12
Healed and Whole Forever

Spiritual Perception in Nature

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How can we learn to perceive the natural world more fully, more deeply—on its own terms, but also as part of a larger whole of which we are a part? Such a question does not arise in a vacuum but is itself a response to what has too often been lacking in our relationship with the living world: a sense that we are part of a living whole that calls for our deepest moral-spiritual engagement. What Pope Francis has called an 'integral ecology' points to the kind of holism that refuses to separate the concerns of our social-political life from that which we generally refer to as environmental or ecological. But how can we help bring into being—in our own lives and in the larger social-political-environmental sphere of which we are a part—an embodied practice of integral ecology? One part of the answer is to reflect more deeply on how we perceive the natural world and our place in it; to ask how our habits of perception shape, for better or worse, our attitudes and ethical responses towards the natural world. And to consider whether our capacity to perceive ourselves as part of an ecological whole and to live out of that perception can be deepened through more assiduous attention and practice.

The light is slowly bleeding from the desert sky. Silhouette of mountains in the distance. Whispery mesquite branches tremor in the breeze. The pungent smell of soil and sage, still damp from recent rains. Bats circling in and out of the darkness. It is quiet, still, open. I pause to locate myself here, to take in all that is unfolding around and within me. The whole of it. My senses are alive, my thoughts drifting. In this moment, I find myself thinking of the small community of Cistercian nuns who live over the next ridge, gathering at this moment in their chapel for compline. I call to mind also those hidden figures, unknown to me but even now passing through these mountains on their way north, skirting *la migra* and seeking shelter wherever they can find it. God help them. I hear a low rumbling sound from somewhere in the distance: mining trucks probably. And then silence. What a strange simultaneity. All of this and more present to me here in this fleeting moment, mediated through my senses, my consciousness, my soul. I struggle to take it all in, hold it, respond to it. The whole of it.

One might well ask: what kind of whole is this? What kind of ecology? Who and what belongs to it? What does it ask of us? And how can we learn to sharpen

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and deepen our own capacity for perception so that this sense of the whole can become more fully integrated into our lived experience and our ethical response to this experience? These questions arise for me in a particular way on this evening in the desert. But they are surfacing continuously and more broadly and with increasing urgency in the world we inhabit at the dawn of the twenty-first century. They have become part of a shared global concern, what we might think of as an ecology of concern.[1] Increasingly, we find ourselves facing serious moral questions about how we understand ourselves in relation to the whole and how can we learn to respond to it and live within it with care and respect. I have already alluded to the idea of 'integral ecology' that is articulated in the environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*—an ethical-spiritual vision of the world that invites serious reflection about our relationship to and responsibility for all living beings—the whole fabric of life. These are among the most fundamental concerns of the ecological moment through which we are now moving, and they call for a serious, wholehearted response.

To speak of the whole in this way is already to suggest that it is meaningful to speak of life as possessing coherence and integrity, whether biological, social, or spiritual. This is not immediately self-evident. Indeed some might dismiss it as romantic, idealistic, or naïve. How is it possible to speak in this way when so much of the fabric of life is so clearly broken and fragmented? I am not arguing here that the idea of the whole or its potential meaningfulness is in fact self-evident. The holism that is critical to ecological thinking points to a complex and still-unfolding understanding of how particular species in the natural world are related to other species and to the larger ecosystems of which they are a part. The holism that emerges in artistic, poetic and spiritual discourse, often born of a simple but profound perception of one's participation in a larger reality, connotes something at once more personal and more elusive. And the holism that underlies the idea of 'integral ecology' points to something whose primary meaning arises from a conscious ethical response to the larger reality of the living world. In what follows, I want to suggest that thinking more deeply about the meaning of holism and honing our perceptual capacities to experience the world more holistically can contribute something important to the work of realizing an integral ecology.

Learning to think holistically can help open up an imaginative space in which the capacity to perceive oneself as part of the whole and to live from that deepened perception can be realized more fully. Thinking this way is perhaps best

[1] Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). Nicholsen uses the terms 'love' and 'concern' in their strongest possible sense to frame an argument for a whole-hearted spiritual-ethical response to the deepening environmental destruction we are currently witnessing. She suggests that one of the primary needs in the present moment is 'the effort to make oneself worthy of what one loves'.

thought of as having a prospective, or to speak theologically, an eschatological character. It is in this sense that Rilke is thinking when he speaks of learning to 'See everything/and ourselves *in* everything/healed and whole/forever'.[2] Still, this is not only prospective; it points to the possibility that we may, even now, be capable of perceiving things this way. It suggests a way of seeing that may seem utterly unrealizable in practice, but which practice alone can help us to realize. A paradox perhaps. But helpful to us in a moment when many despair of ever being able to see anything whole.

When biologists identify ecosystems that are healthy and thriving and 'whole', even if they exist amidst larger ecosystems afflicted by destruction and fragmentation and loss, this serves as a reminder that wholeness is real, that it still exists in the world, and that it might be reknitted through ecological restoration. When theologians speak of a vision of the world as whole, in God, in the way Origen and Gregory of Nyssa and others in ancient Christianity did in articulating the notion of *apokatastasis ton panton*—everything restored to wholeness in God in the end—this was understood as a reality both not fully realized *and* meaningfully present to us in hope. Already and not yet. Present to us and still waiting to be fulfilled. This is part of the challenge of thinking ecologically. It is also immensely challenging to hold in a single gaze the entire complex ecological reality within which we exist. But it is important to try to do so. Cultivating such awareness means in the first place deepening one's capacity to notice and respond to the fundamental biological realities of plants, animals, and places, all existing in a complex, dynamic, ever shifting relationship with one another and with the larger web of which they are a part. It also means learning to see and understand the different social ecologies that shape our lives, those social, economic, political, and cultural realities that impact and are impacted by the ecological complexity in which our lives are rooted; especially the slow violence (often hidden from view) that is so often inflicted on poor and often marginalized communities of colour by environmental degradation.[3] And it includes, at least for many, the moral, spiritual, or contemplative ecologies within which we exist, the relationship between the deepest expressions of human philosophical or spiritual yearning and the systems of life that support, inform, and gives them meaning.[4]

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (Eighth Elegy). This version is cited by Pierre Hadot in his essay 'The Sage and the World', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited and with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 258.

[3] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For a thoughtful ethnographic account of the impact of such environmental practices on one community, see Javier Auyero and Debora Alejandra Swistun, *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). On the impact of race in thinking about environmental responsibility, see Lauret Savoy: *Trace: Memory, History, Race and the American Landscape* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015).

[4] See, for example, Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Leslie E. Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet*

To *behold* all of this, in the profound, encompassing, enlivening sense that contemplative practitioners have always understood that term to suggest, and to ask about our relationship to and responsibility towards this immense, intricate reality, is both enthralling and immensely difficult. But this has in fact become one of the great challenges of this historical moment—*learning to see the whole* and placing what Timothy Morton calls 'the ecological thought' at the very centre of our spiritual and ethical practice.[5] In what follows, I want to explore the character of this challenge, by considering, through select examples from the literary and poetic tradition, what it means to see and participate in the living world.

Becoming Painfully Aware

The poet William Blake once observed: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to us as it is, infinite. For [we] have closed ourselves up, till [we see] all thro' the narrow chinks of [our] cavern.'[6] This koan-like statement still retains much of its original power to provoke and challenge, and feels especially poignant in this moment of deepening environmental crisis. In the face of callous destruction of species, entire ecosystems and cultural traditions arising from them, the questions take on added weight and depth. Why have we closed ourselves up to the world around us? Why do we perceive so little of its complex beauty and immense power? And will we ever be able to cleanse the doors of perception and learn to see more clearly and deeply all that we are in danger of losing forever? The cost of not learning to see more deeply, the poet suggests, is staggeringly high: we will remain unable to see and feel the life of the world around us. And cut off from the infinite. And it will become even more difficult than it is currently to summon the necessary moral and spiritual energy to help us respond to all that is being lost, around and within us.

Sitting in the quiet stillness of that desert night, I feel the force of Blake's indictment. The poverty of my own capacity to see is so apparent to me. But so is my growing awareness of why it is so difficult to perceive things fully and deeply. It is more than impatience or carelessness, though these certainly play their part. It is the recognition that seeing things as they are in themselves and as they exist in relation to one another and in relation to me is immensely difficult to do. How much complexity can the mind take in at once? How much can it hold? How much do we want to see and take into ourselves?

Revolution (New York: Praeger, 2012); Stephanie Kaza, *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2008).

[5] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[6] William Blake, *Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 158.

That night in the desert, I recognize the immediacy of light, touch, fragrance, and sound converging with other ways of perceiving—through thought, intuition, and memory. Everything seems to move together, almost as if it were a single perception. Which, in a way, it is. There is immense pleasure in this. But experience has taught me that it requires attention and patience and skill to notice and take it all in. Even more than this it requires openness and empathy. As Aldo Leopold, the great pioneer of a new land ethic in this country, reminds us in his *A Sand County Almanac*, 'We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.'[7] Here we encounter the heart of the moral challenge of learning to see: the challenge of opening ourselves up to and participating deeply in the entire web of life and concerns within which our own lives are bound up. I recognize, for example, that I am bound somehow to those nuns entering into prayer (and they to me); just as I am bound to the lives of those migrants moving slowly through the darkness of the desert night, even though I do not encounter them or know them; and yes, I belong to these mountains, ancient, beautiful, and pulsing with life but also vulnerable to the effects of climate change and a proposed mining operation. The moral-spiritual ecology that I am gradually coming to recognize so far transcends my own narrow concerns that it is hard to grasp; but it does concern and include me. And it is this entire complex reality I want to see and respond to. Learning to see in this way means becoming sensitive to and aware of this entire web and of oneself within it. And of the moral claims that this relationship makes upon us. Learning to see means thinking carefully about what the world is asking of us and what kind of response we are prepared to make.

These concerns are becoming ever more critical to the work of those seeking to live thoughtfully and responsibly in relation to the natural world. There is a growing recognition that without a deep transformation of awareness—born of a deepening commitment to see and respond to the presence of other living beings in our midst—there can be no sustained effort to alter our attitudes towards or ways of relating to the natural world. This simple, powerful idea is at the heart of many of the most thoughtful and moving efforts to heal and renew places that have been so grievously harmed by human neglect, carelessness, and greed. One of the most compelling articulations of this vision can be found in Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si'*. Cautioning against the idea that our primary response to environmental loss and degradation should involve 'amassing information or satisfying curiosity', Pope Francis argues instead that: 'our goal is…to become *painfully aware*, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about

[7] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 214.

it'.[8] Here we encounter an understanding of awareness that rejects the careless, objectifying and utilitarian gaze that so often characterizes our way of being in the world. Awareness in this sense collapses the distance between us and other living beings and creates the conditions for a deeply empathetic response to them. It calls for a more intimate, sensitive, and involving way of seeing reality.

It is striking that so much of what *Laudato Si'* advocates for in terms of environmental responsibility hinges on the idea of cultivating this deeper, more empathetic and encompassing *awareness*. Still, what kind of awareness is this? And where does it lead? In this context, at least, it leads to a profound and costly moral-spiritual awakening, a dawning consciousness that 'what is happening in the world' cannot be kept at a safe distance from those more personal and intimate concerns that occupy our day to day lives. Rather, it must be seen and understood as having everything to do with us. This, I think, is what the Pope is alluding to with his exhortation to allow the larger reality of what is happening in the world to become part of 'our own personal suffering'. Here again we encounter the notion of a moral-spiritual ecology that invites us recognize how porous the borders are between our own lives and the lives of all other living beings. It is a call to *live* with greater awareness of the intimate bonds connecting us to others, and to recognize that we are called to participate in the life of the world. At its root, this is a contemplative practice that echoes the teaching of many ancient spiritual traditions on the need to pay attention, to become more deeply aware of oneself as part of the whole fabric of being. It extends and deepens these traditions in important ways, by inviting us to practice an awareness of the whole that attends carefully to the minute particulars of the living world. But it also draws deeply on the wisdom of these traditions in calling for a transformed awareness that can contribute to the healing of the whole. Learning to become 'painfully aware'—becoming alert and sensitive to the presence of all living beings, to the ethical-spiritual meaning of our relationship with them, and allowing ourselves to feel and struggle with the immense cost of losing these beings—is, it seems, one of the primary spiritual obligations of the present moment.

Seeing into the Life of Things

What does such a contemplative practice look like? And how can we set about describing and reflecting upon it without reducing it to something that is too abstract to hold our attention and concern? It can help to listen carefully to those writers and poets whose fine-grained reflections upon the natural world provide us with a diverse, varied and morally challenging grammar of perception. It is

[8] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*: *On care for our common home* (Washington, DC: USCC, 2015), 19.

here, in the particularity of a given encounter with this place, this animal, this tree, this sky, or this eroded or flooded or poisoned landscape, and in the halting, always provisional efforts to bring such encounters into language, that this grammar begins to become intelligible. Sometimes such encounters unexpectedly open out onto something significant and profound. We are overcome by what Wordsworth has described as 'the deep power of Joy … [by which] … We see into the *Life* of Things'.[9] Here one senses the mysterious process by which our encounter with the minute particular can open out onto 'the whole'—the very *life* of things. Perceiving the living world in this way and learning to incorporate such perception into a sustained spiritual practice can become the basis for a powerful ecological ethic.

Still, what makes such perception spiritual? It is important to acknowledge here that this question can be answered in myriad ways. Religious or spiritual traditions and the language and symbol systems underlying them give us access to an understanding of spiritual perception that relies on a very particular notion of God or divine presence for its meaning. However, there is also a way of understanding spiritual perception that does not draw upon theistic ideas or language for its meaning, but is more open and expansive. I am thinking, for example, of the often implicit and inchoate sense of what William James has called 'the more'. Or what poet Czeslaw Milosz calls simply 'the real'.[10] Such language—often wilfully indeterminate in relation to any specific commitment to theism—captures something important about the way many contemporary persons approach the question of spirituality and spiritual perception. In particular, it reflects a growing feeling that the language of spirituality needs to be continuously translated and reinterpreted if we are to find a meaningful way to express our own relationship with the sacred. In relation to the natural world, the efforts to name this new and still-emerging sensibility are striking in their range and diversity. Allan Hodder, for example, calls attention to an attitude he describes as a 'mindful naturalism', a sense of oneself as so deeply immersed within the rhythms of the natural world that any notion of human identity separate from that larger reality becomes impossible to conceive. Fiona Ellis speaks of an 'expansive naturalism', a sense of nature as capable of revealing and making present to us a great immensity. Timothy Morton notes the importance of an ecological-spiritual sensibility that will enable us to discover 'the liminal space between things'. And Cathy Rigby

[9] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in *Oxford Poetry Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58.

[10] William James, *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 35; Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 25. On the dynamic relationship between spirituality and religion, see: Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum', *Spiritus* 3:2 (Fall 2003): 163–85.

describes this particular historical moment as one in which we are learning to respond to the challenge of 'rematerializating religion and spirituality'.[11]

Such language can, I think, help us to understand how our encounters with the natural world, even the smallest and most humble, can be understood as spiritually meaningful. And how these encounters, rooted in an understanding of spiritual perception that draws upon older, classical ideas of spiritual meaning while also recasting them in less theistic, more open and expansive terms, can help create the possibility of more encompassing and lasting ecological awareness. Often it is those who are sensitive to these small, seemingly insignificant things that can help us begin to see more clearly. 'Have you noticed,' Rainer Maria Rilke asks, 'how scorned, lowly things revive when they come into the willing gentle hands of someone solitary? They are like small birds to which the warmth returns; they stir, waken, and a heart begins to beat in them, rising and falling in those hearkening hands like the utmost wave of a mighty ocean.'[12] The solitary one, or perhaps anyone who is patient and still enough to notice things, contributes something significant to the world: the practice of attention, Rilke suggests, is itself enlivening. This stirring or wakening of things, even if the stirring and wakening is occurring primarily in our own consciousness and sensibility, makes possible a different kind of exchange among and between living beings, ourselves included. We are alive to one another. And aware of this aliveness. Something small and hidden perhaps, but significant.

An exemplary case of intense, solitary noticing can be encountered in the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). Here one finds innumerable instances of close observation of ordinary things, and an effort to give expression in language to perceptions so dense and intricate and dynamic that they sometimes appear to defy such efforts completely. One also encounters here thoughtful reflections on the art of perception itself, what a small miracle it is to perceive anything at all: 'To think of a thing', he notes, 'is [as] different from to perceive it as to walk is from to feel the ground under you'. What is it to perceive a thing, in the sense that Coleridge means it here? And how does it differ from thinking about that same thing? The difference, it seems, has primarily to do with proximity, feeling, intimacy. 'To feel the ground under you' requires sensitivity, openness, vulnerability—in this case to the ground under your feet. A sense that the moment is alive with possibility and that the physical reality within or upon

[11] Allan Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 66; Fiona Ellis, *God, Value and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Timothy Morton, 'The Liminal Space between things: Epiphany and the Physical', in Iovino Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, eds, *Material Ecocriticsm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). Cathy Rigby, 'Spirits that Matter: Pathways toward a Rematerialization of Religion and Spirituality', in Iovino Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, eds, *Material Ecocriticsm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

[12] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Diaries of Young Poet* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 123.

which you are moving has some claim on you—whether aesthetic, moral, or spiritual. Certainly perception, understood in the sense that Coleridge is using it here, involves thinking. But it is something different from discursive thinking. It is closer to meditation, a kind of ruminative thinking that proceeds slowly, carefully, allowing sensory and imaginative experience and awareness to accrue gradually. It is thinking that has been pierced by the thing it is thinking about, that is already responding to the presence of the thing, that wants to enter into lively relationship with it, perhaps become immersed in it. In another of his notebook entries, Coleridge observes: 'There have been times when looking up beneath the shelt[e]ring Tree, I could Invest every leaf with Awe.'[13] Here, perhaps, one catches a glimpse of that cleansing of the doors of perception to which Blake alludes. But Coleridge adds an important note here: we see and feel things continuously, but often with little attention or investment; certain moments of perception, for reasons that are not always clear, hold us, speak to us and invite a response. And the response itself ('I could invest every leaf with Awe') becomes part of the perception, part of how it comes to live within us. Such response can be understood as a spiritual-ethical gesture of respect, reciprocity, even reverence. *Investing* what we behold with meaning and significance, even if we also recognize that this gesture of meaning-making is partial, provisional, and unfinished. Mystery remains. And if it is fleeting in character, such perception is nevertheless real, and can alter the entire way we inhabit our lives. Returning again to Wordsworth, we begin to notice that such perceptive experience can gradually become woven into a growing awareness of 'the deep power of Joy…[by which]…We see into the *Life* of Things'.[14]

A detailed and important account of such seeing can be found in Coleridge's journal from November, 1803, in which he describes what he beheld upon waking early one morning on a coach ride to London:

> It was a rich Orange Sky like that of a winter Evening save that the fleecy dark blue Clouds that rippled above it, shewed it to be Morning [–] these soon became of a glowing Brass Colour, brassy Fleeces, wool packs in shape/rising high up into the Sky. The Sun at length rose upon the flat Plain, like a Hill of Fire in the distance, rose wholly, & in the water that floodedd part of the Flat a deep column of Light.—But as the Coach went on, a Hill rose and intercepted the Sun—and the Sun in a few minutes *rose* over it, a compleat 2nd rising, thro' other clouds and with a different Glory. Soon after this I saw Starlings in vast Flights, borne along like smoke, mist—like a body unindued with voluntary Power/—now it shaped itself into a circular area, inclined—now they formed a

[13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (New York: Oxford, 2002), 35.
[14] Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'.

> Square—now a Globe—now from complete orb into an Ellipse—then oblongated into a Balloon…now a concave Semicircle; still expanding, or contracting, thinning or condensing, now glimmering and shivering, now thickening, deepening, blackening![15]

It is difficult to miss the growing sense of amazement at what the poet beholds, or the unguarded, ecstatic joy that begins to well up within him. At times, he seems to carry in his own consciousness the fluid, dream-like world unfolding before him. Still, his mind is sharply focused, intensely alert to the intricate shape and texture of things, to their strange beauty, to their wondrous power. One senses an effort to perceive in all these different elements moving *together* the very dynamism and life of the world. Such intense preoccupation with seeing and describing things is at the same time an effort to *perceive the world*, and to reflect on that perception in a way that allows one to feel and understand the world and one's place in the world in a new way. It is a dynamic, creative process in which perception and reflection move together to open up new possibilities for life in the world. The immediacy and force of the original perception is palpable. But the reflective work of inquiring into the meaning of such perception, and to the things one perceives (individually and in relation to one another), remains open, unfinished, potentially endless. A compelling and meaningful practice of paying attention to the natural world.

But is it a *spiritual* practice? Is Coleridge's perception of the natural world spiritual? The answer one gives to these questions will depend on how one understands the character of thought and practice under consideration. Does the immersive, ecstatic, relational character of Coleridge's thought express what we might describe as an experience of self-transcendence? Does it yield a greater sense of intimacy and reciprocity between oneself and the 'life of things?' Does it open up a more encompassing awareness of that relationship? Of course, it is also important to consider such questions in light of the historical particularities of Coleridge's situation and the world of which he was a part. But for the purposes of this chapter, it seems sufficient to notice the quality of attention and what that attention yields: a more complex, intricate, dynamic sense of the living world and one's place within it. Joy. Awe. Intimacy. The capacity to see into the *life* of things. Everything appearing to us as it is: infinite. Here are elements of a grammar of contemplative practice that point to a fuller and more adequate way of seeing and living in the world.

[15] Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 39.

Dissolved in the Haze: Subjectivity Subsumed in Matter

One senses here a dawning awareness of how fluid and porous the boundaries between and among things in the world are; and an awareness of how permeable the boundaries of our own consciousness are, how we can come to know ourselves as living within and touched by the life of another. It is not easy to grasp or express the experience of this fluid, shifting movement of life around and within us. To say anything at all is already to risk putting into language something can never be contained or encompassed by it—not only because of its ephemeral character but also because of its endlessness. Here one draws close to those apophatic traditions of spiritual thought practice that freely acknowledge the limits of our abilities to articulate fully the meaning of our spiritual perceptions. There is something analogous, I think, to the challenge of becoming sensitive to those boundary regions where life insistently emerges and moves, where light and wind and birdsong course together and enter into us, where one thing cannot be separated from another, ever.

Henry David Thoreau's journals offer an exemplary case of one person's efforts to trace the impact of the natural world on his consciousness, what we can understand as a deepening spiritual perception of the natural world and his place within it. His journals describe in minute and obsessive detail encounters with places and other living beings that invite a continuous deepening of his capacity to perceive and describe what he perceives as part of an encompassing whole. The sense of being drawn into the world, of feeling one's desire quickened by its sensual beauty, its music, its touch, spills over into a language of excess that reflects the density and encompassing intensity of the experience. Here, the idea of self and world as distinct realities that can be simply and easily distinguished from one another begins to recede from view; instead, there is a growing perception of immersion, of disappearing into a shared world of boundless immensity. Thoreau's careful and assiduous attention to these moments of ecstatic awareness is, as Allan Hodder has demonstrated, central to his emerging understanding of what it is to know ourselves as stitched into the fabric of the living world.[16] Ecstasy begets intimacy, an intimate knowledge that can come to us only through relinquishment of a narrow, bounded self and an openness to an ever emerging sense of participation in a larger whole. Attention to those moments when such ecstatic expansion occurs can quicken and deepen one's sensitivity to the world, can open one to the possibility of a continuous and ever-more encompassing exchange of life. Still, what kind of exchange is this? And who is acting upon whom? Consider these two passages from Thoreau's early journals:

[16] Allan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

> Drifting in a sultry day on the sluggish waters of the pond, I almost cease to live—and begin to be. A boat-man stretched on the deck of his craft, and dallying with the noon, would be as apt an emblem of eternity for me, as the serpent with his tail in his mouth. I am never so prone to lose my identity. I am dissolved in the haze.[17]
>
> The eaves are running on the south side of the house—The titmouse lisps in the poplar—the bells are ringing for the church—while the sun presides over all and makes his simple warmth more obvious than all else.—What shall I do with this hour so like time and yet so fit for eternity? Where in me are these russet patches of ground—and scattered logs and chips in the yard?—I do not feel cluttered.—I have some notion what the johnswort and life-everlasting may be thinking about—when the sun shines on me as on them—and turns my prompt thought—into just such a seething shimmer—I lie out indistinct as a heath at noon-day—I am evaporating airs ascending into the sun.[18]

These journal entries reveal a concern, one that Thoreau never lost, to describe that particular moment of perception when a previously-clear boundary between the self and the wider world begins to dissolve and becomes permeable; but they touch on different dimensions of this experience. In the earlier passage, suggests Hodder, '[A]ll of matter, the creation itself, is subsumed in an ocean of consciousness; [in the second passage], on the contrary, subjectivity is almost entirely subsumed in matter'.[19] The distinction is significant, especially as one tracks the changes in Thoreau's sensibilities over time, from a transcendental idealism that favours human consciousness as the primary subject (into which the natural world is absorbed) towards what Hodder describes as a 'mindful naturalism' in which the natural world begins to emerge as the primary subject, or in any case as a rich, complex reality with its own claims on the human subject. Gradually, the idealism that is so prominent in the early years gives way to a vivid, proto-ecological understanding of the relationships between and among all living beings. Thoreau's unfinished Calendar project, which represents his most intense and sustained effort to catalogue the intricate relations among and between species across time reveals the extent of his commitment to understanding what would later come to be known as the ecological character of the natural world. But his steady and growing attention to this concrete ecological reality never led him to abandon his fundamental concern with that mysterious boundary region across which the self is sometimes drawn in its encounter with the living world. 'I lie out indistinct as a heath at noon-day—I am evaporating airs ascending into

[17] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. I, 69–70. The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Volume 1: *Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844. Ed.* Elizabeth Hall Witherell, Robert Sattelmeyer, Thomas Blanding (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 69–70.

[18] Thoreau, *Journal*, I. 256.

[19] Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 65.

the sun.' For Thoreau, this indeterminate ever-shifting space between the self and the world and the mysterious ecstatic movement by which one is drawn into and beyond it possesses an almost endless spiritual and ethical significance.

Thoreau helped to establish a vocabulary of spiritual yearning rooted in a sense of deep intimacy with and knowledge of the natural world within the tradition of American natural history writing. But he did more than this. As Branka Arsić has demonstrated in her brilliant study of Thoreau's work, he also helped to show that it was possible to practise an orientation towards other living beings rooted in a true sense of reciprocity. This was in part because of how consistently and deeply he questioned the ideology of human exceptionalism. Arsić argues that one of the most enduring and important aspect of Thoreau's work lies in his clear insistence that 'no living form is more accomplished than another, and life doesn't therefore unfold hierarchically and progressively but, more democratically, moves simultaneously in a variety of directions'.[20] And we along with it. Taking this idea seriously, as Thoreau certainly did, involved removing himself more and more from his own reflections on the natural world, in deference to those life forms towards which he was directing his gaze. His practice of perception gradually became purer, more disinterested, more open—a gesture of ascetic relinquishment undertaken for the sake of the world itself.

Immersion, Reciprocity, Regard

Others also took up this challenge, though in different ways. I think here of the work of Mary Austin (1868–1934), a writer who lived and worked for many years in the desert country of California and whose work *The Land of Little Rain* became an American literary classic. Consider her account of the subtle, exchange of light and sound in the vast, beautiful landscape of California's Owens Valley:

> In quiet weather mesa days have no parallel for stillness, but the night silence breaks into certain mellow or poignant notes. Late afternoons the burrowing owls may be seen blinking at the doors of their hummocks with perhaps four or five elfish nestlings arow, and by twilight begin a soft *whoo-ooing*, rounder, sweeter, more incessant in mating time. It is not possible to disassociate the call of the burrowing owl from the late slant light of the mesa. If the fine vibrations which are the golden-violet glow of spring twilights were to tremble into sound, it would be just that mellow double note breaking along the blossom tops.[21]

[20] Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 129–30.

[21] Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 96–7.

This account is noteworthy for its reticence regarding the effect of such subtle movements on the observer. All of Austin's attention is on the shifting movement of life within the place itself. Yet there is tremendous delicacy in her observation, especially regarding the way stillness and light and song move and flow into and through one another. The stillness is itself something palpable. But it is open, dynamic, and receptive to sound, to which it occasionally yields. That 'soft *whoo-ooing*' of burrowing owls, whose song can hardly be distinguished from the 'late slant light of the mesa'. There seems to be something kindred between them. Or perhaps it is simply how they rise and move together, how difficult it is to discern where one begins and the other ends, how light and sound coalesce and resonate continuously in the senses and in the imagination.

Austin makes no attempt here to suggest what it might mean for us to notice and feel this rich movement of life around and within us. But it is difficult to miss the sense of intimacy and participation that her account of the dance of light and sound and stillness on the mesa invites and makes possible. Significant also is her sense of the porousness of the perceptive process through which the life of things enters into us and takes hold of our affections, lifting and carrying us out beyond ourselves into the immensity. The senses are alive and attuned to the living world—with such sensitivity that, for a brief moment, light and sound and subjective awareness of oneself as part of this whole, pulsing, complex reality flow together in a single, rich synaesthetic perception. Austin does not ascribe any explicit spiritual meaning to this moment of perception. But here, as elsewhere, she points to a remarkable possibility (one that she believes too often eludes us but sometimes becomes real): the ability to open oneself to this immensity and enter into it. Becoming part of the life of the world in this way entails learning to relinquish one's place as the central subject and opening oneself to a more inter-subjective way of being in the world. For this to happen, the mind and the senses must become more deeply attuned and responsive to the simple elements of the physical world—sensitivity to sight, sound, texture, fragrance, and taste guiding us towards a more encompassing awareness of our identity as persons alive within the world. It can come as a relief, Austin suggest, to know that the self is not so constrained, that it is capable of living within a larger, more capacious reality.

The feeling of utter immersion. The sense that the reality in which you are moving is simultaneously around and within you—analogous in some ways to what mystics sometimes speak of in terms of absorption into or union with the divine. The sense that one can no longer easily discern the edges of the self against the horizon of such immensity. The awareness that the very idea of the self must be re-examined in light of one's experience of living within that larger whole. Here as with much mystical discourse, there is a fundamental tension or paradox that cannot be entirely overcome: the employment of language to suggest that the old boundaries between self and other have disappeared entirely is nonetheless the expression of a subject attempting to evoke that very experience. Subjective

experience remains, although it is sometimes stretched to such an extent that the very meaning of subjectivity itself is being called into question. This is an imaginative project, an effort to find language to convey the sense of boundlessness in one's encounter with the mysterious Other, whether God or the natural world. What characterizes this imaginative project in so many writers in the modern era is the sense that the distinctive elements of the living world with which one seeks a relationship should never be reduced to a generalized sense of 'nature'. Instead, the particular character of a given place and distinctive character of the life forms within that place must be allowed to speak on their own terms. There is an ethical obligation to listen, to open all the senses to this complex reality and to respond in kind. Spiritual perception of the living world is rooted in this ethic of reciprocity.

The work of French writer Jean Giono (1895–1970) is exemplary in this regard. Here, long familiarity with a particular place—the rugged, beautiful country surrounding Manosque in the Haute-Provence of southern France—shapes and gives life to an extraordinarily intimate perception of the natural world. In works such as *Blue Boy* (1932), *Song of the World* (1934), and *Joy of Man's Desiring* (1936), one encounters an intense, playful, and open-hearted mysticism of the natural world that is at once cosmic and utterly local.

In his autobiographical novel *Blue Boy*, Giono evokes a moment from his childhood that helped initiate him into this encompassing awareness: 'The sap came up from the root hairs and pushed through the trees to the very tips of the leaves. It passed between the claws of the roosting birds. The bark of the tree, the scale of the food, that was all there was between the blood of bird and tree. There were only these barriers of skin between. We were all like sacks of blood one touching the other. We were the world.'[22]

To see and feel the world so fully and deeply, to understand oneself to *be* the world; is this the child's prerogative alone? Or does it also belong to those who have passed on from this place of innocence and perhaps entered into a second naiveté?[23] Giono's work probes these questions endlessly, asking whether it is possible for those who have long since stopped believing the world is alive in this way to be reborn, reawakened—to themselves and the wild world.

It certainly seems possible for Antonio, the protagonist of *The Song of the World*, who has long inhabited the forest near the Grémone plateau in the Haute-Provence, and whose knowledge of the place is intimate, fine-grained, and deeply sensory (even sensual). Giono takes great care to introduce this character to us in the early pages of the novel, focusing almost all of his attention on Antonio's sensibility, his perceptual genius. Or simply the immense sensitivity of his body:

[22] Jean Giono, *Blue Boy*, trans. Katherine A. Clarke (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 134–5.
[23] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 361.

> Every morning Antonio stripped off his clothes. Usually he began the day by slowly crossing the large black branch of the river. He drifted along with the currents; he felt the swirls of each eddy; with the quick of his thighs he touched the long sinews of the river, and, as he started to swim, he felt with his belly whether the water buoyed him up, pressing in on him, or whether it tended to sparkle. From all that, he knew whether he had to take the net with the wide or small mesh, the hand-set, the netting needle, the rod, or whether he had better go off and catch fish with his hands in the pebbled shallows of the ford. He knew whether the pike shot out of the banks, whether the trout swam upstream, whether the fry shoaled down from the upper river; and sometimes he let himself sink, slowly treading water in the depths, to try to touch that huge red-and-black fish which was impossible to catch and which, every evening, came and blew across the stillness of the waters a long jet of foam and a child's moan.[24]

Contemporary readers who encounter this description may well feel such a sensibility and knowledge to be so remote from us as to beggar belief. Has anyone ever lived in the world this way? Still, here is Antonio, someone Giono has conjured into being through his imagination, but who would almost certainly have been a familiar figure in that region, standing before us. And a figure who, against all expectation, has the capacity to speak to us still. Not because he fulfils some need we feel for an ideal, romanticized, rustic sage of the forest. Rather because he reminds us of a certain kind of knowledge that many of us have lost access to: a knowledge that comes to us through an embodied awareness of place. This is an idea whose meaning we grasp intuitively but whose power and significance we cannot always explain or account for. *He knew*. With this simple phrase, Giono signals his awareness that Antonio understands the world and carries knowledge of the intricate relationships that comprise the world in his body. Or rather that his body mediates this knowledge—an idea that has long been cherished within indigenous cultures and that has also been important to the phenomenological philosophical tradition, and that is now being retrieved and reimagined in an ecological context. Still, it requires some effort to say what such knowledge consists of. For Antonio, it is above all a knowledge of a *place*. It is intricate and delicate and particular. The mind is at work, but the knowledge and understanding of things arises through *feel*, something that does not refer in this context primarily to affective experience, but to what comes to us through the senses. What you feel in your body, what you perceive through your senses that tells you where you are. Also, perhaps, who you are, in relation to the whole. Here, I would suggest, is another way of understanding contemplative practice and awareness: deeply

[24] Jean Giono, *The Song of the World*, trans. Henry Fluchère and Geoffrey Myers (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 18.

embodied and geographically and ecologically specific. And, at the same time, fluid, expansive and open to mystery.

Towards Healing: Thinking Like a Mountain

What is this mystery? And what does it mean in the present moment to seek the presence of mystery in the natural world? The accounts above are suggestive of a deep and pervasive longing to rediscover our own capacity to enter fully into the life of the world, to know the world more intimately and intricately and to live in the world with greater regard and responsibility. But it is impossible to escape the awareness that much of the force of this longing in the present moment is due to our growing sense of distance and alienation from the natural world, and our deepening awareness of our complicity in its destruction. Whatever 'cleansing the doors of perception' might have meant for Blake, for us it will necessarily involve recognizing that we are called to become more aware of our part in and responsibility for the whole. The simple, personal desire to become more sensitive to the living world (in this or that place) will need to become woven into a larger fabric of concern that allows us to be more aware (and yes, more 'painfully aware') of the whole. And to consider what it might mean for us to participate in the healing of the torn fabric of the whole. To address this question, here at the end of this chapter, I want to enlist the help of Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), one of the great pioneers of mid-century ecological thought.

In a justly famous section of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* called 'Thinking Like a Mountain', he recounts a painful experience as a young man that provoked in him a profound examination of conscience and brought him to the threshold of a new awareness of who he was in the world and of his own relationship to the whole. He was travelling with friends in the rimrock country of Arizona, when a wolf with several cubs suddenly appeared below them crossing a river. 'In those days,' he says, 'we had never heard of a passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second, we were pumping led into the pack…when our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide rocks'. This was business as usual for the young Leopold and his friends. But what happened next was not. And it changed everything.

> We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

The significance of this experience upon Leopold's emerging ecological awareness was profound. In what follows this brief account, he articulates the birth of his growing understanding of the intricacy and delicacy of ecological relationships and of the blindness that had prevented him and others from seeing and respecting them. He had dreamed of a hunter's paradise. Instead, he came to see that the policy of extirpation of wolves throughout the West had led to the rapid, unchecked growth of deer populations, the subsequent defoliation of entire mountains, and the impoverishment of whole ecosystems. He would devote much of his life to drawing out the implications of this insight, asking what it might mean to rethink not only our individual relationships with the natural world but also the values underlying our shared economic and political life. The 'land ethic' that emerged from these reflections has become one of the most influential and enduring expressions of how a transformed awareness of our relationship with the world can lead to a different and more mindful way of living.

Leopold's own experience suggests how important the transformation of one's awareness can be to the work of cultivating a meaningful ecological ethic. Also how mysterious it is. The unexpected force of the 'fierce green fire' in the wolf's eyes seems to have unnerved him. But what did it mean? He could not say, at least not precisely. 'There was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain'. Leopold takes care to honour the mystery of this encounter. And nothing in his subsequent reflections on the ecological significance of wolves in their environment undermines this sense of mystery. He wants to understand how the ecosystem works, and what intricate pattern enables wolves and deer and mountains to exist together. But there is something in this pattern that eludes and will always elude precise explanation, something to do with its wild character. 'Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf,' suggests Leopold, 'long known among the mountains, but seldom perceived among men'. It cannot be fully known; it is too deep and mysterious. Still, Leopold makes it clear that we have a greater capacity to open ourselves to this mystery than we have acknowledged or expressed, and that until we learn to open ourselves more fully to wild world, until we learn to 'think like a mountain', we will have nothing but 'dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea'.[25]

To 'think like a mountain'. Few ideas have come to resonate more deeply in our emerging ecological consciousness than this one. The sense that we possess the capacity for cultivating a more encompassing awareness of the wild world and of living from the centre of this awareness is both alluring and exciting. Nor is it difficult to imagine how a deepening of such thinking might contribute to the work of repairing the world. The task of integrating such awareness into our individual and collective lives clearly remains unfinished. But as way of understanding what it

[25] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 129–32.

might mean to inhabit the world more fully and thoughtfully and compassionately, Leopold's vision remains compelling and important. It is, I believe, a fundamentally contemplative vision of the world. And its contemplative character is one of its most significant contributions to the ongoing work of engaging, responding to and perhaps helping to heal our broken, fragmented world. Leopold understood, as contemplative practitioners have always known, that the simple act of gazing, of paying attention—one of the most ancient and enduring ways of understanding contemplative practice—can open up a space in which we come to recognize how the lives of others live and move within us, and we in them.

This contemplative vision is at the heart of Leopold's hugely influential Land Ethic—an idea that has helped transform our understanding of the fundamental moral obligation that exists between us, the land and all living beings. And it is very close in spirit to the call in *Laudato Si'* to become 'painfully aware'—the call to open ourselves to an awareness of the depth of our relationship with and responsibility towards everyone and everything, especially the scorned and the lowly. As I think again about that night in the desert, and the challenge of opening myself to the whole in a more open-hearted way, I take heart from the words of the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton who offers his own compelling vision of what it means to participate in a shared, communal reality: 'my veins don't end in me but in the unanimous blood of those who struggle for life, love, little things, landscape and bread, the poetry of everyone'.[26] My veins don't end in me: here is an image suggestive of the kind of intimate participation in the life of the other that is possible for everyone. It is, we might say, a kind of spiritual intuition that the illusion of separation within which we so often live cannot be sustained. It also points to an ethical obligation: a call not to stand aloof from the lives of others or the life of the world. A reminder that deepening our perceptive capacity—learning to 'See everything/and ourselves *in* everything/healed and whole/forever'—can become central to the restorative work into which we are all called.

[26] Roque Dalton, 'Como Tu', in *Small Hours of the Night: Selected Poems of Roque Dalton* (Curbstone, 1996).