us, now, an example of identification-as-connectedness through nature writing! As nonfiction has certain similarities to fiction, a further similarity is that in being a narrative of sorts nature writing can also refigure the readers' narrative identity such that he or she now sees human and self interests as fundamentally linked with those of nature. Through various kinds of literature, the reader can have identification-as-connectedness!

This completes the overall analysis of identification-with-nature through literature. We are left with certain questions, to which I must now give at least preliminary answers. Insofar as identification-with-nature is an account of transformations in environmental identity (and this can happen through literature), we see how literature can have transformative effects on a person's environmental identity. However, in light of the difficulties and developments along this path, it must be questioned whether identification-with-nature is the most adequate model for environmental identity. While the concept of identification certainly has a lot to contribute to an idea of environmental identity, perhaps a concept of environmental identity more firmly rooted in hermeneutics itself would be more adequate. I turn to this question in the final chapter of this work.

## CHAPTER VII

### A NEW, A HERMENEUTIC, ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY

In this thesis, I attempt to ask and answer whether identification-with-nature can occur through literature. I begin by examining Naess' concept of identification-with-nature. This is, overall, a concept of how a person's views towards the self and nature can be transformed through certain kinds of experience with nature and nonhuman others. Ultimately, however, there are contradictions in Naess' work that show there to be two kinds of identification-with-nature. While Diehm elaborates on these distinctions, there is perhaps a better distinction to be made. Under this distinction there is, first of all, identification-as-commonality. This is where a person's view of the natural world and nonhuman others changes such that one now has commonality with nonhuman others. In other words, one now sees nonhuman others as being like humans in a way that is not anthropomorphizing but is ethically significant. The other is identification-as-continuity. Under this kind of identification, one sees the natural world or the ecosystem as being continuous with oneself. Under this occurrence, one will protect nature because it is a part of one's self, in what could be seen as an ecologically enlightened self-interest.

There are, however, complications when the conditions for identification are examined more closely. First of all, identification-as-continuity appears to require a lengthy exposure to mostly undeveloped nature. Such encounters are unlikely given the low amounts of undeveloped nature and the general lifestyle conditions of most people in the United States. Regarding identification-as-commonality, there appears to be a requirement for a certain amount of encounter, either with healthy and flourishing nonhuman others, or with the destruction of nonhuman others. In either case this requires a level of encounter with nonhuman others that is

either unavailable to or simply not had by people in the United States. These problems are exacerbated by the work of Maskit, who argues that identification probably takes a long time, and that if the conditions for identification do not continue a person can backslide. This makes identification through less mediated sensory experiences less relevant, raising the need for the examination of identification-through-literature.

This raises the question of whether an experience of nature in literature can rightfully be said to be an experience of nature. Naess' gestalt ontology can be used to affirmatively answer this question. Reality, for Naess, is the world as it is experienced relationally through the concrete contents. These concrete contents, the secondary and some of the primary qualities, are the same thing experienced when one reads nature writing – which is shown through looking at several examples of nature writing. This claim is backed up further by phenomenology, specifically the work of Embree, which argues that in normal experience a person encounters what the words read are about, not the words themselves. This means that when a person reads, he or she encounters the natural objects described, encountering them relationally through the concrete contents. This ultimately means that the reader is having, in a proper sense, an experience of nature when reading nature literature. Thus we can speak of a person having not identification-with-literature, but identification-with-nature through literature.

Turning to identification-as-commonality, the hermeneutic theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur show how one can have identification-through-literature. As a person reads and interprets, there is a circular relationship: between one's prejudices and the meanings of the text, and between one's understanding of the text and one's understanding of the self. As a person reads, if he or she is properly open and interpreting he or she will reevaluate already held meanings and values. This means that a person gains a new understanding in front of the world

of the work. Drawing on specific examples of nature writing, I show how this change can be said to be one of seeing nonhuman others and natural objects as being-alive; or as alive in an ethically valuable and meaningful sense, or alive in a way not unlike humans. Thus through literature the reader can come to see commonality with nonhuman others, meaning that he or she has identification-as-commonality through literature.

Turning then to identification-as-continuity, the hermeneutic narrative theory of Ricoeur shows how one can have something like identification-as-continuity through literature. Ricoeur's narrative theory shows how a person's life is prefigured, or understood, as a narrative. When a person reads a narrative, this leads to narrative configuration of the story, and a refiguration of one's self-understanding; an understanding of one's own life as a story with a past, present, and future. In this refiguration, a person has a new understanding of the beginnings and ends in life and of the intertwining of histories or stories in life. Further, the reader has a re-articulation of memories and goals and performs ethical thought experiments. Lastly, the reader has a restructuring of the rules for reading the meanings of actions.

Regarding literature with environmental themes, this can lead to a person having a new understanding of how his or her life (as a past, present, and future) and the well being of humanity is connected to the natural world. This new understanding can be one where the reader sees his or her own story, and his or her own well being, as being interwoven with the story and well being of the natural world. This is slightly different than identification-as-continuity, but could be referred to as identification-as-connectedness. And thus someone can come to see the well being of the natural world as fundamentally connected to or interwoven with the well being of one's own life or of humanity in general. And so in another way, not the same as but not

entirely unlike identification-as-continuity, one can have identification-with-nature through literature.

I turn now to look at the ways in which the Deep Ecology principle of identification-with-nature can rightfully be said to be a form of environmental identity. While identification is certainly an interesting form of environmental identity, there is a much better model for environmental identity overall. Drawing on my own work as well as the work of other contemporary scholars in environmental hermeneutics, I conclude this thesis with the argument that a hermeneutic environmental identity is the best current model for environmental identity. A hermeneutic environmental identity more easily encompasses the various factors, including but not limited to so-called "direct" experience of nature, that shape people's views on the environment. The issue of a hermeneutic environmental identity highlights what I will argue is the central problem of environmental ethics and philosophy: varying interpretations of nature.

## 1. Identification-with-nature and the Question of Environmental Identity

In many ways, identification-with-nature can be seen as part of an environmental identity. There are various potential definitions of environmental identity. A fairly fitting definition could be given as an individual's view of the self insofar as it is related dialectically with his or her views of human and nonhuman others as well as the natural environment.<sup>174</sup> Insofar as identification-as-continuity and identification-as-connectedness revolve around one's view of the self, they could be said to be in part a principle of identity in general and environmental identity

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<sup>174</sup> This definition is based loosely on a definition given by Rob Figueroa: "An environmental identity is the amalgamation of cultural identities, ways of life, and self-perceptions that are connected to a given group's physical environment," in Robert Melchior Figueroa, "Evaluating Environmental Justice Claims," in *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood, and Contested Environments*, ed. Joanne Bauer (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 371; as well as a definition given by David Utsler: "Environmental identity is the dialectic of self and the other when the other-than-self being considered is the natural environment," from David Utsler, "Nature as One's Other Self/Other-than-Self: The Hermeneutics of the Self in Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Identity" (presentation, International Association for Environmental Philosophy, Chicago, IL, November 2007), 2.

specifically. Secondly, identity can be said to be dialectical in two aspects: that it is shaped by others, and that identity (at least many definitions of it) determines one's view of others. In this way, identification-as-commonality can also be said to pertain to environmental identity. The question this leaves us with is whether the Deep Ecology principle of identification-with-nature offers an adequate notion of identity.

The idea of environmental identity implied by identification-with-nature has several strengths to it. Between the kinds of identification they account for both the view of self in relation to others and the view of others in relation to the self. Identification can also readily account for changes or transformations in these two major aspects of environmental identity. Naess' philosophy offers particular insight into how a person's environmental identity, both in terms of view of the self and view of others, can change in positive ways (even if these insights did have to be cleaned up a bit in Chapter II of the present work, they are nevertheless very insightful). So there are positive aspects to Naess' implicit view of environmental identity.

Of course, there are some weaknesses in this view of environmental identity as well. The most major problem is that many Deep Ecologists seem to ignore that the dialectic between self identity and others or the natural environment is often filtered through various media, such as literature, film, television, etc. Media shapes the way that a person views his or her self in relation to environment and, insofar as media can be a mediated experience of nature, the way that a person's identity is shaped by the environment. The present work has attempted to illuminate how identification can happen through, and implicitly how environmental identity can be shaped by, literature. Literature had to be laboriously added to identification-with-nature, exposing what I argue is a flaw in that form of environmental identity.

In light of the arguments given in Chapter III regarding the difficulty in people of the United States having access to undeveloped nature, as well as common knowledge regarding the prevalence of media and lack of nature experience in the United States, an adequate notion of environmental identity for people in the United States must include consideration of the way in which media influences identity. This is why I argue for moving past Deep Ecology to what I consider a better form of environmental identity: hermeneutic environmental identity. Hermeneutic environmental identity will be defined below, but note first how, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5, hermeneutics can readily account for the effect of literature on environmental identity. This is not to discard Deep Ecology entirely: the views of transformative experiences in identification-with-nature are insightful and valuable. But it was the analysis of these ideas of transformative experiences using hermeneutics that clearly show how experiences transform one's identity (as seen in Chapter V). I turn now to the principle of a hermeneutic environmental identity.

## 2. The Necessity of a Hermeneutic Environmental Identity

Hermeneutics holds great promise for environmental philosophy. Specifically, hermeneutics provides an ideal framework for evaluating environmental values and interpretations, as well as for evaluating and discussing environmental identity. While approaches to environmental hermeneutics have varied, the most general features have been a conception of the interpretation of the natural environment in some way and a conception of the link between interpretation of texts/objects/others and interpretation of the self. This latter aspect is what would make environmental identity so relevant to environmental hermeneutics.

The real question is to ask what makes a hermeneutic environmental identity an adequate, and even a better, conception of environmental identity. I argue that there are several reasons. First, a hermeneutic environmental identity, being based on hermeneutics, will be more inclusive of the various media that exist in a culture and shape identity. The main arguments given above in the present work, if they are adequate arguments, have already shown this with literature. Further, the hermeneutic theories of Gadamer and, especially, Ricoeur would include anything, as said above, that could be read like a text: art, film, encounters with others, etc. There have also been excellent arguments made for how nature, in what would usually be called a “direct” experience, can be read like a text.<sup>175</sup> To be hermeneutically consistent, I would say a “less-mediated” experience of nature rather than “direct” (insofar as it is mediated only by language and the senses). These points are particularly important: hermeneutics can accommodate various forms of media as well as less-mediated experiences of nature. In other words hermeneutics, despite its roots in textual analysis, does not give up anything in the way of evaluating sensory experiences and encounters with human and nonhuman others. A hermeneutic environmental identity incorporates all the encounters and interpretations that shape a person's view of the natural environment.

The second major strength of environmental hermeneutics is the extent to which, as I argue, it gets to the heart of environmental problems. Environmental hermeneutics highlights ways in which differing environmental views are ultimately interpretation. For example, the debate between positions of anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, biocentrism, or ecocentrism, as well as the corresponding intrinsic value debate, ultimately rests on conflicting interpretations of the other as well as the dialectic of self and nonhuman other. Various aspects of the debates over

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<sup>175</sup> See, for example: Forrest Clingerman, “Reading the Book of Nature: A Hermeneutical Account of Nature for Philosophical Theology,” *Worldviews* 13(2009): 72-91



wilderness rest on conflicting interpretations of human as a part of or apart from nature, and interpretations of which view is correct. And many positions, such as ecofeminism, social ecology, and the theoretical frameworks underlying the environmental justice movement, are ultimately different interpretations of the relations within Western culture and the relations between Western culture and the natural environment.

The idea that environmental ethics and philosophy ultimately rests on interpretation goes hand-in-hand with arguments for the importance of environmental identity. I have argued in another work that environmental identity is important, perhaps even necessary, to environmental hermeneutics.<sup>176</sup> My own argument rests on Gadamer's notion of prejudice as well as his assertion that that "*all such understanding [of a text] is ultimately self-understanding.*"<sup>177</sup> This in some ways refers back to the hermeneutics laid out in Chapter V of the present work, but to give a brief recap: every person is always projecting his or her prejudices onto any encounter or experience, which in turn influences his or her interpretation of that experience or encounter. Further, any interpretation and understanding of an encounter or experience will change a person's self-understanding which, insofar as this changes a person's prejudices, further changes his or her understanding of the encounter or experience.<sup>178</sup>

This means a hermeneutic environmental identity is crucial for environmental ethics and philosophy. Peoples' views of the environment, as well as understanding of rational arguments regarding the value of nature, are ultimately interpretations. These interpretations are in a circular relationship with that person's prejudices, and thus in a relationship with his or her self-understanding. To put it another way, these interpretations are ultimately in a circular

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<sup>176</sup> See Nathan M. Bell "'All Such Understanding' of Nature: Gadamer and Environmental Hermeneutics." A similar argument can be found in David Utsler, "Environmental Hermeneutics: New Horizons for Interpretation." Both were presented at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the North Texas Philosophical Association.

<sup>177</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 251, original emphasis.

<sup>178</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-273.

relationship with that person's environmental identity. This shows, I believe, that environmental problems are largely conflicts of interpretation and issues of environmental identity. If it is arguable that environmental problems are all problems of interpretation or of environmental identity, then this puts environmental hermeneutics in the best position to discuss the views that are at the heart of the ecological crisis.

Some of the major questions are whether, and to what degree, environmental hermeneutics can argue that interpretations of the environment as having value are "better" than interpretations that see the environment as being merely here for human use; and further, is there a "proper" understanding of nature from a hermeneutic point of view? I do not intend to argue these points here, but these are the questions that should be the forward focus of environmental hermeneutics. These questions are part of a larger and more central question, with which I end the present work.

To get at this question, I wish to refer briefly to environmental virtue ethics. Environmental virtues ethics is another fairly new field of environmental inquiry, and one which like environmental hermeneutics would step away from universalistic environmental ethics. Mention of this field is relevant because of the central question raised by environmental virtue ethics: "How does one establish which dispositions regarding the environment are constitutive of virtue and which are constitutive of vice (and which are neither)? That is, how does one go about providing a substantive account of the environmental virtues and vices?"<sup>179</sup> One way to read this question is to see it as asking what kind of people we should be in regards to the environment.

Similarly, there is a central question of environmental hermeneutics. Questions of better and worse interpretation and understanding, considerations of various influences on

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<sup>179</sup> Ronald Sandler, "Introduction: Environmental Virtue Ethics," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald D. Sandler and Philip Cafaro (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 3-4.

environmental identity, all point to a larger question. This is not to dismiss the previous questions, for they are necessary. But the primary question seems to be who we are in relation to the environment. Just like the environmental virtue ethics scholars attempt to establish the right virtues, hermeneutics should seek to establish, along with the right understanding, ultimately the right identity in relation to the environment. Ricoeur (as quoted previously) has said that “it is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego.”<sup>180</sup> As we read the texts of nature, in media, in literature, and in less-mediated experience, what is the world that is disclosed to us? What is the proper self in front of this world? As we move into a future of environmental problems we must ask, from the standpoint of interpretation and self-understanding, who are we in this world?

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<sup>180</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 94.

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