

The Wind

1. The three forms of nature

The most obvious definition of nature is derived through negation. The natural is defined as that which is *not* artificial or synthetic or produced by way of cultural forces. Nature here is essentially that which escapes human touch; the autochthonous realm of life itself, landscapes, lava and the elements.

But nature clearly cannot be considered as separate from culture or technology. Isolating the natural from such factors is *itself* artificial. For example, the history of the technologies of glass production and clock making have profoundly influenced western notions of space and time, to the extent that they are highly significant aspects of a possible explanation of why the west went through industrialisation before China and elsewhere. Historians of technology have detailed the unexpected transfers between technology and perception in the last 300 years. Take glass. Against a medieval background of know-how (think of all those stain-glass windows), techniques of glass grinding advanced sufficiently by the late medieval period to lead to the exploration of the previously imperceptible micro and macro worlds through the microscope and the telescope. Stained glass windows therefore helped develop modern chemistry and astronomy. In a similar way, the discovery of blood circulation by William Harvey in *De motu cordis* in the early seventeenth century led to a paradigm shift in massively diverse forms of knowledge production. All at once unexpected forms of circulation were seen everywhere, in cities, in the clouds and in the stars. Cybernetics began with the heart.

Today, in the so-called information age, it seems that the natural is being slowly and surely engulfed by technology. Algorithmic complexity (produced and facilitated through ever more powerful computational capacity) demonstrates that the stochastic unpredictability associated with natural phenomena such as the weather and other swarming phenomena can be simulated and reproduced virtually. It is not just that nature can be copied in this way either; more profoundly, the story of the origins of nature itself is being transformed through the informational/digital paradigm. Gigabytes of RAM make nature something we can control and produce ourselves: nature seems to lose all mystery as it is increasingly seen as the product of complex mathematics.

We see parallels of this appropriation of nature in contemporary cultural shifts. For example, recent architecture has begun to mimic the natural – take Frank Gehry's obsession with fish-like forms in the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao and more recently for a bank in Berlin. On the one hand, Gehry's work exemplifies the broader phenomenon of post-geometric design that powerful computers afford. On the other hand, the smooth curves and liquid structures of new architecture seem to be leading us back to the cave, and closer to the undulating naturalness of rock and aquatic life-forms.

And yet. A common feeling is that simulated or mathematicised nature is not nature. The sentiment seems to be that no matter how close computers (and algorithms) take us towards producing more and more realistic simulacra of nature, nature itself disappears from the project.

How we can explain this dialectic of simulation and disappearance? If nature is neither the "untouched" nor completely explained away by new dimensions of number crunching silicon, if it is not merely "the inhuman" and yet is something *beyond* culture or technique, how can we understand what it is?

I suggest that what is required is an *ontology* of nature that stresses its character as both "immanent" and "transcendent". Let me introduce what I mean by this ontology by reading from Rilke's Uncollected Poems:

Space reaches *from* us and construes the world:
to know a tree, in its true element,
throw inner space around it, from that pure
abundance in you. Surround it with restraint.
It has no limits. Not till it is held
in your renouncing is it truly there.

Rilke's poem begins to indicate that exteriority and interiority are experientially (and therefore ontologically) interwoven, rather than polar opposites. There is ultimately an absolute ambiguity concerning our experience of nature: we do not know whether we bring ourselves to what we perceive or whether what we perceive brings itself to us. Nature is the "inside of the outside and the outside of the inside." Andre Marchand said:

In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me....I was there, listening.... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it....I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.¹

As the theoretical framework of quantum mechanics indicates, nature does not fit within an "object" ontology - the measured is affected or framed by the measurer. This means that our perception alters the meaning of that which is perceived. Metrics does not reveal objects. On the other hand, it does not just reveal subjects either; perception necessitates an environment within which it may operate. The measurer affects the measured, but this does not imply that the measurer *creates* or *produces* the measured.

This Rilkean "intertwined" ontology of the natural within the field of experience highlights what is missing within the emerging algorithmic appropriation of nature

¹ Quoted in "Eye and Mind", Maurice Merleau-Ponty

through the science (and culture) of complexity. The key absent factor is that of *sentience*. It is through the sentience of perception that the world acquires meaning. It is through perception that the world just is the web of interwoven elements, of exteriorities revealed through interiorities finally renounced in terms of exteriorities, that Rilke poeticises so intensely. The ontological structure of transcendence and immanence cannot be reduced to numbers or formulas. Again, as the glass, clocks, blood, and finally digital examples show, technology can profoundly alter the conditions of our existence, producing new horizons of experience and knowledge. However, without the sentient perceiving human or non-human body at the centre of it all, the world would not weave itself weblike around us, and technology could have no meaning. As the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty once said, "our organs are no longer instruments; on the contrary, our instruments are detachable organs." Technology does not of itself suggest the world is reduced to gadgetry or abstract metrication, it is rather a certain *ideology* of the technological that produces this effect.

2. Names: corporate and poetical

One way of fleshing out the ontology of immanence and transcendence just described is in terms of different conceptions of *naming*.

Right now, there are challenges to the ownership rights of life forms and natural products (the most well known cases being neem trees and basmati rice). This problem is at core a problem about names. Biotech firms think they have the right to ownership of a form of life or genetic code simply because they are able to rename it as genetic code.

Understanding nature in terms of the ontological categories of transcendence and immanence puts a limit on the legitimacy of such techno-corporate appropriations of life. To contest this appropriative utilisation of naming, I will argue that the naming of the natural must be left open to difference and mutation, refusing the neo-colonial project of universal ascription. The Caribbean poet Derek Walcott introduces this other form of naming in his poem Names:

" [...]
And when they named these bays
bays,
was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,
in uncultivated grass
where was there elegance
except in their mockery?
[...]

Their memory turned acid
but the names held;

Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Being men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of every thing to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them."²

Instead of thinking that conflicts of naming must be resolved into those who win and those who lose the crown of the universal (as with colonialisation and now with the neo-colonial project of bio-tech), Walcott's poem points towards what I will call "poetic naming".

Poetic naming does not confer property rights on what is named. When an object is named *poetically*, that name brings the object into being within the context of a linguistic/cultural horizon. The name does not seek to legislate itself as the universal, to be obeyed by all. The poetic name is both *immanent* – it articulates how the object or place is perceived within a cultural frame – but at the same time is always *transcended* – as the object gets re-housed within different contexts.

Although perhaps abstract and overly conceptual, the difference sketched here between corporate and poetic naming would have highly tangible results. If bio-tech industries took on this conception of the poetic name, they would never make profit.

3. Open source and the gift economy

The nomological immanence and transcendence of poetic naming can be described differently using terms currently adrift in digital circles - that of "Open Source" and the "Gift Economy"

Open source is a term that defines the nature of most information on the internet, as well as mapping its long-term trajectory from its origins to beyond the present. As theorists such as Richard Barbrook have argued, open source is more than a marketing strategy for shareware encouraging monopolies of use – it represents a fundamentally different notion of economy: the economy of the *gift*.

When something is uploaded onto a web server, it becomes a gift – to be re-purposed, chopped and changed, cut and scratched. No accessible digital information remains pure. Information that was *immanent* prior to be gifted onto

² Taken from the poem "Names" in **Collected Poetry: 1948 to 1984**

the net becomes transcendent or other than itself as it is re-used and re-contextualised. This means that the internet itself is perpetually *becoming*; it is a turbulent matrix of perpetually changing form. On the net, information *is* transformation.

4. Nature as a gift economy, named poetically

Let us try and bring all these ideas together. Rather than seeing nature as defined against what is considered unnatural, or by subsuming nature within technological or cultural frameworks, nature in its most fundamental sense can only be represented through poetic naming, and therefore in terms of a gift economy. Whatever claims we make about nature, and however we chose to represent it, it will always eventually transcend these fields of immanence. Although our experience as sentient perceptual beings ineliminably weaves us to the world, these webs of immanence themselves are constantly being re-spun and re-cast. Just as our experience of what the world is about changes, so too does the world itself.

It is on the basis of this argument against an inherent link between naming and ownership that I think the most deep-level contestations of current movements within the biotech industry should be fought. Nobody ought to claim ownership of the meaning of life, because the meaning of life itself will forever mutate across time and across contexts as our names for the world segue into other forms of naming. A universalist appropriation of what the name names (whether backed by international law or not) violates this inevitable transformation. It will ultimately prove to be a futile project, like imposing property rights on a tsunami. This is not to say however that sentient beings will not suffer in the attempt. The humble hope of this paper is that through something like poetic naming, a more transitory and fluid approach to the representation of nature will facilitate the act of refusing the rights to its ownership, by demonstrating its ontological illegitimacy.

5. The Gift Economy and Communication

Let me end by responding to a problem that suggests itself from what has been said so far. The ontology of poetic naming within a gift economy means that the same object is often named differently by different people. This raises the problem of communication. The ethos of interdependency engendered through sentience appears to be at risk of breaking up through the relativism of de-universalised fragmentation.

The question that must be raised against the conception of nature described thus far is therefore this: does the poetical conception of naming exacerbate ethical relativism? If different modes of naming produce different objects of experience and horizons of possibility, doesn't this lead to incommunicability, and eventually provoke conflict as different world-views clash? Shouldn't we always be striving

to produce universal judgements about our world and environment, so as to discern more readily right from wrong?

This problem of communication can and must be resolved by returning to the nature of sentience. Sentience refers fundamentally to the capacity of living things to sense, and therefore amongst other things to feel pain. With this in mind, we can develop the project of poetic naming still further. In light of the condition of sentience, such naming begins to be seen as necessitating *responsibility*. We are responsible in such acts to the extent that the way in which we name (and bring things or quanta into being) does not harm the other or cause her suffering. If what we name violates the other's life-world, that form of naming is wrong.

Only when poetic naming is glued in this way to sensitivity to other contexts and other interpretations, and acquires a dimension of responsibility, and therefore is placed directly in relation to communicating across and in the face of difference, can it become a powerful tool in favour of local determination, and local naming. We, as the forever localised and forever mutating we, must retain the right to name our own episteme, our horizon of understanding, our conception of nature. And yet, the natural will always be more than this. The transcendence of our names for the world is a transcendence that is responsible to the other, across time, space and bodily difference. It is only then with great care and attention that the poetry of our life-world should be allowed to reproduce itself, in the face of difference.

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