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Soul-Life: Richard Jefferies' Mystical Vision of Nature

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Abstract: This paper examines Richard Jefferies' contribution to the study of nature mysticism. I argue that the study of nature mysticism can be utilized as a valuable source of insight to cultivate a more ecocentric response to the ecological crisis. Historically, the study of mysticism in the West has been shaped by a monotheistic bias that tends to marginalize the teachings of nature mystics. I seek to redress this lacuna in the field by calling attention to the understudied teachings of the English mystic and author, Richard Jefferies. I claim that Jefferies' spiritual autobiography, *The Story of My Heart* ([1883] 2014) presents a compelling vision of nature mysticism that challenges the reader to reflect critically on conventional understandings of God, body, and time/being. Most significantly, I argue that Jefferies' concept of "soul-life" can be interpreted as an ontological category characterized by an intellectual and moral sensitivity towards the wonders of nature. Jefferies believed that the cultivation of soul-life is transformative and key to unlocking the full potential of our relationship to the earth and each other.

Keywords: Richard Jefferies; nature mysticism; ecology; soul-life; wonder; anthropocentric; ontology; social justice; neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

"I want to know the soul of the flowers" (Jefferies 1895, p. 30). These are the words of a man transformed by the wonders of nature. They are also the words of a dying man. They are taken from one of Richard Jefferies' final essays, "Nature and Books", which he dictated to his beloved wife Jessie as he lay bed-ridden, slowly wasting away from tuberculosis. At the age of 38, he would die defeated, unknown, and penniless. A bitter end for a man who strived so earnestly to celebrate the flesh, body, and vital energies of the natural world. With perhaps the exception of a handful of scholars and a modest but dedicated reader base, the writings of Jefferies remain largely unknown outside of England. This is a shame, given that his mystical vision of nature is an invaluable source of ecological insight. We need such ecological insight now more than ever. The ecological crisis is the greatest existential threat that humanity has ever faced. The anthropocentric path of consumption that currently dominates the ideological order of the world is leading us towards planetary catastrophe. The only way we are going to stave off this disaster is to fundamentally change our actions, which will require a confrontation with a profound ontological question: how do we perceive ourselves as *being in the world*? Is nature here for me, or am I here for nature?

It is easy for the cynic to scoff at Jefferies and dismiss his desire to "know the soul of the flowers" as sentimental rubbish. Such a romantic vision is a bit too odd and a little too naïve to contribute anything of value to a serious discussion about the ecological crisis. The concrete political and economic measures required to mount a serious response to the ecological crisis need to be grounded in a rational framework, one that is realistic and far removed from Jefferies' "magical thinking". The problem with this argument, however, is that this rational mindset has shaped social policy for decades now, yet every year continues to get hotter than the last.[1] Despite the best efforts of our finest scientists, teachers, and activists, we have continued to fail future generations by refusing to adequately address the

ecological crisis. In fact, the crisis is accelerating.[2] Of course, I am certainly not suggesting that we should abandon the scientific approach or lessen our activism. Quite the contrary. What I am suggesting is that this conventional "rational" approach can be enhanced by including a more engaged dialogue with the findings of the humanities. The problem we are facing is complex, and we need a more integrated or holistic approach, one that can accommodate both reason and emotion, both body and soul. This is not a new idea. Consider, for example, the teachings of the Catholic priest and author Thomas Berry, who helped pioneer the field of religion and ecology. Berry was adamant that a comprehensive response to the ecological crisis requires a well-rounded appreciation for the findings of both science and spirituality (Berry 2009). Today, scholars like Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Bron Taylor, Leslie Sponsel, and scores of others have dedicated their careers to highlighting the various ways religion and spirituality shape and are shaped by our relationship with nature. Environmental lawyer and co-founder of the National Resources Defense Council, Gus Speth, cuts to the core of the matter: "Our environmental discourse has thus far been dominated by lawyers, scientists, and economists. Now, we need to hear a lot more from the poets, preachers, philosophers, and psychologists" (Speth 2017, p. 9). Why do we need to hear more from the humanities? Speth explains: "I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystems collapse, and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science, we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. . . and to deal with those, we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we, (Lawyers) and scientists, don't know how to do that".[3] In other words, our response or lack thereof to the ecological crisis is an ethical issue, and moral questions are largely the domain of the humanities. Science and technology can only take us so far. Perhaps to go further, we need to immerse ourselves more deeply into the realm of wonder, imagination, and affect and boldly seek out the hidden reasons of the heart. From this perspective, perhaps it is a little less preposterous to suggest that our capacity to save the world ultimately hinges on our desire to "know the soul of the flowers".

I suggest that the English author and mystic Richard Jefferies' (1848–1887) concept of "soul-life" presents an ecocentric vision of nature that can be utilized to enhance the way we address the ecological crisis. I argue that soul-life can be interpreted as an ontological category characterized by a mystical sensitivity towards the wonders of nature. Jefferies believed that such a mystical state of *being in nature* is transformative and key to unlocking the full potential of our relationship to the earth and each other. This mystical/ecocentric insight, I claim, produces an intellectual and moral power that can be harnessed to inspire a more wonderous worldview to counter the ideology of neoliberalism[4] that has normalized the greed, apathy, and overall disenchantment that currently define our relationship to nature.

My paper consists of three sections that unfold as follows: First, I provide a brief introduction to the study of nature mysticism, focusing on the ways in which it has been marginalized by mainstream religious discourses. In particular, I suggest that the normalization of the world religions paradigm (WRP) within the field of religious studies has played a hegemonic role in devaluing the teachings of nature mysticism in the West. In short, nature mysticism does not meet the standard of what constitutes an "authentic" form of mysticism because it does not conform to the beliefs of (Christian) monotheism. This WRP model of the mystical is problematic because it is not only intellectually dubious, but its scope is too myopic to address the mystical significance of the ecological crisis. In direct contestation of this standard model of the mystical, I claim we need to hear a lot more from nature mystics, especially radical ones like Richard Jefferies. Hence, in the second section of my paper, I explore Jefferies' mystical vision of nature as represented in his most influential work, *The Story of My Heart* (Jefferies 2014). The core concept shaping Jefferies understanding of nature mysticism in *The Story of My Heart* is what he calls "soul-life", which refers to a mystical state of *being in wonder* with nature. This state of mystical wonder not only enhances Jefferies relationship to nature, but his search for soul-life transforms the

way he thinks about God, body, and time/being. Practically speaking, the cultivation of soul-life is fundamentally about spending time in nature. Breathing in the air, basking in the sun, feet on the grass, enjoying the bare fact of being alive. Such a wonderful attitude might begin in nature, but it does not end there. It continues with Jefferies' call for social reform. In the third and final section, I discuss how Jefferies' critique of market capitalism, class, and greed resonates with the contemporary concerns of the environmental justice movement.[5] Taken as a whole, his ecological and social commentary presents us with an opportunity to reflect upon new ways of thinking about the relationship between social justice and ecological flourishing.

2. Nature Mysticism

Long before the familiar gods we know today emerged, our prehistoric ancestors turned to nature as the ultimate source of spiritual meaning. In a sense, we have always been nature mystics. Whether it be the ancient animal bones found in ritual burial sites or the symbolic animal paintings that adorn the caves of Altamira and Lascaux, our earliest spiritual expressions are entwined with nature. It is not for nothing that both Max Muller and E.B. Taylor, two of the founding figures of the field of religious studies, trace the origins of religion to humanity's desire to explain the workings of the natural world.[6] Stated simply, nature shapes our spiritual sensibilities. And the study of mysticism is no different.

Consider, for example, the origins of the term mysticism. It is widely believed to be derived from the Greek verb "muo", meaning "to close", or more specifically, to close the eyes and lips (Bouyer 1980, p. 43). This injunction to close the eyes and lips refers to the oaths of secrecy associated with the sacred rites of the mystery religions of ancient Greece, the most popular of which was the Eleusinian cult of Demeter. Although it is often understated within contemporary religious discourses, it is telling that the earliest known reference to mysticism in the West is tied to the worship of a quintessential mother-earth Goddess.

Mysticism is a social construct, and the meanings we attribute to it are a product of cultural conditioning. We are wise here to heed the words of Richard King:

> Virtually all contemporary studies of mysticism fail to appreciate the sense in which notions of 'the mystical' (including those that are adopted in the studies themselves) are cultural and linguistic constructions dependent upon a web of interlocking definitions, attitudes and discursive processes, which themselves are tied to particular forms of life and historically specific practices. Not only are contemporary notions of the 'mystical' subject to the cultural presuppositions of the day, they are also informed by and overlap with a long history of discursive processes, continuities and discontinuities and shifts in both meaning and denotation. Just as these various meanings and applications of 'the mystical' have changed over time, so too have the variety of attitudes towards them and evaluations of their importance differed according to circumstance. Defining the mystical then is never a 'purely academic' activity (in the sense in which one means 'of no real consequence'), nor can it ever be completely divorced from the historical remains of past definitions of the term. (King 1999, p. 9)

Hence, it is important to consider how established understandings of "mysticism" normalize specific ideological assumptions about power, authority, and issues of inclusion.

Today, the common usage of the term "mysticism" is primarily a product of the material, historical, and cultural conditions of Western modernity. The field of psychology has played a central role in defining this modern approach to the study of mysticism. Following the work of Michel de Certeau (1992), Jefferey J. Kripal claims that "whereas premodern mysticism was historically embedded deeply in traditional forms of liturgical, scriptural, and doctrinal contexts, modernity has witnessed an increasing deracination of the mystical from the traditional forms of authority and faith and an ever-increasing psychologization of its meanings" (Kripal 2001, p. 10). Perhaps one of the most influential figures to hasten this move to psychologize the study of mysticism is the American philosopher William James

who famously outlined four defining characteristics of mystical consciousness: transiency, passivity, ineffability, and noetic quality (James 1958, p. 319). Of the four characteristics that James outlines, the noetic quality or "illumination" is particularly important because he was convinced it was "the essential mark of 'mystical' states" (James 1958, p. 341). According to James, illumination refers to a "highly specialized type of perception" that produces a sense of "enlargement, union, and emancipation" (Barnard 1997, p. 217). Ultimately, James reached the conclusion that mystical states of consciousness are valuable because they produce a unique and extraordinarily powerful kind of knowledge (illumination) that is profoundly transformative. Perhaps most significantly, if James' psychological model is correct, all human beings are mystics *in potentia* by virtue of the fact that we all have access to the same deep layers of mystical consciousness—regardless of one's religious affiliation. In a real sense, then, James' model naturalizes the study of mysticism.

The more traditional "religious" approach to the study of mysticism tends to lean more into metaphysics. Margaret Smith, for example, defines mysticism as "an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and attain a direct experience of God" (Smith 1980, p. 20). Evelyn Underhill refers to it as "the way of union with Reality" (Underhill 1995, p. 3). The notion of "union" with some higher principle or state of consciousness is a common feature of many definitions of mysticism. For example, W. T. Stace claims that the core characteristic of mystical experience is "an undifferentiated unity" (Stace 1960, p. 23). R. C. Zaehner defines mysticism in terms of "the union of the human soul with god" (Zaehner 1957, p. 74). Bernard McGinn claims that unitive language can be limiting and instead emphasizes the importance of God's presence in defining the mystical (McGinn 2006, p. xv). The problem with many of the definitions outlined above, however, is that they tend to exhibit a certain "essentialist" quality that harbors an implicit theistic bias. Hence, I adopt Jefferey Kripal's more pluralistic definition of "the mystical" as "a hidden dimension of human consciousness in which the dichotomies of normal awareness are transcended in an intense experience of unity or communion with a hidden reality or presence" (Kripal 1998, p. 20).

So where does nature mysticism fit in? F. C. Happold provides a succinct definition: "Nature-mysticism is characterized by a sense of the immanence of the One or God or soul in Nature" (Happold 1985, p. 43). In the West, nature mysticism is often conflated with the idea of pantheism or, in some instances, panentheism. Interestingly, the idea of a nature mystic that we have today did not really gain traction within popular culture until around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Prior to this time, nature mysticism tended to be associated with paganism and what early scholars pejoratively regarded as the "primitive" religious beliefs of Indigenous people. It was with the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and a little later the writings of the Romantic poets, like Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, that the idea of a nature mystic proper became fully fleshed out as a religious facet of the Western imagination. Nature for the Romantic was the driving force of spiritual inspiration and served as a sacred site of contact with the Divine (Goodbody 2013). This Romantic ethos would eventually spread to America, most prominently in the teachings of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and the other Transcendentalists (Albanese 2007, p. 171). Today, the spiritual roots of the modern environmental movement can be traced back to the mystical aspirations of the Romantics.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive and insightful scholarly accounts on the modern study of nature mysticism is Paul Marshall's *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World: Experiences & Explanations* (Marshall 2005). Marshall refers to nature mysticism, or "extrovertive mysticism", as a "transformed apprehension of the natural world", defined most often by the following key characteristics:

- unity with the world or some of its contents
- incorporation of the world into the self
- intuitive comprehension of the world
- a love that encompasses all things
- expansive vision of the world

- extraordinary beauty of the world
- luminous transfiguration of the environment
- an altered temporality that includes all times and places (Marshall 2005, p. 28).

As we can see from Marshall's list, the "nature mystical experience" shares many of the same characteristics as a traditional "religious" mystical experience. The core difference of course is the source of mystical meaning: religion or nature?

This tension between religion and nature is tied to an even larger dichotomy between culture and nature. It is widely accepted that this culture/nature dichotomy plays a pivotal role in the way we structure reality. Since at least the rise of the enlightenment this dichotomy has been deployed to justify a logic of domination that places (Western/Christian) culture above nature (White 2017, pp. 78–79). This logic of domination that underlies the culture/nature dichotomy was also deployed to justify the privileged status of the patriarchy and the abhorrent practices of slavery and colonization. Today, it continues to undermine the aims of environmental justice. Take for example the work of Melanie L. Harris, who draws on the insights of ecowomanism to highlight the "parallel oppressions suffered by black women and the earth" (Harris 2016, p. 6). Or consider the work of Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred, who both identify the insidious ways settler-colonialism has normalized the relationship between white Christian supremacy and harmful ecological practices (Deloria 1973; Alfred 2005). As an apparatus of state power, religion has been implicated in this "civilizing" project every step of the way, and consequently, this logic of domination has influenced the way mysticism is addressed in the West. This is all to say that the marginalization of nature mysticism in both the historical and contemporary field of religious studies is not just an academic exercise. Rather, it is the product of an ingrained cultural bias that draws on established sites of Western power and authority to preserve and perpetuate a particular worldview of the mystical that looks an awful lot like (Christian) monotheism.[7]

In his classic work *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957), R. C. Zaehner outlines an influential typology of the mystical that is emblematic of this religious (Christian/monotheistic) bias that I argue traditionally shapes the study of mysticism in the West.[8] Zaehner identifies three types of mysticism. The first is nature mysticism, which "sees the human self as encompassing all Nature, the subjective 'I' is merged into the cosmic All" (Zaehner 1957, p. 59). From a phenomenological perspective, there are typically three characteristics that define a "natural mystical experience" for Zaehner: First, a keen sense that "without and within are one;" second, a personal realization of the absurdity of death; and third, the transcendence of space and time (Zaehner 1957, p. 41). Zaehner's second category is "soul mysticism", which he characterizes as an experience of mystical isolation when the soul is absorbed into an impersonal and undifferentiated One that transcends space and time (Zaehner 1957, p. 59). He associates "soul mysticism" with the mystical traditions of the East. The final type of mysticism Zaehner identifies is theism, which he refers to as "the mysticism of the love of God" (ibid). Theistic mysticism, according to Zaehner, is a more authentic form of mysticism in comparison to nature and soul mysticism because, first, theistic mysticism privileges the central role of God's grace; and second, theistic mysticism recognizes the social applicability of love and thus offers a more sophisticated moral framework. And here we come to the heart of Zaehner's bias—namely, that mysticism proper can only be framed morally in relation to a transcendent God of love, or, more specifically, to the transcendent God of the Christian tradition. Essentially, Zaehner believes that theistic mysticism, or more specifically, Christian mysticism, is superior to nature mysticism (and soul mysticism) because it recognizes the moral imperative inherent to any authentic mystical state of consciousness. How else, asks Zaehner, are we to determine if a mystic is a saint or a scoundrel if not by the moral measure of how well they exemplify God's love? The nature mystic may experience something extraordinary in terms of accessing states of consciousness that were previously barred. However, they lack God; they lack grace; and thus, their vision of the mystical is at best solipsistic and, at worst, morally dubious.

The popularity of Zaehner's typology brings the biases of the field of mystical studies to the fore. Specifically, Zaehner adopts a clear hierarchical model of evaluation where monotheistic mysticism sits at the top, signaling its sovereign power. Beneath it is Eastern mysticism, which is ostensibly more tolerable than nature mysticism because it at least possesses some relatable dimensions, including institutional structures, sacred texts and rituals, and an elite class of religious "experts". At the bottom of the hierarchy is nature mysticism, the least authentic, and thus least valuable form of mysticism. Why? Because it does not conform to the standard model of what constitutes the mystical as established by the social/political powers of Western monotheism. Nature mysticism is anti-institutional; there is no cheering-squad, and there are no advocates at the parent-teachers' meeting demanding it be part of the religious studies curriculum. And thus, the teachings of nature mystics are relegated to the margins of religious studies and, by extension, culture.

I argue that the dominance of the world religions paradigm (WRP) within Western religious discourses has normalized this process of marginalization. The concept of the WRP refers to the idea that beliefs and practices of the most "popular" religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, etc.) play a hegemonic role in dictating what it means to be religious.[9] In recent decades, the WRP has been critiqued on numerous fronts by a variety of scholars, including Tomoko Masuzawa, who writes, "Although regularly mentioned in scholarly tracts as well as in non-scholarly media, world religions is not a technical term. There has been little critical discussion of the concept or its history; nor is there an established definition agreed upon by religion specialists. . .It is therefore best to understand that the meaning of this term at present is largely determined by conventional practice rather than by any scholarly consensus or rigorous analytic considerations" (quoted in McCutcheon 2019, p. 118). In other words, the WRP serves a political purpose: to normalize disproportionate power relations between certain religious actors over others. This leads Catherine Bell to ask an important question: "what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they simply do not loom large enough in the world? That they are confined to national entities and thus do not hold the promise of generating a transnational community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype used and so may not even technically qualify as religions after all?" (Bell 2006, pp. 34–35). Stated simply, the WRP is hierarchical, elitist, and exclusionary.[10] When we apply these same critiques to the study of nature mysticism, we see a similar pattern emerge in which the teachings of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim mystics get lauded, published, and taught, while the teachings of nature mysticism remain obscured, understudied, and eventually forgotten.

How has this bias played out for Richard Jefferies specifically? For the most part, Jefferies' teachings are often framed as a foil to demonstrate the folly of nature mysticism. Take for example the following commentary by Evelyn Underhill, widely recognized as an authority on the modern study of mysticism. She acknowledges that Jefferies is a mystic, but that the quality of his mysticism does not quite make the grade. He got close, she admits, but ultimately missed "the Life known to the great mystics" (quoted in Rossabi 2017, p. 643). In other words, Jefferies is a mediocre mystic, and his nature mysticism is just not "great". In his classic work, *Cosmic Consciousness*, Maurice M. Bucke, points out that Jefferies felt the "Cosmic Sense" but did not quite meet the threshold of an authentic mystical state of consciousness (Bucke 2015, p. 282). Zaehner goes further. He praises the uniqueness of Jefferies' nature mysticism, calling particular attention to his atheism, yet nonetheless claims that Jefferies was "an unwilling witness on Christianity's behalf" because he maintains a distinction between the animating energies of creation and creation itself (Zaehner 1957, p. 49). Further, Zaehner argues that Jefferies views on immortality align with the Christian doctrine of Original Sin (Zaehner 1957, p. 49). It would appear as though Jefferies was a Christian after all—even despite himself! Given Zaehner's influence on the field, it is worth noting that he was also keen to highlight another important observation about nature mystics that distinguishes them from theistic mystics: they are mentally unstable. Commenting on the mysticism of Rimbaud and Blake (and we can infer Jefferies

as well), Zaehner concludes, "...there is a definite connexion between nature mysticism and lunacy" (Zaehner 1957, p. 52).

Perhaps nature mysticism has been historically marginalized within the field of religious studies because it is anti-institutional, anti-dogmatic, non-hierarchical, spontaneous[11] and innately egalitarian. Such ideas run counter to the practical reality of any organized religion that purports to possess the exclusive truth of Ultimate Reality. Most significantly for the focus of this paper, it is vital to call attention to and critique this negative bias towards nature mysticism because the teachings of certain nature mystics might provide valuable insight and much-needed guidance on how to incentivize our culture to become less anthropocentric and more ecocentric. Stated simply, a deeper education in nature mysticism might just inspire us to care a bit more about the welfare of the planet. Or as Carl Von Essen puts it, "Mystical experience of nature can be of particular relevance to our troubled age, bringing deeper into our consciousness and emotions the logic that nature sustains humanity as humanity must, in turn, sustain nature (Von Essen 2010, p. 7).

3. The Story of My Heart

"I am a son of the soil", writes Jefferies (quoted in Keith 1965, p. 17). Indeed, he was born on 6 November 1848, in Coate, Swindon, England, to a farming family with deep roots in the area.[12] Life is tough on a poor dirt farm, and Jefferies never really took to the idea of hard labor. He did, however, enjoy his time loafing in the fields and meadows, thinking, dreaming, and wondering. He left school at 15 and eventually landed a job as a freelance journalist, documenting the concerns of the local farmers and the general goings-on of the rural countryside. He would marry a local farmer's daughter, Jesse Baden, in 1874 and they would have three children. Over the next few years, Jefferies would continue to hone his writing skills with essays on agriculture, wildlife, and gamekeeping. He even tried his hand at being a novelist, with mixed results. He would eventually attain a modest degree of professional success by publishing collections of his nature essays, but he always found it difficult to make ends meet. In the winter of 1881 at the age of 33, Jefferies fell severely ill. For the next six years, he would struggle to survive a painful battle with tuberculosis that would eventually leave him bedridden for the remainder of his short life. He died on 14 August 1887, leaving his family destitute. An entry from one of his last notebooks underscores the brutal reality that he was forced to endure near the end: "Three great giants are against me—disease, despair, and poverty" (quoted in Besant 1888, p. 361).

Jefferies is often described as shy and somewhat reserved, and this aloofness garnered him a reputation as an eccentric. In terms of appearance, he was fairly tall and thin, with brown hair, an auburn beard, a long nose, and big blue eyes (Salt 1894, p. 23). He did not really indulge in any vices, and by most accounts was a dutiful husband and dedicated father. He was a voracious reader and passionate about spending time in nature, jotting down his discoveries along the way. Although mostly self-educated, he did manage to cultivate a unique voice as both a journalist and an author. Critics, however, described him as a "mere cataloguer", "vague", and a "curiosity" (Morris 2007, p. 11). On the other end of the spectrum, one of his earliest biographers, Henry Salt, ranked him as a "great prose writer" (Salt 1894, p. 103), and the literary critic Q. D. Leavis described him as a "many-sided and comprehensive genius" (Morris 2007, p. 11). His plain, unassuming style has drawn comparisons to the work of Twain, Hardy, and Ruskin. The uniqueness of his writing, argues Brian Morris, comes from his capacity to combine "rationalism and mysticism, social realism with an ecological sensibility, and a vivid empirical naturalism with an extraordinary poetic imagination (Morris 2007, p. 25). D.H. Lawrence was fond of his writing, but perhaps the most striking praise bestowed upon Jefferies comes from the American author Henry Miller: "Here is the man who speaks my inmost thoughts. He is the iconoclast I feel myself to be yet never fully reveal. He makes the utmost demands. He rejects, he scraps, he annihilates. What a seeker! What a daring seeker!" (quoted by Keith 1965, p. 177). I think Miller hit the nail on the head. For all his faults as an author, Jefferies'

legacy stems from his willingness to be vulnerable, to seek out something authentic—but to what end?

I claim that the key to appreciating Jefferies' voice as an author is to position his writings in dialogue with his mysticism; that is, he was a mystic first and an author second. Only when he had an opportunity to indulge his mystical proclivities did his writing truly soar. One of Jefferies' greatest claims to fame as a novelist is his two children's books, *Wood Magic* (Jefferies 1924) and *Bevis* (Jefferies 1882). Both stories follow the adventures of a young boy, Bevis, who magically communicates with animals and other forces of nature. Here is an excerpt from the conclusion of *Wood Magic* in which the Wind conveys its secret knowledge to young Bevis:

> Bevis, my love, if you want to know all about the sun, and the stars, and everything, make haste and come to me, and I will tell you, dear. In the morning, dear, get up as quick as you can, and drink me as I come down from the hill. In the day go up on the hill, dear, and drink me again, and stay there if you can till the stars shine out, and drink still more of me. And by and by you will understand all about the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the Earth which is so beautiful, Bevis. It is so beautiful, you can hardly believe how beautiful it is. (Jefferies 1924, p. 375)

Here we have Jefferies using the literary medium of a children's fable—where elements of fantasy and magic are commonly deployed—to experiment with and reflect upon his own sense of the mystical, which, much like Bevis, is rooted in the wonders of nature. This sense of mystical reverence for the wonders of nature pervades his most accomplished writing. Take for example his most highly acclaimed work, *The Pageant of Summer* (Jefferies 1906), which dramatizes a personal rapport with the beauty and grandeur of the natural world:

> I seem as if I could feel all the glowing life the sunshine gives and the south wind calls to being. The endless grass, the endless leaves, the immense strength of the oak expanding, the unalloyed joy of finch and blackbird; from all of them I receive a little. Each gives me something of the pure joy they gather for themselves. In the blackbird's melody one note is mine; in the dance of the leaf shadows the formed maze is for me, though the motion is theirs; the flowers with a thousand faces have collected the kisses of the morning. Feeling with them, I receive some, at least, of their fulness of life. . .. The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendour of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we can stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time. . .. These are the only hours that are not wasted—these hours that absorb the soul and fill it with beauty. This is real life, and all else is illusion. . . (Jefferies 1906, p. 279)

There is a vibrant energy running throughout the imagery that enlivens a normally prosaic experience of witnessing nature with an undercurrent of spiritual engagement. As such, Jefferies seeks to strike a balance between nature realism—oak expanding, blackbird's melody, etc.,—and an existential realization of what it means to *feel* nature and to be *absorbed* in its beauty. What is this subtextual meaning that he alludes to? That such moments of intimacy between the soul and nature are edifying, essential, and real. The mystical significance of this intimacy between the soul and nature is the focus of Jefferies' most personal and most popular work, *The Story of My Heart* (Jefferies 2014).

As the title suggests, *The Story of My Heart* is Jefferies spiritual autobiography. It details the evolution of his mysticism and how his mystical experience of nature shaped his views on the world, which are in many ways quite radical. Here is a nature mystic that disavows God, embraces the flesh, and detests asceticism of any sort. And yet, entwined within these radical views on almost every page of *The Story* is a highly sensitive pean to nature, a confession of human fragility, and an all-too familiar call for empathetic understanding of

a man's search for meaning amidst the chaos of change. Beyond its aesthetic value, there is a morbid gravitas surrounding *The Story,* which is perhaps to be expected when one considers that the words were penned by a desperate man so close to the brink of death.

As an autobiography of the soul, it is a true confession, and he rarely holds back. He explains, "I have been obliged to write these things by an irresistible impulse, which has worked in me since early youth. They have not been written for the sake of argument, still less for any thought of profit, rather indeed the reverse. They have been forced from me by earnestness of heart, and they express my most serious convictions" (Jefferies 2014, p. 214). Jefferies freely admits that he struggled to write *The Story*, pondering over it for nearly 17 years. This is no surprise to anyone familiar with the phenomenology of mystical experience in that such a profound experience transcends rational modes of understanding; that is, it takes time to muster the right words to explain the ineffable. But such is the purpose of *The Story*: to gesture towards the infinite.

In the opening sections of *The Story*, Jefferies details his first mystical experience:

> I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up: through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race. I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart. By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to feeling, but I know no other. (Jefferies 2014, p. 31)

This mystical encounter with the energies of the Earth transformed him. The world took on a different hue, and within this heightened state of mystical wonder, his soul opened up to a whole new way of *being in the world.* He was now ready to embark on a hitherto unknown path of intellectual and moral discovery. In a short time, it would lead him to radical insights about the question of God, the value of body, and the nature of time/being. Morally speaking, he became convinced that what really matters in this world is not the accumulation of material possessions or social status, but rather a deep realization of "soul-life".

I claim that Jefferies' concept of soul-life is key to understanding his mystical vision of nature. It is a nebulous concept that Jefferies never defines in detail, which was likely a purposeful tactic to inure his reader to the provocative stance he takes against traditional religion and the social conventions of the day. However, we can glean a workable meaning of soul-life from how he contextualized it throughout his work. Near the end of *The Story*, he provides a tentative definition of the soul as "that inner consciousness which aspires", but he maintains that this definition is deficient and instructs the reader to "leave my book as a whole to give its own meaning to its words" (Jefferies 2014, p. 216). Borrowing from Brooke Williams' analysis, I read Jefferies' notion of the soul as a "conduit between the earth and me, through which energy and nourishment flow" (quoted in Jefferies 2014, p. 223). By extension, I take soul-life to refer to those dimensions of interaction between soul and earth that empower the flow of (cosmic) energy. From this perspective, I argue that soul-life can be read as an ecological concept that draws on the (intellectual and moral) energies of the mystical to facilitate a deeper appreciation of and connection with nature.[13] In *The Story* Jefferies identifies three core ideas that were transformed by his search for soul-life: God, body and time/being.

Jefferies was not a religious man in any conventional sense of the word. In fact, his critics characterize him as an atheist. And they are not wrong. How might we square this supposed atheism with his mysticism? It becomes clear very quickly from even the most cursory reading of *The Story* that Jefferies had little regard for the traditional Christian God. In fact, he found the idea abhorrent: "How can I adequately express my contempt for the assertion that all things occur for the best, for a wise and beneficent end, and are ordered by a humane intelligence! It is the most utter falsehood and a crime against the human race" (Jefferies 2014, p. 167). According to Jefferies, the belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God is illusionary nonsense. Further, even if there is a God, we ought to despise it for being such a failure. Clearly, argues Jefferies, any sober minded individual can recognize that all things happen by chance. But there is no need to despair about living in a godless universe, according to Jefferies, because we have the capacity and will to shape reality as we see fit. Only once we liberate ourselves from the shackles of God will we be able to realize our ultimate potential. This type of Nietzschean logic is familiar territory to the modern reader; however, Jefferies keeps the reader on their toes by taking an unexpected turn and confessing his deep-seated desire for something more than God:

> I conclude that there is an existence, a something higher than soul—higher, better, and more perfect than deity. Earnestly I pray to find this something better than a god. There is something superior, higher, more good. For this I search, labour, think, and pray. If after all there be nothing, and my soul has to go out like a flame, yet even then I have thought this while it lives. With the whole force of my existence, with the whole force of my thought, mind, and soul, I pray to find this Highest Soul, this greater than deity, this better than god. Give me to live the deepest soul-life now and always with this Soul. For want of words I write soul, but I think that it is something beyond soul. (Jefferies 2014, p. 91)

What are we to make of Jefferies' seemingly paradoxical position of disavowing God and simultaneously praying for a state of spiritual connection with "this something better than a god"? It is a matter of context. Jefferies cannot abide by the belief in Christian monotheism, which for him is nothing more than a depository of human projections. This traditional concept of God is beholden to the vainest conceits of our culture and its all-too-human limitations and prejudices. Jefferies wants something else—something more. He wants to know that force "more subtle than electricity" that connects the cosmos to the human heart yet demands nothing in return, akin to the flower that blossoms because it must, to that wave that inevitably meets the shore—and the sun shines on regardless (Jefferies 2014, p. 89).

The body is another important idea that Jefferies seeks to interrogate in his search for soul-life. A familiar trope in the history of Western mysticism since at least Plato revolves around the need to liberate the soul from the body; that is, the soul can only reach a state of spiritual fulfillment by escaping the material bondage of the body. The body, in other words, is a tomb for the soul. Hence the widespread popularity of ascetic practices within the history of Western mysticism, which are designed to violently subdue the distracting impulses of the body in order to help purify the soul for its journey towards God (Oliver 2009, p. 33). Jefferies claims that such practices are "pure folly". He takes the whole morbid idea of asceticism to task:

> I believe all manner of asceticism to be the vilest blasphemy—blasphemy towards the whole of the human race. I believe in the flesh and the body, which is worthy of worship—to see a perfect human body unveiled causes a sense of worship: The ascetics are the only persons who are impure. Increase of physical beauty is attended by increase of soul beauty. The soul is the high even by gazing on beauty. Let me be fleshly perfect. (Jefferies 2014, p. 142)

Jefferies viewed the body as a source of spiritual inspiration: "the divine beauty of flesh is life itself to me" (Jefferies 2014, p. 108). Unlike traditional religious mystics, Jefferies felt no aversion towards matters of the flesh; rather, the flesh signals an intimate encounter

with the beauty of form itself, offering us the only truly embodied reality of something rather than nothing. In other words, *embodiment is reality*, and this fleshy reality ought to be embraced in all its sweaty, stinky, and decaying glory. Jefferies' embrace of embodiment thus speaks to the hybridity of soul-life, by which I mean that soul-life is about integrating the knowledge of body *and* soul, materiality *and* mind, matter *and* energy. By closing off one domain or another, one loses access to an entire field of meaning. However, by seeking to integrate both body and soul, soul-life provides an opportunity to construct a more well-rounded or holistic understanding of our relationship to the cosmos.

Our understanding of this relationship to the cosmos is tied to the question of how we view and value time/being. Jefferies was no scientist and maintained an ambivalent relationship to science. He admired Darwin and yet, in the same breath, denied the theory of evolution (Manning 2020, p. 2). He did not have a problem with the aims of science *per se*, but rather he questioned its tendency to police boundaries on how we understand the ultimate meaning of our existence. Or, as he puts it: "the mind is not to be pinned to dogmas of science any more than to dogmas of superstition" (Jefferies 2014, p. 181). Neither science nor religion can fully explain the profundity of soul-life—there is always a remainder, a more, that cannot be placed in the "killing-jar" of our cultural habits. This is particularly true, argues Jefferies, for how we apprehend time and being, which are interwoven into the deepest dimensions of soul-life.

Jefferies was fascinated with the idea of immortality, but like his approach to "God" and "body", he sought to expand on its conventional meaning. His logic on the matter runs as follows: Duration shapes our regular sense of reality. Time passes, seasons change, and so do I. But mystical states of consciousness appear to suspend this conventional sense of time, so that only the "now" exists. He goes on:

> Realising that spirit, recognizing my own inner consciousness, the psyche, so clearly, I cannot understand time. It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumulus, on earth, now; I exist in it. The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumulus was raised; in a thousand years it will still be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now. For artificial purposes time is mutually agreed on, but is really no such thing. The shadow goes on upon the dial, the index moves round upon the clock, and what is the difference? None whatever. If the clock had never been set going, what would have been the difference? There may be time for the clock, the clock may make time for itself; there is none for me. (Jefferies 2014, p. 67)

Time is a construct. The only authentic reality, the only real state of being, is *now*. The past is gone, the future is unknown, and thus it is only *now* that matters. But it is difficult to live in the moment. We are pulled into the past by our regrets and "what if's" and endlessly busy ourselves into oblivion with hopes of the future. "Wake up" screams Jefferies; only *now* do you breath; only *now* is their light upon your face; and only *now* can you realize eternity. How? By living the soul-life, which entails aligning the soul with the spiritual rhythms of nature so that one can learn how to "walk in the midst of immortal things" (Jefferies 2014, p. 70). Basically, it boils down to perspective. Twenty-four hours is a literal lifetime for the typical mayfly, but a mere day for you and me. The notion of immortality for Jefferies is not only a state of mind but also a state of being: "The fact of my own existence as I write, as I exist at this second, is so marvelous, so miracle-like, strange, and supernatural to me, that I unhesitatingly conclude I am always on the margin of life illimitable, and that there are higher conditions than existence" (Jefferies 2014, p. 73). This "higher condition than existence" is what Jefferies means by immortality. It is a state of *being in wonder* with the nature of existence: "there is nothing that is not wonderful; as, for instance, the existence of things at all" (Jefferies 2014, p. 222). Soul-life is not about asking *why* there is something rather than nothing, but about basking in the fact that there

is something rather than nothing. It is about feeling the energies of the earth and cosmos within one's soul, to become part of the whole, and making contact with that "something more than existence" (Jefferies 2014, p. 73).

4. Ecological Legacy

Jefferies has been labeled a "pagan", "pantheist", "earth spirit", "the high priest of summer", and even hailed as "the founding father of environmentalism in Britain".[14] For his own part, he claims there "never was such a worshipper of earth' (quoted in Rossabi 2017, p. 80). According to Brian Morris, "as a poet naturalist and pioneer ecologist Jefferies certainly needs to be placed alongside Henry Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold, as one of the true precursors of the environmental movement (Morris 2007, p. 25). Given these accolades, it thus might come as no surprise that the great environmentalist herself, Rachel Carson, kept a copy of *The Story of My Heart* by her bedside (Rossabi 2023, p. 393). Jefferies, however, is not your typical naturalist. He was a journalist by trade, and this skill added a factual flavor to his style of writing, lending fine detail to his documentation of the flora and fauna of the English countryside. Nothing was off limits—large and small game, birds, fish, insects, and wildflowers—they were all affectionate subjects of his pen. He studied changing habitats, landscapes, farms, and working conditions and even critiqued harmful agricultural practices (Morris 2007, p. 476). Some have suggested that Jefferies oeuvre can perhaps be best interpreted as an endorsement of the "return to nature" movement that first emerged with the Romantics. I tend to agree. However, I want to call attention to an often-understudied dimension of his ecological vision—namely, how it intersects with his call for social reform.

More specifically, I suggest that Jefferies' understanding of social reform is tied to the mystical sensitivities he acquired by seeking out the soul-life. In his early career, he comes across as politically conservative but appears to have softened his views over time to adopt a much more liberal, even socialist position in his later writings. The details of this political transition are still debated[15], but the fact is that he viewed the pervasive ambition for wealth with utter contempt (Jefferies 2014, p. 143). All material fortune, he writes, "ends in a cipher" (Jefferies 2014, p. 145). The vast majority of us have been bamboozled into thinking that our value in this world comes from the attainment of material possessions and that if we do not work hard to acquire more stuff, we are wasting our lives. Jefferies contests such nonsense and declares:

> This falsehood is the interested superstition of an age infatuated with money, which having accumulated it cannot even expend it in pageantry. It is a falsehood propagated for the doubtful benefit of two or three out of ten thousand. It is the lie of a morality founded on money only, and utterly outside and having no association whatever with the human being itself. Many superstitions have been got rid of in these days; time it is that this, the last and worst, were eradicated. (Jefferies 2014, p. 189)

Jefferies is basically claiming that the reality of the market is a fraud designed to maintain the status quo of power, in which the greedy desires of a select few come at the expense of the needs of the many. Our obsession with money is inhumane and ought to be "eradicated". Perhaps even more pointedly, Jefferies claims that the upper-class bemoans idleness not because of any actual moral reason but, more practically, they are in fact threatened by the idea of the lower-class having the time to reflect on the harsh realities of social and economic inequality. In other words, if you are forced to work all day long in order to eat, then you will be too exhausted to get any funny ideas about changing the system (Jefferies 2014, p. 198). Taking to the defense of the poor and working class, Jefferies goes on to vilify the "well-to-do" as criminals because they not only benefit from such an immoral system of oppression, but they also take active measures to ensure its permanence. Jefferies calls out the absurdity of such a system: "Food and drink, roof and clothes, are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it freely—not as a grudging gift but as a right, as a son of the house sits down to breakfast—

then is the world mad" (Jefferies 2014, p. 190). And finally, here is perhaps Jefferies' most stinging critique of the capitalist order, which leaves little room for interpretation: "One man whipped with hunger toils half-naked in the pit, face to face with death; the other is crowned by his fellows sitting in state, with fine wines and the sound of jubilee. This is the Divine Right of Capital" (quoted in Morris 2007, p. 182).

From an ecological perspective, Jefferies' class critique aligns with the contemporary concerns of the environmental justice movement, which seeks to highlight the fact that those least responsible for causing the climate crisis are bearing the greatest brunt of the burden.[16] In other words, the worst culprits behind the ecological crisis are those who consume most of the planet's resources, which are the upper class. There are enough resources on the planet to maintain a sustainable existence; there is enough water in the well for us all to have a drink. Or, as Jefferies puts it, "This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence. This our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us" (Jefferies 2014, p. 188). The problem is that this abundance is wasted by the super wealthy, who selfishly lord their power over the commons. This avarice is normalized by the reigning ideology of neoliberalism, which aims to commodify the earth's resources for the sake of human profit. The problem, however, runs much deeper than politics in that neoliberalism is but a symptom of a much more insidious anthropocentric ontology that privileges human interests over the wellbeing of the planet. According to Lynn White Jr.'s classic essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (1967), this anthropocentric ontology is in fact a product of religious beliefs and values. White claims that "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not" (White 1967, p. 1207). And this is why it is so important to study nature mystics like Jefferies, who attempt to counter this anthropocentric ontology by calling attention to the unsettling fact that nature is "absolutely indifferent to us" (Jefferies 2014, p. 85). Or, to put it another way, that is no less disturbing but equally revelatory: Culture requires nature. *But nature has no need for culture.*

5. Conclusions

We need more wonder in our lives. We need to learn how to wonder about "the soul of the flowers". This is the point of Jefferies' philosophy. We have become seduced by the soul-crushing routine of what he calls "house-life", which runs as follows: "Remain; be content; go round and round in one barren path, a little money, a little food and sleep, some ancient fables, old age and death" (Jefferies 2014, p. 127). The house-life (or screen life as it is today) breeds disenchantment. The antidote to this sad script is wonder.[17] And there is nothing more wonderous than the natural world, for "all things seem possible in the open air" (quoted in Salt 1894, p. 74). Perhaps even the transformation of one's very soul.

The planet is on the precipice of an ecological catastrophe that threatens to end all life as we know it.[18] And yet, half the population of the world's most powerful country unabashedly denies this reality.[19] It would appear as though the science is just not convincing enough. Regardless of which end of the political spectrum one identifies with, however, we are all equally moved by wonder. The study of wonder, I believe, might just play a critical role in combating our apathy towards the ecological crisis.[20] Wonder not only "excites our ontological imagination" but can compel us to both intellectually and morally "discern what is of intrinsic value or meaning (as opposed to what is of utilitarian value or meaning). And it consequently elicits efforts to find a harmonious relationship with, rather active mastery of, our wider surroundings" (Fuller 2006, p. 9). Stated simply, by activating our "environmental imagination",[21] wonder can help us cultivate a more ecocentric understanding of the world.[22] It is from this context that I suggest that *The Story of My Heart* ought to be read in terms of what I call a "wonder text", which refers to a specific form of mystical confession characterized by a reverence for nature and an evocative posture geared at eliciting a state of wonder in the reader.[23] Think of Henry David Thoreau's classic, *Walden* (Thoreau 2000) or Annie Dillard's Pulitzer-Prize-winning

work, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* (Dillard 2013). Like Jefferies' *Story*, these texts share a similar form and purpose: to confess how their mystical encounters with the wonders of nature transformed their lives and to draw on this sense of intimacy to seduce the reader into a state of spiritual/ecological receptiveness to the idea that they too might experience something similar by getting out into the wild.

What made Jefferies' writing so distinctive, according to Brian Morris, was that he was able "to invoke a sense of wonder with regard to the natural world" (Morris 2007, p. 410). Exactly. Wonder, I argue, is the bridge that links Jefferies' concept of soul-life to the contemporary understanding of ecology. Ultimately, soul-life can be understood as a mystical state of *being in wonder with nature*. It is this sense of mystical wonder that shapes the way Jefferies responds to the question of God, body, and time/being. There is always something more to God, to the body, to time/being that exceeds conventional modes of knowledge—thus underscoring wonder's capacity to act as both a state of inquiry and contemplation (Schinkel 2020, p. 481). Furthermore, the mystical wonder that defines soul-life also inspired Jefferies' interest in social reform.[24] Jefferies felt compelled by the moral beauty of soul-life to call out economic injustice and critique a social order of privilege that profits from the suffering of the less fortunate. These are valuable insights; however, any connection we make between Jefferies' teachings and the noble aims of the environmental justice movement is bound to remain marginalized until the field of religious studies and our larger culture make a greater effort to embrace a pluralistic understanding of the mystical. In the meantime, we can keep *The Story of My Heart* close at hand to reflect upon our moral duty to the earth and each other. Such a wonderful story is ultimately designed to inspire us to turn off the screen, leave the house, and "Go straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown; go higher than a god; deeper than prayer; and open a new day" (Jefferies 2014, p. 126).

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Notes

1 https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-analysis-confirms-2023-as-warmest-year-on-record/ (accessed on 11 June 2024).

2 https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/ (accessed on 11 June 2024).

3 https://earthcharter.org/podcasts/gus-speth/ (accessed on 14 June 2024)

4 For a comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism and its impact on the climate crisis see Noam Chomsky and Marv Waterstone, *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance* (Chomsky and Waterstone 2021).

5 https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/efam/environmental-justice/principles_of_environmental_justice/ (accessed on 12 June 2024).

6 For example, Muller claims that religion is rooted in humanity's attempt to rationalize natural phenomena and Tylor claims that investing the natural world with idea of a soul (animism) is the first form of religious expression. See Russel T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (McCutcheon 2019).

7 According to Grace Jantzen, "what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help to constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs. Put starkly, the church (and nowadays the university) will exert its power to determine who counts as a mystic, excluding from that category any who are threatening to its authority" (Jantzen 1995, p. 323).

8 We might also consider how this bias plays out in the work of W. T. Stace's interpretation of nature mysticism (extrovertive mysticism). In *The Philosophy of Mysticism* (1960) he outlines an influential distinction first made by Rudolph Otto (1976) between introvertive and extrovertive types of mystics. According to Stace, "the essential difference between them is that the extrovertive experience looks outwards through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind" (Stace 1960, p. 61). Stace clearly privileges introvertive mystical experience over extrovertive mystical experience, as evident by his claim that "the extrovertive experience, although we recognize it as a distinct type, is actually on a lower level than the introvertive type, that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfillment in the introvertive type of experience" (Stace 1960, p. 132). In other words, nature mysticism is lacking. What, exactly? Perhaps God? And this lack of God makes it less valuable.

[9] For a pioneering analysis of this trend see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (Smith 1998) and Tomoko Mazusawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Mazusawa 2005). See also Susanne Owen, "The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change" (Owen 2011).

[10] An interesting parallel can be drawn here between the critiques of the WRP and the insights of ecofeminism. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, has long suggested that there is an "interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature (Ruether 2009, p. 362). This interconnection is often obfuscated by the social and political interests of patriarchal religions, which tend to be hierarchical, elitist, and exclusionary.

[11] The debate between spontaneous and acquired mystical states (see Stace 1960) has proved problematic for the radical constructivist position as popularized by the work of Steven Katz (Katz 1978). The constructivist position claims that mystical experience is a product of religious indoctrination. However, this position is difficult to maintain when considering the spontaneous character of nature mysticism. The experiences of nature mystics are often "situated *outside traditions of doctrine and practice*, occurring under a variety of non-religious circumstances" (Marshall 2005, p. 176). To put the matter differently, there is no room in the constructivist model for novelty. Furthermore, in contrast to the constructivist position, certain theorists claim that mystical experiences "result from a deconstruction of ordinary experience". For example, in *Mysticism Mind and Consciousness* (1999) Robert Foreman claims that "mystical experiences don't result from a process of building or constructing mystical experiences, but rather from an un-constructing of language and belief. It seems to result from something like a releasing of experience from language" (Forman 1999, p. 99).

[12] For the most contemporary and comprehensive biography on Jefferies see Andrew Rossabi's *A Peculiarly English Genius or, A Wiltshire Taoist: A Biography of Richard Jefferies*, Vol. 1 (Rossabi 2017), Vol. II (Rossabi 2020) and Vol. III (Rossabi 2023).

[13] I believe that a fascinating resonance can be drawn between the affective quality of Jefferies' concept of soul-life and Edward O. Wilson's theory of "Biophilia" (Wilson 1984).

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/oct/13/richard-jefferies-swindon-coate-water (accessed 22 June 2024).

[15] According to Besant, "He belonged to the people, and cursed either party" (Besant 1888, p. 59). Rossabi suggests a combination of his own experience with poverty and the moral sense gained from his mystical illumination proved formative to Jefferies' "sympathies" with the suffering of the poor (Rossabi 2020, p. 643). W. J. Keith claims that Jefferies' socialist leanings ought to be "interpreted not as an increasing radicalism, but as a broadening humanitarianism (Keith 1965, p. 38).

[16] https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-emit-much-planet-heating-pollution-two-thirds-humanity (accessed 22 June 2024).

[17] Anders Schinkel defines wonder as "a mode of consciousness in which we experience what we perceive or are contemplating as strange, beyond our powers of comprehension, yet worthy of our attention for its own sake" (Schinkel 2018, p. 34).

[18] The UN secretary general, António Guterres, recently warned that humanity faces "collective suicide" by continuing to ignore the issue of climate change. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/18/world/europe/un-chief-suicide-warning-climate-change.html#:~:text=Europe%20Extreme%20Heat-%20%20%20,U.N.%20chief%20warns%20that%20humanity%20faces%20%E2%80%99collective%20suicide%E2%80%99%20over%20climate,dangerously%20high%20temperatures%20on%20Monday (accessed 23 June 2024).

[19] https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/ (accessed 25 June 2024).

[20] Haydn Washington claims that "we will not solve the environmental crisis (and reach a sustainable future) without a change in worldview to ecocentrism and a rejuvenation of humanity's sense of wonder toward nature" (Washington 2018, p. 14). For deeper examination of the relationship between wonder and mysticism see Robert, C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Fuller 2006). Or more recently, Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The Transformative Power of Everyday Wonder* (Keltner 2023).

[21] "*Environmental imagination* is the term that the Harvard professor Lawrence Buell uses to describe a process that can 'energize' thought and action toward renewed engagement with nature" (Von Essen 2010, p. 212).

[22] It is significant to note here the fascinating connection transdisciplinary scholar of Nahua and Maya descent Yuria Celidwen and professor of psychology Dacher Keltner make between states of awe and the concept of "ecological belonging" (Celidwen and Keltner 2023).

[23] I am inspired here by Jefferey J. Kripal's concept of "mystical hermeneutics", which suggest that reading mystical texts can potentially elicit a personal encounter with the mystical (Kripal 2001).

[24] According to Robert Fuller it is the emotion of wonder that "most readily enables us to become capable of true empathy or compassion" (Fuller 2006, p. 95).

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