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Coughlin, Jenna M.

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Conceptions of Nature in *Nynorsk* Poetry:
Local Language and Situated Knowledge
in Ivar Aasen, Olav Nygard, and Aslaug Vaa

By

Jenna M. Coughlin

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Scandinavian Languages and Literatures

in

the Graduate Division of

The University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Prof. Mark Sandberg, chair

Prof. Linda Haverty Rugg

Prof. Line Mikkelsen

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Abstract

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This dissertation proposes new readings of the *Nynorsk* poetry tradition and changing views of the relationship between nature, aesthetics, and language therein. Through the dual frameworks of ecocriticism and the study of global modernisms, I take Ivar Aasen, Olav Nygard, and Aslaug Vaa as examples of writers who are strongly associated with a particular rural region, yet also experienced increased mobility due to social changes brought about by modernization in Norway. I examine how these poets viewed their relationship to rural nature and cultural traditions and adapted them to create a new, vernacular literary tradition. Using ecocritical understandings of nature as the co-product of human and nonhuman processes, I argue that poets in the *Nynorsk* tradition often represent nature as an agent in the formation of culture, partly as an effort to argue for the cultural agency of rural people as well. This involves a situated, rather than detached, understanding of the environment. Moreover, using the concept of eco-poetics, I examine their understanding and use of language as something dynamic and not wholly subject to human control as a part of the *Nynorsk* tradition and aesthetic. This view of language facilitates an understanding of the poem and the lyric tradition as processual and creates a less individualistic understanding of the role of the poet. This dissertation thus contributes to eco-poetics by positing the efficacy of poetic practice, rather than representation, as a means of mobilizing poetry in the service of social or political ends. Likewise, it contributes to the globalization of both modernism and ecocriticism by interpreting the relationship between human and nonhuman nature in the Norwegian context as negotiated and positing that advocating for the co-agency of nature and rural people was a key part of the rural writer's modern experience.

In chapter one, I interpret Ivar Aasen's glossary of vernacular plant names, *Norske Plantenavne* (1860), as a text that draws attention to the situated knowledge that rural Norwegians had of their local environments. This represents an attempt to legitimize such knowledge; however, Aasen ultimately participates in the effacement of that same knowledge by attempting to reconcile it

with Linnaean taxonomy. The collection and promotion of vernacular plant names in the Norwegian knowledge tradition, however, blurs the boundary between ethnobotany and the natural sciences and establishes a foundation for the idea of rural people as having a unique contribution to make to national identity.

In chapter two, I examine how the relationship between the concepts *heim* [home] and *verd* [world] in Aasen's poetry collection, *Symra*, similarly negotiates between rural environments and the changes occurring within and beyond them. By reconsidering previous ways of categorizing these poems, I demonstrate how concerns regarding nature and culture intersect throughout Aasen's work. In particular, I argue that the negotiated relationship to nature Aasen represents in the rural context is constructed in an effort to demonstrate what assets and tools rural people can utilize to negotiate their entrance into a wider world without losing a sense of orientation or community. Aasen thus represents ways in which rural people and nature are uniquely vulnerable in the process of modernization but also champions their unique capacity to weather difficulty.

In chapter three, I examine the work of a poet who did weather a number of difficulties that he faced as a person of rural origin compelled to mobilize in pursuit of economic and creative opportunities. I argue that Olav Nygard experienced modernity unevenly in that it provided him with access to education and the aspiration to be a poet but not with the economic stability to achieve his aspirations. In Nygard's poetry, this informs his interest in both dynamic nature and language as unstable ground. Using the concepts of sensuous poesis from the field of ecopoetics and new materialist approaches to agency, I examine how Nygard not only represents but enacts new understandings of thought, memory, and the body as diffuse material processes not confined to the individual subject. However, rather than a source of distress, expanding the capacity of *Nynorsk* in order to express these novel understandings of nature and language provided Nygard with a source of optimism in the face of change.

In chapters four and five, I turn to the prose and poetry of Aslaug Vaa. Associated with the high mountain region of Telemark, Vaa developed a global consciousness during her studies in continental Europe and travels in West Africa. Thus, the creative capacity she believes *Nynorsk* to have is beneficial not only within the narrow confines of Norwegian culture and literature but is a potential model for how vernacular language and local cultural traditions might empower other communities marginalized by political and economic developments in modernity. In particular, I argue that Vaa represents women, rural Africans, and nature as silenced by instrumental rationality. However, through a notion of biosemiotics, or the ability of all living things to communicate in either unarticulated or articulated language, I contend that Vaa sees attention to the language of living things as a practice that can revitalize language and the mind and safeguard the creative capacity of the individual. Furthermore, I explain how Vaa enacts that attention in her poetry through poetic forms that emphasize poetry's ritual function, thus engaging the reader in a practice of attending to aural and visual signals in nature.

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Introduction

It is early November in Oslo. Outside there is the early darkness of late autumn and the chill of approaching winter. But inside Det Norske Teatret [The Norwegian Theater], the audience is facing not a curtain but what appears to be a wall made of corrugated metal. Projected onto the wall are scenes of pristine nature—tropical fish, mountain peaks, running horses, and flying birds. Slowly, a door in the wall is opened from the inside. The audience sees first a hand, then an arm, and finally the body of a human figure. The figure is androgynous, with slicked-back hair, a gray jumpsuit and light gray skin with what appear to be grease stains on the face and arms. She carefully steps onto what we come to understand is the narrow ledge around an oil platform. Using exaggerated hand gestures, she delivers her opening lines:

WAT vul aig bli
om du kreip fra
din vord til uss? (Rimbereid 3)
What will I be if you crawl from your world to us?

Gesture helps the audience understand the figure's strange language—a blend of English, German, Old Norse, and Scottish and Norwegian dialects perhaps best described as a *petrolect*, the imaginary language of a future in which humans have extracted all the fossil fuel on earth. The environment is now toxic, cities have become uninhabitable, and people live in repurposed oil platforms with names like “Organik 14.6,” suggesting they are the last existing structures that house organic life. A plan is underway to relocate humanity to underwater cities where they will lead virtual lives through avatars rather than in organic bodies. *Aig* [I], the protagonist and speaker of this long-form poem turned dramatic monologue (adapted for the stage by Ane Dahl Torp, who also plays *Aig*) is to be one of the first test subjects to inhabit this virtual world.

The imagined future dialect in which *Solaris Korrigert* [Solaris corrected, 2004] is written raises questions about the relationship between language and the material world, especially as that material world undergoes radical changes. In turn, these questions suggest both the historical status of place, nation, and writing in the Norwegian context and the contemporary trouble it is in. Writing place and writing nature were significant aspects of the formation of national and regional identity, especially in the history of Norwegian literature, generally regarded as beginning with the ratification of the Norwegian Constitution in 1814. For Norway, having a language and literature of its own was as important for asserting Norwegian claims to independent national status as having a nature of its own. *Solaris korrigert*, written by Øyvind Rimbereid, is the last in a series of collections of topographical poetry. While the first two collections (*Seine topografjar* [Late topographies, 2000] and *Trådreiser* [Wire-travels, 2001]) explore historical landscapes, *Solaris korrigert* imagines a future that can be described as post-place and even post-nature. *Aig* used to live in “Stavgersand,” a composite of present-day Kristiansand and Stavanger, in the south-southwest region of Norway, the center of the oil and gas industry. Now, “siddy” has become an abstract concept without physical referent:

SIDDY Stavgersand, siddy min,
exist nearli ne at all, mang

konclud naw. KAN henda den exist
onli som ein olda namn,
som symbol an ein sidde? (Rimbereid 12)
CITY Stavgersand, my city, almost doesn't exist at all, many now conclude. Maybe it
exists only as an old name, as a symbol of a city?

As *Aig* suggests, the places of the past, such as cities, are mere symbols in 2480, as life prepares to go virtual. This is further indicated by the lexicon of *Aig*'s dialect: She uses versions of the English words *place* and *city*, as if the Norwegian words *sted* and *by* disappeared long ago. The intimate, rural way of life that has played a significant role in defining national identity is presumably long forgotten. Moreover, the former grandeur of Norway's unique nature has been shrunk down to a pathetic size. Yet its status as tourist destination is still intact: Norway apparently has the distinction of being the last place on the planet with any "untouched" nature at all. *Aig* describes tourists who flock there to see "WILD-BEAUTI-PARK-NORWG!" (Rimbereid 12). To them, the nature park counts as "ein *wirklig* place" [a *real* place], even though it no longer bears any significant relationship to people's daily lives (Rimbereid 13). In the stage production, *Aig*'s description of the nature park is accompanied by the projected image of a single tree housed under what appears to be a geodesic dome; otherwise, only dirt and rubble surround it. "Nature" is defunct in *Aig*'s world: the word has gone out of use. The use of "Wild" suggests there is still a word for a nature unaffected by people, but the designation "park" undermines the first concept. It is a tame wilderness. The loss of a distinctly Norwegian nature in the poem expresses contemporary anxieties that the ecological destruction wrought by the same industry that has funded Norwegian national prosperity, as well as the influence of larger, technocratic states such as the United States and Germany, will ultimately deprive the nation of its unique identity.

In addition, the loss of concepts essential to the idea of "the Norwegian" has caused a subsequent loss of distinctive language. *Aig*'s limited vocabulary implies that, as living things have gone extinct and alternatives to petroculture have been eliminated, human language has been reduced to basic concepts, and vernacular terms have been lost. A commodified "Beauti" has replaced words like *vakker* and *skjønnhet*; the clunky "Luv" has replaced *elske* and *kjærlighet*. Because the speaker's world is so limited, *Aig*'s words and imagination are limited too, making *Aig* seem naïve but also endearing. Yet, *Aig* is a kind of philosopher-poet; even with her limited vocabulary, she still manages to pose questions about the relationship between image and reality in the age of satellite imagery:

SOMTIIMS aig find og seer an min screen,
seer an region Norwg-West,
picts takat fra ovfen,
...
SPOTS av ljus i ein sigd,
som om all saman hengr. Ein sigd klar til ou skera gennom all mateie
og all human life.
...
OR seer out som half moons,
detta?
JA, er det detta wi er?

EIN world af half moons?

MEN wat er da oren sol?

WAT wi da reflecten,

halft or heilt? (11–12)

SOMETIMES I find and see on my screen, look at the region Norway-West, pictures taken from above ... SPOTS of light in a scythe, as if everything is interrelated. A scythe ready to cut through all material and all human life ... Or does it look like half-moons?

YES, is that what we are? A world of half-moons? BUT what then is our sun? WHAT do we reflect, in part or in whole?

Because of passages like this, *Solaris Korrigert* can ultimately be read as an expression of optimism in human creativity and the adaptive capabilities of both language and the mind.

Central Questions

Due to the way in which *Solaris Korrigert* deals with contemporary anxieties such as globalization, mass migration, and anthropogenic climate change, it is relevant to a number of sociological and political questions. However, the invention of a dialect to fit this imaginary future also raises a number of epistemological questions, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between nature and language: Does our language constrain our understanding of nature? Can it ever enhance it? To what extent does language participate in the project of dominating nature, and how can it be used to critique that project? Can language imitate or emulate nature? When the physical environment of a region changes, how does it affect the culture and language of the people who live in that region? If a regional nature is unique, is the language that originates from that region also unique or a better tool for describing regional nature than language that originates elsewhere?

This dissertation endeavors to examine multiple layers of the textual production of the Norwegian concept of nature within the framework of poetry, more specifically the framework of poetry written in *Nynorsk*.¹ I have chosen to focus on the poets Ivar Aasen (1813–96), Olav Nygard (1884–1924), and Aslaug Vaa (1889–1965) for two main reasons: first, they all engage with vernacular language and how it originates in, represents, and adapts to changes in a local environment in a manner that is unique among their contemporaries; second, they are each associated with particular rural regions of Norway, yet they were all mobile figures who were pushed from these rural regions by the conditions of modernity. This mobility, whether to research the dialects of Norway, seek out a more stable economic situation, or study in Europe and write newspaper articles from West Africa, could be understood as the result of Norway's "uneven" modernity, to borrow a term from the study of global modernisms. That is, all of these writers respond to a relationship to place that is undergoing fundamental changes. Yet, rather

¹ *Nynorsk* [New Norwegian/New Norse] was referred to as *Landsmaal/Landsmål* [Country/national language] before the official name of the language became *Nynorsk* in 1929. To avoid confusion, I refer to the language as *Nynorsk* throughout. The written form used by the majority of Norwegians is *Bokmål* [Book language].

than going “back to nature,” these are poets who embrace change in various ways. They see both nature and language as adaptable, and nature as the co-product of both natural and social processes.

An increased interest in ecocritical methods in Scandinavia has recently led to the publication of scholarly works on Scandinavian literature that engage with environmental problems such as global warming. Some of these deal primarily with texts from the 1970s onward (Hennig). The first ecocritical dissertation in Denmark was on the poet Inger Christensen, and the recent book *Den materielle drejning* [The material turn] introduces the work of Jane Bennett, among other ecocritical thinkers, alongside (mostly) recent Danish fiction and poetry (Fjørtoft; Gregersen and Skiveren). Madsen also writes about the contemporary Scandinavian poets Katarina Frostensen and Lars Skinnebach (Madsen). Essays such as that by Torsten Bøgh Thomsen and the recent anthology by Espen Stueland undertake social and cultural analyses of Scandinavia in the era of climate change (Bøgh Thomsen; Stueland, *700-årsflommen*). The website associated with *Forfatternes klimaaksjon* began first as the platform for the Norwegian Writer’s Climate Campaign §112, an activist initiative meant to draw attention to the so-called “environmental paragraph” of the Norwegian constitution (Jakobsen). Although the campaign has concluded, the website still regularly features new, environmentally oriented poetry, essays, and interviews (“Forfatternes Klimaaksjon §112”).

However, recent scholarship also draws attention to environmental concerns that can be seen earlier in the 20th century in poems by Rolf Jacobsen,² Hans Børli,³ Olav H. Hauge,⁴ and Tarjei Vesaas.⁵ Scholars have also read works by Knut Hamsun and Karen Blixen ecocritically (Wærp, “Lengselen etter et enklere liv”; Wærp, “Isak Sellanrå”; Mortensen; Persson), and Reed has recently written about the representation of the Scandinavian far north in the prose of Stina Aronson (1892–1956), a Swedish writer who is a contemporary of Aslaug Vaa (Reed).

Though not necessarily ecocritical, other accounts of the concept of nature in Norwegian literature have attempted a broader scope: Nina Witoszek’s *The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”* (first published in Norwegian as *Norske Naturmytologier*) makes an argument for Norwegian exceptionalism that is grounded in a rational, benevolent attitude toward nature that she views as mostly cultivated in literary sources from the medieval period all the way up to Arne Næss’s Deep Ecology. Similarly, the anthology *Naturhistorier* tracks the understanding of nature through various literary periods and genres; however, its authors note as much dissent as agreement (Lærkesen et al.). Though focusing on the cabin [*hytte*] in Norwegian literature, along the way Rees tracks various views of place, nation, and nature as they change in response to historical, social, and economic changes (Rees).

Although I chose *Solaris Korrigert* as my opening example in order to demonstrate that the concerns of the poets presented in the chapters that follow in fact intersect with contemporary environmental concerns, this work does not focus solely on texts that respond directly to

² Tysdahl notes Jacobsen’s critique of industrialism (220–21).

³ See (Wærp, *Diktet natur*) and (Bekkevold) on Børli.

⁴ See (Stueland, *Natur, force majeure og toksiske perspektiver*).

⁵ See (Greenwald, “Tarjei Vesaas’ lyrikk: Ei utfordring or natur- og modernismeomgrep”; Greenwald, “Introduction”) on Vesaas and Deep Ecology, as well as (Furuseth) on Vesaas’s novel *Fuglane* [*The Birds*, 1957].

environmental degradation. Rather, it is intended to be somewhat more in line with attempts to track the view of nature and place in response to change—with the addition of a particular focus on poets of rural origin, their views of language, and the ways in which these concerns about place and language intersect. Looking at the anxieties of earlier moments is productive for several reasons: first, it reminds us that contemporary views of nature have formed out of a long history of dissent. Second, it allows us to see how people have grappled with changing nature without the cloud of pessimism that seems so difficult to dispel at our current moment. A great deal of the optimism expressed by the poets I treat here seems to be associated with their engagement in the larger project of creating a new cultural tradition that nevertheless retained a sense of contact with the past. That this provided so much energy and focus to the poets treated here helps to increase our understanding of the value of literature in general, and poetry in particular, at a moment when our aesthetic frameworks seem in need of a renovation.

By way of introduction to the project's method and scope, I will first provide the definition of ecopoetics that I will use to engage with these poets' work. I will then explain in more detail what I mean by global modernism and how it can help us better understand these particular poets and their relationships to nature and language. Finally, I will provide overviews of each chapter.

Ecopoetics

A number of ecocritics and environmental philosophers have advanced anthropological arguments regarding the origins of language and how nature and poetry participate in language development. In *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, Felstiner argues that poetry is connected to nature via myth; for example, language calls things into being in some creation narratives (1–2). Felstiner also advances a sensory argument, namely that poetry allows us to see things afresh, just as the use of our senses in nature promotes a state of alertness (2). Moreover, as poets draw inspiration from the natural sciences and the invisible biological processes they describe, Felstiner notes, “nature poems increasingly deal in things not seen at all” (2). Similarly, Fisher-Worth and Street state in the preface to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, “[P]oetry returns us in countless ways to the world of our senses ... awakening our dulled perceptions and feelings. This is the power of all poetry” (443). Street and Fisher-Worth thus subscribe to an extremely inclusive definition of “ecopoetry” and would likely agree with Robert Hass, who states, “In certain fundamental ways, of course, poetry has always been about nature, because we are organic beings and part of the cycle of birth, flourishing, and death that renews all organic life ... all poetry is in this sense nature poetry” (Fisher-Wirth and Street 1030). Although the concept of ecopoetics in this work is not so inclusive as that of Hass, I do not focus exclusively on “nature” poetry, understood as poetry that focuses on nature as its central theme, but rather poetry that takes up the intersection between the natural and various social concerns, or that exhibits an understanding of aesthetics and poetics that is partly inspired by nature.

All of the poets discussed in the following chapters have a connection to forms of oral poetry or song performance in rural Norway. Because heightened sensory perception and engagement with nature through things like myth and animism are things of the past, some ecophilosophers see hope for a better nature ethic in the revitalization of such oral poetic forms. For example, David Abram sees dwindling language diversity as a consequence of decreased biodiversity: “It is hardly a coincidence that so many native languages are unraveling at the very same historical moment when innumerable local ecosystems on every continent are fragmenting

and falling apart. The conjunction makes evident how deeply the internal coherence of an oral language is entwined with the vitality and coherence of the land itself” (Abram 265–66). To him, “the rejuvenation of oral culture is an ecological imperative” because oral aesthetic forms, such as poetry, are a “practice of alert, animal attention to the broader conversation” that goes on around human beings (Abram 291–92). The poets treated here share, to a degree, Abram’s interest in oral culture as something that connects their own poetry to a vernacular tradition, helping it resonate with their readership and preserve a sense of continuity with the past. But while Abram stresses something more like a return, these poets perform a gesture of looking back to look forward: that is, rather than reviving the past, they consider how one might utilize it in order to create a language that can communicate something new rather than succumbing to disorientation or meaninglessness.

In this sense, they have perhaps more in common with a contemporary practitioner of ecopoetics like Evelyn Reilly. Reilly is more interested in how linguistic and formal experimentation can renew language, exploring its adaptive capabilities. To her, ecopoetics is “an investigation into how language can be renovated or expanded as part of the effort to change the way we think, write, and thus act in regards to the world we share with other living things” (255). This, she emphatically states, is not nature poetry: “I’d assert that it has nothing to do with nature poetry, the separation into genre being a symptom of the disease” (255–56). A collection such as *Solaris korrigeret* would likely be just what Reilly has in mind, given how well it illustrates the way technology and climate change fundamentally challenge categories such as *human, animal, nature, organic, place*, and so on. It is far from the *topophilia* to which Abram tends and which is expressed in many of the treasured texts of American nature writing, or of Norwegian “nature” poetry, for that matter.

Reilly’s ecopoetics focuses on making language and how, in turn, language can remake our understanding of nature. This is in keeping with the distinction Jonathan Bate makes when he introduces ecopoetics not as a genre of poetry, but a form of *poiesis* or “making” that aims to be “not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it but an experiencing of it” (42). While ecopoiesis does not occur only in poetry, Bate does claim the special ecological efficacy of poetry in that “the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a peculiar force to the *poiesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language’s most direct path to the return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling” (Bate 75–76; emphasis original).

While the editors of *The Ecopoetry Anthology* suggest that attention to poetry can promote attention to nature, Bate notes that the relationship between ecopoetics and ecopolitics is complicated and often contradictory (40). This is because the ecopoem, particularly when it describes an individual, subjective experience in nature, can represent nature as a retreat from the social, or even imply that the poem can serve as a substitute for nature. As Garrard and Lindström point out, the former implies nature is fully apart and wholly other to the human (neither an ecological nor very practical view for addressing environmental problems) (48–49), while the latter grants a special status for the aesthetic that excuses it from engagement with anything outside itself. For this reason, many accounts of ecopoetics since Bate have attempted to delimit the instances in which ecopoetics is useful for ecopolitics. In particular, they ask how ecopoetics can go beyond individual experience to draw attention to relationships between society, culture, and nature, or how it can draw attention to the poem as an always imperfect or incomplete representation of nature.

In *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, Rigby provides an overview of such definitions of ecopoetics, especially those that reject the claim that the poem can serve as a substitute for contact with nature. In such accounts, the aesthetic product does not claim to be either separate from, superior to, or identical with nature. For example, employing Merleau-Ponty, Scigaj coins the term *référance* as an alternative to Derrida's *différance*, using it to contrast the concerns of ecopoets with those who view nature as a purely textual construct (37).⁶ According to Scigaj, "The real 'play' or nudge that one often finds in reading ecopoetry and environmental poetry is a self-reflexive heightening of language that reveals language's limitation" (37). The aim of *référance* is not to make text the object of contemplation but "to turn the reader's gaze toward an apprehension of the cyclic processes of wild nature after a self-reflexive recognition of the limits ... of language" (38). Similarly, Rigby's own "ecopoetics of negativity" stresses that ecopoetics must "disclose its own inadequacy as a form of representation, or mode of response, in order to resist the logic of substitution: the illusion, that is, that the text can stand in for something else, whether embodied experience, empirical knowledge, or ethico-political action" ("Ecopoetics" 2207–11; see Rigby, "Earth, World, Text"). Like Reilly, Gilcrest focuses on the degree to which ecopoets see the symbolic vocabulary of the western poetic tradition as in need of revision; however, he too is concerned with the limits of language. The "pragmatic environmental poetics" practiced by Robert Frost, among others, aims "to produce the symbols by which a new and more responsible environmental ethic is to be constituted. At the same time, such a poetics acknowledges, either implicitly or explicitly, the limitations that human perception and language place on mimetic ambitions" (Gilcrest 125). "Pragmatic environmental poetics," he writes, "arises out of a belief that the 'responsible' ... deployment of symbols serves to establish a more responsive, and epistemologically adequate, attitude toward environmental discourse" (126).

All of these approaches that subscribe to a narrower definition of ecopoetics, then, consider how past or current language, symbols, images, metaphors and other poetic figures might prove inadequate or even misleading when it comes to representing nonhuman nature and ecological relationships (especially since human influence on nonhuman nature has become increasingly apparent and substantive). Yet, an alternative to this focus on representation or naming might be those forms of ecopoetics that focus on how aesthetic production and poetic language might be, in some sense, not identical with but *related to* natural processes. For example, Knickerbocker focuses on modernist poets who do not use language to represent nature mimetically but rather employ "'sensuous poesis,' the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (2). As in the biosemiotics proposed by Wheeler and explained in chapter four, "[S]ensuous poesis operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable from the rest of nature" (2). In focusing on "sensuous" aspects of language, including rhythm, rhyme, and other aural effects, Knickerbocker emphasizes how poems "enact" rather than simply represent nature (13).

⁶ One of the ironies of Scigaj's work is that two of the poets whom he critiques for viewing poetry as closed and non-referential, Robert Hass and Jorie Graham, have since become publicly engaged with both environmental concerns and ecopoetry. This suggests the degree to which the radical constructionism described in Scigaj's account is more a product of literary criticism than a view illustrated by the poetry itself.

This often differs in practice from the subjective representation of an encounter with nature that we might expect from the “nature poem.” For poets who practice sensuous poesis, “however influenced by experience ‘in the field,’ their language takes on its *own* wildness and materiality distinct from but still a response to nature” (13; emphasis original). Because of its generative properties, language, like nature, is never entirely subject to human control. Knickerbocker’s ecopoetics, then, is one in which, as Rigby puts it, “[t]he natural systems that have enabled the emergence of these diverse [human] creative practices” are “seen as poietic or, rather, autopoietic, continuously generating new forms and patterns, and dissolving old ones, in a dynamic process of open-ended becoming” (“Ecopoetics” 2174).

As we will see in subsequent chapters, the idea that certain processes in nature participate in the production of human culture informs Aasen’s work, while Nygard’s implies that human creativity arises in the context of a community of nonhuman agents. Finally, in Vaa’s poetics, poetry is not an adequate *substitute* for engagement with nature but a similar *practice* that draws the practitioner’s attention to her relationship with nature by reminding her that language is an aspect of her biological being. In this sense, both language and nature are similar in all three in that they are agentic and creative.

Moreover, rather than solely concerned with individual accomplishments or invested in the idea of the poem as a lasting monument, all three poets were aware of poetry’s potential to engage with larger social projects, from the uplift of rural people (Aasen) to the establishment of *Nynorsk* as a legitimate language of modernity (Nygard) to urban planning and public art (Vaa). This social orientation explains their rejection of (in the case of Aasen and Vaa) or questioning attitude toward (in the case of Nygard) poetic genius. Rather than a romantic model in which the poet transcends materiality by transforming it through the powers of the mind or imagination (see Dvergdsdal 147–49), these poets have a more practical attitude toward poetry as a practice that deals in the concrete, serves a social purpose, and is the product of tradition. As such, rather than cultural monuments, they often see their work as transient “flowers” in a greater field or on a longer vine (a persistent metaphor in the *Nynorsk* tradition, as we will see). Aasen uses the metaphor of the *symre* [anemone] to present an ecopoetic view of authorship, in which individual poems are transient participants in a larger creative field. Vaa, likewise, represents the poet as a participant in natural processes, and the reader along with her, through her use of rhythm and lyric address. Of the three, Nygard participates most in a heroic (in his case vitalist, rather than romantic) view of the poet, but he writes a number of poems in which processes in nature are represented without the presence of an individual lyric subject (e.g., “No reiser kvelden seg”), poems that Arnes calls his *fenomendikt* [phenomenon poems] (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 37), and even in his heroic depictions of poets (“Shakespeare,” “Wergeland”), poets’ powers are represented as the culmination of concrete, natural processes over which they do not have individual control.

On the whole, as in Reilly’s ecopoetics, the emphasis in *Nynorsk* poetics on both change and continuity and outward orientation toward larger social projects makes it “a relational poetics,” and, in the transition from Aasen’s time to Vaa’s, we can see that it “reflects the shift from a classification biology obsessed with naming, to an ecological biology with its emphasis on processes of interaction and change, and, on the molecular scale, with randomness and contingency” (Reilly 258).

Global Modernisms

In recent decades, there has been a call to globalize modernism, defining it more broadly as part of modernity, not simply a reaction to it. This includes accounting for the various forms that modernism takes in different nations or regions, as well as its different manifestations within national contexts. As Friedman expresses it in “Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies,” “Every modernity has its distinctive modernism” (475).⁷ Similarly, Susan Hegeman writes (of the American context) that it is important to understand “the complex relationship between modernism as a practice and the experience of modernity itself. This experience, rather than reflecting a seamless parade of jazz, cars, and steel, is, rather, marked by a perception of uneven development, and even friction, between those sites of modernization’s greatest impact, and the places that it touched less completely” (22). There are a number of ways in which Norwegian modernity is distinctive from that of other nations, including the lack of populous urban centers, the cultural and social importance of rural areas and people, and the messy process of developing a national vernacular, which included the idea of a “new” national language grounded in the old that was seen as fresh and unifying by some and antiquated and divisive by others.

During the period of time covered in this dissertation, roughly one hundred years from 1860–1963, the textual production of the concept of “nature” is a distinctly modern project. It is one that is first central to the creation of the modern nation state and later, a concern of proto-modernist and modernist poetics. This textual production of nature is at the same time informed by changes to material nature brought about by modernity, including the organization of knowledge into formal institutions, the democratization of higher education, the introduction of various forms of rapid transportation and mass communication, the modernization of agricultural practices and the industrialization of Norway, and urbanization, to name a few of the most salient changes. In Norway, these processes were both late in relationship to other European nations and “uneven” in that they were experienced differently in different regions or by people in different social categories, including class and gender.

In her account of the “Regime of Goodness,” or the origins of what she calls “an achieved utopia of the European Left” (*Regime of Goodness* 7), Witoszek argues that one of the sources of Norwegian “good nature” is a preference for country over city, that is, seeing the rural as the center of the “moral universe” (25). From this derives not only the benevolent attitude Norwegians have toward their fellow citizens but also their careful stewardship of the natural environment. In addition to this preference for rural life, Witoszek also points to the rhetorical tradition of the “ecolect,” which communicates “a utilitarian, humanist worldview and a concrete allegiance to place rather than any animist or mystical relationship to nature” (68). Witoszek thus emphasizes the importance of the rural context and a particular language informed by the natural environment as sources of an ultimately humble and respectful attitude toward nature. Yet, her examples of “ecolect” are nature metaphors that tend to map in one direction: from the natural

⁷ Examples of global modernist studies in the Nordic context include (Lothe and Tysdahl; Jansson et al.; Stenport, “Comparative Scandinavian Modernisms”; Stenport, “Scandinavian Modernism”).

onto the human, not the other way around.⁸ That is, these are ways of textually producing culture, using the natural as a source of positive criteria but nevertheless implying that the process of nation-formation is a “natural one.” This has the potential to both naturalize social inequalities and obscure ways in which nature itself is socially constructed.

Notably, the sources of her examples are Bjørnson, Welhaven, and Wergeland, all members of the *embetsklasse* [administrative class], who played leading roles during the national romantic period before political movements aiming to advance the interests of the *bondeklasse* gained momentum. In the examples from the *Nynorsk* poetic tradition that I will focus on, it is apparent that, rather than an association with nature being an unmitigated good, rural people are also associated with nature in a way that limits their agency; that is, they are associated with nature as passive matter, as material for the production of culture, not as agents in its production. This can be seen in romantic descriptions of Aasen as an autodidact, despite his engagement with continental, enlightenment thought, of Nygard as having heroically transcended the narrow confines of rural tradition, and of Vaa as a woman whose poetry comes naturally to her, rather than being the product of concerted effort or mastery. The experience of modernity for this group of thinkers and poets involved overcoming or attempting to transform this negative perception of rural life and culture. Because of the ingrained cultural association between rural people and nature, in order to advocate for their own agency as men with rural backgrounds or, in Vaa’s case, as a woman of any class, they often advocate also for the agency of nature. They view nature, then, neither as a category that predates society nor as a purely social product, but rather as either a constraining factor or participating agent in the creation of culture.

In as much as all three of these figures respond to the positive and negative impact that the developments accompanying modernity had on them, the idea of an “uneven” modernism is useful for understanding them. While “insisting on ... provincial and vernacular interests in the context of modernism” in the American context can help us not to “excessively privilege the modernists’ own self-presentation of their efforts, as enacting radical breaks from history” (Hegeman 24), in the context of *Nynorsk* poetry the exact opposite might be necessary. That is, the emphasis on “provincial and vernacular interests” has been so strong that it is assumed that these poets preserve tradition, when in fact they can be thought of as consciously constructing tradition. By insisting on their increasingly global interests, I attempt to avoid excessively privileging any notion of them as adherents to place-based or vernacular tradition. Rather than seeing the alterity of their language as a mark of their alterity in modernity, it is instead a mark of their way of participating in it from a unique perspective that is “situated” in the rural context.

The term “modernism” did not appear in print in Norway until the 1930s,⁹ and while I certainly do not mean to argue that Aasen is a modernist poet, I would go so far as to say that

⁸ E.g., National leaders described as “force[s] of nature,” environmental determinism in accounts of the Norwegian personality, “ecological metaphors to describe civic events and processes,” and “invoking nature metaphors in positively charged aesthetic judgments” (Witoszek, *Regime of Goodness* 68–69). Environmental determinism in accounts of the Norwegian personality is perhaps the exception in that it suggests how nature might play a role in influencing culture; however, in the national romantic period, this also tended to posit a uniform, rather than varied, Norwegian mentality, helping to provide a “natural” definition of the nation as *folk*.

⁹ For a detailed account of literary modernism in Norway see (Brumo and Furuseth).

Nygaard anticipates modernism, and that there are certainly features commonly associated with modernist aesthetics in Vaa. I do argue that the linguistic projects and poetry of all three are best understood as responses to modernity that “register ... the historical specificity of the moment” (Hegeman 24). However, with respect to Nygaard and Vaa, I suggest that we can avoid seeing Norwegian poetic modernism as lagging behind that of Europe and America (as “derivative and belated,” as Friedman puts it, 477) by paying attention to the unique use of vitalist imagery and the vitalist perception of language, as this takes a particular form and significance in the specific context of Norway’s class and, later, gender politics (e.g., the idea of a rural “class” with cultural power and a feminism that is perhaps more advanced in Norway than elsewhere at the moment when Vaa begins writing). Furthermore, we can see Vaa beginning to engage in forms of critique that address problems of the 20th century, such as nuclear warfare, racism, and late capitalism, from an increasingly global perspective.

Recent attempts to engage with modernism ecocritically also provide some helpful questions to pose when approaching the poetry and prose dealt with in this project. For example, Raine notes that modernist texts are often either “science skeptical” or “science inspired” (105). By paying attention to which attitude they tend towards, we can see either an emerging critique of natural science and technology or an enthusiasm for the impact these might have on aesthetics. While there is no explicit critique of science in Aasen, I will argue that there are hints in his work of a critique of enlightenment natural science for suppressing or discounting vernacular knowledge as knowledge. In this sense, his work associates modernity with a loss of earlier, alternative understandings of nature. There is also a critique of agricultural methods not informed by thorough knowledge of rural life. In Nygaard, we can see a science-inspired ecopoetics that engages with physics, physiology, and changing notions of the human mind. In Vaa, we have a deeply science-skeptical poet, but her skepticism is not toward science *as such* as much as toward its marriage with capitalism and technology and the exclusion of anything but instrumental rationality from the realm of reason.

Finally, it is worth mentioning recent efforts to globalize ecocriticism, much like the attempts to globalize modernism that preceded it. In “Globality, Difference and the International Turn in Ecocriticism,” Heise notes that ecocriticism has expanded its scope beyond the Anglo-American context especially since 2000. While ecocriticism has always been sensitive to alterity, it generally attends not to the alterity of the postcolonial other but “the nonhuman other” (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 638). Ecocriticism has always placed a great deal of emphasis on place, especially “the difference that place makes in figuring nonhuman alterity” (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 640). As she explains, “ecocriticism brings a distinctly spatial imagination to bear on the question of alterity” (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 640). In early ecocriticism, this meant focusing on how nonhuman nature and human relationships to it are unique in specific, local contexts (e.g., Thoreau’s Walden Pond or the Sierra Nevada mountains in the writings of John Muir). However, as ecocriticism has become more globally comparative, “[p]lace in its varying material and symbolic significations figures centrally ... as a way of mapping relations between culture and nature” (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 640). Although “local specificity” is still important to comparative scholars, “specificity figures in their approaches less as difference than as variations in a context of globally shared environmental concerns,” such as climate change (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 638).

This project participates in this comparative movement in ecocriticism by insisting that place makes a difference in how nonhuman alterity and the human relationship to it is understood, especially in the rural Norwegian context. It also examines how the sense these poets have that modernity is threatening to leave rural places and people behind contributes to their desire to express an alternative, what I call “situated,” view of nature and language. As such, it provides both examples of environmental concerns that are shared with other, especially rural regions at the time, such as urbanization, and examples of concerns unique to the Norwegian context, particularly with respect to language and place. The chapters on Ivar Aasen engage with some of the concerns of early ecocriticism in that the focus is on Aasen’s representation of a unique relationship to nature that is “negotiated” in the Norwegian rural context. Yet, I keep global relationships in mind, showing how an engagement with enlightenment natural science informs and subtly undermines Aasen’s work. Subsequent chapters on Nygard and Vaa explore increasingly global concerns, as Nygard draws inspiration from the natural sciences and Vaa takes a global perspective on growing threats to the environment and regional cultures and how they disproportionately affect those viewed as racial others. My ultimate aim for the project, then, is to keep one eye on local specificity while directing the other toward how the “local” in Norwegian literature is increasingly subject to and engaged with global developments.

Overview

In chapter one, I will examine a little-known text by Ivar Aasen, best known as the creator of *Landsmaal* (now *Nynorsk*). *Norske Plantenavne* (1860) is a glossary of vernacular plant names found throughout the rural regions of Norway. By situating it historically in relationship to “Det store hamskiftet” [The great transformation] in agriculture, I consider how the glossary might be seen as part of Aasen’s larger aim of securing access to modern knowledge for rural people. Rather than making Aasen an outlier, such a view connects him to the history of botany in Norway, which involved amateurs and sought to counter the cultural and political hegemony of Denmark. This history makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between natural science and ethnobotany in the Norwegian context. Further evidence of this can be found in *Norske Plantenavne* itself. I examine Aasen’s commentary on names within this text, arguing that, rather than reducing plants to their visible structure, as in Linnaean taxonomy, he draws attention to ways in which names also convey cultural significance.

This approach suggests how the example of Aasen might challenge or confirm critiques of enlightenment natural science that have emerged from both a postcolonial and ecocritical perspective. For example, Aasen’s example complicates the figure of the “benign naturalist,” put forth by Mary Louise Pratt. Rather than attempting to extract resources or displace local knowledge, as in the “benign naturalist” model, the commentary Aasen provides on human/plant interactions throughout his text indicates his interest in “situated knowledge,” a term I derive from the work of Donna Haraway. This type of knowledge does not fit the enlightenment model of “hyperseparated” nature and culture. Rather, Aasen’s *Norske Plantenavne* relies on a non-binary view of nature and culture that is necessary to support Aasen’s goal of granting rural people not only access to “universal” knowledge systems but also a sense that their own local knowledge is a legitimate contribution to the Norwegian nation. *Norske Plantenavne* can thus be seen as an alternative modernization project meant to hybridize enlightenment and situated knowledge systems but that also reveals fundamental incompatibilities between the two. Yet this

emphasis on local nature knowledge and practices also establishes a framework for regarding rural people as making unique contributions to the nation.

In chapter two, I demonstrate how seeing Aasen's understanding of rural knowledge as "situated" can shed new light on his poetry collection, *Symra* (1863). By examining the interplay between the notions of *heim* [meaning both home and world] and *verd* [world] in the collection, I argue that Aasen's representation of the *bygd* [or rural community] does not advocate for a return to the past but rather highlights positive aspects of this community that he believed could and should be carried over into modernity. In Aasen's view, the changes that accompanied modernization offered opportunity but also rendered rural communities uniquely vulnerable, particularly when the loss of community left them disoriented, or when people without situated knowledge of rural life came in and altered it. However, the "community" Aasen describes is not limited to the social community; rather, it includes the nonhuman environment. Reading poems like "Gamle Grendi" ["The Old Hamlet"] and "Dei Gamle Fjelli" ["The Old Mountains"] along with approaches to place derived from anthropology and phenomenology, I argue that Aasen conveys a non-binary understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. In particular, Aasen presents living in community as being a "neighbor" to people and nature; this relationship involves negotiation rather than mastery or domination. Finally, I suggest that Aasen's poetics might be considered an "ecopoetics" due to its focus on process, performance, and practice over product or closed aesthetic object. *Symra* thus establishes a tradition in which *Nynorsk* poetry is viewed as a form of linguistic and eco-practice in which individual, communal, and aesthetic concerns can be addressed within a rural context for a broader audience.

Like Aasen, the poet treated in chapter three, Olav Nygard, attempts to mediate between situated and "universal" knowledge, and he also does so by conducting experiments with nonstandard language. Born in the remote western valley of Modalen and having published only four collections between 1913 and 1923, he could be overlooked as a minor figure. However, because Nygard does not participate in the heroic nationalism or religious themes present in the work of other interwar poets, Nygard broadens the notion of agency or creativity further than any of his contemporaries to include not just rural people but also nonhuman nature. In doing so, he also undermines stable notions of place and identity. In this chapter, I present an overview of Nygard's life, focusing on the ways in which he had the kind of difficult, "uneven" experience of modernity that Aasen anticipated. I will then examine the views of the concrete or "situated" versus the universal or transcendent in Nygard's work, arguing that the idea that a rural poet must renounce and move beyond the local to be relevant in modernity is a feature of this "uneven" experience that resonates even into the second half of the 20th century. However, recent concepts from ecopoetics and ecocriticism can help us to look past this narrative in order to better understand the way creativity is represented in Nygard and what its implications are for nature, subjectivity, and aesthetics. I argue that Nygard distances himself from Norwegian National Romanticism by questioning the stability of both nature and language. I then show how he employs "sensuous poesis" to question whether humans really have control over language as a medium. Rather than an autonomous or bounded subject, I argue that mind and body in Nygard can be seen as "agentic assemblages" (a term derived from the work of Jane Bennett), existing in dynamic relationship to their surroundings. This in turn questions the boundaries of the human subject in a way that borders on the trans-human.

The poet who is the subject of chapters four and five, Aslaug Vaa, shares Nygard's view of language as autopoetic, like nature. She is also closely associated with a particular region, Telemark, and she employs features of its dialect in her verse throughout her oeuvre. However,

Vaa's uneven experience of modernity afforded her several opportunities Aasen and Nygard did not have, including the opportunity to study in continental Europe and travel in West Africa. On the other hand, in addition to overcoming the notion that rural identity had no place in modernity, she also had to struggle to create a place for herself as a woman writer. In chapter four, I will present Vaa's notion of "poetic thinking" as it relates to her ideas about vernacular language and poetics more generally. I see a significant resemblance between Vaa's idea of the creative capacity of concrete language that is situated in a local environment and Wendy Wheeler's presentation of biosemiotics and creativity in *The Whole Creature*. Rather than worrying about the ability of language to represent nature, or about creating poetry that draws attention to language's failure to represent, both Vaa and Wheeler focus on art as a practice that emerges from our biological, as well as social, being. Furthermore, for both, poetry in particular draws attention to the continuity between language and biology. This suggests how we might get beyond concerns about representation to instead consider the importance of not allowing given social structures to limit the ability of human and nonhuman nature to grow and thrive. Finally, I connect these ideas to Vaa's critique of the Vigeland sculpture park, which suggests the practical implications Vaa's poetics had for urban ecologies, including city planning and public art projects.

Finally, in chapter five, I will turn to Vaa's poetry to see how the notion of "poetic thinking" is enacted in her poetry through content and form. Along the way, I note her tendency to critique masculine vitalism, instrumental rationality, and romantic nationalism from a perspective that could be considered ecofeminist. I also note ways in which she anticipates foundational texts for ecocriticism, such as Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology." I also note her global orientation, and how this produces an awareness of colonial and racist ideologies used to justify environmental destruction. This suggests that her ecofeminism involves a nascent awareness of how place, race, and gender intersect with respect to whom environmental degradation affects and to what degree. Finally, drawing on Culler's notion of the ritual function of poetry as a rehearsal of values, I suggest how her late work attempts to *perform* rather than describe poetic thinking. Vaa does this primarily through rhythm, lyric address, and what I call "biosemiotic imagism."

Limiting the focus to these particular poets who both write in *Nynorsk* and are interested in the capacity of this language form to express an alternative, "situated" view of nature is thus useful for answering the question, How can we better understand the relationship between (human) language and nonhuman nature? Is it possible to understand this relationship as one of contact and exchange, such that culture is not always viewed either as superior or determinative of the material world and knowing that at stake in our recuperation of the material is also the status of woman, indigenous people, and others subjugated according to a logic that views materiality as a "lower" form of life? In order to examine this textual production without providing a universalizing or generalizing account of conceptions of nature in Norway, then, I have examined "outliers" who contest dominant views of nature in a version of local language that helps them to better express a local or "situated" perspective on concerns of national and international importance.

Chapter 1: Situated Nature Knowledge in Ivar Aasen's *Norske Plantenavne* (1860)

On August 13, 1871, a seminary student named Torkjell Mauland wrote a letter to Ivar Aasen (1813–96). Aasen was by then well known as the author of several dictionaries and grammars on Norwegian rural dialects and as an advocate for *Landsmaal*,¹¹ a new form of written Norwegian based on these dialects. Mauland wrote to Aasen to suggest some additions to a short text Aasen had published in 1860, *Norske Plantenavne*. *Norske Plantenavne* is a list of the Latin names of 382 plant species found in Norway organized according to the Linnaean system, followed by lists of vernacular names for each species that Aasen had collected from various regions of Norway. Aasen also occasionally used plant names he had found in older, similar plant lists. Here and there, Aasen also comments on the origins or meaning of certain plant names, suggesting implicitly and sometimes explicitly that they are the most suitable names to be adopted as the species' official designation in the vernacular.

After providing Aasen with a short list of plants and their corresponding names in the local dialect of “Jadren” (today's Jæren, a region south of Stavanger on Norway's southwestern coast), he makes the following comment on the usefulness of *Norske Plantenavne*:

Det er ei stor Plaga naar ein skal læra Plantelæra og lyt bala med dei danske Nomni. Eg minnest et eg ein Gong hadde følt Strid med at læra det Namnet 'Bjerg-Volverilei.' Hadde det daa voret dei latinske Nomni, som vardt balade med, so var det endaa likare. Mange Lærarar i Botanik er inkje uviljuge til at taka norske Nomn, men dei veit so faae (Djupedal, “Brev til Ivar Aasen om Norske Plantenamn” 63).

It is a great nuisance when one is to learn botany and must struggle with the Danish names. I remember that one time I struggled terribly to learn the name ‘Bjerg-Volverilei.’ Had it been the Latin names that I had struggled with it would have been better nevertheless. Many teachers in botany are not unwilling to use Norwegian names, but they know so few.¹²

This seminarian, presumably from Jæren, wants to learn botany but finds it difficult to do so using the Danish scientific texts that would have been the most readily available at the time. The farmer's difficulty is certainly understandable given that the Norwegian name for *volverlej* [L. *Arnica Montana*] is the much more transparent *solblom* (sunflower). According to the Norwegian Forest and Landscape Institute, the *solblom* is “selve symbolet for en slåtte- eller beitemark i tradisjonell hevd” [the very symbol of a hayfield or pasture, according tradition] (Rasmussen). This is because, although the plant is wild, it tends to thrive in areas that have been fertilized according to traditional agricultural practice. The plant's bloom served as a sign that it was time

¹¹ Landsmaal can be translated as either “country language” or “national language”; thus, it simultaneously references Aasen's dual purpose—to elevate *bondekultur* and to establish it as the basis for national culture.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all trans. are my own.

for harvest—in Sweden, it is known as *slåttergubbe* [old man harvest] (Rasmussen). The seminary student's complaint is an example of the competing knowledge claims that arose as enlightenment and folk nomenclature clashed with one another: the Linnaean system made claims to universality, but it also made claims regarding what constituted knowledge. The situated knowledge Mauland had about the *solblom* and its significance for agricultural practice, as well as the reciprocal relationship between human activity and the flower's prevalence, is effaced by the taxonomic system that removes species from their context, placing them in relationship to one another according to their visible structures.

Mauland's complaint also echoes that made by Aasen in the forward to *Norsk Grammatik* (1864), in which he argues that requiring "Almuen" (meaning not just the *bondeklasse* but the majority) to learn a second language in order to participate in church, school or government places an undue burden on those who already occupy the least advantageous position in society (Aasen, *Norsk grammatik* 3). Aasen goes on to describe difficulties very similar to Mauland's:

I Stedet for at den almindelige Børnelærdom og al anden nødvendig Kundskab skulde meddeles i en Form, som stemmede noget nær overeens med Folkets Tale, blev Lærdommen her meddeelt i en fremmed Form, saa at den ofte blev misforstaaet og sædvanlig kun halvveis eller meget dunkelt forstaaet, ligesom den ogsaa blev vanskelig at komme ihu og endmere vanskelig at meddele til Børn og Paarørende i den daglige Samtale. (*Norsk grammatik* 4)

Instead of ordinary children's education and all other necessary knowledge being communicated in a form which is very nearly identical to the speech of the people, here scholarship is communicated in a foreign form, so that it is often misunderstood, and usually only halfway or very dimly understood, just as it also became difficult to remember and all the more difficult to communicate to children and their relatives in everyday conversation.

The consequence that most concerns Aasen in the context of a newly democratizing nation is that knowledge will only be available to an elite few: "Og den nærmeste Følge heraf maatte da blive den, at Almuen ikke lærte mere, end den var nødt til, og forøvrigt overlod alt dette Kundskapsvæsen til de enkelte gode Hoveder, som vare nemme nok til at lære alt, hvad man kunde ønske" [And the most immediate consequence of this must then be that the common people did not learn any more than was necessary and largely left all this knowledge business to the few good heads who were clever enough to learn everything one could wish to learn] (Aasen, *Norsk grammatik* 4).

The following chapter will examine the little-known text that inspired Mauland to write Aasen with his complaints, contribution, and thanks. Given Aasen's stated goal in *Norsk Grammatik* to make knowledge more readily available to the common people, it is not difficult to see how *Norske Plantenavne* fits into his larger program: just as Aasen's project of systematically describing Norwegian grammar legitimated Norwegian as an independent language among the other languages of Europe, the list of Latin names incorporates Norwegian plant life into a system of knowledge that is widely available in Europe, making it a legitimate object of study there. At the same time, the list of vernacular names maintains the availability of that knowledge for rural Norwegians. Recent Aasen scholarship has demonstrated Aasen's indebtedness to an enlightenment tradition and in this view of Aasen a project such as *Norske Plantenavne* may seem unproblematic. Yet enlightenment knowledge systems have been

critiqued from both a postcolonial and an ecocritical perspective for effacing the kind of knowledge referenced by vernacular plant names. This is reflected in contemporary divisions in the university system, in which folk knowledge of plants belongs to the field of ethnobotany, while the taxonomical systems derived from western natural sciences are the purview of the biological sciences. Similarly, as I will later explain, even though Aasen emerged from the same tradition as professional botanists in Norway, his engagement with botany is described alongside ethnobotanists.

This chapter will point out moments when Aasen's enlightenment project of providing access to universalizing knowledge systems such as Linnaean taxonomy works at cross purposes with his desire to preserve and elevate the status of rural knowledge. As I will demonstrate, Aasen's list of names contains hints of folk taxonomies and local nature knowledge that enlightenment taxonomical systems discard as not universally available and therefore not knowledge about the natural world. As I will also explain, however, while postcolonial and ecocritical thinkers provide a critique of enlightenment natural science that is helpful for understanding problems that arise in Aasen's project, they also provide alternative models that allow us to consider Aasen's project as a hybrid of enlightenment and romantic ideas and his view of local nature knowledge as significant because it is contextualized or "situated" not only in a particular physical environment but also a social one. Aasen's project, then, was not only about providing access to knowledge for rural people but also legitimizing traditional forms of knowledge as part of a larger, "collaborative" understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. I will further explain this "collaborative" (or "negotiated") relationship with nature in chapter two in a discussion of Aasen's 1863 poetry collection, *Symra*. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is still important to understand "situated knowledge" as a component of a relationship with nature in which nature and culture are not (hyper-)separated from one another but part of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

In this chapter, I will first situate *Norsk Plantenavne* (and the poetry collection *Symra*, published shortly after it) in the context of the social and environmental changes of the 1850s. I will then account for recent Aasen scholarship that tends to view him as figure informed more by enlightenment models of knowledge than romantic ideals. However, given that the Enlightenment has been critiqued from both a postcolonial and ecocritical perspective, I will go on to explain how Aasen presents challenges to the model of the "benign naturalist," a figure posited by Mary Louise Pratt to account for the role of enlightenment natural history in colonial ideology and practice. In order to demonstrate this, I make a foray into the history of botany in Norway before turning to *Norske Plantenavne* itself. In my view, the commentary Aasen provides on human/plant interactions indicates an interest in his part in what I term "situated knowledge" (borrowing from Donna Haraway). In the same way that Aasen cannot be read as a "benign naturalist," this type of knowledge does not fit the enlightenment model of "hyperseparated" nature and culture, posited by Val Plumwood and many other ecofeminist thinkers. Rather, Aasen's *Norske Plantenavne* relies on a non-binary view of nature and culture. This is necessary to support Aasen's political program in terms of both the right of the *bondeklasse* to access to knowledge and the legitimacy of that knowledge as both an aspect of and advantage for the Norwegian nation. Although I believe that Aasen's poetry collection *Symra* also supports such a reading, I will begin instead with *Norske Plantenavne*, situating it in the context of the history of botany in Norway before examining the commentary Aasen provides on plant names in his glossary. Ultimately, however, I will conclude that this hybrid project is

flawed in that enlightenment knowledge systems and situated knowledge are incompatible. Yet this emphasis on regional nature tradition and practices establishes a framework for regarding situated knowledge as the special purview and unique contribution of rural people, a framework that later poets would work within to serve different ends than Aasen's, as I will explore in subsequent chapters.

The Historical Context for *Norske Plantenavne*: “Det store hamskiftet”

In order to understand the significance of Aasen's project not only from the perspective of nation-building but also from the perspective of environmental history, it is useful to describe the historical context in which Aasen was working. The year in which *Norske Plantenavne* was published is described as a “watershed” in Norwegian Agricultural History. The political, economic and social situation in rural Norway was changing, and the environment would have been undergoing changes along with it. The term “peasant” does not neatly fit the Norwegian context, but it is perhaps the best translation of the Norwegian *bonde* (plural: *bønder*). The *bondeklasse* included crofters (*husmenn*), who did not own land or whose land parcels were too small to be legally recognized as separate, as well as freeholders and tenant farmers. Both of these groups had separate, legally registered land.¹³ Crofters, who had increased in number in the first half of the 19th century, had no legal position until 1851 (Lunden 164–5). In the decade leading up to 1860, the number of crofters had increased to its maximum of 90,000. The draining and stone- and tree-clearing work that had occurred from 1814–1850 set up a period of more capital-intensive labor from 1850–1900. “Never in the past or future were so many Norwegians occupied in farming as in the 1850s,” Gjerdåker and Almås write. “The limits of elasticity were stretched to the utmost—at places beyond the environmental critical level” (259).

Beginning in 1860, however, urbanization led to an increased reliance on technology and more capital-intensive forms of farming (261). As a result, crofters' children began to seek other opportunities (5). The field of modern agronomy thus began to replace “traditional communication of know-how and skills between generations” (261). While the number of crofters was in decline, the number of day laborers would grow up until 1890 (260). This, along with emigration to the United States and mass migration to the north of Norway (the “poor man's America”) meant that increasing numbers of Norwegians were on the move, leaving the local contexts in which their families had lived for generations and entering new ones, not always to stay. *Bønder* who moved to an urban context were becoming consumers instead of producers (263). In the meantime, the *jordskifte* [land consolidation] or *utskifting* [replacement] of the 1850s altered cultivated landscapes, particularly in the western fjord regions (266). This was a practice of land consolidation that handed over larger swaths of land to independent farmers,

¹³ The only farmers who could not be considered *bønder* would be “gentleman farmers.” Although not a legally recognized group, these were farmers in Østlandet and parts of Trøndelag who had extensive holdings and employed crofters and other servants (Lunden 165). As Gjerdåker notes, although they were a few such estates in Norway, “the large majority of agricultural properties were modest by English standards,” and typically heads of farms worked alongside other members of the household (286).

instead of the previous practice of *teigblanding* [strip farming], which was a form of incomplete ownership (267). As Gjerdåker writes, “Increasingly the restructuring of properties—the adaptation to individual farming—was seen as a matter of course. The modern, capitalist concept of time and money as an inherent twin entity gained ground gradually, particularly among young farmers” (269).

“Mobility,” as Mark Sandberg points out in his account of late-19th century Scandinavian visual culture, “is perhaps too cheerful a term for some of the correlative social experience of urban in-migration or poverty-induced emigration, since it skews the notion too much in the direction of the expanding systems of middle-class travel and tourism” (*Living Pictures, Missing Persons* 5). For a figure such as Aasen, this increased mobility was indeed a mixed blessing, as his own urban and itinerant life as a scholar afforded him opportunity and security, while also alienating him from his class of origin. Moreover, he was keenly aware that his class of origin, even when embracing the opportunities mobility offered, experienced the insecurity of entering new places and social circles much more keenly than people with middle-class backgrounds. Aasen witnessed a great deal of change during his lifetime, which spanned nine decades of the 19th century (1813–1896), but he also contributed to it through the creation of *Landsmaal*, a standard written Norwegian which would eventually be adopted as a standard language on equal footing with Dano-Norwegian by the Norwegian parliament in 1885. This written standard, based on rural dialects, was to provide easier access to literature and education for Norway’s *bondeklasse*, which had previously been forced to learn to read and write in Danish in order to access religious and secular knowledge.

Less discussed, however, is the extent to which he also contributed to the modernization process. By modernization, I mean the process by which human mobility increased in Norway, both within the country (in the form of urbanization and the introduction of transportation systems such as roads and railways) and out of the country (through emigration), as well as the advent of technologies that would decouple communication and place, such as newspapers, the telegraph, and the national postal service. Aasen’s travels would result in descriptions of remote areas of Norway that were still relatively unknown in urban areas and among the population of Norway’s former ruling power, Denmark.¹⁴ Ottar Grepstad draws attention to this in his 2013 biography: “At det faktisk var blitt mogleg å ta seg fram på så mange stader i landet, var altså ein del av den moderniseringa som var ein nødvendig føresetnad for det Aasen fekk gjort. Det han gjorde, styrkte den same moderniseringa” [That it had in fact become possible to make one’s way to so many places in the country was therefore an aspect of the modernization that was a necessary precondition for what Aasen accomplished. What he did strengthened that same modernization] (80). In particular, Grepstad emphasizes Aasen’s role in the transition “frå munnleg tale til skriftkultur” [from oral speech to written culture] (191): although Norwegian *bønder* had long been able to read, access to writing spread in the 19th century. A written vernacular Norwegian aided this process. Aasen also contributed to the modernization of the scholarly milieu in Norway, which began with the establishment of a university in Christiania

¹⁴ Denmark first entered into a union with Sweden and Norway in 1397. After its dissolution in 1523, Norway remained subject to the Danish monarchy until 1814, when it was ceded to Sweden under the Treaty of Kiel. Although Sweden allowed Norway local governance under its own constitution, independence from Sweden was a political cause throughout the 19th century.

(now Oslo) in 1811; in a period of nation-building, it was deemed necessary to prove that the country was capable of participating in European knowledge systems by producing scholars on par with those in Denmark and elsewhere. Although Aasen never held a university position, his lifelong annual stipend from the Norwegian government beginning in 1851 made him part of a state effort to place both Norwegian language and scholarship on equal footing with larger European nations. Modernizing Norwegian by demonstrating its legitimacy as a distinct language among the Nordic languages also contributed to this process by enabling the production of vernacular scholarship and literature.

But even as Aasen's travels and scholarship participated in this modernization process, his literary works exhibit a critique of modernization as it was unfolding in Norway, in particular the system of inequality that was being reinforced between the Norwegian the *bondeklasse* and its elite, the *embetsklasse* [administrative class], who enjoyed their position due to their former association with the Danish administration. In 1814, only farmers who owned land or those who had rented it for at least five years had the right to vote, while all members of the administrative class, including administrators, judges, clergy and military officers, as well as university professors and government advisers had that right (Hommerstad). *Bønder* were left in the clear minority when it came to the election of representatives to the *Storting*. It was not until the 1830s that the *bondeklasse* began to assert political influence, and not until the 1850s that, with the help of an alliance with academics that the stage was set for the overthrow of the administrative class (Myhre), which would occur with the winning of a majority in the *Storting* by the *Venstre* [Left] party and the establishment of parliamentary government in 1884. An important aspect of the administrative class's power was its relative unity, despite geographical separation, based on "en felles, urban og europeisk orientert kultur" [a shared, urban culture oriented toward Europe] (Myhre). In order to counter its power, the *bondeklasse* would need to develop a similar sense of unity. As Stephen Walton has argued, Ivar Aasen contributed to this movement by adopting the administrative class's own rhetoric to propose a national culture that would derive from the *bondeklasse*, rather than being based on the premises of the administrative class (Walton, *Farewell the Spirit Craven*). One aspect of this rhetoric was the focus on rural nature as a site of purity and freedom. Walton has written extensively on how Aasen's *bonde* origins and intellectual aspirations fit well into the administrative class's vision of integrating the *bondeklasse* into national life. However, this narrative soon clashed with Aasen's counter-hegemonic vision, one that asked the elite to capitulate to *bonde* language and culture instead. Similarly, romantic visions of Aasen, including the romantic take on Aasen's relationship to botany, quickly clash with the reality of his practical, political agenda.

Ivar Aasen, "Benign Naturalist"?

One of the easiest things to romanticize about Aasen, aside from his social station,¹⁵ has been his interest in local nature, especially his early interest in plants and plant names. However, already

¹⁵ As Aasen complains to the author of a German biography, who has described Aasen as "Der Sohn armer Landleute," "Mine Forældre vare egentlig hverken fattige eller rige; de vare hvad man kalder simple Bondefolk, med liden Formue, men dog med nødtørftigt Udkomme" [The son of a poor peasant;

during his lifetime Aasen tried to correct the misconception that an interest in local botany motivated his interest in documenting Norwegian dialects. In a letter to Carl Friedrich Frisch, written in February of 1874, Aasen provides commentary on a German biography Frisch was writing. He writes that, due to a “Gisning” [conjecture] on the part of P. A. Munch, it has often been repeated that “det var Plantenavnene, som førte meg ind paa Sprogstudiet” [it was plant names that led me into the study of language] (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 140). In reality, his linguistic studies were inspired by an encounter with “Rask’s islandske Grammatik og nogle gamle Sagaer” [Rask’s Icelandic grammar and some old sagas] that helped him understand the grammatical forms in the “Bondesprog” [“peasant” language] which was his own “mother tongue.”

Although the short biography by Munch which Aasen references praises Aasen’s linguistic expertise more than it romanticizes his rural background, the idea that local botany inspired Aasen’s linguistic scholarship fits well into a national-romantic reception of his work. That Aasen was an amateur botanist who took up linguistics as an extension of this work makes him appear to be an autodidact, when, in fact, he had access to a number of Enlightenment-era texts that provided the methodology for his botanical studies.¹⁶ These texts, in turn, belonged to a long tradition of amateur botany in Norway. Informed by enlightenment knowledge systems, this research was conducted first in the service of the Danish king and later in support of Norwegian intellectual independence. Aasen’s relationship to the history of botany in Norway fits well within revised conceptions of Ivar Aasen as an inheritor of enlightenment thinking and values (and even an anti-romantic thinker).¹⁷ Ottar Grepstad uses this and subsequent research on Aasen’s intellectual connections to the Enlightenment in his accessible biography *Historia om Ivar Aasen* (2013). The botanists who were Aasen’s predecessors and provided him with some of his pedagogical materials as a student and tutor could be described as participants in what sociologist Nina Witoszek describes as the “Pastoral Enlightenment” (Witoszek, *Regime of Goodness*; Witoszek, *Naturmytologier*). “Pastoral Enlightenment” is Witoszek’s proposed alternative to “National Romanticism,” a term that seeks to incorporate pre-1814 influence on

My parents were actually neither poor nor rich; they were what one might call simple rural folk, with little fortune, but with just what is necessary for livelihood] (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 139–40).

¹⁶ Two key figures provided him with a methodological framework: Jens W. Hornemann (1770–1841), professor of botany in Copenhagen and author of *Forsøg til en dansk oekonomisk Plantelære* [Attempt at a Danish economic plant study] (1796), and Hans Strøm, who wrote *Physisk og Oekonomisk Beskrivelse over Fogderiet Søndmør beliggende i Bergens Stift i Norge* [Physical and economic description of the province of Søndmør, located in the Bergen bishopric] (I:1762, II:1766).

¹⁷ As Idar Stegane writes, “[D]en resepsjonen som vi finn no for tida hos Willy Dahl og Stephen J. Walton, og svært markant hos Apelseth og Sørbo, av Aasens lyrikk som kritisk og medvite antiromantisk, er eit heller nytt fenomen, også i nynorsk tradisjonen” [The reception that we find these days in Willy Dahl and Stephen J. Walton, and especially noticeable in Apelseth and Sørbo of Aasen’s lyric as critical and consciously anti-romantic is a totally new phenomenon, also in the *Nynorsk* tradition] (“Aasens lyrikk” 91). For classical and romantic impulses in Aasen’s view of nature and nature knowledge, see (Apelseth 2003) and (Kolstad 2002). For the classical influence on his rhetoric and linguistic program see (Apelseth 1996b; Apelseth 2013). For anti-romantic tendencies in his poetry, see (Sørbo 1996; Sørbo 2003). (Monsson 1996 and Gunnhild 1996) discuss Aasen’s relationship to 18th century universal grammar and the historical comparative methods that were developing in the 19th century.

Norwegian intellectual life, national identity, and especially views of nature. In a follow-up anthology of essays that build on and critique Witoszek's theses, Peter Burgess specifies that Pastoral Enlightenment refers to "et spenningsfelt mellom den kristen opplysningen og den spesielle form den tok i Norge på den ene siden, og på den andre siden, en rekke grunnleggende naturtradisjoner som klart differensierer seg fra de kontinentale romantiske" [A tension between the Christian Enlightenment and the special form it took in Norway on the one hand and, on the other hand, a series of foundational nature traditions that clearly differentiate themselves from continental romantic ones] (6). The "pastoral" thus refers to Christian ministers who educated their parishioners in Christian morality and enlightenment reason. However, while Witoszek uses the concept to explain Norwegian exceptionalism, including the lack of a true "romantic" period in Norway, Arne Apelseth in the same volume notes that her account of the benign clergy fails to address issues of power and class. As he writes, "Opplysningshistoria òg er ei historie om korleis kunnskap og danning slutta å vere standseksklusive kvalitetar. I det ligg at kombinasjonen av kunnskap og danning som mange prestar førte advokatur for gradvis kunne bli eit våpen som kunne vendast mot embetsstanden sjølv—og vart det" [The history of the Enlightenment is also a history of how knowledge and education stopped being qualities that were exclusive to certain social classes. By that I mean that the combination of knowledge and education that many priests advocated for gradually could become a weapon that could be turned against the administrative class itself—and was] ("Prestar, poteter og patriotisme" 43). In general, the "enlightenment values" associated with Aasen have been almost exclusively positive, including objectivity, reason, practicality and utility. This positive evaluation of the Enlightenment, however, is not the one that appears in either postcolonial or ecocritical scholarship. Thus, while Witoszek's concept can help dispel the myth of the "genius" Ivar Aasen who had no intellectual predecessors but instead springs from nature, the concept also requires some revision. Namely, it requires an account of how knowledge and access to knowledge can be instruments of power.

One of the aspects of classical natural sciences critiqued from both postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives is the separation of nature and culture, language and thought. The account of this separation that most closely relates to enlightenment taxonomy is Foucault's reading of early modern natural history in *The Order of Things* [*Les mots et les choses*, 1966]. Foucault argues that the attention to structure paid by natural historians, rather than representing an increased level of attention, represented an exclusion of other senses (150). Natural history made the visual mode, which focused on the visible structures of organisms, primary to the exclusion of smell, sound and even color, which were understood as less objective modes of perception. Visual structure, Foucault argues, was best suited for transforming the structures of organisms into language, such that the language became the thing itself; the organism could thus be removed from its context without any significant loss of knowledge. According to Foucault, the language of taxonomy "should not accept the constraint imposed by derivation and its forms; it should not lend credit to any etymology. It should unite in one and the same operation what everyday language keeps separate: not only must it designate all natural entities very precisely, but it must also situate them within the system of identities and differences that unites them and distinguishes them from all the others" (151).

While the names of species were meant to be more or less arbitrary designations for visible structures and their place in a larger order, natural historians did include commentary, which Foucault calls *litteraria*. This commentary, placed behind taxonomical categories, served as "a sort of supplement in which discourse is allowed to recount itself and record discoveries, traditions, beliefs and poetical figures." But these are no longer the most important information;

rather, “the thing itself” appears in the taxonomical language, not within a social reality, but “within the reality that has been patterned from the very outset by the name” (142). (This understanding would undergo another transformation in the 19th century, as time would be introduced to the concept of history; in the sciences, this takes the form of evolutionary thinking, while in linguistics the historical comparative method would replace the concept of universal grammar.) Foucault describes classical taxonomies as reductive knowledge systems, in which names are arbitrary designations for visible structures. Knowledge of these systematizable structures comes to constitute the whole of what is knowable about the natural world, while *litteraria* is relegated to the status of knowledge about people.

For postcolonial scholars, the reductive view of nature that undergirds enlightenment knowledge facilitates the exploitation of the colonized. Mary Louise Pratt employs Foucault’s account of classical natural sciences to enact a postcolonial critique of the “benign naturalist.” The “benign naturalist,” a figure modeled after Swedish botanist Carl Linné, assisted in the imperialist colonial project. With his botanical naming system, which sought to categorize all plant life according to its reproductive structures, the benign naturalist would accompany expeditions into the interior of territories unknown to Europeans. By finding, collecting and labeling these plants, the naturalist made them available for European knowledge and, hence, exploitation. In the meantime, this “Eurocentered” form of knowledge displaced “vernacular peasant knowledge” in the regions subsumed under colonial power (5). Part of the success of this project, Pratt claims, is that both the naturalist himself and his work had an appearance of harmlessness: the naturalist was often described as delicate, even feminine, and his work was understood as “pure” science, uncorrupted by economic motives (33). However, Aasen’s herbarium and subsequent plant name glossary indicate that Pratt’s account requires some adjustment in the context of the colonial, or perhaps culturally and politically hegemonic, relationship between Denmark and Norway. A brief digression into the history of botany in Norway demonstrates that Aasen’s herbarium belongs to a tradition that differs from the Swedish, Linnaean context, as well as that of greater European imperial powers.

“Benign Naturalist?”: The History of Botany in Norway

In the recent and invaluable work *Botanikkens historie i Norge* (2007), Per M. Jørgensen traces the history of Norwegian botany from the pre-Linnaean plant collectors of the 17th century to the institutionalization of botany in Norway in the 19th century. However, it is interesting to note that Ivar Aasen, as well as one of the authors on which he modeled his work, Hans Strøm, appears in a sub-chapter on ethnobotany, rather than in the mainstream history (Borgen 116). This is understandable given that Aasen never participated in the institution of natural sciences that had begun forming already by the time he was gathering material for his herbarium, though not because he was an amateur. As Jørgensen’s history details, many amateur botanists made important contributions to the knowledge of Norwegian plant species (see also Jørgensen, “Om amatørernes betydning for utviklingen av botanikken i Norge”). As I will discuss later, Aasen was interested in plant uses and made observations about folk taxonomy. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Aasen in a subsection on ethnobotany belies the degree to which he is indebted to the same intellectual traditions as the early professional botanists who were his contemporaries.

Before Linné’s time, botany was an interest area for members of the clergy, who wrote about plants out of the belief “at man kan lære å forstå Gud på to måter: ved å studere Bibelen og ved å studere skaperverket” [that one can learn to understand God in two ways: by studying the

Bible and by studying creation] (Jørgensen, *Botanikkens historie i Norge* 19–20). Just as they implemented basic literacy in Norway, it was priests who took the lead in plant collection (not pharmacists as elsewhere in Europe) (Jørgensen, *Botanikkens historie i Norge* 26). During this period, there were also botanists at work in Norway under the direction of the Danish king, in particular, King Christian IV (1577–1648). The king received reports on the natural resources of the various administrative regions sent by their administrators. These kinds of expeditions and reports are a better fit for Pratt’s model of the “benign naturalist”; however, their results had little lasting impact on botany as a field (Jørgensen, *Botanikkens historie i Norge* 35). Between 1700 and the 19th-century institutionalizing period, botanical research was carried out by amateurs; these are Aasen’s forebears both in their amateur status and methodology. Some of them also shared the goal of granting intellectual legitimacy to Norway, not only by demonstrating that Norwegian nature was a worthwhile field of study but also that Norwegians could carry out the work themselves.¹⁸ This period that Jørgensen labels the “Linnaean period” supplies numerous examples of clergy who collected information about local geography, flora and fauna.¹⁹ While Aasen is a clear inheritor of their methods and ideas, the main difference between them and Aasen is their class (none originate in the *bondeklasse*) and often region, as few of them hail from the regions they study. The inclusion of Norwegian names in these botanical works becomes more common in the second half of the 18th century. Botanists also become more modern in their method with respect to their reliance on observation.²⁰

The late 18th century is also when Norwegian nationalism becomes a motivating factor for amateur botanists, whose works advanced Norwegian intellectual independence. Johan Ernst Gunnerus (1718–73) is credited with writing the first Norwegian flora during this period (Jørgensen, “Om amatørernes betydning for utviklingen av botanikken i Norge” 187). Gunnerus collected folk material and dialect words in addition to plants (*Lysaker*). After corresponding with Linné, he eventually published *Flora Norvegica* (1766), in which he describes 314 plants with Latin and Norwegian names and in several cases also Danish, English, French and German (Sneli 268). Jørgensen argues that Gunnerus was inspired both by the local nature, which was new to him, and his Norwegian nationalism. He suggests that the title of Gunnerus’s work “Flora

¹⁸ The best evidence of this change in motivation is that these accounts are written in the vernacular and are, thus, accessible to a broader audience. Works by members of the administrative class, including, for example, Strøm's, still begin with a dedication to the Danish king.

¹⁹ Jørgensen gives the end date of this period as 1814. This is certainly because the ratification of the Norwegian constitution marks the beginning of the era of institutionalized knowledge in Norway, but, nevertheless, it illustrates the tendency in scholarship on Norway’s nation-building period to neglect the intellectual continuity between the Dano-Norwegian enlightenment period and the era of Norwegian nation-building (Apelseth, “Prestar, poteter og patriotisme” 35–7). Linné visited Norway during his travels to remote areas of Sweden in 1732 and 1734 (Jørgensen, *Botanikkens historie i Norge* 48). He also had several Norwegian pupils, including Martin Vahl, who became a colleague of Hornemann, the botanist on whose system Aasen organized his herbarium.

²⁰ For example, a contemporary of Linné, Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764), bishop in Bergen and educational reformer, did not conduct his own research but built on the reports of others in his work *Et første Forsøg paa Norges naturlige Historie* (1752–53), one year before Linné’s *Species plantarum* (Walløe). In this work, he gives only the Danish names for plants he describes; he supplies neither Latin nor Norwegian names (Pontoppidan 154–82; Sneli 266–7).

Norvegica” is meant as an answer to “Flora Danica,” a work that also described Norway’s plants as a part of the Danish kingdom and was being conducted by a German botanist in Norway (sent by Frederik V). Jørgensen argues that by engaging with domestic intellectual activity, including encouraging parish priests to collect plants and conducting domestic plant-collecting expeditions himself, Gunnerus positioned himself as an advocate for Norwegian scholarship. In a memorial over Gunnerus, the rector Gerhard Schøning stated that Gunnerus “kom til Trondheim med den overbevisning at han ville vise at nordmenn var likeså dyktige i vitenskapen som andre” [came to Trondheim with the conviction that he wanted to show that Norwegians were just as capable scientists as anyone else] (Jørgensen, “Gunnerus, Linnés norske tvillingsjel” 119). During his lifetime, Gunnerus initiated and promoted the first scientific academy in Norway, Det Trondheimske Selskab, which became Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab in 1767. It was this society that would go on to fund Aasen’s research.

The other amateur whose work had the most significance for Aasen was Hans Strøm (1726–97), whose topological description of Sunnmøre became an archetype for the genre. Strøm is regarded as the first natural scientist in Norway to use modern methods, basing his work only on his own observations. Strøm’s brother sent his work to Linné, but, according to Jørgensen he was “too modest” to continue a correspondence (Jørgensen, “Hans Strøm – Norges første moderne biolog” 221). Although Strøm was inspired by Linné’s *Species plantarum*, he did not use binominal nomenclature. Aasen would have become familiar with Strøm by reading his work at Sivert Aarflot’s (1759–1817) unique library at Ekset, a half hour’s walk from the Aasen farm in Ørsta. Strøm was the parish priest at the time of Aarflot’s confirmation and advised that he seek a position as a school teacher. Both Aasen’s botanical project and his linguistic project, then, emerge from an intellectual milieu in which Norwegians resisted Danish claims to authority by studying local nature to serve their own ends and demonstrating their facility at doing so. Aasen was seen by agents of this milieu as the next link in a chain of Norwegian scholars capable of continuing this work.

Although Aasen has often been romanticized as an autodidact, it is clear that he not only received resources and training from the local representatives of this established intellectual milieu but also sought validation from its more far-flung representatives. Nearly all of Aasen’s biographers view his journey to Bergen in 1841 as the key event in his life. With him Aasen brought four works, a list of place names from his home region of Sunnmøre, a list of proverbs from the same, a grammar and partial dictionary of its dialect, and an herbarium of plants gathered in the regions of Skjodje and Ørskoug from 1837–39.²¹ There, Aasen met with bishop Jacob Neumann, who soon after published a piece in *Bergens Stiftstidende* in support of Aasen’s receiving a stipend to fund his scholarly work (Neumann). (The piece also ran in the Christiania newspaper *Den Constitutionelle*.) Neumann’s call was answered by Det Kgl. Norske Videnskabers Selskab, an Enlightenment-era society of learned Norwegians, which granted Aasen a yearly stipend. This stipend facilitated Aasen’s initial travels (1842–46), on which he collected the linguistic material which would form the basis of *Det Norske Folkesprogs*

²¹ “Søndmørske Stedsnavn” (1840), “Søndmørske Ordsprog” (1841), “Den Søndmørske Dialekt En grammatisk Oversigt med Fragmenter af en Ordbok” (1841), and “Herbarium af vildt voxende Planter, som ere funde i Skodje og Ørskougs Sogne paa Søndmør, i Aarene 1837, 38, 39; samlet og ordnet af Iver Iversen Aasen.”

Grammatik (1848). Together with *Ordbog over det norske Folkesprog* (1850), Aasen laid the groundwork for a modern understanding of the Norwegian rural vernacular.

Because Aasen received a stipend to support his linguistic work, his herbarium has become a historical footnote. Despite Aasen's later tendency to downplay the work, the herbarium was, by all accounts, remarkable for its time, both in its accuracy and its approach (Often and Sæbo 5; Lid 57). It was a large collection of plants from Skodje and Solnør, which Aasen had collected while he was serving as a private tutor for the family of Ludvig J. Daae from 1835–42. The herbarium consists of five folios and contains 509 specimens ordered according to the Linnaean system. For each specimen, Aasen has written the Latin name, followed by the name of the plant in the local dialect of Sunnmøre, if it existed. Some of the entries also include commentary by Aasen on the origins of the name or on difficulties he had in identifying the specimen.²²

Peter Vogelius Deinboll (1783–74) examined Aasen's herbarium in Molde on July 27–28, 1840. He was a Danish priest who had assisted Vahl on an expedition in Telemark in 1802 and was closely connected to Hornemann in Copenhagen (Hornemann thanks Deinboll in the introduction to his *Forsøg*). He conducted many expeditions in Finnmark while he was a priest there and was well regarded as a botanist in his own time. According to Aasen, Deinboll mostly confirmed that his work was correct, though a few species were unknown to him. Aasen also got the chance to see Deinboll's own collections (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 29–30). Johan Koren, the doctor who examined Aasen's herbarium on his trip to Bergen in 1841 was similarly approving; however, Aasen goes on to explain that Koren was himself unable to secure a living as a natural scientist and thus became a doctor. Koren, it seems, did not encourage Aasen in this profession because of the lack of professional opportunities (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 44–45; see also; Often and Sæbo 66–67).

Bishop Neumann also examined the herbarium at this time, but his lack of interest seems to have stemmed mostly from his lack of expertise in the field (Neumann). We also know that Matthias Numsen Blytt examined the herbarium at some time between 1847 and 1862. In a letter to the editor of *Norsk Haandleksikon*, Aasen offers some corrections to his biography for the new edition; namely, Aasen wants to correct the impression the previous edition might give that he resented the rejection of his herbarium by the botanists of his day: “Sagen var nemlig den,” Aasen explains, “at min Samling ikke indeholdt noget nyt eller noget særdeles vigtigt for Plantekjendere, og at den altsaa ikke kune have noget synderligt Værd” [The issue was namely that my collection did not contain anything new or anything especially important for those who are knowledgeable about plants, and that it therefore could not have any particular value] (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 174). Walton, as Often and Sæbo also note, suspects that Aasen here “laga ei postfaktisk rasjonalisering for å gi opp botanikken til fordel for språkarbeidet” [created a post-factual rationalization for having given up botany in favor of his linguistic work], particularly since there is no indication that he desired recognition as a botanist any less than as a linguist when setting out for Bergen (Walton, *Ivar Aasens kropp* 7). However, Often and Sæbo also offer the suggestion that little resulted from Aasen's collection in part because his

²² Aasen's herbarium is kept at the Ivar Aasen-tunet in Volda. The text of the herbarium, corrected and supplemented by botanists using up-to-date scientific names and information (particularly on mosses and lichens, which posed the most problems for Aasen) is printed in Lie 1941 and Urke 2013.

approach—the careful study of the plant life of a limited region—was not of interest at the time, although it would later become a subject of interest for plant ecology.²³ Botanists of the time were more interested in “rariteter, sjeldsynte artar ... framande pinnar og skrottar frå eksotiske land” [rarities, seldom-seen species ... foreign sticks and carcasses from exotic lands] (Ofen and Sæbo 7–8). As Aasen credits Blytt with writing, regarding his herbarium, “Den bergenusiske Flora er overalt sig selv lig” [The flora of the Bergenhus region is the same everywhere] (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 174). While Aasen was seeking botanists to evaluate his own herbarium, the field was becoming institutionalized in Norway. Hans Strøm had proposed the establishment of a university in Norway in 1788 and 1793 (Jørgensen, “Hans Strøm – Norges første moderne biolog” 63), but this was not realized until 1811. The first professor in natural history, Jens Rathke, was appointed in 1813. Rathke was a student of Martin Vahl and emerged from the same intellectual impulses as Aasen, although he was educated in a very different context. The more established intellectuals to whom Aasen showed his herbarium, then, were more attuned to the kind of colonial knowledge project Pratt describes, collecting exotic plants and bringing them to Norway, while Aasen was busy applying similar methods but to a knowledge project that involved a deep study of a particular region. In this sense, his herbarium anticipates the methodology of the field of plant ecology.

As this brief history demonstrates, the example of Ivar Aasen presents some challenges to Pratt’s account. Although Aasen utilized the same systems as Linné’s many disciples, he was not sent by nor part of a great colonial power. Instead, he lived in a country dominated politically by Sweden and culturally by Denmark. Moreover, he belonged to the more politically disenfranchised class within his own country, where Dano-Norwegian elites led the project of nation formation. While Norway did have a history of “benign naturalists” who reported back to the Danish king, it also had a history of church and amateur naturalists, many of whom had more local, democratic goals. In the years immediately preceding 1814 and the formative years thereafter, botany would participate in a nationalist project that focused on Norwegian nature and the establishment of Norwegian centers of knowledge. At the same time, the predominance of amateurs meant that an early form of ethnobotany also flourished in Norway, as oral knowledge of the use value of numerous plants, as well as their local names, were recorded for posterity. In gathering samples and relying on direct observation, Aasen employed the same modern scientific methods in both his botanical work and his linguistic research. By collecting plants, botanists also endeavored to legitimize the nation and create an identification between nature and nation. In this sense, rather than enlightenment values characterizing Aasen’s botanical work and romanticism characterizing his linguistics, it is apparent that there is a blend of both orientations in both fields, also among professionals.

Aasen’s botanical project emerges from this context, and his linguistic project also depends on similar modes of thinking. While Aasen inherited the Linnaean system, Aasen’s work also occurred at a later historical moment in which natural scientists were attempting to establish their own scholarly institutions autonomous from Denmark. Aasen, however, did not participate

²³ In fact, in a rare study of the herbarium, Odd Veve suggests ways in which the herbarium might provide information for contemporary botanists on which plants have since disappeared from the cultural landscape of Sunnmøre and which plants have spread due to cultivation and migration. This allows for a historical comparison of local ecologies (164).

in formal institutions for the natural sciences, although his linguistic project was largely funded through a state stipend. Furthermore, Aasen's work as a naturalist exhibits an interest in local forms of knowledge that had not yet been supplanted by enlightenment natural history. Rather than appropriating the traditional knowledge of another, subjugated people group in order to make it available for study and economic advantage, Aasen advocated for the knowledge of his own class, the *bondeklasse* or *Almuen*, as he terms it in *Norks Grammatik*. Yet, the representation of Aasen in the popular imagination is strikingly similar to that of the “benign naturalist.” Even the descriptions Pratt commonly finds in travel accounts call to mind attributes that were later assigned to Aasen: modest, pale, shy, and even effeminate (Grepstad 107–8). Yet, this romanticization served different ends in Norway. Making Aasen out to be a harmless autodidact who sprang from the *bondeklasse* and not from a bourgeois intellectual tradition has served the *Nynorsk* (as *Landsmaal* has been called since 1929) movement in Norway by providing a heroic vision of Aasen. It has also served opponents of the *Nynorsk* movement by helping to render Aasen's political ambitions harmless. This view projects onto him a “neutral” and idiosyncratic interest in linguistic curiosities, rather than a systematic study that served the goal of expanding democratic opportunity to *Almuen*. In view of this, it is important to take a critical stance toward the romantic reception of Aasen as a botanist, as it tends to support a view of Aasen as “close to nature” rather than to intellectual tradition and to “naturalize” dialect by extension, denying the creativity of folk language.

Aasen's Commentary in *Norske Plantenavne*

Having situated Aasen in the context of enlightenment natural history and demonstrated the ways in which he complicates Pratt's account of the “benign naturalist,” I will now turn to *Norske Plantenavne* itself. Aasen's work in the natural sciences fell by the wayside as he began his travels to research Norwegian dialects. However, in *Norske Plantenavne*, Aasen employed a normalized form of the plant names from Sunnmøre that had appeared in his herbarium, along with those he had collected from other dialects. Here, the two programs could be said to come together.

Aasen completed the list in 1856, and it was printed in *Budstikken* in 1860 at the request of Professor F. C. Schübler, the journal's editor (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker* 61). The article never came out as a book, although Aasen discussed plans to include it in a monograph that would also cover the names of Norway's animal, bird, and fish species in his work reports to *Stortinget* from 1879–88. The work's apparent working title was *Naturhistorisk Navnebok*.²⁴ Although Aasen writes very little about his motivation for writing *Norske Plantenavne*, Aasen's feelings on the Norwegian names chosen by natural scientists is suggested when he writes in his annual report from 1885, “i den skriftlige Brug af de norske Navne, f. Ex. paa Fugle og Fiske, ofte viser sig en stor Sjødeløshed, idet man jævnlig bruger et slettere Navn i Stedet for et bedre, eller en

²⁴ On Aasen's unfinished project on Norwegian animal names see (Walton, *Ivar Aasens kropp* 606). Walton sees the work as the collecting project that was normally followed in Aasen's work by a standardizing project. *Naturhistorisk Navnebok* would likely have been that standardizing project—that is, a work that would offer norms for the increasingly professionalized field of zoology.

forvansket Dialektform i Stedet for den rette og fuldkomne Form. Jeg har derfor flere Gange taget denne Navnerække for mig til Behandling” [In the written use of the Norwegian names, e.g. for birds and fish, often a great carelessness is displayed, in that one constantly uses a poorer name instead of a better one, or a garbled dialect form instead of the correct and complete form. I have therefore several times taken upon myself the treatment of this list of names] (Aasen, *Brev og dagbøger* 241). Aasen the linguist is mostly disturbed to leave the choice of names to scientists who do not have a firm grasp of Norwegian grammar; however, he also mentions the use of “worse” rather than “better” names, suggesting that aside from the grammatical he had another set of criteria by which to judge a name’s suitability.

In his introduction, Aasen explicitly states that it is a language study, not a work of natural science, as it is not based on original botanical research (Aasen, *Norske Plantenavne* 3). Aasen also states his preference for oral sources over written ones; he nevertheless indicates that he has employed Hornemann, Gunnerus, Wille’s *Beskrivelse over Sillegjord* and Strøm’s *Beskrivelse over Eger*, among other texts. The text itself gives Latin names first, followed by Norwegian names listed according to their region of origin. The work seems to be built on the premise that there is a one-to-one correspondence between Linnaean species names and Norwegian folk names for the plants Aasen lists. While the names are probably interesting material for the linguist or ethnobotanist,²⁵ what is interesting for the purposes of this study is Aasen’s commentary on certain names inasmuch as they suggest his interests and preferences.

As previously mentioned, there is precedent for considering figures such as Hans Strøm and Ivar Aasen as early practitioners of a form of ethnobotany. In his seminal work, Brent Berlin defines the broader field of ethnobiology as “the field . . . devoted to the study, in the broadest possible sense, of the complex set of relationships of plants and animals to present and past human societies” (3). Ethnobiology addresses, according to Berlin, two basic questions: the economic question of how humans use nature and the cognitive question of how they view nature (4). The former is also a question posed by the enlightenment natural scientist, but the latter is a question that leaves room for views of nature that resist what Pratt characterizes as the imperialist gaze of the benign naturalist. While Aasen inherits the former from the broader European enlightenment tradition, he also inherits the latter as part of a national romantic program: asking how *bønder* in various regions label nature establishes for Aasen their connection to the nation’s past as well as their cultural and social relationship to their local environment. However, as further examples will demonstrate, Aasen gives little attention to the antiquity of plant names, suggesting other criteria took priority. The examples for which Aasen shows most enthusiasm, in fact, are those that bring together objective criteria and cultural criteria—that is, names that refer both to a readily observable aspect of the plant while at the same time referring to the way in which nature provides the context in which everyday life takes place. Both of these aspects seem to provide a means by which a local society orients itself in relation to both nature and others. I will first address comments on plant names that direct attention to the plant’s relationship with human beings before turning to comments that indicate tension between folk taxonomies and Linnaean taxonomy.

²⁵ Vevle (1997) argues that Aasen’s herbarium creates a detailed enough representation of the types of vegetation in the region during his time to be used to draw conclusions about the change in vegetation types over time, including the prevalence of cultivated versus wild plants.

Unlike Linnaean nomenclature, as Berlin explains, “[E]thnobiological nomenclature represents a natural system of naming that reveals much about the way people conceptualize the living things in their environment” (26). Aasen draws attention to the etymology of a number of plant names, using their reference to features of the plants and the ways humans interact with them. Aasen often comments on plant names without specifying whether their observed qualities recommend them for official status or not. However, the fact that Aasen draws attention to certain names gives an indication of what his preferences might have been. (As does the conclusion to the work, which I will mention later.) Aasen’s comments first draw attention to rural knowledge of plants, while at the same time suggesting the powers of observation and skill at utilizing plants that *bønder* had long before the arrival of universalizing knowledge systems. At the same time, the comments point out the interaction between nature and culture inherent in these names, suggesting that what is at issue is not so much knowledge that is associated with a particular class or region, but “situated knowledge,” knowledge produced within a particular social and environmental context.

A number of the names that Aasen comments on are in keeping with the pedagogical aims of the glossary. These are names which refer to a visual aspect of the plant and would thus assist amateurs in plant identification (perhaps more so than Danish or Latin names). In this sense, some of them do not venture far from a Linnaean emphasis on visible form; for example, “Krossved” [Cross-wood; *Viburnum opulus*],²⁶ which Aasen comments “er ellers at passeligt Navn, som nemlig hentyder til, at Kvistene staae parviis og i modsat Retning, saa at de danne et Kors” [is otherwise a suitable name, which namely refers to the fact that the twigs grow in pairs and in opposite directions, such that they form a cross] (*Norske Plantenavne* 10). Like the “cross” in “Cross-wood,” several other names that refer to the visible structure of plants do so through reference to cultural objects: for example, “Kjevlegras” [*Phleum pretense*], which denotes the plant's resemblance to a rolling pin [kjevle] (*Norske Plantenavne* 4–5). Aasen states a preference for this name over the more common “Timotheigras” because of its relation to an object of everyday use. Similarly, the *Geranium sylvaticum* is called by several variations on “Sjuskjære.” Aasen translates this as “Syvsax” [seven blade] and explains that it derives “vistnok deraf, at Bladene oftest have syv Flige, og at de lange Frøkapsler have nogen Lighed med en Sax” [Apparently because the blades most often have seven lobes and that the long seedpods bear a resemblance to a sword] (*Norske Plantenavne* 19).²⁷

These are largely what Berlin calls “transparent” names; that is, the name clearly describes some aspect of the plant, its use, or where it grows. Ethnobotanists have generally found that more transparent names are assigned to less managed plants, likely because transparent names are useful memory aids when dealing with plants with which people interact less frequently. On the other hand, plants more frequently interacted with are easy to remember regardless of their name, and these receive more “opaque” names that lack a descriptive element (Berlin 258). These “less managed” plants are also those people are less likely to interact with as

²⁶ I supply the Latin names given by Aasen, although some of these do not correspond with present-day nomenclature.

²⁷ According to Høeg, Norwegians were still referencing this account of the name’s meaning in the 1970s (Høeg 376).

they urbanize. By listing such names and clarifying their descriptive element, Aasen preserves this kind of folk knowledge along with the names.

While some ecocritics might object that names referencing crosses and swords merely project human cultural categories onto nature, a number of examples rely on “cross-references” between aspects of the natural environment. These names begin to suggest ways in which human culture derives its forms and meaning from nature, rather than projecting cultural forms onto it. For example, “Gjeitaføyk,” the name for willowherb [*Epilobium angustifolium* in Aasen’s work, now *Chamaenerium angustifolium*] in Sunnmøre “hensigter til Frøet” [refers to the seed], according to Aasen (1860, 12). The plant’s seed is white and fluffy; thus, the name refers to its resemblance to a snowdrift [Nynorsk: snøføyk]. The conceptual category available to Norwegians when naming the plant, in this case, derives from other aspects of nature available to them, rather than cultural objects. Another similar example is the name “Skjéreblom” [*Viola tricolor*], which draws attention to the resemblance between the flower and another easily identifiable species, the “Skjor” or “Skade” [in contemporary Bokmål: *skjære*; Nynorsk: *skjor* or *skate*], the Eurasian magpie [*Pica pica*]. This flower is so named “rimeligvis af en Lighed i Farven” [it can reasonably be assumed due to a similarity in color], Aasen speculates (*Norske Plantenavne* 8). This name cross-references a plant with another species belonging to the same ecosystem, thus facilitating the recognition of both. It suggests how the cultural imagination of the communities Aasen studied were populated with images from the natural world, as well as from spheres that could be seen as more predominantly human.

Since the above-mentioned names assist in identification through visual references, they do not significantly depart from the mindset of the enlightenment naturalist. Rather, by referencing them, it seems likely that Aasen is making a comparative move: not unlike European natural scientists, Norwegian *bønder*, too, are observant and practical and are to be viewed as authorities on the plant life of their regions. This is knowledge, then, that seems compatible with the Linnaean system. However, when vernacular names draw attention to features of a plant other than visible structure, the compatibility of the systems is more in doubt. This is particularly the case when Aasen mentions names that draw attention to aspects of a plant that could be described as phenomenological; that is, they refer to knowledge based on an experience of the plant’s interaction with its environment or with the human body.

A good example of this is the common wild oat, *Avena fatua*, Aasen notes that its names containing “flog” (such as *floghavre*) meaning flight or gallop, refer to the plant’s movement, “da de nemlig med sine krumme børster drives frem og tilbage, som om de vare levende” [That is, when they with their bent brushes are driven back and forth as if they were alive] (*Norske Plantenavne* 6). The name draws attention to a notable phenomenon that would be familiar to anyone who had seen the plant in its natural environment. As this name is found in other Germanic languages as well, Aasen’s appreciation comes not from national chauvinism, but from an interest in the way of perceiving the plant that the name conveys. Another example is the name for a certain kind of seaweed: *Fucus vesiculosus*. While the Latin name refers to the “little bladders” that run along the plant, Aasen prefers the name “Smelletang” [pop-kelp], “saa kaldet af dens Blærer, som springe med et lidet Knald, naar de trykkes” [So named because of its bladders which burst with a little pop when they are pressed] (*Norske Plantenavne* 29). Another is *Hieracium Pilosella*, a plant known as “Svæva,” meaning “den søvnige eller egentlig den som sover ind, og sigter dertil, at disse Blomster lukke sig imod Aftenen” [The sleepy one or really the one who sleeps in and referring to the fact that these flowers close toward evening] (*Norske Plantenavne* 21). Not unlike *floghavre*, this name refers to the plant’s behavior. This is an

observable feature but not one that can be regarded in isolation from its environment. Even as Aasen tries to draw attention to the bonde's objective, observant attitude toward nature, he is revealing how the aspects of plants that are important to people within their communities differ from those deemed important by universalizing scientific knowledge systems.

Aasen also comments on plant names that derive their meaning from reference to human practices, defined loosely here as cultural, religious, agricultural, or other practices. An example such as “Krossved” could be viewed obliquely as a member of this category, but examples that refer to farming practices or cultural traditions such as myth more directly relate plants to human activity.

A rather unsurprising example is the vernacular name for numerous species of sphagnum moss, which is “Veggjamose” [wall-moss] “fordi den bruges til tætning i Tømmervægge” [because it is used as insulation in log-cabin walls] (*Norske Plantenavne* 27). More interesting for what it reveals about human/nature interactions is the *Caltha palustris*, known as “Sigablom” or “Døleblom.” Aasen writes that the name indicates “Voxestedet, da nemlig Sig ... og Døl betyder den fede eller stærkt gjødslede Eng i Nærhede af Fæhusene” [the place where it grows, namely *Sig* (a pool, or place where water has sunk) ... and *Døl* means the rich or heavily fertilized meadow close to the barns] (*Norske Plantenavne* 17). In this example, human practices are related directly to the location and proliferation of a particular plant, drawing attention to the way in which human practices influence the environment in unintentional ways. Rather than an attitude toward nature that endeavors to shape and control, the name reflects an awareness that the “domestic” and the “wild” are not neat categories, and opens the possibility for understanding the consequences for a technological transformation such as “Det store hamskiftet” to affect humans and nonhumans alike.

Aasen also refers to connections between plant names and oral traditions. A few names are interpreted as references to Norse mythology. If Aasen had a national romantic outlook in that he gave preference to connections between folk botany and Norse antiquity, one would expect to find an enthusiasm for these names. However, Aasen mostly displays caution: in the case of “Tyved” [*Daphne mezereum*] and “Tyrhjelm” [*Aconitum septentrionale*], Aasen states that a relationship to the Norse god Tyr is possible, but in the latter case adds that this connection is “vanskeligt at bestemme” [difficult to determine] (*Norske Plantenavne* 16). For the name “Balderbraa” [*Pyrethrum indodorum*] and its variations Aasen does show great interest, writing that the name is “et af vore mærkeligste Plantenavne og er heldigviis let at forklare, da nemlig den gamle Gudelære giver tilstrækkelig Oplysning om Oprindelsen” [one of our most remarkable plant names and is fortunately easy to explain, as the old pagan teachings provide information as to its origin] (*Norske Plantenavne* 22–3). He goes on to explain the origin of the name based on Snorri's (Prose) *Edda*, in which the god Balder is said to be so bright in appearance, that the brightest of flowers is compared to his brow.²⁸ At the end of the plant list, Aasen makes some concluding remarks regarding how the process of standardizing Norwegian plant names ought to

²⁸ According to the *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, «braa» likely means “(movable) edge,” whereas “Balder” comes from Old Norse “ballar,” the genitive of “böllr,” English “ball” or “sphere.” The name thus refers to its crown of petals, which bend in the evening, and its half-spherical disk flower. The interpretation of the flower as “Balder's eyebrow” has its origins in learned interpretation as early as Snorri Sturluson (1179—1241) (“Baldersbraa”).

be conducted. Here, he stresses that the standard name should not be the most known, but “de bekvemmeste og mest betegnende Navne” [the most suitable and descriptive names] ((*Norske Plantenavne* 30–1). Aasen does state a preference for antiquity here (“Allersikkrest vil det være, nor man finder Spor til Navnet i det gamle Sprog” [The most certain names of all are those names of which one finds traces in the old language]) and names a few examples, including “Balderbraa” (1860, 31). However, there are so few examples of this type that it is doubtful that Aasen truly thought it practical to rely on this criterion.²⁹

***Norske Plantenavne* as Locally Situated Nature Knowledge**

By commenting on certain names in his glossary, Aasen carries out his pedagogical project in two ways: he attempts to secure knowledge transmission by ensuring future generations will be able to derive knowledge from these names. He also advocates for peasants, not as ignorant people who need to be enlightened from the outside (that is, by Denmark or Europe at large), but objective observers who are authorities on the environments in which they live. As I have demonstrated above, the type of knowledge transmitted does not fit within the confines of the Linnaean taxonomy Aasen utilizes; as such, it does not participate in the “hyperseparation” of nature and culture that many ecocritics argue enlightenment natural science performs. Instead, it aligns better with models that accommodate human and nonhuman interaction.

While postcolonial scholars, such as Pratt, critique enlightenment natural science for its role in justifying oppression of the colonized, for ecocritics (especially ecofeminists) the reductive strategy of enlightenment natural science performs what Val Plumwood calls a “hyperseparation” of nature and culture. “Hyper-separation,” according to Plumwood, “means defining the dominant identity emphatically against or in opposition to the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities” (“Nature as Agency” 12). In the logic of hyperseparation, “inferiorized social groups and their characteristic activities” are associated with nature, while “dominant groups associate themselves with the overcoming or mastery of nature, both internal and external to the human self” (“Nature as Agency” 13).

As an ecofeminist, Plumwood is drawing here on observations about the association of women and the colonized with nature in order to deny their agency and justify exploitation and pointing out that, in “anthropocentric” societies, this logic extends to nonhuman nature as a whole. According to Plumwood, the consequence of hyperseparation is “backgrounding,” that is, seeing the contributions of nonhuman nature, women, or oppressed social groups as non-essential. When dominant groups “background” contributions to culture made by people it has othered or by nature, to which it has denied agency, then “the dominant party can afford to ‘forget’ the other, ... and if their level of denial goes deep enough, may be inclined to do so even where the other is not replaceable” (“Nature as Agency” 13–14). Among these contributions are forms of knowledge based on non-anthropocentric models of human/nonhuman relationships. The separation of visible structures from other aspects of organisms that Foucault describes

²⁹ I found only two examples in which Aasen refers to the similarity of a plant name to Swedish (“better” for Aasen than a relationship to Danish), Icelandic or Faroese; Aasen gives the Old Norse (“G.N.” for *gamal norsk*) when he observes an etymological relationship to a dialect word.

(including *litteraria*, or their interactions with human culture) performs a separation of what counts as knowledge about nature from knowledge about culture.

Plumwood's account is more adaptable to the Norwegian context than Pratt's because, rather than limiting "hyperseparation" to the great colonial powers of Europe, she includes the "backgrounding" of "oppressed social groups" among its effects (Plumwood, "Nature as Agency" 13–14). Oppressed social groups are certainly found outside of colonial contexts, and it could be argued that *bønder*, particularly of lower economic status, fit this description. One could raise the objection that *bønder* were hardly in the "background" of the Norwegian nation-building project but rather were foregrounded as the source of authentic, distinctive Norwegian culture. However, Aasen and other participants in the language movement reacted to the use of *bonde* as "source" in a way that relegated the *bondeklasse* to a passive or static status, rather than seeing them as active agents in the formation of the nation. Today, an ecological perspective includes seeing the relegation of nature itself to passive or static as similarly problematic.

Through the locally situated knowledge Aasen draws attention to in his commentary, he also draws attention to the agency of rural people in the formation of culture, in dialogue with a specific natural environment. I am proposing "locally situated" to describe the knowledge Aasen sees as the alternative to "hyperseparation" here in order to capture both the "local" or regional orientation of Aasen's work, as well as to reference an idea of contextualized knowledge derived both from phenomenologists of place and "new materialists" such as Donna Haraway. "Local" describes rural place in Aasen's linguistic work because his project is carried out by assembling data from "localities"—places or regions perceived as distinct due to natural geographic boundaries (fjords, waterways, mountains, etc.), as well as linguistic and cultural differences that have arisen within, and sometimes because of, those boundaries. I use the term "local" and not "native" to avoid any reference to indigenous peoples. (Norway's indigenous group, the Sami, are notably absent from Aasen's work.)

"Locally situated knowledge," then, seems a useful way to refer to knowledge that is contingent on place, broadly understood as a network of nonhuman elements, such as wind, water, mineral, plant and animal life, and human elements, such as social relationships, oral tradition, architecture, agricultural practices, and so forth. Beginning from a human, phenomenological perspective (informed by Merleau-Ponty), Edward Casey defines "implacement" as the way in which phenomena, landscape and body are "covertly connected" with respect to place (29). According to Casey, when bodies encounter the landscape, they convert it into place by gaining orientation within it. Though body and landscape are not "natural givens," culture enters the picture not through the imposition of culture onto nature but through body-landscape interplay (i.e., experience) (2009, 29–30). This resulting orientation within a place can be described as a local way of knowing that place.

While I find Casey's account applicable to Aasen's representation of rural life, particularly in his poetry (see chapter 2), I find Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" a more useful term for understanding why, as I will demonstrate below, discrepancies inevitably emerge in Aasen's project (Haraway). Haraway proposes situated knowledge as an alternative to the notion of objectivity in the western scientific tradition, in which the observer assumes a distanced, superior relationship to nature (not unlike "hyperseparation"). By proposing situated knowledge as the pursuit of objectivity through contextualization, Haraway attempts to avoid radical social constructionism, which, she argues, concedes any claims about materiality to the patriarchal system that social constructionist critiques of science were originally meant to

dismantle. She writes, “Science has been about a search for translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality—which I call reductionism, when one language (guess whose) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions” (Haraway 187). In this system, as in Foucault, vision is primary. Haraway counters this not only with other senses but with *embodied* vision, which is not universalizing but always “partial.” Rather than finding a “larger vision” of the world through distance, Haraway argues, “The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (196). Rather than the “hyperseparation” that Plumwood critiques, in which nature is viewed as static and passive, “situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor or agent” (198). (Situated knowledges, then, bear a relationship to Plumwood’s solution to hyperseparation, which is “collaborative nature,” a model in which nature is seen as agentic and which I will employ with some modifications in chapter two.)

In the model of situated knowledges, “subjugated people” hold a privileged position not, Haraway cautions, because they are inherently “innocent” but because “[t]hey are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god-trick and all its dazzling—and, therefore, blinding—illuminations” (Haraway 191).

While Norwegian *bønder* were subject to the political and cultural hegemony of Denmark (and to different degrees, depending on economic status) and not to the subjugation of the colonized, Aasen does on many occasions present the *bonde* as seeing both “from below” and from “somewhere in particular” rather than the nowhere that is everywhere. In my usage of “local” for the purposes of this study, members of the administrative class could also be considered “locals,” depending on the length of their tenure in a region or if they had been recruited from among the local population. What is excluded, however, is the projection of longing for an imagined, pre-modern past onto the rural context; instead, local knowledge is communicated by locals accounting for their experience, including both the embodied practices and material landscapes which contribute to the production of the cultural meaning of the local. Locally situated knowledge, then, is the epistemology that facilitates a collaborative view of nature in which both human and nonhuman actors possess agency: they affect themselves and others. Locally situated knowledge is a way of knowing nature from “up close,” or perhaps “down among,” rather than from the enlightenment naturalist’s distanced, objective and universalizing gaze. This can be seen both in the introduction to *Norsk Grammatik* cited earlier and in Aasen’s poetic work, which I will turn to briefly now in order to present a particular salient example of locally situated knowledge.

***Symre* as Locally Situated Knowledge**

Having proposed locally situated knowledge as a way of understanding the kind of knowledge Aasen advocates for, I can now turn to the example from *Norske Plantenavne* that most clearly illustrates his commitment to a non-binary view of nature and culture. Aasen notes that the name *symre* and variations on it are used in various dialects to designate both the Linnaean species *Anemone nemorosa* and *Primula acaulis*. In the first entry he notes, “Navnet Symra (af Sumar, Sommer) passer bedst til denne Art, som paa mange Steder er den allerførste, som blomstrer om Vaaren” while in the second he reiterates that the name refers to summer “og kan forklares som Sommermærke eller Tegn til Sommer, fordi disse Planter blomstre tidlig om Vaaren” [The name *symra* (from summer) is best suited to this species, which in many places is the very first one

which blooms in the spring ... and can be explained as the mark or sign of summer, because these plants bloom early in the spring] (Aasen, *Norske Plantenavne* 7–8). Aasen would have been very familiar with *Anemone nemorosa*, as it still blooms today in great numbers at the Aasen farm in Ørsta. The name meets the criterion of antiquity (through its etymological connection to the Old Norse word for summer) while also facilitating identification; however, it is also both a plant and a name to which Aasen ascribes cultural significance. Aasen would go on to name the first literary collection he would publish in *Landsmaal* after the flower. *Symra* was to serve as the first of many publications that would demonstrate the viability of Aasen's new written form of Norwegian as a literary language.

In the foreward [Fyrestev], Aasen expresses much of the intention behind the collection. In a collective voice, a group of “Folk” state their demands on the poet:

Kom med Visor, og helst av deim,
 Som kvika og inkje krenkja;
 Sliket som høver vaar eigen Heim,
 Og slikt som me sjølve tenkja. (Aasen, *Symra* 17)
 Sing a song and of the kind
 that cheers, and not oppresses.
 One that speaks our people's mind,
 and our thoughts expresses. (Aasen, *Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 4)³⁰

This utterance comes apparently from the Norwegian *bondeklasse*, who seldom hear verse composed after the manner in which they think, or which is associated with their own “Heim.” Aasen goes on to explain that he has tried to meet this demand with his little collection but apologizes that “sjeldan fekk eg so min Song, / som helst han skulde vera” [I seldom got my song to be as it should]. Because of this, he has published only a little, with the intention that others will come after and meet this demand more successfully. The *symre* serves as the symbol of this “blooming” that was to come:

Symra teiknar til Sumars Bil
 Um Vaaren tidla ho blømer;
 Men fleire Blomar maa koma til,
 Naar Kulden or Markom rømer.
Symra is a sign of summertime. It blooms early in the spring; but more flowers will follow when the cold flees from the fields.

Symra is glossed in the 1863 edition of the poetry collection that shares its name. It is the only word Aasen glosses, suggesting that he knew it would be unfamiliar to many. In fact, a map of the distribution of the word and others similar to it that is presented in the volume *Planter og*

³⁰ All references to *Symra* are taken from (Aasen, *Symra*). Myskja (2002) has produced translations of Aasen's *Symra* that are largely faithful to the poems' content and convey their style as well. I use his translations of Aasen's poetry whenever linguistic differences do not interfere with my analysis. All other translations are my own.

tradisjon demonstrates that the use of *symre* and its variations was concentrated in Aasen's home region, while other regions of Norway used distinctly different words, such as *hvitveis* (Høeg 694). Thus, *symre* is both a plant name associated with a particular region and an "unmanaged" plant. Such semantically transparent dialect words for plants or other natural features do not appear elsewhere in *Symra*, which mostly refers to plants that belong to intermediate taxa (such as *Blom*, *Lauv*, *Gras*, *Fugl*). Aasen's glossary indicates there was little regional variation in the names of these intermediate taxa. In this sense, his findings agree with those of modern ethnobotany, which has found that the genus is the building block of both folk and modern scientific taxonomies (Berlin 59). The most agreement tends to occur at the generic and intermediate levels, while the most difference occurs at the highest (life form, e.g. "plant," "animal") and lowest (species and subspecies) levels (Berlin 34). Because Aasen was attempting to create a nationally legible form of writing, though one based on rural dialect, Aasen demonstrates a preference in his poetic compositions for plants with names that vary little and with some shared cultural and social significance.

Aasen selects this one local word, however, perhaps as an example of the type of language that "høver vaar eigen Heim"—a type of language that is located somewhere in particular. Since plenty of nature lyric had been written in Dano-Norwegian, it cannot be a lack of depiction of local nature alone that the *bønder* in Aasen's poem are complaining about; rather, it must be a way of representing that nature that they feel is lacking ("slikt som me sjølve tenke"). The name *symre* derives from situated knowledge of the flower in its natural environment and in conjunction with its cultural significance as a marker of seasonal change and its social significance as a meaningful sign in an agrarian society. The preference for *symre* displayed both in the glossary and in his subsequent poetry collection suggests that, despite his attempts at making the local universally accessible, there were times when Aasen thought it worthwhile to teach his non-rural audience new vocabulary. In the case of the *symre*, not unlike the *solblom*, certain plant names encapsulate a particular relationship with nature that is also part of the nationalist program Aasen was attempting to advance along with his linguistic one. The *symre* fits particularly well into a locally situated view of nature, its meaning having been produced through the contribution of material nature, not as raw material but as a dynamic element of a local ecology (as it both results from and participates in seasonal change in the environment), and through human creativity in both "reading" the plant as an indicator of a natural cycles and ascribing to it a symbolic meaning by relating it to human processes of change, as Aasen does with the title of his collection. This is not just knowledge regarding a particular place that few outsiders know, but knowledge that cannot be accessed remotely. It is a contextual knowledge that recognizes interrelationships between various aspects of a place, including the interrelationship between the natural and the social.

Discrepancies between Linnaean and folk taxonomy

Although the *symre* is a useful symbol for Aasen, it poses problems for his project to reconcile Norwegian plant names with the scientific taxonomy of his day, as do several other names in *Norske Plantenavne*. These differences between local folk taxonomies and Linnaean taxonomy indicate something about Aasen's evaluation of local understandings of nature: by and large, Aasen does not dismiss folk categorizations as incorrect, but he is working toward the goal of organizing the names according to modern principles. Thus, in the work there is interplay between universality and uniqueness, as the local names which Aasen intends to serve as a

vernacular for students and scholars will preserve aspects of local knowledge and cultural history. Ultimately, however, they reveal the incompatibility of the universalizing system of knowledge Aasen is attempting to deploy with the locally situated knowledge he advocates for through vernacular plant names.

As mentioned earlier, *symre* designated at least two Linnaean species and today is a term for “vårplante av ymse slekter” [spring plants of various genera] (“Symre”). The 1996 edition of *Symra* mentions that *kvitsymra* denotes an anemone, while *kusymra* is the name for a primula, flowers that belong to different families in present-day taxonomy (Aasen, *Symra*). Aasen found that many of the names he collected did not fit neatly with Linnaean species. Some names designated any species of grass at a particular point in its life cycle,³¹ some species were named according to salient features other than those which matter for the Linnaean system,³² and some names designate the seed of many different plants.³³ Aasen “excuses” the folk names at times for grouping many species together because they are easily confused.³⁴ Aasen finds a proliferation of names that apply to many different uncultivated species (e.g., grasses) without recognizing members of the group as distinct. Size, prevalence and ease of observation are among the reasons why some species are recognized and named and others are not (Berlin 261–3). This explains why Aasen especially struggles to find names of distinct species of seaweed, ferns and lichens with which *bønder* were unlikely to interact.

But, as Berlin concludes, the most distinctive species “stand out as living landmarks, like the great forest giants of the tropical forest, guide the observer through and over the biological landscape. These landmarks are, of course, the folk genera that form the basis of all systems of ethnobiological classification” (290). The *symre* seems to be an example of a taxa that serves as such a landmark, in this case of seasonal change, in that it is significant enough to be the archetype for its group, of which there are many variations (e.g. *kvitsymra* and *kusymra*) (Berlin, 34–35). As I have already suggested with the *solblom* and *symre* (as well as the famous *Storbjørka* [Great Birch] from the poem “Gamle Grendi,” which will feature prominently in chapter two), Aasen’s interest in local nature knowledge seems to be borne out by the prominent position of a small set of “living landmarks” that earn a mention in his poetry and his

³¹ *Aira flexuosa*: “Et Par Navne, som betegne gammelt eller vinterstaaet Græs, høre vel ogsaa nærmest til denne og den foregaaende Art” [A few names that designate grass that is old or standing in winter likely belong also most closely to this and the previous species] (*Norske Plantenavne* 5).

³² *Festuca ovina*: “Forvexlingen af disse og flere Græsarter kan forklares deraf, at man kun har lagt Mærke til Bladene og ikke til Toppen” [The conflation of this and several other species of grass can be explained by the fact that one paid attention to the leaves and not the top] (*Norske Plantenavne* 5).

³³ *Chenopodium album* (Meldestokk): “Melde er ellers et Navn paa Frøet av flere forskellige Slags Ugræs i Kornet, f. Ex. Spergel, Arve og lignende” [‘Melde’ is otherwise a name for the seed of different types of weeds among grain, for example, Spergel, Arve and the like] (*Norske Plantenavne* 9); *Spergula arvensis* (Linbendel): “Frøet hedder: Melde, Mennel (Helgeland), Ro (Sogn), hvilket ogsaa gjælder om lignende Frø af andre Væxter” [The seed is called ... which also applies to similar seeds of other plants] (*Norske Plantenavne* 14).

³⁴ *Matricaria Chamomilla* (Kamilleblom): “Da de her nævnte Arter lettelig forvexles, kunne maaske enkelte af Navnene paa den forrige Art ogsaa høre hertil” [Since the species named here are easily confused, certain names of the above-named species could possibly belong here also] (*Norske Plantenavne* 23); See also ³¹

representation of them as nonhuman elements according to which human society orients itself socially as well as in relation to the natural environment. Yet, Aasen chooses a regionally distinctive name for it, whereas elsewhere in his poetry, he follows a universalizing impulse by holding to names that are more widespread.

This is consistent with his strategy in *Norske Plantenavne*, in which he does not attempt to reconcile the conflict that arises between the folk systems and the Linnaean system. Rather, Aasen tries to demonstrate that local names are suitable for the creation of a vernacular system of taxa that corresponds to the Linnaean one. He proposes a practical solution to the problem of the lack of names for some taxa and the proliferation of others: taking names from species that seem to have an abundance of names and applying them to those that lack names or using them as names for families of plants (Aasen, *Norske Plantenavne* 30).³⁵ In this sense, he does not indicate any concern that the Linnaean system will alter the rural view of nature (or that modernization will alter nature itself, although it inevitably did). Instead, he prioritizes the organization of local nature according to a system that is accessible to those unfamiliar with it. Thus, priority is ultimately given to universality.

Although Aasen seems unconcerned about discrepancies between universalizing and local systems of knowledge, a later poem indicates that he did see himself as speaking “from below,” pointing out that universal knowledge claims often mean that “one language (guess whose) must be enforced as the standard” when knowledge is made mobile (Haraway 187). In “Lovtale yver Culturen,” printed anonymously in *Dølen* in 1866, Aasen critiques the elite for whom “culture” is synonymous with the European continent. In improving the Norwegian populace, this elite believes every trace of local specificity, including vernacular language, should be dispensed with in favor of “the general,” which they have, in fact, narrowly defined. Rural Norway is, for this elite, a cabinet of curiosities, in which “Sumt er pittoresk og plastisk” [some things are picturesque and plastic] and thus deserving of enthusiasm, while other things are “vulgært og uelastisk” [vulgar and unelastic] and worthy of scorn:

Alt, som daa er primitivt

Antiquerat og naivt

Lyt han refsa effektivt

So det rømer successivt.

Soleis skal det trivielle

Vika for det idelle,

Alt det smaa og spesielle

Jamnast i det generelle. (Aasen, *Skrifter i samling* 84–85)

Everything then that is primitive, antiquated and naive, he shall rebuke effectively so it secedes successively. So shall the trivial give way to the ideal, everything small and particular is subsumed into the general.

³⁵ Aasen recommends that those names not used as “Hovednavn ... sættes tilside som overflødige” [principal name ... be set aside as extraneous] or that some of the names be used for “nærstaaende Arter eller endnu bedre som Slæktnavne og Klassenavne” [similar species or, even better, as family names and class names] (1860, 30).

The poem suggests he saw the universalizing tendencies of the cultural elite not as a form of objectivity but a form of oppression. This is a clear example of Aasen speaking as *bonde* “from below”: he critiques what he sees as a preference in continental thought for categorization, which he characterizes as a form of cultural imperialism in which the alterity of viewed as peripheral, such as the Norwegian countryside, is subsumed and erased. In this view, specific nature or views of nature are not important unless they are aestheticized according to an elite, “continental” set of standards. *Norske Plantenavne* can be seen as an effort to mitigate this imperialistic view of the Norwegian countryside: it attempts to further the process of making Norwegian plant life available for study in accordance with continental scientific methods without dismissing folk knowledge of that same plant life as “primitive,” “naïve,” or “trivial.”

Conclusion

While recent Aasen scholarship has begun to revise neat distinctions between National Romanticism and pre-1814 intellectual traditions, the implications of this revision with regards to notions of power, colonialism, and nature ideology has yet to be considered. With his herbarium, Ivar Aasen worked within an enlightenment system; his plant name collection, however, represents a more ambiguous project. While his use of Linnaean taxonomy reduces plants to their structures and situates themselves within a universalizing taxonomical system, his effort to advocate for the vernacular names of plants endeavors to preserve other aspects of the organisms in their environmental context. In that sense, it refuses to “background” rural contributions to knowledge or to deny their practices and experiences as knowledge about nature.

Given that Aasen employs the tools he inherited from Christian enlightenment thinkers in Norway in the service of particular class interests, his example demonstrates that Witoszek’s concept of the “Pastoral Enlightenment” as a consensus model that forms the basis of Norwegian culture is in need of an adjustment. Similarly, his example demonstrates the need for a revision of postcolonial critiques of enlightenment natural science in order to apply them to colonial relationships in the Scandinavian context. While Aasen uses the same tools as the Linnaean “benign naturalist,” he does so in order to advocate for a hegemonized (if not colonized) group. As a *bonde* who became a middle-class, urban scholar, Aasen’s interest in plant names and the local or folk knowledge they contain ultimately represents a departure from both the “benign naturalist” and the romantic genius in favor of a more hybrid position—as both an ethnobotanist who possessed local nature knowledge and an informant who used the tools of modernization to present that knowledge for a national audience. In *Norske Plantenavne*, Aasen seems to have wanted to create a gloss that would allow the two systems to persist separately while still being able to relate to one another. In this way, the Norwegian *bondeklasse* could participate in enlightenment knowledge systems (and enjoy the economic and political benefits of doing so) while maintaining the connection between local nature and their local way of referring to it.

Aasen was, ultimately, responsible for the introduction of many Norwegian names for species that continued to be used by Norwegian botanists. For example, in Blytt’s introduction to *Norges flora* (1874), he writes, “De norske Navne ere næste alle anførte efter I. Aasens ‘Norske Plantenavne’” [The Norwegian names are almost all given as in I. Aasen’s ‘Norwegian Plant Names’] (Often and Sæbo 10). The 1994 edition of *Norges flora* has two thousand species names from Aasen, plus sixty other names of species used as family names (per Aasen’s suggestion) (Often and Sæbo 11). Vascular plants have “ei relativt stabil norsk namnsetjing” [a relatively stable Norwegian nomenclature] today, mostly taken from *Norske Plantenavne* (300 names), but

in relation to the number of blooming plants, this is few; there are 2,500 names in the 1994 edition of *Norges Flora* (Often and Sæbo 11).

Aasen did not anticipate, however, the gradual changes local nature and ways of life would undergo as a consequence of those same modern knowledge systems. The combination of increased mobility for the *bondeklasse* and consolidation, modernization, and increased production in agricultural regions meant that the local nature knowledge and systems of knowledge transmission that Aasen had relied on to collect plant names were passing away. The small number of named and familiar plants in Aasen's time could not measure up to modern botany's capacity for discovering and naming new species. Nor did Aasen's project have any slowing effect on subsequent developments in agriculture. The modernization of agriculture in Norway eventually transformed the very localities for which Aasen advocated, accelerating the rate of draining and clearing new land for cultivation, reducing the area of uncultivated and grazing land, and endangering some of the species Aasen recorded.

These processes would ultimately threaten the existence of some of the very plants Aasen lists. The *solblom* mentioned by the seminary student Torkjell Mauland in his letter of 1871 has become rare today. According to a report on the threatened species, "I takt med at arealet av naturbeitemark, skogsbeite og naturlige slåtteenger minsket på 1900-tallet, begynte solblom å minske i utbredelse. Gjengroing, innsådde grasarter, bruk av kunstgjødsel og planting av gran på gammel eng er de største truslene mot plantearten" [As the area of natural pasture, forest pasture, and natural hay meadows decreased in the 1900s, the solblom began to become less widespread. Overgrowth, the introduction of non-native grasses, the use of artificial fertilizer and the planting of spruce trees in old meadows represent the greatest threats to this plant species] (Rasmussen). Because of the decrease in its prevalence, the plant continued to be categorized as "vulnerable" on the Norwegian national list of endangered species (Norsk Rødliste) as of 2015. In fact, thirty percent of the Norwegian list of endangered species is made up of species that rely on human practices such as mowing and grazing of domestic animals for their survival ("Norsk rødliste"). This suggests the degree to which human practices and the survival of biological species are interdependent, especially in the Norwegian context. (In chapter two, I will discuss the prevalence of such landscapes, named *kulturlandskaper* [cultural landscapes], in Norwegian nature and the debate in ecocriticism over how to theorize such landscapes.)

Although the modernization of knowledge in Norway threatened to efface local knowledge, it would be a misconception of Aasen's work to argue that he opposed this process of modernization in favor of a retreat to *bonde* society. Instead, he participated in modernization processes through his travels and his normalizing linguistic work that contributed to the form that both versions of written Norwegian have today (Lundeby, "Ivar Aasen som veiviser til bokmålet"). However, Aasen imagined a modernity that was different from the one that resulted, one that would receive more of its impulses from rural Norway. Thus, *Norske Plantenavne* can be seen as a kind of *alternative* modernization project, one in which the knowledge and practices of Norwegian *bønder* inform and influence the nation as a whole, preventing the exploitation of both marginalized people and nonhuman nature. This idea of extending rural values onto the nation does not depart significantly from what Stephen Walton has argued about Aasen's literary work; according to Walton, "[Aasen's] rejection of the values of the urban ruling-class elite represents an extension of the perceived values of rural society to the whole of society" (*Farewell the Spirit Craven* 211). However, he goes on to caution, "This is not the same as to identify Aasen's view with one's own notions about what the mores and values of nineteenth-century Norwegian rural society might have been" (*Farewell the Spirit Craven* 211).

While I agree that we must be careful not to take Aasen's portrayal of rural communities at face value, I believe the observations Aasen makes about Norwegian vernacular plant names provides evidence of a particular view of nature based on intergenerational knowledge transmission, observation, and social practice. Where we can see aspects of this same situated knowledge in Aasen's poetry, we can thus regard it as based at least in part on realities that Aasen has inferred from local language. In his poetry, as I will argue in the next chapter, Aasen suggests how this situated knowledge is constituted and why it can help protect a mobilizing *bondeklasse* from the negative consequences of modernization to which they may be uniquely vulnerable.

Chapter 2: Situated Nature Knowledge in the Poetry of Ivar Aasen

In the biography *Historie om Ivar Aasen*, Ottar Grepstad describes the birch tree immortalized by Ivar Aasen in the poem “Gamle Grendi” [“The Old Hamlet”] (Grepstad 22–24). Probably dating back to the 1700s, the tree was known locally as *Storebjørka* [The great birch]. “Tid eg minnest ein gamall Gard,” the poem begins, “med store Tre og Runnar” [I often remember an old farm with large trees and bushes] (Aasen, *Symra* 27). Aasen goes on to describe a place that would have been recognizable to his audience as a farmstead in western Norway:

Tett med Stova stod ei Bjørk so breid,
Der hadde Skjorerna sitt gamle Reid,
Staren song i kvar ein Topp, som beid,
Og Erlor i Tunet sprungo.
By the farmstead stood a mighty birch,
There of old the magpies had their perch.
Starlings sang as sweet as choir in church,
And wagtails the air were winging.³⁶ (Aasen, *Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 7)

Such an idyllic scene would seem to validate the perception of Aasen's poetry as a product of the national romantic period in Norway, with its idealized view of local, rural nature and a rural way of life. When examined alongside Aasen's total published poetic production, however, it becomes apparent that it is one of only a few poems that could be regarded as “nature poetry,” i.e. poems that consist primarily of description of the nonhuman world and the human response to it. Even in Aasen's poems that do represent nature, it is rarely depicted through the lens of individual subjective experience but rather depicts how natural elements, such as trees, mountains, and fjords, orient the community in time and space. Rather than romantic, the poems could be alternatively considered pastoral poetry because of their philosophical tone and seeming preference for rural over urban life. Yet, both the Norwegian social context and the background of Aasen himself make “Gamle Grendi” (and, indeed, the entirety of *Symra*) a poor fit for the pastoral. The pastoral mode in poetry has traditionally been the pastime of an aristocratic elite. As Raymond Williams argues in “Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral,” it is a mode that disguises the reality of social relations in favor of a nostalgic longing for “the simplicity of country life” (279). The shepherds in the pastoral mode, according to Williams, “are the objects rather than the subjects of pastoral” (279). In it, “the life of the shepherd could be made to stand for the life of nature and for natural feeling” (279). This calls to mind Val Plumwood's critique of the “hyperseparation” of nature and culture (explained in chapter one) in which marginalized people

³⁶ The religious metaphor is Myskja's addition. Line three could be translated, “The starling sang in every treetop that could be found.”

(be they indigenous, women or lower class) are relegated to the status of nature—nature, in this case, meaning static, passive, and premodern.

Rather than a mode in which Aasen participated, then, the pastoral should be viewed as a genre to which Aasen took a critical stance. Yet, starting as he often did with values shared by the different communities to which he belonged (an academic elite as well as an economically diverse rural community), Aasen deployed the strategies of the genre to an extent as well. So, while the imagery of “Gamle Grendi” could be viewed as pastoral, Stephen Walton has argued that in *Symra* Aasen attempts to replace the universal subject of poetry, usually a member of a cultural elite, with a rural subject who despite his humble origins experiences the same ups and downs as other people and has the same ability to be philosophical about them (*Farewell the Spirit Craven* 213). In this sense, he is not the object of nostalgia but a figure with whom a person of any social status could identify. One could read *Symra* then as written in a “counter-pastoral” mode in which the “shepherd” or *bonde* is the subject rather than object of the work.

Yet, if *Symra* were merely a counter-pastoral in which the rural figure takes on the role of “everyman,” the boundaries between culture and nature on which the pastoral is based would still be maintained. An example such as “Gamle Grendi” clearly does not divorce the *bonde* from nature. Rather, in the process of portraying rural communities as dynamic players in the formation of culture, Aasen also tends to grant culturally formative capacities to nature. A further description of *Storebjørka* (as presented by Grepstad) gives an indication of the slippery relationship between nature and culture it exemplifies: although it is a living organism, Grepstad writes, “Ivar Aasen hadde dikta Storebjørka inn i norsk kulturhistorie” [Ivar Aasen had written The Great Birch into Norwegian cultural history] (24). In the context of *Det store hamskiftet* [The great transformation] in Norwegian agriculture (described in chapter one, “The Historical Context for *Norske Plantenavne*”), as well as the accompanying migration of rural people to urban areas and to America, “Gamle Grendi” preserved the tree in perpetuity in literary form so that his audience could continue to identify with a rural community, even as they left it (and even as it transformed such that return became impossible). In “Gamle Grendi,” Aasen renders the tree anonymous, however, and through this gesture it becomes an element in a kind of template for what defines the rural Norwegian. In this sense, it is a generalizing or standardizing gesture, just as Aasen’s linguistic work created a standardized Norwegian with reference to numerous specific dialects. At the same time, Aasen believed the preservation of the physical tree was also important. According to local tradition, Aasen paid his brother Jon Ivar two crowns a year not to cut the tree down during his lifetime (Grepstad 24). This indicates that Aasen was attached not only to the idea of the tree as a landmark of rural life but also to that particular tree as a singular element of his home community. The anonymous, aestheticized representation of the tree was not an adequate substitute. This belief in the continued importance of the material nature to which the poem refers has informed national preservation efforts: the Norwegian parliament decided to grant a yearly stipend for the care of the tree beginning in 1972 and, after the tree had to be cut down after a storm in 2005, supported the planting of its clone at the Aasen farm by Crown Prince Haakon in 2008 (Grepstad 24–25). This suggests that it was not sufficient to perpetuate the tree as a cultural symbol, but that the genetic makeup of the tree itself was deemed worthy of preservation. This is a contemporary update of the view of the tree already present in Aasen’s poem: the tree participates in the farm described by Aasen both naturally through its role in the local ecosystem and culturally through the orientation in time and place it provides for the farm’s residents. The textual representation of the tree, moreover, transfers the tree’s properties

as a natural and cultural landmark onto the page, making it a literary landmark for an increasingly mobile (and potentially disoriented) community. The literary text also increases the tree's cultural capital such that its material preservation in the local environment is made a national priority.

The birch tree in (and out) of Aasen's poem illustrates the collapsing of nature and culture that often occurs when the meaning of a Norwegian place is interpreted. Norwegian geographers and land managers frequently apply the term *kulturlandskap* [cultural landscape] to various regions in Norway (Christensen 9–10). *Kulturlandskap* is defined as “landskap som helt eller delvis er blitt omformet fra den opprinnelige naturtilstand på grunn av menneskers virksomhet” [Landscapes that have been completely or partially transformed from its original natural state due to human intervention] (Bruun). While industrialized areas in which ecosystems have been destroyed may come to mind, *kulturlandskap* can also designate ecosystems that have emerged due to human and natural interaction. The defining features of these landscapes, such as plant and animal life, depend on human intervention for their survival. Yet, human intervention alone cannot explain their existence because they depend equally on natural elements and processes.

An example can be found on the island of Hovedøya in the Oslo fjord: The island's location gives it a unique climate that allows species to grow that cannot be found on the mainland. The island also has a long cultural history: it is the site of the ruins of a 12th-century cloister; thus, human intervention also has a long history on the island. Because of this, though large parts of the island are designated nature preserves, sheep are periodically brought to the island to graze because without this intervention a number of its unique species could not survive (Friluftsetaten and Byantikvaren 15). As with the cloned birch tree, human intervention is required to preserve a natural feature which has come to be regarded as an important aspect of human cultural history. Simply protecting the area from human intervention, as in a wilderness preserve, would not be sufficient to maintain what makes the site a landmark—its living organisms. At the same time, these interventions suggest a belief that the human contributions to the cultural landscape, such as the cloister, the written history of the island or Aasen's poem, are less valuable without the continued existence of the nature to which they relate or refer. Therefore, authorities will go to great lengths to preserve that nature. Now that the Aasen family farm serves as a museum for the author and as the Nynorsk cultural center,³⁷ the farm Aasen describes only exists as a work of poetry, the land having been dedicated to performing a different sort of work. Yet preserving the natural surroundings of the museum as the context in which Aasen lived and the sometimes subject of his poetry is among its priorities (“Aasen-tunet”). In this sense, it is very difficult to separate the institution's relationship to nature from its relationship to culture.

The birch tree in “Gamle Grendi” and its afterlife helps to illustrate how literary genres such as pastoralism and romanticism fall short of accounting for the social and material lives of nonhuman “landmarks” in their local environments and beyond. The birch tree described in Aasen's poem thus brings together several elements already discussed in chapter one—Aasen's

³⁷ The Aasen-tunet is the first known museum dedicated to an author, established by his family in 1899.

amateur work in botany carried out in the 1830s and his linguistic work in the same field published in *Norske Plantenavne* in 1860—and Aasen’s 1863 poetry collection, *Symra*, which takes its name from a wildflower.³⁸ In chapter one, I have argued that Aasen’s glossary of plant names is a project that advocates for locally situated knowledge, an epistemology based not on the reductionist objectivity of enlightenment natural sciences but one that tries to make room for “implaced” or “situated” forms of knowledge that had been cultivated by rural communities over centuries.

In this chapter, I will argue that Aasen saw the changes accompanying modernization as rendering particularly vulnerable the rural communities on whose behalf he was attempting to create a language and literature. He saw this vulnerability as the result of changes to the social structure of these communities as well as to their natural environments and attitudes toward nature. While he acknowledged the opportunities brought about by modernization, he also recognized that the lack of orientation toward others and toward nature it produced could make newly mobile rural people vulnerable to both economic exploitation and psychological pain.

Although *kulturlandskap* might seem appropriate for the kind of landscape Aasen describes in “Gamle Grendi” and elsewhere in *Symra*, I will first argue that a non-binary conception of nature and culture based on practice rather than observation alone better fits Aasen’s view of the relationship between the two. In particular, Aasen presents a rural community in which knowing one’s human and nonhuman surroundings means “neighboring” them, and that the resultant relationship to nonhuman nature involves negotiation, rather than mastery or domination.

I will also argue that the impact of environmental and social change are interrelated in Aasen’s poetry, and that this fact has garnered little recognition because Aasen’s poetry has often been divided into artificial thematic categories that separate nature from culture. I will then go on to examine the terms *heim* [home or earth] and *verd* [world] in *Symra*. Rather than suggesting these as alternative thematic categories, I argue that they are elastic terms that Aasen uses in order to suggest that the positive abilities and attitudes rural people have developed in the context of a “negotiated” relationship with nature can be applied to the new, disorienting situations in which they find themselves. Rather than seeing these qualities as exclusive to *bønder*, however, Aasen suggests they can be adopted by the nation as a whole. In conclusion, I will suggest ways in which Aasen’s poetics might be considered an “ecopoetics” due to its focus on process, performance and practice over product or closed aesthetic object. *Symra* effectively establishes a tradition in which *Nynorsk* poetry is viewed as a form of linguistic and eco-practice in which individual, communal and aesthetic concerns can be addressed within a rural context for a broader audience. The prediction that Aasen makes at the end of *Symra* that “more flowers” will come after his collection will be answered in the 20th century by Olav Nygard (chapter three) and Aslaug Vaa (chapters four and five), poets who in a variety of ways understand their poetry as ecopoetic practice.

³⁸ See “Symra as locally situated knowledge” in chapter one for a discussion of the collection’s title.

“Negotiated Nature”

Seeing the great birch as part of Norwegian cultural history could be argued to be a kind of naïve reading of “Gamle Grendi”; however, it can also be seen as an example that fits well within ecofeminist perspectives on nature that attempt to do away with nature/culture binaries in favor of conceptions that take into account the interrelationship between the natural and the cultural. As Rachel Tillmann explains, feminists have long challenged the nature/culture dualism that grounds a mechanistic view of nature (30). Nature/culture dualism conceives of matter as passive, having no agency of its own and changing only in accordance with natural laws or due to the intervention of a human subject. Moreover, it sees matter as separable from both mind and other forms of matter. This is problematic from a feminist viewpoint because it is used to justify the social oppression of women, who, having been associated with nature and with matter, come to be regarded not as subjects but objects. But it is not only women who have been perceived as “closer to nature” in conjunction with a project of western mastery but also indigenous peoples and rural peasants.

Although Norwegian rural peasants did not suffer the indignities and violence that were enacted upon, for example, indigenous Americans or the Sami (the indigenous people of Scandinavia), rural peasants served as “material” for the formation of a Norwegian national identity. Apelseth writes:

I pakt med romantiske idear var bonde- eller allmugekulturen alt tidleg på 1800-tallet utpeika som viktig råmateriale som det kunne formast ein norsk nasjonalkultur av. Føresetnaden for fiksjonen—eller den raude tråden i den kulturhistoriske kontinuiteten—var å få denne kulturen til å framstå som noko opphavleg, som det eigentlege og ekte norske. For å få det til måtte han framstillast som i hovudsak upåverka av felleseuropeisk kultur ... Bonde- eller allmugekultur vart i samsvar med det omtolka og avgrensa til oralkulturens repertoar: eventyr, folkeviser, stev, ordtak, dialektar—og analfabetisme. (“Ein europear så god som nokon” 35)

In accordance with romantic ideas, *bonde* or popular culture was designated from the early 1800s as important raw material from which a Norwegian national culture could be formed. The prerequisite for that fiction—or the red thread in that cultural historical continuity—was to make this culture appear to be something original, as the truly and genuinely Norwegian. In order to achieve this, it had to be presented as principally uninfluenced by pan-European culture ... *Bonde* or popular culture was, in accordance with this, reinterpreted and confined to the repertoire of oral culture: folk tales, folk songs, ballads, proverbs, dialects—and illiteracy.

In this account, “folk culture” was denied originality and creativity and was instead viewed as a conduit for cultural content from the past. The use of the peasantry as “resource” can be detected in the bourgeois enthusiasm for consuming folk culture, while at the same time regarding them as too rough or backward to contribute to Norwegian society without a healthy dose of outside intervention. A number of Aasen’s poems (including “Lovtale yver Kulturen,” discussed in chapter one, “Aasen’s commentary”) directly object to this attitude toward the peasantry.

One alternative to the view of nature as passive, raw material that has been proposed is the idea that nature is culturally constituted. Although not a politicized term in the Norwegian context, elsewhere advocates of the concept “cultural landscape” attempt to counter the

colonialist gaze which views nature as a blank slate by drawing attention to indigenous management and transformation of landscapes long before colonialism. Similarly, for some feminist theorists embracing language as constitutive of nature has been a way to flee an essentialist association of woman with nature, instead claiming language and culture as the space in and through which women can lay claim to a liberated subjectivity.

However, more recently, ecofeminist thinkers such as Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, and Val Plumwood have argued that these forms of nature skepticism, which posit an always-already acculturated nature, leave an imperialist or patriarchal view of nature in place. Rather than abandoning the term, they argue, the category of “nature” ought to be reconceived in order to better account for nature’s activity, dynamism, unpredictability, and even agency.³⁹ Plumwood’s engagement with rural and indigenous cultures from her home context of Australia proves most useful for providing an understanding of how Ivar Aasen’s work can be viewed as an attempt to describe local nature knowledge and rural *bondkultur* not as something that has sprung from the soil or is a mere vehicle for the nation’s past but as something that has been created *in situ* through a dynamic relationship between individuals, communities, and their environmental surroundings.

Plumwood employs the term “collaborative nature” to describe such a dynamic relationship. In “collaborative nature,” natural and social processes are taken to be wholly inseparable from one another. Rather than matter always being transformed by culture, matter and culture transform in response to one another (Plumwood, “The Concept of a Cultural Landscape” 125). It is a view based neither on environmental determinism nor cultural determinism but that instead regards matter as having its own agency. Agency for Plumwood simply describes the generative processes of nature that are outside human control and place limits upon what humans can do (“Toward a Progressive Naturalism” 40). This is not the agency of an intentional, unified subject but “a dispersed creativity and a decentralized intentionality” (“Nature in the Active Voice” 42). Understanding nature as active or agentic in this way takes into account the often-unexpected outcomes of human intervention in natural processes as well as the ways in which nature thwarts human attempts to direct or redirect it toward their own ends. As she writes, “The implications of over-estimating human control and agency include not only the failure we have noted to observe and value nature’s creativity and services, but also exaggerating the potential for control of natural systems and processes, denying the need for negotiation with nature, and reinforcing settler traditions of forcing the land to adapt to us rather than vice versa” (“Nature in the Active Voice” 138).

Collaborative nature offers an alternative to the nature/culture binary by acknowledging the agency of nature and natural processes in the formation of human culture. “Collaborative” however is a positive term that acknowledges the role of nonhuman nature as a contributor to humans’ physical survival, way of life, and culture. In the spirit of Plumwood (who calls for accounts of human relationships to nature that examine particular contexts on a case-by-case basis), I use the term “negotiated” for Aasen’s account of the relationship between *bønder* and

³⁹ See (Tillman) for an overview of “New Materialism.” See also (Alaimo and Hekman; Plumwood, “The Concept of a Cultural Landscape”; Plumwood, “Nature as Agency”). See (Rigby, “Writing After Nature”) for an overview of the alternatives to the term “nature” that have been deployed by ecocritics, as well as their advantages and disadvantages.

nature because of the frequency with which *bønder* are forced to confront natural limits. The acknowledgement of the limits that nature places on human behavior is arguably as prominent in Aasen's poetry as the celebration of nature's contributions. It is through a negotiated relationship to nature that the Norwegian *bondeklasse*, Aasen claims, has developed a particular set of attitudes toward both the natural world and society that makes them particularly able to cope with change and to accept human limitations.

Previous Readings of Nature in Aasen's Poetry

Attitudes of neighborliness, adaptability and humility have perhaps been observed in the poems usually considered "nature poetry," as well as those considered "patriotic," which also contain a great deal of nature imagery. However, by understanding Aasen's nature as negotiated, it is possible to see how this same attitude is presented as the one with which *bønder* ought to meet modernization. In a sense, my aim is to contextualize Aasen's poetry in a different way than it has been contextualized heretofore. Thus far, Aasen has been contextualized in terms of class conflict (beginning with Arne Garborg, but taken up again by Willy Dahl and Stephen Walton) and, most recently, in terms of intellectual traditions, as renewed attention has recently been granted to his intellectual debt to the Enlightenment.⁴⁰ Rather than viewing nature as secondary to the class consciousness Aasen's poems exhibit, or to his "counter-hegemonic" nationalistic project,⁴¹ I see the relationship to nature as fundamental to how Aasen defines the experiences and attitudes of the peasantry as different from those of the cultural elite. By doing so, it is possible to account more fully for the thematic threads that run through *Symra*, as well as to see the connection between the collection's first half, which contains most of its nature imagery, and the second half, which contains most of its philosophical musings.

As in chapter one, I have also chosen to distance my reading from efforts to categorize Aasen's representation of nature as drawing on either enlightenment or romantic philosophy. While a number of scholars have clearly demonstrated Aasen's indebtedness to classical rhetoric and his at times intentional distancing of his poetic production from romantic ideals,⁴² such readings are more productive as correctives to received readings of Aasen as a representative of National Romanticism that can be found in literary histories.⁴³ On the other hand, using either the Enlightenment or Romanticism as a lens often leads to a reductive reading of both of these

⁴⁰ See "Ivar Aasen: Benign Naturalist" in chapter one.

⁴¹ See (Walton, *Farewell the Spirit Craven* 211).

⁴² See (Hansteen; Sørbø, "Portalen til nynorsk-lyrikken"; Sørbø, "Aasen og den forseinka romantikken").

⁴³ Apelseth argues that, in critiquing the lack of attention paid to the intellectual forerunners of National Romanticism, it is perhaps more important to examine the reception of National Romanticism than to examine the original rhetoric: "Det er poeng å hente i kritikk av den 17. mai-retorikken som skapte nasjonale heltar, men det er viktigare å ta fatt i den moderne og avnasjonaliserte reproduksjonen av dette tankegodset" [There are insights to be derived from a critique of the 17th of May-rhetoric that created national heroes, but it is more important to grasp the modern and denationalized reproduction of this mindset] ("Prestar, poteter og patriotisme" 42).

movements and of Aasen through the binary objective/utilitarian or subjective/introspective.⁴⁴ Moreover, until very recent years, these readings have often concluded with value judgments that predictably value the subjective and original over the objective and traditional.⁴⁵ These fail to provide a nuanced reading, as the objectivity of the enlightenment view of nature is debatable (as discussed in chapter one), while “utilitarian” glosses over the fact that there exist various approaches to making use of nature and that the approach in rural Norway was undergoing significant changes at the time. Of the subjective and introspective there is little to find in *Symra*, and often these “romantic” qualities facilitate a psychological/biographical reading of the poems, an approach which I will also avoid.⁴⁶ Instead, I will show how Aasen’s poetry portrays how rural communities are transformed by economic and social changes and how he posits that their view of nature has the potential to either change along with it or mitigate the effects of that change.

Willy Dahl was the first to draw attention to the connection between nature and social conditions in his 1977 essay, “Ein bondegut møter kapitalismen” [A son of rural people meets capitalism]. While his observation that “folk arbeider i Aasens dikt” [people work in Aasen’s poetry] is often cited as an important move away from the assessment of Aasen as a part of the national romantic tradition and toward a view of him as a class-conscious dissenter, Dahl’s statement is part of a larger observation about nature in Aasen’s poetry: “Natur er noko du høyrer heime i, lever i, arbeider i ... I denne naturen rører menneska han seg på ein uspalte og sjølvsgd måte” [Nature is something you belong in, live in, work in ... In this nature, a person conducts himself in an undivided and intuitive way] (“Ein bondegut” 78). It appears that Dahl here attributes to Aasen an understanding of the *bonde*’s relationship to nature as one of lost authenticity. It is “uspalte” [undivided] while the modern experience is fractured, “sjølvsgd” [given] while the modern experience is contrived. But Dahl’s reading of Aasen’s nature here is primarily materialist: “Hos Aasen finst det jo nettopp inga kløyving når det gjeld forholdet til natur og levevilkår: Naturen er både det du lever i og det du lever av, og det er praksis, dvs. arbeid, som formar om naturen og dermed vinn over motseiinga” [In Aasen, there is no division where the relationship between nature and living conditions are concerned: nature is both what you

⁴⁴ A typical example is Kolstad, who writes that Aasen had “one foot” in the enlightenment view of nature (in which nature, as material, is separate from the mind) and “one foot” in the romantic view (in which nature is mystical and always retains an unknowable element): “I mange henseender er naturen ennå bare en dekor eller en økonomis ressurs, i andre henseender berømmer han den som det viseste av alt og som kilde til all kjærlighet” [In many respects, nature is still only a decoration or an economic resource, in other respects, he commends it as the height of wisdom and as the source of all love] (178)

⁴⁵ Wiland cites several literary historians who regard Aasen as “uncreative.” For example, Paasche writes, “Dikteren Ivar Aasen har ikke stor fantasi” [The poet Ivar Aasen does not have a great imagination] and describes his poetry as “upersonlig” [impersonal] (qtd. in Wiland 65); more recently, Venås has written, “Noka stor og skapande diktarånd var ikkje Ivar Aasen ... Han skapte vakre vers om jordnære emne, men utan rike hugskot eller noko flog som lyfter lesaren til nye rømdar med opplevingar av utenkt slag” [Ivar Aasen was no great and creative poetic spirit ... He created beautiful poems on down-to-earth subjects but without rich imagination or any flights that lift the reader to new heights with heretofore unimagined experiences] (Venås, *Livssoga åt Ivar Aasen* 20; also cited in Wiland 65).

⁴⁶ Walton also critiques this tendency to read Aasen biographically, particularly as the speaker of his own poems (*Ivar Aasens kropp* 664).

live in and what you live on, and it is praxis, that is to say, work, which transforms nature and therefore triumphs over contradiction] (Dahl, “Ein bondegut” 82). In his Marxist reading, praxis in nature is work alone; however, the names to which Aasen draws attention in *Norske Plantenavne* together with a reading of nature in his poetry indicates that praxis in nature involves more than work; it also includes community formation, acquisition of knowledge, and orientation in time and space. Indeed, praxis is often implacement—that is, an interaction between body, mind and place.

Just as nature is deployed in the service of Dahl’s Marxist reading, elsewhere in Aasen scholarship the representation of nature in *Symra* has rarely been the focus but rather a means of discussing generic status, literary antecedents or how nature imagery serves to represent the *bondeklasse*.⁴⁷ These readings are usually confined to a subset of poems categorized as *naturdikting* [nature poetry] with gestures toward similar poems outside the collection. There are internal reasons for this: *Symra* is subtitled “*to Tylfter med nya Visor*” [two dozen new songs] and follows a thematic trajectory from poems that address the nation and contain explicit nature imagery to poems that address individual and social philosophical problems. These poems are framed by the “*Fyrestev*” [Foreword] and “*Etterstev*” [Afterward].⁴⁸ The collection appeared in three editions that were revised by Aasen himself (1863, 1867, 1875), and the last of these has been the source of most subsequent editions. The twenty-nine poems that appear across these editions represent roughly half of Aasen’s published poetic authorship (Wiland 52). Because of this, even for scholars who attempt to account for Aasen’s total poetic production, *Symra* occupies a central role.⁴⁹

While a general thematic progression is noticeable in *Symra*, previous accounts of the collection have taken pains to divide it into specific categories. Willy Dahl gives four: *sentrallyriske* [lyrical], *nasjonal-agitatoriske* [national-agitational] or *kulturfilosofiske* [cultural-philosophical], *kunstfilosofiske* [aesthetic-philosophical] and *absurde* or *skjemtedikta* [absurd, light verse]. Dahl is mostly concerned with deemphasizing the poems that can be regarded as *sentrallyriske* in favor of Aasen’s poems that have a more political program (“Ein bondegut” 70). Subsequent scholars often retain the categories *skjemtedikt*, *sentrallyriske*, and *kulturfilosofiske* (Kongslien; Walton, *Farewell the Spirit Craven*). Sørbo adds the category *naturdikting*, while Walton divides *sentrallyriske* into *eksistensielle* [existential] and *naturdikt* and adds *patriotisk*, *moral filosofisk* and *samfunnsfilosofisk* [patriotic, moral-philosophical, social-philosophical] (Walton, *Ivar Aasens kropp* 710–11). Walton places poems such as “Gamle Norig” [“Old Norway”] and “Nordmannen” [“The Norwegian”] both of which contain nature imagery, in a separate category from *naturdikt*, implying that a subjective, poetic “I” is a

⁴⁷ An exception would be Kolstad 2002, which focuses on nature in Aasen’s authorship more generally (although he does not discuss the herbarium or *Norske Plantenavne*).

⁴⁸ “Stev” refers to a stanza form with its origins in medieval Old Norse eddic poetry and continuing in the folk ballad tradition well into Aasen’s time. See Myhren and Fidjestøl for Aasen’s deployment of this form.

⁴⁹ An additional 140 poems can be found in Aasen’s unpublished papers; however, the bulk of these (80) are poems written in Danish during his youth, and many should be regarded as pedagogical exercises (Wiland 52–53). Aside from a few poems in dialect from Aasen’s “transitional period,” the remainder are written in *Landsmaal*.

prerequisite for nature poetry. However, it is clear that Aasen uses nature imagery to perform a variety of functions, of which subjective experience of nature is only one. Seemingly to correct this, Kongslien creates the category *dikt om landet* [poems about the nation], which includes both patriotic and nature poetry, but there is still a case to be made that the division between the two halves disguises shared thematic concerns (94). In the 2013 edition of *Symra*, Idar Stegane identifies a three-part thematic progression, rather than a two-part structure, including *landet, historia og tradisjonen* [nation, history, and tradition], *tankedikt* [contemplative poetry], and a third group of poems on similar subject matter but in a more humorous style (although he acknowledges a more serious tone in the two prior to the “Etterstev”) (“Symra 150 år” 85–86). While the collection does support such categorization in that it has an apparent thematic progression, the practice also seems to be influenced by Aasen’s own methods, as he was a perpetual list-maker and generated a list of categories when selecting poems for inclusion in *Symra* (see Djupedal, “Om Symra” 64–65). We know, however, that he did not keep to this plan strictly, and there is no indication that he conceived of the final collection in such terms.

In fact, there is good reason to break with Aasen’s systematizing impulses when examining his work. To begin with, *Symra* is not an especially large collection, so such a division is not necessary to facilitate an assessment of the whole. Secondly, the small number of poems in each category means that few shared characteristics can be identified among the poems in each group to make a compelling case for cohesion. Moreover, few of his poems hold themselves strictly to one kind of subject matter versus another. His poems usually considered *naturdikting* also comment on society, and his poems that have been labeled “patriotic” also contain nature imagery. As I will later demonstrate, some significant nature metaphors appear at key moments in Aasen’s social philosophical poetry as well. Finally, since *naturdikting* appears only in the first half of the collection, the division into categories particularly obscures thematic concerns the two halves of the collection have in common, and how the binaries home/away, specific/universal, local/global may be dichotomies Aasen uses to build up what is, in fact, a more unified vision for the future of the *bondeklasse* and the nation as a whole. Most importantly for this chapter, cordoning off nature in particular from other concerns of Aasen’s can have the effect of obscuring the way in which views of nature inform, reflect, or are informed by his view of modernization and its effect on the peasantry.

My reading of *Symra* will preserve the division that Aasen makes in the collection’s subtitle (“*tvø tylvter*”), by drawing attention to the central role of *heim* in its first half and *verd* in its second; however, I ultimately wish to argue that both sections represent a response to modernization in general and social and physical mobility specifically. *Heim* and *verd* are often the terms Aasen uses to convey a sense of the local versus the non-local, including urban settings as well as the world beyond Norway. However, rather than comprising a strict binary, both terms prove linguistically and conceptually elastic, as could be expected of a socially and geographically mobile figure such as Aasen. I will argue that Aasen advocates for the value of local knowledge of people and places as Norway develops into a modern nation. This knowledge is important for the cultural elite because it is essential for taking stock of the local impact of changes occurring at the national level and beyond. At the same time, it is important for the *bondeklasse* to maintain the value of such knowledge, as it produces attitudes toward inconstancy and change in the world that will inoculate them to the overinflated promises of modernity.

Heim and Verd in Symra

Heim originates from the Old Norse *heimr* and, as Idar Stegane explains,

kan ha ei svært vid tyding, verda eller universet, t.d. i tittelen på boka *Heimsyn* (1875) og i dikta ‘Nøgje’ og ‘Livssyn’; det kan brukast om meir avgrensa område, heimland for nordmennene t.d. ‘millom Bakkar og Berg ut med Havet’; og det kan gjelde fyrst og fremst grenda og heimegarden som i ‘Gamle Grendi’; heim i tydinga familieliv finst òg. (“Aasens lyrikk” 91–2)

can have a quite broad meaning—world or universe, for example in the title of the book *Heimsyn* (1875) and in the poems “Satisfaction” and “Outlook on Life”; it can be used for more delineated areas, as the homeland of the Norwegians as in “Between hills and mountains by the sea”; and it can apply first and foremost to the village and ancestral farm as in “The Old Hamlet”; home in the sense of family life can also be found

As Venås points out, Aasen chose the name *Heimsyn* for his pedagogical reader on world history and geography because in his home dialect “når folk fór ut og ville sjå seg om på ein stad dei skulle flytta til, vart det kalla ‘å heimsjå seg.’ Sameleis var det ‘ei heimsyn’ eller ‘ei heimsjåing’ når unge folk gjorde seg kjende med noko meir av verda enn dei såg på fødestaden” [When people set out in order to take stock of a city they intended to move to, it was called ‘å heimsjå seg’ (lit., to look at a home for oneself). Similarly, it was called ‘ei heimsyn’ or ‘ei heimsjåing’ (a view of home; looking at a home) when young people made themselves acquainted with something more of the world than what they had seen in their place of birth] (Venås, *Då tida var fullkomen* 269).⁵⁰ *Verd* originates from Old Norse *verr* and *öld*, referring to the age of humankind. It can mean world, both in the sense of the universe or cosmos [Old Norse: *allheimr*], the earth or planet earth, all humankind, or the area outside of one’s *heimstad* [home-place] (“Verd”). *Verd* then, can include *heim* within its domain, as a segment of mankind or a region of planet earth, or it can refer to all that lies outside or beyond it. Moreover, when *heim* refers to the world at large, it brings with it the connotations of “home,” characterizing the planet as the place where human beings live. As Idar Stegane also points out, Aasen uses *verd* in both an inclusive and exclusive sense, and he uses *heim* at times to refer to the local and familiar, as well as to the larger home of human beings.

For example, in the poem “Heimvegen” [“The Way Home”] home is the stable point to which the individual can always return:

I Heimen der hyggjer seg Barnet best
Til Heimen vil Ungdomen stunda,
Og Mannen, som sviver i Aust og Vest,
Vil helder paa heimferdi skunda. (*Symra* 25)
The child thrives best at home, the youth longs for home, and the man who wanders in

⁵⁰ *Heimsyn: Ei snøgg Umsjåing yver Skapningen og Menneskja, tilmaatad fyre Ungdomen* [View of the world: a brief overview of creation and humankind, suitable for young people] (1875).

the east and west would rather hurry home.

But *heim* is also used in one of the collection's final poems, "Livet" ["Life"], which offers a summation of the theme that life has many ups and downs: "Heimen er baade vond og god, / det skifter med Sut og Gaman" [Both good and ill in the world we find, / and joy is mingled with sorrow] (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 23; *Symra* 63). The poem goes on to describe these vacillations as a central facet of life on earth, in contrast to a spiritual "Von i Barm / um eit, som varer lenger" [Hope in my breast for something that will last longer]. *Heim* here refers to the (non-spiritual) world in general, including one's place of origin. In this context, local place is not excluded from the charge of instability. *Verd* also appears in both an exclusive and inclusive sense. In the poem "Gamle Grendi," the speaker remembers the home of his youth, as he "framand uti Verdi stend" [stands a stranger out in the world]. The world is *outside* the secure enclosure of the *grend* [hamlet]. Later, several poems use *verd* to characterize a world that full of uncertainty and falsehood, a problem that also plagues the local community, although most often because of individuals who gossip ("Tolugt Mod"), seek power for themselves ("Fals og Fusk"), or aspire to affluence ("Høgferd," "Hugen til Rikdom"). In these examples, the inconstancy of the world in general pervades local communities both past and present ("Det gjeng no so att og fram, / som fyr det heve gjenget" ["*Att og Fram*"; "Advance some, and then retreat: now as before we see it"] (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 21; *Symra* 59)).

These examples illustrate the elastic sense of home and world in *Symra*: *heim* often denotes local place, particularly in the first half of *Symra*. However, the privileging of home does not automatically imply a position that is anti-"world": although home remains the point by which individuals and communities orient themselves, and skepticism toward promises of advancement is encouraged, curiosity about the world is not discouraged, and the world at times can be understood as home. Stegane also points out, however, that *after* Aasen's time, when the largest waves of emigration to America were taking place, Aasen's emphasis on home "gir ... ammunition på fleire nivå til ein heimstad-ideologi som får sterkt rom både i språkdebatten og i andre kulturelle og politiske samanhengar fram mot hundreårsskiftet og utetter, ikkje minst i kritikken av utvandring til Amerika som var sterk t.d. hos ein leiande person som Arne Garborg" [Gives ... ammunition at several levels to a homestead-ideology that gains a strong position both in the language debate and in other cultural and political contexts around the turn of the century and after, not least in the critique of emigration to America, which was strong, for example, on the part of a leading individual like Arne Garborg] ("Aasens lyrikk" 92). This selective reception of *heim* in Aasen has impacted the subsequent reading of *Symra*.

The first half of *Symra* opens with poems that represent *heim* as a place where individuals and communities orient themselves in a "vernacular landscape" via implacement, "neighboring" both humans and nonhumans, and a collaborative or negotiated relationship to nature. Parallels are drawn between knowing nature and knowing one's community, as local nature is constituted through a bodily and socially mediated perception that transgresses nature/culture binaries. By observing and respecting nature's cycles and limitations, Aasen argues, the *bonde* develops an attitude of both curiosity and caution. Later, when Aasen transitions to social philosophical poems, the depiction of the world "out there" as both good and bad by turns is carried out in part through the use of natural metaphors, while the prescribed attitude toward modernization is borrowed from the attitude toward nature that is produced by this local understanding of it.

Heim in Symra

Setting aside “Fyrestev,” to which I have referred above and to which I will return at the end of the chapter, the first half of *Symra* contains poems that establish the concept of *home* as an environment in which local knowledge of human and nonhuman nature orients human activity and structures social life. This is certainly presented as the ideal relationship to nature in contrast to a displaced or exiled condition in which the individual lacks orientation and is put at risk of moral or psychological dissolution. These poems are primarily directed at an audience familiar with the *bygd* [small, populated area in a rural context] or *grend* as a point of origin, but it also sets these places up as a positive example for outsiders. I will first discuss how Aasen depicts the local relationship to nature before discussing the attitude toward nature that life in the local place depicted cultivates.

In focusing on orientation in relation to nature rather than construction of nature, I draw on the work of Edward Casey. Not unlike Plumwood’s “collaborative nature,” Casey’s concept of “implacement” seeks to account for a place that has been influenced by humans and human perception without arguing that that place has been *determined* by the human. In particular, I focus on Casey’s reading of “dimensional structures,” which humans rely on to orient themselves in place. Arguing against a conception of these structures as determined by human perception of them, Casey writes, “Certain dimensional structures inhere in things and places themselves and may reflect little if any influence from the incursion of human bodies into their midst. The most obvious case in point is that of wild places from which human beings are altogether absent. But even in vernacular landscapes in which human bodies are manifestly present, it would still be implausibly somatocentric to claim that the presence of these bodies is responsible for their very constitution. Getting oriented in these landscapes depends much more on attending to clues in them than on any innate sense of directionality belonging to the human body” (Casey 101). While Aasen’s descriptions of nature have often been described as “monumental,” “objective” or “realistic,” Casey’s account of the interaction between place and body (or bodies) can be helpful in accounting for the way in which Aasen focuses his descriptions on natural elements that give dimension to non-built spaces in which human community is formed.⁵¹ Local place in Aasen’s poetry could thus be regarded as a “vernacular landscape”—one in which humans do not constitute nature by perceiving it, but rather orient themselves in it by “attending to clues” as to

⁵¹ The account that comes closest to this is Fjeldstad’s reading of the poem “Gamle Norig.” In response to the idea that it is a “naturskildrande dikt om landet,” he writes, “Sjølvs ved eit [sic] ytlig lesing ser vi at denne karakteristikken ikkje heilt held, for i den siste strofa er det snarare folket det er snakk om ... Og ser vi nøyare etter, er folket jamvel til stades meir umerkande også i dei to første strofene òg ... Diktet er altså heller eit dikt om landet og folket. Eller rettare: om tilhøvet mellom landet og folket. Kanskje er det t.o.m. slik at diktet har like mykje å gjøre med kultur, moral og samfunn, som med natur og menneske” [poem about the country that describes the landscape; With even a cursory reading, we see that this characteristic is not completely maintained, for in the last stanza, it is the people more narrowly that are discussed ... and if we look more closely, the people also appear more indistinctly in the first two stanzas, too ... The poem is therefore moreso a poem about the country and the people. Or more correctly: about the relationship between the land and the people. Maybe it is also the case that the poem has as much to do with culture, morality, and society as with nature and the human] (1985, 360).

how to build, cultivate and relate. The primary “clues” by which humans orient themselves in *Symra* are stable natural elements that constitute physical boundaries but also come to be endowed with cultural significance. This is the case with *Storebjørka*, mentioned in the opening of this chapter, which serves as a physical landmark, marking this particular place and constituting a stable element in the midst of change.

“Gamle Grendi”: “Neighboring” Nature

In “Gamle Grendi,” the *grend* provides a context in which social knowledge can be cultivated to produce a local community. Although the definition of *grend* is a “busetnad med hus som ligg nokså nær kvarandre i ei bygd; del av ei bygd” [dwelling place with buildings that are fairly near to one another in a village; a part of a village] (“Grend”), the description in the poem includes both natural and built elements as its components. “Ein gammall Gard” [An old farm] is made up, not only of buildings and the enclosed farmyard, but also “Tre og Runnar, / Vollar, Bakkar og Berg og Skard / og Blomster paa grøne Grunnar” [Trees and bushes, pastures, hills and mountains and hollows and flowers in green meadows] (*Symra* 27). As the birds depicted in the second stanza build their nests in the birch tree, humans form their dwelling within these borders. And stanza three makes clear that people comprise an important component of the *grend* as well:

Heime var eg so vida kjend
og slapp in, kvar eg vilde,
i kvart Hus i den heile Grend,
um endaa Folket kvilde. (*Symra* 27)

At home I was so widely known and could go wherever I wanted, in every house in the entire village, even if folks were resting.

While I referenced *local nature* in accounting for Aasen’s interest in Norwegian plant names, the first half of *Symra* is particularly interested in nature as a context for local community—that is, a network of people who live and work in relatively close proximity. But this local community in Aasen is distinctly implaced, in that it arises within the bounds of geographical features and built spaces and is constituted through the shared knowledge of local people, places, and natural cycles. The centrality of a description of social life to Aasen’s description of the *grend* suggests that Aasen has a social notion of place. As Casey describes, “The power of a place such as a mere room possesses determines not only *where* I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but *how* I am together with others (i.e., how I commingle and communicate with them) and even *who* we shall become together. The ‘how’ and the ‘who’ are intimately tied to the ‘where,’ which gives to them a specific content and coloration not available from any other source” (23). Place as experienced comprises not only the physical but also a corresponding set of social behaviors.

This social view of place helps to articulate better the significance of the “collective” which is often discussed in Aasen’s verse.⁵² While the voice of his poetry is often described as collective, the collective attitudes expressed in Aasen’s poetry arise in a society that is implaced; that is, in a relation to built and natural spaces. This helps explain the lack of individualism in Aasen’s verse, even when he depicts the sensory experience of place.⁵³ As Casey writes, “This implacement is as social as it is personal. The idiolocal is not merely idiosyncratic or individual; it is also collective in character” (23). The *grend* that consists of a blend of natural and built elements becomes the context for a set of behaviors that orient the human socially as they also provide physical orientation. This local community would be undergoing transformation during Aasen’s time as local nature transformed and people were displaced to urban areas and to America. Rather than nature representing stability in contrast to the instability of human society, the stable element of “Gamle Grendi” is the “safety net” of community that emerges from both secure social conditions and intimate knowledge of place.

What I want to emphasize here is that the community of the *grend* negotiates its place in nature, rather than achieving “harmony” with it. Moreover, the community is not closed to outsiders. Ecocritical readings of English Romanticism, in particular, have at times positively evaluated a perception of nature as an organic “whole” and certain communities as living in “harmony” with it. Critics of Romanticism have argued, however, as Kate Rigby points out, “To construe ‘home’ as a locus of ‘community’ ... marks a distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that can have unsavory implications for those viewed as intruders” (70). That *Landsmaal* was a divisive and insular project was certainly a criticism leveled against it at the time (and continues to be leveled at *Nynorsk* advocates today). However, Rigby argues that rather than a mystical “whole,” some Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Clare portray something more like “collectives of co-existents to the extent that they are present as places of welcome to newcomers” (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 70). Rigby derives the notion of a “collective of co-existents” from Timothy Morton, but his is one among many attempts to theorize a nature in which humans and nonhumans retain their separate status without becoming “hyperseparated” (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 70). The “safety net” in “Gamle Grendi” could be read as this type of welcoming collective, as the stanza cited above continues:

Der var kjenningar i kvar ei Kraa

⁵² Sørbø notes Aasen’s use of a collective voice in what he terms “visdomslitteratur” [wisdom literature]: “Det som kjem til uttrykk, er nordmannens tankegang, meir enn Aasens” [That which is expressed is the Norwegian’s way of thinking, more than Aasen’s] (“Portalen til nynorsk-lyrikken” 61). This distinguishes Aasen’s voice from romantic lyric. Walton also discusses the collective voice in Aasen as a political gesture that used the *bonde* to represent “thinking and feeling man” and argued that a “philosophical point of unlimited validity can be communicated through the perceptions of *bonde* protagonists” (*Farewell the Spirit Craven* 213).

⁵³ For example, Kongslien notes that Aasen uses more synonyms than adjectives in his nature descriptions: “Daglegdagse ord med vidt innhald blir brukte, og det er få presiserande adjektiv. Det skaper ei allmenn skildring med eit sterkt objektivt preg” [Everyday words with broad content are used, and there are few clarifying adjectives. This creates a universal depiction with a strongly objective character] (97).

Og naar eg ukjende Folk fekk sjaa
Spurde eg radt, kvar dei var ifraa
Og dei var lika milde. (*Symra* 27)

I had acquaintances in every corner, and when I encountered unknown people, I asked right away where they were from, and they were just as kind.

The speaker is neither suspicious of nor does he exclude the new or unfamiliar; the community is able to accommodate “ukjende Folk.” The poem does not make clear why even the unknown people which the poem’s speaker encounters there are “lika milde,” but it suggests that Aasen imagines that the local community can accommodate increased mobility, provided the sense of community is kept intact.

In the analogy it draws between human social relationships and relationships to nature, the idea of “neighboring” in *Symra* is similar to that employed by Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) in his “Kalendar,” an unpublished journal of lists and charts in which he “charted the seasonal life of Concord” (Case 109). Throughout the 1850s Thoreau recorded both “subjective” and “objective” seasonal phenomena based on his frequent walking tours; these phenomena included not only weather patterns and temperature but human habits, such as changing to warmer clothing or sitting by open windows (Case 110–11). Kristen Case argues that the journal reflects Thoreau’s attitude toward scientific observation, which he critiqued for viewing phenomena as “independent” rather than “related to you” (112). Not unlike Aasen, Thoreau had an interest in botany, but he wrote of taxonomy that “the most natural system is still so artificial. I wanted to know my neighbors, if possible, —to get a little nearer to them” (113). By “neighbors” here Thoreau means the plants themselves. He goes on to describe how he put this desire into action by “visiting” them to observe their cycles over a period of years (113).

Case relates Thoreau’s method of “neighboring” to “contemporary efforts to rethink the nature/culture binary,” including Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges. “Thoreau’s insistence on the value of a deep knowledge of place,” Case writes, “his directive that we become ‘expert in home cosmography,’ reflects an anti-Cartesian view of world and self as mutually constituted and revealed” (122). The first half of Aasen’s *Symra* is in some ways an exercise in “home cosmography,” detailing as it does the elements, structures and cycles of the rural Norway with which Aasen was most familiar. Case argues that Thoreau’s “knowledge-as-neighboring” rather than distant observation is a knowledge based in practice, especially Thoreau’s practice of walking. Similarly, walking occurs frequently in *Symra* and was of course fundamental to Aasen’s method of collecting knowledge. Yet for Thoreau, who has been accused of misanthropy, “knowledge-as-neighboring” directs social attitudes toward the nonhuman world at the expense of the human one, or perhaps favors individual subjectivity over community. Aasen, on the other hand, advocates for “knowledge-as-neighboring” as a constitutive element of both human social practices and nature practices and most importantly brings into question whether the social and the natural can ever be disambiguated in the context of human practice.

While I have focused so far on the stable nonhuman elements by which the community orients itself, Aasen also suggests that the *bonde* does not experience all of nature as stable. Rather, community is necessary in part because it offers protection when nature acts unpredictably. The final stanza of “Gamle Grendi” suggests the value of neighbors when natural resources are insufficient:

Var det noken, som der leid vondt
 og vardt fyre Tap og Spilla,
 braadt det spurdest um Bygdi rundt,
 og alle tykte, det var illa. (*Symra* 27)
 Were there any who suffered harm,
 Whose lives were hurt or blighted [Lit. experienced loss or ruin]
 Soon the word spread from farm to farm,
 And all would dearly see them righted [Lit. everyone thought it was terrible]. (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 8)

In previous readings of Aasen, little attention has been paid to the unstable elements of nature; however, just as the mixed household common in the west fjords has been assumed to be the context for the speaking subject (whether “I” or “we”), so the troubles that would arise in such a context (crop failure, a boat lost at sea, unforeseen illness) are implied in a phrase such as “Tap og Spilla.” These, too, fall under the purview of “nature,” as much as trees and mountains. Perhaps a reading of Aasen’s nature as benign puts too great an emphasis on what Aasen describes, rather than what he withholds. The harshness, uncertainty and loss of living as a small-scale farmer in the west fjords would have been so well known to the audience that it was unnecessary to mention. Moreover, Aasen’s metapoetic texts, including the “Fyrestev” of *Symra*, indicate that he believed poetry should have an uplifting effect, even more so as part of a project to advance the peasantry’s position in the nation. Lament over nature’s volatility would hardly serve such a purpose.

But the difficult aspects of the *bonde* way of life that are the result of nature’s unpredictability cannot be improved upon; the social conditions under which they are living, including their susceptibility to exploitation can. Particularly in the second half of *Symra*, Aasen focuses on these social conditions. It is possible, nevertheless, to see the “dark side” of nature in *Symra*’s notable omissions, with the understanding that Aasen’s audience of *bønder* would have readily filled them in. In “Gamle Grendi,” the community weathers these times through an understanding that their relationship to nature is negotiated: sympathy and solidarity lessen the impact, but the harmful as well as helpful sides of nature are accepted. Other poems in the first half of *Symra* also address attitudes toward stability and change. These subjects are taken up explicitly in a number of poems from the second half of *Symra* that have been categorized as “philosophical,” but it is important to note that these themes originate not in a difficult life “out there” but also in daily rural life.

“*Dei gamle fjelli*”: *Mountain as Merkestein*

“*Dei gamle Fjelli*” [“The Old Mountains”] provides further examples of the importance of local knowledge for social orientation in Aasen (*Symra* 23). Here, as in the *grend* of the previous poem, the *bygd* is dynamic and open to the outside world, rather than isolated or static. The people of the *bygd* portrayed in the poem know the mountains well because of their position between mountain and sea. *Bygd* usually designates an area that is less densely populated than a city and where farming, forestry and fishing are the main industries (Solerød). But even in the present day *bygd* also designates “et sosialt og kulturelt fellesskap der tilhørighet, lokale tradisjoner og skikker skaper lokal identitet mellom innbyggerne” [a social and cultural community in which belonging, local traditions and customs create a local identity amongst

residents] (Solerød). Given the geography described, the *bygd* here likely represents a typical village in the west fjords. As has been pointed out many times in Aasen scholarship, “Dei gamle Fjelli” portrays the mountains as a stable element in nature.⁵⁴ However, drawing on Casey’s theory of implacement, the mountains in “Dei gamle fjelli” can be seen as a kind of container for the dynamic world, setting a limit on the human perspective and human activity. A reading such as Sørbo’s, in which Aasen is said to describe nature “objektivt og skild fra menneska, som implisitt blir bedne om å sjå, og finna sin plass” [objective and separated from humans, who are implicitly called upon to look and find their place] (“Portalen til nynorsklyrikken” 58) neglects the human perspective from which the various names for the mountains arise. It also neglects the dynamism in the act of perception as Aasen depicts it.

The human does not perceive the mountains from a stationary position, but rather moves in relationship to it. In the first stanza of the poem, the perspective is that of a human standing below the mountains, within the *bygd*. The “same gamle Bryningom / og same Toppom paa” [same old ridges and same tops upon them] surround the built, human space. In the second stanza, the speaker enjoys a privileged perspective above the settlement, where it is possible to see past the mountains to the rest of the countryside. The necessity of ascending the mountaintops to do this, together with the description of the open sea on one side and the “Fjelli kring um Grenderna med tusund Bakkar blaa” [mountains surrounding the village with a thousand blue slopes] on the other, gives a further sense that this is an implaced settlement, where natural elements that are difficult to traverse provide a visible boundary that human senses cannot easily surpass and a physical boundary for human activity. Rather than being perceived as restrictive, however, these boundaries provide a context for human activities, such as the “mange Hendingar” [many events] that have transpired in the area “alt paa eit litet Bil” [all in a short time]. Moreover, the proliferation of words for mountains and parts of mountains—*Fjell*, *Bryning*, *Topp*, *Fot*, *Merkestein*, *Bakka*, *Voll*, *Koll*, *Kropp*, *Nut* [Mountain, ridge, top, foot, milestone, slope, pasture, mountaintop (also: head), body, knoll]—while not obscure terms, indicate the locals’ knowledge of the parts as well as the whole, and their familiarity with the mountains from various angles. Rather than finding a place that is separated from nature, humans in “Dei gamle Fjelli” find a position in relationship to nature. The difference may be subtle, but the important point here is that the secure position the people depicted in the poem occupy is predicated upon their knowledge of a specific natural context.

The poem also draws key connections between natural features and the body, suggesting the way in which nature orients the human. Casey draws on the cognitive metaphor theory of Johnson and Lakoff to account for the importance of the structure of the human body for spatial orientation. In particular Casey describes how verticality, derived from the up/down orientation of the body, structures perception of place as well as serving as an important metaphor for discussing abstract concepts such as power and time (117). In the previous chapter, I discussed

⁵⁴ Ystad, in a representative quotation, writes: “Like monumentalt er «Dei gamle Fjelli», som på liknande vis sameinar menneske og natur – men slik at naturen, sjølve landet, er det som står fast og trygt gjennom all menneskeleg omskifting” [Equally monumental are “The old mountains,” which in a similar way reconcile the human and the natural—but such that nature, the land itself, is that which stands safe and secure through all human transformations] (Ystad). See also (Sørbo, “Portalen til nynorsklyrikken”; Kongslien; Bø).

how cognitive structures seem to impose limits on the ways in which humans divide the natural world into categories and how this is reflected in folk taxonomies from a wide variety of cultures (“*Symra* as locally situated knowledge”). Just as folk nomenclature seems to interest Aasen because of the evidence of local knowledge of nature that local language provides, while also being compatible with Linnaean taxonomy, local knowledge of geographic features seems here to exemplify both a highly specific experience of nature and one that can be readily universalized. Rather than a romantic anthropomorphism that sees the mountains as inspirited, the description of mountains as bodies relies on a cognitive blend of human and nonhuman. That the residents of this western fjord settlement would perceive the mountains as *kroppar* with both *topp* and *fot* conveys both an intimate knowledge of these features and one that is easily apprehended by outsiders, for whom up/down orientation and the drawing of analogies between body and landscape are commonplace. The wind that wears at the tops and water that laps at the feet can thus be seen both as natural elements to which the mountains are largely indifferent and circumstances in life that threaten human stability but which the human, securely implaced, may respond to with a detached stoicism.⁵⁵

Thus, although the human and natural do not “smeltar saman i metaforen” [meld together in the metaphor] as might be expected in romantic nature lyric (Sørbø, “Portalen til nynorsklyrikken” 58), there is a blend of the nonhuman and the human in the use of *Topp*, *Fot* and *Kropp*, as well as of the given and the cultural in a description such as *merkestein*. While the natural boundaries provided by sea and mountain give human activity a delimited context, when humans do venture from the nest, these elements also serve as landmarks to navigate by. The fifth stanza presents the mountains as signposts that gladden passing sailors who are searching for their home. The mountain as “landmark” is also suggested by the use of “Merkesteinarne” in stanza one. By referring to a mountain as a *merkestein* [a stone set up to mark a border, road, or other designated place] (“Merkestein”), Aasen again collapses nature and culture through the use of a metaphor that blends the two: built landmarks are mapped onto naturally occurring geographical features that also serve as landmarks. While a *merkestein* is a stone intentionally placed by humans to indicate a border or a path, mountains serve as convenient borders or markers of pathways for humans because they are stable and readily observable; at the same time, they set limits on human visual perception and mobility. Because of this, the use of mountains as border markers is not wholly a social construction; rather, the mountains place physical limitations on humans that in turn influence the physical and social habits of humans.

In *Phenomenological Landscapes*, Tilly argues that prehistoric peoples placed monuments in an intentional relationship to landscape features, which, in a way, preceded these constructions as monuments in themselves. He writes, “The monument draws together and serves to coalesce the natural and the cultural as a framework for experiencing and understanding

⁵⁵ The mountain/valley landscape is so fundamental to Aasen’s depiction of place that he uses it as the source for a metaphor (a rare poetic device in Aasen) in the unpublished poem “Paa Havet”: “Paa Havet der ruggar det gildt under Fot, / naar Baarorna koma og stanga imot; / som gangande Bakkar aat Baaten dei slaa / med Dalar imillom og Toppar uppaa” [The sea rocks pleasantly underfoot when the waves are crashing; they hit the boat like moving mountains with valleys between and peaks on top] (*Skrifter i samling* 135). The image suggests a person who is so at home on the sea that they find it as comfortable as travelling by land.

the world. ... It captures and draws attention, domesticating the view of the landscape. The monuments, then, are to do with the formation and stabilization of attitudes toward the world” (207). By representing mountains as monuments, Aasen suggests that, though naturally occurring, “wild” elements, through human knowledge and use of them as landmarks, they become a domestic element in the landscape around which stability can be built. Finding one’s place in such a world, then, is a dynamic activity that involves natural “clues,” individual, cognitive inputs, and the social transmission of knowledge.

The mountain as a landmark that collapses culture and nature is thus similar to other elements in nature Aasen features in the collection, such as *Storebjørka* and the *symre*. These particular landmarks have a very specific meaning for the communities Aasen is attempting to represent, but they have enough “universal” salience (through the prevalence of birch trees and anemones in Norway, as well as the widespread metaphor of verticality and the practice of setting up stone monuments) to be taken up as aspects of “Norwegianness” by the national audience.

To call the mountains “vernacular” elements would perhaps be a more fitting way to describe this literary gesture, as Aasen establishes the mountains as monuments in language, even as his audience of *bønder* may have been trading their physical connection to a mountainous landscape for an urban one. The stability of the mountains in the poem, then, is not due to their status as natural elements alone. The mountains are surrounding structures that the residents of the *bygd* below know well and can understand their own history and location in relation to. In contrast, the change within the poem refers to development in the *bygd* that keeps the dynamism of human work from being relegated to “out there” in the world beyond the local. Having introduced this idea of stability amidst change within the context of the *bygd*, Aasen sets the stage for a discussion of larger scale changes in the second half of *Symra*.

Season cycle: Observation and Caution

“Dei gamle fjelli” indicates that human society is changeable also in the context of a local community; it is not only a negative feature of the world “out there.” Likewise, the portrayal of the stable mountains in this poem, in contrast to the dynamics of human activity, should not be extended to Aasen’s view of nature as a whole. Instead, certain elements of nature provide stability, while others are dynamic and potentially even destabilizing. The poems “Vaardagen” [“The Spring Day”], “Sumarkvelden” [“The Summer Evening”], and “Haustvisa” [“Autumn Song”] could be called a “season cycle,” in that they present spring, summer, and fall (winter is omitted). These three poems present examples of nature providing the structure in which human activity takes place or as providing signs that orient the human in time.⁵⁶ “Vaardagen” has often been described as one of the few poems in the collection that describes a subjective experience of nature. However, the poem is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. Beginning with a call to go

⁵⁶ “I ‘Haustiva’ dominerer naturbileta i skildringa av skiftande årstider, men blir, særskilt i slutten, knytt til korleis ‘me,’ menneska, opplever det” [In “Haustvisa” nature images dominate the depiction of changing seasons, but become, especially near the end, connected to how “we,” human beings, experience it] (Kongslien 1988, 97).

outdoors (“Upp av Krakken!” [“Get up from your stool!”]), the poem describes both a beneficial nature and the observant and curious attitude of the subject (*Symra* 29). The final two stanzas begin with “Kvar ein kagar” and “Kvar ein lyder” [Wherever one looks; wherever one listens] respectively, giving a directive to undertake a careful study of nature. The flowers, birds and butterflies mentioned next bring to mind an interested naturalist. Aasen broadens his call in the final stanza to a collective “oss”:

Lat oss ganga seint og sjaa oss vel i Kring:
Vegen er so full av fagnadsame ting.
Langa Stunder
treng eg til aa sjaa paa desse Funder. (*Symra* 29)
Let us slowly walk, look carefully around:
Everywhere you glance can pleasant sights be found.
I need leisure
to see all the things there are to treasure. (*Ivar Aasen’s Poetry* 8)

The emphasis on thoroughness in Aasen’s account of a spring day does not suggest spontaneity, nor does it encourage philosophical reflection over the natural world, but a more careful observation of the material world that promotes better understanding and a more active relationship to it.

“Sumarkvelden” similarly lacks reflection, other than in the fifth stanza, which presents a familiar injunction to seize the day. In the context of this season cycle, however, it is notable that in this description of joy and life, Aasen also gives his subject a cautious attitude: “Di skal eg sjaa paa Blomen, fyrr han blaknar, / og nøyta Sumar’n, fyrr eg honom saknar” [“I will regard the flower in its blooming; / Enjoy the summer ere a fall is looming”] (*Ivar Aasen’s Poetry* 9; *Symra* 31). Building on the suggestion in “Vaardagen” that spending the winter indoors is to be trapped “som ein Fugl i Stenge” [“like a bird in a cage”], Aasen concludes “Sumarkvelden” with a similar reminder. Rather than reading this biographically, with an image of the scholarly Aasen who reads and writes all winter before setting out to travel in the summertime, it is possible to see Aasen constructing (and advocating for) a curious, yet cautious attitude, which he here attributes to the *bonde* who is acquainted with both the deprivations of winter and the abundance of summer. Accommodating one’s behavior to the rhythm of the seasons shapes the attitude, just as living in the geographic “nest” of fjord or valley does. There is both a security and a boldness to Aasen’s *bonde* that he depicts as worthy of emulation, but this is grounded in the *bonde*’s experience of lack, something that is described by its absence. “Haustvisa” implies this lack more clearly, depicting the slow descent of fall into winter (*Symra* 33). This descent is part of a steady, reliable cycle; nonetheless, it is a cycle that includes darkness, emptiness, and desolation. Winter is described as “kald og streng” [cold and harsh] forcing a retreat into a house where, it is implied, only the “blessed” can take shelter. The omission of the desolation of winter from the cycle, but inclusion through allusions within the poems, is in keeping with Aasen’s metapoetics, as expressed in “Fyrestev.” However, references such as those in the season cycle, as well as poems regarded as patriotic such as “Nordmannen,” which I will turn to next, imply that Aasen kept these in mind and expected that his audience would as well. His project, however, was to depict and encourage *bønder* to “neighbor” each season, getting acquainted with and adjusting their behavior to each. This observant and accommodating attitude would not only help *bønder*

to weather the ups-and-downs of nonhuman nature but also amount to an advantage when facing the ups-and-downs of society at large.

“Nordmannen”: Negotiated Nature

In the context of the first half of *Symra*, which I am characterizing here as preoccupied with *heim*, the *bonde* in “Nordmannen” exemplifies the qualities of observation and caution seen in the poems discussed so far and ultimately must “negotiate” his relationship to nature. It is impossible not to address the nationalistic purposes of the poem, however. The synecdochal strategy Aasen uses defines the nation through the male *bonde*, thereby excluding not only the cultural “elite,” but also women and migratory people, such as the Sami.

While scholars have praised this and other of Aasen’s poems for their “monumentality” (e.g. Vige 161; Dahl, “Ivar Aasen som lyrikar” 73; Ystad), this strategy seems to facilitate such appropriation. The descriptor “monumental” refers to the simplicity of the poem’s vocabulary, its unvarying meter, and its direct imagery. These stylistic choices give the poem a timeless quality: by avoiding historical references or archaic language and relying on references to Norway’s most notable geographic features, Aasen composed a poem that is still accessible today. This “timelessness” also makes the poem easy to interpret outside of its specific sociohistorical context. At the same time, it allows audiences to project preformed conceptions of Norwegianness and nationhood onto the *bonde*. (This will be discussed in chapters three and five, in which I present poems by Nygard and Vaa that can be read as reinterpretations of “Nordmannen.”) For example, along with the similarly nationalistic poem “Gamle Norig,” Dahl’s revisionary reading of “Nordmannen” famously emphasized its particular class perspective, arguing that the poem had been misappropriated in readings that regard it as a unifying account of the nation (“Ein bondegut”).

Rather than focusing on the *bonde*’s claim to the land or the idea of nationhood for which the poem is a metaphor, I wish to draw attention here to the description of the limits nature places on the *bonde*’s activities. In “Gamle Norig” [“Old Norway”] those who “bygde Landet,” are described as “Van til Møda, meir en til Kjæla” [built the land; “Wont to labour more than leisure”] (*Ivar Aasen’s Poetry* 9; *Symra* 19). Here, the *bonde*’s familiarity with hardship is a product of his relationship to nature. Similarly, the Norwegian’s position between “bakkar og berg” [hills and mountains] in “Nordmannen” and among the “steinutte Strender” [stony beaches] that have to be dug out before he can make a home depicts the struggles of establishing a home in such a nature (*Symra* 21). In contrast to the stability of the rock (which is here a challenge rather than an advantage), the sea constitutes the poem’s unstable element. It is “ruskutt aa leggja ut paa” [rough to row out on] and the difficult winter is hardly benign either.

While the first two stanzas do involve transformation of the landscape (suggesting a utilitarian view of nature in which the Norwegian is praised for altering it to suit his needs), the transformation is limited to what is necessary to provide security. The Norwegian here has modest expectations; he accepts the limitations set by the surrounding landscape. Readings of “Gamle Norig” and “Nordmannen” generally regard them as tributes to Norwegian nature, even efforts to define Norway as a nation by its nature. However, “Nordmannen” does not emphasize the Norwegian’s work or struggle so much as his attitude. The sea attracts him because of the fish but also out of pure curiosity—“den Leiken den vilde han sjaa” [he wanted to see them at play]. This is another call to be observant (or “neighborly”) not unlike the one in “Vaardagen.” The patient, “wait and see” attitude described in the fourth and fifth stanzas, as in the season

cycle of poems, portrays an accommodating attitude toward nature, one that accepts its hardships as well as its benefits.⁵⁷

In other places in Aasen's poetic authorship, there are poems that more clearly express the idea that there ought to be limits on how much humans ought to transform local nature. While Kolstad sees an exception to Aasen's benign view of nature in, for example, "Dei træla, dei træla" [They toil, they toil] (a song from the play "Ervingen," written in 1855), in the context of the changes to agricultural production of the 1850s, this song can be interpreted as a response to a form of production that is taxing for both nature and laborer. Those who "toil" in the song are not everyday bønder struggling for subsistence: they "freista alt, som dei kann vinna, / dei sankalt, som dei kann finna. / Ja dei leita, – ja dei leita / etter alt det, som Vinningar kann heita" [They attempt anything they can achieve, they gather everything they can find. They search, yes they search for anything that could be considered profit] (*Skrifter i samling 73*). This is an exploitation of nature's resources that seemingly cannot be satisfied:

Dei grava, – dei grava
i Berg og i Myr, ja dei grava.
Dei byggja, – dei byggja
paa Hus og paa Veg og paa Bryggja.
All Jordi, trur eg, dei vil jamna;
all Malmen, trur eg, dei vil samna. (*Skrifter i samling 73*)
They're digging, they're digging in mountain and bog, yes they're digging. They're
building, they're building houses and roads and wharves. All the earth, I think, they will
flatten. All the ore, I think, they will mine.

Just as a secure society arises from a negotiated relationship to nature in *Symra* and benefits humans and nonhumans alike, this striving after more and more wealth from natural resources levels mountains, disturbs wetlands, and creates a swarm of human activity that throws the input of human and nonhuman off-balance. Economics, environmental welfare and human welfare cannot be separated here.

In a similar, unpublished poem, "Attersyn" [Looking back] (1851), Aasen depicts a *bygd* that the speaker used to know well ("væl eg visste kvar Hamar og Heid / paa kvar ei Leid" [Well I knew every cliff and heath in every direction]) but which has now been transformed by "Mange Slags Skifti" [all kinds of changes (*Skrifter i samling 109–11*). Although both "hamar" and "heid" are stable landscape features that the changes in the village could not have altered, the speaker's knowledge of the area in relation to those points has been changed by cultivation and development. There are houses where there previously were none, and "Aakrar er mangestad brotne" [fields have been plowed in many places]. The poem ultimately laments that the one who leaves his home becomes foreign to it; however, the speaker specifically regrets that the changes to the area have rendered it unfamiliar. Kolstad, who argues that Aasen views nature primarily as

⁵⁷ Aasen questions whether human or natural creation is superior in the poem "Kunst og Skapnad" [Art and creation] (c. 1860). Rather than finding in favor of one or the other, Walton writes, "What resolves the contradiction between man and nature is the peasant in his cautious use of nature" (*Farewell the Spirit Craven 255*).

a resource, argues that the speaker is lamenting the loss of nature's usefulness in a line such as, "Dan mosegraa Skogjen er nedhoggen slett, sum' utav Treom er rotne" [The moss-gray forest is felled to the ground, some of the trees are rotten] (185). However, this could also be seen as a reaction to nature transformed in vain: the mature forest was felled, altering the environment, and since it was done poorly, there is not even the hoped-for amount of useful timber—the substandard harvesting shows disregard for the forest's value as a part of local nature. The refrain of the poem "Sælest er dan, som fær sitja i Ro / i same Kro" [Happiest is he who can sit in peace in the same corner] is unrealistic for Aasen's time, however. Few would have been able to "sit in peace," and so it is hardly beneficial to call them "blessed." The poem also represents one of Aasen's experiments in writing in dialect, so it would have been excluded from publication in *Symra*. It nevertheless suggests that local nature offers not resources alone but also landmarks by which people orient themselves, and thus moderation in the use of nature's resources is to the benefit of the local community. The curious, cautious and accommodating relationship to nature described in the first half of *Symra* affords both individual and community a sense of stability within the context of local nature. Elsewhere in Aasen's poetry, especially in the second half of *Symra*, this becomes an argument for meeting exaggerated promises about mobility and modernization with skepticism.

Verd* in *Symra

Due to the categorization of the poems of *Symra* into thematic groups and the nature/culture binary that is usually upheld in readings of Aasen, few readings of his depiction of nature go beyond the poems in its first half. By looking for continuity between both halves of the collection, it becomes apparent that relationships to nature are also thematized in the second half, particularly as these relationships respond to the social and economic changes occurring in Norway at the time. While the first half of *Symra* focuses on *heim*, the rest of the collection takes up the subject of *verd*, a term that is often a stand-in for that which is "out there" beyond the local community. This is not just the city but also the social landscape of mid-19th century Norway and cosmopolitan modernity more generally.

It has been noted (beginning with Garborg and continuing with Dahl, Walton and Kongslien) that Aasen addresses not only a universal problem of the falsehood and unreliability in the world but "ei klar kulturkløft" [a clear cultural division] within a specific "sosial referanseramme" [social frame of reference] (Kongslien 99). Garborg more specifically noted that the "skald" or poet of *Symra* "trur ikkje paa den nye framgangs-'lovi' som sume syng upp um" [does not believe in the new "law" of progress that some are singing about] (184). Rather, the poet points out that "progress" is not for everyone. In fact, the promise of "progress" can be a way to compel rural people to work harder without greater reward and to sever ties with their communities. (This has the additional effect of diminishing their political clout.) Through the use of the general term *verd*, the poems in the latter half of *Symra* undermine the allure of both Norwegian cities and America. The lack of faith in "progress" these poems display, more specifically, encourages skepticism toward modernization, particularly mobility, accrual of capital, and disdain for one's own class in part by upholding the relationship to nature they have cultivated in their local communities. This same view, characterized by a negotiated relationship with nature, should inoculate them to the inflated promises of the city and the world beyond it. Those who are not sufficiently skeptical are vulnerable to promises of freedom and advancement that put them at risk both economically and socially. At the same time, several poems address the

national audience by pointing out that the freedom, independence, and self-determination said to accompany modernization are only available to those who have means or access. In this sense, there are no examples of explicit critique of the city qua city in *Symra* and few in Aasen's poetic production as a whole.⁵⁸ Rather, the critique is directed at the lure of the world beyond the local, including the promise of social and economic advancement—a promise that Aasen portrays as risky to pursue and illusory in the end.

As with nature's changing seasons, in *Symra* it sometimes seems as though society's ups and downs simply happen without a particular cause. That Aasen portrays these cycles similarly would seem to support the view that his poetry naturalizes social conditions, thereby concealing the structures that produce them. However, there are moments in Aasen's poetic production that clearly portray such ups and downs as class dependent. In fact, they depict ways in which the individual's relationship to nature is class dependent: specifically, the elite aestheticize nature and the *bonde* in order to conceal the labor demands being put on them and to justify barring them from democratic participation. Members of the *bondeklasse*, on the other hand, do not have the luxury of aestheticizing nature, particularly when they are working for the benefit of another. Here, Aasen advocates an observant attitude reminiscent of the call in "Vaardagen" to "ganga seint og sjaa oss vel i Kring" [slowly walk and look carefully around] (*Symra* 29). By being observant, the *bonde* will see that some of modernity's promises are illusory or not available to all.

In the poem "Falsk og Fusk" ["Fakes and Frauds"] the world is described as a place in which glittering appearances mask a reality that is mundane at best:

Med Fals og Fusk er Verdi full,
og mangt eit Korn læst vera Gull;
men naar ein ser det nærre,
so var det verdt eit mindre Rop
d'er berre Graastein alt i Hop
og stundom nokot verre. (*Symra* 51)
Many a fraud the world does hold,
Many a lump pretends to gold.
But if your eye is keener
You'll see its worth a smaller boast:
It's plain and simple rock at most
—And maybe something meaner. (Aasen, *Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 17)

The world here could be imagined to be the world in a Christian sense (i.e., the transitory, physical world in contrast to an eternal, spiritual one). However, the subsequent stanzas indicate that Aasen is referring more specifically to his own historical moment, one in which the nation's progress is being hailed as progress for all. Aasen contradicts this by arguing that progress,

⁵⁸ Aasen composed some poems in a typical pastoral mode as a student; however, as Walton points out, Aasen had never seen a city in the 1830s when they were written (Walton, *Ivar Aasens kropp* 672–74). The unusual poem "Kraakelunden" [The crow grove] (unpub., 186–) presents a dystopian view of the city (*Skrifter i samling* 137–38).

freedom, and praise for the nation's traditional customs are like a gold nugget that turns out to be gravel. Although people are claiming that “alt nytt skal vera Framgang stødt” [“All things are better than are new”], in reality, “et eine fær ein betre Ham, / det andre verder verre” [“Some things may for the better change, / But others for the meaner”] (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 17; *Symra* 51). The benefits of progress are unevenly distributed. The discussion of freedom blames this inequality on an uneven distribution of power: the man who boasts of freedom in “fagre Ord” [“pretty words”] does not seek freedom for everyone, but rather wants to assume the position of power held by the current lord and become “ein strengere Herre” [“a stronger lord”].⁵⁹ “Naar ein ser det nærre” and “Naar det kjemer nærre” comprise the poem's refrain, falling in the third line of each stanza and dividing promise from reality. This suggests again that the kind of close observation that helped the *bonde* orient himself in the world of “Gamle Grendi” can also be a help in detecting false promises.

While these two stanzas encourage more careful scrutiny of the promise of advancement for all, the poem also questions the aestheticization of the *bonde*: although “Landsens gamle Sed og Viis” are praised by the nation's elite, when they “naa sjølv dei gamall Sed faa sja, / so kvekka dei og røma fraa, / som ingen Ting var verre” [The old ways and customs of country life; see the old ways for themselves, they recoil and run away as if nothing could be worse]. This calls out the hypocrisy of the elite, who employ a sanitized version of the *bonde* as a symbol for the national spirit while refusing to consider the realities of rural life. Although the relationship to nature is not named specifically here, the uneven distribution of the benefits of progress can be seen in the context of mid-19th century Norwegian society as a commentary on the state of the crofter, in particular, while traditional agriculture and other ways of interacting with nature fall under the “gamle Sed og Viis” that the elite disdain.

In the “Etterstev” to *Symra*, Aasen expresses this again, more explicitly, with the following question:

Kvat Raad skal Guten der heime hava?
 Dei vil, han skal ned i Moldi grava
 Og endaa vera so blank og fin,
 At Skinnet glansar og Kragen skin.

Skal alle gang med kvita Hender,
 So kjem det Armod i manga Grender.
 Skal Guten grava og stræva hardt,
 So verder neven vel hard og svart. (*Symra* 67)

What is a boy from the country to do? They want him to dig down in the dirt and still be pure and handsome, for his skin to gleam and his collar shine.

If everyone goes around with white hands, poverty will come to many a village. If the

⁵⁹ “Av Fridom skrøyter mangein Mann, / og fagre Ord han tala kann, / men naar det kjemer nærre, / so vil han liten Fridom sjaa, / og kann han Vald i Grendom faa, / han verd ein strengere Herre” [“Of liberty some men will prate, / Of freedom grandly they orate, / But if your eye is keener / You'll see them freedom ill afford to those to whom they play the lord”] (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 17; *Symra* 51).

boy is to dig and work hard, his fist will surely be hard and black.

Although Aasen may emphasize nature's benign aspects in the first half of *Symra*, these poems tend to be directed toward those who call the countryside home and thus gloss over what they already know: producing a living from nature is difficult. But these later, philosophical poems also address the elites who also make up the collection's intended audience. As consumers, they are more detached from this aspect of nature, Aasen argues, to the detriment of the *bonde* whose uplift they claim to be seeking. The same heroic excavation depicted in "Nordmannen" returns in this final poem, as a reminder to the audience that it is impossible to do such labor without getting dirt under one's nails. Aasen questions the demand the elite places on the *bonde* that this dependent relationship to nature has to be abandoned before a person becomes suitable as a citizen. Somehow the difficulties of negotiating with nature have to be acknowledged in the national self-imagination.

The poem immediately following "Fals og Fusk," "Uvitingskap" ["Folly"] continues a similar line of argument, setting up the "Etar" [eater] and "Tugtar" [chastener] as elites who consume rather than produce and yet rebuke the farmer and fisherman for not extracting enough profit from land and sea (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 18–19; *Symra* 53). After again pointing out that progress is easy to talk about when one does not face difficulties but is hardly relevant to someone who "mot Bakken skal kraala" [must crawl uphill], Aasen describes the Eater, who travels the land criticizing farmers for not cultivating the land to his standards. He similarly criticizes fisherman for carrying out useless work in which they lose more than they gain. The poem addresses the criticism by claiming that, should the Eater have inherited a farm, he would "bøygdest av Møda" [be bent over by toil] and were he a fisherman and had to get his own food from a stormy sea, his "Modet det dovnad' vel av" [courage would surely fail].

Here, Aasen emphasizes the different relation to nature one has when one depends upon it for one's livelihood and is accustomed to its vagaries. While the Eater attempts to profit from nature through others' labor, the *bonde* remains dependent on it for survival. It is the Eater whose labor is done by others who has unreasonable expectations for what nature can provide and lacks humility toward its forces. The producers, however, are familiar with both the benign and harsh aspects of nature. Due to an economic system that emphasizes profit, they are being increasingly subjected to this harshness, while those who are profiting avoid even thinking of it. It is notable that as in "Fals og Fusk" the elite have a knowledge problem; they fail to see and understand something about the condition of the *bonde* that perpetuates inequality. This is an interesting reversal of the *Folkeopplysning*, the goal of which was to educate the non-elite and thereby raise them to the level of democratic participation. Aasen here reverses the roles of the classes, postulating the *bonde* as informed and the elite as ignorant.

Having established that the *bonde*'s conditions are potentially worse as a result of modernization, not better, the *bonde* is encouraged to maintain an observant stance in relation to promises of economic advancement. In "Det einlege standet" Aasen uses irony to question the promise that leaving one's local community will be to the benefit of the individual

[“Bachelorhood”] (*Ivar Aasen’s Poetry* 14; *Symra* 43).⁶⁰ This poem, which opens the second set of twelve, revisits “Gamle Grendi” by providing a negative image of what happens to the individual who breaks with it, portraying more explicitly the risks the individual is subject to when operating outside the context of a community. Instead of following a description of the annoyances of belonging to a local community, the refrain “Aa nei, det slapp du vel” [“Oh no, that you’ll be spared”] follows the advantages belonging to a community provides, providing an ironic commentary on individualist discourse. When the *bonde* who aspires to greater independence “fer ... or Huset paa Langvegen ut” [“Leaves the house on a long journey”] or “kjem ... heim fraa den framande Stad” [“comes ... home from a foreign town”], he does not have to bother being met by inquiries about when he intends to go home or requests to bring greetings with him; neither is he bothered by someone who “ser inn i Stova” [“stops by the house”] when he suffers from “Sotter og Sykjoer” [“illness and sickness”]. The poem provokes the reader to think about the disadvantages of independence, as well as its advantages. The disadvantages described are ones that would particularly impact a person of more humble means and with fewer social connections, suggesting that Aasen here cautions against a rash departure from local community in pursuit of personal advancement.

After portraying the elites’ relationship to nature as an ill-informed one, then, Aasen cautions the *bondeklasse* against adopting a similar view. Preserving local nature knowledge serves as a protection against this. The poem “Hugen til Rikdom” suggests that it is not seeking economic improvement in itself that is problematic but pursuing wealth beyond what is necessary for security [“Desire for Riches”] (*Ivar Aasen’s Poetry* 20–21; *Symra* 57). In the first half of *Symra*, the *bondeklasse* is portrayed as secure in a familiar natural context from which they negotiate a living but ultimately do not alter substantially. Instead their given natural surroundings become cultural landmarks as well, and built objects blend into nature. In “Hugen til Rikdom,” the *bonde* who aspires to riches dreams of excess and of importing things to local nature that do not belong there. This is a transformation of the local that goes too far, according to the poem. The speaker goes out to “eit annat Land” [another country] and takes from it what he most wants to emulate. The *bonde* dreams of

Spegjar i alle Grunnar,
Fuglar i Bur i kvar ei Sval
og spanske Tre og Runar ...
Hestar med lange Leggjier
engelske Kyr og andre Dyr
so fullt som My og Kleggjier. (*Symra* 57)

Mirrors on every surface, birds in cages in every corridor and Spanish trees and bushes
... Horses with long legs, English cows and other animals swarming like mosquitos and horseflies.

⁶⁰ Slette’s *Norsk Engelsk Ordbok* defines “Det einslege standet” as “single blessedness” (Slette, “einsleg”).

The *bonde*'s mirrors will only reflect each other if they cover every wall, suggesting there is no substance to the *bonde*'s interest in the cosmopolitan; in particular, he has no interest in art or culture. The other examples are “unnatural” nature; that is, nature that does not belong to the local and adds nothing to it but its exotic associations. Rather than comprising an aspect of the community, as does *Storebjørka* or the birds that reside in it, these are objects for display and for signaling that their owner is wealthy and cosmopolitan (when, in fact, he regards the city as full of “Sveim” [contagion]). The critique here is not of an interest in the outside world but of an interest only in the advantages one can gain by pretending to cosmopolitanism. This is not just a critique of the *bonde* who has become a consumer but also a critique of his relationship to nature, which is exploitative instead of collaborative. In contrast to a nature that is regarded as a neighbor and has formed a sense of place over time, the plants and animals mentioned have no meaning except as symbols of economic and cultural capital.

In a gesture that seems to unify *Symra* as a collection, nature imagery returns in its final poems, “Livet,” “Vit og Tru” [“Knowledge and Faith”] and the “Etterstev.” In “Livet,” the reader is encouraged to view vacillations in society in the same way as natural cycles.⁶¹ This is accomplished, in part, by the use of *heim* in an ambiguous sense, in that both its narrow and broad meanings are activated:

Heimen er baade vond og god,
 det skifter med Sut og Gaman.
 Hæv er den, som med same Mod
 kan taka mot alt tilsaman. (*Symra* 63)
 Both good and bad in the world we find
 and joy is mingled with sorrow.
 Happy is he who with even mind
 can meet each new tomorrow. (*Ivar Aasen's Poetry* 23)

Heim in this poem, then, does not exclude *verd*, which appears later:

Verdi snur seg fraa all Sut
 og fraa ein Vesallmanns Lagnad.
 Ho vil, at Mannen skal stræva hardt
 og ikkje fraa Verket vika. (*Symra* 63)
 The world turns away from all suffering and from a small man's fate. It wants that man to struggle mightily and not turn away from his work.

⁶¹ Several poems in *Symra* describe vacillating circumstances as the way of the world (“Tolugt Mod,” “Tjon og Von”). “Att og Fram” makes more explicit that this is an aspect of life the *bondeklasse* has historically been familiar with. Referring to the Viking Age as a period of “Rikdom” [riches], the speaker provides a reminder that hunger and poverty followed. He goes on to suggest that the recent period of economic advancement could be just as transient. The seems to serve as an argument against unfettered optimism about modernity as a “golden age” similar to Norway's medieval past.

The insight that vacillations between good and bad are to be expected in life (whether at home or in the broader world) derives from observing nature:

Lauvet fell um Hausten av,
um Vaaren atter det spretter,
Dauden herjar um Land og Hav,
men Livet kjem alltid etter. (*Symra* 63)
The leaf falls off in autumn, it sprouts again in spring, death harries on land and at sea,
but life always returns again.

Neither nature nor society is always benign but both undergo periods of growth and decline. Here, the storms that are suggested in *Symra*'s first half are referred to explicitly:

Stormen sopar i Skogom hardt,
so Tre og Kvister brotna;
men grøne Kvister vil renna snart
av Rotom til deim, som rotna. (*Symra* 63)
The storm sweeps mightily through the forests so trees and branches break; but green
branches will soon shoot forth from the roots of those that rotted.

The poem combines a warning against idealizing nature, which provides its share of disappointments, with a warning against idealizing the opportunities offered by the world. Both require persistence and "Mod" [courage] in order for the individual to see progress.

A similar image occurs in "Etterstev," immediately following the statement that the *bonde* has to get his hands dirty:

D'er brotne Kvister i alle Skogar;
det henger Mold under alle Plogar;
paa alla Leider det Lyte finst,
og myket der, som ein ventar minst. (*Symra* 67)
There are broken branches in every forest; dirt hangs under every plow; wherever you
look, you can find a flaw, and many things you least expected.

The image of broken branches here also echoes the calls in "Vaardagen" and "Falsk og Fusk" to look more closely at nature. Observation again yields the insight that all places (and circumstances) have their advantages and disadvantages. Aasen goes on to discuss "gamla Tider" [ancient times] in which circumstances really were worse for people. Yet, in the last stanza he concludes that they can become better still. Rather than needing to go out into the world to gain such insights, however, he suggests that the peasantry can rely on their knowledge of local nature in cultivating a skepticism toward both the idealization of the past and exaggerated promises for their future. The "myket der, som ein ventar minst," suggests not only the valuable things that can be found in unexpected places, but also the useful knowledge that is already within the *bonde*'s grasp, but which society has underestimated thus far.

Conclusion: *Symra* as Ecopoetic Practice

Although it has often been argued that nature in Aasen provides “et stort bilde på de urokkelige og stabile som mennesket trenger, et holdepunkt i livet, stabile verdier” [a great picture of the steadiness and stability that humans need, a reference point in life, stable values] (Bø 243–4), in this chapter I have argued that Aasen portrays the relationship between human and nature as that which provides stability, but suggests that that relationship is not always easy or comfortable. Moreover, both Aasen’s poetry collection, *Symra*, and his plant name list, *Norske Plantenavne*, published three years earlier, demonstrate an awareness on Aasen’s part that changes were occurring in the society around him that would affect local nature, rural society, and the relationship between the two. While Aasen’s commentary in *Norskse Plantenavne* suggests he believed such knowledge to exist among *bønder* and that it was worthy of a place in modern knowledge systems, the poems of *Symra* suggest how he believed such knowledge to have been produced and what its benefits might be. Using phenomenological and anthropological theories of how humans find meaning in place, I suggest that the representation of place in Aasen be read not as simple or naïve. Rather, his poems depicting *heim* demonstrate how meaning is produced from an interplay between human concepts and language as well as physical inputs and boundaries. Situated knowledge is produced by a “neighboring” relationship to human and nonhuman nature that involves a form of observation that is conducted “down among” people and things rather than from a position of distance or detachment.

Similarly, while agreeing with previous readings that nature in *Symra* serves as a resource of which humans make use, I also argue that nature often sets limits on human behavior in Aasen’s poems, indicating that “harmonious” is a less apt descriptor of the relationship than “negotiated”: humans must plan for and adapt to changing seasons and to the limits set by mountains and sea, only altering the landscape modestly to fit their needs. This is, if not as collaborative a model as the kind Val Plumwood attributes to some indigenous societies, a kind of negotiation between nature and people that characterizes small-scale farming methods, rather than the mechanistic farming methods that began to take hold in rural Norway in the mid-1800s during the transition to a market-based economy. Aasen depicts this relationship to nature as having developed positive attributes within *bonde* communities, such as caution, curiosity, and adaptability. However, aware as he is of the socioeconomic developments of his time, Aasen does not advocate in *Symra* that *bonde* communities remain static and resist modernization. Rather, those poems in *Symra* that turn to the larger world indicate that the attitudes developed in relationship to local nature can serve as a guard against the exaggerated promises of modernity and the risks to which the mobile *bonde* is subjected.

Within the secure context of the local *grend*, it is possible to meet the unfamiliar graciously. Exposure to the unstable elements of nature, on the other hand, cultivates a stoicism and adaptability that can serve the *bonde* well in the face of social change. In endeavoring to emphasize the beneficial aspects of the *bonde*’s collaborative relationship to nature, including the limits nature sets on human exploitation of its resources, Aasen advances an argument that such a relationship to nature cultivates a particular attitude in *bonde* society that can serve this class well, also outside the *grend*. Essentially, seeing instability and change in both *heim* and *verd* allows Aasen to draw an analogy between both places and argue that the attitudes that produce success in the former can be carried over to the latter. Thus, Aasen develops an argument over the course of *Symra* that a particular relationship to nature is the correct one, and needs to be

brought along into the conception of the modern nation if the *bonde* class is to avoid alienation and exploitation.

The idea that emplacement constitutes a special kind of knowledge appears, as Ursula K. Heise has noted, not only in the masculine, individualist discourse associated with wilderness, but also in socially conscious environmentalist movements, such as bioregionalism (Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* 51–2). Aasen’s approach could be productively related to bioregionalism, a movement in which local nature is a center of value, but also a point of origin for a political community. When local environmental movements see progress, it is often because local knowledge and community have gained a voice in decisions that will impact that community and its environment. This is similar to the kind of argument Aasen makes: if local knowledge and community are admitted into the discussion of what the nation ought to be, the outcome will be better for a greater portion of the nation’s population.

Although it could be argued that emplacement was a shared frame of reference when Aasen started his project, it would not have remained so for long. Urbanization was changing the social landscape and an urban proletariat would soon make up a greater share of the population than rural peasants. This had an unanticipated impact on the languages Aasen surveyed as well, the use of which diminished. Describing the changes of early 20th century, Einar Lundeby writes, “Veksten i industrien medførte stor innflytting til byene, og de landsens folk som kom til byen, så seg best tjent med å ta opp byens språk så godt de kunne. Det gamle bondesamfunnet med sin sans for nasjonale verdier tapte mye av sin posisjon, og det gikk også ut over dialektene” [The growth of industry was accompanied by substantial urbanization, and the rural people who came to the city perceived themselves as best served by taking up the language of the city as well as they could. The old *bonde* society with its sense of national values lost much of its position, and that also worked to the disadvantage of their dialects] (“Ivar Aasen og Østlandet” 132). Without emplacement as a shared frame of reference, neither Aasen’s linguistic nor poetic projects could bring this alternative modernization about.

Not unlike *Norske Plantenavne*, Aasen’s poetry made local and rural life “mobile,” in that it became available to a reading public. It therefore textually legitimated a culture that was undergoing material transformation, thereby creating a community in an imagined rather than physical place. This is subtler than the account of Norwegian given by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, in which Aasen’s represents the only effort at creating a vernacular Norwegian in Norway (77). In fact, his represents an effort to supplant the urban imagination of Norwegian nature and culture with a *bonde*-driven account of the same as the imagined home of the nation. Moreover, Aasen’s choice in his poetic work of more accessible language and conceptions of nature mean that his poetry is still comprehensible today, even though the nature and society he refers to have transformed in significant ways.

Yet, as Idar Stegane points out, the idea of the *bygd* as the home of the nation and of the proper subject matter for *Nynorsk* poetry is based on a selective reception of Aasen’s poetry that places greater emphasis on poems such as “Gamle Grendi” and “Nordmannen” than on his philosophical poetry (“Aasens lyrikk” 93). In fact, Aasen can be seen as an advocate for an ecopoetic practice rather than a genre of place-bound descriptive poetry. I read his poetics as more practical and ecological because of Aasen’s attention to the way poetry was received and

transmitted by his audience (i.e., his attention to orality and song), as well his emphasis on process over finished, closed aesthetic product.

As most readings of Symra note, Aasen stated on several occasions that he did not consider himself to be a poet, nor would he like others to do so.⁶² Scholars such as Sørnbø have also argued that Aasen critiques the romantic idea of the poet as a person who is gifted with special insight. Instead, Sørnbø argues, Aasen believed “[f]olket er eit korrektiv til skalden, like mykje som omvendt” [The people are a corrective to the skald, just as much as the skald is to them]; they “har ingen sans for diktarånder som svevar fritt over vanlege folk, og som ikkje kjenner seg forplikta på sømd og sanning” [have no sense for poetic spirits who float freely above ordinary people and don’t feel themselves obligated to propriety or the truth] (“Portalen til nynorsklyrikken” 57). Aasen demonstrates this kind of awareness in his “Fyrestev,” in which he presents the collection as a response to the particular need expressed by his audience for relatable poetry. This rejection of “diktarånder” distances Aasen from a poet such as Henrik Wergeland, whom Dvergsdal argues was a poet interested less in nature than in “åndens blikk på naturen” [the spirit’s view of nature]. Informed by romantic philosophy, Wergeland saw freedom not in nature but in creativity. As Dvergsdal explains, “Dikteren argumenterer for sin verdi ved å vise til sine åndskrefter og skaperkraft, manifestert ved evnen til å se og beskrive i utgangspunktet verdiløs natur som levende og åndsfylt natur ... Det overordnede fokus i diktet rettes mot åndens krefter, ikke naturens egenverdi” [The poet argues for his own value by displaying his intellectual ability and creative power, manifested through the ability to see and describe nature that is inherently worthless as nature that is living and imbued with spirit ... the overarching focus in the poem is directed toward the powers of the mind, not nature’s inherent value] (149). The association of *bønder* with nature in this view would make them candidates for creative transformation rather than sources of creative inspiration. Aasen declares himself not a poet in order to displace his own “spirit” or intellect as the source of creativity and replace it with the creativity of the *bondeklasse* in general, a tradition in which neither *bønder* nor nature is “dead” but are living sources of poetic inspiration.

In looking for the ancient source of the “realm of pure ideas” that romantic poetry prioritizes, ecocritics such as David Abram have argued that the concept of “Nature” as a separate realm of ideas follows the invention of alphabetic language (261–2). As Kate Rigby puts it, alphabetical writing does “something new” in that it directs attention from “materiality of the more-than-human world ... toward the ideational world” (“Writing After Nature”). In the

⁶² On September 1, 1882, he writes, “For det første har jeg nu meget imod at blive medregnet blandt Digtere; thi om jeg end har skrevet adskillige Vers, har jeg dog ikke villet sætte noget Navn paa dem; og jeg har endog været meget ærgerlig over, at man imod min Villie har sat mit Navn paa enkelte saadanne Vers.” He writes similarly in June of 1885, “Jeg har meget imod at blive omtalt imellem de norske Digtere ... Jeg har ikke villet vive mig ud for nogen Digter, og jeg kan just ikke troe, at de rette Digtere ville ansee mig som en af deres Jævnliges” [In the first place, I am now greatly against being numbered among the poets, for though I may have written various verses, I have yet not had a desire to put a name on them, and I have moreover much regretted that others against my will have put my name on some of these verses; I have much against being considered among the Norwegian poets ... I have not desired to venture myself a poet, and I cannot believe that the true poets would regard me as one of their equals] (Djupedal 64).

book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram advocates for poetry as a genre that conveys a sense of the physicality of language, thus connecting it to the sensory experience of nonhuman nature and the physical means of communication (i.e., “language”) that we share with nonhuman animals (273–4). Although Aasen’s goal was to create a written Norwegian that could be adopted as the standard for the nation, his methodology prioritized the written speech of contemporary people living in rural areas. Moreover, aspects of his poetry suggest he endeavored to continue the tradition of oral poetry (a more overtly physical, performative mode) rather than replace it with a fixed, “authoritative” text.

Aasen relies on folk ballad forms in much of his poetry and emulates Norwegian folk proverbs in both form and content.⁶³ Moreover, he wrote the poems in *Symra* to be sung, listing after each poem title the melody they were to be sung to (and in several cases apparently composing the melodies himself).⁶⁴ This suggests that he attempted to continue a tradition of oral poetry as a practice that forms and sustains communities. The goal of the poetry being taken up into living tradition took priority over its mimetic function. In his recent *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler has called for renewed attention to poetry’s “ritualistic” function, a way of relating lyric form to tradition, performance, and reception. He argues that lyric is characterized by “a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements— between formal elements that provide meaning and structure and serve as instructions for performance and those that work to represent character or event” (234–5). Rhythm and repetition in particular provide both these semantic and performative elements. While Culler connects these ritualistic elements to classical poetry, “lyric as encomiastic or epideictic discourse— discourse of praise or blame, articulating values” (235–6), a native Scandinavian tradition of such a lyric also exists in the form of eddic and skaldic poetry. Aasen, drawing in particular on the native tradition of wisdom poetry such as that found in *Hávamál*, can be argued to emphasize this ritualistic dimension of lyric as a means of articulating values. The repetitive form of Norwegian folk lyric, especially with its refrains (several of which have conveyed key ideas commented upon in this chapter) performs this ritualistic function particularly overtly. The subsequent popularity of Aasen’s poetry speaks to the effectiveness of this strategy. Although much ecocriticism on poetry has pondered central problems with representation, I believe Aasen’s poetry suggests poetry’s ritual function in relationship to nature and ideas of nature is worthy of more attention as this may represent poetry’s most useful quality.

The metaphor of the text as a *symre* further suggests Aasen’s preference for a poetic practice more focused on process than product. Many readers of *Symra* have argued that this metaphor reveals the ambitious goal of Aasen’s project: that is, to be the first collection of poetry

⁶³ Bjarne Fidjestøl evaluates Aasen’s use of alliteration, concluding that Aasen made use of a form of alliteration that refers “outward” to “universal language use” and a “literary and linguistic tradition beyond [the text],” rather than a form that refers “inward” to the poem itself (74). Myhren also evaluates Aasen’s adaptation of both “stevdikting” and folk proverbs: Aasen regularized the metrical form of the “stev,” taken from the ballad tradition, as well as adapting the folk proverbs he and others had collected into his verse (2002). Grepstad writes that Aasen began calling his poems “viser” [tunes] or “songar” [songs] and not “dikt” [poems] already around 1835 (261).

⁶⁴ The 2013 edition of *Symra* contains a detailed description of the various song settings of the collection and their publication history.

written in the *folkemaal*, the “true” language of the Norwegian people. As Myhren explains, “‘Symra’ blømer før markene har tina skikkeleg, og då fyrst kan fleire blomar bløma. Her utnytta Aasen dei etymologiske kunnskapene i eit poetisk bilete ... Ordet symre er avleitt av sumar ‘en som bebuder sommeren’ (1873). Men ‘Symra,’ som blømer på klaken, er ogso eit bilete på fyrste groren i ein landsmåls litteratur som skal veksa fram når tida er mogen” [“Symra” blooms before the ground has thawed properly, and only then can more flowers bloom. Here, Aasen makes use of his knowledge of etymology in a poetic image ... The word *symre* derives from summer, “one who heralds the summer” (1873). But “Symra,” which blooms on frozen ground, is also an image of the first growth in a *Landsmaal* literature which will spring up when the time is ripe] (86). While this could be seen as a self-congratulatory gesture, the otherwise self-deprecating attitude of the “Fyrestev” suggests otherwise. Instead, Wiland argues that Aasen’s goal with *Symra* is not achieved in the work alone but only if people take up *Landsmaal* and compose in it. Wiland writes, “Folkepedagogen og folkereiseren vil at folket skal følge etter og utfold seg kulturelt på egne premisser. Dermed er ambisjonen i det lyriske programmet uavgrenset. *Programmet stopper ikke med Aasens virke, det ønsker ikke bare et tilpasset formspråk, og en diktning som kan synge folkets tanker og vekke mot, det krever en ettervekst av folkelig lyrikk*” [The pedagogue and promoter of the peasantry wants the peasantry to follow and develop itself culturally upon its own premises. In that sense, the ambition of this lyrical program is unbounded. The program does not stop with Aasen’s work, which requires not only a suitable style, and a poetry that can sing the bonde’s thoughts and awaken courage, it requires a subsequent growth of vernacular poetry] (63; emphasis added). For Aasen, the particular text is not as important as the larger impact the project will have.

Even if the style of poets to come departs dramatically from Aasen's (as, we will see, it does), they are, nevertheless, extensions of his text, because he positions his own work as such. This is not a patriarchal notion of authorship (and, thus, to call Aasen the “father” of Nynorsk is to misrepresent his poetics): he positions his work, not as a symbol or a cause of the literature in *Landsmaal* to come, but as an *inevitable result* of its historical moment and intellectual environment. Essentially, if he had not come along to do the work, another person with a similar background could have done the same. He also presents the work as an *environmental indicator* of what is to come, in the way that an early blooming flower indicates the transformation about to take place. The flower participates in that transformation without being its necessary or singular cause. At the same time, the flower’s disappearance is an indicator of seasonal changes, while also furthering those changes through the subsequent effects of its absence. The *symre* not only will but must give way to other things. Its being surpassed will give room for change in a burgeoning literary community.

Symra here presents an ecological view of authorship because Aasen looks to nature for a model of creativity in which the end result is not a single work composed independently by an inspired individual, but rather the end result is a *process*, one that is seen as nearly autopoietic or self-perpetuating. As Kate Rigby explains in her account of ecopoetics, “The natural systems that have enabled the emergence of ... diverse creative practices might also be seen as poietic or, rather, autopoietic, continuously generating new forms and patterns, and dissolving old ones, in a dynamic process of open-ended becoming” (Rigby, “Ecopoetics” 2182–83). Just as natural processes like those that bring about and occur with the change of seasons are continuously generative, the end goal of *Symra* is to encourage and give way to more poems (more literature, more song, more text) by more poets in different and greater varieties. With the metaphor of the *symre*, Aasen assumes the association of *Landsmaal* with nature—not with a static, passive

nature that requires transformation by mind to become culture, but with a dynamic, generative nature which literature emulates.

When Aasen says he is not a “poet” and never was, he is saying that he is not a poet in the sense that it was understood at the time. Rather than an indelible work in which the inspired mind of the poet transforms humble nature, Aasen sees his own work as a passing moment in a process the end point of which is unknown. In this sense, it is ironic that Aasen’s work is often described as “monumental.” A lasting, static monument is the last thing he wanted *Symra* to be; there is nothing monumental about a flower. Rather than being concerned about his poetry assuming a permanent place in a literary canon, Aasen was more concerned about initiating a sustainable future for Norwegian literature.

Aasen’s relationship to futurity is interesting in light of current challenges to the idea of “Norwegianness” as well as to the conception of “Nature.” Even though the local nature and local community it proposes as a possibility in a modernizing world would remain confined to the realm of imagination, the ambition of Aasen’s project to relate local experiences to the philosophical and social challenges of the world beyond it and his insistence that its languages, experiences, and aesthetic forms had something to offer to these larger debates would inspire subsequent generations of poets. As poets attempt to formulate new ways of understanding nature and new aesthetics that are responsive to these changes, imagining the future “correctly” may be less important than putting forth attempts inspired by alternative modes of thinking and marginalized aesthetic traditions. Inspired by the project of establishing a *Nynorsk* poetry, subsequent poets would deploy Aasen as an intertext in order to continue to probe the relationship between *heim* and *verd* as well as to understand the relationship between language, nature and poetic expression. As we will see in the following chapters, situated knowledge would continue to serve as the “root” of poetic thought for poets such as Olaf Nygard and Aslaug Vaa.

Chapter 3: Situated Nature Knowledge in the Poetry of Olav Nygard

No sit du ferdaglad i varme sæte,
ditt auge slær seg fram som falk i flog
og bringa lyfter seg med bylgjekjæte,
du sym i skyheim-syner; der er søg,

...

Han styn, din sterke staalhest, yve sprengjer,
og jorda vikjer sine kroke-kne
or vegen din, stolt herre! Sjaa ho rengjer
si graaberg-møne ut, og vyrk ho bed
deg take beinleid: frøsande du trengjer
deg gjenom alpenatta, varest ved
ein morgon naar dei siste skoddestrimlar

kverv av i eventyrblaa Roma-himlar. (“Til ein ven paa Italiaferd” *Vv* 44)

Now you sit (travel-glad) in warm seats, your eyes cast forth like a falcon in flight and your chest rises with (waves of mirth), you swim in (sky-home-sights); there is a draught

...

He groans, your strong (steel-horse), gallops over and the earth bends its (crooked-knee) out of your path, proud lord! See, it stretches out its (gray-mountain-spine), and graciously bids you take the shortest route: snorting you squeeze your way through the alpine night, awakening to a morning when the last (streaks of fog) disappear into the (fairytale-blue) (skies of Rome).⁶⁵

For those familiar with the poetry of Olav Nygard (1884–1924), it may be surprising to begin a discussion of his work with an image of a train, to my knowledge the only one that appears in his work. Representations of nature and natural forces, not technology, are Nygard’s purview. At the same time, his inclusion in an exploration of situated nature knowledge in Norwegian poetry may be equally surprising. It is generally agreed upon that the kind of knowledge that Nygard is preoccupied with is not local but universal. Yet, in this poem, Nygard occupies the point of view of a person in a particular situation. He is writing to his friend and fellow poet Tore Ørjasæter (1886–1968), who had just received a writer’s stipend to travel to Rome. Nygard rushed to get his affairs in order and travel over the central mountains of Norway so that he and his family

⁶⁵ In an effort to represent Nygard’s poetic form as closely as possible, I have provided literal translations for all citations of his work. Phrases in parentheses represent compound words in the original language. All citations from *Ved vebande* [At the borders of the sacred/at the timberline] are from the original 1923 edition (hereafter abbreviated within parenthetical citations as *Vv*). Nygard defines “ved vebande” in a letter to Hulda Garborg (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 109). Poems published posthumously are cited from *Dikt i samling* [Collected works] from 1984 (hereafter abbreviated within parenthetical citations as *DiS*).

could accompany Ørjasæter. But Nygard's tuberculosis caught up with him, and he never made it on the trip. Instead, he wrote this poetic greeting.

Although the setting is different from that of the majority of his poems, which often feature brooks, valleys, mountains, waterfalls, and other elements of the western Norwegian landscape, the poem relies on similar strategies. The descriptions are compacted through the use of compound words, almost like the kennings of medieval Icelandic poetry; human features are zoomorphized and animated in unexpected ways (the *eyes* cast forth, not the gaze); and nature is personified,⁶⁶ bowing to let the steel horse pass. In one of Nygard's more typical poems, the mountain might step aside for a roaring river or flood. Here, it bows to the poet, but the poet is seemingly collapsed with his mode of transportation: rather than being *in* the train, he seems to *be* the train squeezing through the mountains. However, as in many of Nygard's nature descriptions, the personification is not merely fanciful. Rather, it is a representation of the experience of viewing the mountains from a train window. Although the train tracks are winding through the mountains, from a seat inside it, they could *appear* to be giving way to the train. And, although the sound patterns of alliteration, assonance and rhyme are dense, bordering on the overwrought, they also participate in the meaning of the poem. For example, the alliterative s's in "du sym i skyheim-syner; der er søg," produce a swirling, tongue-twisting effect that mirrors the image of swimming in a sky full of images. Moreover, the frequency of these effects produces a sense of relentlessness, a driving forward that mimics the sound and motion of the train. Nygard's description is thus "situated" in that it attempts to represent a train journey phenomenologically by animating the inanimate, compacting images so that they seem to arrive almost at the speed of perception,⁶⁷ and using the sounds of language to mimic the accompanying sights and sounds.

In the rest of the poem, Nygard asks Ørjasæter to send him just a glimpse, "ein solgyllt svaletanke" [a (sun-gilt) (cooling-thought)] so that he can forget his own pain and trouble. As a substitute for this gift from his friend, though, he muses in the last stanza that he can always shroud his soul in "avdalsdraumar / der freden under blaae skuggar bur" [(remote valley-dreams) where peace dwells under blue shadows] (Nygard, *Vv* 45). The poem thus concludes with a scene that is more common in Nygard's work: the dreamer finds a quiet place where he can be consoled by dreams of a world beyond his material conditions. Although Aarnes has argued that imagination in Nygard is not merely compensatory (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 149), here it certainly seems to be, especially since Nygard had hoped to accompany his friend on the journey. In fact, though Nygard's poetic ambitions ran high, they were cut short when he died of

⁶⁶ In the influential work *Lyriske strukturer*, Atle Kittang notes that there is a distinction in Norwegian between personification and "besjeling" or animation: personification occurs when abstract concepts are given human attributes (his example from Nygard is the depiction of *day* riding a horse), while animation occurs when inanimate objects are assigned attributes normally associated with living things (the mountain bows) (87). While I am unsure whether the distinction between concepts and objects is helpful in the case of Nygard's work, the concept of "animation" is helpful, given the frequency and significance of motion in his oeuvre. Another alternative might be Vassenden's "forkropping" [embodiment], a way of making abstract concepts "fleshy" without necessarily personifying them (*Skapelsens problem* 163).

⁶⁷ Aarnes compares this strategy to the way events unfold in the genre of vision poetry, such as "Draumkvedet" (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 118).

tuberculosis at the age of thirty-nine. Surely it was not only the opportunity to see Italy he was missing, or the benefits of a southern climate, but also the life of a professional poet, a career that had been unimaginable for a Norwegian *bonde* in the not-too-distant past. Moments of reverie like this one are part of the reason why Nygard has often been associated with romanticism. In *The Song of the Earth*, Bate describes reverie in Rousseau as a way for the self to take refuge from society “through reorganization of his mental and emotional world.” In this way, he creates “his own interior ‘state of nature’” (42).

But two things separate Nygard’s reverie here from the kind Bate describes: first, the “interior ‘state of nature’” in Nygard is not very peaceful or solitary. Rather, it is often a turbulent space, populated with various nonhuman actors. Moreover, in romantic reverie, as Bate writes, “the price of this intoxication with the spirit of things” rather than material reality “is a definitive break from the human community. Panthesim displaces philanthropy, communion with nature stands in for social awareness” (41). What prevented Nygard from forming this kind of misanthropic attitude was his connection to and faith in the project of advancing *Nynorsk* literature. Just as in the previous two chapters I related Aasen’s project to the experience of rural people in the context of significant changes to agriculture and the economy, I begin with this poem to illustrate the potential connection between Nygard’s preoccupation with imagination and unfulfilled longing and his “uneven” experience of modernity. Here, I borrow a term from the study of global modernisms, an effort to expand the definition of modernism in order to better account for its diverse manifestations in nations *outside* the major political powers of Europe and America, as well as in economic, social, or other groups *within* nations that may have experienced the effects of modernity differently.⁶⁸ While other Norwegian writers may have experienced similar mobility and insecurity in the late 19th and early 20th century, in Nygard’s case, the idea of change and newness becomes positively associated with the *Nynorsk* language, and participation in its literary tradition provides a sense of purpose and stability.

This chapter will also contribute to the discussion of Nygard’s poetics by suggesting that the strategies he uses to represent natural phenomena and human perception can be productively understood as a kind of ecopoetics. Setting aside the neo-romantic or, more accurately, vitalist aesthetic that comes through in some of Nygard’s poems, I examine moments in which his efforts to portray processes in nature draw attention to the dynamic materiality of language, its “wild” properties that, like nature, elude human control. However, just as Ørjasæter’s journey inspired Nygard to long for something not previously represented in his poetic work (which is full of longings), I argue that the longing for transcendence was a double-edged sword for Nygard: developments in education and access to opportunity for rural people gave him the tools to be a poet and the desire for renown in the literary community, yet his own “uneven” encounter with modernity, characterized by mobility, instability, and lack of economic opportunity, thwarted his dreams. Nature, too, was a fickle friend to Nygard, for, although its dynamic processes inspired him (and perhaps developments in contemporary natural sciences inspired these novel representations as well), it was also invisible, natural forces that occupied his bloodstream, sometimes thwarting, sometimes facilitating his artistic pursuits. While some have

⁶⁸ See (Friedman; Wollaeger and Eatough). Although Friedman mentions “uneven” experiences of modernity, a fuller articulation of the term occurs in Hegeman’s *Patterns for America* (22, 24).

argued that Nygard should be seen as optimistic, seeing death as part of a larger, harmonious cycle of life, in this chapter I will linger over moments of doubt and uncertainty in his work. These moments suggest that Nygard was aware of both the limits of imagination and the unpleasant ways in which materiality at times asserts itself.

Because of Nygard's obscurity outside Norway and the limited appreciation he has received within it, I will begin the chapter with a short biography before addressing previous views of the poet and his work. This account is not meant to be comprehensive but will instead focus on Nygard's relationship to local nature and tradition, as well as views of the role that the earthly or concrete as opposed to the cosmic or transcendent plays in his work. I suggest that, given Nygard's unusual view of language and recent suggestions that Nygard drew inspiration from developments in the natural sciences, concepts from ecocriticism and ecopoetics can aid us in understanding how Nygard depicts processes in nature. To do so, I will first illustrate how he both utilizes and distances himself from the national romantic tradition. I argue that, in the poem "Grunnfjell," Nygard engages intertextually with Aasen's "Nordmannen," questioning the stable ground that nature and language provided in the national romantic model. In the service of a more dynamic view of nature, I argue that Nygard employs a kind of "sensuous poesis," defined as "the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (Knickerbocker 2). However, I will also go a step further by suggesting that Nygard responds not only to the "nonhuman nature" outside or beyond the human but also to elements of "nonhuman nature" within the self. Nygard often represents thought, memory, and other cognitive processes in nonhuman terms, and even represents the body as place, questioning the boundaries of the human subject in a way that borders on the trans-human. I will explore these moments using Jane Bennett's concept of the body as "agentic assemblage."

Biography

Although Olav Nygard is often seen as an outlier among *Nynorsk* poets of the interwar period, he is in others very much representative of his time. Nygard benefitted from movements to advance the social and economic standing of rural people through education, as well as to advance literature and culture in *Nynorsk*. However, his periods of direct contact with these institutions were brief, frequently interrupted by economic difficulties and illness. Nygard was born in 1884 in what Hulda Garborg (1862–1934) described as "ei innestengd bygd der slite med jordi og handverk av ymse slag var einaste livberging for ungdomen" [an isolated village where toiling in the fields and craftsmanship of various kinds were the only means of making a living for young people] (167). Nygard's father played the Hardanger fiddle and was known as a local seer (Greiff 30–31); Nygard inherited this tradition in that he learned the fiddle himself and describes seeing visions of his own in poetry and letters.⁶⁹ Nygard knew local folk tunes and he even performed

⁶⁹ Dalgard claims that Nygard loved two things: carpentry and playing the fiddle (Dalgard, "Olav Nygard" 50). According to Gjerdåker, Nygard actually combined these interests by building fiddles himself (100). Nygard describes visions in numerous poems, such as "Minnevigsle" and "Wergeland" and fiddle-playing in poems such as "Spelemann" (*Flodmaal* 41–42; *Vv* 24–27; *Flodmaal* 47–49). He describes a vision he

some of them for folklorists (Eggen). Although he would learn to compose in classical forms, his inheritance from folk tradition suggests itself in the frequency of musical imagery in his work and his facility with folk ballad meters when he does employ them.

The geographical isolation in which Nygard grew up is often emphasized, just as it is in Hulda Garborg's description. The farm where Nygard grew up, called Krossen, was some distance from the nearest *bygda*, or cluster of farms. Lavik's detailed description explains how of the local topography uniquely situated Krossen's occupants between dramatic landscape features:

... framfyre garden er slengd ned ein ás, elder stor haug som stengjer fyr utsynet nedetter og som hev demt upp elvi so der vert eit vatn. Ned mot dette vatnet ligg dá dei vene bøjarne. Men beint yver garden ligg ein veldug horg. Ei dalagrop skil denne frá Smørstakken, eit fjell yver 4000 fot høgt, med svimlande bergflog ut mot dalen. Ei djup gil gjeng ned millom dette fjellet og horgi ... Dette er mot nord. I sudaust botnar dalen mot eit berg dei kallar Krossgavlen, det ser ut som det kunde vera portalen til dvergekongsslottet. ... Her ligg garden i "tri dalamot." Fjellelvar møtast der frá tri kantar. (Lavik 135)

... a ridge is cast down in front of the farm, or a great knoll that obstructs the view downwards and which has dammed up the river so that a lake has formed. The areas suitable for farming are down toward this lake. But right over the farm there is a great [steep but often flat-topped] knoll. A hollow divides this from Smørstakken, a mountain over 4,000 feet high with dizzying precipices out over the valley. A deep gully runs down between this mountain and the knoll. ... This is toward the north. In the southeast, the valley ends abruptly in a bottom toward a mountain they call Krossgavlen, which looks like it could be the portal to the hall of the mountain king. ... The farm is situated here at "the meeting place of three valleys." Mountain streams come together there from three directions.

While Hulda Garborg emphasizes the social conditions that accompanied this isolation, Lavik's description emphasizes the psychological effects of living in such a place:

Det song vel i hugen når sumaren vermde denne undersvene dæld i fjelli og gylte horgjer og stakkar. Og stengd vart fulla hugen når snjofoket stod stint i skaret mot sud um vetren og stengde frá bygdi. Her var det som skræmde og det som lyfte, her var dei bråe, tunge skifti, her var det på livet laust á berga seg og her var den djupe, den forferdelege einsemd og det underfulle samliv med naturi. Her hev vel Olav Nygard fenge noko av denne skire luft og høgd yver si dikting, her hev han fenge den kjensla av litilvoren mann, den bøygnad under lagnaden som sermerkjer bondeskaldar. Og her i einsemd heh han fenge grunningi av livsens gátor. (Lavik 135–36)

There was music in one's mind when summer warmed this wondrously beautiful dell in

had of his unwritten works as "daudedømde born" [stillborn children] to Arne Garborg in 1908 (Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 100). Greiff also cites Nygard on the importance of visions to his creative process (107).

the mountains and cast a golden light on knolls and heights. And one's mind was completely cut off when the snowpack was solid in the gap toward the south in the winter and closed off the route to the village. Here there was that which terrified and that which elevated, here there were sudden, violent changes, here it was a question of life and death to persevere, and here there were extremes, that terrible loneliness and that wonderful cohabitation with nature. It was surely here that Olav Nygard got some of the lofty air and height over his poetry, here that he captured the feeling of insignificant man, that bowing down to fate which characterizes rural skalds [the Old Norse term for poets]. And here in solitude he acquired a grounding in life's mysteries.

Lavik's description creates something of a problem of origins: his interpretation of the landscape surrounding Krossen is accompanied by so much of the affective world of Nygard's lyric, that it is hard to determine whether the landscape inspires such feelings or Lavik has learned to "read" it through a Nygardian lens. While we will return to such questions later, for now it is sufficient to note that this was the environment in which Nygard spent his childhood and early youth, and many of its natural features and processes feature prominently in his work. Yet, from his teenage years on, Nygard became increasingly mobile, rarely settling in one place for long.

According to his brother, Nygard first expressed his dream to be a poet in 1902, before he had received any formal schooling (Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 321). In the following years, he would attend a local *amtsskole* (a public high school for young *bønder*) for only six months before studying at Møre *folkehøyskole* in Ørsta (Ivar Aasen's home region). *Folkehøyskoler* [university colleges] were established throughout Scandinavia in accordance with a plan conceived by Danish writer and clergyman N.F.S Grundtvig (1783–1872). Grundtvig's idea was to promote *folkeopplysningen* [the enlightenment of the people] by establishing institutions of higher learning that were not as specialized as universities or Latin schools but would provide general education across subject areas. The *folkehøyskole* in Ørsta was established in 1899 (Klepp). Nygard spent only two years there altogether, interrupted by a year of training in carpentry. But the years were formative for Nygard. Aarnes identifies two main sources of Norwegian culture, the first being a shared cultural history with Denmark and the second a tradition after Ivar Aasen centered in particular locations of knowledge formation, including Ørsta/Volda (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 10). Nygard's years at the *folkehøyskole* placed him in the latter tradition: the school was founded by Andreas Austlid, who in 1880 won a competition for the best ABC-book in *Nynorsk*, judged by Ivar Aasen. He went on to publish the first complete school reader in *Nynorsk* in 1902–06 (Skagen). Nygard's teacher, Olav Åsmundstad, was the first to translate a medieval Icelandic family saga (*Njálssaga*) to *Nynorsk* and very likely taught Nygard to read Old Norse, and it was here that Nygard's interest in Shakespeare began ("Olav Åsmundstad"; Spaans 136). Although Nygard would receive no formal schooling after 1907, these years must have provided a solid enough foundation for his continued self-study of poetry. Nygard's initial interest, however, was in drama, and he attempted to apprentice himself to Nationalteatret by sending one of his plays to Arne Garborg (1851–1924). He didn't succeed in this attempt, but he did establish a connection with the Garborgs; he visited Labråten in Asker, where the literary couple lived, and eventually toured with Hulda Garborg's theater troupe (the precursor to Det Norske Teatret, the *Nynorsk* theater she founded in 1912). When life as a playwright and actor in Oslo proved unsuccessful, he moved to Bergen where he worked industrial jobs, apparently the lowest point in his life. He would publish his first poetry collection soon after (*Flodmaal* [High watermark], 1913), but he

would also be diagnosed with tuberculosis that same year. His treatment would require stays at an area hospital, as well as Luster sanatorium.

Nygaard faced another setback when Olav Norli, the publisher of *Flodmaal* who had initially agreed to publish another collection of Nygaard's work, withdrew his promise. Instead, Johannes Lavik (author of the above description of Krossen and editor of *Gula Tidend*) published the next two collections (*Runemaal* [Runic speech or charm], 1914, *Kvæde* [Songs], 1915). Many exemplars of this edition were lost in a fire in Bergen in 1916. What followed were five artistically unproductive years for Nygaard, as he struggled with financial difficulty. He tried his hand at farming at three different farms during this period. In 1921–22, he planned his trip to Italy, and when this did not materialize, he wrote *Ved vebande*, which would be published shortly before his death. It was often during these bouts of illness that Nygaard had the most leisure to write. The bitter irony of this situation was not lost on Nygaard; as he wrote to Hulda Garborg of the productive period in which he wrote *Ved vebande*, “Eg hev tid, fyr eg duger ikkje til betre arbeid” [I have time because I am not fit for better work] (qtd. in Vassenden, *Skapelsens problem* 172).

But Nygaard's efforts were at least validated before his death. On Christmas Eve in 1923, he received a letter from Arne Garborg, declaring the work “eit herlegt arbeid, høyrer til det beste og er, trur eg, det finaste me hev av lyrikk på norsk. Sjølv målet er so rikt og fint at det i beste meining når høgdi. ‘Ved vedbandet’ (sic) er eit meisterverk, som vil gjera saknaden etter Dykk tung” [a tremendous work, ranks among the best and is, I think, the best lyric poetry we have in Norwegian. The language itself is so rich and fine that it attains the heights, in the best sense of the word. ‘Ved vedbandet’ (sic) is a masterpiece that will make us miss you all the more when you are gone] (cited in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygaard* 326).⁷⁰

Most critics are in agreement with Garborg that *Ved vebande* represents Nygaard's highest achievement as a poet, with the exception of a few posthumous poems (e.g., “Til son min” [To my son]). Except in a small circle, Nygaard did not receive many accolades for his work during his lifetime. In the letters exchanged between Nygaard and Ørjasæter, it is apparent that the latter was at the center of the literary happenings of his time, while Nygaard watched at a distance (Nygaard, “Brev” 214).

Nygaard's language certainly represents a barrier to entry today, but even at the time he wrote an “idiosynkratiske versjon av Garborgs midlandsnorm” [idiosyncratic version of Garborg's midland norm] (Nygaard, “Brev” 215).⁷¹ However, it is also worth noting that this was a period of rapid and idiosyncratic growth in *Nynorsk* literary history. Prior to the establishment of norms, there were so many linguistic experiments going on that one might ask, as Vassenden does, “[K]va er rett og galen skrivemåte i nynorsken omkring 1920?” [What is a right or wrong way to write in *Nynorsk* around 1920?] (Nygaard, “Brev” 215). There were also a variety of ways in which Nygaard did not suit the literary tastes of his time: Dalgard has suggested that Nygaard was not only difficult to read but too “privat subjektiv” and “ikkje ... synte noen nemnande

⁷⁰ Here Garborg perhaps means to declare the work among the best by a Scandinavian poet and then further suggest that it is the best poetry written in *Nynorsk*. *Nynorsk* advocates at the time sometimes designate *Nynorsk* simply as “norsk.”

⁷¹ For more on Nygaard's language form see (Akselberg).

lokalkoloritt, noe denne realistiske tida sette stor pris på. Nygard var liksom frå starten oppe i skyene” [privately subjective; did not display any elements of local color worth mentioning, something this realistic period valued highly. Nygard was up in the clouds practically from the beginning] (“Olav Nygard” 52). Similarly, Vassenden notes that some critics at the time felt the imagery in *Ved vebande* bordered on “overdrivelse” and was, in a phrase, “for mykje” [exaggeration; too much] (*Skapelsens problem* 175). These evaluations thus tend to accord with Witoszek’s assessment that representations of uncontrolled nature were unsanctioned in Norwegian culture (*Regime of Goodness* 24). According to Witoszek, philosophical vitalists such as Hamsun and Vigeland were “cultural dissidents” whose “demonic” ideas of nature were either rejected or reinterpreted in accordance with the mainstream view of nature as rational and benign (for example, the negotiated relationship to nature depicted in Aasen’s *Symra*) (Witoszek, *Regime of Goodness* 24; 68).⁷² Although Nygard’s poetry expresses a more aesthetic than philosophical vitalism, one could perhaps see negative reactions to his work as efforts to label him a “cultural dissident” in relationship to the mainstream view of nature. As I will later argue, finding new ways to represent processes in nature was a central concern of Nygard’s, and this novelty (or perhaps “futurity” as Spaans suggests) was more important to him than being culturally acceptable. These initial objections to Nygard on aesthetic grounds, together with his difficult economic and personal circumstances, form a picture of Nygard as someone who was unevenly affected by modernity. Despite the optimism that sometimes accompanies accounts of industrialization and increased social and economic mobility (especially as emigrants tried their luck across the Atlantic), Nygard’s life illustrates the challenges presented by this increased mobility (challenges that, as I argued in chapter two, Ivar Aasen’s poetry tried to warn of).

Previous Accounts of Nature in Nygard

Although Nygard faced many setbacks, he also won over fierce advocates who have revived interest in his work at several key moments since his death. Rather than provide a comprehensive overview, I will track the assessment of Nygard’s relationship to nature, including the local landscape specifically as well as materiality or “the concrete” more generally. As I mentioned above, Arne and especially Hulda Garborg encouraged and affirmed his work during his lifetime. In 1928, *Nynorsk* advocates Olaf Hanssen (1883–1949) and Conrad Clausen (1902–90) established *Nygarðsringen* [The Nygard circle] and published the series *Døyande Gallar* [Dying Gauls], named after one of Nygard’s poems. They also published a collection in memory of Nygard (*Runor rita minnet Olav Nygarðs* [Runes written in memory of Olav Nygard], 1931), and in 1934, Hulda Garborg wrote the forward to a memorial edition of his poetry. In these texts, as in Lavik’s description of the nature around Krossen cited above, it is hard to identify the source of particular views of nature, that is, whether the author views Nygard’s nature descriptions through a Nygardian lens or through a more general framework characteristic of its time.

Vassenden, who has played a significant role in the recent reevaluation of Nygard’s place in literary history, situates him in relationship to the vitalist aesthetics and philosophy circulating

⁷² For Vaa’s response to fascist tendencies in Vigeland’s work, see chapter four, “‘Poetic thinking’ as biosemiotics.”

in Scandinavia in the late 19th and early 20th century. “Vitalism” as Vassenden defines it is “en forestilling om at alt levende stammer fra en særlig livskraft, en skapende impuls som ikke lar seg forklare ut fra mekanismens lover. Vitalisme betegner også tendensen til å dyrke kraft og vitalitet, oftest med utgangspunkt i livet slik det viser seg i og gjennom nature” [A conception that all living things originate from a particular life-force, a creative impulse that cannot be explained by means of mechanistic laws. Vitalism also designates the tendency to cultivate power and vitality, often with a basis in life as it manifests itself in and through nature] (*Norsk vitalisme* 13). Vassenden does not identify a clear vitalist wing in Norwegian literature but rather claims that Nygard (along with fellow interwar poets Aukrust and Ørjasæter) represents “et sent romantisk paradigme som er i ferd med å rakne i sømmene” [a late romantic paradigm that is about to burst at the seams] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293). Vassenden explains that writers and thinkers in the *Nynorsk* movement during Nygard’s time undertook “et fortløpende språklig fornyelses- og skapelsesarbeid” [an ongoing linguistic renewal and creative project] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293). For some, this was part of the larger project of constructing a “(mer) norsk identitet,” while others, such as Nygard, explored some of the “mindre ideologiserbare elementer” of linguistic renewal [elements that are less easily ideologized] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293). While both sides employ images of the organic, natural, and lively, “Forskjellen er at mens vi i mål og kulturreisingsbevegelsen ser en spesifikk bruk av disse tankene som virkemidler, finner vi at det i poesien ofte utgjør en beveggrunn i seg selv: Det er nettopp skapelsen, veksten og den språklig dynamiske prosessen i seg selv som er hovedsaken” [The difference is that while we see a specific use of these thoughts as instruments in the movement for the promotion of language and culture, we find in poetry that they often constitute a motive in itself] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293). Thus, vitalism provides a useful framework in which to understand Nygard’s work inasmuch as he distances himself from nationalist concerns and “forholder seg til spørsmålet om *liv* og *krefter* på en drøftende, utprøvende måte” [concerns itself with questions of *life* and *forces* in a discursive, experimental manner] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293; emphasis original).

As Vassenden explains, Nygard was not alone in his enthusiasm for the idea of *Nynorsk* and *Nynorsk* literature as a kind of vital force. This can be illustrated by an essay written by Tor Ihle, also from 1924. Ihle uses plant metaphors to characterize the *Nynorsk* literary tradition and portrays the work of advancing it as cultivation. “Seig er den norske jorda og tungrudd,” he writes, “djupt maa ho gravast um groen skal bli grøde. Men ein skynsam nybrottsmann forstaar au at jorda er rik” [The Norwegian soil is dense and hard to turn; one has to dig deep if sprouts are to become a harvest. But a shrewd ground-breaker also knows that the soil is rich] (Ihle 140). Ihle spins this into an extended metaphor, and, despite first characterizing composing in *Nynorsk* as especially difficult work, he ultimately describes Nygard’s poetry as essentially organic, “sprungen ut” from his mind [sprung forth], from his “tankefrøa” that “eig livsens voksterkraft i seg” [seeds of thought; contain life’s powers of growth within themselves]. In Nygard’s poetry, he claims, “[d]iktinga utviklar seg etter livsens egne voksterlover” [poetry develops according to life’s own laws of growth] (Ihle 143–44). Although Ihle claims this as a kind of supreme rationality, his ideas are not so much opposed to developments in the natural sciences as inspired by them. He compares Nygard’s use of analogy and metaphor to scientific instruments such as the microscope and telescope and describes Nygard as an observant naturalist, especially attentive to “det endlaust rike mangfelde i natura” [the endlessly rich diversity in nature] (144). He even describes Nygard as a kind of “psykolog” [psychologist] of the earth: using observation of its physical reality to ascertain the mysteries of its inward reality (144). Ihle’s essay is a useful indication of the ideas that were circulating among members of the literary circle who sought to

promote Nygard's work. Rather than archaic or backward looking, as some have viewed Nygard's use of Old Norse roots and classical meter,⁷³ they saw Nygard's poetry as forward-looking and of a piece with the scientific advancements of the day.

This idea that Nygard's poems are the product of and perform a kind of autopoiesis becomes lost in the reception of Nygard after World War II, most likely because a scholarly argument for Nygard's merit required a view of him as one of the masters of the lyric genre. In the 1950s, modernist poet and critic Claes Gill (1910–73) began to establish what Vassenden calls a scholarly basis for canonization (*Skapelsens problem* 22). Gill delivered a lecture on Nygard's work via radio broadcast in addition to writing the introduction to Nygard's *Dikt i utval* (1958). After this, Dale (1957) and Greiff (1959) published the first scholarly monographs on Nygard and his work. The other enthusiastic advocate for Nygard during this time was Olav H. Hauge. Although Hauge expressed his admiration for Nygard only in his diaries, which were published in 2000, Hauge's assessment of Nygard has more or less secured his work a place of interest in the Norwegian lyric tradition.

Gill and Hauge were much more interested in Nygard's treatment of the transcendent than his engagement with the material world. The night of Gill's radio address, Hauge expressed his enthusiastic agreement with Gill in his diary: "For Nygard er ånd den einaste realitet, materien berre manifestasjon av ånd ... Han ser menneske berre som åndsmenneske som gjest på jord, styrd av kosmiske krefter. Han har ikkje tid til, eller ser ikkje dei ytre ting som er rundt oss og synest dei er nok" [For Nygard spirit is spirit/mind the only reality, material only a manifestation of spirit/mind ... He sees a person only as a spiritual person, as a guest on earth, directed by cosmic forces. He does not have time for, nor does he look at the outer things that surround us and believe that they are enough] (346).⁷⁴ For some critics of the period, demonstrating that Nygard was a poet who transcended the material was essential in order to claim that a backwoods autodidact deserved a place in the Norwegian canon. For example, in his account of Nygard's life, Trygve Greiff depicts Nygard as having undergone a sort of hero's journey from a *bonde* with a "passive og halvbevisste forhold til sproget" [passive and semi-conscious relationship to language], merely an "ufritt medium" [involuntary medium] in the folk tradition, to a truly free and creative individual (32). In Greiff's conception, the rural class is slavish, and tradition is characterized by passive transmission of static material. This becomes an intergenerational struggle, as Nygard is charged with forming the material inherited

⁷³ For example, Spaans cites the following evaluations of Nygard from literary histories: "Han er meir i slekt med det 19. hundreåret enn det 20. hundreåret ... han fyller ein tom plass i nynorsk lyrikk før Ivar Aasen" [He has more in common with the 19th century than the 20th ... he fills an empty place in *Nynorsk* poetry before Ivar Aasen] (qtd. in Spaans 135).

⁷⁴ To cite Gill directly, "De sanseintrykk av vestlandsnaturen som i rikt monn gjennomvever Nygards diktning, er uegentlige i den forstand at de bare tjener som stofflige utgangspunkter for en kosmisk opplevelse. Derav denne uhyre varsomme bruk av deskriptive naturbilder, de må aldri stille seg i veien for det syn som ser tvers igjennom og forbi dem" [The sensory impressions of the nature of western Norway that are woven throughout Nygard's poetry in generous measure are inauthentic in the sense that they only serve as material points of departure for a cosmic experience. Because of this extremely conscious use of descriptive nature imagery, they must never block the path for that vision which sees straight through and beyond them] (171).

from tradition rather than allowing it to form him: “Det var ikke en kamp *mot* slekten, men *på vegne av* slekten—for å frigjøre dens krefter fra tusundaars draum” [This was not a struggle *against* his family, but *on behalf of* his family—in order to free their powers from a thousand years of slumber] (Greiff 36).⁷⁵

Although Nygard’s personal lineage is not represented in his poetry in such an explicit way, nor is he explicitly nationalistic in the manner of other interwar poets, the idea that a poet embodies the liberated forces that have been dormant within a people are clear in his work.⁷⁶ He also expresses his belief in the creative capacity of *Nynorsk*. As he wrote to the poet Tore Ørjasæter, “nynorsk lyrikk er det no likevel som ber fram det nye i sitt fang” [still, it is *Nynorsk* poetry that carries forth that which is new in its arms] (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 113). While this statement from Nygard is oft-cited, what exactly Nygard meant by “det nye” is an open question. The assumption was, for a time, that what was new lay beyond the local, rural environment. Although writing about Ørjasæter (as well as Aslaug Vaa, who is the subject of the chapters four and five), Leif Mæhle, a scholar likely to reject the negative characterization of tradition presented by Greiff, nevertheless praises “heimbygdsdiktatarar” [poets of the rural homeland] precisely because they are *not* “lokalbundne” [tied to the local] but rather have “vandra vegen frå bygda til verda ... Oftast går denne utviklinga mot det allmenne og universelle gjennom ein konsentrasjon om *eg-et* og det sentralt menneskeleg” [traveled the path from the *bygda* to the world ... Most often this development goes toward that which is shared and universal by means of a concentration on the lyric “I” and that which is centrally human] (Mæhle, *Frå bygda til verda* 9). One might question how much Nygard belonged to the *bygda*, given his early isolation and later mobility, but a preoccupation with pursuing the universal certainly characterizes his work. Yet, as Longum points out, those works by rural authors that tackle the most “universal” problems and themes are not always the ones favored by future readers; rather, concrete, vivid representations of a particular time and place can prove more captivating than efforts to make a local, time-bound experience more relatable (460–61).

Having moved past the moment when universal relevance was deemed necessary for a poet to achieve high literary status, in recent years, scholars have revisited Nygard’s poetics with renewed interest in the dynamic relationship between the local or concrete and universal. This is apparent in the proceedings of the Nygard conference in 1997, which features presentations such as Tveisme’s “Ikkje berre himmelsyner. Nærveret i Olav Nygard si dikting” [Not just divine visions. Presence in Olav Nygard’s poetry]. Aarnes uses phenomenology as a framework for understanding Nygard’s language and imagery as attempts to represent, not the imagination alone but “en *interaksjon* mellom sinn og ‘tingen selv,’ mellom fornemmelse og virkelighet” [an *interaction* between mind and ‘the thing itself,’ between perception and reality] (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 144). He concludes that, rather than pointing us away from reality, this acquaints us with “underbevissthetsterskelen” [the threshold of the subconscious], which is always embodied (145). Although Aarnes does not use the term “vitalism,” he suggests a connection to the idea of an essential life-force when he observes that in Nygard’s work, “Det uendelige var urfenomenet

⁷⁵ Here, Greiff seems to mean not only Nygard’s personal ancestors but the entire lineage of rural, western Norway.

⁷⁶ See, for example, his poems to Shakespeare and Wergeland (Nygard, *DiS* 163–66; Nygard, *Vv* 24–27).

som muliggjorde alle andre fenomeners fremtreden i endeligheten” [The infinite was the ur-phenomenon that made possible the emergence of all other phenomena in the finite] (145).⁷⁷

Likewise, Vassenden argues in *Skapelsens problem* [The problem of creativity] that the central problem in Nygard’s work is where creativity originates (*Skapelsens problem* 20–21). In pursuit of this end, Nygard creates images that indicate “et ønske om å bringe sammen elementer som ennå ikke har vært brakt sammen” [a desire to bring together elements that have not been brought together before] (*Skapelsens problem* 273). Here we could think, for example, of how he brings together the animal, human, and technological in his depiction of the train in “Til ein ven på Italiaferd.” In addition to these surprising combinations, “[h]ans bilder springer også ut av bevegelse, av en dynamisk poesi- og språkanskuelse” [his images also spring from movement, from a dynamic view of poetry and language] (*Skapelsens problem* 274). Here, we can think of the way in which Nygard’s train almost threatens to derail, as he uses the sound and rhythm of language to contribute to the sense of motion in the poem. In the end, Vassenden argues that Nygard’s work moves from mimesis to poesis, from an attempt to represent existing images to the attempt to make new ones (*Skapelsens problem* 271). In this sense, the vitalistic elements of Nygard’s work appear less often as “eksplisitt tema enn som motiver, eller simpelthen som skrivemåte” [explicit themes than as motifs, or simply as a *mode of writing*] (*Norsk vitalisme* 293).

Yet, although recent scholarship has directed attention back to Nygard’s engagement with the material world, Aarseth is correct that “han aldri lokaliserer skildringane sine. Geografiske namn finst mest ikkje ... Lyrikaren vil skape ein allmenngjerande effekt; det må ikkje vere noko regionalt eller lokalt avgrensande i teksten” [he never locates his descriptions. Geographical names are for the most part absent ... The poet wants to create a universalizing effect; there must not be anything regionally or locally delimiting in the text] (47). In this sense, like Aasen, Nygard attempts a balancing act: on the one hand, he draws explicitly on the specific nature that informs his imagination and on the unique qualities of *Nynorsk* that enable his experiments in form; on the other hand, he wishes to compose work that has national relevance and participates in a broader European lyric tradition as well. Rather than do so by couching his poetry as generally applicable wisdom, as Aasen does, Nygard instead focuses on processes found throughout nature (sundown, moving water, waves), the mind (memory, thought), and the body (sleep, death), and creates relations across these categories, always in search of some elusive element that is common to them all.

While Norwegian scholars have been more interested in revisiting materiality in Nygard’s work in order to better situate him in the context of Norwegian literary history, I am interested in how Nygard’s view of the dynamic relationship between language, nature, and the body might contribute to the study of ecopoetics and global modernism. Though the American poet Walt Whitman took up vitalist themes to advocate for a distinctly American aesthetic, while Norway may have similarly regarded itself as a young nation, having gained full independence in 1905, the Norwegian language situation made vernacularity a unique preoccupation for Nygard and his contemporaries. Thus, in this chapter, I will focus less on what Aarnes calls Nygard’s

⁷⁷ For a succinct version of Aarnes’s ideas in *Poesien hos Olav Nygard*, see (“Ved det hellige”).

“livsmetafysikk” and more on his effort to represent, through the use of vitalist imagery and sound, a “situated” understanding of processes in nature.

Agentic Assemblages and Sensuous Poesis

Employing Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling” (Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”), Jonathan Bate introduces “ecopoetry” and “ecopoetics” in his seminal work *The Song of the Earth* as “not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it but an experiencing of it” (42). Bate goes on to articulate that poesis or “making” can occur in any medium; however, he also concedes that “the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a peculiar force to the *poesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language’s most direct path to the return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling” (Bate 75–76; emphasis original). However, Garrard and Lindström have recently critiqued the notion of a poem as itself an environment or “dwelling,” which they term “ecophenomenological” poetry, for providing individualistic visions inadequate to our present environmental challenges (48–49). By arguing that nature and poetry are essentially interchangeable experiences, ecophenomenological poetry promotes an interest in nature for nature’s sake “because it is different from and outside the self” (47). Garrard and Linström contrast this with “environmental poetry,” which explores relationships between humans and the environment, understanding that nature is always in some sense a social product.

The notion that nature and the poem could be interchangeable was also inadequate for the challenges of Nygard’s time, which included not only the social and economic changes that affected him personally, but also challenges to previous notions of the subject posed by developments in the natural sciences and psychology. This is indicated by Nygard’s interest in relationality and his skepticism toward national romantic conceptions of nature and romantic aesthetics. These challenges are perhaps encapsulated in the central problem of Nygard’s work that Vassenden identifies, namely where creativity originates—does it emerge from the mind, the body, the natural environment, or some greater, cosmic “beyond”? And if not any one of these, how does the dynamic among them operate? In Nygard’s work, these same questions seem to apply to language as well. For this reason, Nygard’s work is perhaps best related to the work of Scott Knickerbocker, who identifies what he terms “sensuous poesis” among a number of modernist poets, many of whom chose traditional poetic forms over the free verse of those American poets more commonly thought of as “nature poets.” Not unlike Bate’s notion of “making,” sensuous poesis “perform[s] the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature rather than merely represent[ing] it” (159). “[H]owever influenced by experience ‘in the field,’” Knickerbocker argues, for these poets, “language takes on its *own* wildness and materiality distinct from but still a response to nature” (13; emphasis original).

As in Nygard’s difficult and often surprising metaphors, animations, and compound words, language “becomes wilder” by undergoing “defamiliarization, enacting at the level of figure and sound (rather than straightforward description) the speaker’s experience of wildness” (13). Similarly, I argue that Nygard’s skepticism toward both language and “stable ground” in nature suggests a dynamic relationship between imagination and the material world. I will establish this first by examining an early poem that illustrates Nygard’s relationship to the *bygd* in a poem that can be read as a response to Aasen’s “Nordmannen.” In “Grunnfjell,” Nygard suggests that neither nature nor language offer stable ground and that one should be skeptical toward claims of harmony with nature in poetry. I will then turn to Nygard’s representations of

the body as itself a landscape or topography in which dynamic processes occur, arguing that he represents the body at times as an “agentic assemblage,” questioning the boundaries between human and nonhuman. Finally, I will turn to vibration in Nygard’s work as a representation of perception, thought, and/or emotion that draws attention to the dynamic relationship between mind, body, and nature.

“Grunnfjell”: Nygard’s Break with Bygd as Stable Ground

Eg byggjer i tru
ei skjelvande sjulita verbogebra
fraa trongrømde tune i dalskuggen graa
til himelen høge og heilage blaa. (Nygard, *Flodmaal* 5).
I build in hope a trembling (seven-hued) (rainbow bridge) from a confined farmyard in
the gray (valley-shadow) to the sky, high and holy blue.

Presentations of Nygard’s work often begin with the opening poem of his oeuvre, “Bru” [Bridge], as it illustrates the journey from a local perspective bounded by material conditions to a transcendent perspective facilitated by poetic language. The poet, awaited as a guest in the “blaa-himmelslotte” [blue-sky-castle], hears a song “som ingen vet raad / aa syngje med ord ifraa dalen den graa” [that no one knows how to sing with words from the gray valley]. This provides a concise demonstration of Nygard’s early poetics and fits fairly well with Bate’s assessment of language in Romanticism: “Romanticism often insists that language is a prison house which cuts us off from nature, but simultaneously the poet strives to create a special kind of language that will be the window of the prison cell” (47). However, in subsequent poems Nygard experiments with language in a way that questions the distinction between language that belongs to the “gray valley” and that which belongs to “blaa-himmelslotte.”

This is perhaps because Nygard begins already with a suspicion toward the notion of stability, either in nature or language. The scenario in “Grunnfjell” is easily summarized: the poem tells the tale of a person who lives comfortably in his wooden house in the summertime. However, the peace of his existence is disrupted when a summer storm passes over, and the house burns to the ground. Although good weather returns, the subject of the poem is left homeless. In order to avoid such a disaster again, he tries to build a sturdier house of stone. “Grunnfjell” portrays an individual seeking to establish a home in a rural landscape and at the same time serves as a more universal allegory for the subject’s relationship to circumstances beyond human control. In this sense, it is similar to “Nordmannen,” which describes the process of carving out an ordered dwelling place in the midst of an uncultivated landscape (Aasen, *Symra* 21). In Aasen’s poem, the abundance of fish serves as compensation for the rough seas and the pleasantness of summer as compensation for winter. Thus, as I argued in the previous chapter, Aasen presents building and dwelling in this landscape as a process of negotiation in which the subject of the poem achieves contentment by accepting the limits of both the natural and the human. Although in different meters, both poems make use of alliteration; in the case of Aasen’s poem, this tends to underscore the theme of stability in the poem. Aasen’s alliterative pairs suggest relationships of similarity between “Havet” and “Heim” [sea; home], “Hug” and “Heimlege” [mind; home-like]. Similarity is collapsed into identity when Aasen twice

emphasizes that the subject has cleared the ground for his home “sjølv” [himself], underscoring his industriousness.

Nygaard perhaps plays on his audience’s assumptions that these relationships of stability are endemic to the *bygd* when he begins his poem by using alliteration to create an opening image of harmony that borders on hyperbole:

Eg budde i bordhus
og aatte ein hage
med blomar som lavde
av brikne og brage.
Og solskyer sveiv
yve vaar blaae tindar
og siglde som svanur
in linndrøge vindar. (*Flodmaal* 24)

I lived in a wooden house and had a garden with flowers that hung down in great clusters of freshness and radiance. And (sunclouds) drifted over (spring-blue) peaks and sailed like swans in (mildly driven) winds.

That this alliteration is meant to participate in the notion of harmony is indicated by the comparatively infrequent use of alliteration in the next two stanzas, those depicting the storm. The more compact use of alliteration returns in the pronouncement: “Eg hev ikkje hardare / illrøyne ride; / eg trudde at live / til endes var lide” [I have never weathered a worse misfortune; I thought there was no hope of survival] (*Flodmaal* 25; emphasis mine). There is reason to suspect here that Nygaard is casting doubt on perception and echoes this doubt in his use of poetic form. The subject of the poem believes his house to be secure, a belief that is mirrored by his ordered, harmonious representation of it. But he is wrong: the wildness of nature enters the scene, and simultaneously language escapes any attempt at strict control. It is the subject who keeps returning to the harmonious mode with his wish for security, as in the third to last stanza he declares his burning desire to “finne eit feste / som stod um den høgkvelvde blaaheim laut breste” [find a fortress that would stand if the (high-vaulted) (blue-home) burst open] (*Flodmaal* 26; emphasis mine). Although the subject, like Aasen’s Norwegian, tries to “grave / ei tuft” that will provide him with a firm foundation [clear a site], “fulltrygge grunnfjelle / hev eg kje funne” [I have not found (wholly stable) bedrock] (*Flodmaal* 27).

Though, in the interest of a national project of rural uplift, Aasen argued for a rural way of life that negotiates a stable place in nature, Nygaard here casts doubt on nature as a source of stability, while also suggesting the role of poetic language in creating the Norwegian myth of nature as stable. Rather than nature as stable ground for either individual or national identity, Nygaard would begin to consider instead how the human mind and body interact with natural forces and how language mediates these relationships. He does this, at times, by replacing the *bygd* as allegory with an image of the *bygd* as body and the natural forces that circulate within or pass through it as *like* (though not identical to) feelings, thoughts, and memories.

“*Agentic assemblages*”: *Body as topography*

Nygaard often portrays thought and memory as physical, suggesting their origins lie *outside* the subject. In doing so, he uses landscape or topography as a metaphor for the subject. That is, instead of situating his lyrical subject in a valley or farmyard, he represents the mind as a place where cognition or perception occurs as a dynamic process, not unlike the wind and weather of “Grunnfjell.” For example, in the poem “I ei minnebok” [In a memory book] (*DiS* 51), Nygaard decries the memory book as “ei gløymekiste” [casket of forgetting] that

jagar minna ut fra hjartebeite
og set dei fast som naut i band og ring
til svelteforing paa det arme blade,
og sel dei til den graae likeglade. (*DiS* 51)
drives memories out of the (pasture of the heart) and pens them in like cattle with rope
and ring to (starve-graze) on the pitiful leaves [meaning both the leaves of plants and
book pages, as in English] and sell them to the gray (just-as-well).

Here, memories are portrayed as living things that need to stay fresh in the mind; they need the freedom to wander and “feed” off the thoughts or feelings of the heart in order to retain their meaning. There is a skepticism toward language again here, but skepticism mostly to written language, described here as “pitiful,” because it is confining and insufficient to nourish the imagination. But the image also suggests that memories wander the mind freely in a manner outside the subject’s control and that this is essential to, as the next stanza says, “kveikjer hugen” [quicken the mind].

Understanding memory as vital material in this way introduces the question of where memory is located. In the poem “No kvil deg,” the lyric subject visits a mountain cabin from his childhood:

Det stend i same stad det vesle sel
som det var løyst or strake tidartaumar;
og ho hev anda inn eit vik av sjæl
i vegg og ved; høyr, tungført minne tel
og trøyer seg med skimt av hennar draumar. (*Vv* 22)
It stands in the same place, the little cabin as if it had been loosed from the tight (reins of
time); and it has breathed in a (musical phrase) of soul into wall and wood; listen,
laboriously memory speaks and entertains with a snippet of its dreams.

This is an extended iteration of “If walls could talk ...” in which the cabin is embodied: the poem implies that it can “breathe” or that the porous walls pull in the words and events that happen around it. By animating the walls, the poem implies that the mind is similarly porous, that memory is an involuntary process. It also represents how a renewed encounter with a place we once knew reinvigorates memories that were previously dormant, suggesting that memory is not confined to the subject but is a dynamic process resulting from multiple agents, including the sights and sounds associated with a particular place.

This stanza echoes another from the posthumous poem “Aa, her steig under” [Oh, here wonders arose] in which the subject sits in a moment of reverie. Here, calling up memories causes the cosmic forces of “aandeheimann” to rush to earth and “blandar blod med alt som jordlangt sveimar” [(the spiritual and intellectual world); mix blood with all that wafts (along the

earth)] (*DiS* 158). The poem concludes with a representation of imagination as a physical process in which

sjølv or luft og lette avdagseimar
drikk lunga yvejordisk drykk som spinn
seg gjenom alle pulsar ut og hjalar
fraa ytste aadr til inste hjartedalar. (*DiS* 158)
from the air itself and light (twilight-vapors), the lungs drink the supernatural drink that
spins its way out through all pulses and calls from the uttermost vein to the innermost
(valleys of the heart).

The poem is clearly vitalist in orientation, portraying a universal source of growth that pervades the earth, achieving an organic oneness between the two. The physicality of Nygard's description of lungs that drink and vapors that interweave themselves into the spaces of the body dispenses with the notion of the body itself as an organic whole, instead flattening it out as a kind of landscape into which, like the rest of the earth, this cosmic life-force can enter and pervade in such a way that the two entities are no longer separable.

Although such a notion of the body threatens the autonomy of the subject, an additional aspect of Nygard's imagery suggests that these moments are contingent or temporary in his work: although his poems often end with moments of dissolution or reverie as in the poem above, some of his later poems also question the potential for such experiences other than in language. For example, in the final stanza of "Timann skrid undan" [Time passes by], the speaker asks, "—Er det kje einstad i rømdenn ein avdøles stad / gøynd og fordrøymd og lagd ut um all livgjeven lagnad—/ der vil eg dorme med solheimar sloknar i rad" [Is there not somewhere in the universe an (out of the way) place, hidden and dreamed of and set apart from (life-given) fate—there I will rest while (sun-homes=stars) extinguish one by one] (*Vv*, 53). Here he implies that such a place of remove from which the human can watch the fate of the material world, as if apart from it, exists only in imagination, or in poetry.

Given the contingent or passing nature of these moments in which the body becomes one agent in a larger configuration of dynamic processes, we might think of the body, thought, and natural forces in Nygard as forming a kind of "agentic assemblage." In the book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett explains that, toward the end of the 21st century, new models of how things happen in biological, economic, and political processes became necessary. "Organicist models," she writes, "in which each member obediently serves the whole, were clearly out. A host of new ways to name the kind of relation obtaining between the parts of a volatile but somehow functioning whole were offered" (*Vibrant Matter* 11). From these, Bennett adopts the model of "assemblages" from Deleuze and Guattari, defining them as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" characterized by their lack of central authority, emergent properties, distributed agency, "distinctive history of formation" and "finite life span" (*Vibrant Matter* 12–13). What Bennett adds to this model is the notion of the body itself as "agentic assemblage." Drawing on Spinoza's notion of the "conative" body, she argues, "[B]odies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage. What this suggests for the concept of agency is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts" (*Vibrant Matter* 6). In other words, human action cannot be seen as the result of one person's (or even a

collective of persons') efforts; what humans make or do is also the effect of nonhuman things and networks of things.

Nygard's view of the mind and body does not fit perfectly with such a model: he certainly aspires to an organic model of the universe, although its attainability is sometimes put in question. However, in pursuit of this larger organicism, Nygard seems more than willing, even eager to question the organic model of the body. Rather than the individual body containing all the parts it needs to think, feel, and imagine, some of these parts seem to have either spilled out into nature, or require natural forces to flood or stride in and facilitate these processes. And although Nygard was not responding to the conceptual challenge of how things happen in the late 20th century, he does seem to be grappling with the new knowledge of his time. I cited above Nygard's declaration that "nynorsk lyrikk er det no likevel som ber fram det nye i sitt fang" [still, it is *Nynorsk* poetry that carries forth that which is new in its arms] (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 113). Ronny Spaans takes this quote as the title of his recent article and suggests that rather than a romantic or modernist, Nygard was a kind of futurist; what seem to be anachronisms in his work are employed in the service of expressing novel visions and understandings, not in the service of retreat to the past. Spaans supports this by comparing some of Nygard's compound words to astronomy terms in *Nynorsk* that were proposed in the early 20th century; Spaans suggests Nygard's compounds can be understood in light of efforts to create scientific terms with Norse, rather than Latin, roots (143). This is further supported by Nygard's own statements on naturalism. Nygard wrote (in a letter to Ørjasæter in March of 1923) that there were two main intellectual currents in Norway at the time: naturalism "som hev kome so langt inn at han minner mykje um vitskap" and "ein ung himelsusande" or "optimistisk-idealistisk" [that has advanced so far that it is very reminiscent of science; a young echoing of the divine; optimistic-idealistic] (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 112). Of his own engagement with these he writes that the latter "hev ikkje fenge nokon av oss heilt i si magt" [has not caught any of us entirely in its power] (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 112–13). This is surprising given how often Nygard is identified with idealism. Of the former he writes "eg [er] ytterlig forbina yve meisterskapen deira, og freistar av livs magt aa lære kunstenn av dei" [I am utterly entranced with their mastery and am trying with all my might to learn the art from them]. As Spaans observes, "Nygard må ha vore svært fascinert av den litterære retninga naturalismen, og særleg av naturalismens evne til å innlema element frå vitskapen i skjønlitteraturen" [Nygard must have been quite fascinated with naturalism as a literary movement, especially by naturalism's ability to incorporate elements from science into literature] (142). While Nygard found the idea of the transcendent alluring, he was also impressed by those who held themselves to external and observable things. Making things like thought and memory that were normally invisible visible by animating or otherwise representing them as embodied perhaps represented a middle ground between the two.

By thinking of not just the body but other "objects" as agentic assemblages (or parts of them), we can perhaps answer a question like the one posed by Aarnes in response to compound words in Nygard's poem "Til son min": "Hva betyr vendesoler, kvervemaanar? Hvorledes kunne dikteren finne på å forberede noe så overraskende, så i logisk forstand meningsløst?" [What does (turning-suns), (circling-moons) mean? How could the poet come up with something so surprising, so meaningless from a logical standpoint?] (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 72). Here, Nygard clearly refers to the rotation of stars and the orbital paths in which moons move around other planetary bodies. Orbiting is not exactly something planetary bodies *do* but rather something that *happens* due to their material composition and the assemblage or configuration of

relationships in which they are found. Nevertheless, Nygard collapses the dynamism of this system into the thing itself, suggesting its motion cannot be distinguished from its matter and vice versa. While planetary orbits are perhaps more stable than the assemblages Bennett has in mind, Nygard also imagines a kind of deep time that allows him to reflect on them as finite (“*der vil eg dorme med solheimar sloknar i rad*” [there I will rest while (sun-homes=stars) extinguish one by one] (*Vv* 53)). As elsewhere in Nygard’s poetry, there is an interest in moments of upheaval as well as those moments when things come into balance or to rest.

The terms *vendesoler* and *kvervemaanar* can be seen as attempts to use language to enhance our perception of the celestial and how things happen there. But when Nygard animates things like thought and memory, things already closely associated with language, he starts to portray the vital materiality of language as well, suggesting that it is not merely a passive medium but also an active agent in aesthetic production. Nygard’s struggle to create language adequate to the dynamics he wishes to represent can thus be thought of as an indication that he sees signs as becoming detached from single, stable referents. As Mark Sandberg argues in “Writing on the Wall: The Language of Advertising in Knut Hamsun’s *Sult*,” references to advertisements and consumer goods in *Sult* [*Hunger*, 1890] create an association between the development of modern mass media and the increased mobility of signs. In advertisements, words become detached from their referents in time and space. Sandberg reads the protagonist’s meditations on advertisements (especially in the newspaper) as a source of inspiration for his linguistic experiments in the novel. For example, in the scene in which the protagonist spends a night in jail, he invents (or seems almost visited by) the nonsense word *kuboå* (“Writing on the Wall” 289–91). He ponders possible meanings for the word, including concrete ones like padlock and knitting yarn, but also “spiritual” meanings. This juxtaposition of dissimilar things, Sandberg argues, “raises important questions about the ability of language to point reliably to a location” (“Writing on the Wall” 293)(293). Similarly, a term like “*kvervemaanar*,” inspired by astronomy, seeks to refer not just to an object but an object in motion. Furthermore, the difficulty of discerning the meaning of words like *kvervemaanar* and *kuboå* also draws attention to the words as material, as sound. While the protagonist of *Sult* employs nonsense to do this, Nygard seeks hyperspecificity, but the end is rather the same. While in Hamsun this sound may be ultimately meaningless, suggesting the impossibility of meaningful communication in modernity, in Nygard materiality is accompanied by optimism because it facilitates a recognition of materiality as something shared. Rather than expressing dismay over the alienation of the sign from a stable context, Nygard takes the opportunity to celebrate relation over identity.

Vibration

This is perhaps why vibration features so prominently in Nygard’s work. In physics vibration is defined as “the rapid alternating or reciprocating motion to and fro, or up and down, produced in the particles of an elastic body by the disturbance of equilibrium; the motion in the particles of a sonorous body by which sound is produced” (“Vibration, N.”). Nygard seems particularly interested in vibration because it connects motion and sound and because it is a diffuse phenomenon; the motion of one thing or group of things can set everything around it in motion.

Vibration is among several key tropes that Nygard uses to represent feelings or impressions that arise, not from one source in particular, but from multiple sources. These include the *flood* (e.g. *Flodmaal*) and the *wave* (e.g. “*ekstase-byglja*” [the wave of ecstasy], *Vv*

63).⁷⁸ Vibration occurs in Nygard's work through vocabulary such as *biv* and *bivra* [the noun and verb forms of "tremble"], as well as *skjelv* [tremble]. But it also occurs frequently with reference to wind, song, and especially stringed instruments, including the fiddle.⁷⁹ The opening and closing stanzas of one of Nygard's most canonized poems, "No reiser kvelden seg" [Now the evening arises], contains key representations of vibration:

No reiser kvelden seg i vesterbrun,
han trør paa lette føter gjennom tun
og skuggeveven fjell imillom hengjer,
Det gjeng ei kviskring gjennom kjørr og lyng,
og talatrasten skifter ljod og syng
med avdagsskjelven under sine strenger. (*V* 13)

Now the evening arises in (the line of mountains or ridges in the west), he treads on light feet through the yard and (a web of shadow) hangs between the mountains, a whispering passes through wood and heather, and the song thrush changes its sound and sings with (the tremble of twilight) under its strings.

As an American reader, this stanza always reminds me of Carl Sandburg's "the fog comes / on little cat feet" ("Fog," 1916), but rather than the single metaphor of Sandburg's poem, Nygard's contains a whole menagerie. Constructions like "skuggeveven" support a reading of Nygard as interested in assemblages, but he also employs "kviskring" as both sound and vibration. The whisper passes *through* surrounding nature and seems to cause the bird to change its tune, but the effect here is diffuse rather than the result of a direct interaction between subject and object. In what sense a thrush has strings is wholly unclear in the poem, but Aarnes suggests that "under ... strenger" here is a reference to the Hardanger fiddle (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 44). In addition to the four strings that are played with a bow, as on a standard violin, this folk instrument has four strings directly beneath that resonate along with the upper strings. If Vassenden is correct, this suggests that "evening" has both direct and indirect effects on the various organisms and natural features that participate in it. It further suggests that the human subject responds both voluntarily and involuntarily to natural processes. Because whispering and singing can also be read as synonyms for poetry and poetic effects, Nygard simultaneously suggests that poetic composition has a similar agency that diffuses into body and environment, to varied (perhaps unpredictable) ends.

Vibration also stresses relationships among things in nature, rather than collapsing elements by positing that they are identical. In the final stanza of the poem, this is performed

⁷⁸ A search of the digital text of *DiS* yields eighteen occurrences of a form of "bylgje" in the roughly 170 pages of Nygard's work. The curator of the site diktarbiologi.net, which lists word occurrences in Nygard's work by category (most of them natural categories of various types), locates ten unique compound words ending in -flod, some of which occur multiple times in Nygard's collected works (*Olav Nygard - Habitat*).

⁷⁹ [Diktarbiologi.net](http://diktarbiologi.net) lists four occurrences of *bog* or *bogedrag* [bow, drawing the bow, as a fiddle], thirteen uses of *streng* [string] and eighteen of *spel* [play, as an instrument] (*Olav Nygard - Musikk*).

through a greeting between the “eternal” forces operating in the background and the transient processes of birth and death:

Det gjeng ein sælebiv imillom fjell
so fræa emnar seg og hamsar fell
og undrings-øre augo upp seg vender:
Or djupe himlar slær ein baaregong
av evig skapings-gir og sfæresong
som helsar frendblidt mot dökke strender.

A happy tremble passes between the mountains, so the seeds sprout and the kernels fall and eyes, (drunk with wonder), turn their gaze upward: Out of deep skies strikes a (wave) of eternal (creative drift) and (song of spheres) that (with friendly joy) greets dark strands.

In the sensuous poesis of Wallace Stevens, Knickerbocker argues, “[b]oth the sounds of poetry and the things of nature ... operate under a principle of rhyme: ‘resemblance’ rather than ‘identity’” (Knickerbocker 23). Rather than rhyme, this principle of resemblance in Nygard is performed through alliteration, which weaves the various elements described into a web of tight associations, making subject and object relationships especially difficult to determine. The resulting suggestion is that “[p]oetry and the imagination are not identical with nature and reality, but they do resemble each other in the way they function” (Knickerbocker 23). Just as evening cannot be identified by any one cause or process but is rather an assemblage of dynamic events, Nygard represents poetry as an assemblage of sonic and meaning effects, in which “greeting,” a relational gesture that is not quite final or complete, is more the goal than meaning. Nygard tries to get his reader to “vibrate” more than understand. In this sense, in his poetry, “metaphor and rhyme and other poetic devices are not then merely ‘mechanical’ but as lively and fluid as the processes of nature” (Knickerbocker 23).

This is also suggested by the stanza that immediately proceeds the image of the cabin that “breathes” memories, presented in the poem “No kvil deg.” In it, Nygard personifies the wind in a way that suggests that its role, rather than to *produce* sound or motion in nature is to gather up various elements and unify them in song:

Og vinden sviv i tjuveham og stel
seg fange fullt av rare ljod og lundar;
han fangar sullansong fraa bekk som stundar,
han sveipar i si kufte vart og væl
det linne hamra-hull og alvespel.

And the wind sweeps in (the shape of a thief) and steals its arms full of strange sounds and melodies/voices; it gathers (the humming song) from the brook that runs along, it sweeps in its jacket carefully and well the mild (striking-song) and (fairy music).

By attending to the wind, the poem suggests, one can detect all manner of sounds otherwise distributed throughout nature. Drawing attention to the resemblance among sounds in nature undermines the importance of any one place, but it also suggests that these various sounds act in chorus, without the need for a hierarchy. Because the wind gathers sound in this stanza, it is easy to imagine that the wind is also a metaphor for the poet, who here, rather than orchestrating or

transforming nature, is a mere “thief” who “steals” whatever pleasant sounds he finds, storing them under his jacket for use at another time. Since the stanza offers no hierarchy of agency in nature, it also avoids placing the poet apart from or atop a hierarchy of creative processes.

This brings to mind a discussion of personification in Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett notes that, where our present ecological challenges are concerned, there are “risks associated with anthropomorphizing,” including “superstition, the divinization of nature” and “romanticism” (*Vibrant Matter* 29). Here Bennett suggests that in order to address the human impact on nature, we have to avoid understandings of nature that turn our attention away from material realities, such as the belief in supernatural causes or the immaterial “beyond,” or the longing for an imaginary past. In as much as it looks to a *spiritual* life-force to transform the cosmos into an organic whole, the vitalist metaphysics in Nygard’s poetry is not likely to be a useful source for ecopolitics. Not unlike reverie in Rousseau, the pursuit of this immaterial force, even if an imminent rather than transcendent one, would likely draw attention away from material conditions and could be a form of “political apostasy” (42). However, Nygard’s particular use of anthropomorphism may have some redeeming value. As Bennett argues, anthropomorphizing can “[work] against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’” (29). “[T]he philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism,” Bennett argues, often arises from an instance that “only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency” (29). By suggesting this may not, in fact, be the case, anthropomorphism can help us to “discern a kind of life irreducible to the activities of humans or gods. This material vitality is me, it predates me, it exceeds me, it postdates me” (29). Rather than removing the human from community, anthropomorphism can thus be seen as a way of expanding the human community to include nonhuman actors, forming a larger biopolity.

For Nygard, this view of creativity as something that not only humans or poets can do supplies optimism at a moment when the mobilization of words and people that undermines stable notions of place and subjectivity could be a source of cynicism or distress. Yet, Nygard’s view of nonhuman agency could have a dark source as well. As Bennett writes, “One can invoke bacteria colonies in human elbows to show how human subjects are themselves nonhuman, alien, outside, vital materiality” (29). The field of biology, especially recent discoveries in fields such as epigenetics, suggests that “human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like—indeed, that insofar as anything “acts” at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage” (29–30). Although Nygard’s hero, Wergeland, also had tuberculosis, he did not know that the disease was caused by bacteria. Robert Koch, German physician and scientist, first presented his discovery of the tuberculosis bacteria in 1882. According to the Nobel Institute, this lecture “considered by many to be the most important in medical history, was so innovative, inspirational and thorough that it set the stage for the scientific procedures of the twentieth century” (*Tuberculosis*).

Nygard was certainly aware of the cause of his disease, and he describes it in his own idiosyncratic way. In a letter to his wife Rakel, written from Luster sanatorium, he writes, “Eg hev kje vore hjaa doktaren endaa, men eg hev fenge sputte mitt, og hev nok funne smaadyr i det, trur eg. Elles veit eg ingen ting endaa” [I have not seen the doctor yet, but I have collected my spittle, and [the doctor] has probably found (little creatures=bacteria) in it, I think. Otherwise I do not know anything yet] (qtd. in Aarnes, *Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 241). By referring to the bacteria as “little creatures” or “little animals,” Nygard identifies them as something living and other, yet present in his own body. This brief glimpse into Nygard’s view of his illness suggests that, at least on one occasion, he thought of the illness as an animate, nonhuman life-force that occupied his

body. Considering how significant a role this illness played in facilitating, as well as thwarting, his efforts to write, it is not unreasonable to associate other images that question the border between the human and nonhuman as inspired, at least in part, by the biological fact of his illness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Nygard can be seen as a figure whose experience of modernity was “uneven,” perhaps not unlike a figure usually seen as central to the development of Scandinavian (if not international) modernism, Knut Hamsun (1859–1952). Both were mobile figures in their youth who rejected or did not succeed in emigration to America, and both had great literary aspirations, a possibility only recently afforded them by the development of modern communication systems, publishing, book distribution, and literary celebrity. Yet Nygard had a source of purpose and optimism in his youth that Hamsun lacked—the establishment of *Nynorsk* as the preeminent literary language of Norway. As I have also argued, this necessitated a break with national romantic ideas of language and nature in order to experiment with what he saw as the vital materiality of *Nynorsk* and grapple with the instability of the age.

Today, a return to Nygard’s vitalist interests can be a way to productively examine what his linguistic experiments have to offer in a time when reimagining the relationship between nature and the human, potentially decentralizing or unbounding our conception of creativity and the body, seems critically important. By understanding agency in Nygard as distributed throughout an assemblage and observing how language participates in this dynamic via sensuous poesis, it becomes possible to see the potential for a non-hierarchical creative process that Nygard represents in his work. This undermines the notion of the human as unique in its creativity, which could be unsettling. But for Nygard this provides a consoling sense that there is something that (in Bennett’s words) “predates ... exceeds ... [and] postdates” the human.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Aasen similarly undermines the notion of the poetic genius or the monumental artwork through the metaphor of the *symre*. This metaphor seems to be perpetuated in Nygard, in that process and potential are also emphasized over monumentality and finality. The metaphor of *Nynorsk* itself as agentic and the product of organic processes seems particularly salient in *Nynorsk* literary history. For example, in 1953, Olav H. Hauge describes Aukrust as the culmination of an organic process of development to which *Ny gard* also belongs:

Kanskje eit folk lyt sova i mange hundradår fyrr dei føder slik dikting som Aukrusts. Det er den norske ånds blom, vaksi gjenom frå forntidi, gjenom *Edda* og eventyri og folkevisor, norrøn tru og tenkjing i møte med kirstendomen, denne renningen var det som skulde setja blom i Aukrust, ein blom for teinen har sett andre blomar òg. Duun, Ørjasæter, Uppdal, Falkberget, Nygard, Krokann, Vesaas, alle er dei blomar på teinen som rann. (Hauge 349)

Perhaps a people has to sleep for many centuries before they birth such poetry as Aukrust’s. It is the bloom of the Norwegian spirit, growing forth from ancient times, through *Edda* and folktales and folksongs, Norse belief and thinking met with Christianity. It was this plant that would bloom in Aukrust, one flower, for the vine has yielded other flowers too. Duun, Ørjasæter, Uppdal, Falkberget, Nygard, Krokann, Vesaas, they are all flowers on the vine that flourished.

Similarly, in Aarnes's work from 2004, he seems unable to resist an organic metaphor: Nygard's goal, he claims "var ikke å overvinne sproglige og metriske hindringer. Han forstod, ante eller skuet noe han ville fastholde, om skjebnen, kjærligheten, livet og døden. Hans verden er en meningsverden, nedfelt i et inkarnert uttrykk, et uttrykk som ennå er under tilblivelse, like en plante som jordens humus ennå henger ved" [was not to overcome linguistic or metrical hindrances. He understood, sensed, or observed something he wanted to hold onto, about fate, love, life, and death. His word is a world of meaning, contained in an incarnate expression, an expression that is still in the process of generating, like a plant that the soil of the earth still clings to] (*Poesien hos Olav Nygard* 30–31).

In comparing these two quotations, we can see that Hauge retains an Aasenian idea of *Nynorsk* as eco-poetic, as facilitating and generating the continuation of a cultural tradition. This is an eco-poetics that lends a sense of naturalness to what was, in fact, the product of a great deal of human effort. Although these authors are "flowers," they are, in a sense, finished products. Aarnes, on the other hand, sees the poem itself as generative. This is more in line with the eco-poetics of Aslaug Vaa, which we will see in the following two chapters. Vaa is interested, not only in how language is *like* nature, but how the poet can utilize this similarity to create a poem that is itself generative. Moreover, while in Aasen we saw a notion of nature and culture as nonbinary that, at times, participated in a very early ecopolitics, it should be apparent in this chapter on Nygard that, aside from the biopolitical community Nygard's anthropomorphism might suggest, the ecopolitical has largely disappeared. Instead, it has been replaced by optimism in relationship to technology and new understandings of nature. The ecopolitical will return, however, in Vaa, as fears of a technocratic culture that might exclude other understandings of nature, as well as a confrontation with environmental degradation (in such forms as the atomic bomb) lend a sense of urgency to her affirmation of the vital materiality of *Nynorsk*.

Chapter 4: Situated Nature Knowledge in the Poetics of Aslaug Vaa

Aslaug Vaa (1889–1965) begins her first poetry collection with some definitive statements on how she perceives her home region, Telemark, and its role in her creative process. In her poetic imagination, the strength of a regional tradition is its language and the nature that provides the frame of reference for that language. Already in her debut, Vaa articulates this special quality of regional, vernacular language. She writes in a *Nynorsk* that is distinctive due to the inclusion of linguistic elements from the Telemark dialect. Rather than an ecstatic experience in nature, however, her depiction of the region is mostly realistic, though warm and with a nod to local figures of speech:

Det er Telemarkin. Dit telene vandra ein gong
og gav seg til bu, i dalar ved æar og votn.
Der fisken spratt, der bygget gulna i lidan,
og høgt uppi Heian der reinen flaug ivi mosen,
og falcken fauk for veidmanns hønd og ørnir krinsa i lufti—
som er so rein og klår som ingen stad elles i verdi,
å ja, me sei me kan sjå når myhanken geispar på Skorve – (*DiS* 16–17)⁸⁰

That is Telemark. Where the people once wandered and made their dwelling, in valleys beside rivers and lakes. Where the fish jumped, where barley turned gold on the hillside, and high up on the moor where the reindeer flew over the moss, and the falcon dived for the hunter's hand and eagles circle in the air—that is so pure and clear as no other place on earth, oh yes, we say we can see when the crane-fly yawns on Skorve.

The use of free verse in “Telemarkin” [Telemark]—unique in Norway in its time—is easy to overlook due to the poem's markedly regional content. As Jan Inge Sørbo writes, “Dersom Aslaug Vaa hadde ein tanke om å smugla moderne eller modernistiske problematikkar inn i ein tilsynelatande tradisjonell lyrikk, lukkast ho altfor godt. Tradisjonalsmen vart oppfatta langt klårare enn dei moderne innslaga” [If Aslaug Vaa had a mind to smuggle modern or modernistic issues into a seemingly traditional poetry, she succeeded far too well. Traditionalism was perceived much more clearly than the modern elements] (Sørbo, “Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 94). However, to read the traditional and the modern in this poem as dichotomous or even distinct is to misunderstand her project. Vaa was conscious of herself as an inventor of tradition as much as its inheritor: It must be kept in mind that the “traditional” material in her verse is shaped by a cosmopolitan poet who had left Telemark long ago, and who herself wrote to Tore Ørjasæter, “Om eg hadde butt i Telemark, hadde eg ikkje kome til å kunne skrive stort, nei ... Korleis skulle eg ha bygt meg upp i ei bygd—i ei stoge ved vegen? Einsleg kvinnfolk. Hu

⁸⁰ All citations of Vaa's poetry are from *Dikt i samling* (1989), abbreviated as *DiS*. All translations in this chapter are my own.

nei” [If I had lived in Telemark ... I would have never been able to write much, no ... How could I have built myself up in a little town—in a little house by the road. Lonely woman. Oh, no] (cited in Mæhle, “*Fann eg dei stigar*” 28).

The poem “Telemarkin” is clearly addressed to the generation that, like Vaa herself, left the region for the wider world. They are depicted taking the train home for visits and wondering if their friends and family who have never left understand the significance the region holds for them. In the poem’s final stanzas, returning to traditional meter, Vaa attempts to rally this generation:

Lat ‘kon minnast dei som skjenkte
av si røynsle, av si ånd!
Tormod kvad og Aasmund tenkte,
forma ut med konstnarhønd,
dette underlege målet,
mjukt som blomen, hardt som stålet.
tak det opp og set det merke,
fullfør dette skaparverket,
unge tele, og ver vak,
open for di eigi sak.
Hugs at vil du andre vinne
må du fram til sjavdeg finne,
røyn på det din styrke, du! (*DiS* 19)

Let us remember those who gave to us from their experience, from their spirit. Tormod recited and Aasmund thought, formed with the hand of an artist this wonderful language, soft as a flower, hard as steel. Take it up and make that mark, fulfill this creative work, young Telemarkan, and be vigilant, open for your own sake. Remember that if you want to win over others, you must discover yourself, rely on your strength!

Tormod here is the reciter of *Draumkvædet*, a vision poem with its roots in the medieval period that was first recorded in Telemark in the mid-19th century. Aasmund is Aasmund Vinje, a journalist and poet from the region best known for demonstrating that *Nynorsk* could be a tool for engaging with continental thought and composing in classical meter.

Here Vaa consciously shapes an idea of the “traditional” as the strength of her generation, a group who might otherwise feel that they are modernity’s outsiders or that their regional culture is something they must leave behind to become modern individuals. Instead, Vaa charges them with retaining and developing both the artistic (“mjukt som blomen”) and reflective (“hardt som stålet”) capabilities of their regional language. This is not a charge to harmonize the traditional with the modern but to cultivate the traditional as the basis for their personal strength. The softness and hardness of their local language suggests its fragility and value but also its resilience and potential as a tool for critique. (As we will find in her later poetry, the knife becomes a metaphor for precise and probing thought.) By writing a poem such as “Telemarkin” in free verse, Vaa provides a demonstration of the task she assigns to her generation.

“Telemarkin” is thus both a realist description of a local region for outsiders and a didactic poem for a generation of rural youth experiencing urbanization and globalization. Over the course of her poetic career, which includes seven poetry collections published from 1934–63, Vaa continually returns to several key ideas about nature, language and poetics: first, that nature

communicates in the form of unarticulated “speech,” that different languages and discourses can be in or out of touch with this form of communication to varying degrees, and, finally, that the degree to which one is in touch with these natural origins of language can determine the degree to which one is free to think and create. This freedom is ultimately linked to the fundamental value of life, especially human life, and hope for the future. However, if these ideas become gradually more articulated throughout Vaa’s collections, they are linked to different poetic forms along the way: Vaa never entirely abandons traditional meter, but she also employs various forms of free verse, the sonnet form, and, in her late work, a kind of imagism. Her poetry thus follows a general trajectory from didacticism to performativity—from telling to showing or enacting.

Although Vaa shared a number of themes and a vocabulary of images with the masculine vitalists of her generation, her work raises several questions. How did she become one of the first women to participate in modern poetry in Norway? How did she uniquely articulate that generation’s preoccupation with (*Nynorsk*) language and its poetic potential? And finally, what can be made of her view of nature, language, and creativity today, in light of recent developments in ecocriticism and eco-poetics?

In order to answer these questions, I will first provide an introduction to Vaa’s biography. This is necessary given that Vaa is not well known outside of Norway and has only recently been reevaluated within it. I will then connect aspects of Vaa’s biography (including her origins in the *bondeklasse* and her gender) to some previous readings of her poetry in order to suggest how ecocriticism and eco-poetics can shed new light on (and potentially motivate new interest in) her work. I will then turn to the view of language and poetics that emerges from Vaa’s essay writing (a notion she calls “poetic thinking”) before connecting it to notions of biosemiotics and creativity in Wendy Wheeler’s *The Whole Creature* (2006). In Aslaug Vaa’s poetics, “situated knowledge” takes the form of attention to unarticulated language in nature, a process that results in creativity, freedom, and an affirmation of the human. This is why, as I will conclude, she sharply critiques the Vigeland sculpture park. Her critique of the park suggests that Vaa’s poetics had practical implications for urban ecologies, including city planning and public art projects. In chapter five, I will return to Vaa’s poetry to see how these ideas are acted out both in content and form, as well as the critiques of masculine vitalism, instrumental rationality, and romantic nationalism her poetry performs. Here, too, an emphasis is placed on art and poetry as positive practices of and within the natural world, rather than attempts to achieve ever more faithful representations of it.

Biography

Vaa was born in 1889 to a prosperous *bonde* family in Telemark, a region of high mountain plateaus. Like Olav Nygard, her father attended *amtsskole*. He also attended agricultural school and met Vaa’s mother at *folkehøyskole*. As such, Vaa’s parents benefitted greatly from expanded educational offerings for members of the *bondeklasse*. According to Mæhle, Vaa’s father was engaged with issues including *folkeopplysning*, language politics, and Norwegian nationalist activism (“*Fann eg dei stigar*” 14). Her father was also known as a good storyteller and singer, and Vaa recalls hearing him and others perform folksongs in their home. Here she describes the impact that old and new traditions had on her poetry, such as *Draumkvædet*, as well as Aasen’s “Gamle Grendi”:

Eg hev eit barneminne um Draumkvædet, eg høyrde det songe av ein av dei gamle kvædarane—og den merkelege oppleving det var sette seg so fast i sinnet at eg på ei vis kom til å føre det eg seinare skjønar som poesi, attende til dette. Og når far song ‘Tidt eg minnest ein gamal gard’ — var det mest som eg trudde at Ivar Aasen måtte vera skyld med vårt heilage kvæde. (cited in Mæhle, “*Fann eg dei stigar*” 15)

I have a childhood memory of “Draumkvædet.” I heard it sung by one of the old reciters—and that strange experience became so firmly rooted in my mind that I in a way came to connect that which I later came to understand as poetry back to this. And when father sang “Tidt eg minnest ein gamal gard” (the first line of Aasen’s “Gamle Grendi” [The old farm])—it was almost as though I believed that Ivar Aasen must belong to the same lineage as our sacred poem.

Vaa’s upbringing took place during a period of uplift for rural people during which education made it possible to celebrate and promote tradition, while also incorporating more recent literature into that tradition. It is worth noting that, to a child’s ears, older folkloric material and Aasen sounded of a piece with one another and that these together formed her idea of the poetic tradition.

Vaa herself attended the equivalent of middle and high school and took her Latin *artium* exam in Christiania in 1909. She took her exams in philosophy at the University in Oslo in 1911. As Mæhle notes, the daughter of a *bonde* with a degree in Latin would have been a rarity in Norway in 1909 (“*Fann eg dei stigar*” 15). In 1911, she married Ola Raknes (1887–1975). Raknes became well-known within Norway as a philologist and *Nynorsk* advocate and internationally as one of the leading proponents of the work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957).⁸¹ Their first trip to Paris made a lasting impression on her. A few years later, they returned to Paris when Raknes became a lecturer in Norwegian at the Sorbonne. At that time, Vaa took classes in literature, art, folklore, history and philosophy. They socialized with a circle of Scandinavian artists and writers, including the Danish poet Sophus Claussen. While Raknes was a lecturer at University College in London from 1921–22, she made only short visits, but they spent 1928–29 in Berlin, where she was exposed to avant-garde theater. Raknes had traveled to Berlin to study at the *Berliner Institut für Psychoanalyse*. Afterwards, he became a clinical psychologist. It was this career change that contributed to the couple’s decision to divorce in 1938. Although Vaa maintained a personal interest in psychology, Vaa’s break with Raknes manifests itself obliquely in her poetry, which treats themes such as strained communication between men and women (e.g., “Menn’skje” [Person], “Sid’beinet” [Adam’s rib]) and overly reductive views of the human psyche (e.g., “Tankekniven” [The thought-knife]) (*DiS* 86; 108-10; 156-57).

Vaa’s career as a poet began in 1926 when she wrote a tribute to the poet Olav Aukrust in *Den 17de Mai (Og ordet var--* 11–12). She stated later that Aukrust’s *Himmelvarden* [The sky beacon, 1919] impressed her so greatly that it discouraged her from writing poetry altogether.

⁸¹ Raknes was also an editor for Det Norske Samlaget and worked with Olav Nygard on the publication of both *Ved vebande* and Nygard’s translations of Robert Burns.

But after her poem appeared in print, Aukrust encouraged her to produce more poetry, especially since there were not yet any women writing poetry in *Nynorsk* (Mæhle, *Frå bygda til verda* 148). Aslaug Vaa published her first poetry collection, *Nord i leite*, in 1934. This made her one of the first women to publish a poetry collection in Norway, along with Halldis Moren Vesaas (1907–95). Grønstøl and Langås note that, while women played an important role in the development of the modern Norwegian novel, women were less active in the genre of lyric, especially in the 19th century (“Naturen, kjærleiken og diktinga” 91). The interwar debuts of Vaa and Moren Vesaas were the forerunners to a series of contributions by women to modernist poetry in Norway.⁸² In addition to writing in *Nynorsk*, Moren Vesaas and Vaa also had their region of origin, Telemark, in common. Grønstøl and Langås argue that this is likely not a coincidence: The traditions of this region, “kjerneområdet for norsk folkedikting og folkemusikk” [the heart of Norwegian folk poetry and folk music], could very well have provided them with a point of entry into poetic composition (“Naturen, kjærleiken og diktinga” 91). If true, then Ivar Aasen’s effort to democratize both learning and literature through *Nynorsk* could be said to have succeeded. However, Vaa not only draws on folk tradition both formally and thematically with apparent ease but also views input from one’s place of origin as a crucial part of the creative process. In this sense, folk poetry traditions and the availability of *Nynorsk* did more than provide her with a point of entry. Local nature and local language play an important role in her poetics, serving a critical potential in the face of language and ideology she saw as increasingly dehumanizing.

Her first three collections, *Nord i leite* [In northern regions, 1934], *Skuggen og strendan* [The shadow and the strand, 1935], and *Villarkonn* [Wild grain, 1936] came out in quick succession. By 1937 she had become well-established as a poet and received a travel stipend, which she used to travel to Angola in what was then Portuguese West Africa. Vaa wrote a series of columns on her travels for *Arbeidermagasinet*, and the trip sparked a lifelong interest in (especially West) African culture and literature.⁸³ Vaa would continue to work as both a playwright, journalist and critic—her essays (published mainly in *Arbeiderbladet* in the 1950s) deal with humanism, psychology, sociocultural linguistics, anthropology, and poetics—themes that also appear in various forms throughout the roughly thirty years during which she was active as a poet.

In 1938, she debuted as a playwright, but she published one more collection before the occupation of Norway, *På vegkanten* [On the roadside, 1939]. Her first four collections contain poems based on motifs from local folklore and quite often deal with gender and erotic love. The last three, *Fotefår* [Footprints, 1947], *Skjenkarsveinens visur* [The cupbearer’s songs, 1954] and *Bustader* [Dwelling places, 1963] depart from folklore motifs and become more international in

⁸² Moren Vesaas’s *Harper og dolk* was published in 1929. Marie Takvam is another poet who wrote in *Nynorsk* and contributed to poetic modernism in Norway. She debuted in 1952 with *Dåp under sju stjerner*. (Takvam hailed from Ivar Aasen’s home region, Sunnmøre.) The representatives of a parallel movement in *Bokmål* were Inger Hagerup, who published *Jeg gikk meg vill i skogen* in 1939 and Gunvor Hofmo who debuted in 1946 with *Jeg vil hjem til menneskene*.

⁸³ Vaa would work on the play *Honningfuglen og leoparden* [The honeybird and the leopard] for several decades before it was published in 1965 and performed in 1966. Its protagonist is an African doctor, educated in northern Europe and married to a white woman, who returns to Africa and grapples with his position between two cultures.

orientation: several poems incorporate African settings or motifs; she writes in sonnet form in *Skjenkarsveinens visur*, and these collections exhibit more influence from international modernism. She does, however, vacillate between poetic forms that utilize traditional ballad meter and experimental forms of free verse throughout her poetic production.

Jan Inge Sørbø writes that *folkedikting* was quite simply for Vaa “den forma ho skriv i” [the form she wrote in] (“Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 93). He argues that, rather than a form of nostalgia, her “dialektprega nynorsk” [dialect-inflected *Nynorsk*] represents an effort to deal with modern philosophical and existential problems within her own context (“Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 98). While I appreciate Sørbø’s effort to disassociate Vaa’s interest in folklore and folk composition from romanticism, he downplays the significance of language in general and dialect in particular in Vaa’s poetics. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Vaa had a theory of language and poetics that became more explicit in the 1950s, although it manifests itself in less articulated forms in her earlier collections as well. Although one essay in particular, “Litt om poetisk tankegang” [Some thoughts on the poetic thought process] is famous in this regard, when taken together, her essays on language best indicate her view of how language evolves and the value of linguistic diversity. The importance of this development and diversity to Vaa can be productively connected to the idea of biosemiotics and creativity described by Wendy Wheeler, making Vaa a kind of “vitalist stopover” on the way to contemporary ecopoetics. Before discussing Vaa’s poetics, however, I will first discuss the view of her relationship to tradition as well as the view of her gender in Norwegian literary scholarship in order to suggest why ecocriticism and ecopoetics are useful frameworks in which to reexamine her work.

Vaa in Norwegian Literary Criticism

As her biography demonstrates, Vaa is markedly international in her orientation—arguably more so than either Aasen or Nygard, neither of whom traveled outside of Norway. As can be seen in the previous chapter on Nygard, it was common for Norwegian critics of the mid-20th century to valorize early *Nynorsk* poets for their ability to break free from the confined traditions of the *bygd* in order to create something of universal relevance. For example, in 1952, some prominent members of the Norwegian social and cultural scene petitioned the government for a stipend on Vaa’s behalf. They wrote, “Ho har synt eit frodigt lyrisk talent med røter i eit tradisjonsrikt telemarkisk kulturmiljø. Or gamal lokal-intim vokstergrunn greiner hennar dikting seg ut i ålmen og universell art, moderne i psykologien, mangslungen og levande” [She has displayed a fruitful lyrical talent with roots in the cultural environment of Telemark, rich with tradition. From old local-intimate fertile ground, her poetry branches out in an accessible and universal manner, modern in psychology, varied and living] (cited in Mæhle, “*Fann eg dei stigar*” 29). This quotation is striking in that it represents Vaa’s lyric itself as a plant, a gesture that naturalizes her poetry, while also potentially diminishing the effort involved in producing it.⁸⁴ It also suggests

⁸⁴ The analogy between rural poets and plants appears frequently in Norwegian literary history and criticism. To give an anecdotal example, at an event in 2016 at the Norwegian National Library commemorating another rural poet, Tor Jonsson, a panelist suggested Jonsson suffered psychologically in

that, while facilitated by its “roots” in local tradition, the value of her work is to be found in its “universal” applicability. Vaa is thus praised for her ability to transcend her humble origins.

The gesture of “naturalizing” *bondekultur* is by now a familiar one. In chapter one and two, I discussed how the view of the *bonde* as close to nature is often accompanied by the notion that *bondekultur* is static and passive, and thus readily available as a resource for the superior cultural work of nation-building. I have argued that Aasen was sensitive to such a view, and that his view of peasant culture as dynamic and active was informed in part by locally situated knowledge that disrupts the nature/culture binary. In Nygard’s case, I have argued that his meta-romantic critique of the pursuit of aesthetic “transcendence” is conducted through attention to dynamic processes in nature that question boundaries of inside/outside the human. In the case of Vaa, the problem of being reduced to nature because of her peasant status is compounded by the problem of being similarly reduced because of her gender.

As I mentioned in chapter two, observations about the reduction of peasant and colonial other to nature followed on the heels of the observation by ecofeminists that the nature/culture binary also collapses woman into nature.⁸⁵ In the application cited above, Vaa’s talent is described as *frodigt*, an adjective suggestive of female fertility. The traditions of Telemark are described not just as *lokal* but also *intim*. This suggests an association of tradition with emotions and the body, rather than reason and intellect.

The idea of woman as passive matter, in contrast to the dynamic (and competitive) creativity of men, had a prominent position in the vitalist aesthetics in vogue in the first half of the 20th century. As such, it is hardly surprising that we see such a view reflected in evaluations of Vaa. Vassenden argues that Vaa’s view of woman is similarly essentialist, in that it associates woman with earth and her creative capacity with fertility, thus “internalizing” the capacity for creativity represented in masculine vitalism (*Norsk vitalisme* 462–63). The critique of Vaa’s “feminist vitalism” as essentialist echoes a critique aimed at many early ecofeminists (Marland 852–53). Indeed, language strikingly similar to that used in the above citation from Vaa’s stipend application appears throughout her poetic oeuvre. For Vaa, poems do “grow,” and it is of utmost importance what kind of “ground” they grow out of. However, I will argue in this chapter that rather than a feminist vitalism that is merely the opposite side of the masculine vitalist coin, Vaa’s view of language and poetics presents an account of language and creativity that does not accept a nature/culture binary. Rather, for Vaa, culture, language and poetry are the result of a creative process that involves contact with tradition and nature as well as reflection. In this sense, Vaa’s notions of creativity and freedom could be related to Arne Næss’s concept of “self-realization,” which he defines as “realizing inherent potentialities” (Næss 86). Self-realization is a process of growth (or maturation as Næss terms it) culminating in “the fulfillment of potentials that each of us has, but that are never the same for any two living beings” (82). To be free, for Vaa, can perhaps be thought of as not being externally or internally impeded in the process of self-realization either from without or from within—either by social and political relationships or for lack of concepts or language that can facilitate this process. Moreover, as Næss notes, self-realization is a way of expressing the “ultimate goal or purpose of

Oslo because he couldn’t tolerate being “omplanta” [transplanted]. The association between Ivar Aasen and plant life is described in chapter one (“Ivar Aasen: Benign Naturalist?”).

⁸⁵ See chapter two, “Negotiated Nature.”

being” without proposing a finite answer to that question, or a purpose “outside or beyond the world” (94).

The result of this creative freedom is thus not the replication of the old but the production of something new. This newness is contrasted with a kind of narrow repetition of settled wisdom, expressed in the form of abstract language. For Vaa, the *bygde*, its nature, language and poetic traditions are neither something to be overcome nor something to retreat to at the expense of the wider world. Rather, the home region represents a critical position one can take, not unlike Haraway’s notion of the critique that is enabled by a position “from below”—that is, from a subjugated position, or, in the case of rural Norway, a place that has been left behind in some respects by modernity. For Vaa, the rural is a position from which to perform a critique of modernity, with particular attention to gender, nature, and language.

Leif Mæhle, a scholar who served as Vaa’s longtime interpreter and advocate, thus provides a welcome update to the quotation above: “Godt festa i norsk tradisjon og lokal kultur og med vid orientering i europeisk åndshistorie og samtidskultur førte tankane henne ofte inn på originale, utradisjonelle vegar og til overraskande konklusjonar” [Well-grounded in Norwegian tradition and local culture and with a broad orientation in European intellectual history and contemporary culture, her thoughts often travelled along original, untraditional paths and to surprising conclusions] (“*Fann eg dei stigar*” 31). This is the conclusion that several other scholars have come to in the early 21st century, as Vaa’s poetry and poetics have received new attention due to her engagement with questions of gender and aesthetics (Grønstøl and Langås, “Naturen, kjærleiken og diktinga”; Grønstøl and Langås, “Dikt og tanke”; Hopp), her participation in broader European intellectual trends and critique of instrumental rationalism (Sørbo, “Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt”), and her place in international modernist poetics (Tysdahl). Yet, while Hopp notes the “ecofeminist” orientation of her work, Vaa has yet to be examined in conjunction with ecofeminist theory. While she certainly could be read alongside early ecofeminist theory now largely dismissed as “essentialist,” I will endeavor in this chapter to read her alongside the work of Wendy Wheeler, a feminist “new materialist” who provides an argument for the biological basis of culture in her book *The Whole Creature*. Wheeler, like a number of ecofeminists, deems it important to move past the notion of a nature/culture binary.⁸⁶ She does this through reference to recent developments in evolutionary biology and the notion of biosemiotics, defined as “the study of signs and significance in all living things” (19). Although Vaa did not have access to the biology Wheeler writes about, Wheeler’s work is still helpful for reading Vaa because the two share an interest in unarticulated language in nature and its role in bodily and mental processes of learning and creativity. They also see these as critical to preventing human creative potential from being limited by economic and political systems. Wheeler’s work can also be seen as a contribution to a larger conversation about language and nature in ecocriticism, particularly in the field of ecopoetics, as I will discuss in chapter five. The following chapters can thus be seen as part of an ongoing effort to reevaluate Vaa’s work and its participation in Norwegian literary history by paying particular attention to her theory of language and creativity in light of recent insights about nature and culture derived from ecofeminism, while also considering what her personal poetics can contribute to the notion of

⁸⁶ For a discussion of this, see chapter two, “Negotiated Nature.”

ecopoetics specifically, as well as to the idea of the lyric and its social function in the Norwegian context.

“Poetic thinking”: Language and Poetics in Vaa’s Essayistic Production

The essay in which Vaa most explicitly lays out the concept of “poetic thinking” appears in a festschrift dedicated to Tore Ørjasæter, a *Nynorsk* poet who influenced both Nygard and Vaa. In the paragraph that is most often cited, it is easy to see a connection between Vaa and philosophical vitalism:

Poetisk tenkjing byggjer på kravet om erkjenning av det opphavlege, og på evna til å sjå—sjå skapningen ikring seg og kjenne seg eitt med den. Kvar dag, kvar augneblink blir ein sett på prøve om ein stettar det kravet til å rydje og byggje. Likesæla for kravet vil føre til ‘Drakesjøen.’ Poetisk tenkjing er so fjert frå all leik med ord og effekt, at ho er underlagd strengaste lov: Der er eit mål å nå, der sjelene trår mot si fullkome. Fornekting av dette fører til angsten for den nedvurdering av menneskja som grip meir og meir om seg i vår tid. Det sterkaste ein kan møte denne angsten med, er å halde levande i seg ynsket om å ‘vera ein draum i Guds hjarte’ og soleis vera i harmoni med alt det skapte og gjenom det gjera livsviljen i stand til å yte seg og bli verdig. Gjera livsviljen fri til å vera i nært samband med seg sjølv og livet ikring seg. (“Litt om poetisk tankegang” 94–95)

Poetic thinking builds on the requirement to recognize the original/primeval, and on the ability to see—see creation around you and feel that you are one with it. Every day, every moment you are put to the test of satisfying the requirement to order and build. Indifference to this requirement will lead to “the sea of dragons.” Poetic thinking is so removed from all play with word and effect that it is subject to the strictest law: There is a goal to reach, wherein souls move toward perfection/completion. Denial of this leads to angst for the devaluation of humanity that is spreading more and more in our time. The strongest thing you can meet this angst with is to keep alive within yourself the wish to ‘be a dream in God’s heart’ and so be in harmony with all creation and through that enable the will-to-life to realize itself and become worthy. Make your will-to-life free to be in close contact with yourself and with the life around you.

“Vitalism” as Vassenden defines it is “en forestilling om at alt levende stammer fra en særlig livskraft, en skapende impuls som ikke lar seg forklare ut fra mekanismens lover. Vitalisme betegner også tendensen til å dyrke kraft og vitalitet, oftest med utgangspunkt i livet slik det viser seg i og gjennom nature” [A conception that all living things originate from a particular life-force, a creative impulse that cannot be explained by means of mechanistic laws. Vitalism also designates the tendency to cultivate power and vitality, often with a basis in life as it manifests itself in and through nature] (*Norsk vitalisme* 13). Vitalism performs a critique of rationalism, identifying instead instinct, intuition, or the irrational as the means of putting oneself in touch with this *livskraft* [life-force]. Vassenden associates Vaa’s philosophical vitalism most closely with Henri Bergson (whom Ola Raknes translated into Norwegian) (*Norsk vitalisme* 464, 511). Bergson critiques Western civilization for its emphasis on intellect, which both rejects instinct and creates a contradiction between body and spirit (*Norsk vitalisme* 82). Rather than

through the cultivation of *livskraft* or irrationality, this contradiction can be overcome through intuition, a combination of instinct and reflection (*Norsk vitalisme* 82). Bergsonian vitalism replaces fulfillment through oneness with the Christian God with oneness with “life.” “Life” in this model thus tends toward a metaphysical, unknowable “essence,” rather than an observable property of the material world.

As Vassenden notes, vitalistic philosophy and imagery (if not ideology, per se) were extremely popular with the generation of poets writing in *Nynorsk* in the early 20th century,⁸⁷ so it is not surprising that we find elements of this in Vaa as well. For example, the description of “poetic thinking” above emphasizes “oneness” with creation. It rejects wordplay (perhaps as too detached an exercise) in favor of the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. This fulfillment is attained through harmony with creation and the benign expression of one’s *livsvilje* as a property shared with other living things. However, there are a few reasons not to take this quotation as the definitive account of Vaa’s poetics. Vassenden notes that this is a late (1956) articulation of her views, and there is a likelihood that it is *etterpåkløkk*—that is, a retrospective justification of her previous work (*Norsk vitalisme* 465). He does not note, however, that this paragraph follows directly after an excerpt from one of Ørjasæter’s poems and cites from the stanza multiple times (“Drakesjøen,” “ein draum i Guds hjarte”). For this reason, it is perhaps best to view this paragraph as a favorable reading of Ørjasæter’s poetics, rather than a strict formulation of Vaa’s own. Vassenden also notes that the optimism in this form of vitalist philosophy (especially the benign will-to-life that does not hinder any other forms of life) would be hard to maintain after the Second World War (*Norsk vitalisme* 85). Vaa’s explanation does include the idea of *angst* and especially the *nedvurdering* [devaluation] of humanity that greatly concerns her in her later work. But it is also worth noting that Ørjasæter himself published only one postwar collection of poetry, *Livsens tre* [Tree of life] (1945). Vaa, who published three collections after the war, revised her worldview and poetics in response to the war more than Ørjasæter did. One would not expect to find a full articulation of this postwar view in an analysis of Ørjasæter’s poetics.

But the main problem with taking the above quotation as the definitive statement on Vaa’s poetics is that there is nothing in it about language, an important theme in her poetry and the topic of a number of her other essays in the 1950s. Just a few paragraphs later in the same essay (and not in direct response to a poem by Ørjasæter), she writes:

Den sokalla poetiske tanken må stadig arbeide med abstraksjonar, på same tid som han aldri må sleppe det konkrete grunnlaget. Han må ikkje tumle med symbol utan å ha klårt for seg kva desse symbol er runne ut frå. På same tid må han vera fri, fri både for abstraksjonen og symbolet, utan det vil han ikkje ha evne til å kaste seg ut på dei hundre favnars djup, dukke etter det utenkte. Fri til å strekkje seg ut over sine egne grensur, for det er fyrst der, i det lovande land, at han vil finne freden. (“Litt om poetisk tankegang” 95)

The so-called poetic thought must constantly work with abstractions, while at the same time never letting go of their concrete basis. It must not frolic with symbols without

⁸⁷ In *Norsk vitalisme*, see chapter five on Kristofer Uppdal, seven on Aukrust, Ørjasæter, and Nygard, as well as chapter ten on Tarjei Vesaas.

having a clear idea of what these symbols have emerged from. At the same time, it must be free, free of both abstraction and symbol. Without that it will not have the ability to throw itself out upon the depth of a hundred fathoms, dive into the *unthought*. Free to stretch itself beyond its own borders, for it is first there, in the promised land, that it will find peace.

This paragraph articulates a key concern in Vaa's work: The difficulty of working in two discourses—the abstract and the concrete. For Vaa, the poet's job is to create a sense of contact between the two discourses. By seeking the "origin" of symbols or abstract language, the poet is able to be truly creative—to discover thoughts previously "unthought" and thus extend beyond the borders of her own mind and/or subjectivity. This departs somewhat from a typical vitalist philosophy because the "essence" of life Vaa describes is "concrete" and observable, if not possible to fully articulate in language. As we will see throughout this chapter the "concrete basis" to which Vaa refers is often found in nature and natural processes. Moreover, it is often dialect that best creates contact with this "concrete basis" because it is closest to its origins in a particular environment and to the unarticulated speech of nature.

The observable "concrete basis" of language is made apparent by her other terms for "poetic thinking," which include "organic" and "musical thinking" (Mæhle, "Om 'poetisk tenking'" 139; Vaa, "Litt om poetisk tankegang" 92). "Musical thinking" can be defined by its opposite, "å turrdikte" [to compose dryly], which she explains is a term from the "god gamal diktartadisjon" in Setedalen in Telemark [good old poetic tradition] ("Litt om poetisk tankegang" 92). A poet is said to *turrdikte* when there is no tune to his poem, nor does the poem bring to mind a traditional tune it could be sung to. Because recitation in song is really what poetry is in this tradition, a *turrdiktar* [dry composer] is really no poet at all. Rather, poetic thinking is "den som all poesi kan førast attende til, anten han gjev seg uttrykk i ord eller i tonar, i form eller i fargar" [that which all poetry can lead back to, whether it expresses itself in words or in melodies, in forms or in colors] ("Litt om poetisk tankegang" 92). Even when it expresses abstractions, poetry shouldn't lose touch with this concrete basis.

This idea of the musicality of language, whether by reference to tradition or song in the natural world, manifests itself in Vaa's poetry in a variety of forms. In her early collections, she compares thought or language to the sound of wind and weather or to the blooms of trees carried on the wind; for example, from *Nord i leite*: "Drus det ut utivi for vind og ver / som hugskoti gjennom hugen din fer" [It was driven out upon the wind and weather, as thoughts travel through your mind] ("Nivelkinn," *DiS* 43); "... endå du musa det so det kom som ein lindeblom" [... even though you whisper it so that it arrived like a linden blossom] ("Det draus lindeblomar" *DiS* 44). Flowers also speak frequently in Vaa, as in "Det talar under haselrunnar" or "Sid'beinet" [There are voices under the hazel bushes; Adam's rib] (further discussed in chapter five; *DiS* 46; 108–11). Often natural or physical phenomena are credited with articulating things that words cannot, as in "Elvesteinen" [The river stone]: "Og bed ei bøn / som ein ikkje veit ord til / men som fer gjennom holdet som eld og frost" [And prayed a prayer that you didn't know the words to but that ran through your flesh like fire and frost] (*DiS* 103). While sounds and processes in nature are portrayed as communication, visible processes in nature are often represented as writing. An early example is the poem "Marskveld" [March evening]: "No svånar daggullet ned, og dei / sjønnur stig ut / og på kvelden skriv dei navnet åt / den ljoshærde gut –" [Now the gold of day subsides, and the shadows emerge and upon the evening they write the name of the light-haired boy] (*DiS* 160). While this is a romantic gesture (the shadows remind the speaker of

a lost love), Vaa will later use the motif of waves or branches writing in a way that draws attention to the materiality of writing (see chapter five, “Biosemiotic Imagism”).

While many of these earlier comparisons of natural process to speech or writing are likewise romantic, a poem such as “Haustsongen” [The autumn song, 1939] more clearly indicates the direction in which Vaa’s view of language and nature is headed—toward a critique of the “stiffening” or increasing abstraction of language and subsequent devaluation of both human and nature. The first four stanzas begin with sounds in nature, some set alongside human sounds produced by the harvest: “Det syng i lufti – / Er det fuglan? ... Det singlar i konnet, / vinden rister / lutande aks ... Frostnotti mullar / stille tonar / som broste glas” [There is singing in the air – is it a bird? ... The grain chimes, the wind shakes its drooping heads ... The frost nights mutter quiet tunes like broken glass] (*DiS* 194–95). Human beings are said to breathe these sounds in, where they reach the brain and “nører livet, / tender elden / når hugen kolnar” [nourish life, light a fire when the mind cools] (*DiS* 195). But the poem goes on to lament that “I denne vrengde verdi / døyr klangen, / stivnar til hikst” [In this twisted world the sound dies, stiffens into a sob] (*DiS* 196). It concludes with a call to listen and “stemme viljen etter songen” in order to achieve peace and harmony [tune your will to the song] (*DiS* 196–97). This is a vision that Vaa fails to maintain after 1945, and her later poetry is less didactic in its presentation of a nature that signifies. Nevertheless, these poems illustrate the frequency with which she draws these comparisons between human language and signification in nature and begins to suggest the revivifying potential of the latter.

In the essay “Metamorphosen i målet” [Metamorphosis in language], Vaa describes “cultured” language as the product of a long process whereby language transforms from a utilitarian means of communication to an artistic means of expressing subjective thoughts and feelings. But language does not leave behind what Vaa calls “plogfori” [the furrow] on its journey to “altaret” [the altar]; rather, a “kulturmål” [cultured language] is most effective when it derives from “den kjelda som dei sermerkte vokstervilkår på ein serleg stad kan gjeva” [the source that the unique conditions for growth in a specific place can provide]. Just as the development of language is influenced by its environment, so too is the mind “forma av stad og høve” [formed by place and circumstance]. Development from the concrete to the abstract/symbolic is both spurred and guided by “tonen, musikken” or “fonetikk” [tone, music; phonetics]. Musicality seems to provide the criteria by which language is judged for its aptness and intelligibility along the way. According to Vaa, words and expressions are “tested” in “ein atmosfære som er skapt av utveljing, av trongen til gyldighet og til form, om ein ikkje liksom godt kan seia at denne atmosfæren skapest av kunstnarinstinkt i menneskjesinnet” [an atmosphere created by discretion, of the requirements of validity and of form, if one cannot just as well say that this atmosphere is created by the artistic instinct in the human mind]. Thus, unlike accounts of Vaa (or other *Nynorsk* poets such as Nygard) in which the confines of local dialect are transcended to attain the realm of the symbolic, the ability to produce novel, “expressive” language arises from “den faste grunnen i eit målføre og den utveljande evna som stadig aukast ved at vedkommande dyrkar sitt eige mål” [stable grounding in a dialect and a discerning ability that improves steadily as the individual cultivates his/her own language]. One’s *målføre* provides a set of both emotional/psychological and rational criteria (described as “utvalgskritisk” [selectively critical]) by which novel instances of language can be judged.

Rather than making the case for a version of local language as the basis for a national standard (as in Aasen’s nation-building project), for Vaa, dialect and language diversity provide a richer fodder for creative endeavors and a better basis for responding to and incorporating new

impulses in a globalizing world. For example, in the essay “Millom setervegen og sementen” [Between the shieling path and the cement, 1956], Vaa proposes that urbanization and globalization can occur without being dehumanizing, if contact with the past is not lost. This can happen in urban planning, as well as language pedagogy. Vaa’s first example is the preservation of *seterveger*, or traditional paths to and within former pastureland, in a newly built Oslo suburb. Along with the spaces designated as “friarealer” [open spaces], these reminders of the past create a sense of “einskap” [unity] by establishing a connection to the place’s social history and incorporating nonhuman nature into an otherwise built space. Her other example is a set of radio interviews featuring youth from northern Norway. She marvels at the youths’ ability to discuss current social and political issues, as well as international artistic currents, such as jazz, all while preserving their distinctive regional dialect and local traditions. It is the grounding these youths have in their home language, she speculates, that gives them the security to embrace the wider world: “Det som trengst, er at det er noko, at der er stoff, noko som kan feste og noko som er verd å strekkje seg etter” [That which is needed is that there is something, that there is material there, something that can provide security and something that is worth striving for].

Dialect, and its accompanying connection to nature and history, provides a sense of structure and continuity that ultimately facilitates creativity and adaptation. However, Vaa warns against a too-strict adherence to rules. Language is and should be flexible, in her model. For example, in the essay “Individet og fellesskapet” [The individual and the community], Vaa explains how, after living in Oslo for a while, she began to shift between “riks og lands” [*Riksmål/Bokmål* and *Landsmål/Nynorsk*] depending on her audience and even found herself writing in *Bokmål* without really intending to. She regards this as “ei glede, ei kjensle av rikdom—at no åtte eg litt av Slotssparken og bjørkan på Grünerløkka, som eg åtte litt av bjørkelidan i heimbygdi mi” [a joy, a sense of wealth—that now I possessed a little of the palace park and the birch in Grünerløkka [a neighborhood in east Oslo], just as I possessed a little of the birch grove in my home village]. Although, as a practitioner of and advocate for *Nynorsk*, she writes that changes to standard usage can be frustrating, she warns that the “ivory tower” in which standard language and linguistic theory reside can be limiting: “Det kunne vera ikkje so lite av både åreforkalking og autoritetstru gøymt av der inne i det elfenbeinstårnet. At tankan tok til å stivne. Når tanken er daud, gøymer han seg av i ordet, og gjer det ogso daudt. Er tanken levande, sprengjer han daude råmur” [There can be more than a little of both calcification of the arteries and faith in authority hidden up there in the ivory tower. Thought tends to stiffen. When thought is dead, it hides itself away within words, and makes them dead also. If thought is alive, it breaks dead frames]. The metaphor that limited thoughts or language are stiffened or calcified while free and creative thought is alive is a common one in Vaa’s poetry. “Dead” thought has typically been interpreted as (masculine) instrumental rationality, a reductive view of life in general and the human in particular. However, here it is clear that a monolingual society or attempts to keep language “pure” from social or historical change can also kill thought.

Vaa does not, then, see dialect as having a mystical connection to nature in general but rather an evolutionary relationship to its particular region of origin. These contacts are made, in part, through contact with unarticulated forms of communication in nature, such as birdsong, and the “music” of wind and water. Social norming can help to preserve this “musicality” even as language changes. Should a user leave this origin or make contact with new influences, dialect will also change accordingly. Because this is not a metaphysical understanding of language, but rather a theory of semiotics and creativity, we can perhaps regard it as a “stopover” on the way to a semiotics based in evolutionary science, such as the one put forth by Wendy Wheeler.

“Poetic thinking” and Biosemiotics

The aim of Wheeler’s *The Whole Creature* is to present a biological argument for the “fundamental sociality” of human beings. Wheeler relies on developments in biology in the second half of the 20th century, especially complexity science and ideas such as epigenetic inheritance. These developments participate in a movement that has taken place in evolutionary biology from reductionism to a recognition of the role of complexity and emergence in living systems across the 20th and into the 21st century. In this more recent account of living systems, “sociality can be seen as firmly rooted in an account of evolution that sees it as a process of symbiogenetic co-operative communication (from the cell all the way up), with the consequent emergence of more complex levels of life” (Wheeler 13). “Communication” for Wheeler is a capability not only of humans but all living things (16). Within the humanities, Wheeler thus faults the “linguistic turn” for placing too much emphasis on “articulated language” at the expense of other ways of communicating (16). While words are powerful, she specifies, “they are one aspect of semiotic communication amongst other, unconscious and ‘gestural,’ ones. The focus on abstract conceptual knowledge articulated in written or spoken language tends to obscure or occlude this” (17).⁸⁸ She proposes *biosemiotics* as an alternative approach, one in which communication by verbal as well as nonverbal means is the subject of study (19). This potentially clears the way not only for animal studies as part of cultural studies but also the study of biological responses to literature and culture, especially since Wheeler focuses on the ill-effects that an atomistic view of human beings can have on their physical and emotional health.

She also provides a view of creativity and culture that rejects a nature/culture binary and suggests a biological basis for language not far from Vaa’s own language theory. “Languages,” she states, “are not themselves properly understood as simply alternatives to a realist ontology; they themselves have a material history and are evolutionary ... Articulate language is an evolutionary accomplishment in which the semiosis that is apparent in all nature achieves a new, and more complex, level of articulation” (19). This is a view in which human communication differs from communication in nature not in kind but only in complexity. Part of this complexity is the advent of “abstract conceptual thought” (19).

As we have seen, Vaa similarly thinks of abstract language and thought as the result of a kind of evolutionary process that occurs in the context of a particular natural and a social environment. But she also expresses a concern that abstract language that has become too distant from its concrete origins begins to limit creativity. To her, this overreliance on abstraction can facilitate a reductive view of the world. This is in keeping with Wheeler’s general observation about the view of creativity in the humanities, which she argues has always rejected reductionism and mechanism, seeing creativity instead as the “emergent” property of repetition of the familiar together with a receptive encounter with difference (29–30). According to Wheeler,

⁸⁸ Wheeler also rejects radical forms of constructionism that would deny the significance of biology: As she writes, “Human and natural biology are palpably *not* human constructs, either mastered or made” (16).

contemporary biology confirms that the process of evolution, rather than being determined by DNA, “is dependent upon the creative symbiosis of (initially microbial) separate organisms”—that is, an “encounter between similarity and difference” (133). Wheeler describes this as “process open to the other” (133).

Vaa’s account of creativity in “Litt om poetisk tankegang” and of openness to global impulses in “Millom sementen og setervegen” can be said to follow this same model. Grounding in language through repetitive social and environmental processes allows the mind, when introduced to new impulses, to incorporate them and create something both intelligible and new, rather than losing all sense of orientation and potentially rejecting them. In this sense, also like Wheeler, Vaa connects creativity to freedom. While a focus on abstract conceptual thinking can lead to an “underestimation” of “non-linguistic (conscious and unconscious) semiosis” (108), “flourishing consists in the richness of our semiosis: our contacts, our ability to be heard and responded to, our sense of being supported and effective in a rich number of ways” (109-110). Vaa’s poetry is full of instances in which wordless things signify, as well as instances in which people, lacking words, are not heard or responded to. This blocking out of certain signals because they are not sent in a socially recognized way, leads to the devaluation of humanity that worries Vaa.

In contrast, the restoration of communication is associated with a restoration of hope in both Wheeler and Vaa: while earlier stages in the evolution of creation and language are not lost, the creative process allows humans to bring that earlier learning “to bear upon the future” (124). Wheeler writes that creativity or “semiotic freedom . . . is thus very closely tied to the human experience of hope” (124). A narrow idea of rationality limits what it is possible to think and thus limits creativity and growth. At least in her essays from the 1950s, Vaa refers to a longing or tendency toward life to mean something like creativity or even “semiotic freedom.” In the essay “History og miljø” [History and environment], she writes that there are periods when a set of concepts becomes dominant. This is sometimes positive, in that those concepts are helpful in facilitating understanding, but it can also lead to “sløvhet og vanegang” [laziness and conventionality]. At those times, according to Vaa, one begins to feel “ein løynd lengsel etter å kjenne det spire i seg, og ver med i voksterlivet ikring seg” [a secret longing to feel a germination within you, and to participate in the growth of living things that surrounds you]. Vaa uses “lengsel” [longing] or “drift” [tendency], words that might be familiar in a vitalist context for describing the pull of a metaphysical life force. The pull Vaa describes, however, is not toward unity with a life force but toward participation in a creative process that can liberate the individual from “eit altfor vel tilrettelagt vaneliv” [an all too well-established life of habit]. While symbolism and abstraction may be higher points in this evolutionary scale, language also risks becoming “dry” and solidified at this stage. The ultimate problem with this is that it prevents language from being a tool for novel thought. The mind gets stuck in predetermined patterns, and this limits freedom and flourishing. As we saw in the poem with which I opened this chapter, “Telemarkin,” Vaa rejects the idea of dialect as something that rejects change in favor of “the traditional,” depicting it instead as something that can help to foster development or creativity. Later in her poetics, this is expressed as a capacity of poetry in general; poetry informed by the “musicality” of dialect is perhaps the epitome of this process.

Poetry thus plays a privileged role for Vaa, as it does for Wheeler (as well as in many foundational ecocritical texts). Wheeler notes that conditions often seen as key to creativity, such as a well-nurtured environment with many inputs, a state of receptivity, and a willingness to break rules, can be seen as present in the evolution of biological systems of well (146–47). “For

creativity to occur,” she writes, “the linear grammatical logic of language abstracted from experience must give way to its earlier iconic substrates in the tacit experiential knowledge which lies in the body-mind” (147). She credits poetry not only with performing this “giving way” to tacit knowledge of things like metrical and sound patterns, but also often explicitly guiding the reader through a process of reflection than yields new insights. Thus, she argues, “poetry materialises and instantiates the process of human discovery in general” (147). Likewise, for Vaa, poetry is a kind of special case of symbolic or abstract language in its ability to maintain contact with the concrete experiences of the “body-mind,” while also reaching out to the unknown. In a handwritten note probably from the 1950s, Vaa writes, “Grunnelementet i poesien skulle vera tanken og naturen, dei jamsides, ikkje den eine fyrst og den andre etter, ikkje den eine som grunnlag for den andre. Men verkande saman, slik at det skaper eit nytt plan—dvs. det poetiske plan” [The foundational element in poetry should be thought and nature, side by side, not the one first and the other after, not the one as the basis for the other. But working together, such that they create a new plane—that is to say, the poetic plane] (cited in Mæhle, “Om ‘poetisk tenking’” 138–39). In this sense, the poem itself is “poetic thinking”—not an explanation of it, but the thing itself, “slik at sjølve diktet med sitt biletspråk og konstrastar skaper ei ‘poetisk tenking’ som blir ei ny erkjenningssakt” (cited in Mæhle, “Om ‘poetisk tenking’” 139). As we will later see, Vaa’s approach to poetic form changes in accordance with this idea, as her work tends to move from a didactic explanation of poetic thought to formal enactments of it.

Conclusion

Both Wheeler and Vaa have a theory of language in which all living things are viewed as semiotic; human language is taken to have evolved in the context of that rich semiotic environment, which includes both natural and social inputs. In order to think “non-reductively,” they both suggest that human beings have to return to the semiotics of nonhuman forms of life. For Wheeler, biosemiotics allows her to push back against the “linguistic turn” and its exclusion of the material from the realm of meaning. It is also important in pushing back against neoliberalism for its conception of human beings “*primarily* as isolated and monadic self-interested individuals” (18). While Vaa shares Wheeler’s concern about the ideological hegemony of economic systems (as we will see in chapter five), a conception of nature as semiotic also allows her to distance rural “tradition” and an aesthetics that is attentive to nature from either National Romanticism or the national socialist ideology that sought to appropriate Norway and the *bondeklasse*. In Vaa’s view, “tradition” is not static; rather, it provides a stable basis from which to encounter others and to change. Similarly, the goal of contact with nature is not to be subsumed by a greater force but to be inspired by the vitality of nature to develop one’s own creative capacity in novel ways.

As should be apparent from the examples used in this chapter, Vaa’s poetics is articulated in essays that engage with questions of practical social concern, such as how written language reform ought to be carried out, how the new and old can be balanced in remote parts of Norway, and how urban development can be carried out in a way that supports human wellbeing. One of the best examples of this is Vaa’s critique of the Vigeland sculpture park. This essay, “Kunst og ideologi” [Art and ideology], both clarifies her poetics and articulates its practical implications.

Vaa published her review of the Vigeland sculpture park on July 31, 1945. (Norway was liberated from occupying forces on May 8, 1945.) She writes that she had expressed misgivings about the ideology expressed in Vigeland’s artwork to another member of the *Arbeiderparti*.

Devoting the entire park to Vigeland's work was a kind of "kunstdiktatur" [aesthetic dictatorship] in her opinion; moreover, "Nesten alle figurene virker som symbol på brutal makt" [Almost all the figures seem like symbols of brute force]. In Vaa's account, her concerns were dismissed: "Nei, vi var ikke så nøye med ideologien den gang" [No, we were not so careful about ideology back then]. She goes on to lament, "I dag er vi blitt våre. Vi har kjent det på kroppen hva det kan komme ut av en falsk ideologi, også i kunst" [Today, we have become more vigilant. We have felt upon our bodies what can come of a false ideology, even in art]. However, her critique of the park is not just about the glorification of "brute force," but also the way in which the work dominates the natural space that it occupies. Vaa expresses this in terms of gendered violence: the park gives the "disheartening" feeling that "her er naturen voldtatt. Den deilige hagen med den glade bekken er blitt en steinørken som brer seg opp mot alle tiders redsel, Monolitten" [here nature is being raped. The delightful garden with the happy brook has been made into a desert of stone that spreads up toward the horror of every age, The Monolith]. She goes on to ask, "Får de skjønne hengepilene stå i fred, eller skal de byttes ut for bronsetre, for å høve inn i planen?" [Will the beautiful willows be left in peace, or will they be replaced with bronze trees, in order to accommodate the plan?].

The idea that the sculptures perform an act of gendered violence on the surrounding nature is in keeping with the "brute force" she sees in the park, carried out almost exclusively by male figures. But the discouragement she feels at the transformation of the park from a lively garden to a *steinørken* populated with bronze trees is also in keeping with her poetics. The purpose of a park, not unlike the *seterveger*, is to provide contact with living, dynamic things—with open-ended processes in nature. These, in turn, promote creative thought. The sculptures draw attention away from these elements of the park and toward "Monolitten," a symbol of the loss of individuality in an evolutionary process characterized by competition and struggle.⁸⁹ Public art, especially in an urban space, should provide a respite from feeling determined by built spaces and economic systems and instead provide space to think outside these constraints:

Når det gjelder større byer må vi komme bort fra det døde og tunge preg av masse og over til mer levende livsform, ved å dele dem opp i bygder eller grender ... lage en hel del småbyer inni storbyen, hver med sine parker og festlokaler. Folk blir mer rotfestet på den måten, kjenner seg mer inderlig hjemme i akkurat den gata de bor i, og til det formål må også kunstverkene spres utover, så hver bygd eller småby har litt å samles om og glede seg over.

When it comes to big cities, we have to come away from the dead and heavy sensation of mass and over to more lively forms of life by dividing them up into villages or neighborhoods ... create a whole lot of small towns within the big city, each with its own parks and banquet halls. People become more grounded that way, feel themselves more

⁸⁹ Vaa also suggests this large solo project limited Vigeland's own artistic development. She sees his later work as bearing signs of "stagnation" and speculates, "Han har sikkert ikke hatt det godt med de tomme uttrykk fra figurene sine glanende på seg" [He cannot possibly have thrived with the empty expressions of his figures glowering down at him].

deeply at home right on that street where they live, and to that end art work must also be spread out, so that each village or town has something to gather around and take pleasure in.

Because of this view of public art, her critique is also directed at the decision to devote such a large part of the city to the work of one artist and to spend so much on one large project in one part of the city, rather than on smaller projects throughout. The plan itself is, to her mind, “undemocratic.” Aslaug’s suggestions here, although couched in seemingly nostalgic terms like “rotfestet” and “inderlig hjemme” are not far from the contemporary insights on human health that Wheeler draws on—that people must be considered “whole creatures,” not only biological but emotional and social, in order to thrive.

The sociologist Nina Witoszek treats Vigeland (along with Knut Hamsun) as a “cultural dissident,” who attempted to write a “demonic nature” into Norwegian cultural history (*Regime of Goodness* 24). In Witoszek’s view, this “demonic nature” represents a brief aberration from the national “ecolect,” an authorized way of speaking about nature characterized by “a utilitarian, humanist worldview and a concrete allegiance to place rather than any animist or mystical relationship to nature” (*Regime of Goodness* 68). Witoszek explains the suppression of these demonic views as taking place through a form of collective amnesia; contemporary visitors, she observes, largely ignore the problematic ideology that was so glaring to Vaa (163–65). This “ecolect” participates in a nature ethic characterized by “a partnership with nature” as acted out by the folkloric figure of Askeladden, “because only partnership, not a ruthless exploitation, guaranteed survival” (122). But, as Iselin Theien points out, Witoszek tends to oversimplify Norway’s industrial and economic development. In particular, she questions how this account can be rectified with the use of nonrenewable resources by the Norwegian oil industry (583). Theien’s observation points to the tendency of cultural narratives about nature to conceal some practices even as they reveal others, much in the way collective amnesia regarding Vigeland’s park might conceal an instance of indifference toward and/or sympathy with totalitarian ideology.

Returning to Vaa’s essay reveals the grounds on which certain contemporaries of Vigeland’s objected to his “dissident” project. Together with Vaa’s other essays, it is clear that the idea of the *bygd* and local language provided her with a basis not only on which to object to totalitarianism but also to forms of urban planning that do not allow room for contact with nonhuman nature. Elsewhere in the same work, Witoszek characterizes the nation-building project in Norway as “not so much a fusion as a fission, ... a splitting up into two nations, two or three peoples, three or four languages, and a dozen local cultures” (57). Vike notes, “Implikasjonen av dette er kanskje at kulturhistoriske endringsforløp må ses i lys av hvordan konflikter ble utspilt på, snarere enn hvordan folk gradvis lot seg veilede av, felles kulturelle verdier” [The implication of this is maybe that the course of cultural-historical changes should be seen in light of how conflicts were played out over, rather than how people gradually allowed themselves to be led by, shared cultural values] (Vike 77). While Vaa has her background in one of those “local cultures” that once vied for input into the national identity, in the 20th century it is apparent that she uses the idea of “local culture” to participate in national debates regarding language, urbanization, aesthetics and politics. She sees her background in *bygdekultur* as a critical position from which to renew and reaffirm a national commitment to cultural values, such as the promotion of democracy and respect for life in its various manifestations.

Vaa's poetics, then, have practical implications for the role of language and art in public life. Just as she gave recommendations regarding the language debate, her poetics also continue a tradition of poetry and poetics that is socially engaged. This is a tradition that dates back at least as far as Aasen's *Symra*, which he viewed as a tool for peasant uplift as well as class critique, likely stemming from an idea of poetry as social praxis derived from the rural poetic tradition they both held in common. So, while Vaa's poetics participates in a form of philosophical vitalism, it is also connected to an emphasis on language and its grounding in the material world that she derives in part from folk poetic practices. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, although early in her poetic oeuvre she portrays harmonious oneness with and in nature as a goal, especially in her later work, *livsvilje* is not the pull toward a given, spiritual essence but rather a way to describe the human tendency to pursue freedom via growth and creativity.

In the essay "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to New Materialism," Jane Bennett identifies two types of vitalism—the "naïve vitalism" that inserts a spiritual property into the system of physical laws and the "critical vitalism" of Bergson and Hans Driesch, the German biologist and philosopher who is the focus of her essay ("A Vitalist Stopover" 56). While both emerged in the transition from matter- to energy-based physics, Bennett distinguishes the critical vitalism of Driesch from naïve vitalism in that his concept of a "vital agent" was grounded in objective observation (56). Because vitalism has pointed to both spiritual and material bases for the "autonomy of life," Bennett argues that it need not necessarily be affiliated with a particular politics. Both the materialist and religious or nationalist varieties, however, "share a valorization of freedom or the element of unpredictability and indeterminacy in action" (62). They both insist that "the world contains persistent moments of freedom, despite the comforting regularity provided by natural or divine law" (62). However, for religious or nationalist vitalism, nonhumans (including humans labeled as such), are excluded from that freedom. Bennett argues that vitalism's lasting appeal is its "faith in the existence of an undetermined world" and "the fact that there seems to be something inside the practice of experimental science ... that leads it to *understate* or downplay the freedom, the energetic fluidity or surprising creativity of the natural world" (62). Particularly in the Anthropocene, as matter is rising up against the science that tried to master it, humans need to feel that they have freedom from being determined by the nature they have transformed and the technology they have created. Because the "concrete basis" of poetic language for Vaa resides in observable nature—even the nature of an urban ecology, as we will see—she can be regarded as a kind of "vitalist stopover" on the way to a nonbinary view of the origins of language and culture—one that suggests that a capacity for freedom and creativity are still to be found in the natural world.

Chapter 5: Situated Nature Knowledge in the Poetry of Aslaug Vaa

Konn og gull

Konnet gøymest i moldi grå,
Gullet ligg langt inni bergi blå

Det glima i steinan. Konnet det vaks
Og ran upp i gyllne, voggande aks.

Vinden singlar i rugen mot kveld,
Gullkonni gløder som blod og eld.

So hamrar me gullet med jønn og stål,
So sankar me konnet moge i mål.

Penningan ruller kring lond og strond,
Brødet blir brote med trøytt hond.

Gullet legg svik i mange manns ord,
Konnet gjev godt til alle manns bord. (Vaa, *DiS* 137)

The grain is hidden in the gray soil; gold lies deep within the blue mountain. It gleams within the stone. The grain grows and runs up into golden, swaying heads of grain. The wind sings in the grain toward evening; lumps of gold glow like blood and fire. We hammer the gold with iron and steel; we reap the ripened grain in due time. Money rolls over land and strand; bread is broken with tired hands. Gold puts deceit in many a man's words; grain benefits many a man's table.

The poem “Konn og gull” [Grain and gold] from Vaa’s second collection, *Skuggen og strendan* [The shadow and the strand, 1935] uses a simple, folk meter and rhyming couplets to contrast two substances, portrayed as opposites, grain and gold. This didactic poem resembles a number of similar wisdom verses in Aasen’s *Symra*, such as “Tjon og von” [Hardship and hope], “Fals og fusk” [Fakes and frauds], and “Att og fram” [Advance and retreat]. As I established in the previous chapter, Vaa was well versed in folk poetics and oral tradition. However, by the 1950s, she began using this foundation to suggest how human beings could avoid being overly determined by reductive systems of thought and discourse in modernity, as well as to keep in contact with the origins of language, thus maintaining their capability to imagine new or alternative systems. While the primary goal of such alternative forms of thought and expression is always the reassertion of the value of human life, by stressing the importance of nonhuman nature in facilitating creativity, Vaa also makes an argument against the domination of nature. In her essays, she occasionally goes so far as to articulate the practical implications of her view, including a concept of urban ecology that does not advocate for a retreat from the city but rather the incorporation of non-built spaces where contact with nonhuman nature can be made.

“Konn og gull” is a good example of an earlier, more didactic formulation of her idea of “living” as opposed to “dead” discourse. While grain is a substance that humans plant in an environment (“moldi grå”) where it is allowed to flourish autopoetically, gold is a substance that humans extract from its environment by force. Gold “glows” and circulates, but it performs no transformations and is a source of social discord (“svik”). Grain, on the other hand, is transformed into a nourishing substance that plays a role in a unifying social ritual (breaking bread). The image of the wind that “sings” through the grain in the evening is a frequent one in Vaa’s work and is a good example of her biosemiotics—although the living element (grain) is passive in this case, the dynamic play between elements of the environment is a form of signification in Vaa’s poetic world. Gold could also be said to stand metonymically for the discourse of the market and economics, while grain represents a pre-modern social structure and way of thinking. While it does not call for the dismantling of the economic system in which gold participates, it does suggest that the value of nature’s autopoiesis, of community, and of human wellbeing over profit can be reaffirmed by a kind of ritual performance of those values.

Although Vaa’s later poems, especially after 1945, depart from folk motifs and complicate dichotomies such as that between “konn og gull,” she continues to enact formally the ability of poetic language to serve as a repetitive rehearsal of values. In the poem “Apokalyptisk dag” [Apocalyptic day] from *Budstader* (1963), each stanza begins “Velsigna kvar . . .” [Blessed be every] (*DiS* 295–96). The things called on to be “blessed”—snowflakes, birds, a child’s first step—are contrasted with examples of human hubris that they are to be blessed “mot” [against]—such as “sigersmarsjar / for koloniar på månen” [victory marches for colonies on the moon]. The poem culminates in a cry to “Stans! Stans! Stans / dei svimlande vegar!” [Halt! Halt! Halt the dizzying paths!]. The poem is thus less didactic than “Konn og gull” but is built up using contrasting couplets and relies on speech acts (Blessed be; Halt!) rather than description. This creates the impression that the poem is a prayer to ward off the apocalypse, imagined as a day when human hubris leads to the denial of the value of reverence for life.

As I argued in chapter four, one of the central values in Vaa’s poetics is contact with the unarticulated language of nature and cultivating its autopoetic capability. In “Apokalyptisk dag,” snowflakes and sparrows stand in for forms of communication in nature that promote wonder and humility. The poem does not describe the process by which they do so; however, other poems from Vaa’s post-war collections endeavor to perform rather than simply represent this open-ended process. Since Vaa’s poetics were about a critique of and resistance to reductive or closed modes of thought in general, this process is one that can be performed by the reader—that is, creative thought is not a capacity that is exclusive to the poet. As “Konn og gull” demonstrates, the use of memorable dichotomies, folk poetic forms, and the idea of audience participation in the poetic “ritual” derives from an oral tradition of poetic practice, derived from Vaa’s own exposure to oral performance of Aasen and older material, together with the more global perspective on folklore and oral culture she acquired during her time in Europe and Africa.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Vaa views nature as *biosemiotic*; that is, she draws attention to ways in which nonhuman nature signifies or even communicates. Receptiveness to these signals keeps language lively, which for Vaa often means creative, and draws attention to the relationality of the self. As others have noted, Vaa critiques both neo-romanticism/masculinist vitalism and instrumental rationality in her work. However, the role of language in these critiques has been less well articulated. In the following chapter, I will draw attention to the role of language in these critiques. I will also explain how Vaa’s ideas regarding

technology and poetics participate in philosophical concerns and debates that are foundational to contemporary ecocriticism, such as Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and those expressed in Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology." Informed also by attention to the subjugated, poems such as "Fotefår" [Footprints] and "Eg" [I] suggest the need for a postnational sense of identification among those "left behind" by modernity. Finally, I will turn to examples in which Vaa puts her notion of "poetic thinking" into practice. Rather than mimetic representations of either nature or subjective experience of nature, drawing on Jonathan Culler's notion of the ritual function of poetry as a rehearsal of values, I argue that these poems guide poet and reader into a mode of thinking through the practices of writing and reading poetry. The notion of nature signifying or communicating through unarticulated language and/or song runs throughout Vaa's oeuvre; however, it undergoes several changes in its significance and form. While in her earlier work nature might speak of its unknown or unknowable vitalist "essence," Vaa increasingly emphasizes the poetic and mental processes by which these signals are received. Her poetry ultimately suggests the importance of ecopoetic *practice* over either mimesis or reference.

"Sid'beinet": An ecofeminist critique of masculine naming practices

In her own lifetime, Vaa was mostly regarded as a "feminine" exception to the masculine, vitalist nationalist discourse of her contemporaries.⁹⁰ More recently, however, her work has been reexamined so as to draw attention to the feminist critique in her work, as well as her critique of instrumental rationality—two critiques that are not entirely distinct from one another. While these are welcome reevaluations that suggest Vaa deserves a more prominent place in Norwegian literary history, especially poetic modernism, I will attempt in this chapter to build on previous analyses by taking into account Vaa's view of language and nature. I will also demonstrate that her global orientation facilitates a post-nationalist critique of environmental degradation and

⁹⁰ For example, Ørjasæter describes her poetry as "feminine" in that it seems to have "gjort seg sjølv" [made itself]: "Noko som straks serkjener Aslaug Vaas lyrikk er det frodige mjuke og umekaniske. Noko urøyvt og yndefullt ein kann vel kalle det for kvinneleg ... Det er so langt burte som vel mogleg frå det ein m. a. kunde kalle typisk maskulin lyrikk d. v. s. det utrekna konstruktive" [One thing that immediately distinguishes Aslaug Vaa's lyric is its fertile, soft, and unmechanical quality. Something untouched and graceful that one could rightly call feminine ... It is as far as possible from that which one could otherwise call typically masculine lyric, that is to say, calculated construction] (282–83). Similarly, Dalgard's account of her erotic poetry relies on sexist assumptions: "Natur og eros går ofte i eitt i dei sentrale dikta til Aslaug Vaa. Dette finn ein nok døme på hos mannlege diktarar óg, men ikkje på samme måten ... Eros lever lenger og sterkare i kvinna enn i manne, behovet for varme og kjærleik synest aldri å slokne hos henne. Dette er kjærleikslyrikken til Aslaug Vaa eit sterkt vitnemål om" [Nature and eros often blend together in the central poems of Aslaug Vaa. One can certainly find examples of this in poets by men as well, but not in the same way ... Eros lives longer and stronger in woman than in man; the need for warmth and love seems insatiable for her. Aslaug Vaa's love poems bear a strong witness to this] (Dalgard, "Aslaug Vaa" 61). Sørbø writes that women were largely defined out of the interwar period because of the strong association many male poets made between nationalism and masculinity ("Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt" 88–89).

human exploitation. While starting with a distinction between rural dialects and *Bokmål*, as Vaa's perspective becomes more global, the type of language and thought she sees as needing protection and cultivation broadens to include rural Africa. I will also point out an additional critique Vaa makes of instrumental rationality in the form of technology, one that anticipates Heidegger's, but with an additional critique of national romanticism and settler or frontier ideology.

As I explained in chapter four, Vaa's poetry collections from before the Second World War take up love and erotics as central themes. Recent readings of the role of nature and poetics in these poems have produced fuller accounts of how the feminist vitalism of Vaa (and potentially other early female modernists) differs from their masculine vitalist counterparts.⁹¹ Vaa's poems that address love and the erotic often address problems of communication and intersubjectivity. As Grønstøl and Langås suggest with the article title "Naturen, kjærleiken og diktinga" [Nature, love, and composition], it is impossible to separate these issues from nature and aesthetics in Vaa's work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Vaa certainly associates woman with nature, but Grønstøl notes that this association does not de-individualize woman as in romanticism and vitalism. Rather, her association with nature affirms autonomy and subjectivity ("Kva er ein tanke?" 93).

Grønstøl sees this particularly in Vaa's poem "Sid'beinet" [Adam's rib] from *Skuggen og strendan* (1935). In the first half of this poem, Eve is described as having been denied access to language because her existence is secondary to that of Adam. The rib he has given her becomes the central symbol of her lack of autonomy and inability to express herself: "For mange tusunår var Eva stum / for talens rette bruk" [For many millennia, Eve was unable to speak properly] (*DiS* 108). Every time Eve finds herself at a loss for words, she feels a pain in her rib. Adam, on the other hand, has names for things like deer, birds and fish, but he is content to spend his life hunting, and he cannot understand Eve's longing for fulfillment through communication.

Adam's form of naming thus provides an example of the "turrtenkjing" [dry thinking] that, according to Dalgard, Vaa distances herself from. Not unlike the *turrdikting* explained in chapter four, *turrtenkjing* is "mannens logiske tenking som meir eller mindre kaldt registrerer det vonde ved sida av det gode" [man's logical thinking that more or less coldly registers what is bad alongside what is good] (61–62). Dalgard is right to associate *turrtenkjing* with "mannen," especially at this stage in Vaa's work. But while Dalgard sees Vaa as a poet who critiques categorization without attention to value or value judgments, "Sid'beinet" critiques Adam (or man's) limited conception of value, which is confined to *use* value. While Eve tries in vain to communicate her feelings—to establish an intersubjective relationship with Adam—his mind wanders to the hunt.

Han tenkte på hindi han fanga
--den vilde han stikke idag,
lema sund og finna det beste stykket

⁹¹ Vassenden (2012) applies the term "feminist vitalism" to Vaa; Grønstøl in her biography of Hulda Garborg, another woman writing in *Nynorsk* in the early 20th century, also suggests Garborg participates in the imagery and rhetoric of "vitalromantikken" [vital romanticism] but from a feminist angle (*Hulda Garborg* 22). Moldung (2005) has also written about "feminist vitalisme" in the poetry of Marie Takvam.

og riste det på gloen ikveld. (*DiS* 109)

He thought about the deer he had captured—he was going to cook it today, butcher it and find the best piece and roast it on the fire tonight.

Adam's inability to understand Eve is here connected to his utilitarian view of nature, in which he not only captures the deer but also quarters it. (The poem thus draws an early connection between instrumental rationality and the knife.) Though not explicitly referred to, the poem's focus on language and silence also brings to mind the authority given to Adam to name all of creation in Genesis chapter two. Eve's voicelessness suggests she does not participate in this gesture of dominion over nature but is rather part of the creation over which Adam has been given authority—although her pain at not being able to speak suggests this state of subjugated silence is intolerable for her.

In the second half of the poem, Eve finds her own way of communicating, discovering an alternative to Adam's utilitarian understanding of nature. She arrives at this understanding by listening to nature, effectively inverting the gesture of establishing dominion by naming. Eve finds herself under a shadow, where she begins to hear nature "talk." Although plants eventually gain the power of articulate speech, it is notable that the initial description is of unarticulated forms of signification produced by wind:

Og dei små stråi musa

lettar enn vinden,

og inn i skuggan av trei

sveiv det fræ og blom frå lindi

og netar frå haslan draus ned i fanget hennar. (*DiS* 110)

And the small blades whispered lighter than the wind and in the shadow of the tree, seeds and flowers swayed from the linden and nuts from the tree sprinkled down into her lap.

Attention to these signals in nature, portrayed as sound and motion, enables Eve to discern the flowers' articulate speech, "mange små ord som samla seg til ein song" [many small words that gathered into a song]:

Haslen song: som natakjønni vere du

når du stend i livs mogning.

Strondegraset song:

som mine gyllenraude aks

retter sag rake frå mi mjuke lege

vere du

når du vaknar til ny dag! (*DiS* 110–11)

The hazel sang: Be like a nutmeat when you stand in your life's fullness. The beach grass sang: Be like my golden-red ear that shoots straight up from my bed when you wake to a new day!

The flowers speak in the optative, simultaneously providing her with a language and using language to initiate growth in Eve, a process that is meant to unfold in an individual and autonomous manner. The flowers' speech culminates with this pronouncement in the second to last stanza:

Du er ei og heil
i din vokster som me!
Høyr, du er ei og heil! (*DiS* 111)
You are one and whole in your fullness as we are! Listen, you are one and whole!

Grønstøl writes, “Om naturen i dette diktet symboliserer ei ‘naturlov,’ er budskapet at det i menneskets ‘opphavlege’ ligg ein kime til autentisitet, subjektivering, til språk og kulturell deltaking. Naturen gir stemme til den som kulturen har gjort stum” [If nature in this poem symbolizes a ‘law of nature,’ the message is that a source of authenticity, subjectivity, language and cultural participation can be found within the ‘primordial’ state of humanity. Nature gives voice to that which culture has silenced] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 94). But it is not that nature encourages her to reject culture and live among it, rather an alternative form of culture (here represented as language) is proposed in which nature—and woman’s—autonomous value gains admittance.

Inasmuch as Eve turns to nature for an alternative source of language to the one given to Adam, we see here the “seeds” of the theory of language and creativity Vaa puts forth in her later essays. Although her use of personification borders on the embarrassing for a contemporary audience (especially because of the strong association between flowers and Romanticism), the speaking flowers here serve not so much to inspire nature but to draw attention to ways in which nature signifies. As a consequence, the poem also performs a critique of what is portrayed as a masculine naming project. The proliferation of names for specific flowers (linden, hazel, beach grass, bluebell, rose lily), as opposed to the category names to which Adam’s vocabulary seems to be limited (deer, bird, fish), participates in this critique. While for Aasen, the local names of flowers draw attention to the locally situated knowledge of peasants, for Vaa, flower names indicate the uniqueness and value of individual living things, not in a way that de-individualizes (as a pretty woman might be equated with a flower) but so as to draw attention to the unique way in which different living things fulfill their processes of becoming. Nature, listened to and paid attention to at close range, doesn’t tell Eve what she is or what her role is, but reminds her that, like nature, she is an autonomous being capable of growth. “Sid’beinet,” builds on the tradition of advocating for situated knowledge that Aasen established by incorporating two additional critiques, first, of a utilitarian attitude toward nature and, second, of a romantic/vitalist reduction of woman to passive matter. As for Aasen, it is through language, particularly language that arises via interaction between humans (in this case, women) and their environment, that provides a basis for an alternative understanding of nature.

The idea that one should think in a way that follows nature’s course, rather than arriving at nature with one’s view of it already formed recurs a number of times in Vaa’s poetry. Elsewhere, gender is not such an explicit component of this ecopoetics of autonomous becoming. However, “Sid’beinet” makes it easier to see how Vaa moves from the *Nynorsk* critique of the relegation of the peasant to secondary status to a similar understanding of the subjugation of woman. Here, a different approach to nature that emphasizes respect for nature’s autonomy and agency becomes possible from the vantage point of woman, just as situated knowledge supported a humble attitude toward nature in Aasen’s account of the peasant.

“Fotefár”: A Postnationalist Critique of “Thinking in Numbers”

I have already noted that Vaa is not a nationalistic poet. In “Sid’beinet,” we can see how her concern for woman’s agency and participation in culture motivates her to advocate for situated knowledge of, or more appropriately perhaps, attention to nature. But one would also expect Vaa to distance herself from a nationalist framework, particularly after World War II and given the clear rejection of an undemocratic vitalist ideology she expresses in her essay on the Vigeland sculpture park. In addition to her ecofeminism, recent scholarship has drawn attention to her critique of instrumental rationality, especially in her poems that deal explicitly with epistemological questions. The kind of instrumental rationality she critiques in these poems seems to be a reductive investigation or analysis of the human individual based on a restrictive, preconceived notion of what the human is. This form of instrumental rationality reduces the human subject to an object. While I largely agree with the readings of her critique that have been undertaken so far, I would like to draw attention in this section to some extensions of that critique. Vaa’s poems set in Africa not only critique a reductive approach to the human subject, but also to the nature and people of non-European countries, especially those not yet wholly subsumed into modernity. By comparing readings of a poem such as “Tankekniven” to the less-examined “Under fikentreet” and “Fotefár,” I believe a connection can be made between Vaa’s advocacy for situated understandings of nature and local languages, her critique of instrumental rationality, and an increasingly postnational framework in which she expresses solidarity with languages and cultures dismissed in modernity as being without value.

As Grønstøl explains, Vaa’s epistemological poems address questions such as, “Kva er det å tenkja? Kva er, og korleis finn vi kunnskap? ... Korleis tenkjer vi etisk, til beste for mennesket, for kulturen og sivilisasjonen?” [What is thinking? What is, and how do we find knowledge? ... How can we think ethically, for the benefit of humanity, for culture and civilization?] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 77). The poem “Tankekniven” [The thought-knife] from the collection *Villarkonn* (1936) begins with a call to “Sjå meneskjet der det ligg ope / for tankens flengjande kniv!” [See the person where it lies open for thought’s flaying knife!] (*DiS* 156). Like the deer that Adam quarters in “Sid’beinet,” the subject here is flayed by “den kalde tanken” [the cold thought]. Before the knife approaches, the person “sveiper seg ut” [unfurls itself] from layers of silk, flannel and homespun, which Grønstøl reads as metonymic of “ulike historiske, geografiske og etnologiske sivilisasjonar” [different historical, geographical, and ethnological civilizations] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 80). The body, stripped of the markers of civilization, recoils from the knife, demanding an autonomy similar to that which the flowers wished for Eve: “Lat meg fløyme ut etter mi eigi drift” [Let me flow out in my own way] (156). As both Grønstøl and Sørbø note, the human is able to meet the gray, hard knife with its own chilly, blue flame. This suggests a capacity for reflection on the human’s part. If the de-civilized body is, as Grønstøl suggests, a form of primitivism, it is not one that champions instinct but “den driftsbaserte erkjenningsmåten, den tanken som veks ut av organiske prosessar” [the intuitive mode of recognition, the thought that grows out of organic processes] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 88, 82). Rather than rejecting thought and embracing irrationality, she rejects “den einsidige kalkulerande tanken” [one-dimensional, calculating thought] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 81–82).

Sørbø connects this critique of “den einsidige kalkulerande tanken” with the critique of instrumental rationality put forward by members of the Frankfurt school. He argues that Vaa’s poems concerning the subject/object relationship and poetic thought participate in a debate over whether a non-instrumental rationality is possible, one that became especially salient after World

War II (“Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 98). This is a debate that Vaa engaged with via continental psychoanalytic theory and that, as Sørnbø points out, members of the Frankfurt school also took up (“Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 98–99). Although he does not present any direct evidence of her engagement with these authors, he notes that her work exhibits similar concerns and ways of thinking, particularly in relation to psychology. He points, for example, to Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*, which presents an idea of love as a disciplined exercise in which the individual ought to maintain a sense of autonomy (98). He also notes that Wilhelm Reich, a friend whose work Ola Raknes championed, sought to synthesize the philosophies of Marx and Freud (“Mellom Telemark og Frankfurt” 98). Sørnbø agrees that Vaa does not advocate a retreat into the pre-rational but distinguishes between “tankar som har eit slags organisk feste i livshistoria, i materien og ein tanke som løyser seg frå dette og blir utvendig tenar for eit eller anna føremål” [thoughts that have a kind of organic basis in life experience, in the material, and a thought that divorces itself from this and becomes a superficial servant to one purpose or another] (103). In particular, her concept of poetic or organic thought “inneber kommunikasjon—med andre, med naturen eller med eiga livshistorie” [involves communication—with others, with nature, or with one’s own life experience] (103). Poetic thinking thus constitutes an attempt at “ein annan slags rasjonalitet” [another form of rationality], one that “ikkje ... mis[ser] kontakten med det den sprang ut av, med kroppen og barndommen [does not lose contact with that which it sprang from, with the body and childhood] (105).

The connection Sørnbø draws between Vaa and the Frankfurt school is interesting because it provides the grounds on which to see Vaa’s work as having broader implications, not just for the individual in general but for gender and race, especially in relationship to the environment. Because of the connections it draws between race, class, gender, and domination, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in particular, has served as a foundational text for ecocriticism. As Rigby explains, Adorno and Horkheimer were “writing as Jewish Marxist exiles from Nazi Germany during the Second World War” (Rigby, “Ecocriticism”). Thus, while they were predominantly concerned with “domination on the basis of ‘race’ and class, they also pointed to certain connections between the domination of women and that of the natural world. The ‘marriage of Mind and Nature,’ ... was, they observed, always patriarchal ... This had implications for women as well as for non-human nature” (Rigby, “Ecocriticism”). That Vaa’s critique of instrumental rationality involves a feminist critique of woman reduced to matter is thus not surprising. Vassenden, for example, connects “Tankekniven” to Wergeland’s poems of the anatomy chamber, except the subject position has been given to the one threatened with dissection (*Norsk vitalisme* 466). I have also attempted to demonstrate that there is an element of class critique in Vaa’s championing of certain aspects of the perspective of the *bonde*, especially attentiveness to the connection between nature and language. One might go on to ask, then, if Vaa also critiques instrumental rationality for justifying a domination of nature that is predicated upon domination on the basis of race.

This can be found in Vaa’s poems set in Africa, which first appear in *På vegkanten* (1939). Not all of these poems represent the best of Vaa’s work, and the occasional lack of language beyond the stereotypical creates uncomfortable moments for the contemporary reader. Yet, in several of them, Vaa displays a striking consciousness of the role of race in the domination of nature. The “hard” form of thought critiqued in “Konn og gull” and “Tankekniven” are more explicitly associated with economics in at least two of Vaa’s poems set in Africa, “Underfikentreet” [Under the fig tree] and “Fotefår” [Footprints]. The destruction of rural ways of life, along with their accompanying modes of thought and language, occurs as late

capitalist economic systems affect greater swathes of the planet. In this sense, there are apparent parallels between Vaa's view of rural Telemark and of rural Africa: both are "left behind" by modernity; both contain within them the potential "seeds" of alternative modes of thought that can preserve alternative forms of value from being lost. But an awareness of the racialized body prevents Vaa from effacing the differences between how rural Africans and rural Europeans have been treated.

In the poem "Underfikentreet" (from *På vegkanten*, 1939), Vaa represents a scenario in which a black child begins to cry at the sight of the white speaker. His cries ring out among the noises of the village, where women's chatter is equated to the speech of birds:

Med' turtelduva kurra,
Kanarifuglan kvitra
Og kvendi lo og prata utanfor stråhytta (*DiS* 224)
While the turtledove cooed, the canary twittered, and women laughed and chatted outside
the straw hut.

With reference to the rest of Vaa's poetic production, this parallel is neither negative nor racialized: being in touch with the various forms of signification in nature is for Vaa a sign of active, vibrant culture.

Yet, rather than a speaker who reassures the child by demonstrating her own sympathy with his people's way of life, we are given an address that acknowledges the role of race in economic exploitation:

Ja, liten, du må vel ræddest,
Når du møter den andre rasen,
Desse kvithudingane
Som ser på deg med sine ljose augo,
Harde av reiknekunster,
Og tamde av tankar. (*DiS* 224–25)
Yes, little one, you should well be afraid, when you meet the other race, these
white-skinned people who look at you with their light eyes, hard with the arts of
calculation, and tame in their thoughts.

Here "hard" or "dry" thought is described as *reiknekunster*, arts of calculation: culture here is reduced to economic skill and value. As a result, this culture produces "tame thoughts." Although the speaker momentarily assumes an African perspective with the phrases "den andre rasen" and "desse kvithudingane," she does not seem to exclude herself from these categories. A distancing "they" is notably absent. Instead, the address in "Under fikentreet" puts the reader in the position to recognize that the white body announces its affiliation with such a system, regardless of the behavior or the intentions of the speaker toward the child. If we assume the subject of the poem is a woman (as perhaps her presence near the village women and proximity to the child suggests), this could be considered a proto-intersectional moment in Vaa's work: although Eve was excepted from Adam's utilitarian way of thinking due to her gender and even the one being oppressed by being deprived of speech, the speaker in "Underfikentreet" recognizes that her status as woman does not negate her whiteness and, by extension, her association with colonialism and its accompanying ideology. Moreover, any notion of the

speaker as Norwegian and therefore not complicit in the colonial project is absent from the poem.

In “Fotefár,” the title poem of Vaa’s first collection published after World War II, the consequences of the reign of *reiknekunst* are made clearer, again in the context of racialized forms of exploitation. In it, an African man approaches and then retreats from the speaker who observes him as he leaves the fields and is eventually driven away into the mountains. The poem opens with an image of the man’s arms that participates in masculine vitalist tropes that are virtually absent from the rest of Vaa’s work. In this sense, the man is depicted within a primitivist framework. However, Vaa delays situating the figure geographically until the third stanza. Before this, the man is represented as a human figure cloaked in shadow, not unlike the cloaked figure at the beginning of “Tankekniven” before it unfurls itself from the social “layers” of history, geography, and class. The so-far anonymous figure has become

[...] ein draum
som gjeng att. Ein skugge som ingi
sol kan drive vekk.

Det er når landet hans fær tronge grensur,
og han let tistlan få gro i hjarta ... (*DiS* 254)

[...] a dream that walks again. A shadow that no sun can drive away. When his country got narrow borders and he let a thistle grow in his heart ...

Borders are cast as a negative aspect of modernity. So far, this could describe any number of people constrained by political or symbolic borderlines. It is in the third stanza that she situates him: “Mannen som Afrikas sol / klædde i skuggar” [The man like Africa’s sun, clothed in shadow] (*DiS* 254).

But while his current condition is cast negatively, he offers something to the poem’s speaker:

Eg kjende liv i eit frose kim,
då eg i målet hans høyrde gjenklagen
av ville dyrs song om nettan,
når dei diltar i flokk til drikkestaden
og løva og gasellen gli saman
til milde blå skuggar ... (*DiS* 254)

I sense life in a frozen seedling, when I hear in his speech the echo of the songs wild creatures sing at night, when they patter down to the watering hole and the lion and the gazelle glide together into soft blue shadows ...

Vaa creates an association between the man and nature, not via the body but via language. The speaker recognizes creative potential in his speech, and that this speech is associated with “eit frose kim”: this echoes the representation of the Telemark dialect in “Telemarkin” (this wonderful language, soft as a flower, hard as steel), as well as the chilly, blue flame of thought with which the human figure in “Tankekniven” confronts the knife. Organic language here is an alternative form of rationality. This is further indicated by the image of the lion and the gazelle: rather than presenting an image of the two lying down together in harmony, the stanza trails off.

Instead of a pastoral image, the gliding into shadow suggests a mode of thought that questions dualities.

In contrast to his own organic language, it is by the actions of “dei som tenkjer i tal” that the man has been “dømdest til undergang” [those who think in numbers; doomed to destruction] (254). This group is later addressed:

Du som tenkjer i tal,
du kjenner deg som seierherre,
fordi du tok domedagen frå Vårherre.
Men kjenner du loven
for denne din tankes gang?
Veit du at tanken veks ut frå sin eigen lov,
som treet du plantar?

Stans og lye,
du vil høyre føtar som flyktar,
flyktar frå deg,
og tek med seg tufti
du stend på. (*DiS* 255)

You who think in numbers, you think of yourself as a conqueror because you took doomsday away from the Lord. But do you know the law of this, your way of thinking? Do you know that thought grows according to its own law like the trees you plant?

Stop and listen, you will hear feet them flee, flee from you, and take with them the ground you are standing on.

The African man cloaked in shadow has fled the poem, and his flight takes with it a language grounded in its reference to the body and to nature, thus pulling the rug out from underneath the rigid thinker. This suggests that Vaa sees this kind of language as a necessary corrective that can prevent a devaluing of the human and of nature that has consequences for the exploiter as well as the exploited. Her critique has become more explicitly ecological, as “reiknekunst” is blamed for the destruction of “tufti / du stend på” in both the literal sense—the destruction of nature—and the figurative sense—the grounds of reference for language and, by extension, culture. Moreover, the gender essentialism present in Vaa’s earlier work is again disrupted, here by the figure of the African man, rather than the women and children in “Fikentreet.” This may also indicate a proto-intersectional insight on Vaa’s part, in that the man’s status as colonized now places him in a situation somewhat similar to Eve’s in “Sid’beinet,” that is, he is silenced because his form of language is dismissed from the realm of value.

In this poem, Vaa achieves this vision not by imagining the rural African as a uniquely primitive other, but through a kind of blend of rural Norway and rural Africa, enacted through a play with geographic specificity and the use of very similar metaphors for language and poetic thinking that occur elsewhere in her poetry. As Larsen notes, Vaa read and wrote about literature

by African authors;⁹² she observed in African poetry an affirmation of altruism and a resistance to dehumanization (97). She believed this tendency needed to be cultivated by allowing Africans to research and interpret their own culture, in an effort to limit Western influence on these tendencies (Larsen 97). In its emphasis on self-understanding and -interpretation on the part of a marginalized group, this proposal is reminiscent of the principles behind political and social movements to advance the *bondeklasse* in 19th and early 20th century Norway. It also calls to mind her suggestion in “Millom setervegen og sementen” that understanding of and appreciation for local tradition has afforded youth in northern Norway the confidence and creativity to participate in modern politics and aesthetics. A grounding in nature and tradition facilitates both new and critical thought. Rather than praising the primitive, these proposals are in keeping with Larsen’s assessment that, in Vaa’s poetics, “Å tenkja fram ein ny tanke er skildra som intens og ekstatisk mental aktivitet” [Thinking forth a new thought is depicted as intense and ecstatic mental activity] (97).

“Eg”: A Postnationalist Critique of Technology

Thus far, an understanding of Vaa’s poetics and theory of language has made it possible to understand “Sid’beinet” as an ecofeminist critique of a patriarchal system of naming that facilitates the reduction of nature to its use value, rather than a system of naming whereby attentive listening promotes an appreciation for nature’s creativity and individuality. It has also made it possible to see the parallel Vaa draws between rural Norway and rural Africa in resisting *reiknekunst* and the hegemony of economic value—although Vaa also portrays the clear limits racialized thinking sets on the usefulness of this analogy. This could be seen as an emerging postnationalist view, one in which shared rural origins provide more grounds for solidarity than nationalist origin in the face of a modernity dominated by economic value. In the following section, I propose that this postnationalist view also manifests itself in the form of a critique of National Romanticism, one that rejects the idea of the Norwegian settler as necessarily having a benign relationship to nature.

The idea that the Norwegian has a humble attitude toward nature is sometimes taken as a given in the Norwegian national imaginary.⁹³ The origin of such a view could be located in any number of national romantic texts, including Ivar Aasen’s “Nordmannen.” However, as I explained in chapter two, this attitude of humility is represented by Aasen as a counterpoint to an increasingly exploitative attitude arising particularly in the mid-1800s as farms consolidated and the pursuit of profit became more common. This critical dimension of Aasen’s poem “Nordmannen” is sometimes lost today due to the romanticized reception of Aasen both by his

⁹² See, for example, her review of novels by the Nigerian writer Amos Tutola and the essay “Moderne Afrikansk diktning.”

⁹³ Witoszek points to the emphasis on humility in foundational texts such as the medieval “Håvamål” [Sayings of the High One] and the tales of the folk hero Askeladden (Witoszek, *Regime of Goodness* 101–102; 122).

critics and by *Nynorsk* language advocates. However, as we saw with a poem such as “Uvitingskap,” Aasen does make this critique quite explicit elsewhere.⁹⁴

Another reason this dimension is difficult to detect is because Aasen’s strategy in *Symra* is similar to that of his glossary *Norske Plantenavne*. He believes the attitude of the *bonde* can be generalized to the nation as a whole. While in his glossary, he does this by trying to reconcile Linnaean and vernacular nomenclature, in “Nordmannen” he relies on easily accessible metaphors. As Lakoff and Johnson describe in their seminal book *Metaphors we Live By*, the metaphor “Theories and Ideas are Buildings” occurs frequently in western discourse (46). As such, the mention of building in *Nordmannen* activates a metaphorical understanding in which the peasant represents the everyman and the farm can represent something abstract, such as the nation or even a multinational corporation. The adaptability of this metaphor is exploited in the 2009 commercial *Made by Norway* produced by the financial and fossil fuel concern, Aker. In it, the actor Anderz Eide recites the text of “Nordmannen” over historical footage of Norwegian fishermen alongside footage of contemporary Norwegian industrial labor, including oil platform workers, suggesting that claiming and extracting fossil fuels is just one among many heroic nation-building activities. Even though the poem depicts a humble *bonde* struggling to eke out an existence on a rocky strand, not asking of nature more than he needs to survive and content with his lot, the simple metaphor means the poem’s message can be reversed: it can be used to encourage an idea of the Norwegian as always modest and good in his relationship to nature, even if what he builds is an oil platform.

Aslaug Vaa, in the poem “Eg” [I] (also from *Fotefår*, 1947), picks up on this weakness in Aasen’s poem. She writes what could be considered a new version of the poem, this time in free verse, breaking away from the inevitability and harmony implied by Aasen’s original ballad form and depicting a farmer who gradually pulls nature into the domain of his control:

Eg bygde meg bu ved rennende å,
ho rann og ho renn og renn.
Eg reiser en gard,
gjerder inn tun,
minnest kvar stein eg rudde,
minnest kvar torve eg velte,
no er det eg som eig dei. (*DiS* 244)
I built a house by a running river,
it ran and it runs and runs.
I build a farm,
fence in a yard,
remember every stone I uprooted,
remember all the sod I turned,
now it is I who owns them.

⁹⁴ See chapter two, “*Verd* in *Symra*”

By clearing land just as the famous Norwegian in Aasen's poem, the farmer establishes a relationship of ownership with the land. He also reforms (and reconceptualizes) it as a place suited to his own purposes: "Hondi mi forma dei til eit bol" (My hand formed them into a home] (*DiS* 244). Although *bol* could be translated simply as "home," it has associations with insects and small animals.⁹⁵ This might suggest a relatively small-scale transformation of nature.

Unlike Aasen's Norwegian, however, this farmer does not seem to accept the limits placed on him by nature. He builds a bridge to a better pasture and finally dams the river. This is where the gendered relationship in this poem also becomes clear, as the poem's I recounts: "Spørjande stirer ho på meg frå dammen / og kallar meg herre" [Puzzled, she stares at me from the dam and calls me lord] (*DiS* 244). "River" is normally grammatically feminine in *Nynorsk*, but the contrast between the feminine river and the "lord" of the farm, as well as the literary gesture of portraying rivers as feminine that occurs in other *Nynorsk* poems Vaa would have known (including Olav Nygard's "Bekken og bjørka" [The brook and the birch]), suggests she intentionally portrays this as a gendered relationship in which a masculine actor harnesses a feminine creative force for his own benefit.

Vaa identifies this moment of damming the river as a turning point for the farmer:

Den dagen eg tvinga inn elvekrafti
til tenar for meg,
kjende eg himlen og jordi kvile i hondi mi.
Då var det eg tok til å lure
om det ikkje var eg
som ha skapt dei. (*DiS* 244–45)
The day I forced the river's power
into my service,
I felt heaven and earth
resting in my hand.
That was when I began to wonder
if it were not I
who had created them.

The form of nature practice represented in the poem has not only transformed the landscape (or made it *into* a landscape) but also circled back to form the speaker's language and way of thinking. The speaker justifies his imprisonment of the river in retrospect by imagining his act of enslavement is actually a creative one. This seductive capacity of language to transform reality, as if by magic, is also suggested toward the beginning of the poem with the transformation of *eg* to *eig* by the addition of a single letter. This similarity also creates a close association between ownership and identity.

Vaa's portrayal of the moment of damming the river as the turning point in the farmer's relationship to nature from making a home for himself to imagining himself as nature's master is

⁹⁵ Slette gives "nest" and "sleeping place" as definitions, in addition to "living-place, home, domicile, [or] residence" (Slette, "ból").("ból")("ból")

interesting in that it anticipates, yet departs from, Heidegger's argument about the difference between peasant and modern technology in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (Heidegger, *Technology* 3–35; first presented in lecture form in 1949 and 1950). According to Heidegger, by damming the Rhine, modern technology performs a "setting-upon" [*bestellen*] nature in order to hold its energy in "standing-reserve" [*Bestand*], continuously available for human use (Heidegger, *Technology* 16–17). This "challenging" stance toward nature in which it is commanded to reveal itself rather than allowed to unfold, Heidegger terms "*Ge-stell*," or "enframing" (*Technology* 19). Modern technology impedes nature's processes of becoming in a way that peasant technology, such as the windmill or bridge, does not (*Technology* 16). Interestingly, Vaa does not exempt the peasant from this critique; rather, she uses a peasant to exemplify this relationship to nature.

To understand why, we need to again consider Vaa's theory of language and creativity. In her article, "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoeisis," Kate Rigby responds to Jonathan Bate's attempt to disassociate Heidegger's concept of dwelling from "an irrationalist cult of blood and soil" through a reading of Paul Celan's "Todtnauberg" ("Earth, World, Text" 432). In her view, Heidegger's own concept of dwelling is intentional, rather than mystical: "Although ... dwelling involves an attunement to the given, it is itself not given, either by place of birth or ancestral belonging ... dwelling is an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment, not something that is in any sense 'in the blood'" ("Earth, World, Text" 432). As I have tried to show in this and the proceeding chapter, Vaa similarly does not see "attunement" to nature as the product of birth or ancestry; rather, it is a conscious practice of attention toward nonhuman forms of semiosis in nature, and the cultivation of new thought and language "refreshed" by this semiosis. While some rural practices may not "enframe" nature to the same degree as modern technology, Vaa identifies the problem not only in practice but in language as well: it seems that even if the technology does not wholly constrain nature, it may give the human an idea of domination that is as powerful as the practice itself. From Vaa's perspective, it doesn't help matters that the language describing certain practices disappears as those practices themselves disappear, for it makes the ideas of the past as difficult to access as the practices.

Heidegger's alternative to technology that "challenges forth," *poiesis* or "bringing forth" reserves a privileged role for poetry, which, as Rigby puts it, "lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art" ("Earth, World, Text" 430). The definition of *poiesis* as "that drawing forth into unconcealment which simultaneously allows things their own being" (431) is reminiscent of the role of the flowers in "Sid'beinet": when centered in Eve's attention, they disclose their autonomy, as well as their similarity to Eve. However, Rigby goes on to suggest "the (im)possibility of ecopoeisis," arguing that Heidegger's privileged role for poetry depends on a privileged view of naming: nature can "self-disclose" but "only the word grants being to a thing" (433). Rigby critiques this as anthropocentric, countering that "we need poets not so much to draw things into Being through their song, but rather to draw us forth into the polyphonic song of our nonhuman earth others" (434). Rigby prefers a theory of *ecopoeisis* such as Scigaj's *réf rence* (a play on Derrida's *diff rance*), in which art does not speak nature into being but rather draws attention to the failure of language to fully represent

nature, thus directing the reader's attention back to the world.⁹⁶ Rigby contends that art can only "save" the earth by disclosing it as unsayable: "It draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing. ... by disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place" (437). For Rigby "there is no substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world" (437).

As much as Vaa could be imagined to share Rigby's desire to affirm the importance of such "embodied involvement," such an account cannot be squared with biosemiosis, for in its notion of cultural practice as an extension of our biological being, poetry itself is a form of "embodied involvement." Wheeler and others (such as David Abram), who take signification as a shared capacity of all living things, see the musicality of poetry, in particular, as fundamentally physical in its effects. As such, it may not be necessary to be skeptical of, or directed outside, the text to draw one's attention to nonhuman nature. Vaa, as I described in chapter four, is a poet who is attuned to musical effects—both in her free verse and her adaptation of folk verse forms to new content. It should also be apparent at this point that address is an important poetic technique for her: from the ritualized address in the form of prayer in "Apokalyptisk dag" to the flowers' address of Eve (an address that is also directed to reader through *prosopopeia*) to the sympathy and blame conveyed by direct addressing a weeping African child and the masters of *reiknekunst* in "Under fikentreet" and "Fotefår," respectively. In the next section, I will argue that Vaa's more or less didactic presentation of poetic thinking becomes more performative, especially in her later poems. She employs (eco)poetic thinking not only in the poem's composition or content but attempts to inspire or move the reader to poetic thinking through the rhythm and performative language of the poem itself. This view of poetry as biosemiotic practice, I argue, presents an alternative to the view of *ecopoeisis* as doomed to fail because of the failure of language to represent. This is because it is a poetics that demonstrates that, to quote Toril Moi, "representation—naming—is one of the many things we do with language. But there are ... so many other things we do with words that have nothing to do with representation" (14).

Vaa's postwar poetry: Performative Ecopoetics

"Moreld" as incantation

In one of the few analyses of Vaa's poetry that focuses on her later work, Prytz characterizes the poems of *Skjenkarsveinens visur* (1954) as follows: "Diktene ... inneholder ikke påstander eller ferdige formler, føres ikke frem til et avsluttende poeng, et kategorisk imperativ. Ja, det er som om diktene ikke *har* slutt. Der hvor dikterordene slutter, der fortsetter Diktet sitt hemmelige liv i ens sinn" [The poems do not contain claims or premade formulas, do not lead to a concluding point, a categorical imperative. It is as though the poems do not *have* an end. Where the poet's words conclude, the poem continues its secret life in one's mind] (153). Here Prytz describes the performative aspect of Vaa's later poetry, how she uses rhetorical openness (as well as formal strategies) to create a poetry that acts *upon* the reader. It is this aspect that I will take up in the

⁹⁶ Gilcrest similarly proposes "skeptical hermeneutics," a modernist (eco)poetry that takes a skeptical stance toward language's ability to represent the nonhuman.

following section.⁹⁷ Here, I am following Jonathan Culler in paying attention not to “general performativity”—a feature of all literature inasmuch as it has the capacity to create imaginary worlds—but “the special structural efficacy or successful formulation in a work ... where without an explicit performative construction, the poem seems to accomplish what it names” (2692). Vaa’s notion of poetic thinking implies that attention to nature *and to poetry* can bring about changes in one’s form of thought that can allow one to think outside of established or hegemonic concepts. In later poems, she seems to attempt a poetry that will stay with the reader after reading and alter her form of thought.

The special performativity of poetry is something that I believe all three poets treated in these chapters were cognizant of (as I explain in the introduction). Vaa employs two performative aspects of lyric that Culler sees as connected to the “ritual” nature of lyric, rhythm and address. Culler sees this ritual function of poetry as central to its origins but also active today: lyric is used to communicate praise and blame, and this ritual pronouncement aids in the process by which lyric serves to affirm values. The affirmation of values is further aided by the memorable quality of lyric—the ease with which it can be memorized, performed, and repeated. Vaa is explicitly a poet of values. She is also unapologetic in her use of traditional poetic forms that maintain clear connections to the genre’s social functions. The poem “Apokalyptisk dag” is an excellent example of how she employs poetry’s capacity to level both praise and blame (at innocence and hubris, respectively) in a form made memorable through rhythm and rhyme in an effort to protect a reverence for living things against a pursuit of technological advancement that is seen as potentially dehumanizing.

The poem “Moreld” from *Fotefár* (1947), utilizes rhythm and performative language, not so much in a ritual of praise or blame, but rather to demonstrate or perform “poetic thinking” (*DiS* 238–39). The poem takes its name from a natural phenomenon, the “små lyspunkt som kan vise seg i havoverflata når sjøen er i rørsle, og som kjem av sjølvlysande plankton” [small points of light that sometimes appear on the surface of the ocean when the sea is in motion and that come from bioluminescent plankton] (“Moreld”). In “Moreld,” the rowing of a boat seems to set the phenomenon in motion. Thus participating in, rather than merely bearing witness to, the phenomenon, the poem’s “I” is conveyed back to the primeval both spatially (“Mitt hjartas anker tek botnen” [My heart’s anchor reaches the bottom]) and temporally (“Manar meg ned mot alt upphavs tid” [Summons me down to the origin of all time]). The result seems to be a form of liberation, as the light source behind the *moreld* “lyfter [meg] mot ukjende mål / mot det eviges fang ...” [lifts me toward unknown goals, toward the lap of the eternal].

The concluding ellipsis is in keeping with what Prytz observes of Vaa’s late poems: the poem does not *have* an ending. Rather, we are left with a sense that the process continues and to

⁹⁷ Mæhle similarly notes that there is an immediacy to her later poetry. While “*leitinga* meir enn sjøve målet ... driv henne fram” throughout her oeuvre [*searching* more so than the goal itself ... compels her forward] (170), in her later work, “Diktaren står på ein heilt ny måte midt *i* ein livsprosess; den litt kjølige allegoriseringa og dei avstands-skapande ‘som’ er borte. I dei poetiske bileta som no opnar seg, kan vi ikkje lenger dra noko skilje mellom dei ytre tinga og det sjelelege landskapet” [The poet stands in an entirely new way directly *in* a life-process; the slightly chilly allegorizing and the distancing ‘as’ are gone. In the poetic images that now open up, we can no longer draw a distinction between the outer things and the spiritual landscape] (177).

wonder what “goal” the “I” might eventually reach. That the goal is unstated suggests that the poem enacts Vaa’s idea of poetic thought, which is not a mode of thought that reaches foregone conclusions but rather cultivates an openness that allows thought to grow or unfurl in indeterminate ways. But the concluding ellipsis also compels the reader to continue the thought herself, as wondering what the goal is leaves one lingering over the poem’s situation and subject matter in a way that holds the reader in an engaged, yet open state of mind.

So far, I have performed a reading of the poem in which the poem’s “I” is taken as a fictional speaker in a given scenario. Most other readings similarly attempt to interpret the “journey” taken by the poem’s subject. Mæhle, who reads the poem as a metaphor for the course of a human life, emphasizes that the human figure in the poem goes back “ikkje berre til det logne, kjære opphavlandet, ikkje berre til dei urcellene i havet som moreldsglansen kjem frå, men heilt ned til ‘alt opphavs tid’” [Not only to the peaceful, beloved land of origin, not only to the primordial cells in the sea that the *moreld* comes from, but all the way down to ‘the origin of all time’] (183). This experience enables the subject to see life and time from an expansive perspective, which ultimately “gjev næring og groevne til menneskesinnet” [provides the human mind with nourishment and the capacity for growth] (183). Vassenden reads the *moreld* as “et bilde på sameksistensen mellom jeget og verden” [an image of the coexistence between the ‘I’ and the world] (478). Interaction with the world (read as erotic contact) grants insight into the mystery of life. Rather than a transcendent insight, however, “som i den filosofiske vitalismen er overskridelsen hos Vaa en overskridelse *innover* mot immanens” [as in philosophical vitalism, transcendence in Vaa is a transcendence *inward* toward immanence] (479). What distinguishes Vaa from other vitalists, in Vassenden’s view, is that she represents this insight as the product of a feminine interaction with the world; she utilizes images of impregnation and fertility, rather than the masculine imagery used by her counterparts (*Norsk vitalisme* 479).

While I recognize the images of fertility in “Moreld,” what I do not see is the “kjønnet kropp” that facilitates this interaction [gendered body] (*Norsk vitalisme* 479). Instead, the poem seems to obscure or even eschew individual subjectivity, performing a process more than it narrates a scenario. By reading the transformation undergone by the subject in the poem, Mæhle and Vassenden’s readings neglect the performative aspects of the poem that undermine the idea of subjectivity altogether as they act upon the reader using rhythm and address. (I use the term “rhythm” here to refer to both the metrical pattern and deviations from it that together produce the poem’s sonic effects.) Mæhle notes that Vaa employs a metrical form similar to that of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson’s “Ære det evige forår i livet” [Honor the eternal spring in life] and takes this similarity to indicate a shared interest in evolution and the oceanic origins of all life, as well as the notion of evolutionary time (“Det lydde eit bod” 180). The five-line stanzas consist of two two-footed, iambic lines framed between two four-footed, dactylic lines, with a concluding return to a two-footed iambic line (4-2-2-4-2) (Sejersted and Vassenden 226). Not unlike the poem “Bølge” [Wave], the rhythm of the poem suggests the motion of waves, such that “alle elementa er sett i rørsle ... rommet og stunda er skriven inn i gyngande, rørlege prosessar som opnar og utvidar tida” [all the elements are set in motion ... space and time are written into rocking, mobile processes that open and expand time] (Grønstøl and Langås 95).

This effect is heightened by the delayed appearance of a speaking subject. The first stanzas rely on an impersonal construction to represent the poem’s scenario:

I lette eimande skoddelag
gli dei åreslag,

som ein tryllestav
vekkjer dei moreldens livskrye glans
i det nottsvarte hav. (*DiS* 238, emphasis added)
In light, steaming layers of mist, *oar-strokes glide*, like a magic wand they awaken the
moreld's glimmer, teeming with life, in the night-dark sea.

In his chapter on rhythm in lyric, Culler notes that metrical regularity, together with the absence of an “I,” make it difficult to interpret a poem as the utterance a fictional speaker in a particular context. Rather than the voice of a speaking subject we associate with lyric, these poems produce the effect of “voicing” (821–23). Notable examples of this might include nursery or other nonsense rhymes. In the Scandinavian context, gnomic poetry such as *Hávamál* [The sayings of the high one] might come to mind. However, some lyric poets employ this effect as well. Culler also notes that poetic features such as repetition, in the form of rhythm and rhyme, as well as apostrophe are often associated with magic (3795–96). This, he proposes, can be attributed to our (largely involuntary) physiological response to rhythm: “Although our body has its own rhythms, of breathing and of heartbeats, our rhythmic competence most often responds to rhythm as something exterior which nonetheless engages us, draws us to beat in time with it, finding or sensing a pattern, in noises, movements, action in the world” (2877–2881). This sense of being drawn in by rhythm makes poetry processual, as well as mimetic. Culler writes, “Rhythm in language ... enlists us in a process in ways that other texts do not” (2877–2881). Similarly, the “magical” aspect of apostrophe is that it “posit[s] a potentially responsive or at least attentive universe, to which one has a relation” (4442–4444). Together these “special” forms of performativity produce a sense that words are making things happen.

Vaa's poems that are more explicitly concerned with values (such as “Konn og gull” and “Apokalyptisk dag”) similarly rely more on “voicing” than voice: what we seem to hear is a voice of wisdom or admonition, rather than the utterance of an individual subject in a particular situation (as in “Underfikentreet,” or in the first half of “Fotefár,” before the poem switches to direct address). Similarly, in “Moreld,” the presence of the subject is delayed while the idea of magic is activated through the comparison of the boat's oars to a *tryllestav*, or magic wand. If rowing, in this metaphor, is moving the wand, then the poem itself is an incantation, the magic words that set a thought process in motion. That this thought process belongs as much to the reader as to the poem's “I” is indicated by how delayed the appearance of a subject is—long delayed even, since “min ferdaveg” does not appear until the fourth stanza. The appearance of a personal pronoun, “meg,” is almost teasingly delayed until stanza five when the speaker finally articulates the effect that the reader has been experiencing: “Millionar liv ... meg tek og meg triv” [Millions of lives ... grasp me and grab me].

The rhythm indeed takes hold of the reader, and, while Vassenden identifies this as erotic, Grønstøl and Langås see such rhythms elsewhere in Vaa's poetry as a means of uniting the sensual and the transcendent (Vassenden, *Norsk vitalisme* 477; Grønstøl and Langås, “Naturen, kjærleiken og diktinga” 100). The “magic” performed by the poem can thus be seen as an identification between the plankton and the subject, “en overskridelse *innover* mot immanens,” as Vassenden puts it, the result of which is “næring and groevne til menneskesinnet” [a transcendence *inward* toward immanence; nourishment and the capacity for growth to the human mind] (Vassenden, *Norsk vitalisme* 478; Mæhle, “Det lydde eit bod” 183). However, without paying attention to the poem's form and its reluctance to give voice to a particular

subject, the same conclusions could have been reached about “Sid’beinet.” In that poem, the flowers declare:

Du er ei og heil
i din vokster som me!
Høyr, du er ei og heil! (*DiS* 111)
You are one and whole in your fullness as we are! Listen, you are one and whole!

But “Moreld” eschews declaration in favor of performance. As Culler writes, “A reader of verse, attentive to the rhythms and verbal patterning, produces or articulates the text as he or she hears it, occupying, however temporarily, the position of speaker” (2881–82). The text does not merely represent a subject who makes contact with immanence and finds her mind nourished in the process but attempts to engage readers in this process themselves.

The use of apostrophe at a key moment in the poem makes this clear: the motion of the boat in the poem has progressed from the third stanza where it lies bound “med hjartas band” [with the cords of the heart] before beginning to glide. Rowing, which drives the speaker back to those primeval forms of life represented as forms of naive (“barndomsord” [childhood words]) and nonhuman semiosis (“biune berande bod” [the bees bearing messages]), eventually reaches the source of the *moreld* (“ljoslivet” [the light-life]), where “Mitt hjartas anker tek botnen” [My heart’s anchor sinks to the bottom]. The poem lingers here momentarily:

Eg voggar vak
mot bylje på bylje av ny-tende ljøs
frå dei åretak. (*DiS* 239)
I rock softly against wave after wave of newly kindled light from the strokes of the oar.

The declarative “I” at the beginning of the stanza suggests that a speaking subject has coalesced by this point in the poem, perhaps undermining my argument that the reader is meant to occupy this position. However, all along the poem’s incantatory rhythm has continued to compel the reader, along with the speaker and the boat. Moreover, Vaa inserts an apostrophic line in the final stanza, a gesture that produces a sudden awareness of this:

Ljoskjelda kviler på botnen av tid
—la båten gli—
The light source rests at the bottom of time—let the boat glide—

This address is ambiguous inasmuch as it could be read as encouragement, exhortation, or command. Its addressee is also unclear: it could also be read as the poem’s “I” talking to him/herself, except that it stands so clearly apart from the rest of the poem. There are no other moments of address, and Vaa sets it off typographically as well. Thus, the most plausible reading is as an interruption (by the poet?) exhorting the reader to give in to the poem’s effects, to allow the “boat,” here the mind, to unmoor itself from the known and venture out toward “ukjende mål.”

This sudden address serves to remind the reader that she has been made to occupy the position of the subject, borne along by the poem’s rhythm just as the subject has been borne along by the waves. The effect is having been rocked into a state of receptivity to the materiality

of language (as the “I” is to primeval forms of life) that has the potential to foster creativity—should the reader allow it to take effect. The poem thus questions the exclusivity of human claims to signification, suggesting there are important forms of signification in nature that we need in order to understand “the human” in its full breadth and depth. The best method of getting in touch with these kinds of signification is one that draws attention to the physicality of language—a physicality that is shared with, and can be used to interact with, the physical world. Thus, poetry is not a “substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 437), but rather *is* a form of getting out into the world. The poem suggests that the experience of allowing language’s physical effects to take hold, to direct one’s eyes, mouth, breath, attention, is in key ways the *same* as immersing oneself in the natural world and allowing it to influence you.

Biosemiotc Imagism

Several scholars have noted that one of the poetic forms Vaa experiments with in her later work is a kind of imagism. As Tysdahl explains, imagism is characterized by a focus on concrete sights and sounds. Citing the imagist manifesto, he explains that the imagist poet is to “render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous” (214). Grønstøl, however, points out that Vaa tends to direct and bolster the connotative potential of the images she presents by adding reflection or explanation to them (“Kva er ein tanke?” 96). The poems express “bearbeidd sansing” [reworked perception], rather than the kind of bare perception the imagists sought to convey (97). However, I am interested in two instances of a kind of imagism that sees processes in nature as performing a kind of writing. Similar to the examples given in chapter four, in which Vaa describes sounds and visible phenomena in nature as music, verbal communication, or written language, the poems “Teikn” [Characters] and “Ljos Nott” [Bright night] describe the branches of a tree and erosion caused by waves, respectively, as forms of writing. However, rather than “sinnstilstandar prosjisererte ut i naturbilete” [states of mind projected out into images of nature] (“Kva er ein tanke?” 72), as some of these earlier examples are, Vaa avoids the appearance of a subject at all in these poems. The effect again is “voicing” rather than an individual voice. These poems may seem disconnected from the realm of values because of their concrete imagery and openness to interpretation. Yet, as Culler observes of William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow,” they can also be seen as “an unorthodox, unfinished version of the poem of praise” (748-749).

The poem “Teikn” from *Skjenkarsveinens visur* (1954) describes the branches of a tree, an image that appears throughout Vaa’s oeuvre, but here to a very different conclusion:

Teikn

På turre jorde
millom fjorgamle strå
stend treet

treet—lekkja til mold
røtar syg seg ned
søkjer mot tyngdi
grunnvatten, grunnfjell,

tree—nakne greinir tøygjær seg upp
og skriv kinesiske teikn
pá flagrande grå blomstersilke. (*DiS* 274)

Characters

On dry ground among last year's stalks the tree stands. The tree—linked to earth, the roots draw themselves down, seeking out the weight, the ground water, bedrock. The tree—naked branches stretch up and write Chinese characters on fluttering gray flower-silk.

In some ways, "Teikn," presents an image of poetic thinking that produces the effect of almost instantaneous apprehension because of the sparse description and brevity of the poem. That is, rather than explaining poetic thinking, the poem represents it in a single image. In such a reading, the tree is the mind with its "roots" seeking deep down to the root of culture, thought, and/or language. Despite the "dry ground" that surrounds it on the surface (perhaps the "dead" or "hard" thought or language Vaa often decries), the mind, like the tree, has the ability to reach down into the past, the imminent, or the invisible to find new sources of "life," or thought. The product of this "drawing down" is the "naked branches" that reach up, "writing" on the gray sky. The reference to "blomstersilke" suggests a spring that hasn't yet come, a potential for growth that lies dormant, or perhaps a contrast between the seemingly dead but actually living tree and the apparent barrenness of winter. Vaa's twist on imagism here is presenting something unseen, the root network beneath the tree, as just as important as what is seen, the branches that the root network sustains. Just as the tree is not only the visible organism but also the structures beneath, the mind is not only its products but also the deep "network" of references and associations it draws upon in its creative processes. This network is unseen but represents a form of lively potential that is always present.

Yet Vaa leaves the poem open in its last stanza: rather than giving us the tree's message (as the flowers delivered their message in "Sid'beinet"), we are only told that the tree's branches form a script. What messages the script might convey are left open to the imagination. One could read this as a tribute to the powers of imagination over nature. However, such a view is not in keeping with Vaa's poetics elsewhere. This leads us back to the notion of "sensuous poesis," which I introduced in chapter three in relationship to Olav Nygard's poetics. "Sensuous poesis," as Knickerbocker defines it, is "the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (2). It "operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable from the rest of nature" (2). In his chapter on Wallace Stevens, Knickerbocker provides a reading of "The Snow Man," a poem that could be read productively alongside "Teikn." In its insistence that "One must have a mind of winter ... *not* to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind" (emphasis added), Stephen draws attention to the "dynamic play" between nature and imagination: rather than it being a form of projection to hear mournfulness in the sound of the wind, "The Snow Man" suggests that "[n]o matter how much we pare down or restrict language to get at brute nature, 'something resides' that seems to have meaning (Knickerbocker 36). This "something" is the "wild" aspect of language, the sense that language is "beyond our ability completely to control it, like nature" (Knickerbocker 36).

Culler notes that “[c]onceived as a spatial domain, lyric lies between the pictorial and the musical” (5146-5147). While “Moreld” plays on lyric’s potential as music, “Teikn” draws attention to the poem’s visual structures, performing “dynamic play” between the branches of the tree and written language. The comparison between tree branches and non-alphabetic writing draws attention to the materiality of writing: Chinese characters are logograms that stand for whole words or phrases. Some are pictographic; thus, Vaa may have chosen the reference because she saw it as form of writing in which the relationship between the represented object and the written sign is more concrete than in alphabetic writing. The reference thus draws attention to the “concrete” origins of language. The comparison between branches and characters also draws attention to the materials in and on which language is written. Finally, it suggests a similarity between the visual forms of written language and visible structures in nature. Thus, rather than using rhythm or rhyme here to draw attention to the resemblance between the body and nature, as she does in “Moreld,” Vaa draws attention to the similarity between the structures of nature and the structures of human writing, suggesting not only that our perception of the latter informs our perception of the former, but also that the evolution of the latter has and can continue to draw on the former for inspiration.

Vaa does use sound to great effect, however, especially to represent the process of roots spreading and sucking out moisture through alliteration (“syg seg ned / søkjer”) and the idea of the underground as foundational through the use of “heavy” syllables (“grunnvatten, grunnfjell”). This is accompanied by a play with the visual not seen often in her earlier work, as “grunnvatten, grunnfjell” also has a square, stable look on the page, while the lines of the final stanza seem to unfurl or trail off tentatively, seeming to gesture beyond the page. As Knickerbocker claims, this emphasis on “‘resemblance’ rather than ‘identity’” allows poets to portray the complexity of the relationship between nature and culture “without fixing their relationship into a stable theory” (23). In “Teikn,” the reader is left with an awareness of this resemblance between tree and poem, with a suggestion that nature indeed signifies in ways that are similar but not identical to human signification, and with the question of how to interpret such signs. The tree metaphor also suggests the complex “roots” of human language and invites an exploration of its various sources which otherwise might become lost, especially as the mind deals in increasingly abstract concepts.

Another example of Vaa’s biosemiotic imagism is the poem “Ljos nott” from *Bustader* (1963). The poem describes the relationship between sea and land. Although the poem involves the personification of these elements, it does focus on a single image or process and the particulars of that process, namely erosion. In the poem’s opening, the sea is described as “ventande” before the dawn as it “sender ... sine bodir i land” [expectant; sends ... its messages to land] (*DiS* 300). The wave “leikar” with a stone that lies on the beach, “lukkar han inne i kyss etter kyss” [plays; encloses it in kiss after kiss]. While this personification would seem to bring the wave and the stone into the realm of human concerns, the end result of this process is difficult to interpret through the framework of romantic love. The “goal” of this embrace is that

[...] han kanskje om ein tusen år
 skal ha fenge rita inn ein hieroglyf
 om so mange dei ljose nettar— (*DiS* 300)
 ... maybe in a thousand years, it will have managed to inscribe a hieroglyph about these
 many bright nights—

Reading the poem as a metaphor for human love, one could perhaps think of the indelible impression that one person leaves on another over the course of a long relationship. In this sense, the poem could be interpreted as another account of the encounter between self and other, one marked by a dynamic “play” in which two entities maintain their autonomy, rather than fusing together into a whole. Yet, because that result is a “hieroglyph,” itself a sign that can be read, the poem also insists on a metapoetic reading.

It is also notable that Vaa omits the relationship between subject and addressee (I/you) that is present in her earlier poems about love and autonomy. This omission makes it possible to interpret the poem as other than a metaphor for human love. The poem describes an observable process in nature, the long process by which water erodes stone. In this sense, it is an effort to portray, in brief, the same sense of deep time that “Moreld” attempts to grant access to. The poem suggests the end result of this process could be “a hieroglyph,” another logogram that conveys whole words or ideas in a single sign. It thus invites “reading” the beach stone as the story of processes that both proceed and outlast the human lifespan. Rather than assuming the position of the subject within the poem, the reader stands outside, looking: This encourages a particular, “situated” stance toward the beach, suggesting that knowledge of the natural world is made available through suggestive signs “written” on seemingly mundane objects.

On the one hand, this could be read as a gesture of *réf rence*: The poem encourages the reader to take an attentive stance with them beyond the poem, to the experience of the “more-than-human natural world” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 437). However, in keeping with a view of nature as culture, the poem could also be read as a metapoetic commentary on the poem (and mind) as hieroglyph: Rather than a moment of sudden inspiration, the poem is the result of steady, subtle influences from without that may eventually approach meaningful signification. However, all attempts at making the processes of nature permanent or to produce from them a “closed” meaning are only partial. It is ecopoetic in its interest in *process* over “any sense of finality or closure” (Knickerbocker, 54). In this sense, it is oriented toward a particular attentive stance toward processes in nature—a form of practice—rather than an adequate representation of the physical world. Meaning *even in nature*, Vaa suggests, is always incomplete because its processes are always ongoing. These later experiments in a kind of biosemiotic imagism thus attempt to be what they describe: memorable, single images that give the impression of being immediately apprehensible in their entirety, yet with meanings that are always incomplete and therefore inexhaustible.

Conclusion

As Fosse writes of Vaa’s poetry of intersubjectivity, “  oppn  forhold til eit anna menneske,” or, in this case, the natural world, “er noe aktivt. Men det er ogs  noe utanfor v r vilje ... At vi kjem inn i eit eg-du-forhold er ei *handling*, og det er noe som *skjer*. Det er   grip og bli gripen” [To achieve a relationship with another person is something active. But it is also something outside our will ... Coming into an I-you relationship is an *act*, and there is something that *happens*. It is to grasp and be grasped] (76). Wheeler similarly views poetry as an intentional retreat into what are at times involuntary processes, as the mind moves away from “the linear grammatical logic of language abstracted from experience” in order to access “its earlier iconic substrates in the tacit experiential knowledge which lies in the body-mind” (147). In as much as poetry draws our attention to the “earlier iconic substrates” of language, especially through sound, she writes, “Poetry materialises and instantiates the process of human discovery in general” (147).

Especially in poems such as “Moreld,” Vaa endeavors not to provide “ein oppskrift” [a recipe or pattern] for poetic thought, to borrow a phrase from Fosse, but rather “ein måte å vera på som kan opne for at vi når fram” [a mode of being that can facilitate reaching our goal] (76). In this case the “måte å vera på” is poetic (or organic or perhaps ecological) thinking. Rather than abandoning the rational or “losing” oneself to nature or the poem, poetic thinking is the recognition of a fundamental similarity between nature and culture that provides a potential basis for creative thought.

In Vaa’s essays from the 1950s, Larsen notes that Vaa saw the atomic age as presenting unique conceptual challenges for human beings and also, paradoxically, the product of human thought processes (96). Vaa believed that thought could be applied in the service of life-sustaining processes, not just destructive ones. Yet, she also argued that the great mental capabilities of human beings are dangerous when combined with the hastiness of the age (Larsen 97). Vaa’s concerns about the atomic age can be productively related to the concerns that have arisen with the declaration that we are living in a new geological age, the Anthropocene. Changing climates, shifting seasons, altered migratory patterns, and increasingly mobile humans present many cognitive challenges, which produces a sense of disorientation. Yet, cognitively we also aware that these are changes produced by human thought and action. The “hastiness of the age” moreover makes adherence to the timelines that climatologists suggest we must meet in order to avoid the most disastrous outcomes of global warming seem impossible. Watching the pace of these developments, one might feel compelled to shout “Halt!” along with “Apokalyptisk dag.”

Vaa saw time spent in nature as a respite from this hastiness, one that allowed people to see things in a “menneskelig perspektiv” rather than the dehumanized perspective that is often brought about by the discourses of war, economics, and technology [human perspective] (Larsen 97). Yet, the idea that nature also communicates or signifies in ways that resemble human communication or signification suggests that poetry, and perhaps art more generally, has the potential to provide this “menneskelig perspektiv” as well. Toward the end of her oeuvre, we see her attempting to induce this perspective by using poetry to draw attention to the resemblance between natural process and human language (both written and spoken). This also suggests that, though she relies on the language of humanism, her definition of “menneskelig” resembles the notion of the human as a “whole creature,” that is, not only a thinking, creating being but also a fundamentally biological and relational being. As the character Dr. Kassenga says in the play *Honningfuglen og leoparden*, the first thing the earth produced wasn’t the human brain: “Ho er bare det siste, og hev å lyde — som alt anna. ... Og krenkjer me jordi — krenkjer me menneskje. Krenkjer ein menneskje, krenkjer ein jordi. ... Og soleis er det at ein skaper seg øknar — på si jord — og i sitt hjarta” [It is only the most recent, and needs to listen—like everything else. ... And if we harm the earth—we harm humanity. If you harm humanity, you harm the earth ... And that is the way that you create wastelands—in your world—and in your heart] (Vaa, *Honningfuglen og leoparden* 65).

Vaa’s poems enact a form of ecopoetic practice by pointing out that nature processes such as plant growth, flowing water, and wind and weather patterns can be observed, contemplated and imitated. Imitating these processes produces a form of thought that is present in the material world, respecting its autonomy and observing its open-ended growth with interest. This thought then becomes autonomous and open-ended itself. Instrumental rationality is the opposite of this kind of thought; it is removed over and above the material world, views it as an object to be managed through a form of thought that seeks to control and contain nature, as well

as women and racial others, but ultimately life itself. This form of thought, then, provides a way to live alongside, in, and among other forms of life without exploiting or suppressing their vitality. Yet, as Bennett points out, it is a notion of life and language in which an “element of unpredictability and indeterminacy” remains, thus countering a tendency in “the practice of experimental science ... to *understate* or downplay the freedom, the energetic fluidity or surprising creativity of the natural world” (62). While Vaa tends to direct the reader back to fundamental processes in nature through the “wild” aspects of poetic language, in our present situation, those “fundamental processes” are themselves “surprising” and dynamic in ways that are often alarming or destabilizing rather than reassuring. Yet the notion of poetry as being like nature in the sense that it is processual makes Vaa a potential “stop-over” on the way to ecopoetics for contemporary poets and readers wondering how to engage with a nature in flux.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have examined “situated” views of nature among three poets writing in *Nynorsk*, each from the perspective of their historical moment and “uneven” experience of modernity. For each of them, the *Nynorsk* language had the capacity to express a view of nature that is either marginalized, novel, or threatened. They view *Nynorsk* as a product of culture, like other languages, but also as uniquely in touch with the contributions that the natural environment makes to culture. For them, the question “How can we better understand the relationship between human language and nonhuman nature?” is best answered from a situated perspective, not one that derives its notion of objectivity from a position above or at a remove from its object of interest. Thus, they look to natural processes, the etymological roots of words, the history of word usage, and the place of poetic forms in the context of traditions that go back to the oral to provide a basis for language and literature that communicates the concerns of its time without losing contact with the environment or the past. They understand the relationship between language and nonhuman nature as one of contact and exchange, such that culture is not always viewed either as superior to or determinative of the material world.

Many ecocritics have noted that at stake in the status of the material world is also the status of women, indigenous people, and others subjugated according to a logic that views materiality as a “lower” form of life. The poets treated in this work understand this to varying degrees: Aasen notes that denigrating dirt also denigrates those who work in it. Nygard actually participates in vitalist notions of feminine passive materiality and masculine agency, but his notion of dynamics in nature suggests the possibility of a biopolitical community in which humans are decentered. Vaa also essentializes at times the relationship that women and rural people (including rural Africans) have to nature. However, her notion of attention to nature and language production as conscious, active processes eschews romanticism or primitivism and makes a case for education in local cultural traditions in the service of new artistic production as one way of empowering marginalized communities.

In light of Vaa’s proposals, it is interesting to consider how contemporary Norwegian poetry might engage with or be predicated upon the concerns and efforts of these earlier poets. One might think of the recent activist project *Forfatternes klimaaksjon* §112 [The Norwegian Writer’s Climate Campaign] as being a popular pedagogy project in the spirit of Aasen. Given that the project aimed to inform the public, as well as encourage school children to write their own pieces in response to climate change, it suggests an instrumental view of poetry that sparked some initial controversy. Yet, the diversity of poetry published on the campaign’s website suggests that at least two levels of political action are possible: it is possible to draw attention to the relationship between art and politics within the poem itself in the hope of spurring action, but it is also possible to suggest art’s political efficacy through the larger social context in which a work is distributed and received. Thus, the site’s less overtly ecopolitical poems announce their political engagement not by restricting themselves creatively but by signaling a desire (and perhaps a sense of responsibility) to participate in a larger discussion about climate change and national policy. In this latter model, not unlike Aasen’s notion of poem as *symre*, no one poem has to say it all.

In the same way that Nygard has been characterized as a “futurist,” we might see *Solaris korrigeret* [Solaris corrected, 2004], the example with which I opened this work, as a collection that tries to imagine a possible future for the Norwegian language, one in which some of the

fears associated with global capitalism and fossil fuel consumption have come to pass, but in which human creativity and the capacity to adapt provides grounds for optimism. The speaker of *Solaris korrigert* also tries to understand forms of nonhuman intelligence, such as that of robots, and how engagement with these intelligences alters the notion of the human. Another collection that experiments with language in order to represent nonhuman cognition is Morton Langeland's *ÆÆÅ* [IAMTOO, 2012]. Using a hybrid of dialect, *Nynorsk*, and other experimental language forms, the collection attempts to represent the cognitive process of a school of mackerel:

æ æ å
 æ æ makrell
 æ æ me fler
 æ æ sa mi å mi kalla oss mi
 å mi veit å tror mi tror mi veit mi æ same
 I am too
 I am mackerel
 I am with more
 I am we said and we called our self we
 and we know and think we know we think we are the same

The failure of written dialect to distinguish between grammatical forms causes an ambiguity that here helps the reader to imagine how organisms that exist in swarms might think. For example, because “æ” means both “I” and “am,” the mackerel’s utterance does not distinguish between subject and verb. Instead, the dialect makes them identical iterations and diminishes the significance of being “I” in relation to being “too” or “with more.” This diminishes the sense that there is an individual speaking subject in the poem without replacing it with a collective “we” that is just like an “I,” only grander. Instead the patterns of “I” and “we” that Langeland develops suggest an intelligence that emerges from an assemblage of similar but non-identical beings and helps us to think beyond individualistic or organic notions of subjectivity.

Finally, one contemporary poet who engages with both international literature (especially Latin American) and questions about language and power in a manner not unlike Aslaug Vaa is Inger Elisabeth Hansen. Her work has long engaged with colonialism and the history of mobile objects and bodies in a way that questions stable notions of cultural tradition. Recently, however, she has connected all of this to environmental degradation and climate change in the collection *Å resirkulere lengselen: avrenning foregår* [To recirculate longing: Run-off occurs, 2015]. A contributor to *Forfatternes klimaaksjon*, Hansen draws attention to language, including the language of traditional poetic symbols, and how it shapes our view of nature. Often, she directly questions this language in order to challenge us to remake it in response to a changing, even weird, nature. For example, she takes up the albatross, made famous in the romantic lyric tradition by Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in order to ask how plastic pollution has emptied out its romantic meaning and is causing new, disturbing meanings to form:

Spørsmålet er:
 når forsvant albatrossen i albatrossen? Når begynte albatrossen
 å dø på feil måter? Når begynte den å ta feil?
 ...
 Hvor mange meter plast kan man hale ut av tarmen på en albatross?

Har du sett inn i tarmen på en albatross?

Når ble den en søppelavhengig, selvdestruerende styrtet skrott uten los?

Når tippet albatrossen over og ble en ripofag som snurrer rundt der ute

over havene av plast som snurrer og snurrer rundt der ute

uten minnelos, der Atlantis, der Atlantis? (Hansen 54)

The question is: when did the albatross in the albatross disappear? When did the albatross begin to die in the wrong way? When did it go wrong? ... How many meters of plastic can be drawn out of the intestine of an albatross? Have you seen inside the intestine of an albatross? When did it become a garbage-dependent, self-destructive fallen carcass without a pilot? When did it tip over and become an autophage that swirls around out there over oceans of plastic that swirl and swirl around out there without a pilot for your memory, where Atlantis, where Atlantis?

All of these examples suggest that Norwegian literature provides many examples of poetry that engages with ecocritical questions particularly by considering how language changes and how these changes might alter our view of nature. While not all of this poetry is written in *Nynorsk*, some of it relies on the diversity of written language forms in Norway to facilitate both linguistic experimentation and the intelligibility of these unusual forms for the reader. Regardless, all three examples suggest an awareness of language as existing in diverse forms, including oral and written ones, and as undergoing a continual process of historical and social transformation. The historical development of Norwegian and continued promotion of diverse vernacular forms (whether it be the ubiquity of dialect use in public life and media or the equal legal status of *Nynorsk* and *Bokmål*) makes the contingency and variability of language particularly salient in the Norwegian context. This, in turn, makes it uniquely available as a thematic and aesthetic concern of Norwegian writers. Acceptance of linguistic diversity in Norwegian is by no means universal, nor does that acceptance readily extend beyond variations on Norwegian to include other languages. However, the historical presence of such diversity does create a unique capacity within Norwegian literature for linguistic experimentation. If we are, as ecopoets argue, in need of new language forms and symbols to understand our current moment and formulate ethical and aesthetic responses to it, such variation might provide grounds to be optimistic about our ability to do so.

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