

**In Bron R. Taylor, editor-in-chief, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.
London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum Publishers, 2005. Pages 18-21
(Volume 1)**

Aesthetics of Nature and the Sacred

1. Natural Archetypes

Confronting nature one experiences archetypes of the world – sun and sky, wind and rain, rivers and Earth, the everlasting hills, shores, seas, forests and grasslands, the fauna and flora. These represent – more literally represent, present again – the elemental forces of nature. They bear the signature of time and eternity, with an aura of ancient past subliminally there, processes timelessly recurring. A living landscape couples dynamism with antiquity and demands an order of aesthetic interpretation that one is unlikely to find in art and its artifacts.

The phenomenon of forests, for example, is so widespread, persistent, and diverse, spontaneously appearing almost wherever moisture and climatic conditions permit,

that forests cannot be accidents or anomalies but rather must be a characteristic expression of the creative process. There is also the steppe and the veldt, the tundra and the sea, and these too have their power to arouse a sense of antiquity and of ongoing life.

Aesthetic experience of nature moves beholders with how the central goods of the biosphere – hydrologic cycles, photosynthesis, soil fertility, food chains, genetic codes, speciation, reproduction, succession – were in place long before humans arrived. Aesthetics is something that goes on in experiences of the human mind, but the dynamics and structures organizing natural history do not come out of the mind. Immersed in a nonhuman frame of reference, subjective though aesthetic experience may be, one makes contact with the natural certainties. At more depth, these are the timeless natural givens that support everything else.

On these scales humans are a late-coming novelty, and yet the only species that can behold and ponder this genesis, and that awareness too is aesthetically demanding. The challenge is to complement the natural dynamics, which have been ongoing over the millennia, with this novel emergent that comes into being when persons arrive, enjoy their unique presence, and search for the significance of life. "I went to the woods," remarked Thoreau, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 1966:61).

No one can live in bare woods alone; civilization too is, for humans, an essential fact of life. The town, however, is not so aboriginally archetypal. Were civilization to collapse, the Earth would revert to wildness, because this is the foundational ground. Such aesthetic power of nature stands in strong contrast to classical experience of art forms, religious though these arts often are. The creations of sculptors, painters, musicians, and craftsmen always betoken civilization. In nature, one is not dealing with art, artifact, artist; one has penetrated to the foundational ground.

In the heavens, there are stars, galaxies, celestial beauties, which are also required (as astronomers have discovered) for the construction of all but the simplest elements, and thus they are required for Earth and life. There are inanimate earthen kinds that nature generates over the epochs: mountains, canyons, rivers, estuaries, also stimulating aesthetically. But the miracle of Earth is that nature decorates this geomorphology with life. There are trees rising toward the sky, birds on the wing and beasts on the run, age after age, impelled by a genetic language two billion years old. There is struggle and adaptive fitness, energy and evolution inventing fertility and prowess. There is succession and speciation, muscle and fat, smell and appetite, law and form, structure and process. There is light and dark, life and death, the mystery of existence.

Once this was Eden with its tree of life, or the shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse, or the cedars of Lebanon clapping their hands in joy; today the experience is more science-based. Some aestheticians caution whether one should require much science here, since being moved by natural beauty is perennial and multi-cultural. Still, when the science is added, the science only intensifies this sense of life's transient beauty sustained over chaos, life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing. A visit to these wilds contributes to the human sense of place in space and time, of duration, antiquity, continuity, to the human mystery of being the sole aesthete in a kaleidoscopic universe. There one encounters "the types and symbols of Eternity" (William Wordsworth in Selincourt 1965: 536).

2. Sublime Nature

Encountering these outdoor archetypes humans reach the sense of the sublime. By contrast, few persons get goose pimples indoors; maybe in church, but infrequently in art museums, in shopping centers, or at the city park. The sublime invokes a category that was, in centuries past, important in aesthetics, but today many think it to have lapsed. Still, although the category is not currently fashionable, the sublime is perennial in encounter with nature because wherever people step to the edge of the familiar, everyday world, they risk encounter with grander, more provocative forces that touch heights and depths beyond normal experience, forces that transcend daily life and which both attract and threaten. Mountains, forests, canyons, seas – these are never very modern or post-modern, or even classical or pre-modern. They explode such categories and move beholders outside culture into fundamental nature.

Almost by definition, the sublime runs off scale. There is vertigo before vastness, magnitude, antiquity, power, elemental forces austere and fierce, enormously more beyond our limits. The forest's roots, its radical origins, plunge down to depths one knows not where. The trees point upward along the mountain slope, which rises to join the sky, and the scene soars off to heights unknown. The frames and pedestals familiar to cultured aesthetic experience are gone. There is no choir, no organist seated at the console, no artist signature at the bottom of the painting, no gardener planting the oncoming season's flowers. One encounters what was aboriginally there in its present incarnation.

In some realms of nature – awe-struck before the midnight sky, or watching a sunset over arctic ice, or deep in the Vishnu schist of the Grand Canyon in the Southwestern United States – beauty and power are yet lifeless. In a forest, however, the sublime and the beautiful are bound up with the struggle for life – windswept bristlecone pines along a ridge in California's Sierra Nevada. The aesthetic challenge is conflict and resolution presented on these

awesome scales. In the intensity of this conflict, there can often be religious yearning for life in another world, where the hunger, thirst, death of this one is transcended. But the earthen beauty remains nevertheless. The ancient Hebrews found green pastures in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23). The desert languished, but sooner, later, always, there was rain: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly" (Isa. 35:1-2).

Clouds, seashores, mountains, forests, even deserts are never ugly; they are only more or less beautiful; the scale runs from zero upward with no negative domain. Destroyed forests can be ugly – a burned, windthrown, or diseased forest. But even the ruined forest, regenerating itself, still has positive aesthetic properties. Trees rise to fill the empty place against the sky. A forest is filled with organisms that are marred and ragged – oaks with broken limbs, a crushed violet, the carcass of an elk. But these are only penultimately ugly; ultimately these are presence and symbol of life forever renewed before the winds that blast it. Consider the "flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more" (Ps. 103:15-16). "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;... I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matt. 6:28-29).

Forests are full of shadows, and this is metaphorically as well as literally true. The darkness shadowing life is as much the source of beauty as is light or life. In some moods, nature is ugly, even evil ("fallen"), and the problem of justifying nature's harshness has much troubled religious thought. Still, there are streams in the desert. Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Yes, giants have fallen, and rotting logs fill the forest floor. See these cones: there is power in them enough to regenerate the forest for millennia. Put your hand in this humus from which the present forest rises – "the immeasurable height of woods decaying, never to be decayed" (William Wordsworth in Selincourt 1965: 536). The ugliness softens and is reset in somber beauty. When one remembers this regeneration of new life out of old on a scale of centuries and millennia, one knows the sense of the sublime.

3. Sacred Nature

When beauty transfers into the sublime, the aesthetic is elevated into the numinous. "Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!" (Isa. 44:23). "The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly; the cedars of Lebanon which he planted" (Ps. 104:16). "The groves were God's first temples" (William Cullen Bryant in Frazer 1994: 82-97). The forest is a kind of church. Trees pierce the sky, like cathedral spires. Light filters down, as through stained glass. The forest canopy is lofty, far above our heads. Forests, like sea and sky, invite transcending the human world and experiencing a comprehensive,

embracing realm. Encounters with primordial nature often prove more provocative, perennial signs of this than many of the traditional, often outworn, symbols devised by the churches. Life regenerated is out there in nature; on such an Earth we may hope in beauty forever.

Parallel experiences are found in Asian faiths:

As I come along the mountain path,
What a heart-warming surprise,
This cluster of dainty violets! (Basho)

Full moon, and under the trees
Patterned shadows – how beautiful
Alongside mine! (Baishitsu)

As with Christian longing for heaven beyond Earth and its struggles, the Asian faiths can also dwell on the *dukkha*, suffering, and unsatisfactoriness of this life, at times casting this aesthetic experience into doubt.

Aestheticians may protest that their experiences need not be religious (as some protested before that these experiences need not be scientific). Nevertheless, the line between aesthetic respect and reverence for nature is often crossed unawares, somewhere in the region of the sublime. Mountaintop experiences, the wind in the pines, a howling storm, a quiet snowfall in wintry woods, solitude in a grove of towering spruce, an overflight of honking geese – these generate "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused ... a motion and spirit that impels ... and rolls through all things. Therefore I am still a lover of the meadows and the woods, and mountains" (William Wordsworth in Selincourt 1965:105). John Muir exclaimed, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness" (in Wolfe 1938:313).

Science secularizes nature, although historians will notice that Christian monotheism had already disenchanting nature. That might be thought to make secular nature, less provocative of religious experience. But primordial nature has proved strangely resistant to being secularized in the etymological sense of that term, being reduced to "this present age" (Latin *saeculum*), or reduced to the merely "profane" (common, ordinary) either. Some features of nature mechanize well (planets in orbit; tectonic plates). But elsewhere there is too much that is organic, or, better, too much that is vital, or, better still, too much that is valuable.

When value is discovered there, as with the forest as spontaneously self-organizing, as generator of life, not merely as resource, but as Source of being, the forest starts to become a sacrament of something beyond, something ultimate in, with, and under these cathedral groves. Vital nature has a way of spontaneously reenchanting itself – a vast scene of sprouting, budding, leafing out, flowering, fruiting, passing away, passing life on. Forests are not haunted, but that does not mean that there is nothing

haunting about forests. Perhaps the supernatural is gone, but here the natural can be supercharged with mystery. Science removes the little mysteries (how acorns make oaks which make acorns) to replace them with bigger ones (how the acorn-oak-acorn loop got established in the first place). Thanks to the biochemists, molecular biologists, geneticists, botanists, and ecologists, modern beholders know about how this green world works. But is this an account that demystifies what is going on?

Moses thought that the burning bush, not consumed, was quite a miracle. Modern naturalists hardly believe any more in that sort of supernatural miracle; science has made such stories incredible. What has it left instead? A self-organizing photosynthesis driving a life synthesis that has burned for millennia, life as a strange fire that outlasts the slicks that feed it. This is rather spirited behavior on the part of secular matter, "spirited" in the animated, root sense of a "breath" or "wind" that energizes this mysterious, vital metabolism. The bushes in the Sinai desert, the cedars of Lebanon – all such woody flora are hardly phenomena less marvelous even if one no longer wants to say that this is miraculous.

Indeed, in the original sense of "miracle" – a wondrous event, without regard to the question whether natural or supernatural – the phenomenon of photosynthesis with the continuing floral life it supports is the secular equivalent of the burning bush. The bush that Moses watched was an individual in a species line that had perpetuated itself for millennia, coping by the coding in its DNA, fueled by the sun, using cytochrome *c* molecules several billion years old, and surviving without being consumed.

To go back to the miracle that Moses saw, a bush that burned briefly without being consumed, would be to return to something several orders of magnitude less spectacular.

The current account from science is a naturalistic account, but this nature is quite spectacular stuff. The forest wilderness, Muir insisted, is a window into the universe. Science traces out some causes, which disappear rearward in deep time, and carry on a continuing genesis, and leave the beholder stuttering for meanings. The forest remains a kind of wonderland, a land that provokes wonder. The empirical phenomena about which there is absolutely no doubt need more explanation than the secular categories seem able to give.

Loren Eiseley, surveying evolutionary history, exclaims, "Nature itself is one vast miracle transcending the reality of night and nothingness" (1960: 71). Ernst Mayr, one of the most celebrated living biologists, impressed by the creativity in natural history, says, "Virtually all biologists are religious, in the deeper sense of this word, even though it may be a religion without revelation ... The unknown and maybe unknowable instills in us a sense of humility and awe" (Mayr 1982: 81). The sublime is never really far from the religious. If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it

must be this enthralling creativity that characterizes our home planet. Here an appropriate aesthetics becomes spiritually demanding.

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Further Reading

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- See also: Aesthetics and Nature in China and Japan; Jung, Carl Gustav.