

“TO DISCOVER AN ORDER AS OF A SEASON”:
SOME THOUGHTS ON NATURE POETRY

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I’ve been thinking about Frost lately, especially his deliberate writing of seemingly old-fashioned verse—nature poetry—to take on modern epistemological and aesthetic questions: questions of how we know and especially the questions of whether poetry imposes or discovers meaning, and all the nuances in between those two poles. Frost’s inheritance was the Puritan tradition in which nature was a book rife with meaning placed by God. The Puritans were confident they could read that book. Of course, that confidence had eroded by Frost’s time, proving innocent, sometimes absurd, and often violent and harmful.¹ Frost’s poetic father is Wordsworth (it often seems to me that Frost’s poems are deliberate re-writings of Wordsworth) who had already probed the world we “half-perceive” and “half-create.”² Frost takes a second look at the loss of the Puritan tradition and the possibilities and fears of Romanticism. On the one hand, if we no longer believe that God places meaning in Nature, we’re free to create our own truth; on the other, such loss can produce anxiety—we’re fearful that whatever we create is an imposition of our own needs and will and possibly be just another illusion.

In many ways, Wallace Stevens’ work, work that is in my mind intimately connected to Frost’s, plays out these tensions. Consider his famous poem, “The Idea of Order at Key West,”³ in which a woman walks beside the sea. “She” is the sole arbiter of

1. See Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, 17–57 and Rotella, *Reading and Writing Nature*, 3–94.

2. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 163–65.

3. Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” 128–30.

the world, the poem informs us, who makes the sea sing in her words. And yet the poem poses an oppositional question to this position: would the “She” have any song at all to sing if she were not alongside the sea, if she had not first heard the “meaningless plunges of water and the wind”?⁴ On a larger scale, Stevens’ work as a whole plays out the tensions between the imagination as sole creator of meaning and the meaning that is immanent in the world. While “Idea of Order at Key West” is originally from Stevens’ second book,⁵ his early work, on the whole, displays the freedom to make meaning that is “unsponsored, free [see ‘Sunday Morning’].” But his late work makes clear the bondage of the solitary self that generates multiple perspectives, *ad infinitum*. Stevens’ late-in-life search is to discover not to impose. For Stevens, to discover a reality not our own “is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible.”⁶ It is this “must” that recognizes what is at stake. Such discovery must be possible if ever we are to escape the inherent loneliness of the solitary self. It is this *must* that forces us out of ourselves and into speech, and poems.

Nature poetry is an ideal fit for the exploration of these epistemological concerns. Although the nature poem is still as foreign to our modern urban culture as it was in Frost’s time, I want to speak about my own sense of the nature poem and why I see the form as particularly apt at addressing the issues of meaning and belief. I think that my own writing began to take shape when I realized what I believed, what I staked my life on. What I discovered was that, despite the daily atrocities we’re witness to, my gut sense of the world was that it was *good*. I use that word as it is used in Gen 1: And God looked at the world and saw that it was good. And I use it as a synonym for what Wallace Stevens came to call innocence in the “Auroras of Autumn.” Stevens found in that poem that “we are an unhappy people in a happy world.”⁷ There is a tension, that is, between our daily experience of evil and horror and our ongoing sense of hope. To me, the

4. Ibid., 129.

5. Stevens, *Ideas of Order*.

6. Stevens, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” 403–404.

7. Stevens, “Auroras of Autumn,” 411–21.

oddest, most mysterious aspect of my existence has been the experience of hope proved “along the pulses”⁸ as Keats would say. Simone Weil put it this way: “At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy to the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.”⁹

At the heart of most nature poems—even if this tenet is called into question—is both the trust and hope that there is some connection between the natural world and the human community. And most nature poems place their trust in attentiveness. Wendell Berry, in *What Are People For?* writes “to pay attention is to come into the presence of a subject. In one of its root senses, it is to ‘stretch toward’ a subject, a kind of aspiration. We speak of ‘paying attention’ because of a correct perception that attention is owed.”¹⁰ Berry’s statement is grounded, as are nature poems, in a belief that there is a reality outside our mental universe. And that belief is connected to the structure and language of a nature poem—that is, the poem’s artifice of realism and its stance that words are not entirely arbitrary. Let me turn to Berry again to define what I mean by “not entirely arbitrary.” In the title essay of his book *Standing by Words*, Berry defines his “stand”; he writes that

no statement is complete or comprehensible in itself, and that in order for a statement to be complete and comprehensible three conditions are required: it must designate its object precisely; its speaker must stand by it: must believe it, be accountable for it, be willing to act on it; and, finally, this relation of speaker, word, and object must be conventional; the community must know what it is.¹¹

One of the communal aspects of traditional nature poems is the walk. A person goes out into the natural world, looks around, and reflects on what is seen. While we might get a laugh these

8. Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, 93.

9. Weil, “On Human Personality,” 51.

10. Berry, “Writer and Region,” 83.

11. Berry, “Standing By Words,” 25.

days from Wordsworth's depressive speaker coming upon a field of daffodils, a butterfly, or a leech-gatherer, exclaiming "Hark," and, in that hark's beholding, be lightened of his burdens just like that, the artifice of the poem as walk needs little defense. As A. R. Ammons has shown, the "walk" has a built-in open-endedness about it. Even if we're walking to a specific location, each walk is a new walk because what comes to our attention is constantly changing.¹² Whether it's Frank O'Hara walking the streets of New York noticing "this and that" or Frost coming upon an abandoned woodpile in a frozen swamp, the walk poem invokes both a spatial landscape and the landscape of one's own mind. The sticking point, of course, involves the relationship between the two. I think that the nature poem is a particularly apt vehicle for exploring that relationship.

For me, the best nature poems constantly keep in question the meaning that the mind creates out of its own needs and desires, and that meaning which, while we may never be able to make sense of it, lies outside of our mind's powers. We have learned to call into question the dangerous Romantic illusions of self-possession and the dogmas surrounding our capacity to know, to reach any kind of formalizable completeness. But that doesn't cancel what I see as the poet's task: the revelation of presence, an awakening to the astonishing sense that things are, though they need not be. And our modern beliefs don't negate the nature poem's search for a reality and meaning outside the mind's constructions. If anything, such thought intensifies the urgency of and necessity of that search.

Here's Frost's poem "Mowing" as an example:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:

12. Ammons, "Corson's Inlet," 147.

Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.¹³

There's no Romantic passive listener here, waiting for the truth of nature to reveal itself. But there is both an attentiveness to the world and the job at hand, and a need to probe the sensed connection between mower, scythe, and swale: "what was it it whispered?" Certainly the question itself, asked of a scythe, commits that old pathetic fallacy of giving human characteristic to a scythe. But Frost purposefully draws our attention to the mind's imposition—to its need to find a meaning in the sound of the swinging scythe; and, perhaps more importantly, he also draws our attention to the way the work's rhythms create an intimacy that is real but quite unexplainable. Consider the syntax of the answer: "What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself." Here's that wonderful Frost-style ambiguity. It could be that the speaker doesn't know very well what it is the scythe whispers. Or he may not know himself very well. And it may be that he's feeling the effects of being taken out of himself and into the sounds of his labor.

After considering the various possibilities, the speaker is certain only of what the sound is not. There will be no easy transcendence here: the sound may be about the sweat of our labor ("the heat of the sun"), but it surely is not some faerie truth. No, whatever the sound means, its meaning is only to be found in the "earnest love that laid the swale in rows." The speaker, moving within the rhythms of his mowing and the rhythms of his mind's reflections, comes, in time, to this: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." The "fact" here, as its Latin origin, *factum*—an "act or feat"—suggests, is the mown hay, that which has been done. But the speaker's satisfaction comes not in the results, but in the labor itself. Whatever is known is known only as the felt sweetness of a moment when some wholeness

13. Frost, "Mowing," 26.

constellates itself out of the particulars of sweat, swale, consciousness, and scythe. Is this sweet sense of wholeness discovered in nature or imposed by human nature? Frost gives us only the silence of the period between his two final sentences:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

The swale has been cut. It will become hay as it dries in the sun. The speaker has felt the sweetness of his labor. At this border between nature's silence and the speaker's need for meaningful speech, the world of nature and the human world both are joined and kept apart. At this border there is an exchange of gifts—the speaker received nature's self-forgetfulness, and nature, the gift of human consciousness.

Rilke's advice in his *Letters to a Young Poet* is pertinent here; he says to the young poet: "Don't search for answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would be unable to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now, perhaps, then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without ever noticing it, live your way into the answer."¹⁴ Knowing, here, comes of living. Knowledge consists of both taking the world into ourselves, and the love of going out to the things of the world themselves.

As Stevens' and Frost's poetry illustrate, there is a need to deconstruct the old hierarchies, to constantly remind ourselves of the mind's endless impositions of meaning; but, to me, the process of doing so is not to end with the play of language but rather but rather in order to

. . . discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,
To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to come on major weather . . .¹⁵

14. Rilke, *Letters To A Young Poet*, 34–35.

15. Stevens, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," 403–404.

The nature poem, then, as practiced by the best writers from Wordsworth to Frost to Merwin, Hass and Charles Wright in our own time, makes use of the built-in tensions between the landscape and the speaker's reflections as he/she moves through that landscape. The best nature poems never arrive at a fictional Eden, are never an escape from the world's horror, but rather are an attempt to register the feel of what is always lost: "the muddy center before we breathed,"¹⁶ as Stevens put it. Yet if this "muddy center" cannot be reached within the normal operations of language, it still exists beyond our capacity to name it, even if whatever we can know of that "muddy center" arises from our naming and imagining. My point is this: far from being a throw-back to some nostalgic past, the contemporary nature poem can have the continuing, and essential value, of reminding us of an origin that cannot be rendered intelligible, that cannot be made our own (we do not create the world), that invokes terror more often than joy, and that can be discovered only as a gift.

And so I arrive at those already mentioned characteristics: that the nature poem operates out of the trust that there is some connection between the natural world and the human community; that paying attention is "owed" because there is a reality outside our mental universe; that words point to something beyond themselves.

All poems—regardless of style—move towards (or attempt to) the chaos of our perceptions, the rawness of our experience, and then back again, submitting that chaos to the regularizing mode of language. The difference between the poem, which "means" solely at the level of the surface play of sound and language and the nature poem I'm trying to describe is the wager on meaning I spoke of. The poem I'm looking for and trying to write wagers on meaning despite the fact that, as George Steiner has said, we cannot "make final sense of sense itself."¹⁷

At this point, you might ask, what grounds this wager on meaning? One such ground is the new biological understanding that we live in a reciprocal and interactive world. Simply put, the

16. Ibid, 383.

17. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 215.

ecological model cultivates the insight that everything is connected. To say this can have a kind of new age “goofiness.” And often does. But the validity of such a statement rests on seeing each thing in its singularity, in its difference from everything else—most of all ourselves—while at the same time realizing that each thing is bound to another in vital relationship. The best nature poems to my mind do not find a system of symbols in the natural world, but rather a world that stands for nothing but itself, its actual existence an ongoing presentation that is always creating in the present. But if nature lies outside our grasp, it is still the context in which we exist, the context that has made us who we are. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder puts it this way:

I have a friend who feels sometimes that the world is hostile to human life—he says it chills us and kills us. But how could we be were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and a livable temperature range between freezing and boiling—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us fluids and flesh. The “place” (from the root *Plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind.¹⁸

The nature poem I’m trying to describe, then, must recognize the difference between ourselves and the world, while, at the same time, recognizing that we do not exist as “rootless intelligences without layers of localized contexts.”¹⁹ To quote Snyder again, we must recognize that “grandparents, place, grammar, pets, lovers, children, tools, the poems and songs we remember, are what we think with.”²⁰

Here’s Robert Hass’ both maligned and praised famous poem, “Meditation at Lagunitas” from his book *Praise*:

18. Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, 31.

19. *Ibid.*, 65.

20. *Ibid.*, 65.

All the new thinking is about loss.
 In this it resembles all the old thinking.
 The idea, for example, that each particular erases
 the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
 faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
 of that black birch is, by his presence,
 some tragic falling off from a first world
 of undivided light. Or the notion that,
 because there is in this world no one thing
 to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
 a word is elegy to what it signifies.
 We talked about it late last night and in the voice
 of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
 almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
 talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, *hair*, *woman*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman
 I made love to and I remembered how, holding
 her small shoulders in my hands sometimes
 I felt a violent wonder at her presence
 like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
 with its island willow, silly music from the pleasure boat,
 muddy places where we caught a little orange-silver fish
 called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.
 Longing, we say, because desire is full
 of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
 I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
 the thing her father said that hurt her, what
 she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
 as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
 Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
 saying *blackberry*, *blackberry*, *blackberry*.²¹

Hass has woken to the memory of a previous night's conversation with a friend. That conversation concerned loss, specifically those old notions that the particular subtracts from the universal, the actual clownish woodpecker from the Idea of Woodpecker, and the new idea that words point to an absence since the word *blackberry* is not a blackberry but a word, and that word means something different to all of us, depending on

21. Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," 4–5.

who we are, what our experience is with blackberries and so on. In that sense the word is an “elegy to what it signifies.” But then Hass realizes that this kind of abstract talking and these kinds of theories about language make the world “dissolve” and, more importantly to our speaker’s reflection, don’t correspond with his experience. As the passage from Snyder makes clear, words like *pumpkinseed*, *bread*, and *woman* are connected to our experience of the place in which we live, and have contexts that are crucial to their meaning (Hass’ childhood river, a woman who cut bread in a specific way, the woman he made love to, the feel of her shoulders in his hands). In that sense words are not elegies so much as evocations, belonging to the particulars of experience in which Hass’ poem immerses us, so that when *blackberry* is repeated in the last line three times, it evokes the presence of blackberry rather than its absence.

The contemporary nature poem re-enacts, it seems to me, what Elizabeth Bishop jokingly calls “total immersion” in her poem “At the Fishhouses.” As in Bishop’s poems, the details accrue and accrue, literal and accurate, and meaning is evoked through the accumulation of those particulars. Though critics are sometimes right to criticize those poets who move too blithely from the ordinary world to hidden symbolic meanings, unaware it seems of the “oh-so-sensitive” speaking “I” at the center of their lyrical visions, it seems to me they often ignore or simply don’t see the probing consciousness that is at home in the “immersion” of details—all those memories of Hass that evoke both our bodies in the world and the way in which words themselves are embodied. In the best nature poems the “meaning” (and by meaning I intend no singular truth) of the poem suggests itself out of the process of discovery—a process taking place between the poet and the world, the poet and the poem, the reader and the poem, and the reader and the world.

The nature poem that I see as vital cannot return to the metaphors of “nature as a book.” That way of thinking always returns us to that fundamental dichotomy of self and world. Wallace Stevens gave this definition of poetry, or what he thought poetry

should be: “A revelation in words by means of the words.”²² If our experience is language bound, as Stevens acknowledges, it still has the capacity to surprise its user, to “refresh life,”²³ in Stevens’ words. Nature poems have an obvious advantage it seems to me in this task. They use language to turn our attentions to the world—not in order to understand it, but in order to see it. By “refresh” Stevens meant a capacity to see the world as if for the first time, free of what he called the “man-locked set” of our preconceptions. To Gary Snyder this involves the recognition that human beings didn’t get “smarter” at some point and invent first language and then society. To Snyder, “Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence. Animals that we were/are.”²⁴ We cannot take credit for language. It is of a complexity that eludes our intellectual capacities—the linguists go on trying to describe, unsuccessfully, language a child learns and masters by the age of six. And certainly we have all felt some connection between the world and our urge to give its elusiveness a voice in words. For me, the heart of the nature poem has always been grounded in its need to pronounce—again and again—that the world is and for no reason. The journals of Lewis and Clark, replete with the struggle and urgency to find a language for the expanse and abundance of the world they were confronted by, added over one thousand words to the American language. Or think of the child’s hunger for words—what’s this, the child asks, what’s this, what’s this.

Our mistake has been to think that once something is named that we know it, that chaos has been resolved into order. Modern physics has taught us, thankfully, how each thing is really an event: at the subatomic level there is no longer a clear distinction between what is and what happens. The universe is a participatory universe to which the modern nature poem is constantly trying to be attentive to and present for. Such attention—and this characteristic is essential—must be both passionate and modest simultaneously. A nature poem by definition can only be an

22. Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” 33.

23. Stevens, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” 382.

24. Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, 18.

account of something too large to grasp. It must be accountable to the strangeness of our existence and the world's. As Wallace Stevens put it,

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.²⁵

The nature poem, then, reminds us as well of our constant hubris, our arrogance in thinking that we create the world. It is in this role that I think the nature poem is most spiritual and political. In *Imagining the Earth*, John Elder draws an analogy between wilderness areas and poetry—"In both cases," he writes, "human reason draws and defends a boundary beyond which its own dominance will not be allowed."²⁶ In reminding us that the non-human is the context for the human, that we must, as John Elder has put it, become "true servants" of the earth, nature poetry is spiritual and political. The best nature poems bring us face to face with the utter strangeness of our existence, with the core of irrationality we cannot comprehend, while reminding us that we still endure. Let me conclude then with a passage from Simone Weil's essay, "The Needs of the Soul":

The great instigators of violence have encouraged themselves with the thought of how blind forces are sovereign throughout the whole universe. By looking at the world with keener senses we shall find a more powerful encouragement in the thought of how these innumerable blind forces are limited, made to balance one against the other, brought to form a whole by something which we do not understand, but which we call beauty.²⁷

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25. Stevens, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," 383.
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27. Weil, "Needs of the Soul," 94.

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