

### **Stickin' it to the Lamb:**

Eco-Aesthetics, the Myth of the Peaceable Kingdom and Why the Lamb Must Die  
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*I believe the common denominator of the Universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility and murder. —Werner Hertzog, Grizzly Man (2006)*

In his call for papers to the Ecological edition of *Poiesis*, Stephen Levine asserts that “the environmental movement suffers from a lack of imagination,” suggesting our current vision of a benevolent Gaia leads to a kind of poverty of imagination about our relationship with nature. Certainly the image of nature as a harmonious system of romanticized “primeval purity” exists in our mythology. It is woven through the lore and literature of Western culture. In the introduction to Thoreau’s 1854 *Walden Pond*, he retreats from the society of man to the wilderness in order to avoid the artificial labours of man and understand “the essential facts of life” (returning to town only from time to time so that his mother can do his laundry). In Emerson’s 1836 collection of essays titled simply *Nature*, he writes of using nature to transcend an American culture he found to be derivative, retrospective and isolated from the real.

Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? (1854, p.1)

The concept of nature as a retreat from the *unnatural* behaviour required by society is an old one. The model for this romantic image is presented in whole cloth in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Duke Senior, in exile from the court, proclaims the forest of Arden preferable, saying:

Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious court?  
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam.  
The seasons’ difference, as the icy fang,  
And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,  
Which, when it bites and blows upon my body,  
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say  
‘This is no flattery: these are counselors

That feelingly persuade me what I am.'  
Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life exempt from public haunt  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones and good in every thing. (Act II, Scene I).

Obviously, Shakespeare was not a naturalist. Perhaps the most famous representation of the nineteenth century romantic view of nature is Edward Hicks 1833 painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Hicks was a naïve artist, and his oddly skewed perspective makes the hodge-podge of farm animals and large predators look as if they were stuck on to the front surface of the canvas in a flat pile. His tiger has the body of a horse, and it is clear that he has never seen a lion. The painting has a near-medieval feel, with things in their theological sizes. A cherubic child pats a leopard's nose, and the lion sits amicably between an ox and a lamb. All appear to occupy the Hudson River Valley in early autumn foliage. As an image it is charming, a sort of temperate Rousseau toned down for the colder climes.



1834- Edward Hicks- *The Peaceable Kingdom* Oil on canvas, 30" x 35.5"

It takes only a moment's study to understand the difficulty with the image is not in execution, but content. In a peaceable kingdom, everybody starves: predators first, then with no natural controls on population, everyone else. The lamb must be eaten. Environmentalists, I believe, know this better than anyone. So what would account for the extraordinary lacuna that allows the human animal to be treated as an outsider to the system, an interloper or spoiler?

Perhaps it comes down to a particular kind of mythology that places human beings in the role of Adam and Eve, having "dominion over the beasts of the fields and the birds of the air." But more fundamental than the mythology of exceptionalism might be the fact of reflective consciousness: The fact that we are studying the animals, and they are not studying us—or so we assume—may explain who the "boss" is. Still, everything we discover in biology, anthropology, sociology and even Cosmology seems to confirm our niche within the animal kingdom, the ecology, the planet, and the universe. Nature abhors a vacuum so much that outside of magma chambers, there is no lifeless place on, under or above earth. From the bottom of the ocean to the peaks of the Andes, life is not the exception but the rule. From a Darwinian perspective, if human beings did not exist, or were to suddenly disappear, another climax predator, for that is what we are, would arise to fill the niche. In any approach to understanding the aesthetic encounter with nature, we must concede, it's an inside job.

Stephen K. Levine suggests that revisiting the myth of Gaia, Chronos, and beauty born of incest and mutilation might be one way of broadening the imagination by which we understand our experience of nature. From the perspective of an artist, I can appreciate that a diversity of images provides a basis for a wider range of imaginative possibility. However, as a practicing expressive arts therapist, I feel certain that a paucity of imagination about nature is not, in fact, the issue. There is hardly a more imaginative or wildly unrealistic treatment of the experience of world than the peaceable kingdom. Of course, working in a field of images, we recognize the value of a strong metaphor. But replacing one mythological perspective with another, or considering them in tandem does not address the core issue of working with clients in nature. Adding a mythology feels to

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me like changing lenses. What I would like to see my clients do, so-to-speak, is put down the camera.

### **The Necessity for Aesthetic Encounter**

The most engaging and (in my view) helpful thing about the experience of world is that it is a sensual encounter. With few exceptions, my fundamental challenge begins with helping my client discover or rediscover their aesthetic connection with nature through a lived, sensual experience. Understanding how we can help others better attend the aesthetic encounter with world is the first step, in treating nature as more than a metaphoric construct, or projection of the self. In a time when the balance of the entire ecology literally hangs upon the actions of our single species, it's necessary to dispense with some old ideas.

We must lay aside the idea that we go into nature or the wilderness with the intent of "finding ourselves." This is one of the staples of ecopsychology literature. And it should be acknowledged that there is value in this idea if our desire is to cast nature as a kind of mirror for the psyche, a metaphoric recapitulation of our internal experience. However, this leads to an imaginal encounter, rather than an aesthetic and sensory one. Such encounters may be helpful, even healing, but they reveal more about our relationship to our personal narrative than they do about the natural world. In his writings on perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty reframes the encounter with world as a synesthetic, bidirectional communication. There is no objectivity in perception; neither is the perceived world a projection or fantasy. In the view of Merleau-Ponty, we are in the flesh of the world, and of it (1962), and therefore cannot create meaning apart from it. Being in and of the world means that there is a difference between a Pine Tree and a Larch, or a Crow and a Raven whether we notice it or not. To the extent that we deprive ourselves of the specificity of the aesthetic encounter, we lessen our connection, understanding and empathy of the world around us.

If we are to have an authentic aesthetic connection to nature, we must stop treating nature as a grab bag of metaphors. Life may be like a river, but collectively rivers are as different as snowflakes. In the studio, there may be a tree of life or family, and it need be no specific shape or color. But in the outdoors, there is no such thing as a generalized tree. Even within species, there is no template. This one has a curved trunk, that one a split bark, another, a knot of roots at its base. The hallmark of phenomenological observation is specificity. We begin the aesthetic encounter by knowing, and acknowledging, that it is impossible to see everything.

The richness of the aesthetic encounter, where detail is limited only by time and the acuity of our senses, exceeds any imaginal construct we might formulate. Who would have imagined the diving bell spider, hunting her prey under water, a tiny bubble of air protecting her? Who could have conceived of an amethyst geode or a Venus Flytrap? The plain air visual studio is only the most limited way to work in nature. When we lay aside the materials of art and allow our surroundings to become container, material, and *oeuvre*, the sensuous world reveals itself to us as a nearly unlimited resource for change.

### **Seeing as Making**

We have an unavoidable aesthetic and imaginal relationship with the experience of world. We perceive things around us, and we do not do so randomly, but with focused attention. The responsive part of that focus has to do with attractors: the way we become aware of the other half of the dialogue with landscape when a particular movement, sound, colour or sensation catches our attention. Human beings are notoriously “change blind” when we look at still photos that have slight but obvious differences. Yet the world is not a photograph. Add motion, sound, scent, touch and proprioception to the mix, and humans can notice and respond to amazingly small changes in the environment. Remembering Merleau-Ponty’s writings, the dialogue with the world is not one in which we always lead. We do not always choose, but are also chosen.

There is a certain dissonant strangeness in the idea that we are chosen by images and occurrences in our experience of world. I believe this concept seems strange because it is in conflict with a pervasive conceptual framework that assumes we are the authors of our own experience. This in turn, seems to be allied with the propensity to make experiences meaningful. One artifact of consciousness is a tendency to retrospectively ascribe foresight to responsive action. In short, having done something, we can usually find a ready explanation for why we did it. But in practice, we do not make a conscious decision to acknowledge the cry of a child, or the buzz of a fly. Things in our world make themselves known to our senses, and through that connection, engage our imagination.

However, we are not only perceiving what chooses us. A large portion of our focused attention is directed by us. We choose, expressing our preference through attention. That choice is the key to understanding the aesthetic encounter with the experience of world. When we look, we are making. Although we do not invent our environment, we do assemble much of it through ongoing selective aesthetic choice, just as when we engage in the art making process. And of course, as in the artistic process, there are surprises. Our attention is captured by an odd detail, or sudden change. In partnership with our surroundings, the experience of *world* is emergent. To re-imagine our aesthetic relationship to nature, we must understand the complexity of an immersive, life-long, co-creative dialogue. We must acknowledge that what we see depends not only on what is there, but on what we choose, and what chooses us.

If we are constrained by a subjective viewpoint on the world, does it devalue the phenomenological approach? I would argue that it does not. In fact, the effects of subjectivity are broad, but profoundly limited. When I look with a client at a painting in the studio, and I point out the yellow streak in the red corner, she will see it, because it is an artifact of the physical world. When we do a session in nature, she and I may vary in our noticings about a boulder. Still, neither of us will walk through the stone as if it doesn't exist. I would argue that a phenomenological approach is of great value, so long as we don't confound our efforts towards phenomenology with a search for facts or truth.

**Now, Be Here.**

I grew through my late teens in Vancouver in the late era of the VW Microbus, encountering the admonition “Be Here Now” and the book of the same name. The apparent cause of misery in human life was a failure to “remain in the now,” neither imagining the future nor remembering the past. People applied themselves assiduously to the task of now-ness, conversing in the moment about being in the moment. Forgetting the now, and remembering the then, it seems to me as if the true difficulty was not the now-part, but the *here-part*. Because our narrative of self is in continual attendance, seemingly independent of place, there is a way of being in the now with a blindness about where now is. This is particularly endemic in the age of the ubiquitous cell phone, high speed internet and a continual wave of technological devices designed to allow us to approach omnipresence. And clients emerging from the midst of this complex, placeless narrative are possessed of a kind of world-hunger. This said, it is not always easy to derail the narrative so that the aesthetic encounter can begin in earnest. At such critical moments, although it may first seem counter-intuitive, phenomenology is liminality. The focused encounter with the thingly-things of the world, the touch, taste, scent and sight of the things that live before us, is often a profound change from ordinary or habitual experience.

Meeting the world phenomenologically requires things of us. We must slow down. Our senses are most acute when we come to stillness and silence. Then our relative motion does not disturb the visual field. Our ears are free from our own chatter, the rustlings of our clothing, and the sound of our footsteps. In stillness, our acuity rises. The feedback signals to our ears “turn-up the volume,” making a wider range of the ambient sound audible. Our vision, freed from the need to compensate for the motion of our head, becomes more acute, and our grasp of detail finer. And our ability to notice change around us is heightened. But we need not remain motionless. Walking slowly and quietly offers us the information of our kinesthetic and proprioceptive body, as it unfolds the landscape. I often open client sessions with such a walk, punctuated by moments of stillness, in response to attractors in the world around us. This kind of attending in

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stillness and slow progression might easily be mistaken for a retreat to interiority, but it is quite the opposite. The full extension of the senses spreads us more broadly into the fabric of the world.

This is neither a metaphoric nor a metaphysical claim. It is a simple, mechanical detail of the experience of world. We are embodied, central nervous system beings—the brain does not end at the basal ganglia. Information from the network of neurons travels at the speed of light from every area of the body, providing a kind of simultaneity of experience that allows the brain to experience a tickle on the foot, and take evasive action in fraction of a second. But our senses are not limited to our neural network. The mechanics of sight ties our light-speed nerve impulses into the brain with an imperceptible delay over the entire range of our vision, from an inch to ten miles. Our olfactory senses notify us of a fire miles away, or days ago. Our hearing captures things both near and distant. Stillness makes the neural network bigger.

As for the reason to undertake this way of relating to the experience of world, suffice it to say these things: What we do not fully see cannot serve as a resource for change. What we do not notice cannot inspire. What lies outside of our experience, we cannot hope to protect. This is the core concept of eco-aesthetics, the idea that our primary relationship to world occurs through our aesthetic sensibilities. When we are able to see the world more as it exists, we can then begin to understand that environmental protection is really about saving us. I have spent a decade of my life in the quest of breaking the habits of my culture, with our many myths about the meaning of the natural experience. I have struggled with the tyranny of premature explanation, and preemptive meaning-making, both in the art studio and in nature. I have gained uncertainty and curiosity, and a genuine reverence for the real. And above all, I have gained the certainty that I have a place, both unearned, and undeniable, a birthright of being human, in the real and fragile ecology of the world. Knowing that what the world offers is infinitely more complex than any story I can tell about it keeps me returning to what *is*, while the fragile threads of experience slowly weave me more and more securely into the rich tapestry of the real.

**Author's notes:**

Although no direct citation is present, I would like to credit Herbert Eberhardt for the idea of delaying meaning-making, Steven K. Levine and Paolo J. Knill for the basic conceptual framework of intermodal expressive arts, including the concepts of liminality, experience of world and for my introduction to concepts from the writings of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. The term eco-aesthetics was one coined in my masters thesis as an aesthetically-based response to eco-psychology.

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