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A
Philofophical Enquiry
INTO THE
SYNESTHETIC EXPERIENCE
OF
TOUCHING
THE
SUBLIME



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TOUCHING
THE
SUBLIME

What does it mean to be connected with nature? Living in a human world, buffered from nature by human-made things, I had become accustomed to thinking of it as something we go out to and then retreat from. However, once I asked myself the question, it didn't take long to realize how embedded we are in nature, and how many threads in philosophy have urged us all to come to this realization again.

The first indication came to me from my favorite painter, the Canadian, Lawren Harris. His geometric representations of landscapes capture the spiritual experience I feel in nature better than any realist. Seeking to distill the experience even further, he resorted to pure abstraction and found kinship with the American transcendentalists. Developed in the early nineteenth century Transcendentalism was a literary, philosophical, religious, and political movement focused on skepticism, intuition, individual liberty, and finding truth in nature as forces against the corruptions of society and its institutions. A figurehead of the movement was Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson. His beautiful writing alluded to me that he believed in God in the same way as I do, using the concept as a placeholder for an unknowable power in which to find meaning through internal reflection and contemplation of nature.

But it was Emerson's influences from eighteenth century German Idealism that I found an expression of a familiar feeling. Along with thorough analysis of the human mind's activity of creating experience, Emmanuel Kant reintroduced the concept of the sublime—where one is confronted by the overwhelming force of nature—though I found his overly technical writing drained the emotional and spiritual effect from the experience by insisting on human's rational superiority over nature.

Fortunately I came to realize Kant was not the only author to resurrect the concept, nor the first. There was a rich history of attributing the feeling to the experiences of early alpinism. Anthony Ashley-Cooper was one of the first to describe a treacherous landscape when crossing the Alps, and while it threatens imminent demise, he takes it as an opportunity for humility in the face of nature and to reflect on the mysterious forces that shape it.

This, to me, is the first step in encountering the sublime: the acceptance of the limits of our rational faculties, and a non-dogmatic openness to realities beyond our understanding. This is one of the concepts my infrared photography is meant to express, by exposing us to a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum that is beyond the reach of our known senses. In this way, openness to processes beyond our immediate experience means that one needs not to be fearful to experience the sublime. Push your rational faculties far enough and you could start to feel it. Consider the scale of the universe, or the communications of a mycelial network, or how a limestone mountain was once a coral reef. Opportunities to encounter the sublime are only as limited as the imagination.

Yet all of this focus on the experience of the sublime being in the mind neglects an important part of being embedded within nature—the physical connection to it. I found satisfaction for this in the contemporary concept of enactivism, wherein our experience of reality is formed by the mutual interaction between our sensorimotor capabilities and what our environment affords us. In the same way that our minds have limits to push against, our bodies can be challenged by our engagement in nature. A landscape becomes representative of the subjective experience within it. If we are willing to detach from our ego, this realization of our embeddedness then places us within the sublime, as our existence extends beyond our bodies into the interconnectedness of everything.

As the ego dissolves into its surroundings, our intuitions come to the forefront, and we can extend our intuitions of ourselves into the objects of our environment. The sublime exists in this tension between the existentialism in which one embodies the environment, and the idealism which claims that the human mind is the active originator of experience. In this formulation it occurred to me that the sublime becomes a mode of existence, rather than a transient moment, and can be used to inform an open perspective on all experiences. As this dynamic tension creates our reality it also informs the artistic process, when one realizes how much influence is owed to unknown forces that surround us.

Welcome to the sublime. These perspectives have shaped the way I engage with and see my environment when I explore the backcountry that surrounds my home of Vancouver, Canada and further afield. This book expresses that relationship, with inspiration flowing between reading, travel, and creativity, but it is ultimately an imperfect translation. There exists another gap that creates tension where the sublime can be found, that is between the intention and interpretation of creative work. I invite you to find your perspective in these landscapes as well as your own connection to your environment, pulling away the layers of presuppositions that have built up over time, realizing the world we create is a plurality of nearly infinite possibilities.



Encountering the Threshold

There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, — no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

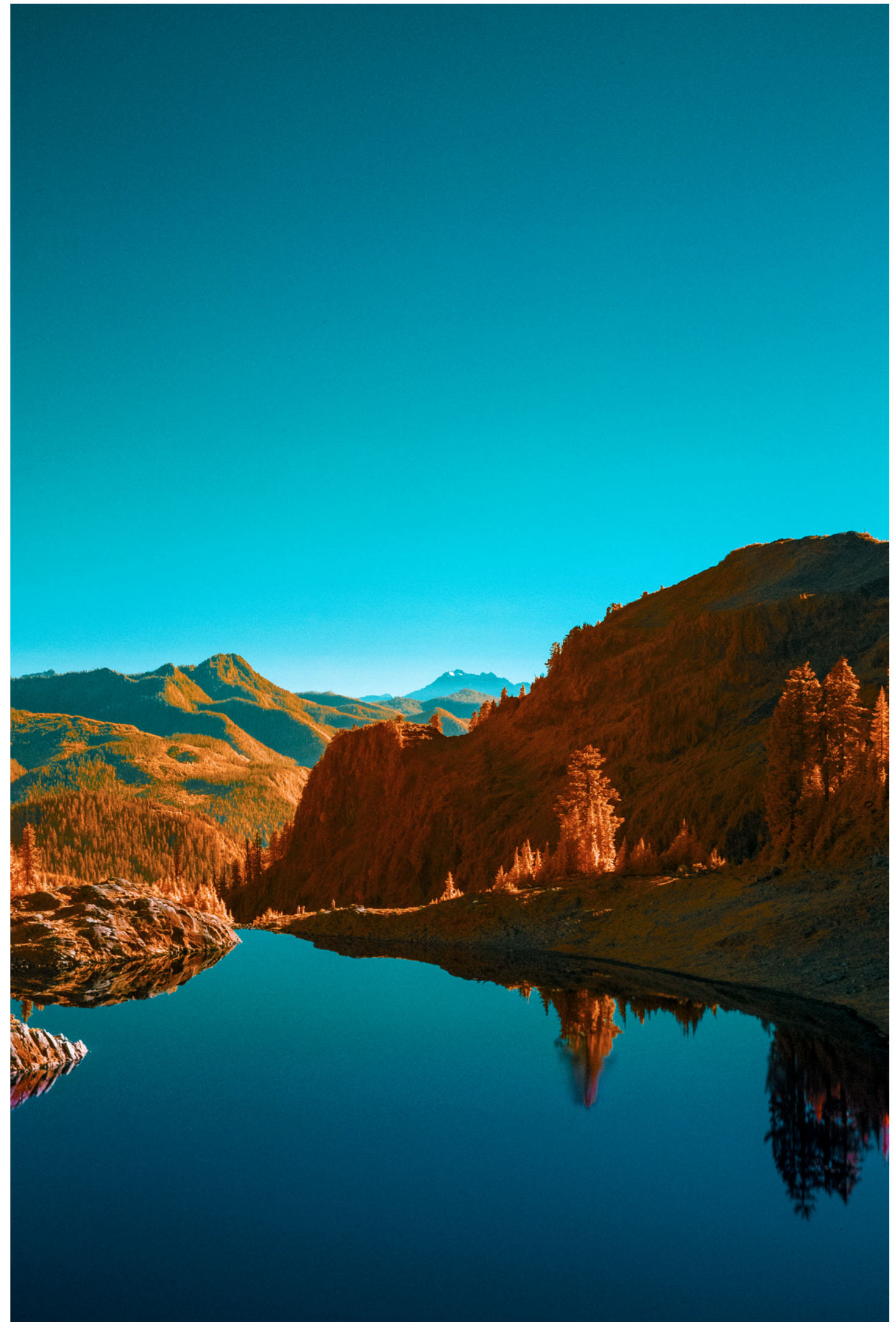
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 1836





The feeling of the sublime, so far as it arises from a contemplation of the distance of the stars, of their greatness and physical extent, reflects itself in the feeling of the infinite, which belongs to another sphere of ideas included in the domain of mind. The solemn and imposing impressions excited by this sentiment are owing to the combination of which we have spoken, and to the analogous character of the enjoyment and emotions awakened in us, whether we float on the surface of the great deep, stand on some lonely mountain summit enveloped in the half-transparent vapory vail of the atmosphere, or by the aid of powerful optical instruments scan the regions of space, and see the remote nebulous mass resolve itself into worlds of stars.

Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, 1845







Embedded in Ambiguity

To see is to enter a universe of beings which display themselves, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But insofar as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945





Action is not something happening in the brain, and is not just providing new sensory input for the brain; it's what the whole organism does in its interactions with the environment or, under a different description, what a person does in the world, and this changes the world as much as it changes the brain. [...]

If nature cannot be understood apart from the finite cognitive capacities and action affordances that humans have to investigate it (and this is not only the enactivist view but a hermeneutical principle), this makes the scientific enterprise—which is itself a form of active engagement and exploration—more complicated. An enactivist philosophy of nature supports a kind of holism in which a plurality of factors are understood to contribute to the full conception of mind.

Shaun Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind*, 2017





Approaching Infinity

Now anyone who has become so engrossed and lost in the intuition of nature that he continues to exist only as the pure, cognitive subject will thus be immediately aware that as such he is the condition, which is to say the bearer, of the world of all objective being, because this now presents itself as dependent on him. He thus draws nature into himself, so that he feels it only as an accident of his being. It is in this sense that Byron said: “Are not the mountains, waves and skies, a part of me and of my soul, as I of them?”

But how could anyone who feels this way consider himself absolutely transient in contrast to everlasting nature? He will rather be seized with the consciousness of what the Upanishad of the Veda expresses: “I am all these creations taken together, and there is no other being besides me.”

Arthur Schopenhaur, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1819





Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a “revealer,” that is, it is through human reality that “there is” being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky. Thanks to us, that star which has been dead for millennia, that quarter moon, and that dark river are disclosed in the unity of a landscape. [...] With each of our acts, the world reveals to us a new face. But, if we know that we are directors of being, we also know that we are not its producers. If we turn away from this landscape, it will sink back into its dark permanence.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 1948

