

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF NATURE: REINVENTING NATURE
THROUGH THE LITERATURE OF JIM HARRISON

by

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James Fielding Lewis IV

July 2007

DEDICATION

For Liz, who—in ways I'll never know—has been through it all and helped see me through.

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ABSTRACT

The term, “nature,” has been and continues to be utilized widely throughout Western culture to great effect in shaping our understanding of ourselves as “human beings,” what we conceive of as our “environment,” and our existence. This thesis aims to explore traditionally and alternatively-based popular understandings and conceptions of “nature,” their origins, and their consequences, along with the making of an alternative conception of nature through a reinvention of the term by means of the literary arts. In the course of this study, the work of several significant thinkers and writers concerning the subject of “nature” are referenced, including that of Joseph Campbell, Jim Harrison, Matsuo Basho, William Cronon, Alan Watts, Al Gore, John Muir, and Thich Nhat Hanh, along with insights concerning the perceptions and conceptions pertaining to the subject of nature as offered within The King James Bible. This thesis additionally explores the intersection amongst myth, nature, science, and art, supporting the need for a critical poststructuralist approach to analyzing the term “nature,” along with a validation for an episteme of sensibility, as necessary for a legitimate intellectual underpinning from which to understand and interact with ourselves and our “environment” in an effort to work towards our and its preservation and well-being.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONSTRUCTION OF “NATURE” AS WE KNOW IT: TRADITIONALLY
AND ALTERNATIVELY-BASED CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE,
THEIR ORIGINS, AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

“And unto Adam he said, Because thou has harkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.”

–Genesis 4:17

“I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature’s loveliness.”

–John Muir, Co-Founder, The Sierra Club

“This too is a moral moment, a crossroads. ...This is a moral, ethical and spiritual challenge.”

–former Vice President Al Gore on his campaign to eliminate “Global Warming”

“First point I’ve been saying is what they (the Chinese and Japanese) mean by “Nature,” that it is something that happens of itself. That it has no boss.”

–Alan Watts, Zen philosopher

“Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, all are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We’re part of the earth, and it is part of us.”

–Chief Seattle, 1862

What is Nature?

In the context of Western culture, what is “nature” and how does our understanding of the term affect our understanding of both ourselves and also our environment? Perhaps more importantly, how does this understanding affect our and the environment’s

preservation and well-being? From where does our understanding of nature, what is “natural” and “unnatural,” what is the “natural world” and what is not, what is “wild” or “wilderness” and what is “tame” or “civilized” originate? (Notice how the dualistic mode of thinking, common to Western thought, already is manifest here as conceptions and meanings of the term “nature” begin to be explored.)

In Western culture, nature has been typically perceived of as the “Other” : a vast but delimited facet of existence, somehow “pure” and “self-sustaining,” something to be “conserved,” “preserved,” and “managed,” something of which we are the designated “steward,” something to be valued—indeed—something upon which to base our values, ethos, and morals. Our understanding of nature in the West, you might say, is a combination of the legacy left to us by the Judeo-Christian tradition and, more recently, Sierra Club co-founder, John Muir (1838–1914):

When people use the word “nature” to refer to the whole of creation, they are echoing a long semantic history that tracks backward to the medieval past and even to classical antiquity, implying without much reflection that nature is One Thing with One Name, a monolith that can be described holistically in much the same way as God. (Cronon 25)

True to William Cronon’s observation in his pioneering theoretical text, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, in which Cronon has compiled a collection of contemporary critical essays that challenge popularly maintained, albeit, in some cases, as in those pertaining to the current environmental movement—dearly held—conceptions of nature, identifying them through the lens of poststructural theory as constructs, John Muir

suggests his perception and understanding of nature as a separate, singular monolith that is the direct manifestation of God, as noted in the following passages from his essay, “A Near View of the High Sierra” :

This was the alpenglow, to me one of the most impressive of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. At the touch of this divine light, the mountains seemed to kindle to a rapt, religious consciousness, and stood hushed and waiting like devout worshippers. ...the darkest scriptures of the mountains are illumined with bright passages of love that never fail to make themselves felt when one is alone.
(Wilderness Essays 114,15)

And, in the following passages by Muir, notice the use of the word “nature” as “Nature” (with a capital “N”) and, again, how Muir clearly perceives nature as a definable, monolithic entity:

The canyons, too, ...however lawless and ungovernable at first sight they appear, are at length recognized as the necessary effects of causes which followed each other in harmonious sequence—Nature’s poems carved on tables of stone—simplest and most emphatic of her glacial compositions.

...Here are the roots of all the life of the valleys, and here more simply than elsewhere is the eternal flux of Nature manifested. ...And while we thus contemplate Nature’s methods of landscape creation, and, reading the records she has carved on the rocks, reconstruct, however imperfectly, the landscapes of the

past, we also learn that these we now behold have succeeded those of the pre-glacial age, so they in turn are withering and vanishing to be succeeded by others yet unborn. (Wilderness Essays 129)

Further note John Muir's comment in his text, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, in which Muir spoke of the "sudden splash [sic] into *pure* wilderness–baptism in *Nature's* warm heart" (my emphasis added) (Wilderness Essays ix) and his mentioning of the Yosemite Valley, in his essay, "Snow," as "that sublime Sierra Temple where every day one may see the grandest sights" (Wilderness Essays 97).

Additionally, looking at Muir's work objectively, as in the case here observing the comments regarding Muir written by Frank Buske in Buske's introduction to *Wilderness Essays*, it can be seen how Muir constructed nature as Other by means of reflecting upon how Muir "appreciated relationships with nature" :

...he (Muir) came to believe that all living things were brothers and sisters to man (though it is doubtful that he ever learned to like sheep). ...Anything and anyone living in a direct relationship with nature he could appreciate." (Wilderness Essays xvii)

What is particularly interesting to note here is the use of the word "relationship" and what it denotes and, therefore, what Buske's use of the word in this context, that is, in regard to nature, implies: In order to have a relationship, there exists the prerequisite of having two individual, separate entities. In the case to which Buske is referring to here, Muir is specifically described as perceiving a relationship between human beings and "Nature," the corollary of which is that human beings and nature exist as two separate

entities (a Biblically-based notion perhaps brought about by Muir's strong Christian upbringing and concurrent familiarity with the Bible) and, thus, to imply that nature exists as "Other."

What Muir has left to us, then, is the idea of nature, what we perceive of as natural and separate from the physically constructed environment created by man, as a divine Other, a manifestation of God and, as Muir sees it, a tangible aspect of divinity, the violation of which is a sin. Muir's perspective naturally leads to a necessary question: Who or what is to determine what constitutes a violation of nature and critically speaking, does such a monolithic entity identified simply as "nature/Nature" (Identify the term as you will.) even exist? Let's begin, then, by examining the word/term "nature" as a cultural and linguistic construct and peer back at its origins in Western culture through a poststructuralist lens.

The Fall: Nature and The Judeo-Christian Tradition

The construct, in the West, of nature as "Other," largely has its origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Before *The Fall*, remember, Adam and Eve were in the Garden naked and content: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 3:25). Based upon such a description, you might say they were "natural beings" or, as we like to put it in the West, "in touch with nature" : "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, ..." (Genesis 2:28).

Interestingly, the above depiction of life in The Garden of Eden is indicative of a more harmonious, synthetic, even Zen-like understanding of nature. Is it *The Fall*, then,

that led the original couple to a dualistic split with the natural world and humanity's subsequent dichotomous "relationship" with nature?

And unto Adam he said, Because thou has harkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

(Genesis 4:17, 18, & 19)

Was it at this time that all that was non-human became the Other, in need of being subdued, cultivated, guarded against and managed for (in the case of the Old Testament) Man's best interest?

But what of 4:19? : "...till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Is such a statement not suggesting, explicitly, a synthesis with the earth? With nature? Of course, Man was given dominion over the animals prior to *The Fall*, implying a "relationship" with animals indicative of their being perceived of as Other. Also, within the cited passage below, especially note the statement concerning Man's dominion "over all the earth" :

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the

cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. ...subdue it....” (Genesis 2:26 & 28)

It is notably ironic how man, on one hand, is identified as existing as earth (“dust”) and on the other has dominion over it, including the living physical realm of existence.

Regardless of this irony, it nonetheless seems *The Fall* brought upon a warring state between man and the Earth, the result of which has been Man’s perennial quest (in the West) to control, “conquer,” and “subdue” the earth and its creatures, including that aspect of man [biblical term, “man,” consciously employed here as opposed to the term “humanity,” which is arguably a secular term and will be utilized later in this thesis within the context of explication of secularly-based ideas] commonly referred to as “*human nature*” and often perceived of as “sinful” and in need of being “subdued.” In light of this explication, then, given the meaning of the well-know Biblical passage 4:19, “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” man would be at war with himself.

Considering *The Fall* and its consequences involving man and nature, most telling perhaps is that God created man in the Garden *east of Eden*, which implies that by so doing, God encapsulated Man within a space separate from whatever environment existed outside the perimeter of the Garden. Even though all was provided for Adam and, eventually, for Eve, by means of the delimited space of the Garden there existed this realm outside of Adam, Eve, and their anthropocentric perspective: there existed the rest of

what might be deemed “the natural world,” of which Adam was ultimately given dominion, even being asked to name the myriad creatures amongst him:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and what so ever [sic] Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; (Genesis 3:19 & 20)

Of course, throughout history man in the West would continue employing language to give names to “the planet” (case in point) along with all of its features and processes, making fertile ground, incidentally, for a Saussurian-based linguistic analysis of how we come to understand nature, ourselves, and our environment.

Therefore, it can only be figured that before the advent of towns and cities, clothing, houses, or any of the trappings of what is conventionally referred to as “civilization,” all of which, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition would eventually spring from the labors of Adam and Eve’s descendents, there was only Adam, Eve, and what surrounded them; and, therefore, all that was identified as something other than themselves and their life in The Garden existed within the Judeo-Christian Tradition as the original “Other,” as according to scripture Adam and Eve’s life in the Garden was a self-sustaining synthesis of existence. Thus with *The Fall* began humanity’s alienation to existence—including its own— and, as it is understood by mythmakers such as Jim Harrison and Zen philosophers such as Alan Watts, humanity’s “fall” away from itself as

an entity of natural beings, a division from which people in the West have suffered ever since.

Secularizing Nature and the Rise of the Modern Environmental Ethos

Parallel to this Western conception of nature deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition are the attempts in our contemporary, secular era to not only reinvent nature but to refigure our “relationship” to it—including all corresponding moral values and ethics. Ironically, addressing the environmental issues arguably caused by the West’s historical Judeo-Christian-based understanding of nonhuman nature, specifically issues concerning rapid suburban growth and accompanying sprawl, the widespread building of dams and their affect upon wild fish populations, the massive growth of industrial pollution caused by the emissions from CFCs, coal-fired energy plants, automobiles, and myriad other fossil-fuel burning machines leading to phenomena such as “acid rain,” holes in the ozone layer, and the build-up of “greenhouse gasses,” the environmental movement emerged within the U.S. following W.W. II during the 1950s and 60s. At this time, works such as Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and John Muir’s *The Mountains of California* (1907) gained traction amongst America’s intelligentsia, helping to give birth to a reconstituted identification in the West of nature and its value, with Leopold often being cited as having founded the “conservation” movement and Muir the “preservation” movement.

Occurring simultaneously with the rise of this environmental movement, was the rise of an accompanying morality and ethos, built upon a construct of nature, similar to

that manifested by the Judeo-Christian tradition and expressed by Muir, as being a complete and separate monolithic entity—an “ecosystem”—that if left unmarred by human impact is self-sustaining and harmonious (still, to this day, a tremendous and frequently challenged assumption). In accord with the Biblical sentiments concerning “Nature” expressed by Muir, nature, to environmentalists, developed a holy and sacred status, the violation of which was what you might call “a terrible sin.”

It is at this juncture that high levels of guilt and anxiety common to many people in the West’s relationship with God experienced a transmogrification, in what was now a largely secular U.S. society, to a relationship with “Nature.” As a case in point, note here the rhetoric of former Vice President Al Gore, a vociferous advocate of environmental causes, as he vehemently makes his case for taking action to combat what he perceives as “the climate crisis” :

The climate crisis also offers us the chance to experience what very few generations in history have had the privilege of knowing: *a generational mission*; the exhilaration of a compelling moral purpose; a shared and unifying cause; the thrill of being forced by circumstances to put aside the pettiness and conflict that so often stifle the restless human need for transcendence: *the opportunity to rise*.

...When we rise, we will experience an epiphany as we discover that this crisis is not really about politics at all. It is a moral and spiritual challenge. (Gore 12)

Considering the rhetoric of Gore, claiming environmentalism as a movement with “natural” agency and moral authority requisite for legislating laws and social behaviors

promoting environmental wellness is gradually producing a vision of what might be referred to as an “environmental state” rather than, say, for example, “a theocratic state”; and, arguably, the movement is having an adverse, stifling, and oppressive effect upon human freedom similar to that produced by fanatical Judeo-Christian belief. In a culture steeped in the shame-based guilt and anxiety motivated paradigm of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a shift has occurred in which attitudes, feelings, and behaviors once deeply affected by a perceived relationship with God (as recognized by the Judeo-Christian Tradition) are now, in our largely secular society, deeply affected by a perceived relationship with “Nature.” For example, a codified system of behavior deemed as “environmentally responsible” has been established, the transgression of which produces a personal sense of guilt, high levels of anxiety, shame, and even criminal punishment. How do we feel, for instance, if we fail to “recycle”? How do we feel if we purchase a Humvee in order to feel safe driving around in city traffic? How do we feel if we live in a suburban neighborhood in the American West (a location in which the climate is particularly dry) fertilizing our pseudo-lawn with nitrates and subsequently cutting it with a gasoline-powered riding lawnmower? How do we feel if we use one too many paper towels or double-ply rolls of toilet paper? What about if we leave the lights on in our office or have the heater in our homes adjusted to a high setting during the winter months so we don’t have to dwell in turtlenecks and heavy wool sweaters?

To gain insight as to how an answer might be formed to these questions, consider the behavior described here regarding tree planting as a means of generating “carbon credits” as reported recently by The Associated Press:

The question isn't as silly as it sounds. People worried about global warming increasingly are trying to "offset" the carbon dioxide -- the leading greenhouse gas -- they spew into the atmosphere when they drive, fly or flick on a light. One idea popular with the eco-conscious is to have trees planted for them. You get to keep driving and flying, but those trees are supposed to suck in your trail of carbon.

Indicative of the Judeo-Christian association with the notions of "God" and "Nature" aforementioned, critics' response to this "eco-conscious" approach to reducing one's "carbon-footprint" has been reported as the following:

...plantings and other carbon offsets are like the medieval practice of selling indulgences to wash away sins: It may feel good, but it doesn't solve much. "The sale of offset indulgences is a dead-end detour off the path of action required in the face of climate change," says a report by the Transnational Institute's Carbon Trade Watch. (A.P. 27 May 2007)

So, you might say, synonymous with the behavior revealed by the A.P. described above, for many of us, particularly those of us whom have been educated to be "environmentally aware" or, as is probably the case with many individuals, including the neuro-rich Hollywood set, caught up in the zeitgeist, the answer to the question of how do we know feel when we transgress environmental dictums is as follows: We frequently feel high levels of shame, guilt, and anxiety over such perceived "infractions." Ironically, you might say (though many people in the West are ostensibly secularists) that we feel as though we have "sinned" and/or committed "crimes" against "Nature" (See Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s *Crimes Against Nature*), crimes, I might add, which are increasingly punishable by law.

“Environmental law,” described as “a system of complex and interlocking statutes, common law, treaties, conventions, regulations and policies which seek to protect the natural environment which may be affected, impacted or endangered by human activities” was brought into being in the U.S. mainly during the 1960s with the advent of The Clean Air Act (1963), The Wilderness Act (1964), and the creation of The Environmental Protection Agency (1970). Environmental law is a legal phenomenon that has frequently come to transcend state and, at times, even national boundaries to garner international support, as in The Kyoto Accords, a transnational pact in which industrialized nations (notably excluding the U.S.) agreed to reduce greenhouse gas causing emissions by 5% below their 1990 levels by the year 2012 (Wiki).

Following in the wake of discontent over the failure of the U.S. to ratify The Kyoto Accords, emissions related laws at the state level have increasingly become more nuanced, as in the case of the recent legislative effort supported by Ms. Nancy Alderman of Connecticut by means of which “drivers of cars and trucks idling unnecessarily for more than three minutes will face a ticket” (NYT.com Steele). Such laws promoted by people like Alderman are merely indicative of the kind of national division that exists in the West over “environmental policy” and the kind of grassroots efforts made at the local level to alter what is perceived as human environmental impact in spite of federal action or lack thereof, whatever the case may be.

In mentioning the Kyoto accords and in attempting to facilitate the development of a broader view of the kind of international efforts being made in the promotion of sound environmental policy, it is further worth taking into account the current movement

underway in Europe led by exiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor and current rotating president of the G-8 Bloc of Industrialized Nations and The European Union, Angela Merkel, to reduce greenhouse gasses during the next two decades. In the proposed agreement “the 27 EU members have agreed to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent by 2020, and by 30 percent if a broader international agreement can be reached,” a proposal to which the U.S. (the world’s leading polluter) responded with the following comment: “The U.S. still has serious, fundamental concerns about this draft statement. The treatment of climate change runs counter to our overall position and crosses multiple ‘redlines’ in terms of what we simply cannot agree to” (A.P. 27 May 2007). Not surprisingly, the U.S. did not agree to the EU proposal.

Environmental Martyr or Terrorist? Self-Sacrifice in the Name of Nature

Arguably emanating as a result of the kind of extreme rhetoric of certitude concerning the environment expressed by individuals such as Gore, the environmental movement has its own martyrs willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of their particular deity, “Nature.” Serving as an excellent example of this phenomenon is the case of Rod Coronado, described by New York Times correspondent, Randal C. Archibold [sic] as “a celebrity ex-convict in the underground world of environmental and animal rights radicals who advocate burning construction sites and research labs.” Coronado, in his zeal against “luxury living,” refers to fire, in relation to how it can be used to destroy luxury homes and expensive office buildings, as a “cleansing force.” Facing up to twenty-years in federal prison in violation of a recent terrorism statute,

Coronado now claims, “You can burn luxury homes all day and night, and it is not going to stop growth. That is me speaking from logic, not from facing federal intimidation and prosecution. I don't believe anymore in illegal direct action.” (NYT.com Archibold)

Indeed, individuals such as Coronado maybe martyrs in the eyes of their supporters, however, interestingly enough, they are now identified as “terrorists” in the perception of law enforcement officials such as F.B.I. director Robert S. Mueller III, who recently claimed that “prosecuting crimes committed in the name of the environment was one of the bureau’s ‘highest domestic terrorism priorities’” (NYT.com Yardley). Somehow, it seems, these radical “environmentalists” view human beings and their own attempt at survival on the planet and the material constructs of this effort (e.g. whaling boats, chainsaws, and the like) as foreign to “Nature,” “evil,” and separate, when, in fact, it is arguable that such devices, heinous as their effects may sometimes prove, are merely, collectively speaking, the “claws” and “teeth” that allow human beings to thrive on the planet as—to use the language of science—a “species.”

Such secular-progressive sentiments and positions concerning nature and the environment—radicalized by individuals like Coronado—and their accompanying sense of morality and ethics are further exemplified by former American Vice President Al Gore in his seminal work *An Inconvenient Truth*. Notice how Gore, like Muir, clearly perceives nature as Other, something that is apart from us (though our survival depends upon it) and something that we, as humans affect and, ostensibly, can control (Really, an arrogant position when one considers the lack of ability to simply “control” one’s self.):

...since I was first introduced to the idea of global warming by my college

professor Roger Revelle, I have always tried to deepen my own understanding of the human impact on nature, and in my public service I have tried to implement policies that would ameliorate—and eventually eliminate—that harmful impact.

(Gore Introduction 9)

Now note the agency Gore claims in the secular conception of nature and the environment and his appeal to morality concerning these two entities. Also, note the tone with which Gore promulgates his position on nature and the environment. Is his tone not similar to that of “fire and brimstone” preacher—the late Jerry Falwell—of *The Old-Time-Gospel-Hour*? Is his vision not “apocalyptic” if we do not act to save ourselves by saving the environment?

After thirty years as a student of *the climate crisis* (my emphasis added), I have a lot to share. I have tried to tell this story in a way that will interest all kinds of readers. My hope is that those who read the book and see the film will begin to feel, as I have for a long time, that global warming is not just about science and that it is not just a political issue. It is really a *moral* issue (my emphasis added).

So whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, whether you voted for me or not, I very much hope that you will sense that my goal is to share with you both my passion for the Earth and my deep sense of concern for its fate. It is impossible to feel one without the other *when you know all the facts* (again, my emphasis added). (Gore, Intro. 10)

Okay, note how Gore is leaving no room here for speculation, for questioning, for challenging his vision; the information he presents concerning the environment are “the

facts” and Gore’s rhetoric claims complete and undeniable certitude, truth, and damnation if we are not inclined to heed his warning and behave appropriately. Incidentally, such thinking and its concomitant rhetoric is precisely why terms like “nature” and “the environment” need to be subjected to the critical analysis offered by poststructuralism as manifest in the work of William Cronon

Ironically, come to think of it, Gore’s rhetoric on the environment is quite similar to his rival George W. Bush’s rhetoric on terrorism (It is worth noting that there seems to be less resistance amongst scholars to subjecting Bush’s thinking and rhetoric on terrorism to poststructuralist scrutiny than, say, there exists in subjecting terms like “nature” and “environment” to the same scrutiny.): "Over time it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity," he said. "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror," and, as interpreted by CNN, “President Bush said...that there was no room for neutrality in the war against terrorism, and that the international coalition against terror will “fight this evil and fight until we are rid of it. ...A coalition partner must do more than just express sympathy, a coalition partner must perform," Bush said. "That means different things for different nations. ...But all nations, if they want to fight terror, must do something."

Again, as reported by CNN, Bush said threats by Osama bin Laden to use weapons of mass destruction must be taken seriously: "This is an evil man that we're dealing with, and I wouldn't put it past him to develop evil weapons to try to harm civilization as we know it," Bush said. " And that's why we must prevail, and that's why we must win." And, making a reference to the fascist and communist regimes in the 20th century, Bush

said: "Today, our freedom is threatened once again." (CNN.com)

Now, hear Gore speak on the need for international collaboration and a collective approach to combat what clearly, though he has never employed the specific rhetoric of war, probably for fear of being compared to the "war-mongering" rhetoric of his political rival, nonetheless comes across as a "war" to save the environment, complete with its accompanying potential perils and sacrifices:

The climate crisis is, indeed, extremely dangerous. In fact it is a true planetary emergency. Two thousand scientists, in a hundred countries, working for more than 20 years in the most elaborate and well-organized scientific collaboration in the history of humankind, have forged an exceptionally strong consensus that all nations on Earth must work together to solve the crisis of global warming.

Last year, the national academies of science in the 11 most influential nations came together to jointly call on every nation to "acknowledge that the threat of climate change is clear and increasing" and declare that the "scientific understanding of climate changes is now sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action. (Hmm, like the evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? The evidence of a concerted international effort on Al Qaida's part to attack the so-called "civilized world"?) So the message is unmistakably clear. This crisis means "danger!" At stake is the survival of our civilization and the habitability of the Earth.

Consider what happened during the crisis of global fascism. At first, even the truth about Hitler was inconvenient. Many in the west hoped the danger would

simply go away. They ignored clear warning and compromised with evil, and waited, hoping for the best. By the end of that terrible war, we had gained the moral authority and vision to create the Marshall Plan—and convinced taxpayers to pay for it! (Gore 10 & 11)

Perhaps, the most ironic aspect of the secular position on the environment which implies that we, as human beings, are capable of controlling it, is the connection to early traditionally-based Biblical thought concerning nature and Man's relationship to it, decreeing Man to "subdue" or, said another way, control nature as a "steward" of the land. So, then, is our current environmental movement, advocating our taking action to control the environment by controlling our own impact upon it, though secularly-based, not a plea to act as good, responsible "stewards" of the land, the Earth, using an empirically-based episteme supporting the development of "scientific" knowledge to guide our actions?

Referring back to the current event aforementioned regarding climate change (associated with the Kyoto Accords) and international cooperation in securing an agreement to lower greenhouse gas producing emissions by 2020 and 2030, U.S. speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, had this to say in reference to the Bush Administration's decision to forego support for the new treaty: "We are trying to preserve the planet, which many in our country, including I, believe is God's creation, and we have a responsibility to preserve it" (Bozeman Daily Chronicle, A.P. 30 May 2007).

Further note the continuation of Pelosi's recent statement as written by the A.P.:

“The California Democrat said faith-based organizations could play a role in battling climate change. The United States needed ‘the spirit of science to show us the way and faith-based organizations to help mobilize to preserve the planet.’”
(Bozeman Daily Chronicle, A.P. U.S. 30 May 2007)

The implication of Pelosi's statement is both profound and also politically brilliant. Her position represents the forging of common ground between faith and science-based perspectives: act as a good steward of the land and use science to assist in this effort. In other words, if you're a “good” Christian, support legislative efforts to combat climate change through science.

Nature and the Rise of Eastern Philosophy in the West

“Nature in Western culture is the product of a monotheistic religious tradition; it is often unrecognizable for people whose cultures have not taught them to worship a lone deity.”

–William Cronon

As previously explained, similar to how the Judeo-Christian position has been built upon the cornerstone of what I will refer to here as “the God construct,” our largely secular society of the twenty-first century is creating a similar tradition built upon the construct of “Nature.” In either case, nature, in accordance with our Western heritage, still exists as the “Other.” In the case of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are “taming” nature, believing that it was put on the earth for our benefit to be “subdued” and subsequently managed through wise stewardship for our economic advantage; in the case

of the secular notion of the same, nature is to be preserved, protected, and “managed” for our physical, spiritual, and moral salvation.

The consequences of these dualistic, dichotomous, and polarizing conceptions of nature upon the West has been an unhealthy society suffering from what has been diagnosed by Western medicine as a compendium of physical, psychological, and emotional illnesses and a physical environment that is perceived as being in grave jeopardy.

To more fully grasp and perceive these adverse consequences of popular understandings of nature in the West, it befits one to look collectively at Western society and culture. One simply need examine the manner in which cities and towns have been historically constructed to notice the underlying ideological and religious paradigm affecting the West’s relationship with nature. Most of our cities, for example, did little to synthesize their development with what was deemed to be the natural world around them; New York, Los Angeles, London, Philadelphia, Boston, Paris, London, and Berlin all make excellent cases in point. Fabricated “parks” may exist, but artifice is altogether different from having healthy rivers flowing through active metropolitan areas.

Furthermore, notice the development of “strip malls” and “suburbia” in the United States and how these constructs are designed in a highly geometric and economically organized manner. Indeed, it is difficult in such settings to find one blade of grass out of place; and, ordinances even exist to ensure that such transgressions don’t occur.

Notice also, during the F.D.R. era of the 1930s and 40s, the attempt to control and harness nature for the benefit of man through the building of dams to generate electricity

and the worldwide extraction of oil during the later half of the twentieth century to create cheap sources of power. Concurrent with these developments, the collective widespread rise of industrialization worldwide gave birth to increasing amounts of industrial pollution in the form of carbon dioxide, stagnating river systems, ozone destroying CFCs, and acid rain.

Such phenomena represent empirically understood physical issues concerning human interaction with the environment; also at issue, however, are the physical, psychological, and emotional effects upon human beings caused by the West's interaction with nature that have, in the view of organizations like the "Institute for Health and the Environment" manifested themselves in a variety of disorders. The following mission statement of the Institute for Health and the Environment illumines the organization's position:

It is well recognized that many factors contribute to health and illness, such as socioeconomic conditions, individual lifestyles and behaviors, culture, genetics and access to health services. Changes in the natural environment caused by chemical pollution, rapid industrialization, war and climate changes are dimensions that, until recently, have been largely overlooked as having a significant impact on human health. For instance, there is mounting evidence that communities located near hazardous waste sites are more likely to report increases in birth defects, cancer, neurological deficits and immune deficiency. The living environment is also a major factor for both physical and psychological health. (Institute for Health and the Environment)

Clearly, in the view of organizations such as the Institute for Health and the Environment, the causes of many of our society's illnesses—physical and psychological—can be linked to our “relationship with nature” and our interaction with our “environment.”

If it is true that, in the West, much of our physical, psychological, and emotional illness and suffering stems from a relationship with nature that is dysfunctional, irrational, and unhealthy, what does such an observation say about the consequences of how human beings come to perceive of and, subsequently, conceive of nature? In other words, what does this observation suggest about the consequences of “nature” as a linguistically-formed cultural construct? Doubtless, how our understanding of the nonhuman world is constructed certainly has serious physical, psychological, and emotional consequences.

Slowly gaining recognition of the vital relationship that exists between our understanding of nature and our health, people in the West have been experiencing a dramatic shift away from the more traditionally understood, dualistically figured Biblically and/or secularly-based conception of nature toward a more holistic and synthetic understanding of the term manifesting key tenets of Eastern thought. Western culture's identification of the non-human realm of existence surrounding and, you might say, enveloping humanity (understood as a term familiarly dubbed “non-human nature”) as “the Other” has, for example, in the minds of Zen philosophers such as Englishman Alan Wilson Watts (1915–73), a leading popularizer of Asian philosophies and religion in the West during the later half of the twentieth-century, caused a schizoid state for

humanity (Wiki Watts): many people in the West perceive the universe but see themselves as separate from it, owing to the idea that existence outside of humanity exists as “Other” from the human experience. Therefore, people in the West, as perceived through Eastern thought (i.e., Buddhism [India], Taoism [China], and Zen [Japan]) frequently are at war with various aspects of their person that they deem as “wild” or somehow as part of the Other that is “nature.”

In much of Eastern thought, these various “passions,” psychological and emotional states—many of which are highly disturbing, as well as highly pleasurable—frequently come to be understood through metaphors linking human emotions and consciousness to natural phenomena, as in the case here of a therapy session lead by well-known Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh:

Let us visualize a lake in the highlands...the water in the lake is so still that it reflects truly the blue sky and the mountains. And, if you look into the water you see your face not distorted at all because the water is calm. Is still. And you take a picture of the lake. And you see that the mountain and the sky reflected in it are just the mountain and the sky above. So when you practice breathing in you say, breathing in, I see myself as still waters. It means you calm yourself by your breathing. When we are not calm, we distort things. We cannot receive the message from other people, the truth from other beings. (Hanh)

Hanh’s metaphor and approach to healing through the Eastern philosophy of Zen and the widely-followed teaching of individuals such as Alan Watts evince yet another recently adopted understanding and conception of “nature” gaining popularity in the

West stemming from Eastern philosophy and spiritual practice. Arguably, at the core of this cultural movement underway in the West is the need for “healing,” healing, that is, from the wounds and scars of a cultural relationship with nature (“nature” being, in my own description, the existence of which we are a part: that exists but which is impossible to precisely describe with language) familiar to both the Judeo-Christian and secular paradigms aforementioned.

To provide further explanation, these traditions concerning nature born of Eastern thought now being subscribed to by Westerners propose a synthetic and holistic understanding and conception of nature and humanity. In other words, Eastern philosophy does not view nature and what we, in the West, would dub “the environment” as being separate from human beings. To the contrary, Eastern/Asian thought suggests the notion of human-beings as being not at odds with themselves (their “nature”) and their environment but “at one” with the Earth in which they exist, the cosmos enveloping them, and themselves.

Specifically, this Eastern concept of humanity and nature as sharing a synthetic existence is most apparent in the teachings of Zen, which, notably, has gained considerable popularity in the U.S. during the past several decades as Westerners seek relief for their tortured bodies, psyches, and emotions engendered by a dichotomous “relationship” with nature and a mechanical existence lived as empirically-understood-economic-instruments for a capitalist culture. Westerners are more than ever reinventing nature in a manner corresponding largely to the tenets of Zen Buddhism, in which human beings and the nonhuman world are identified as being one and the same.

The more synthetic manner of perceiving nature put forth by Zen practice actually deconstructs the traditional and popular Western view of nature as Other, conceptualizing the human being as inherently existing as part of the environment, universe, cosmos. The study and practice of Zen Buddhism and its many manifestations in the West has emerged into a so-called “New Age” form of healing and therapy by which the Otherness of nature is deconstructed and even let go of. Eastern philosophy and spiritual thought, similar to that of many Native American tribes, maintains no construct of nature. A conception such as “Nature,” for example, is unthinkable and unknowable to these cultures: “...There is not one single Chinese word that means the law of nature as we use it” (Watts).

Watts’ interpretation of Zen philosophy raises an interesting question in the discourse surrounding nature. What about the disappearance of the construct of “nature” altogether? Like practitioners of Zen, the Native Americans, for example, at least in some instances, did not conceive of a separate concept of nature in existence. Even though the particular speech cited here was not, in fact, composed by Chief Seattle in 1862 but, rather, written by an Anglo-European environmentalist, it serves well to communicate a vision of what a worldview might be like sans “nature”:

The president in Washington wishes to send word that he wishes to buy our land. But, how can you buy or sell the sky? The Land? The idea is strange to us.

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. ...We’re part of the earth, and it is part of us.

...This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth.

All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. (Campbell *The Power of Myth* DVD)

Is it necessary to have this idea of “nature”? Would we be any less “in tune with nature” without such a concept? Maybe we would be more in tune and less conflicted, genuinely intertwined with our existence, without dichotomizing terms created by language to interfere with our largely intuitive existential experience and understanding.

Is such a state not what practitioners of Zen seek to attain through meditation? A state of consciousness free from mental “chatter” as Watts describes it, in which we fully experience ourselves in the present moment, as a wave that breaks on the shore or as a river that flows downstream? Just being, without any concept of nature, absent of any linguistic constructs affecting our consciousness at that given moment?

If such a phenomenon is possible, then what is it that we are experiencing at that moment, and why does it engender such a healing affect upon our psyches? Why can't we define this existential reality by means of language? Indeed, why is this experience “languageless”? And, if it is incapable of being identified through language, yet arguably, such a state of reality exists, then how can we arrive at a deeper understanding of it and so seize upon this understanding to affect the preservation and well-being of ourselves and our environment? In order to comprehend how we might cultivate such an episteme of sensibility, it is necessary to focus upon the complex intersection amongst art, myth, spirituality, science, and nature, noting, in this thesis, the means by which literature cultivates perceptions and conceptions of nature and, by so doing, assists us in forming a

more useful approximation of ourselves and our existence.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY, NATURE, APPROXIMATIONS, AND SENSIBILITY: REINVENTING
NATURE AND OUR EPISTEMIC PARADIGM THROUGH THE LITERATURE OF
JIM HARRISON

“If you can’t understand a shark or hyena you probably don’t have a shot at understanding yourself.”

–Jim Harrison, “The Last Good Country”

“Tomorrow, we’ll deconstruct how dolphins play.”

–Greg Keeler, “Poetry Lesson”

Natural Sensibilities: An Introduction to Jim Harrison

Jim Harrison is a critically-acclaimed contemporary American writer whose work has served to deconstruct traditionally-based Western constructs of nature while simultaneously reinventing nature and, by so doing, how we think about and interact with ourselves, our environment, and our existence. Having several volumes of poetry, a wide-ranging collection of novels and novellas, myriad essays, and block-buster screenplays to his credit (a list which is still growing), Harrison works extensively with the subject of nature in his literature.

By means of creating a mythological landscape (i.e., myth-making), Harrison assists his readers in suspending their disbelief of what is possible in life within the paradigm of what conventionally thinking Westerners might refer to as “the natural world,” “nature,” or “the laws of nature.” In so doing, Harrison does not confine himself

within the episteme of science or the institutionalized theology of popular religions, but, rather, reinvents and broadens our perceptions of nature and existence and, consequently, our understanding of ourselves and our environment. The outcome of Harrison's insight and his sharing of it through literary artistry is a liberative and transformative experience for the average Western reader, addressing psychological, spiritual, emotional, and physical concerns of self and society.

Described by Kay Bonnetti, founder and director of American Audio Prose Library, as one of America's "most original writers, a poetic experimentalist who brings to his novels his gift of compression and precision of language" (Bonnetti), Harrison was born into an agricultural family in the American Midwest (Michigan); and, his rural roots factor heavily into his use of image and landscape. Though the author is by no means "regional" in scope, "I am no more a 'rural' writer than some New York writers are 'New York'" (Bonnetti Interview) and his work does not, thematically and structurally, center itself upon a rural landscape, there is not a single piece of Harrison's literature that I'm aware of in which Harrison does not include a variety of connections and representations to what is conventionally deemed to be "the natural world." Indeed, at the crux of Harrison's manner of looking at nature is the notion that human beings, themselves, are every bit as 'natural' as a tree, a river, or, for example, a wolf, an animal for which Harrison possesses a special affinity and about which he has written both a novel (*Wolf*, 1971) and a screenplay (*Wolf*, 1994) that served to represent the commonly repressed and denied inherent, wolf-like qualities within human beings—both male and female.

Similar to Zen-like ways of thinking, by which Harrison has been noticeably

influenced, Harrison, in short, to use language in a manner communicative of conventional, traditionally-based understandings of nature, conceives of human beings and nature to exist as an organic synthesis, deeming the concept in the West of “Nature” as the Other to be an abominable falsity. The corollary of Harrison’s view is that thinking to the contrary, so commonplace in Western culture, is the source of many of our neuroses, breakdowns, and illnesses, especially as related to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual states.

Zen in Nature: Harrison and the Literary Manifestation of Zen

Harrison, throughout his own healing process, engaged in over seven years of intensive psychoanalysis, the gained psychological awareness and underpinnings being reflected in much of his literature. Furthermore, as earlier noted, the author has participated extensively in the study and practice of Zen Buddhism, though it is worth noting that Harrison, in fact, does not think of himself as a Zen Buddhist:

I do not remotely consider myself a Zen Buddhist, as that is too ineptly convenient, and a specific barrier for one whose lifelong obsession has been his art rather than his religion. Someone like Robert Aitken Roshi is a Zen Buddhist. I’m still a fool. (*After Ikkyu* xiii)

Notwithstanding this claim, any study of Harrison makes it clearly apparent that the philosophy and teachings of Zen Buddhism, which Harrison considers in his own life to be more of an “attitude” than a spiritual practice, have had an enormously therapeutic and

restorative effect in the author's life:

(Harrison on Zen) I practiced because I value life, and this seems to me to be the best way to get at the heart of the matter. We are more than dying flies in a shithouse, though we are that too. There are hundreds of ways to tip off a cushion and only one way to sit there. Zen is a vehicle of reality, and I see almost as much of it in Wordsworth as I do in Ch'an texts. (*After Ikkyu* vii)

Most telling, is the manner in which the Zen philosophy manifest in Harrison's literature relates to an understanding of nature. Zen practices the encouragement of a letting go of the ego, the "self," by which a restorative synthesis with what *is* occurs, what *is* often being what we would conventionally refer to in the West as "nature." Zen allows for a releasing, a breaking down of the constructs between human beings and what they have identified as "nature" into a synthesis. This synthesis, in Zen thought, is the reality of our existence and the environment's. An example of a Zen poem from the Japanese master, Basho, most famous for his *hakkai* (or "haiku") verse, is especially useful here in gaining a sense of the manifestation of nature within Zen literature:

The cry of the cicada
Gives no sign
That presently it will die. (*Ueda* 10)

Harrison ultimately published his own collection of Zen-influenced verse: *After Ikkyu* (Shambhala Press, 1996). *After Ikkyu*, perhaps my favorite collection of Harrison's poetry, reveals much of the author's philosophy concerning nature and humanity. Here, perhaps more than in any other work of Harrison's, we discover Harrison's synthetic view of humanity and nature and gain the sense that in learning to perceive his existence

in such a way was, in fact, the author's salvation.

In *After Ikkyu*, for example, Harrison makes an explicit reference to the Judeo-Christian theological construct maintaining that nature and all the creatures within it exist in relation to human beings as the "Other." Along with equally making explicit his intense dislike of this construct, Harrison makes implicit the unhealthy dichotomy that currently exists between human beings and nature as a result of this view of nature supported by the Judeo-Christian Tradition:

It wasn't until the Sixth Century that the Christians/decided animals weren't part of the kingdom of heaven./Hoof, wing, and paw can't put money in the collection plate./These lunatic shit-brained fools excluded our beloved creatures./Theologians and accountants, the same thing really,/join evangelists on television, shadowy as viruses. (*After Ikkyu* 36)

In contrast, within *Ikkyu*, Harrison suggests his alternative, more synthetic conception of humanity, nature, and existence: "Not here and now but now and here./If you don't know the difference/is a matter of life and death, get down/naked on bare knees in the snow/and study the ticking of your watch" (*Ikkyu* 14).

Myth and the Reinvention of Nature

Though Harrison's imagining of humanity and nature is succinctly captured within his Zen-influenced work, Harrison's Zen poetry is still somewhat difficult to grasp for the average reader, due, to no small degree, to its Zen-influenced style and content. (Zen being, in itself, too abstruse for many to comprehend; so, for example, there exists

“Buddhism” for the masses and “Zen Buddhism” for those with the intellect necessary to grasp it.) The manifestation of nature as a central theme in Harrison’s literature, however, is by no means limited to his Zen-influenced poetry. Indeed, Zen-influenced verse simply provided the prolific author with yet an additional and particularly effective means of conveying his alternative philosophy pertaining to nature and humanity. In fact, Harrison’s synthetic understanding of humanity and nature and his profound insight into existence is manifest in all of his literature, the complete body of which serves to deconstruct, in particular, the Judeo-Christian construct of nature and, therefore, the secular notion of “Nature,” which arguably, as aforementioned, has acted as a replacement construct for what heretofore had been “God.”

On a popular level, Harrison’s most noted work, the novella *Legends of the Fall* (later turned into a Hollywood film by Tri-Star Pictures in 1994), captured Harrison’s alternative, synthetic view of humanity and nature on a broad palette incorporating myth and Native American cultural elements. The protagonist, Tristan, is himself the very embodiment of Harrison’s syncretic conception.

Though Tristan, unbridled by civil society’s constructs, comes across at the surface level as more “primitive,” or, as Freudian theory might suggest, strictly representative of the “Id,” the character, though all of these, is really far more complex than a hasty psychoanalytic interpretation can offer. Tristan, along with being “wild” and driven by “passions,” as he is clearly characterized in both the novella and cinematic portrayal, is additionally learned, cultivated, and possessing of an intelligence, intuitive and otherwise, that is seemingly supernatural.

Ironically, what creates these “supernatural,” heroic, and loveable qualities in Tristan is the fact that the character does not live within or by the conventional constructs of the Western World—most tellingly, the construct that figures nature as something other than himself. Even when the character dies, for example, his grave (a superficial barrier which would have created both literally and also figuratively a boundary of artifice between Tristan and the natural world) is emphatically put forth by Harrison as being of no consequence. Indeed, *of particular consequence* is the fact that Tristan has no marked grave, and, in death (a scene represented in the film as an elderly Tristan experiencing a fatal encounter with an enraged grizzly bear in which the two fiercely fight), has seemingly vanished, or, perhaps better said, just transitioned into another form of existence, a process which Harrison makes come across as being completely natural. The emphasis, therefore, put forth here by Harrison is that Tristan’s death and subsequent undocumented decomposition are representative of a “natural” and, therefore, “good” death:

Tristan died in 1963. The moon of the popping trees. He was last seen up in the North Country, where the hunting was still good. His grave is unmarked, but it does not matter. He had always lived in the borderland anyway, somewhere between this world and the Other. It was a good death. (script, *Legends of the Fall*, Tri-Star 1994)

Tristan, it seems, intuitively senses what is “natural” within himself and within others: man, woman, child, or beast. Accordingly, Tristan lives by what he feels and senses in this regard. This is not to say he is thoughtless or lacking in intellect; to the

contrary, one gets the sense that Tristan is possessed of a very intelligent mind, which he deftly uses as one would a handy tool for his survival. But directing his behavior is something more than feeling, although it is that, too. Directing his behavior is something seemingly mysterious, even possessed of supernatural insight. What is implied in *Legends of the Fall*, in fact, as motivating this enigmatic character's behavior is what might be called an unobstructed human condition, that is, in Tristan's case, a man behaving "naturally," with no awareness really within himself of there being any division between man and nature.

It is here, in the peculiar characterization of Tristan, that Harrison most notably engages in mythmaking. How Tristan senses reality, the fact that we are lead to comprehend how this character's life is experienced in such a way as to be more than is conventionally perceived, leads us to infer a deeper, more complex existence that we are, by our nature, a part of, but, somehow alienated from. Within the mythological framework of the novel, it might be said that this "Other World" with which Tristan is so familiar and that increasingly comes across as being mythological in scope is, in fact, what Harrison is putting forth as being our natural state of existence from which we have grown estranged.

The average Westerner's sensibilities, for example, so well represented by every other character in *Legends* excepting the singular, full-blood, Native American character, "One Stab," are clearly seen as being deeply troubled by any natural impulses and feelings arising within them; whereas, in contrast, Tristan seems perfectly at ease with such "primal" instincts and has the courage to act upon them. The result is a truly

liberated character in Tristan whose behavior in life becomes the stuff of “legends” :
 “Some people hear their own inner-voices with great clearness, and they live by what they hear. Such people become crazy, but they become, *legends*.” (script, *Legends*, Tri-Star 1994).

Indeed, even pertaining to madness, in his portrait of Tristan and by noting the manner in which Tristan is perceived and handled by authorities busily engaged in the senseless horrors of WWI, Harrison seems to suggest and even celebrate “madness” and so-called “mad” behavior as being natural and implicitly mocks the notion of sanity as being represented by the type of behavior sanctioned by Western decorum and social normalcy:

Then Tristan went mad and there are still a very few old veterans up in Canada that remember his vengeance, because he was captured and restrained before it reached full flower. Tristan and Noel first feigned new seriousness as soldiers and volunteered for the scouts on nightly reconnaissance missions. At the end of three nights seven blond scalps hung in various stages of drying from their tent pole. On the fourth night Noel was fatally wounded and Tristan reached camp at mid-morning with Noel over the pommel of his saddle. He rode past crowds of soldiers to his tent where he laid Noel on his cot and poured brandy down his lifeless throat. He sang a Cheyenne medicine song One Stab had taught him and a group of soldiers gathered around the tent. Alfred was brought on a stretcher by the commanding officer to reason with Tristan. When they opened the tent flap Tristan had made a necklace of the scalps and had laid his skinning knife and rifle

across Noel's chest. They put him in a straitjacket and sent him off to a hospital in Paris where he escaped within a week. (*Legends of the Fall* 217)

On the subject of nature and mental health, Harrison is delivering a great deal in this passage—most profoundly, a challenge to the conventional behaviors accepted as normative and sane sanctioned by nations with troops engaged in hideous battles on the frontlines during WWI. By depicting Tristan in the above manner, Harrison challenges the conventionally accepted notion of “sanity” that condemns Tristan's behavior and confines him to a straitjacket and presents for the reader an alternative notion of what type of behavior can be considered as sane and normative.

Tellingly, in the case referred to here, Tristan's behavior is indicative of the “conventional” Native American wartime practices taught to him by One Stab; and, we can infer that within the Native American cultural paradigm Tristan's actions would not merely be “condoned” but, in stark contrast, lauded for their bravery and deft fighting skill. (Incidentally, this particular facet of Harrison's text makes an excellent case in point for Harrison's adroitness as a writer of postmodern literature.)

In probing this example, it furthermore needs to be noted how, indifferent to the ideological principles around which the war was ostensibly being fought (principles that motivated Tristan's Harvard-educated, younger brother, Samuel, to eagerly enlist in the war that lead him to his death), Tristan did not seriously engage in battle on the front *until it became personal*, that is, until Samuel was killed in action by the Germans and Tristan became deeply moved to seek vengeance. Therefore, all of Tristan's behavior for which he was placed in a straitjacket and institutionalized is, in reality, suggested by Harrison as

being sane and the only *natural thing* for a person, untainted by ideologies and true to his or her nature, to do in such insane circumstances.

The operative subtext of this critical experience in Tristan's life can be said to be suggestive of the notion, again, of Tristan, amidst the chaos of WWI, simply staying in touch with his natural self. Actually, in the case of Tristan, it is an oversimplification to say that he is "staying in touch" with his natural self; Tristan is, *always*, his natural self, which, said another way, means that he is himself as a human being, as a man, without any adulteration or misdirection caused by Western cultural ideas and practices. Living in such a way is how Tristan survives, no, thrives; and, his motivations often transcend anything that would be defined as "normal" or even conceivable by conventional Western cultural standards.

Such an "abnormal" basis for Tristan's behavior is especially evident in his relationship with Susannah, Samuel's betrothed, who, in the event of Samuel's death, ultimately marries Tristan and, later, Tristan's older brother and foil, Alfred. Despite her engagement to Samuel, which is made implicitly clear as having been a marriage of convenience and a love more of the idea of each other than, in contrast, the natural attraction and reality between the two of them, Susannah, in truth, loves Tristan and feels a passion for him unprecedented in her life. Tristan, to the contrary, is not in love with Susannah, and marries her following Samuel's death in an attempt to "bring back Samuel" :

Tristan and Susannah scarcely had left their compartment on the train trip which Isabel (Tristan's mother) thought was indecent and which enlivened

Alfred's secret jealousy. Tristan had in mind the making of a son to replace his brother and that was the sole purpose of his marriage, in essence a cruel impulse he knew, but could not help himself. (*Legends* 224)

The reaction of Tristan's older brother Alfred to Tristan's treatment of Susannah is indicative of the type of incomprehension experienced by the typical, or, in Alfred's case, highly cultivated (a noteworthy distinction actually, given the point I'm trying to make) Westerner in the face of Tristan's behavior. Alfred, secretly jealous of his brother, truly loves Susannah, wishes to marry her, and generally "do right" by her. The conversation between the two brothers the morning after Tristan and Susannah had sex for the first time (prior to their marriage) is revealing of this common misunderstanding of Tristan's behavior by others, even those who are closest to him:

ALFRED. (sternly) When are you planning to be married?

TRISTAN. (slightly offended) Good morning.

ALFRED. (indignant) Damn you Tristan. You will marry her.

TRISTAN. (with sarcasm, and showing his disdain for conventionality) Make 'an honest woman' of her?

ALFRED. (enraged) Yes! God damn you to hell, Tristan. ...Do you love her? Or, did you seduce her just to spite me?

TRISTAN. That's not what I did. (script, *Legends*, Tri-Star 1994)

In this heated exchange between Alfred and Tristan, Alfred, naturally, assumes his brother is simply taking sexual advantage of Susannah's love for him, and while Tristan may indeed be attracted to Susannah, he does not love her, and his intentions for her, as

earlier noted, are of an intensely personal and mythological nature: Tristan wishes to resurrect his beloved younger brother, Samuel (whom he feels he has forsaken by failing to protect Samuel on the front in WWI), by producing a child through Susannah.

How should we think about this? Is such an intention not surreal? Does it not transcend and refigure how one perceives existence? Clearly, such thinking is beyond the conventionally accepted paradigms of science and empirically-based epistememes; and, it broadens and opens up how we imagine and think of our existence. It is, therefore, substantively mythological. That such intentions drive Tristan's behavior is, furthermore and more to the point, indicative of a conception of nature and what is natural for human beings beyond the confines of popular epistemic structures and the paradigms they engender. Maybe, through Tristan's character, Harrison is trying to point out an alternative perception of reality, the manner in which one person interacts with this reality, and the effect this individual has upon others with whom he or she interacts.

A Native American Underpinning

In creating the character of Tristan, it's no accident on the part of the author that Tristan is more the product of One Stab's ("One Stab" being a Native American character central to the novella) child-rearing than that of Tristan's own father, Col. William Ludlow's. One Stab, you might say, served as a somewhat atypical "nanny" for Tristan as a child; and, the fact that Tristan was affectionately nurtured by the elderly Native American and imbued with Native American conceptions of nature and existence is indicative of Harrison's own deep fondness for Native American cultural traditions and

the manner in which these traditions deconstruct our traditionally-held notions of ourselves and nature. It is One Stab, for example, who teaches Tristan “the great joy of the kill, when the hunter cuts out its (the animal’s) warm heart, holding it in his hands, setting its spirit free” (script, *Legends*, Tri-Star 1994); and, it is One Stab who possesses a clairvoyant, paranormal relationship with Tristan that allows the elder Native American to sense Tristan’s state-of-being from far away distances.

Though Harrison creates a relationship between One Stab and Tristan that clearly comes across as mythic, it is arguable, in accordance with Harrison’s philosophy of humanity and nature, that Stab and Tristan’s relationship, on a more complex level, is meant to suggest what is possible, that is, what exists when two individuals simply share an existence unfettered by unnatural constructs, allowing each to access his or her own natural state and the natural laws of existence and, thereby, communicate in ways unknown to conventional Westerners, who, in their embracing of Western social and cultural norms, have inured themselves to what is possible in their natural state and ignorantly and simply refer to all such phenomena as “myth.” (It should be noted that some traction for such phenomena, as is manifest in the work of Harrison mentioned here, is being gained in literary studies, where this paranormal type of behavior and experience is currently critically referred to as “magical realism.”)

Tristan’s behavior is so unconventional, for example, that more than likely, as viewed within the framework of Western psychology, Tristan would be diagnosed as being “dysfunctional,” “neurotic”—even “psychotic.” But through this enigmatic character, Harrison seems to be asking us whether or not cultural behavior common to

Native Americans, such as “the vision quest” for example, are so-called psychotic events, natural experiences, or both, and not unhealthy, but healthy and necessary in the development of a human being. What is possibly being revealed in a Native American vision quest, for example, or in behavior such as Tristan’s, is a more profound aspect of life and existence than our culture is willing to condone, due to the perceived loss of empirically-based productivity which our empirically-based, economically-motivated society might suffer should individuals explore this facet of their existence.

Indeed, Harrison’s work suggests a culture in the West encouraging of a construct of nature as Other existing in the name of economic productivity, with the conventional thinking emerging from this paradigm suggesting that all that is natural must be “managed” or otherwise controlled within individuals and society lest we lose footing in the global economic competition: “Life, this vastly mysterious process to which our culture inures us lest we become useless citizens” (Theory and Practice 15).

The Tristan character, for instance, in contrast to that of his older brother and foil, “Alfred,” apparently has no interest in an economic manner of thinking about life; such a paradigm of thought as a motivation for his behavior seems never to enter Tristan’s mind excepting the financial acquisitions requisite to his own survival or to those for whom he feels a responsibility. Tristan’s characterization in this manner is suggestive of the idea that any narrowly pursued economic focus by an individual or a society is, in the opinion of Harrison, neurotic. Tristan, for example, acquires his wealth in lump sums, much in the same way in which a hungry predator would occasionally kill, eat heavily, and subsist for a while off the spoils. The following sentence taken from the text of *Legends of the*

Fall accurately illustrates these seemingly rapacious qualities of Tristan, illuminating his bestial but, as put forth by Harrison, natural and sensible behavior: “Tristan was a true carnivore who could store up and either ride or sleep or drink and whore for days” (*Legends* 197).

This animal metaphor, perhaps exaggerated by Harrison for effect, is, however, apropos, as it represents precisely what Harrison is attempting to convey through his literature about the nature of human beings: i.e., we are animals; we are natural and, as Harrison puts it, “fellow creatures” with other animals of the earth; and, to deny this about ourselves is to lie to ourselves and, at our peril, deny our very existence.

A Necessary Aside: Nature, Native Americans, and “Aesthetic Victimry”

Continuing to explore the Tristan character, it can be seen how Harrison, along with being influenced by Zen, has equally been influenced by Native American tradition, culture, spirituality, and thought. In light of this observation, something worth examining in the relationship between Tristan and One Stab, theoretically speaking, is the link between the popular construct of “Nature” in the West and how this construct influences Westerners’ construct of Native Americans. Generally speaking, Harrison’s consideration of Native Americans and Native American culture, for example, is sympathetic, uncritical, and lionizing: a position that well-regarded Native American scholar, Gerald Vizenor, might suggest as being indicative of typing Native Americans as “romantic victims.” In a broader sense, as understood by Vizenor, Harrison’s perception might be identified as a manifestation of a cultural framing of Native Americans typical amongst

Westerners and linked to what Vizenor refers to as “aesthetic vitemry” (Vizenor 12).

The native, in Harrison’s literature, is always seen as being representative of the author’s own particular view of nature and humanity, not just manifesting it, but serving as a pointed example of it. Therefore, what we have is Harrison’s reinvention of our understanding of nature in Western culture and the author’s concurrent appropriation of Native American cultural viewpoints to lend agency to his position.

For the Native American, theoretically, no such viewpoint similar to Harrison’s could exist, as these cultures maintained no idea or construct of nature to reinvent in the first place. Harrison’s validation of Native American culture, while congruent with his own manifested understanding and construct of nature, is grossly generalizing and delimiting of native culture in general, again suggestive of Vizenor’s idea of tragic vitemry in its lamenting the death of native culture, as if, as Vizenor puts it, there is no “survivance” in such a viewpoint, no chance for natives to possess alternative or changing worldviews:

Perhaps the best thing I’ve learned/from these apparently cursed and
bedraggled/Indians I’ve studied all these years/is how to die. Last year I sat
beside/a seven-year-old Hopi girl as she sang/her death song in a slight
quavering/voice. Who among us whites, child/or adult, will sing while we die?

(Theory and Practice 15).

Harrison, in his appropriation of Native Americans, for example, does not mention the literature or ideas of contemporary Native Americans like Sherman Alexie, who is vociferous about his dislike of the delimiting notions of Native Americans as

“traditional” with a mandate to grow long hair (if you’re a man) and dress in traditional clothing, talk like Harrison’s fictional character One Stab, and “fancy dance” if you’re to be considered native or, more specifically and to the point, “Indian.” Why, Alexie suggests, as evidenced by his various lectures around the country, can’t natives also break with tradition, be “progressive,” and not be lumped into the stereotyped way of existing as the “traditional, full-blood ‘Indian’?”

Death, Sex, and Sensibility

Reaching further into Harrison’s literature, the author’s synthetic view of humanity, nature, and existence is everywhere evident in his voluminous collection of poetry and essays. You might say that the author, in living his life, maintains his own “theory and practice of nature” or, said another way, of life, his literature manifesting his theory and his life his practice.

This particular paradigm of Harrison’s is well-developed in his collection of verse titled *The Theory and Practice of Rivers And New Poems*. Within “The Theory and Practice of Rivers,” the title poem for the collection, Harrison’s lived synthesis with nature is written out in its most explicit and eloquent form:

I’ve decided to make up my mind/about nothing, to assume the water mask,/to
finish my life disguised as a creek,/an eddy, joining at night the full,/sweet flow,
to absorb the sky,/to swallow the heat and cold, the moon/and the stars, to
swallow myself/in ceaseless flow. (*Theory and Practice* 63)

Written at a time of great despair following the tragic death of his young niece

(fifteen years old), Harrison's *The Theory and Practice of Rivers And New Poems* represents the author's struggle to find survival in nature, to even discover, for instance, his late niece within the snow, the water, the ether of the swamp:

Near the estuary north of Guilford/my brother recites the Episcopalian/burial service over his dead daughter./Gloria, as in Gloria in excelsis./I cannot bear this passion and courage;/my eyes turn toward the swamp/and sea, so blurred they'll never quite/clear themselves again. The inside of the eye,/vitreous humor, is the same pulp found/inside the squid. I can see Gloria/in the snow and in the water.

She lives/in the snow and water and in my eyes./This is a song for her. (*Theory 5*)

The ability of "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" to manifest so well Harrison's synthetic perception of nature and humanity lies within the poem's sine qua non—the death of Harrison's niece or, more specifically, death itself. In "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" death is seen by Harrison in a manner similar to the romantic tradition expressed by Whitman in "Leaves of Grass," as something profoundly natural and, unique to Harrison—highly sensuous:

...to understand a man, or woman, growing/old with eagerness you first consider/ the sensuality of death, an unacknowledged/surprise to most. In nature the physiology/has heat and color, beast and tree/saying aloud the wonder of death;.../ (*Theory 23-24*)

It is in the perception of death that the synthetic understanding of existence Harrison evokes is most evident and, Harrison might argue, most denied by the mainstream culture in the West.

Similar to how Harrison conveys his philosophy of nature and humanity through his celebration of sensuality made manifest in his extensive writing on sex, eating, drinking, hunting, and fishing, death too is identified as being sensuous, be it painful, as is commonly understood, or pleasurable—a possibility often repressed, denied, or overlooked by Westerners for its extreme distance from the conventional manner of understanding death as being something to dread and, accordingly, to avoid. In “The Theory and Practice of Rivers,” therefore, is where Harrison makes his most revealing statement and suggestion concerning the possible *pleasure* of death, and even to how “nature herself” allows for and makes special provisions for this natural event that is part and parcel of life and existence:

I am trying to become alert enough to live./Yesterday after the blizzard I hiked far back/in a new swamp and found an iceless/pond connected to the river by a small creek./Against deep white snow and black trees/there was a sulfurous fumarole, rank and sharp/in cold air. The water bubbled up brown,/then spread in turquoise to deep black,/without the track of a single mammal to drink./This was nature’s own, a beauty too strong/for life; a place to drown not live. (*Theory* 28)

Death, then, is “natural,” a part of “nature,” as common as breathing. So why is it then that we in the West fear and even loathe death? Legislate against our engaging in death as an act of our own volition? Could our attitude in the U.S. toward death, for instance, have something to do with our popularly understood construct of nature? And could this attitude, for example, stem from a misinterpretation of the Old Testament proclamation concerning the physicality of our existence?

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

(Genesis 4:17, 18, & 19)

Why is it that this passage typically projects a negative and foreboding connotation, as if coming from the earth and returning to the earth is something to dread and lament? Why has this passage been interpreted in such a manner? Consider what the consequences might be if an alternative interpretation that celebrates this aspect of our existence were to gain traction; and, take into account, for example, this passage taken from the Sukhavati and read aloud by Joseph Campbell in a production by Mystic Fire Video based upon Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyer's famous interview documented as *The Power of Myth* (1988): "The bliss of relationship to the "Mother Goddess. ...And man was not breathed into the earth; man came out of the earth" (Sukhavati, *The Power of Myth*). Keep in mind that this statement is pronounced in a tone of awe and joy. How ironic the two depictions of human creation, their denotation and connotation. Can't it be said that the two viewpoints denote the same reality but simply maintain a radically different connotation with equally radical consequences?

Similar to the death experience, so well illustrated in "The Theory and Practice of Rivers," what other aspects of living manifest themselves in Harrison's literature as being representative of his philosophy concerning nature and humanity? Said another way, what other facets of life does Harrison explore in order to deconstruct popular perceptions and constructs of nature and simultaneously reinvent our understanding of the term? As aforementioned the author joyously explores the traditionally taboo subject

of sex, along with eating and drinking, hunting and fishing, and sundry other pursuits revitalizing to the body, spirit, and mind. Generally speaking, the author, true to his philosophy, is quite adept at creating a synthesis of sensuality and clearly sees how the sensuality associated with eating, drinking, sexuality, and even reading are intrinsically linked:

I love to cook, hunt, fish, read good books, and not incidentally try to write them. Even the occasional glories of our sexual lives can be drawn into this picture. All of our sense and passion merge because we are one person and it's best not to neglect any of these passions if we wish to fully live our lives. (The Raw and the Cooked 3)

As written by Harrison, sex, eating, and drinking, for example, are nature in action: widespread behaviors ubiquitous amongst humans but not at all the less left out of the mainstream cultural discourse for being so. Sex, the fundamental behavior sustaining human existence about which Harrison writes humorously, joyously, and extensively, is an important vehicle for the author to convey his philosophy because of the rife, deeply entrenched cultural practices reflective of traditional understandings of nature associated with our sexual behavior which so inhibit human beings in the West from freely engaging in sexual activity. As nature is traditionally understood—i.e., as the Other—as a primal aspect of our personality which we should inhibit and repress, so the “sex-drive” is considered a fundamental urging of this primal aspect of ourselves, i.e., a “natural instinct,” which we must either deny or repress. In contrast, for Harrison, sex seems to be a human behavior which gets at essential aspects of who and what we are, true elements,

at least, of how we feel and why that, while not necessarily acted upon, are denied and/or repressed at our peril.

You might say, in Harrison's work, there is something of the popularized liberative notions of human sexuality concomitant with the sexual revolution within the U.S. during the 60s and early 70s, but Harrison's explication of sexual behavior and his matching commentary evince a more "earthy" essential component to human sexual behavior which, in turn, makes our traditional, socially accepted attitudes toward sex seem inane and artificial.

Second only to sex, eating and drinking likewise play an important role in both manifesting Harrison's reinvention of nature and also in his refutation of a culture that, clearly in Harrison's opinion, maintains as its primary motivation the creation of economically-profitable human beings: "producers," if you will:

As a poet I am the bird, not the ornithologist, and I am not going to spend my increasingly precious days stuffing leaks in an educational system as perverse and sodden as the mercantile society for which it supplies faithful and ignorant fodder.
(294)

Precisely because Harrison rejects the notion of being a "highly functional" human being in the conventional sense, that is in the name of profit until our dying day, at which moment, it is hoped few will spend much time mourning, as this may interfere with the daily work routine, and, hence, "productivity," the author unapologetically advocates eating, drinking, and fornicating with gusto and intemperance.

Nowhere is Harrison's "indulgent" behavior better exemplified than in his

collection of culinary essays, *The Raw and the Cooked*. Within this savory compilation, Harrison's prologue, "The 10,000-Calorie Diet" best serves up his "rationale" for what some might refer to as excessive hedonism, while Harrison might simply ascribe the behavior to "living as a natural human being" free from the constructs of an empirically-based, economically-motivated society. The prologue begins as follows, noting the jovial author's observations as he joyfully "makes progress" on his "10,000-calorie-a-day-diet plan":

It is easy to remember the cheekbones that once emerged, not surprisingly, above my cheeks. In my unpublished manuscript *Zen Sex*, I counseled men to pad their boney protuberances to avoid bruising women. ...The main thrust of the chapter, however, was a ten-thousand-calorie-a-day diet so that boney lovers might not injure one another....

...Before being sidetracked, I mentioned the ten-thousand-calorie compassion diet, assuming the one you love deserves it, and this includes any of the three gender combinations. ...The diet itself is a cross-cultural barrage of feast dishes including cassoulet, feijoada from Brazil—the black-bean stew that contains a dozen smoked meats—daub made of hindquarters of Charolais and a case of good Burgundy, a Michigan doe for six, a Thracian lamb for four, a Georgia piglet for three, a wild turkey stuffed with fruit and sausage for two, the ten-pound rice – and-fish Sumo stew for one. I forgot the choucroute garnie made of pig hocks, seven varieties of sausage, potatoes, and sauerkraut for seven, and the bollito misto for six or nine, whatever....

...Now the new you is on your kindly way after thirty days, having gained at least fifteen pounds because you have also eaten all the leftovers. You will immediately notice that women are now likely to tweak at your ears, tug at your wattles, back up to you like a sleepy truck to a loading platform. ...In short, everyone is more amenable, gentler, if not actually happier.

...Of course, there are specific drawbacks. Last year I attended the funeral of a southern writer of no consequence who had weighed more than four hundred pounds previous to death,....” (The Raw and the Cooked 7, 8, 9)

Clearly, Harrison suggests the overlooked positive consequences of an indulgent life, but what does lionizing such unconventional behavior, what many might deem to be “self-destructive” say about the author’s relationship to nature? Implicit in all of his work centered upon the joys—and pains—of eating, drinking, fornicating, and the like is the notion that such behavior is somehow “natural” and, therefore, “normal.” Only most of us, ascribing to the somewhat *unnatural* standards of normalcy in Western culture, (represented by radical weight-loss programs, for example, and body fat calculation to determine our food choice)—to our detriment—don’t view it that way. The 10,000 Calorie-a-day-diet plan, you might say, is representative of the joyous possibilities of life relished and desired by our natural-self that our culture has traditionally either oppressed, encouraged us to repress, or inured us to by means of a cultivated and gradual desensitization process.

Of course, this is not to say that a 10,000-Calorie-a-day-diet adhered to daily is “normal”; but, adherence to a regimented 2000-calorie-a-day-diet plan (as is

recommended by the F.D.A.) for the rest of one's existence is just as abnormal. In fact, it could be argued that the occasional 10,000-calorie-a-day-diet is natural. Just ask a human being who's not sure when he or she will eat again and, furthermore, not sure when he or she will be able to afford such an indulgent eating experience. If nothing else, the sensual effect of Harrison's over-the-top diet—both pleasurable and painful—reminds us of the fact that as humans, we are, in fact, sensual beings capable of experiencing much more than that for which the conventional standards of our cultural decorum will typically allow.

Harrison's work is, indeed, liberative in relationship to these fundamental human behaviors and their attendant desires and impulses; and, it is my theory that the liberative influence of Harrison's work related to our "more base" behavior is intertwined with how the author's literature fosters our own reinvention of nature, our relationship to it, and, consequently, our relationship to ourselves and what we conceive of as existence. Harrison, for example, makes no discrepancy between his enjoyment of "fine art" and fine food; to enjoy both, he suggests, is natural: "Not that much is finer than a morning spent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Musee d'Orsay in Paris followed by a good lunch" (*Raw and Cooked* 3).

While it is true that these gustatory and aesthetic activities, along the line of spending a morning at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York followed "by a good lunch," are commonly identified as being "high-brow" pastimes or representative of the "fine," for Harrison, implicit in such activities, be they involving fine dining, fine art, or engaging in exotic sexual experiences resonant of Vatsyayana's *The Kama Sutra*, is a

search for the genuine or, said another way, the natural: “My search for the genuine in the food in my life came about slowly and certainly wasn’t a product of how I grew up in the upper Midwest, a region notorious for its bad food” (*Raw and Cooked* 2). Activities such as dining, appreciating fine art, and cultivating a connoisseur’s love of wine, are shown by Harrison not as evil deviations from Biblical tradition fostered along by the devil and they’re also not represented as being “elitist” pursuits; they are simply natural enjoyments motivated by human desire, the absence of which is, according to Harrison’s invention of nature, “unnatural” and therefore injurious to one’s health. To repeat a wonderful aforementioned statement of Harrison’s: “All of our sense and passion merge because we are one person and it’s best not to neglect any of these passions if we wish to fully live our lives” (*The Raw and the Cooked* 3).

So, Harrison then, in short, through his treatment of behavior related to the natural activities of eating, drinking, and sexuality identifies not only traditional, Biblically inspired behavior as being unnatural, but, additionally, the empirically engendered behavior common to the modern secular movement. You might say that Harrison considers both of these paradigms as wholly too restrictive, bankrupt of creativity, and altogether—most importantly—too lacking in validation of life’s inherent sensuality. The upshot is that the conventional human behavior encouraged by both the traditionally-based Judeo-Christian paradigm and also the modern, empirically-based secular paradigm is conceived of as “unnatural” and, therefore, unhealthy.

Empirically-Understood, Economically-Motivated Beings

Parallel with Harrison's synthetic view of nature and humanity central to his work (really the author's Weltanschauung) is what comes across as his principal critique of contemporary Western culture as being a structure in which human beings are viewed as empirically understood beings to be utilized for economic gain existing within a cultural framework that is, itself, predicated upon economic gain and competition. Harrison's position is clear: there is more to life than science in the service of economics; and, many of our contemporary illnesses of mind, body, and spirit stem from a failure to grasp this tenet and a simultaneous lack of awareness to anything in existence beyond that which is posited by the empirical-economic paradigm. Such circumstances are why Harrison embraces "myth-making" as a means of connecting with readers and illuminating his philosophy of nature. Harrison seems to be making an attempt to fill the niche of contemporary artist as mythmaker outlined so well by renowned mythologist, Joseph Campbell:

We have today to learn to get back into accord with the wisdom of nature and realize again our brotherhood with the animals and with the water and the sea.

...How to relate this society with the world of nature and the cosmos. ...We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet.

...The only mythology that is valid today is the mythology of the planet—and we don't have such a mythology. (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, DVD/*The Power of Myth* 40, 30, & 28, respectively)

In illustrating Harrison's movement into myth, consider this passage taken from

“The Theory and Practice of Rivers,” noting, in particular, the manner in which Harrison leads the reader from the drearily dry “reality” constructed through science into an alternative myth, in which life—even in death—is replete with mystery, beauty, and experience far beyond the confining parameters of empiricism:

On waking after the accident/I was presented with the “whole picture”/as they say, magnificently detailed,/a child’s diorama of what life appears to be:/staring at the picture I became drowsy/with relief when I noticed a yellow/dot of light in the lower right-hand corner./I unhooked the machines and tubes and crawled/to the picture, with an eyeball to the dot/of light which turned out to be a miniature/tunnel at the end of which I could see/mountains and stars whirling and tumbling,/sheets of emotions, vertical rivers, upside/down lakes, herds of unknown mammals, birds/shedding feathers and regrowing them instantly,/snakes with feathered heads eating their own shed skins, fish swimming straight up, the bottom of Isaiah’s robe, live whales/on dry ground, lions drinking from a golden/bowl of milk, the rush of night,/and somewhere in this the murmur of gods—/a tree-rubbing-tree music, a sweet howl/of water and rock-grating-rock, fire/hissing from fissures, the moon settled/comfortably on the ground, beginning to roll. (*Theory and Practice* 28 & 29)

Connecting Harrison’s thinking here with the author’s reinvention of nature, is the understanding that it is “unnatural” for human beings to wholly live their lives within such an economically-motivated empirically-structured paradigm. Science serving economics and the application of this theory to the lives of human beings is seen by

Harrison as an abomination, specifically in how such a paradigm robs human beings of their natural sensuality. It's almost as if Harrison is, through his representation of what is natural, stating the familiar cliché that "human beings are not machines," which, interestingly enough, is, theoretically speaking, a strikingly "essentialist" claim.

Machines, as viewed by those whom conventionally construct nature as being delimited by all that is conceived of as being "natural" (i.e., a construct formed by its dependence upon other constructs), are certainly not "natural" as viewed through this conventional framework. Therefore, to treat human beings as such and/or for human beings to treat themselves as such is a violation against what is real, what is natural, and the consequences of such approaches to life are, in addition to garden variety neuroses, a deprived and diminished life.

So, it seems, Harrison figured the best approach to validating his belief in a passionately led life free from mechanistic behavior induced by the modern "machine" of contemporary economic-empiricism and/or artificially constricting, unimaginative, Biblically-based traditional lifestyles was to reinvent our understanding of what is natural and, therefore, our understanding of nature, ourselves, and our existence.

Theorizing "Essentialism"

A useful question to ask, then, is whether or not Harrison maintains a theoretical perspective in his approach to experiencing, understanding, and communicating nature or, conversely, a perspective that is identified by theorists as "essentialist." Is Harrison a myth-maker who, in the process of writing literature, creates a mythos which gives nature

and what we consider to be natural an alternative understanding? The irony here, theoretically speaking, is that if this is so, and Harrison, through myth-making, reinvents nature and, in so doing, casts off the “artificial constructs” of the empirical-economic machine and the Judeo-Christian tradition in favor of a more “grounded” and essential understanding of ourselves as beings who are fundamentally a part of a world known as “natural,” has Harrison not created his own construct of nature? Of course, it is only a “construct” as seen through the lens of poststructural theorists; as Harrison, himself, sees and writes nature, the author’s representation of the natural is equally his representation of the “real.”

That being said, it is likely that poststructural theorists would likely identify Harrison’s ideas about nature and what is natural as invented “constructs,” as despite Harrison’s use of myth to redefine how human beings perceive nature and themselves, from a theoretical perspective, the author’s conviction is clearly “essentialist.” Perhaps even, Harrison is suggesting, by sharing his beliefs about life, the natural, and nature through myth, that myth itself is a natural process and state of existence for humanity, a theory, if you will, or a belief backed by a conviction based upon notions of humanity, myth, and nature, i.e. what is real or “reality.” Put another way, the mythmaking Harrison engages in throughout his literature, whether real or not in an empirical sense, is, indeed, real nonetheless, as it exists within the imaginations of human beings and forms their understanding of existence and of themselves; therefore, the need for myth, our making of myths and their effect upon us is natural; and, if we lose touch with this natural

element of mythos in our lives, the loss exists as a deprivation with serious consequences for ourselves as individuals and for the whole of humanity:

MOYERS. What happens when a society no longer embraces a powerful mythology?

CAMPBELL. What we've got on our hands. If you want to find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read *The New York Times*.

MOYERS. And you'd find?

CAMPBELL. The news of the day, including destructive and violent acts by young people who don't know how to behave in a civilized society. (*The Power of Myth* 8 & 9)

So, myth is a natural phenomenon, without which we are deprived and unhealthy, therefore, theoretically, we exist in a condition in which versions of reality are, in reality, myths, whether these versions of reality be empirically-based, as in the case of secularism supported by science, or spiritually and theologically-based, as in the Judeo-Christian Tradition. This notion, however, as examined through the lens of its own paradigm, is itself a myth. Is it not?

Literature and the Episteme of Sensibility

Clearly not a proponent of cultural and literary theory as a means of explaining our existence and getting in touch with ourselves, Jim Harrison, unlike poststructural theorists, does not propose that we can never know reality but, rather, that reality is far

more complex than our currently understood scientifically-based episteme can ever comprehend, and to get any inkling of reality we must open ourselves to the mysterious nature of life and existence and try to learn to feel and sense reality with our heart, with our soul, or said another way, with our poetic sensibility, an aspect of our being that Harrison argues lies deep and dormant within us all and is the key to our salvation, our preservation, and well-being. In Harrison's way of looking at things, for example, postmodernism, in contrast, is viewed as an "abyss" :

It has become apparent to many that the ultimate disease, the abyss of postmodernism in art and literature, is subjectivity, and that the disease is both sociopathic and terminal. In other words, if the poet or aficionado of consciousness does not own a coequal passion for life herself, the social contract, he better be wary about the abyss he chooses. The obvious traps are the two halves of the brain in incestuous embrace, neurotic noodling, and ordinary spiritual adventurism of the most claustrophobic sort. (*Before Dark* 297)

What Harrison offers, then, in terms of coming to understand nature, ourselves, and existence with greater clarity and insight is not an empirical episteme, but an episteme of sensibility cultivated through an appreciation and engagement with poetry and the arts. (These words are horribly inept at describing what I'm trying to convey here, in the same manner that English is inadequate for articulating the tenets of Zen, the joys of human sexuality, or the myriad variations of snow in the Inuit inhabited northern reaches of the Yukon territory.)

This is not to say, however, that Harrison wholly rejects science; evidence exists

widely throughout his literature to support that Harrison is, in fact, an author appreciative of science. It is just that, perhaps, Harrison perceives science as yet another form of myth, however complex, the details of which the poet likes to play with in his thoughts and imaginings, as he casts about reinventing how we see the world. It is interesting to note, for example, Harrison's use of scientific knowledge in his poem, "Natural World," and how science serves the poet in creating the images necessary to engender the profound impact of his verse. It's as if Harrison, as a poet, is doing the necessary work of giving scientifically-based "facts" meaning by translating this "data" into poetry and, therefore, human insight and understanding:

The earth is almost round. The seas/are curved and hug the earth both/ends are crowned with ice.//The great Blue Whale swims near/this ice, his heart is warm/and weighs two thousand pounds,/his tongue weighs twice as much;/he weighs one hundred fifty tons.//There are so few of him left he often can't find a mate;/he drags his six-foot sex/through icy waters,/flukes spread crashing./His brain is large enough/for a man to sleep in. (*The Shape of the Journey* 86)

Looking at the manner in which Harrison synthesizes, through art, science with poetic sensibility, it might be said that Harrison's work embodies what the late Nobel Prize Laureate, Egyptian Novelist Naguib Mahfouz, declared was necessary for the world's survival and well-being: a synthesis and fruitful co-existence of art, science, and religion:

The progress made by science and technology has not always been negative. It has been of immense service to mankind. Of course, there are some destructive

aspects, but I think that this process of dehumanization can be fought with the aid of two great forces: religion and art. ...I am optimistic that science, guided by a sense of awareness, can constantly adjust its trajectory. Art and religion are there to guide the way. (Interview 3) (Please consider Mahfouz' statement in relation to the aforementioned statements of House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, in regard to religion and the environment. [pp. 20 & 21])

Mahfouz was fully cognizant of the dehumanizing effects of science and technology central to much of Harrison's work; however, Mahfouz was no luddite. Far from it, the celebrated Middle Eastern writer advocated the wise use of science and technology to facilitate life and spread learning and enlightenment, but, always, science and technology were to be accompanied by and harmonized with the humanizing effects of art and religion.

Harrison, by turning science itself into myth, allows for science but in a manner which equally allows for the maintenance of life's mystery, an aspect of existence that Harrison celebrates as being life-affirmative, healing, and rejuvenating. Always, with Harrison, there is the sense of profound humility in the face of life, a testament to the author's erudition and experience. Indeed, nothing seems to possess total sway over Harrison, and it's as if the poet possesses a critical consciousness of subtlety, approximation, and nuance without identifying himself as a postmodernist.

Can one be an essentialist and not subscribe to absolute constructs of "Truth?" Perhaps, if one holds that truth and reality is something beyond language. Such a concept is akin to what contemporary war writer Tim O'Brien suggests in his acclaimed piece of

short fiction, “How to Tell a True War Story,” that truth is something felt at a visceral level and, therefore, the only way in which language can work to convey reality is to evoke feelings commensurate with experience. Therefore, O’Brien’s literature works to evoke feelings in the reader which the author believes are coequal with those experienced by wartime soldiers. In trying to convey the “truth” of combat experience, for example, feelings are all that O’Brien trusts; therefore, O’Brien works to convey the experience of Vietnam through feeling rather than quantitatively-based facts and figures.

Poststructural theory, based-largely upon Saussurian linguistics, maintains that truth cannot be determined because reality as we know it is the result of linguistically fashioned social and cultural constructs. But, what if we could sense something beyond language that language is too clumsy and inept to express? Or, in spite of Saussure’s theory, what if language is logocentric? Harrison might suggest, and I have to agree with him, that similar to so many things in life, language, itself, becomes, for its scholars, as difficult to deconstruct and identify the origins of as does the smallest particle of matter for the most highly competent and lavishly funded physicists. This “reality” concerning the origins of language, of course, is likely the reason why Saussure rejected study directed at the origin of language, the reason being that identifying this origin is as mysterious as getting beyond our universe and the possible myriad universes that lie beyond our own, or, in contrast but expressing the same, breaking apart the smallest particle of matter.

In Harrison’s literature, then, is an opening up of insight, knowledge, and understanding rather than a closing down. A way of thinking that broadens rather than

narrows.

A useful example in gaining an understanding of how Harrison expands rather than ossifies thought while evoking an essentialist sense of reality involves his approach to gender related insight. The writer has often been characterized pejoratively, for example, by critics as being unnecessarily macho; but, this uncritical reaction is just a misunderstanding from a standpoint that rejects authenticity for fear of its political consequences. In Harrison's poem, "Porpoise," for example, the seemingly sexist content is, in fact, not sexist at all:

Every year, when we're fly fishing for tarpon/off Key West, Guy insists that porpoises/are good luck. But it's not so banal/as catching more fish or having a fashion/model fall out of the sky lightly on your head,/or at your feet depending on certain/preferences. It's what porpoises do to the ocean./You see a school making love off Boca Grande,/the baby with his question mark staring at us a few feet from the boat./Porpoises dance for as long as they live./You can do nothing for them./They alter the universe. (*Theory* 47)

In "Porpoise," Harrison simply makes reference to the image of a fashion model falling out of the sky, "lightly," to evince the profound nature of what his pal, Guy de la Valdene, means by "good luck" in reference to porpoises. The reality of myriad men's idea of good luck as being something as "banal" as having sex with a fashion model or catching more fish, for example, pales in comparison to that which Guy is describing, which is more profound, existential, and mythic in scope. The idea of dolphins as being good luck put forth in Harrison's poem concerns a deeper awareness of our existence and

interconnectedness with, as Harrison would put it, “our fellow creatures” and the cosmos; and, to decry the poem and poet as being too “macho” is both to miss the point of the poem and to inaccurately cite the denotation of the word “macho” :

Actually, what ‘macho’ is in Spanish is somebody like who would fuck a virgin with a swan or throw a rattlesnake into a baby’s carriage or screw his mother, you know, cut his sister’s throat. That’s what ‘macho’ is. I don’t know where they got this word or what it represents. You know. And I don’t know what it has to do with me.” (*An Interview with Jim Harrison*)

Furthermore, the fact that most men would enjoy the “good luck,” however banal, of catching more fish or fornicating with a highly attractive fashion model on the bow of the boat, is not “sexist,” it’s simply a fact revealing how men—typically—think and feel, whatever the reason for these thoughts and sentiments might be.

So, in the wake of science, which, despite its remarkable understanding of physical matter, has failed to arrive at any form of metaphysical certainty, what way of knowing may become transcendent, or, if not transcendent, respectably incorporated into our current episteme and understanding of nature, ourselves, and our existence? Indeed, even in regard to physicality, the scope of science is still extremely limited. Certainly, we have come to know and understand a great deal more than was previously understood before the Enlightenment; and, humankind’s ability to work with physical matter toward our own ends has been spellbinding within industrialized nations. However, it is equally apparent how our meddling with physical matter has created physical consequences with which we are struggling to adjust or reconcile to some form of sustainable living, a fact

which, in itself, undermines any position suggesting our mastery and comprehension of physicality. Is it not true, for instance, that, notwithstanding the seemingly prodigious gains in our ability to work effectively with physical matter, we are yet unable to meet our physical needs completely as a species and that Western medicine, despite its “miracles” is yet unable to prevent the physical reality of death? If such is the case, how can such an episteme claim ultimate understanding of existence and, for example, be taught in our schools to the exclusion of poetry and the arts?

While as a student of science and physics I am frequently impressed by the knowledge human beings have established in these disciplines, writing out my thoughts at this moment, and pondering the currently recognized limits to understanding in these fields in relation to that which still remains a mystery to us, I am equally humbled by our lack of physical understanding and, even more so, by our equal lack of metaphysical knowledge (In my opinion, the distinction between “physical” and “metaphysical” becomes quite vague when one begins examining the limits of quantum physics, for example.) But, maybe that’s just it. When considering metaphysics, the term “knowledge” is inappropriate. When dealing in metaphysical questions and concerns, the terms “awareness,” “insight,” and “sense,” perhaps, are more suitable. In comprehending metaphysics, then, we are having to learn to live with “approximations,” as in the postmodern sense, upon which we understand, for example, ourselves, our existence, and what is meant by the term “nature.” For science has already and continues vigorously to explore the physical realm of existence with the resultant knowledge being a justification for everything from our “environmental policy” to our spiritual beliefs. But, recognizing

the inadequacy of the “myth” of science (if we wish to call it that), again, what epistemic paradigm could join science and perhaps be of more use to us as a means of understanding our existence?

In his exploration of poetry, nature, humanity, and existence, Jim Harrison offers us a keystone for an episteme of sensibility cultivated through poetry and the arts—an episteme of sensibility that makes clear the fallacy of living as empirically-understood economically-motivated beings and how a life lived in such a way within a culture that is only validating of empirical thought and economics and blind to a poetic way of knowing is depriving and invariably leads to illness, despair, and a dying of thirst and hunger for this non-material element of existence.

Again, such a position is not, by any means, an all out rejection of science (an absurd proposition), but an inclusion of science within a paradigm of understanding that is more aware of science’s limitations and, therefore, cognizant of the ill-effects brought about by a myopic sense of ourselves and our environment as perceived strictly through a scientifically-based-economically-motivated paradigm of life.

In explicating what I am getting at here with the notion of an episteme of sensibility cultivated through the arts, consider how poetry, both the writing and reading of it, is, for Harrison, a matter of survival—of life and death. In Harrison’s opinion, the acts of writing and reading poetry are tantamount to killing to eat or going to the well for water, breathing, sleeping, and sex—if we don’t engage in these activities we die. I might also add that, for Harrison, and for many others, the same can be said for hunting and fishing, an essentialist claim I know but, given what is understood about our existence over the

last one to three million years, maintains a strong degree of accuracy.

What is of particular note regarding poetry as a necessity for our survival is the fact that poetry, its content, is not physical; we cannot quantify through science just how it relates to our physical needs for survival. But, that's just it. Through the lens of science we are only examining our physical needs for survival, not those which are metaphysical and, therefore, related to what we attempt to identify by means of language as "the soul," "the spirit," and "the mind." Simply said, poetry (More accurately, on a broader context, poetry as used in this thesis includes the rest of what is called "the arts.") is "soul food." Such a statement is clichéd, sure, but no less the accurate for being so. Note how this notion is identified by Harrison, himself:

Bonnetti: You've complained someplace about the fact that you say there's so little useful information in novels nowadays....

Harrison: Well, I mean useful to what Robert Duncan would say your 'soul life.' You know. Information without which we can't live. Like Pound said, 'poetry is news that stays news.'

Bonnetti: Or William Carlos Williams says, 'You won't find the 'news' in poetry, but people die every day for the lack of it.'...Do you have a statement, a public statement that you can make about what you consider 'useful information' in the novel?

Harrison: Information that is 'food for your soul,' you know, as corny as that sounds. (*An Interview With Jim Harrison*)

When one reads *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*, for example, one gets the sense that Harrison is, indeed, writing for his own survival; the poem reflects a desperate attempt by the author to hang on to life, to survive by means of verse, by writing—a sense of the poem validated by Harrison's own explication of writing as a means of survival: "I want to get to the point when I can see a cow without saying 'cow.' It's never gonna

happen because that's my particular burden to make sentences. ...That's my only defense against this world is to build a sentence" (*An Interview with Jim Harrison*).

Even more pointed in regard to this notion is Harrison's essay, "Poetry as Survival," in which Harrison clearly explicates how, in his opinion, poetry and the arts are fundamental to our survival and well-being and are noticeably devalued and absent from ourselves and our society:

There have been quite enough exquisite apologias for poetry written over the centuries, from Aristotle to Catullus and Vergil [sic], Wang Wei, Dante, Shakespeare and Dryden, down to Whitman, Yeats, Pound and Garcia Lorca. But then, unlike the sciences, such knowledge is not easily transmittable or cumulative, and an art so seemingly fragile to the masses has its value in continual question by even apparently educated men.

Frankly, this is not my fault, and I have long since given up concerning myself with the matter. As a poet I am the bird, not the ornithologist, and I am not going to spend my increasingly precious days stuffing leaks in an educational system as perverse and sodden as the mercantile society for which it supplies faithful and ignorant fodder. (*Before Dark* 294)

What is finally suggested here concerning our understanding of nature, ourselves, and our existence, is that our need for poetry and the arts, though we are not able to perceive this through a microscope (although I believe one day we may be ingenious enough to discover a quantifiable approach to measuring the effects of artistic deprivation), is, in fact, natural, as natural, for example, as our physical need for water

and food, or our need for sex.

So, how will we know? Understand? Upon what basis we will act and/or evaluate our actions? When will we learn to accept metaphysical uncertainty as certainty? Or, in other words, be certain in our realization that to discover reality and certainty, if such entities indeed exist, we must sense it? That the only reason we believe there is no certainty is because we are operating under an errant episteme based upon empiricism and science and that what is needed is an episteme of sensibility cultivated to a high degree of awareness through the arts. Maybe, if we are able to realize this episteme in a new myth befitting of the twenty-first century, we will come to understand more precisely what is meant by the word “nature.”

Therefore, it may be said, in conclusion, that our poetic sensibility, though latent in many of us, exists in a manner similar to that of our physical heart and is, therefore, a part of nature, just a part that is metaphysical rather than physical, but none the less real for being so, just much harder to understand and not subject to the “laws” of empiricism. Consequently, in any understanding of nature, we must take into account this metaphysical understanding of ourselves, an understanding, of course, which deeply broadens how we come to think about and live with and within nature and ourselves and to which we can only gain insight through poetry and other artistic vehicles that afford us intelligent access to this fundamental—and vital—aspect of existence.

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