

From Romantic Aesthetics to Environmental Ethics: Rethinking the Role of Natural
Aesthetics in Ecocritical Discourse

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Abstract

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This dissertation questions the growing tendency in contemporary ecocriticism to regard the Romantic concept of nature as antithetical to a modern system of environmental ethics. By emphasizing the inherent interconnectedness between human and non-human organisms, most ecocritics overlook the fact that a genuine appreciation for the natural world can only be obtained through the mediation of aesthetic concepts and artistic devices (such as a refined style, lyrical tone, and diction) that are prevalent in the Romantic theory of nature. In this study, I focus on selected works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and William Wordsworth, in order to examine the relation

between late eighteenth-century ideas of nature, aesthetics and ethics, and illustrate the specific contribution of natural aesthetics to the formation of ethics. I argue that the Romantics' theorization of nature aimed at constituting an ethical system that was significantly secularized, and rivaled the capitalistic values that fueled the rapidly expanding process of modernization. With this project, I hope to reorient ongoing ecocritical debates by offering an alternative reading of Romantic aesthetics and its implicit purposes. In particular, by foregrounding the ethical project that lies at the core of the Romantic theorization of nature – and which includes in its realm of concern non-human organisms as well as the environment – I contend that the Romantic concept of nature has advanced the development of modern environmentalism, and that it may play a prominent role in establishing a better environmental order of the future.

Chapter one profiles Rousseau as one of the earliest proponents of the green movement by shedding light on the pre-environmental sensibility that informs much of his theoretical work, such as the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. Chapter two examines Rousseau's literary production – including *Julie, Or the New Heloise* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* – where his views of the natural environment are articulated by means of literary techniques and aesthetic criteria from which they cannot be divorced. This points to the inextricable connection between our ideas of the environment and the field of aesthetics, which constitutes a fundamental premise in the Romantic conception of nature. Chapter three is dedicated to a study of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the “Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,” that illustrates the formal similarities between aesthetic activity and morality and stresses the importance of natural aesthetics to the establishment of

ethical frameworks. In chapter four, I discuss Wordsworth's treatment of affect as a distinctive component of his ethical theory as outlined in the "Essay on Morals," *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Prelude*. By highlighting the compelling ethical values and the pre-environmental implications of Romantic aesthetics, I show that modern environmental ethics has been greatly influenced by the Romantic concept of nature, and that the solution to a better natural order might have been with us for more than two hundred years.

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Introduction

In the last decade, there has been increasing consensus among ecocritics that the Romantic concept of nature has hindered the development of an environmentally conscious system of ethics due to its metaphysical orientation. Eighteenth-century notions of the natural world are in fact contingent upon the Cartesian distinction between subject (i.e. the human self) and object (i.e. the circumscribing environment), which sanctions the belief in man's superiority over non-human organisms on rational and intellectual grounds. Most ecocritics agree that this dichotomous understanding of man's relation to nature has allowed for the objectification of the physical world and the fetishization of its constituents, thus contributing to the well-known process of natural degradation that has afflicted us since the beginning of the Industrial revolution. The proponents of deep ecology – the most radical division of the environmental movement – advocate instead an alternative view of mankind that divests it of its self-proclaimed particularity and stresses its underlying interconnectedness with other living, as well as inanimate, beings. In particular, Arne Naess – the philosophical father of deep ecology – critiques Western ideas of self, which he deems too narrow and often synonymous with ego, in a seminal text entitled “*Self* Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World.” Here, Naess elaborates a different concept of self that is admittedly informed by Eastern ideologies, such as the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, and which he calls “ecological self.” (Naess 22) The ecological self, he explains, is unlike the ego in that it “cannot avoid ‘identifying’ with ... all living beings, beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not,” and in so doing experience “intense empathy” for them. (20, 22) Naess

believes that human beings reach “all-sided maturity,” and their sense of self is “widened and deepened,” when they realize that their existence is intimately linked to that of other non-human organisms. (20) The ecological self is therefore always already engaged in a relation of interdependency with sensible objects from which it cannot fully differentiate itself, and with the surrounding environment of which it is a constitutive yet unprivileged part. In this sense, Naess’s model obfuscates the boundaries between the self (in its traditional sense) and the other, eliminating the possibility for the human to secure any type of critical distance from the non-human.

The ideas expounded by deep ecology have gained considerable momentum since their original inception in the 1980s, and found several committed supporters even among the less extreme sections of the environmental movement. In *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton presents a similar argument by claiming that we should dispose altogether of the concept of nature we inherited from the Romantics – that is, as a transcendental rhetorical construct – in order to aim at an understanding of the environment that is strictly predicated on its organic facticity. In the introduction to this work, Morton contends that “[one] of the ideas inhibiting genuinely ecological politics, ethics, philosophy, and art is the idea of nature itself,” and that Romantic notions of nature “will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society.” (1) While he admits that the Cartesian distinction between subject and object that foregrounds the human confrontation with the environment cannot be entirely “dissolved,” he maintains that new forms of ecological writing should attempt to “blur” their boundaries so as to point to their implicit commonalities. (Morton 15) Morton’s theoretical framework is comparable to Naess’s in that it posits man inside a natural context from which he cannot

easily abstract himself – either physically or ideologically – and that divests him of any claim to supremacy over organic nature. By depriving nature of its transcendental qualities and its ties to metaphysics, this model also wishes to equate the physical world with the biological factors accounting for its existence.

My dissertation goes against the grain of contemporary ecocritical discourse by arguing that Romantic ideas of nature are not only fundamental but also unavoidable for the underpinning of any modern system of ethics or environmental ethics. I claim that a critical detachment from nature, such as that endorsed by the Romantic movement, is necessary in order to elaborate a functional theory of the environment that bears productive ethical outcomes. In fact, in unmediated fusion with the natural world it is impossible to cognize nature, and it is only when nature is contextualized – when, to say it with Wordsworth, emotions are recollected in tranquility – that we can think about it and act towards its preservation. The premise of this study is that the modern concept of nature has evolved since the late-eighteenth century in strict correlation with variable notions of aesthetic sensibility, so that it is inconceivable to separate our ideas of nature from the field of aesthetics. A meaningful bond with the environment, as desired by ecologists and ecocritics, can therefore only be achieved through the mediation of aesthetic concepts, which in turn have significant leverage over our ethical constitution. Assuming that it were possible to dispense with the Romantic concept of nature, such an undertaking would require the renunciation of the field of aesthetics which, as I shall argue, is largely instrumental for the formation of an ethical system. By dismissing the Romantic concept of nature, ecocriticism would thus equally have to dispose of the realm of aesthetics, which plays a pivotal role in establishing a system of environmental ethics

such as that which they hope to obtain. In this study I challenge the ecocritical model by showing that the Romantics derived from their theoretical engagement with aesthetics an ethical paradigm that, if properly understood, is still valid today.

The title of this dissertation promises to discuss the relevance of eighteenth-century theories of nature for the development of modern attitudes towards the natural world. However, my aim is not to present or endorse any specific environmental plan, but rather to uncover the conceptual implications of Romantic aesthetics. As I do this, I use the latter term in three distinct but essentially related ways. First, I understand aesthetics as the field of philosophy that investigates the choices we make according to how we feel. In this sense, I am concerned with the notion of aesthetic *judgment* – that stems from an emotional state and which effects a change in the world – instead of aesthetic *attitudes* towards sensible objects. It is by acknowledging the fact that our aesthetic predisposition affects our lives in practical and lasting ways that its ethical reverberations become most evident. At the same time, my study also engages the well-known aesthetic categories of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque (especially as canonized by the British tradition) as they point in unique ways to certain fundamental traits of our ethical constitution, such as our inclination towards pleasure and the morally good, our fascination with vastness and infinitude, and our natural aversion to fear and terror. Finally, I explore the ways in which the Romantic receptiveness to the aesthetic character of nature is expressed in written form by means of a highly refined literary style and rhetorical devices. I trust that the use I make of this concept will become clear in the context of each chapter as I apply it to the works of the writers therein discussed.

This dissertation concentrates on selected works by three major writers of the pre-Romantic and Romantic eras – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and William Wordsworth – whose contribution to the formation of the modern concept of nature cannot be overemphasized. I argue that their treatment of natural aesthetics reveals a growing awareness in late eighteenth-century Europe of the importance of this category for the constitution of ethics – a philosophical stance that has recently been largely overlooked. At the same time, I contend that embedded in their texts is a certain pre-environmental sensibility that contributed, often implicitly, to the development of the ecological movement. While there is no evidence that Rousseau, Kant and Wordsworth corresponded with each other during their lifetime, each of them was in differing degrees conversant with the work of his predecessors. As I shift my focus to a new author, I briefly discuss the nature of his indebtedness to his precursors before examining his distinctive contribution to the field of metaphysics. This methodological approach reveals the conceptual consistency of these writers’ investigation of natural aesthetics and their pronouncements on its associations with ethics. While Romantic aesthetics has been extensively theorized in the last decades, there is, to my knowledge, no study that fully recognizes the paramount importance of its moral implications. More recently, Romantic ethics has become a growing field of academic inquiry, although most of the texts available on this topic tend to focus on a singular author or national tradition.¹ By putting into dialogue canonical texts of the Romantic tradition with works that arguably laid the foundations of this movement, I hope to demonstrate that the eighteenth-century

¹ See, for example, Adam Potkay’s masterful study of the ethical import of Wordsworth’s poetry in *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (2012).

treatment of natural aesthetics principally aimed at conceptualizing an ethical model that significantly challenged preceding notions of morality.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I explore Rousseau's theoretical work (including the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*) and argue that embedded in his political philosophy are the origins of modern pre-environmental thinking. My main claim here is that Rousseau's political and ecological theories are inextricably intertwined and that his philosophical enterprise reveals a genuine concern for the state of the natural environment. In the first section of this chapter, I analyze the ways in which Rousseau's theory of nature departs from three preceding and long-standing views of the natural world that derive respectively from Platonism, the Christian doctrine, and early modern political theory, as represented in particular by the thought of Thomas Hobbes. In the second section, I consider the role of transformism, and Buffon's largely influential *Histoire Naturelle*, in shaping Rousseau's alternative ideas of nature. Rousseau's interest in transformism, an emerging scientific discipline grounded in a pre-Darwinian theory of evolution according to which species undergo altering processes, allowed him to think of nature as time sensitive and vulnerable to external factors.

The second chapter focuses on Rousseau's literary production, demonstrating that his treatment of nature is always already mediated by aesthetic categories. In fact, Rousseau's nature writing is informed by a rhetorical mode replete with figures of speech, literary allusions and aesthetic considerations, which contribute substantially to his theorization of the environment. This suggests that, while certain things in nature are pre-reflective, all *thoughts* about it are aesthetic in character and therefore inherently

abstracted. In the first part of this chapter, I consider the aesthetic component of Rousseau's ethical model as enunciated in the "Profession of Faith" of *Emile*. This is a necessary step that allows me to explain his aesthetization of the natural realm in imaginative works such as *Julie, Or the New Heloise*, of which I offer a selected close reading. In the second part, I present a new reading of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* that reveals its logical consistency, as each reverie foregrounds two important philosophical investigations on the subject of ethics. Some of the most important ethical meditations contained in this text center on the topics of happiness, lying, charity, and filial affection.

Chapter three opens with a study of Kant's teleology as delineated in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which explains the conceptual differences between the notion of "end" and the specific subcategory of "natural end." Of particular interest here is the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," where Kant discusses the substantial changes experienced by the self during the aesthetic contemplation of objects whose end is unclear. I then explore the underlying correspondences between the notion of "natural end" and the concept of "free will" illustrated in the "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals," in order to reveal the formal similarities Kant recognizes between aesthetics and morality. In the last section of this chapter, I seek to clarify Kant's controversial claim in the *Third Critique* that humanity represents the final end of nature by contextualizing it within the teleological discourse to which it belongs. By doing so, I demonstrate that Kant's ethical model entails certain fundamental moral obligations towards the non-human and the environment. The nature of these duties is most clearly enunciated in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, to which I briefly refer at the end of this section.

In chapter four, I trace Wordsworth's philosophical affiliations back to Rousseau and Kant, while identifying affect as a distinctive aspect of his ethical theory. I initially consider the "Essay on Morals" and the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, where affect is granted privileged status for its unique ability to influence human behavior and encourage acts of selflessness that contribute to the moral affirmation of mankind. I then offer a close reading of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "The Discharged Soldier," as these poems exemplify Wordsworth's views of affect as an aesthetic property that has significant leverage on our ethical constitution. This chapter also presents a discussion of Wordsworth's environmental ethics and its pre-ecological implications, that become most prominent in books 5 and 6 of the *Prelude*, and which I understand as contingent on an ethics of affect. This study concludes with a brief epilogue in which I consider the contribution of Romantic aesthetics to the development of modern environmentalism, as well as its still largely unacknowledged influence on contemporary environmental art.

Chapter One: The Origins of the Ecological Thought in Rousseau's Philosophical Work

In the last two decades of critical discourse, a few scattered voices have attempted to demonstrate the fundamental contribution of Rousseau's works since the end of the eighteenth century to the constitution of a European ecological consciousness.

Contemporary ecocritics such as Gilbert LaFreniere and Joseph Lane have rightly recognized Rousseau as one of the first pre-environmentalists of the modern era and one of the founders – albeit unknowingly – of the Green Movement. Yet still today Rousseau remains known, praised and studied mainly for his monumental work in political philosophy, whereas his equally groundbreaking investigations into the natural sciences and his unprecedented understanding of the environment are considered marginal or, at best, supplementary. We therefore still lack a comprehensive study of Rousseau's works that convincingly places his interest in the natural world at the center of his philosophical and political enterprise. In fact, if we keep disregarding the urgency of his message about the state of the environment and if we minimize the weight of his concerns with early modern modes of interaction with the natural world (as we seem to have done all too well until very recently), we cannot fully understand the mutual dependency and essential complementarity of Rousseau's political philosophy and ecological theory. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, Rousseau's political thought is always ecologically self-conscious and his stance towards the environment politically inflected. This chapter expands on recent ecocritical research in order to demonstrate that Rousseau has a pre-ecological understanding of the organicity of nature and that embedded in his political

and literary works are the germs of Western ecological thinking.² Indeed, Rousseau's theory of human and organic nature lies at the core of contemporary ecological thought and is still relevant and useful today.

What however has gone largely unnoticed in ecocritical discourse, and what I set to prove in the second chapter of this study, is that the description of the natural world in Rousseau's work – even when situated in a scientific or an ecologically oriented context – is always already mediated and shaped by aesthetic predicaments. Clearly, this is not only true of Rousseau, who arguably initiated the modern debate on the concept of nature, but of all subsequent writers, regardless of their philosophical convictions. While the newer strand of thought in ecocriticism wishes to dispose of the highly aestheticized Romantic idea of nature in our manifold dealings with the environment, Rousseau's work suggests that all thoughts about nature are deeply aesthetic in character. More specifically, the Rousseauian model teaches us that writing of or about nature entails the use of existing or yet undefined aesthetic categories that are impossible to bypass or disregard. In fact, I shall argue that these very aesthetic categories have contributed in meaningful ways to our understanding of the environment and to the conceptualization of ideas geared to its preservation. The second chapter offers close readings of specific passages from Rousseau's oeuvre, focusing on his recurrent use of figures of speech and literary allusions, which bear witness to the prevalence of an aesthetic focus in his ideas of nature.

² As I explain in greater detail on page 23 and ff. of this chapter, I understand Rousseau's theorization of nature as "pre-environmental" and "pre-ecological," mostly because it precedes chronologically the development of modern ecological thought. In this particular context, I am not differentiating between his pre-environmental and his proto-environmental views.

Since its germinating stages in the mid-eighteenth century, the field of ecology – understood as an interest and as a science – developed from an idea of nature that has been in constant evolution. Notions of what ‘nature’ might be or mean have however always been dependent to varying degrees on aesthetic factors, at least since Rousseau’s initial considerations in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (hereafter *Second Discourse*). Eighteenth century ecology is therefore not to be understood only as a response to the negative effects of industrialization on the landscape and its inhabitants, but also as an attempt to preserve those aesthetic features that were associated at the time with the concept of nature. The inseparability of the field of aesthetics from the idea of nature that appears so remarkably clear in Rousseau’s works should make us question not only the newer trends in ecocritical thought but also the environmental politics that we have adopted since the Industrial Revolution. If we are willing to accept that Rousseau is the father of European environmentalism and that the modern concept of nature he put forward has an unmistakable aesthetic foundation, we discover an unforeseen relation of interdependence between ecology and aesthetics. This opens up an equally unforeseen but fundamental set of questions such as: How does aesthetics contribute to the underpinning of the ecological thought? What has been the role of aesthetics in our relations with the environment? And also, can the field of aesthetics contribute today to the actualization of healthier modes of interaction with the environment? I believe that Rousseau’s works offer interesting insights into these difficult questions, which will prove particularly helpful to us in our contemporary socio-historical context. In fact, Rousseau’s treatment of nature is grounded in the belief that a genuine concern for the

environment is largely predicated on the appreciation of its aesthetic qualities and their effect on the self.

Before delving into a closer study of Rousseau's pre-environmental thinking, however, it is necessary to clarify his use of the word "nature." Rousseau employs this term concomitantly as a synonym for the environment and its non-human components, and to refer to specific aspects of mankind – as in the phrase "human nature." Although a causal relation between "nature" and "human nature" is evident in the use of these terms, Rousseau never seems to explain clearly their exact correlation. One of the major enterprises of the *Second Discourse* is to pinpoint the moment in human development when man separated himself physically and ideologically from his natural habitat and started to think of himself as other than an integral part of nature. But while Rousseau addresses this question *conceptually* and provides a set of plausible philosophical interpretations to explain this rupture, he never substantiates his theory with an equivalent clarification of his use of terminology. As a consequence, Rousseau's readers – and contemporary readers in particular – are left to wonder what exactly is natural about "human nature" and whether the Modern Age (whose germinating stages Rousseau studied with minute attention) has not eradicated from us any claim to naturalness. A clarification of Rousseau's terminology is thus required for a contemporary ecologically conscious readership that may feel uneasy with his idea of "human nature" which, one might argue, suggests the existence of different "types" of nature while implying the superiority of the kind of nature possessed by human beings.

Rousseau is obviously not the first modern thinker to have hypothesized a relation of interdependence between mankind and organic nature, or to have considered the

natural environment as a necessary precondition for human development. While pre-Renaissance European cultures conceived of man as entirely separate from the rest of the material world and as a privileged species elected by the Christian God to govern over inferior life forms, early-modern intellectuals started to think of man as integrated in a complex organic context on which he largely depended. In the early-modern mindset, man was thus no longer regarded as God's chosen creature, but as a living being that – while still preserving his particularity – belonged to a system of co-dependent living organisms. As a consequence of this reconfiguration of man's role within the environment, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many laws that were previously believed to be applicable only to the organic world were extended to mankind. This demonstrates that the internal and external factors determining the state of the environment were then believed to have a similar consequential effect on the state of mankind and that the human condition was subsumable under the condition of the organic world. In his study of eighteenth century natural philosophy, Asher Horowitz notes that “[t]he general conception of nature among the thinkers of the Enlightenment ... was embodied in the idea of phenomena governed by abstract universal laws” and adds that this view of nature “was also applied to human nature, which was therefore conceived of as static, fixed, sealed off from any essential transformation.” (Horowitz 80)

While Horowitz's remark shows that from an early-modern perspective the meaning of the phrase “human nature” hinges on the newly discovered reliance of humanity on the natural realm, this expression assumes a more complex connotation in the context of Rousseau's works, and especially when considered within the philosophical architecture of the *Second Discourse*. As many critics have argued, in this

treatise Rousseau distances himself from the widely accepted eighteenth-century concept of nature as fixed and unchanging in favor of the notion of a temporalized natural world.³ Rousseau's concept of nature rejects the traditional view of the universe as a "fixed and vast hierarchical chain of creatures stretching down from God through man to nothingness" – what was generally referred to as the "Great Chain of Beings" – in favor of a pre-Darwinian understanding of nature that stresses the changing quality of the organic world through time. (Bernhard 9) From this perspective, all species are subjected to developing processes that make them equally susceptible to external factors, such as climatic and geological changes, and therefore mutually dependent on each other. The most groundbreaking implication of this newly formulated view of nature was that mankind's physical as well as inner traits had not remained invariable through time, but had rather been subjected to a series of elaborate changes.⁴ In particular, man's inherent qualities – that is, Rousseau's concept of "human nature" – were transformed as a consequence of his progressive detachment from his original natural environment and his concomitant engagement in social interactions.

By historicizing the concept of "human nature," Rousseau therefore confers on this term its modern, albeit slippery quality. In fact, in the *Second Discourse* he orchestrates a narrative of mankind's development through time that is characterized by

³ See for instance, Kuhn, Bernhard. "A Chain of Marvels": Botany and Autobiography in Rousseau. *European Romantic Review* (Volume 17:1), p.1-20. See also the chapter entitled "The Idea of Nature in the Eighteenth Century" in LaFreniere, Gilbert F. *The Decline of Nature: Environmental History and the Western Worldview*. Bethesda, Dublin, London: Academica press, 2007.

⁴ In the Preface to the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau notes that a better understanding of humankind presupposes the consideration of "all the changes that must have been produced in his original constitution in the course of time and events" (*Second Discourse* 26).

its progressive detachment from the natural environment, and by doing so he makes the meaning of “human nature” contingent on a given socio-historical context. This means that those inner characteristics or psychological traits that for Rousseau constitute “human nature” had not been present in the same degree or with the same intensity throughout the course of history. “Human nature” in eighteenth-century Europe was essentially different from that of prehistoric civilizations or of indigenous tribes, and was to undergo further unpredictable changes in conjunction with the evolution of mankind. The questions that puzzle the contemporary reader regarding the meaning of the term “human nature” are thus similar to those that Rousseau addresses, albeit indirectly, in the *Second Discourse*. Here, Rousseau is interrogating the validity of man’s claim to natural origins at a historical moment when accelerated industrialization and capitalistic modes of production were redefining the very nexus between mankind and the natural environment. Was it possible, in other words, for the human being to hold on to his natural origins and strengthen his physical and emotional bond with the environment at a historical moment when economical and political factors were drastically redefining his relation to the land and its resources? Exactly how natural was “human nature” at a time when increasingly large masses of people left the rural countryside to move to highly industrialized urban centers?

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau answers these questions by analyzing the crucial historical moment when man initiated his process of separation from the organic world, and it is here that the meaning attributed to the term “human nature” becomes clearer. Part I concentrates on an examination of man “in the embryo of his species,” while he was still an integral and undifferentiated constituent of the environment.

(*Second Discourse* 26) It is at this particular moment in his development that his connection with nature is strongest and most evident. While still unburdened by the weight of social interactions and completely content in an idyllic condition of solitude and independence, man inhabits a perfect “natural state” where “his heart yearns for nothing [and] his modest needs are easily within reach” (26, 35). Here “human nature” and “organic nature” are practically one and the same thing because mankind coexists in perfect symbiosis with its surrounding environment. This communion with nature, however, is irremediably compromised as soon as man engages in civil society – the cradle and the very source of inequality – because it generates vice and unnatural feelings such as envy and vanity. (60) Part II explores the unfavorable consequences of man’s weakened relationship with the natural world, while suggesting that this particular stage jeopardized the integrity of his “human nature.” Nonetheless, at this historical juncture when civil interactions were still unsophisticated, human beings managed to maintain a secure bond with their natural environment and preserve virtually unchanged the original character of their “human nature.” It is only in subsequent and more advanced social circumstances that man’s bond with nature deteriorates and “human nature” is compromised by corrupting external factors that are generally traceable to highly urbanized and mechanized contexts.⁵

In the context of Rousseau’s philosophical enterprise the term “human nature” may therefore be defined as the set of intrinsic human traits developed during the period of man’s uncompromised union with the organic world, when his needs were fulfilled by his natural surroundings and his interactions with other living beings did not disrupt the

⁵ For a more detailed examination of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, see below, pp. 36-48.

delicate balance of the environment.⁶ “Human nature” remained relatively unaltered as mankind engaged in the first forms of civil society, characterized by pastoral and agricultural economies that guarantee a secure bond with the natural world.⁷ However, as man began to participate in more complex forms of civil life and yield to unnatural social behaviors symptomatic of the Modern Age, the set of natural attitudes obtained at the onset of his development waned and gave way to destructive practices. Part of the underlying urgency of the *Second Discourse* therefore stems from Rousseau’s conviction that he was writing at a pivotal moment in the history of mankind, when his contemporaries risked severing all contacts with their natural origins. From this perspective, the treatise is a plea to a society trapped in capitalistic aspirations to reassess the negative repercussions of its environmental politics and to assign greater value to the origins of human nature. Rousseau’s concept of nature thus implies the recoverability, if not of the natural state in its mythical perfection, at least of healthier modes of human interaction with the organic world that will preserve the original character of “human nature.” In fact, a large part of Rousseau’s literary production is informed by a socio-

⁶ Recent scholarship tends to agree that Rousseau understood the natural state as a mythical or hypothetical stage rather than a historically identifiable moment in the development of humankind. For a study of this particular question see, for instance, chapter 2 in Plattner, F. Marc. *Rousseau’s State of Nature*. DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1979. Rousseau himself, in the opening paragraph of the *Second Discourse*, admits the un-recoverability of this state due to the still insufficient progress of scientific research in the mid eighteenth century: “On this subject I could form only vague and almost wholly fanciful conjectures; comparative anatomy has as yet made too little progress, and the observations of naturalists are still too uncertain to provide a basis for solid reasoning.” (*Second Discourse* 26) One should also consider that Rousseau would have incurred considerable dangers in challenging the veracity of the Biblical account and contradicting the ecclesiastical authorities. This is probably why he adopts the view that man might “have been at all times formed as I see him today, walking on two feet, using his hands in the same way we do.” (26)

⁷ This is more evident in *Julie, Or, The New Heloise*, as I discuss in the second chapter of this study.

political agenda that aims to recover earlier attitudes towards the environment that are essentially anti-capitalistic and pro-rural and reveal his keen pre-environmental consciousness. It is Rousseau's belief in the possibility of repairing the damage inflicted on the natural world as well as on ourselves that makes his ecocritical theory particularly useful in contemporary discourse.

While I hope to have clarified the uses of the word "nature" in the specific context of Rousseau's work, this term remains profoundly controversial in contemporary discourse as a result of its manifold applications. After Rousseau, we still question its precise implications and we regard with mistrust new concepts of nature that challenge our own, as they often seem to threaten our ideas of humanity and its place in the world. Although the issue of "nature" is far from being resolved, modern debates still partly rely on Rousseau's model, at times in unacknowledged ways. It seems that after more than two and a half centuries from the composition of the *Second Discourse*, we still depend on its philosophical postulations without fully understanding the weight of their underlying implications. This suggests that Rousseau's ideas of nature are still relevant and applicable to modern discourses and that, if understood correctly, they can lead us to a more functional theorization of this concept. It should be evident at this point that Rousseau views nature as a dual concept, including on the one hand its predominant element – the organic world – and on the other its most peculiar facet – humankind. Although Rousseau recognizes mankind as an inherent component of the natural system (and, as such, essentially dependent on its organic processes) he acknowledges the particularity of the human species – by virtue of its higher capacity to reason as well as its free will (31, 34) – and hence treats it separately in the body of his political writings.

Interestingly, the same distinction is made in contemporary criticism in ways that are unmistakably similar to Rousseau's philosophical stance.

The modern discomfort with ideas of nature is probably best articulated by Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) where he claims that "nature" is "perhaps the most complex word in the English language" and that any "full history of the uses of nature would be a history of a large part of human thought." (Williams 219, 221) Williams distinguishes "three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings." (219) While the first entry does not pose a relevant problem for the immediate purposes of this study, the second and third meanings Williams attributes to the word "nature" reveal his polarized view of the environment and mankind, which he presents as bearing an almost dichotomous relation. In entry (ii) Williams refers to a nameless "force" that regulates the natural processes of the organic world and its inhabitants. Yet, by choosing to single out mankind among all other living species, Williams suggests that either this natural force operates in an atypical manner on human beings or that they respond differently to its effects, thus implying the inherent uniqueness of the human species. Although this succinct definition does not allow for further speculation on the exact properties attributed to the concept of "force," or of its effects on mankind, it undeniably assigns a distinctive quality to the human species.

The third entry in Williams' definition of "nature" further highlights the perceived particularity of mankind in the realm of living organisms. Here the term "nature" represents the environment in its material facticity, which comprises climatic and

geological factors as well as all vegetable and animal species. While these are integral components of “nature,” and contribute in essential ways to its meaning, mankind is for Williams an addendum that may be included or omitted without altering in any relevant way the essence of this concept. Put differently, nature remains nature, whether we take it “as including or not including human beings.” (219) This implies that mankind is an obvious part of the natural realm, but it may also be conceived independently from the organic world on the basis of its exceptionality. The human being therefore shares with other species a common natural origin as well as certain natural characteristics – what Rousseau would call his “human nature” – but he may also be abstracted from the “material world” and examined separately from other living beings, as Rousseau does in his political work. (219) Clearly, Williams does not betray ecological sympathies in his definitions of the word “nature,” which reinforce rather than blur the Cartesian distinction between subject (i.e. mankind) and object (i.e. the environment), but nonetheless displays pronounced Rousseauian influences. Acknowledging the particularity of mankind is not synonymous with accepting an anthropocentric view of the world – as Rousseau’s work shows – but amounts to the objective recognition of man’s unique qualities. After all, even a theorization of nature that wishes to obfuscate the boundaries between man and the environment can only be articulated by man, by means of his unique ability for abstract thought which ultimately confirms his exceptionality.

Three decades after Williams’ *Keywords*, Andrew Biro examines the unresolved question of nature from an ecocritical perspective only to conclude that, “as a host of recent writers have made clear, [this concept] has become especially troublesome of late.” (Biro 3) In the introduction to *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics*, Biro initially

remarks that “recent social and political theory has worked very hard to insist that claims about ‘nature’ are necessarily mediated by culturally specific prejudices.” (3) In this sense, the term “nature” refers to a set of behaviors, attitudes or practices held by a given civilization and, as such, it is culturally constructed. Post-modern criticism has played a fundamental role in revealing the extent to which different notions of nature have been determined throughout history by variable social and cultural factors. To be sure, “nature” should never be used as a normative principle to determine standards of human behavior or social conduct. While in the past several socio-political institutions such as the “family,” or “marriage” and concepts like “patriarchy” and “heterosexuality” were considered “natural,” we have recently recognized the unreliable and dangerous character of these assumptions. Biro thus rightfully concludes that “any sort of radical or even progressive politics that is worthy of the name must be willing to cast a highly skeptical eye on any claim that invokes ‘nature’ as the basis of its authority.” (3) There is in fact an incipient danger in labeling as “natural” beliefs or practices that we consider legitimate, as our judgment is predicated upon unreliable socio-political factors rather than on any scrupulous study of the natural world.

At the same time, the term “nature” also denotes the environment that, despite its often culturally determined appearance, has an undeniable organic facticity. This is what Biro calls “extra-discursive” nature, a phrase that points to the material constitution of the natural world, which hosts us and grants us in return the privilege to think of nature in abstract forms. (8) Although contemporary criticism has shown that several uses of the word “nature” often reveal more about a given society’s perception of itself than about the actual environment, Biro reminds us that “nature” is first and foremost an organic

reality that is fundamentally unresponsive to our ideas of what it should or ought to be. In order to illustrate the relevance of this particular definition of “nature,” Biro mentions the example of certain business lobby groups who claim that “economic growth should not be curtailed to protect the natural environment – that in other words, there are no natural limits that might act as a brake on economic expansion.” (3) By critiquing this unethical view of nature, he stresses the fact that, while this term is often employed metaphorically and bears profound cultural implications, it nonetheless also refers to the material world on which our lives and thriving ultimately depend. Biro therefore concludes that “there are indeed certain natural limits and that we cannot culturally construct a new definition of nature as a way of averting ecological catastrophe.” (3) “Nature,” understood as the organic world, is a physical reality as well as an abstract concept and mankind should recognize it as such in order to secure its chance for a healthy and enduring development.

Biro’s indebtedness to Rousseau may not be as immediately apparent as Williams’ but his treatment of mankind and its manifold theorizations of “nature” arguably have their basis in the Rousseauian model. While Biro does not employ the term “human nature” for the purposes of his work, he does single out mankind’s peculiar relation to the environment by considering the plethora of abstract meanings given to this concept orchestrated by multiple civilizations over the centuries. Biro suggests that the fabrication of abstract terminology that makes use of the word “nature” and its derivatives to convey a set of social and cultural phenomena is symptomatic of the dangerous human tendency to conceive of itself as somehow separate from the natural system. Humankind, by devising terms that are only loosely based on the materiality of the natural world while turning a blind eye to its inherent organic constitution, betrays an

unjustified sense of autonomy from the environment that is responsible for much of the damage inflicted to its basic constitution. Like Rousseau, Biro therefore investigates historicized ideas of nature that expose mankind's conscious sense of its exceptionality in relation to the natural environment in its material facticity. More importantly, Biro agrees with Rousseau that while human beings are endowed with a certain particularity derived from their higher intellectual capacities, they are not in any way more autonomous than other living beings from the natural system that they inhabit. The fact that Biro's ecocritical study produces an analysis of the concept of nature that shares Rousseau's same fundamental postulations testifies not only to the contemporary relevance of Rousseau's work, but also to its underlying importance for the emergence of environmental thinking.

The premise of this chapter is that Rousseau had a pre-ecological understanding of the organicity of nature and that his philosophical work laid the foundations not only for early modern pre-environmentalist thinking but also for contemporary environmental politics. His theorization of nature makes him one of the earliest proponents of the Green Movement and a relevant figure in the ongoing defense of environmental preservation and animal sentience. In this light, Rousseau is arguably the first critic of modernity, since much of his ecological critique openly condemns capitalistic modes of production while endorsing sustainable interactions with the natural world. (LaFreniere 185) It is however important to bear in mind that Rousseau was an environmentalist *avant la lettre* as his interest in nature was antecedent to the emergence of ecology as a word as well as

an organized field of study.⁸ Rousseau never used terms such as “ecology” or “environment” or their respective derivatives because they did not exist at his time, nor could he substantiate his views of nature by means of solid scientific theories such as those put forward by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*, which appeared eighty years after Rousseau’s death. Rousseau should thus be recognized as a pioneer in environmental theory as he dared to challenge well-established views of nature by trusting his intuition and keen sense of observation, even while lacking substantial scientific evidence or public support. A brief overview of the prevailing concepts of nature prior to Rousseau may prove helpful in providing a better understanding of the revolutionary, and at times inflammatory character of his contribution to this subject.

The complexity of Rousseau’s ecological thought partly derives from his broad knowledge of earlier theorizations of nature that he presents in the *Second Discourse* by means of a rigorous, albeit at times veiled, critique. Arthur M. Melzer argues that in this text Rousseau challenges three main doctrines: “Christian thought and especially the doctrine of original sin; early modern political theory, particularly the thought of Thomas Hobbes; and classical political philosophy, especially in its Platonic strain” (Melzer 17).⁹ Obviously, these schools of thought did not develop separately from each other, but they cooperated in establishing ideas of nature that shaped the cultural milieu in which Rousseau found himself writing. For instance, early modern political philosophy is

⁸ In *Nature’s Economy: History of Ecological Ideas* Donald Worster notes that the term “ecology” did not appear until 1866, and it took almost another hundred years for it to enter the vernacular.” (X)

⁹ Among these, the Christian dogma seems to be most vividly present in Rousseau’s mind by virtue of its long-lasting effect on public opinion as well as its socio-political relevance. This is why Rousseau provides a critique of the biblical account that is meticulously careful and heavily self-censured.

indebted to the Christian view of man as inherently corrupt, which in turn owes a great deal to the Platonic view of the soul as perpetually torn between the dictates of reason and passion. Despite the fact that these doctrines have much in common, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau tackles them separately, while systematically juxtaposing to them his theory of nature that stands out for its remarkable departure from common eighteenth-century perceptions of the natural world and opens new ways of thinking about the environment.

The main view of nature Rousseau disputes is the account of the creation of the earth in the Book of Genesis. In particular, Rousseau takes issue here with the doctrine of original sin that was largely accepted as an uncontestable truth well into the eighteenth century. (17) After the fall of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden and before the description of the great flood that destroys all life forms, God recognizes that “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” (Genesis¹⁰ 6:5) The deluge is designed as a form of colossal punishment for the entirety of mankind that, already in its early stages of civil interaction, is denounced as violent and morally unsound. God realizes in fact that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” and that a predisposition to vice is congenital in the human race. (8:20) The Book of Genesis thus posits evil at the core of the human heart and, by so doing, makes it a constitutional and unchangeable aspect of human nature. As is well known, Rousseau challenges this view in fundamental ways by arguing that moral corruption is socially induced rather than naturally inborn. In “Letter to Beaumont,” Rousseau is adamantly clear when arguing that “man is a naturally

10 Quotes from Genesis are taken from: Coogan, Michael D. Ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

good being ... that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and that the first movements of nature are always right.”¹¹ (*Letter to Beaumont* 28) The idea of man’s natural goodness is reiterated with equal force in the *Second Discourse*, where Rousseau maintains that man’s most prominent natural virtue is pity. By locating the cause of human corruption in society rather than in the human spirit, Rousseau frees human nature from its imputed Christian guilt and allows for a thorough redefinition of the concept of nature.

Rousseau’s most drastic departure from the Christian model, however, consists in his claim that man’s relation to the natural environment is not hierarchical as in the biblical account, but rather predicated on adaptation and transformation. In the Book of Genesis, God is presented as an authoritative figure that creates the material world according to a systematic and coherent design for the purposes of mankind. Life on earth is generated in a logical manner following a six-day plan in which a rational God initially creates large objects, such as the sky and planets, and then attends to progressively smaller entities like animals and plants that are ordered in categories: “the great sea monsters ... every winged bird of every kind ... cattle [and] wild animals” (Genesis 1:20-1:24) The God of Genesis orders the emergence of fully-developed organic species by verbal acts – “Let the earth put forth vegetation” – to which follows his judgment of the newly originated object: “And God saw that it was good.” (1:1) When the object is received positively, God grants it the name that it will bear indeterminately and be adopted by future generations of men. In this sense, Christian nature operates according to God’s will and adheres strictly to his prescribed rules and expectations. The biblical

¹¹ Part of this passage from the “Letter to Beaumont” is also quoted by Melzer.

account clearly lacks the notion of organic development through time, which is otherwise present in the *Second Discourse*. In fact, here Rousseau admits that mankind has been subjected to a series of “successive developments” that modified its “internal and external structure” and that differentiated it from other species. (*Second Discourse* 26) While Rousseau chooses not to pursue this line of investigation due to the lack of scientific evidence at his time, his pre-evolutionary theory challenges in fundamental ways the authority of the Christian doctrine.

Furthermore, in Genesis, man occupies the highest position in the chain of living beings as he is created in God’s image and granted unrestrained ascendancy over organic and inorganic matter. While it is true that Adam is initially created from clay – a natural object – it is God himself who, with his divine powers, infuses “the breath of life” into his nostrils. (Genesis 2:7) The biblical account leaves little to the imagination regarding the rights given to man over inferior organisms and natural surroundings:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind . . . and *let them have dominion* over the fish and the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God [blessed men] and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and *fill the earth and subdue it*’ (1:26, emphasis added).

In the Christian mindset, man’s role is to gain control over other life forms not merely for the purposes of his immediate sustenance, but for his proliferation and his expansion in the world. There is no specific mention here of the way in which man’s subjugation of the natural realm should occur. In fact, the Christian God imposes no limitation

whatsoever to human supremacy, which seems to be justified by the fact that he only grants sentience to mankind, while all other organisms are portrayed as voiceless commodities used to achieve this species' full potential. Man's dominance over the natural world is further exemplified in the section following the creation of the Garden of Eden, in which God confers on Adam the right to name the animals designed for help and companionship: "the Lord God formed every animal ... and brought them to man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." (2:18) The privilege of naming that God initially reserves to himself is here extended to Adam in order to emphasize the right of ownership that the latter – and, by extension, all humankind – holds over other animals.

The divide between mankind and other species becomes more prominent after the deluge when God restores peace on earth by means of the rainbow covenant. God's rage against human corruption comes in the form of a monumental flood lasting one hundred and fifty days, during which mankind is eradicated from the world alongside every vegetal and animal species who, deprived of any rights, are essentially portrayed as an extension of human agency. After Noah reintroduces life on earth, God establishes a pact – symbolized by the "bow in the clouds" – in which he promises to never again inflict such a devastating punishment. (9:13) The rainbow therefore functions as a visual reminder that, regardless of how violent or menacing climatic conditions may seem, God will hereafter protect mankind from absolute catastrophe. Hence, the biblical account after the rainbow covenant introduces a type of nature that is highly regulated and non-threatening as it responds to the will of a forgiving God who has come to terms with men's flaws and weaknesses. In fact, here God recognizes the propensity to vice and

violence as an inborn trait of the human species and therefore unremovable from its basic constitution. This is why at this point, as Michael Coonan remarks, God “revises his earlier command of vegetarianism” (“I have given you every plant ...and every tree ... you shall have them for food”) and institutionalizes an omnivorous diet: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you” (Coonan 22, Genesis 1:29, 9:3). As a consequence of man’s admitted tendency to violence, he obtains a position of complete mastery over all other living organisms and every animal who now lives in “fear and dread” of his might. (9:2)

The biblical concept of nature, which is best represented by the rainbow covenant section, thus clearly advances a view of the environment as entirely submissive to mankind. In this context, all living organisms are devoid of any degree of sentience or reason as their sole existence consists in subservience to the human species. Accordingly, from a human perspective, Christian nature is intrinsically benevolent as it posits as the ultimate objective of its organic processes the protection and advancement of mankind, while at the same time guaranteeing its safety from external factors. Worster maintains that this view of nature lasted well into the Age of Reason, and its most prominent characteristic was “its benevolence.” (Worster 44) In fact, it was generally agreed that nature was “an order expressive of God’s kindness towards his creatures, and especially towards man, for whom the creation primarily exists.” (44) Obviously, this concept of nature rests on the assumption that any unfavorable natural phenomenon evokes the physical manifestation of God’s disapproval, which only emphasizes its anthropocentric character. In fact, conceiving of climatic or organic occurrences – regardless of their origins or cause – as indirect repercussions of men’s moral conduct implies a profoundly

“anthroponormative” view of the world. On the contrary, such blatant anthropocentrism is absent in Rousseau’s work, which stresses the idea of man’s interrelatedness with his natural surroundings. For instance, in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau argues repeatedly that the thriving of humankind is contingent on the recognition of its place and function within the system of interrelated organisms and that men are lost if they “forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and that the earth itself belongs to no one”¹² (*Second Discourse* 55).

There seems therefore to be enough evidence to conclude along with historian Lynn White, Jr. that Christianity is vigorously anti-environmental and “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”¹³ (White 1205) White makes his point by contrasting the Christian notion of nature with pagan animism, in order to highlight their diverging consideration of non-human entities. He maintains that in Antiquity every life form was believed to possess a guardian spirit that was unlike the human type but with whom men could communicate. Human interactions with the vegetable and animal world were predicated on the conscious recognition of non-human entities as living creatures and therefore carried out with particular consideration for their status as sentient beings. For instance, every human alteration of the environment, such as the killing of an animal or the cutting of a tree, was preceded by a ritual intended to “placate the spirit in charge of that particular [being] and to keep it placated.” (1205) By conferring a certain degree of sentience to the natural world, pagan animism implicitly grants it certain fundamental

12 While Rousseau is here primarily making an argument in favor of human equality, he equally recognizes that no human entity can claim ownership of the earth or violate its rhythms.

13 Worster briefly refers to White’s work in *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*.

rights that determine the entire economy of inter-species relations, while significantly extending the privileges of personhood to other living organisms. By contrast, Christianity's refutation of the pagan concept of nature divested the environment of any claim to sentience, presenting its non-human occupants as undiscerning matter that could be disposed of without the inconvenience of emotional interference. In other words, Christianity "made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" precisely because those feelings were negated and suppressed. (1205)

Donald Worster reaches a similar conclusion with regards to the Christian stance on nature in his discussion of pastoral literature. In particular, Worster observes that in Christian pastoralism, unlike its arcadian counterpart, the figure of the shepherd generally avoids mingling with his sheep and remains virtually separate from his natural environment. The Christian shepherd maintains an authoritative distance from his immediate surroundings, since his mission is not that of partaking of the natural life of the place but rather that of defending his sheep "against the hostile forces of nature" (Worster 26). Also unlike arcadian pastoralism, the Christian genre withholds from politically infused allusions to the detrimental effects of urbanism, and does not endorse ideas of land preservation or biodiversity. This is because the natural realm is perceived primarily as a menace to the safety of the shepherd's flock – a symbol for the Christian community – rather than a locus of idyllic natural bliss. As a result, Christian pastoralism leans towards a configuration of wild nature as essentially unwelcoming and intimidating as it represents "the source of demonic threats, fleshly appetites, and animal instincts that must be vigorously repressed." (26) Worster therefore joins White in reckoning that no religion in the history of mankind has been more adamant than Christianity "in excluding

all but man from the realm of divine grace and in denying any moral obligation to the lower species.” (26). In Christian pastoralism the natural world functions allegorically as a reminder of man’s inborn corrupted nature that should be restricted and counteracted. Accounts of subjugation or utter elimination of inferior life forms for the preservation of the flock that are characteristic of this genre arguably allude to the Christian practice of self-castigation, which is intended as a form of repentance for human sin and corruption. It therefore appears that Christian pastoralism, as well as much Christian philosophy, by systematically projecting ideas of vice and corruption onto natural objects and depriving them of any intrinsic value might have silently sanctioned the innumerable unethical treatments of non-human organisms that have tainted our history.

The second theoretical position Rousseau criticizes in the *Second Discourse* is Thomas Hobbes’s concept of mankind. The principle of natural goodness that Rousseau elaborates in his philosophical work is in fact intended as a deliberate rejection of Hobbes’s pessimistic view of the human condition in its natural state. (Melzer 20) In *Leviathan*, Hobbes maintains that men are naturally evil and that, when unsupervised by a sovereign power, their lives are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (*Leviathan* 100) The lack of social structure in the primitive stage leads for Hobbes to a “war ... of every one against every one” which generates pervading disorder while feeding on violence, fear and abuse. (100) This chaotic condition denies the possibility for human industry or the development of the arts and sciences, but it is only transitory as Hobbes explains that instinctually man seeks to overcome the unfavorable character of the natural

state by resorting to the power of reason¹⁴. (Sahlins 117) Human beings have outgrown their primitive stage as well as their original brutishness by means of rational thought that has prompted the creation of organized societies, which for Hobbes are best preserved when superintended by an effective government exercising absolute authority. In the *Second Discourse* Rousseau is particularly critical of Hobbes, cautioning his readers “not [to] conclude with [him] that man is naturally wicked ... or vice-ridden” since “his own concept of natural right is no less false” than that elaborated by his contemporaries. (*Second Discourse* 44). Unlike Hobbes and his predecessors, Rousseau articulates a doctrine of natural goodness that explains human corruption as socially induced rather than embedded in the natural constitution of man, and that locates the source of civil inequities in society rather than in human nature.

As Arthur Melzer remarks, in the *Social Contract* Rousseau argues that “no man has a *natural* authority over his fellow men” since the tendency to control and subjugate other human beings is absent in the natural state. (*Social Contract* 49, emphasis added) By conceiving of the natural state as a condition in which human contact is minimal and men lead a predominantly solitary and peaceful existence, Rousseau rejects Hobbes’s view of the state of nature as ridden with violence, contentiousness and oppression. As a consequence, in the *Social Contract* Rousseau “demonstrates that man is born free” while all forms of civil control are based on social conventions.¹⁵ (Melzer 128) This radical

14 For a more detailed commentary on Hobbes’ political theory and his often misinterpreted view of the human condition in the natural state, see Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics*, pp. 168-183.

15 For Rousseau, “free” and “good” are logically connected terms. Born free from the impulse to oppress and enslave other human beings, man is essentially good and his heart uncorrupted. Rousseau’s belief in man’s natural goodness is supported by his comments in the letter to Beaumont quoted above (see pp.25-26).

reconceptualization of human nature has two basic implications that lie at the core of Rousseau's democratic thought. On the one hand, Rousseau unburdens the concept of human nature from any alleged tendency to wickedness or corruption while positing the natural state as the happiest and healthier stage in human development. This view of mankind has important psychological implications, since it allows Rousseau to redefine not only human essence but also the value of human life and of every individual within a given social environment. On the other, Rousseau is able to reject arguments defending the legitimacy of oppressive political systems on the basis of man's alleged corrupted nature while positing the theoretical premises for the underpinning of democratic systems that safeguard human rights and human dignity. Rousseau therefore concludes that all forms of human slavery as well as any totalitarian regime such as the monarchical system of pre-revolutionary France violate man's natural right to freedom and personal accomplishment, which are the necessary premises for the establishment of functional and flourishing human societies.

The third target of Rousseau's doctrine (the first being Christianity and the second Hobbes) is the Platonic theory of the fragmented character of human nature that is best articulated in Book IV of the *Republic*. Melzer explains that "such a view asserts that the human soul or personality is not naturally one, unified, or self-consistent, but composed of two disparate and possibly antipathetic elements: reason and passion." (Melzer 20) In the *Republic* Plato actually identifies three main constituents of the human soul that are set in antagonistic tension: the first is the "rational part" which is supported by the second, the "spirited part," in regulating the processes of the third component, the "appetites," that are responsible for generating passions such as thirst, hunger and lust.

(Plato 1071, 1072) The Platonic theory of the soul is thus predicated on the composite notion of human nature that is torn between, on the one hand, an irrational drive towards “indulgences and pleasures” and, on the other, the rectifying role of reason. (1071) By conceiving of man as wholly and consistently good, Rousseau identifies only one driving principle in man, which he calls *amour de soi*, while positing reason and passions as unnatural consequences of socialized life. Rousseau explains *amour de soi* as a form of self-love that is completely independent from external factors and that regulates our survival and well-being¹⁶. Therefore, in the natural state, man acts consistently since he is driven by merely one natural principle and is essentially unburdened by alienating agents such as rational thought or passions. Melzer argues that, in this respect, Rousseau’s concept of natural goodness has profound philosophical implications since “his rejection of psychological dualism ... leads him to new emphasis on human equality and the dignity of all men.” (Melzer 22) Indeed, the Platonic doctrine bears inegalitarian implications since it suggests that the goal of human happiness is hampered by certain natural drives that are detrimental to self-accomplishment. In this sense, nature is discriminating, as it seems to reserve “psychic health and happiness for the natural elite who are strong and wise enough to know how to rule their natural wayward souls.” (22) Conversely, by positing *amour de soi* as mankind’s only natural drive, Rousseau sets human happiness in everyone’s reach and grants men equal opportunities in securing constant and thriving well-being.

Rousseau’s theory of nature stands out from the cultural climate of the mid-eighteenth century delineated above in essentially two ways. First, by temporalizing the

¹⁶ See, *Second Discourse*, p.115.

concept of nature, Rousseau abandons pre-Enlightenment notions of the natural world as static and unchanging. While Hobbes inherited from Bacon a view of nature as “atomic, inert, and reducible to its constituent parts, a mere physical resource to be manipulated at will,” Rousseau took an interest in newly emerging scientific disciplines that were gathering remarkable evidence of nature’s organic development over time. (Bronner 266)¹⁷ These revolutionary ideas, that are probably best illustrated in Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*, are generally referred to as *transformism*, “in order to distinguish them from later, more sophisticated evolutionary theory” (LaFreniere 179). By drawing extensively on Buffon, Rousseau became one of the first philosophers of transformism and had a pivotal role in the propagation of its postulations not only among the *philosophes* but also, on a much larger scale, throughout Europe. Secondly, Rousseau revised conspicuously the concept of human nature by stripping it of its negative connotations it had gained over the course of the centuries, initially via the Christian doctrine and subsequently through seventeenth-century political philosophy. By framing mankind as an inherent constituent of a dynamic and evolving natural system, Rousseau could apply the notion of change to the human species and thus historicize the concept of human nature. This reconceptualization of human nature allows Rousseau to argue that his contemporary social environment was not sanctioned by natural law but was rather the result of a series of arbitrary conventions that could be revised or changed.

Rousseau’s momentous revision of the concept of nature also paved the way for the development of an ecological consciousness and the subsequent emergence of environmentalism. One of the most evident consequences of the temporalization of nature

¹⁷ Also quoted in Lane.

was the realization that if the organic world had undergone evolutionary processes for an extended period of time, these transformations would continue indeterminately in the future and affect the environment in unpredictable and possibly detrimental ways. In particular, Rousseau developed the sense that modern human activity was having an increasingly negative impact on nature which, especially during the Industrial Revolution, was showing the first signs of profound damage. In fact, in a note to the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau reveals exceptional pre-ecological insight by advancing that “if you take note of the epidemic diseases generated by the bad air in places where masses of men are gathered together ... you will see how dearly nature makes us pay for the contempt we have shown for its lessons.” (*Second Discourse* 97) Rousseau clearly understood that nature was not unresponsive to modern modes of environmental exploitation and that the increasingly abusive methods of land manipulation were having deleterious effects not only on men’s natural surroundings, but also on their own constitution. In addition, Rousseau’s theorization of mankind as sharing common ancestral origins with other species played an important role in redefining the concept of “personhood” and extending its ensuing rights to non-human life forms. Not only does Rousseau foresee the possibility that man may have evolved from inferior life forms, but he even challenges the legitimacy of prescribed notions of humanity by questioning whether “the various animals resembling men ... might not indeed be genuine savage men [who had] remained in the primitive state of nature.” (102) By problematizing the concept of humanity and recognizing the presence of sentience and reason in non-human life forms, Rousseau inaugurates the debate on the rights of personhood that is still ongoing today. The remainder of this chapter thus concentrates on Rousseau’s ideas of

nature as outlined in the *Second Discourse* and the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (hereafter *First Discourse*), while reflecting on their pre-ecological implications from their inception in the eighteenth century to our present era.

While Rousseau is generally known for his classical upbringing and his work in literature and political philosophy, he was also very much at the forefront of eighteenth-century scientific research and he supplemented his rigorous study of nature with the best and most recent scientific data at his disposal. Besides drawing extensively from Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* – where he probably first became familiar with transformist theories – Rousseau studied traveler's reports of scientific expeditions to sub-equatorial regions, such as Prévost's *Histoire des Voyages*. This text contains detailed descriptions of exotic species like the orangutan and chimpanzee, which were still virtually unknown in Europe. He also collected "eye-witness' accounts of primitive tribes both in South Africa and America" that served him as a model for the delineation of his concept of the natural man as well as the idea of human nature. (Masters 95) His unorthodox modes of scientific inquiry resulted in the formulation of important hypotheses that punctuate the *Second Discourse* and that laid the fundamentals for modern disciplines such as biology, ethology and human anthropology. (Melzer 95) Rousseau's most fundamental contribution to the field of natural science is arguably his anticipation of modern evolutionary theory that destabilized the anthropocentric views of eighteenth-century society. By bringing to the forefront of his scientific analysis the qualities in non-human species that are common to mankind, he disputed the preconceived assumption of man's superiority over the natural environment.

While Rousseau lacked a functional vocabulary to articulate a clear theory of organic evolution, the *Second Discourse* is replete with scientific remarks that suggest his unequivocal understanding of the evolutionary processes embedded in the natural system. Given the humanistic nature of this treatise, Rousseau does not delve at length into questions regarding non-human beings but rather concentrates on modern man that he sees as the result of a series of “changes in [his] conformation that may have been produced by ... long-established practice[s]” (*Second Discourse* 95). In the opening paragraphs of Part I, Rousseau defines man as “an animal less strong than some” who after a “long process” characterized by a number of “successive developments” obtained certain “artificial faculties” exclusive to his species. (26) This developmental theory is all the more outstanding since, as early as the mid-eighteenth century, it offers a daring comparison of mankind to other animal species and suggests that man may share a common origin with other life forms. In fact, Rousseau comes remarkably close to recognizing that man belongs to the family of primates as indicated by his extensive references to the existence of human-like traits in apes and his hypothesis that man was originally a quadruped. (87) Rousseau’s transformist theory is however contingent on the idea of a primitive natural state from which man’s development began – what he calls the “hypothesis” of the “primitive condition” – and is therefore situated within a temporal frame. (51) As Asher Horowitz explains, “Rousseau requires a *starting point* that embodies several presuppositions [which nevertheless] do not include the assumption of a metaphysical gap between man and animals” (Horowitz 67, emphasis added). In this sense, man in the primitive stage is just another “animal of a peculiar sort,” and it is

precisely to the natural state that we shall now turn in order to gain a better understanding of Rousseau's theory of human nature. (68)

It is true that, as the opening paragraphs of the *Second Discourse* clearly indicate, Rousseau's main object of investigation is the moment of human separation from nature rather than the natural state itself. The time of man's idyllic union with the environment is here only described in retrospect as a condition whose original quality is forever lost and essentially irretrievable. In fact, as many critics have argued and as Rousseau himself explains in the notes, the idea of modern "men return[ing] to the forests to live with the bears" is an absurd conclusion typically raised by his opponents that he "would rather obviate" than dignify with a response. (*Second Discourse* 100) In order to obtain a clearer understanding of the natural state, it is therefore necessary to proceed in reverse order and start by looking at the causes that ignited such fateful separation in order to gain better insight into the preceding condition of natural wholeness. Rousseau maintains that the initial detachment of mankind from the state of nature occurred when *amour de soi* ceased to be the sole driving principle in man and other unnatural impulses began to influence his behavior. In particular, Rousseau identifies *amour-propre* as the antithetical drive to *amour de soi* and the predominant cause of man's severance from nature. Unlike *amour de soi*, which is simply predicated on the individual's instinct of self-preservation and his fear of pain, *amour-propre* is a form of love of self that is stimulated by narcissistic drives and that "depends on comparing oneself with others" within an elaborate social context. *Amour-propre* "consists in someone basing his or her self-worth on a perceived superiority to another" – which becomes possible in a system of stable civil interactions – and it therefore "breeds contempt, hostility, and frivolous

competition.” (Delaney) In this sense, the rise of *amour-propre* represents the source of all evils and constitutes Rousseau’s version of the Christian Fall as it marks the beginning of man’s downward path towards corruption and dejection.

Rousseau explains that as a result of the historical shift from solitary lifestyles based on individual sustenance to the first forms of civil gatherings, human beings became more “sociable,” their “hearts and minds were cultivated, contacts increased, and bonds grew tighter.” (*Second Discourse* 60) The emergence of stable human communities coincided with the proliferation of the arts, such as dancing and singing, and the refinement of certain skills like physical strength or eloquence which came to be “highly regarded” (60). It is at this particular historical juncture in the development of the human species when “[e]ach person began to gaze on the others and to want to be gazed upon” that *amour-propre* arose as a common human trait. (60) As soon as public esteem was universally praised, man’s sense of self-worth was no longer measured by his ability to survive independently in the natural environment, but was rather based on social standing. *Amour-propre* thus became the predominant driving instinct in mankind and gave rise to detrimental feelings such as “vanity ... scorn ... shame and envy” that Rousseau regards as “concoctions ruinous to happiness and innocence.” (60-61) In practical terms, Rousseau blames the division of labor that was introduced as a way of facilitating large-scale production for disrupting man’s original bond with nature and compromising his state of idyllic contentedness. Happiness can be reached while expectations are reasonable, as when men contented themselves with the product obtained from “work that one person alone could accomplish and ... arts that did not require the collaboration of hands.” (62) However, as soon as man’s avid desire to

accumulate goods arose, “property was introduced” and “equality evaporated” concomitantly with the introduction of social hierarchy. (62) Interestingly, even when commenting on the development of man’s character and inner traits, Rousseau has an eye on the natural environment. In fact, he notes that one of the negative consequences of the division of labor is the transformation of “vast forests” into “open country” ready for cultivation, which entails considerable manipulation of the land with obvious ecological repercussions.

Rousseau argues that reason is another factor that concurred with *amour-propre* in causing man’s estrangement from nature. Prior to the emergence of social life, the “savage man” was not a rational being but “consigned by nature to instinct alone” and was driven by “purely animal functions” (34). More specifically, in his primitive stage man was only endowed with “perception and feeling,” that he shared with “every other animal,” and his uncomplicated existence did not require the development of intellectual faculties or the use of logical thought. Rousseau views reason as an unnatural human trait because it disrupts our primordial bond with nature and, as Melzer explains, it “projects us out into the external world – the world of things, comparisons, means, interests – and thus positively alienates us from our true self.” (Melzer 45) In fact, reason may actually represent the original cause of human corruption for Rousseau, as he maintains that it “breeds vanity” – which is a direct consequence of *amour-propre* – while “reflection ...strengthens it” (*Second Discourse* 47). As Biro notes, when “we peel back the historical layers, or go back to the state of nature ... we discover that reason itself lies at the root of inequality” since it was instrumental to the conceptualization of the division of labor which in turn fueled unnatural instincts such as vanity and greed. (Biro 63)

Moreover, Rousseau privileges feeling over reason, arguing that “reason develops through the activity of the passions” and that men are motivated to use logical thought by the selfish desire to enjoy its outcomes. (*Second Discourse* 34) Rousseau thus undermines the emphasis placed on reason by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and inaugurates the cult of feeling that will become a predominant trait of the Romantic period and which is grounded on the belief that through feeling man can obtain a higher and happier state of being.

According to Rousseau, it is therefore necessary to inquire into the earliest stages of human development – prior to the appearance of the first forms of social relations and the concomitant insurgence of *amour-propre* and reason – in order to find human goodness and happiness in their pure, uncompromised state. It is in fact at this historical moment that Rousseau sees man as being entirely fulfilled by a simple life in communion with nature and his heart still uncorrupted by external agents. While Rousseau maintains that it was only at this brief point in time that man was wholly gratified, he revolutionizes eighteenth-century notions of human nature by arguing that man’s progressive detachment from his natural origins weakened *but did not eradicate* his inherent goodness or his ability to reach happiness. Thus man is essentially good despite of his socio-historical circumstances and has the capacity to return to his natural self and retrieve the primordial state of happiness, albeit only momentarily.¹⁸ Melzer claims that not only the natural man, but also the “primitive savage, denizen of a later epoch where men have developed most of their faculties and live together in loose tribes” is fundamentally good. (Melzer 16) However, the wider the gap between man and nature,

¹⁸ Rousseau’s views on how to reconnect with one’s natural self and obtain happiness are discussed in the second section of this chapter.

the more morally corrupted human societies become and the less predisposed to happiness they are. Given the history of mankind's unnatural evolution, Rousseau's hopeful promise to modern man lays in the idea that his natural goodness has remained dormant but essentially active – regardless of how highly civilized he has become – and that he can thus reclaim it by reconnecting with his natural self and gaining full consciousness of his natural origins.

While vanity is the offspring of *amour-propre*, the direct manifestation of *amour de soi* is the feeling of pity, which for Rousseau represents the most evident proof of man's natural goodness. In the natural state, the feeling of love for oneself that Rousseau calls *amour de soi* is instinctually projected outward in the form of pity for the pain and sufferance of other living beings. In fact, the natural man has no desire to inflict physical harm but is rather moved by sympathy and compassion for his fellow human beings. Pity is thus the primordial and all-encompassing feeling that deters man from wanting to impose his will through violent acts and that secures a state of peaceful tolerance. Moreover, pity has a regulatory function among men since in pre-socialized contexts it takes the place of "laws, moral habits, and virtues, with the added benefit that there no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice." (*Second Discourse* 47) Rousseau describes pity as a "pure movement of nature," all the more powerful because it is "universal and useful" to all men. (45, 46) Pity is a defining attribute of the human species and it lies at the very core of the human character since "it precedes any kind of reflection" and is more powerful than "the most vicious immorality" (45, 46). Therefore, in the state of nature, man's innate goodness must have been immediately apparent as it informed every relation with the outer world and constituted the premises of any form of human action. It

is then by positing the feeling of pity as the defining trait in the natural man that Rousseau argues for man's essentially good nature and for his right to happiness and self-accomplishment.

It is especially by means of his analysis of pity that Rousseau gives the most evident environmentalist imprint to the *Second Discourse*, as here he presents a forceful claim for animal sentience and animal rights. In fact, while he maintains that pity is an underlying human quality, he also recognizes the presence of this feeling in all living beings. Pity is for Rousseau a "fitting predisposition" not only in men, but also in other "creatures as weak and subject to as many ills as we" (45). Pity is such a primordial and fundamental natural trait that "even the beasts themselves sometimes show discernible signs of it." (45) Rousseau mentions several animal species in which the feeling of pity is particularly prominent or easily discernible and argues for example that:

we observe every day the aversion of horses to trampling any living body underfoot; an animal never passes a dead creature from its own species without uneasiness; there are even some that give their dead a sort of burial; and the sorrowful lowing of cattle entering a slaughterhouse bespeaks their feelings about the horrible spectacle facing them. (45)

Animals are presented in these lines as complex living organisms that are capable of elaborate feelings like sympathy and compassion and that are endowed with varying degrees of understanding, as they seem to comprehend abstract ideas such as death and forthcoming danger. Rousseau recognizes the existence of certain behaviors in the animal kingdom, such as the practice of burying the deceased, and of certain mental and emotional attributes such as the concept of kinship or the propensity for empathy, that

had traditionally been regarded as exclusive to mankind. By doing so, he portrays animals as creatures that are much more similar and closer to man than what both mainstream Christian doctrine and early modern scientists had thought. In this sense Rousseau rejects preconceived notions of human exceptionality and subverts received ideas of personhood by suggesting that certain traits and characteristics that are normally considered human are also present in non-human species. As Lane and Clark rightly point out, Rousseau's work greatly contributes to the development of environmentalist thinking by "undermin[ing] the 'dichotomy' between man and nature" and by depicting animals as being remarkably similar to the natural man. ("The Solitary Walker" 67)

In fact, if the feeling of pity is present "in the same capacity" in the natural man as well as in animals, and if pity is the outward expression of *amour de soi*, Rousseau implicitly suggests that the animal kingdom is equally endowed with this important primordial drive. By recognizing the existence of *amour de soi* in animals, Rousseau makes a salient case for his hypothesis of a common natural origin from which all living organisms developed. For Rousseau *amour de soi* is "a natural sentiment" that prompts not only the savage man in the natural state but also "every animal to watch over its own preservation," and which therefore regulates human and animal life in essentially the same way. (115) In this sense, animals are "ingenious machines" not unlike men, rather than insentient beings, as they are endowed with complex natural drives – such as *amour de soi* and pity – that Rousseau initially recognizes in mankind. Also like humans, animals have an innate capacity to formulate ideas and are thus naturally predisposed to thought. Rousseau maintains that "[e]very animal has ideas because it has senses, and even combines these ... up to a certain point" although they lack the sophistication and

abstract quality that is otherwise present in humans. (33) Therefore, regarding their propensity to think, “man differs from the beast only in degree” but shares with animals the same fundamental ability to organize ideas in order to produce logical thought. (33) Horowitz remarks that, in light of their similar predisposition to feelings and understanding, “savage man in his mode of existence is . . . virtually indistinguishable from other animals” or, to put it differently, animals partake in the qualities that have traditionally been reserved to mankind. This speaks to the instrumental role of the *Second Discourse* in revising notions of humans’ mythical separation from the animal kingdom and in positing certain animal species as sentient beings deserving rights, protection and preservation.

Rousseau makes another point in favor of animal rights by suggesting that mankind is naturally predisposed to vegetarianism and that a carnivorous diet not only disrupts the balance of the animal kingdom but might have also been one of the causes for man’s fated departure from the natural state. Rousseau divides the animal kingdom into on the one hand herbivore and frugivore species that generally have “blunt teeth” and long intestines and, on the other, carnivores that are characterized by “pointed” teeth and shorter colons. (90) By doing so, Rousseau argues that men, “having teeth and intestines like the frugivores, should naturally be placed in this class” and that they are naturally designed to adhere to a vegetarian diet. While Rousseau does not clearly state that men in the natural state were vegetarian, he advances that vegetarianism would have been their most consonant diet given their peaceful and compassionate predisposition. In fact, he maintains that since “prey is almost the only thing carnivores fight over, and since frugivores live together in constant peace, it follows that if the human race were of the

latter kind, then it would ... have had an easier time living in the state of nature” (91). In the Rousseauian mindset, a carnivore diet is therefore associated with ideas of human domination over animal species and recalls images of brutal subjugation and ferocious competition that are normally fueled by *amour propre* which, as we have seen, is the primary cause from man’s separation from the natural state. Rousseau speaks in favor of vegetarianism in other works of his philosophical oeuvre and in particular in the *Emile* but never committed himself (or Emile for that matter) to a strict vegetarian diet. Rather, as Kelly and Bloom remark, vegetarianism is for Rousseau “connected with a view of the harmoniousness of nature and man’s peaceful relation to it and the other species as opposed to the state of war.” (Kelly and Bloom 741) Rousseau thus posits vegetarianism as a way of securing non-violent interactions with some animal species that he regards as complex living beings similar to men and, in so doing, he grants to the animal kingdom certain fundamental rights that had previously been reserved to mankind.

While the *Second Discourse* lays the theoretical foundations for the emergence of environmental thinking, the *First Discourse* serves in multiple ways as its conceptual premise, especially with regards to the formulation of Rousseau’s pre-ecological stance. On the one hand, the *First Discourse* denounces the eighteenth-century belief that human well-being can be achieved by means of technological and scientific improvement. Rousseau attacks the uncritical recourse to technology and science which compromises the fragile balance of the organic system for the sake of human development and maintains instead that the hope for human happiness only grows slimmer as man’s engagement with scientific research increases. As LaFreniere remarks, in the *First Discourse* Rousseau condemns “the sophistication [of the] sciences, and claim[s] to have

unmasked the so-called ‘progress’ of civilization as a regressive process in relation to human morals and happiness.” (LaFreniere 189) In fact, the scientific methods believed to produce an overall amelioration in the quality of human life are here denounced as having counteractive effects that would not only prove unsuccessful in securing human happiness but also inflict substantial damage to the organic fabric of the earth. On the other hand, Rousseau advocates forms of human living that are predicated on a close contact with the natural world and that adopt ethically sound modes of interaction with the environment and its resources. In particular, Rousseau favors pre-modern rural societies founded on agrarian sustenance and set in a rustic environment as they allow for the preservation of good morals and ensure a state of constant peace and happiness. While Rousseau recognizes that rural communities are the result of a substantial detachment from the original state of nature, he argues that they are still characterized by unimpaired *amour de soi* and by social interactions that are founded on virtue deriving from a sound relation with the natural world.

In the *First Discourse* Rousseau shows great concern for the state of eighteenth-century scientific research and laments the absence of ethical principles in the practice of scientific inquiry. As we have seen, Rousseau does not advocate a return to the savage state, prior to the emergence of civilization and the concomitant development of the sciences, nor does he believe that it was possible to restrain the process of large-scale modernization that was under way in most European countries at his time. Marcel Schneider makes a valid point when arguing that “Rousseau n’a pas envisagé le retour à l’état de nature sachant très bien que les fleuves ne remontent pas à leur source. Les restaurations sont illusoires. Il a seulement voulu protéger ce qu’il était possible de

changer, freiner le progrès technique”¹⁹ (Schneider 35). To be precise, Rousseau did not wish to slow down technological and scientific development so much as to change their objects of investigation as well as their *modus operandi*. In other words, it was not the pace at which the process of modernization was occurring that worried him, but the means employed to reach them. In fact, in the “Observations by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva,” Rousseau clearly maintains that “science is very good in itself” and that “to say the opposite would be to repudiate good sense.” (*First Discourse* 37) It is thus not the study of the sciences *per se* that Rousseau holds responsible for the increased moral perversion of modern civilizations, but the underlying social and psychological motivations that prompted these methods of scientific development and which, in return, intensify moral corruption. Rousseau further clarifies his stance in the *First Discourse* where he concludes that “our sciences are vain *in the object they have in view*” rather than in themselves and have consequently become “dangerous in the effects they produce.” (13, my emphasis)

Rousseau recognized in fact that the modern sciences were not positing as their fundamental goal an objective and disinterested study of mankind and the organic world as they are lost in “false paths ... a thousand times more dangerous than the truth is useful” (13). At his particular historical juncture when man’s separation from nature seemed irreversible, Rousseau wonders whether mankind would even be able to recognize this long awaited “truth” promised by scientific exploration, what would be “our *Criterion* in order to judge it properly,” and who among us would know how to

19 “Rousseau did not contemplate the possibility of a return to the natural state knowing too well that rivers never go back to their original source. Restorations are illusory. He only intended to protect what was still subject to change, slow down the technological progress” (my translation).

make “good use” of it. (13) In fact, Rousseau believes that the modern man “has too limited a mind to make much progress [in the] beautiful and sublime” fields of science and that the civilized condition has infused his heart with “too many passions” that make it impossible “not to put [their study] to bad use” (38). This is why the ultimate objective of modern scientific research has been the selfish improvement of the human condition, which has been pursued with little attention to the negative repercussions inflicted on the organic fabric of the world. The development of modern manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution that was supported by the “substitution of coal for wood as a source of fuel” and the systematic program of urban planning that changed the shape of Europe’s natural topography are only two of the aims supported by scientific investigation that were geared towards the amelioration of human life. (LaFreniere 235) However, as the case of eighteenth-century England clearly shows, these uses of scientific data supported by the capitalist agenda caused irreparable damage not only to the environment but also to the human species. As LaFreniere lucidly explains, the “use of coal turned London into a center of air and water pollution [while the] smog and dust of industry permeated the greater London area, killing lichens and other organisms.” Also, “[l]iquid and solid waste were dumped into the Thames, only to be swept back by the tides entering its estuary, killing virtually all fish and sea mammals in the vicinity”. (235) Moreover, the pollution of drinking water provoked thousands of deaths among the inhabitants of these large urban areas. As his philosophical work clearly shows, Rousseau was a rigorous observer of these changes in the constitution of the natural world which he attributed to the escalation of detrimental human traits such as “ambition,” “avarice,” “vain curiosity” and “pride.” (*First Discourse* 12)

It is therefore essentially *amour-propre* – man’s first unnatural drive – that fuels these unethical modes of scientific inquiry and that is ultimately responsible for the extensive damage caused to the organic world especially since the Industrial Revolution. Rousseau describes modern sciences as the victims of a vicious cycle, since they are born from *amour-propre* and “they nourish it in turn,” thus failing to generate a tangible improvement in the human condition or to ensure human happiness. (13) Indulging in these types of scientific pursuits only perpetrates the state of crisis that has characterized modern civilization as it produces a series of negative consequences that are detrimental to men, their self-realization, and their natural surroundings. Rousseau indicates an “irreparable loss of time” as the “first injury” inflicted on society by the sciences while the second and greater evil is the emergence of luxury that is born “from the idleness and vanity of men.” (13, 14) Whereas ancient political thinkers and philosophers valued virtue and strove towards the strengthening of their society’s moral texture, Rousseau argues that modern civilizations are only concerned with increasing their wealth and “dare deny ... that luxury is diametrically opposed to good morals” (14). Rousseau thus attributes to the modern fixation with luxury the “dissolution of morals” which was taking place at his time and that deeply preoccupied him. (15) As a possible solution to this state of modern impasse, Rousseau proposes that the study of the sciences be reserved to a few “Preceptors of the human Race” such as “Verulam, Descartes [and] Newton,” who are the only true disciples of nature and who have no teacher besides their “vast genius” (21). In the final pages of the *First Discourse* Rousseau thus wishes that kings may “allow into their councils the men most capable of advising them well” and that these intellectuals may find an “honorable asylum in their courts.” (22) In fact, these

selected few would prove disinterested in the pursuit of luxury, material wealth or self-aggrandizement and would be motivated in their scientific explorations by a genuine and disinterested desire to unveil the truths about mankind and their natural environment.

In addition to his project for the reform of modern science, in the *First Discourse* Rousseau endorses simple societies that are located in the country and founded on a rural economy as a way of rectifying contemporary civilizations and eradicating their unnatural thirst for luxury and self-gratification. It is indeed among pastoral and agrarian communities that Rousseau recognizes the presence of strong morals and where he sees *amour de soi* still prevailing over *amour propre*. Virtue is the predominant human trait lying at the foundation of rural societies as it regulates civil interactions while securing the advancement of good morals. It is in particular with regards to the question of the weakening moral fabric of modern civilizations that Rousseau reflects on “the simplicity of the image of the earliest times” when mankind still maintained a significant bond with its natural surroundings. (16) Rousseau imagines with pleasure “a lovely shore, adorned with the hands of nature alone” where “innocent and virtuous” men gathered “together in the same huts,” as the happiest and healthiest period in human development. (16) In fact, at this historical time when the arts were unperfected and the sciences were at their germinating stage, human life was still uncomplicated and free from those destructive tendencies that led humanity to its fateful separation from nature and the fall into vice and moral perversion. For Rousseau the preservation of virtue and morality as shared social traits therefore depends on a close relationship with the natural world as well as on the awareness that real and maintainable human thriving can only occur when mankind refrains from abusing natural resources and strives to respect the natural rhythms of the

earth. Since Rousseau knows that a *return* to pre-modern rural societies is impossible, he seems to suggest here that the process of modernization that was undergoing at his time should have included a plan for the conservation of the natural system that was *similar* in scope and character to rural attitudes towards the land and its inhabitants. In other words, Rousseau sensed that such a drastic revolution in the modes of production and in human attitudes towards the land could not have occurred safely without the institutionalization of an environmentalist agenda aimed at the protection of nature.

The fundamental parallel between the *First Discourse* and Deep Ecology – a particular strain of ecological theory – should become apparent at this point. As Lane and Clark observe, Rousseau’s recurrent message in this treatise is that “no increase in our domination or production can make us happy.” (“The Solitary Walker” 68) Like the practitioners of Deep Ecology, Rousseau rejects the idea that the accumulation of goods exceeding our primary needs and the subjugation of non-human species can result in a sensible amelioration of the human condition or the self-realization of the human race. Instead of these essentially capitalistic values, Rousseau and proponents of deep ecological thought champion methods of human development that take into consideration the repercussions of human activity on the environment, and that posit the prospering of mankind at the same level of importance as that of all other living beings. Also like Rousseau, deep ecology blames men’s vanity and insatiable greed, which are immediate consequences of *amour propre*, for “the crisis that now pervades the human-nature relationship.” (71) The cause for the profound difficulties facing modern civilizations as well as the environment therefore resides at the core of the human soul rather than in external factors that lie beyond human control. Lane and Clark explain in fact how for

Arne Naess – the founder and philosophical father of the Deep Ecology movement – the environmental problem “is essentially a crisis of the human spirit that must be addressed at the deepest levels of human identity and behavior.” (71) Thus, Naess’s theory of the environment, and Deep Ecology at large, might have been inspired by Rousseau’s philosophy and, in particular, his realization that mankind holds complete responsibility for the critical state of the environment and its inhabitants. In this light, the study of Rousseau’s works proves to be of crucial importance at this particular historical moment as it invites readers to delve in an introspective analysis of themselves, their societies, and their attitudes toward the natural world.

In concomitance with his rejection of the sciences, in the *First Discourse* Rousseau also elaborates a forceful attack against the arts that later evolved into a systematic rejection of most artistic forms and became one of the strongholds of Rousseau’s philosophical system. The most blatant condemnation of the arts came ten years later in the *Letter to d’Alembert* where the theater is criticized for its detrimental effects on morals and for failing to generate substantial social improvement. However, in his writings about nature, Rousseau reveals a mild sympathy for the developing appreciation of picturesque landscapes which rivaled the garden aesthetics of seventeenth-century France. It is no secret that Rousseau privileges wild and uncultivated natural sceneries that recall the state of nature in its pristine and uncompromised character. After all, as we have seen, in the *First Discourse* he locates the savage man in a natural environment that achieves aesthetic value without human intervention or artificial stratagems as it is “adorned by the hands of nature *alone*” (*First Discourse* 16, my emphasis). Rousseau clearly distances himself from the garden aesthetics

predominant in France at his time, as it forced nature into minutely organized and perfectly geometrical forms that inevitably recalls acts of human domination over the natural world. In fact, as Schneider remarks, this form of artistic expression strives towards an ideal space where every decorative element in the garden – the water, plants, statues and terraces – aims at the valorization of the castle and, ultimately, of the monarchical system. (Schneider 63) It is therefore not difficult to perceive how Rousseau's distaste for the French garden bears political implications and how his preference for lush and undomesticated grounds reflects his distrust of totalitarian regimes and his nostalgia for the natural state. In the second half of the eighteenth century, when the need for social freedom felt more prominent, the French taste in landscape shifted towards the English garden and the aesthetic category of the picturesque. The liberty conveyed by trees that grow according to their natural predisposition and by waters that imitate the rivers and lakes found in nature obviously resonated with the widespread need to break away from overbearing social restrictions. Schneider explains that, in this sense, Rousseau proved to be a man of his century as he concurred with the mid eighteenth-century predilection for picturesque aesthetics and the celebration of natural freedom over human manipulation. (Schneider 64-65)

The most evident example of Rousseau's propensity for gardens that emulate natural patterns is to be found in his epistolary novel *Julie, Or The New Heloise* where, in letter IV-11, St. Preux presents the Wolmars' secret garden. Expressing Rousseau's point of view, St. Preux describes this private estate as a "secluded" and "well-hidden" area where the surrounding "heavy foliage ... does not allow the eye to penetrate" thus conveying the idea of vegetable abundance and lack of order. (*Julie* 387)

At first, St. Preux cannot believe it to be a garden since he is presented with the “wildest, most solitary place in nature,” a true “wilderness” he enjoys especially for its “cool, verdant [and] lush” quality (*Julie* 387-8). Human intervention is so well disguised that when he concludes that “no human labor” must have occurred in these grounds, Julie corrects him by saying: “nature did it all, but under my direction, and there is nothing here that I have not designed.” (388) The estate also includes what St. Preux initially believes to be an aviary – a feature he finds offensive since it forces birds to the confinement of cages – but which to his relief proves to be a sanctuary where animals are “the masters” and humans pay tribute to nature’s beauties. (391) Rousseau’s pre-environmental sensibility therefore also transpires in his acceptance of picturesque gardening as the only art form that does not weaken human virtue and morals. In fact, in the eighteenth century picturesque aesthetics was arguably the most ecological type of artistic expression as it celebrates the landscape’s natural shapes and favors natural abundance over human intervention. While this chapter concentrated on the pre-environmental theory that emerges from Rousseau’s philosophical work, the example of *Julie* shows that his entire *oeuvre* is informed by a profound environmental imprint. In addition, we start to notice how Rousseau’s pre-environmental stance is not independent from eighteenth-century aesthetics; a pattern that becomes particularly evident in his literary production that I explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Rousseauian Aesthetics and its Contribution to the Constitution of an Ethical System

Rousseau addresses for the first time in his oeuvre the notion of organic nature in Part One of the *First Discourse*. Here, his praise of the sound morals of primitive rural societies culminates in a succinct but incisive homage to their physical surroundings. “One cannot reflect on morals” Rousseau remarks, “without delighting in the recollection of ... the image of the earliest times. It is a lovely shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, towards which one incessantly turns one’s eyes and from which one regretfully feels oneself moving away.”²⁰ (*First Discourse* 16) In these lines, nature is introduced by way of a synecdoche that employs the figure of a pleasantly verdant “shore” to denote the geological complexity of pre-industrial pastoral environments. Nature is then granted human agency as it has “hands” that are responsible for embellishing the earth’s surface and personified to the extent that it becomes an object of contemplation and adoration that replaces a traditional love interest. The stylistic rigidity of the eighteenth-century philosophical treatise is thus momentarily avoided as Rousseau slips into the realm of imaginative writing, where he reflects on “one” hypothetical individual and his profoundly emotional attachment to an enticing landscape. What transpires with remarkable clarity is that the transition from the subject of morals to the characterization of the natural world is marked by a corresponding shift to a refined literary style and a

²⁰ This English translation preserves the stylistic features present in the original version: “On ne peut réfléchir sur les mœurs, qu'on ne se plaise à se rappeler l'image de la simplicité des premiers temps. C'est un beau rivage, paré des seules mains de la nature, vers lequel on tourne incessamment les yeux, et dont on se sent éloigner à regret.” (*Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* 20-21)

lyrical tone. While this passage constitutes only an early and isolated reference to the difficult topic of organic nature, which Rousseau investigates at much greater length in his later works, it nonetheless displays a fundamental aspect of his theory. It indicates that Rousseau's views of the natural environment are articulated by means of literary techniques and aesthetic criteria from which they cannot be divorced. In fact, from their early germination to their final formulation, Rousseau's ideas about nature inhabit a literary and aesthetic dimension that is largely responsible in determining their character, meaning and implications.

By attributing aesthetic qualities to his writings about the natural environment, Rousseau establishes an insoluble connection between his ideas of nature and the field of aesthetics, which becomes all the more intricately knit throughout his literary career. The present chapter investigates the constitutive character and philosophical repercussions of this bond by looking at two of Rousseau's most influential imaginative works, *Julie, Or the New Heloise* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. These texts prove that the formulation of Rousseau's concept of nature depends on certain literary strategies and aesthetic considerations that are deeply embedded in his texts, thus suggesting that the content of his philosophical enquiries is inseparable from its form. It is precisely by using a rhetorical mode replete with figures of speech, literary allusions and poetical overtones, that Rousseau is able to enunciate his theory of the natural environment. After exploring the nexus between nature and aesthetics, this chapter examines the related proposition that an unmediated communion with the natural realm produces a series of beneficial effects on the self. Rousseau repeatedly maintains that aesthetically pleasing areas have regenerative powers that grant a deepened sense of self while strengthening the moral

constitution of the individual. He deems contact with nature responsible for revitalizing natural passions such as pity, sympathy and charity, which are at the foundation of our ethical code. As suggested by the association of good morals with pastoral life in the *First Discourse*, there exists in Rousseau's philosophical thought a relation of interdependence between nature, aesthetics and ethics according to which the underpinning of an ethical system is contingent on certain aesthetic attitudes towards the natural world. Understanding the relations between these three realms becomes particularly urgent at a moment when we seem to have forgotten the considerable influence of Rousseau's works in the shaping of the modern concept of nature as well as the significant role of aesthetics in our ethical stance towards the environment.

While it is true that Rousseau's aesthetization of nature is indicative of a personal and essentially subjective taste for unspoilt and wild areas, it should be recognized first and foremost as a consciously devised strategy that speaks to the intellectual consistency of his philosophical enterprise. The attribution of aesthetic qualities to the natural world allows Rousseau to imbue nature with value and treat it as a new object of devotion and worship that takes on divine connotations. As such, it rivals the orthodox God of Christian religion by offering the possibility of a relationship with a transcendental realm that is nonetheless considerably simplified. In fact, while Rousseau identifies a superior entity in the natural world – that manifests itself precisely by means of its aesthetic character – he dissociates it from the Christian doctrine and its philosophical complications. According to him, human beings can entertain a spiritual experience that allows them to transcend their physicality and perceive the self-organizing will by simply establishing an intimate union with a pristine natural environment. Unlike the devotion to

the Christian God, which is predicated on absolute faith in the Scriptures and the uncritical rejection of rationality, the only prerequisite for the worship of nature devised by Rousseau is a sensitive soul that is receptive to the beauties of the earth. The moral code resulting from nature is evidently much more readily available and accessible than that propounded by Christianity and its effects on humanity more immediate. Rousseau's aesthetization of nature therefore bears important ethical consequences, as it is part of a large philosophical project geared towards a substantial reconstitution of eighteenth-century society. Before delving into an analysis of Rousseau's literary works, it is thus necessary to account for the philosophical motivations that justify his aesthetization of nature and that are most clearly enunciated in the section entitled "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" in *Emile, Or on Education* (hereafter respectively *Emile* and "Profession of Faith").

The "Profession of Faith" is strategically located in Book IV of *Emile* at a point when Rousseau's hypothetical student, having completed his childhood education and reached his adolescent years, is ready to be introduced to civil society. The first three books of this treatise delineate an educational model geared toward strengthening the child's *amour de soi* and his faculties of self-preservation, while protecting him from culturally determined factors that are detrimental to his natural integrity. (Bloom 9) Respectively, books IV and V detail Emile's emotional development as he learns about complex feelings such as romantic love, which he is now able to fully comprehend, and that will lead him to civil responsibility. The "Profession of Faith" is located at this particular juncture in order to present the form of religious worship that is most consonant with Emile's education and that would best complement his ideal social

environment. This new spiritual doctrine is however voiced neither by Rousseau himself nor by Emile's tutor, but by a defrocked Vicar whom the latter supposedly met long before undertaking his pedagogical experiment, and whose beliefs he never shares with his pupil. By employing this elaborate narrative technique, Rousseau manages to articulate a set of controversial religious views that he largely endorses— since he deems pertinent to Emile's education – without fully committing himself or his student to their implications.²¹ At the same time, given its remarkable theoretical consistency and its essentially unclear contribution to Emile's education, the “Profession of Faith” acquires a certain conceptual independence that makes it a powerful and pivotal text in understanding Rousseau's fundamental stance towards religion.

The necessity for the new spiritual doctrine advanced in the “Profession of Faith” arises from a particular intellectual position that takes a distance simultaneously from the Christian dogma and the Enlightenment tendency to over-rationalization. On the one hand, the Vicar's spiritual stance consists in an extensive revision of Christianity that strips it of its central doctrines of sin, redemption, and revelation, as it relies only on postulations that are accountable for by means of the senses and reason. (Dickstein 50) Rousseau's most notable concession to Christian philosophy is the concept of a monotheistic deity, which he does not feel immediately compelled to call “God,” but that he more generally refers to as a powerful “Being active in itself” and endowed with “a single intelligence” (*Emile* 437-8). On the other hand, while Rousseau adopts a rationalist line of inquiry not unlike that of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, he is nonetheless

²¹ Jeffrey Macy analyses in greater detail Rousseau's reservations about the Vicar's creed in “‘God Helps Those Who Help Themselves’: New Light on the Theological-Political Teaching in Rousseau's ‘Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.’”

skeptical of their categorical dismissal of divinity. As Macy remarks, “the unrestrained rational critique of religion” that was widely spread among his contemporaries, can for Rousseau “undermine the commitment of most individuals to act in conformity to morality” and thus bears severe socio-political repercussions. (Macy 616) Since Rousseau recognizes the social role of religion in its underpinning of morality, he preserves the idea of God – albeit in a heavily secularized form – so as to salvage the fundamentals of a moral system that he deems essential for the constitution of a healthy society. It is precisely by maintaining the notion of an all-powerful metaphysical entity, and relocating it within the physical confines of organic nature, that Rousseau fashions an alternative ethical model which is intimately bound to the natural environment. While substantially in line with eighteenth-century empiricist philosophy, Rousseau’s “Profession of Faith” therefore refuses to let go of transcendence by hinging on the notion of a self-governed entity that, though significantly demystified and naturalized, is instrumental in the foundation of an ethical code.

It is however necessary to follow Rousseau’s argument systematically, as it unfolds in the pages of the “Profession of Faith,” in order to fully apprehend the contribution of aesthetics to his philosophical model. After introducing the Savoyard Vicar and briefly delineating his troubled life, Rousseau becomes a silent witness of this character’s spiritual declaration, which is essentially organized in two sections. Initially, the Vicar propounds an analytical enquiry into man’s innate faculties that he deems sufficient in order to obtain a reliable theory of God. Having established the existence of a divine will, he then proceeds to an audacious refutation of the major tenets of Christian philosophy, which culminates in an open defense of natural religion. From the beginning

of his philosophical examination, the Vicar regards the individual as a self-reliant being who can obtain a viable understanding of himself and the outer world by means of introspection and self-analysis. In his first postulation he underlines the primacy of the senses by arguing that they are responsible for endowing man with the consciousness of his existence. As Bloom notes, the individual's quest for knowledge is predicated exclusively on "the evidence of his senses and the call of his desires [which] will be his only authorities," while all other external influences will be rejected from the outset. The Vicar is however immediately confronted with the problem of the permanent leverage of the senses on the self, "whether immediately or by memory," as he is "continually affected by sensations." (*Emile* 429) This raises the question of whether one's sense of existence is entirely dependent on sensorial perceptions or if "the sentiment of the *I*" is partly independent from them. (429) The answer to this fundamental issue is not immediately available but takes the Vicar through a complex dialectical investigation.

After having established the importance of the sensorial dimension in shaping one's sense of self, the Vicar makes a case for the existence of objects that are dissociated and independent from the self. While sensations generate inside the individual, he maintains that their cause is external because men lack full control over them and cannot easily regulate their occurrence. The Vicar recognizes in fact that his sensations "affect [him] without [his] having anything to do with it, and [that he has] nothing to do with producing or annihilating them." (430) He thus comes to the conclusion that while sensations are a constitutional element of the individual, their cause is essentially foreign, which leads him to speculate about the presence of external objects that are in relation with the self and hold the power to influence its status. At this point, the Vicar cannot but

admit the existence of “matter” which is separate from the self and that he calls “bodies” when it is “joined together in individual beings” (430). In so doing, he takes the first step towards refuting his previously formulated hypothesis that man’s awareness of his existence is solely dependent on his senses. By acknowledging other bodies as an undeniable fact of reality and arguing for their active participation in determining the development of sensations in the individual, he is indeed indirectly admitting that certain exterior factors contribute in shaping one’s notion of self. Thus far, the Vicar therefore conceives of reality as being made of a multitude of bodies endowed with senses, which entertain a relation of interdependence with each other and whose materiality is unquestionable. This position sets him aside at the same time from the “disputes of idealists and [those of] materialists” whose “distinctions concerning the appearance and reality of bodies” he regards merely as “chimeras.” (430)

The Vicar’s second proposition is that the individual is “endowed with an active force” that he calls the “faculty of comparing,” and which is akin to the faculty of judgment in the Kantian sense, since he promptly equates comparing to judging. (430) This mental power is distinct from the senses because while the latter expose the individual to objects simply as “separate, isolated, as they are in nature,” the former has the ability to “move them ... transport them, and, so to speak ... superimpose them on one another in order to pronounce on their difference or their likeness and generally on all their relations.” (430) The senses therefore notify the individual about the presence of physical objects in his environment not as they relate to each other or to the self, but merely as individual unities. It is the faculty of judgment which takes on the task of drawing comparisons between the inherent characteristics of different objects and that

attributes to them definitional qualities. Though relying on the sensorial dimension, this newly discovered mental power is unquestionably more sophisticated and proves that man is an “active and intelligent being” who is naturally inclined to complex forms of thought. (431) The Vicar therefore concludes that the individual, far from being a slave to his senses, is equipped with a higher mental force that resides in him at all times and by means of which he ascribes meaning to the outer world. He also realizes that, while he cannot permanently abstract himself from the continual exposure to sensorial perceptions, he is nonetheless “the master of giving more or less examination to what [he] sense[s]” (431). By arguing that it is possible to choose how to employ the information delivered by the senses, the Vicar can finally deduce that our perception of reality is determined not only by the senses, but that there exist concurring mental faculties which contribute to our understanding of the physical world.

The Vicar subsequently veers towards a discussion centered on the concept of motion that allows him to distinguish between two essentially different types: the first he calls “communicated” motion because its cause “is external to the body moved,” while the second is “spontaneous or voluntary” since its cause is located within the body. (432) The watch is an example of communicated motion because, while it is an object endowed with a certain degree of autonomy, “if nothing external to the spring acted on it, it would not strain to straighten itself out and would not pull the chain.” (432) On the contrary, animals and human beings are endowed with the unique ability to move spontaneously. After making this distinction, the Vicar argues that motion is never generated by matter itself or, in the case of animated beings, by the body. He explains that matter “receives motion and communicates it, but it does not produce it.” (433) In fact, the more he

observes “the action and the reaction of the forces of nature acting on one another, the more [he finds] that one must always go back from effects to effects to some will as first cause.” (433-4) In the case of inanimate objects, one needs to isolate an instance of motion that is not produced by another in order to identify a “voluntary action” that can only be generated by a will. (434) As for living beings, the Vicar finds it more difficult to pinpoint the power that is responsible for producing their actions, although he considers it immediately apparent since he maintains: “I want to act, and I act. I want to move my body, and my body moves.” (434) He therefore comes to the conclusion that there exists a will which “moves the universe and animates nature” in all of its forms. While this entity is in charge of presiding over every life process in the cosmos, it is not fully intelligible by the human mind, as it is known only by “its acts” and “not by its nature.” (434)

The recognition of a superintending will represents a pivotal moment in the Vicar’s philosophical enquiry as it allows him to argue for the existence of a divine entity. By comparing the manifold organic processes of the cosmos and noticing that they are regulated by “certain laws,” rather than occurring in disarray, he deduces that this power is endowed with “intelligence.” (438) The supreme will is therefore “an active and thinking being” which is in control of “mov[ing] the universe and order[ing] all things,” and which he deems apt to call “*God*.” (438) However, unlike the Christian God, this newly conceived deity is more readily available as it manifests itself in all organic objects and all living beings indiscriminately, from the most awe inspiring to the least particular. The Vicar claims to see God not only “in the Heavens which turn, not only in the stars which give us light, not only in [him]self, but in the ewe which gazes, in the bird which

flies, in the stone which falls, in the leaf carried by the wind.” (435) This concept of divinity subverts the traditional hierarchy established by the Christian idea of the Great Chain of Beings – according to which mankind presides over inferior species – by recognizing that all of nature’s creatures entertain a relation of interdependence with each other. This is why the Vicar believes that “[t]here is not a being in the universe that cannot in some respect be regarded as the common center around which all the others are ordered” (437). According to the Vicar’s religious doctrine, every natural object is profoundly valuable as it is representative of the divine will through which it operates and that makes it an indispensable component for the continuation of life on earth.

Despite its close association with the physical environment that posits it comfortably within man’s reach, this divine entity resists easy categorization and remains for the most part impenetrable by human reason. The Vicar reiterates that only God’s “intelligence,” its “power” and its ability to “will” can be inferred independently, and from these he deduces one final quality – God’s “goodness” – which he considers a “necessary” consequence. (438) He explains that God has “allowed for our preservation throughout history by giving us innate sentiments suitable to our nature,” thus suggesting that its goodness is evident in having equipped all human beings with the essential prerequisites for their sustenance on earth. (453) By making goodness one of God’s fundamental qualities, the Vicar maintains the primeval bond between divinity and morality that was originally established by Christian philosophy. However, the type of morality propounded by this newly conceived divinity is much more compelling as it avoids those dogmatic constraints that, according to Melzer, “entail the ultimate subordination of proud morality to humble piety and love of God.” (Melzer 355) By

positing God's goodness at the center of his doctrine and freeing it from the philosophical intricacies imbedded in the Christian faith, the Vicar "reverses this priority" thus making "morality – man's free moral action in the world – the highest thing." (355) Moreover, since God is present homogeneously in every facet of nature, it follows that all living organisms are endowed with the propensity towards goodness. In this respect, morality is a natural tendency intrinsic to men rather than an alien quality that can only be obtained by means of passive reverence and uncritical faith. As a result of the Vicar's substantial simplification of the concept of divinity and his emphasis on goodness as a defining trait at the same time of God and mankind, he makes "religion more inward and private," thus undermining "the political power of the Church" and empowering man's free agency in the world. (356)

It is the impossibility of fully comprehending the divine character of the natural world that, almost paradoxically, makes its aesthetic dimension all the more apparent and significant. As the Vicar understands that the scope of his philosophical investigation is hindered by the limits of human reason, he is met with the realization that while nature's profoundest mysteries may be destined to remain unraveled, its physical attributes are nonetheless imbued with aesthetic connotations that invest it with unprecedented worth and meaning. The Vicar is in fact ultimately unable to determine whether nature operates teleologically but, as he contemplates its workings and analyzes its laws, he becomes aware of its aesthetic qualities. After having established the existence of the divine will, he observes:

I judge that there is an order in the world although I do not know its end;
to judge that there is this order it suffices for me to compare the parts in

themselves, to study their concurrences and their relations, to note their *harmony*. . . I am like a man who saw a watch opened for the first time and, although he did not know the machine's use and had not seen the dial, was not prevented from *admiring* the work. 'I do not know,' he would say, 'what the whole is good for, but I do see that each piece is made for the others; *I admire the workman* in the details of his work; and I am quite sure that *all these wheels are moving in harmony* only for a common end which is impossible for me to perceive. (*Emile*, my emphasis 435-6)

As the Vicar ponders over the complex interactions between different living organisms and the biological processes that regulate the natural world, he notes that they occur harmoniously according to an unfathomable order. Here, he employs again the analogy of the watch in order to explain that while man is not given to understand the purposiveness of nature, he can nonetheless admire its harmonious qualities and worship the supreme will that oversees its intricate workings. Since harmony is among the fundamental attributes of aesthetics, it follows that the Vicar regards the natural system as being enwrapped in an aesthetic dimension that makes it an object of interest and devotion able to stir intense emotional reactions and produce pleasure.

At this point, the Vicar's philosophical investigation into the purposiveness of the natural world comes to a halt as he concludes that while man is able to conceive of the notion of design and the idea of a superior will, he cannot articulate a sensible theory of ends. The recognition of the limits of reason is followed by a concomitant sense of intellectual closure that can only be embraced as the sign of man's finite mental faculties. The Vicar's analytical enquiry is however far from useless as it allows him to come to the

important realization of the aesthetic character of nature. Aesthetics holds a paramount role in determining the relationship of the individual with the physical world as it prompts his profound admiration and engages him in an edifying relation with the environment whose beneficial effects are all the more enjoyable since reason, having abandoned its intellectual pursuits, is finally appeased. Additionally – as it will become progressively clearer in the course of this chapter – the concept of goodness that the Vicar derives from the aesthetic character of nature has the principal effect of strengthening the moral constitution of the individual, and thus carries a series of complex personal and socio-political consequences. For instance, in his profession of faith the Vicar mentions that he “meditate[s] on the order of the universe, not in order to explain it by vain systems but to admire it constantly” and that these contemplations result in a “condition of happiness, strength, and freedom” (*Emile* 457). As Rushworth incisively explains, in this respect Rousseau inaugurates a new attitude towards the cosmos that will gain momentum during the Romantic period which consists of “an aesthetic response to its harmony” – as opposed to the typically neo-classical “intellectual response to its order” – and that thus hinges entirely on the recognition of its aesthetic attributes. (Rushworth 322)

The prominent role that the Vicar assigns to aesthetics in his philosophical model is helpful in understanding Rousseau’s literary treatment of nature. The aesthetization of the natural environment that occurs systematically in Rousseau’s imaginative writings points to the Vicar’s realization that aesthetics constitutes the fundamental determinant in the relationship of the self with the outer world, both as a physical reality and as a link to a transcendental realm. Aesthetics conditions the individual’s affective response to his

environment, therefore contributing to shaping his moral predicaments as well as his personal and social character. Since man cannot ascertain by means of reason whether nature operates teleologically, as he is denied complete knowledge of its workings, his receptivity to its aesthetic attributes becomes the primal factor in establishing his attitude towards the physical environment. It seems that by conferring aesthetic qualities to his literary description of nature, Rousseau sought to awaken his readers' aesthetic sensibility and sensitize them to the importance of their ethical stance towards the natural realm. This means that, by virtue of the written text, the benefits derived by the self in unmediated contact with nature become a common good that is shared with the reader. Rousseau's aesthetization of nature may thus be regarded as part of a project that attempts to stimulate the aesthetic sense of his contemporary readership while promoting a collective emotional attachment to the environment during a pivotal historical time that was haunted by the ghost of the Industrial Revolution. Rousseau might have felt that an increased awareness of the aesthetics of nature could have been the first step towards introducing much needed changes in the moral texture of his rapidly changing society. Moreover, Rousseau's literary use of nature as an object of worship that substitutes the Christian dogma may be regarded as part of an unavowed attempt at furthering the secularization of his cultural milieu in ways that are less overt and less compromising than that adopted by the Vicar.

From this point onward, the "Profession of Faith" consists in an unapologetic refutation of the central doctrines of Christianity that is predicated on the Vicar's firm belief in man's innate faculties. In particular, the Vicar takes issue with the notion of revelation, which presupposes the acceptance of divinely inspired knowledge that cannot

be verified by independent examination. He argues that since God is fundamentally good and has endowed man with faculties that allow for the attainment of his full potential, it follows that these faculties are adequate enough to obtain a viable theory of divinity as well as appropriate forms of worship. This is why man cannot be deemed guilty for “serving God according to the understanding he gives to [his] mind and the sentiments he inspires to [his] heart” (*Emile* 459). In support of this argument the Vicar further maintains that the “greatest ideas of the divinity come to us from reason alone,” and that there are no valuable teachings in the Christian doctrine which cannot be equally derived “from the good use of [man’s] faculties” (459). Every individual ought to rely on reason alone and be wary of those preachers whose theories cannot be proven rationally. In fact, as all men belong to the same species and are equally endowed with reason, no one can claim to have “recourse to extraordinary means” or possess superior knowledge. (462) The exercise of reason actually becomes for the Vicar one of the highest forms of divine worship because this mental faculty, as all other human faculties, is a gift from the supreme will to mankind. The Vicar therefore confidently concludes that God could not have possibly provided him with “understanding in order to forbid [him] to use it,” and that “to subject [his] reason is to insult its author” (465).

Another essential problem with the concept of revelation is that by granting human attributes to God, it ultimately tarnishes its status as a superior entity. The idea of a deity that discloses detailed knowledge in ways that are fully intelligible to mankind presupposes the ability to communicate verbally or by means of selected human beings that have been divinely endowed. This becomes particularly evident in the case of the Christian faith according to which God divulges his message concomitantly to his son,

who can engage in conversation with him, and through the Apostle's work in the Scriptures. The Vicar takes sides on this issue by condemning those "peoples [sic] [who] took it into their heads to make God speak" because by doing so "each made him speak in its own way and made him say what it wanted." (460) This resulted in the proliferation of different religions, each founded on a distinctive account of revelation, which ultimately led to a series of intense ideological tensions and extensive armed conflicts. The Vicar restates his belief that what can be known about God is obtainable by individual means and adds that if one "had listened only to what God says to the heart of man, there would never have been more than one religion on earth." (460) In the Vicar's view, God will not communicate verbally as this is a uniquely human faculty, nor is this necessary since its fundamental attributes can be inferred by means of personal introspection and close examination of the physical world. He therefore explains that he decided to close all books except for one that he calls the "book of nature," which is "open to all eyes" and teaches only those lessons that are required to "serve and worship its divine author." (473) He maintains that no one should be excused for not following his example or refusing to read this book because "it speaks to all men a language that is intelligible to all minds," and thus holds the power to introduce important changes in the moral imprint of societies. The use of the expression "book of nature" in the closing section of the "Profession of Faith" is particularly suggestive considering that all of Rousseau's imaginative works are precisely this: texts which shed light on the worth of nature and the ways in which it can be revered and celebrated.

From the foregoing we come to understand that Rousseau's use of a highly refined register for his treatment of nature is a carefully devised strategy aimed at

reproducing in narrative form the aesthetic attributes of the organic world. This is particularly evident in his epistolary novel, *Julie, Or the New Heloise*, where ample space is granted to descriptions of the natural environment that never escape the confines of aesthetic sensibility (hereafter *Julie*). *Julie* offers an interesting case study in Rousseau's use of nature not only because it represents his only attempt at a novelistic endeavor so profoundly committed to artistic considerations of nature, but also because it points with remarkable clarity to the bond between nature and aesthetics that we have identified as an underlying characteristic of his philosophical system. In particular, letter 23 of Part 1 is of great interest since it constitutes one of Rousseau's most well crafted literary portrayals of the natural world, where it is described as a highly aestheticized realm. Also, this letter offers the first meaningful insight into the mind of Saint-Preux, one of the main characters of the novel and in many respects a stand-in figure for Rousseau. The aestheticization of nature here as well as in many other sections of *Julie* allows for new and groundbreaking theorizations of the natural environment that have profound repercussions on the characters and their identities. By virtue of its attractive qualities, the physical world becomes in fact a place that invites unprecedented confrontations and psychological explorations, which often result in a deepened sense of self and a heightened awareness of one's surroundings.

This often quoted letter is penned by Saint-Preux and occurs just after the young Julie admits of corresponding her teacher's illicit affections and kisses him in the secluded bower of her residence at Clarens. (Birkett 2) However, overcome by moral scruples and the pressing thought of their different social status, Julie decides to send Saint-Preux away temporarily in the hopes of quelling their mutual attraction. Letter 23

revolves around the description of Saint-Preux's distraught emotional state, as he must leave his lover to travel across the Alps, and the ways in which his aesthetic appreciation of nature affects his mood. His journey begins in the idyllic alpine setting of the Swiss countryside and leads him to progressively higher elevations, where he is confronted with the less populated and hardly explored regions of the Alps. Saint-Preux's ascent, motivated by no other reason than Julie's request, induces an unexpected but profoundly engaging visual exploration of the physical environment that absorbs him completely and ultimately results in a highly intellectual enterprise. As Birkett correctly remarks, Saint-Preux's experience "produces a continual discovery of pleasant scenes" and a "perpetual revelation of differing visual perspectives" that, as soon as they solidify in literary form, have the effect of "giving temporal and spatial order to inchoate nature." (2) In other words, this character writes nature into existence, or at least articulates by means of his letter a new view of the natural world that is inspired by his fortuitous encounter with an aesthetically charged environment. This becomes particularly evident in the case of his description of mountains that, because of their just discovered aesthetic value, finally make their way into narrative form as new objects of wonder and praise. Saint-Preux's journey through nature is therefore on both "the physical and the literary planes" a "form of composition" which, as this chapter argues, is fundamentally aesthetic in character. (2)

Rousseau's account of Saint-Preux's peregrination through the Swiss countryside opens with a veiled reference to the most highly celebrated lyric treatment of the theme of journeying. This character explains that his adventure began by "climb[ing] slowly, and on foot, paths that were fairly rugged" in the company of a "guide" who becomes a faithful friend. (*Julie* 63) Here Saint-Preux clearly compares himself to Dante who, in the

first Canto of *Inferno*, travels through a similar “shadowed forest... dense and difficult” until he meets Virgil, his counselor and assistant. (*Inferno* 3) Like Dante, he initially feels “lost in the darkness of a dense wood” and intimidated by the foreign setting, while at the same time visually drawn to its unusual physical characteristics. (*Julie* 63) More importantly, both journeys are as much an experiment in self-analysis and self-discovery that leads to personal growth as an adventurous exploration of uncharted territories. In fact, the “paths” that Saint-Preux embarks on allude metaphorically to the unexpected and frightening new directions his life has taken after the unforeseen separation from his beloved Julie. Unlike the Medieval epic, however, Saint-Preux’s experience is far from imaginary because, while he wishes to escape in a state of “daydream” that would numb his senses and soothe his troubled emotional state, he is relentlessly drawn back to reality by the visual stimulation of the “unexpected vista.” (63) His journey is therefore fully contingent on an organic environment that opens his eyes to the complexity of the natural world, while educating him on its intricate processes, and that eventually proves to be the very cure for his dejected state. By alluding to one of the founding texts of Western literature, Rousseau thus attributes from the outset a deeply literary dimension to his first extensive treatment of organic nature.²²

Also like Dante in the *Comedy*, Rousseau continually adapts the style and tone of his writing to the subject at hand. However, breaking away from the medieval tradition and in typical Rousseauian fashion, in *Julie* nature is reserved the highest forms of literary expression and becomes the most elevated theme. In fact, as soon as Saint-Preux

²² Another model for this letter may be Petrarch’s “Ascent to Mount Ventoux,” in which the description of the climb to the top of this mountain is accompanied by a series of considerations on the state of the narrator’s emotional state.

begins his portrayal of the circumscribing alpine setting, letter 23 undergoes a series of notable shifts. To begin with, as the visual exploration of his surroundings grows into a complex mental occupation, the syntax expands so as to accommodate the multitude of contemplated objects. Birkett observes that in Saint-Preux's representation of this environment, "rhythms become more subtle, clauses longer [and] sentences open to a greater number of phrases." (Birkett 3) This is particularly evident when this character notices the intricate juxtaposition of "wild and cultivated nature" in the countryside, which produces unexpected patterns whose description requires an extensive use of commas. (*Julie* 63) Here, as well as in the following three periods, colons and semi-colons abound, slowing down the rhythm and allowing the reader to fully appreciate the richness of the depicted images. Rousseau also resorts to the use of indefinite articles and "noble plurals (*des champs dans des precipices*)" which, accompanied by "adjectives with weak descriptive impact," contribute to produce a refined literary effect.²³ (Birkett 3) Additionally, his selected use of figures of speech confers to the tone of this letter a remarkably elegant quality. For instance, Rousseau presents the different facets of this natural setting by means of the anaphoric repetition of the adverbs "tantôt" and "quelquefois," which grants a poetic tone to the narrative²⁴, while he employs a form of

²³ In the Stewart and Vaché translation used here, the use of plurals is preserved while the French indefinite article "des," which in English would be translated with "some," is omitted: "[B]eside a cave one would find houses; one would see dry vine branches where only brambles would have been expected, grapevines where there had been landslides, excellent fruits among the boulders, and fields on steep inclines." (*Julie* 63)

²⁴ The adverbs "tantôt" and "quelquefois," are translated in English with the equivalent "sometimes" and the phrase "on occasion": "Sometimes huge cliffs hung like ruins above my head. Sometimes high and thundering waterfalls drenched me in their thick fog. Sometimes a perpetual mountain stream opened by my side an abyss the depths of which eyes dared not fathom. On occasion, I got lost in the darkness of a dense wood." (*Julie* 63)

metonymy that refers to the “hand of men” in order to denote the presence of rural artifacts in the landscape. Nature itself is personified as it is described as “taking pleasure” in stimulating the viewer’s aesthetic sensibility by adorning herself in manifold attires representative of the four seasons. (*Julie* 63) It is therefore clear that Rousseau attributes to this alpine environment an aesthetic character that remains an invariable element of his literary treatment of nature and which becomes all the more apparent and intense in his description of mountains.

In fact, as Saint-Preux observes the surrounding “cliffs” and the far-off peaks he recognizes that, being “variously illuminated,” they too contribute to the aesthetic character of the landscape. (63) Instead of dismissing the Alps as dissonant elements that tarnish the experience in nature, he notices that they heighten the effects of “the chiaroscuro of sun and shadow,” and produce an overall “continual” scene that “never cease[s] to elicit [his] admiration.” (63) Mountains are actually more than marginal objects with merely decorative purposes, as Saint-Preux explains that since their prospect is “vertical,” it “strikes the eye at once and much more powerfully than that of the plains, which can be seen only obliquely.” (63) These imposing presences are therefore among the most prominent aesthetic features of the natural setting as they have the strongest and most enduring impact on Saint-Preux’s mind. The newly discovered aesthetic character of the Alps is conveyed by dint of a specific choice of diction that reveals their otherworldly quality. The higher alpine region is in fact described as an “ethereal” space where one feels like “strolling through the clouds,” and where the “purity of the air” allows him to breathe “more freely,” feel “lighter in the body,” and engage in profound meditations that take on a “sublime character.” (64) Additionally, the contemplative

mood induced by this location leads Saint-Preux to profound philosophical considerations about the nature of knowledge that represent the most elegant passage in the letter. In particular, Rousseau employs a masterfully devised analogy to explain that, from an elevated vantage point, this character is able to observe “thunder and storms gathering below” him, which he compares to “the all too vain image of the wise man’s soul, the original of which never existed, or exists only in the very places that have furnished the emblem.” (64) While this atmospheric phenomenon is a concrete reality that unfolds under Saint-Preux’s eyes in all of its might, the intellectual’s self-proclaimed cognitive powers lack adequate proof as they only reside in their full potential inside the confines of his mind. Saint-Preux’s direct exposure to a majestic natural scene therefore leads him to the important realization of the volatile and fragile character of the human mind, a realization that becomes all the more powerful and consequential as it is communicated in highly aesthetic forms and through unsurpassed literary skills.

Rousseau’s inclusion of mountains in what he considers aesthetically pleasing nature is of paramount significance if we consider that well into the eighteenth century they were normally regarded with fear, skepticism and even contempt. Practically, the Alps lacked safe and reliable trails; they were largely inaccessible by common means of transportation, and were known for their unpredictable weather, all of which made them places that most men tended to avoid during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Ideologically, the endorsers of Classical and Neo-Classical aesthetics preferred smooth lines, geometric shapes and visually containable natural objects to the monumental and chaotic appearance of mountainous areas. (Birkett 1) This means that, as Thacker notes, well into the late “seventeenth century, the only acceptable part of the natural world was

that which was cultivated,” and which thus consisted either in pastoral and agrarian environments or in gardens that featured the rococo style. (Thacker 3) Thacker further explains that the widespread aversion to the highlands was intensified by several theological studies, such as Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681). In this treatise Burnet, considering the “precipitous shapes of mountains, and the irregular and asymmetrical coastlines of the continents, ... concludes that such roughness, such ugliness, could not have been the work of God,” but rather a sign of his displeasure and the “visual proof of the chaos which occurred at the time of the Flood.” (3) Pre-Enlightenment cultures therefore felt justified in their scorn of alpine regions by a long tradition of Christian literature that regarded them as the persistent reminder of God’s wrath against man’s tendency towards sin, while conceiving of more easily inhabitable environments – such as plains and riverbanks – as clear evidence that the earth was crafted to accommodate man’s needs. On the contrary, by treating mountains as his most elevated literary theme and imbuing them with aesthetic value, Rousseau extends the limits of what was generally considered “valuable” nature further afield, and contributes to create a sensibility and a respect for pristine settings that would become one of the cardinal themes of Romantic literature and aesthetics. The cultural revolution ignited by Rousseau’s aesthetic treatment of alpine areas thus points to the significant albeit often underestimated power of aesthetics in shaping our notions of reality as well as our understanding of the world.

It is precisely the aesthetic character of nature – which Rousseau conveys with outstanding vividness and unprecedented literary refinement – that catches Saint-Preux’s interest and prompts him to engage in a direct confrontation with the physical

environment. The alpine setting is in fact so enticing as to induce this character to project his emotional state onto the landscape almost unconsciously, and treat natural objects as mirrors of his conflicted mental condition. In the opening paragraph of letter 23, Saint-Preux claims that the sole purpose of this missive is to offer Julie a brief account of the “state of [his] soul” and of the emotional turmoil caused by their separation. He gives no indication that nature will be of primary concern in this context, or that he intends to touch upon the topic of his travels. (*Julie* 63) Instead, he states that he “shall not give ... a detailed account of [his] journey” because his secret and potentially compromising correspondence with Julie “must be reserved for the things that concern each of [them] most directly” and avoid topics that are not immediately related to their wellbeing or their relationship. Moreover, he mentions that he has already written a separate “narrative” detailing the outstanding natural environment of the Alps that he intends to share with her at a later time. However, Saint-Preux only begins to address his emotional state when he explains that he is simultaneously “sad with [his] woes, and consoled by [Julie’s] joy,” and then fails to fully maintain his original proposition. (63) In fact, the focus of this letter shifts almost unperceptively from this character’s mental disposition to a description of his natural surroundings that are nevertheless clearly expressive of his innermost feelings and become metaphorical representations of his dejected condition. Initially, he presents a gloomy landscape marked by “huge cliffs [that] hung like ruins above [his] head” and “abyss[es] the depth of which eyes dared not fathom,” which are evocative of his melancholic state and his incumbent fears. (63) Aesthetically pleasing nature therefore becomes for Saint-Preux an intimate confidant that welcomes the lot of

his troubled heart and promises to keep its innermost secrets, while reflecting his feelings on the contours of its cliffs and peaks.

As we have seen, Saint-Preux's initial exposure to this natural environment gives way to an increasingly engaging examination of the landscape, which culminates in an intellectual exercise requiring his utmost attention. While he is at first instinctively drawn to the most visually commanding objects that are emblematic of his dejected mood – such as cliffs, summits and waterfalls – as the intricate alpine scenery unfolds under his eyes he becomes more aware of its diverse features. In fact, he progressively shifts his attention to marginal elements such as “fields” and “a pleasant meadow,” “grapevines [and] excellent fruits” the sight of which captures him entirely and produces an effect of sudden “delight” (63). Interestingly, as he fully commits to this occupation, Saint-Preux feels a sense of “calm” returning to his heart that he rightly attributes to the pleasure provided by this natural “variety.” (63) This leads him to recognize the remarkable “empire that the most insensible beings hold over our most intense passions” and which he deems superior to philosophy, as this intellectual discipline does not “exert as much power over the soul as a succession of inanimate objects.” (63-64) It therefore becomes evident that if at the beginning of Saint-Preux's journey nature functions as a mirror for his conflicted emotions, it subsequently provides a distraction from his condition and eventually becomes the very cure for his demoralized state. Indeed, among the mountain peaks he notices a “change of humor” that allows for “the return of that inner peace [he] for so long had lost.” (64) As noted above, Saint-Preux realizes that higher elevations are conducive to meditations that have beneficial effects since they make him feel “serene of mind,” and which are responsible for an overall elevated state where “one is grave

without melancholy [and] peaceful without indolence” (64). With this letter Rousseau thus seems to suggest that, by externalizing one’s feelings and projecting them onto the landscape, the individual’s emotional turmoil ceases to be a potentially isolating internal condition and becomes a shared experience that involves the participation of a multitude of complying natural objects. The recognition that the individual is not alone, but rather part of an intimate interaction with akin objects, opens the way to his rehabilitation and the restoration of his moods, while ultimately resulting in a profound appreciation for the natural world. This is why the crossing of the Alps proves to be for Saint-Preux an eventful occurrence that instills in him renewed hope for himself as well as for mankind.

In fact, his brief permanence among the Alps is an edifying experience that grants him deeper insight not only into his personal situation but also, more broadly, into the human condition. The alpine setting becomes in many respects an imaginary platform that allows Saint-Preux to reflect on humanity, its constitutional qualities, and its relations to the organic world. Overall, there is the pervading sense in letter 23 that nature is a much stronger and resilient entity than mankind, a sense that runs counter to the underlying beliefs of the Enlightenment while displaying a certain pre-Romantic sensibility, and which transpires in Saint-Preux’s multiple allusions to the fragile character of humanity. The organic world is here described as an all-powerful system that men should never attempt to dominate or restrain, but from which they can derive valuable lessons as well as concrete benefits. If properly engaged and correctly understood, nature can provide men with a series of favorable effects that will allow them to find relief from the encumbrances of everyday life. More specifically, Saint-Preux explains that the aesthetic character of the alpine setting engendered in him a number of

meditations that proved to be equally reinvigorating for his body as for his mind. This leads him to the realization that when men are exposed to “a favorable climate” they produce “passions” which contribute to the attainment of their “felicity,” and concludes that a “prolonged sojourn” in an unspoilt environment could be among “the principal remedies of medicine and morality.” (64) His communion with nature therefore results in an increased understanding of humanity and its relation to happiness, as well as in a renewed sense of self. It is however important to notice that Saint-Preux becomes fully aware of the power of nature only once he is removed from the alpine setting and is able to reflect on this experience from a detached perspective. During the first day of his journey he generally accredits the pleasant features of nature for his renewed sense of tranquility without being able to pinpoint the exact reason for this welcomed change. As this “peaceful state” intensifies on the following day, Saint-Preux notices that “it had yet another cause” that was not known to him then, and which he later identifies in the compelling character of the mountains. However, it is only when he elaborates in writing his thoughts relative to the journey that he comes to a comprehensive understanding of the might of nature and of its powerful ascendancy over mankind. Rousseau is therefore among the first thinkers to argue that in unmediated fusion with the natural world it is not possible to cognize nature, but that it is only when nature is contextualized that it becomes possible to think about it and gain a better understanding of its laws and processes.

If Rousseau had attributed aesthetic qualities only to physical environments such as the Alps that for most men of the eighteenth century were out of hand and largely inaccessible, his argument in favor of the reinvigorating powers of nature would have had

several limitations. The aesthetic appreciation of a natural setting that can be reached solely by means of strenuous physical exercise and extensive traveling is in fact an option reserved to the few who are endowed with remarkable stamina and a taste for adventure. Accordingly, if only a minor segment of the population were to profit from the well-being imparted by aesthetically charged environments, the influence of nature on mankind would be minimal and its contribution to the ethical underpinning of societies essentially negligible. On the contrary, Rousseau argues that virtually everyone can enjoy wild and unkept nature because – besides being much closer to human centers and more readily available than normally believed – its effects can also be reproduced within the comfortable boundaries of gardens and parks, by means of simple changes in landscape practices. In this particular sense, the garden becomes an experimental space where the aesthetics of uncultivated nature can be replicated, regulated, and even improved, while its ensuing benefits made available to a considerably much larger public. This has important repercussions for Rousseau's philosophical system because, by democratizing the healing properties deriving from this type of natural aesthetics, he grants nature significant leverage in shaping the ethical fundamentals of civil societies. Rousseau treats the theme of the garden and its effects on the self in letter 11, Part 4 of *Julie*, where Saint-Preux describes a confrontation with a manufactured natural setting whose outcome bears profound similarities to that of his previous experience in the Alps. This suggests that Rousseau identifies in the organic world a universal force whose benefits for humankind are not necessarily contingent on specific natural conformations or geographical settings.

Approximately a decade has elapsed from Saint-Preux's initial declaration of love to Julie and the circumstances surrounding letter 11 of Part 4, during which time these

characters have ventured into drastically different life paths. After their tortuous affair, Julie attempts to reclaim her virtue by consenting to marry Monsieur de Wolmar, a nobleman previously selected by her father, the Baron d'Étange. Saint-Preux, unable to suppress his feelings for Julie or fully accept her new resolution, embarks on a wandering trip through Europe that exposes him to multiple vicissitudes. At the time of the events described in this letter, Julie has informed Wolmar of her early romantic involvement with Saint-Preux, which he dismisses as a juvenile mistake of no significant consequence. Saint-Preux is therefore invited back to their estate at Clarens where he spends several days in the company of the couple and their children. Here, Julie accompanies him into a secret garden of unusual charm that she aptly calls Elysium, the paradisiacal land at the end of the earth reserved to those of righteous heart. This garden is situated at only twenty feet from her house, hidden behind a shaded avenue, but as soon as Saint-Preux enters through its gate overgrown with foliage he feels transported into another realm. Julie's garden has in fact all the qualities of an uncharted territory that still retains its unaltered natural features and whose neglected character reminds him of rugged and unpopulated lands.²⁵ Understandably, Saint-Preux's first reaction is to believe that he finds himself in "the most solitary place in nature," and that he is "the first mortal who

²⁵ While in Britain Julie's Elysium would have likely been classified as an "English garden" displaying predominantly "picturesque" features, Rousseau does not employ either of these terms in Letter 11 of Part 4. In *On Other Grounds*, Brigitte Weltman-Aron presents a compelling study of the influence of English landscape practices on French gardening during the late eighteenth century. Here, she argues that even if in France the literature on gardening was influenced by the works of English essayists such as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, French authors attempted to elaborate a type of garden aesthetics that was essentially independent from the dictates of the British tradition. Rousseau himself expressed skepticism in the uncritical adoption of English features for the improvement of French gardens. For more on this topic, see Weltman-Aron's work, Watelet's *Essay on Gardens*, and Dora Wiebenson's *The Picturesque Garden in France*.

ever set foot in this wilderness.” (387) As Neumeyer remarks, this garden represents for him the “ideal of the unspoiled” which he first recognized in the alpine setting he traversed as a young man and that he now discovers within the limits of human society. (Neumeyer 189) Saint-Preux is equally attracted to the “element of surprise” provided by the juxtaposition of different natural objects which intensifies his impression of being exposed to an uncultivated environment. As the illusion of wilderness does not subside, Julie explains that she is the “superintendent” of this area and that its seemingly untamed appearance has been obtained “under [her] direction” and through careful design. (*Julie* 388) Saint-Preux is initially met with disbelief but, as he recognizes the presence of artifice, his admiration for his surroundings remains unaltered. This character is therefore confronted with an unprecedented experience produced by a manufactured environment that, by virtue of its resemblance to the Swiss countryside, marks a significant shift in aesthetic sensibility.

In fact, Julie’s Elysium constitutes a dramatic departure from eighteenth-century rococo aesthetics and its aspiration towards geometric precision and architectural sumptuousness. The predominant feature of this garden is its natural abundance that is obtained by allowing trees and undergrowth to develop freely, so as to replicate the natural patterns of uncultivated areas. This vigorous explosion of vegetation results from the convergence of disparate elements such as “dark shade, bright and lively greenery [and] flowers scattered on every side” which, combined with “the bubbling of flowing water,” creates a lavish and primitive setting. (387) The overriding effect is therefore that of a wild environment that strikes the eye as being simultaneously “cool, verdant, lush, decked out” and whose intricate complexity fully captures Saint-Preux’s attention. (388)

The endemic quality of Julie's garden derives from the choice of native plants and local materials over tropical or imported articles that, while consonant with a preexisting aesthetic sense, would affect the illusion of unkept nature. Indeed, as Saint-Preux supervises this enclave, he notices the absence of "exotic plants and products of the Indies" that have been replaced by "local ones," which have been "arranged and combined in a manner that yield[s] a cheerier and pleasanter effect." (388) The garden therefore features only common herbs such as "thyme, balsam [and] marjoram" and familiar shrubs like "raspberry... elderberry [and] trifolium" that however assume an unexpectedly powerful aesthetic quality. It is important to notice that Saint-Preux's description of Elysium is characterized by a shift to an elevated style not unlike that which informs his previous treatment of the Alps. Here, as well as in his portrayal of the alpine setting, he employs qualifying adjectives and adverbs in order to convey his intense response to the aesthetic attributes of the garden ("heavy foliage;" "narrow passages;" "I was struck by a pleasantly cool sensation," "I began to roam ecstatically"). (387-8) He also resorts to rhetorical figures such as hyperboles ("A thousand wild flowers") and multiple apostrophes that produce a refined literary effect. (388) Thus, in this letter too, the aesthetic character of nature is conveyed by means of a corresponding elegant register, which further stresses the importance that Rousseau accords to aesthetics in the human relation to the natural environment.

In particular, Saint-Preux's attention is caught by the sound of "indistinct chirping" coming from "the bottom of the orchard" which persuades him to continue his exploration of this natural haven. (390) As he approaches the source of this noise, he notices that it is produced by different species of birds gathered together, which leads him

to wonder whether Julie built an aviary at the heart of Elysium. The idea of a cage however strikes him as inconsistent with the overall aesthetic character of the garden and leaves him momentarily confused and dismayed. When Saint-Preux finally reaches the birds' dwelling place, he is relieved to discover that it is actually a sanctuary where these animals enjoy complete freedom and where they are allowed to live and interact according to their natural habits. Indeed, in this "enchanted" setting they can be observed "flitting, running, singing, spitting [and] feuding" as if they inhabited a pristine environment unaltered by the hands of man (391). Julie subsequently tells Saint-Preux that while her family owns this land, she thinks of the birds as their true "masters" and considers herself merely a guest who has been granted the privilege to study and appreciate their beauty. In fact, she explains that the birds settled in this wood long before she decided to enclose it as part of her orchard and that her only merit consists in having attracted more of them by "anticipating their needs, never frightening them [and] letting them brood in safety" (391). It therefore becomes even more apparent that the reconfiguration of this area from its previous condition is aimed at accentuating its wild and unkept aspect while minimizing the signs of human intervention, so as to obtain a seemingly untamed environment. In this respect, Neumeyer remarks that the freedom "which is given to the growth of every plant [is here] extended to every living creature" (Neumeyer 191). Freedom then becomes the highest trope of this new aesthetic sensibility, which takes a firm stance against the Neo-Classical pursuit of luxury and the rococo fascination with precious or exotic birds that are enclosed in volières and small cages.²⁶

²⁶ The idea of freedom that is conveyed by this type of gardening aesthetics has clear

As we have seen, Saint-Preux feels an immediate attraction to this garden because it replicates with meticulous attention to detail the aesthetics of pristine nature. As soon as he steps into Elysium, he is instinctively drawn to a direct confrontation with its natural setting whose effects on the self are essentially the same as those provided by the Alps. In fact, while he is initially met with surprise at finding unrestrained nature within the confines of an aristocratic estate, he soon establishes an intimate communion with the features of the garden that culminates in a pleasurable and reinvigorating experience. At first, Saint-Preux is “[s]urprised, stunned [and] transported by a spectacle so unexpected” and which leaves him “motionless for a moment” (*Julie* 387). When he finally recovers, he is unable to contain his enthusiasm at the sight of Julie’s magnificent accomplishment that he praises with a series of passionate interjections: “O Tinian! O Juan Fernandez! Julie, the ends of the earth are at your gate!” (387) However, as he grows accustomed to this unwonted environment, he becomes progressively more receptive to its beneficial powers. Indeed, the more he “roam[s] through this agreeable sanctuary” the more he feels increasing in him a “delightful sensation” which is nourished by the seemingly endless variety of the circumscribing scenery. (390) Saint-Preux finally finds happiness by abandoning himself to a momentary state of daydream induced by the “enchancing sight of nature” that projects him into a deep contemplative state. (390) The contact with nature becomes even more intense on the following day, when he is allowed to visit the

political undertones. Julie stresses repeatedly the fact that the unkept look of her garden was obtained by economical means, employing native plants and restricting the number of gardeners in charge of its maintenance. By shunning the taste for luxury and exotic elements typical of the rococo aesthetics, this emerging aesthetic sensibility is implicitly making a statement against capitalism and industrialization. One may also argue that, besides betraying anti-capitalistic tendencies, Julie’s garden also displays a certain pre-environmental consciousness as it makes use of only local materials and allows its living organisms to evolve naturally and thrive.

garden in complete solitude. On this occasion, he spends “two hours” immersed in an ecstatic contemplation of the charms of nature, which “he would not trade for any other time in [his] life.” (400) Here, he indulges in a pleasing meditation that allows only “honest thoughts” and that produces a pervading and long-lasting state of “well-being.” (400)

The benefits that Saint-Preux derives from his sojourn in the garden are then clearly identical in character as well as intensity to those perceived during his ascent to the Alps. By maintaining that there is essentially no difference in this respect between wild and altered environments, Rousseau implicitly argues that men have the power to recreate in urban settings the natural conditions responsible for the reinvigorating effects that are normally associated with uncultivated nature. The new type of gardening aesthetics whose rules Rousseau expounds in this letter – and that are arguably in line with the emerging British taste for picturesque landscapes – provides a viable blueprint for the enhancement of outdoor areas and the attainment of these much sought-after results. Moreover, the accuracy with which he lays out the principles of this growing aesthetic trend suggests that he must have considered it instrumental for the reconceptualization of the human relationship with nature, which he hoped would occur on a large scale across Europe. One of the fundamental assumptions in Rousseau’s treatment of manufactured environments is therefore that the rehabilitating faculties of nature are, at least in potential, at everyone’s reach. This means that his philosophical model grants unprecedented importance to natural aesthetics, whether accidental or reproduced, in the constitution of healthier and more morally sound societies. For Rousseau, nature determines the ethical predicaments of the individual as well as of his

social environment predominantly by means of its manifold aesthetic qualities. We should however bear in mind that in *Julie* Saint-Preux's firsthand experience of nature is always accompanied by its theorization in writing, which is shared with the addressee of his letters as well as with the readership at large. The use of a highly refined register for the characterization of the natural world outlined above grants to the text the same healing properties Saint-Preux originally identified in nature, thus contributing to the strengthening of morality. This indicates that Rousseau sees the moral reconfiguration of society as occurring concomitantly by means of direct exposure to the physical world and of a systematic conceptualization of nature that takes shape in theoretical as well as imaginative texts.

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the importance that Rousseau grants to natural aesthetics in the constitution of an ethical system, we must investigate the concrete ways in which a beneficial communion with the natural environment affects the moral constitution of the individual. This is an issue that Rousseau addresses specifically in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, where the question of the relation between nature and ethics gains the center stage (hereafter *Reveries*). The *Reveries* is an autobiographical narrative that reads as private diary in which the author, now an elderly and invalid man, exposes himself in the first person by pondering on the course of his tormented life and the solace found during his last years in the aesthetic qualities of the sensible world. Intended as a continuation to *The Confessions*, this text however distances itself from its prequel by ignoring chronological as well as factual accuracy, and by refusing to comply with any prescribed agenda. On the contrary, it treats only those pivotal incidents and themes in Rousseau's life that left an indelible trace in his consciousness. Moreover the

Reveries, which was most likely written for private use and left unfinished, appears unconcerned with traditional narratological problems such as the notions of perceived author or intended audience and offers instead a rare and remarkably honest glimpse at Rousseau as a man and an intellectual.²⁷ Consequently, in this text Rousseau refuses to conceal his views behind fictional characters – as he otherwise felt compelled to do when he wrote the “Profession of Faith” or *Julie* – and takes full responsibility for his frequently controversial positions, that he explores in greater detail and attempts to justify. More importantly for the purposes of this study, Rousseau presents here his final concept of nature and comments on its influence on the ethical predicaments of human societies in much more candid and lucid ways than in his previous writings.

As the title suggests, this unconventional autobiography pivots around the notion of “reverie” and the favorable effects produced by this experience on Rousseau’s mental and physical state. The reverie is a moment of aesthetic ecstasy that is obtained when the self engages in an unmediated contact with a pristine natural setting. As described by Rousseau, the reverie is typically characterized by the temporary loss of sensory perceptions and the suspension of rational thought that are superseded by the sense of being one and the same with the circumscribing environment and a pervading feeling of happiness. When the reverie draws to an end, the self however regains full control of his rational faculties that at this point have been strengthened and reenergized. In fact, Rousseau’s reveries yield systematically to profound considerations about the human

²⁷ The question of whether Rousseau ever considered publishing the *Reveries* is complex and cannot be fully addressed here. On the one hand, all aspects of this text seem to point to the fact that it was intended for private use and there is no substantial evidence that it was ever intended for publication. On the other, the remarkable conceptual consistency of this work, as well as its refined language and register, suggest that it received painstaking attention and was extensively revised.

condition that generate a deepened sense of self as well as an increased understanding of mankind. It appears that the reverie, similarly to Saint-Preux's confrontations with the natural world in *Julie*, is a phenomenon with a bipartite structure. At the onset of this experience, the self is entrapped in the present moment, as it is entirely absorbed in the aesthetic assessment of nature which causes the arousal of pleasure. It is only when the reverie wanes and reason awakes that the self assumes a critical distance from the recently ensued events and begins to think of itself in relation to the sensible world. The resulting considerations, as well as the description of the idyllic places in which they occurred, are ultimately preserved in writing in the *Reveries*, where they can be revisited by Rousseau as well as by the reader. In his final treatment of nature, Rousseau therefore reiterates his long-lasting belief that any theorization of the physical world is contingent on the critical detachment of the self from its immediate surroundings. In this respect, the moment of reverie may well be regarded with Goulbourne as "a means of storing up a treasure trove of happy memories" that, by being fixed in textual form, will bring Rousseau and his readership continued and reinvigorated "happiness in the future" as well as opportunities for further philosophical investigations. (Goulbourne xviii)

While Rousseau frequently refers to the moment of reverie for its power to increase personal wellbeing and stimulate thought, in this text he describes in detail only two of these confrontations with nature, respectively in Walk 5 and Walk 7.²⁸ In both instances, Rousseau's recently revived interest in botany plays a significant role, as it

²⁸ To be precise, and as I mention later, Rousseau also briefly discusses a moment of reverie in Walk 2. However, this reverie is atypical in that it generates from a concussion Rousseau suffers after a fall caused by an accident involving a dog and a carriage. For this reason, as well as for space constraints, this particular experience will not be taken into consideration here.

requires his prolonged exposure to naturally rich settings that are largely responsible for the experience of reverie. In Walk 5, he evokes a summer spent as a “solitary” man on the Island of St Pierre, on Lake Neuchatel, which he regards as one of the happiest periods of his life. (*Reveries* 49, 50) In this natural haven, his daily routine consists of morning walks during which – “magnifying glass in hand and [a] copy of [Linnaeus’s] *Systema Naturae* under [his] arm” – he engages in the botanical study of the surrounding vegetation. (52) His afternoons are spent relaxing on a boat that drifts aimlessly in the lake, while in the evenings he further indulges in the beauties of the natural world from “some secluded spot” by the lakeside. (54) The first reverie occurs precisely at sundown when Rousseau, sitting alone by the banks of the lake, allows himself to become receptive to its remarkable aesthetic features. Here, he is initially drawn to the “sound of the waves” and the “movement of the water” that have a soothing effect on his senses. In particular, the “ebb and flow of the water,” by virtue of their rhythmical motion, lull his soul into a state of complete peace where it can enjoy “a delicious reverie” (54). So immersed in the state of reverie, Rousseau maintains only a vague yet pleasant awareness of his existence, which spares him “the trouble to think.” (54) In fact, while he occasionally contemplates “some slight and brief reflection on the stability of this world,” his mind is essentially transfixed and his cognitive faculties impaired by the overpowering beauty of the circumscribing environment. (54) At this point, Rousseau only wishes that this moment of reverie, so comforting and pleasurable, would protract indefinitely into the night.

Paul A. Cantor correctly remarks that Rousseau adopts a religious register in his treatment of the reverie in Walk 5, as when he describes himself as a “contemplative”

who loves to “meditate” in a natural setting where he wishes to spend “the whole of eternity.” (Cantor 375, *Reveries* 49-50) From this stylistic remark, Cantor proceeds to argue that the reverie “resemble[s] traditional mystical experiences” in that Rousseau – similarly to a mystic immersed in contemplation – “leaves behind all the transitory goods of this world in quest of absolute felicity.” (Cantor 375) It may be helpful to think of the reverie in relation to a mystical experience, but one must be aware of the fundamental ways in which these phenomena diverge. Although they share important characteristics – namely, the self’s withdrawal from the sensible world and its search for union with a superior entity – their ultimate goal is radically different. In fact, while the mystic seeks a bond with a deity, and is therefore engaged in a religious practice recognized by an established doctrine, Rousseau secures an independent connection with the secular realm of nature. Cantor recognizes these opposite objectives, but he complicates his analogy by maintaining that while the mystic undergoes a transcendental experience, “Rousseau’s reveries are immanent in nature and do not point beyond themselves to anything which transcends the world.” (375) This contradicts Rousseau’s position in the “Profession of Faith” where he argues for the existence of a superior will in nature that, while simultaneously present in all natural objects, is an immensely powerful entity which refuses easy categorization. While it is true that for Rousseau nature is a concrete organic reality, it is thus also a transcendental realm that allows the self to feel part of the larger and infinitely complex circumscribing environment. In this respect, the reverie is a transcendental experience during which the self maintains an intimate bond with the primordial will that inhabits all living beings and which is responsible for the processes that regulate the cosmos.

The reverie of Walk 5 is superseded by a profound meditation on the nature of happiness that interrogates man's chances of obtaining a permanent and dependable state of contentedness. Personal happiness and individual fulfillment are chief factors in the constitution of a solid ethical system and the foundation of healthy and morally sound societies. The fact that Rousseau's confrontation with nature produces not only intense personal pleasure but, more importantly, crucial philosophical considerations on the universal question of happiness, suggests that the natural world and the attitudes assumed towards it are instrumental in determining the ethical texture of the individual. In his post-reverie musings, Rousseau remarks that historically men have developed "affections" for "external things," which are unavoidably transient, instead of attributing value to their inner self. (*Reveries* 55) Since external objects can only procure brief satisfaction, as they "necessarily pass away and change," men have come to wrongly associate happiness with those "periods of sweetest joy and keenest pleasures" that are only "scattered points along the line of our life." (55) On the contrary, Rousseau identifies as true happiness that "simple and lasting state, which has nothing intense about it in itself, but which is all the more charming because it lasts" and survives even the dissolution of the most intense of pleasures. He explains that this state originates in the moment of reverie when the individual withdraws from the outer world, excludes all outward stimuli, and dwells solely on the sense of his "own existence" (55). It is precisely when the individual secures an intimate bond with his deepest self that he experiences "a precious feeling of contentment and peace" that protracts itself indeterminately after the reverie and whose favorable effects have significant and long-lasting reverberations on his life.

This newly obtained insight into the nature of happiness that results from the experience of reverie prompts Rousseau to make a point on the moral conformation of eighteenth-century society. The indelible value of the *Reveries* lies precisely on the fact that, while being a predominantly introspective work, it also intervenes in incisive ways on collective issues by offering frameworks for imagining alternative societies. Rousseau initially calls out his contemporaries for “being constantly stirred by passion” and, more specifically, for fixating on those “sensual and earthy” values that disrupt the potentially continuous state of happiness deriving from the confrontation with nature. (56) He further argues that the modern man, by reason of his increased physical and ideological alienation from the environment, has entertained an inaccurate view of the reverie and its ensuing state of well-being, so much so that he has lost all “sense of its charm.” (56) However Rousseau, who traditionally favors abstract analytical investigation to social propaganda, refuses to articulate a full-fledged plan for the institutionalization of alternative attitudes towards the physical world or the public condemnation of harmful passions. On the contrary, he limits himself to encourage a committed pursuit of the “sweet ecstasies” deriving from the state of reverie, whilst he recognizes that his contemporaries have become dependent on an overly “active life” that feeds on “constantly recurring needs” and which has significantly impaired a genuine appreciation of the natural realm. (56) Rousseau’s most meaningful contribution to the issue of human happiness in this context derives from his willingness to share his personal experience and present an uncensored portrait of his humanity. In his final considerations on the concept of happiness, he describes himself unashamedly as a forlorn man at the end of his life “who has been cut off from human society,” but who has found in the state of reverie

“compensation for human joys which neither fortune nor men could take away” (56).

Rousseau’s proposition for a cultural shift is therefore modestly phrased as a private remark, an invitation to share a glimpse of his life, which is nonetheless consequential as its striking honesty resonates with those who share a common sensibility and a similarly arduous fate.

Like the reverie in Walk 5, the moment of communion with nature described in Walk 7 arises from a confrontation with a wild setting that is motivated by the interest in botany. Rousseau relates here a botanical excursion he undertook as a younger man in the untamed forests of Jura, in northern Switzerland. This solitary expedition brings him to remote alpine regions whose imposing geological conformation is in stark opposition to the charming natural features of the Island of St Pierre. In fact, Rousseau must hike “deep along the winding paths up the mountain ... passing from wood to wood and rock to rock” before he reaches a hidden refuge whose circumscribing environment is “wilder than anything [he] had ever seen in [his] life.” (79) This awe-inspiring landscape is populated by “[b]lack fir trees [and] huge beech trees, several of which had fallen over with age,” thus creating an “impenetrable barrier.” (79) The nearby ancient woods are interspersed with “sheer rock faces and terrifying chasms, which [he] only dared look into while lying flat on [his] stomach” and that clearly intensify the frightening aspect of the place. (79) The overall eerie quality of this environment, which is mostly inhabited by crying owls, is only somewhat counteracted by the presence of a few “familiar little birds” whose sound lightens “the horror of this solitude.”²⁹ (79) Despite his intimidating

²⁹ With his description of these natural features, as well as with his treatment of the Swiss Alps in *Julie*, Rousseau is clearly laying the foundations for what will be referred to in nineteenth-century aesthetic theory as the category of the sublime. This points to his

surroundings, in his secluded refuge Rousseau is able to immerse himself in the study of a few local plants which “delight ... and amuse [him] for a long time.” (80) Rousseau’s botanizing soon gives way to a pleasing reverie induced by the close interaction with the natural world during which he begins “dreaming more freely” and, similarly to St. Preux on his first visit to the Alps, he imagines to be “the first mortal” to ever have reached this location. (80) This scientific undertaking is therefore interrupted by the overpowering aesthetics of nature that gains control of Rousseau’s mental faculties and plunges him in a peaceful state of idyllic union with the cosmos and its constitutive elements.

In Walk 8, Rousseau shifts from the description of the reverie obtained during this botanical excursion to a series of considerations on morals that allow him to comment on his difficult social interactions as an emerging author on the French intellectual scene. Here, Rousseau returns to some degree to the theme of happiness as he notes that, as a younger man, he led a “stormy life” that gave him “neither inward peace nor outward tranquility” and that deprived him of all pleasurable feelings. (83) He explains that he had then succumbed to a system of contrived social conventions which, while giving him the superficial impression of being “well regarded, well received, and warmly welcomed wherever [he] went,” ultimately left him with a profound sense of unhappiness and “dissatisfaction” (88). His emotional state precipitated when he discovered that some deceiving colleagues of low moral standards made him the object of a “plot in which [he] had quite unwittingly been ensnared for a long time,” and that ignited his public and

profound contribution to nineteenth-century philosophy and the shaping of Romantic sensibility. At this germinal stage, however, Rousseau’s concept of the sublime lacks conceptual consistency and is therefore not easily separable from the other aesthetic categories. This is suggested, for instance, by the fact that in Walk 7 Rousseau experiences a moment of reverie in a natural environment that, from a Romantic perspective, would inspire fear and terror.

personal downfall. (84) This leads him to a discussion of the concepts of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, which he originally coins in the *Second Discourse* and that constitute a fundamental aspect of his philosophical theory.³⁰ In retrospect, Rousseau understands that at that early juncture in his life he had fallen victim of *amour-propre* – the narcissistic drive stimulated by complex social contexts – which caused him to become estranged from his *amour de soi*, the natural instinct towards self-preservation and wellbeing. The “terrible lessons” he learned from his colleagues’ betrayal however “cut [his *amour-propre*] down to its original size,” and convinced him to free himself from “the yoke of public opinion” and permanently leave modern society. (88) While Rousseau chooses to spend the last years of his life away from the public eye and shielded from corrupted academic circles, he is nonetheless keenly aware that his contemporary society thrives on *amour-propre*, “the artificial passion” that “breeds illusions [and] disguises itself,” and which he peremptorily condemns in this context. (88) Rousseau does not specify whether these reflections emerged as a direct consequence to the moment of reverie delineated in Walk 7, but by strategically placing them in the *Reveries* after his treatment of this occurrence, he implicitly confirms his belief that the most compelling ethical investigations arise from an unmediated relation with nature.

In fact, while the *Reveries* have often been regarded as a collection of scattered thoughts lacking logical consistency, a closer examination of this work reveals its precise organization and underlying coherence. Although I have discussed here only two instances of human confrontation with nature that exert positive influence on the ethical constitution of the self, namely in Walk 5 and Walk 7, the overall structure of this text

³⁰ See chapter 1, p.40 of this study for a clarification of these terms.

aims at emphasizing the fundamental link that Rousseau recognizes between natural aesthetics and ethics. The *Reveries* are organized in such a way that each reference to the moment of reverie is followed by two separate philosophical investigations on the subject of ethics which focus either on Rousseau's personal experience or on his contemporary society. With the exception of Walk 1 that explains the nature of this project, and the last Walk in which Rousseau pays homage to his benefactress, Madame de Warens, the rest of this work conforms to this particular pattern and repeats it three times. This point becomes clearer by looking at a synopsis of the themes treated in each walk:

Introduction	Walk 1
1 st Reverie (R1) – incident with dog	Walk 2
- 1 st Philosophical consideration (R1) – critique of Enlightenment	Walk 3
- 2 nd Philosophical consideration (R1) – concept of lying	Walk 4
2 nd Reverie (R2) – Island of St Pierre	Walk 5
- 1 st Philosophical consideration (R2) – concept of happiness	Walk 5
- 2 nd Philosophical consideration (R2) – comment on charity	Walk 6
3 rd Reverie (R3) – Forest of northern Switzerland	Walk 7
- 1 st Philosophical consideration (R3) – critique of <i>amour propre</i>	Walk 8
- 2 nd Philosophical consideration (R3) – love of children	Walk 9
Conclusion	Walk 10

The conceptual architecture of the *Reveries* I have outlined here demonstrates the wide range of ethical concerns examined in this text and, more importantly, their contingency

on the self's aesthetic appreciation of nature. Natural aesthetics is thus clearly and unmistakably a paramount aspect of Rousseau's philosophical thought, as it leads to important ethical considerations that bear tangible social and cultural repercussions.

Recent criticism has argued that the importance of aesthetics for Rousseau's philosophical model is also testified by his unusual approach to botany in the *Reveries*. In fact, his engagement with this discipline is presented in this text first and foremost as an aesthetic exercise that is dissociated from any committed scientific pursuit. Bernhard Kuhn argues that while Rousseau's botanizing is conducted "with the meticulous exactitude of the taxonomist, carefully noting the structural similarities and differences" of plants, it aims primarily at the aesthetic appreciation of the vegetable world. (Kuhn 7) In fact, while Rousseau admires and champions "the taxonomic system and nomenclature of Linnaeus for bringing much needed clarity to the study of plants," he is also conscious of "the limits of any given system of classification" as it fails to account for the infinite complexity of the organic world. (7) This is why he refuses to systematize his findings into "an unchanging, atemporal taxonomic tableau," and prefers instead to indulge in the contemplation of the aesthetic properties of nature. (7) Paul A. Cantor concurs with this view and adds that botany, unlike any other scientific field, allows Rousseau to treat plants as "beautiful objects" that exist independently from their natural environment. (Cantor 369) Indeed, eighteenth-century botany treats plants mostly as "isolated wholes" and focuses on their individual structures, while largely overlooking their relations with other organisms or with the natural system at large. (369) Cantor thus maintains that Rousseau, by treating plants as autonomous aesthetic objects whose value is not strictly predicated on their relation to the natural environment, contributes to the establishment of

aesthetics as a separate philosophical category. Despite the autobiographical and deeply personal nature of the *Reveries*, Rousseau's examination of aesthetics in this work is doubtlessly as methodical and consequential as that of any philosophical treatise.

Cantor further maintains that since Rousseau studies the vegetable kingdom exclusively as "a self-contained realm," he avoids having to address the difficult issue of the teleology of nature. (Cantor 370) He explains that, in the context of his botanical pursuits, Rousseau does not investigate the purpose of plants "in a larger order of nature," but rather "wishes to study what Kant was to call the inner purposiveness of plants, the individual plant as a structural system." (372) According to him, botany – by focusing exclusively on the constitutive properties of plants – "offers Rousseau the kind of limited teleology he desires, what we might call a teleology without theology." (372) In other words, Rousseau does not have to question whether the natural realm operates according to a system of ends and whether a superintending entity regulates the natural processes. Consequently, he can refrain from perpetrating in his work "a view of nature saturated with traditional divinity" and that is heavily determined by Christian philosophy. (372) While this interpretation correctly accounts for the influence of eighteenth-century modes of scientific enquiry on Rousseau's botanizing, it disregards the fundamental character of his attitude towards nature as well as the history of his philosophical thought. On the one hand, as noted above, Rousseau's botanical investigations only partly comply with eighteenth-century modes of scientific enquiry, while essentially consisting in unconventional confrontations with the natural world that aspire to the feeling of interconnectedness with the cosmos produced by the experience of reverie. Rousseau himself refers to his interest in botany in Walk 7 as a "whim" and a "fruitless study"

whose main purpose is to distract him from his dejected state and grant him the chance to enter in unmediated contact with the natural world. (*Reveries* 70) Although botany allows him to think of plants as self-contained entities, he is therefore always aware that they belong to a much larger and infinitely complex natural realm. On the other hand, Rousseau investigated the question of the teleology of nature twenty years before the composition of the *Reveries* in the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” where he distanced himself from traditional Christian views. As we have seen, in this section of *Emile* the Vicar argues that it is not possible to ascertain whether nature operates teleologically but he notes that all its processes are imbued with aesthetic qualities. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau is therefore unconcerned with teleological matters and explores instead the aesthetic aspect of nature for its beneficial effects on the self and on the ethical constitution of societies.

It is undeniable that there exists an insoluble connection in Rousseau’s philosophical model between his ideas of nature and the field of aesthetics. Rousseau finds it impossible to think of nature independently from its aesthetic properties or to inhabit a natural environment without being affected at least to some degree by its aesthetic features. To some extent, for him the consciousness of being part of the larger natural realm is dependent on the recognition of aesthetics as one of its most important constitutive qualities. Concomitantly, natural aesthetics is instrumental in determining the moral texture of the self and, by extension, of his social environment. Rousseau’s assessment of the aesthetic character of nature leads systematically to ethical considerations that have a profound impact on the self and that aspire to the strengthening of the moral constitution of societies. While Rousseau clearly values first-hand

experiences with the organic world, he admits that it is only by securing a critical distance from nature that it is possible to fully understand its aesthetic character as well as its contribution to the underpinning of an ethical system. As we have seen, he obtains such distance during the writing process, when most of his theorization of nature reaches its highest and final form. As I intend to show in the next chapters, Rousseau's work contributed to the formulation of a concept of nature that largely influenced the Romantic Movement and whose ideological reverberations are still with us today. It is therefore difficult to imagine the outcomes of a system of environmental ethics such as that proposed by contemporary ecocritics that begs for the rejections of our inherited ideas of nature, and the abandonment of the Cartesian distinction between subject and object, so as to blur the boundaries between the human and the environment. Instead, we need to reevaluate the meaning of the Romantic concept of nature since it is only by understanding its emphasis on aesthetics and ethics that we can elaborate a system of environmental ethics that will produce new and healthier ways of interacting with the world.

Chapter Three: Natural Instantiations of Morality: the Convergence of Aesthetics and Ethics in Kant's Moral Philosophy

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant elaborates a theory of teleological judgment that, despite originating in Part One in a complex study of aesthetics and culminating in Part Two in an even more convoluted engagement with the field of teleology as such, is nonetheless grounded in a fairly straightforward idea. Kant believes that human beings can make sense of objects only when their purpose is entirely manifest. According to him, we understand an object and are thus able to subsume it under a concept if we manage to determine the end it serves in the physical world.³¹ This point is nowhere more clearly stated than in the opening sections of this work, where Kant defines the purpose of an object as the “real ground of its possibility” and explains that an end is in sight when an object and its concept are each other’s reciprocal cause.³² (*CJ*, §10, 5:220-221) The *Critique of Judgment* is evidently informed by an unrelenting concern with the notion of ends which becomes all the more apparent in the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” where Kant questions the philosophical legitimacy of teleological views of nature. However, in a striking and somewhat unexpected turn of events, the middle sections of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” single out a unique set of objects whose defining characteristic is the very *absence* of determinate ends. Kant asserts here that in the apprehension of these objects the human mind fails to perceive

³¹ For instance, we can easily attribute the concept “pencil” to any instrument consisting of a thin stick of graphite secured in a cylindrical piece of wood because we are able to identify its purpose – that of writing or drawing on paper.

³² “If one would define what an end is in accordance with transcendental determinations ... then an end is the object of a concept insofar as the latter is regarded as the cause of the former (the real ground of its possibility)”. (*CJ*, §10, 5:220-221)

any definite end and has therefore stepped into the realm of aesthetics. In particular, the analytic of the beautiful and the sublime are of special interest for my purposes in that, by detailing the range of feelings produced during aesthetic activity, they illustrate the considerable influence of aesthetics on the constitution of our ethical code, which has been the overriding theme of this project. My exposition in this chapter will take the following form. First, I will elucidate Kant's concept of end, and the specific subcategory of "natural end," as delineated in the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" to show the importance that teleology holds in the overall architecture of his epistemology. Second, I will turn to the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" in order to examine the consequential effects experienced by the self during the aesthetic appreciation of objects whose end remains concealed. This will reveal the formal similarity that Kant perceives between aesthetics and morality, and the importance of aesthetics for the establishment of ethical frameworks. At this stage, the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* will provide a useful apparatus to understand Kant's moral vision and the supreme principle of morality. Finally, I hope to argue that Kant – building on Rousseau's critical method – offers an account of ethics that acknowledges the substantial contribution of our aesthetic receptiveness to sensible objects, and that compels us to consider our aesthetic inclinations in the orchestrations of ethical systems, including those geared toward natural conservation.

In the early stages of his intellectual career, Kant developed a brief but intense fascination with Rousseau's thought that left an indelible imprint on the configuration of his moral philosophy. It is estimated that Kant read *Emile* in 1762 – approximately two years before the composition of the "Remarks" on *Observations of the Beautiful and the*

Sublime – in which he expressed ample admiration for this text. (Kuehn 132) The “Remarks” show that Kant was especially receptive to one of the theoretical bedrocks not only of *Emile* but of Rousseau’s entire philosophical opus, the idea of “human nature” as a condition jeopardized by the process of modernization. Rousseau’s notion of the natural man convinced Kant of mankind’s fundamental goodness and the possibility of a moral system rooted in the worth of humanity. (Korsgaard 5) The theoretical reverberations of this concept resonate with particular emphasis in one of Kant’s most personal comments in the “Remarks”:

I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge and a restless passion to advance in it, as well as a satisfaction in every forward step. There was a time when I thought that this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I despised the rabble that knows nothing. Rousseau set me right. This blind prejudice vanishes; I learn to respect human nature, and I should consider myself far more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that this view could give worth to all others to establish the rights of man. (Kuehn 131-2)

Rousseau introduced Kant to a new ethical paradigm according to which all men share a common origin and the existing sociopolitical stratification, while felt as a concrete reality, is the arbitrary result of unjustifiable but longstanding cultural attitudes. Accordingly, the formation of ethical societies ought to be predicated on the recognition of the universal character of human nature – which should gain primacy over prevailing cultural conventions – and grounded in an indiscriminating love of mankind.

In a less often cited but equally significant passage from the “Remarks,” Kant even compares Rousseau to Newton for his revolutionary contribution to the domain of moral philosophy:

Newton was the first to see order and regularity bound up with the greatest simplicity, where before him disorder and badly matched manifoldness were to be met with, whereas since then comets travel in geometric course. Rousseau was the first to discover under the manifoldness of the available shapes ... of mankind man’s deeply hidden nature and the concealed law according to which providence through its observation is justified. (Shell 46)

Not only did Rousseau provide an account of the human condition in its natural state that persuaded Kant of the intrinsic worth of mankind but, more importantly, he relocated the moral law from the domain of theology to that of reason. In these lines, Rousseau’s providence is the benevolent character of nature operating through discernible laws whose observance will lead men to moral justice, rather than the protective care of an orthodox God acting by means of impenetrable dictates. It is precisely this thoroughly new articulation of morality that serves as the foundation of Kant’s metaphysics of morals. We can however safely assume that Kant’s indebtedness to Rousseau extended beyond *Emile* or the concept of human nature, and that he was acquainted with most of the major works of his oeuvre. For instance, as other critics have noted, Kant’s categorical imperative displays conceptual affinities to Rousseau’s notion of the general will, and his political theory in general derives from the *Social Contract* the idea of a universal end uniting all people under common laws. (32) The present transition to

Kant's ethics is justified by these significant thematic resonances, as well as the unprecedented level of sophistication of Kant's engagement with morals and aesthetics that was largely made possible but which was not fully explored by Rousseau.³³

The question of natural teleology raised in the *Critique of Judgment* has become particularly pressing as of late, given the state of contemporary science. Our prevailing modes of scientific inquiry derive from the seventeenth-century rejection of Aristotelian views of nature fostered by intellectuals such as Descartes, Hobbes and Newton among others. (Ginsborg 1) While Aristotelian science admitted of the notion of goals and purposes in nature, its modern equivalent accepted only mechanical explanations and excluded the possibility of intentionality. As Ginsborg remarks, this alternative framework "proved to be enormously fruitful for the development of physics and chemistry," although it failed to adequately account for certain natural processes "which are now referred to as 'biological.'" (1) Mechanically oriented science could for instance explain the planets' rotation in the solar system as the result of concurring gravitational forces, or the growth of plants as the effect of a chemical reaction known as photosynthesis, but it struggled to elucidate larger questions involving biological phenomena that appeared to be goal driven. Among the challenges faced by this new science was that of providing a rationale for the formation of complex living organisms from the biologically undeveloped matter of embryos while resisting the use of teleologically inflected language. In other words, how was it possible to explain this

³³ I cannot present here an extensive comparative study of these authors and the conceptual affinities of their works. I would however like to clarify that I do not consider Rousseau merely a precursor of Kant, as I hope chapters I and II demonstrate, nor do I intend to overemphasize Kant's intellectual affiliation to Rousseau. For a more thorough study of this topic see Kuehn and Orwin.

biological process without supposing that the fully formed organism was its intended outcome and embryo development its necessary means? (1) These difficulties persist to a certain extent in the current scientific climate as our approach to scientific investigation is still fundamentally mechanical and firmly excludes the possibility of natural telos though lacking unadulterated evidence for this claim.

It has become increasingly obvious that we cannot understand the natural world in its vast complexity by relying solely on the mechanical approach we inherited from the seventeenth century. Yet this scientific method prevails today despite its narrow scope of inquiry even in rapidly evolving disciplines such as system biology. An interesting example of its resilient character is provided by recent developments in this discipline on the concept of natural robustness, that is, the ability of natural systems and living organisms to survive when confronted with disturbance such as climate change or food shortage. Studies in robustness concentrate on the innate faculty of most life forms to develop skills that allow them to adapt to new circumstances or altered environments.³⁴ Understandably, the question of natural intentionality is unavoidable in this context but is only rarely addressed and often prematurely dismissed. Biologist Andreas Wagner offers a rare insight into this issue in *Robustness and Evolvability in Living Systems*, where he comments on the slippery quality of scientific jargon. Wagner acknowledges in the introduction to this work that the “functional language” of his study, due to its unavoidable figurative character, tends to describe biological systems as if “serving specific functions or purposes” and is therefore problematic as it implies a teleological

³⁴ For an accurate definition of the concept of robustness in natural environments see Stefano Allesina and Antonio Bodini, whereas for its particular application to animal species see Simon A. Levin and Jane Lubchenco.

view of nature. (Wagner 9) Despite the intricate quality of the subject matter, in his metalinguistic observations he rather hastily disproves the possibility of natural telos:

Such language raises thorny problems if taken literally [because] words like “function” and “problem” insinuate an intelligent agent standing behind a system’s design. However, for all we know, the biological systems I examine here emerged from the blindly groping search that characterizes all of biological evolution. That they embody solutions to important biological problems is obvious only in hindsight, after the systems that embody these solutions survive. It should be understood that functional language merely provides a convenient and compact way to describe the endpoint of the convoluted paths evolution takes. (10)

Wagner admits that this linguistic impasse poses important philosophical questions, but he is nonetheless unwilling to consider the idea of intelligent design in nature for lack of empirical evidence. By suggesting that system biology should limit itself to the study of organic processes and disregard altogether the notion of telos, he endorses the mechanical investigation of the natural world that has prevailed since the seventeenth century. I am obviously not suggesting here that nature *does* function in a teleological fashion or, much less, that we should assume that it does, but rather that if we exclude a priori this possibility we risk producing a reductive explanation of the system. As Wagner’s remark shows, we cannot wish away the problem of natural teleology by blaming the inadequacies embedded in our language, because after pointing them out he still refers to nature as “seeking solutions” and aiming at “endpoints.” (10) Nor should we assume that the theory of evolution is enough to invalidate the principle of natural teleology, since

there is no reason to suppose that just because a system undergoes a “blindly groping search” and undertakes “convoluted paths” it does not operate teleologically. (10)

I want to argue that Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* helps us think through these theoretical difficulties by framing natural teleology within a metaphysical discourse that is unprecedented in its level of intellectual consistency. Kant’s treatment of the concept of natural purpose allows us to imagine new methods of scientific investigation that can yield more nuanced accounts of the natural system and its vastly intricate organic processes. However, this remains a highly controversial topic that places us on the edge of generally accepted scientific speculation by raising unavoidable theological concerns. Wagner rightly points out that when we entertain the possibility of a teleological organization of nature, we are only one step away from admitting the existence of intelligent design. (10) The widespread resistance in scientific environments to address this question may be explained if we consider that scientific development has historically been motivated by a desire to rationalize natural phenomena which runs counter to the prevailing religious dogma. By questioning natural teleology, science would therefore have to venture outside of its domain of expertise and engage with a set of metaphysical problems bearing on large theological issues. Kant was certainly aware of the delicate nature of this task but in the *Critique of Judgment* he attempts to bridge these disciplines with unswerving intellectual honesty by holding them on equal terms. In fact, his theory of teleological judgment suggests that, while it is advantageous for the sake of our rational and scientific pursuits to treat nature as teleologically determined, we cannot

preclude the possibility that the natural system may *actually* be operating teleologically³⁵ – thus refraining from a premature dismissal of the notion of intelligent design.

Additionally, by withholding judgment on the question of natural teleology, we may grow more receptive to the aesthetic quality of the natural world that we have assiduously rationalized for centuries and we may begin to imagine new and healthier ways of relating to the environment.

I. The Teleological Judgment of Nature

During the Critical period Kant became a firm supporter of mechanical science, especially in its Newtonian strain, as a new methodological approach to the study of the physical world. He however remained skeptical throughout his intellectual career that an exclusively mechanical interpretation of nature could have produced a comprehensive explanation of its systems.³⁶ (Ginsborg 2006, 2) In Kant's view, the prospect of unraveling nature's mysteries was complicated by the specific case of living organisms because, while he believed that their existence could not be accounted for merely by

³⁵ In the opening sections of the "Critique of Teleological Judgment," Kant writes that "[o]ne has good reason to assume, in accordance with transcendental principles, a subjective purposiveness of nature in its particular laws. Its many products seem to have been designed for our power of judgment as they contain a form so specifically suited for it that by means of their variety and unity they serve as it were to strengthen and entertain the mental powers". However, he later clarifies this point: "[b]ut that things in nature serve one another as means to ends, and that their possibility itself should be adequately intelligible only through this kind of causality, for that we have no basis at all in the general idea of nature as the sum of the objects of the senses." (CJ, §61, 5:359-360)

³⁶ In my explanation of the concept of natural end I follow Ginsborg's article "Kant's Biological Teleology and its Philosophical Significance," to which I am greatly indebted. Ginsborg argues that Kant expressed concern about the limits of mechanical science to unravel the laws of the organic world as early as the 1750s in *Universal Natural History*, and a decade later in *Only Possible Proof of the Existence of God*. (1)

means of physical laws, he also refused to treat them as products of a superintending divinity modeled after the Christian God. (2) Observations of the natural realm had in fact by then proved that plants and animals were not finalized products of a divine intelligence unaffected by their circumscribing surroundings, but rather complex living beings undergoing intricate and ever changing organic processes. Ginsborg maintains that since neither seventeenth-century science nor traditional theology offered a convincing framework for the understanding of living organisms, Kant felt compelled to elaborate a third view “articulated most fully in the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgment,’” which reintroduced the Aristotelian notion of “natural teleology.” (2) At the time of the composition of the third *Critique*, Kant must have realized that life forms cannot be treated simply as artifacts – mere inanimate objects in a permanently static condition – but that it is convenient for our mental constitution to regard them as “natural artifacts,” that is natural objects embedded in an organic setting and functioning towards the attainment of ends. Within the context of the third *Critique*, Kant’s analytical approach to artifacts therefore extends to natural objects as he deems it advantageous to treat both as if serving specific purposes and goals. At the same time, he recognizes that natural objects are unlike any other type of physical object in that the notion of natural end presents a set of difficult philosophical problems.

In the “Analytic of the Power of Judgment,” Kant resorts to a practical example in order to distinguish the concept of end as a comprehensive term commonly ascribed to artifacts from that of natural end specifically associated with natural objects. In §64, Kant imagines a peculiar scenario in which a person traveling through a seemingly deserted land comes across a geometrical figure – a rectangular hexagon – drawn in the sand. (*CJ*,

§64, 5:370) As the traveler perceives this figure and seeks its corresponding concept by means of the faculty of understanding, he notices that it represents an idea of pure reason. He must thus conclude that its author can only be another human being or an entity equally endowed with reason, and exclude the possibility that it was created by “the sand, the nearby sea, the wind, the footprints of any known animal,” or any “non-rational” object. (5:370) In other words, the rectangular hexagon is an artifact since only a rational being can be regarded as the causality of its effect – that is, as the vehicle that reproduced its geometric shape in the sand from a concept of reason. This hypothetical scenario allows Kant to argue that objects such as artifacts and “products of art”³⁷ display an end whose cause cannot possibly be natural but which must be, so to speak, rational. (5:370) An end thus qualifies as such when it is conceived with regards to an object made by an author, in accordance with a corresponding concept, and is consequently the product of design. Kant’s definition of end, bearing a close relation to the notions of “author” and “concept,” presents significant difficulties for the articulation of the corresponding concept of natural end. In fact, one may ask, how can the idea of natural end be treated as subordinate to that of end if, for all we know, its corresponding object cannot claim a superintending author or a mental concept for which it was made? In other words, how can we possibly treat living organisms as for example deep-water corals or mushrooms as natural ends if we cannot identify their author or determine the concept according to which they were created?

³⁷ Here, “product of art” is to be understood as “product of someone’s skill” (from the Greek *techne*) as opposed to “artwork.” Kant provides a Latin explanation of this phrase in parenthesis, *vestigium hominis video*, which in the Cambridge edition is translated as “I see it as a trace of a human being.” (p.242)

Kant admits that the idea of a natural object as a natural end requires further clarification in order to avoid incurring contradictions or logical inconsistencies. He accordingly formulates what he calls a “provisional” definition of this concept that he then illustrates by means of a practical example. A thing exists as a natural end, Kant argues, “if it is the cause and effect of itself.” (5:371) This carefully chosen formulation allows him to treat natural objects teleologically by preserving the notions of causality and end, while at the same time setting them apart from other physical objects. In fact, while an artifact requires an author as causality for its possibility, a natural object does not need any external agent in order to originate itself but rather functions as its own enactor. Kant explains that trees of any kind instantiate this description in three fundamental and interconnected ways. First, a tree is the cause and effect of itself when considered as emblematic of its species. A tree generates other trees “of the same species” in accordance with “a known natural law,” and in so doing it “unceasingly produces itself” first as the effect of an older tree and then as the cause of younger ones, thus managing to preserve itself indefinitely. (5:371) The second way in which a tree fits Kant’s definition is by generating itself “as an individual.” This natural organism possesses the remarkable faculty to grow “in accordance to mechanical laws” by transforming the nourishment obtained from the circumscribing environment which consists of differentiated matter into “its own product” – that is, into new matter that is unique to its constitution. A tree’s ability to regenerate itself by tending to such processes as the production of new leaves, the development of roots, and the thickening of its bark, indicates a “capacity for separation and formation” that “remains infinitely remote from all art when it attempts to reconstitute such a product.” (5:371) Artifacts and products of

art are indeed unable to reconstitute themselves and, more importantly, they are unable to produce the organic material of a tree from the nutriments required for its sustenance or from any other substance. Finally, Kant maintains that a tree not only sustains itself as an individual organism, but that the preservation of each of its parts is “reciprocally dependent on the preservation of the others.” (5:371) For instance, while branches keep leaves alive by providing them with the necessary nutrients from the earth, leaves contribute to the wellbeing of the branches as well as of the tree itself since “repeated defoliation would kill it.” (5:372)

The initial definition of a natural end as “cause and effect of itself” together with its accompanying example serves Kant to lay the foundations for a solid theorization of this concept. In §65, he introduces a rather tortuous discussion on the notion of “causal nexus” that constitutes a preliminary step in his exposition. Kant distinguishes the nexus “of real causes,” conceivable by the faculty of understanding, from the nexus “of final causes,” that can only be entertained by the faculty of reason. (5:372) The nexus of real causes consists in a series of descending causes and effects according to which a cause x produces an effect y , which in turn may function as the cause of an effect z . This type of nexus is “descending” in that the order in which this connection takes place cannot be reversed so that, for example, an effect y engendered by a cause x would at the same time qualify as a cause for effect x . On the other hand, the nexus of final causes, by involving a series of descending as well as ascending causes and effects, allows for this type of scenario. This means that while from a descending perspective x is the cause of y , in ascent y must be considered as the necessary cause of x , and that x and y are therefore in a relation of reciprocal dependence. The latter model provides a conceptual framework that

allows us to conceive of natural objects as being at the same time the cause and effect of their possibility. In fact, if x , y , and z are the components of a living being, we see how they would regenerate and mutually support each other so as to guarantee the organism's overall wellbeing, and how such meticulous internal organization would not require any kind of external supervision.

After introducing the nexus of final causes as a concept of reason that illustrates the self-sustaining character of nature, Kant lays out two fundamental prerequisites for a natural object to qualify as a natural end. He initially argues that living organisms must consist of parts that are “possible only through their relation to the whole,” and that this property distinguishes them from other physical objects. (5:373) In an artifact considered as an end, the parts are possible only in relation to an author who organizes them according to a corresponding concept so as to produce the object. On the contrary, since a natural object cannot claim an external maker as its causality, its parts must be thought of exclusively in relation to their hosting organism, which functions in many ways as their author. Kant then specifies that the constituents of a natural object must be “reciprocally the cause and effect of their form” and so “produce each other, as far as both their form and combination is concerned” (5:373). These postulates, which are evidently grounded on the nexus of final causes, justify a teleological view of nature by salvaging the notions of author and causality while substantially rearticulating their implications. Kant can then confidently reinforce that for a “self-organizing being” to be called a natural end not only must each of its parts exist “for the sake of the others and on account of the whole,” but they must also mutually produce each other. (5:374) In order to further clarify the self-regenerative faculty of nature, he introduces a noteworthy analogy in which he compares

natural organisms to a watch. In so doing he elaborates on Rousseau's treatment of the watch in the "Profession of Faith" as an example of communicated motion that closely resembles but is unlike living beings, thus further proving his indebtedness to this work.³⁸ Kant explains that in a watch "one part ... is present for the sake of the other but not because of it" since its producing cause is not internal, but rather embodied by the watchmaker who is responsible for its functioning. Consequently, a watch lacks the ability possessed by natural objects to "replace parts that have been taken from it" or "repair itself when it has fallen into disorder." (5:376) Kant therefore concludes that the natural world is composed of "organized beings" endowed with a "self-propagating formative power" that cannot be found in artifacts or reproduced by artifice, and by virtue of which they are far superior to and more valuable than any man-made product.

In the "Analytic of the Power of Judgment" Kant manages to solve the apparent contradiction embedded in the concept of a natural object as a natural end by pointing to its self-organizing properties. The ability of living organisms to sustain and reproduce themselves enables us to regard them, by means of the reflective power of judgment, at the same time as products of nature and as ends. (Ginsborg 2006, 5) However, while this view suits the constitutive character of our mental faculties, it does not assess if organisms actually do operate according to design. At this juncture in the *Critique*, Kant is therefore faced with the thorny question of whether teleology is an objective quality of nature, or merely a feature we assign to it for the sake of our intellectual convenience, a question that he explores in its full scope in the "Dialectic of the Power of Judgment." As Ginsborg notes, this issue was particularly pressing in the seventeenth-century when the

³⁸ For a discussion on this topic, please see chapter II of this study (pp. 66-70)

notion of natural telos had been grossly mishandled, either by being hastily embraced or uncritically rejected. She identifies two leading scientific positions that shaped the cultural environment against which Kant found himself writing. The first and most popular is “preformationism,” a view that supported natural teleology by claiming that “all plants and animals” were originally created by God “in miniature form” and then “expanded or unfolded” as they had been designed to be “through the operation of a complex mechanism.” (6) Preformationists would have thus concurred with Kant’s first requisite regarding the concept of natural end, as they agreed that the constituents of a living organism were in relation to each other according to mechanical laws, but they dismissed the possibility of nature’s self-regenerative power supported by the second condition. On the other hand, those embracing a Newtonian view refused the notion of telos by arguing that natural organisms were produced solely through gravitational and other “basic forces.” (6) From this perspective nature was not only unable to regenerate itself but, if it displayed any type of inner organization, it had to be accounted for merely as the result of a combination of physical forces. Kant disentangles himself from these contrasting positions by engaging in a metaphysical investigation of the objective possibility of natural teleology that occupies him for most part of the “Dialectic” and that produces significant outcomes.

Kant addresses this complicated issue in §70, where he introduces two principles of reflective judgment that are in apparent contradiction with each other, and which he thus initially treats as respectively the thesis and the antithesis of an antimony.³⁹ The

³⁹ Here too I follow Ginsborg’s line of investigation in order to elucidate the meaning of Kant’s antinomy. As she notes, Kant presents a highly intricate argument that has been the subject of several heated academic debates and cannot be fully addressed in this

thesis is the maxim that “[a]ll generation of material things ... must be judged as possible in accordance with mechanical laws.” (*CJ*, §70, 5:387) Accordingly, every physical phenomenon can be explained by means of an exclusively mechanical approach not unlike that inaugurated by Newton in the seventeenth century. The antithesis is the maxim that “[s]ome products of material nature cannot be judged as possible according to merely mechanical laws” but that “judging them requires an entirely different law of causality, namely that of final causes.” (5:387) According to this principle, mechanical science cannot fully account for the existence of certain natural products whose vast complexity requires an appeal to teleological views. At this point, instead of discussing the seemingly antithetical character of these maxims, Kant sets them up against a concurring set of hypothetical principles that, as Ginsborg points out, are “constitutive rather than regulative and belong to determining rather than reflective judgment.” (Ginsborg 2006, 8) As per the constitutive principle that corresponds to the thesis of the antinomy, “[a]ll generation of material things is possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws.” Conversely, the constitutive principle reflecting the antithesis is the maxim that “[s]ome generation of such things is not possible in accordance to merely mechanical laws.” (*CJ*, §70, 5:387) Clearly, with these constitutive principles Kant questions teleology as an objective property of nature rather than a mode of inquiry into the natural world that suits our cognitive faculties. After having outlined the dichotomy between regulative and constitutive principles, Kant must determine whether the former

context. For the purposes of this study, I will present a simplified and comprehensive reading of the antinomy, and concentrate instead on its results and their implications for the overall meaning of the *Critique*.

do in fact constitute an antinomy and, if not, identify the cause for his contemporaries' inadequate interpretation of the natural system.

On the one hand, Kant argues that the pair of constitutive principles is not inconsistent with each other since they are only hypothetical and belong to the determining power of judgment which, by definition, does not allow for any "conflict in the legislation of reason." (5:387) Considered as such, however, they would be mutually exclusive as it is obviously not possible to assert at the same time that all of organic nature operates mechanically, while some of it does not. On the other hand, Kant reassures us that the pair of regulative principles is not contradictory either. In fact, by saying that we must judge the possibility of natural organisms by means of mechanical laws, one is not suggesting that they are entirely accountable for only by means of such laws. (5:387) The implication is rather that we are justified in resorting to other approaches for the study of nature – namely the theory of final causes – when mechanical science fails to provide satisfactory answers for its inner workings. Kant therefore concludes that this quadripartite model is devoid of contradiction, and he explains in §71 that the source of our misconceptions about the organic world lies instead in our tendency to treat regulative principles as if they were constitutive. (5:389) This model however clearly shows that regulative principles "belong only to reflective and not to determining judgment" and they thus "play only a heuristic role in our understanding of organisms, rather than making an objective assertion about how those organisms came to be." (Ginsborg 8) The resolution of this antinomy allows Kant to enunciate a fundamental distinction between the constitution of our mental faculties, which determines the modes of investigation into the natural realm most consonant to it, and the actual character of

nature that is essentially inscrutable. It is indeed inaccurate to assume that just because it meets the requirements of our cognitive disposition to regard an organism as operating either mechanically or teleologically, that it actually complies with either one of these interpretations. More importantly, however, Kant is now able to weigh on the question of nature's teleological properties by arguing that, given the limits of our mental constitution, we cannot pronounce ourselves on this matter. He explains that, since reason cannot assess the causality of nature a priori by means of determining judgment, we must resort to the faculty of reflective judgment, which is however unequipped to answer conclusively whether or not organisms attend to specific purposes and goals.⁴⁰ In this respect, Kant distances himself from preformationism as well as Newtonian views by noting that we cannot treat teleology as an inherent aspect of the natural world but merely as an interpretative framework for scientific exploration.

We come to realize that Kant's critical engagement with natural teleology is only partly successful. In the "Analytic" he manages to prove that natural objects can be

⁴⁰ Kant elaborates on this topic in §71: "[T]he concept of a thing as a natural end is a concept that subsumes nature under a causality that is conceivable only by means of reason, in order to judge ... that which is given by the object in experience. But in order to use it dogmatically for the determining power of judgment, we would first have to be assured of the objective reality of this concept, for otherwise we would not be able to subsume any natural thing under it. The concept of a thing as a natural end, however, is ... not a concept that can be abstracted from experience, but one that is possible only in accordance with a principle of reason in the judging of the object. It thus cannot be understood and dogmatically established at all as in accordance with such a principle of its objective reality... Thus it cannot be treated dogmatically for the determining power of judgment, i.e., not merely can it not be determined whether or not things of nature, considered as natural ends, require for their generation a causality of an entirely special kind... but this question cannot even be raised, because the objective reality of the concept of a natural end is not demonstrable by means of reason at all (i.e., it is not constitutive for the determining, but is merely regulative for the reflecting power of judgment.)" (*CJ*, §74, 5:396)

fruitfully regarded as ends, thus sanctioning the recourse in scientific fields to a teleological approach to nature. However, in the “Dialectic” he must recognize that the limits of our mental faculties invalidate any definitive judgment about the objective character of living organisms. While this creates evident obstacles for his analytical inquiry, as well as for our understanding of the organic world, there is the underlying sense in this part of the *Critique* that Kant has been preparing the ground for a much more compelling undertaking than that posed by the question of natural teleology per se. In fact, while it is true that Kant is essentially unable to determine whether nature operates according to design, his treatment of this issue allows him to weigh in on the heated controversy regarding the notion of intelligent design. In §71, he argues that we are not only fully justified in ascribing teleology to the natural realm for the sake of our rational investigations, but that we are compelled to do so by our cognitive faculties. He maintains in fact that it is “an entirely correct fundamental principle for the reflective power of judgment” to assume that nature is endowed with intentionality, “no matter how rash and indemonstrable that would be for the determining power of judgment.” (*CJ*, §71, 5:389) Besides, given the disposition of reason, “we *must* conceive of a causality different from mechanism, namely that of an (intelligent) world cause acting in accordance with ends” in order to elaborate valid interpretative theories. (5:389, emphasis added) We are therefore left with no choice but to embrace teleological views in our scientific pursuits, while bearing in mind that they only hold descriptive value and may not be representative of the actual constitution of nature.

By underscoring the primacy of teleology, Kant indirectly suggests that the question of intelligent design lies under the surface of every scientific engagement with

the organic world. In fact, it is not possible to entertain the notion of natural telos without having to hypothesize the existence of an intelligent world-cause that superintends nature's processes. As Kant puts it in §75 of the "Dialectic," the concept of a natural end is "inseparable from [that of] its contingency" and thus interrogates the possibility of a "being that exists outside of this world" and that is accountable for the continuation of life on earth. (5:398) In so doing, he substantially reconfigures seventeenth-century scientific discourse by arguing not only that natural teleology constitutes a fundamental premise for scientific exploration, but also that the related problem of intelligent design is right at the center of this discipline. From this perspective, the widespread tendency in modern science to evade these issues is symptomatic of a certain intellectual narrowness that Kant, at least in the context of the *Critique*, seems to despise. The fact that the notion of natural design is inextricable from that of a supreme cause does not however mean that teleology can prove the existence of God in any unassailable way. Kant clarifies that even though "teleology cannot find a complete answer for its inquiries except in a theology," it ultimately fails to demonstrate that "such an intelligent being exists" (5:399-400). According to our reflective power of judgment "we absolutely cannot base the possibility of ... natural ends on anything except and intelligent being," so that the idea of a governing power in nature would seem unquestionable. But the determining judgment cannot uphold this postulation and proclaim the existence of God because it cannot prove in the first place that natural objects do in fact act in conformity with ends. Kant can only claim that "we cannot make any objective judgment at all, whether affirmative or negative, about the proposition that there is an intentionally acting being as a world cause" (5:400) He therefore seems to have come to another impasse because he cannot

pronounce himself on this matter. Nevertheless, this impasse bears monumental philosophical consequences as it simultaneously challenges the unswerving belief of established religions in a form of divinity, and science's blatant and often untimely avoidance of this complicated issue. Kant is evidently pursuing here fundamental questions pertaining to theological concerns that are arguably of much larger import than those related to natural teleology, and which unfortunately cannot be fully addressed within the scope of this study.

II. The Aesthetic Judgment of Nature

From the foregoing we realize that one of the highest merits of Kant's theory of teleological judgment is that of providing a conceptual framework that explains how natural objects may be regarded as natural ends. As we have seen, the notion of end is of paramount importance in his epistemology because it is only when the end of an object is in sight that it is possible to subsume it under a concept and gain full understanding of it. This model is therefore particularly useful for our scientific endeavors in that, by granting the possibility of natural ends, it makes natural objects eligible for theorization. It is in fact by treating living organisms as if they were teleologically determined that we can begin to explain their inner processes and their relation to the environment. However, in the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," Kant targets a special subcategory of natural objects that requires separate consideration by virtue of their singular character. Their underlying characteristic is the absence of a determinate end, which obfuscates their

presumptive purpose while imbuing them with aesthetic value.⁴¹ Since aesthetic objects⁴² display only unclear ends, it follows that they are not subsumable under any definite concept, and that we must resort to a form of judgment other than that elaborated in the “Dialectic” in order to pronounce ourselves on their constitutive qualities. Kant’s task in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” is that of explaining how judgments of taste are made, but this query is immediately complicated by two apparently contradictory postulates. In the First Moment of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” Kant explains that such judgments are subjectively grounded on a feeling of pleasure, unlike cognitive judgments that rest on objective grounds and conform to logic. (Ginsborg 1997, *CJ*, §1, 5:204) Indeed, the judgment of taste does not involve cognition in the traditional sense and is rather informed by sensations. In the Second Moment he claims instead that this type of judgment is universally valid and that the person who “pronounces that something is beautiful” not only “expects” but actually “demands” general agreement. (§7, 5:212-213) Clearly, the question Kant must address is of a much more convoluted character as it interrogates how aesthetic judgments are possible while being at the same time subjectively determined and universally valid. It is necessary to illustrate this issue at this

⁴¹ I am not suggesting here that all aesthetic objects are natural objects. As it is well known, within the context of the third *Critique* Kant grants aesthetic value to artifacts too, on condition that they adhere to certain requisites. He treats the specific case of works of art in §§ 42-53 of the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment.” For the purposes of this study, I am however only discussing natural objects that are endowed with aesthetic qualities, which are also the only kind Kant addresses in the analytic of the beautiful and of the sublime.

⁴² I use the phrase “aesthetic object” for convenience’s sake, in order to refer to an object able to engender aesthetic responses in the viewer, while being aware that – as Kant explains in the context of the mathematically sublime in §25 – aesthetics describes a state of mind rather than a physical quality in objects.

point, since it will grant us deeper insight into the formal similarity that exists between aesthetics and morality.

In order to explain how judgments of taste can simultaneously claim subjective ground and universal validity, Kant must first ascertain whether the feeling of pleasure emerging from aesthetic activity precedes or follows the judgment itself. This is an important concern that provides the fundamental outline for his inquiry into the nature of aesthetic judgment and its mode of occurrence. In §9, Kant notoriously states that if the pleasure preceded the judgment, it would merely hinge on the representation of the given object and could therefore only declare private validity, as opposed to being “universally communicable.” (Ginsborg 1997) It must follow that the feeling of pleasure is the consequence of what Kant describes as a “state of mind” obtained by the cognitive faculties with respect to the given representation. (*CJ*, §9, 5:217) However, the fact that Kant grounds the judgment of taste in a cognitive state requires clarification because, as we have seen, he also maintains that it does not involve determinate concepts. In *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World* Dieter compares the judgment of taste to the process of cognition *tout court* so as to identify the defining features of this particular mental state. On the one hand, in cognition the faculty of imagination serves the needs of understanding by synthesizing the sensory manifold, and it is thus essentially subservient to its rules. (Dieter 50) While Dieter admits that they cooperate with each other, he specifies that the freedom enjoyed by imagination is severely limited by the pressing demands of understanding. On the other hand, in aesthetic activity these cognitive faculties engage in a substantially different kind of interaction that results in what Kant calls a harmonious “free play” (*CJ*, §9, 5:217). Here, as is the case for the

acquisition of knowledge in general, imagination synthesizes the manifold of representations and presents it to understanding, but it does so spontaneously and without restrictions. In fact, since aesthetic experience does not presuppose rules of cognition, “the power of imagination ... can remain free within its perceiving” and unconstrained in its relation with understanding. (Dieter 52) For its part, the faculty of understanding welcomes “the free activity of its counterpart” as it does not interfere with its normal functioning. (51) Furthermore, the understanding notices that its lawfulness is in accordance with the freedom of imagination, which it fully accepts and endorses. Evidently, the mutual agreement of these cognitive faculties is “playful” in that it occurs without any pressure or imposition from either part, and it thus results in a pleasure of taste that lasts as long as the aesthetic activity itself.

It appears that for Kant the judgment of taste depends on this peculiar mental state that is characterized by a free play of imagination and understanding as they engage in harmonious interaction. Dieter describes effectively the nature of the free play by comparing it to “a dance of two partners who harmonize in their movements without influencing each other and who enjoy their joint performance.” (51) Obviously, this exquisite mental occupation can only be positively received and the individual is justified in seeking its effects through aesthetic exposure. By grounding the judgment of taste on this mental state, in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” Kant can finally argue that it holds universal validity because it reproduces the general conditions for cognition shared by all mankind. (*CJ*, §9, 5:217) At the same time, he can claim that it is subjectively determined as it is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure that, while also ubiquitous, is unique to each individual as it belongs to the realm of sensations. With this explanation, Kant avoids the

risk of contradiction and demonstrates the significant sway that aesthetic activity holds simultaneously on men's cognitive and affective faculties. However, the question still remains of how an aesthetic judgment can arise from a universally valid mental state that involves faculties normally employed for cognition, while not being grounded in a concept. Even the judgment of taste must involve an appeal to some type of concept, since it appertains to sensible objects. Kant addresses this issue in the "Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment," where he distinguishes between "determinable" and "indeterminable" concepts. (§57, 5:339) He explains that an aesthetic judgment is grounded in an indeterminate concept, which he defines as that kind of concept from which "nothing can be cognized and proved with regard to the object" because the aesthetic object itself is "undeterminable and unfit for cognition" (5:340). We come to understand that aesthetic judgment, while originating in a particular mental state, is in fact grounded in a concept, albeit indefinite. This view has practical advantages because, as Cohen and Guyer remark, "the presence of a concept ... grounds the claim to universality" but its indeterminate quality "eliminates the possibility of proof and preserves the 'aesthetic' character of the judgment." (Cohen and Guyer 9) By introducing this new element, Kant eliminates the possibility of further inconsistencies and can therefore conclude his exposition on the judgment of taste.

In the Third Moment of the "Analytic of the Beautiful," Kant shifts his attention from the act of judging to the object being judged and lays out the qualities it must possess in order to elicit aesthetic interest and generate pleasure. He begins this discussion by arguing that all objects – including aesthetic objects, which by definition lack a clear end – must be thought of as existing in relation to some end or as serving

some purpose. Regardless of whether or not we are able to determine the purpose of an object, we must consider it “purposive” because “its possibility can only be explained ... insofar as we assume as its ground a causality in accordance with ends” (*CJ*, §10, 5:220) Every object is purposive in that it is seen as fit to serve some purpose, “as suited for some use, and as existing because of that suitability,” even if its actual end remains concealed. (Cohen 231) It follows that purposiveness is independent from the notion of end, while also an underlying feature of every sensible object. At this point Kant introduces an important distinction between two types of purposiveness. He maintains that a common object, such as an artifact, which is conceived with regards to an objective end displays “objective purposiveness.” (*CJ*, §15, 5:226) Conversely, an aesthetic object cannot claim either an objective end (otherwise it would entail a definite concept) or a subjective end (or it would elicit interest⁴³), and it is therefore only endowed with “subjective purposiveness.” By arguing that aesthetic objects have “subjective purposiveness,” Kant means that they have the “form of purposiveness” without actually serving a determinate purpose. (§11, 5:221) In other words, these objects look like they are suited to serve an end but, at the same time, they do not convey any specific end for which they are suitable. It is in this particular sense that, as Cohen remarks, the aesthetic object displays only “mere suitability,” only “the *form* of purposiveness.” (Cohen 231) We thus come to understand that, according to this model, something acquires aesthetic

⁴³ The aesthetic judgment is disinterested by definition. In fact, as Kant remarks in §2 of the “Aesthetic Power of Judgment,” “if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing” (*CJ*, §2, 5:204) The viewer cannot be biased about the existence of the aesthetic object, but must be completely unconcerned with its existence so that he or she can judge from a position of critical distance. On the contrary, the agreeable arouses interest as it is grounded on “a private feeling” and generates personal gratification. (§5, 5:210, §7, 5:212)

value when it satisfies two fundamental requisites; it must reveal the suitability for an end through formal purposiveness, but it must avoid any relation to concrete purposes.

It is on these premises that Kant famously defines beauty at the end of the Third Moment as “the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end.” (*CJ*, §17, 5:236) If we consider beauty as a quality inherent in objects, then beauty manifests itself in the object’s propensity to suit a purpose, as long as that purpose remains inscrutable by our mental faculties. In order to give practical substance to these conditions, Kant cites the particular example of an ancient utensil, such as those found on archeological sights, which consists of a stone “equipped with a hole” that likely served as the base for a handle. (5:236) He then notes that this object displays purposiveness while hiding any definite end, and in this respect one may be inclined to declare it beautiful. It is purposive because our cognitive faculties are naturally predisposed to regard it as such in order to justify its existence, but it lacks a clear end since we cannot determine the specific purpose it served when it was still intact. However, just the fact that its shape leads us to hypothesize that it might have performed some practical function is enough to deprive it of aesthetic status. Kant maintains that since we recognize the stone as a “work of art,” we must relate its shape to “some sort of intention and to a determinate purpose” which make it unsuitable for aesthetic appreciation.⁴⁴ (5:236) On the contrary, he explains that a flower, such as a “tulip,” is the epitome of beauty because “a certain purposiveness is encountered in our perception of it which, as we judge it, is not related to any end at all.” (5:236) In fact, a flower does not pursue any detectable goal and its existence seems unaffected by the notion of purpose.

⁴⁴ Here, as in note 7, the phrase “work of art” should be understood as “product of art” or “product of someone’s skill,” as opposed to its contemporary meaning of “artwork.”

In §16, Kant mentions that even the botanist, who has a scientific knowledge of this natural organism and is able to recognize its “reproductive organ,” will overlook “this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste.”⁴⁵ (§16, 5:229) The choice of a natural object as the ideal embodiment of beauty is suggestive of Kant’s preference for the natural world over art as a medium with which to engage our aesthetic judgment, train our aesthetic sensitivity and – as we are about to see – strengthen our moral code.

III. The Nexus between Aesthetics and Ethics

The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* stands out among most philosophical works of the Western tradition in that it does not limit itself to recognizing the underlying correspondences between aesthetics and ethics, but attempts to identify their exact point of convergence. Cohen argues that Kant generally acknowledged the existence of “concrete and pedestrian connections” between these fields, and that he might have even believed that the beautiful and the morally good at times coincide. (Cohen 221) However, in the context of the *Critique*, Kant locates a “purely formal comparison of good things to beautiful things” according to which the latter is *like* but not *the same as* the former. (221) This becomes particularly evident in §59, where he notoriously claims that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good,” and that the pleasure of taste reflects a universal feeling of respect for mankind. (*CJ*, §59, 5:353) Kant maintains that the

⁴⁵ The choice of the tulip in §17 is noteworthy since this flower typically conceals its pistil, and by extension its sexual functions, from the viewer by means of the tight arrangement of its petals. We can therefore understand how the botanist, who is aware of the presence and purpose of the pistil in a tulip, can nonetheless express a judgment of taste about this flower by simply engaging in aesthetic contemplation.

beautiful symbolizes the morally good by offering “indirect presentations” of moral concepts in an essentially analogical manner. (5:352) Morality’s need for symbolic representation is justified by the fact that moral ideas, which have their seat in a priori pure practical reason, must find a way to convey their presence on the sensory level. (Guyer 39) In fact, in the concluding paragraph of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” Kant explains that the principal task of aesthetics is that of judging the “sensible rendering of moral ideas,” which would otherwise be confined to the abstract realm of reason. (*CJ*, §60, 5:356) He therefore implies that aesthetics provides a tangible instantiation of morality, which validates its existence and illustrates its operations. In this sense, aesthetics’ highest achievement is not that of producing pleasure in contemplation, but rather that of securing a way to make “moral ideas evident to the senses,” so that they may gain leverage over human life. (Guyer 39) The symbolic resemblance of the beautiful to the morally good plays out in four fundamental and largely interlaced ways that need to be individually addressed in order to obtain a full understanding of the significant sway that aesthetics holds over our ethical code and moral stance.

Before addressing the similarities between these fields, it is however necessary to briefly elucidate Kant’s stance on morality, which is best conveyed in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter *Grounding*). This text lays out his most influential views on moral matters that were later elaborated in the *Critique of Practical Reason* among other fundamental works. In the first two sections of the *Grounding*, morality is explained in terms of wills that act in accordance with objective principles which have their seat in reason. Kant maintains that since the will employs reason in order to acquire

principles for action, it may be regarded as “nothing but practical reason” itself.

(*Grounding* 23) By means of its operations, the will typically attempts to realize some end in the external world, to effect some purpose that lies outside the confines of reason and which aims at altering a given state of affairs. (Cohen 229) However, this task is severely complicated by the fact that the will “also submits to subjective conditions” and its actions are equally determined by subjective principles, which Kant calls maxims.

(*Grounding* 24, 32) This poses a problem because if the will were to act only according to private inclination and seek to obtain ends for its personal advantage, it may not conform to morality. It follows that in order to be morally good the will must adhere to the “categorical imperative,” a law of pure reason that compels it to act exclusively upon principles whose actions are necessary in themselves and unconcerned with ulterior motives. (25) In other words, the categorical imperative regulates the will by making it do what is morally good, independently from private disposition. In fact, Kant explains that this law is only concerned with “the form of the action and the principle from which it follows,” while it ignores the “matter of the action and its intended result.” (26) But the will cannot disregard its subjective constitution and, in order to abide by the categorical imperative, it must respond only to those maxims that – though privately grounded – are universally desirable. Kant specifies that we “must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law” and this is the fundamental “canon for morally estimating any of our actions.” (32) We therefore conduct ourselves in accordance with morality if we are able to act only on those maxims that can be held as universal laws, and which conform to a world we want to inhabit and whose conditions we wish to respect. In the third section of the *Grounding*, Kant further maintains that a will which complies with

moral laws and adheres to the categorical imperative is free. By choosing principles for action that are grounded in reason and by being itself representative of practical reason, the good will is indeed immune from the dictates of passion and impulse that fuel desires of personal gain, and can therefore claim complete autonomy. In this respect, Kant states that “a free will and a [good will] are one and the same,” because to act according to moral laws means to act from a position of unadulterated freedom.

In the opening paragraph of the *Grounding*, Kant declares that the most fundamental feature of the good will is its unqualifiedly good character. He claims that there is nothing else in the world that is unconditionally valuable, and that “can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will.” (7, Korsgaard 46) In fact, the morally good will obeys only the rules imposed by the categorical imperative which require it to act “without reference to any expected end” or intended outcome from which it may benefit. (*Grounding* 14) This however presents a problem because, as we have seen, the sole function of the good will seems to be precisely that of achieving a purpose that lays outside of itself and that affects the sensible world. One may thus wonder how it is possible that the good will ignores the notion of intended end if its very job is that of adopting means from which to derive ends. Cohen tackles this issue in “Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality,” where he discusses this apparent contradiction by arguing that if the good will aimed at obtaining external ends, it would be “hopelessly” and “inevitably qualified.” (Cohen 229) In fact, if the good will is the only unqualifiedly good thing, it follows that anything outside of it is qualified, such as any external end it may pursue or means it may adopt. But it would be absurd to claim that a good will that adopts qualified means to produce qualified ends is unqualifiedly good, as we must assume on these

premises that it too is in some sense qualified. Cohen resolves this difficulty by suggesting that for a good will to be unqualifiedly good, it must pursue ends that are also unqualifiedly good, and that the only condition for this to be possible is that its ends “must not be external [and] lie outside the will,” but rather internal and an integral part of the will. (229) He argues that the only way in which we can entertain this scenario is by imagining “a will which in willing takes itself as its end” or, more precisely, that “regards that very willing as its end.” (229) The good will therefore appears to be working towards no specific end because it constitutes its very own end and wills for no other sake than that of willing. Its unique purpose is that of willing according to moral laws, while resisting the urge to realize any other external goal. We therefore come to understand how the good will, by acting on laws given by reason and taking its task as its sole purpose, can attain goals in the outer world whose moral worth is the same as that on which it acted.

At this point it is possible to outline the four fundamental ways in which the beautiful may be regarded as an indirect representation of the morally good, and by extension illustrate how aesthetics operates in support of morality. In their first point of convergence, the judgment of taste and the act of willing according to morality display an apparent disinterestedness in the notion of end or the attainment of particular goals. In our judgment of taste, the aesthetic object does not appear to be associated to any actual end or serve any definite purpose but, as we have seen, it only presents the suitability for an end, the form of purposiveness. In a similar way, the good will does not pursue any external end, since its end is internal and, much like that of the aesthetic object, indeterminable. In fact, in the *Grounding* Kant argues that the good will is not involved

with the means by which the moral action is performed or its ultimate outcome, but only values the principle on which such action is derived and the form of acting. (*Grounding* 26) The beautiful and the morally good are therefore comparable because, while the former reveals only the form of purposiveness and conceals its presumed purpose, the latter manifests only the form of an action and hides its intended result. In this sense, the aesthetic activity is reminiscent of morality since in the judgment of taste the viewer engages in a relation with sensible objects that eludes utilitarian concerns or desires of personal aggrandizement, just as – to qualify as moral – an individual’s acts must be untainted by private inclination. We should however refrain from maintaining with Cohen that, since Kant defines the beautiful as the symbol of the morally good, the good will and the beautiful object are “analogues.” (232) This is true only in a figurative sense – because the beautiful object *does* exhibit features that are common to those of a good will – but not in a strict sense. We recall that for Kant aesthetics describes a state of mind rather than a physical quality in objects, and in this respect there is no such thing as a “beautiful object” but only objects that generate aesthetic responses. It is thus more appropriate to argue for the presence of a formal resemblance between the moral experience and the aesthetic experience, which has as a result noticeable reverberations on the sensory level.

The second correspondence between the judgment of taste and the good will is the display of freedom in their respective occupations. We have ascertained that during the aesthetic activity the faculty of imagination is not restricted by rules of cognition, but is rather allowed to act spontaneously in its relation with understanding. At §59, Kant claims in fact that in the judging of the beautiful, “the freedom of the imagination” is

represented “as in accord with the lawfulness of the understanding.” (*CJ*, §59, 5:354)

This allows for the free play of these mental faculties on which both the aesthetic judgment and the associated feeling of pleasure are grounded. He then compares this set of conditions to those in place during the moral judgment, whereby the “freedom of the will” is conceived as the agreement of the will “with itself in accordance with universal laws of reason.” (5:354) The good will, by faithfully conforming to the laws sanctioned by reason, earns the title of practical reason and enjoys complete independence. It becomes apparent that imagination in aesthetic contemplation and the good will in the act of willing behave in a free and completely autonomous way, and that they are thus comparable processes on formal grounds. In this respect, Guyer explains Kant’s assertion that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good by arguing that the freedom of the imagination in the assessment of the beautiful “may be taken as a symbolic representation of the freedom of the will” associated with the fulfillment of the moral action. (Guyer 252) He also points out a fundamental difference between these occurrences that concerns the faculties involved in their realization, arguing that while the autonomous character of the will “is represented only by concepts” and pertains to the realm of reason alone, the free disposition of imagination is felt on the sensory level. (252) Imagination in its aesthetic employment therefore acts in support of morality by furnishing “a sensitive representation which can symbolize an otherwise unintuitable object of pure thought,” and which gives practical substance to our moral constitution. (252)

As Cohen notes, at the end of the “Analytic of the Sublime” Kant ultimately “awards the symbolic plum of representing the morally good to the sublime, in explicit comparison with the beautiful.” (252) In fact, in the General Remark Kant admits that

although the aesthetic experience of the beautiful shares important parallelisms with the moral action, it is the experience of the sublime that embodies it most accurately. He claims here that the feeling of the sublime “cannot even be conceived without connecting it to a disposition of the mind that is similar to the moral disposition,” thus arguing for the existence of a fundamental bond between the sensory manifestation of sublimity and the moral constitution of reason. (*CJ*, §29 General remark, 5:268) Since moral disposition is that state in which the will derives its freedom by respectfully subjecting to the dictates of reason, and given that morality shares a *formal* affinity with aesthetics, it follows that the sublime experience must replicate a similar set of conditions in order to qualify as the quintessential symbol of morality. For Kant the beautiful is clearly not a valid candidate for this title because while it “cultivates a certain liberality in the manner of thinking ... nevertheless by means of it freedom is represented more as in play than as subject to a lawful business” (5:269). Indeed, during the assessment of the beautiful, imagination in its freedom *harmonizes* with understanding, rather than surrendering to laws imposed by other faculties. On the other hand, the Kantian sublime provides a faithful instantiation of morality because it entails a form of submission of imagination to the power of reason that is analogous to that experienced by the will as it complies with the same cognitive faculty. Imagination initially attempts to synthesize the sensory manifold “without anything hindering it,” but as it is unfit to accomplish this task it can only yield to the supreme power of reason. (2:253) Additionally, Kant maintains that the moral law “makes itself aesthetically knowable only through sacrifices” and by virtue of the fact that the sublime also involves sacrifice, namely on the part of imagination, we can deduce

that this experience prevails over that of the beautiful in conveying the true nature of morality. (5:271)

A clarification of Kant's treatment of the aesthetic category of the sublime in the context of the "Analytic of the Sublime" is in order at this point. Kant explains that during aesthetic activity the attempt of the human mind to fathom nature's magnitude (the "mathematical sublime") or its infinite strength (the "dynamical sublime") causes the frustration of imagination as it fails to meet the needs of understanding. Imagination tries to encompass nature as an integrated "whole," but this strenuous task exceeds its abilities and is left unfulfilled. (§26, 5:255) In fact, this faculty by its constitution cannot process the idea of "absolute totality," which is rather germane to the realm of reason, and must therefore abort its pursuits. (5:251) But Kant claims that as imagination acknowledges its limitations, "the mind hears in itself the voice of reason" and discovers a hidden power of cognition able to entertain representations of boundlessness and infinitude. (5:255) We thus come to understand how, during the sublime experience, imagination must sacrifice its lawful operations by interrupting its collaboration with understanding. Its defeat is however favorably received because it allows the mind to recognize the existence of the supersensible faculty of reason, which would otherwise remain unperceived, and accept it as the legitimate seat of morality.⁴⁶ It is in this particular sense that the encounter with the sublime in nature provides a sensible instantiation of morality, as well as an intuitive understanding of the moral action that is grounded on the formal similarities between these experiences. Kant can ultimately conclude that the moral good, "judged

⁴⁶ I would like to acknowledge Professor Modiano's lucid treatment of the Kantian sublime in her article "The Kantian Seduction: Wordsworth on the Sublime," to which I am greatly indebted.

aesthetically, must not be represented so much as beautiful but rather as sublime,” and thereby expresses his preference for the latter as the highest symbol of morality. (§29 General remark, 5:271) In his discussion of this topic, Cohen resolves the apparent tension between the beautiful and the sublime by suggesting that these aesthetic experiences may be regarded as illustrative of different aspects of morality. He maintains that the freedom of imagination resulting from the confrontation with the beautiful evokes our “potential to be free from the determinism of impulse.” (Cohen 253) Conversely, the subjection of imagination and the concomitant suspension of its freedom that are typical of the sublime experience remind us that “we can only achieve our potential for such freedom by the righteous submission of even our most humane inclinations to the principle of pure practical reason.” (253) We may thus reasonably assume that the beautiful and the sublime cooperate with each other in order to provide the human mind with the most accurate characterization of morality and its inherent laws.⁴⁷

In their third point of intersection, the judgment of taste and the good will acting in accordance with morality involve a claim to universality that, although founded on different premises, speaks to the social value of these experiences. As we have seen, in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” Kant argues that it is possible as well as necessary to speak of taste in universal terms because aesthetic judgment presupposes “the assent of everyone” partaking in aesthetic activity. (*CJ*, §7, 5:213) Our assessment of the beautiful is in fact grounded on a cognitive state produced by the free interaction of imagination

⁴⁷ Given space restrictions and the subject of this chapter, I can only present here a reductive treatment of the Kantian sublime. For a more accurate study on this topic see Paul Guyer’s *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, chapters I and IV, and Paul Crowther’s *The Kantian Sublime: from Morality to Art*.

with understanding that simulates the essential conditions for cognition possessed by all men, and which can thereby declare universal validity. In this sense, the judgment of taste attests to the common mental faculties shared by mankind as well as our ability to profess universal agreement about sensible objects that engender a feeling of pleasure. On the other hand, in the *Grounding* Kant explains that the good will under the rule of reason acts only on maxims that are regarded as universal laws, while ignoring those that seek individual gain or the realization of private purposes. This allows Kant to declare that, according to the supreme principle of morality, “rational nature exists as an end in itself,” and each individual ought to “treat humanity, either in [their] person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” (36) In fact, if we were to treat others as means in order to achieve personal ends, we would be acting on principles that have only private validity, while likely causing distress to the outside world, and we would thus relinquish our ties with morality. But the categorical imperative enforced by reason ensures that the good will responds only to maxims that have universal validity and which view humanity as a “kingdom of ends” of which we are a constitutive and legislative part. (39) We therefore understand how the good will, by acting on internal rather than external ends, contributes to the creation of a society founded on the moral law in which individuals are considered as ends in themselves. Additionally, since the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, we may be entitled to regard the universality of the judgment of taste as representative of the universal character of the maxims adopted by the good will in its moral pursuits.

The fourth and final correspondence between the judgment of taste and the moral action discussed here relates to the feeling of pleasure deriving from their respective

cognitive states. At the end of §59, Kant compares these mental occupations in order to determine the type of pleasure for which they are responsible. He explains that “the beautiful pleases immediately,” without any interest for the contemplated object, and with a claim to universal validity. (*CJ*, §59, 5:354) Similarly, the morally good pleases immediately, without any prior interest that is subjectively determined, and with an analogous claim to universal validity. (Guyer 41) They also present differences because while the pleasure produced by aesthetic activity depends on the freedom of imagination and the absence of determinate concepts, that of the moral action hinges on the freedom of the will and requires the involvement of concepts of reason. Nonetheless, the pleasure of taste, by virtue of its important similarities with the pleasure of moral practice, may be regarded as acting in support of morality and its virtuous pursuits. In fact, by engaging in aesthetic occupations we cultivate feelings of pleasure that are akin to those experienced in our moral undertakings, and which as a result attune us to the moral law and its related principles. In this regard, Guyer maintains that the “experience of pleasure in a disinterested state of mind,” that is obtained during the judgment of taste, “accustoms us to disinterested enjoyment in general and thus prepares us for the more difficult task of joyfully superseding personal interests in a way that morality can often require.” (34)

Kant’s decision to incorporate aesthetics within the context of the *Critique of Judgment* is therefore justified by the necessity to illustrate the important ways in which the aesthetic assessment of nature supports our moral constitution, rather than by the desire to treat the categories of the beautiful and the sublimes as aesthetic tropes that attend to self-serving purposes.

It is noteworthy that in the *Grounding* Kant completely disregards the question of pleasure associated with morality as he centers his analysis predominantly on the notion of the good will and its relation to the categorical imperative. This text presents a “stark moral vision” by suggesting that the good will responds exclusively to the conception of duty enforced by the moral law, while disregarding the contribution of sentiment to our moral stance. (Sherman 369) On these bases, in Section I Kant hypothesizes the existence of a man who is “by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others,” or has lost “all sympathy with [their] lot,” but who can still lead a life imbued with “moral worth.” (*Grounding* 11, Guyer 31) In fact, by strictly conforming to the categorical imperative, he is able to conduct himself benevolently and in accordance with moral dictates, although his behavior derives “not from inclination, but from duty.” (*Grounding* 12) Around the time of the composition of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant must have however realized that feelings constitute an essential aspect of moral activity, and that the pleasure associated with morality demanded careful consideration. As Guyer correctly observes, in the *Critique* Kant makes clear that “moral perfection requires the development of feelings compatible with and conducive to those intentions that are dictated by pure practical reason alone,” and that “the cultivation of [aesthetic sensibility] can assist in this regard.” (Guyer 30) Kant therefore comes to acknowledge that feelings are a constitutive part of the human experience and that they play a fundamental role in shaping our moral attitude. He also declares that aesthetics encourages the development of feelings that are in harmony with the pleasure of moral action, and by so doing it supports the enactment of moral laws. Indeed, aesthetics provides concrete instantiations of moral pleasure that attest to the existence of morality within the confines of reason

while giving it palpable substance. The idea that feelings contribute to the constitution of morality, which surfaces for the first time in the *Critique*, gains prominence in later works including the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* as well as the *Doctrine of Virtue*. For instance, as Guyer notes, the *Doctrine* finally makes explicit that “the full panoply of our duties include the cultivation of our feelings of sympathy toward natural objects other than human beings, for the sake of humane feelings within ourselves.” (32) At this juncture in his career, Kant fully recognizes our profound dependence on the natural world for the pursuit of our aesthetic activities as well as the orchestration of our moral frameworks.

IV: Inferences

We can at this point safely conclude that aesthetics exerts ample leverage on the constitution of our ethical stance and the consolidation of our moral texture. At different moments in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant shows that through the cultivation of our aesthetic sensibility we accustom our mind to follow the moral law of reason, and by so doing we participate in envisioning a social paradigm that is founded on solid ethical premises. To be sure, aesthetics does not have any immediate moral content, but it contributes to the fortification of our moral foundations by providing tangible instantiations of morality. Natural aesthetics in particular seems to have unparalleled value in Kant’s model, as it is systematically held in higher esteem than art or other aesthetic expressions entailing human intervention. For instance, Kant notes that the spectators of an enticing natural scenery become aware of the existence of “a beautiful

soul” within them that is possessed only by the true lover of nature, and that would otherwise remain concealed during the aesthetic assessment of art. (CJ, §42, 5:300) Given these postulates, we would assume that Kant grants considerable value to the natural world and that he would argue for certain fundamental duties towards non-human lives and their circumscribing environment. But one may find this supposition at odds with the commonly held view according to which, in the *Critique*, Kant declares humanity the ultimate end of nature. Indeed, taken at face value, this statement seems to imply that the sole purpose of nature is to tend to man’s needs and ensure the proliferation of the human species, and thus to perpetuate an essentially Judeo-Christian mindset. But this seemingly utilitarian conception of nature would undermine its aesthetic worth, which is however tirelessly emphasized and celebrated throughout this work. We must therefore attempt to better qualify Kant’s claim that humanity represents the final purpose of nature in order to accurately illustrate his views on aesthetics as well as his overall moral vision.

In the opening sections of the “Methodology of the Teleological Power of Judgment,” Kant defines a final end as that type of end which needs no other as the condition of its possibility, and then boldly asserts that the human being is “the ultimate end of nature here on earth.” (§83, 5:428) He further elaborates on this concept at §84, where he maintains that mankind alone “is capable of being a final end,” and that “the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated” to it. (§84, 5:436) Inaccurate interpretations of these and similar passages in the *Critique* have contributed to ranking Kant among a stream of humanist thinkers who value mankind above other non-human life forms in ways that promote an unethical employment of the natural environment. But

the true meaning of Kant's statement can only be fully grasped if considered in light of the larger discussion on natural teleology to which it pertains. As we have seen, one of the fundamental arguments of the *Critique* is that, given our mental constitution, we must adopt a teleological view of the world in order to gain knowledge of its sensible attributes. We thus have no choice but to resort to the faculty of reflective power of judgment, which however does not allow us to make conclusive statements about the objective constitution of the sensible realm. Accordingly, it is only from a purely teleological perspective and by conceiving of the natural world strictly as "a system of ends" in accordance with the reflective power of judgment, that Kant recognizes mankind as the ultimate end of nature. (§83:429) He further explains that man earns this title merely in the capacity of "moral being," and for no other real or hypothetical aspect of his constitutive self that would set him above other living organisms. (§84, 5:435) Human beings may rightfully consider themselves authorized to "subject the whole of nature" to them, or resist "any influence from nature," but only "as [subjects] of morality" and with no other claim related to their human status. They prevail over nature as moral entities by virtue of their moral faculty, but this does not necessarily entitle them to claim any physical right over its objects. Guyer explains that Kant's statement, so understood, implies a fundamental concern for the natural world because, if it is true that mankind is morally superior to nature, it must follow that any use of it ought to be morally determined. (Guyer 331) It is in this particular sense that in the *Critique* Kant avoids reiterating the belief in mankind's unrestrained and all-encompassing superiority over non-human life forms that originated in Christian philosophy and which has otherwise largely informed our interactions with the sensible realm.

Kant's account of the sublime in the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" seems to entail a view of man's moral ascendancy over nature similar to that outlined above, but which is never explicitly articulated and only evident in retrospect. As noted in the previous section, Kant maintains that during the sublime experience the mind perceives sublimity when imagination abandons its unproductive pursuits and recognizes the unrivalled power of reason. At this point, reason is welcomed as a supersensible faculty that "surpasses any standard of sensibility" and which is accepted as being "great beyond all comparison" (*CJ*, §26, 5:255). Moreover, Kant ascertained in the *Grounding* that one of reason's fundamental tasks is to preside over morality and that, when we subject to the moral law, we are complying with this faculty alone. (*Grounding* 8) On these premises, one may claim that the recognition of the supremacy of reason, which constitutes the climax of the sublime experience, must in some way prompt the recognition of our moral agency, since morality is an inseparable component of reason. According to this line of inquiry, the sublime experience would grant us awareness not only of the infinite power of the faculty of reason, but also of morality as its highest and most noble occupation. When Kant states that sublimity produces in our minds a feeling of "superiority over nature [that] reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it," he may thus allude to an essentially *moral* type of superiority, as when he declares man the ultimate end of nature. (*CJ*, §28, 5:261-62) In this sense, the sublime experience – by involving a confrontation with powerful and potentially frightening natural objects – allows our mind to perceive its moral constitution and realize that we are free agents even when confronted with nature's inestimable might and boundlessness. As moral beings, we are

in fact endowed with a free will that oversees our choices and actions even in the direst circumstances and the most unwelcoming natural environments.

This is not to say that Kant did not deem mankind superior to other life forms in important and unassailable ways, which are largely representative of his eighteenth-century cultural environment. In the section on the dynamical sublime, he unapologetically argues that the human mind is endowed with a power that “is not part of nature” compared to which “everything ... is small” and unthreatening, and in so doing he unequivocally grants mankind a privileged position in the sensible world. (5:261) In fact, he suggests here that the power of the human mind does not have any concrete affiliation with sensible objects but is rather autonomous and transcendent. It is however necessary to specify that Kant justifies man’s superiority over sublime nature *strictly* on intellectual grounds, by suggesting that any authority he may have over the environment derives from, and is arguably limited to, his unique rational endowments. In his analysis of the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, he consistently advocates the *mind’s* ascendancy over the natural world – rather than unrestrained human dominance – while also acknowledging men’s “*physical* powerlessness” in the face of material nature. (5:261, emphasis added) Additionally, one must consider Kant’s characterization of reason in the wider scope of the third *Critique* as well as his overall moral philosophy – where it is repeatedly described in relation to morality – in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this faculty. Given the insoluble bond between reason and morality that emerges from his philosophical apparatus, it seems reasonable to suppose that the sublime experience – just like the judgment of the beautiful – entails profound moral ramifications which, while not immediately evident, are nonetheless

consequential. In this sense, the sublime experience does not merely grant us a sensible instantiation of morality, but it is instrumental in helping us recognize ourselves as moral beings endowed with free will.

We come to understand that our relation to nature bears unavoidable moral implications that ought to determine the ways in which we conduct ourselves in the world. Kant repeatedly declares that man is superior to nature first and foremost on account of his moral character, and it is precisely by virtue of his moral superiority that his interactions with the sensible world should be conducted in an ethical manner. As moral beings living within a natural context to which we are bound on ethical grounds, we are thus invested with certain moral duties towards our circumscribing environment. This does not amount to saying that the *Critique of Judgment* is informed by a pre-environmental consciousness or, much less, that in this work Kant reveals a pre-ecological sensibility. While it is true that Kant recognizes the intrinsic value of the natural world as well as its separate status from humanity and culture, it would be inaccurate to argue that he contributed to the development of modern ecology. Given his admiration for Rousseau both as a philosopher and an author, it is not unlikely that he shared many of his contemporary's views on the environment and man's dependence on its resources, but in the third *Critique* he is not directly concerned with this issue. It is nonetheless important to recognize that any type of environmental politics is founded on a set of ethical predicaments and ethical attitudes on which it largely depends. The *Critique* offers salient ways to think of the moral duties that indirectly bind mankind to non-human nature, which are arguably the precondition for the establishment of any ethical system geared towards natural preservation. In Kant's philosophical system, it is

during the aesthetic engagement with the natural environment that these moral duties become most apparent and compelling.

We must also acknowledge that the period beginning with the *Critique of Judgment* and ending with the *Metaphysics of Morals* marked a considerable shift in Kant's view of the natural world. Prior to this period, Kant granted worth to non-human life forms strictly on the basis of their usefulness to mankind. Any duty towards nature was meant to "ensure that natural objects, whether animate or inanimate, [were] available for legitimate use by other persons" and it therefore hinged on a more impelling "duty of consideration toward the needs of our fellow humans" (Guyer 304-5). Kant's position significantly changed in the *Critique of Judgment*, where nature acquires value on account of its aesthetic imprint rather than its usefulness. Guyer explains that, on these new premises, "although the respect we may owe to nonhuman nature is still grounded on duties to mankind," rather than to the organic system as a separate entity, "two key differences emerge." (306) On the one hand, the natural world gains worth not because of its employability but by virtue of the unique and invaluable aesthetic attributes of its individual constituents. On the other, "Kant grounds the duty to which the beauty of nature may give rise not in our duties to *others* but in our duties to *ourselves*, and, [more specifically,] in our duty to preserve and cultivate our moral character" (306-7, emphasis in text). In fact, given the ascendancy of natural aesthetics on our moral constitution, the consideration we ought to have for the natural world is first and foremost a form of consideration for ourselves as moral beings. In this sense, a considerate attitude towards aesthetic nature reinvigorates our moral self and makes us better individuals and citizens.

But it is in a brief yet incisive section of the *Doctrine of Virtue* that Kant's theoretical engagement with non-human life forms comes to the forefront in full force. Here, Kant reinstates his belief that, according to reason alone, a human being can have "no duty to any beings other than human beings," and he explains that any supposed duty to non-human nature one may feel may have "is only a duty to himself" – thus reinforcing the line of reasoning elaborated in the third *Critique*. (*Virtue*, §16, 6:442) This allows him to argue that the "wanton destruction" of a beautiful environment "is directly opposed to a human being's duty to himself" because it "uproots that feeling in him which ... greatly promotes morality" (6:443) He further maintains that "the violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself" since it dulls "his shared feeling of their suffering" and weakens "a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality" (6:443). Kant finally condemns "agonizing physical experiments" on animals, while also promoting acts of "gratitude" towards service animals and pets for their work and loyalty. (6:443) This shows that Kant's concern for non-rational nature – while clearly lacking a pre-environmental sensibility – was in constant evolution and gained prominence especially during his mature years, when he realized that any system of ethics must entail certain fundamental duties towards non-human life in order to be effective and fully functional.

I hope to have shown in the context of this chapter that aesthetics is of paramount importance for the cultivation of a moral disposition that is conducive to the orchestration of ethical systems, including those entailing programs for natural conservation. In fact, Kant places aesthetics at the center of his philosophical investigation of morality, and in so doing he suggests that our moral orientation is intimately bound to our aesthetic

evaluation of the sensible world. In the *Critique*, as well as in the later works, aesthetics is also acknowledged for generating a new appreciation for the vegetal and animal kingdoms which expands our duties from the confines of human relations to non-rational organisms and their habitat. It is therefore difficult to imagine ethically sound societies that ignore our inherited ideas of nature because so much of their underlying meaning is informed by aesthetic predicaments. It seems equally unlikely to envisage forms of environmentalist politics that disregard our separate status from non-human nature or the fact that any value ascribed to the natural realm originates in the critical assessment of its aesthetic conformation. We should however recognize that our faculty of aesthetic judgment is stimulated not only when we entertain natural objects that are traditionally regarded as beautiful, but whenever we are confronted with an organized being.⁴⁸ The innate human ability to judge aesthetically is responsive any time we engage in a relation with a complex organism whose end is not immediately evident, even when we have a scientific understanding of its functioning. For instance Kant, elaborating on Rousseau's theorization of nature, includes among the natural objects imbued with aesthetic value those that generate a sublime experience by virtue of their magnitude or strength. The underlying aesthetic character of nature in all of its manifold representations becomes even more evident during the Romantic period, when the sublime is recognized as an aesthetic category in its own right, and aesthetic worth is granted even to natural objects such as barren or thorny lands, which were previously considered unattractive. It is thus possible to argue that an aesthetic principle is present in every human relation with nature

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Professor Searle for helping me think of aesthetics both as a philosophical category and an underlying feature of nature, as well as for his continued support during this project.

and that, to a certain extent, any analytical inquiry into the natural realm is an inquiry into our aesthetic constitution.

Chapter Four: From Feeling to Moral Action – The Ethical Implications of Wordsworth's Poetry

The eighteenth-century preoccupation with natural aesthetics and its particular contribution to the constitution of ethics, which represents a fundamental tenet of both Rousseau's and Kant's philosophical enterprises, finds unprecedented literary expression in the poetry of the British Romantics. Among the poets of the first generation, it is arguably William Wordsworth who commits most seriously and consistently to exploring the ethical implications of aesthetic nature, having developed early on in his life a profound appreciation for the environment and obtained the undisputed title of nature poet among his contemporaries. In fact, Wordsworth might be held accountable for single-handedly introducing into the British collective imaginary of his time an ethical model that, as M.H. Abrams incisively remarks, is essentially "secularized" because it hinges on the self's relationship with the physical world rather than an orthodox god. (*Natural Supernaturalism* 12-13) Although Wordsworth was conversant with the new philosophy that was making its way through the continent, his moral theory stands out from that of his predecessors for its prominent emphasis on affect. In his opus, Wordsworth repeatedly suggests that ethics would remain a metaphysical concept, confined to the realm of abstract ideas, had it not a solid foundation in the innate human predisposition to feel for the other which reveals its practical dimension. He believes that our ability to empathize with the other inspires habitual acts of altruism and charity that have the power to strengthen our moral predisposition and improve the ethical standards of society. In this respect, the moment of human communion with the natural

environment, that Rousseau celebrates for its beneficial effects on the self and that Kant acknowledges as a necessary step in the realization of the supremacy of reason and the moral law, acquires even greater importance in Wordsworth's literary enterprise. Indeed, it is precisely while in intimate contact with nature that the self acquires full access to the wide spectrum of human emotions, and attunes its affective reactions to the external world. In this chapter I argue that affect lies at the core of Wordsworth's moral view due to its unique ability to influence human behavior and encourage acts of selflessness that, if considered collectively, contribute to the ethical advancement and moral affirmation of mankind. Although I focus on Wordsworth's undeniably significant contribution to the development of environmentalism, I believe that his stance on the natural world depends on a much more deeply rooted philosophical conviction in the primacy of feeling. I therefore understand his environmental ethics as contingent on an ethics of affect that originates in the aesthetic experience of nature, and that determines the self's relation to the human as well as the non-human other.

Because of Wordsworth's renowned reticence to engage critical commentary in his writings, it is often difficult to assess whether his knowledge of contemporary philosophy was firsthand or derivative. There is however little doubt that during his college years in Cambridge, and certainly by the time of the break out of the French Revolution, Wordsworth had read the fundamental works of Rousseau's oeuvre and participated in what Mahoney calls the "Rousseauistic enthusiasm for the toppling of the *ancien regime*" that was overtaking the continent. (Mahoney 139) At the end of the eighteenth century, Rousseau's controversial voice had reached beyond the borders of the francophone world and attracted wide international attention to the extent that religious

and political dissidents across Europe “had already started pressing independently for reform.” (Davies 43) The hype created by his egalitarian views resonated with particular force with those intellectuals who recognized in them a new concept of mankind and man’s relation to the physical world, to which Wordsworth had shown great partiality. It is therefore no surprise that at the time of his death, his personal library “contained many works of philosophy that one might expect to see on an intellectual’s shelf” and among which Rousseau’s treatises were especially prominent. (Keith 15)

Wordsworth’s indebtedness to Rousseau’s thought is nowhere more evident and compelling than in his poetry of the 1790s. For instance, as Chandler observes, in the opening stanzas of *The Ruined Cottage* Wordsworth fiercely rejects “the Hobbesian position that any state of civil society is preferable to the state of . . . nature” by celebrating instead rural life in typical Rousseauian fashion. (Chandler 161, also quoted in Mahoney 217). In this poem, Wordsworth outlines a rustic environment that is inhabited by an old traveler described as the “pride of nature and of lowly life,” and by Margaret who personifies mankind’s idyllic balance with the natural element. (*The Ruined Cottage* l.37) While these figures belong to a forlorn and irretrievable past, their pathos and natural propensity to feeling speak to the ethical foundation of their rural community, which is preferred over modern civilization and its morbid fascination with “the plague of war” (l.136). Similarly, as Gill notes, in *Salisbury Plain* Wordsworth echoes Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* by opening with the proposition that inequality among men was absent in the natural state, and only originated as a consequence of modernization. (Gill 75) Wordsworth argues that the “hard lot” of the “hungry savage” was a universal condition shared with others who “repose in the same fear, to the same

toil awake,” whereas that of the civil man is aggravated by the privileged classes who “on the couch of Affluence rest,” breeding social injustice and corruption. (*Salisbury Plain* ll.17, 3, 18, 24) This indicates not only that Wordsworth’s knowledge of Rousseau’s writings was detailed and extremely accurate, but also that it left an indelible mark on his philosophical views since the early stages of his poetic career.

It is more difficult to determine the nature of Wordsworth’s acquaintance with Kant’s theoretical enterprise. Even though there may be truth to Wordsworth’s famous declaration to Crabb Robinson that he had “never read a word of German metaphysics,” his indebtedness to Kant’s philosophy remains undeniable, and in many ways still unresolved. (Morley . . . , also quoted in Thomas 2) We have generally come to agree that most of his knowledge on this topic derived from his friendship with Coleridge, who was a much more committed scholar of continental philosophy. Their lengthy conversations on contemporary theory provided a wealth of reliable information to Wordsworth, and should not be overlooked. Keith maintains that Coleridge “was a major fund of philosophical knowledge to which Wordsworth had direct, frequent access between 1797 and early 1804, when Coleridge left the Lake District,” and argues that “Wordsworth’s philosophical development up to 1804 is essentially Coleridge’s,” at least in the field of German metaphysics. (Keith 16) But Wordsworth must have also conducted research independently, as indicated by the fact that he owned “a book popularizing German philosophy for an English audience” – Willich’s *Elements of the Critical Philosophy* – which contains a comprehensive overview of Kant’s opus. (15) Wordsworth was particularly receptive to Kant’s treatment of natural aesthetics in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, a theme that also left a permanent imprint on the Romantic

movement. In this respect, Weiskel observes that in the Continent the eighteenth-century interest in the aesthetic category of the sublime “open[ed] up through Kant into the vast and gloomy corridors of German idealism,” which conceived of it chiefly as a mental power that set “man and nature in desperate opposition” with each other. (Weiskel 5) This dichotomy was resolved by acknowledging the supreme power of reason and its stark superiority over natural aesthetics. Conversely, in England the particularly keen receptiveness to aesthetic nature allowed for “finer accommodations, in which nature is not merely thrown over but appears as a medium through which the mind discovers and presents itself.” (6) This is especially true with Wordsworth, for whom the organic world plays a predominant role in man’s unveiling of his mental faculties and moral constitution.

Wordsworth’s debt to Kantian philosophy is most evident in his fragmentary essay on “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” where he fully endorses ethics’ dependence on natural aesthetics. While in this work Wordsworth begins with some preliminary distinctions between the categories of the beautiful and the sublime, he immediately recognizes their equally significant leverage on the human mind in typically Kantian fashion. In fact, Wordsworth argues that the observation of beautiful or sublime scenes in nature is “of infinite importance to the noblest feelings of the Mind & to its very highest powers,” thus foregrounding from the outset the relation between the physical environment and the mind. (“The Sublime and the Beautiful” 350) He even ventures to say that consistent exposure to natural aesthetics contributes to the overall wellbeing of our cognitive faculties, since “it is impossible that a mind can be in a healthy state that is not frequently and strongly moved by sublimity and beauty” (349). It is however in his

treatment of the aesthetic category of the sublime that his Kantian affiliations prove indisputable. In his essay, Wordsworth agrees with Kant that the sublime has far greater ascendancy over our moral constitution than the beautiful for its distinctive ability to involve the faculty of reason. He explains that, when the sublime experience draws to an end, it is superseded by a “sense of repose” which he interprets as “the result of reason and the moral law.” (355) It is true that Wordsworth’s analysis of the sublime is less accurate than Kant’s, because it fails to elaborate on the specific effects of sublime activity on the faculty of reason. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant suggests that the main contribution of aesthetics is that of providing perceptible instantiations of morality, whereas Wordsworth focuses only on the existing relationship between sublimity and the moral law. (*CJ*, §60, 5:356) Nevertheless, Kant’s influence on Wordsworth’s concept of the sublime is substantial, and even extends beyond the issue of its association with morality, as demonstrated by the related question of fear and terror. Wordsworth is clearly thinking of Kant’s section on the dynamical sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* when he contends that the sublime experience relies on the arousal of “personal fear,” which should not “be strained beyond a certain point” or felt too imminent. (“The Sublime and the Beautiful” 354) He therefore concurs with Kant that the mind must remain free from “humiliation” as well as from any sense of “prostration” to a higher power, and by doing so he distances himself from previous well-established theorizations of the sublime such as that elaborated by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry*.⁴⁹ (354)

⁴⁹ In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* Edmund Burke considers fear and terror constitutive elements of the sublime experience. Unlike Kant and Wordsworth, he understands sublimity as contingent on

In “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” Wordsworth stresses even further his philosophical association with Kant’s aesthetics by upholding a central argument of the *Critique of Judgment* on the nature of the sublime. In the section on the mathematical sublime, Kant famously claims that sublimity is not a quality pertaining to physical objects, but a cognitive state in which the mind recognizes its ability to entertain the idea of a supersensible, “absolute totality.” (*CJ*, §25, 5:250) Here, he specifies that “it is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime.” (5:250) Wordsworth fully supports this view when he comments on those intellectuals who have erroneously searched for the origin of sublimity in “external objects & their powers, qualities, & properties” rather than in “the mind itself” (“The Sublime and the Beautiful” 357). He believes that these philosophers, having grounded their investigations on misguided assumptions, encountered a series of “difficulties & errors” which fueled “endless disputes” regarding the supposed locus of the sublime. (357) Wordsworth intervenes in this debate by stating that “[t]o talk of an object as being sublime or beautiful in itself, without references to some subject by whom this sublimity or beauty is perceived, is absurd” and, in so doing, he propounds the view that the sublime is a subjective response to the physical world, rather than a material quality in sensible objects. (357) By endorsing this argument, he can contend with Kant that the ultimate end of the sublime experience is to reveal the power of reason and its underlying affiliations with morality. In fact, he maintains that the sublime experience requires the engagement of certain

“ideas of pain, and danger” produced by objects or situations that are likely to threaten our sense of safety. (Burke 39)

fundamental “moral qualities” that are possessed by all men, and which point to its eminently ethical character. At the same time, Wordsworth underscores the subject’s receptiveness to “the forms of the external universe” as a crucial element for the successful enactment of the sublime, thus raising the natural world to the same level of importance as our rational constitution. In so doing, he acknowledges the substantial contribution of aesthetic nature towards our assessment of morality and ethical dispositions in more overt ways than those articulated by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.⁵⁰

While in “The Sublime and the Beautiful” Wordsworth displays remarkable analytical skills and a rare gift for theoretical argumentation, his ethical views are best conveyed in his notebooks, marginalia, and especially his poetry. Wordsworth’s aversion to overly rationalized philosophical systems is renowned and, as Modiano correctly points out, even self-confessed in this essay where he admits to have been “seduced to treat the subject” of the sublime “more generally” than he had “at first proposed” (356, Modiano 24). Such heightened skepticism of traditional modes of philosophical inquiry derives from Wordsworth’s understanding of ethics as a natural inclination that originates in the depths of the human heart, and that informs every personal relation with the external world. As clearly indicated in his poetry of encounter, as well as in larger projects such as the *Prelude*, morality may be regulated by theoretical principles superintended by the faculty of reason, but it only manifests itself through concrete acts

⁵⁰ I do not intend to present an exhaustive study of Wordsworth’s philosophical indebtedness to Kant, or of the Kantian overtones in the essay on “The Sublime and the Beautiful.” For a comprehensive analysis of this topic, see Raimonda Modiano’s “The Kantian Seduction: Wordsworth on the Sublime.” My principal goal here is to demonstrate Wordsworth’s intellectual affiliations to Kant’s overall philosophical enterprise.

of love, generosity, and compassion, whose true domain is the heart. It follows that this notion of ethics is better conveyed in verse and personal commentary than in polished analytical form. In particular, poetry grants the freedom to investigate the plethora of human emotions that make up our ethical core, and the feeling of pleasure deriving from moral action. In this sense, poetry provides Wordsworth with the ideal medium to explore man's ethical foundations and articulate the constitutive elements of his moral theory. As is well known, Wordsworth never made a secret of the philosophical orientation of his poetry, neither in his published work nor in his private correspondence. In the 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he agrees with Aristotle that "Poetry is the most philosophic of all writings" because it sets as its ultimate object of inquiry "general, and operative" truth. (Preface 605) In his letters, Wordsworth makes even stronger arguments for the theoretical implications of his poetical work, as in his declaration to Lady Beaumont that there is "scarcely one of [his] Poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment," or his claim to Sir George Beaumont that he expected "to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing" (Gill, "The philosophic poet" 158).

Wordsworth's most lucid theorization of ethics in non-lyrical form appears in what is now known as the "Essay on Morals," a notebook entry probably written in the last quarter of 1798, of which only the initial fragment survives. ("Essay on Morals" 101) Though this text has yet to receive adequate critical attention, it contains Wordsworth's first concerted attempt to synthesize the moral views he articulated just a few months earlier in the *Lyrical Ballads*, while also foreshadowing the theory of poetry elaborated in the Preface to this collection four years later. Its exceptional value derives from the fact

that it was written at a time when Wordsworth was still deeply involved with the themes he treated in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, but free from the pressure that a project such as the development of a cohesive theoretical system intended for publication might have generated. In particular, the “Essay on Morals” is a key text for understanding Wordsworth’s poetry because it “anticipate[s] the theorizing on literature as an instrument for moral improvement [and] moral insight” that Wordsworth advocates not only in the Preface, but also throughout the rest of his literary career, including the various versions of the *Prelude*. (101) Wordsworth’s distrust of conventional theoretical approaches to the question of morals is unambiguously expressed in the opening sentence of this essay, where he claims that “publications in which we formally & systematically lay down rules for the actions of Men cannot be too long delayed.” (103) His unapologetic attack is directed against such philosophers as Godwin, Paley and, by extension, “the whole tribe of authors” who believe that a theoretical system based on abstract reasoning can have practical and lasting effects on man’s moral conduct. (103) Wordsworth argues instead for an alternative model for the purification of morals that aims at instituting concrete changes in man’s everyday life by improving his habitual conduct. He maintains in fact that “our attention ought principally to be fixed upon that part of our conduct & actions which is the result of habits,” rather than on “bald & naked reasonings” that betray our recalcitrant and excessive confidence in the faculty of reason. (103)

From this critical standpoint, in the “Essay on Morals” Wordsworth articulates a wholesale rejection of contemporary philosophy that illustrates, via negativa, the specific implications of his concept of ethics and his project for the strengthening of morals. With

unusually firm resolution, Wordsworth declares that he knows “no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affections[? s], to incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our minds, & thence to have any influence worth our notice in forming those habits of which I am speaking.” (103)

Wordsworth suggests here that an effective ethical model ought to generate in the reader a visceral emotional reaction, perceived in the depths of the human fiber, and in so doing he unambiguously assigns ethics to the realm of affect. He believes that ethics originates in the natural inclination towards love and other “affections” for external objects, which engender an emotional reaction in the individual. (103) Accordingly, Wordsworth argues that texts aiming at the moral advancement of society ought to present a vivid “image” – a “picture of human life” – able to engender in the reader a “feeling” that, if embraced and acted upon, could possibly yield ethical outcomes in everyday life (103). He believes that, unlike the philosophical treatise that “*describe*[s] nothing” and “convey[s] no feeling,” this alternative approach to ethics is “practically useful” as it holds the power to modify and improve those habits that make up our ethical conduct (103, emphasis in text).

It is reasonable to assume that, as early as the “Essay on Morals,” Wordsworth regarded the *Lyrical Ballads* as the essential archetype of this new ethical model precisely because the poems in this collection portray evocative images of human interactions that seek to exhort an emotional response in the reader. The ethical relations that pervade these poems awaken moral sensibility and offer examples of sound ethical conduct that ought to be considered and eventually adopted in ordinary circumstances. At the same time, they reveal the underlying tension between the benevolent feelings that

motivate moral deeds, and the self-congratulatory mood which often accompanies them – thus inviting the reader to ponder on the practical limits of ethics and the possible setbacks embedded in moral behavior. Wordsworth therefore seems to choose poetry for his theoretical treatment of ethics, as well as for the presentation of an ethical revival that hinges on this genre’s ability to involve affect and rectify human behavior.

In delineating this ethical model, Wordsworth emphasizes the importance of “habit,” which he understands here as the sum of those moral “actions” performed by compassionate individuals as part of their regular conduct (103). While he recognizes that the “vain man, the proud man, and the avaricious man” are equally able to engage in occasional “act[s] of giving,” these are “more or less accidental” and do not constitute habit. (103) Instead, Wordsworth believes that only the “affectionate & benevolent man” is capable of weaving moral action into his daily routine and commit to consistent acts of selflessness. (103) Habit represents a fundamental aspect of Wordsworth’s ethical system that stresses its pragmatic aspect while setting it apart from traditional approaches to morals. In fact, whereas abstract philosophical theories that rely solely on logic are “impotent over our habits,” his program derives the unique power to alter ordinary behavior from its eminent focus on affect. (103) Interestingly, the *Lyrical Ballads* is permeated with instances of ethical acts that are carried on habitually by unassuming individuals as part of their moral conduct. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” just to name one example, Wordsworth illustrates the well-established relationship between the residents of a rural village and a local mendicant who has become a social landmark in the community. Wordsworth explains that, out of sympathy for the beggar and his “helpless ... appearance,” the frequent traveler “does not throw / With careless hands his

alms upon the ground,” but respectfully stops his horse to “lodge the coin / Within the old Man’s hat” (“The Old Cumberland Beggar” ll. 25-29) Similarly, the woman superintending the town’s toll gate interrupts her work whenever the beggar approaches in order to lift the latch, and the postman stirs his vehicle “with less noisy wheels to the road-side... without a curse / Upon his lips” (ll. 36, 41-3). These characters’ habitual demonstrations of courtesy and respect for the beggar are the outward manifestation of their strong moral tendencies. This is not to suggest that in this poem Wordsworth equates habit with morality, which would inevitably trivialize the highly complex philosophical category of ethics. The fact that the villagers display certain fundamental moral inclinations does not make them exemplars of ethical behavior, as suggested for instance by their apparent unwillingness to establish a deeper bond with the beggar which may disrupt their habitual interactions. It is thus by delineating these characters’ natural tendency towards selfless behavior, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties deriving from ethical relations, that Wordsworth attempts to stir an emotional response in his readers.

Wordsworth describes here what is in many ways an unbalanced relationship. On the one hand, the beggar serves an important moral function in the village because his presence “compels [its citizens] to acts of love” which awaken their “virtue and true goodness.” (ll.90-91) In this sense, the beggar attunes the villagers to morality by predisposing them to ethical behavior. On the other, the villagers limit themselves to ease the beggar’s existence and facilitate his transit through the village, while never engaging in conversation with him or offering him shelter from the elements. The beggar therefore remains a “solitary man,” a “Poor Traveller” with “no companion,” who seems destined

to live at the margins of society and deprived of meaningful human contact. (ll. 24, 45, 58) He is a threshold figure that exists in a liminal space, as he cannot be fully reintegrated into society or associated with nature. In fact, just as the villagers avoid any type of intimate contact with the beggar, he refrains from establishing a bond with the circumscribing natural environment. For instance, when he eats his “scraps” at the foot of a hill, he refuses to share them with the nearby birds, although his “palsied hand” eventually betrays him by inadvertently dropping some crumbs on the ground. Still, the birds do not dare approaching the beggar more than “the length of his half staff,” an image that evokes separation and signifies the insurmountable gap between this figure and the natural world. (l. 21) While in this poem Wordsworth describes a rural community whose moral sense is significantly fortified by the presence of a local mendicant, he does not fail to point to the inherent complexities of moral relations and the practical limits of benevolent feelings such as altruism and charity. This is best exemplified by the figure of the female villager who, after having left some alms for the beggar, returns home “with exhilarated heart ...and builds her hope in heaven.” (ll. 153-4) Wordsworth seems to suggest here that this character is simultaneously motivated by a feeling of selflessness and the selfish desire to be rewarded in heaven for her deeds. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” Wordsworth thus offers a glance into the life of a rural village that shares solid moral foundations – what in the “Essay on Morals” he calls a “picture of human life” – but whose ethical conduct remains problematic and, at times, puzzling. (“Essay on Morals” 103)

Wordsworth introduces another relevant aspect of his theory of poetry in the “Essay on Morals” when he claims that the feeling of pleasure is largely responsible for

stimulating moral action. He argues that “good actions” – whether described in verse or executed in real life – generate a “delicious sensation” of pleasure, which is simultaneously the incentive for and the outcome of moral behavior. (104, emphasis in text) He maintains that “we feel internally [the] beneficent effect” of moral conduct, as its accomplishments are met with a sensation of pleasure that brings unadulterated satisfaction and which does not require rational explanation. (104) In this text, Wordsworth does not clarify the nature of the relation between habit and pleasure, nor does he elaborate an exhaustive explanation of how these factors contribute to the underpinning of ethics. Instead, he limits himself to outline in preliminary form the fundamental constituents of his ethical model, which will only appear in its final form in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. This also anticipates his view of literature as a viable tool for the ethical advancement of society that will become a pivotal argument of the Preface. In fact, Wordsworth specifies in the “Essay on Morals” that literary texts can contribute to the strengthening of ethics by illustrating concrete examples of human conduct and describing “how men placed in such or such situations will necessarily act” (“Essay on Morals” 104). These instances of moral integrity, if properly understood, will encourage readers to redirect their lives “into a more beneficial course,” or infuse them with “new ardor & new knowledge when they are proceeding as they ought.” (104) From this perspective, a poem such as “The Old Cumberland Beggar” may inspire readers to perform acts of charity in their social environment by portraying the solid bond between a mendicant and the members of a rural community, while also drawing their attention to the problematic reverberations of moral actions that are not conducted in a genuine spirit of altruism and selflessness.

The foregoing analysis of Wordsworth's "Essay on Morals" should indicate that this notebook entry is not merely a precursory text to the Preface, but that it represents its principal conceptual foundation. This suggests that Wordsworth had thought deeply about the theoretical implications of his poetry since at least the first publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and that he was as much involved in the development of a new theory of poetry as Coleridge. The most significant connection between these texts is Wordsworth's emphasis on affect as a predominant facet of his ethics. In the Preface⁵¹ Wordsworth foregrounds affect in his discussion of poetry and its ethical implications, when he famously describes it as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and asserts that "it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Preface 598, 611). Poetic composition begins in an emotional state that elicits the portrayal of past feelings which would otherwise remain dormant, and it thus largely depends on the self's awareness of his or her affective disposition. Affect holds a prominent position in Wordsworth's ethical views as he specifies that in his poetry feeling "gives importance to the action or situation [therein described], and not the action and situation to the feeling." (599) But Wordsworth's explanation of poetic creation does much more than highlight affect, as he further states that, in every human being, feeling and thought are intimately connected and interdependent. He identifies a universal human trait when he maintains that "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts" which, in turn, "are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings." (598) While Wordsworth is here primarily concerned with delineating the source of his poetic creation, he

⁵¹ I am not so much interested here in elucidating Wordsworth's theory of poetry *per se* as to analyze his understanding of the relation of mutual dependence between aesthetics and ethics that transpire in his commentary on poetry.

simultaneously comments on a common human characteristic that speaks to the nature of his ethical views. By arguing that rational thinking informs men's emotional sphere, and that past feelings have the power to determine thought, he demonstrates that our aesthetic perception of the physical world conditions our critical attitude towards its constituents. In the context of his definition of poetry, Wordsworth therefore describes a mode of thinking that reveals the role of aesthetics in the formation of our ethical core. In fact, if feelings have leverage over reason, and reason is the legitimate seat of morality, it follows that aesthetics contributes substantially to the establishment of our ethical makeup. In this respect, Wordsworth's view of ethics' dependence on aesthetics is not only congruent with his earlier theoretical work, such as the essay on "The Sublime and the Beautiful" and the "Essay on Morals," but also with that of Rousseau and Kant.

As Wordsworth unfolds his theory of poetry in the Preface, he systematically defends the proposition according to which aesthetics is conducive to the underpinning of ethics. In his opening remarks, he maintains that the *Lyrical Ballads* champions a new "class of poetry" that is founded on affect, and whose relevance derives from "the quality of its moral relations." (595) Wordsworth conceives of his poetry as a moral undertaking precisely because it entertains only those feelings and emotions that fortify the moral texture of mankind. Similarly, while commenting on the universal correspondence between the mind and the "affections of our nature," Wordsworth argues that poems such as "The Brothers" – in which the natural environment represents a prominent element – display "the strength of ... moral attachment when early associated with the great and beautiful objects of nature" (598). Natural aesthetics, in both its beautiful and sublime manifestations, is therefore a crucial contributing factor to the establishment of solid

ethical values since the early stages of human life, as it enhances human receptiveness to benevolent feelings. Wordsworth further claims that the overall purpose of these poems is ethical because they have been so conceived as to place the “Reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them.” (598-99) The fact that this argument springs from a discussion of poems including “Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman” and “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” which portray highly aestheticized natural environments, suggests that the moral import of Wordsworth’s poetry and its ensuing beneficial results are largely dependent on the natural element that informs them. In many respects, the natural world that he experienced first-hand during his numerous tours, and that he meticulously described in literary form, constitutes the ethical fulcrum of these poems and the original source of their reinvigorating effects on morals. Wordsworth is thus able to conclude that the conceptual premises on which the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* are founded will influence the reader’s “moral feelings” and allow them to “be corrected and purified.” (603)

In the Preface, Wordsworth presents his stance on the concept of pleasure – which he briefly outlined in the “Essay on Morals” – and recognizes it as an essential factor in the moral furtherance of mankind. Pleasure is a central constituent of Wordsworth’s ethical theory principally because it promotes feelings that are consonant with morality. He states that the pleasure produced by his poems is grounded on “just notions” and is of the utmost “importance to our taste and moral feelings.” (602) In particular, pleasure fortifies “sympathy,” the innate human tendency to empathize with others and engage in altruistic acts aimed at the improvement of their physical or emotional condition.

Wordsworth argues that “[w]e have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure,” and even suggests that when “we sympathize with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations of pleasure.” (605) Although the display of pain and dire affliction may raise in us sadness or uneasiness, our instinctive tendency to empathize with the other generates a feeling of pleasure, which might be explained as resulting from the awareness that we are in the position to help.

Accordingly, Wordsworth regards pleasure as one of the “grand elementary principle[s]” that presides over most aspects of human life, and by means of which man “knows ... feels ... lives, and moves.” (605) He thus understands pleasure as a primal drive that prompts simultaneously a desire for knowledge, and the development of benevolent feelings. The urge to obtain and maintain pleasure indeterminately encourages man to develop his rational aptitudes and refine his emotional perceptiveness so as to live at the fullest of his abilities. In this context, Wordsworth states that “[w]e have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been build up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone,” thus crediting man’s sensitivity towards pleasure for the remarkable complexity of his mental faculties. The concept of pleasure that Wordsworth began to theorize in the “Essay on Morals” is therefore treated in the Preface as a pivotal element of his ethical views, as well as of his poetical work of which his ethics constitutes a salient part.

In the Preface, Wordsworth also addresses the notion of habit, which he briefly referenced in the “Essay on Morals,” when commenting on the purpose of his poetry. He claims that one of the principal aims of his poems is to convey the mental states ensuing from his emotional response to a contemplated object or situation. More specifically,

Wordsworth wants to account for the “fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature,” as we interact with our surroundings. (598) He deems the transcription in literary form of these mental states common to all mankind particularly necessary because he believes that, by observing closely the relation between feeling and thought, “we can discover what is really important to men” and their ethical furtherance. (598) Wordsworth fully endorses “the repetition and continuance of this act” – by which feelings and thoughts are analyzed in light of their interdependent nature – as an activity that contributes to the advancement of men and the strengthening of their moral relations. (598) In fact, he explains that if we make a habit of considering our cognitive states as being contingent on incidental emotional reactions, “our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length ... such habits of mind will be produced” that will benefit ourselves as well as our social environment. (598) By bearing in mind that our aesthetic perceptions play a significant role in determining our critical stance, we will become “enlightened” individuals and our ethical character will be consolidated. While in the “Essay on Morals” Wordsworth treats habit as the sum of moral actions performed by individuals, in the Preface he stresses the importance of our “habits of mind,” or modes of thinking, which are equally instrumental in establishing changes geared to the rectification of morals. Clearly, the feeling of pleasure is a vital factor in the creation of these habits. There is in fact no cognitive state described in the *Lyrical Ballads* that is not rooted in and accompanied by an intense feeling of pleasure and delight.

The *Lyrical Ballads* consists of poems that illustrate the ethically oriented text Wordsworth defended in his “Essay on Morals.” These poems characteristically present

common “incidents and situations,” occurring in rural environments, that bear profound ethical implications. (Preface” 596-7) More importantly, in each of these poems Wordsworth traces the origins of a pleasurable feeling either he or one of his characters enjoyed firsthand, often in a natural or rural setting, and the concurring mental state that reveals the ethical import of this experience. The underlying concept common to all poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* is that the moral outcomes resulting from the individual’s intimate confrontation with nature can be shared with the rest of society through the medium of literature, so as to promote a large-scale ethical change. It is by proclaiming the benefits of man’s relationship with the physical environment to his affective and cognitive faculties that the *Lyrical Ballads* may be considered a text aiming at the ethical furtherance of mankind. This work promotes a mode of thinking predicated on the innate correspondence in the human being between feeling and reason, and it therefore highlights the undeniable contribution of our aesthetic perceptions to the underpinning of our ethical constitution. In this sense, Potkay is correct in noting that Wordsworth hoped the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* would “make his readers better and flourishing persons, attuned to moral purposes through the pleasure of form.” (Potkay 1) It is in its framing and use of the feeling of pleasure that the *Lyrical Ballads* acquires its distinctive argumentative form. As we have seen, pleasure holds a central role in these poems because it represents simultaneously their conceptual fulcrum and one of their most important projected outcomes. Indeed, these poems originate from the recollection of a feeling of pleasure – which becomes the point of departure for various philosophical considerations – and aim at instilling in the reader a kindred emotional state by means of artistic and literary devices. This work is thus informed by an ambitious project geared

towards the advancement of morals, which is particularly compelling as it appears in literary rather than argumentative form.

By conferring a distinctive moral purpose to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth demonstrates that he was very much aware of his socio-political environment and deeply concerned with the wide-ranging problems that afflicted the continent at the turn of the century. Although most of his poems center on seemingly uncommitted descriptions of pastoral landscapes or ordinary scenes of rural life, their underlying ethical import renders them effective tools for the moral rectification of mankind and the respective consolidation of its social structures. In the Preface Wordsworth specifies that his poetry, by foregrounding affect, awakens the human mind to its emotional dimension and refines its ability to perceive feelings “without the application of gross or violent stimulants.” (599) By making a habit of attuning the reader’s mind to its affective constitution, these poems reveal the “beauty” and “dignity” of man’s cognitive faculties while making them progressively stronger. Wordsworth argues that “to produce or enlarge this capability [shared by all men] is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged,” and adds that “this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day.” (599) This remark is followed by an incisive commentary on contemporary society in which Wordsworth notes that “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.” (599) In particular, he singles out “the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of

intelligence hourly gratifies.” (599) Wordsworth is here undoubtedly referring, on the one hand, to the political upheaval spread across Europe by the breakout of the French Revolution and, on the other, the rapid expansion of urbanization caused by industrial and technological innovations, arguably two of the most consequential events of his time. This demonstrates that while on the surface Wordsworth’s poetry seems largely unconcerned with the social environment in which it originated, it is actually rooted in a profound awareness of its harrowing problems and motivated by a momentous plan for the improvement of man’s moral disposition.

New Historicists have notoriously criticized Romantic poets, and in particular Wordsworth, for excluding from their work any type of overt reference to their complex socio-political circumstances, while concentrating on what have been considered uncritical celebrations of the natural world. Alan Liu echoes a similar attack in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, an overall outstanding study of the Romantic movement that exposes its intrinsic historical implications. Here, Liu maintains that much of Wordsworth’s poetry is engaged in “a sustained effort to deny history” and to account for the human experience by means of representations of the natural world rather than through direct reference to specific historical contexts. (Liu 13) In this sense, the description of nature in verse provides a convenient imaginary platform for the poetic representation of the self that avoids potentially traumatic confrontations with the tragic historical reality of nineteenth-century Europe. Marjorie Levinson follows an equivalent theoretical trajectory in her controversial study of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” which aims at reconfiguring the picturesque qualities of the Wye Valley into a more historically conscious setting. From her standpoint, this poem is not a celebration of England’s

flourishing rural environment, but a committed attempt to deny the growing signs of industrialization on the land. (Levinson 41-42) Levinson reads Tintern's "pastoral farms / Green to the very door" as referring not to a locus of still abundant and widespread vegetation, but to the geometrically shaped properties of British laborers resulting from the practice of landscape enclosure. ("Tintern Abbey" 17-18) Such readings seem to overlook the fact that, as we have seen, Wordsworth pursued in his work a much broader project than the mere characterization of a complex set of historical circumstances, namely the delineation of a plan for the fortification of morals that aimed at improving the current political situation and prevent the repetition of similar occurrences in the future.

Wordsworth endorsed the moral views outlined in the Preface throughout the rest of his literary career, emphasizing in particular the fundamental role of affect in the underpinning of ethics. As indicated by the poetical work produced after the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth never questioned the proposition according to which ethics arises from a particular emotional disposition that resists rationalization and which is often reinforced by the confrontation with aesthetically pleasing natural environments. The primacy of affect in Wordsworth's ethical model is traceable in a poem that appeared shortly after the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* under the title "The Discharged Soldier," and that was later integrated into the 1850 version of the *Prelude*. (W. J. B. Owen 91) Given the multiple employments of this piece over the course of several decades, its treatment of ethics may be considered representative of Wordsworth's overall theoretical stance. In "The Discharged Soldier," Wordsworth foregrounds affect as the necessary precondition for the occurrence of an ethical encounter that results in a

considerably edifying experience. This poem well exemplifies his moral stance because it describes ethics as rooted in a concrete interaction between individuals that awakens feelings of sympathy and kinship, rather than as an abstract metaphysical concept. As Potkay accurately remarks, the ethical import of Wordsworth's poetry of encounter derives from the speaker's confrontation with unfamiliar others, which generates "interest" in their condition and a sense of "responsibility, however undefined," for their welfare. (Potkay 5) Yet, during these exchanges, the speaker avoids identifying with his interlocutors and refuses to entertain any unrealistic expectation to fully understand their plight. (5) In fact, the disenfranchised other "command[s] attention" but "disallows easy judgment," thus enabling a type of human interaction that, instead of focusing on the relationship between its participants, raises pivotal philosophical questions about the nature of ethics. (5) I concur with Potkay in arguing that this approach allows Wordsworth to treat "morality without moralizing," and that this constitutes the "only sort of ethics available to serious poetry." (5) At the same time, by focusing exclusively on concrete encounters between individuals, Wordsworth highlights the limits of poetry in its treatment of ethics. Indeed, he demonstrates that "the ethical imperative of poetry is not to set everything right in the world [and that] poetry is not coextensive with justice," but that it only plays a role in imagining possible pathways leading to more righteous societies. (5) This is particularly evident in the closing section of the poem in which, as we shall see, Wordsworth exposes the limited nature of the speaker's altruism as he parts from a war veteran who is visibly still in need of close supervision and prolonged care.

Much of the criticism available today on "The Discharged Soldier" tends to concentrate on the fortuitous encounter between the speaker of the poem and the war

veteran, while largely overlooking the introductory verse paragraph. This thirty-five-line opening section constitutes however one of the most relevant fulcrums of the composition, as it sets the ground for the unfolding of the main scene and allows for its consequential ethical outcomes. Here, Wordsworth traces the development of a significantly complex emotional state that awakens the speaker's moral sense and predisposes him to feelings of empathy and altruism. At the outset of the poem, Wordsworth describes a nocturnal ramble in the countryside initially undertaken with "an exhausted mind worn out by toil," and a sense of unworthiness of the "deeper joy" that the "distant prospect" will provide. ("The Discharged Soldier" ll.17, 18, 19) This dejected mood is nonetheless counterbalanced by a sense of tranquility and a receptivity to "amusement" that supervene as the speaker takes notice of the aesthetic character of the surrounding natural objects. (l.13) Although the physical environment holds remarkable sway over the speaker's mind, I want to argue that it is his receptivity to its aesthetic import that prompts the emotional shift necessary for ethical behavior. In fact, while he claims to enjoy walking "Along the public way," it is more precisely its dazzling "watery surface ... glitter[ing] in the moon" which catches his attention and stimulates his aesthetic sensibility. (ll. 2, 7) The layer of rainwater that coats the road is internalized by the speaker's mind and perceived as a natural stream "Stealing with silent lapse to join the brook / That murmured in the valley." (ll.10-11) The road is not recognized for what it is, a flat surface that facilitates transit, but is rather reimagined as a ravishing natural element that becomes the emblem of "solitude" and "quietness," and which mirrors the speaker's emotional state. (ll. 4, 5) In a Kantian sense, at this stage in the poem the speaker finds himself immersed in an aesthetic dimension in which imagination is

allowed to operate freely – finding itself unhindered by the demands of understanding – and where the nearby objects retain relevance by virtue of their aesthetic qualities rather than their concrete materiality.

We come to realize that it is not the speaker's *physical* proximity to the natural environment, but rather his *aesthetic receptiveness* to its features, that prompts the emotional shift described at the onset of the poem. In fact, it is only when he engages *aesthetically* with his surroundings that he is able to overcome his despondent mood and embrace the newly surfacing feelings of delight and tranquility. In this pastoral setting, the speaker is absorbed in a typically Rousseauian reverie that causes the temporary weakening of his sensory and cognitive faculties, while engendering a pervading sense of pleasure.⁵² As he walks alone on the “silent road,” his consciousness of space dissipates and the circumscribing environment becomes an ethereal dimension emanating a profound sense of calm: “Above, before, behind, / Around me, all was peace and solitude” (ll.21, 24-25). Here, the repeated use of directional words to convey lack of direction suggests that the speaker is completely enwrapped in aesthetic experience and is no longer relying on his cognitive faculties to maintain a bond with the physical world. He further relinquishes his senses of sight (“I looked not round”) and hearing (“nor did the solitude / Speak to my eye”) as the aesthetic bond with nature allows him to “*feel*” its presence and beneficial effects. (ll. 26-27, emphasis added) When aesthetic activity finally reaches its climax, the speaker secures a solid bond with his soul that infuses him with a sense of self-contained wholeness and a concomitant feeling of pleasure:

What beauteous pictures now

⁵² See my analysis of Rousseau's concept of “reverie” and its defining characteristics in chapter two, p. 94, of this work.

Rose in harmonious imagery – they rose
As from some distant region of my soul
And came along like dreams, yet such as left
Obscurely mingled with their passing forms
A consciousness of animal delight,
A self-possession felt in every pause
And every gentle movement of my frame. (ll.28-35)

It is precisely this “happy state” obtained by means of aesthetic contemplation that generates in the speaker the emotional shift conducive to moral action. (l.28) Indeed, he explains that the intimate communion with the natural environment has “disposed [him] to sympathy” and inclined him towards acts of empathy and generosity, of which the discharged soldier will be the ultimate recipient. At this point, the speaker’s propensity to ethical behavior is therefore fully restored, allowing for the unfolding of the morally inflected encounter that takes place in the remaining sections of the poem.

At “a sudden turning of the road” during his nocturnal walk, the speaker is confronted with what he initially describes as the “uncouth shape” of a man “in stature tall ... lank, and upright,” who strikes him for his uncommonly “meagre stiffness” and overall ghastly appearance. (ll.37-44) While these are obvious signs of malnutrition and neglect that in the late eighteenth century could have easily been ascribed to the vagrants and beggars of pre-Industrial England, the speaker refuses to speculate about the soldier’s identity. On the contrary, he limits himself to suggest that, on account of these visual clues, one “might almost think / That [the man’s] bones wounded him.” (ll.44-45) He thus refrains from drawing hasty conclusions based on outward clues, choosing instead to

continue his careful observation of the soldier from the “shade / Of a thick hawthorn.” (ll.39-40) As he prolongs his perusal, the speaker further remarks that the soldier’s lips are emitting “murmuring sounds as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought” but, in a similar fashion, he avoids qualifying these symptoms with an exact diagnosis. (ll.71-72) For Potkay, the ‘as if’ of these lines has “protoethical heft” in that it conveys the speaker’s conscious disentanglement from the soldier, and his admission that “he has no idea of what the other is thinking or feeling.” (Potkay 55) The soldier’s moans *seem* to indicate a persistent state of discomfort or profound emotional distress, but these are only educated guesses at best. In “The Discharged Soldier,” the speaker therefore fully recognizes “the otherness of the other,” and the eminent disparity between their current situations, while being nonetheless moved by a compelling feeling of empathy and a sense of moral responsibility for his dejected condition.⁵³ (55) By refusing to project his feelings on to the soldier, and refraining from formulating risky assumptions about his current state, the speaker acknowledges his individuality and the gap that separates them. Wordsworth’s poetical treatment of this particular encounter teaches us that it is only from a human confrontation that resists gratuitous objectifications, and which values the other’s unique character, that a genuine ethical exchange can occur.

⁵³ Potkay’s reading of “The Discharged Soldier” focuses primarily on the encounter between the speaker of the poem and the war veteran. In his analysis, he claims that the speaker is not moved by empathy, but that he rather “steps back from the enjoyment of sympathy.” (Potkay 57) He maintains that Wordsworth “confines sympathy to the preethical sphere in the poem’s opening movement,” when the speaker “receives ‘amusement’ from the near objects he passes.” (57) I have argued instead that, while the feeling of sympathy originates during the communion with nature, it endures throughout the encounter with the soldier and allows for the ethical act described in the closing sections of the poem.

Wordsworth's handling of these characters' verbal communication is equally geared towards preserving the soldier's individuality and highlighting his otherness. Once the speaker manages to tame his "heart's specious cowardice" and leave his hiding place, he approaches the soldier to inquire about his recent history. ("The Discharged Soldier" l. 86) Wordsworth however withholds the soldier's reply from the readers, offering instead only a succinct report on his previous tribulations. (Yousef, "Wordsworth, Sentimentalism, and the Defiance of Sympathy" 211) The speaker explains that the soldier shared "a simple fact," conveyed with "unmoved" demeanor and a "stately air of mild indifference" which conceal his emotional state and the true import of his psychological trauma. ("The Discharged Soldier" ll.100, 97, 99) Readers are granted merely factual information about the soldier's past – his dismissal from service in the "tropic isles," his recent arrival to England, and his present attempt to return to his "native home" with the "little strength" left in him – but they are denied access altogether to the emotional component of his tale. (ll. 101, 104,105) As Yousef accurately remarks, these characters' "conversation is clearly an anti-climax" – or at least it was for those eighteenth-century readers accustomed to sentimental fiction – because in it the speaker abstains from any "identificatory projection" or appropriation of the soldier's emotional condition. (Yousef "Defiance of Sympathy" 211, 210, Potkay 56) Although affect is a fundamental component in the development of ethics, as it consolidates the individual's propensity to moral action, Wordsworth refuses to capitalize on the soldier's emotional struggle or trivialize his personal experience. The speaker, as well as the readers, only gets to know the soldier well enough to empathize with his present state and feel a sense of ethical responsibility towards him, while having to accept his utter impenetrability, his

strangeness, and otherness. In fact, as the latter part of the poem suggests, what seems to matter most for Wordsworth is not the soldier's tragic account of his every trial and tribulation, but the ethical outcomes that his encounter with the speaker can generate. In this sense, Potkay argues that "the ethical relation presented in Wordsworth's poem is not countered but rather underscored by uncertainty," and the impossibility to fully understand the other. (57) By recognizing the otherness of the soldier as a mark of his individuality and infinite complexity, the speaker feels compelled to moral action and so engages in an ethical gesture – that of seeking food and shelter for the night – which aims at alleviating, only if momentarily, his precarious condition.

It is important to recognize that while the speaker's encounter with the discharged soldier yields significant moral outcomes, it also exposes the limits of his altruism and the impossibility to equate ethics with justice. In the last section of the poem, the speaker accompanies the soldier to a nearby village where he intends to entrust him to the care of a "kind" and "honest" friend. (l. 112) Even though he escorts him to the doorstep of his friend's cottage, he does not linger to see him access the inn and receive the much-needed help. On the contrary, he prepares to resume his nocturnal walk, relishing in a sense of narcissistic delight for the accomplished deed that exceeds his concern for the soldier's wellbeing. As they part, the speaker gladly welcomes the soldier's "blessing" and expressions of gratitude – which seem to have a galvanizing effect – but the soldier remains a "poor [and] unhappy man" who is left in the hands of another stranger. (ll. 171) Readers are inevitably led to question the authenticity of the speaker's altruism, the adequacy of his response to this particular set of circumstances, and even wonder if he has recognized the gravity of the soldier's physical state. In fact, this war veteran belongs

to that category of ghastly and forlorn figures, such as the Cumberland beggar, that exist in a realm between life and death and which have no chance to be successfully reintegrated in society. It is impossible to determine whether the speaker ought to have taken greater responsibility for the soldier, since nothing is known about his life and his ability to be of any more help. It is however true that in the poem Wordsworth creates a dramatic tension between these characters' emotional states, which is only reinforced by their opposite socio-economical situations. This is best exemplified by their relation to solitude, in that the speaker's separation from the modern world has been deliberately pursued and generates a type of self-indulging pleasure that is normally reserved to the financially stable, whereas the soldier's stark isolation is a consequence of social victimization which aggravates his already deplorable state. In "The Discharged Soldier," Wordsworth therefore traces the origins of a feeling of empathy that produces notable ethical outcomes, while also pointing to the obvious limits of individual acts of charity, knowing all too well that morality is not always reconcilable with justice. Indeed, in the closing lines the speaker returns to the unbeaten path that will likely lead him to a comfortable and welcoming home, whereas the soldier's chances of a full physical rehabilitation and a dignified life remain slim.

I have argued that, in "The Discharged Soldier," Wordsworth describes ethical action as being contingent on aesthetic predisposition, which is generally stimulated by exposure to a pristine natural setting. The ethical view indicated here, and echoed in many of Wordsworth's poetical compositions, reflects the philosophical model originally delineated in the "Essay on Morals" and later refined in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. This reveals that Wordsworth was a remarkably consistent theorist and a firm

believer in the significant role of aesthetics in the constitution of ethics. This philosophical position would have never been articulated so eloquently in verse, had Wordsworth not been a committed scholar of Rousseau and Kant, and had his ethics not emerged from a careful examination of his predecessors' theoretical work.⁵⁴ In "The Discharged Soldier" Wordsworth also stresses the fact that ethical behavior is not prompted simply by unmediated contact with nature, but rather by the individual's aesthetic response to the circumscribing natural environment. According to his ethical model, the communion with the physical world constitutes merely a preliminary step in the process of moral consolidation, which can only occur by means of active aesthetic confrontation with its sensible objects. More precisely, it is by engaging the benevolent feelings stimulated during aesthetic activity that men can strengthen their ethical core. In this sense, affect lies at the foundation of Wordsworth's ethical system because he believes that the awakening of feelings such as empathy and compassion allows for moral advancement. As we have seen, in "The Discharged Soldier" the speaker's act of generosity towards the war veteran is prompted by a feeling of sympathy that generates during his aesthetic encounter with the natural environment. But this is not a limited case, as Wordsworth treats affect as the source of ethical behavior throughout much of his poetical work. For instance, in "Nutting" the moral imperative to respect the natural state of forests phrased in the closing lines of the poem hinges on "a sense of pain" that the speaker experienced originally as a child after having defaced "with merciless ravage" a hazelnut bough. ("Nutting" 50, 43) Also, just to name another example, in "Peter Bell"

⁵⁴ According to Mahoney, it is reasonable to assume that Wordsworth read Rousseau during his college years in Cambridge, before he began the composition of "The Discharged Soldier." (Mahoney 139) It however remains unsure whether at that time he had already familiarized himself with Kant's metaphysics.

the main character's newly developed ethical stance on animals, which is illustrated by his relationship with the ass, depends on his feelings of pity and regret for this creature's miserable state. This suggests that Wordsworth considers affect as the necessary condition for the establishment of ethical relations between human beings *as well as* between men and the natural environment. The pre-environmentalist concern for nature that transpires in much of his poetry should therefore be understood as being primarily grounded not in an uncritical appreciation for the outdoors, or the desire to blur the line between the human and the non-human, but in a much more compelling philosophical conviction in the power of affect to alter the human relation with the natural world.

I do not intend to downplay the ecological implications of Wordsworth's poetry, which are largely responsible for the pathos as well as the political import of his verse, but to suggest instead that his sustained concern for the environment derives from a theoretical position that values natural aesthetics for its positive effects on affect and, by extension, on human behavior. It is therefore only to be expected that his defense of the environment was conveyed in verse, by means of highly refined language and figures of speech, which celebrate the importance of aesthetics in human life. Wordsworth's pre-environmental sensibility is best conveyed in the *Prelude*, where nature is recognized as a self-organizing system that allows for the creation and development of human cultures, and which is thus granted independent status. In the Arab dream passage of Book 5, Wordsworth rewrites the Biblical story of the rainbow covenant by abandoning traditional associations of the deluge with an adverse force representative of the wrath of God.⁵⁵ He inscribes instead the catastrophic powers of the cataclysm within the complex

⁵⁵ See Genesis 8:20-9:17.

set of geological phenomena that allow for the very existence of the natural world, and in so doing he divests it of its original negative connotations (though not of its awe-inspiring force)⁵⁶. From this perspective, nature is an all-powerful self-regulating system that is able to regenerate itself even after its most violent acts of self-destruction:

‘Should earth by inward throes be wrenched throughout,

Or fire be sent from far to wither all

Her pleasant habitations, and dry up

Old Ocean in his bed left singed and bare,

Yet would the living Presence still subsist

Victorious; and composure would ensue,

And kindlings like the morning; presage sure,

Though slow, perhaps, of a returning day.’ (*The Prelude*, Book 5, ll.29-36)

Present in these lines is not only the typical Wordsworthian faith in the undying powers of nature, but also an almost ecological sense of its fragility, which is implied in the idea that after a natural disaster nature would return to its previous condition only after a “slow” and laborious, though certain recovery.

Moreover, in the Arab dream sequence Wordsworth inverts the balance of power between nature and culture by making the survival of human civilizations contingent on the natural settings that host them, rather than perpetuating the Enlightenment’s aspirations of complete human mastery over nature. As Collings remarks, before the Romantic period “nature was conceived ... as an aspect of culture [and as] an extension of a given culture’s conception of itself.” (Collings 181-2) In these lines, on the other

⁵⁶ David Collings was the first to notice that in “this dream sequence, Wordsworth rewrites cultural dislocation almost entirely as natural cataclysm.” (Collings 180)

hand, not only the concept that a culture has of itself but also its chances for survival rest on the geological conditions of its natural settings. In fact, the continuity of humanity and its wisdom at a time of natural disaster are no longer guaranteed as the speaker wonders what fate “the meditations of mankind” would encounter given that they “lodge in shrines so frail” as the human mind and, by extension, pamphlets and books (*The Prelude* 5.37, 48). Wordsworth does not seem to offer a definitive answer to the question of the fate of human knowledge and its products in case of a cataclysm. Within the account of the dream the literary work seems doomed to destruction because the shell that represents it contains a prophecy of the “Destruction of the Children of Earth” and, implicitly, also of the Arab who strives to save it by burying it (5.98). Collings explains that the “very object that the Arab would preserve from destruction brings destruction to its wake... He will never be able to bury the shell, for he cannot protect the shell from itself.” (Collings 187) The speaker in Book 5 of *The Prelude*, on the contrary, seems more cautious in voicing a definitive sentence in this regard since in the following sections he digresses at length on praises of such “immortal Verse” as that of Shakespeare, Milton and other previous writers of whom he wants to “assert [the] rights” and “pronounce [the] benediction” (5.164, 217-9) What however emerges from this passage with unprecedented emphasis is a new understanding of nature as crucial to the development of human culture rather than subsidiary to it.

Wordsworth further elaborates on the inevitability of nature’s sovereignty over man in a still overlooked section of the Mont Blanc episode in Book 6 of the *Prelude* which, in many ways, encapsulates Romanticism’s most refined sense of the complexity

of the natural world. Much recent criticism has concentrated on section 6b⁵⁷ in which the speaker, after having realized that he has unknowingly crossed the Alps and missed the much-awaited visual experience of the alpine setting, comes face to face with the power of Imagination.⁵⁸ What still needs to be emphasized, however, is the fact that the realization of the human mind's superiority over the sensible world therein described represents only a fleeting moment of apparent cognitive disorientation ("I was lost as in a cloud") that is rapidly overcome as the traveller resumes his descent into the gorge of Gondo in section 6c (*The Prelude* 6.529). After all, as powerful and awe-inspiring as the discovery of Imagination might have been, Wordsworth admits in 6c that "The dull and heavy slackening that ensued / Upon those tidings ... Was *soon* dislodged" (6.549-551, emphasis added). As Hartman remarks, despite "this recognition, Wordsworth ... bend[s] back the energy of his mind and of his poem to nature" in this section, since he recognizes that the natural world is the primordial and unavoidable entity that fostered this realization in the first place (Hartman 39).

Hartman sees the Mont Blanc episode as a tripartite experience whose "tertiary effect ... finally reach[es] nature, when the soul assured of inner or independent sources of strength goes out from and of itself" only to return to the suspended journey and reunite with the surrounding natural environment (17). There is no supernatural quality or

⁵⁷ I am using here Hartman's original subdivision of this sequence also adopted by Liu: 6a, the crossing of the Alps (ll.488- 524), 6b, the apostrophe to Imagination (ll.525-547) and 6c, the descent through the gorge of Gondo (ll.549-572).

⁵⁸ An illuminating analysis of this section of the Mont Blanc episode is offered by Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime* where he shows that here the lyrical "I" is displaced by the overpowering effects of the sublime experience and the concomitant recognition of the power of Imagination which – due to the obliteration of authorial presence – is received as an "unfathered vapour." (*The Prelude* 6.527)

transcendental power in the “gloomy Pass” where the speaker hikes after his encounter with Imagination (*The Prelude* 6.554). Abrams’ comment on nature as described in Book 12 may be applied to the gorge of Gondo section as well, since here too “[t]his ‘new world’ is simply the ordinary world of ‘life’s every-day appearances,’ which has been renovated by the interplay of mind and nature” but which still retains its organic qualities (*Natural Supernaturalism* 337). Wordsworth’s realization of the power of Imagination therefore grants him not only a deeper appreciation for the human mind, but also a more refined insight into the complexity of the natural world which reveals its self-regenerating and self-governed character. In fact, during his descent through the “narrow chasm” Wordsworth is met with another startling realization:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And every where along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn ...
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind (*The Prelude* 6.553, 556-568)

It is difficult to ascertain whether the “one mind” that is responsible for the natural features of this alpine scenery is the poet’s mind, a power in nature, or the all-inclusive Coleridgean concept of “the one Life” but what is certain is that in these lines Wordsworth presents different natural phenomena – as opposed or unrelated as they may

seem – as being mutually dependent on and in close reciprocation with each other (“The Eolian Harp” l.26).

Nature’s autonomy is best represented in the decaying woods whose deterioration provides the very means for their survival, as well as in the only apparent disorganization of the thwarting winds that is largely responsible for the morphological qualities of the valley and its rich ecosystem. As Collings insightfully notes, in this section “nature becomes its own scene of destruction while remaining itself” because it is “at once permanence and change, security and chaos, creation and deluge” (Collings 194). More importantly, nature in the gorge is described as a system that functions efficiently even without or, more precisely, because of the absence of human intermission. The only human presence is a group of hikers, among whom the speaker, that descends the narrow pass without disrupting its natural processes but actually becoming an integral part of the landscape: “The brook and road / Were fellow-travellers . . . And with them did we journey several hours” (*The Prelude* 6.553-555). In this respect, the Mont Blanc episode reproduces a Kantian moment not only for the realization of the human mind’s sovereignty over the natural world but, more importantly, for the notion that the moment of perceived mental superiority over the sensible world is embedded within a much larger understanding of nature as a self-organized system on which the human being is ultimately dependent. At the same time, these sections of the *Prelude* demonstrate that Wordsworth’s pre-environmental sensibility is entirely contingent on highly aesthetic poetic language and imagery, and that his ecological message is thus intimately tied to his belief in the power of aesthetics to introduce consequential changes in man’s ethical relations.

Epilogue

One of the fundamental arguments I have explored at different stages of this study, and that I wish to further elaborate here, involves the role of the arts in determining the human relation to the natural world. As we have seen, many of Rousseau and Wordsworth's imaginative works indicate that the most meaningful experience of nature is obtained through the mediation of art – a position upheld by several of their successors during the Romantic period. In other words, it is only when we engage with artistic representations of the physical environment, at a safe remove from the elements, that we can develop a critical appreciation for nature. John Keats conveys this point with remarkable rhetorical force in a section of "I Stood Tip-toe upon a Little Hill," where he praises Apollo for the gift of poetry. Here, Keats maintains that metrical composition offers the highest means to proclaim the underlying value of natural aesthetics. After a lengthy celebration of the sensible objects that populate the surrounding landscape, the speaker asserts that the true beauty of the earth is best revealed through the medium of art:

In the calm grandeur of a sober line,
We see the waving of the mountain pine;
And when a tale is beautifully staid,
We feel the safety of a hawthorn glade:
When it is moving on luxurious wings,
The soul is lost in pleasant smotherings:
Fair dewy roses brush against our faces,

And flowering laurels spring from diamond vases. ("I Stood Tip-toe" 127-134)

Keats suggests that poetry has the unique power to stimulate an intellectual confrontation with nature that uncovers its true aesthetic character, and which would otherwise be difficult to obtain while in unmediated fusion with the environment. Almost paradoxically then, poetry allows us to secure a distance from the physical world in order to attain the fullest, most sensuous and satisfying experience of nature.

Similarly, in "Sleep and Poetry," Keats recognizes the importance of establishing a direct contact with the physical environment through the continued exposure to its constituents, but admits that the ultimate knowledge of nature resides in poetry. As the speaker begins to unravel his poetic program, he posits nature as one of his principal sources of inspiration. In fact, in the attempt to refine his creative skills, he considers kneeling "Upon some mountain-top," until he may feel "A glowing splendor round about [him] hung, / And echo back the voice of [poetry's] own tongue" (Sleep and Poetry 50-52). In typical Wordsworthian fashion, the speaker suggests that he will learn proper poetic expression through the communion with the sensible world because nature conceals a language that is suitable for metric composition. Yet, in his search for poetic adequacy, Keats ultimately invokes "Poesy," as he is aware that only art can provide all-encompassing insight into the nature of the world. (53) He hopes that by devoting himself completely to poetry, he will obtain "the fair / Visions of all places" and receive access to the "eternal book" that will teach him the secrets of the earth. From this perspective, only poetry can capture the true meaning and value of natural objects such as "an enchanted grot," or "a green hill," that set the stage for much of Keats' verse. (76-77) These examples show that the Romantic mind acknowledges the vital contribution of aesthetics

in determining man's relation to the natural world, and that the full import of natural aesthetics is uncovered only by establishing a critical distance from the physical environment.

Although critical interest in the topic of natural aesthetics has declined since the late eighteenth century, the Romantic concept of nature has continued to influence in significant ways the course of aesthetic theory. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno articulates a view of natural beauty that reveals a profound indebtedness to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, as well as an underlying Romantic sensibility. In a discussion on the relation between art and nature, Adorno reiterates the view that the aesthetic appreciation for the natural world requires a type of detachment from the environment which he equates with historical consciousness. "Without historical remembrance," Adorno maintains, "there would be no beauty" because the assessment of beauty is contingent on the viewer's ability to situate the aesthetic object within its historical context. (Adorno 65) This premise allows him to state that "Times in which nature confronts man overpoweringly allow no room for natural beauty," thus arguing for the importance of mediation in the human confrontation with the physical environment. (65) Adorno is here arguably thinking of Kant's treatment of the dynamical sublime, in which the absence of immediate fear is a necessary condition for the attainment of the sublime experience, and presupposes a certain degree of separation from the aesthetic object.⁵⁹ In order to further elaborate his point, Adorno mentions the example of rural communities that derive their sustenance and livelihoods directly from the earth. He contends that "as is well known,

⁵⁹ See "On the Dynamically Sublime in Nature," where Kant states that "Someone who is afraid can [not] judge about the sublime in nature" because "it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended." (*Critique of Judgment* 5:261)

agricultural occupations, in which nature as it appears is an immediate object of action, allow little appreciation for landscape.” (65) In fact, since the land constitutes their primary source of profit, agricultural societies cannot easily assume the kind of critical distance that is conducive to aesthetic activity. Adorno does not explicitly comment on the role of the arts in uncovering the aesthetic character of the natural world, but by conceiving of natural aesthetics as dependent on the human separation from the environment – either physical, intellectual, or both – he defends a philosophical position that originated in the early stages of the Romantic Movement. Equally importantly, Adorno refuses to treat natural beauty as subordinate to artistic beauty in the vein of Schelling and Hegel, thus restoring natural aesthetics to the privileged position it originally held in Kant’s *Third Critique*.

Natural aesthetics holds paramount importance also for contemporary French philosopher Michel Serres who, in his influential *Natural Contract*, argues for the need of alternative modes of interaction with the earth. Just as in the *Social Contract* Rousseau laid the foundations for modern political society, in *Natural Contract* Serres delineates a model for an ecological community of the new millennium that is committed to rectify its relations with the planet. After commenting on the longstanding history of violence inflicted on the world at the hands of mankind, Serres proposes to re-conceptualize the nature of our bond with the environment. “That means,” he explains, that “ we must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract . . . in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect” (Serres 38). Of the four principles mentioned here, “reciprocity” is evidently informed by an environmental sensibility, in that it begs for

terms of exchange with the earth that take into account its fundamental needs. The remaining three, however, bear aesthetic connotations and indicate that Serres' vision of modern ecological societies acknowledges the significant role of natural aesthetics in determining human attitudes towards the environment. In fact, with the notions of "contemplation" and "admiring attention," Serres points to the importance of developing an aesthetic appreciation for the natural world by means of a visual engagement with its constituents. He implies that a committed observation of the natural objects that make up the background of our daily lives can engender esteem and high regard for their underlying value. Conversely, the idea of "respect" has mainly ethical import but, in associations with the other principles, suggests that genuine consideration for the earth largely depends on aesthetic factors.

Serres conceives of natural aesthetics as the highest form of beauty available to mankind, and the finest template used by poets and painters alike to achieve artistic beauty and impart value to their works. In the section entitled "War, Peace," Serres argues that "nothing is as beautiful as the world," and that "nothing beautiful comes forth without this gracious giver of all splendor." (24) Indeed, the physical environment has historically offered men an imaginary platform to negotiate in artistic form the meaning of the human experience in and with the world. Serres instantiates this point by reminding us that in the *Odyssey* Homer "sings of rosy-fingered dawn" amidst "the atrocities of the Trojan War," thus finding relief from the dejected state of mankind in the aesthetic character of nature. (24) Similarly, Romantic painter Francisco de Goya conveys "pride [and] strength" in his illustrations of Spanish bulls in *La Tauromaquia*, and in so doing he resorts to the animal kingdom to explore the meaning of

quintessentially human emotions. (24) In this sense, nature and art are in a relation of mutual dependency because if the physical world inspires the production of art, the artistic use of the natural realm draws critical attention to its aesthetic qualities and inherent worth. Here, Serres also expresses concern for the increasingly high levels of pollution that are affecting the health of the planet, while also jeopardizing its aesthetic character. He worries about the state of natural beauty by noting that “the worldwide world today offers [nothing but] the painful face of mutilated beauty.” (24) The precarious condition of natural aesthetics inevitably calls into question the future of the arts, and their ability to capture what remains of the magnificence of the earth. The underlying implication seems to be that, if the arts can no longer convey the beauty of the world due to its damaged character, future generations will grow more insensitive towards the planet that hosts them. Understandably then, when Serres presents his views on raising children in the closing section of his treatise, he stresses the necessity of awakening their interest in “the beauties of the world,” because only by learning to value natural aesthetics will humanity be able to save the world, themselves, and the arts. (95)

More recently, Lawrence Buell treated the topic of natural aesthetics in a paper entitled “Environmental Imagination at a Crossroads,” delivered at the University of Washington on October 31, 2013.⁶⁰ I wish to briefly reflect on Buell’s presentation here as it strikes me as one of the most insightful interventions in the field of ecocriticism, and an excellent point of departure to evaluate the legacy of Romanticism. Unlike many proponents of environmentalism, Buell is optimistic about the possibility of undoing the damage we have inflicted to the world over the last two centuries. In fact, he prefaces his

⁶⁰ Since Buell’s paper has not been published yet, I am using the recorded version of his talk for my quotations.

argument by stating that we may be in the early stages of a “new Copernican revolution in environmental ethics,” which could significantly reorient man’s attitude towards the earth and its non-human inhabitants. (Buell) Buell substantiates this point by mentioning three recent advances in the collective imaginary that denote a clear shift in environmental sensibility. First, he claims that since the mid 1900s mankind has become aware of its capacity, forced by the nuclear age, “to inflict world-scale destruction” and jeopardize the future of the world. (Buell) He believes that mankind, by having gained full consciousness of its destructive powers, has developed a higher degree of responsibility for its actions and an increasing desire to correct them. Secondly, Buell notes that since the rehabilitation of the natural world can only occur by very slow increments over an extensive period of time, we now hold future generations accountable for “ward[ing] off environmental disasters that haven’t yet occurred.” (Buell) This preventive approach shows that we have understood the magnitude of the problem at hand, as well as the important role that the education of younger generations will play in obtaining better environmental health. Lastly, he claims that contemporary society has finally expanded “the arena of moral consideration beyond Immanuel Kant’s ‘kingdom of ends’ reserved to humans only,” so as to include other sentient beings. (Buell) As I argued in chapter three of this study, Kant uses this phrase in the *Critique of Judgment* in the context of an intricate discussion on morality, in which he claims man’s superiority over nature strictly on moral grounds.⁶¹ In this sense, Kant elaborates a much more environmentally sensitive argument than is generally thought. Buell’s remark nonetheless illustrates a notable shift in common opinion that has allowed for the extension not only

⁶¹ See section IV, entitled “Inferences,” in chapter three of this work.

of basic rights, but also of the privileges of personhood, to several non-human species. Despite his overall positive attitude, Buell reminds us that “environmental crisis ... are crisis in slow motion,” whose solutions are often equally lengthy, and that any “excess of impatience and frustration” could compromise even our best intentions. (Buell)

Buell’s main undertaking in “Environmental Imagination at a Crossroads” is to explore the contribution of the arts and the humanities in promoting the development of “a better planetary environmental order.” (Buell) While he agrees that specialists in the scientific fields tend to have “practical answers to the question of the environment,” he believes that the humanities “have a much more foundational role to play,” which lies “in the power of stories, words, image, feeling [and] conviction.” (Buell) He maintains that what the sciences lack in order to obtain solid results is “a coherent vision of the common environmental good” that is compelling enough to generate “sustained public support.” (Buell) This vision can however be developed by the arts, as they possess the unique ability to engage our emotions in such a way as to produce significant changes in our ethical views. In fact, unlike scientific disciplines such as ecology or system biology, the arts can bring nature “into people’s everyday images, into the stories they tell” so that “its beauty and its suffering [may] be seen and focused on.” (Buell) Buell singles out aesthetics as the particular property of the arts by means of which a change in environmental ethics can be attained. In order to articulate this point, he initially comments on the power of aesthetics to shape public opinion and raise interest even in the least employable or profitable areas of the earth:

How in the world do you turn a bog, or a fen, or a swamp, into a wetland?

How do you muster support to turn waste places into sanctuaries, places

considered valuable only when transformed, drained, filled, what not?

[O]bviously you need hydrologists, life scientists, regional planners, ...

but you need aesthetics too. It took a transformation of collective values as well as economics and policies for wetland protection as we know it to become one of 20th century environmentalism's success stories. (Buell, my emphasis)

A natural environment that is generally considered worthless can only acquire positive connotations and become universally valuable when it elicits a positive aesthetic response. Buell then mentions other examples of ecological progress in order to further emphasize the importance of aesthetics, such as the recent response to the campaign for the extension of drilling on Alaska's north slope (Buell). He notes that the devastation of this area has been contained to a significant degree thanks to the overwhelming "power of photography, film, and TV to dramatize its charisma" and unveil its aesthetic value. (Buell) This shows that the artistic treatment of nature can and does affect public attitudes, influence human behavior, and implement much needed regulations for the preservation of the environment.

After drawing attention to the role of aesthetics in contemporary environmental politics, Buell wishes to identify the main characteristics that environmentally conscious art ought to possess in order to foster a much-needed "new Copernican revolution."

(Buell) Instead of attempting to articulate an innovative theory of art, Buell proposes to consider the techniques used by existing works of art that display a genuine concern for the natural world. Without focusing on individual works, he enumerates "five resources on which environmental imagination across the spectrum of different genres has drawn,

in order to unsettle consciousness [and] ethical complacency” (Buell). I think it is important to reiterate these artistic strategies here because, as I intend to show, they shed light on the important contribution of the Romantic movement in shaping modern environmental sensibility. The first of these is the dramatization of non-human actors, such as the telling of a story “from the point of view of [an] animal that coax ... listeners to dis-identify from their own humanness [and] see the human world as uncanny, alien, threatening.” (Buell) This, Buell maintains, is a simple but powerful device that allows the writer to tell the story from the vantage point of the historically underprivileged other, while downplaying “the level of human involvement” and significantly limiting the power of human agency. (Buell) The second device is the dramatization of “the geobiotic interdependence” between human beings and other life forms, so as to highlight the fact that “bodies and personhoods are not as distinguishable from their environments as the mind tends to think.” (Buell) Artistic works that display this feature treat “human bodies as indistinguishable from their environments, for better or for worse,” in the attempt to promote a sense of bonding with the earth. In fact, it is only by creating a narrative that better accounts for the still largely overlooked mutual reliance between human and non-human organisms that we can develop healthier modes of interaction with the planet.

The third technique consists in what Buell calls “toxic discourse,” a type of discourse that identifies human-produced waste as the primary cause of global environmental change. An example of this are “stories ... that evoke the fear of one’s everyday environment having been poisoned by anthropogenic [pollutants],” such as gas emissions or chemical refuse. (Buell) Toxic discourse is a particularly powerful device in

that it calls into question our use of natural resources and our methods of disposing of unwanted material, while also inviting us to think of alternative ways to exist and operate in the world. The fourth device is the “evocation of [nature] as time-scape,” which stresses nature’s mutability over time and its vulnerability to external factors. (Buell) Buell claims that, by treating the environment as time sensitive, we can make a stronger claim against the disastrous effects of global warming, which are destined to worsen exponentially if left unaddressed. Of the first four artistic devices Buell addresses in his paper, I like to think of the first two as motivational in character, whereas the last two as corrective. In fact, the dramatization of non-human actors and the focus on mankind’s geo-biotic affiliations invite us to reconsider the value we have attributed to human life by reflecting on the complexity of our bond with the physical world. Conversely, toxic discourse and the emphasis on nature’s temporality point to the aspects of our present conduct that either need to be revised or drastically changed. I believe that this balance is representative of Buell’s optimistically cautious approach to the difficult issues involving the environment. Lastly, Buell mentions “environmental futurology” as the fifth device employed in environmental art. This term refers to a type of discourse that depicts possible environmental scenarios of the future and illustrates their potential repercussions on the world and its inhabitants. According to Buell, science fiction is the genre that is best adapted to dramatize environmental crisis on a “planetary scale,” as it has often imagined natural “catastrophes before science did.” (Buell)

As his repeated references to film and photography seem to suggest, Buell is mainly thinking of contemporary art when outlining the five most prominent resources of the environmental imagination. In his paper, he never mentions works from previous

eras, except for Thoreau's *Walden*, nor is he interested in tracing the origins of these artistic devices in our literary heritage. However, I think it is important to recognize that the Romantic text already made ample use of these strategies, either as presented by Buell or in a prototypical form that reflects its pre-environmental background. Obviously, the Romantic writer lacked a modern understanding of the environment, or a fully developed ecological theory, so that it would be inaccurate to assume that the use of these strategies in the late eighteenth century was motivated by similar environmental concerns. In fact, while contemporary artists have been employing them to support more or less specific environmental policies, the Romantic writer's intention seems to be that of celebrating the value of the natural world and its aesthetic qualities despite the lack of fully reliable scientific evidence. I would like to briefly comment on a few Romantic texts that in my opinion display some of the artistic devices Buell describes in his paper, so as to suggest that the Romantic representation of nature has deeply influenced contemporary artistic expressions of the natural world, as well as the environmental movement as a whole. As I do this, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive reading of these texts, nor will I be able to fully explore the ways in which the Romantic use of these strategies differs from that of contemporary artists. Instead, my main goal is to point to the still widely unacknowledged continuity in our artistic and theoretical treatment of nature since the Romantic period, and stress the vital contribution of Romantic literature in providing an ethical foundation for modern environmental politics. Clearly this is a complex undertaking that I can only partly address here, and that I shall pursue in greater detail in another context.

Romantic literature has notoriously found in the animal kingdom one of its most compelling sources of artistic inspiration. From William Blake's symbolic representation of the lamb and the tiger, to Percy Bysshe Shelley's highly aestheticized portrayal of the skylark, the Romantic mind has always been fascinated with the non-human other, by virtue of its undeniable otherness and its unsettling humanness. Coleridge's "Ode to a Young Ass" offers a viable example of what Buell calls "dramatization of non-human actors" by centering on the deplorable physical and emotional state of a working animal. While it is true that this poem is not told from the point of view of the young ass, it nonetheless begs the reader to consider the world from a non-human perspective and engage with fundamental questions regarding animal sentience and animal abuse. Here, Coleridge attempts to prompt an emotional reaction in the reader by depicting the young ass as a pitiful creature who has been exploited and objectified since an early age. In fact, this animal is described as a "Poor little Foal" and a "Child of Misery," whose entire existence consists in hard labor and a "thousand aches" that are inadequately rewarded with a "starving meal" ("To a Young Ass" l.1, 10, 11). In the first half of the poem, the speaker focuses entirely on the animal's psychological condition, so as to emphasize his status as a sentient being and his typically human response to inhuman circumstances. His captivity causes him to live in a state of perpetual fear and dejection, which are only exacerbated by his "dulled spirits" and "sad heart." (5, 13) Additionally, he seems to suffer from an intense form of depression that forces him to bend his "moveless" head "earthward" in anticipation of a much harsher future foreshadowed by the figure of his chained mother. (8) In the second half of the poem, the speaker mentions the young ass's master – who is similarly afflicted by "Woe" and "Half famish'd in a land of Luxury" –

thus hinting at a much larger problem that bears socio-political implications. (22, 20) But he immediately shifts his attention back to the animal, whom he wishes to free in the “Dell / Of Peace and mild Equality,” where he would be allowed to “toss [his] heels in gamesome play” and “frisk about” in a pristine environment. (31, 32) By doing so, Coleridge drastically limits the extent of human involvement in the poem while foregrounding the figure of the animal, which becomes an emblem of human brutality to be denounced and condemned.

Romantic literature employs forms of “toxic discourse” that approximate Buell’s definition of this concept, but that are clearly not grounded in the kind of scientific data which is available today. Although the negative effects of anthropogenic waste on the environment were becoming increasingly noticeable at the end of the eighteenth century – especially near large urban centers such as London – this correlation was not yet supported by solid scientific documentation. The Romantic use of toxic discourse is therefore only based on the unsubstantiated belief that certain human behaviors, such as aggressive deforestation, industrialization and warfare, might have had detrimental repercussions on the natural world. William Wordsworth’s “Salisbury Plain” presents an interesting example of toxic discourse in that it depicts a barren environment that has deteriorated as a result of ongoing wars. Composed shortly before the outbreak of the war between France and England and after Wordsworth witnessed first handedly the events of the Revolution, this poem describes a “sickly” landscape whose “troubled west . . . red with stormy fire” and “wastes of corn that stretched without a bound” suggest that in a state of war it is not only mankind that suffers and dies, but also the very habitat that hosts it (“Salisbury Plain” 119, 37, 44). In fact, unrelenting combat has transformed this

area once populated by clusters of fresh “cowslip” and “teeming” hazelnut trees into a “forlorn” and “vacant” plain whose “wet cold ground” is no longer able to sustain life. (241, 242, 61, 62, 63). This endangered environment is arguably the focal point of the composition because, as Hartman remarks, it “is more intriguing than its people. The latter are almost aids to intensify our emotion for this landscape [that] sends a strange comfort of desolation into the heart” and which, more importantly, begs us to consider the natural consequences of armed conflicts. (Hartman 118) This does not amount to saying that in “Salisbury Plain” Wordsworth is motivated by environmental concerns, or that he shows a modern understanding of the type of land contamination that occurs during wartime, but rather that he identifies the underlying interdependency between human activity and nature which has become a major concern of contemporary environmental discourse.

Although the use of “environmental futurology” in Romantic literature is uncommon, an excellent example of this type of discourse can be found in Lord Byron’s “Darkness.” This poem accurately conforms to Buell’s definition of this artistic device by describing a natural catastrophe that produces dramatic results on a global scale. Byron wrote “Darkness” in 1816, after a succession of volcanic eruptions in the Dutch West Indies sent a large pall of black smoke and debris over northern Europe, causing the temporary disappearance of the sun and a drastic drop in temperatures. Inspired by these geological events that plunged the European population in a general state of panic, this poem imagines a similar natural cataclysm and its repercussions on the world and its inhabitants. In the opening line, the speaker declares that a vision came to him in a dream “which was not all a dream,” thus granting a prophetic value and a sense of urgency to

his account. (“Darkness” 1) This vision tells of the sudden death of the sun, which casts the earth in a complete state of darkness and puts every life form at risk. In these tragic circumstances, men begin to burn their possessions, including their “habitations,” in order to make beacons and watch fires that will optimize their chances of survival. (12) But as entire cities are “consumed” and civilization falls apart, they are overcome by madness: “some lay down / And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest / Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled; / And others ...looked up / With mad disquietude on the dull sky” (24-29) Nature is equally affected by this planetary crisis as “Forests [are] set on fire,” “wild birds” shriek on the ground, wild animals become “tame and tremulous,” and vipers lose their venom. (19, 32, 35) As life is completely eliminated from the earth, its surface becomes a non-space:

The world was void,
The populous and the powerful – was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless –
A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay.
The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirred within their silent depths;
...
The winds were withered in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish’d; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them – She was the universe. (69-82)

It is difficult to ascertain whether Byron really believed that the climatic anomalies of 1816 could have provoked a similar type of apocalyptic scenario, and if his treatment of

the natural world in this poem is informed by environmental concerns. From a modern perspective, however, “Darkness” bears striking prophetic connotations in that it portrays many of the natural aberrations that are unfortunately afflicting the world today.

The two remaining resources of environmental art – the dramatization of the geobiotic interdependence between mankind and nature, and the evocation of nature as timescape – are much more commonly used in Romantic literature, where they however lack modern environmental implications. As I demonstrated in the context of this study⁶², the former concept informs most of Rousseau’s imaginative works and is a defining feature of the reverie. In fact, this aesthetic experience of nature normally results in a heightened awareness of the human dependency on the physical environment and its constituents. For instance, in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau repeatedly hints at the fact that later in life he managed to preserve his mental health thanks to a continuous aesthetic engagement with the natural world, which reinvigorated his mood and counteracted his depression. This text equally points to the negative effects of human activity on the environment as when, in Walk 7, Rousseau mentions the presence of a stoking mill in the Swiss Alps, which emanates a “clicking noise” that interferes with the sounds of the forest. (*Reveries* 118) On the other hand, the concept of nature as time sensitive is well illustrated in the Arab Dream section of Book 5 of the *Prelude*, which I have also discussed in this study.⁶³ Here, Wordsworth imagines a violent natural cataclysm that causes inestimable damage to the earth and its inhabitants, jeopardizing in particular the future of human civilizations. While mankind’s ability to restore its ascendancy over the

⁶² See, in particular, Chapter Two, pp. 93 and ff.

⁶³ See Chapter Four, pp. 192 and ff., for an analysis of the pre-environmental implications of this passage.

world remains unsure, Wordsworth reassures us that nature would not only survive – its “living Presence still subsist” – but also return to its original state after a “slow” and painstaking process. (*The Prelude*, Book 5, l. 33, 36) The notion that nature would regenerate itself according to unfathomable rhythms, and repopulate the earth as it once did before the natural disaster, stresses its mutability over time and its adaptability to different environmental circumstances.

With these examples, I hope to have shown that the strategies of environmental art that Buell identifies in his paper, and which he hopes will be even more prominently featured in the future, are conceptually rooted in the Romantic era. This suggests that contemporary art still largely relies on Romantic aesthetics and that Romantic views of nature have continuously informed our imaginative treatment of the environment. The recent advances in environmental ethics, which have occurred also thanks to the proliferation of artworks grounded in the Romantic concept of nature, suggest that the latter has made a positive contribution to the development of modern environmentalism, and that it may well be of further use in times to come. This position contradicts the widespread opinion among ecocritics that the type of natural aesthetics theorized by the Romantics is antithetical to a modern system of environmental ethics and is to be held responsible for most of the ecological problems that are affecting the planet today. I believe that if the arts are to play a role in effecting a substantial change in the world – and if environmental art more specifically is to contribute to the improvement of our ethical relations with nature – aesthetics will have to be at the forefront of this project. It is in fact by eliciting an emotional response in the public, with the help of the persuasive power of imagery and artistic device, that the arts will prompt a general concern for

nature and promote ethical attitudes that are conducive to better environmental conditions. As I have argued in this study, Romantic literature endorses a highly compelling ethical view of nature by exploring not only the aesthetically pleasing features of the physical world but, more importantly, the aesthetic reactions that these produce in the individual. In this sense, the Romantic mind understood that an ethical revolution could not have occurred by promoting a highly unrealistic return to nature, or by fetishizing a holistic fusion with its constituents, but that it is rather contingent on the benevolent feelings that nature inspires in the self and which reveal its true underlying value. The time seems to have come to acknowledge the important contribution of Romantic literature in generating a genuine appreciation for nature, which has been an instrumental factor in the development of a modern environmental sensibility, and to address its unfavorable status in contemporary ecocritical discourse. After all, Romantic literature has shown us that nature, to say it with Wordsworth, is “a world of ready wealth” which blesses our minds and our hearts, so that we may be ready to “walk forth into the light of things” (“The Tables Turned” l. 17, 13)

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