http://www.jnani.org/intro/positiva_natmyst.html

Nature Mysticism

Introduction

Nature Mysticism is presented here as a route to the transcendent through Nature. It is *jnani* and *via positiva* though in ways special to itself.

The term 'Nature Mysticism' was coined and used by scholars of religion at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, including William James and Evelyn Underhill, and has remained an obscure term. There is no entry for it in the Encyclopaedia Brittanica for example. This section will look at Nature Mysticism in the writings of **Richard Jefferies, Thomas Traherne, Walt Whitman, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Annie Dillard**, and other sources, all of whom were Westerners (with the exception of Krishnamurti who probably owed more to the West in his thinking than the East). There is however a vigorous Nature Mysticism to be found in the East, in the Upanishads, in Taoism and in Zen.

Nature Mysticism is not to be confused with the spiritual life of early Shamanic religions, also known as paganism, Earth religions and so on. For the Shaman all elements of the natural world are imbued with spirit, and hence Shamanism is a spiritual life that is occult in its overtone, not transcendent. For the Shaman the spirit behind an object in Nature, such as a tree or animal, is engaged with on the basis of the temporal issues of an organic survival, though with empathy and reverence. For the Nature mystic an object such as a tree or animal is engaged with on the basis of finding the eternal. This means in fact that Nature as a whole is more important than its constituent elements, and Nature is more important as an aesthetic experience than as a means to survival. The Shaman is at an early stage in the evolution of the spiritual life, where an alienation from Nature has not yet been experienced, while the Nature mystic has undergone all the necessary anguish of separation. Hence the Shaman only dimly loves Nature and appreciates its beauty, while the Nature mystic loves Nature as one only can after the profound alienation that the intellectual life brings in its wake. This love however is not *bhakti* but typical of the transformation of the intellectual, that is to say any intelligent person, into the *jnani*.

The aesthetic component of Nature Mysticism is intimately involved with both the *jnani* temperament and with the path of *via positiva*, indeed we could say that Nature Mysticism is the *jnani* instinct for balance and purity turned outwards and finding in Nature its reflection. However, the very sensitivity to beauty that is the requirement for a Nature mystic is also the source of Nature's most likely rejection: how does one deal with the suffering and death that all living entities undergo? A thoughtful and sensitive individual has to confront the fact that in Nature all living entities survive through the death of other living entities. Given that the *jnani* has to penetrate appearances, much like a scientist, there can be no scope for a romanticised or Arcadian view of Nature. The act of predation, the 'Nature red in tooth and claw' of Tennyson, has to be accommodated without flinching, but neither, as Hitler found, can it be a reason for exultation or a model for human society. Indeed the meditation on the mortality and suffering of the individual in the context of the eternity and joyfulness of Nature as a whole is a vital part of Nature Mysticism.

In this section we will look at the few individuals and writings whose work illuminates the understanding of Nature Mysticism and for whom the very term was invented. The key issues are how it relates to the concept of *jnani*, the expansiveness of the *via positiva*, and how the aesthetic sensibility of the Nature mystic can come to terms with the sometimes harsh realities of the living world.

Richard Jefferies

Life and Work

Richard Jefferies was born in 1848 near Swindon, England, and died in 1887. If the term 'Nature Mysticism' was invented for one man then it was Jefferies. His unique autobiography *The Story of My Heart* describes a relationship with Nature that is unparalleled, but has had only a select following since its first publication in

1883. In Elizabeth Jennings' introduction to the 1968 edition she suggests that to find an equivalent one must seek out Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation* or Teresa of Avila's *Life*.

The Story of My Heart is more often out of print than not, but to find a second-hand copy or to ask a library to obtain it is well worth while, and a study of it over time is a spiritually rewarding. Only a few short sections can be quoted here, and these do not do justice to the range of his thought or the full power of his ability to conjure the transcendent from the ordinary English countryside. In the following passage he is lying on the grass by a tumulus, the burial-place of a warrior of some two thousand years previous:

> Realising that spirit, recognising my own inner consciousness, the psyche, so clearly, I cannot understand time. It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumulus, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumulus was raised; in a thousand years more it will still be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now. For artificial purposes time is mutually agreed on, but there is really no such thing. The shadow goes on upon the dial, the index moves round upon the clock, and what is the difference? None whatever. If the clock had never been set going, what would have been the difference? There may be time for the clock, the clock may make time for itself; there is none for me.
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> I dip my hand in the brook and feel the stream; in an instant the particles of water which first touched me have floated yards down the current, my hand remains there. I take my hand away, and the flow — the time — of the brook does not exist for me. The great clock of the firmament, the sun and the stars, the crescent moon, the earth circling two thousand times, is no more to me than the flow of the brook when my hand is withdrawn; my soul has never been, and never can be, dipped in time. *(The Story of My Heart, p. 30)*

In this fragment alone Jefferies should have commended himself to anyone pursuing the depth of the spiritual life, because he has found the eternal in the present. What more did the Buddha find? (We will look in the section '*jnani* and the West' at how we can see Jefferies amongst the 'lost Buddhas of the West'.) The above passage also shows Jefferies to be a *jnani*, an impression that may be confirmed in this next extract:

> Burning in the sky, the sun shines as it shone on me in the solitary valley, as it burned on when the earliest cave of India was carved. Above the indistinguishable roar of the many feet I feel the presence of the sun, of the immense forces of the universe, and beyond these the sense of the eternal now of the immortal. Full well aware that all has failed, yet, side by side with the sadness of that knowledge, there lives on in me an unquenchable belief, thought burning like the sun, that there is yet something to be found, something real, something to give each separate personality sunshine and flowers in its own existence now. Something to shape this million-handed labour to an end and outcome, leaving accumulated sunshine and flowers to those who shall succeed. It must be dragged forth by might of thought from the immense forces of the universe.
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> To prepare for such an effort, first the mind must be cleared of the conceit that, because we live to-day, we are wiser than the ages gone. The mind must acknowledge its ignorance; all the learning and lore of so may eras must be erased from it as an encumbrance. It is not from past or present knowledge, science or faith, that it is to be drawn. Erase these altogether as they are erased under the fierce heat of the focus before me. Begin wholly afresh. Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god, deeper than prayer; and open a new day. *(The Story of My Heart, p. 73-74)*

Jefferies goes on to tell us that from his home near London he almost daily made a mile and quarter walk to an aspen by a brook 'to walk off the concentration of mind necessary for work [as a journalist]'. In the above passage he comes close to presenting us with a teaching or practice, one that a Zen Buddhist would call 'beginners mind'. For an educated Westerner of the Victorian period to understand that the spiritual life begins with the jettisoning of all prior knowledge or views, yet operate independently from the *bhakti* context of Christian tradition, is remarkable. Jefferies' emphasis on Nature would also sit very well with Zen. Jefferies has not of course come across the Zen concept of 'no-mind' so he uses the word 'thought' in a way that would be odd in a Buddhist or Hindu context. He means by it something more like consciousness or awareness than discursive reasoning, as is suggested when he says that the goal of the spiritual life is 'dragged forth by might of thought'. We also find in this a typical *jnani* trait, that of the use of the will to attain. Yet surrender is also part of his Nature Mysticism, in the sense of spending many hours in Nature making himself available for that moment when his soul 'should be transported'. This is not so different to a Rumi or Kabir waiting with longing for the 'lover' (God) to descend into them, but in this case it is not a devotional waiting but a *jnani* longing of the soul. Jefferies walked for hours, especially in his native Wiltshire, a characteristic we also find in the spiritual life or Henry Thoreau.

We will see that the Nature Mysticism of Whitman and Traherne is less active, while Jefferies shared a certain restlessness with his contemporary Henry Thoreau, who would stride for hours through the woods and fields of Concord, Massachusetts, which happened to be owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. Reginald Lansing Cook in his interesting analysis of Thoreau as Nature mystic says this of him:

> He realised that it was wise to be outdoors early and late, travelling far and earnestly in order to recreate the whole body and to perceive the phenomena of the day. There was no way of knowing when something might turn up. He had noticed that when he thought his walk was profitless or a failure, it was then usually on the point of success, "for then," he surmised, "you are that subdued and knocking mood to which Nature never fails to open." One late August day, in 1851, when it appeared to him that he had walked all day in vain and the world, including field and wood as highway, had seemed trivial, then, with the dropping of sun and wind, he caught the reflex of the day, the dews purifying the day and making it transparent, the lakes and rivers acquiring "a glassy stillness, reflecting the skies." His attitude changed, and he took what Keats called "the journey homeward to habitual self." He exulted in the fact that he was at the top of his condition for perceiving beauty. *('The Nature Mysticism of Thoreau' in The Concord Saunterer, p.9)*

This reminds us of an interesting fact about Jefferies' life and work, that the Transcendentalists had at the same time but quite independently arisen in the United States, often engaged with similar issues (to be discussed in the section **19th C USA**. As we saw with Whitman however, the emphasis today is on understanding their movement more in literary terms than spiritual ones. The resonance between Jefferies' work and that of Thoreau and Whitman is remarkable. Jefferies makes no mention of Thoreau's *Walden* though it was published in 1847, and could have had no inkling of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as it was published at the same time as *The Story of My Heart*. One only has to think of the remarkable coincidence of the Buddha's work and that of Heraclitus for example to realise that similar spiritual insights have often arisen independently. Jefferies, like all spiritual geniuses, makes a unique contribution however, and is prone to his own inner contradictions. Like the Buddha or Krishnamurti he pays no attention to the spiritual insights of the past, presenting his own vision entirely in his own terms. Above all he is at odds with the prevailing Victorian ethos both in its work ethic and its prudery. Nature for Jefferies finds its ultimate expression in the human body:

> There came to me a delicate, but at the same time a deep, strong and sensuous enjoyment of the beautiful green earth, the beautiful sky and sun; I felt them, they gave me inexpressible delight, as if they embraced and poured out their love upon me. It was I who loved them, for my heart was broader than the earth; it is broader now than even then, more thirsty and desirous. After the sensuous enjoyment always come the thought, the desire: That I might be like this; that I might have the inner meaning of the sun, the light, the earth, the trees and grass, translated into some growth of excellence in myself, both of the body and of mind; greater perfection of physique, greater perfection of mind and soul; that I might be higher in myself. *(The Story of My Heart, p. 56)*

This is amplified in another passage:

> Not only in grass fields with green leaf and running brook did this constant desire find renewal. More deeply still with living human beauty; the perfection of form, the simple fact of forms, ravished and always will ravish me away. In this lies the outcome and end of all the loveliness of sunshine and green leaf, of flowers, pure water and sweet air. This is embodiment and highest expression; the scattered, uncertain, and designless loveliness of tree and sunshine brought to shape. Through this beauty I prayed deepest and longest, and down to this hour. The shape — the divine idea of that shape — the swelling muscle or the dreamy limb, strong sinew or curve of bust, Aphrodite or Hercules, it is the same. That I may have the soul-life, the soul-nature, let the divine beauty bring to me divine soul. Swart Nubian, white Greek, delicate Italian, massive Scandinavian, in all the exquisite pleasure the form gave, and gives, to me immediately becomes intense prayer. *(The Story of My Heart, p. 17)*

Jefferies takes sunshine, leaf, air and water as his starting point, but it is the perfection of human form that 'ravishes him away'. That the 'simple fact of forms' can transport him is one of the clearest statements of the *via positiva* one can find, and contrasts directly with the Buddha's distaste for the body and the manifest world, characterised by him as 'conditioned co-origination'. But Jefferies love of Nature has its limits, for example he tells us that the form of a dog is alien to him, and above all he draws the line when it comes to Nature expressing itself through the social intercourse of men and women. In short there is nothing convivial about Jefferies. His spiritual life is 'solitary and elect' as Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas. But, as Jesus promises, there is no doubt that Jefferies found eternal life.

One question remains: was Jefferies a spiritual Master, in the sense of having disciples? Elizabeth Jennings in her 1968 introduction says 'there are few solid facts to pin upon this strange writer,' and certainly in *Story*

of My Heart Jefferies makes no hint as to a life of spiritual teacher. It is quite possible that Jefferies' mysticism was so inward and private, that apart from the grandeur of it that we can perceive in his prose, he touched no-one of his acquaintance or not enough to leave a trace. In Buddhist terminology we might suggest that he remained an *arhant* rather than a *bhodisattva*, an enlightened one (or nearly so), but not a Master. Whitman is different because apart from the hints in *Leaves of Grass* as to his stature of Master, one quickly finds in the biographies of the time first-hand accounts of the kind of presence and influence that is the touchstone of the Masters presented here.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

Nature Writings

We have introduced Krishnamurti in the 'Selected Masters' section, and saw that he could not be called primarily a Nature mystic in his teaching or thinking. However the space which he devotes to descriptions of Nature in his notebooks indicates the importance it held for him, and we also know that he spent a considerable time walking in Nature and gardening where the opportunity allowed. Perhaps the best of his many 'notebooks' is *The Only Revolution*, which introduces each section with keenly observed natural scenes, though not observed in the way that a naturalist would. Here are some examples:

> The sun wasn't up yet; you could see the morning star through the trees. There was a silence that was really extraordinary. Not the silence between two noises or between two notes, but the silence that has no reason whatsoever the silence that must have been at the beginning of the world. It filled the whole valley and the hills.
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> The two big owls, calling to each other, never disturbed that silence, and a distant dog barking at the late moon was part of this immensity. The dew was especially heavy, and as the sun came up over the hill it was sparkling with many colours and with the glow that comes with the sun's first rays.
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> The delicate leaves of the jacaranda were heavy with dew, and birds came to have their morning baths, fluttering their wings so the dew on those delicate leaves filled their feathers. The crows were particularly persistent; they would hop from one branch to another, pushing their heads through the leaves, fluttering their wings, and preening themselves. There were about half-a-dozen of them on that one heavy branch, and there were many other birds, scattered all over the tree, taking their morning bath.
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> And this silence spread, and seemed to go beyond the hills. There were the usual noises of children shouting, and laughter; and the farm began to wake up.
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> It was going to be a cool day, and now the hills were taking on the light of the sun. They were very old hills probably the oldest in the world with oddly shaped rocks that seemed to be carved out with great care, balanced one on top of the other; but no wind or touch could loosen them from this balance.
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> It was a valley far removed from towns, and the road through it led to another village. The road was rough and there were no cars or buses to disturb the ancient quietness of this valley. There were bullock carts, but their movement was a part of the hills. There was a dry river bed that only flowed with water after heavy rains, and the colour was a mixture of red, yellow and brown; and it, too, seemed to move with the hills. And the villagers who walked silently by were like the rocks.
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> The day wore on and towards the end of the evening, as the sun was setting over the western hills, the silence came in from afar, over the hills, through the trees, covering the little bushes and the ancient banyan. And as the stars became brilliant, so the silence grew into great intensity; you could hardly bear it.
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> The little lamps of the village were put out, and with sleep the intensity of that silence grew deeper, wider and incredibly over-powering. Even the hills became more quiet, for they, too, had stopped their whisperings, their movement, and seemed to lose their immense weight. *(The Only Revolution, p. 24)*

For Krishnamurti, Nature's appeal is in the silence that resonates between him and it. He, like Jefferies, was glad for the minimum of modern intrusion on nature, so that the human blended with it and did not jar. In the next extract it is clear how people and their obliviousness to nature pained Krishnamurti.

> On every table there were daffodils, young, fresh, just out of the garden, with the bloom of spring on them still. On a side table there were lilies, creamy-white with sharp yellow centres. To see this creamy-white and the brilliant yellow of those many daffodils was to see the blue sky, ever expanding, limitless, silent.
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> Almost all the tables were taken by people talking very loudly and laughing. At a table nearby a woman was surreptitiously feeding her dog with the meat she could not eat. They all seemed to have huge helpings, and it was not a pleasant sight to see people eating; perhaps it may be barbarous to eat publicly. A man across the room had filled himself with wine and meat and was just lighting a big cigar, and a look of beatitude came over his fat face. His equally fat wife lit a cigarette. Both of them appeared to be lost to the world.

And there they were, the yellow daffodils, and nobody seemed to care. They were there for decorative purposes that had no meaning at all; and as you watched them their yellow brilliance filled the noisy room. Colour has this strange effect upon the eye. It wasn't so much that the eye absorbed the colour, as that the colour seemed to fill your being. You *were* that colour; you didn't become that colour you were of it, without identification or name: the anonymity which is innocence. Where there is no anonymity there is violence, in all its different forms.

But you forgot the world, the smoke-filled room, the cruelty of man, and the red, ugly meat; those shapely daffodils seemed to take you beyond all time.

Love is like that. In it there in no time, space or identity. It is the identity that breeds pleasure and pain; it is the identity that brings hate and war and builds a wall around people, around each one, each family and community. Man reaches over the wall to the other man but he too is enclosed; morality is a word that bridges the two, and so it becomes ugly and vain.

Love isn't like that; it is like the wood across the way, always renewing itself because it is always dying. There is no permanency in it, which thought seeks; it is a movement which thought can never understand, touch or feel. The feeling of thought and the feeling of love are two different things; the one leads to bondage and the other to the flowering of goodness. The flowering is not within the area of any society, of any culture or of any religion, whereas the bondage belongs to all societies, religious beliefs and faiths in otherness. Love is anonymous, therefore not violent. Pleasure is violent, for desire and will are moving factors in it. Love cannot be begotten by thought, or by good works. The denial of the total process of thought becomes the beauty of action which is love. Without this there is no bliss of truth.

And over there, on that table, were the daffodils. *(The Only Revolution, p. 145)*

This is included because it shows many of Krishnamurti's concerns and how he related them to Nature. In the daffodils he 'forgot the world'; for Krishnamurti, more like Jefferies than like Whitman, was not the 'rough' type that allows for the common, coarse and good-natured. The following passage shows again Krishnamurti's sensitivity to nature (he is speaking to Asit Chandmal):

"Have you noticed, sir, " he said, "that when you enter a forest, for the first time there is a strange atmosphere, as if nature, the trees, do not want you to enter. You hesitate, and say 'It's alright,' and walk in quietly. The second day the resistance is less. And the third day it is gone."

I do not communicate with nature, and so this was something I had never discussed with Krishnamurti.

(from One Thousand Moons - Krishnamurti at Eighty Five, *p.24)*

It is instructive to compare Krishnamurti with the Buddha and Richard Jefferies in this context. As far as we can tell all three men placed no importance on the spiritual teachings of other individuals or traditions, relying entirely on their own direct apprehension of the truth. In different degrees this amounts to a form of iconoclasm, not of a destructive kind but nevertheless a view that was forcefully held. In the case of the Buddha we find no interest in Nature at all, though his eyes must have been as open and as sensitive to it as Krishnamurti or Jefferies. Was it simply that our consciousness of Nature is a result of the Industrial Revolution and the following realisation that we were in danger of losing it? Not necessarily, when we think for example of the Nature writings of Matsuo Basho in Japan of the seventeenth century, a place that was to be untouched by the Industrial Revolution for another two hundred years. What then, makes a man like Krishnamurti, in many ways so like the Buddha, place such an emphasis on Nature? Without knowing more about the Buddha as a man, all we might say is that perhaps it comes down to personality, and in particular an aesthetic sense. The is shared between Krishnamurti and Jefferies, but their response to Nature is not quite the same. The immense reserve of Krishnamurti did not permit the more ecstatic expression found in Jefferies' prose, but he nevertheless finds the same eternity in it. Perhaps, in keeping with Krishnamurti's temperament, it was *silence* above all that Nature spoke to him about, as we see in this passage:

Silence has many qualities. There is the silence between two noises, the silence between two notes and the widening silence in the interval between two thoughts. There is that peculiar, quiet, pervading silence that comes of an evening in the country; there is the silence through which you hear the bark of a dog in the distance or the whistle of a train as it comes up a steep grade; the silence in a house when everybody has gone to sleep, and its peculiar emphasis when you wake up in the middle of the night and listen to an own hooting in the valley; and there is that silence before the owl's mate answers. There is the silence of an old deserted house, and the silence of a mountain; the silence between two human beings when they have seen the same thing, felt the same thing, and acted.

That night, particularly in that distant valley with the most ancient hills with their peculiar shaped boulders, the silence was as real as the wall you touched. And you looked out of the window at the brilliant stars. It was not a self-generated silence; it was not that the earth was quiet and the villagers asleep but it came from everywhere—from the distant stars, from those dark hills and from your own mind and heart. This silence

seemed to cover everything from the tiniest grain of sand in the river-bed—which only knew running water when it rained—to the tall, spreading banyan tree and a slight breeze that was now beginning. There is the silence of the mind which is never touched by any noise, by any thought or by the passing wind of experience. It is this silence that is innocent, and so endless. When there is this silence of the mind action springs from it, and this action does not cause confusion or misery.

The meditation of a mind that is utterly silent is the benediction that man is ever seeking. In this silence every quality of silence is. *(The Only Revolution, p. 31)*

But Nature is not always such a private matter for Krishnamurti and there are times when he uses it in teaching. In the next extract he is talking to a sannyasi or monk, who has been explaining why renunciation is necessary:

Do look at that river—the morning light on it, and those sparkling , green luscious wheatfields, and the trees beyond. There is great beauty; and the eyes that see it must be full of love to comprehend it. And to hear the rattling of that train over the iron bridge is as important as to hear the voice of the bird. So do look—and listen to those pigeons cooing. And look at that tamarind tree with those two green parrots. For the eyes to see them there must be communion with them—with the river, with that boat passing by filled with villagers, singing as they row. This is part of the world. If you renounce it you are renouncing beauty and love—the very earth itself. What you are renouncing is the society of men, but not the things which man has made out of the world. You are not renouncing culture, the tradition, the knowledge—all of that goes with you when you withdraw from the world. You are renouncing beauty and love because you are frightened of those two words and what lies behind those words. Beauty is associated with sensuous reality with its sexual implications and the love that is involved in it. This renunciation has made the so-called religious people self-centred—at a higher lever perhaps than with the man of the world, but it is still self-centredness. When you have no beauty and love there is no possibility of coming upon that immeasurable thing. If you observe, right through the domain of the sannyasis and saints, this beauty and love are far from them. They may talk about it, but they are harsh disciplinarians, violent in their controls and demands. So essentially, though they may put on the saffron robe or the black robe, or the scarlet of the cardinal, they are all very worldly. *(The Only Revolution, p. 46)*

This is a very significant passage from Krishnamurti and contains an irony that will be lost on most, that this could be word for word what Osho said many times in his discourses. However, the particular way that Krishnamurti describes Nature is all his, and he is making an important point to the renunciate monk in front of him. (This takes place in India where the ideal of sexual repression and renunciation are deeply embedded in popular consciousness.) The first point that Krishnamurti is making is that to see Nature one needs eyes full of love, and a sense of communion, and to renounce the world is to renounce beauty and love. He also points out that the train on the iron bridge is as important as the bird. His next point is that one can withdraw from the company of others, but the society follows one through one's culture and conditioning. Hence in fact one does not give up the world, because the old ideas are still with one, but one gives up love and beauty, and without those the 'immeasurable thing' cannot come about. In India it is particularly noticeable that renunciation is often accompanied by either an increase in pedantry or a deadness of look, though these are universal qualities of the so-called saints or sannyasis (there are of course genuine cases as well).

Krishnamurti's rejection here of the renunciative stance can be seen as a form of *via positiva*, and he certainly includes Nature in this, and even uses it in teaching as we see above (though he concludes this section in his notebook with another attack on the guru-disciple relationship). What Krishnamurti could not do was to take his love for Nature and extend it much beyond the train on the iron bridge, to include mankind and the whole spectrum of its grandeur and folly. Like Gurdjieff, he lived through two world wars, the loss of his beloved brother at an early age, and, because of his undoubted sensitivity, Krishnamurti was somewhat pessimistic. It is in the work of Heraclitus and Walt Whitman that we find the *via positiva* taken to its logical conclusion, an acceptance of the whole of life, its 'hidden harmony'. But this is a little unfair on Krishnamurti: we would best think of him as being the great Master who taught the path of no path at all.

One last quote from Krishnamurti will bring us neatly to consider our next spiritual Master in the context of Nature Mysticism: Thomas Traherne.

It was a lovely morning with fleeting clouds and a clear blue sky. It had rained, and the air was clean. Every leaf was new and the dreary winter was over; each leaf knew, in the sparkling sunshine, that it had no relation to last year's spring. The sun shone through the new leaves, shedding a soft green light on the wet path that led through the woods to the main road that went on to the big city.

There were children playing about, but they never looked at that lovely spring day. They had no need to look, for they were the spring. Their laughter and their play were part of the tree, the leaf and the flower. You felt this, you didn't imagine it. It was as though the leaves and the flowers were taking part in the laughter, in the shouting, and in the balloon that went by. Every blade of grass, the yellow dandelion, and the tender leaf that was so vulnerable, all were part of the children, and the children were part of the whole earth. *(The Only Revolution, p. 148)*

Walt Whitman

Nature Writings

We have already examined Walt Whitman as spiritual Master, and seen his teachings as *jnani*, *via positiva*, and we will also examine him later as one of the 'lost Buddhas of the West'. Here we look at him as Nature mystic. As we will find with Traherne we cannot call Whitman solely a Nature mystic because his vision is broader than that, but there is no doubt that Nature was extremely important to him. One of his biographers, John Burroughs (himself something of a Nature mystic) remarks somewhere that Whitman was fond of flowers. In fact his love of Nature was as expansive as all else was with Whitman, and nothing except the paralysis of later life could keep him away from meadows, forests, streams, and above all the sea. Burroughs tells us in his biography of Whitman:

The sea, too, had laid its hand upon him, as I have already suggested. He never appeared so striking and impressive as when seen upon the beach. His large and tall gray figure looked at home, and was at home upon the shore. The simple, strong, flowing lines of his face, his always clean fresh air, his blue absorbing eyes, his commanding presence, and something pristine and elemental in his whole expression, seemed at once to put him *en rapport* with the sea. (*Whitman: A Study, p.50*)

Whitman was a carpenter's son and grew up on Long Island by the sea. Although we cannot say as with Jefferies that Nature was his route to the transcendent, nevertheless we cannot subtract it from him as we could with Thomas Traherne. We have suggested that an aesthetic sense is essential to the Nature mystic, which Traherne certainly possessed, but Whitman and Jefferies demonstrate that something more is also involved: a *knowledge* of Nature that derives from long observation. This does not have to be schooled as with the great naturalists such as John Muir and John Burroughs, and nor does the observation have to be scientifically based. Rather, it is the eye of love that distinguishes birds from each other, trees from each other, and so on, for each expresses a character that gladdens the heart in different ways. In this typical extract from *Leaves of Grass* Whitman is engaged in the 'cataloguing' that he is often dismissed for, but is better seen as a *via positiva* statement of the non-dual state, couched in terms of the appreciation of Nature:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots,
And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
But call any thing back when I desire it.

(Song of Myself, v. 31)

Whitman had no formal education and did not study Nature in a scientific way, but has the simple adequate vocabulary of the natural world that intelligent men and women living outside of cities always possess (usually learned from one's mother). He knows the tree-toad, the wren, and here the mocking-bird:

As I have walk'd in Alabama my morning walk,
I have seen where the she-bird the mocking-bird sat on her nest in the briers hatching her brood.

I have seen the he-bird also,
I have paus'd to hear him at hand inflating his throat and joyfully singing.
And while I paus'd it came to me that what he really sang for was not there only,
Not for his mate nor himself only, nor all sent back by the echoes,
But subtle, clandestine, away beyond,
A charge transmitted and gift occult for those being born.

('Starting from Paumanok' v. 11)

Whitman did of course live in a context of both the American Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau and the time of the great early naturalists such as John Muir and John Burroughs. He met Emerson and Thoreau, and counted Burroughs as a friend (Burroughs provides us with one of best contemporary Whitman biographies in his *Whitman: a Study*). It was Emerson's endorsement of *Leaves* that allowed its early literary survival, and Whitman once argued with him at length over its contents, confessing later that every objection which Emerson raised confirmed once and for all for him the truth of his own chosen path. In Thoreau Whitman certainly found an appreciation of Nature in common, but suspected that Thoreau's romantic views were more from a 'morbid dislike of humanity' than a love of woods, streams and hills. This reminds us again that Whitman's *via positiva* starts with his fellow men and women and ends with them, encompassing Nature on the way, rather than making it his prime focus. As Thoreau pointed out to Whitman, Whitman was a man capable of seeing the worst in men as much as anyone, and when Whitman is in the mood he can be devastating on this subject. However he always makes sure that the object of his criticism is understood to have the same divine origin and destination that Whitman had come to realise so fully in himself. He is more inclined however to put things mildly, as in this passage:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

(Song Of Myself, v. 32)

We have pointed out before that the Nature Mystic needs an aesthetic sense, and with Jefferies and Whitman we see that a detailed knowledge, though not necessarily scholarly or scientific, of Nature is also present. Whitman provides us also with some material regarding one of the major obstacles to Nature Mysticism, the problem of death and suffering. We have seen in some of the extracts in the 'Selected Masters' section on Whitman that he came to terms with death, and in particular death through that most violent of human activities: war. This extract reminds us of his attitude to death, and how he relates it to Nature:

And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try and alarm me.
To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes,
I see the elder-hand pressing receiving supporting,
I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors,
And mark the outlet, and mark the relief and escape.

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me,
I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,
I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts of melons.
And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,

(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

The next extract could seem callous, until we remember how he ministrated so tirelessly to the needs of the sick and dying in the Civil War hospitals:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,
My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

(Song of Myself, v. 33)

Whitman would many times have had to 'lean on his cane and observe' as he talked to a dying soldier on his cot, and he is showing us here almost a method of the non-dual *via positiva*, the exercising of deep empathy with existence in its destructive mode. Without the cosmic vision, the expanded sense of self that the depth of the spiritual life provides, such encounters with the suffering of others simply closes the heart and mind of a sensitive person to the natural world. If instead one can truly evade the wish 'I want the world to be different to this', then the *via positiva* opens up, and non-duality is there in its blissfulness. The idea that one can stand by the agonies of a wounded person and find no quarrel with life, to repeat the earlier point, *seems* monstrously callous. Yet everything that could be done has been done (Whitman ministrated to the kind of needs that the doctors could not, they having done their best), and one is now personally tested: one 'becomes the wounded person' and can one retain the love of life that came so easily in the summer meadow? This scenario illustrates just how hard the *via positiva* is in the beginning, and how easy it is to retreat into the *via negativa*. (We could say that while millions may have been attracted to the spiritual life of *via negativa* through an encounter with suffering, and that it may seem the easier path to start with, in the long run it gets much harder. More on this later)

Whitman has conquered suffering and death as surely as the Buddha did, but leaves us with that paradox when contemplating the *via positiva / via negativa* divide: does the Enlightened individual return here or not? Whitman (and there is good evidence that he believed in reincarnation) has no fears regarding the 'endless rounds of rebirth' so feared by the Buddhists, as this poem shows:

TO THE GARDEN OF THE WORLD

To the garden of the world anew descending,
Potent mates, daughters, sons, preluding,
The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being,
Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber,
The revolving cycles in their wide sweep having brought me again,
Amorous, mature, all beautiful to me, all wondrous,
My limbs and the quivering fire that ever plays through them, for reasons, most wondrous,
Existing I peer and penetrate still,
Content with the present, content with the past,
By my side or back of me Eve following,
Or in front, and I following her just the same.

Does not Krishna hint at this same delight in returning to the 'garden of the world'? We will consider this idea later on, but for now a few more thoughts from Whitman on Nature. The following quotation is in response to another friend and biographer, Richard Maurice Bucke, who had suggested writing about a magnificent waterfall:

"All such things need to be at least the third or fourth remove; in itself it would be too much for nine out of ten readers. Very few care for natural objects themselves, rocks, rain, hail, wild animals, tangled forests, weeds, mud, common Nature. They want her in a shape fit for reading about in a rocking-chair, or as ornaments in china, marble or bronze. The real things are, far more than they would own, disgusting, revolting to them." Whitman adds: "This may be a reason of the dislike of *Leaves of Grass* by the majority."

The last two extracts are from *Specimen Days,* Whitman's prose diary from later in life, both on the subject of trees:

10 - 13 *October [1881]*: I spend a good deal of time on the Common, these delicious days and nights every mid-day from 11.30 to about 1 and almost every sunset another hour. I know all the big trees, especially the old elms along Tremont and Beacon streets, and have come to a sociable-silent understanding with most of them, in the sunlit air, (yet crispy-cool enough), as I saunter along the wide unpaved walks.

1 *September*: I should not take either the biggest or the most picturesque tree to illustrate it. Here is one of my favorite now before me, a fine yellow poplar, quite straight, perhaps ninety feet high, and four feet thick at the

> butt. How strong, vital, enduring! how dumbly eloquent! What suggestions of imperturbability and *being*, as against the human trait of mere *seeming*. Then the qualities, almost emotional, palpably artistic, heroic, of a tree; so innocent and harmless, yet so savage. It *is*, yet says nothing. How it rebukes by its tough and equable serenity in all weathers, this gusty-tempered little whiffet, man, that runs indoors at a mite of rain or snow. Science (or rather half-way science) scoffs at reminiscence of dryad and hamadryad, and of trees speaking. But, if they don't, they do as well as most speaking, writing, poetry, sermons or rather they do a great deal better. I should say indeed that those old dryad-reminiscences are quite as true as any, and profounder than most reminiscences we get. ('Cut this out,' as the quack mediciners say, and keep by you.) Go and sit in a grove or woods, with one or more of these voiceless companions and read the foregoing, and think.
>
> One lesson from affiliating a tree perhaps the greatest moral lesson anyhow from earth, rocks, animals, is that same lesson of inherencey, of *what is*, without the least regard to what the looker on (the critic) supposes or says, or whether he likes or dislikes. What worse what more general malady pervades each and all of us, our literature, education, attitude towards each other, (even towards ourselves,) than morbid trouble about *seems*, (generally temporarily seems too,) and no trouble at all, or hardly any, about the sane slow-growing, perennial, real parts of character, books, friendship, marriage, humanity's invisible foundations and hold-together? (As the all-basis, the nerve, the great sympathetic, the plenum within humanity, giving stamp to everything, is necessarily invisible.)

Whitman uses the term *plenum* here as humanity's foundation, and the slow-growing fundament of Nature which it teaches us about. He also uses the term *inherency*, another useful concept in considering both the *via positiva* and Nature Mysticism. Although he mentions dryad and hamadryad, Whitman is not an occultist, and does not recommend the view of Nature that Rudolf Steiner might adopt where the significance of trees for example lie in the spirits that inhabit them. Rather it is a resting in *what is*, finding Nature to be good, and through the loss of the sense of separate self, finding that oneself is good too. Death and suffering are no more than things to take in one's stride, giving them due care and close, unflinchng attention.

Thomas Traherne

Life and Work

Thomas Traherne was born in 1637 in Hereford, England and died in 1674 in Teddington. He was the son of a shoemaker, educated at Oxford and was ordained in 1660. From 1669 to his death he served as chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, and published only one work in his lifetime, *Roman Forgeries*. The works for which he is now famous, his poetry and the prose including *Centuries of Meditations*, were discovered over a period lasting from 1896 to 1967. The unique nature of his thought and its much later discovery in an essentially secular age means that Traherne has had no impact on the spiritual life of the West, but is all the more deserving of study.

F.C.Happold, author of the Penguin anthology *Mysticism* (1962), writes of Traherne: "Though Thomas Traherne cannot be numbered among the great mystics, he demands a place in any anthology of mysticism. Nowhere else does one find a similar fusion of nature-mysticism and Christo-mysticism as exquisitely balanced, so that both are essential parts of his consciousness, neither being complete without the other." This is a good summary of Traherne though he will be discussed again in the 'lost Buddhas of the West' section, where the extraordinary resonance between his unique and personal vocabulary and that of Buddhism will be drawn out in more detail.

For the same reason as with Whitman, Traherne cannot be called a pure Nature Mystic because his vision is all-encompassing, in other words it includes the world of men as well as of Nature, and the inner world as much as the outer. However his ecstatic *via positiva* does encompass the natural world and gives us pointers to a more complete understanding of Nature Mysticism.

Early in the *First Century of Meditations* Traherne writes:

> I will open my mouth in parables: I will utter things that have been kept secret from the foundations of the world. Things strange, yet common; incredible, yet known; most high, yet plain; infinitely profitable, but not esteemed. Is it not a great thing, that you should be heir of the world? *(p.187 of* Selected Poems and Prose, *Penguin, from which all the following extracts are taken)*

Traherne introduces us here to one of his great themes, that we are inheritors of the world, even more that we somehow 'own' it in its entirety, more surely than owners of property are legally entitled to whatever small share of the universe that conventional inheritance or acquisition has brought them. It is a theme that Douglas Harding often returns to, and in fact he often alludes to Traherne in his writings. (The association between the two men has been immortalised in a song by the 70's British popular group The Incredible String Band called 'Douglas Traherne Harding'.)

Traherne is a Christian, and unlike Whitman and Jefferies, adheres to his tradition, though in a form that few Christians would recognise. His radical point of departure is that the greatness of God is found in his 'work,' that is in the creation. He puts it like this, with italics for emphasis: *"The end for which you were created is that by prizing all that God hath done, you may enjoy yourself and Him in blessedness." (p. 190)* He also says "That all the world is yours, your very senses and the inclinations of your mind declare." (p.191) Traherne also praises the body and its senses, as do Whitman and Jefferies, and is hence at odds with the Gnostic and Manichaean influence in Christianity which saw the material world as corrupt. Yet in his own way Traherne shuns the 'world's distempered mind' and had a lively sense of the sin and corruption that were to be set aside before the world and God could be claimed as one's own.

Traherne hints of himself as teacher in the introduction to *Centuries*, and in 'Mankind is sick' talks of the physician healing the sickness, the 'sad distemper of the mind'. We know so little of his life that we cannot tell whether he worked in a way recognisable to us as a spiritual Master, and had disciples. His teachings are clear however and could be summed up in the phrase 'the infant eye', which capacity he encourages us to develop, and the word 'felicity' which is the natural state of one who possesses the infant eye.

When it comes to Nature, Traherne presents us with few descriptive passages, prefering more sweeping statements such as 'The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it.' *(p.198)*. Yet here and there are more detailed accounts of Nature, such as in this extract from the *Third Century* which also encapsulates many of Traherne's common themes:

> The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold. The gates were at first the end of the world, the green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me; their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal cherubims! And the young men glittering and sparkling angels and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the streets, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die. But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the light of the day, and something infinite behind everything appeared: which talked with my expectation and moved my desire. The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver was mine, as much their sparkling eyes, fair skins, and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the world was mine, and I the only specatator and enjoyer of it. I knew no churlish proprieties, nor bounds nor divisions; but all proprieties and divisions were mine: all treasures and the possessors of them. So that with much ado I was corrupted; and made to learn the dirty devices of this world. Which I now unlearn, and become as it were a little child again, that I may enter into the Kingdom of God. *(p. 226-227)*

In the last part of this extract Traherne quickly recapitulates his 'fall' and 'salvation'; the inevitable corruption within which he is alienated from the vision of his childhood, and the 'unlearning' of the ways of the world so that, childlike, he reclaims his expansive vision. Douglas Harding's account of this process parallels Traherne's version and puts it on a perceptual footing that is more suited to the modern age. But we are focusing on Nature here, and we note Traherne's description above of corn, trees, and the skies. We find the same treated again in these stanzas from *Poems of Felicity*:

4
For so when first I in the summer-fields
Saw golden corn
The earth adorn
(This day that sight its pleasure yields),
No rubies could more take mine eye;
Nor pearls of price,
By man's device
Set in enamel'd gold most curiously,

More costly seem to me,
How rich so e'er they be
By men esteem'd; nor could these more be mine
That on my finger shine.

5
The skies above so sweetly then did smile,
Their curtains spread
Above my head
And with its height mine eye beguile;
So lovely did the distant green
That fring'd the field
Appear, and yield
Such pleasant prospects to be seen
From neighbouring hills; no precious stone,
Or crown, or royal throne,
Which do bedeck the richest Indian lord,
Could such delight afford.

6
The sun, that gilded all the bordering woods,
Shone from the sky
To beautify
My earthly and my heavenly goods;
Exalted in his throne on high,
He shed his beams
In golden streams
That did illustrate the sky;
Those floods of light which he displays,
Did fill the glittering ways,
While that unsufferable piercing eye
The ground did glorify.

('The World' p. 89-90)

In the following extract from 'Walking' Traherne has commented on men that move like 'statues dead' who neither see nor love, and quite miss the beauty of Nature:

5
To note the beauty of the day,
And golden fields of corn survey;
Admire the pretty flowers
With their sweet smell;
To celebrate their Maker, and to tell
The marks of His great powers.

6
To fly abroad like active bees,
Among the hedges and the trees,
To cull the dew that lies
On every blade,
From every blossom; till we lade
Our minds, as they their thighs.

7
Observe those rich and glorious things,
The rivers, meadows, woods, and springs,
The fructifying sun;
To note from far
The rising of each twinkling star
For us his race is run.

8
A little child these well perceives,
Who, tumbling among grass and leaves,
May rich as kings be thought;
But there's a sight
Which perfect manhood may delight,
To which we shall be brought.

9
While in those pleasant paths we talk
'Tis that toward which at last we walk;
But that we may by degrees
Wisely proceed
Pleasures of love and praise to heed,
From viewing herbs and trees.

(p. 136-137)

Traherne presents us here with an analogy with bees, and suggests that we can cull the beauty of Nature for our minds as they do 'nectar on their thighs'. He introduces the child again, but finishes by pointing out that Nature takes one in 'perfect manhood', by degrees, to something higher, not clearly spelled out but to do with love.

As these extracts show, Traherne is not particularly interested in the detail or workings of Nature's abundance, the kind that we might find in the 19th century writers such as Jefferies, Thoreau, Muir, Burroughs or Whitman. What he does contribute to our understanding of Nature Mysticism must surely lie in his conviction, firstly that we are blessed through our senses with the enjoyment of the natural world, and secondly that in a deeply intimate way we 'own' it. References to the infinite and the eternal are found in abundance in his *Meditations*, but Nature is not the primary route to them, as with Jefferies and Krishnamurti, but more a stage within which to express enjoyment of the senses as a right or even a duty to the Creator. This last passage repeats some of these themes in inimitable Traherne fashion:

> By the very right of your senses you enjoy the world. Is not the beauty of the hemisphere present to your eye? Doth not the glory of the sun pay tribute to your sight? Is not the vision of the world an amiable thing? Do not the stars shed influences to perfect the air? Is not that a marvellous body to breathe in? To visit the lungs: repair the spirits: revive the senses: cool the blood: fill the empty spaces between the earth and heavens; and yet give liberty to all objects? Prize these first: and you shall enjoy the residue. *(p. 194)*

19th Century USA

Introduction

Richard Jefferies seems to have been something of a lone voice in mid-19th century Britain when it comes to the particular view of Nature that we are investigating here. The Romantic writers, in particular Wordsworth, come closest in spirit, but Nature tends to be the fuel of imagination rather than transcendence in their work. In contrast, mid-19th century America produced a number of writers who were either Nature mystics or in whose Nature writings we can often find a thread of transcendence. Although the term is used in a different way, America was of course the home of the new literary and philosophical movement, the Transcendentalists, founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He visited the British Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, but took his philosophy in a different, very American, direction, partly based on Kant. More important to us is his friend Henry David Thoreau, whose Nature writings have a surprisingly strong resonance with Jefferies, though they were unknown to each other. At the same time the two great American naturalists of the 19th century, John Muir and John Burroughs, were articulating a new consciousness regarding the great wildernesses of America, the first concerns that man's dominion over the natural world could not go unchecked for ever. These two men were friends and are credited with creating the beginnings of the ecology movement; Burroughs is also important for us because he was friend and biographer of Whitman.

Emerson will not be included in this section because, although his writings on Nature can rank with the best to be found from the time, his intelligence was more subtle and convoluted than makes a good Nature mystic—he has the beginning of a 20th century diffidence. Here is just a short quote from his essay on Nature that *is* in keeping with the Nature mystics:

> It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object. The fall of snowflakes in a still air, preserving to each crystal its perfect form; the blowing of sleet over a wide sheet of water, and over plains, the waving rye-field, the mimic waving of acres of houstonia, whose innumerable florets whiten and ripple before the eye; the reflections of trees and flowers in glassy lakes; the musical steaming odorous south wind, which converts all trees to windharps; the crackling and spurting of hemlock in the flames; or of pine logs, which yield glory to the walls and faces in the sittingroom, -- these are the music and pictures of the most ancient religion.

We will return to the theme of Nature as the 'most ancient religion' in the next section (**Scholars / Occult**). Here we include another short section from the same Emerson essay that finds him now unsatisfied:

> Quite analogous to the deceits in life, there is, as might be expected, a similar effect on the eye from the face of external nature. There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape. I have seen the softness and beauty of the summer-clouds floating feathery overhead, enjoying, as it seemed, their height and privilege of motion, whilst yet they appeared not so much the drapery of this place and hour, as forelooking to some pavilions and gardens of festivity beyond. It is an odd jealousy: but the poet finds himself not near enough to his object. The pine-tree, the river, the bank of flowers before him, does not seem to be nature. Nature is still elsewhere. This or this is but outskirt and far-off reflection and echo of the triumph that has passed by, and is now at its glancing splendor and heyday, perchance in the neighboring fields, or, if you stand in the field, then in the adjacent woods. The present object shall give you this sense of stillness that follows a pageant which has just gone by. What splendid distance, what recesses of ineffable pomp and loveliness in the sunset! But who can go where they are, or lay his hand or plant his foot thereon? Off they fall from the round world forever and ever. It is the same among the men and women, as among the silent trees; always a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and satisfaction. *('Nature', from Essays: Second Series, 1844)*

That Emerson finds a 'referred existence' in Nature, even a disappointment, almost brings him to the mood of the 20th century existentialists, but more on this later.
For now, if we put together the voices of Whitman, Thoreau, Muir and Burroughs, we have a powerful call for the values of Nature Mysticism, but ironically it is the lone voice of Jefferies on the other side of the Atlantic that articulates them most clearly. We have already looked at Whitman, now let us find in Muir, Thoreau and Burroughs the voices that echo Jefferies.

John Muir (1838-1914)

John Muir, born in Scotland, has been described as follows: 'A pre-eminent scholar, botanist, geologist, and writer, John Muir worked toward the preservation of the wilderness and is acknowledged to be the "Father of the National [US] Park System." His tireless efforts, writings, and friendships with presidents, writers, and philosophers influenced the nation's awareness of the need to preserve the wilderness for generations to follow.'

The following extracts from his letters, written while he was travelling or working in the high Sierra mountains, give some indication of Muir's sensitivity to Nature, bordering on the mystical. Muir, like other intelligent men of his time, had begun to question his Christian upbringing, in particular the doctrine of original sin, as this letter shows:

> Your last, written in the delicious quiet of a Sabbath in the country, has been received and read a good many times. I was interested with the description you draw of your sermon. You speak of such services like one who appreciated and relished them. But although the page of Nature is so replete with divine truth, it is silent concerning the fall of man and the wonders of Redeeming Love. Might she not have been made to speak as clearly and eloquently of these things as she now does of the character and attributes of God? It may be a bad symptom, but I will confess that I take more intense delight from reading the power and goodness of God from "the things which are made" than from the Bible. The two books, however, harmonize beautifully, and contain

> enough of divine truth for the study of all eternity. It is so much easier for us to employ our faculties upon these beautiful tangible forms than to exercise a simple, humble living faith such as you so well describe as enabling us to reach out joyfully into the future to expect what is promised as a thing of to-morrow. *(Letters, 1866)*

We note that Muir is rather implying that the Christian ideal is future-oriented, whereas he finds his confirmation of God in the present 'tangible forms.' The next extract simply conveys Muir's love of the beauty of Nature:

> I left Indianapolis last Monday and have reached this point by a long, weary, roundabout walk. I walked from Louisville a distance of 170 miles, and my feet are sore, but I am paid for all my toil a thousand times over. The sun has been among the treetops for more than an hour, and the dew is nearly all taken back, and the shade in these hill basins is creeping away into the unbroken strongholds of the grand old forests.
>
> I have enjoyed the trees and scenery of Kentucky exceedingly. How shall I ever tell of the miles and miles of beauty that have been flowing into me in such measure? These lofty curving ranks of bobbing, swelling hills, these concealed valleys of fathomless verdure, and these lordly trees with the nursing sunlight glancing in their leaves upon the outlines of the magnificent masses of shade embosomed among their wide branches,--these are cut into my memory to go with me forever. *(Letters, 1867)*

The following passage is simply another lyrical but closely-observed description of what he sees:

> The scenery, too, and all of Nature in the pass is fairly enchanting, strange and beautiful mountain ferns, low in the dark cañons and high upon the rocky, sunlit peaks, banks of blooming shrubs, and sprinklings and gatherings of [ ] flowers, precious and pure as ever enjoyed the sweets of a mountain home. And oh, what streams are there! beaming, glancing, each with music of its own, singing as they go in the shadow and light, onward upon their lovely changing pathways to the sea; and hills rise over hills, and mountains over mountains, heaving, waving, swelling, in most glorious, overpowering, unreadable majesty; and when at last, stricken with faint like a crushed insect, you hope to escape from all the terrible grandeur of these mountain powers, other fountains, other oceans break forth before you, for there, in clear view, over heaps and rows of foot hills is laid a grand, smooth outspread plain, watered by a river, and another range of peaky snow-capped mountains a hundred miles in the distance. That plain is the valley of the San Joaquin, and those mountains are the great Sierra Nevadas. The valley of the San Joaquin is the floweriest piece of world I ever walked, one vast level, even flower-bed, a sheet of flowers, a smooth sea ruffled a little by the tree fringing of the river and here and there of smaller cross streams from the mountains. Florida is indeed a land of flowers, but for every flower creature that dwells in its most delightsome places more than a hundred are living here. Here, here is Florida. Here they are not sprinkled apart with grass between, as in our prairies, but grasses are sprinkled in the flowers; not, as in Cuba, flowers piled upon flowers heaped and gathered into deep, glowing masses, but side by side, flower to flower, petal to petal, touching but not entwined, branches weaving past and past each other, but free and separate, one smooth garment, mosses next the ground, grasses above, petaled flowers between. *(Letters 1868)*

Muir is quite aware however that most people simply do not see Nature as he does, a sentiment we find in Jefferies, Whitman and Thoreau, but he is not too disturbed:

> All sorts of human stuff is being poured into our valley this year, and the blank, fleshly apathy with which most of it comes in contact with the rock and water spirits of the place is most amazing. I do not wonder that the thought of such people being here, Mrs. Carr, makes you "mad," but after all, Mrs. Carr, they are about harmless. They climb sprawlingly to their saddles like overgrown frogs pulling themselves up a stream-bank through the bent sedges, ride up the valley with about as much emotion as the horses they ride upon, and comfortable when they have "done it all," and long for the safety and flatness of their proper homes. *(Letters, 1870)*

Muir of course spends most of his time away from the 'world and his ribbony wife'. Although he works as a scientist, his interaction with Nature is at the same time mystical and transcendent in the way that Jefferies would appreciate:

> I am very, very blessed. The valley is full of people but they do not annoy me. I revolve in pathless places and

> in higher rocks than the world and his ribbony wife can reach. Had I not been blunted by hard work in the mill and crazed by Sabbath raids among the high places of this heaven, I would have written you long since. I have spent every Sabbath for the last two months in the spirit world, screaming among the peaks and outside meadows like a negro Methodist in revival time, and every intervening clump of week-days in trying to fix down and assimilate my shapeless harvests of revealed glory into the spirit and into the common earth of my existence; and I am rich, rich beyond measure, not in rectangular blocks of sifted knowledge or in thin sheets of beauty hung picture-like about "the walls of memory," but in unselected atmospheres of terrestrial glory diffused evenly throughout my whole substance. *(Letters, 1870)*

The next extract shows that rock and water move him as much as flower and tree:

> Silver from the moon illumines this glorious creation which we term falls and has laid a magnificent double prismatic bow at its base. The tissue of the falls is delicately filmed on the outside like the substance of spent clouds, and the stars shine dimly through it. In the solid shafted body of the falls is a vast number of passing caves, black and deep, with close white convolving spray for sills and shooting comet shoots above and down their sides like lime crystals in a cave, and every atom of the magnificent being, from the thin silvery crest that does not dim the stars to the inner arrowy hardened shafts that strike onward like thunderbolts in sound and energy, all is life and spirit, every bolt and spray feels the hand of God. O the music that is blessing me now! The sun of last week has given the grandest notes of all the yearly anthem and they echo in every fibre of me.
>
> How little do we know of ourselves, of our profoundest attractions and repulsions, of our spiritual affinities! How interesting does man become, considered in his relations to the spirit of this rock and water! How significant does every atom of our world become amid the influences of those beings unseen, spiritual, angelic mountaineers that so throng these pure mansions of crystal foam and purple granite!
>
> I cannot refrain from speaking to this little bush at my side and to the spray-drops that come to my paper and to the individual sands of the slope I am sitting upon. Ruskin says that the idea of foulness is essentially connected with what he calls dead unorganized matter. How cordially I disbelieve him to-night! and were he to dwell awhile among the powers of these mountains, he would forget all dictionary differences between the clean and the unclean and he would lose all memory and meaning of the diabolical, sin-begotten term, foulness. *(Letters, undated, 'midnight')*

In this last extract Muir shows that all the elemental forces of Nature are a delight to him, even earthquakes:

> These earthquakes have made me immensely rich. I had long been aware of the life and gentle tenderness of the rocks, and, instead of walking upon them as unfeeling surfaces, began to regard them as a transparent sky. Now they have spoken with audible voice and pulsed with common motion. This very instant, just as my pen reached "and" on the third line above, my cabin creaked with a sharp shock and the oil waved in my lamp.
>
> We had several shocks last night. I would like to go somewhere on the west South American coast to study earthquakes. I think I could invent some experimental apparatus whereby their complicated phenomena could be separated and read, but I have some years of ice on hand. 'T is most ennobling to find and feel that we are constructed with reference to these noble storms, so as to draw unspeakable enjoyment from them. Are we not rich when our six-foot column of substance sponges up heaven above and earth beneath into its pores? Aye, we have chambers in us the right shape for earthquakes. Churches and the schools lisp limpingly, painfully, of man's capabilities, possibilities, and fussy developing nostrums of duties, but if the human flock, together with their Rev.'s and double L-D shepherds, would go wild themselves, they would discover without Euclid that the solid contents of a human soul is the whole world. *(Letters, 1873)*

The last sentiment made here, that 'the solid contents of a human soul is the whole world' is a transcendent statement of the *via positiva*, and could have been expressed by Whitman or Jefferies, or for that matter any great *jnani* of the non-dualist persuasion. The bulk of Muir's writings focus on his work as naturalist, and so his observation has the contemporary ring of a scientific account, yet the receptivity that he had to the beauty of the wilderness has a deeply spiritual basis. It is a tribute to the American spirit that Muir has been held in such affection, and that his contemporaries in government heeded his council regarding the great wildernesses.

Henry Thoreau (1817-1862)

Henry David Thoreau was a bright youngster from an undistinguished family in Concord, Massachusetts, eventually graduating from Harvard. After only two weeks in a teaching job in a Concord school he returned to his father's pencil-making business, but a canoe trip in 1839 persuaded him that he was to be a poet of Nature rather than a schoolmaster. His friendship with Emerson helped him in this ambition, and his work was first published in the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*. In 1854 Thoreau retreated to Walden Pond, on land owned by Emerson, and built a cabin there. He grew his own food and lived alone for two years, during which time he wrote the diary series now known as *Walden*. The following extracts give an idea of Thoreau's feel for Nature:

> I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. *(Walden: Higher Laws)*

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen--links which connect the days of animated life. *(Walden: Solitude)*

The next extract touches on the issue of loneliness, an important one at some time or other in the spiritual life for most people, for some solitude seems essential to a grasp of the transcendent:

> Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Æolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far more worth than my hoeing. If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me. Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they, beyond any deserts that I am conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at their hands which my fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded. I do not flatter myself, but if it be possible they flatter me. I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. *(Walden: Solitude)*

Thoreau reflects further on solitude in the next extract by considering the 'witness' or witnessing consciousness:

> With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts

and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes. *(Walden: Solitude)*

Thoreau's idea of 'doublness' is an important element in the *jnani* experience, that there is an 'I' beyond our ordinary human self ('human entity'), that is the witness to all the drama of our life. We remember that Maharshi made a sudden leap of identification into the 'witness', leaving behind so thoroughly his 'human entity' that he nearly died. Thoreau has not gone so far, but has an insight into the destination. He also comments that this perspective can make one a 'poor neighbour and friend.' This is true of course in the secular life, but it is the very quality that makes one a good spiritual friend.

In this last extract Thoreau reveals his generosity, some would say his unworldliness, but at the same times tell us a little story of the *via positiva*:

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms--the refusal was all I wanted--but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife--every man has such a wife--changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes, "I am monarch of all I survey, My right there is none to dispute."

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk. *(Walden: Where I Lived, and What I Lived for)*

To most of his Victorian contemporaries the idea that 'it surpassed his arithmetic' to tell whether he owned the farm, the ten cents, the ten dollars or all together, would simply confirm his status as idiot. But to us he is telling us what Traherne remarked upon at such length, that in a very real way he owned the farm and the landscape, and that he needs no wheelbarrow to carry off its annual harvest. He *is* all that he surveys, and nothing tells us more powerfully of what one *is* than Nature.

Whitman thought that Thoreau's love of Nature lay more in a dislike of Man, and it is true that Thoreau does not have such a high opinion of people and their occupations as does Whitman. But Thoreau may just have been a more solitary type, and we find that he shared with Whitman to some degree at least the ability to 'become' what he saw, a quality of the *via positiva*. Thoreau is more like Jefferies, and walked in the forests in a similar way, waiting for the transcendent moments to come upon him.

John Burroughs (1837-1921)

John Burroughs was a naturalist almost as well-known as John Muir, and did for birds and wildlife what Muir did for the wilderness in general. The 'EcoTopia/USA Ecology Hall of Fame' online project, dedicated to the heroes of the American environmental movement, says this about Burroughs:

John Burroughs earned his place in the Ecology Hall of Fame with a million and a half copies of his twenty three volumes of essays extolling nature and encouraging people to experience the natural world. While he wrote for adults, teachers found his work both challenging and interesting to students. Eleven schools were named for him; some still in operation. Known as the Hudson River naturalist and the father of the American nature essay, Burroughs became one of the most popular and respected authors of his time. At his rustic cabin, Slabsides, not far from the Hudson that he built with his son in 1895, Burroughs entertained many famous visitors in his later years. Theodore Roosevelt, Walt Whitman, Henry Ford and Thomas Edison came. Fellow

Ecology Hall of Famer, John Muir, was a contemporary and friend.

Henry James called Burroughs "a more humorous, more available and more sociable Thoreau." Burroughs is of particular interest to as both naturalist and one of Whitman's biographers. Burroughs knew him initially through *Leaves of Grass*, and was nervous of him as 'poet of wickedness also'. On meeting him Burroughs says: 'I saw that the man and the work were one, and the the former must be as good as the latter was good.' In fact Whitman made a great impression on Burroughs, and on Whitman's deathbed Burroughs remarked: 'It is the face of an aged loving child. As I looked, it was with the reflection that, during an acquaintance of thirty-six years, I never heard from those lips a word of irritation, or depreciation of any being. I do not believe that Buddha, of whom he appeared an avatar, was more gentler to all men, women, children and living things.'

Burroughs found no trace of traditional religion in Whitman, saying 'Ecclesiasticism is dead'. 'In the past this ideal was found in the supernatural; for us and the future democratic ages, it must be found in the natural, in the now and the here.' Despite Burrough's very good instincts here about the spiritual life, and the thirty-six years of acquaintance with Whitman, he never made the leap of transcendent understanding that seems to lie behind both Muir's and Thoreau's writings, as we see here:

> "I wish there were something to light up the grave for me, but there is not. It is the primal, unending darkness. The faith of all the saints and martyrs does not help me. I must see the light beyond with my own eyes. Whitman's indomitable faith I admire, but cannot share. My torch will not kindle at his great flame. From our youth up our associations with the dead and with the grave are oppressive. Our natural animal instincts get the better of us. Death seems the great catastrophe. The silver cord is loosened, and the golden bowl is broken. The physical aspects of death are unlovely and repellent. And the spiritual aspects—only the elect can see them. Our physical senses are so dominant, the visible world is so overpowering, that all else becomes as dreams and shadows.
>
> I know that I am a part of the great cosmic system of things, and that all the material and all the forces that make up my being are as indestructible as the great Cosmos itself—all that is physical must remain in some form. But consciousness, the real Me, is not physical, but an effect of the physical. It is really no more a thing than "a child's curlicue cut by a burnt stick in the night," and as the one is evanescent, why not the other?
>
> Nature is so opulent, so indifferent to that we hold most precious, such a spendthrift, evokes such wonders from such simple materials! Why should she conserve souls, when she has the original stuff of myriads of souls ? She takes up, and she lays down. Her cycles of change, of life and death, go on forever. She does not lay up stores; she is, and has, all stores, whether she keep or whether she waste. It is all the same to her. There is no outside, no beyond, to her processes and possessions. There is no future for her, only an everlasting present. What is the very bloom and fragrance of humanity to the Infinite? In the yesterday of geologic time, humanity was not. In the tomorrow of geologic time, it will not be. The very mountains might be made of souls, and all the stars of heaven kindled with souls, such is the wealth of Nature in what we deem so precious, and so indifferent is she to our standards of valuation.
>
> This I know, too: that the grave is not dark or cold to the dead, but only to the living. The light of the eye, the warmth of the body, still exist undiminished in the universe, but in other relations, under other forms. Shall the flower complain because it fades and falls? It has to fall before the fruit can appear. But what is the fruit of the flower of human life? Surely not the grave, as the loose thinking of some seem to imply. The only fruit I can see is in fairer flowers, or a higher type of mind and life that follows in this world, and to which our lives may contribute. The flower of life has improved through the ages—the geologic ages; from the flower of the brute, it has become the flower of the man. You and I perish, but something goes out, or may go out, from us that will help forward a higher type of mankind. To what end? Who knows? We cannot crossquestion the Infinite. Something in the universe has eventuated in man, and something has profited by his ameliorations. We must regard him as a legitimate product, and we must look upon death as a legitimate part of the great cycle—an evil only from our temporary and personal point of view, but a good from the point of view of the whole." ... *from Facing the Mystery, vol. 23, p. 285-288*

When Burroughs says that his torch will not kindle at Whitman's great flame we can understand this from the perspective of the Master/Disciple relationship, and place it in the context of those that certainly did kindle, Richard Maurice Bucke in particular. Yet Burroughs' biography is curiously more authoritative than Bucke's, perhaps because Bucke is too clearly the disciple of this great, but misunderstood, Western guru. Nevertheless, Burroughs' musings on death in the extract above will be useful later on when we examine the more ambivalent attitudes to Nature in the late 20th century. In particular, he finds that he cannot 'crossquestion the Infinite', the very activity that is assumed by the *jnani* outlook and determination, but he has an accommodation with his personal death that seems much harder a century later.

In the meantime let us look at some genuinely inspired writings by Burroughs on Nature, in which we can again see the influence of Whitman on his thinking. Here is a meditation on Autumn:

THE FALLING LEAVES

> The carpet of the newly fallen leaves looks so clean and delicate when it first covers the paths and the highways that one almost hesitates to walk upon it. Was it the gallant Raleigh who threw down his cloak for Queen Elizabeth to walk upon? See what a robe the maples have thrown down for you and me to walk upon! How one hesitates to soil it! The summer robes of the groves and the forests — more than robes, a vital part of themselves, the myriad living nets with which they have captured, and through which they have absorbed, the energy of the solar rays. What a change when the leaves are gone, and what a change when they come again! A naked tree may be a dead tree. The dry, inert bark, the rough, wirelike twigs change but little from summer to winter. When the leaves come, what a transformation, what mobility, what sensitiveness, what expression! Ten thousand delicate veined hands reaching forth and waving a greeting to the air and light, making a union and compact with them, like a wedding ceremony. How young the old trees suddenly become! what suppleness and grace invest their branches! The leaves are a touch of immortal youth. As the cambium layer beneath the bark is the girdle of perennial youth, so the leaves are the facial expression of the same quality. The leaves have their day and die, but the last leaf that comes to the branch is as young as the first. The leaves and the blossom and the fruit of the tree come and go, yet they age not; under the magic touch of spring the miracle is repeated over and over.
>
> Whitman's expression "the slumbering and liquid trees" often comes to my mind. They are the words of a poet who sees hidden relations and meanings everywhere. He knows how fluid and adaptive all animate nature is. The trees are wrapped in a kind of slumber in winter, and they are reservoirs of living currents in summer. If all living bodies came originally out of the sea, they brought a big dower of the sea with them. The human body is mainly a few pinches of earth salts held in solution by several gallons of water. The ashes of the living tree bulk small in comparison with the amount of water it holds. Yes, "the slumbering and liquid trees." They awaken from their slumber in the spring, the scales fall from their buds, the fountains within them are unsealed, and they again become streams of living energy, breaking into leaf and bloom and fruit under the magic of the sun's rays.

Burroughs, like the other writers here, can approach the joyousness of Jefferies in his prose, but is more inclined to also see Nature through the eyes of science. That he could not be kindled by Whitman's flame is the rule, not the exception, and we are grateful for the reminder that, despite the value of these three writers to Nature Mysticism, and hence to the *jnani* outlook, the fact is that it is Whitman that is the true spiritual *jnani* genius of nineteenth century America. We finish with one last quote from Burroughs:

> "What I enjoy is commensurate with the earth and sky itself. It clings to the rocks and trees; it is kindred to the roughness and savagery: it rises from every tangle and chasm; it perches on the dry oak-stubs with the hawks and buzzards; the crows shed it from their wings and weave it into their nests of coarse sticks; the fox barks it; the cattle low it, and every mountain path leads to its haunts." *From "Before Beauty" [Birds and Poets]*

(The site author is indebted to the various on-line resources from which many of quotations and some of the images on this page have been taken. See **Links**.)

Scholars / Occult

Scholars of Mysticism

The Nature writings of the 19th century mystics and naturalists attracted the attention of the first scholars of mysticism, including William James and Evelyn Underhill. In fact a notable predecessor to James was Richard Maurice Bucke, friend and biographer of Whitman, who published a book called 'Cosmic Consciousness' in the late 1890s. The spiritual impact of Whitman on Bucke undoubtedly led to this book, a compilation of the spiritual greats in recorded history. Bucke's analysis is entirely influenced by the deep impression that Whitman made on him, though he adds some concerns of his own, for example an evolutionary theme. William James, although he quotes from Bucke, has little patience for Whitman:

> In some individuals optimism may become quasi-pathological. The capacity for even a transitory sadness or a momentary humility seems cut off from them as by a kind of congenital anaesthesia. The supreme contemporary example of such an inability to feel evil is of course Walt Whitman.
> ---
> Thus it has come about that many persons to-day regard Walt Whitman as the restorer of the eternal natural religion. He has infected them with his own love of comrades, with his own gladness that he and they exist. Societies are actually formed for his cult; a periodical organ exists for its propagation, in which the lines of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are already beginning to be drawn; hymns are written by others in his peculiar prosody; and he is even explicitly compared to the founder of the Christian religion, not altogether to the advantage of the latter. *(Varieties of Religious Experience, p.83, 84)*

William James is using Whitman to illustrate one side of a dichotomy that he sees dividing religious experience: the religion of the 'healthy minded' and the religion of the 'sick soul'. James has detected in the Nature writers of his time, and perhaps in the general expansiveness of the American mood, a reversion from what he sees as the wholesome preoccupation of Christianity with sin and damnation to a more primitive, if not pagan, optimism. Without entering his arguments in detail, it is worth noting that he finds the 'healthy minded' a feature of the spirituality of the Nature mystics, and associates them with pre-Christian religions.

It is not a coincidence that James was psychologist as much as philosopher, and it is not unfair to the profession of psychology as a whole to say that their interest lies with the 'sick soul.' What James is really sensitive to is a Christian outlook that Muir, Thoreau, Whitman and Jefferies have abandoned entirely. This states, and no doubt part of its original energy came from Manichaean and Gnostic sources, that Nature, and man in particular, represents the 'fall.' We have characterised part of the impulse behind this view as *via negativa*, but in our conclusions about Nature Mysticism and *via positiva* James's attack on the 'healthy-minded' will be re-examined. The basis of the attack is that 'healthy-mindededness' is naive. If we think of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the horrors of which led Voltaire to create his Doctor Pangloss and the story of Candide, from which we have the expression 'Panglossian' (meaning naively optimistic in the face of irrefutable tragedy, and intended to caricature the philosopher Leibniz), then Muir's almost visceral delight in the same phenomenon would illustrate James's point. Is the ability then, to find the transcendent in Nature, merely a Panglossian trait? More on this later, but meanwhile we look at two more scholars who have in different degrees contributed to the debate: Evelyn Underhill and Edward Mercer.

Evelyn Underhill (1875 - 1941)

Evelyn Underhill first published her *Mysticism — The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* in 1911, some nine years after James' *Varieties*. It built on the work of James and Bucke; it focused on mysticism; it was broader in its sources, though it did not venture further than the Religions of the Book (considering mystics of the Far East to be nihilists); and it shared the emphasis on mystical experience. Underhill was aware of Whitman and Jefferies, neither of whom she acknowledged as full-blown mystics. Unlike James she placed no great emphasis on the distinction between the healthy-minded and the sick soul, seeing in the mystics a universal earnestness and determination in their pursuit of the absolute. There are many sympathetic references to Nature in her book, none of which make the association with naive healthy-mindedness that James implies. Here are some examples:

> Such use of visible nature as the stuff of ontological perceptions, the medium whereby the self reaches out to the Absolute, is not rare in the history of mysticism. The mysterious vitality of trees, the silent magic of the forest, the strange and steady cycle of its life, possess in a peculiar degree this power of unleashing the human soul: are curiously friendly to its cravings, minister to its inarticulate needs. Unsullied by the corroding touch of consciousness, that life can make a contact with the "great life of All"; and through its mighty rhythms man can receive a message concerning the true and timeless World of "all that is, and was, and evermore shall be." Plant life of all kinds, indeed from the "flower in the crannied wall" to the "Woods of Westermain" can easily become for selves of a certain type, a "mode of the Infinite." So obviously does this appear when we study the history of the mystics, that Steiner has drawn from it the hardly warrantable inference that "plants are just those natural phenomena whose qualities in the higher world are similar to their qualities in the physical world."
>
> Though the conclusion be not convincing, the fact remains. The flowery garment of the world is for some mystics a medium of ineffable perception, a source of exalted joy, the veritable clothing of God. I need hardly add that such a state of things has always been found incredible by common sense. "The trees which move some to tears of joy," says Blake, who possessed in an eminent degree this form of sacramental perception, "is in the Eyes of others only a green thing that stand in the Way." *(Mysticism, p.191)*

> To "see God in nature," to attain a radiant consciousness of the "otherness" of natural things, is the simplest and commonest form of illumination. Most people, under the spell of emotion or beauty, have known flashes of rudimentary vision of this kind. Where such a consciousness is recurrent, as it is in many poets, there results that partial yet often overpowering apprehension of the Infinite Life immanent in all living things, which some modern writers have dignified by the name of "nature-mysticism." *(Mysticism, p.234)*

In the first passage Underhill hints at a personal sensitivity to nature, though in the second one is left with the impression that "nature-mysticism" is for her too grand a term. Incidentally, she gives the following as a list of poets that fit the description in the passage: Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning and Whitman.

Underhill is keen to defend the mystic from the general assumption that they deny the world; she often uses their relation to Nature to illustrate this. At one point she cites the seeing of "all creatures in God, and God in all creatures"; at another the brother Wolf of Francis of Assisi; and at another the case of the Peruvian Saint, Rose of Lima, who sang the praises of God for a whole hour in alternation with a songbird. In another passage Underhill recommends natural objects as subjects for contemplation.

> Seen thus a thistle has celestial qualities: a speckled hen a touch of the sublime. Our greater comrades, the trees, the clouds, the rivers, initiate us into mighty secrets, flame out at us "like shining from shook foil." The "eye which looks upon Eternity" has been given its opportunity. We have been immersed for a moment in the "life of the All": a deep and peaceful love unites us with the substance of all things, a "Mystic Marriage" has taken place between the mind and some aspect of the external world. *Cor ad cor loquitur*: Life has spoken to life, but not only to the surface-intelligence. That surface-intelligence knows only that the message was true and beautiful: no more.
>
> The price of this experience has been a stilling of that surface-mind, a calling in of all our scattered interests: an entire giving of ourselves to this one activity, without self-consciousness, without reflective thought. To reflect is always to distort: our minds are not good mirrors. The contemplative, on whatever level his faculty may operate, is contented to absorb and be absorbed: and by this humble access he attains to a plane of knowledge which no intellectual process can come near.
>
> I do not suggest that this simple experiment is in any sense to be equated with the transcendental contemplation of the mystic. Yet it exercises on a small scale, and in regard to visible Nature, the same natural faculties which are taken up and used it is true upon other levels, and in subjection to the transcendental sense in his apprehension of the Invisible Real. Though it is one thing to see truthfully for an instant the flower in the crannied wall, another to be lifted up to the apprehension of "eternal Truth, true Love and loved Eternity", yet both according to their measure are functions of the inward eye, operating in the "suspension of the mind." *(Mysticism, p.302)*

Underhill was an Anglican, though attracted to some aspects of Roman Catholicism. Her religious beliefs made an uncritical examination of Nature Mysticism difficult, but probably more valuable than James's. When she says that the absorption in Nature cannot 'in any sense to be equated with the transcendental contemplation of the mystic,' we would have to disagree with her; all the evidence being presented here arguing that, although rare, the Nature mystic reaches the heights of the greatest *jnani*.

Underhill was one of the very first female professors at Oxford University, and was succeeded much later by another scholar of mysticism, R.C.Zaehner. He was a Roman Catholic, and again his treatment of Nature Mysticism has to be understood in that context. Although he shared James's disquiet about Whitman he is relatively understanding of Jefferies, and invents a new category of mysticism for him.

J.Edward Mercer

J.Edward Mercer seems to have written the only book published in the English language with the title 'Nature Mysticism' (1912). Mercer was aware of Jefferies and Whitman (both of whom are quoted extensively, though Jefferies more so) but naturally not of Traherne or Krishnamurti; he does also cite James' *Varieties*. *Nature Mysticism* is scholarly review of a wide range of sources, stating at the same time that 'metaphysics and theology are to be avoided' the latter surprising as Mercer was bishop of Tasmania. He gives us a useful definition of nature mysticism that can complement the first approximation given earlier:

> The goal of the nature-mystics is actual living communion with the Real, in and through its sensuous manifestation. *(Nature Mysticism, p.10)*

This definition is useful because it avoids the emphasis on ecstatic or otherwise special experiences and focuses more on a continuum, as implied in the word communion. The use of the term 'the Real,' though vague at this point, is also useful if we place it for the time being merely in opposition to the false or fanciful (thus alerting us to the danger of the romantic or merely aesthetic dimension of Nature Mysticism). Mercer is

careful also to deal with the charge of anthropomorphism and also deals with the issue of animism (quoting Wordsworth's recollection of a boyhood incident on a lake where a peak seems to come alive to him). Mercer is oddly cautious about Nature itself, spending many chapters on the elements (eight on water, two on air, and one on fire) before dealing briefly with vegetation; he more or less rules out a discussion of animal life. Despite this the book is valuable, particularly for its conviction that nature mysticism is worthwhile in itself and also for the view that its pursuance can be fostered.

Occult Nature

We turn now to a brief consideration of the occult view of Nature, partly because it is raised by most of the scholars of mysticism, and partly because we have already established that the occult provides a useful boundary and distinction with the transcendent. We find occult descriptions of Nature in the 16th and 17th century writings of Jacob Boehme, William Blake, and Emmanuel Swedenborg. It is present in some degree in the Romantics of the 18th and 19th centuries, in Goethe and in a highly developed form in the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. We have seen that both Emerson and William James see Nature Mysticism as a form of the 'ancient' religion or paganism, by which they imply that it has little to do with the transcendent.

To tease out the real relationships between Nature, the transcendent and the occult, we need to recap an earlier discussion on the development of the spiritual impulse. Anthropologists have found that in Upper Palaeolithic times, and in cultures that have up to very recently lived effectively a similar life, a more or less universal spiritual impulse existed which can be called Shamanism (or Paganism, earth religion, animism, or other terms). The characteristic of Shamanism is that the world is seen as imbued with spirit, that is each entity in the natural world has its corresponding spirit, whether mountains, trees, or animals. Although details vary, the rituals and social cohesion that is created out of this basic starting point are remarkably consistent across epochs and continents.

From Shamanism there evolves a more symbolic religion which we could call polytheism, where the spirits have been mythologised into deities, particularly noticeable in the emergence of the city state where its inhabitants are somewhat cushioned from the basic forces of Nature. This is typified by the Athens of Plato, who incidentally seemed to have little interest in the natural world outside the city gates.

Polytheism in turn develops into or gives way to monotheism. Monotheism reduces the spiritual world to a single essence, God. Nevertheless this single entity is 'wholly other' to use the words of Rudolf Otto, and the supplicant retains the 'fascinans tremendum' that has its roots in the ancient impulses in Shamanism.

Monotheism in turn yields to the transcendent, where the single 'One' is found not to be 'wholly other', but one's own true identity; the state of non-dualism. This very brief summary is necessarily crude, but, it has been pointed out before, all four stages seem to coexist in Hinduism, allowing for all types of person within society to find their own spiritual path. This is an important point, and in great contrast to the Christian West which effectively stopped in its development at the monotheistic stage, neither sanctioning the transcendent (as a goal for the individual) nor permitting the more atavistic impulses of Shamanism or polytheism any legitimate expression.

Our discussion of Nature Mysticism can then be seen as an enquiry as to whether the impulse behind it is transcendent, i.e. of the highest spiritual order, or occult (Shamanistic), i.e. an atavistic impulse. There is of course a fascinating example of the collision between an originally transcendent religion and a purely Shamanistic one, in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, where the admittedly Tantric form of Buddhism encountered the Bon native religion between the 7th and 10th centuries. In this case the separate impulses are catered for in different levels of the resulting religion, and there seems little indication that Nature itself is involved in the transcendent side of Tibetan Buddhism.

So, would James and Emerson be right in seeing Nature Mysticism as a 'return' to an older form of religion, i.e. Shamanism or a related form? The answer must be no, because, as we see in the works of Jefferies, Krishnamurti, Whitman, and to a lesser extent in the other examples in this section, animism plays no part. The impulse is instead *aesthetic*, at least in the first instance, and as it grows become *unitive*, that is it leads the Nature mystic to the non-dual space of transcendence. In contrast the occult Nature of Rudolf Steiner for example, has no transcendent implication. In fact Steiner raises a host of questions in this context, for example is not his Anthroposophy a thorough updating of the Shamanistic/animist world-view for the modern era? If so, does this not update the atavistic spirit-oriented impulse into a transcendent one? The answers to these questions lie in the realisation that Theosophy is an occult *Christianity*, with its customary boundaries to transcendence, but with a hierarchy of spirit beings that belong more to a polytheistic outlook. Inherited

from its Christian basis is the view in Anthroposophy of the 'fall', and Steiner comments on the inevitable sadness of spirit beings when first incarnated in the material world.

The value of the distinctions being made here is not to prioritise one outlook over another, but to make clearer for an individual where their spiritual path may lie. To call Shamanism 'atavistic' is not to denigrate it at all, but to locate it in relation to the transcendent, and to help distinguish the Nature Mysticism under discussion here from other forms of spiritual life.

Science / Ecology

Rupert Sheldrake

We have identified a relationship between *jnani* and science in the introductory section of the site, and will explore it further in the ***jnani* and the West** section. The work of controversial scientist Rupert Sheldrake helps us understand one aspect of the relationship between Nature Mysticism as a *jnani* path, and science. We saw that the American naturalists such as John Muir and John Burroughs had a semi-mystical view of Nature tempered through their scientific understanding, though it may be that for Muir the two lived in parallel, while for Burroughs there was more of a synthesis. Sheldrake himself trained as a biologist in the 1970s at Oxford, but his love of Nature, which had drawn him into the discipline, was taken aback by a world where' the first thing one does to study a living organism is to kill it'.

In fact it has often been commented upon that the naturalists of the 19th century were in effect animists, in contrast to the physicists of that time who had constructed a 'clockwork universe' where spirit had no place. The point is that a hundred years later the situation had been reversed, so that the naturalists, in particular the biochemists, now represented the extreme reductionist view, while the physicists had become quite mystical in their accommodation of the paradoxes of quantum theory. It is just the reductionist scientific view of living organisms that Sheldrake has rebelled against. His first book 'A New Science of Life' was published in 1981 and raised a storm of criticism. The editor of the scientific journal *Nature* Sir John Maddox wrote "This infuriating tract... is the best candidate for burning there has been for many years." In an interview broadcast on British television in 1994, Maddox went further: "Sheldrake is putting forward magic instead of science, and that can be condemned in exactly the language that the Pope used to condemn Galileo, and for the same reason. It is heresy." Sheldrake's book proposed a new theory of how organisms take on their form, a problem known in science as morphogenesis. His idea was that a 'morphogenetic field' existed in the simplest form of the plant or animal, and its development was guided by this field.

'A New Science of Life' finishes with a very brief section on 'transcendent reality', but it is in a later book, 'The Rebirth of Nature — New Science and the Revival of Animism' that Sheldrake enters the territory of the Nature Mystic. He presents a historical survey of our gradual estrangement from Nature, and the role of science in this, mentioning on the way the Nature writings of Emerson, Muir, and Thoreau. He then presents a chapter called 'The Reanimation of the Physical World' which draws on various theories in science, predominantly chaos theory, to show that the 19th century vision of 'clockwork universe' (particularly that of Laplace) has been undermined. He then returns to the theme of his earlier work, morphogenetic fields, and begins to equate them with other invisible influences including the accepted electromagnetic and gravitational fields of science, and the spirits of animism. As the book progresses, and as we would expect from its subtitle, it is clear that the spiritual language that Sheldrake draws on is Shamanism, and that his view of Nature is essentially atavistic and not transcendent.

Sheldrake usefully illustrates for us how some scientists work with the most modern of intellectual tools and contexts, and yet have instincts that belong to pre-scientific thinking. Two routes are open to them, firstly to separate these two parts of themselves into essentially public and private worlds, or, like Sheldrake, to attempt a synthesis. Scientists who take an interest in the spiritual, and attempt a kind of synthesis, often tend to be drawn to the occult because it is also a system of knowledge. Hence the great interest in the paranormal and parapsychology. Other scientists, and we could cite Einstein and Schroedinger as examples, are drawn more to the transcendent, and we find in Einstein an affinity with Spinoza, another of our 'lost Buddhas of the West'. These themes will be examined in more detail in the section ***jnani* and the West**.

The Gaia Hypothesis

The Gaia hypothesis is the work of James Lovelock, and is a scientific outlook that is interested in the planet as a whole, and more specifically as having its geology, oceanography and meteorology understood as intimately shaped by the forces of life, rather than forces of the inanimate. Sheldrake draws on this idea, but his animism is not found in Lovelock's work, and is not a necessary consequence of it.

What is of interest to us is to what extent a scientific understanding of Nature, and in particular a sophisticated one like the Gaia hypothesis, can change the way that a Nature mystic may engage with Nature. We saw that it was not until the late 18th and mid-19th centuries that a Nature Mysticism emerged that relied partly on a close *observation* of Nature; Traherne in contrast was not so interested in discriminating one part of it from another. What Muir does is effectively an early version of Gaia, in that he sees the rocks, glaciers, and skies as intimately living as he does the flowers and forests. What Lovelock has done is to put Muir's intuitions on a sound scientific footing. The transcendent sense of awe that may touch one in a high mountain can only be deepened by seeing how the rocks themselves have been formed by the lives and deaths of billions of living creatures, and that the clouds and vapours that form the glorious capping to the mountains are an indirect result of the most intimate of physical processes within these organisms: breathing. In short, the analytic processes of science, which chop reality into smaller and smaller pieces, can also help in the vision of Nature as a whole. Indeed, what some of the biologists of Sheldrake's generation are doing is to create a 'holistic' science which looks at organisms as a whole.

Ecology

We have seen that the founding fathers of ecology in America had a sensitivity quite in keeping with Nature Mysticism, and so it is a good question to ask: can Nature Mysticism be the spiritual foundation for ecological thinking? This would imply that some kind of synthesis is possible between spiritual and scientific thinking, but we have seen that this leads with Sheldrake into a form of animism or Shamanism. We are interested however in a Nature Mysticism that is based on the *jnani* concept of transcendence, and individuals that respond to this form of spirituality are rarer than those that may resonate with animism.

Annie Dillard

Life and Work

Annie Dillard was born in 1945, studied English, theology, and creative writing, and came to attention with the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The book was written in 1974, when she was twenty-nine, and comprises a series of Nature essays somewhat in the tradition of Thoreau's *Walden*, a subject she had chosen for her Master's thesis. Her family background was Presbyterian, and later in life she converted to Roman Catholicism.

Dillard tells us that "I am no scientist. I am a wanderer with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts." At times her work does sound like popular science, but in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* it is her closely observed accounts of Nature and her reflections on its implications that commend attention. Dillard represents a more 20th century mind than Krishnamurti does, and is a good contrast to the predominantly 19th century Nature mystics and naturalists in this section. She shares with Sartre for example a typical 20th century 'iron in the soul', manifesting itself as an ambivalence about the very Nature she is so preoccupied with. Nevertheless her feel for Nature is profound and mystical, and in combination with her more modern sensibilities lets us explore the problems of perfection, pain and death in connection with this spiritual path.

Dillard has the aesthetic sense and naturalist's vocabulary of the Nature mystic, a Christian background, and many of those culturally determined secular instincts that developed since Whitman and Traherne. 'Iron in the soul' and irony, as well as passion and transcendence, though the latter is constrained by personal and social reservations. We could sum these up as a morbidity, that is an over-developed fear of one's own mortality, and by extension of other living beings. To say that this fear is 'over-developed' is from a bigger perspective than the 20th century intellectual ambience of the USA in the seventies, when Dillard wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and which fear seems of course quite natural to most of us today. The book, with all its wonderful descriptions of Nature starts with two images that spell out to us her (and our) unease and

fascination with Nature. The first is of her old tomcat jumping on her bed in the morning with bloody paws, leaving her as though she had been 'painted with roses'. The second, described in more detail is of a frog that doesn't jump at her approach (for this is her amusement one summer along the creek):

> He didn't jump; I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island's winterkilled grass, lost, dumbstruck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away. He was a very small frog with wide dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. *(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p.5-6)*

She goes on to tell us that the 'oval shadow' was a giant water bug which eats insects, tadpoles, fish and frogs. The account, told with superb artistry, leads her straight into a reflection on the meaning of life: "That it's rough out there and chancy is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac." This description touches on the very anxiety that modern life has at its core, a paradox when we compare our securities of living today with the much more dangerous world of mid-nineteenth century Whitman or seventeenth century Traherne. Dillard cites Pascal, that most modern of pessimists, in his expression *Deus Absconditus,* and wonders if God has not left but merely absconded with the *meaning*. She goes on to ponder:

> It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe has spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly at its hem. (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p.7)

Having introduced us to the horrors of the natural world and her anxieties in their typical 20th-century articulation, she then comes to the counterpoint: that the world is full of beauty, grace, power and light. She illustrates this with a description of a mockingbird, the same bird that Whitman had mentioned a hundred years earlier:

> About five years ago I saw a mockingbird make a straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.
>
> The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating at thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded the corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there. (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p.7-8)

This passage shows Dillard's sensitivity to beauty, her knowledge of science, and also a hint for the Nature Mystic to 'be there'. We can take that simply as an invitation to observe Nature, or see in it an exhortation to be truly in the present, with silent mind, available. Some of Dillard's descriptive passages are overwhelming in their intensity and response to the power of Nature, and can be located in the direct tradition of the great American Nature writers. That she is a woman gives her prose and observation some additional subtlety in this largely male tradition; does it also make her that much more inclined to tackle the underbelly of the natural world head-on? Or speak of Nature's power in almost sexual terms? Like for Thoreau and Jefferies, but unlike for Whitman, Nature is a quest and a context for effort, for seeking, never knowing when the unanticipated satisfaction arises or the anticipated phenomenon fails to materialise. "The lover can see, and the knowledgeable," says Dillard, which could be equally true of Nature or the spiritual life, though 'knowledgeable' is not of the Universities or pulpits.

Yet Dillard is haunted by that peculiarly 20th century alienation spelled out so vividly for us in Sartre's *Nausea*. In a mild form it shows as an anxiety about *perfection*, that on close examination all the living things that she encounters have a feather missing, a lump of fur chewed off, the teethmarks of just-failed predation, a parasitical invasion, or any of countless other imperfections. More severe is her distress at the unbridled fecundity of the animal world, pointing out that 'acres of rats' sounds quite sinister in comparison with 'acres

of tulips.' It is the insect world that particularly alienates her however, devoting a whole chapter to them, called 'Fixed' in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. But first, let us look at some passages that are reminiscent of *Nausea*, where she finds the silence of the countryside unbearable:

> I do not want, I think, ever to see such a sight again. That there is loneliness here I had granted, in the abstract—but not, I thought, inside the light of God's presence, inside his sanction, and signed by his name.
> ---
> When I turned away in this manner, the silence gathered and struck me. It bashed me broadside from the heavens above me like yard goods; ten acres of fallen, invisible sky choked the fields. The pastures on either side of the road turned green in a surrealistic fashion, monstrous, impeccable, as if they were holding their breaths. The roosters stopped. All the things of the world—the fields and the fencing, the road, a parked orange truck—were stricken and self-conscious. a world pressed down on their surfaces, a world battered just within their surfaces, and that real world, so near to emerging, had got stuck.
> There was only silence. It was the silence of matter caught in the act and embarrassed. *(Teaching a Stone to Talk, p.131-133)*

This could easily have been from *Nausea* in fact: 'choked', 'monstrous', 'stricken and self-conscious', 'stuck', 'caught in the act and embarrassed' is exactly Sartre's language. Dillard resolves the situation in an unexpected way however; she later finds herself unexpectedly explaining to a friend that those fields were full of 'angels':

> From that time on I began to think of angels. I considered that sights such as I had seen of the silence must have been shared by the people who said they saw angels. I began to review the things I had seen that morning. My impression now of those fields is of thousand of spirits—spirits trapped, perhaps, by my refusal to call them more fully, or by the paralysis of my own spirit at that time—thousands of spirits, angels in fact, almost discernible to the eye, and whirling. If pressed I would say they were three or four feet from the ground. Only their motion was clear (clockwise, if you insist); that, and their beauty unspeakable.
> There are angels in those fields, and, I presume, in all fields, and everywhere else. I would go to the lions for this conviction, to witness this fact. What all this means about perception, or language, or angels, or my own sanity, I have no idea. *(Teaching a Stone to Talk, p. 136-137)*

This presents us with the completion of an interesting journey around Dillard's psyche: we have the mystic receptivity to Nature common to the 19th century writers, overlaid with the ambivalence brought on by the acts of predation she witnesses; taken to an extreme of alienation in the description of her loneliness; and then resolved with an atavistic call to the ancient idea of Nature spirits. What we are encountering of course is the typically complex psyche of any modern intelligent person, but through its contemplation we can understand much better what obstacles might lie in the path of Nature Mysticism as a route to the transcendent.

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There is a revealing passage in the introduction by Richard Adams to *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*: "If she were to feel much more deeply the misery, futility and waste of Nature which she describes so tellingly, she would go out of her mind; so would we all." But why is this true at the end of the 20th century when it wasn't for the 19th century Nature writers and mystics? Whitman, Jefferies, Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs did not find 'the misery, futility and waste of Nature', so why do we now? Let us look further on Dillard's precise take on this problem. Her reactions to the world of insects is a good starting place; it involves a whole series of unconscious anthropomorphisms:

> Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another. I never ask why of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of almost every insect I see. More than one insect—the possibility of fertile reproduction—is an assault on all human value, all hope of a reasonable god. Even that devout Frenchman, J.Henri Fabre, who devoted his entire life to the study of insects, cannot restrain a feeling of unholy revulsion. (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p.63)

Dillard's honesty is ever valuable to us: why do we forgive the large predators, for example lions, and not the insects? Our inner confusion shows up again and again, for example in a Nature programme for television where the zoologist/commentator talks lovingly of how lion cubs learn to make their first kill, and then reacts in genuine horror when he witnesses the stragglers from a herd of wildebeest discovering the cubs and trampling them to death. Why, using Dillard's language, is the one killing cute and cuddly and the other 'an assault on all human value'? Why is it acceptable for the frog to be eaten by a heron, higher on the

evolutionary scale, but unacceptable for it to be eaten by a giant water bug, a mere insect? No glib reply will help of course, but a good starting point to this conundrum may lie in the concept of identification. We *identify* with the large predators, because we are one of them, indeed Dillard several times points out that she is a meat eater and 'predator', though whether she has killed anything larger than a mosquito in her life is not clear. Another clue to this paradox may lie in the fact that we identify not just with large predators per se, but because of their intelligence. This is partly the theme behind the *Fixed* chapter, that insects show so little intelligence:

> That the insects have adapted is obvious. Their failures to adapt, however, are dazzling. It is hard to believe that nature is partial to such dim-wittedness. Howard Ensign Evans tells of dragon-flies trying to lay eggs on the shining hoods of cars. Other dragon-flies seem to test a surfce, to learn if it's really water, by dipping the tips of their abdomens in it. At the Los Angeles La Brea tar pits, they dip their abdomens into the reeking tar and get stuck. If by tremendous effort the dragonfly frees itself, Evans reports it is apt to repeat the maneuver. *(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p.65)*

Why is that a lack of intelligence is a prompt for us to despise or even hate? The two most common criticisms of the ubiquitous town pigeon for example are that it is injured (as Dillard also contemplated with her 'frayed flighted things') or that they are stupid. Do these two things not command our compassion rather than horror? It seems that an injury or a manifestation of stupidity alienate us instead, because we anthropomorphise, i.e. we imagine ourselves to be the stuck dragon-fly or club-footed pigeon and shrink in horror at what it would mean to our own lives. Why don't we do it though for the antelope or zebra that has just become lunch for the vulture or lion? We do of course, but the point is one of priorities: we care slightly less for them because they are not 'kings of the jungle' which we secretly believe that we are.
Dillard, as an educated late-20th century Westerner, has a new take on Nature that invitably changes her thinking from her 'Walden' forebears: Darwinism. This adds to the complexities and ambivalences already present in her love of Nature, as we find in her descriptions of her visits to the Galapagos islands, a fitting pilgrimage for a 20th century Nature writer:

> Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don't believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I, when we're both so lovable? Are my values so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves? This is the key point. *(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p. 176)*

A key point indeed. One of the definitions of the spiritual life is the gradual alignment of one's own will (and hence its disappearance and that of its owner) into the will of God, or in non-theistic terms into the will of existence or the Whole. We will pursue this point in the concluding sections on Nature Mysticism, but for now let us see how Dillard grapples with the issue:

> Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.
> Consider the former: the world is a monster. Any three-year-old can see how unsatisfactory and clumsy is this whole business of reproducing and dying by the billions. We have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as a man who flicks a beetle over on its feet.

Like all great writers Dillard speaks for the community of her time, and finds in addition an image that is purely her own to make the point. Here it is the simple act that most of us may have carried out: righting a helpless creature like a beetle on to its feet which would otherwise have perished. And her point is that she has found no god yet who does as much. She continues:

> There is not a people in the world who behaves as badly as praying mantises. But wait, you say, there is no right and wrong in nature; right and wrong is a human concept. Precisely: we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world. The universe that suckles us is a monster that does not care if we live or die—does not care if it itself grinds to a halt. It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill. We are free and seeing; we can only try to outwit it at every turn to save our skins.
> This view requires that a monstrous world running on chance and death, careening blindly from nowhere to nowhere, somehow produced wonderful us. I came from the world, I crawled out of a sea of amino acids, and now I must whirl around and shake my fist at that sea and cry Shame! If I value anything at all, then I must blindfold my eyes when I near the Swiss Alps. We must as a culture disassemble our telescopes and settle down to backslapping. We little blobs of soft tissues crawling around on this one planet's skin are right, and the whole universe is wrong. *(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p. 177)*

Dillard is making a very contemporary point here that it is because we do not 'blindfold our eyes' or 'disassemble our telescopes' that we are seeing what even a three-year-old sees: 'a monstrous world running on chance and death'. But did not the 19th century Nature enthusiasts see as much 'chance and death' as we do today? The answer has to be yes, but something has changed in the modern soul, a relatively recent morbidity that cannot contemplate death of the self and by extension the death of other living things (or vice versa). Let Dillard continue:

> Or consider the alternative.
> Julian of Norwich, the great English anchorite and theologian cited, in the manner of the prophets, these words from God: "See, I am God: see, I am in all things: see, I never lift my hand off my works, nor ever shall, without end --- How should anything be amiss?" But now not even the simplest and best of us sees things the way Julian did. It seems to us that plenty is amiss. So much is amiss that I must consider the second fork in the road, that creation itself is blamelessly, benevolently askew by its very free nature, and that it is only human feeling that is freakishly amiss. The frog that the giant water bug sucked had, presumably, a rush of pure feeling for about a second, before its brain turned to broth. I, however, have been sapped by various strong feelings about the incident almost daily for several years.(*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 177-178)

One could spend a longer time with Dillard, and indeed one should in order to discover more of the positive and mystical side of her response to Nature, and other relevant issues that she raises. However, for now, she has served us well by spelling out in the most vivid way the major obstacle to Nature as a route to the transcendent.

Via Positiva

Nature Mysticism

In this section we consider how the study of Nature Mysticism illuminates the concept of *via positiva*. We have seen how Traherne presents us with a *via positiva* that has a Christian context and a full awareness of sin and a withdrawal from the 'evils of a world,' though it is not renunciative in the old sense. Whitman presents an earthier form of *via positiva* from which the Christian sense of original sin and the 'fall' is expunged. Neither men are full Nature Mystics, and we go to Richard Jefferies to see how Nature becomes the vehicle for a spiritual expansion of the highest kind. Krishnamurti in turn provides us with a perspective on Nature from one of the great 20th century *jnanis*, though we understand his perspective to be relatively unaffected by typical 20th century concerns. It is Annie Dillard who, despite having a well-developed sense of the mystical in Nature, voices the very modern reservations, doubts, diffidencies, and ambivalences about the natural world that can prevent it being a route to the transcendent.

We have also looked at how the spiritual impulse to Nature may be transcendent, or it may have its roots in the atavistic spirituality of Shamanism. Rupert Sheldrake has shown us how a scientist may also be drawn to this view of Nature, and find parallels with elements of science, particularly the idea of a 'field'.

How do we *look* at Nature if it is to become a *via positiva,* a route to the transcendent? We have investigated the Nature Mystics and naturalists of the 19th century and found that they looked or rather observed Nature in a way that Traherne does not seem to, a way that is sensitive to the detail and multiplicity of its forms, a way in harmony with science. Krishnamurti does the same, but Dillard shows us a way of focusing on Nature that takes us away from *via positiva* and raises the very doubts and questions that is the driving force behind the *via negativa*, the perception (promoted by Mani for one) of the corruption of the manifest world.

This view is shared to some degree by the occultists, Blake less so than Steiner. However, we are only interested in the occult in as far as it delineates the transcendent.

Suffering

Let us return to the question of *looking*. What is there in Dillard, and by implication in 20th century thought, that makes *looking* more pessimistic than in the 19th century, more inclined to see the 'leeched turtle and the frayed flighted things'? What did Jefferies and Whitman possess, what did the naturalists of the great American wilderness possess, that modern man and woman does not? The cynical answer is naivety, but

that will not suffice here. An alternative answer to explore is simply 'a sense of proportion.' Is it not conceivable that the modern mind has lost a sense of proportion that our forbears had, for the simple reason that we have lost the very contact with Nature that we are trying to re-establish here.
Dillard is saying, as so many would agree, that the life of creatures is full of suffering, both in living and dying. Tennyson articulated this view with these well-known lines:

> Who trusted God was love indeed
> And love Creation's final law
> Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
> With ravine, shrieked against his creed.

These very lines were quoted by Anthony Freeman, a vicar sacked by the Church of England for 'not believing in God.' He writes about the 'design argument' (a proof for the existence of God) which relies on the perception that the created world has intelligence and goodness behind it:

> Emotionally I hung on to the design argument long after conceding that there was no intellectual force in it. And it was my emotional response, to a growing doubt that the universe really has a design, which finally tipped the balance against it. I can still admire the way in which elements of nature interlock, but I can no longer accept that it is part of a plan. For example I can marvel that animals have so developed that they can breath air; I cannot accept (as the old view required) that God made air the way he did in order that the animals could breathe. Nor can I accept any longer (as traditional faith requires) that a good and skilful God would have designed so much waste and violence into nature, 'red in tooth and claw.' *(Freeman, Anthony, God in Us, London: SCM Press, 1994, p.18)*

So, we have 'waste', or profligacy or prolific fecundity, whichever way one prefers to call it; we have violence in the acts of predation which no one can deny, and we have suffering. But, the question is, in what proportion? This question is almost *never* asked; it is an everyday wisdom that life 'is' suffering, and this idea found of course a unique expression in the First Noble Truth of the Buddha. Let us take a typical predator/prey ecology found in Nature, that of lions and zebras. We watch with differing degrees of revulsion when our television screens show us the chase and the final act of killing and eating the prey, although we have already pointed out that we identify more with the lioness than with the zebra. From the moment that the first claws enter the zebra's flesh, to the death of the animal, usually by asphyxiation caused by the lioness's jaws at the windpipe, what interval elapses? How long does the animal suffer? Thirty seconds? One minute? Two minutes? It is very rare in Nature that creatures take longer than this to die from the natural violence of predation. Starvation, it is true, can take longer, but if we de-anthropomorphise the situation, that is, avoid the temptation to attribute the animal with the *anxiety* we would feel, we actually observe that very little suffering is involved. It was realised for example that the culling of elephants in South Africa through helicopter-born rifle teams was infinitely more distressing to the animals than the natural wasting away caused by drought. If we take the average situation of the higher animals in the different niches they occupy in the food-chain, then in all honesty we have to admit that suffering is a tiny, tiny fraction of their life's experience. The *other* point almost never considered is how much animals simply enjoy life. From the intense pleasure that the young of the gorilla species (and this is typical of all mammals) display in walking, running, jumping, and play, to the quiet introspections of the oldest silverback, is all that not worth a hundred, or thousand, or million times over the suffering that may, in the proportion we observe, be their lot?

Let us consider a different example, the frog of Annie Dillard. She tell us that the horror of what she saw 'sapped her' almost daily for several years, but admits to us that the entire scenario of the frog's death, as its brains turned to 'broth' lasted no more than a second. One second! Perhaps the frog had lived for six months up to then, as egg, tadpole, and finally in its amphibious form, feeding, we note, on insects. Did it not enjoy the day and night, the fluid ease of its mastery of land and water, its encounters with its own kind, and the delicious array of insect life provided for it? And was it not *entirely* fitting that just for once a frog should in turn provide a meal for a insect, especially a giant one? As Burroughs says, 'The physical aspects of death are unlovely and repellent,' then adding that the 'grave is not dark or cold to the dead, but only to the living.' The frog was gone in a second, its grave the stomach of another creature, a place that was only dark and cold to Annie Dillard. One second for the frog, but two years of being sapped by 'strong feelings.' *Of course*, this is what makes us human, that we can be sensitive and brood on things, but is this in any kind of proportion? One second to six months is about one in fifteen million. Or 0.0000006% of the frog's lifetime. Let us say that the frog was extremely lucky, and that as much as 1% of an animal's life involves suffering, i.e. 99% of an animal's average lifetime is free of suffering. Given that life lives on live on the planet Earth, it might seem that Nature, far from being 'red in tooth and claw' has designed the system *extremely* well, if not

compassionately. Six months of happy froggy pastimes for one second of searing agony. Not a bad deal surely.

Let us pursue this train of thought out of the realm of pure Nature, and into the human realm. We might well say that humans have a greater capacity for suffering. If we give the animals a 99% pain-free life, what might a realistic figure be for people? How about 90%? That would mean that in the present population of six billion people on this planet 5.4 billion people had a 'nice day' in the last twenty-four hours. Isn't that a staggering achievement?

No, a great many would reply, William James amongst them. He might have accepted the figure of 90% non-suffering, but would find no cheer in it:

> To begin with, how *can* things so insecure as the successful experiences of the world afford a stable anchorage? A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and life is after all a chain. In the healthiest and most prosperous existence, how many links of illness, danger, and disaster are always interposed? Unsuspectedly from the bottom of every fountain of pleasure, as the old poet said, something bitter rises up : a touch of nausea, a falling dead of delight, a whiff of melancholy, things that sound a knell, for fugitive as they may be, they bring a feeling of coming from a deeper region and often have an appalling convincingness. *(Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 136)*

James's point here is that if life is a chain, then one experience of suffering is enough to break it. But is this metaphor convincing? For a start, if life is a chain, then while one end may be secured in the good fortune of birth the other end has no anchor-hold at all because it is located in death. Furthermore what kind of fortitude is there in a person if it cannot take any suffering in its stride, or even grow in some way from it? Does James really admire the personality that retreats after the smallest reverse? Is not one of the most admired men of all times Nelson Mandela for whom such a large proportion of his life was spent in prison, and a large proportion of that in solitary confinement? While we may be willing to accept our 90% guess for the *average* person, does not the far more unfavourable percentage for Mandela show how a truly *wise* person still finds in Life's favour after such disproportionate deprivation?

James's analysis of the 'religion of the sick soul' and the reasons he finds overwhelmingly in favour of this pessimistic outlook is instructive and thoughtful, and it is pointless to suggest that rational argument can sway a person who, by instinct, sees life this way. Nevertheless it is still important to argue a case for a sense of proportion, as we are doing here. James includes the following point in his discussion:

> We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. *(Varieties of Religious Experience,p.140)*

It is not hard to find a host of intelligent men and women down the ages who share this view, including Vivekananda (Ramakrishna's disciple) who was quite convinced he could design a better world. And we agree with James in one sense, that to find the deathless and incorruptible is the whole journey of the *jnani* (and the *bhakti* for that matter), but we disagree with James and Vivekananda that the manifest world itself could offer a 'life without death, a health not liable to illness.' The insight of the great naturalists and Nature mystics is that Nature requires death, ours just as much as the frog's or zebras'. Their great skill is to find the eternal and the deathless in the very fabric of the natural world, the one that Dillard is so ambivalent about and that James and Vivekananda would 'redesign.'

via positiva

We now come to some more general and perhaps radical ways of understanding the manifest world and *via positiva*. It is not that likely, but let us say that we convince a James or a Dillard that they have wanted for a lack of proportion, and that they come to an accommodation with suffering and predation on that basis. A further step is need to obtain to the full *via positiva* of whom Whitman is the best epitome. This involves a deeper understanding yet of how our quintessentially human needs are met by the very structures in Nature that have been objected to so far. Anthropologists are pretty clear, and stand in disagreement with the more vociferous of the vegetarians, that human physiology and the human brain developed through hunting. Our very intelligence, keenness of sight, alertness, our socialisation, and above all our willingness to take risks, all stem from an evolutionary adaptation to hunting in groups, and the survival bonuses that go with an omnivorous diet. Alongside all of this we have the aggression and the territorial instincts that lead us to war.

But what if Vivekananda was able to design the world that fitted with his preferences? Could we conceive a of a world where life did not live on life, where there was no competition for survival? Even Vivekananda ate vegetables, which either had to die to give him life, or give up their possibility as grain, seed, or nut for growing into their own potential, rather than his. But perhaps we could at least design out the carnivores (and redesign us as pure herbivores): this would rid us at a stroke of 'Nature red in tooth and claw.' But the world is finite, so as gentle herbivores, man included, how would the animals allocate their territories? Is it not true that all the males of even the most rigorously plant-eating species fight each other for space and resources? In Vivekananda's ideal world perhaps a gentler process could be found. But as we travel down this hypothetical road we are successively denying to Nature the primary mechanism for its creative impulse: the struggle for survival. The beauty, strength, intelligence, and sheer vibrancy of a plant-eating gorilla or zebra derives as surely from struggle as the beauty, strength, intelligence, and sheer vibrancy of a predator like the polar bear, lion, or eagle, or for that matter, man. And it is only in the drama of hunting and being hunted that the real 'quickness' of life emerges, as in that wise old expression 'the quick and the dead'. Dillard mused on the seals that they were either 'fat or dead,' but this older expression is wiser.

And this brings us to the central point. Through the drama of the hunt we are either 'quick or dead,' but this way of serving Nature's mechanism for the creation of its evolutionary masterpieces is not in itself why we are addicted to life, but because of the drama inherent in it. To be witness to a *drama* is the deepest life-impulse in us. A 'safe' anodyne life where danger has been designed out of existence is to very quickly turn us from 'quick' to 'dead.' It is Dillard's gift as a writer to bring alive the dramas in Nature, and even to be part of them, by allowing the death of the frog to haunt her, and us too through our vicarious powers as reader. At the heart of the *via positiva*, if one is to truly accept one's identification with the whole, and with all things in it, one needs to develop this understanding of the dynamics that shape the manifest world: that its structures revolve around drama. The mystic and Nature mystic have in some important way transcended the personal identification with these dramas, and so paradoxically may seem naive, but in reality have simply understood the proportion of things, and the dynamics behind them.

But all of this discussion has only really dealt with some objections to Nature Mysticism as a form of *via positiva*. We have argued, and some might find convincingly, against the objections, but let us look more closely at how *via positiva* evolves from these early steps. First of all we should say that the choice of this path is more by temperament than by reason. Those inclined to this path are engaging in a process of progressive identification with a larger and larger sphere of the world, and in the case of the Nature mystic, they are starting with the natural world. We have pointed out that the first obstacle, that of suffering and predation, arises perhaps from the very sensitivity that draws the individual to Nature. But a sense of proportion, and a profound understanding of the dynamics that give rise to the very fabric of human experience, and a recognition of the intrinsic role of the dramatic, all temper those initial objections. Temper but not desensitise of course, because the aspirant on this path has to become more alive and more open, has to quiver with every beautiful leaf and dewdrop, and shudder with every cracked bone and ripped hide. Nature teaches well, if one can listen, and we have seen how it taught some of the geniuses of this path. But the lessons and deeper understandings of the dynamics that shape the natural world have to be extended to the human world, a progression that Thoreau perhaps could not make, where Whitman could. To see that the dynamics of survival play their role in the human drama, intertwined with the great human capacities for love and comradeship, and to accommodate the human counterparts to the acts of predation in the natural world, all this takes a great soul indeed.

We have pointed out that the *via positiva* is harder in its earlier stages, and looked at the obstacles, and they are formidable. But the outcome is a kind of spirituality that has not yet been truly celebrated, apart from here and there. It is far from Panglossian, Arcadian, anodyne, 'happy-clappy', naive, 'healthy-minded' (in James's sense), and a real study of the life of Whitman shows 'no dainty, dolce affetuoso', but a 'grizzled, grey-bearded, forbidding'' seasoned man of the world, and containing such a benign wisdom. It is a wisdom that is utterly different to the Buddha's. At the same time the destination *is* the same; in the words of a Zen tradition: 'no self, no person, no living being, no lifespan.' One has become none of those things by becoming all things; furthermore, like Whitman, we find 'no two alike, and each one of them good.'

Which brings us to a vital element in this debate, the delicate subject of compassion, delicate because, like love, it is trespassed against in words, not because of its treatment there, but because of its scarcity in deed. By proclaiming that 'life is suffering' the Buddha is accorded the sense of magnificent compassion, but in the instant of proclaiming that 'life is good' one is open to the charge of indifference to suffering. All we can do is take again our best example of the *via positiva*, Walt Whitman, and remind ourselves, not of his words, but his deeds, which were a lifelong manifestation of compassion in action. James was mistaken to say of Whitman: 'He is aware enough of sin for a swagger to be present in his indifference towards it', or that he 'was cut of from even a transient sadness or a momentary humility by a kind of congenital anaesthesia'. A

closer look at Whitman through the eyes of those who actually knew him showed that indifference was the last thing they found in him, and as for the capacity for sadness and humility, he showed these in abundance too. He simply wasn't morbid (though he seemed to have produced some unpublished verse that is morbid in the extreme, perhaps his own way of purging it from his system). The facts of Whitman's life showed him always in the service of others, never more so than in the accounts of his ministrations to dying soldiers in hospital, a role he took on entirely from his own promptings. He helped in simple ways like bringing fruits or sweets, or making them comfortable in their crude beds, and in practical ways like writing down and posting the last expressions of the love of an illiterate man for his family or sweetheart, and more profoundly still by bringing his benign presence to them, so that they would 'swear that they had been in the presence of an angel'. And then, through his life, like the Buddha, he taught the discipline of transcendence to any who had the inner ear for it. The real compassion is to bring the awakened heart to bear on those who still live in the relative nightmare of false identifications; both men spent their lives on it. The false identifications are equally dispelled by *via negativa*, or *via positiva*.

Jnani

Nature Mysticism and *jnani*

We have seen that Nature Mysticism and the *via positiva* are inextricably linked. None of the great renunciates on the *via negativa* have spoken about Nature, the Buddha being a good example. We do find of course an interaction with the living world, and there are many accounts of animals being drawn to Ramana Maharshi for example. But we find that there is no place for Nature in his teachings, as his 'who am I?' has the tendency to strip away all the manifest world, starting with one's own body-mind. What Nature Mysticism does is to illustrate a non-renunciative form of *jnani* transcendence.

Firstly, can we be so sure that Nature Mysticism is a *jnani* path? Bearing in mind that at some level *all* these distinctions have to disappear, the answer must still be yes. If we survey the great *bhakti* Masters then we find that their devotions and ecstasies are very much an inward affair, and turn outwards only in respect of their beloved disciples. This is not to say that they may not have a sensitive eye for Nature, or that they may not have a deep understanding of the dynamics and drama of the conditioned realm (manifest world). Rumi for example has a rich store of natural observation to draw on in his poetry, but it is usually always there as a metaphor, and not for itself. Indeed, and we have not commented on it yet, but the very idea that the natural world contains within its fabric the transcendent, which in some ways means a leaving behind of the manifest world including Nature, is paradoxical. Perhaps for the *bhakti* the developed aesthetic eye is simply not present because they use the eye of the heart, and that is more likely to respond to human love and its transcendent counterpart, the love of God.

So let us return to the question of what Nature Mysticism tell us about *jnani*. If, as we just suggested, the eye for the natural world is so developed (and also the senses of hearing, taste, smell, and touch), then somehow the senses bring about an exalted state of *mind*, in the first instance, rather than *heart*. The fact that the Nature mystic may also have a scientific inclination tells us again that the *jnani* individual in this context delights in knowledge of the manifest world, and its sensory counterpart, Nature. But this is not knowledge that textbooks contain, but its highest development; wisdom.

Another common feature with the more renunciative type of *jnani* is the presence of a refined will; we see it in Jefferies and Thoreau, that they create a spiritual practice, usually of walking, that is a direct counterpart to the many meditation practices found in Hinduism and Buddhism. It is not the *bhakti* form of surrender, but a making oneself available through the effort of placing oneself in a particular context. In Zen it is sitting with eyes closed; with Nature Mysticism it is walking with eyes open.

It might be possible to doubt that Nature Mysticism had something in common with the fully-developed *jnani*, were it not for the wonderful example of Krishnamurti. Although his dialogues and lectures did not often use the device of Nature, his attitude towards it is remarkably close to that of a Jefferies or a Whitman. We have said that Krishnamurti was not that representative of 20th-century Western thinking as a whole, but as a modern Buddha perhaps his response to Nature was a truly modern innovation over the Buddhas of the East, and represents an archetype for the future.

A *jnani* pedagogy for Nature Mysticism

If we consider the diverse ways in which the great *jnani* Masters taught then it can be hard to find the common elements in their teachings. We have seen that a distinction between *via positiva* and *via negativa* can help, but what exactly can we bring from the teachings of the *jnani* Masters to Nature Mysticism? First of all it is clear that the Nature Mysticism we are looking at is one that is not based on animistic impulses, but transcendent ones. This is not to say that an animistic understanding is not also important, and that it cannot be incorporated into a *jnani* world view. In our selection of nature writers and mystics not one of them completely avoids the language of animism in their work. The *jnani* perspective however may contain the animistic, but never the other way round.

We must turn to Krishnamurti first, again, to suggest a starting point for a *jnani* pedagogy of Nature Mysticism. We should be cautious here, partly out of respect for Krishnamurti, because he denies the possibility of a path or pedagogy. Nevertheless, like for the Zen aspirant who has a place and practice, we can identify a context, or situation, in which the 'immeasurable thing' can happen: quite obviously Nature. Does it need, as John Muir might suggest, to be wilderness though? If a wilderness is available then fine, and in the beginning perhaps an effort needs to be made to find one, however circumscribed, but in the long run even the little Nature that is permitted in the modern city will serve the purpose. Indeed the very paucity and vulnerability of the natural within the man-made environment makes it that more poignant; for example the buddleia that grows throughout London, England is as exquisite as it is persecuted. It grows out of brickwork and paths at the least encouragement, and in times of economic plenty considerable sums of money are spent on its eradication. To no avail!

So much is obvious, that one need to place oneself in whatever Nature that one can find. The next is to progressively cultivate that aesthetic sensibility, so that it grows into a profound love. This is not the love of the *bhakti*, but the love born of understanding and the resonance with beauty. A scientific mind may help, or, as Thoreau rather bemoaned, an engagement such as fishing, hunting or birdwatching, or for that matter the pursuits of the professional naturalists. But, in the long run, the point is to be silent and without goal, for those are the very things that Nature will speak about when the moment comes. It will speak, as it did to Jefferies, about eternity, or, as it did to Krishnamurti, about silence, or as it did to Traherne and Thoreau, about our right to 'own' it, a simple reflection of our vastly expanded self that arises through the transcendent.

The *jnani* can also bring to Nature the fundamental question of the *jnani* path: who am I? If one has the *via positiva* outlook then this question simply follows the opposite route to the 'neti-neti' of the Advaita non-dualist tradition, saying instead the Brahmanic 'I am that,' 'I am that.'