On Beauty and Interpretation: Getting Closer to Nature with David Abram's Poetic Language

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Abstract: In this article, David Abram's solution to the problem of distance between the human being and the environment—the usage of poetic language—is evaluated using Paul Ricoeur's concept of distanciation and Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime. The first section deals with David Abram's book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Ted Toadvine's critique of the book, and Abram's reply to Toadvine's critique. In the second section, Abram's proposition on the usage of poetic language is read through the exposition of Paul Ricoeur's distanciation and the idea of the sublime. Finally, Abram's usage of poetic language is shown as an effective tool in getting closer to nature.

Keywords: Ecophenomenology • Poetic Language • Hermeneutics • Environment • Sublime

Introduction

Ecophenomenology is the bridging of the gap between phenomenology and environmental philosophy where phenomenology is used to tackle and discuss pressing environmental issues. Since phenomenology raised the importance of going back to raw experience as the starting point of philosophy, environmental philosophy may greatly benefit from both the questions and answers that practitioners of phenomenology can provide. The scholars who worked on phenomenology have been extensively used in ecophenomenology, most notably Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty especially since their work centers on questioning basic assumptions about one's relation to the world one is embedded in.

Philosophers have created an interesting approach to meld the two fields of study: to understand the inner worlds of non-human animals. However, ecophenomenol-

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ogy in this form has its limits. One such limit is aptly described by Thomas Nagel in his article "What is it like to be a bat?"[1] where he said that philosophers tend to explain even the unexplainable through familiar, although insufficient terms. For example, he explains that if we acknowledge that an animal has consciousness, then we accept that it has subjective experience. He further argues that the subjective character of their experience cannot be captured by any of the methods we currently use to analyze or explain consciousness.[2] Furthermore, even if we want to imagine what it would be like to become a specific animal (in his case, a bat), "… [we are] restricted by the resources of [our] own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task."[3] Corry Shores responded to Nagel's article through "What Is It Like to Become a Rat? Animal Phenomenology through Uexküll and Deleuze & Guattari"[4] has argued that we can use the "transpositional" method from Uexküll's *Umwelt* theory and the "transformational" approach from Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal" to gain a phenomenological description that is faithful to the subjective experience of non-human animals. Shores argued that the combination of these two could allow us to know first-hand what it is like to be an animal.[5]

However, even he concludes that it is impossible to *completely* know what it is like to be a certain animal by saying that "…a combination of these two methods could still allow us to gain *partial access* to an animal's inner

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[1] Thomas Nagel, "What Is It like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/2176743

[2] Ibid., 437–38.

[3] Ibid., 439.

[4] Corry Shores, "What Is It like to Become a Rat? Animal Phenomenology through Uexküll and Deleuze & Guattari." *Studia Phaenomenologica* 17 (2017): 201–21. https://doi.org/10.5840/studphaen20171710.

[5] Ibid., 202.

life…"[6] It continues to evade me how the methods he proposed would allow us to change the way our different body parts would interrelate with each other and with the external world. But even if his methods are viable, we would only gain a partial understanding of a *certain type* of animal's subjective experience. Would it be enough to create an effect on our engagement with the world? Perhaps not, especially since we find it difficult to relate to animals that are vastly different from us anatomically.[7] Many of the examples I see are about dogs or other creatures that are somewhat close to us.[8] But what about the others, like the *Condylura cristata* or the star-nosed mole?

We know from our most basic experience that we cannot enter the minds of the animal and experience the world the way they do. Our experience of them enables us to communicate with them to some extent, and science has been enlightening us on the anatomical, biological, and chemical components of the world around us. However, we are incapable of getting inside—not just the head—the mind of the non-human, the component that will enable us to have a truly subjective experience of what it is like to not be ourselves. This is important as the way we see the world, our engagement of it, and our language evolves based on our experiences: the indigenous tribes have their own concepts and words from decades, possibly even centuries, of living in one

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[6] Ibid., 219; emphasis mine.

[7] Nagel, "What Is It like to Be a Bat?," 438.

[8] See, Simon P. James, "Phenomenology and the Problem of Animal Minds," *Environmental Values* 18, no. 1 (2009): 33–49; Dominique Lestel, Jeffrey Bussolini, and Matthew Chrulew, "The Phenomenology of Animal Life," *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 125–48; Shores, "What Is It like to Become a Rat?", and; Matt Mazur, "Is There an Animal Consciousness? A Phenomenological Approach," in *2014 Honors Council of the Illinois Region Papers* (2014): 1–13.

area; Filipinos have distinct concepts that even we cannot explain to an outsider such as the concept of *loob*,[9] among other things. Our growing lack of experience of nature (especially of those living in highly urbanized areas) deny us access to certain concepts that can only be understood in the wild or natural context. There is a reason why we have not adopted the indigenous bird calls, but people from across the globe can understand one another through memes: we just do not have enough experience of the wild earth to warrant a development in that direction.

In this paper, I shall evaluate David Abram's solution to the problem of distance between the human being and the environment—the usage of poetic language—using Paul Ricoeur's concept of distanciation and Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime. What I find interesting in David Abram's work is that he focuses on *our* experience as human animals to get closer to nature instead of trying to gain access to the subjective experience of our non-human counterparts. I find that this project, although ambitious in its own way, is more a viable solution than the others I have presented here.

In the first section of the paper, I shall discuss David Abram's book *The Spell of the Sensuous* in which he discusses the issues brought about by the advent of the phonetic alphabet, Ted Toadvine's critique of the book, and Abram's reply to Toadvine's critique. I shall do this to show what I see to be the shortcoming in Toadvine's critique. In the second section, I shall evaluate Abram's

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[9] See, for example, Albert E. Alejo, *Tao po! Tuloy: Isang Landas ng Pag-unawa sa Loob ng Tao* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1990); Prospero R. Covar, *Kaalamang Bayang Dalumat ng Pagkataong Pilipino* (Quezon City: Dr. Jose Cuyegkeng Memorial Library and Information Center, 1993). Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Babaylanism Reconsidered," *Diliman Review* 42, no. 1 (1994): 64-72; Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Hiya: Daan at Kakayahan sa Pakikipagkapwa," *MST Review,* Introductory Issue (1996): 66-90.

proposition on the usage of poetic language through the exposition of Paul Ricoeur's concept of distanciation, and Burke's idea of the sublime. Finally, I shall provide my evaluation of Abram's solution in which I show that the usage of poetic language can enable us to witness the openness of the world and experience the multiplicity of its meanings.

The Spell of the Sensuous

One of the most important works in the field of ecophenomenology is David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*. In the book, he attempted to find a possible root of the ecological crisis and centered his discussion on a tool that he claims took the magic away from the living Earth and transferred it to the page: the phonetic alphabet.

Abram discussed how our perception was once engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the world, and that phonetic literacy took that reciprocal engagement from human-to-world to human-to-text.[10] He argued that the way the indigenous oral peoples developed their language was to let it be sustained by the animate landscape, such as when the hunter had to learn the language of the animal they are tracking while paying attention to the cries of the landscape, or when the words of the people themselves make use of the calls of their local birds.[11] The indigenous peoples' language was not a strictly mental phenomenon; it was born from the land and one's continuous engagement with it and its inhabitants.

However, the creation of writing slowly took the locus

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[10] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 7.

[11] Ibid., 147.

from the animate world and transferred it onto something more concentrated and more specifically human.[12] Human perception allowed us to engage with a living, breathing world, a world full of subjects that are also capable of perceiving us, and the indigenous peoples were acutely aware of how synesthetic perception truly is due to their ability to *see* with their other senses.[13] The human being was in an intersubjective relationship with other centers of experience, and their synesthetic ability was attuned to them, but when the advent of writing came, the person's synaesthesia was torn away from the surrounding landscape and ended up trained on the markings on a page.[14] Abram claims that since the inscribed words engaged our focus and became our new form of animism, our environment, in a sense, died—its silence came to be as we began to speak only to ourselves, through a medium only we can understand.

Toadvine's Critique of Abram

Toadvine found Abram's arguments to be problematic and addressed some specific points. He argued that instead of rethinking the mind-body dualism that usually favoured the intellectualist, Abram went on to the opposite direction and hailed the body over the mind and accused reflection of being the cause for the environmental crisis.[15] Since the phonetic alphabet brought with it our interaction only with ourselves, we began to lose touch with the sensuous. Toadvine argued that this implies that the oral-corporeal culture was at

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[12] Ibid., 131.

[13] Ibid., 130.

[14] Ibid., 131.

[15] Ted Toadvine, "Limits of the Flesh: The Role of Reflection in David Abram's Ecophenomenology," *Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2005): 155–70.

odds with the literate-reflective culture, the latter which was somehow not presented as a continuation of the perceptual reciprocity that Abram believed was important.[16]

Second, he argued that Abram had romanticized the oral culture of the indigenous peoples.[17] This is connected to his first argument against Abram. Abram's book quoted plenty of indigenous peoples' narratives, and so Toadvine accused him of "orientalism" as they seemed to be presented as the ultimate model for the pre-reflective, corporeal relationship that one should have with the Earth. He also accused Abram of not talking about the higher and deeper levels of interaction towards our fellow humans that our speech and symbols bring us.[18]

Instead of the ecophenomenology that Abram had proposed, Toadvine asserted that a better development would have been Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work on the chiasm.[19]

Abram's Reply and Arguments

Abram argued for the most part that Toadvine's criticisms were baseless and that he failed to include many of the other arguments in his paper. I would, however, like to focus on two of Abram's counterarguments that center on text and speech for the purpose of this paper. First, Abram argues that the book's discussion on the phonetic alphabet and how it became the locus of our perception was not a denigration but an acknowledgment of its power as magic: the new form of

[16] Ibid., 161–62.
[17] Ibid., 159,161.
[18] Ibid., 163–66.
[19] Ibid., 167.

animism.[20] Second, Abram discussed his notion of speech in two ways: first, the importance of acknowledging the environment as a living body, and second, the importance of expressiveness in speech.

As mentioned earlier, Abram talked about how important it is that we acknowledge the things that are "active, expressive powers" which must be addressed through conversations, stories, invocations, and even prayers.[21] Hence, the descriptions, the "talking behind one's back," must open to discourse, and not just intellectual discussions among the academics and scholars but also the kinds of discourses that address and more importantly, *engage* the world around the self. Abram argues that this kind of participatory discourse is necessary for a human being to be able to fully and respectfully acknowledge and realize the wild Other-ness of the world.

His second argument is closely related to the first one. Regarding the other kind of speaking, Abram argues that our manner of linguistic engagement must not remain aloof but must reflect the expressiveness of the environment and the animal body. He is influenced by Merleau-Ponty in this case as "…he showed that phenomenology ultimately blurs the distinction between linguistic content and form, since the sound, rhythm, and shape of our words are themselves expressive phenomena in their own right—affecting and influencing the bodies that hear them (whether these be human bodies, or the tensed and muscled flesh of a moose protecting her young, or the wooden walls of one's room, or even the ambient air itself)."[22]

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[20] David Abram, "Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine," *Environmental Ethics* 25, no. 2 (2005): 171–90; Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 133.

[21] Abram, "Between the Body and the Breathing Earth," 188–89.

[22] Ibid., 189–90.

Abram argues that it is not just *who* we address but also *how* that is important. He argues that poetic language must be part of ecophenomenology because to not be is to prolong the existence of the distance between the human beings and their environment which they have stopped paying attention to. This poetic form of writing is evident not just in *The Spell of the Sensuous* but also in his other works, most notably in *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*.[23] I quote here Abram's work to provide an illustration:

> It was then, in mid-stride, that I noticed the hills slowly dancing. Look: that steep slope across the way is even now splitting into two thickly wooded slopes, one gliding toward me and the other gliding backward, as a wide swale—invisible a moment ago—is now opening between. From within that hollow, or rather through it, a distant cliff, ocher and gray, is now beckoning. This trickster-like landscape is still metamorphosing; it didn't halt its transformations after those foothills emerged from what had seemed a flat plane—now those hills are shifting among themselves as I walk.[24]

The imagery that is present in the text allows us to visualize his adventure as he gets lost in the hills after his car had broken down. Narratives such as these could have not been included in his writing, or he could have told them in a drier, less visual manner. However, that would have beaten the purpose of his ecophenomenology. In writing his story in this way, he not only told us about the landscape he was walking on, but rather *showed* us what it looked like. In reading such texts aloud, one can feel the cascading and steep slopes of the hills in one's speech, as if the terrain is not just in front of the reader

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[23] David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, 1st Edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

[24] Ibid., 83.

but also inside her mouth. He also makes use of words such as "loping"[25] instead of simply walking and speaks of his journey across the terrain as if he is an animal traversing through unfamiliar territory. He mentions in his defence against Toadvine that the way he wrote *The Spell of the Sensuous* is an attempt at an alternative way of speaking, that instead of writing in such a strictly intellectual and scholarly manner, he wrote in a way that "allows that reciprocity [with the sensuous] to come to voice."[26] Abram wrote: "I am struggling, there, to find a way of speaking *in accordance* with my animal senses—a way of speaking and thinking *as an animal in my own right,* and hence as a full participant in this earthly cosmos."[27]

Abram's ecophenomenology focused on the grounding of one's language on the sensuous, giving many examples of the indigenous peoples' experiences and narratives. He said that incorporating the sensuous in our language is not about going back in such a way that we would drop literacy and writing altogether, but rather it is about acknowledging the magic humans have created in the form of the written word and freeing this written word and using it in such a way that responds to the Earth and its inhabitants. Abram points out that although we are able to empathize with the non-human animals, an environmental ethic that does not center on the human being—but rather influences the relationship between ourselves and the environment—needs a change, a shift, in our manner of writing and speaking.[28] Considering how this is the central argument of Abram, I was surprised when I realized that Toadvine did not address this part. This aided in piquing my interest in the final

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[25] Ibid., 82.
[26] Abram, "Between the Body and the Breathing Earth," 190.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

statement Abram posed at the end of his paper:

> I believe nonetheless that this is a work we must all, to some extent, be engaged in: the struggle to disclose a new way of speaking—one that affirms the wild alterity of this multiform Earth even as it enacts and brings to voice our thorough interdependence with that which we cannot fathom, cannot determine, and cannot control.[29]

On the Usage of Poetic Language

Ricoeur's Distanciation

Distanciation is the method of releasing the text from its author's intentions to "give it a life of its own".[30] Paul Ricoeur provides its multiple levels. The first takes place in spoken discourse in which the speakers are both in the present and can clarify referents through the physical acts of pointing or gesturing. This spoken discourse is what Ricoeur calls an "event" which has a timeframe, a known or present speaker, an object, and an exchange which takes place due to the existence of the other.[31] However, the content of this discourse does not disappear once the actual event has finished; something endures beyond the discourse itself. This is where meaning resides. Hence, "the very first distanciation is thus the distanciation of the saying in the said."[32]

In the second kind of distanciation, Ricoeur provides

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[29] Abram, "Between the Body and the Breathing Earth," 190.

[30] Pia Sander Dreyer, and Birthe D Pedersen, "Distanciation in Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation: Narrations in a Study of Life Experiences of Living with Chronic Illness and Home Mechanical Ventilation," *Nursing Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (2009): 64–73.

[31] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Edited by John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 95.

[32] Ibid., 96.

us the idea of discourse as a work. As a work, discourse takes on a different, more complicated, form. First, it can be quite long; second, it is locked into a certain genre; and third, it can be individuated due to the style of its author. This means that the process of interpretation becomes more difficult as more elements come into play. The discourse becomes reworked through the writing process and thus becomes both constrained and explained through the structure. Hence, the second kind is a "distanciation by writing."[33]

Due to the act of writing, the event of discourse becomes fixed and permanent. However, this is not the only change that writing brings, but a separation from the author as well. Even though the text is individuated due to the style of its author, and this becomes part of the interpretative process, the fact that the work is out there apart from the author opens it to a series of interpretations separate from what the author in his limited frame of reference may have intended.[34]

According to Ricoeur, the act of distanciation is integral in two parts. First, it is a component of the written text; and second, it is what makes interpretation possible.

In Ricoeur's discussion of "the world of the text"[35] he posits that the reference in the discourse has disappeared or was destroyed. In oral discourse, it is possible for any one of the speakers to physically point to the reference of their speech. However, in written texts this is impossible. What makes it even more impossible is the fact that as was mentioned above, the written text has several components integral to its being written, and one of these is the imposition of the genre. According to Ricoeur,

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[33] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 100.
[34] Ibid., 101.
[35] Ibid., 102.

> However, the abolition of ostensive reference is taken to its most extreme conditions only with the appearance of certain literary genres, which are generally linked to but not necessarily dependent upon writing. The role of most our literature is, it seems, to destroy the world. That is true of fictional literature—folktales, myths, novels, plays—but also of all literature which could be called poetic, where language seems to glorify itself at the expense of the referential function of ordinary discourse.[36]

However, even if he seems to reprimand the users of poetic language, he argues that this is exactly what makes possible the openness of the text to interpretation—especially interpretation not of what is behind the text but what is in front of it.[37]

There is then a third kind of distanciation which is made possible only through the usage of poetic language, which he calls the "distanciation of the real from itself."[38] Poetic language, especially when used in fictional literary genres, enable the readers to project their own selves and their possibilities upon the world of the text. Hence, instead of reading the text and seeing exactly what it refers to or hearing the speaker and seeing with your own eyes what the reference of his speech is, the reader when engaging with poetic language can imagine possibilities in the midst of their everyday existence and derive new meanings from what is shown (and perhaps, not even necessarily said) in the text.

The Sublime

Poetic language invariably makes use of the sublime to allow the readers to connect to the text and its

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[36] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences,* 103.
[37] Ibid., 104.
[38] Ibid.

reference. Edmund Burke has written about this in his book on the sublime. There are various things that count as the sublime, such as low-level danger, magnificence, and judicious obscurity are some of the examples that Edmund Burke identified.[39] In his words, "… and in nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those which are more clear and determinate."[40]

However, not all the time do we encounter nature such as what can be called sublime. This is where we go back to the necessity of poetry, which Burke argues can "raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than [he] could do by the best painting."[41] Poetry is able to convey passions in a way that painting cannot, as even if more descriptions are given regarding a certain thing, the obscurity that remains still render the object sublime.

> So that poetry with all its obscurity, has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art. And I think there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions.[42]

Poets, philosophers, environmentalists, and even common folk have talked about locations and sceneries such as mesmerizing sunsets, great canyons, tall forests, and other such places which have evoked a certain sense of wonder and fear. Kant wrote before that when we come face to face with such imagery, our resistance turns futile as we "measure ourselves against the apparent

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[39] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757).

[40] Ibid., 49.

[41] Ibid., 45.

[42] Ibid., 47–48.

almightiness of nature."[43] In nature, it is seen as proof of greatness and holiness and has even been used by some as a reason for preserving certain environments.

Evaluation of Abram's Solution

David Abram proposed that to bridge the divide between the human being and the earth, we must affect a shift in our ways of speaking and writing. In this way, we connect ourselves to the earth and pay attention not just to the intellectual capacity of our fellow human beings, but also our more affective sides as we incorporate our more corporeal ways into our speech and texts. Since Abram's solution is the usage of poetic language, I decided to evaluate it through Ricoeur's distanciation and the concept of the sublime.

Ricoeur talked about the different kinds of distanciation which we discussed in our previous sections. In the first kind, the gap between the act of saying and the output which is the said provides the space for the derivation of meaning. In the second kind, the fact that the speech has been transposed into writing adds new elements to it such as the author, the style used by the author, the literary genre fit for the composition, and the production process. This causes a greater distanciation than the first kind. Finally, the third kind of distanciation enables a wider scope of interpretation as reality begins to be separated from itself due to the usage of poetic language. In this case, the obscure yet at the same time graphic descriptions provided by poetic language provides the space for the reader to project her own possibilities to the text. This provides a two-fold interpretation then: the interpretation of the text itself, and the interpretation of the reader. As explained by

[43] Christopher Hitt, "Toward an Ecological Sublime," *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 603–23.

David Utsler, "Self-understanding comes by way of a reflective, analytical detour and the dialectic of the self and the other-than-self over against the immediate positing of the subject in the cogito."[44] This means that the text being open to interpretation allows the reader to also understand themselves as they interpret the text. Instead of being closed upon oneself, a connection is formed between the reader and the text. On the other hand, the obscurity provided by poetic language allows us to see the object in a more mysterious light, and the lack of clarity is necessary for the reader to not immediately project her meaning to the text but look for other possible interpretations that she believes is more appropriate.

As we become focused on interpreting and pay attention to the descriptions of the text as we read the poetic language, we get to discover new dimensions of ourselves and our environments as we visualize them and connect with them through our senses, imaginations, and emotions. It is difficult not to be affected when we read the experiences described by the characters in a narrative, and it is difficult not to visualize the places that they are in when the author describes them with poetic language. We become invested when we read poetic language as we employ the synaesthesia that Abram discussed in his book. If we use this kind of language in talking about the natural environment, then it is very much possible that we also become invested. At the end of the day, that is the goal.

In connection to this, poetic language makes use of the concept of the sublime, which is both a normative conception, but the kind which continues to evade us when beholden as well. Upon looking at the idea of the sublime, we saw that Burke has argued that poetry has

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[44] David Utsler, "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics as a Model for Environmental Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 53, no. 2 (2009): 173–78.

the capacity to be a good source for it, even more so than visual art. Poetry, or if we shall expand it, poetic language, provides us the ability to render scenes as obscure and mysterious, which is necessary for a source to be called as sublime because clarity and knowledge induces immediate understanding and does not effectively form "the grander passions".[45]

This is similar to Abram's solution as seen through the lens of Ricoeur's concept of distanciation. Abram argues in his discussion about prayer that:

> In its oldest form, prayer consists simply in speaking *to* the world, rather than solely *about* the world. We should recognize that it is lousy etiquette to speak only *about* the other animals, only *about* the mountain forest and the black bears and the storms, since by doing so we treat such entities as totalizeable objects, able to be comprehended and represented by us, rather than as enigmatic powers with whom our lives are entwined and to whom we are beholden.[46]

What better representation of the "wild alterity of this multiform Earth"[47] than a text that would show obscurity and mystery? Obscure enough that it would excite the senses, and graphic enough that we would be able to visualize for ourselves what the text means. However, there are two possible issues here. First, the subject of poetic language may have to be sublime in itself; second, if the first issue is not the case, then the *usage* of poetic language itself may make it sublime. Let us look again at Abram's writing in *Becoming Animal*:

> That ocher-gray cliff that called out to me a moment

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[45] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, 49.

[46] Abram "Between the Body and the Breathing Earth," 189.

[47] Ibid., 190.

> ago has been swallowed up, once again, by this protean terrain, while a wooded hillside is now extending a muscled shoulder in my direction, reaching its arm out to hold and merge with the steep slope that I'm descending. A few conifers leaning out from that ridge lure me toward it. It appears much too narrow to safely cross, but as I approach the ridge it thickens and widens out; there's a faint path worn by creatures along the top edge. A horde of crows passes overhead, yelling, their raucous cries filling my awareness until they blessedly dissolve back into the blue silence. Let's follow this deer trail and see if it offers a way though these labyrinthine hills.[48]

While it provides us a wonderful picture of the landscape he was traversing, it leaves enough to the imagination for the reader to have to fill in the gaps with her own interpretation. In this case, especially considering how in the previous paragraph of his text he makes mention of what the landscape makes him feel:

> I found myself grinning at the way I'd been fooled by the topography. And a little giddy, too; the rapid metamorphosis in the land had induced a felt shift within my organism. My eyes, in particular, were tingling, as though they were touching, even caressing, the things that they saw. And the sky's lucid blue no longer seemed the color of a far-off haze overhead, but more a medium through which I was moving, an enveloping fluid imparting its swirling clarity not just to my eyes but to the whole, rippling surface of my skin as I descended.[49]

A landscape that falls short of the sublime would not elicit such a reaction, or even such a poetic description of his experience. And again, if the landscape *does* fall short

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[48] Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 83.
[49] Ibid., 83.

of the sublime, then his very usage of poetic language to give us a picture of his experience and the landscape he was on would provide us the image of the sublime, making it more mysterious and more open to the interpretation of the reader. It is noteworthy that this approach of using poetic language to build a connection between human and environment has been researched by the scientific community and is also seen as a possible tool by the U.N. to make the Sustainability Development Goals more actionable.[50] Emotion has a way of urging us to act, and it is easier to act *for* an environment that is alive and speaks to our senses in its own ways, than one that is dry and dead.

We should make mention that not all landscapes or pieces of nature fit the requirements of what constitutes the sublime. Many of us live in environments that fall short of being remarkable, and in many cases, even memorable. Not every encounter we have with the natural environment burns itself into our minds. Abram's proposal to use more affective, poetic language allows readers to see their environments in a manner that makes it more alive and more worth noticing as we encourage ourselves to see how our senses and our environments interact with each other.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented David Abram's project to shift our way of speaking and writing to a more poetic language which makes use of our affective and corporeal selves instead of the purely intellectual one which we tend to use in our scholarly and academic lives. I believe

[50] Maria Hofman-Bergholm, "Storytelling: The Ancient Tool of Using Stories to Communicate Knowledge for a Sustainable Future," in *Integrated Science*, edited by Nima Rezaei, 13:237–54 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

that this is relevant to the pastoral ministry of caring for the environment as it provides us a viable way of building a relationship with nature as it is seen as alive—and we are seen not as separate from it, but a being that is both fully animal and fully human engaging with it. I discussed the debate surrounding his work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, in which Abram talks about the new animism created by the advent of the phonetic language. He argues in his book that instead of human beings engaging with nature and entering conversations with it, we became focused on ourselves instead as we began to use our synesthetic senses on the words in our pages. After discussing Toadvine's criticisms against Abram's work, I went back to Abram as I discussed his reply in which he clarified numerous points from his original work. From this, I evaluated his solution through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's distanciation and the sublime. I discussed Ricoeur's concept of the three kinds of distanciation, and the sublime as identified by Edmund Burke. Finally, we arrive to the conclusion that Abram's solution of using poetic language in ecophenomenology can be an effective tool in our goal to be closer to nature.

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