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LEARN OF THE GREEN WORLD WHAT CAN BE THY PLACE

Notes on Time, Morality, and Nature

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to be a tulip and desire no more
but water, but light, but air.
John Berryman

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INTRODUCTION

I want start with a few stepping stones towards a deeper notion of time, nudging our perception away from the seconds, weeks and years of our quotidian world towards the geological *millions of years* and philosophical *infinity*. From this more detached perception of time, I hope to derive a clearer sense of our moral thinking and of our responsibilities as humans towards nature. I furthermore aim to demonstrate the role poetry can play in creating an increased moral awareness towards the natural world and, consequently, of ourselves as beings within nature. What arises from such a view is less selfishness, and, accordingly, increased compassion. As a result, the following essay is to some extent a defense of poetry, attempting to demonstrate and defend the irreplaceable function of poetic language and thought in asserting our humanity – or, rather, in identifying the crossing points of *humanity* and *nature*, as it is one of the main tenets of this essay that these two cannot be separated.

This essay is also, and essentially in its overall ambition, a personal attempt to meet Socrates' ultimate moral challenge to every human being when claiming (in Plato's *Apology*) that the "unexamined life is not worth living". What follows therefore are reflections and observations on such fundamentals as the nature of our moral codes, of our language, of our responsibilities towards the natural world and on our capacity to reason, all patched together with quotations from books and authors that have been instrumental in shaping this author's world view. Thus, finally, the following is also a personal essay on reading.

TIME AND MORAL PROGRESS

To begin with, this is the Canadian nature poet Don McKay, accounting for the letter *H* in his 'geopoetic alphabet':

> *History*
>
> The history of jazz, the history of Canada, local history, social history, clinical history, natural history, earth systems history, a brief history of time. The strain on the poor word, which displays itself dramatically be the time we get to Stephen Hawking's paradoxical title, has begun to show up, for me, at any rate, when we reach 'natural history'. I think it's because history really is intimately as well as etymologically connected with 'story', and 'story' always means human events – human events which unfold in a shapely manner. They have beginnings and ends we can count on; they create little homesteads for us that, whether inflected comically or tragically, colonize flux.
>
> But when we turn to any event in the 'natural world' – a wave on a beach or a snowfall on a street – the safety of story is under constant threat. At any moment, we realize, this fragile structure can open out into the continuous metamorphoses of deep time […]. A natural historian has to trot quickly through phrases like "in only a few million -

> years" and "the mass extinctions of the Permian," lest the reader pause too long and begin to sink in her own wonderment. All historians, we might say, have to cope with rogue elements which threaten to invade the narrative. But the natural historian puts herself in harm's way; she can't remain safely within the stockade, but must venture out among the bears, the lichens and the aeons, risking geopoetry at every turn.[1]

'Geopoetry' – unfamiliar to my computer's automatic spelling device and therefore underlined with red – is glossed thus by McKay in his geo-alphabet:

> What better term for those moments of pure wonder when we contemplate even the most basic elements of planetary dwelling, and our words fumble in their attempts to do them justice? What else but 'geopoet' should we call Xenophanes, as he stands with a fossil of a seashell in his hand, in his mind the wild notion that the quarry he stands in once lay under the sea? What else should we call you as you watch the creek tug another bit of clay from the cutbank and feel a similar tug on your life? Or, for that matter, myself, trying to cobble together this strange sign system out of the varieties of our dumb astonishment?[2]

McKay calls for a continuum in our thinking of time, pointing out in one of his books that because of the two tectonic plates forming the San Andreas Fault on North-America's west coast, a sliding boundary moving 2 to 4 inches a year, San Francisco and Los Angeles will lie side by side in about 15 million years' time.

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1 *Deactivated West 100*, pp. 44–45.

2 Id., pp. 42–43.

Everything flows, nothing is fixed. Except perhaps our thinking, believing that what is before our eyes is a permanent, never-changing creation. We cannot see the mountains move, and so we infer they stand still. Evolution – this slowest of all slow processes – is met with disbelief. Not out of religious obstinacy anymore, but because of sheer misgivings about something so extraordinary as fish crawling ashore and, in due time, taking the shape of man (hence the invention of 'intelligent design', to explain away the phenomenon). Finally, if evolution really happened, – then it *happened* and isn't happening anymore. Ours is a set worldview.

This, on the other hand, is the American naturalist-anthropologist and poet Dr. Loren Eiseley, well known for his blend of scientific and lyrical accounts of the origin and continuance of life:

> The world is fixed, we say: fish in the sea, birds in the air. But in the mangrove swamps by the Niger, fish climb trees and ogle uneasy naturalists who try unsuccessfully to chase them back to the water. There are things still coming ashore.[3]

Criticizing our still "Ptolemaic" worldview, Eiseley draws attention to and laments our anthropocentric vision, secluding for man alone a place in the center of existence, in the center of life:

> We teach the past, we see further backward into time than any race before us, but we stop at the present, or, at best, we project far into the future idealized versions of ourselves. All that long way behind us we see, perhaps inevitably, through human eyes alone. We see ourselves as the culmination and the end, and if we do indeed consider our passing, we think that sunlight will go with us and the earth

[3] *The Immense Journey*, p. 54.

> be dark. We are the end. For us continents rose and fell, for us the waters and the air were mastered, for us the great living web has pulsated and grown more intricate.[4]

Published in 1946, Eiseley's first book *The Immense Journey* – on man and nature, and man *in* nature – has proved prophetic in its concerns about our species' arrogance towards the natural world and the possible consequences of such haughtiness. Now, 65 years later, scientists claim that, because of man's ever-increasing influence on the planet and its ecosystems, we are entering a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene, or the Age of Man. This is a proper term for the times responsible for impending catastrophes and devastation to our habitats, should man's careless usurping of Earth's resources continue without change.

Man's greed is, arguably, *natural*, animalistic, revealing the inborn will to survival shared by all living creatures. The danger however is the ego-centrism and, consequently, limited perception of time resulting from a standpoint concerned only about one self's continued existence, managing to ignore impending threats future generations face because of one's way of life. Selfishness is at the root of the Anthropocene and the all too familiar dangers now posing the natural world. With reason alone, the crowning jewel of man's evolutionary aptitude, can we oppose and call attention to awaiting catastrophes.

This is Peter Singer's account of the origin of reason in *The Expanding Circle*, his monumental book on ethics and evolution, which I will discuss further later on:

> Our language developed to the point at which it enabled us to refer to indefinitely many events, past, present, or future. We became more aware of ourselves as beings existing over time, with a past and a future, and more conscious of the

[4] Id., p. 57.

> patterns of our social life. We could reflect, and we could choose on the basis of our reflections. All this gave us, of course, tremendous advantages in the evolutionary competition for survival[.][5]

However, the animal in us – our innate greed and the resulting limitations in time perception, only turning our gaze towards the present when building the next dam or digging for more coals – seems to prove stronger than our reasoning, capable of projecting our minds into the future to see what awaits us. This dominant shortsightedness was one of Eiseley's warnings, stressing that what is now might not be later, should we fail to acknowledge that our existence cannot be taken for granted:

> It pays to know this. It pays to know there is just as much future as there is past. The only thing that doesn't pay is to be sure of man's own part in it.
>
> We are one of many appearances of the thing called Life; we are not its perfect image, for it has no image except Life, and life is multitudinous and emergent in the stream of time.[6]

Now, in the Anthropocene, ironically it might be the last geological epoch of the planet as *we* know it – and we know it only as an infinite resource.

Moving from millions and billions of years to infinity, this most unfathomable of life's conditions, the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's well-known poem "L'infinito" – with Emily Dickinson, a

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[5] *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and the Moral Progress*, pp. 91–92.

[6] *The Immense Journey*, pp. 48, 59.

fellow chronophobiac, reaching similar heights in her time-perceptive poetry – ranks among the closest I think we can get, in language, to grasping the feelings and awe this phenomenon stirs. Concerning its *physics* and as explanation, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* would probably be a better starting point than Leopardi's 1819 poem. Yet the clarity, control and scope of these few and carefully ordered sentences in Leopardi's poem is such a rare feat that even the best of academic explaining falls short as clarification in comparison.

Leopardi's poem is *final*, absolutely definite in its account of the absolutely infinite:

The Infinite

Always have I loved this lonely hill,
And this hedge that hides from sight
The most part of the extreme horizon.
But sitting here and gazing,
I imagine boundless spaces,
Unearthly silences beyond it,
And such a deep stillness
That my heart almost takes fright.
And as I hear the wind rustling thro' the trees,
I compare the infinite silence
With this voice: and I recall eternity,
The dead seasons, the present time,
Alive, and its sound. So in this immensity
My thoughts drown: and it is sweet
To be wrecked in this sea.[7]

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[7] *Selected Works of Giacomo Leopardi*, p. 23.

I will fail all attempts at adequately understanding my condition as a human being if I disregard the role time plays in my existence. In the words of novelist Eva Hoffman, "[t]ime gives us our existential premise, and coming to terms with it is equivalent to grappling with the great questions."[8] We are temporal creatures with – although the fact is often forgotten or simply not observed – a past and future far outstretching our limited life span. The role time plays in biology and genetics drives this point home. I quote again from Peter Singer's revolutionary study on evolution and ethics, *The Expanding Circle*, where time is of the essence:

> In the long-term view, our genes have come from millions of different ancestors, spread all over the world, and our descendants, in a few thousand years, will be similarly dispersed among millions of future human beings. So a detached view of evolution should lead us to consider the future of the entire human species, rather than just our own welfare and that of our kin and tribe.[9]

It is this *detached view* of time I want to have as a focal point, moving away from the mundane (and self-centered) 'tragedy' of my own mortality, measured out by the beginning and end of my personal time. Because my present condition – age, nationality, gender – is more liable to cloud rather than clarify my understanding of, to put it solemnly, what it means to be alive, should I fail to take into account what preceded and what will follow me.

Since we possess a mind capable of imagining what came before and what might ensue – eons occupying endlessly more space and time than one's own temporal existence, and thus ensuring a fuller picture demonstrating the "many appearances of the thing called Life" – it is one's moral obligation to project one's mind both back

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8 *Time*, p. 11.

9 *The Expanding Circle*, p. 59.

and forward in time, trying to make out how things were and how they may become, not just for oneself but universally for all. This, Peter Singer claims, has been the progress of our moral *thinking*, although he wonders how widely the disinterested view in ethics has been *practiced*:

> [T]he shift from a point of view that is disinterested between individuals within a group, but not between groups, to a point of view that is fully universal, is a tremendous change—so tremendous, in fact, that it is only just beginning to be accepted on the level of ethical reasoning and is still a long way from acceptance on the level of practice. Nevertheless, it is the direction in which moral thought has been going since ancient times. Is it an accident of history that this should be so, or is it the direction in which our capacity to reason leads us?[10]

But what responsibility! And what an immense task. Life in all its images. Nobody can shoulder such a burden adequately. And, I am forced to believe, very few want to. The 'expanding circle' referred to in the title of Singer's book is the on-going evolution of morality, with moral laws at work within a family or tribe at the dawn of humanity in due time extending to class or race, then to the entire people, then to a group of peoples, then to all humanity, and, finally, extending to man's dealings with the natural world.

One's position in the circle is, of course, personal. Yet it is Singer's belief that by reasoning and by adopting the disinterested view, one will come to distinguish between right and wrong, realizing that what benefits the world in the long run also benefits oneself – or, rather, one's genes!

Thus, by reasoning from a disinterested point of view, a Shanghai CPO will recognize that China's economic growth,

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[10] Id., p. 113.

although increasing his and many others' quality of life, is achieved immorally, should one take into account the approximately 300,000 miners who die each year digging for coals in order to keep fuelling the growth. Similarly, reading over the Kyoto Protocol with a pen in hand and reasoning from a disinterested or a universal point of view rather than his nation's or even his own (considering his chances of re-election), the President of the United States would make haste to sign the Protocol, knowing that America's emission of greenhouse gases is a fundamental cause in global warming, threatening the entire planet and its ecosystems on a scale never seen before.

It is selfishness which stands in the way towards a greener future. And selfishness, Peter Singer fundamentally claims, is what needs to be abolished in order for our ethical thinking to progress:

> We can now state the rational basis of the expansion of ethics. Disinterestedness within a group involves the rejection of purely egoistic reasoning. To reason ethically I have to see my own interests as one among the many interests of those that make up the group, an interest no more important than others. Justifying my actions to the group therefore leads me to take up a perspective from which the fact that I am I and you are you is not important. Within the group, other distinctions are similarly not ethically relevant. That someone is related to *me* rather than to you, or lives in *my* village among the dozen villages that make up our community, is not an ethical justification for special favoritism; it does not allow me to do for my kin or fellow villagers any more than you may do for your kin or fellow villagers. Though ethical systems everywhere recognize special obligations to kin and neighbors, they do so within a framework of impartiality which makes me see my obligations to my kin and neighbors as no more

> important, from the ethical point of view, than other people's obligations to their own kin and neighbors.[11]

However, we seem to be nowhere near the final (utopian?) stages of the circle – man's dealings with the natural world. Indeed, so local and self-centered is our thinking still that arguably even the most advanced of our societies haven't progressed further than adherence to the welfare of one's own group and not that of others (a strong case in point being George Bush's 'patriotic' refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol).

Everyday language is another case in point, and perhaps the clearest indication of how intricately tied to the present – and selfish – our thinking is, ever since the Romans started preaching the hedonistic maxim: seize the day!

Carpe diem. You snooze, you lose. *La hora es ahora.* Tomorrow is a world away. *Den tid, den sorg*. It's now or never.

Finally, there is the underlying mechanism and ethos of advanced societies, the capitalist credo responsible for accelerating our lives to the maximum (and, ever more frequently, beyond that, into stress related diseases and discomfort). Namely, that *time is money*.[12]

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[11] *The Expanding Circle*, pp. 117–118.

[12] A telling account of our speeded-up lives is the following story told by American poet Gary Snyder, describing a truck-ride with an aboriginal elder in central Australia:

> We were traveling by truck over dirt track west from Alice Springs in the company of a Pintubi elder named Jimmy Tjungurrayi. As we rolled along the dusty road, sitting back in the bed of a pickup, he began to speak very rapidly to me. He was talking about a mountain over there, telling me a story about some wallabies that came to that mountain in the dreamtime and got into some kind of mischief with some lizard girls. He had hardly finished that and he started in on another story about another hill over here and another story over there. I couldn't keep up. I realized after about half an hour of this that these were tales to be told while *walking*, and that I was experiencing a

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Novelist Eva Hoffman, the author of a recent book on time and its manifestation in advanced modern day societies, takes up the ideas of French theorist Jean Baudrillard when discussing our rising inability to join together "disparate occurrences" in time. As we are constantly flooded with one-dimensional information carrying neither past nor future concerns, our sense of time is to an ever-increasing extent becoming limited to a "perpetually created and perpetually vanishing present". What follows is our inability to make sense of the broader temporal strokes of reality:

> French theorist, Jean Baudrillard, takes this idea [the increasing pace of our cultural and technological developments] further, suggesting that in hurtling along on the currents of sound bites, buzz and instantly forgotten information, we are losing the very notion of historical time, or 'event'. In order for disparate occurrences in the political space to coagulate into an 'event', we need to make connections between them, to reflect on their meanings, and to see their shape. Instead, as indiscriminate information keeps bombarding us from all sides, the happenings in the public realm remain just that: something that happens, and then disappears. Journalists and bloggers produce information in real time; we receive it in a constant succession of disconnected data. And, in this perpetually created and perpetually vanishing present, there is no time to take stock, to consider relationships between occurrences, or link into the longer and deeper time of history.[13]

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speeded-up version of what might be leisurely told over several days of foot travel. (*The Practice of the Wild*, p. 82.)

13 *Time*, pp. 170–171.

Much in the same vain is George Steiner's concern for the "metaphysic of the instant", articulated thus in his seminal book *After Babel* (with Steiner here emphasizing the past but, as will be discussed further on, giving equal importance to the future later in his book):

> In the recent revolts of the very young, a surrealistic syntax, anticipated by Artaud and Jarry, is at work: the past tense is to be excluded from the grammar of politics and private consciousness. Being inevitably 'programmed' and selective in values, history is an instrument of the ruling caste. The present tense is allowed because it vaults, at once, into the conforming future. To remember is to risk despair; the past tense of the verb *to be* must infer the reality of death.
>
> This metaphysic of the instant, this slamming of the door on the long galleries of historical consciousness, is understandable. It has a fierce innocence. It embodies yet another surge towards Eden, towards the pastoral before time [...]. But it is an innocence as destructive of civilization as it is, by concomitant logic, destructive of literate speech. Without the true fiction of history, without the unbroken animation of a chosen past, we become flat shadows.

George Steiner furthermore argues that without art and literature, "there could be no culture, only an inchoate silence at our backs", with Steiner defiantly claiming – and *After Babel* showing – that it is "no overstatement to say that we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time."[14]

Indeed, poetry – as a universal art form overstepping the boundaries of specific time and place, but in particular drawing its

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[14] *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation*, p. 31.

power from the past – offers an alternative to this failure of comprehending time adequately and, for that reason, of fulfilling our moral responsibilities towards the natural world and each other. I have mentioned the possible catastrophic consequences of a selfish and shortsighted vision of time, deriving from our species' arrogance in believing that the world and its bounty is inexhaustible and made for our glory alone – a tiresome (and, of course, a very dangerous) sense of superiority as old as *Genesis*' emphasis that man is to subdue and have dominion over "every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

In poetry, however, instead of stipulations about dominion, we tend rather to find exhortations and humility. "Humility is endless" it famously goes in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Taking another example from high modernism, the following is the culmination of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, the incarcerated poet here – whether repentant for his Fascist leanings or still belligerent – reaching what can be called this work's conclusion or ethical belief; emphasizing humbleness towards the natural world while detesting the "contra naturam" of greed and conceit:

> The ant's a centaur in his dragon world.
> Pull down thy vanity, it is not man
> Made courage, or made order, or made grace,
> Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.
> Learn of the green world what can be thy place
> In scaled invention or true artistry,
> Pull down thy vanity,
> Paquin pull down!
> The green casque has outdone your elegance.
>
> "Master thyself, then others shall thee beare"
> Pull down thy vanity
> Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,
> A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,

Half black half white
Nor knowst'ou wing from tail
Pull down thy vanity
        How mean thy hates
Fostered in falsity,
        Pull down thy vanity,
Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity,
Pull down thy vanity,
        I say pull down.[15]

Pound's overall method in his opus magnum, *The Cantos*, was to draw lessons from history; in Steiner's words "to translate out of time". But as an example of moral behavior, "Learn of the green world what can be thy place" is a special paradigm throughout the Pisan sequence, more so than in other parts of the opus. Knowledge here is derived from nature, either directly through the poet's close observations of his surroundings (Pound was being held captive in a US military camp near Pisa in Italy when these poems were written, for a time sleeping in a wire cage open to the elements and the burning sun) or by way of such authoritative figures as Confucius or Lao Tse. In fact, this ethical paradigm – to learn one's place and humility from nature – echoes the words of Jesus when, in his Sermon on the Mount, he tells his disciples to "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow". But whereas Christ's example is taken in order to glorify the Creator, the lilies being an illustration of His inventive making, Pound's emphasis is on the natural world as a meaningful creation in itself, independent from any higher reality.

Nature appears in modern poetry as a phenomenon which is studied – scientifically, even – in order to learn about ourselves. No longer does it function as the open book from which God's mind can be read, as it usually did in Romanticism (with the notable exception of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, where nature and the growth of the poet's

[15] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p. 541.

mind are intricately linked). At the start of this chapter on time, morality and natural awareness, I mentioned the Canadian nature poet Don McKay and his geopoetic alphabet. I will now delve deeper into the question of ecological compassion through the works of other 'geo-poets' who have crossed this reader's path, and who offer in their writing a deeper understanding of what it means to be alive within – and not isolated from – time and nature.

ECOLOGICAL COMPASSION

As mentioned above, Peter Singer's expanding circle of moral progress ends with man's dealings with the natural world – although Singer, rather surprisingly, draws his line with sentient animals:

> The circle of altruism has broadened from the family and tribe to the nation and race, and we are beginning to recognize that our obligations extend to all human beings. The process should not stop there. […] It is as arbitrary to restrict the principle of equal consideration of interests to our own species as it would be to restrict it to our own race. The only justifiable stopping place for the expansion of altruism is the point at which all whose welfare can be affected by our actions are included within the circle of altruism. This means that all beings with the capacity to feel pleasure or pain should be included; we can improve their welfare by increasing their pleasures and diminishing their pains.[16]

Singer argues that beyond sentient life, our actions take place in a so to speak moral vacuum, as they can in such cases neither increase nor diminish the non-existing pain or pleasure of the non-sentient life form in question:

> The expansion of the moral circle should therefore be pushed out until it includes most animals. (I say "most" rather than "all" because there comes a point as we move down the evolutionary scale—oysters, perhaps, or even more rudimentary organisms—when it becomes doubtful if

[16] *The Expanding Circle*, p. 120.

> the creature we are dealing with is capable of feeling anything.)[17]

It should be noted that Singer's book, first published in 1981, was written before the dangers of global warming and other ecological threats became a pressing issue (a question – dare one say? – of life and death). Singer mentions briefly that "the ecology movement has emphasized that we are not the only species on this planet, and should not value everything by its usefulness to human beings". Also, by reference to German philosopher Albert Schweitzer's ethical principles, Singer points out that

> [c]laims that go beyond animal life have been put forward, as part of the general swing away from an ethic concerned only with the welfare of human beings. Albert Schweitzer proposed and ethic of "reverence for life" which specifically included plant life: "A man is really ethical," he wrote, "only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to help all life which he is able to succour, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy as valuable in itself, nor how far it is capable of feeling. To him life itself is sacred."[18]

The sanctity of all life follows – if not ethically, then strictly biologically – from the intricate connections at work between all living organisms, sentient or not, in the continuously repeating cycles of natural creation. Rather than appealing to the metaphysics of 'new-age, tree-hugging' animism, by speaking from the strictly cosmological viewpoint of the origin and distribution of matter ever since the Big Bang and subsequent cooling of the universe, we can

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17 Id., p. 120.

18 Id., pp. 121–122.

confidently say that all life is within us, and that we are within each tree and stone.

In his essay "How Flowers Changed the World", naturalist Loren Eiseley comments memorably on this inter-connectedness of all life by giving as an example the abrupt and miraculous appearance of flowers:

> A little while ago—about one hundred million years, as the geologist estimates time in the history of our four-billion-year-old planet—flowers were not to be found anywhere on the five continents. Wherever one might have looked, from the poles to the equator, one would have seen only the cold dark monotonous green of a world whose plant life possessed no other color.
>
> Somewhere, just a short time before the close of the Age of Reptiles, there occurred a soundless, violent explosion. It lasted millions of years, but it was an explosion, nevertheless. It marked the emergence of the angiosperms—the flowering plants. Even the great evolutionist, Charles Darwin, called them "an abominable mystery," because they appeared so suddenly and spread so fast.
>
> Flowers changed the face of the planet. Without them, the world we know—even man himself—would never have existed. Francis Thompson, the English poet, once wrote that one could not pluck a flower without troubling a star. Intuitively he had sensed like a naturalist the enormous interlinked complexity of life.
>
> Without the gift of flowers and the infinite diversity of their fruits, man and bird, if they had continued to exist at all, would be today unrecognizable. Archaeopteryx, the lizard-bird, might still be snapping at beetles on a sequoia limb; man might still be a nocturnal insectivore gnawing a roach

> in the dark. The weight of a petal has changed the face of the world and made it ours.[19]

However, by failing to see or take into account this "enormous interlinked complexity of life", Singer insists on limiting the moral circle to animals capable of feeling pleasure or pain:

> It is easy to sympathize with Schweitzer's and [Aldo] Leopold's concern for all living things. Once the expansion of ethics to all sentient creatures has been accepted, it is only a small step to extend this expansion until it takes in plants and even inanimate natural objects like the land, streams, and mountains.
>
> Nevertheless, I believe that the boundary of sentience—by which I mean the ability to feel, to suffer from anything or to enjoy anything—is not a morally arbitrary boundary in the way that the boundaries of race or species are arbitrary. There is a genuine difficulty in understanding how chopping down a tree can matter *to the tree* if the tree can feel nothing. The same is true of quarrying a mountain. Certainly imagining myself in the position of the tree or mountain will not help me to see why their destruction is wrong; for such imagining yields a perfect blank.[20]

Our ethical relation to and dealings with the natural world – contrary to Singer's apparent assertion of moral vacuum once we cross the boundary of sentient life – never take place in isolation. Chopping down a tree matters of course not only to the tree, but also – and

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19 *The Immense Journey*, pp. 63, 77.

20 *The Expanding Circle*, p. 123. Singer here refers to the early ecologist Aldo Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac* and its emphasis on man's unethical treatment of land and plant life through the justification of property.

more importantly – to the ecosystem of which it is a part.[21] Hence, because of life's "enormous interlinked complexity", through the destruction of non-sentient life forms such as trees, we harm sentient creatures such as birds. And – to elaborate upon this obvious truism – should we unsustainably fell millions and millions of trees, we start harming the planet and, consequently, ourselves in the long run. Sustainable deforestation on the other hand is the result of long-time, ethical/pecuniary thinking, with man – through his reasoning powers – seeing that gain in the short run can equal loss in the long run, as overfishing and dead fishing grounds are further examples of.[22] But as has been discussed above, offering up one's immediate material gain and pleasure for the benefit of future generations requires a good deal of detached way of thinking, and, concomitantly, a different sense of temporal morality.

Nonetheless, rather than attempting to push our sense of time further back into the erratic past and forward into a joint and better future, we are to an ever-increasing extent becoming locked in a self-centered here and now, as pointed out by Baudrillard and Steiner

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[21] Writing on sylvan plant and animal life in *The Forest and the Trees: A Guide to Excellent Forestry*, Gordon Robinson says:

> There are as many 5,500 individuals (not counting the earthworms and nematodes) per square foot of soil to a depth of 13 inches. As many as 70 different species have been collected from less than a square foot of rich forest soil. The total animal population of the soil and litter together probably approaches 10,000 animals per square foot. (*The Forest and the Trees*, p. 87.)

[22] Pointing out the economic value of 'still-standing' forests, Gary Snyder writes:

> We must make the hard-boiled point that the world's trees are virtually worth more standing than they would be as lumber, because of such diverse results of deforestation as life-destroying flooding in Bangladesh and Thailand, the extinction of millions of species of animals and plants, and global warming." (*The Practice of the Wild*, p. 143.)

above. Correspondingly, Singer wonders whether his limited views are only products of time:

> Perhaps my incomprehension proves only that I, like earlier humans, am unable to break through the limited vision of my own time.[23]

As mentioned, Singer's book was first published in 1981. Now, thirty years later, with our climate getting sicker and our temporal stupor aggravating, the necessity of reaching a new stage in our moral thinking has become apparent. I therefore believe that Singer's account of our ethical progress would, quite logically, extend to man's dealings with the natural world as well, should the book appear today. Because – as becomes clearer day by day, with scientific data accumulating – only by taking responsibility for our actions in the present will we behave ethically towards future generations, to those who will inherit this sick earth.

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Peter Singer's book has featured extensively in my discussion. It has provided a theoretical groundwork to fall back on, both regarding the nature and origin of our ethical thinking as well as the role time plays in shaping man's morality. But Singer has little to offer when it comes to ecological compassion and awareness, even quite unbendingly claiming that "imagining myself in the position of the tree or mountain will not help me to see why their destruction is wrong; for such imagining yields a perfect blank."[24]

To oppose and overwrite Singer's "perfect blank", here is what American poetess and essayist Mary Oliver has written (or, rather, imagined) from, quite literally, a tree's point of view:

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[23] *The Expanding Circle*, p. 123.

[24] Id., p. 123.

Can You Imagine?

For example, what the trees do
not only in lightning storms
or the watery dark of a summer night
but now, and now, and now—whenever
we're not looking. Surely you can't imagine
they just stand there looking the way they look
when we're looking; surely you can't imagine
they don't dance, from the root up, wishing
to travel a little, not cramped so much as wanting
a better view, or more sun, or just as avidly
more shade—surely you can't imagine they just
stand there loving every
minute of it, the birds or the emptiness, the dark rings
of the years slowly and without a sound
thickening, and nothing different unless the wind,
and then only in its own mood, comes
to visit, surely you can't imagine
patience, and happiness, like that.[25]

Taken from Oliver's *Long Life* (note the title), a beautiful collection of essays on nature and poetry, "Can You Imagine?" seems written almost in direct opposition to Singer's and others' reluctance to give nature a voice within themselves, the poet here offering her readers a hint of what just such a voice might sound or think like — with *patience* and *happiness*, in Oliver's last line, functioning as the two key words of this poem and its message.

"Learn of the green world what can be thy place" is a reciprocal moral principle when given the chance to operate between man and the natural world. Knowledge derived from the long life of nature

[25] *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings*, p. 14.

adds significance to our short lifespan, enabling us to see further than – to *overlook*, as it were – our own mortality, thus helping us to come to terms with our transience. In turn, by realizing and acknowledging the inter-connectedness of all life, both in the far past and long into the unforeseen future, increased ecological compassion and responsibility is attained. What follows is that the damage nature suffers from selfish, short-sighted hands is lessened.

The literature emphasizing natural awareness is long, only in recent centuries ranging from such diverse works as Thoreau's *Walden* to Native American pastorals like Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree*; from the later *techne*-oriented philosophy of Martin Heidegger to the Swedish-Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright's critique on modern technology in such books as *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* and *Myten om framsteget*; from the environmental activist poetry of Gary Snyder to Don McKay's geo-poetry and Mary Oliver's appeals to 'nature-imagination'.

Indeed, poets, as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" (with the emphasis on *unacknowledged* here), have for a long time insisted on the need for a change in attitude, long before the need became as ubiquitously pressing as it is today. This is Gary Snyder, from a 1975 essay titled "The Politics of Ethnopoetics":

> What we are witnessing in the world today is an unparalleled waterfall of destruction of a diversity of human cultures; plant species; animal species; of the richness of the biosphere and the millions of years of organic evolution that have gone into it. In a sense ethnopoetics is like some field of zoology that is studying disappearing species. We must have a concern with this because our subject matter is rapidly disappearing and we, (and I mean "we" to mean everyone, regardless of his color or ethical background, who is now plugged in to the fossil fuel industrial society, we are

> all that "we"), we are the ones who are in some inexorable, karmic, historical way keeping it going down.[26]

In their poetry, Snyder and others have tried to keep it from "going down", but, it would seem, to little avail. Nonetheless, it is in the writings of ecologically attuned authors that we access the philosophy capable of pointing out why and where we have erred, and, eventually, how to put things right again. And, indeed as Snyder himself has emphasized, only by appropriating our human thinking to the planet's geological timescale will we attain a deeper understanding of the negative effects our behavior can have. In the words of the American literary critic Helen Vendler, in Gary Snyder's poetry we are:

> given, on loan, a time-sense that we ourselves may live in but rarely, but that Snyder lives in always—the opulent time-sense of a luxuriously unfolding evolutionary dynamic in which we are very late comers. When reproached for the "impracticality" of his ideas on how to live, Snyder is fond of pointing out that he is in synchrony with the large evolutionary picture, whereas his critics live too narrowly in the present: "It's only a temporary turbulence I'm setting myself against. I'm in line with the big flow … 'Right now' is an illusion too."[27]

For the remainder of this discussion on ecological compassion, in order to further still our understanding of time and its essential role in shaping our natural and ontological awareness, I therefore want to take a closer look at the poetry of one particular, time-oriented poet, that of the Norwegian Tor Ulven.

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[26] See http://www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses/snyder_politics.pdf

[27] Vendler, Helen. *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*, p. 123.

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Borrowing Aristotle's distinction between poetry as a universal description of what could happen whereas history is a particular account of what did happen, in much the same way does poetry differ from prose. In keeping with Aristotle's claim, poetry still today emphasizes the general. More often than not – unless in epic or historical works, such as Pound's *Cantos* or Dante's *Comedy* – does poetry operate without proper names, a particular time or definite settings, whereas prose writing deals with specifics in character, time and space: a book of poems about love as opposed to Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, poems about time as opposed to Proust's *À la recherche de temps perdu*.

The poetry of Tor Ulven (1953–1995) fits this claim of 'unspecificness'. In fact, reading through Ulven's *samlede dikt* – a collection of the five books of poetry published in his lifetime, covering more than 500 pages – very little can be deduced about the exterior circumstances of the man himself. The emphasis is almost exclusively on the interior, on this particular mind's battle with what ails and haunts it. Yet, although painful and morbidly dark at times, there is none of the confessional, biographical emphasis of a Sexton or Lowell here. For that, the poetry is too detached from this poet's personal life, focusing instead on our collective lot as temporal, transient and natural creatures. Not the self-absorbed 1st person *I* but rather the inviting, communicative (and, at times, self-accusing) 2nd person *you* runs through Ulven's work. This dialectical emphasis – along with his body-drawn imagery, dark vision, economy of expression and occasional obscurity – makes for a close comparison with Paul Celan's terse, vivid, moral-driven and *du*-dominated poetry.

As to particular time and space, albeit born and raised in Oslo and ultimately ending his life in the city at the age of 41, Ulven's poetry carries few direct allusions to his specific urban surroundings. In Aristotle's terminology, his poetry is *universal*.

In a comprehensive book on representation and reality in Tor Ulven's prose and poetry, *Å være vann i vannet*, Janike Kampevold Larsen says in her introduction:

> Med Tor Ulven inntok den eksistensielle pessimismen norsk litteratur. Tekstene sirkler om tema som fravær, forsvinning og pinen ved å være overgitt sitt eget jeg – og dette i et språk som stråler av nærvær, som gir de mest spektakulære forestillinger.
>
> Ulvens forfatterskap bærer en ambivalens med hensyn til det jordiske livet. På den ene siden er det smertefullt: Det er smertefullt å skulle forholde seg til det å være menneskelig, ikke som en opphøyet form for liv, men som en helt tilfeldig utvikling av en art og med artstrekk som er langt fra flatterende. Det fremstilles som fåfengt å skulle late som om det finnes noe mål eller mening med tilværelsen. På den andre siden er det en paradoksal og mørk glede i Ulvens diktning: Den skisserer muligheten for å tenke seg verden uten oss eller omvendt å tenke seg oss som en integrert del av den materielle verden.[28]

Already broaching topics very much at the center of this essay, such as man's illusions about his evolutionary superiority dealt with by Loren Eiseley above ("ikke som en opphøyet form for liv, men som en helt tilfeldig utvikling av en art og med artstrekk som er langt fra flatterende") and emphasizing man's fusion with nature ("å tenke seg oss som en integrert del av den materielle verden"), Larsen goes on to identify a particular poem to speak for this inter-connectedness and correspondence between man and the natural world in Ulven's

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[28] *Å være vann i vannet: Forestilling og virkelighet i Tor Ulvens forfatterskap*, pp. 7, 9.

oeuvre, taken from *Forsvinningspunkt* (1981), his second collection of poems:

> Være vann i
>
> vannet.
>
> Være stein i
>
> steinen.
>
> Eller elske hånden
> som griper steinen
>
> under vannet.[29]

The poem, as Larsen claims and goes on to show in her discussion, is representative of Ulven's poetics as a whole and this author's nature-ordered *Weltanschauung*, refusing to obey the clear-cut separation (hierarchy, even) which we, in our increasing arrogance, have established between humanity and nature. Consequently, Larsen outlines the fundamental, two-fold vision she sees as running through Ulven's poetry thus:

> På den ene siden: å være ett med materien. På den andre siden: å ha en relasjon til materien. Denne relasjonen kan være både sanselig og persiperende – det vil si vi kan ha en kroppslig opplevelse av den, og vi kan se på den og forholde oss bevissthetsmessig til den. Det er med andre ord snakk om forskjellen på å være i det ikke-menneskelige og å forbli i det menneskelige. Det er forskjellen mellom å "være" del av det formløse og døde og å være i menneskets

[29] *Samlede dikt*, p. 113.

> mulighet til å differensiere mellom ulike former og å berøre dem.[30]

However, more than being an investigation of the *difference* between "å være i det ikke-menneskelige og å forbli i det menneskelige", there are also instances where the division between human and non-human is *wiped out* altogether in Ulven's poetry, making for this poet's strong appeal. The two often exist in a strange and powerful mix, with Ulven's lyrical I – or, rather, *du* – frequently crossing our man-made border between the human and the natural. The examples are numerous. The following prose poem – fittingly titled "Obligatorisk undervisning", as a fundamental representation of this author's vision – offers, in its stunning (if bleak) imagery, a summing up of what has been said and re-said time and again in this essay about our temporal place in nature and the randomness of our cyclical existence – whether we incarnate as humans, insects, earth or stone:

> *Obligatorisk undervisning*
>
> Du snur en stein som ligger på den fuktige bakken fordi du liker å se maurene, de gulbleke markene og saksedyrene som det ventelig vrimler av under den; alle disse småkrypene du er den første til å oppdage, til å gripe på fersk gjerning. Men på undersiden av steinen er det denne gangen et ansikt, og dette ansiktet begynner å snakke med grøtet stemme, mens små jordklumper løsner omkring munnen. Etter hvert forstår du av den knirkende, men bydende talen at det er din tur til å ligge med ansiktet ned mot jorden, helt til noen kommer og snur deg, nokså tilfeldig, i et anfall av barnslig nysgjerrighet.[31]

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30 *Å være vann i vannet*, p. 11.

31 *Samlade dikt*, p. 398.

Reading Ulven, more often than not I am hesitant to elaborate on his thinking, as I feel it ruins the poetry and lessens any understanding of it. His poetry is *definite*, to repeat what I said earlier of Giacomo Leopardi, whose poetry Ulven himself was well versed in. Presenting the reader with a particular thought or image, Ulven is economic and efficient in his use of language, with ease and exceptional beauty portraying the most complex of subjects. Consequently, his poetry is to an unusual extent ill-suited for paraphrase. Indeed, it is primarily the richness and clarity of Ulven's powerful vision which this essay has attempted to grasp and outline, through its meanderings elaborating extensively on – *paraphrasing*, even – poems such as the following, on time and transience:

Anton Webern kommer
mot deg

Nei

han har sendt lydene
foran

lydene av vanndråper
fra en

tenkende

dryppsteinsgrotte. Det går
fem tusen generasjoner
med fugler
der oppe

mellom hvert
drypp

Den hører
sine egne lyder
forsvinne

i tiden. Du drypper

og blir borte[32]

Similarly, as human and non-human elements often co-exist in Ulven's language, time also crosses our conventional thresholds between past, present and future, blending into an unusual geological temporality encompassing all three at one and the same time. Manipulating time through the means of a tape recorder – reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's method of time distortion in *Krapp's Last Tape* – Ulven here demonstrates that we will all be seen as creatures belonging to a Stone Age by future generations:

Din egen stemme

på lydbåndet,
det er
speilbildet

som forteller
at også du
hører til

i en steinalder.[33]

---

32 *Samlede dikt*, p. 179.
33 Id., p. 174.

Skulls, bones, fossils and other archeological traces of the past crowd Ulven's poetry. Unearthing layer after layer of time, we finally reach the Precambrian, Earth's earliest geological epoch, when primitive life began to form some 4 billion years ago. But again, the following poem seems to take place in at least two time-zones at once – as there were certainly no faces to reflect in the Precambrian waters:

> Fra det blikkstille
> brådypet
> skal bunnsteinene
> stige opp
>
> gjenom speilbildet ditt:
>
> I dag
> er det prekambrium.[34]

In contrast to Ulven's temporal simultaneity between our Holocene present and Earth's days of infancy, Don Mckay's poem "Precambrian Shield" emphasizes the tangible and visible distance between the two geological periods. The poem begins thus:

> Ancient and young, oldest
> bone of the planet that was just
> last week laid bare by the blunt
> sculpting of the ice: it seemed a land designed
> to summon mammals – haunched and shouldered,
> socketed. Each lake we entered
> was a lens, curious and cold
> that brought us into focus.
> Would I go back to that time,
> that chaste and dangerous embrace?

[34] Id., p. 115.

> Not unless I was allowed,
> as carry-on, some sediment that has since
> accumulated, something to impede the
> passage of those days that ran through us
> like celluloid. Excerpts from the book of loss.[35]

A focal point in my discussion on morality, time and natural awareness has been what Loren Eiseley called "the enormous interlinked complexity of life". Understanding our role as the dominating creature within this immense cyclical chain of creation and re-creation and realizing that modern man is oftentimes oblivious to his ensuing responsibilities will rest on our ability to experience nature differently. Nonetheless, rather than acknowledging man as an integral (and increasingly destructive) part in the life-chain, in our lack of humility (from *humus*, earth – hence humans: earthlings) we are prone to seeing us as almost *above* the natural world and hence outside its cycle:

> People from the high civilizations in particular have elaborate notions of separateness and difference and dozens of ways to declare themselves "out of nature." As a kind of game this might be harmless. […] But at the very minimum this call to a special destiny in the part of human beings can be seen as a case of needlessly multiplying theories (Occam's razor). And the results—in the human treatment of the rest of nature—have been pernicious.[36]

In contrast to this inability to see life in its cyclical entirety, by repeatedly weaving his imagery around the natural and temporal fundamentals of (human) existence – namely water and time – Tor Ulven plunges his readers into the deeper layers of being:

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35 *Strike/Slip*, p. 8.

36 Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*, pp. 106–107.

Dråpene
av isvann
du fanger i munnen

løsnet
for tusener av år siden

og opphørte
å dryppe
for tusener av år siden

De faller videre

Slutten
på serien

har ennå ikke
nådd deg[37]

Again, water – as it so ubiquitously does in poetry – functions as a chronometer, through its own cyclicality here mirroring that of life. But despite the trope's frequent use throughout the centuries, Ulven's imagery is striking and new, no matter how "ancienne" the simile is. Therefore, to conclude my discussion on temporality in Tor Ulven's poetry – although I have done no more than ripple the waters of this unique poet's works – I want to reprint the following *kortprosa*, demonstrating Ulven's ability to introduce his readers again to time and its (at times unbearable) essence through a marvelous sense of alienation:

Konsert XI

[37] Id., pp. 187–188.

(nocturne ancienne)

> Mørkredd og hundrevis av år gammel. Sengehalmen rasler og vannuret kaster bivrende reflekser mot muren. Vann som drypper og lys som brenner. Det kunne vært over nå. Hvorfor må tiden dryppe dråpe for dråpe, for ulidelig sakte å fylle hjerneskallen av døgn? Tåre-ur, istapp-ur, piss-ur, rottegnage-ur som går og går for lykkelige og ulykkelige. Hvorfor er ikke vannuret en foss, så alt kunne hende fort, fort, og årene av søvnløshet styrtet i dypet og ble skum?[38]

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Commenting on Tor Ulven's manipulation of time, Janike Kampevold Larsen has written authoritatively:

> Det er mange kommentatorer som har vært opptatt av at Ulvens diktning griper tilbake til det fortidige, til en urtid – at den henplasserer mennesket i en tid da det ikke fantes. Men toposen er mer kompleks og interessant enn som så: Det dreier seg ikke om en entydig tilbakeskrivning av mennesket til en jordisk urtid, det er her overhodet ikke tale om en regressiv bevegelse. Vi har heller å gjøre med et jeg som forskytes mellom tider, tider som er markert gjennom verbalformer som er uforenlige innenfor et normalt tempussystem. Vi vet at det vanlige er at grammatiken etablerer tempussystemet fra et jeg-her-nå-perspektiv. Det er dette prinsippet Ulven bryter med, neglisjerer og spiller ut mot verden. Tidsforskyvningene er mange, og de har det til felles ad de alltid overskrider det talende

[38] *Stein og speil: mixtum compositum*, p. 57.

> nåtidsøyeblikket. Den som snakker, og den som ser, er ikke fested i én tid – det er et jeg i fri bevegelse mellom epoker.[39]

To conclude this essay on the interlinked complexities of time, nature and morality, in the third and last chapter I intend to explore further the implications of temporality in Indo-European syntax as briefly mentioned here by Larsen, with special emphasis on the corollaries of *futurity* for man's reasoning powers as presented by George Steiner in his previously mentioned book on language and translation, *After Babel.* Additionally, I will address the question of futurity in terms of our expectations and demands for a certain standard of living, and whether this demand is globally compatible – and rightful – in the long run. In other words, I will attempt to sketch what awaits us from the current point of view, with special emphasis on the Swedish-Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright's *provocative pessimism* as put forth in his book *Myten om framsteget*.

[39] *Å være vann i vannet*, p. 79.

FUTURITY

Our ability to foresee, to ascertain our own death, rests on the grammar of futurity – on our ability to say *I will die*. In turn, futurity is derived from a logical deduction of the past, from the fact that every man that ever lived *died*. It is reasoning *sub specie praeteritorum* – from the aspect of things past – which gives us, in the strictest sense of the word, a predictable future. The further back we see and acknowledge our mistakes, the clearer becomes our picture of the desired things to come. Because the future is, quite literally, in our hands: it depends on what we do with them; and, in turn, to what purpose we use our hands depends on our ability to break loose from the one-dimensional, selfish present and fix our gaze Janus-like both backwards and forwards. — Hands, those "tricky manipulators who have so busily converted rock to stone, who perpetrated the pyramids and silicon valley", to quote from Don McKay's poem, "Quartz Crystal".[40]

I have mentioned George Steiner's bold claim in *After Babel* that "we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time", which perhaps is the ultimate argument for the necessity of art (and poetry, as a past-driven, time-embracive enterprise, in particular). Later in his book, discussing the implications of our Indo-European syntax and what man's ability to form the future tense entails for his reasoning abilities, Steiner writes:

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[40] *Strike/Slip*, p. 16.

> Whatever may be the proto-linguistic or meta-linguistic codes of other species, I would want to argue strongly that man alone has developed a grammar of futurity. Primates use rudimentary tools but, so far as has been observed, they do not store tools for future usage. There is a vital sense in which that grammar has 'developed man', in which we can be defined as a mammal that uses the future of the verb 'to be'. Only he, as writes Paul Celan in *Atemwende*, can cast nets 'in the rivers north of the future'. The syntactic development is inextricably inwoven with historical self-awareness. The 'axiomatic fictions' of forward inference and anticipation are far more than a specialized gain of human consciousness. They are, I believe, a survival factor of the utmost importance. The provision of concepts and speech acts embodying the future is as indispensable to the preservation and evolution of our specific humanity as is that of dreams to the economy of the brain. Cut of from futurity, reason would wither.[41]

I have drawn up a dichotomy between *reason* and *selfishness* as the two competing factors shaping our collective behavior and position towards nature, determining our willingness to effectuate changes for future generations. In much the same way, Steiner here accentuates the link between reason and futurity, although, as mentioned above, I believe our reasoning abilities rest as much on our sense of the past.

Continuing his discussion on the future tense as a "survival factor" for the "preservation and evolution of our specific humanity", Steiner narrows his argument down to the implications of futurity for the individual:

> The language fabric we inhabit, the conventions of forwardness so deeply entrenched in our syntax, make for a

[41] *After Babel*, pp. 166–167.

> constant, sometimes involuntary, resilience. Drown as we may, the idiom of hope, so immediate to the mind, thrusts us to the surface. If this was not the case, if our system of tenses was more fragile, more esoteric and philosophically suspect at its open end, we might not endure. Through shared habits of articulate futurity the individual forgets, literally 'overlooks', the certainty and absoluteness of his own extinction. Through his constant use of a tense-logic and time-scale beyond that of personal being, private man identifies, however abstractly, with the survival of his species.[42]

Man's ability to see beyond his personal time-scale is a direct result of the "enormous interlinked complexity of life", a vision which has been this essay's recurrent argument for a greater ecological compassion. To which extent our *languages* are shaped by nature, to which extent they mirror natural time and elements, is beyond the scope of my discussion. But the claim has been made and passionately argued for. In his posthumously published essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", edited and printed by Ezra Pound in 1918, American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa traced the origin of Chinese ideograms back to prototypes in nature. In this controversial essay, Fenollosa also maintains that the grammatical subject-verb-object word order of uninflected languages directly reflects the temporal order in nature. These syntactic building blocks derive from natural processes, which in turn come about through what Fenollosa calls *transference of power* – i.e. through man's interaction with nature:

> The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in

[42] Id., pp. 167–168.

sentences because all truth is *transference of power*.

To express this redistribution of forces in nature, three word-types are needed, equivalents of the grammatical division of sentences into subject, verb and object:

> [T]he first denoting the agent or subject from which the act starts, the second embodying the very stroke of the act, the third pointing to the object, the receiver of the impact.

Fenollosa's example of such power transference – *Farmer pounds rice* – is to demonstrate that the temporal order of causation is intimately linked to word order in Chinese, English or any other uninflected language; a grammatical-temporal order which "exactly corresponds to [the] universal form of action in nature."

Whereas inflected languages "have little tags and word-endings, or labels, to show which is the agent, the object, etc.", in Chinese

> there is nothing but the order of the words to distinguish their functions. And this order would be no sufficient indication, were it not the *natural order*—that is, the order of cause and effect.[43]

Consequently, the natural origin of Chinese (and superiority, according to Fenollosa) is not only recognizable in the nature-like ideograms but also in the very structure of the language, accurately mirroring the temporal order of causation in nature.

Whether derived from nature or not, I have attempted to demonstrate that our sense of past, present and future is *embedded* within nature and its cyclical, geological temporality, and that our ability to act sensibly towards the natural world depends on how

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[43] See Pound, Ezra. *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*, pp. 312–313.

extensive our sense of time is. That, however, as Steiner points out, is highly individualistic:

> Events a billion years off are fully conceptual in a mathematical calculation and in language, but lie outside any zone of imaged, sensorily analogical apprehension. What then of ten million years, of half a million, of five generations? The quality of grasp, of registered impression, will be specific to different cultures and professional milieux. The quotient of substantive association in an astrophysicist's or geologist's consciousness of great time spans is obviously larger than that normal to an insurance actuary.[44]

It has been my aim to demonstrate the collective, moral imperative of pushing this insurance actuary's temporal perception beyond the limits of his mortality. But have I mistaken man's freedom and right to pursue happiness for selfishness in my discussion? How far does our freedom and claims for a certain level of comfort reach? Again, the discussion revolves around our reasoning capabilities, around our time perception and willingness to see further, and, hence, around our ethics, as shown by Georg Henrik von Wright in *Myten om framsteget* which I will now turn to. But underlying Wright's argument is Steiner's link between reason and futurity as man's essential survival mechanism – a link which, in Wright's most pessimistic opinion, might not hold, with the direst of consequences.

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Containing essays written between 1987 and 1992, Wright's book is a continuation of thoughts on technology, science and reason as put forth in his controversial book *Vetenskapen och förnuftet*. Although

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[44] *After Babel*, p. 163.

Wright duly acknowledges the improvements modern technology has brought about, he takes a skeptic's stance towards a blind belief in the possibility of continued progress, a belief he sees as mythical and, in the end – because of foreseeable consequences when Earth's resources run dry or its ecosystems become irredeemably spoiled – as not founded on reason:

> En sak som makten over nature kan åstadkomma är att öka människors materiella välbefinnande. Det ger den industriella och tekniska utvecklingen imponerande bevis på. Det är inte fråga om annat än att förhöjt materiellt välbefinnande, högre levnadsstandard, i många, ja kanske i de flesta fall utgör framsteg i ordets verkliga bemärkelse och värderas som en förbettring av livets villkor. Men därav följer inte att denna värdering håller när tillväxten stigit over en viss nivå, eller när dess återverkningar på miljön eller på den sociala ordningen måste tas med i räkningen.[45]

Calling attention to how international – or, rather, meta-national – industries are allowed to run lose[46] (without, one gathers, the limitations to exploitation of natural resources a democratic system might establish, these systems being weak or non-existing where meta-national industries strike), Wright appeals to a universal sense of solidarity, reminiscent of what Peter Singer claims is the final step of man's expanding ethical circle:

> I en värld på väg att enas, tack vare teknisk och industriell utveckling samt rationalisering av de sociopolitiska systemen, har kraven på solidaritet människor emellan fått nya dimensioner. Solidariteten kan inte längre begränsas till en trång krets av blodsförventer eller gemensamma

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45 *Myten om framsteget*, p. 46.

46 Id., p. 147.

> professionella intressen. Den måste överskrida alla gränser för nation, ras och religion och bli till en global ansvarskänsla – global också i den bemärkelsen att den sträcker sig till dem som kommer att vandra på denna jorden efter oss.[47]

But of this "global sense of responsibility", dependent also on man's duty to future generations, Wright is disbelieving, stressing that only under extreme circumstances and suffering is man willing to re-consider established values:

> [A]ll historisk erfarenhet talar för att kunskap om villkoren för ett förnuftigare sätt att leva omsätts i handling bara om det finnst ett tvång att handla på ett sätt som legitimeras av kunskapen. Det är osäkert om något annat än landsomfattande lidanden eller outhärdliga hot um undergång kan utöva ett sådant tvång på människan.[48]

Perhaps now, more than in 1992, the time has come – with global threats of irredeemable changes to our habitats – for a change in attitude and a re-ordering of our priorities. However, judging from the dominant view at the time of increased economic growth in the West as being the solution to poverty and unequal distribution of wealth elsewhere (!) and the irrational schemes proposed to attain such growth, Wright acknowledges his pessimism towards the future. For, despite increased awareness of the dangers our environment is exposed to, and despite an ever-increasing understanding of the necessity of renewable energies and sustainable management of resources, our emphasis is still that

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47 Id., p. 55.
48 Id., p. 126.

> tillväxten i industriländerna [skall] få fortsätta, levnadsstandarden om möjligt inte tillåtas sjunka utom tvärtom stiga, och människor inte tvingas att avstå från de tusen nya leksaker som högteknologisk industri i ökad takt spottar ut over en också geografiskt ständigt expanderande marknad. […] Utan tillväxt ingen utjämning av välståndet. "Vi måste först bli ännu rikare för att sedan också kunna hjälpa de fattiga." […] Botemedlet mot fattigdomen är ekonomisk tillväxt. Med stigande levnadsstandard hejdas folkökningen – det visar tillståndet i i-världen. Sålunda måste tillväxten öka om jorden skall räddas.[49]

However, with this line of doubtful reasoning,

> [l]ångt innan vi kommit därhän att de som varit fattiga njuter den välmåga som krävs för frivillig barnbegränsning skulle ekologiska och demografiska storkatastrofer ha skakat värdlen. Patienten skulle kanske dö på vägen mot det som man anser vara ett "naturligt tillfrisknande".[50]

As to the reasonable *possibility* of an ever-increasing economic growth, Wright is duly suspicious:

> Jag känner inte ett enda övertygande eller ens seriöst argument för möjligheten av ständigt tillväxt. De argument som jag hört har jag funnit antingen helt ogenomtänkta eller också eskapistiskt fantasifulla – såsom gruvdrift i stor skala på månen eller utflyttning av delar av jordens befolkning till konstgjorda rymdsatelliter, eller til planeten Mars som gjorts beboelig.[51]

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49 Id., pp. 144–145.
50 Id., p. 145.
51 Id., p. 145–146.

In light of such far-fetched argumentation, Wright darkly admits:

> Själv finner jag sådana utvecklingsperspektiv långt mindre troliga än tanken att människan genom sin utbredning och sin exploatering av jorden bevisar sin oduglighet som biologisk art och därmed dömer sig själv till undergång.[52]

Urging for a change in our fundamental attitude towards the world rather than hoping for automatically presented solutions through our free-running capitalist economic systems, Wright pushes for different values to take precedence – for man to change

> sina attityder, sin inställning till vad människan behöver, vad som är ett gott liv, och att förvärva sig en global solidaritetskänsla, som inte ställer vakthållning om det egna materiella välbefinnandet i centrum för övervägandena om hur man vill ha det.[53]

It is tempting to see here the influences of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wright's philosophical mentor at Cambridge, who both preached and practiced the ideal of an inner growth instead of exterior wealth. (Wittgenstein, it is worth mentioning, gave away his vast family inheritance as a young man and led a Spartan life afterwards). Indeed, Wright claims that his thoughts on science and progress in *Myten om framsteget* owe a great deal to Wittgenstein's grim opinions on the subject, for example as expressed in *Culture and Value* (1977), a posthumously published collection from Wittgenstein's notebooks. Discussing the atom bomb as a possible end to our "disgusting soapy water science", Wittgenstein elaborates thus:

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52 Id., p. 146.
53 Id., p. 148.

> It isn't absurd, e.g., to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are.

And a little later he says, reminiscent of Ezra Pound's insistence on international industries as "casus bellorum":

> Science and industry, and their progress, might turn out to be the most enduring thing in the modern world. Perhaps any speculation about a coming collapse of science and industry is, for the present and for a long time to come, nothing but a dream; perhaps science and industry, having caused infinite misery in the process, will unite the world – I mean condense it into a single unit, though one in which peace is the last thing that will find a home.
>
> Because science and industry do decide wars, or so it seems.[54]

However, although Wittgenstein lived to experience two world wars, he did not witness the global economic and ecological threats Wright reacts to in his book. And, although citing attempts of a "sammansmältning mellan den naturgivna biosfären och den av förnuftet skapade teknosfären till någonting som kallats noosfären, från grekiskans ord för förnuftet, *nous*"[55], Wright admits that as the years have passed, in light of the above-mentioned lines of dubious argumentation and blind faith in our economic systems, his

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54 See Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, p. 485.

55 *Myten om framsteget*, p. 126.

pessimism has only deepened and his confidence in man's ability to reason withered:

> Jag kan inte längre, som jag gjorde i slutet på den boken [*Vetenskapen och förnuftet*], bekänna mig til förnuftet som ett hopp för mänskligheten.[56]

Now, twenty years later, one wonders whether the legitimacy of Wright's pessimism hasn't been confirmed, and whether the link between futurity and reason hasn't been broken with the temporal short-sightedness dominating our minds. Indeed, as I write this, a terrible famine has hit parts of East-Africa, although institutions such as UNICEF and the Red Cross have for the last three years repeatedly spoken about imminent dangers facing the area – about a famine *in the offing* – but to no avail in terms of international support or preventive actions taken. We have still to learn how to react in time, with the most calamitous of consequences. For "[f]uturity is a necessary condition of ethical being."[57]

CONCLUSIVE WORDS

Discussing death as a prerequisite for meaning in her book on time, Eva Hoffman repeats the story of Sigmund Freud's meeting with Rainer Maria Rilke on one if his walks:

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56 Id., p. 149.

57 *After Babel*, p. 151.

> During a brief walk which has entered literary history, Freud met Rainer Maria Rilke – a poet who experienced a terror of mortality and who disconsolately felt that the transience of all things human meant that, ultimately, they had no value; they didn't count. Not so, responded Freud. It is the transience of nature and human beings – of the loved human face – that gives them their poignant significance; it is because we know all things living shall pass that we cherish them.[58]

Similarly, George Steiner elaborates upon Elias Canetti's *Die Befristeten*, a fable imagining a city whose inhabitants are named after a number representing their life span:

> A child called 'Ten' will not be scolded; it has so little time. A man baptized 'Eighty' luxuriates his whole life long, be he ever so fatuous or incompetent.[59]

But the certitude of one's future death brings about a meaningless present. Life flattens out as man's "freedom of the future indefinite" is eradicated.[60]

With their examples, both Hoffman and Steiner point out that with absolute knowledge of our end, our actions lose their significance and ethical bearing. But in our present-obsessed selfishness – which we sometimes refer to as a right to freedom and life – we show little concern for the pressing ecological and moral issues discussed in this essay, and, consequently, for what happens once our time is through. Contrary to such a stance, I have attempted to demonstrate life's "enormous interlinked complexity" and the ensuing ethical obligations. Such a view, whether labeled

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58 *Time*, p. 113.
59 *After Babel*, p. 146.
60 Id., p. 147.

sentimental, primitive, reactionary or naïf, nonetheless offers man a meaningful place in nature, for it reveals the responsibilities we have towards the natural world. And – I would strongly claim – only through responsibility does one's life acquire meaning. To learn of the green world what can be one's place is thus a philosophical view charging our lives with significance, morality and gratitude towards the beauty of our existence.

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