

REOPENING THE BOOK OF NATURE: RECONCEPTUALIZING NATURE
THROUGH AN ENVIRONMENTAL
HERMENEUTIC

by

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Abstract

The idea of nature as a book to be read has a long and rich history, playing an important role in shaping human attitudes toward the natural world. Through the medieval and early modern periods, the world came to be extensively semiotic – the leaves on the trees, the birds in the sky, the rivers and streams were to be read carefully and attentively, as they were signifiers of deeper and divine meaning. With the rise of scientific era, the metaphor no longer became relevant and in our contemporary understanding of nature, its ideas no longer seem to be important. This paper looks to return to this relinquished metaphor with new meaning and in a new light, within the framework of philosophical hermeneutics. Drawing on the philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer, we can give credence to the notion of nature as a kind of text to be read and interpreted in an attempt to better comprehend our relationship with nature in terms of a world of meaning that we exist with, are a part of and participate in. Influenced by Gadamer, reading and interpreting nature does not remain passive, but instead is a creative and productive process. This may provide a move away from the conventional *modus operandi* of imposing an order on how we come to understand and relate to the environment, and subsequently open ethical components in engagements of understanding and interpreting.

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1. Introduction

The book of living nature is unlike other books in this respect: One can read it over and over, and always find new meanings. It is a book that goes to press every night, and comes forth fresh every morning.
John Burroughs ("The Summit of the Years", 13–14).

In our understanding and relation to the natural world, numerous environmental thinkers have noted the importance of metaphors and how influence our attitudes and interpretations. As Erazim Kohak (1996) describes, metaphors “shape the context of our experience as a meaningful whole, deciding in the process not only what is primary and what derivative, but also who we ought to be and how we ought to act” (p. 31). Thus, instead of being understood merely as linguistic or poetic embellishments, metaphors are considered powerful and integral conceptual tools that perform cognitive, discursive and normative functions¹ (Keulartz 2007). How we come to terms with and speak about the natural world is often times mediated through the use of metaphor, thus playing a central role in shaping our understandings of our relationship to nature.² For example, William Mills (1982) coined the term “metaphorical vision” to depict a society’s or era’s tendency

¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (1980) prominent work *Metaphors We Live By*, establish and elaborate the view that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life; not just in language, but in how we act and think, subsequently influencing the structures of our understanding.

² In this paper, nature is understood in the broadest sense, referring to the sphere and phenomena of the world not produced by human beings; I will use it coextensively with the terms natural world or [natural] environment. However, it should be noted that the term ‘nature’ is both complex and equivocal, one that carries multiple meanings and references; it is an idea that can be at once “very familiar and extremely elusive” (Soper, 1995: 1). The literature and discussions exploring and deconstructing conceptions of nature remain extensive. For example, see Raymond (1972), Evernden (1992), Soper (1995) and Cronon (1995). Soper (1995), for instance, distinguishes between nature as a social construction, often contested in its meaning, and Nature as an “extra-discursive” reality, existing outside of conceptual construction. Cronon (1995) explicates how nature is construed through the idea of ‘wilderness’, which he argues is not only a human creation, but necessarily embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural (p. 80). Subsequently, nature is seen as a kind of pristine otherness, a place independent and free from humanity. Conceptions of nature are thus met with much ambivalence and implications. By denoting nature as the realm of the nonhuman, I am not suggesting that humans are separate from the natural world, but rather am looking to highlight the autonomous and independent aspect (otherness) of the world in which we live with, depend on, interpret, give meaning to, etc.

to seize upon a particular metaphor as a central conduit for understanding its environment (p. 237).

The idea of the natural world as a book is one such metaphor that has held great prominence in thinking about the environment. While the metaphor of the “Book of Nature” dates back to late Antiquity, it became most prominent during the medieval and early modern periods; its ubiquitous nature marked in the literature, theology and even early scientific thinking of such times (Harrison, 2006).⁴ The Book of Nature was an important religious concept, commensurate with the Book of Scripture, as a way of seeking divine revelation or better understanding reality and creation (Bulhof, 1990). Yet, moving beyond such religious conceptions, the Book of Nature generated an interesting model of looking at nature as a kind of text to be read and interpreted. Books and texts have since their origins proved resonant symbols, that of meaning, communication and narrativity. Subsequently, the metaphor of the book of nature, points to the idea of being able to read nature, stressing its meaningfulness, its character as a message or an expression. In contemporary modern day thought, however, the metaphor of the ‘Book of Nature’ has lost its resonance, for it is no longer assumed that there is any author or Creator to this book. Instead, it has been discarded in favor of the other models of nature under the modern scientific and technological tradition (Clingerman, 2009; Keulartz, 2007; Meisner, 1995).

Why return to the idea of nature as a book, as a text to be read? Contemporary hermeneutic philosophy is one of the ways in which credit is given to the metaphor of reading reality and subsequently, nature (Bulhof, 1990). In its most basic terms,

⁴ For example, it can be found in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Shakespeare, Galileo and Edmund Burke.

hermeneutics can be considered the art or theory of interpretation, but under the writings of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer it opened up primarily to the philosophy of understanding and to the idea that interpretation constitutes a fundamental way of (human) being in the world. The purpose of my paper, therefore, is to return to this relinquished metaphor of the book of nature through the framework of philosophical hermeneutics in an attempt to better comprehend our relationship with nature in terms of a world of meaning that we exist with, are a part of and participate in. In particular, I will be drawing from the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, whose primary concern is investigating into the nature of understanding; this in turn, provides an understanding for how one may come to interpret the natural environment in particular ways, and subsequently how it becomes meaningful. I argue that through Gadamer, the Book of Nature can be reestablished with significant ontological import, wherein reading and interpreting nature does not remain passive, but instead is a creative and productive process. This may provide a move away from the conventional *modus operandi* of imposing an order on how we come to understand and relate to the environment, and subsequently open ethical components in engagements of understanding and interpreting.

I shall begin by providing a historical context to the metaphor of the Book of Nature (Section 2), wherein it not only manifested itself as a prevalent manner of speaking, but also made important ontological claims to truth about nature and reality. Moreover, in tracking the metaphor through its usage in the past, Section 3 will also show how its meaning and utility slowly vanished under new paradigms of the early modern period. Section 4 of the paper will be dedicated to “reopening” the Book of Nature through the fundamental aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. I will explore

how nature and reality itself can be understood as a kind of text through Gadamer, which remains open to a plurality of meanings and how Gadamer in turn provides a valuable insight into the conditions of understanding itself and this will be used to investigate what it means to interpret nature and how it can become meaningful to us. Section 5 reveals how reading the Book of Nature implies an ethical relation between interpreter and text (nature itself), one that requires an open and sensitive engagement with the natural world. Finally, Section 6 will explicate the limitations of Gadamer's hermeneutics in extending it to involve the non-human world, particularly in his anthropic and language-centred model of hermeneutics.

2. The Book of Nature: Its Historical Resonance

It has been argued that the idea of the natural world as a kind of text has its roots as far back as Antiquity⁵, yet the concept of nature as a kind of book emerged most prominently within medieval theological tradition (van Berkel & Vanderjagt, 2006). Subsequently, the invention of the printing press in the late 15th century had a significant effect on thinking and discourse about books and manuscripts, as they became common commodities (van Berkel & Vanderjagt, 2006: ix). Prevalent in its early use, the Book of Nature, alongside the Book of Scripture, became an important source of religious knowledge and divine revelation (Harrison, 2006: 7). This was found in Scripture itself, through the work of St. Paul who asserts “[t]hat which may be made known of God is manifest among them...For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made....” (as cited in Mill, 1982: 239–240). In the notion of God manifest in his creation, waiting to “be made known,”

⁵ Mills (1982) quotes Ernst Robert Curtius in noting that early traces of the metaphor can be found in the Babylonians, who saw the stars as “the writing of the sky” (p. 239).

medieval writers thus found purchase and authority in the idea of nature as a kind of book. There now existed two ways of knowing God, two distinct but commensurate texts, that established its authority concerning the divine. While the metaphor was intended as a manner of speaking, it also transcended mere comparison, where nature was thought to express something about its Author. English physician and scholar Thomas Browne echoes such sentiments, proclaiming “Thus there are two Books from whence I collect my Divinity: besides that written one of God, another of His servant nature, that universal and public manuscript, that lies expanded unto the eyes of all” (as cited in Harrison, 2006: 7). Conceiving of the world as a sacred book highlighted its importance in what it signified, as well as expanding the natural world into the domain of instruction, where ‘reading’ carried many interpretive and ethical implications.⁶

Harrison (2006) cites that through this metaphor, Nature acquired religious authority, which helped to provide an important motive for the pursuits of natural philosophy and natural history (p. 8–9). While the Book of Nature was predominantly a religious concept, it by no means was exclusively so, and as Ernst Robert Curtius (1963) argues, with the import of the 17th century it passed into common usage, where it slowly became secularized (p. 321). The metaphor, while still holding important religious implications in its use, also became a way to mediate and legitimize the beginnings of the modern and natural sciences⁷. In seeking to legitimate specific approaches to nature, discourse focused on general criteria for how to *interpret* and read the Book of Nature. Experimentation, thus, became one such hermeneutical strategy, wherein dissection and

⁶ For example, the idea that Nature was thought to express some divine revelation, knowledge or wisdom, elicited a certain kind of reverence, respect and attentiveness (Bulhof, 1990).

⁷ Harrison (2006) argues that the importance of the study of nature needed to be established over a range of other prominent disciplines at the time and wherein the notion that nature was a book played a significant role in founding a social relevance to the study of nature and new sciences (p. 2).

the use of instruments became particular ‘reading’ techniques (Harrison, 2006). For instance, Robert Boyle suggested that through experimentation one is able to “read the stenography of God’s omniscient hand” (cited in Harrison, 2006: 20). Reading the book of nature demanding a radically different approach, calling for the investigation of nature that lay beyond the visible surface into its inner workings.

Finally, the discussions about the language of nature became central to the metaphor of the Book of Nature. The most notable reflections concerning the language of nature came through the work of Kepler and Galileo, the latter famously suggesting that the Book of Nature was written in mathematical language while the former indicating that the “pages of nature had been written by God in the language of geometry”

(Harrison, 2006: 24). Galileo, in a well-known quotation, wrote that:

“Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and recognize the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it. Without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth” (as cited in Clingerman, 2009: 75).

For Galileo, the move to the language of mathematics provided a more solid basis for understanding Nature compared to the ‘instability’ of the perceptual realm⁸. In asserting that the language of Nature was mathematical, Galileo not only assigned a new ontological status to mathematical objects, but as established a new realist vision for reality (Harrison, 2006).⁹ Clingerman (2009) also sees this as the continued split between the two Book’s, wherein mathematics and the natural scientists became the ‘proper’

⁸ A view also heavily influenced by the mind-body dualism explicit in Rene Descartes’ philosophy. The mind (domain of mathematics) was thought as not prone to the kind of errors of the senses.

⁹ Harrison (2006) describes this as a new kind of cosmology – a ‘mathematical cosmology’ wherein mathematics could be directly mapped onto physical reality (p. 24).

domain for understanding and interpreting the Book of Nature, while faith and religious philosophy became the domain of the Book of Scripture.

Mills (1982) points to certain underlying implications in the metaphor held throughout its use: i) a book must have an author (theological implication); ii) a book represents an attempt to communicate meaning¹⁰; iii) a book is written in legible characters or language (p. 239). Such examination of the Book of Nature reveals not only its pervasiveness in the medieval and early modern periods, but also its diversity of meanings and contexts, engendering the basis for a symbolic universe.

3. Losing the Book of Nature

After Galileo, there began a continued secularization of the natural sciences and society. In his *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, Clarence Glacken writes that at the turn of the 17th century, “one read the book of nature not to find out about something else but to learn about nature itself” (as cited in Mill, 1982: 239). While the Book of Nature found currency in the American Transcendental and Conservationist movement¹¹, the metaphor seemed to all but disappear under the Darwinian revolution. In his publication *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin seemed to “pull the carpet” out from under the metaphor, where divine author no longer played a part (as an explanatory tool) in nature (van Berkel & Vanderjagt, 2006). As consequence, the idea of being able to read nature was though to rest on a misunderstanding. New metaphors and models of nature began to arise, replacing the idea of Nature as a book. For example, the idea of nature as a mechanism or

¹⁰ Such meaning Mill argues, need not be restricted to finding literal interpretations of the text, but instead meaning may also be “discoverable” (p. 239).

¹¹ Armand (1997) writes of the metaphor’s occurrence in American nature writing during the Transcendental movement, but notes that “that by the time of Muir and Burroughs, the once vital metaphor of the Book of Nature was not merely a commonplace, but superannuated and sadly constrictive” (p. 39). Metaphors of architecture or sculpture became far more potent and relevant.

machine had already emerged as a popular metaphor during the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century (Clingerman, 2009). Many environmental thinkers noted that the turn towards a reductionist conceptualization of nature – reifying it as mere inert matter – contributed towards an increased alienation from nature and began to stress the possibilities of command, control and correction (Clingerman, 2009; Keulartz, 2007; Evernden, 2004; Meisner, 1995). Similarly, commenting on the redefinition of nature and knowledge through a growing scientific worldview, Neil Evernden (2004) remarks how nature became “simply a material object whose form is determined by the forces of necessity, and an entity which can be, so to speak, strapped down and cross-examined until its forced to reveal its secrets – that is, its necessities, its regularities, its properties...” (p. 116). Consequently, under such a view, the world appears for the most part to be rather decided and determined, rendering Burroughs notion of “re-reading” nature and finding new meanings obsolete. Instead, objectivity and the rational underpinnings (the rules, properties and laws Evernden dubs as “secrets”) of nature constitute the basis for ‘real’ understanding or knowledge.¹² While there have been attempts by some to move past such materialistic metaphors (Lovelock’s idea of Gaia for example), there have been little attempt or interest at returning to the Book of Nature, suggesting that it has not only lost its resonance, but its explanatory capacity as well – and thus marking a closure.¹³

¹² John Locke, for example, in his primary and secondary qualities distinction thought that it was the primary qualities - extension, shape, size, number – that truly existed in the world and subsequently, what nature could be characterized by. Secondary qualities (and so values and meaning) are seen to exist merely in human beings.

¹³ By explanatory capacity, I mean the cognitive, discursive and normative functions of metaphors Keulartz (2007) describes, that work to determine different attitudes towards the world. Outside of some emerging philosophical and biological views and writings, presently the idea of nature as a book or text has been confined to more of a historical figure, rather than an active metaphor.

4. A Reopening: Gadamer and Philosophical Hermeneutics

What might it mean to return to the Book of Nature in contemporary society? Could reopening it in a novel way yield a deeper way of understanding the natural world and our relation to it? The following section will attempt to explore and respond to such questions, offering a reorientation of the metaphor under the perspective of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy. Evidently, this reopening of the Book of Nature will differ from the one understood from the past, or from contemporary theologians. Instead, it will center on the compelling model of looking at nature as a kind of text to be read and interpreted and in the process challenge such notions of nature, book and reading.

Such a project will reside in the intersection of philosophical hermeneutics and environmental thought, as hermeneutic philosophy is one of the ways in which credit is given to the metaphor of reading reality. The term ‘hermeneutics’ derives, etymologically from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which is generally translated as “interpret” or “understand”¹⁴ (Holroyd, 2007: 2). In its most basic terms, hermeneutics can be considered the art or theory of interpretation and understanding, although it incorporates a broad range of domains, both philosophically and exegetically (Palmer, 1969). In particular, through the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and, later, William Dilthey (1833-1911) hermeneutics no longer denoted merely the art of interpretation and understanding of texts, but also became expanded to the objective, universal methodology of the humanities, often referred to as “the methodology of understanding” (Palmer, 1969). Under such a domain, hermeneutics became concerned with developing a procedure and epistemology for understanding.

¹⁴ The genesis of the notion of hermeneutics is also associated with the name of the messenger of the gods, Hermes, who possessed the ability to translate or interpret messages from the gods to humans, in a form that they could understand (Holroyd, 2007: 2).

However, under the influence of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics developed in broader philosophical terms, turning away from the emphasis of epistemology and method (Palmer, 1969). Under Gadamer, hermeneutics became defined as ontology of understanding and pointing towards a more fundamental way of encountering the world.¹⁵ In particular, it explores how people come to understanding with texts, traditions and one another, expanding the both the notions of meaning and text. For example, human beings are constantly surrounded by structures of meaning that can be compared to texts – cities, institutions, social communities and groups.¹⁶ Evidently, an emerging field of environmental philosophy has sought to bring environmental study and philosophical hermeneutics in conversation, exploring the ways in which landscape and the environment itself can be viewed as a text to be read and interpreted (Drenthen, 2009; Clingerman, 2009; Van Buren, 1995). Thus, we can explore through the insights of philosophical hermeneutics how we come to an understanding and interpret our environment and how they become meaningful for us.

The Book of Nature may then be able to reemerge within this hermeneutical framework; in particular I will be drawing from the philosophical work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to do so. Through Gadamer we can offer an ontological reflection on the metaphor of the Book of Nature, wherein reality and nature itself is a kind of text that can address us.

¹⁵ See Grondin (2002) for an explication of Gadamer's basic notion of understanding, which in itself can be a vague concept. Subsequently, Grondin (2002) refers to three different yet corresponding modes of understanding: i) an intellectual grasping; ii) a practical know-how; and iii) an agreement. Unless I specify, I will choose to refer to understanding as a general phenomenon that encompasses all three notions.

¹⁶ Holroyd (2007) comments on how contemporary hermeneutic scholars, such as Ricoeur, have extended the scope of hermeneutics to the ontological understanding of the human or cultural sciences (p. 2).

4.1 Gadamer and Text

In his *magnum opus Truth and Method*, Gadamer begins by questioning and challenging the exclusive claims of truth and understanding given to scientific rationality and methodology. For Gadamer, there are many important ways of understanding and experiencing the world, and subsequently other forms of truth besides scientific truth that have a valid role in interpretation. As a result, hermeneutics is “not a problem of method all” (Gadamer 1989: xx). That is, hermeneutics is not concerned with a method of understanding, but is related to something much broader and fundamental.¹⁷ Following Heidegger, Gadamer makes an important ontological claim that hermeneutic understanding is much closer to the basic human experience: “Understanding is not a resigned ideal of human experience...it is, on the contrary, the original form of the realization of Dasein, which is being in the world...[it] is the *original characteristic of the being of human life itself*” (p. 250, emphasis added). In other words, we are beings whose fundamental state, or mode of “being-in-the-world” is to understand and to seek understanding. Furthermore, since understanding is an on-going effort, without a definitive beginning or end – and since humans are existential finite beings –it is also fundamentally *interpretative*.¹⁸

Gadamer’s ontology and universal aspect of his hermeneutics thus provides a way to open up the Book of Nature in a new light, as well as the notion of text. Indeed, the

¹⁷ Two things should be clarified at this point. First, by method, Gadamer is referring to the common scientific approach for establishing truth and knowledge claims, i.e. that it results from following a transparent set of rules, that it can be objectively verified, is independent and neutral from the observer, etc. Secondly, Gadamer should not be seen as discrediting methodological approaches, but rather challenging its universal validity and application.

¹⁸ As Grondin (2002) explains through Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s ontology, “interpretation doesn’t *occur* as an activity in the course of life, but *is* the *form* of human life. Thus, we are interpreting by the very energy of our life, which means ‘projecting’ in and through our desires, wishes, hopes, expectations, as well as in our life experience” (p. 36).

metaphorical book of nature rests upon the idea of text – and in its theological roots, a text and book written by a divine author. But through Gadamer, we can interpret the idea of text not only in a broader fashion, but also with ontological import, expressing something about reality. According to Gadamer, the concept of text refers to “all that which resists integration in experience,” and argues that it does not occur outside of the interpretative event (as cited in Risser, 1997: 164). Gadamer considers the text a specific phase (or stage) in the event of understanding, so that as Risser (1997) notes, it represents the “authentic given which is to be understood and remains the firm point of relation over the possibilities of interpretation” (p. 164). Implicit in the notion of text, therefore, is the idea of its corporeality, or material expression that constitutes the “firm point of relation” through which meaning or understanding can manifest itself. When thinking about texts, it is typically understood as manifested (corporeally) in the form of written works or dialogue (speech), but Gadamer also extends this to works of art and historical events.¹⁹ I argue however, that the corporeal nature of the natural world²⁰ (and indeed reality itself) offers such an “authentic given” that can be regarded as a text. Thus, the Book of Nature can become readable by way of interpretation; that is, as interpretive beings that stand in meaningful relation to a reality that discloses itself in its various expressions and manifestations.²¹

¹⁹ This is because for Gadamer, they represent and can characterize sensible and corporeal forms of *language*. The importance of language, as will be explained later on, represents a fundamental aspect of Gadamer’s philosophy, and which subsequently restricts the notion of text in his work to the linguistic. Nonetheless, Gadamer still provides a framework, with the universal aspect of his hermeneutics and corporeal nature of text, for expanding the notion of text to the natural world.

²⁰ By corporeal nature I do not mean something temporally or spatially static, but somewhat akin to Clinger’s (2009) notion of textuality as a fluid physical presence of nature itself (p. 81).

²¹ Echoing this idea, van Buren (1995) suggests that “it is simply a fact of life that the biophysical world lends itself to a number of interpretations as to its sense for human beings, and that these interpretations, to one degree or another, all “correspond” to “reality” and reveal some aspects of it. (p. 269)

Another important aspect of Gadamer's thinking in relation to texts is that the "matter of the text" is a meaning that is distinct from the intention of the author (Westphal, 2011). Gadamer argues that the "real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author, and his original audience.... Not just occasionally, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond the author" (as cited in Westphal, 2011: 48). This insight becomes important for reopening the Book of Nature in contemporary society, moving beyond the historical and theological doctrine of a divine author. Instead, Gadamer affirms that the text remains fundamentally *autonomous* and *open*. Meaning cannot be reduced to knowing what meaning the author intended, nor can it be found in a "original", hidden or fixed meaning present in text, waiting to be discovered. Conversely, meaning is temporal, situational and progressive, open to interpretation and reinterpretation, implying diversity and open possibility (Wiercinski, 2011). Text and meaning thus become interlaced in a much more productive and creative process. Evidently, the Book of Nature need not imply the existence of an "ultimate coherent truth", nor that it has a divine author. Rather, it can point to the natural world as both an autonomous and open text, rife with possibility and meaning to be understood on its own terms.

Consequently, the acknowledgement of the autonomy the text, as the source of its own claims, for Gadamer (1989) opens up the awareness of the "other" or as he describes a "sensitivity to the texts alterity" (p. 271). In his analysis of the hermeneutic experience, Gadamer suggests that tradition, as language, "expresses itself like a Thou," meaning that it relates itself not as a mere object, an "It", but as a subject and unified being²² (p. 352). Subsequently, hermeneutics begins when we are addressed by alterity (Gadamer 1989:

²² See Buber (1996) for an explication of his I-Thou and I-It relationships, which Gadamer draws from.

298). For Gadamer, the focus and status of the hermeneutic other is *language*, often describing the experience of the voice of the Other, as the experience we have with a text or work of art. However, under the context of the Book of Nature, we can describe the experience of alterity as the natural world itself; nature is an other that addresses us in experience. This opens up possibilities for ethical implications for a hermeneutical experience and understanding of the natural world, which Gadamer draws out in bearing between the meaning of experience and the relationship to the other; such ethical implications will be explored later on in the paper.

4.2 Gadamer and the 'Nature' of Understanding

So far, I have attempted to show how the Book of Nature can be reoriented through the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer, specifically pointing to the natural world as an interpretable text, opening itself as an other, from which we may generate meaning and understanding. How we garner such understanding and meaning constituted an important question for Gadamer and his hermeneutic project endeavored to clarify the conditions that can lead to understanding. Subsequently, Gadamer's universal claim of hermeneutics means that there are underlying features and aspects in the basic experience of understanding anything in general. This provides a basis for exploring what happens when we interpret, and what occurs when we try to understand nature and our natural surroundings. In particular, I will focus on the familiar hermeneutical concepts of prejudice, tradition, historically effected consciousness and fusion of horizons that provide a basis for talking about meaning, interpretation and understanding in terms of our relation to the non-human world.

Central to understanding the hermeneutic experience is the way in which we are both limited and open to how we understand and come to know the world. Georgia Warnke (2002) writes, “Gadamer locates the conditions of understanding meaning ... in the traditions to which interpreters belong and in the authority of those traditions” (p. 79). The power of history and tradition were integral for Gadamer, as he recognized that as finite beings, all interpretation takes place within an ongoing historical, cultural and linguistic context (Westphal, 2011). Therefore, in this view, nature and our environment are things that we encounter through – and are mediated by – cultural and social traditions. Our embodiment in the particular history and culture that shape us and form the basis for our interpretation, Gadamer expresses as the historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). It is “at once the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined” (Gadamer, 1989: xxxiv). It is through our particular historically effected consciousness that opens up different meanings and interpretations of the very same text or object. For example, Ablett and Dyer (2010) indicate that the terms wilderness, countryside and bush delineate different ways cultural traditions interpret and identify with nature outside of the urban environment (p. 220). They go on to suggest, using Gadamer’s insights, that such descriptions are “neither transparent nor (despite some similarities) synonyms. Each term signifies a ‘sense of place’ within the preconceived meanings and practices of ever changing and interweaving *traditions*” (p. 220, emphasis added).

Such preconceptions of tradition, which shape the experiences of our environment, Gadamer refers to as prejudice. However, Gadamer rejects the typical

pejorative view of prejudice as something that hinders and closes off understanding. Instead, prejudice represents the “historical reality” of one’s being and understands it as prejudgment; rather than closing us off, Gadamer argues that our prejudices are what open us up to the world, providing the basis for understanding (Gadamer, 1989: 278). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer reestablishes Heidegger’s “fore structure of understanding”²³ in relation to prejudice, as the anticipatory structures that allow us, in advance, to engage with what is to be interpreted or understood (Scheibler, 2000). As a result, our relation to the natural world is consequently shaped by our existing views about nature, along with our overall projections (expectations) and pre-established meanings. Encountering a tree for example, and the descriptions and interpretations that follow, will be conditioned on the different kinds of prejudices and traditions individuals bring to bear. As a city planner, for example, the meaning or understanding of the tree may be derived from its aesthetic appeal for a particular site – and this will reflect the prejudices and past experiences that have allowed the tree to be interpreted as such.

Westphal (2011) indicates that the core themes of Gadamer’s hermeneutics center on the notion of an interpreter belonging to a world, a horizon of meaning and expectation that functions as the “a priori conditions of the possibility of experience as interpretation” (p. 48). Unfortunately, Gadamer’s focus remains bounded to the products of *human* tradition, language and history and as Smith (2005a) argues, this represents the anthropocentric limits to his hermeneutics. Our understanding, as Gadamer suggests, is importantly shaped by the way we belong to the world. However, we do not just belong to the world by participating in and being structured by something beyond ourselves

²³ “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (Heidegger, 1967: 191–192)

(history), but as importantly, we belong to the world concretely, through our relations with our surroundings and environment. As a result, when talking about the structures of our experience and understanding, we must be able to include and recognize the way our environment plays an important role. This also means relinquishing the notion that history and nature are antithetical; the project of historical materialism, for example, can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with not only the propensity for humans to transform the world, but how the world in turn, also transforms and shapes human activity.²⁴ We must also be able, therefore, to refer to a ‘*naturally* historically affected consciousness’, that is the consciousness affected in the course of *material* history, traditions that have been shaped by both human and natural. Furthermore, this must also include not only the importance of how a natural history may determine our understanding of the non-human world, but also the affective tone that conditions such understanding and experience²⁵. As Evernden (1985) notes, “we see in nature what we have taught to look for, we *feel what we have been prepared to feel*” (p. 48, emphasis added).

The notions of prejudice and (naturally) historically effected conscious bring to light the inescapable, yet invaluable conditions of being-in-the-world that structure our very understanding and experience. Thus, when we interpret a text or seek to understand the other, we are afforded with a certain standpoint that reflects our finite present and situatedness (both temporally and materially) in the world. Gadamer (1989) refers to this as a horizon, “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a

²⁴ In discussing the relationship between the concept of nature and historicism in Marx Zhang (2006) quotes R.G Collingwood as stating that, “for Marx himself nature was more than the environment of history, it was the source from which its pattern was derived.”

²⁵ Smith (2005) understands this as developing an ‘affective natural historicity.’

particular vantage point.” (p. 301). Our horizon constitutes the background and context of meaning in which we integrate new experiences and understanding. Accordingly, different horizons correspond to and are determined by different contexts, prejudgments and affected consciousnesses that different individuals bear when understanding something. The horizon represents at once the limits to our understanding, but also points towards the expansion and possibility of something more.²⁶ Subsequently, Gadamer (1989) characterizes understanding, the structure of the hermeneutical experience, as a kind of event which he refers to as a “fusion of horizons” [*Horizontverschmelzung*] (p. 304). The basic idea is that a horizon can be brought in contact with another horizon, wherein one’s understanding or horizon is moved or expanded to a new one. In particular, Gadamer describes this process in the engagement of interpreter and text, wherein understanding the text (the horizon of the past) is a matter of interacting with it and applying it to the present (horizon of the interpreter). Or similarly, Gadamer speaks of the fusion of horizons as the resolution in dialogue, where understanding or agreement arises, between interlocutors²⁷ (Vessey, 2009).

²⁶ Gadamer avoids understanding horizons as mere standpoints that limit all ‘vision’ beyond themselves, but rather appropriates Husserl’s phenomenological meaning of the term, wherein limits are not insurmountable or closed but remain open possibilities. See Gadamer (1989) pp. 237–239 for his account Husserl’s influence. See also Vessey (2009) for a discussion on the deeper understanding of Gadamer’s meaning and use of the term ‘horizon’.

²⁷ This is not restricted to dialogue between two people, but in fact Gadamer speaks of understanding as dialogical in nature, wherein the possibility of dialogue with texts, tradition or culture is embraced as well. Understanding as fusion of horizons, in other words, entails a dialectical play or between one’s own horizon and the horizon of the other (text, person, or as I shall attempt to argue, nature) (Vessey, 2009). However, the dialogical dimension of understanding Gadamer espouses is not the primary focus of this paper, and carries with it implications when applied to the topic at hand that cannot be adequately addressed at this time (i.e. what it would mean to speak of having a dialogue with nature, or similarly to talk about nature having a ‘voice’ that can address us, etc). Secondly, it should be noted how Gadamer speaks of the fusion of horizons to describe how differing horizons come together through *language* and *conversation*. Gadamer views language as the ultimate ground of the fusibility of horizons and this corresponds to his fundamentally linguistic conception of understanding. This indeed points to a limiting factor in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, one that privileges an anthropocentric view of communication and understanding. I will expand on this further in section 6, but the main thrust of Gadamer’s fusion of

However, I take Gadamer's central insight as regarding understanding as a process that involves the formation of a new context of meaning and enables an integration of what was once unfamiliar, inaccessible or distant (Vilhauer, 2010). For Gadamer (1989), the fusion of horizons represents the eventful moment of understanding with the other, but one that is not totalizing: "The fusion of horizons does not consist in subordinating an other to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other" (p. 303). This remark by Gadamer brings forth two important in articulating this event of fusion of horizons. The first has to do with the notion of "fusion" itself. Many have criticized the idea of understanding as a fusion of horizons because it implies a merging and conformity of horizons, one where as Habermas envisions, means a kind of absorption of one horizon into another that removes alterity or otherness altogether²⁸ (as cited in Vilhauer, 2010). But Gadamer is careful to note that when we encounter the other, when we attempt to understand the other or give meaning, we do not transpose ourselves, but rather make open ourselves to new meaning amongst difference. Similarly, Smith (2001) points out that the fusion of horizons "does not entail an assimilation of positions but marks a conscious attempt to bring out differences and learn from them" (p. 71). This brings forth Gadamer's next important point, that the fusion of horizons, the event of understanding, produces a "higher universality," something that is

horizons, as I interpret, seems to be in the way new worlds of meaning are created in an event of understanding.

²⁸ E. D. Hirsch, Emilio Betti and Jurgen Habermas represent the main critics of Gadamer's conception of understanding, whose general qualm seems to be that the fusion of horizons opposes difference, tension or plurality amongst meaning or viewpoints (Vilhauer, 2010). For a discussion of these critics, see Vilhauer (2010), particularly chapters 4 and 5 and Vessey (2010).

reducible to neither the interpreter (oneself) or the other (text, nature, etc). Rather, it opens up a new space; a new world of meaning that is both unique and familiar.

How might this fusion of horizons articulated by Gadamer apply to and elucidate the ways in which we give meaning to and understand nature, particularly in reconstructing the metaphor of the Book of Nature? In Melanie Walton's (2011) essay, "Re-creation: Phenomenology and Guerilla Gardening," she eloquently reflects on an encounter with a clump of daffodils amidst a litter-strewn urban area, wherein her attention was "struck by their beauty and existence amidst adversity." (p. 73). She goes on to describe that "[t]heir instant beauty compelled me to attend to them in and of themselves, which I could only do by noting their constant contrast to the vacant lot and thus, rethinking their interrelation with me in order to consider our cooperatively created meaning" (p. 73). For Walton (2011), this encounter granted her a moment of "beauty and ecological encouragement" and in the process created a new context of (shared) meaning, which opened up a new and ethical response to attending to these daffodils.²⁹ This provides a nice exemplar for thinking about the fusion of horizons, and the ways in which we can come to new meanings or understanding with nature. For on one hand, one's own horizon is broadened and transformed, and on the other, that which we seek understanding with (the daffodil for example) becomes transformed and illuminated in a new perspective.

This suggests that reading and interpreting the Book of Nature are *performative and creative acts*, outcomes of a process in which both reader and text (nature) are *agents*. This is

²⁹ One objection here might be if there is any such thing as a "shared" meaning being created. That is, is the meaning given to the daffodils more than just Walton's construction – does the daffodil have any interpretive horizon of its own to be fused with in the first place? While this marks a valid point of contention, the latter end of this paper points to some possible ways the non-human world can participate in communicating meaning in determinate ways.

highlighted when Walton speaks of the “cooperatively created meaning” with the daffodil, and thus the encounter is importantly viewed as a bilateral exchange rather than a unilateral one. Nature, in this regard, is not seen as a merely passive object but instead as a genuine other who has the ability to make claims on the subject. Subsequently, this allows us to talk about meaning that moves beyond mere anthropomorphism – that is meaning resulting from our own moods, concerns or projections, or “hearing what we want to hear” (Smith, 2001). Meaning is not something that one can arbitrarily decide, but as Gadamer has articulated, it is created through an event of understanding.

In this sense, it should be noted that Gadamer is not espousing a subjective relativism in interpretation. While a text may open up a plurality of interpretations, it does not imply that there are no bad or invalid ones. The autonomous nature of text means for Gadamer that, at some point, we will run into some conflict or contradiction that will cause us to revise, not only our understanding but our prejudices as well (Vilhauer, 2010). Similarly, if we speak of nature as a genuine other, then it too has the ability to challenge us and assert its otherness³⁰; or in certain cases, even push back and resist our interpretations. In his *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold’s (1949) offers a vivid and powerful example of this, recounting his experience of killing a wolf and watching the “fierce green fire” dye in her eyes:

“I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I *sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view*” (p. 130, emphasis added).

³⁰ Walton (2011) goes on to say how the appearance of the daffodils, its contrast to the urban environment, challenged her everyday framework of meaning by which she approached the world – in particular, how such daffodils could constitute a garden or ecosystem “already created and continually in flux” despite amongst the seemingly vacant lot (p. 68 – 73).

For Leopold, this encounter represented a transformational moment in his life, but it also embodies the ways in which the non-human world can not only challenge our prejudices, but also withstand and fight back against our attempted interpretations and understandings. Before this encounter, Leopold (1949) viewed the wolf as a mere obstacle that reduced the number of “game” species, such as deer, for the hunters (p. 130). With this understanding, killing the wolf not only became justifiable, but he had “never heard of passing up a chance” to do so (Leopold, 1949: 130). However, after witnessing the dying gaze of the wolf, these initial meanings (or prejudices) for Leopold became evidently challenged and revised, as a new understanding emerged through such an experience. Perhaps the dying fire in the wolf’s eyes called Leopold to recognize that she was not some non-consequential thing, but in fact a *living being*. It is clear that for Leopold (1949) this encounter inspired him to recognize that the wolf both mattered to and was intimately connected with the land and ecosystem.³¹ We can thus encounter the non-human world in ways that thwart our very expectations and this is what lies at the heart of the hermeneutical experience for Gadamer.

So far, I have been attempting to explicate an interpretation of Gadamer’s fusion of horizons that *represents an encounter where new possibilities of understanding and meaning arise in our relation to the natural world*. This does not yield an ‘objective’ and final meaning, but rather brings forth a meaning that represents one of the many

³¹ Later Leopold (1949) would introduce what he called the ‘Land Ethic’, wherein the land is best regarded as a kind of community (rather than commodity) composed of a myriad of interdependent parts (p. 201). What was perhaps unpopular at the time, but what Leopold came to understand, was the idea that the wolf, as a predator, was intimately connected to the health of the land, and subsequent deer population.

possibilities of being.³² As such, our interpretations of nature (like a text) and our appropriated meanings can change over time, finding new forms of relevance, applicability and ways of broadening our horizon. However, it is this trajectory towards understanding and interpreting nature, that ultimately presents an ethical response, or reading of nature that remains open and tactful to its otherness and “richness of potentialities” (Bulhof, 1990).

Reading the Book of Nature: Ethics at Play

If we take the metaphor of nature as a book seriously, motivated by Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy, the than its ‘reading’ contains important ethical implications. First, we have seen how Gadamer understands text as an “other”, as an autonomous source of its own claims. Nature too can be thought of as an other that addresses us in experience, and just as reading a text requires a certain kind of responsibility, i.e. safeguarded from arbitrarily imposed meanings, so to does this responsibility extend to our relation to the natural world in the Book of Nature. Secondly, our belonging to the world, both in the sense of our physical embodiment and relation to tradition (horizons, prejudices, history), means that a fully objective and distanced interpretation or understanding is not possible. Consequently, as Nicolas Davey (2006) writes, the “ontological actualities underwriting understanding deprive [our] hermeneutic consciousness of any certainty of interpretation. What they reveal is the ever-present difficulty of residing within ‘the quietness of a single interpretation’” (p. xiv). The productive nature of understanding and interpretation means that there is no such thing as

³² Gadamer (1989) contends that the meaning of a text or work of art, for example, is never finished, but is in fact an infinite process where “new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning” (p. 298)

the interpretation; reading nature is an ongoing task, which does not capture any finality. This is where the ethics come into play – for in the absence of a definitive interpretation, we must be able to navigate sensitively in relation to such possibility and to the alterity of nature. In Gadamerian terms, engaging in the Book of Nature, or reading nature, must be seen as a kind of play that moves away from imposing an order on how we relate to and understand the natural world, but instead becomes an ongoing task of remaining open to the to the “irreducible differences presented to us” (Smith, 2005b).

The inclinations towards sensitivity and openness mark for Gadamer the ethical and hermeneutical underpinnings for understanding. Every encounter with the other has the potential to change the interpreter and create new possibilities of meaning, but only if we are open in the first place. Gadamer (1989) describes this as being able to look beyond what is close at hand – our standpoint, horizon and prejudices – and become aware of and challenge our own biases (p. 272). This would entail, for example, challenging standard predispositions to view a forest merely as a resource, or the bird song as intelligible ‘squabble’ or the daffodil as merely a particular genetic botanical species. Such interpretations are not invalid or wrong in their own right, however the hermeneutical point is to resist the propensity to treat such fore-meanings or prejudices as absolute and non-contingent. Entering into a genuine understanding (or fusion of horizons) involves putting both our prejudices and ourselves at risk: “[o]penness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me...” (Gadamer, 1989: 355).

Reading a text, Gadamer describes, must involve entering into a kind of play (*Spiel*) between text and reader, wherein both text and reader have an effect on each

other³³ (Vilhauer, 2010). The concept of play serves an important ontological role in how we create meaning, and much like the fusion of horizons, it sees understanding itself as a dynamic and interactive process.³⁴ In particular, Gadamer (1989) describes play as a “mode of being” whose fundamental spirit is the “to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal...” (p. 104). Subsequently, this back and forth movement means that play has a certain freedom to it; to play is to move away from mere method and the instrumental pursuit of final goals. Yet, play constitutes much more than a detached or neutral attitude over such possibility. The interpreter is not a subject that is at distance to ‘objects’ of the world, but instead play is primordially an *engagement* and *participation* with that which is different. To be readers of the Book of Nature, then, means that we must be able to participate openly with its text (nature) that represents what Smith (2011) calls a “being in community with” (p. 108). “To be in community with is not to rule over, nor is it to be made formally equal/equivalent” (Smith, 2011: 108). Instead, it means attending and being open to the diverse possibilities of nature’s being, and to the many ways the natural world discloses itself to us.³⁵ The ethical responsibility that comes into play in reading nature would be to not retreat into a single, coercive, interpretative framework³⁶ but

³³ Of course, Gadamer primarily introduces the concept of play in the context of his reflections on encounters with art. See Gadamer (1989) pg 102 – 161.

³⁴ Vilhauer (2010) provides an excellent discussion not only on Gadamer’s concept of play, but its ethical implications as well (See Chapter 5).

³⁵ See Smith (2011), particularly Chapter 4 on his discussion of “letting nature be.” This seems to be the kind of ethical responsibility implied in my argument for reading the Book of Nature.

³⁶ One such coercive framework is the modern day predisposition to understand nature, in Heideggerian terms, “technologically”. Technology refers to, not a particular kind of artifact, but to the way in which beings reveal themselves to us (Heidegger 1996: 318). Anything that reveals itself technologically, does so as a “standing reserve”, that is, as something ready to be put to use (Heidegger 1996: 318). Therefore, to say that nature tends to reveal itself technologically, is to say that it is seen as a mere resource, something to be used and nothing more. Even Heidegger (1996), writing at the time, states “The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit” (p. 320). Moreover, this way of enframing the world has led to reductive approaches to nature, either in the form of utility-based valuations of the natural world and quantitative accounts of nature. In either case, nature is reduced to the status of object, resembling an I-It relation, rather than an I-Thou.

instead seek to preserve and safeguard its difference.

There is a basis here for an environmental ethic, that is, the act of reading and interpreting the non-human world can ground certain moral commitments and ethical relations. However, such an ethic is not premised on modernist tendencies that usually start out with a reflection and articulation of abstract values that people should adhere too (i.e. notions such as the ‘intrinsic value of nature’, ‘ecocentric egalitarianism’ or ‘ecosystem integrity’). Such fixed moral frameworks attempt distance ourselves from a type of anthropocentric partiality, or try to adopt an objective and calculative approach to ethical concerns (Smith, 2011, 2005a). Instead, ethics here is articulated as a *mode of being* that is intimately linked to the ways in which we interact with and interpret our surroundings.

Gadamer’s Limitations

While Gadamer’s philosophy has been used thus far to reconstruct a hermeneutical approach to the Book of Nature, his work is not without its limitations, particularly in attempting to extend his hermeneutics to involve the non-human world.³⁷ Therefore, there is a sense in which we must confront and move past Gadamer’s own (anthropocentric) prejudices that reflect his own horizon of understanding and work. Such limitation lies within Gadamer’s language-centred model of understanding and subsequently, his anthropocentric conception of language that not only fails to grant nature meaningful expression of its own (outside of humanity) but also excludes other modes of understanding that lie outside the borders of language (Smith, 2001; Owens, 2011).

³⁷ This has already been encountered in Gadamer’s notion of our ‘effective human historicity’, embodying merely the human and culturally produced traditions that limit our understanding and situate us with a standpoint in the world.

In the final chapter of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1989) speaks of language as the “universal medium in which understanding occurs” (p. 390). When we understand and interpret a text for example, such understanding is not only mediated through language, but it is the fact that the text speaks a language in the first place that we are able to comprehend it. Even the case of interpreting something that is not verbal in nature, such as art, dance or musical composition presupposes language and is ultimately understood in verbal terms (Gadamer, 1989: 400). Subsequently, language becomes the necessary medium in which any dialogue or fusion of horizons takes place. When we encounter another world, for example, Gadamer (1989) maintains that despite its otherness, we are also able to relate to it in some way – there is a ground for understanding and meaning to take place (p. 439). However for Gadamer, “the world and realm of possibilities in which we move...is essentially linguistic” (Owens, 2011: 2). Language, for Gadamer in many cases is narrowed to the sense of verbal “word” (*logos*)³⁸. In *Culture and the Word*, Gadamer describes how “conversation...always takes place in human, learnable ones. Man [sic] ‘has’ the word, as Ferdinand Ebner expresses it, and that is precisely what distinguishes him from all other natural creatures” (as cited in Smith, 2011: 62 – 63). Here Gadamer specifically emphasizes the primacy of verbal, conceptual language and it is this (*logos*) that allows humans to maintain “a free, distanced orientation” towards their environment (Owens, 2011). The latter is something that non-humans, according to Gadamer, do not possess. As a consequence, the non-human world fails to share a language that produces any genuine or determinate communication.³⁹

³⁸ “...interpretation places the object, as it were, on the scale of words” (Gadamer, 1989: 399).

³⁹Smith (2001) describes how Gadamer privileges culture over nature, specifically in its ability to express

It is unfortunate that places our understanding of the world solely within (anthropic) verbal and linguistic structures⁴⁰, and this indeed places some barriers to providing an account of how we come to interpret and understand the non-human world. While the Book of Nature alludes to the type of linguistic understanding Gadamer espouses, through the notions of book and text, we experience nature as a text – its corporeal presence – in a myriad of ways, and in modes of understanding that Gadamer seems to omit. Influenced by Walter Benjamin, Smith (2001) speaks of meaning as a “symptom of a communicative success, of an *expression that has made an impression on others*” (p. 66, emphasis added). This details an important insight, for there are many non-verbal forms of meaning that make impressions on us – a gaze, a sigh, the wagging of tail, impending storm clouds or the stillness of water on a lake. In this sense, the non-human world can communicate with us, but we must point to modes of embodied, non-propositional and sensuous understanding where meaning is formed (See Abrams, 1996; Smith, 2001; Owens, 2011). While Gadamer’s hermeneutic discourse fails to investigate fundamentally different forms of understanding and expressions that produce meaning, this does not necessitate its outright rejection. At its core, Smith (2001) and Owens (2011) note that Gadamer’s hermeneutics does engage in an *expressive* ontology. Rather, we must broaden Gadamer’s hermeneutical horizons to include a notion of understanding that as Owens suggests, “better articulate[s] the subtleties of experience and expression” within our relation to the non-human world (p.10). For reading the Book of Nature extends beyond the verbal, to perception, embodiment and feeling, all of which involve interpretation,

something specifically through language. Nature, by contrast, must be seen as possessing “no determinate voice, it is unable to compose itself in such a way as to speak meaningfully to us. The messages we receive are mere echoes of our own moods, our own concerns” (p. 61–62).

⁴⁰ I have only briefly described and explicated the implications of Gadamer's commitment to the linguisticity of understanding. For a more adequate and in depth account see Smith (2001) and Owens (2011).

communication and understanding.

The Book of Nature Anew

The ways in which we conceptualize our environment through the use of metaphor inevitably express and embody fundamental attitudes toward the world. Today, with a growing and widespread concern about the relation between human beings and the natural world, it is not surprising that there remains not only a concerted effort to better understand this relation, but to also try and make sense of the irreducible complexity of nature. However, as Erazim Kohak (1994) suggests, this must begin with a “radical seeing, encountering the cosmos and ourselves within it in the full richness of meaningful experience” (p. 24). Perhaps this is where the importance of reopening the Book of Nature lies today, for it is predicated on a non-reductionist or non-materialistic model of understanding, but instead opens up a type of framework through which to experience the diversity of nature (the subject of the book) in a myriad of ways (Clingerman, 2009: 78). But the metaphor also makes an important ontological claim: similar to the way we encounter a text, nature can also be interpreted and expressed in a multitude of ways because reality and meaning transcend its actual forms. This opens the door for thinking about an *environmental* hermeneutics, exploring the ways in which we understand, interpret and give meaning to nature and I have argued that Gadamer’s hermeneutics, although not without its limitations, provides the way forward for understanding the metaphor in a new light. Among Gadamer’s contributions, is his conception of text, which abstains from any external authoritative source (i.e. author) regarding its meaning – this means we can turn to the Book of Nature without the need for a divine author. Secondly, Gadamer understands text, not as an object, controlled by and presided over by

a subject, but as an active participant in creating meaning. This encourages viewing nature not as an inert or passive thing, but as a genuine other in which meaning emerges dialectically (as a fusion of horizons). Reading becomes a creative process, producing an understanding or recognition where there was nothing before, potentially changing the way we understand ourselves and the world. Of course, reading the Book of Nature is not like any other book because the world that we encounter is the very world of our existence (Clingerman, 2009: 83). As such, it is a book that inevitably presents itself as worth reading *well*. To do so requires that we openly engage and attend to the otherness of the non-human world. Perhaps it is here that we can start to re-envision a much broader and ethical community, of text and reader, human and non human-alike.

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