Chapter 10:

Postsecularism and Nature

The twentieth century can be thought of as the century of alienation. A whole new language had emerged to describe this condition, and depression can be seen as a symptom of this alienation, along with its method of treatment by Prozac. Spirituality as the experience of a profound connectedness can be understood as both the diametrically opposed condition to alienation, and a more secure alleviation of it than Prozac or other chemical interventions. Hegel had introduced the word at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the sense of 'alienation from Spirit' or 'alienation of Spirit from itself'. But modern Western alienation can also be examined from the perspective of alienation from *Nature*, and a re-engagement with Nature considered as a reclaimation of the spiritual. This re-engagement with Nature needs to take specific forms for it to be understood as having a spiritual basis, but more as a matter of degree than of category shift. The secular argument against the notion of spirituality as connectedness places a range of secular activities of expansion, including sexual love, identification with community, art, football, science, and so on, as forms of connectedness of varying depth. If they become sites for a repressed spirituality then they become part of Taylor's 'nova', but more generally they are the sites for what he calls a purely secular human flourishing.

Nature too, as representing places and activities that are expansive of self, can be theorised in an entirely secular way. But Nature pushed a little harder than a weekend, artistic, sporting, or leisure activity quickly provides a connectedness so profound as to be irrevocably spiritual. To the degree that contemporary intelligence has re-engaged with Nature at this deeper level, we can discover within it possibilities for a postsecular spirituality. Charles Taylor considers Nature to be an important locus for a reframed religious or even moral impulse: 'the moral significance of nature that I have

been describing is clearly also widely felt: the awe at wilderness; the sense of kinship and ecological concern with nature; the desire to renew oneself by leaving the city and visiting wilderness, or living in the country; all these are features of our world.'[64]

But historically Nature has been actively denied as a site of spirituality in the *via negativa* traditions of both East and West. In terms of the five historical modalities of the spirit it is clear that shamanism and Goddess polytheism were deeply bound to Nature; that warrior polytheism began the process of prioritising human-human relationships over human-Nature relationships, and that monotheism and transcendent modalities of the spirit completed that denial of Nature, at least in their *via negativa* manifestations. In the West, at the time of the Industrial Revolution, there was already in train a profound shift back from *via negativa* to *via positiva*, but that re-engagement in the physical world was not necessarily a return to Nature. Political power became deeply wedded to a material wealth that necessarily required the subjugation of Nature, so while the Romantics voiced the aching sense of loss of wilderness, mountain and forest, they, like everyone else, used steam trains to get there and the telegraph to signal their intentions. Descartes is credited with providing the intellectual underpinning for the view of Nature as mechanical; the first atheist texts by La Mettrie and Holbach took Descartes' ideas further in proposing 'man a machine' and 'Nature a machine'. Yet the early twenty-first century provides new possibilities for viewing Nature in a holistic, rhapsodical and spiritual light. Nature is also now the site of an ethical imperative, perhaps *the* ethical imperative for humanity, as ecologists are insisting.

Brody and Abram

Two interesting contemporary writers on Nature, Hugh Brody and David Abram, both of Jewish parentage, have contemplated the role of Abrahamic religion in the subjugation of Nature. Brody is an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker whose book *The Other Side of Eden* recounts his work with the hunter-gatherers of the Arctic. Abram is an ecologist and philosopher whose influential *The Spell of the Sensuous* is a polemic for a return to the senses. The professor of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem says: 'Religion's supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God, to isolate man from the other elements of the dream stage of his mythical and primitive consciousness.' This is because Scholem sees certain stages in the development of mysticism: 'In this first

stage, Nature is the scene of man's relation to God.'[65] The second stage for Scholem is the classical period of monotheism, one in which the abyss between 'God' and man

> can never be bridged. To them the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man's relation to God unfolds.

In the third stage, which he calls the romantic period, mysticism arises which 'strives to piece together the fragments broken by religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity which religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.' Scholem's account is a little like Hegel's, though making it clear that religion (monotheism) represents a cataclysm for the older nature religions. Neither is the old unity to be restored in its original locus – Nature – but on a new plane. It is true of all three monotheisms that Nature figures only as that which is overcome, and this is one of the greatest differences between monotheism and religions of the Far East.

However, Brody and Abram are part of a widespread Western re-evaluation of Nature which places it and embodied consciousness centre-stage again, and hence they are interested in its historical marginalisation at the hands of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Brody asks of the book of Genesis: 'Whose way of life does it reflect and endorse?'[66] Later on: 'Genesis is the creation story in which aggressive, restless agriculture is explained, is rendered an inevitability. Its first eleven chapters are the poem of the colonizers and the farmers. They are not the story of Anaviapik and his people.'[67] Simon Anaviapik was an Inuit who had helped Brody in his research and filmmaking, and who had confirmed for Brody what was emerging as a revolution in white man's thought within the anthropological studies of hunter-gatherers. This revolution suggested that hunter-gatherers represented the 'original affluent society',[68] having ample resources for survival, and leisure time for cultural activities, particularly story-telling. This completely overturned Western notions of the lives of so-called primitive peoples, summed up by Hobbes as 'nasty, brutish and short'. Brody is not in the first instance interested in the spiritual life of the Inuit, but he quickly understands that not only is theirs a shamanic culture, but that the very openness of shamanism allowed it to readily accept Christian ideas. The white coloniser did not of course reciprocate,

but proceeded instead to insist that the Inuit religion was idolatry, to forcibly educate (indoctrinate) children away from their families, and to ridicule their close relationship with Nature.

David Abram, sensitive to the accusation from ecologists that the Judeo-Christian tradition is responsible for the ravaging of the ecosystem, makes a forcible case that Judaism is much closer to Nature than usually assumed. It is the Greeks, he suggests, that created the rift between the world of the senses and the world of the written word, when they adapted the Semitic alphabet and introduced vowels. Hebrew is written using only consonants, with the reader participating in constructing the meaning of a sentence by aspirating the vowels according to context: according to Abram it is the specific use of the breath that gives reading a Hebrew text its sacred character. Furthermore each consonant in Hebrew stood for a concrete object in the natural world, a correspondence that was entirely lost when the Greeks adopted the alphabet. The Greek alpha, beta and gamma were originally *aleph*, 'ox', *beth*, 'house' and *gimel*, 'camel'.[69] Abram claims that the transition to an abstract thinking that denied the senses and Nature was completed by the Greeks, quoting Socrates in the *Phaedrus*: '…I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in towns do.' But somehow, Scholem is more persuasive on this issue.

Brody's encounter with the shamanic culture of the Inuit was full of surprises. Pien Penashue, a hunter in his sixties, practiced scapulamancy, the use of a burnt animal shoulder blade to predict the future. He also told Brody about 'the shaking tent, the most powerful of all Innu shamanic techniques.'[70] The missionaries had attempted to eradicate these practices which they saw as devil worship, and the Inuit were only slowly recovering their old traditions. It fell to Penashue to explain to Brody why the older Inuit were also Christians and sang hymns some evenings: 'The Innu religion is the religion of life. Christianity is the religion of death. We have to follow Innu ways in order to get our food here on our land, to live. But we have to follow the Christians in order to get into heaven. When we die. So we need them both.'[71] The Inuit were able to recover much of their way of life once the zeal of the Christian missionaries had been dissipated by modern secularism and the (limited) recognition of human rights. However Brody makes it clear that this recognition is only to the extent that the Inuit range over land unfit for farming or generally useless to the white man. He regards the destruction of the hunter-gatherer way of life by agriculture a 'holocaust'.[72] Yet it is clear that Christianity was not the only culture to have marginalised

(literally pushed to the margins) the shamanic way of life. Abram defends Judaism when he says 'Such pantheistic notions equating God with nature – common to many practitioners of Kabbalah – would startle the various environmentalists today who charge that Hebraic religion expelled all divinity from the natural world.'[73] But the natural world was already diminished as the locus for the sacred by the emergence of large-scale agriculture along with a warrior-polytheism that abstracted the specific spirits of place into anthropomorphic deities, whose antics mirrored the increasing focus on human-human relationships. In the later monotheisms, and in the religions of transcendence in Greece and India, it was the emergence of the *via negativa* transcendent spiritual impulse that established the core spiritual relationship to be between the human and a non-localised abstract absolute. Nature became the site of the *fall* in the West, and *samsara* – illusion – in India.

Shamanic and Transcendent Nature Spiritualities

The re-awakening of Nature spiritualities in the contemporary West is not simply a recognition of how precious the shamanic modality of the spirit is, but an attempt to rekindle its traditions through study of shamanic cultures surviving at the margins. There appear to be two quite different Nature spiritualities: an ancient shamanism and a more recent nature mysticism. The latter appears in the West in the nineteenth century in the work of writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), John Burroughs (1837-1921), John Muir (1838-1914) and Richard Jefferies (1848-1887), while some equivalent is discernable in Japanese nature writing in the work of the seventeenth-century poet Matsuo Basho, for example. In the twentieth century the natural heirs in the Western tradition are Aldo Leopold and Annie Dillard. This form of nature mysticism is quite unlike the shamanic, because it is not predicated on contact with the spirit world, is not animal-focused, and not intercessionary. Instead its impulse appears as initially aesthetic, but pushed far beyond an appreciation of the beauty of Nature. Nature mysticism has been studied by scholars of mysticism for over a century, though many of those scholars, such as Evelyn Underhill and R.C. Zaehner have been Christians unable to shake off their instinctive horror of 'pantheism'. Yet it is clear that the nature writers we have listed have been able to pursue the unitive goal of the mystic through a direct engagement with Nature (rather than withdrawal from it). They pursued neither the *jnani via negativa* of the anonymous 'Cloud of Unknowing' and the 'Divine

Darkness' of Dionysius, nor the *bhakti via negativa* of focus on 'God' or other devotional objects. Neither was theirs a *bhakti via positiva* as expressed in the cataphatic tradition by celebration of the world in praise of the Christian 'God'. The nineteenth-century nature writers had mostly set their face against the Christian tradition, for example John Muir thought the great canyons of the High Sierra quite the best 'cathedral' for him. Their writings are mystical, but they are not mystics in the traditional sense of someone devoting their entire life and energies to the mystical path of union. Yet the distinction cannot be so clear-cut, between say Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila on the one hand, and Richard Jefferies and Henry Thoreau on the other. The writings of Jefferies and Thoreau show that their spirituality was no passive appreciation of an aesthetic natural realm, but an active form of spiritual *practice*. Both men would walk in forests and fields, or by lake or sea, in order to capture a certain 'something' in those moments, with no certainty in advance of success or failure. They did this in the same way that a Zen or Christian monk or nun enters a period of meditation or prayer, hoping for *satori*, or a moment of grace. Spiritual autobiographies are full of detailed and richly specific accounts of such unexpected twists and turns of the spiritual life.

Henry Thoreau would stride for hours through the woods and fields of Concord, Massachusetts, owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. Reginald Lansing Cook, in his interesting analysis of Thoreau as nature mystic, says this of him:

> He realised that it was wise to be outdoors early and late, travelling far and earnestly in order to recreate the whole body and to perceive the phenomena of the day. There was no way of knowing when something might turn up. He had noticed that when he thought his walk was profitless or a failure, it was then usually on the point of success, 'for then', he surmised, 'you are in that subdued and knocking mood to which Nature never fails to open.' One late August day, in 1851, when it appeared to him that he had walked all day in vain and the world, including field and wood as highway, had seemed trivial, then, with the dropping of sun and wind, he caught the reflex of the day, the dews purifying the day and making it transparent, the lakes and rivers acquiring 'a glassy stillness, reflecting the skies.' His attitude changed, and he took what Keats called 'the journey homeward to habitual self.' He exulted in the fact that he was at the top of his condition for perceiving beauty.[74]

In the following passage from Richard Jefferies' *The Story of My Heart* he is lying on the grass by a tumulus, the burial-place of a warrior of some two thousand years previous:

> I dip my hand in the brook and feel the stream; in an instant the particles of water which first touched me have floated yards down the current, my hand remains there. I take my hand away, and the flow – the time – of the brook does not exist for me. The great clock of the firmament, the sun and the stars, the crescent moon, the earth circling two thousand times, is no more to me than the flow of the brook when my hand is withdrawn; my soul has never been, and never can be, dipped in time.[75]

How does Descartes arrive so confidently at the conclusion that his soul is immortal? How does Jefferies know that his soul can never be 'dipped in time'? One rejects Nature as a machine, the other is transported by it. Yet one of the marks of mystical writings from all the traditions, East and West, is a sense of timelessness as described by Jefferies in this passage. For the nature mystics the trigger for this mystical condition is Nature, but for the *via negativa* mystics it arises from a withdrawal from the senses, rather than a heightened receptivity to them: the spiritual life is rich in its variety. It can be objected that the nature mystics of the nineteenth century were merely pursuing a heightened Romantic sensibility, and there is of course some common ground. There is also a great difference, however, and one could go so far as to say that Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir, Jefferies and Whitman are anti-Romantic to a considerable degree. Burroughs and Muir were naturalists, Jefferies and Whitman were journalists, and Thoreau and Jefferies were decidedly political in their thinking. None displayed the self-absorbed and self-pitying Romanticism epitomised in Goethe's Werther, for example, and keenly saw in Nature its unforgiving cycles of death and predation, as well as its lyrical and transcendent heart.

If the term 'Arcadia' sums up the Romantic vision of Nature, a place that the aristocracy, after Rousseau, visited with their servants and picnic-hampers; if it sums up the vision which underpinned the Highland clearances, allowing for ordinary families on the land to be replaced by the ultimate Enlightenment profit-making machine, sheep, then the term 'anti-Arcadian' represents its opposite. 'Arcadia' drove Capability Brown to demolish unsightly villages at the far end of the view from the aristocratic drawing room, and to dig out the ha-ha at the near end to prevent those very sheep spoiling the lawn. Nicholas Poussin's mid-seventeenth-century painting 'The Ar-

cadian Shepherds' pursues the classical theme of *et in Arcadia ego*, which means that 'even in Arcadia I am' where 'I' is death. To the Romantic the existence of death in Arcadia is a betrayal, nowhere more harrowingly described than in Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, which introduced the phrase 'nature red in tooth and claw' into the English language. Tennyson was writing in 1849, contemporaneous with the nature writers we are discussing. Yet the nature writers are anti-Arcadian because their view of Nature is not of a place for weekend picnics and painting, for profit from shooting and sheep-farming (even if Muir works as a shepherd), or to be viewed from the drawing room. As Whitman says of most people: 'Very few care for natural objects themselves, rocks, rain, hail, wild animals, tangled forests, weeds, mud, common Nature. They want her in a shape fit for reading about in a rocking-chair, or as ornaments in china, marble or bronze.'[76] But the Nature mystics were sanguine about death and predation, paradoxically finding eternity in the very cycles of Nature that whisper chill mortality and cold betrayal to the self-absorbed, effete Romantic.

Ecology and Ecosophy

John Muir was not only a naturalist, writer and nature mystic, but also the founding father of ecology as a discipline and political force, instigating the American National Parks system. Ecology is a branch of the biological sciences, but has within its vision that which the mystic sees in Nature: a holistic understanding of Nature as both competition and *cooperation*. The reductionist biologist finds in the term 'cooperation' an unsupportable anthropomorphism, as though the term was suggesting that organisms somehow *agree* to support each others existence, much as we agree in human cooperative ventures. Leaving aside the findings of science for the moment, we can turn to one of the key ecological thinkers of the late-twentieth century, the Norwegian Arne Naess, born in 1912. Naess was appointed to the chair of philosophy at Oslo University at the age of 27 and was a keen mountain climber, having enjoyed the solitude of the Norwegian fjords and forests in working out his key theory of Ecosophy-T. This is a philosophy of ecology based on a meaning of the word 'philosophy' that is not the formal one taught in the university, but 'one's own personal code of values and a view of the world which guides one's own decisions (insofar as one does fullheartedly feel and think they are the right decision).'[77] An ecosophy therefore is a personal theory of living grounded in the perception of the full interdependency of all living things, which

deeply guides personal conduct. Naess called his own version of this 'Ecosophy-T' (where the 'T' is said to stand for the name of his mountain hut Tvergastein) in the hope that a multiplicity of such ecosophies would emerge from others in the ecology movement. Naess studied the thinking of Spinoza and Ghandi, and after his resignation from Oslo University developed his ecosophy out of a wider range of sources including Gestalt theory. He was keenly aware of the nature of scientific thinking – having been an honoured guest amongst the Vienna Circle – but was drawn to Gestalt ideas because of its emphasis on the whole picture. Naess says:

> Gestalts bind the I and the not-I together in a whole. Joy becomes, not my joy, but something joyful of which the I and something else are interdependent, non-isolatable fragments. 'The birch laughed / with the light easy laughter of all birches. . . .' This gestalt is a creation which may only incompletely be divided to give an I which projects laughter into a non-laughing birch tree.[78]

Naess, as a philosopher deeply bound up with the Kantian tradition of scepticism toward the 'thing-in-itself', has exquisitely teased out in the above passage the problems of the scientific-philosophic difficulty with Nature. If we believe that we merely project our human emotions, in this case laughter, into Nature, then we can retain our separation between the human and the non-human, and Nature remains to be exploited according to our need or whim rather than encountered in the humility of a holistic recognition of interdependence. To the Western scientific-philosophic tradition the idea that the birch laughs is absurd. Even the idea that the robin or blackbird sings joyfully is an anthropomorphism, while the perception of beauty in Nature is relegated to the domain of the artist, and only the Romantic artist at that. Yet the shamanic traditions and later developments in the East like Shinto, Taoism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Zen never made this break with Nature.

Ecology then is a science which looks in one direction at co-operation, holism, Gestalt, and Eastern and ancient traditions of Nature-awareness, but also looks in the other at the biological sciences, predicated as they are on the view of organism-as-machine, digitally encoded with DNA. An ecosystem, viewed from the hard science perspective, becomes no more than a second-order machine in which the fundamental resource, energy, is exchanged through predation amongst the first-order machines, themselves built out of other machines at the level of the eukaryotic cell. Here lies the

dilemma of all attempts at 'holistic' science. As a science it must start with the laborious analysis down to the fundamentals – as Dawkins would have it to the 'selfish' gene – and then slowly build up levels of complexity to arrive at the forest sloping down to the Norwegian fjord. But the holistic view of that forest, the gestalt view, is immediate, sensed at the deepest level of being. Naess in his mountain hut perceives the gestalt as beyond the ratiocinative labouring of analysis and synthesis – he perceives it in the immediacy of the moment. If he perceives it as the nature mystics do, then there is nothing prior to that moment, no history to that holistic sensibility – otherwise it would fall into fragmentation again. Jefferies perfectly describes such timeless states of consciousness. Yet, like John Muir a hundred years previous, Naess is also a scientist, able to draw on the cumulative history of scientific endeavour of many centuries and countless intellects. To the extent that Muir and Naess are mystics, they draw on the universal human capacity to merge at a profound level with existence, and to find in that moment that the birch is laughing with them, to experience a joy that is not their selfish joy but 'something joyful of which the I and something else are interdependent, non-isolatable fragments.' To the extent that Muir and Naess are also scientifically-minded, *they can read into* the forest, mountain and river the accumulated rational knowledge of the human analytical endeavour, and are richer and wiser for it.

Dawkins and the Argument from Design

To approach Nature with only the weapons of analytical science is to 'unweave the rainbow' as Keats puts it:

> Do not all charms fly
> At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine . . .
> Unweave a rainbow. (*Lamia*, 1820)

Although we ought to sharply distinguish philosophy and science in the modern era, for Keats they were the same thing, Newton being the 'natural philosopher' whose work on the visible spectrum had robbed the rainbow of its mystery. Richard Dawkins is much exercised by this accusation, and devotes an entire book, *Unweaving*

the Rainbow, to the defence of science as a poetics. Ian McEwan has the protagonist of *Enduring Love* tell us that Keats was 'A genius no doubt, but an obscurantist too who had thought science was robbing the world of wonder, when the opposite was the case.'[79] This is Dawkins' argument. It was earlier suggested that Dawkins is a nascent *jnani* of the *via positiva* orientation, and there is no doubt that in his writings his awe and wonder at the natural world (as framed by the sciences) are expressed with a literary, poetic and even numinous quality. Dawkins is moved by the beauty and complexity of the natural world in a way that the Buddha for example is patently not, but which the nineteenth-century mystical nature writers are.

John Muir's description of trees as he ascends the Sierra is moving for his capacity to wonder at each new species of oak that he encounters.[80] He is both a mystic and a scientist as these extracts show:

> These earthquakes have made me immensely rich. I had long been aware of the life and gentle tenderness of the rocks, and, instead of walking upon them as unfeeling surfaces, began to regard them as a transparent sky. . . .
>
> We had several shocks last night. I would like to go somewhere on the west South American coast to study earthquakes. I think I could invent some experimental apparatus whereby their complicated phenomena could be separated and read, but I have some years of ice on hand. 'Tis most ennobling to find and feel that we are constructed with reference to these noble storms, so as to draw unspeakable enjoyment from them. Are we not rich when our six-foot column of substance sponges up heaven above and earth beneath into its pores? Aye, we have chambers in us the right shape for earthquakes.[81]

When Muir says that he has 'some years of ice on hand', he was referring to his scientific study of glaciers. Yet his response to the earthquake is astonishing: he shows no fear, but marvels instead that the human frame, the human soul, 'is constructed with reference to these noble storms.' The Romantics of course always praised wilderness and storm, though preferably from a safe distance as Kant says: 'But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height. . . .'[82] Muir spent years in the wilderness alone, or just with his dog, and documents his travels with the enthusiasm of a scientist and the expansivity of soul of a mystic. Muir in his

cabin and Naess in his mountain hut share with Dawkins a lyrical, rhapsodic appreciation of Nature. But Naess uses both the language of science and the holistic language of Gestalt to convey his sense of 'deep' ecology. This sensibility recognises that ecology faces in the Dawkins direction, towards the analytical-synthetic understanding that builds the higher machinery of ecosystem from the lower machinery of gene, but also in the Gestalt direction of the whole. This Gestalt perception makes possible Muir's sense of pure *capacity*, the capacity to be the earthquake, to contain the mountain. Without this sense of identification with Nature, it remains a machine. Further: it is not a question of 'mountains' plural for Muir and Naess, but of 'mountain' singular as a specific mountain, a specificity of place. Naess says: 'In non-nomadic culture, especially agrarian ones, a geographic sense of belonging is crucial. More specifically: rooms, interiors, stairs, farmyards, gardens, nearby trees, bushes – all these things become, on the whole unconsciously, a part of that which is ours, a powerful kind of gestalt.'[83]

While Dawkins responds to the rainbow as the nature writers and the Romantic poets also do to the wonders of the natural world, he is disturbed that Keats believes that the rainbow's 'charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy.' Dawkins says: 'Could anyone seriously suggest that it *spoils* it to be told what is going on inside all those thousands of falling, sparkling, reflecting and refracting populations of raindrops?'[84] Clearly for Muir and for Naess such scientific explanations of natural phenomena do *not* spoil them; on the contrary we find in Muir every bit the enthusiasm of Dawkins for *explanations* and he actively seeks them for glaciers and earthquakes. But Naess's point about a sense of geographical belonging is true also for the rainbow. When Newton abstracts the rainbow into the repeatable scientific experiment – the *experimentum crucis* that changed the world for ever – it loses its sense of place, and enters the 'dull catalogue of common things'. For the poet this is the start of the *reduction* that science performs on Nature, the extraction of the principle from the place. Our experience of rainbows is always situated: whether in the mountains of the Lake District or driving through a city street, the rainbow is precisely so audaciously moving because it is contrasted against a lowering sky or located as a fraction of coloured arc between grey office blocks. It is always unexpected, vivid, and set, like music, against the counterpoint of landscape, whether natural or man-made in its specificity. Once it is repeatable, divorced from Nature, found shimmering in the glancing light on the recording surface of a CDROM, it is no longer a rainbow. When a child *first* sees a CD he or

she may turn it over and over to see the colours, but the next day the magic is gone. Once it is a repeatable matter of spectrum, wavelength, reflection and refraction, a matter of mechanism, it is no longer a rainbow, no longer *the* rainbow. The mystical and poetic sensibility gives way to the scientific sensibility. The rainbow *is* unwoven.

Yet we see that a Muir or a Naess go beyond Keats: they can move between these sensibilities without claiming for either one a supremacy; the science does not spoil the rainbow for them. This means that they go beyond Dawkins too. He says uncompromisingly, with La Mettrie, that 'we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes.'[85] His science is classical, pure, mechanistic, and is derisory towards holism or Gestalt concepts, yet, as his writings demonstrate, his soul is filled with poetry. He reads the Romantic poets, eager to find a place where the awe and wonder that he feels towards science has a counterpart; is delighted where the poets appear to praise science and is despondent when they dismiss it, as Yeats does as the 'opium of the suburbs'.[86] When Blake rails against Newton – Dawkins' greatest hero after Darwin – Dawkins says: 'what a waste of poetic talent.'[87] He is supremely confident of the utility of science, but desperately anxious that we see more, much more in it – that we see its poetry.

Dawkins shares the rhapsodical *via positiva* instinct of poets like Thomas Traherne, William Blake and Walt Whitman that existence is good, that it is a blessing to be born. (We saw that this very optimism of Dawkins has made him subject to the attack from Benatar.) But Dawkins' thesis is that it is the science itself that generates this felicity, that science has inherent within it awe, wonder, beauty and poetry. But examination of any university science curriculum or text-book quickly dispels that notion. To find writings like Dawkins' we have to look at the *private* lives of the scientists, not their peer-reviewed scientific findings; in other words we have to find awe, wonder, beauty and poetry in the hearts of men and women, not in their published science.

In addition to the elements he dislikes within it, Albert Einstein finds within Judaism:

> A sort of intoxicated joy and amazement at the beauty and grandeur of this world, of which man can just form a faint notion. It is the feeling from which true scientific research draws its spiritual sustenance, but which also seems to find expression in the song of birds.[88]

This is not the science of Einstein but the private thoughts of a man

made known through autobiography. Dawkins says: 'And the heart of any poet worthy of the title Romantic could not fail to leap up if he beheld the universe of Einstein, Hubble and Hawking.'[89] But which universe? The college physics text-book doesn't quote the poetic, rhapsodical thoughts of Einstein, but places instead the equations of the Lorenz transformation on the page. Algebra is a dead thing. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory states that the mathematics alone is valid, while any attempt to read into it an anthropic principle, or hidden variables, or multiple universe theories is unscientific – it is meta-science. It is invalid *science* to read a human meaning into the equations. Dawkins is quick to debunk those who see holistic and mystical implications in Schroedinger's equations. He says they are pursuing bad scientific poetics, and insists that there is such a thing as good scientific poetics.[90] But the poetry cannot come from the science, it must have its source elsewhere. The poetic, aesthetic and mystical sensibilities arise from a direct cognition of the *whole*, or wholes, also termed monads or holons by Leibniz and Koestler respectively. The poetry comes from the specificity of a given whole, not the generalisability of the machine-like workings of the parts. Science does the latter – and its very success relies on it – while poetry begins and ends in a radically different sensibility. Muir and Naess can move easily between the two magisteria, giving proper voice and weight to each, while Dawkins, ideologically driven to deny religion and mysticism their voice and weight, attempts to conflate them. His attempt to arrogate to science what is the proper domain of a quite different human impulse – the poetic and mystical – represents the ultimate march of scientism.

Postsecular Nature

If we follow Gould's idea of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA), then science, religion and the arts are the expression of three very different impulses, all equally valid (Wilber calls them the 'big three'). When Dawkins rejects religion and attempts to arrogate poetry to the domain of science he distorts the multiple nature of human consciousness, effectively applying an absolutist monotheism of science. If we reject this monoculture of the mind and allow the three domains under discussion their equal gravitas, then there still remains the question: what happens along the boundaries? If each domain is confident and secure in its own legitimacy, and does not seek to conquer the territory of the other, then what happens to the ambassadors of any one region when posted to one of the others? They create, not the false synthesis of New Age mysticism-and-physics, nor the false victory of science

over all other domains, but a movement of ideas and metaphors. It is this very human capacity to take the image or idea of one domain and use it to illuminate another – the gift of the poet – that has bewitched Dawkins, at the same time that he rejects its use in what he derides as primitive superstition. His rejection of the wisdom of shamanic cultures is only made possible by a selective accumulation of their worst practices. It is as if one were to judge science on thalidomide, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the unregulated availability of antidepressants on the Internet.

But the shamanic view of Nature, which shares nothing with that of the modern biologist, provides precisely that Gestalt sense of the whole, permeated by living spirit. Is it a metaphor that a mountain has a spirit? That metaphor is very alive in the Scandinavian languages, where 'giants' are always on the fjord just the other side of the ridge. Or is the spirit of a mountain to a shaman a genuine 'other', to be engaged in a discourse of mutuality? What is clear, as scholar of shamanism Michael Harner says, is that modern peoples in cities across the West are engaging in a shamanic revival, not concerned with philosophical niceties, but convinced through ritual that there is a spiritual practice of nature-engagement. We can see this as a postsecular openness to spiritual practices of the *via positiva* engaged specifically with Nature. At the same time the nature mysticism of Muir, Whitman and Jefferies represents a vision of Nature that is not shamanic but living alongside the scientific world view, as we have seen, though not deriving from it.

Robert McFarlane, writing in *The Guardian*, says of nature writing today:

> In or around November 1932, nature writing in Britain was dealt a death-blow by Stella Gibbons. *Cold Comfort Farm*, one of the finest parodies written in English, took as its target the rural novels of Thomas Hardy, Mary Webb, the Brontë sisters and DH Lawrence. Mercilessly Gibbons sought out and sent up the hallmarks of the rural genre: all those characters called Amos or Jeb, all those idiots savants, all that loam, and especially all those gushingly naïve descriptions of 'nature' and 'landscape'. Gibbons's book was such a brilliant skit it became that rare literary object; a parody that remained standing once the genre it mocked had collapsed.[91]

But McFarlane sees a recovery of the genre, a new English nature writing, and concedes that in America the tradition of Thoreau was maintained through writers such as Aldo Leopold and Annie Dillard.

Perhaps the huge physical presence of the American wilderness, the legacy of Muir, kept alive an instinctive feeling for the gestalt of the open spaces. It was also in America that the shamanic achieved academic status through the discipline of transpersonal anthropology. Founded in the 1970s, partly due to the work of anthropologist Carlos Castaneda and his popular novels, its scientific wing became the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) when it became a unit of the American Anthropological Association in 1990.

Taken collectively, such a range of Nature-oriented sensibilities can be described as postsecular, even if some of them derive from the most ancient of cultures and others from nineteenth-century thought. Without the humbling of Christianity as an exclusive cultural force none of this would have been possible. At the same time, Nature spiritualities, whether neo-shamanic or Nature-mystical, are an easy entry into the spiritual life for the secular mind with its growing preoccupation with the environment. As suggested, when considering the counter-culture New Age, Nature is increasingly the site of a new ethical imperative, while also remaining that of the profoundest of spiritualities.