

# Natural Beauty: A GA Perspective

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## Abstract

This essay explores the experience of natural beauty using the generative anthropology heuristic. Conceding that evidence of this form of aesthetic experience is almost inevitably textual and therefore mediated and distanced, it examines three suggestive accounts, by Francis Petrarch, William Wordsworth and Annie Dillard, as well as making briefer reference to other sources. The role of memory and imagination in these experiences is theorized, and the overall historical trend towards the wider and wider aestheticization of all perception is sketched.

**Keywords:** Generative anthropology, Eric Gans, René Girard, Francis Petrarch, William Wordsworth, Annie Dillard, *Microcosmos*, natural beauty, aesthetic experience, desire, resentment, memory, modernity.

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What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
O my daughter.  
(T. S. Eliot, "Marina," 1930)

It's widely agreed that the idea of "nature" and the aesthetic enjoyment thereof only gradually emerged in human culture. Francis Petrarch famously climbed Mont Ventoux in 1336. (Or didn't. The feat is of course disputed, as is its firstness and everything else about it. Resentment of claims to precedent-making moments, hinges in history—whoever makes them—is apparently a particularly animating passion amongst historians, the more pivotal the more animating—not to say the doubters are wrong.) Why did he do this (if he did)?

The only motive for my ascent was the wish to see what so great a height had to offer. I had had the project in mind for many years, for, as you know, I have lived in these parts from childhood on . . . . And so the mountain, which is visible from a great distance, was always before my eyes, and for a long time I planned on doing what I have finally done today. The impulse to make the climb actually took hold of me while I was reading Livy's *History of Rome* yesterday . . . where Philip of Macedon . . . climbed

Mount Haemus in Thessaly. From its summit, it was reported that he was able to see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine. . . . I thought it proper for a young man in private life to attempt what no one would criticize in an aged king.[\[1\]](#)



There is an element of insouciance, even whimsy here, as well perhaps as what we might call the founding instance of the “because it’s there!” school. All this is underlaid of course with rivalrous desire—to go not so much where no man has gone before, but where Philip of Macedon has gone, or at least somewhere comparable. The restless and challenging spirit of the incipient Renaissance, of which Petrarch himself is a prime mover? A first instance of touristic one-upmanship? Anyway, he seems to have had (or pretended to have had or imagined) some sort of experience looking about from the summit.

At first, because I was not accustomed to the quality of the air and the effect of the wide expanse of view spread out before me, I stood there like a dazed person. I could see the clouds under our feet, and the tales I had read of Athos and Olympus seemed less incredible as I myself was witnessing the very same things from a less famous mountain.

As if in anticipation of debunkers in ages to come, he does concede the relative position of his mountain in an implicit hierarchy of them. Mountain climbing, we hardly need say, will henceforth be one of the most intensely mediated, indeed overtly competitive of human pursuits, even or especially where undertaken to achieve self-transcendence and inner peace. Inner peace is the transcendence not of the self but of desire or, as René Girard might have framed the matter, it is undisputed possession of the apex of human as well as geophysical triangularity, the position of the model. But it notoriously doesn’t last.



I turned my eyes towards Italy, the place to which my heart was most inclined. The great and snow-capped Alps seemed to rise close by, though they were far away . . . . I sighed, I must admit, for Italian skies which I beheld more with my thought than with my eyes, and an inexpressible longing came over me to see once more my friend and my country. . . .

More with thought, with imagination, with desire, than with his eyes. This of course is merely to concede his humanity. This is human seeing, whatever one is looking at. But there are degrees and emphases, and the fact that the influence of imagination rises to his consciousness suggests a particularly intense weighting of attention towards the sign, as opposed to the referent. If all human seeing after the originary scene is mediated by memories, or remembered signs, an awareness of that mediation is perhaps not just a further instance but a signal moment of experiential transformation, individually and perhaps in this case culturally. Had anyone before this great poetic psychologist ever described the complications of perception in quite these terms?

Petrarch's attention certainly oscillates between the natural images spread out before him, whose stupendous expansiveness has left him dazed, and remembered or imagined images of an Italy that he cannot literally see. Are these latter to be thought of as signs, directing and focusing his attention, filling him with desire? As his attention shifts back to the vast landscape, can he be thought of as experiencing a kind of imagined consummation? But, of course, the condition of every aesthetic experience is literal frustration, as he clearly feels here. The imagined gratification, the content, is hazy, impossible, the heart's helpless desire. Inconceivable, without concept . . . but almost within reach for all that. Were he to start imagining that little nook in Arezzo, being there again, tasting the wine, he would be in another experience, perhaps triggered by the first, but not the specific aesthetic experience of the landscape that we are trying here to describe. He is experiencing the landscape almost as deferral itself—to gaze at it is to be displaced, and this might be true even if the prospect were of another country entirely, to which he had never been. To see—and this is

perhaps a paradox of all experiences of vastness and extent—is to see what one cannot see, to see the limits of seeing, or to see those limits more literally than one usually does. But then this is always the experience of desire—a confrontation with the limits of actuality, its boundary with the imagined.

And one can only bear so much of this kind of thing. Petrarch, like the rest of us, is also “only” human. He starts to moralize, rationalize.

. . . though at the same time I reproached myself for this double weakness which came from a soul not yet up to manly resistance—and yet there were excuses for both my desires, and several excellent authorities could be cited to support me.[\[2\]](#)

As a strategy, one must admit that citing scholarly sources in defense of one’s desires has somewhat passed out of favour, although there is certainly something recognizable about Petrarch’s general intent here. Overall, a couple of striking paragraphs of description and reflection are buried in an allegorized and moralized narrative, involving taking the easier and harder paths and so forth, and climbing as spiritual ascension—rather an inescapable metaphor with a long future ahead of it. Instead of gazing further he opens his portable St. Augustine, seeking insight textually rather than experientially. Doubtless one could claim that such responses, the production of such tropes is part or even at the core of his experience. But the poet spends so little time on form, and so much on the doctrinal content to which it seems to point, that we might wonder if his experience has much useful affinity with the kind we are trying to trace—not of course that there aren’t plentiful examples of his procedure available in modern times. Much “nature writing” is still about the self and its quests and temptations, its failed transcendence or apotheosis as one may decide. But Petrarch here never uses, for example, the word “beauty,” or seems to evoke an experience of it beyond those brief phrases we have quoted.

But he does return to mountains and to nature in his poetry. For example, in *Canzoniere* 129 (c. 1340):

From thought to thought, mountain to mountain top  
Love leads me on. . .  
If on a lonely slope a brook or spring  
or a dark vale between two peaks exist  
That is the place my frightened soul takes refuge  
. . .  
In the high mountains and harsh woods I find  
some peace

Desire for Laura, sexual and romantic desire, indeed love, is involved in, amplified by, gratified to some degree by the natural scenes—by which Petrarch explicitly means the “untrodden” places, the places free of other human beings—that he describes in some

detail. Here too, as on the summit of Ventoux, place, perception and “thought” (or desire) combine. This is something a bit more than the mere love-sick mooning about the forest that Shakespeare sends up in *As You Like It* (1599) or Byron in *Don Juan* (1819).<sup>[3]</sup> Petrarch, again, is interested in this seeing—he recognizes, indeed, that love itself is or can be understood as a kind of seeing. Sight and memory of seeing are among his master themes, the two becoming inextricable from his first sight of his beloved, who henceforth steadily invests other places and phenomena.



I’ve seen her many times—now who’ll believe me?  
in the clear water and above green grass,  
alive, and in the trunk of a beech tree,  
and in a cloud of white so shaped that Leda  
would certainly have said her daughter’s beauty  
fades like a star in sunlight next to it.

Here beauty *is* explicitly mentioned, and it is a beauty shared, or undecidable, between Laura and the natural phenomena in which the poet sees her—a relationship explicitly of identity and not metaphor or comparison: the only simile in the passage links Laura’s beauty and that of Helen of Troy. Up to the top of “the highest and freest peak” he feels his “whole desire” being drawn, and the imagined experience there of longing for the distant Laura strikingly recapitulates and builds on that of his desire for Italy.

Then I begin to measure with my eyes  
my losses, and while weeping I unburden  
the painful cloud that gathers in my heart  
to see and think how much  
air separates me from her lovely face  
always so near and yet so far from me.<sup>[4]</sup>

Seeing and thinking again combine to create the experience of the perceptible imperceptible, the nearness of distance, the presence of absence, that seems distinctive to

this encounter with natural extensiveness. Here the characteristic and much-to-be-imitated Petrarchan conceits and oxymorons are working to a very particular effect. Long before the natural world seems threatened, either by tourism or by environmental degradation, it is intensely associated in aesthetic experience with loss, inaccessibility, unfulfilled longing.

Needless to say, future experiences of nature will not all be mediated by heterosexual desire, even if we might note the striking coincidence here of the emergence both of the courtly love tradition and of this new kind of experience of beauty. Nor will the language of “displacement” or “transference” and so forth be at all adequate. But I’ll refrain from too many strong inferences, beyond the obvious one that fully human seeing is always mediated, and that the vehicle of mediation after the ordinary scene is memory. Nor, Petrarch’s accounts would seem to suggest, is such mediation to be mourned as the loss of an experience more direct, of a kind of primal appropriation. Of course, such experiences of the natural world as he presents us, such unresentful visions of the center, as it were, are made possible firstly by the imagined absence, indeed exclusion of mediators, other people—“the wilder the place is,” Petrarch says, “the more lovely do my thoughts depict her image.”<sup>[5]</sup> This admittedly resentful or defensive prerequisite will persist. But, that granted, surely one of the great benefits of aesthetic experience, and of this particular kind of aesthetic experience as the poet presents it, is just this fruitful interchange between desire and perception. The sign paradoxically makes us or helps us see that which is not the sign, see in a new way. Deferral makes time *for* seeing, intensifies that seeing, eventually carries that seeing out into a world far from the initial object of desire, far from communally agreed upon referents.

Beyond this observation, let’s not try to push the inferences from one example. Rather, we should perhaps concede the central difficulty of any inquiry into aesthetic experience, namely an absence of direct evidence beyond that of the inquirer him or herself. It’s a difficulty that seems even more pronounced in the case of that of natural beauty. It is not that there is a shortage of texts testifying to such experiences—indeed one can be overwhelmed by the plethora. There is a vibrant literature of nature appreciation, a vast scientific literature, and a wide range of visual representation, including rich Chinese and Western traditions of landscape painting. Cinema here, as well, has powerfully contributed. But we are finally reduced to talking about these texts themselves, rather than about the experiences they self-consciously describe, unaided by a common experience of a relatively stable textual subject. We may watch the same movie from the cinema seat beside our commentators, as it were, and strive for some comparative approximation of the experiences they have had. But many more variables are involved in aesthetic experiences of the natural world, which cannot be reproduced the way artworks can. We too can climb Mont Ventoux, but not only are we unable fully to enter into the mind and feelings of a fourteenth-century Christian humanist, but conditions will not be the same, the prospect will have subtly altered, its cultural framing (not to mention commercial appurtenances) will be utterly different. (Note the roadway in our contemporary image—Petrarch’s metaphors



would surely have foundered had he submitted by tour bus.) Instead, we read the texts, the narrative and the poem, and strive to find the experience wholly there, or in Rousseau's *Reveries*, in Wordsworth or Byron or Keats, in Thoreau or figures of our own "golden age" of nature writing,[\[6\]](#) and a thousand others, even down to demotic sources, naïve enthusiasms from various sources, including, for example, those of our relatives recently returned from vacations and eager to show us photos, with running commentary.

Listening to the latter, would we be tempted, for example, to imagine popular and high-art experiences of natural beauty? The question is amusingly posed in a World War Two-era cartoon by the wonderful Bill Mauldin:



"Beautiful sunset, sir. Is there one for enlisted men?"[\[7\]](#)

I have in several places emphasized the diversity of aesthetic experiences, their relativity, their imbrication with myriad variables of context and mood.[\[8\]](#) Still, because such experience is on the originary scene, we must concede that GA does have reason to insist on a substrate of commonality. Eric Gans, following Kant, observes that "judgments of works of art . . . carry with them a sense of universal conviction . . . [and] tolerate relativism only provisionally."[\[9\]](#) In that spirit, this particular discussion will limit its range of textual testimony, with all the potential variables, and add just two more texts to those of Petrarch, using our heuristic to try to theorize the subject in more general terms, looking for ways to talk about the role of memories of texts, and memories of experiences, in the immediate aesthetic experience of natural beauty.

The intuition of common aesthetic judgment to which Gans points—indeed its absence of "concept" in Kant's terms—is surely rooted in the mimetic unanimity of the originary scene, where all desired the object, where for all the sign established a center of sacred

interdiction and significance, and where contemplation of the sign unanimously increased the desirability of the object in that center. That is, the aesthetic experience precedes ethics and all the disagreements that ethical considerations introduce into the human scene. Aesthetic experience is integral to the establishment of a common humanity, part of being human, part of the very definition of that condition. As Gans notes, people do certainly disagree in their aesthetic judgments, but they retain a common belief in “the esthetic sphere” or “art as a whole,”<sup>[10]</sup> which formulation we would adjust only to expand it to “aesthetic experience as a whole.” We all have aesthetic experiences, and these experiences all share something, and there seems indeed a deep-rooted impulse—Gans says we are “naturally driven”—to reach agreement, or indeed to share intuitions of beauty, an impulse founded in what is in effect an “anthropological vision.”<sup>[11]</sup> “’Tis with our judgments as our watches,” Alexander Pope a bit glibly asserted, “none / Go just alike, yet each believes his own,”<sup>[12]</sup> but he would hardly have denied that all concerned believed there was such a thing as time. Rare too is the person who honestly disputes the beauty of a sunset—even if he claims to have seen a better one on a beach in Bora Bora in 2005—or denies that, in either that exotic locale or the present one, it marks the end of a day.

Doubtless, indeed, human beings didn’t always admire sunsets. But on the originary scene the alimentary object suddenly appearing in the new-minted center provokes primeval aesthetic contemplation, an oscillation of attention, however briefly. This object—say an animal carcass—is certainly part of the natural, non-human domain, and although it is not an environment, not a world entire, nothing vast or tinted, it is still invested with desire, it still beckons towards transcendence. The moment of its apprehension is the prototype of a poet gazing at a horizon. The experience of that solitary bard, in short, no matter how high he has hiked or how vehemently he denies his community, is still scenic. Mediation is inescapable—this is how GA understands there being no outside of the text, we might say.

But the issue that remains is of the significance or meaning of the attempt, the much promoted and yet-to-be-abandoned project of escaping or modifying one’s role in that mediation through experiences of natural beauty, through escape to untrodden paths or pathless wastes. Having discounted it in absolute terms—even having identified it as a species of *mensonge romantique*—can we nonetheless assess its possible, partial successes or at least effects?

To that end and for our second textual instance let us jump forward to the Romantic period and William Wordsworth, and in particular his great blank verse poem “Tintern Abbey” (1798).<sup>[13]</sup> Another possibility, of course, might have been J.J. Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1778), the subject of an important GA analysis.<sup>[14]</sup> But Wordsworth, in the wake of both Petrarch and Rousseau, has the advantage for us of explicitly engaging with the theme of memory and perception. For him, the images that return are precisely those of a previous visit to the same beautiful place from which, in the present tense, he attempts to describe his experience, and he confronts directly the oscillation of attention that GA has



placed at the center of all aesthetic experience. Indeed, this latest articulation of Petrarch's combination of sight and thought surely constitutes a major advance in self-consciousness and explicitness:

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. (58-65)

The perplexity of the experience is sad in the senses both of amplification and of sorrow, encompassing also the phase of imaginary appropriation even in the alimentary terms of "life and food." Aesthetic attention, we might venture, is always just such a perplexing combination, but what is particular here is the way the poet has mapped its movements onto the longer duration of an individual human life. He does so for a specific purpose, of direct relevance to our current inquiry. How is the mediation not only of one's own remembered and anticipated seeing, but of the signed desires of our human others to be understood or even accommodated in the aesthetic experience of natural beauty?

Like Petrarch and Rousseau, Wordsworth has explicitly shunned "the din of towns and cities" in pursuit of unmediated experience—he too has sought the untrodden. But where he differs is in the movement of return that is also implicit in this vision of aesthetic experience. Ultimately, he claims, he (and as is revealed, his sister) flee human community in order to return to it, strengthened, better able to see and hear it. Of the many testimonies to an unresentful vision of the center, to love, these lines are famous surely because so many readers have intuited such a vision as an experiential possibility, one they are moved to desire as well:

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. (88-93)

We have excerpted these lines, it should be said, from the middle section of the poem's tripartite structure, that recapitulates the remembered benefits in immediate pleasure—"sensations sweet" and "tranquil restoration"—in ethical mobilization—"little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love," and in more purely spiritual

transcendence, when “we are laid asleep in body / And become a living soul” (27, 30, 34-35, 45-46). All three kinds of benefits are to be considered part or products of the aesthetic experience, although for the moment we will concentrate on the second, with its more explicit concern for the issue of human mediation.

The balance, here and through the whole poem, between a resented other and a beloved if generalized humanity is certainly uneasy, or perhaps we should say, unstable. The denunciations of other people, had they begun to moderate or disappear towards the conclusion of this “process poem,” might have been understood as symptoms of a disorder that the experience of natural beauty had permitted the poet and his sister to heal or transcend, displaced by the more fundamental and eternally sad music they claim now to be able to hear. But this is not the case. It is even as the poem rises to its beautifully muted Wordsworthian climax that the rhetoric is harshest. Nature

. . . can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us . . . (125-132)

But this is perhaps less hypocrisy than an honest testimony to the difficulties not just of his particular historical moment—and these were considerable—but of the perennial project of modernity. This is explicitly a contest—who will “prevail”?—that the poet here frames as a struggle between the “lofty thoughts” produced by this kind of aesthetic experience and the gravitational power of human passions, in particular the resentments and rivalries of a world without a public sacred center of the kind the poet remembered as still having sway in the communal life of his childhood in Westmoreland. Greetings without kindness he has before identified with the modern city—or no greetings at all—in his great book on London he speaks of the way it “baffled [his] understanding” how men could live as strangers, “knowing not each other’s names.”[\[15\]](#)

The lofty thoughts are inseparable from this struggle with others, very much as was the case with Rousseau. Or to be more precise, they are only ever to be separated through such a struggle. But they do nonetheless constitute a phase, an extent of oscillation, that needs to be given its full value as part of a genuine aesthetic experience, and in this case an experience that at least aspires to return to the communal peace of the scene. What is lofty is of course what is deferred. Let us return to the shorter interval of immediate aesthetic experience and the ways Wordsworth describes this immediacy, before he begins to situate the experience in the life-narrative that he builds upon the same model. The poem opens on

the dominant note of “once again” but it describes what is seen from the bank of the River Wye, both times, with care:

Again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a sweet inland murmur. -Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
The day is come when I again repose  
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view  
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,  
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb  
The wild green landscape. (2-15)

These, as another great poet had it, are “green thoughts in a green shade”[\[16\]](#) and Wordsworth’s account of this variety of experience is worth reading carefully. Thoughts, he too says, are imbricated throughout with descriptions of forms—sounds, shapes, colours—a stream of described perceptions, sensations and ideas. Indeed, the slight correction in lines 16-17,—“These hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild”—draws explicit attention to the operation of the mind, to the ongoing fact of this mental narrative, in this case as the poet adjusts his assessment of what he sees and the words he chooses for it. By the end of the verse paragraph the story has even left behind the immediately perceived, as the smoke rising from the woods is embellished into the presence of “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods” or even a possible hermit by a fire. Attention to form, that is, oscillates with a kind of narrative content; attention to the signs, the sounds and sights perceived, shifts to the words consciously chosen for them, to the on-flowing stream of overall experience. As we observed above, the shift of attention to narrative content is an imagining of something desired, something that relates a mere intimation or potentiality of significance to the desirably comprehensible, and this remains true even when the narrative is as minimal and insubstantial as a record of passing mental events or, as in Wordsworth’s phrasing, impressions. Contemplation alternates with a record of contemplation, deferral and sight with thought and event.

Of course, it should also be noted that, following Wordsworth’s text, we focus here on the aesthetic dimension or phase of an experience that would have other, call them physical and physiological components. Sounds, temperatures, visual phenomena were and are registered by human, pre-human or other-than-human sentient beings, triggering various conditioned or automatic responses. This broadly appetitive dimension is the substrate of

fully human consciousness and everything loftier takes place in relationship to it. The eyes move to follow motion, or do not move when there is none. The skin gets goosebumps at the contact of chillier airs, is pleasingly cooled by them in hotter contexts. Loud noises provoke autonomic muscular responses, a quiet susurrant of background sounds a relative calming of alertness, dead silence something else again. Human aesthetic experiences of natural beauty have a bodily aspect, more responsive when direct, less so but not fully muted when indirect, when for example, merely viewing a photograph of the Wye Valley, when most of the physical sensations associated with being *in situ* must be summoned by memory and imagination.



Where artworks seek specifically to generate aesthetic responses to such scenes, they may indeed adopt strategies to suggest and heighten these bodily connections. As time goes on, the range of workable supporting physiological sensations invoked also expands—a Canadian poetry-and-nature-lover might legitimately wonder how well Wordsworth’s communion with the hedgerows or Keats’s with his nightingale would have developed amidst clouds of biting blackflies so dense the poets could hardly see through them, let alone generate the requisite tranquility whilst trying to preserve their own flesh. But in time these more importunate kinds of bodily experience of the natural scene will also be incorporated into the visions—even become badges of their authenticity.

Still, Wordsworth and his readers then and since surely spend much more time on the disembodied or deferred aesthetic moment of the overall experience of the natural world than did people of generations past, back to and before Petrarch, and immensely more than did the first humans on the originary scene. We gaze. Attention spans in this respect have lengthened—at least, many clearly have. Moralizing, narrativizing, emotionally or economically exploiting—such operations can be kept in abeyance longer, by many, while we merely look. It is an easy enough thing to observe such an historical change, harder exactly to explain it or describe just how it works. Where one is not in the direct presence of a sign—no fellow hominid pointing, no book on one’s lap, no pan pipes fluting softly in one’s ears—how does one understand the aesthetic experience involved in looking at a real tree, that black sycamore for example? How is it—not a sign itself, not directly designated by signs—beautiful? As we look, do we remember, for example, a Constable painting of such a tree, or even a whole tradition of such representations? Many a lover of natural beauty might claim in fact that the memory or influence went the other way—in the gallery in front

of the Constable, we remember the Zion of living trees. When we read the Deerslayer canoeing over his glimmering lake,[\[17\]](#) such images return from our own idylls. But both operations, gazing into memory and memory into gazing, are encompassed by what Gans has called “*scenicity*” or “our constant, exclusively human conversion of perception into a scene.” It may be that “artworks,” as he argues, “foreground this operation by cutting off the scene from the life-world . . . allowing it to be intended, thought about, on a mental scene of representation.”[\[18\]](#) But just as the aesthetic moment on the originary scene ultimately enabled and sustained the later creation of art, memories of aesthetically heightened perceptions give life to the works that, in turn, facilitate that even fuller measure of deferral. This involves what Wordsworth variously called “an ennobling interchange” or a process whereby we half “perceive” and “half-create”[\[19\]](#) and its further intensification and enhancement in modernity—arguably an enormous expansion and empowerment of that scenicity—implies no fundamental rupture with previous eras and their processes. In short, a generative anthropologist must concede that memory works both ways, steadily enhancing and making more significant experiences that either do or do not pass directly through formal, or as we might call it, “institutional” representation.

We say “directly” because it must surely be repeated that some at least indirect experience of representation and desire, of mediation, is the absolute minimum requirement for this variety of aesthetic experience as it is for all others. Does a weeks-old infant remember the blissful warmth of sunlight on her face? Yes, surely. But before long, her mother is pointing at something—maybe an animal, or a cloud—and a particular form of attention begins. If it would be fatuous to imagine popular or high versions of the long train of experiences which follow, there are nonetheless some distinctions we might usefully make. Perhaps counterintuitively, we might begin by guessing that as eye and thought, as seeing and desiring or remembering alternate, a long, even ascetic apprenticeship, individual or cultural, is likely needed before the interval of seeing extends itself, at least in aesthetic experience. Like a stalking lion, perhaps a human being can stare long and hard into a landscape, looking for danger, looking for prey. But a long, contemplative deferral of imagined appropriation in the interest of gazing at a woodland scene is what might be characterized, in either case, as a mature achievement. Wordsworth talked about this, too, about the immature phase of such a development, in which passions and desires predominate. He was then “more like a man / Flying from something he dreads than one / Who sought the thing he loved” (71-73). This condition was not without observation of forms, of course—Wordsworth does not claim he was oblivious so much as infatuated, and he uses exactly our own terms for the two poles of the oscillation:

The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite: a feeling and a love,

That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied. . . (77-83)

Here, though, “thought” or what he has just spoken of as “see[ing] into the life of things” (50) does not quite mean what Petrarch meant by it on the mountaintop, where memory and desiring imagination were more the point. Wordsworth really does intend *seeing*, and a condition of such profound deferral of every aspect of the appetitive that

. . . the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body. . . (44-47)

Here one sees with “an eye made quiet” (48), surely one of the best short descriptions available to us of the condition of aesthetic sight, whatever length of duration it remains upon the sign. The unquiet eye is the one that is moving back and forth between the desideratum and its designation. For the quieter eye that anxious shuttle has at least slowed.

This achievement, this “almost” full transcendence of the horizontal relationships of appetitive desire, is once again never a solid state, but occurs, Wordsworth tells us, in certain “blessed mood[s]” (43), and these moods are quite explicitly accessed not through the direct impressions made upon the site of the original experience, but through memory, even if those memories, those images return, as in the poem we discuss, while “once more” upon that site or others like it. Varieties of this broad category of aesthetic experience, then, are perhaps to be distinguished along a chronology of development or intensification of attention to form, albeit one that we quickly must concede lacks a universal teleology, and one upon which many satisfactions or rewards, entirely adequate to their moments, may be known. So, we will be less concerned with narrating that development, especially as some kind of inevitability or normative design, and more with distinguishing and describing the characters of moments along it. And we will also assume that such experiences remain available and potentially recurrent whatever one’s age.

Direct association with the signs that generate mimetic desire must surely begin the journey. Maternal pointings we have mentioned—that child may some short time hence admire the morning glories her mother is growing in a backyard plot, because and through her mother’s admiration of them. Her mother planting, tending as well as pointing to them are the signs generating the experience. The child really sees these flowers now, will remember them, but the warmth of her mother’s presence predominates, for the moment. Love makes for intenser, more retentive seeing, but that is still mainly reserved for the mother herself.[\[20\]](#)

Pointing at animals, also. We must next mention anthropomorphism, or as we might call it,



identification. While a few may choose inanimate phenomena—Romantic poets in Byron’s train, seeing themselves in volcanic terms—by far the investing in animals predominates here, usually and preferably those not too immediately similar. Apes and monkeys tend to induce uneasiness more commonly; lambs, tigers, even birds, less so, although of course there is no unanimity in such responses. But how can we pleasingly identify with creatures who seem a grotesque parody, even a satire upon our forms and capacities? They possess nothing that we lack. Whereas, a tiger’s strength, ruthlessness, stealth, sleekness. . . . At any rate, identification generally entails narrative, sometimes elaborate but also often fairly simple, and the gratifications of narrative predominate, as imagined participation holds attention with a particular charm. The psalmist longed for the wings of the dove, and the tapestry weaver for those of the swallow, others for the raucous freedoms of crows, the glittering glory of the hummingbird. All such involvements—what in the open air one great poet called “transports of cordiality”[\[21\]](#) but which would surely also encompass humbler enthusiasms indoors, as for singing bears and pontificating lion kings—do surely induce or include, however, at least some degree of enhanced attention to form. Such less directly alimentary relationships extend awareness, that is, lengthen the interval of gazing even while that interval remains considerably shorter than that of identification or narrative or other forms of imagined participation.

The operation is perhaps too familiar to need much further comment—all that might be debated is the degree to which exposure to good-natured talking cartoon wolves helps heighten attention at some later date to the shadowy grey forms slipping away through the trees or contributes to finding that sight beautiful. But what about bugs? Aesop’s ants and grasshoppers were so thoroughly moralized that it is hard to see how the fable would have much enhanced the form. But have more than two centuries of romanticism and three-quarters of a century or so of nature films brought us into a different aesthetic relationship with the class denominated *insecta* by Linnaeus in 1758? One of the more eloquent artistic testaments (or inducements) to such a relationship is the film *Microcosmos: Le peuple de l’herbe* (1996), which also possesses the advantage of having a section, as crickets and mantises themselves do not, on the Rotten Tomatoes review-aggregation and viewer response website.[\[22\]](#) The film was something of a tour-de-force of closeup photography and includes some wittily self-conscious anthropomorphizing, including the sisyphian struggles of a dung beetle, and the soft-focus eroticism of a snail tryst to an operatic soundtrack.



The respondents at Rotten Tomatoes, both professional critics and ordinary viewers, are almost unanimous in their praise of the film—and this is fairly unusual. A very few find it slightly tedious, but most are enthralled. This might be explained several ways, of course—the film is surely well-made—but we must ask most pointedly about an apparent absence of resentment. Without explicitly human actors, has the narrative in fact been able to bypass the kinds of closer identification that might generate hostility? While the beetle rolling its ball of dung up the hill may look uncannily like familiar images of the hopeless titan, maybe it is unlikely to trigger a hostile reaction against the attention it has attracted, or the centrality the filmmakers have conferred upon it, exactly because it is not in fact human, or very human-like.



Occasional bug barbarities are featured—spiders and their little doings are always potentially unpleasant—but for the most part there seems to be no narrative context in which the unwilling, natural behaviors on view can mobilize the kind of imaginary participation that might lead to rejection. This may have been a conscious choice, a strategy of the filmmakers, that has worked to effect: the worst sights—one might think of Annie Dillard’s famously horrifying description of a giant water bug eviscerating a frog[23]—are avoided. Another possibly contributing factor is that, by comparison to most nature films of its era and since, the living subjects are not endangered, and there is not the slightest hint that they or their environment are being abused by those watching the film—something of a relief. Insects, at least in this telling, remain abundant, thriving. The usual emotional manoeuvres required either to accept and somehow process blame or shift it to others are not necessary. Still, the near-total absence of resentment might be thought a bit surprising. Only a couple of viewers seem to register any such feelings—Marnie, who “hates bugs,” and was “freaked out” and made to feel itchy; Gregory, “slightly phobic” of them, responded with a mixture of “revulsion and awe.”[24] These perhaps automatic or even “instinctual” responses are arguably not themselves to be considered resentment in our terms, but the promotion of bugs to centrality, to close-up images, to the focus of narrative, may be resented, properly speaking. Gregory’s revulsion and awe might suggest this—he is revolted by what has been made awesome, granted sacrality. One might have expected such responses to be more common—it is not as if humanity’s long relationship with insects hasn’t been fraught. The relatively recent scientific claim that they are essential to our well-being is not yet so widely shared or likely to have entirely obliterated our collective memory of the many outrages visited upon our persons and food supplies. Real fear of larger assailants, those bears, lions, and so on, receded much earlier—Fernand Braudel notes the

various accounts of the *ancien régime* of wolves, penetrating Paris and attacking its inhabitants in the fifteenth century and long after, but finally subsiding by the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>[25]</sup> But something rather remarkable and more recent must have allowed so many of us to transcend our hostility and feel love for the centralized bug, to see it as beautiful or be receptive to artworks that promote a contemplation of it as such.

“What we have loved,” Wordsworth told his friend Coleridge at the conclusion of what is probably his greatest poem, “others will love; and we will teach them how.”<sup>[26]</sup> Others *have* loved, the mediation has certainly been productive, but they have loved in many ways. Dillard, for example, and for our third text we might do worse than consider her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1976), notably extends the range of natural phenomena capable of aesthetic appreciation—or perhaps we should say, models new experiential capacities in this context, testing or stretching as she does the limits of identification. Like Wordsworth’s *Prelude* this generically diverse and somewhat uneven book considers many subjects, including matters scientific, psychological, and spiritual. But it is particularly eloquent and diagnostic on the matter of aesthetic seeing, the fascinations of form, and the various, expansive and unexpected products of the *deferral* of narrative or identification when looking at the non-human world. In the train, too, of Petrarch, she explicitly queries the nexus of seeing and thought, seeing and remembering, imagining. Inspired by an account of a young woman surgically given sight after being blind from birth, who responded to the coloured blur of the world by crying, “How beautiful!”, Dillard describes herself mimetically, desiringly, seeing and trying to see what she imagines the woman saw. In a peach orchard, the fruit become “colour patches” that “wrap around” her eyes.

All day long I walked among shifting colour-patches that parted before me like the Red Sea and closed again in silence, transfigured, wherever I looked back. Some patches swelled and loomed, while others vanished utterly, and dark marks flitted at random over the whole dazzling sweep. But I couldn’t sustain the illusion of flatness. I’ve been around too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn’t unpeach the peaches. (31-32)

And “seeing,” worse still, is “very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it” (33). The flight to nature, of course, has always been a flight from mediation, but neither Petrarch nor Rousseau, nor Wordsworth or Byron, have recognized their defeat, the desperation even of the quest, to the degree some of our more recent nature-writers have done.

But as with many another futile quest, interesting things can sometimes be picked up along the way, or be produced by the doomed effort to, in effect, still the oscillation, defer by very force of will the movement to narrative, to the tyranny of meaning, to identification and imagined gratification. Dillard speaks of “another kind of seeing that involves a letting go” (33) but from our perspective this sounds rather like the obverse of the same coin, the

hopeful modern and post-modern Western embrace of the *via negativa* of an ancient tradition of spiritual discipline, faddish or profound as the individual case may be. Such efforts must be located in the ongoing struggles and resentments of market life. What nonetheless still surely matter are the results of the attempt, through whichever conscious means have been adopted. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is studded with striking passages of description, the seeing not of now-conventional natural beauties—there is hardly a sunset in the whole book, and though there is a nearby mountain we do not climb it or gaze from its summit—but of what we might call whole new genres of aesthetic experience. The description of the death of the frog is matched with others nearly as vivid and disturbing, prompting the identification of Dillard as one of contemporaneity's best horror writers.[\[27\]](#) But there are still others on a wide range of subjects, and offering a variety of effects and impacts. For example, to the evocations of the doves and nightingales of the past, we might add this description of an avian descent from the roof of a four-story building.



The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. (10)

Of course, if we say this is an experience of beauty, we must concede that we are responding here to a beautiful text. We can no more penetrate to the original aesthetic experience through the veil of the text that delineates its basic shape while denying direct access to it than Dillard could escape her own mediations while having it. But we can surely distinguish certain features of the experience recorded here: its subject matter, the extent of attention and, as a particular aspect of the latter, its scientificity. An exact rate of acceleration is offered, that must have been studied and known in advance, or at least looked up after the fact. But such knowledge here seems to function to extend rather than truncate the interval of attention. It contributes to the narrative element, of course—such a speed would kill the falling bird, what will happen?—but it surely also extends the moment of attention to the form, the thrilling rapidity that is paradoxically extended where, without such attention, it would surely have been only the slightest shiver of movement in the vast

flux of such movements, birds hopping, dropping, leaves blowing, beams of light flickering over the whole sensorium. Even brevity itself lengthens if distinguished, if seen. It intimates, to adapt Wordsworth's famous phrasing, immortality.

As modernity advances, we might generally venture, such gazing, while not always empirical *per se*, is increasingly conditioned by the empiricist frame of mind. We might glance, for example, at the entirely unscientific late nineteenth-century Jesuit poet Gerald Manley Hopkins as he looks at the post-Wordsworthian natural world and praises his God

. . . for dappled things  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings  
Landscape plotted and pieced. . . [28]

Textures, details, qualities are ever more completely stripped of narratives or identifications, and thus seen and attended to with a new singleness of attention, a new intensity. But, of course, the rejoicing mood will not last—not for Hopkins himself, in fact, but most certainly not for Dillard and others in his train—or should we say, it will be leavened by those other genres of seeing. On the particular subject of the stippled or mottled, the Tinker's Creek pilgrim is particularly forceful. The mottled is the decaying, the pied is the unwhole, the damaged, the accidental, but seen all the more vividly for that. Marveling at the ravages everywhere visible, at the fact that whole specimens of any species are rare and imperfect ones—spiders lacking legs—the norm, she sees a world

festering with suppurating sores . . . the copperhead shining new on a rock altar over a fetid pool where a forest should grow . . . the knob-footed killdeer, the tattered butterflies and birds, the snapping turtle festooned with black leaches . . . the flies that make a wound, the flies that find a wound, and a hungry world that won't wait till I'm decently dead . . . sharks sliced with scars . . . mites in their hides and worms in their hearts. . . . Is our birthright and heritage to be, like Jacob's cattle on which the life of the nation was founded, "ring-streaked, speckled, and spotted" not with the spangling marks of a grace like beauty rained down from eternity, but with the blotched assaults and quarryings of time? (241-42)

We have noted a tragic, alienated dimension in the aesthetic experiences of natural beauty in Petrarch, and indeed it is present as well in Wordsworth, but nothing like the violence, perversity, and otherness that Dillard and scientifically informed writers like her have helped their readers see. Heedless alterity might previously have been vested on the remote and terrible heights of uninhabited mountaintops—Percy Shelley summoned up for Romantic hubris the "city of death . . . a flood of ruin . . . that from the boundaries of the sky / Rolls its perpetual stream" of destruction[29]—but offered nothing quite so terrible as the



cruel comeuppance of childish identification in this limitless spectacle of indifference, predation and infestation, disease and decay, this vision of the natural world as endless and mechanical process.

Has such a vision prepared us for, does it complement or even heighten the perceived tragedy of our own destructiveness, vis-a-vis our natural environment? Before trying to answer such a question we should perhaps first ask whether the aesthetic experiences we are attempting to describe here can indeed be called tragic. The curbing of identification with that which has been made central would seem part of such an experience, but is it followed by a recognition of our own resentment of that centrality, our imagined and anticipatory violence towards it, and then the pity evoked by the imagined or enacted violence our resentments have produced? This short sequence of passions repeats, of course, the originary narrative and, as Gans indeed notes, “originary narrative is *tragic*: the mortal being that had been the occasion for the sign, abandoned by the sacred Being that it incarnated, is delivered up to the violent desires of the community, to be survived by the sign’s transcendent Being.”<sup>[30]</sup> The violence that rends our identification with the natural world is of course no longer merely alimentary, we do not eat every beautiful thing, the mockingbirds or mountaintops, nor indeed despoil them all in other kinds of consumption—although such direct effects, the prolonged *sparagmos* of human industriousness, surely does contribute to our feeling. Even where, for example, literal destruction or digestive processes are not involved, we do lament our own collective presence, resent the mandatory sharing of that which we treasured on our own internal scenes, the jostling of the tourist other—really, the other tourist—the presence of the souvenir stands and plastic toilets erected to service him (and us). But our alienation, as we and our three authors have in their different ways been suggesting, has a more profound and inescapable source as well: representation itself, thought. To be human is not just to be capable of transcendence, one might say, but to be condemned to it.

Yet this tragedy, like the artworks we call by the generic name, has its redemptive effects. “The residue of sadness that follows a tragedy reflects the excess of our love over our resentment,”<sup>[31]</sup> adds Gans, and this dictum is surely as true in the tragedy of alienation from the natural world as it is in the theatre of Aeschylus or Shakespeare. Precisely that excess, too, has preserved us from each other, and may finally preserve our common habitable world. Tragedy as high art urges no action, makes nothing happen. But melodrama may, and no doubt much or most aesthetic experience of nature, like much or most of the art made about it, is melodramatic in character, its desires and resentments focused more insistently on human rivals and human goals than on the mere spectacle of plummeting mockingbirds. It is not my place here to assess the scientific evidence, the degrees of urgency, the causes or cures, even the ethical considerations, the tradeoffs with morality, raised by human influence on our earthly environment. But we would be blind to suggest that the aesthetic experience of nature in our age is not leavened, for most of us, by a sense of fragility shared neither by Petrarch nor Wordsworth. An unresentful vision of



centralized nature, the excess of love thereby generated, is an undeniable feature of our culture now and will surely have its influence on human affairs in the future. Indeed, the addition of this variety of aesthetic experience to the human repertoire may prove one of modernity's most consequential innovations.

Still, the same can and should be said about the aesthetic experience of the natural world as Harold Bloom and others have said about that of human artworks.[32] Nature no less than the artwork exists for itself—or must be understood to do so if we are truly to appreciate, see, experience it. This too is deferral. It is for its own sake, and when we grant it to be so, then it is most for ours. There are, of course, differing kinds of experience here as elsewhere. But both tragic and melodramatic aesthetic experiences of nature finally require and nurture deferral—or build the deferral that *is* nurture—the extended attention that allows for awareness of form. Beyond the pragmatic environmental considerations touched on above, how very much more beauty it makes available to human experience, this formalization of the entirety of non-human creation, this “binding” of so immense a source of transcendence within the scene of representation.[33] Gans describes the situation as the aesthetic “triumphing” in our era “by becoming indistinct from perception—indeed from experience in general.”[34] But human experience, once again, is always oscillatory, so any such triumph can only ever be partial or temporary, and measured by relative durations or intensities. Who amongst us is really able to aestheticize every experience? Would that we could. Even so, and in whatever duration or intensity, if human beings are able to experience beauty, and while they do, they defer violence and appropriation. On the ordinary scene only one thing, and only briefly, was experienced as beautiful, and that beauty barely distinguishable from hunger, the peace it conferred doubtless brutish and fleeting. Now human attentiveness encompasses, the human itself can “contain,” as the poet and now the songwriter have it,[35] “multitudes,” last lifetimes, see “heaven in a wild flower,” or “eternity in an hour.”[36]

## Notes

[1] *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford, 1985): 11.

[2] *Ibid.*: 15.

[3] See Canto 1, 90-94 in particular.

[4] Trans. Musa: 47-49.

[5] Trans. Musa : 48.

[6] <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/books/g26929946/best-nature-books-writing-trend/>

[7] *Up Front* (Henry Holt, 1945).

- [8] See, for example, "Reflections on the Popular/High Art Continuum," *Anthropoetics* 20.1 (Fall 2014). <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2001/2001dennis/>
- [9] "Art and Faith." <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw659/>
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] *Essay on Criticism* (1711), ll. 9-10.
- [13] Actually, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798."
- [14] Gans: "The Victim as Subject: The Esthetico-Ethical System of Rousseau's *Rêveries*." *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Spring 1982): 3-31. This text is also discussed in my own *Lord Byron and the History of Desire* (Delaware, 2009): 16-17 and ff.
- [15] *The Prelude* (1807) Book VII, ll. 118-20.
- [16] Andrew Marvell, "The Garden" l. 48 (c. 1652).
- [17] James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer: Or the First Warpath* (1841).
- [18] "GA and Cinema." <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw615/>
- [19] *The Prelude* (1850) Book XIII, l. 375, and "Tintern Abbey," ll. 107-08.
- [20] Wordsworth himself explored this process in *The Prelude* (1807) Book II, ll.237-80.
- [21] Emily Dickinson, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" (1865).
- [22] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotten\\_Tomatoes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotten_Tomatoes)
- [23] *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Harper, 1974, 2013): 8.
- [24] <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/microcosmos/reviews?type=user>
- [25] Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*. Translated by Siân Reynolds (Fontana, 1981): 66-67.
- [26] *The Prelude* Book XIV ll. 446-47 (1850). I choose the 1850 reading of "will" over the slightly less forceful "may" of 1807.
- [27] <http://www.anniedillard.com/books-annie-dillard.html>

[28] "Pied Beauty" published posthumously in 1918 but written in 1877.

[29] "Mont Blanc" (Version A; 1816), ll. 105-09.

[30] "Originary Narrative." *Anthropoetics* 3.2 (1997-98).  
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/narrative/>

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] See, for example, Stanley Fish reflecting on Bloom's legacy after his death in October, 2019: "It is wrong, said Bloom, and I agree with him, to ask either of art or of academic life, what is it for? It is for itself, and any bending of it to an external purpose will not simply harm it, but destroy it."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/question-one-should-never-ask-about-work-art/600337/>

[33] "From Kant to GA: Four Reflections." <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw660/>

[34] *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford 1993): 210.

[35] At about the date of this writing, the Nobel Laureate songwriter Bob Dylan releases an album with the song, "I Contain Multitudes" (2020). Walt Whitman, of course, had it first in "Song of Myself" (1855).

[36] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" (1803).