**Relatedness with the natural world: the question of projection**

***by Karen O. Hodges***

**Introduction**

A felt sense of relatedness with the natural world tends to hold deep value for those who experience it, and it is a powerful force shaping effective attitudes and behaviors in response to the current climate emergency. Yet this sense of relatedness has long been called into question as an illusion based upon projection. The argument is made that we project human emotion and intentionality onto nature when nothing of the kind is actually present. This position is well-entrenched in our culture wherever deference is yielded to science. But the matter is by no means settled. In fact, there remains a deep divide between those who trust their heads and those who trust their hearts on this issue. Polarization between the two camps runs so deep that genuine dialogue is difficult to achieve. Each walks its separate track; each preaches to the choir, sometimes eloquently, but tends to fall into a complex when obliged to argue its case to unsympathetic ears.

C. G. Jung was uniquely devoted to holding the tension between these opposite approaches to the question of projection onto the natural world. In his lifetime, he did not definitively resolve this tension (von Franz 1978), but he left a legacy of observations and questions that serve as resources for that ongoing work.

Alongside the Jungian perspective I wish to place a different and complementary one, that of poets for whom nature has been an important subject. In this time of radical threat to the planetary ecosystem, I have wanted a better understanding of what it means to feel kinship with the natural world. In the work of such poets as William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, we can find a sense of relatedness with nature that, far from being naïve about the role of projection, employs imagination to better ground us in our human reality as earthbound creatures. Such groundedness can be an important healing factor for individuals suffering from cultural toxicity.

**It’s only a machine**

If finding human emotion and intentionality mirrored in nature is entirely an artefact of projection, as some believe, then we are called to withdraw that projection. Within the English-speaking world, the ambition to do just that set in long before the concept of projection had found its place in psychological theory. A critical factor was the mechanical philosophy of Robert Boyle, the father of modern chemistry, who argued against traditional concepts such as a ‘spirit of Nature’ or *anima mundi.* Both as a devout Christian and as a scientist committed to understanding how things work, he found no room in his thinking for anything resembling animism. And he especially withheld deference to nature as a kind of goddess, believing that this blocked us from making best *use* of the natural world. He wrote that ‘the veneration, wherewith Men are imbued for what they call *Nature*, has been a discouraging impediment to the Empire of Man over the inferior Creatures of God’ (Boyle 1686, pp.18-9). Boyle proposed that we envision nature instead as a machine, an automaton, something on the order of a wonderful clock that had recently been fabricated in Switzerland. With the remarkable advance of science over the decades that followed, this perspective gained ground, with the result that Western culture learned ‘to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects’ (White 1967, p.1205).

To conceive of nature as entirely inanimate and insensitive, as did Robert Boyle, is to actively reject any felt sense of kinship with it. Recognizing no meaningful point of contact, we can offer it no empathy or solicitude. Where the goal was to optimize conditions for scientific inquiry, this was a liberating prospect. Yet, where right relationship with nature is one’s concern, to seek dominance without impediment reeks of sociopathy. Moreover, likening nature to a machine seems an oddly unfitting metaphor: We tend to think of the machine, in its artificiality, as the very thing that nature is not.

For many scientists, Boyle’s image of nature as machine may be more of a convenient working hypothesis than a settled ontological truth. Nevertheless, it has taken hold in the popular imagination: We are used to imagining that nature *is* a machine - a system in which everything is determined by cause-and-effect processes such that its workings are, in theory, entirely predictable. The average person today may carry this assumption unconsciously, not recognizing its role in their thinking, much less questioning its objective validity. But, if we turn back to its origins, we can find a subjective bias at work: Behind it stands a cultural complex already well-formed in the Western psyche long before the emergence of modern science: the determination to gain power over nature, along with a sense of entitlement, even a sacred mandate, to do so (Hodges 2014). The image of nature as machine especially caters to this aspiration. We are, after all, the makers of machines, a fact which increasingly fills the foreground in the industrialized world. Machines are there to serve us; they owe their entire existence to our design and execution. As such, they should be completely knowable and predictable in their workings. If there are glitches to be worked out, it is within our remit to do just that.

The mechanical hypothesis serves to utterly depotentiate the subjective factor in our perceptions of the natural world, including all projections that render it relatable. But Jung saw projection as a constant in psyche’s engagement with the world, such that subjective relatedness cannot actually be dispensed with. It has everything to do with what we make of things, however seemingly inert, when they are presented to us. Whatever the outer factor - a stone, a computer, a forest, an expressionless bureaucrat behind a desk - the psyche needs to know, ‘How am I to relate to this?’ As Jung observed, the imagination typically reaches for a personification which would put this question in a human context. And do we not continue to personify nature, even in a culture which yields authority to science?

Today, the popular imagination does not hesitate to weave stories of mechanical or electronic artefacts that come to life, with personalities and intentions of their own. Our personifications of nature have a long history of course, and, strikingly prevalent among them, is a fantasy that has been with us since the book of *Genesis*: that of the malignant adversary. This characterization runs the gamut from the merely annoying (insects and weeds) to the overwhelmingly aggressive and powerful (floods, droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes). If we really believed that nature is devoid of intention towards us, such events would not be taken personally, yet we have a spontaneous tendency to do just that. And our emotional response can rise to the level of harsh resentment, in protest of the fact that, apparently, nature could care less about our suffering or what happens to us. To liken nature to a machine may be a poor metaphor overall, but it captures this sense of ‘her’ coldness and emotional inaccessibility. Then why should we care about nature? She is cruel, an implacable being against whom we can only harden our hearts. This is the veiled projection I detect beneath denial that nature is a living thing deserving, if not our veneration, our consideration.

It’s worth taking a closer look at the psychological dynamics behind this adversarial attitude towards nature. At one level lies the survival instinct that we share with all living things: To be alive is to be involved in a concern for survival. In the human psyche, this instinct is heightened by a special anxiety around death: We are shadowed by the conscious realization that, no matter what we do, death will claim us in the end. Every human society develops measures that better the odds for holding our own and prolonging life. But the idea that we can actually rule over the natural world like kings has uniquely captured the Western imagination. This fantasy is now so strong that it sets its imprint on all our collective plans and projects. At the extreme, it becomes a hunger for the kind of unchecked dominance that despots enjoy, power which depends upon dehumanizing the other and holding them in contempt, justifying any measure of cruelty or abuse. To say that nature is only a machine effectively dehumanizes it. The relationship created is one of a Master with his Slave.

When the archetype of Master/Slave constellates, several paradoxes emerge: The position of the Master may seem enviable yet, propped up by inflation, he is subject to an underlying anxiety. And he *should* be anxious, for inflation cuts him off from a sense of reality: He does not see himself or his limitations as they are. He has relinquished that sense of surety that comes with being well grounded. Standing at a great height puts him in constant danger of a precipitous fall and, unless his judgment is excessively clouded, he will go to extremes to stave off that catastrophe. But the resulting immoderate behavior only makes his position more unsustainable.

In the social sphere, this entails constant vigilance and efforts to keep down the oppressed, who may at any time rise up to become implacable adversaries, fueled by longstanding resentments. No amount of power can provide complete insurance against that day of reckoning. In the environmental context, we now face a comparable situation: Our abuse of the natural environment, our often ill-conceived attempts at dominance, have created an untenable situation. We put ourselves too high, and it’s difficult to know how to safely come down from that precarious position. The resulting eco-anxiety is not only felt by the well-informed, those conscious of the complexities of the situation, nor only by those immediately vulnerable to its dangers; it lies at a deep level in us all.

**The tension between will to power and relatedness**

It would be too simplistic to attribute all human actions giving rise to the climate emergency to greed or to a malignant will to power. Many of us are simply pawns in the game, yet we experience our own brand of anxiety related to that of the Slavemaster. Our culture’s extraordinary success in controlling natural processes sets up a vicious cycle: The focus on control feeds a manic obsession with expanding that control to achieve an impossible level of security. Today, our profound and realistic concerns about the health of the planetary ecosystem tend to intensify that quest. We search for new technologies that will save us. But, even if exercising ever greater power could make us safe, it will not bring us back into a balanced relationship with nature. There is a desperate need to right this relationship, not only because we suffer from being out of tune with our world, but also to facilitate a more realistic adaptation to our precarious situation. Jung once stated with stark clarity that love and the will to power are opposites (Jung 1917, para 78). If we take this insight to heart, what the climate emergency most requires of us is that we turn Robert Boyle’s perspective upside down: that we regard the natural world as a living thing with which to work out a sufficiently harmonious coexistence, rather than, as some people in the past have seen it, a feared and hated adversary to be overpowered..

But what does it mean to give love a greater place in our orientation towards the natural world? *Love* is one of the most indispensable words in the English language and, at the same time, one of the most inadequate. While we may recognize love as a feeling state within ourselves, how is it to be rightly translated into action? We cannot even say for certain that what we call love in any particular instance is actually beneficial to the other: the loved object or person or, in the case at hand, any element of nature. Perhaps most relevant is the question of how love of nature is to be instilled and cultivated. Many individuals living in urban settings today have few points of contact with the natural world, and there is a growing fantasy that nature can be virtually dispensed with. There is no relatedness with the faceless stranger we never met.

One of the realms in which love of nature has been especially cultivated in the Western world has been in poetry. The poet, May Sarton, who was a gifted teacher of creative writing, used to tell her students, ‘Love is paying attention.’ She meant that what brings the world alive for poets and their readers is engagement with what is real, what is *there*, along with the psychic reality of one’s feeling for it. This formulation defines the word *love* as a relatedness free from fixed assumptions. Paying loving attention is an act - not simply a state of mind or a concept - and it is an act driven by a longing for genuine contact with the other. It requires that we forego both sentimental idealization and defensive self-insulation. As such, it fits well with Jung’s sense that genuine relatedness comes with the withdrawal of projections: clearing our vision to see the other as they are in themselves. Likewise, it accords with scientific devotion to truth. In fact, however different these two approaches to the world, can the two not function together as complementary ways of ‘paying attention’?

It is only within the individual psyche that love can be fostered. An aspiration long held in the practice of poetry, it belongs in a general way to the individuation process. But love of nature is an aspiration that confronts us with special challenges: In the context of the present climate emergency, it opens us to painful and complicated emotions, including near-unbearable grief, anger, fear, and, yes, anxiety. These emotions need acknowledgement. But their expression, at least in the individuals who enter my consulting room, typically seems inhibited, perhaps by a sense of futility. Who among us thinks they can change things on a grand enough scale to reverse climate change? It is young male analysands who tend to articulate eco-anxiety, but in the form of resignation to a grim future (or no future at all). For them, the problem seems too massive to get hold of. How can they find motivation for entering society as adults?

Where fate deals us an experience of powerlessness, the will to power pulls us in despair. But love has its own power: It nurtures the person who loves, simply through the act of its own expression. The poets and visual artists who’ve paid loving attention to the natural world know this, as does anyone who cultivates a garden. Love sustains psychic life in a way that will to power cannot. And love of nature can sustain us, even as we become increasingly subject to the threat looming over all biological life. In the face of an existential threat, it may not be easy to trust the practical value of love. But Jung’s psychology has always validated the efficacy of creative imagination to find a way forward. And to trust this requires an understanding that neither nature nor we ourselves, as part of nature, are mere machines.

***Pathetic fallacy*: culture war over the value of the imagination**

The image of nature as machine had begun to dominate European thinking by the latter part of the 17th century. Much more than an academic idea, it has deep roots. And it affected the world of poets and playwrights more nearly than one might expect. Like all powerful cultural complexes, it colors the entire setting in which collective life is lived. The same mentality which attempted to purge itself of subjectivity for the sake of science harbored a deep mistrust of the imagination in general, even when it makes no claim to formulate literal truths. It should not be surprising, then, that literary arts in England ebbed to a low point for a good hundred years in the wake of remarkable achievements by Robert Boyle and other pioneers of modern science. The very capacity to appreciate fine poetry was stunted: Even Shakespeare fell out of favor for a time. ‘Say what you mean and mean what you say’ was more than a stylistic rule of thumb: It became a moral and religious imperative to purge one’s thinking of fanciful figurative elements. With that, literary art began drying up for want of *eros*.

In the English-speaking world, it was the Romantic poets who first brought forward a compensatory perspective. It’s not surprising that the Romantic movement blossomed towards the end of the 18th century in England, for it was just then that the industrial revolution began to produce urban blight in cities like Manchester. And it’s not surprising that lyric poets played a leading role in it for, when withdrawal of projections becomes a governing principle, the poet’s very craft comes under threat. It is, after all, a craft that relies upon the refinement of projections which give color to one’s renderings of reality.

It was in a collection of poems published in 1798 that William Wordsworth, in collaboration with his friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, first threw down the gauntlet. These were highly educated men. Coleridge in particular did not limit himself to writing poems but, through literary criticism, ventured into the farthest reaches of psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. But it was the poetry itself which was revolutionary, striving towards a greater naturalness and, for that, drawing heavily on a new feeling for the natural world.

Wordsworth became an early and powerful advocate for nature as ‘teacher’. Though he had no ambition to expand upon this idea in theoretical terms, Wordsworth was thinking in the same vein as Jung when he looked to dream and fantasy for wisdom, that is, to the collective unconscious – a concept which ecopsychology stretches to include an ‘ecological’layer, a layer of the psyche that reaches all the way down into the earth, the non-human sphere of which we ourselves are an integral part. *The ecological unconscious* may be a novel term, but it is faithful to Jung’s feeling for nature. He once advised a correspondent, ‘Why not go into the forest for a time, literally? Sometimes a tree tells you more than can be read in books’ (Jung 1973, p. 479).

Wordsworth’s work gained its authority from his depth of reflection and artistic skill. How does a fine poem become a cultural touchstone, a gift to future generations? We look to poetry to speak to our hearts, but the fact is that the practice of poetry requires its own form of intellectual discipline, its own *logos*. Granted, we don’t expect a poem to make us more clever or more successful in life, but we say that it ‘works’ when it skillfully brings language into play to touch lived experience. *Logos* smells out merely self-indulgent emotion, sloppy sentimentality, and unbridled fantasy. This it prunes away, while bringing to bear keen observation, alertness to patterns which can be arranged to echo one another in the *vas bene clausum* of the poem. It works from a grounding in tradition and an understanding of the mechanics of language. Good poetry is, first and foremost, the product of *eros:* it must engage. But a workmanly l*ogos* serves the *eros* of the poem. And, in the end, poetry aspires to come back around to *logos* by conveying human truths that can’t be reached through logical thought and discourse. The bottom line is that, like other skilled work in the arts, poetry requires a balance between l*ogos* and *eros*: another pair of opposites identified by Jung.

Wordsworth encountered a poetic tradition withering through lack of *eros*; he sought to freshen it through a poetic sensibility whose hallmark was relatedness with the natural world. But this emphasis on relatedness had a way of broadening out: Wordsworth elevated all manner of humble or marginalized persons in poems that expressed, not only empathy, but respect. In this way he anticipated recent developments in the environmental movement, where it is now stated that white supremacy is a significant factor in the climate emergency: ‘You can’t have climate change without sacrifice zones, and you can’t have sacrifice zones without disposable people’ (Sierra Club 2020). In the American South, where I live and practice, the sacrifice zones are neighborhoods and rural areas where coal plants and hog farms dump their toxic effluents on African-American residents. The Romantic poets knew ‘sacrifice zones’ like heavily polluted Manchester, where workers were displaced from lives of rural poverty to become cogs in a mechanistic system that exploited them as disposable.

In the end, neither Wordsworth nor any of his fellow-travelers were able to stave off the next swing of the pendulum, in which a rationalistic perspective reasserted itself. The society had begun to think about reason and imagination in either-or terms: Either one can be imaginative and soulful, or one can be disciplined and socially acceptable. Not both. And the Romantics sometimes played into this fantasy, indulging in theatrically non-conformist behavior or projecting overblown emotion onto scenes from nature. It was this habit of projection that got them into trouble with the cultural critic John Ruskin, who singled it out as false and affected, coining the term *pathetic fallacy* to make his point (Ruskin 1856). Ruskin was willing to soften his judgment if genuine emotion compelled the poet to employ such tropes, since they effectively dramatized a deranged mental state. But, in effect, he took a stand in favor of the scientific feeling for nature: Modern psychology’s term *projection* may not have been in his vocabulary, but to imagine emotion and intention in nature struck a sour note with him. To illustrate his point, he chose lines from Coleridge’s poem, ‘Christabel’:

There is not wind enough to twirl

The one red leaf, the last of its clan,

That dances as often as dance it can,

Hanging so light, and hanging so high,

On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

(Coleridge 1797/1801, p. 27)

Leaves don’t dance or look up at the sky; leaves don’t know or care if they’re the last of their clan. This was, in Ruskin’s view, frivolity undeserving of the respect that poetry should command.

Of course, no reader would imagine that Coleridge was actually assigning mind (in the human sense) to the one red leaf. He was simply doing what poets do; he was animating the scene, giving it a consistent emotional coloration. Every well-written poem draws on a sense of the oneness of the world, seeking to mirror that oneness through the affinities between and among all its elements. Such coherence creates a proper container for the content of the poem. But Ruskin wasn’t having it: True enough, the world moves more or less in concert; nature’s gears more or less mesh; but that’s a matter of mechanics, not affinities.

After Ruskin, the term *pathetic fallacy* found broader uses: It suited the purposes of a scientific community eager to chastise any hint of anthropomorphic thinking. So fanatically can this position be held that, for example, it condemns the popular idiom, ‘[Nature abhors a vacuum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_vacui_(physics))’: The very word *abhor* is thought to smuggle emotion into what should be a purely objective matter. But from a poet’s perspective, this objection is stunningly literal-minded, as was Ruskin’s fussiness about the one red leaf. One can have a strong scientific background, one can be well-aware of what a vacuum *is* according to state-of-the-art physics, and still find the metaphor in that word *abhor* useful for feeling one’s way into the phenomenon. Many a sturdy scientific hypothesis has come out of just such a process. In fact, von Franz concluded that ‘all scientific hypotheses and/or explanations will in the end turn out to be projections’ (von Franz 1978/1980, p. 71).

And here we are at the borderline between *projection* as Jung originally defined it, a spontaneous process which we mistake for objective perception, and a more conscious process, one in which we intentionally throw our imagination into what is going on in the outer world, seeking to understand it. Such projection has long been known to shamans, who might, for example, actually experience flight by stepping outside a sense of their own bodies to participate in the motion of birds carefully observed overhead. More than thought experiments, such acts of imagination step into a sense of ‘I am that’ - but not in an illusory way. Yes, a certain merging of identities takes place, but awareness of having one’s own separate existence is meant to be retained. It seems that an analogous process took place in alchemy, where the practitioner engaged in an *imaginatio vera*: a form of imagination believed to engage so deeply with outer phenomena that it penetrated to the truth of them.

Poetry, which centuries ago outgrew naivité about its projections, carries an implicit sense of *imaginatio vera.* When Coleridge felt the need to defend poetry as a path to truth, he made his own distinction between what he termed *imagination* and mere *fancy.* Reflecting further, he identified a kind of double-mindedness that makes it possible fully to engage with what is imagined without losing grounding in one’s concrete realty. He dubbed this phenomenon ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’ (Coleridge 1817, p. 264), a psychological state which should be no mystery to everyday theater-goers: We enter into a drama on the stage as if it were reality, completely undeterred by the fact that we are sitting in a theater, having paid admission to enter, and that we will leave freely to go back to our own lives when the house lights come back up.

Jung’s was deeply interested in the alchemists’ *imaginatio vera.*  It spoke to his therapeutic approach in ways not always made explicit. Characteristic of mainstream psychotherapy in his day (and ours) was a surgical process that sought to free suffering persons from the unhealthy influence of their illusory projections. But Jung recognized that neither he nor his patients could thrive by simply shutting down projections. Past a certain point, this reductive approach disables the very function which draws on the psyche’s innate resourcefulness. What he proposed was a disciplined practice of imagination contrasted with what he called ‘aimless and groundless fantasies’ (Jung 1953, para 219). The creative imagination must be allowed to do its work - what Jung spoke of as ‘living the symbolic life’ - for it is this work that enables us to love our lives, however persistent or unmanageable our problems may be. What brings healing is full engagement with our challenges, something that can’t happen in the sterile environment of purely objective thought.

**Alienation: the anguish of living in a soulless landscape**

The English countryside known to poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge was hospitable and green. They could not have envisioned the environmental problems we face today, yet they suffered from an acute sensitivity to the alienation from nature that was setting in at the collective level. And because industrialization was new, a shock to the system, they were not inclined to take natural beauty for granted. Wordsworth’s personal experience of relatedness with nature, imprinted early in a free-roaming childhood, became the touchstone of his life and work. It was hard work for him to keep his imagination alive in the inhospitable cultural environment of the day. That motivated him, in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude,* to trace the development of his poetic sensibility back to its earliest formation, a story which has much to do with the naive projections of childhood. One such projection that he describes occurred when he stole a boat and, rowing toward a looming promontory, began to see it as a punitive figure standing over him in judgment of his misdeed. Both author and readers of the poem knew perfectly well that this was an illusion, the product of a guilty conscience. But, rather than dismissing it, Wordsworth credited this budding capacity to be emotionally affected by nature as the ‘seed time’ out of which grew adult insight: a mature knowing that ‘there is a spirit in the woods’ (Wordsworth 1798, p. 212).

Not everyone had Wordsworth’s resilience. Coleridge, in his vulnerability to depression, felt a sense of alienation from nature looming over him. He described this in writing about his discovery of the works of mystics like George Fox and Jacob Boehme:

They [the mystics] contributed to keep alive the *heart* in the *head*; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere *reflective* faculty partook of DEATH, and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter, into which a sap was yet to be propelled from some root to which I had not penetrated, if they were to afford my soul either food or shelter.

(Coleridge 1817, p. 184)

In 1925, Jung tried to come to terms with a similar disheartening vision, what he described as the ‘cheerless clockwork fantasy’ spread out beneath him on the Athi Plains in Africa, as he stood on high ground taking in the broad panorama:

To the very brink of the horizon we saw gigantic herds of animals: gazelle, antelope, gnu, zebra, warthog, and so on. Grazing, heads nodding, the herds moved forward like slow rivers. There was scarcely any sound save the melancholy cry of a bird of prey ….

What came to relieve the oppressive mood induced by this spectacle was a kind of revelation: the idea that, since time immemorial, the human psyche has had a unique capacity to add meaning to what is shown on the mindless hard surfaces of the world:

There the cosmic meaning of consciousness became overwhelmingly clear to me. “What nature leaves imperfect, the art perfects,” say the alchemists. Man, I, in an invisible act of creation put the stamp of perfection on the world by giving it objective existence. This act we usually ascribe to the Creator alone, without considering that in so doing we view life as a machine calculated down to the last detail, which, along with the human psyche, runs on senselessly, obeying foreknown and predetermined roles. In such a cheerless clockwork fantasy there is no drama of man, world, and God; … only the dreariness of calculated processes.

(Jung 1961/1973, pp. 255-6)

For me, this has always been a challenging passage. Does it not contradict the notion presented by Jung himself that consciousness is developed through a progressive withdrawal of projections from the outer world? He had acknowledged that this withdrawal can entail a profound sense of loss as we realize that reality doesn’t fit our projection, and the passage at hand begins by evoking just such an empty feeling. But then he turns to imagining *consciousness* in a creative role, imprinting meaning on what would otherwise have been meaningless (‘a machine … cheerless clockwork’). He regarded this creativity as a primitive function, writing elsewhere that the modern mind can no longer do this for itself: We must draw on a layer of psyche that was laid down before the development of Western-style rationality, but which is still alive within us. In effect, a living relationship with nature can only be mediated by the two-million-year-old man, and it is he who performs vital but unconscious ‘acts of creation’, thereby restoring our root in the Earth. Acknowledging the primitive psyche’s unique role as co-creator of the world in this way, Jung dispels any sense we might have of its inferiority to an analytical mind like Robert Boyle’s.

Jung’s euphoric experience on the heights above the Athi Plains was important to him, echoing mountain-top revelations in the Hebrew Bible. And many readers of Jung have fastened on this passage as a source of inspiration - needed, because to endure a world completely de-animated by science remains as disheartening for us today as it was for Coleridge. Choosing to regard nature as dead and insensitive has led to the alarming multiplication of cityscapes and industrial complexes that reproduce exactly that feeling of mind-numbing sterility described by Coleridge as ‘partaking of DEATH’. And that is an everyday reality that we all know.

No amount of power and control over nature makes a world drained of *eros* any more livable. It does not compensate us for being deprived of relatedness with nature, a condition which Wordsworth portrayed as our human birthright. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth expressed gratitude for what an eco-psychologist might frame as ‘secure attachment’ with nature (Jordan 2009). The poet envisioned this as a natural and fitting extension of his relationship with his mother - no mere illusory transference:

No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:

Along his infant veins are interfused

The gravitation and the filial bond

Of nature that connect him with the world.

(Wordsworth 1800, p. 223)

Jung likewise considered a sense of belonging in nature to be a deep psychic need, one felt instinctively, even where not consciously recognized. The will to power over nature, far from answering this need, seeks to separate us and place us in a position above. It is not power but love that enables us to experience our affinities with the natural environment, and in doing so, heals.

**Challenges to individuation in a toxic culture**

This first quarter of the 21st century finds us in a time of ferment and change with respect to how we view nature, enriched by a heady array of new perspectives. Why, then, dwell on historical developments taking place as long as 300 years ago? My answer to that, both as an analyst and in my personal life, is to remember the extent to which our collective relationship with nature remains pathological. We are all still exposed to that toxicity daily. The cultural complexes driving it, like personal complexes, tend to be so deeply embedded in us as to be, in effect, invisible. And they contaminate our very sense of ourselves as creatures of nature: Are we too machines? To see this cultural background clearly brings the freedom we need in order to extract ourselves from it. Today, the climate emergency cries out for this work to be done by each of us through our own unique processes of individuation.

In my corner of the world, the climate emergency seems to have only a muted impact. Charlotte, North Carolina, is politically conservative and business-oriented, complacent on this issue, with little well-informed public conversation about the dangers we are facing. Individuals who find their way into my consulting room are unlikely to be caught up in climate denial, yet they rarely bring material that can clearly be seen as reflecting these dangers. And, though not all are wealthy, most are sheltered by white privilege from air and water pollution already affecting local populations who lack the affluence to avoid it: a concrete toxicity as invisible to many as that of the culture.

Perhaps it is the greenness of this region which most fosters complacency. Urban life has a way of imprinting upon city dwellers, if only at an unconscious level, an ugly foretaste of nature’s imminent demise. But here, even urban neighborhoods tend to be rich in trees and not far from what is popularly known as ‘God’s country’: relatively unspoiled nature, especially in the mountains to the west. Even the green agricultural lands along which our highways scroll suggest that, in making use of nature, we’ve not laid too heavy a hand upon it after all. In short, most of us can escape the pressures of urban life by the same measure to which individuals have resorted for at least 2,000 years: retreat to the countryside, away from irritants such as crowding, time pressure, and pollution. Thoreau had Walden Pond, Jung had Bollingen, and we can get ourselves to parks and wooded trails for relaxation.

If environmental anxiety lies hidden in the background for my analysands, what does often occupy the foreground is *cultural* anxiety, owing partly to the powerful influence of conservative Christian churches, many of which look askance at symbolic thinking or, for that matter, any kind of social non-conformity. Especially imaginative individuals then often find themselves dismissed as silly, marginalized as crazy, or even scapegoated as a threat to the community. These are often the very persons who find their way into Jungian analysis, a safe haven in which they can work their way out of destructive projective identifications (silly, crazy, bad). Nature often becomes an especially needed place of retreat for such individuals: yet another safe space where self-reflection and personal resources can blossom, sometimes in revelatory ways. To retreat to places in nature where we experience authentic belonging can be more than mere escape: It can be one’s liberation. I wonder how much eco-anxiety arises from fear of losing such places.

More difficult to work with are thoseinstances in which toxic cultural influences have actually been embraced and deeply taken in. The greatest challenge I’ve faced as a Jungian practitioner is work with individuals who hold their own psyches at arm’s length, who think of themselves as a malfunctioning machine and bring into the consulting room the expectation that they can be ‘fixed’, just like their automobiles or computers. This idea can block genuine self-relatedness even for persons with a well-developed imagination and experiences of connection with the natural environment. We live in a society which still tends to see reason and imagination in either-or terms: fantasy as an entertainment which can be indulged when we’re off-duty - pure objectivity as the tool which must be brought to real-life problems. By this standard, it’s especially in times of emotional crisis that we’re enjoined to view our own psyches without *eros*. Thus the anguish of living in a soulless landscape is recreated internally.

Jungian analysis is distinguished by its shift of focus away from pathologizing patients and offering to fix them, instead, facilitating re-connection with their instinctive being, their root in the earth, and thus with the wisdom carried in their own psyches, right down to the level of the ecological unconscious. In Jungian circles, we sometimes speak as though objective knowledge (*consciousness* in a particular narrow sense) is the critical resource. But a thoughtful reading of Jung’s work suggests that it’s this connection (or re-connection) itself which matters most: right relationship with nature, both within the margins of one’s individual being and beyond.

**Strong bridges**

Projection is a natural function which, like virtually all natural functions, has intrinsic value, in spite of the fact that it always puts us in danger of being caught in illusion. The metaphor embodied in the word *projection* implies that what is seen is nothing but a reflection on a screen. But in von Franz’s book on the subject, we find two metaphors proposed by Jung that carry quite different implications: First, projection is the creator of *bridges* connecting us to the world: It is the key to compassion and social feeling. But, beyond that, the phenomenon of synchronicity suggests a genuine affinity between psyche and nature such that they are in a *mirror* relationship.The withdrawal ofprojections ‘in the stricter sense of the word’ remains significant, but not to cut us off from nature; on the contrary, it polishes the mirror, enabling us to live ‘in the creative current or stream of the Self and … become a part of this stream’ (von Franz 1978/1980, p. 199).

But it is in the nature of projection to feel convincing; it makes an implicit claim to truth. So how do we identify mere dust that needs to be polished off our mirror? The best guidance von Franz can offer is to remain alert to any resulting disturbance of adaptation: When things aren’t working for us, projections must be questioned.

Clearly, things aren’t working for us now in our relationship with the natural world. Western culture is struggling to emerge from the grip of a projection that sees nature as an existential threat, if not actually malignant. From Jung’s perspective, to transform this perspective requires hypotheses that better fit reality. Such fundamental premises are not to be reached through reason or observation. They are the fruit of intuition, a genuine *imaginatio vera.*

The work of the imagination is neither simple nor direct: It is a heuristic process, requiring the same freedom to play which children need in their developmental processes. Science has its own form of heuristic process but does not tolerate the unfocused quality of a poet’s search for the poem. It has always been recognized by poets that critical thinking must be restrained in order to give works of the imagination a safe space in which to ripen. Projections must be indulged to see where they will lead, which sometimes takes a very long time, as when Wordsworth allowed his naïve childhood projections to mature over the course of years. *Logos* has its role but must not be allowed to dominate or to come in too soon. Writers know this: Allow too harsh an attitude at the outset and the bridge will be blown up before we can walk it to the other side, entering into vital relationships.

But how, in the meantime, is one to avoid the dysfunction caused by wrong projections? Both the arts and psychoanalysis have traditionally provided a protective boundary between play and immediate action in the world. Because it is only play, one can begin with an acceptance of what comes that is both whole-hearted and provisional, knowing that a process of refinement is underway.

Von Franz searched for criteria whereby to question the validity of a projection, and what she came up with was imminently practical: Does it result in a disturbed adaptation to reality? Might this rule of thumb be fleshed out more fully? Might we identify more specific criteria to be applied in different areas of life? Projection may be ubiquitous, but its style and content diverges widely, and what works well enough in one context may be a hindrance in another. What serves well in the research lab may be a distraction in working through relational conflict. What facilitates the construction of an efficient machine may destroy any possibility of writing an effective poem. Poets measure their projections in basically the same pragmatic spirit as von Franz’s: They aim to communicate. And, though their process doesn’t further science, they seek their own kind of truth. Discrimination is an essential part of their work; *logos* operates in a number of different ways to separate the wheat from the chaff of spontaneous poetic fantasy. Where education in the humanities is devalued and neglected, how is the individuating person to develop this vital resource? How is the split between artificially distanced objective thinking and undisciplined fantasy to be healed?

The nurturing of healthy relationships has an affinity with science in that the other needs to be seen as they are, not distorted by our presuppositions. But it also has an affinity with poetry, with strong bridges formed by *eros.* There are modes of projection which seem intended actively to block relatedness: notably scapegoating and paranoid self-insulation from imagined threats. These must be questioned. And this is no less true in our relationship with the natural world than within the human family. Whatever dangers may face us in nature, it is not the enemy, but rather a potential partner. For that to be recognized at the collective level represents a radical cultural transformation.

Jung understood the urgent need for such a development. Yet he feared that it could lead to a collective regression. Might we abandon all that Western culture has achieved, falling into superstition or naïve sentimentality? Let us take heart from indigenous peoples, who were both imaginative and realistic in their approach to nature, managing adaptation to the natural environment as their inescapable concern. Let us celebrate eminent scientists like E. O. Wilson, who, in our own time, furthered their academic disciplines out of simple fascination with their subjects. Theirs was just that form of “paying attention” so urgently demanded by our times.

**References**

Boyle, Robert (1686). *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Receiv’d Notion of Nature*. London: H. Clark. Retrieved from [*A free enquiry into the vulgarly receiv'd notion of nature made in an essay address'd to a friend / by R.B., Fellow of the Royal Society. (umich.edu)*](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A28982.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext)*.*

Coleridge, S. T. (1817). ‘Biografia Literaria’. In *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, ed. D. Stauffer, (pp. 109-428). New York: The Modern Library.

--- (1797/1801). ‘Christabel’. In *ibid* (pp. 24-43).

Hodges, Karen (2014). ‘Coming into Relationship with the Natural World: a Jungian perspective’. Retrieved from *http://www. jungiananalyticpraxis.com/karen-o-hodges.html*

Jordan, Martin, (2009). ‘Nature and self - an ambivalent attachment?’. *Ecopsychology*, 1, 1, 26-31.

Jung, C. G. (1917). ‘On the Psychology of the Unconscious’. *CW* 7.

--- (1953). *Psychology and Alchemy*. CW12.

--- (1961/1973). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* ed. A. Jaffé, trans. R. & C. Winston. New York: Pantheon Books.

--- (1973). *Letters, Volume I*, *1906-1950,* ed. G. Adler, trans. R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Ruskin, John (1856). *Modern Painters. Volume III, Of Many Things.* New York: John Wiley.Retrieved from *https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.42809/page/n221/mode/2up>*

Sierra Club (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/racism-killing-planet>.

von Franz, Marie-Louise (1978/1980). *Projection and Re-collection in Jungian Psychology: Reflections of the Soul,* trans. W. H. Kennedy*.* London: Open Court.

White, Lynn (1967). ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’.  *Science*, 155, 1203-1207.

Wordsworth, William (1798). ‘Nutting’. In *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

--- (1800). ‘The Prelude’. In *ibid* (pp. 212-263).