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### The Communicability of Nature

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Meg Smith

Honors Project

### The Communicability of Nature: Redefining Nature's Voice

How do we experience nature? In what way can we find ourselves at one with nature, immersed in the experience of nature, and still allow nature a level of healthy "otherness," of individual separation? Writers, scientists, and lost people have long gone to the wilderness, to nature, in search of answers to life's mysteries. In effect it has become a destination, a place apart from humans, where it exists only as a haven and place of meditation. Nature has lost its own individuality, its sense of presence as an entity in and of itself. When we seek nature in order to look for answers, to communicate with it as a guide for life, we fail to see it as an independent presence. Instead, there is the sense that nature speaks "human" and tells us all of its secrets, which, of course, relate to human beings; it is perceived as unlocked.

The perception of nature as wide-open, unlocked, can be seen in many of the major literary movements. William Wordsworth, a Romantic poet, saw nature as simply the answer to life's riddles, a road map on how to live life as a human. He treated nature as the destination for his contemplations, a mirror where he might learn about himself. In a slightly different way, Henry David Thoreau, a Transcendentalist writer, combined the mirror-view of nature with a more healthy respect of its mystifying otherness, allowing it secrets he couldn't unlock. However, from that otherness he creates a dangerous and inhibiting divide between nature and humanity. But, a more modern poet, Wislawa Szymborska admired the

unreachability of nature through human communication. Nature, in order to be given the respect as an individual entity, must be approached on its own language terms, not those proscribed by human communication. Moving beyond socially defined rules of language will allow for a closer connection with nature; one takes into consideration new forms of language and validates the individual existence and presence of nature.

Starting not from the beginning, but at least from the Romantics, Wordsworth's Book Fourteen of *The Prelude* offers up an early conception of nature and sublimity. He writes of climbing Mount Snowdon at night, seeing "The Moon hung naked in a firmament/ Of azure without cloud, and at my feet/ Rested a silent sea of hoary mist./ A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved/ All over this still Ocean" (Wordsworth 378). His language immediately turns to images of vastness, describing the mist as large as a "sea" and the many hills as part of a large "Ocean." However, he doesn't seem as overwhelmed by the majesty of the sublime view in front of him as some other poets who come later (like Thoreau). He still sees this incredible moonscape as resting "at [his] feet," symbolically placing himself above the scene. Here he "beheld the emblem of a Mind/ That feeds upon infinity, that broods/ Over the dark abyss" (Wordsworth 378). Instead of becoming overwhelmed with wonder and fear at the vista before him, he sees the markings of a mind, or person, that thrives in the face of such sublimity, or "infinity"; a person becoming empowered, not minimized, by the incomprehensible. A mind of that caliber is not available to all, so "Nature" puts forth "That mutual domination which she loves/ To exert upon the face of outward things,/ So moulded, joined,

abstracted; so endowed/ With interchangeable supremacy,/ That Men least sensitive see, hear, perceive,/ And cannot chuse but feel” (Wordsworth 379). For those less intelligent, less aware, men, nature creates the overwhelming terror and joy of the sublime as a way of forcing them to feel the “glorious faculty/ That higher minds bear with them as their own” (Wordsworth 379). If you are of a better stock, like Wordsworth himself, the sublime is not fear inducing, but nourishing, and feeds the mind’s imagination. From “whose solemn temple [he] received/ [His] earliest visitation” he learned and never “did ever yield,/ Wilfully, to mean cares of low pursuits;” (Wordsworth 380). The power of nature only served to enhance his “higher mind” and teach him to avoid the lowly pursuits of the body, because that base experience is left for those “men least sensitive.” In this respect, nature’s power was a sort of divinity, teaching about how to live and giving spiritual guidance.

For Wordsworth, nature at its most sublime communicates to him through his mind, acting as a sort of food to strengthen him to live a better life. In this way, as William Cronon describes it in “The Trouble With Wilderness,” now the “mountain [is] as cathedral” (Cronon 75), it is a sort of church or god. For the Romantics, “sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God” and He was easily accessed “in those vast, powerful landscapes where one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of one’s own mortality” (Cronon 75). While I can’t argue with Cronon’s sense that the sublime places on our planet are where the Romantics felt most assured of seeing God, I can argue with his sense that at those places *all* the Romantics felt “insignificant” and “reminded of [their] own mortality.” Wordsworth

admired the scene before him on Mount Snowdon, but instead of feeling insignificant, he felt righteous, overly convinced of his own intellectual prowess and understanding of what God has put before him. In his temple, he is not awed before the power of a mighty being, but sees himself as master of what's before him, master of a sublime nature. In turning the mountain into a temple, he takes away the mountain as itself, a mountain, and places it in his own terms, in his comfort zone. Once nature is now understandable, a temple in which Wordsworth feels comfortable, it is conquerable and loses its mysterious sublime power.

Another important aspect of Wordsworth's sublime is its insistence on the spirit and the mind (and its judgmental renunciation of the body). Any sense that nature might communicate with him bodily, through physical sensation, is relegated to the more lowly minds, denigrated below a communication of the mind. While I do appreciate that Wordsworth allows nature the ability to communicate through the mind, he doesn't seem to actually be listening. Instead, Wordsworth finds in the sublime exactly what he wants to find, effectively silencing it. Because he doesn't "hear" nature, but only the thoughts he placed there to find, nature has lost any power of communication he might have accidentally allowed it. Nature is not an entity in and of itself, a being that can communicate with its own will, but is instead a temple where Wordsworth might learn about life. He disregards any real way that nature might have to communicate with him, namely through bodily experience, and inserts a way that enhances his own intellect and places him in a category of men able to "hear" nature. By mocking the physicality of nature, Wordsworth seems to

take away its power, reducing it to mute place of contemplation and not a body capable of exerting an effect on another body.

As such, Wordsworth's sublime is painfully selfish, focusing not on the power of nature, but on his own mind-- a mind capable of accepting and living off of the vast "infinity" shown him that night on Mount Snowdon. As Christopher Hitt recognizes in his essay, "Toward an Ecological Sublime," "This is exemplary of what Keats (despite having never seen *The Prelude*) was famously to call Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime'" (Hitt 608). In this version of the sublime, the final phase of the sublime is one in which the power of the individual is reinforced, not diminished, in the face of a grande force of nature. Hitt continues, "'Crudely put, the contradiction of the sublime is that it has tended to include *both* humbling fear *and* ennobling validation for the perceiving subject." (606). Wordsworth does not really *see* nature at any point in his hike up the mountain, but goes there looking for self-validation, a way in which to see himself as equal and up to the task of understanding the sublime. Nature is merely a mirror, a place for him to find exactly what he wants to see. He finds himself a man of a "higher mind," and extracts a large amount of knowledge about love and pain from the experience: "to early intercourse/ In presence of sublime or beautiful forms/ With the adverse principle of pain and joy-- / Evil, as one is rashly named by men/ Who know not what they speak" (Wordsworth 380). He believes he has somehow reconciled the paradox of "pain and joy," finding in himself a mind capable of understanding the teachings of nature and of the sublime.

Henry David Thoreau, a man of a different era but with a love of nature writing, also wrote about his experience of the sublime in nature, although with a bit of a twist. Unlike the blatant self-validation of Wordsworth's nature poetry, Thoreau does feel himself ultimately minimized by the scale of Mount Ktaadn in his book, *The Maine Woods*. In Part 6, while describing the scene before him, he seems to lose his fluency, opting for a series of exclamations in the attempt to describe his sublime moment:

I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, — *that* my body might, — but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks!

The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact!*

*Contact! Who are we? where are we? (The Maine Woods 64)*

Here Thoreau is thrown into inarticulation as he struggles to understand the immensity of the mountain. He rightly understands the “other” he has just stumbled onto, ejecting, “Contact! Contact!,” as he begins to comprehend that he has just come across some being, some entity, radically different from himself. In this moment, nature maintains a distinct separation, a sense of difference from Thoreau that forces him to recognize what he does not, and may not ever, understand about this entity before him. Describing how Thoreau's experience may redefine the problematic self-validating third phase of the sublime, Hitt sees in Thoreau “a new way of imagining ‘transcendence,’” in which, “by crossing the threshold of discursive

conceptualization, the speaker transcends logos.” More explicitly, “a sublime encounter with nature seems to have the power to jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language, a perspective that, in modern Western culture, has rendered nature mute” (Hitt 616-617). Instead of transcendence over nature, as seen in Wordsworth, Thoreau experiences a transcendence over his own logos, rendering him momentarily free of a world trapped and labeled by language. He begins to question, “*Who* are we? *Where* are we?,” as he recognizes a different way of being: nature. Nature presents Thoreau with a way of existing so vastly different from his own that he cannot do anything but question his definitions of existence and presence. Without that “perspective constructed by reason and language,” we can begin to see nature on its own terms, as an entity with different modes of communication, not lesser modes.

Along those lines, Damien Smith Pfister, in “A Short Burst of Inconsequential Information: Networked Rhetorics, Avian Consciousness, and Bioegalitarianism,” works with Don DeLillo’s story, *The Body Artist*, exploring the ways in which Mr. Tuttle’s strange way of being in the world (akin to autism, although not diagnosed in the novel) can represent “Contact!” with nature, in that it recognizes new forms of perception as communication. Because, “Despite the difficulties in communicating through representational speech, Lauren and Mr. Tuttle share a series of corporeal moments of identification, hinting at how affectability needs no logos” (Pfister 129). Much like Thoreau transcending his own logos, Lauren had to move beyond her own definitions of language and communication to find a way to identify with Mr. Tuttle, so she turned to the body as language. This was a kind of “ontological realignment,”

that, as Pfister quotes David Abram, “rearranges her ‘common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined” (Pfister 124). Both Thoreau and Lauren echo Hitt’s sense of transcendence over the logos, but Lauren makes movement towards the next step: allowing that transcendence to “rearrange ‘common state[s] of consciousness” that open up new forms and pathways of communication. For Lauren, the step away from her conceived notions of communication allows her the opportunity to communicate in a new way with a person or entity that was previously unreachable.

Although Thoreau seems closely related to Lauren in transcendence, he doesn’t make the final leap towards connecting with nature. Instead, he clings to nature’s otherness, relishing it as an escape from the human world. In the chapter, “The Village,” of his great work, *Walden*, Thoreau shamelessly mocks the village for its trivialities, and commends himself for his quiet life in the woods:

I was even accustomed to make an irruption into some houses, where I was well entertained, and after learning the kernels and very last sievelful of news — what had subsided, the prospects of war and peace, and whether the world was likely to hold together much longer — I was let out through the rear avenues, and so escaped to the woods again. (*Walden* 184)

Note the sarcasm in the hyperbole, “whether the world was likely to hold together much longer,” as he makes fun of the gossip of the village people. To him, they talk about any and all things, speculating on so grand a scale as “if the world will

continue on". In essence, they talk of nothing of substance or of value, instead finding themselves left with exaggerated gossip and histrionic ideas about the world. Unable to remain in that sort of company for long, he "escapes" from this madness to the woods.

The notion of "escaping" to the wilderness identifies nature as "other," a place inexorably separate from humanity. Essentially, the mindset of nature as an "escape" blocks that very nature from Thoreau. Instead, he is projecting the frontier myth, the story that "By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society—so the story ran—an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life" (Cronon 77). He creates nature in the image of "not-culture," a place where he is separate and free from the annoying trivialities he sees in the village. But in doing so, he becomes like "elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen" who "projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image" (Cronon 79). In Thoreau's nature the wilderness was a place where life was lived well, better and separate from the city life he mocked. He created a wilderness that was entirely separate from notions of humanity and culture, a place where he could learn the secrets to life his fellow humans were missing. He admits, "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (*Walden* 90). He went to the woods to learn about how to live, and to relate that knowledge to his neighbors, hoping to share his enlightenment. For him, nature lacked the human traits, the humanity, that bothered him about city life

and thus it could teach him how to really live, not the way his fellow humans were so thoughtlessly doing it.

However, this canyon-like divide creates a dangerous duality. No longer was nature simply nature, but instead an area of “not-culture.” Even worse, nature no longer had its own definitions, but simply mirrored and provided the answers Thoreau was looking for, the same way Wordsworth use nature. From his chapter, “The Bean Field,” we see what he learned from his beans:

This further experience also I gained: I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manure, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops. (*Walden* 178)

The beans take on a meaning larger than themselves, becoming a metaphor for cultivating the seeds of virtue in oneself. In doing so, Thoreau takes away the voice of the beans and inserts his own, projecting what he wants to learn from them onto them, thus “create[ing] wilderness in [his] own image” like the elite tourists Cronon describes. While I believe he sees himself as giving voice to the message and secrets nature contains, in actuality he doesn’t listen at all, using nature as a mouthpiece for his own thoughts and ideas.

Bryan Lee Moore, in “Ecocentric Personification in American Nature Writing,” seems to call attention to this when he discusses Thoreau’s “inverted personifications:” “metaphors that give humans the qualities of the natural world”

(Moore 95). Moore frames this use of personification in a positive light, describing how it allows Thoreau to connect more deeply with the natural world. I disagree with his assumption that this creates a closer connection with nature, rather than furthering the divide. Thoreau uses this “inverse personification” to translate what he learns from nature to the human realm. He wants to “brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning” and “plant [...] such seeds [...] as sincerity, truth, simplicity.” He frequently defines the human world in terms of the natural, but does so only to describe how nature has taught him to live as a human, never to connect more concretely with nature or establish kinship. As such, Moore misses the anthropocentrism of Thoreau’s personification, how it only serves to disconnect him further, becoming a tool to turn nature itself into a series of didactic phrases. The use of the natural images in his work does not reveal Thoreau’s close understanding of and connection with nature, it only reveals his fervent searching for images that connect his own thoughts with natural scenes. Thoreau wants to see his own thoughts and ideas mirrored in the natural world.

Vaguely reminiscent of the selfishness of Wordsworth, Thoreau goes into nature to find exactly what he’s looking for. For Wordsworth, it was validation of his own intellect. For Thoreau, it is teachings on how to live well (which I’m presuming he figured out with intellect, making him not so different from Wordsworth). Both writers saw in nature the message they wanted; they didn’t listen, but used it as a springboard for their own ideas. In that way, they silenced nature. Nature wasn’t allowed any individuality, or agency, but remained a mute mirror for each writer to see what they needed to see. Thoreau’s sublime moment got him close to a sense of

recognizing the value of nature's otherness and learning to listen to it, as Lauren did with Mr. Tuttle. But instead he expanded the otherness and used that as a place to seek out lessons, to learn how to live, and take his learning back to the "real world." Nature becomes so opposite from humanity that is the antithesis, all that humanity is not, and, for Thoreau, a better place for humanity to learn from. While that seems like a positive view, it creates a divide wherein nature doesn't exist in its own right, but only exists as the opposite of "culture," or humans. In that existence, nature exists only to teach humanity better ways of living and doing. From this point of view, nature has lost an individuality or voice. Instead, it is swathed in anthropocentric ideas of what can be found in nature and what that nature might say—ignoring any notion that nature might be capable of thought independent from human exploration.

But, all is not lost. A more contemporary poet, Wislawa Szymborska has written a poem that both describes the problem of communicating with nature and acknowledges the dangers of anthropocentric communication. Her poem, "Conversation with a Stone," consists of a conversation, but more of an argument, between a human trying to enter into a stone and the stone refusing to let the human enter. The person in the poem is reminiscent of the voice of Thoreau and Wordsworth: "It's only me, let me come in./ I want to enter your insides,/ have a look around,/ breathe my fill of you" (1-4). Much like the two earlier writers, the person in this poem wants to enter into the heart of nature and see all, learn what they can. Especially with the phrase, "breathe my fill of you," the person assumes a

superior tone, as if they have the right to simply walk into nature, take their fill, and then exit again into the “real,” or human, world.

An interesting type of personification is also at work here. From the first, the stone is created in the image of a large palace, with a “front door” (1) to knock at and “great empty halls” (26) to walk around in. Although the stone is clearly a natural element, the speaker turns it into something familiar and comfortable: a house.

Personification is normally taking an inanimate or non-human element and giving it human traits. A house is not human, but it certainly isn't natural, either. This is more like “culturefication,” wherein the human takes a natural element and gives it more familiar traits, such as those generally associated with culture, human life, or the opposite of the natural realm. Speaking of personification and anthropomorphism, Moore writes, “It was not, however, until Thoreau that American writers began to characterize the value of wilderness by giving the wilderness human qualities which show that the untamed wild(er)ness is an inextricable part of humanity” (Moore 29). Although he directs this towards the writing of Thoreau, the sentiment is maintained throughout his paper: personification provides closer contact with nature. He asserts that through personification we can find greater kinship with nature by finding that the “wild(er)ness” in nature bears resemblance to ourselves. However, this avoids the very fact that by placing human traits on the natural world, we invariably cover it up, masking the truth of it with human traits. Personification then also assumes a far greater understanding of nature, assuming we are able to find such parallel traits. That assumption also denies nature a respectable “otherness,” a sense that we can't penetrate and understand all of it. The very

similar “culturefication” ignores any pretense of finding parallels and simply jumps to mask the uncomfortable differences by placing the unfamiliar natural element in human terms and conditions. Both literary devices push nature away-- assuming understanding across individual boundaries and covering up differences that make understanding difficult.

There’s also the more blatant personification: the stone is talking. What’s interesting, though, is what the stone says. The stone never seems to give too much away, never seems to say more than a human could rightly know about nature. In fact, the stone’s words discuss how inconsiderate it really is to assume that human language is the best (or only) way to communicate with nature. Perhaps Moore has a point: a more honest, respecting personification can help to give a real, less anthropocentric, voice to a nature that communicates in other ways.

However, the fact that the stone is talking about how it really can’t talk calls upon the elegant use of irony throughout the poem. Szymborska makes her point by satirizing the senseless ironies that play out in our interactions with nature. And one of the main ironies is our sense of personification. The stone says, “I don’t have the muscles to laugh,” (23) but by the end of the poem is “bursting from laughter, yes, laughter” (62). Although nature, the stone, frequently reminds us that it doesn’t indeed laugh, or have these human traits, it is still personified, still “laughing.” The stone is communicating the only way it knows how and the human speaker isn’t listening. Szymborska creates this tension between the stone and the speaker by having the stone insist it can’t laugh, and then having it laugh at the naivety of the speaker. Essentially, Szymborska has created a conversation in which two

entities talk *at* each other, but never communicate. The irony here shows that if we aren't willing to listen, which is one-half of communication, we will continue to see nature how we want to see it: "laughing," and it still won't know how to laugh.

Another major irony that Szyborska deals with is the "culturefication" of the stone, and its refusal to be seen that way. Repeated six times throughout the poem, the person constantly "knocks at the stone's front door," trying to enter the nature-as-palace they have chosen to see. And, in a line that many have said is damning, the stone simply says, "I don't have a door" (66). Instead of damning, this is the shining moment of the stone. All along the person has been trying to enter nature in a way that they find comfortable and familiar, through the front door, but then, in the ultimate irony, the stone asserts it doesn't even have a front door to enter through. In this moment the stone refuses to remain in the nature-as-palace image the person has created and demands to be seen for what it is: a stone. Szyborska here is pointing out the blatant irony of trying to place human qualities and traits upon something that clearly isn't human, and then being surprised when they don't work. We have to redefine the way we approach nature if we want to finally understand it; or else we will just be pounding on a door that doesn't exist.

Thankfully, Szyborska hints at those new forms of communication in her poem. What she gets close to is a view of language, or communication, that is better seen through the lens of eco-phenomenology. After once more asking the stone if she might come in to its "great empty halls," the stone refuses and then adds, speaking of its insides, "Beautiful, perhaps, but not to the taste/ of your poor senses" (32-33). This is vital because it implies that communication is possible, but that at

the moment we have dulled our senses to what nature might have to offer us. And perhaps, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has put forth in *The Visible and the Invisible*, there is another sense we aren't tapping into:

“The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever this is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being.”

(139)

The entire planet of being (in which inanimate objects are *not* excluded) is connected by a “flesh-of-the-world,” providing a more physical interaction. The stone is chastising the human for her “poor senses,” her inability to see beyond human experience. The stone continues: “You lack the sense of taking part./ No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part” (48-49). What this implies is that there is a sort of fifth element or sixth sense that humans aren't tapping into, another way of knowing the world that could provide larger definitions of interchange or communication between beings. This element or sense is Merleau-Ponty's “flesh.” Note the way the stone describes this sense: it is a “taking part,” an sense that involves actively participating with the recipient. The “flesh” is that interaction, a “taking part” in the large interchange of all the beings in the world, including more than just the human elements. But how can humans tap into this world? The stone tells her, “You have only a sense of what that sense should be,/

one its seed, imagination" (Szyborska 52-53). With imagination humans can begin to step outside the human experience; it is our small way of imagining another being. However, it is just the seed and it isn't enough to fully accept the being-ness of what human experience calls inanimate, or non-human. If we can't move beyond imagining, and start believing and listening, we won't be able to feel ourselves as part of a larger flesh, a connection with the rest of the world.

The stone's sense of "taking part" also redefines the subject/object binary created for a nature that only functions as a backdrop or destination for poets seeking enlightenment. In those scenarios, nature is the object, being passively viewed, analyzed, and interpreted. But, for Merleau-Ponty, "sensation is not an invasion of the sensor by the sensible. [...] and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 248). The flesh, or "taking part," places both participants on an equal field, perceiving each other at the same time. This allows for each being to have agency and power; they have a certain "*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 6). While Bennett is more exclusively discussing inanimate objects, I think her Thing-Power applies to all of nature, a normally silent entity dispossessed of its power. And if nature, the stone, has Thing-Power, if it is "vibratory" (Bennett 5), then it is entirely capable of existing in an equitable exchange of perception with human beings or any other entity-- giving it a voice.

The nature of that voice is very different from conventional ideas of language defined by human beings. And I think that's the point. The "literacy myth," as defined by James Paul Gee, is somewhat at fault for the power-hierarchy associated with language: "literacy has seemed to many people something the possession of which makes people better and higher human beings. Literate people are, it is widely believed, more intelligent, more modern, more moral" (Gee 47). As a linguist, he isn't dealing with language and literacy beyond the human realm, but the point is clear: literacy makes you better, smarter, and more powerful. Think of it, he's not only talking about language, but *literacy*, so the lack of even language places a being incredibly low on the hierarchy. Without language, nature isn't even considered, and without literacy it won't be taken seriously. But this is an incredibly anthropocentric view of communication. The stone says, "I don't have a door," refusing to be placed in the easily-defined human realm, and therefore demanding to be taken on its own terms. Nature shouldn't have to prove that it can exist in a human world, it should be understood as it exists in its own world. This also allows it the healthy otherness that comes from maintaining its own secrets, not being completely comprehended and conquered by human understanding. The stone acknowledges the importance of that mystery, saying to the speaker, "My whole surface is turned toward you,/ all my insides turned away" (35-36). The sentiment here is perfectly echoed by David Abram: "Like the bowl, each presence presents some facet that catches my eye while the rest of it lies hidden behind the horizon of my current position" (Abram 52). When the more-than-human-realm (to borrow a term from Abram) is treated as an entity, a being, it becomes less fathomable, an individual that is only perceivable

from certain angles at certain times, hiding the rest of itself from view. In this way it maintains the power of its secrets, the way we accept our inability to ever truly understand and know another human perfectly. The courtesy that comes from accepting the individuality of another mind, or existence, and accepting its otherness is the exact way in which we recognize the consciousness and vitality of another human. When science, or poets, seek to understand nature in its totality, they deprive it of that courtesy, that sense of its individual mind, soul, or consciousness. As the stone reminds the speaker, “You may get to know me but you’ll never know me through” (34).

Once this understanding has been reached, a new sense of communication can be utilized. Working towards that, Abram takes Merleau-Ponty’s works and ties it directly to nature, speaking of a “reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it” (Abram 52). What is important about this interchange is that it is “a sort of silent conversation” that “unfolds far below my verbal awareness” (Abram 52). The stone does not have a door and it cannot laugh—it does not function in an anthropocentric world. But that doesn’t mean we are inexorably divided from nature. Learning to understand physicality, a corporeal language, can move us towards a new way of communicating with nature. As of now, nature is silent. Like Gee’s literacy myth suggests, we have assumed that without language nature can have no power or voice. Once it has an individuality, a mind, once that has been accepted, it can have a voice. But it won’t be on our terms. On a perceptual level we can begin to respond to nature’s physical nudges, learn to listen without expecting verbal language. It has Thing-Power; it is connected to us through

the flesh-of-the-world. It can function in reciprocity with us. We may not learn its language, we may not fully understand it, but it can communicate with us; it can touch us.

What Szymborska's poem does is redefine the way nature can be written about, opening up new ways to view the relationship. But I want to make sure that nature's otherness isn't alienating; making sure that in trying to maintain nature's individuality we don't disconnect our kinship to it. It's important that we learn to feel at home in the new flesh-of-the-world, and begin to understand, perhaps, what Bartholomew Walsh calls "whole-nature." He makes the case for tying together science and eco-phenomenology to become more open. To him, "Being open simply means letting some aspect of reality show itself intelligibly, bringing it near through regular engagement, coming to feel at home in a certain domain" (Walsh 2). If we are open, then "knowledge and experience [can] open us to nature's fully depths" and train the body "to become aware, sensitive, and wide open to receive the land's phenomenological richness" (Walsh 2). Bringing us back to the "flesh," Walsh urges a greater sensitivity to the direct experience of nature, the physicality of that communication. Although at times science can seek to extract from nature, it also focuses on the hands-on aspect of nature, experimenting and observing. Perhaps through a kind of science that focuses on "whole-nature," or truly understanding and coming close to nature, we can begin to seek comprehension and not natural resources.

Poets are moving towards a better sense of how to write about their conversations with nature, and a better way to represent nature in those

conversations. William Wordsworth represented nature as a place to find himself, a mirror for his own intellect. Henry David Thoreau drew a slightly more complicated picture, at times giving nature its due and more often than not finding in nature a place of enlightenment, not an individual. But, with her finely written poem, "Conversation with a Stone," Wislawa Szymborska has started to redefine what a nature poem might look like, depicting a nature that doesn't always say what we want to hear. This is a first step in giving nature an individual mind, an entity that can have agency, and therefore communicate. When it is understood on its own terms, as an entity different from ourselves, the definitions of language and communication change too. Experiencing nature and feeling the physicality as a form of communication become tools for understanding nature's ability to enact change on ourselves, its Thing-Power. As such, the communicability of nature begins to exist, and nature begins to have a voice.

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