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New Nature Narratives: Landscape Hermeneutics and Environmental Ethics

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Introduction

Philosophical hermeneutics is built on the assumption that people make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger normative context. *Environmental* hermeneutics focuses on the fact that environments matter to people too, because environments embody just such contexts. [1] This is most obvious for cultural landscapes, yet it applies to the specifically natural world as well: nature can function as a larger normative context with its own narrative dimension. However, there are many different placial and temporal dimensions at play in our relation to the landscape, which can give rise to different normative interpretations of the meaning of a given landscape. Such differences often play a role in environmental conflicts. One such conflict is the clash between those who care for the conservation of cultural heritage landscapes, and those who believe that we have an obligation to "rewild" our landscapes, or to "create new nature", as the Dutch like to say.[2] Both ethical positions rely on different *readings* of the landscape, readings

[1] John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light, *Environmental Values* (New York: Routledge 2008), 162-164.

[2] The term "new nature" may seem odd to an outsider, but it is the most often used word for ecological restoration projects in the Netherlands. The term expresses the idea that nature is "built" in places where it had been obliterated in the past, much in the same way as the rest of the land was built by humans. In

that not only reflect a specific ethical relation to the landscape, but are also utterly bound to notions of personal identity and sense of place. That is why different landscape readings can easily give rise to deep and seemingly irresolvable conflicts about the landscape, even more so when existing landscape interpretations are challenged by rapid landscape change.

In this paper, I provide building blocks for a reconciliation of the ethical care for heritage protection and nature restoration ethics. It will do so by introducing a hermeneutic landscape philosophy that takes landscape as a multi-layered "text" in need of interpretation, and place identities as built upon certain readings of the landscape. I will argue that, from a hermeneutical perspective, both approaches appear to complement each other. Renaturing presents a valuable correction to the anthropocentrism of many European rural cultures. Yet, heritage protectionists rightly point to the value of narratives for Old World identities. I will conclude with a short reflection on how such a hermeneutical environmental ethic can be helpful in dealing with environmental conflicts.

Resurging wild nature in Europe's cultural landscapes

The European landscape is a contested terrain. European countries are trying to find new, more sustainable attitudes towards nature. The value of wild nature is increasingly being recognized. To compensate for centuries of environmental decline, efforts are made to

other words, the terminology reveals the deep Dutch conviction that is also expressed in the famous Dutch saying "God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands".

increase the share of natural areas in Europe.[3] As a result of renaturing projects, designation of new, large scale habitat areas, and the reintroduction of extinct species, wild nature is literally gaining ground. The establishment of large scale wilderness areas, the so-called PAN-Parks (Protected Area Network), is meant to create stable refuges for biodiversity, whereas the European ecological network Natura 2000 will connect existing natural areas so that species can migrate more easily and biodiversity loss due to fragmentation is counteracted. These developments are applauded by the general public, but occasionally they meet local resistance, particularly in areas with a long agricultural history, despite the fact that many farmers willingly cooperate when offered financial compensation.

Next to ecological restoration, which is anthropogenic, wild nature also resurfaces spontaneously, notably in abandoned rural areas.[4] The European human population is decreasing, and will continue to do so in the upcoming years. Moreover, Europeans are moving to the urban centers, leaving rural regions abandoned. In some urban zones, too, urban adapters such as fox and stone marten increasingly roam the city centers and suburbs.[5] In general, this means that in many cultural landscapes the human influence on

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[3] See Alison Coleman and Toby Aykroyd, eds. *Conference Proceedings: Wild Europe and Large Natural Habitat Areas* (Prague 2009).

[4] See Franz Höchtl, Susanne Lehringer and Werner Konold, "'Wilderness': what it means when it becomes a reality—a case study from the southwestern Alps." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 70 (2005): 85-95; Marcel Hunziker, "The spontaneous reafforestation in abandoned agricultural lands: perception and aesthetic assessment by locals and tourists." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 31 (1995): 399-410.

[5] Gerard Müskens and Sim Broekhuizen, *De steenmarter (Martes foina) in Borgharen: aantal, overlast en schade* (Wageningen: Alterra Report no. 1259, 2005)

the landscape will become less dominant, and non-human species will have the opportunity to occupy new habitats. Lynx and wolf are already repopulating areas where they had gone extinct centuries ago. One of the most spectacular examples is the return of the wolf from Eastern Europe. In the last decade, wolves have already occupied regions in former East Germany, and they are still moving westward. Ecologists predict that the first wolves will reach the German-Dutch border within ten years. When that happens, wolves will have entered one of the most densely populated areas in the world.[6]

At the same time other more or less conflicting trends with regard to landscapes are emerging in the European landscape awareness. Increasingly, traditional landscapes are recognized as part of our cultural heritage and worthy of conservation. This revaluation gains ground against the background of a perceived crisis of the European countryside:

> European landscapes are facing a deep crisis. As a consequence of globalization and the economical change associated with it, traditional functions like production agriculture are becoming less important. After the self-evident but inspired landscapes of numerous generations of peasants, monks and landlords, landscape has now largely become a nameless by-product of the global

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[6] One of the undesirable effects of this development will be that the fear for wild nature will most probably resurface as well. Most Europeans only know of wolves from fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood, and are very much prone to unrealistic fears about predation. Already, conservation groups in Germany and the Netherlands are preparing the general public for the arrival of wolves, mainly with education programs and explain that humans in general do not have anything to fear. But they also started to closely monitor the occasional killing of sheep by domesticated dogs, so that—by the time the wolf finally arrives—wolves cannot be held responsible for all sheep kills.

economy.[7]

In the process of globalization, many local landscape characteristics are eroding and are being replaced by interchangeable and “transportable” stereotypes. Traditionally, places served as shared reference points: they both expressed and helped to support regional identities, thus providing human inhabitants with a means of identification and orientation. This traditional connection between people’s sense of identity and place has disappeared, leading to experiences of “placelessness”[8] and disorientation.[9] Against this background, many seek to conserve those landscape elements that can still support a feeling of regional cultural identity.[10] Even though the very notion of authenticity has become contested[11], alleged historically genuine cultural landscapes are broadly valued as places of authenticity amidst an ocean of interchangeable public space.[12]

The tension between these two trends may converge, but more often they are in conflict with one another. Many perceive the emergence of feral nature as a new threat to

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[7] Bas Pedroli, Thomas van Elsen and Jan Diek van Mansvelt, “Values of rural landscapes in Europe: inspiration or byproduct?” *NJAS Wageningen Journal Of Life Sciences* 54(4) (2007): 431.

[8] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion 1976).

[9] Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe. (London, New York: Verso 1995).

[10] Mahyar. Arefi, “Non-Place and Placelessness as Narratives of Loss: Rethinking the Notion of Place” *Journal of Urban Design* 4(2) (1999): 179-194.

[11] David Lowenthal, “Authenticities Past and Present” *CRM Journal: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 5(1) (2008): 6-17.

[12] Kimberly Dovey, “The Quest for Authenticity and the Replication of Environmental Meaning” in David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, eds., *Dwelling, Place & Environment. Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 33-49.

traditional landscape identity. Some local inhabitants feel that the changes due to ecological restoration undermine their attachment to the landscape[13], and often imply loss of identity, decrease in character, and a trend towards meaningless stereotypes. When debates about ecological restoration and nature conservation become entangled in issues like these, it can seriously undermine the legitimacy of nature conservation efforts. It is therefore useful to look a bit more closely to an example of such a conflict.

The case of land declamation in the Hedwige polder

In 2009, a heated public debate took place in the Netherlands about the meaning and purpose of landscape protection in the Dutch province of Zeeland. This conflict is a perfect illustration of how renaturing landscapes can be perceived as a threat to the sense of place, especially to the identity of landscapes and to people's place-identity.

The province of Zeeland lies in the southwest of the Netherlands and is situated around four North Sea estuaries. The history of Zeeland has been marked by the age old struggle of people against the threat of the sea. Historically, most Zeelanders lived from the sea, but today many of them are farmers who live on land that has been reclaimed from the sea. Zeeland has suffered from many floods. The most recent was the flood disaster of February 1953 that killed nearly 2000 people in one night—it was the immediate cause for the Dutch to initiate the Delta Plan, a nation-wide system of sea dikes and water ways designed to protect the Netherlands from major floods in the future.

[13] Arjen Buijs, "Public Support for River Restoration. A Mixed-Method Study into Local Residents' Support for and Framing of River Management and Ecological Restoration in the Dutch Floodplains" *Journal of Environmental Management* 90(8) (2009), 2680-2689.

The major contributing river to the Zeeland estuaries is the Scheldt. This river once had several estuaries, but the Delta Plan disconnected most of them from the Scheldt. After protests by ecologists and fishermen in the 1970's, it was decided to not close off the Eastern Scheldt estuary entirely (which would have caused the collapse of the saltwater ecosystem), but instead to built a storm surge barrier, with huge sluice-gate-type doors that are normally open, but can be closed under adverse weather conditions. The entire Eastern Scheldt estuary became a designated national park in 2002.

The Western Scheldt, on the other hand, was never closed off, for it is an important shipping route to the neighboring Port of Antwerp, in Belgium. The shores of the Western Scheldt are heavily embanked to protect the surrounding agricultural land. Close to the Dutch-Belgian border, where the river Scheldt meets the salty waters of the North Sea, is a small nature reserve, *Het Verdronken Land van Saeftinghe* (The Drowned Land of Saeftinghe), named after a town that existed here until 1584. It holds a highly dynamic saltwater ecosystem with high biodiversity, but it is also a treacherous place

which cannot be explored without an experienced guide because the tides easily consume large stretches of land in a matter of seconds. Here one can experience the ruthless power of the sea—according to many Zeelanders a reminder why we have to continue fight nature. The Zeeland flag features a lion struggling to stay above water, the province's motto reads "*luctor et emergo*": I wrestle and emerge.

Flag of Zeeland

The conflict started with plans to dredge the Western Scheldt shipping channel. According to the Dutch-Belgian Separation Treaty of 1839, the Dutch and Belgium government are required to carry out "all necessary works" for safeguarding the navigability of the river. In order to ensure future accessibility of the Antwerp harbor for ever-larger ships, the shipping channel in the Netherlands part of the estuary has to be deepened on a regular basis. However, since dredging increases the water flow, this leads to a decrease in food supply for the salt marshes and mud plains along the shore. To compensate for biodiversity loss, European nature protection legislation requires compensation measures. After legal pressure from conservation groups, the Dutch Cabinet eventually decided in 2010 that only the flooding of formerly reclaimed land

would enable the Netherlands to fulfill its international and European treaty obligations and to ameliorate its relations with Belgium. The land declamation would have to take place in the Hedwige Polder, a small (3 square kilometer) and relative young (it was reclaimed from the sea between 1904 and 1907) area of land reclamation between the Drowned Land of Saeftinghe and the Belgium border.

The decision led to much controversy. Some heritage protectionists stressed that the Hedwige polder has a much longer history than is often suggested. Not only does it represent a little changed early 20th-century reclamation project, but more importantly,

> the seemingly young landscape hides a complex layered landscape: under the present surface traces are hidden of an earlier short-lived 17th-century reclamation, of a medieval fenland landscape that was settled and reclaimed from the 10th-century onwards but was lost by 16th-century floodings and, deep below the surface, of a sandy landscape that was used by Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples.[14]

The controversy became more heated when local inhabitants claimed that the Zeeland history of fighting against the sea is of deep importance to the Zeeland sense of identity. A headline from a national newspaper says it all: “Land declamation affects the Zeeland Soul.”[15] Some of the locals accused nature protection groups for being insensitive to these identity issues. Ecologists would merely answer to an abstract idea of biodiversity without paying attention to the particular history and meaning of this place. The plan of giving back to the sea large portions of this hard-won land was considered by many an

[14] Hans Renes, “Landschap in het nieuws: De Hedwigepolder binnenkort ontpolderd?” *Historisch Geografisch Tijdschrift* 27(1) (2009), 25-28.

[15] ‘Ontpoldering raakt de Zeeuwse ziel’, *De Volkskrant*, 17 December 2007.

insult and ultimately a threat to the regional identity.[16]

In spring of 2011, the newly elected Dutch government, strongly influenced by the strong populist, anti-elitists and anti-conservationist sentiments in Dutch politics, decided to again recall the decision to flood the Hedwige Polder with salt water.[17] It was decided that anti-renaturing sentiment (along with the economic interests of the five farmers that work in the Hedwige polder) will be the point of departure for Dutch landscape policy from now on, even if this means that the Netherlands cannot conform to the bilateral agreement with its neighbor Belgium and European legislation concerning

[16] The question that one could ask today, is whether all claims about regional identity and landscape heritage are credible and should be taken seriously in their current form. Some have noted that some of the claims regarding the Zeeland identity suffer from memory defect, and only refer to the situation after 1953. The fight against the sea may have been important in the history of this landscape, but it is only a part of it. The sea has also provided the Zeelanders with fisheries and fertile soil throughout history. Properly understood, the history of humans and the sea is one of give and take. The *Drowned Land of Saeftinghe* could be seen as a reminder that one cannot base one's identity on the idea that the sea can be subjected. The sea will always be a major presence here: humans can chose to aspire to dominate the sea, but such a choice would be self-deceit. Zeelanders may cherish the idea of being fighters against the sea, but in fact their history is better understood as a negotiation process between the landscape's inhabitants and the forces of nature. The current Zeeland identity claim could be seen as a symptom of modern Zeelanders not being aware enough of the role that nature has had in their very own history, and of the many ways that the border of land and sea has provided a place for humans to make a living.

[17] The idea that the flooding of land with *salt* water goes against the very nature of Zeeland is somehow put in perspective by considering the fact that the salinity of the water is deemed irrelevant when the land is consciously flooded with saline water by farmers to grow saline-loving crops such as *salicornia*, again confirms that the real worry of many Zeelanders is the perceived loss of human control over nature.

nature compensation (such as the EU habitat guideline).[18]

Many conservationists consider the Hedwige case as having been crucial for the decreasing support for ecological restoration in Dutch politics. What we can learn from this example is that conflicts between heritage and nature conservation, if not discussed thoroughly enough, can seriously undermine the legitimacy of nature restoration and protection measures.

Culture versus nature?

Many of the tensions in the debate about landscape can be traced back to the fact that the moral debate on landscape has until quite recently been dominated by two perspectives. On one side, nature conservationists have argued that the growth of industry and agriculture have led to habitat loss and species extinction, and have undermined the ecological integrity of the landscape. They believe that time has now come for humans to take a more modest attitude towards the landscape and to counteract and compensate the devastation of the past by restoring or strengthening existing ecosystems or by the

[18] Since then, many new developments took place. In early 2012, after intensive negotiations with the European Commission, the Dutch government finally agreed to partially flood the Hedwige Polder. Deputy Agriculture Minister Henk Bleker informed the European Commission and parliament of the decision that a third of the land (roughly 100 hectares) will be flooded, and another 200 hectares of reclaimed land on alternative sites will also be 'sacrificed' as compensation measure. Neither Flanders nor the European Commission accepted the revised plan; European Commissioner for the Environment Janez Potočnik even launched an infringement procedure against the Netherlands regarding the delayed flooding or partial flooding of the Hedwige Polder "despite clear legal obligations". In June 2012, the Dutch Cabinet fell again, after having been in power for only one and a half year. At the time of printing, the outcome of the Hedwige case remains unclear.

renaturing (agri-)cultural land.[19] Core values of the nature restorationists are biodiversity, scarcity, wildness, ecological resilience, ecological fidelity, and ecological integrity.

On the other side, landscape heritage protectionists start from the idea that landscapes are meaningful reflections of human history. Landscapes can be said to have a biography of their own[20] and can be read as archives that tell a story about the people who dwelled here, how they related to the world and to each other. Cultural landscapes are covered with traces of historic events and remains of past land use. Those concerned with heritage landscapes believe we have to stay in touch with this past "because we owe our existence, our identity, our vision of the world to it."[21] Core values of landscape heritage protection are: landscape legibility, regional identity, sense of place, historical authenticity, and narrative continuity.

This tension between nature restoration and heritage conservation (which more or less coincides with that between the outlook of natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities approach on the other) has produced a stalemate in the moral debate about the meaning of "new nature" (a term used to denote restoration projects in The Netherlands). Heritage protectionists believe that nature development will inevitably erase valuable and irreplaceable traces of human history, will produce a historically *mute* landscape and thus result in an alienation from the landscape. They regard restoration biologists as nature fanatics who start with a false notion of an authentic landscape, and are insensitive

[19] Emma Marris, "Conservation Biology: Reflecting the Past" *Nature* 2009; 462(7269): 30-32.

[20] Nico Roymans, Fokke Gerritsen, Cor Van der Heijden, Koos Bosma & Jan Kolen, "Landscape Biography as Research Strategy: The Case of the South Netherlands Project" *Landscape Research*, 34(3) (2009), 337-359.

[21] Willem van Toorn, *Leesbaar landschap* (Amsterdam: Querido 1998), 66.

towards culture and local human needs. On the other hand, restoration biologists tend to argue that those concerned with cultural heritage are merely conservatives who are unable to acknowledge that certain traditional practices need to be redefined in light of the ecological crisis. Heritage protection would inevitably deify the past, transforming the living landscape into an outdoor museum. The opposition between these mutually exclusive perspectives hinders a productive exchange of ideas about the significance of the landscape.

Today, the need to seek a more productive relation between both perspectives is widely recognized. Many nature conservationists recognize the importance of human perception of nature and the need for public participation in restoration projects; and nature conservation organizations seek to strengthen their social and cultural embedding. Likewise, heritage protectionists increasingly acknowledge the value of biodiversity and the need to make our culture sustainable.

Yet, how exactly both perspectives could be integrated in a comprehensive, more balanced and reflexive view on meaning of place remains unclear. How can we better understand the links between cultural identity and the legible landscape, and contribute to a reconciliation of the perspectives of heritage protection and nature restoration?

Environmental philosophy on ecological restoration and ethics of place

The division between cultural landscape protection and wilderness conservation has until recently also marked environmental philosophy. Debates in landscape philosophy have been heavily influenced by the North-American bias and its emphasis on wilderness

protection.[22] As a consequence, early environmental philosophers had difficulty acknowledging any positive role humans could play in landscape change.[23] Likewise, the debate on ecological restoration focused heavily on issues such as Elliot's critique of the artificiality of "new nature"[24] and Katz's criticism of the anthropocentrism of ecological restoration as such.[25] More recently, environmental philosophers have recognized that ecological restoration can also pay a positive role in improving the human-nature-relationship.[26] This is particularly relevant in the "Old World" context of Europe, where culture and nature are indistinguishably intertwined.[27] Therefore, many contemporary

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[22] Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1991); J. Baird Callicott & Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1998).

[23] See Ned Hettinger, "The Problem of Finding a Positive Role for Humans in the Natural World," *Ethics and the Environment* 7.1 (2002), 109-123; also see William Cronon, "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands; How Do You Manage a Wilderness Full of Human Stories?" in Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, eds., *The Wilderness Debate Rages on; Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 632-644.

[24] Robert Elliott, *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[25] Eric Katz, "The Big Lie. The Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992): 231-241.

[26] For example, Eric Higgs, *Nature By Design. Human Agency, Natural Process And Ecological Restoration* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); William Jordan III*, The Sunflower Forest; Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*. (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003); Andrew Light, "Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature: a Pragmatic Perspective", in Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, Eds., *Environmental Ethics. An Anthology* (London: Blackwell 2003), 398-411.

[27] O'Neill, Holland & Light, *Environmental Values*, Martin Drenthen, *Grenzen aan wildheid;*

environmental philosophers have argued for a better cultural and social embedding of ecological restoration projects.

But despite the growing attention of the cultural impacts of restoration projects, issues of heritage protection as such do not yet play a part in environmental philosophy. Some of the themes that heritage landscape conservationists are concerned with can also be traced back to environmental philosophy. Key terms are "ethics of place" and "sense of place." Some environmental philosophers have pointed out that places are always already filled with meanings[28] and therefore play an important role in structuring people's lives. Others have pointed to the relation between place ethics and land-narratives.[29] Yet, until now, these issues have mostly been dealt with separately. It is about time that environmental philosophers bring together these topics. One way of doing so, I will argue, is to focus on the concept of landscape legibility and its relation to environmental identity.

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wildernisverlangen en de betekenis van Nietzsches moraalkritiek voor de actuele milieu-ethiek (Budel: Damon, 2003); Martin Drenthen, "Wildness as Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration," *Environmental Values*, 14(3) (2005), 317-337.

[28] Ed Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993); Robert Mugerauer, *Interpreting Environments: Tradition, Deconstruction, Hermeneutics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity and Social Theory* (New York: Suny Press, 2001).

[29] Martin Drenthen, "Ecological restoration and place attachment; emplacing non-places?" *Environmental Values* 18(3) (2009): 285-312; Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics of Bioregional Narrative" *Environmental Ethics* 11 (2) (1989): 117-134.

The legible landscape palimpsest, place narrative and identity

The legibility of the landscape is a recurring theme in debates about the significance of cultural landscapes in Europe, both in popular culture[30], environmental education[31], and social environmental sciences[32]. However, this theme is not used as frequently in environmental philosophy and ethics. Originally, the term addresses the relation between landscape perception and human history, yet it could also be used to conceptualize the notion of ecological fidelity that is central in many restoration projects.

The concept of a legible landscape can be used to understand both wilderness protection (conceived of as making explicit the first text of primal nature) and cultural heritage conservation (conceived of making explicit the subsequent historical layers testifying of human interactions in the landscape). The European landscape is like a palimpsest: a multi-layered text, consisting of different textual layers written on top of each other. Even pristine landscapes that contain testimonies of "primal nature" are like pages covered with the signatures of the early human inhabitants occupying European landscapes, while subsequent layers contain testimonies of the various migratory waves, of natural events such as floods and changes in climate, of the invention of agriculture, of industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of large scale agriculture, of the recent rationalization of land use practices, and so on. Today, the designation of large scale ecological restoration and rewilding projects are inscribing yet another text layer to the

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[30] For example, Van Toorn, *Leesbaar landschap*.

[31] Karina Hendriks & Henk Kloen, *IVN Handleiding leesbaar landschap* (Culemborg: CLM, 2007); also see: Martin Drenthen, "Reading Ourselves Through the Land".

[32] Roymans et al "Landscape Biography as Research Strategy…," also see: Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25(2) (1993): 152-174.

palimpsest. Once we recognize the "layeredness" of the landscape text[33], the legible landscape concept can help connect both perspectives: cultural heritage conservation is the making explicit of the subsequent historical layers testifying to human interactions with the landscape, whereas landscape rewilding can be conceived of as the unearthing of the primal text of nature.[34]

Moreover, the notion of landscape legibility can also help us to understand the relation between landscapes and human identity. It is by virtue of their legibility that particular places matter to both individuals and communities as embodying their history and cultural identities. People make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger normative context. For this reason, environments matter to people too: because these embody such a larger context.[35] This is most obvious in the case of cultural landscapes: by providing a broader context with which to understand ourselves they give a sense of orientation and open a perspective on our place in history. This sense of identity is rooted in a narrative understanding of place; these narratives depend on material traces in the landscape combined with the histories that people tell: cultural landscapes are interpreted landscapes. Moreover, because the landscape is always interpreted anew in each era, the

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[33] For a reflection on the notion of layeredness in the landscape, also see Robert Mugerauer's essay in this volume.

[34] "[M]any types of ecological restoration […] can be considered a response stemming from an ethics of memory, when memories challenge the state of the present." (Forrest Clingerman: "Environmental Amnesia or the Memory of Place? The Need for Local Ethics of Memory in a Philosophical Theology of Place", in Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, eds., *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere* [New York: T & T Clark, 2011], 141-159).

[35] O'Neill, Holland & Light, *Environmental values*, 162-164.

cultural landscape's meaning is part of an interpretational history.

Yet, these points apply to the specifically natural world as well: the natural world can also function as a larger normative context, with its own narrative dimension.

> [N]atural environments have histories that stretch out before humans emerged and they have a future that will continue beyond the disappearance of the human species. Those histories form the larger context for our human lives. However, it is not just this larger historical context that matters in our valuation of the environments in which we live, but also the backdrop of natural processes against which human life is lived.[36]

Both types of reference to textual layers in the landscape hold an implicit moral dimension. The moral dimension of heritage landscape protection does not in the first place refer to some "intrinsic" feature of these landscapes themselves, but rather to the fact that their legible features refer to human history, a history that embodies a meaningful narrative about human relationships with these places and with history. To the degree that the legible landscape serves as a *normative* context that can give some "measure" to the present, one can say that landscape legibility supports a (rather conservative) ethics of place.

Most restorationists, on the other hand, use the concept of deeper, underlying "wild" nature as a moral "base line."[37] Many will readily admit that it is impossible to reverse history and turn back to an undisturbed past, yet their aim is not to "build" new ecosystems either. Rather, they seek to restore a sense of continuity with a historically

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Drenthen, "Ecological Restoration and Place Attachment."

deeper past that has been forgotten. Restoration projects should respect the "genius of place" by recognizing (1) the (non-anthropogenic) natural processes and underlying geomorphologic structures that are characteristic of a certain place, *as well as* (2) the (anthropogenic) historical developments of a certain landscape as far as these contributed to the specific character of that area, and (3) the societal functions that have enabled people to interact with these natural processes in ways that are both physically and economically sustainable.[38] Seen from this perspective, ecological restorationists attempt to adjust the anthropocentric place narrative of heritage landscape protectionists and to broaden our sense of human place-history (landscape biography) and our ethics of place. As such, restoration projects could even help revitalize local community's sense of place.[39] By liberating the ancient natural forces that early inhabitants faced and thus consciously reconnecting with the deeper layers of the legible landscape, it becomes possible to re-enact some of the forgotten narrative possibilities that these deeper textual layers accommodate.

Both heritage protectionists and ecological restorationists refer to a particular reading of the landscape as legible text that supports particular moral place narratives. Reading the landscape palimpsest in multiple ways can enrich the debate about future challenges, and choices, but the readings of past layers in the landscape cannot simply be used as a model for the present, because history never repeats itself. Some heritage landscapes may be saved as relicts, but most historic references will at best serve as ideal images or rough guides with regard to our current challenges.

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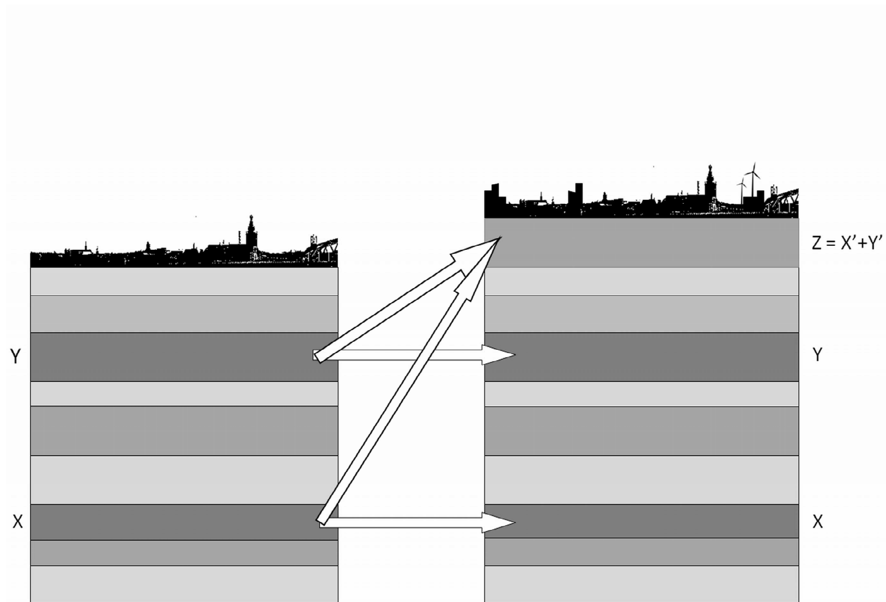
[38] Wouter Helmer and Willem Overmars, "Genius of place." *Aarde & Mens* 2(2) (1998): 3-10.

[39] See Higgs, *Nature by Design*.



Different layers of the palimpsest support different future place narratives.

Both perspectives on the meaning of a landscape—heritage and restoration—are one-sided, but together they complement each other. Heritage protection rightly points to the value of history and place narrative. Ecological restorationists must therefore learn to interpret the value of nature protection in narrative terms as well, rather than relying solely on abstract arguments such as biodiversity protection.[40] On the other hand, the restorationists' argument for the value of the natural world should be welcomed as a valuable correction to the anthropocentrism of many traditional cultures of place.

Reflecting on different elements of the landscape biography can provide different narrative possibilities, ways to continue the historic narrative of which we and the landscape are part. Making explicit past human-nature interactions reminds us that we do

[40] Glenn Deliège, "Restoring or Restorying Nature?" in S. Bergmann, P.Scott, M. Jansdotter Samuelsson & H. Bedford-Strohm, eds., *Nature, Space and the Sacred* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

not start from scratch, but find ourselves in a landscape that always already has a natural and cultural history, and thus can enrich our moral imagination. Ecological references broaden and deepen this context for human self-understanding. In the moral debate about the landscape, both readings can serve a narrative role of guidance for future developments.

Thus, the metaphor of landscape as a legible palimpsest can provide a means of thinking through the new developments in the European landscape and their significance for human place identity, and will allow us to develop a pragmatic approach that may help to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and complementary features of the reading practices involved.

Conservation and restoration require reading the landscape

Restorationists who only refer to abstract values such as biodiversity risk creating the very opposition against nature protection measures that they fear. By arguing solely from an ecological perspective, restorationists risk alienating those who are concerned about the landscape for different reasons.

In the Hedwige case, conservationists at first won the legal and political case, but lost much goodwill among parts of the population along the way. Partly as a result of this event Dutch conservation groups are currently discussing whether or not it is wise to rely solely on legal arrangements and European conservation legislation when it come to finding a new, more balanced relationship with nature. Some have argued that the legal approach, while yielding successful results in the short term, will fail in the long term due to the fact that it distracts attention from the content of the values involved. To get a

clearer view of what is morally at stake in this debate, conservationists need to articulate a broader, and more inclusive vision of what restoration is about. Eric Higgs and William Jordan[41] have both defined ecological restoration as the attempt to not merely heal damaged ecosystems, but to heal damaged human-nature relationships as well. As soon as conservationists acknowledge that landscapes also meet deeply human (anthropocentric) needs by providing people with a sense of direction, purpose and identity, they can also recognize the many alternative ways in which one can articulate the meaning of a landscape to show that it is worth protecting.

Not any heritage protectionist story will do, of course. Whatever meaningful and caring relationship with a landscape we wish to foster, in order for it to be sustainable it should meet with the basic ecological facts as well.[42] A historically rooted understanding of the meaning of a landscape can, on second thought, turn out to be misguided if it is based on an incorrect understanding of the role that natural processes play within a landscape system. Ecologists and conservationists could attempt to correct such

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[41] See Higgs, *Nature by Design* and Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest*.

[42] It may appear strange to speak of "facts" in a defense of a hermeneutical ethic. Facts are often understood as the "objective" substratum underneath all interpretations of the world—those features of reality that exist independent of any specific interpretation. Arguing that interpretations should acknowledge the relevant ecological facts would imply the introduction of a thoroughly *un*-hermeneutical element. One can solve this paradox by first acknowledging that facts are not as "objective" as one may think—facts are only considered *relevant* from a certain specific interpretational perspective that renders them such. Facts in this view, then, refer not so much to the objective substrate that remains when the world is stripped from all interpretation, but rather, those features of the world that each interpretation has to somehow incorporate because they have a kind of "unruliness" that cannot be ignored without undermining the interpretation whole.

“mistaken” place identities, for example by stressing knowledge of the hitherto unknown ways in which the natural system has played a role in the history of a landscape and its inhabitants.

It could be more meaningful, though, to explicitly fall back on an understanding of place-history that appeals to older forms of local traditional ecological knowledge and attempts to provide people with a sense of orientation and deeper understanding of the natural characteristics of the place they care for. Due to modernization processes and the increase in mobility, much knowledge of both natural and cultural history of places has disappeared from the public sphere. Yet, part of this heritage still lives on, in local practices, habits, local songs and narratives, albeit mostly implicitly. The explication and articulating of the meanings inherent in these place narratives—meanings that only unconsciously play a role in a community’s sense of place—can help local communities to better acknowledge the deeper significance of the natural systems they rely on.

An example of how this can be done is the Wealthy Waal Project[43] along the Waal River (the main branch of the Lower Rhine River in the Netherlands). Starting from a bioregional framework that combines existing notions of regional identity with basic knowledge of the biotic system, this spatial development project engages water managers, ecologists, local authorities, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and inhabitants to collectively envision what a sustainable future of the region could look like, both economically and culturally. The project greatly benefits from local landscape historians who show the many ways in which natural forces such as rivers have been (and will always be) structuring forces in the formation of the landscape, *and*—more indirectly—of

[43] http://www.waalweelde.nl

local cultures dependent on it. Many of the environmental problems that we face today are not much different from those of former inhabitants. We can learn from past experiences, by recalling how earlier inhabitants answered to the challenges posed to them by the landscape, and see how this interplay of people and nature has produced the landscape of today. Many of the typical local characteristics of a certain places that people identify with can be traced back to specific natural events such as river floods, and people's responses to them. History can reveal how past human-nature dialogues have had a real effects on the landscape and on the inhabitants who live they today. For example, studying the layout of river banks from the middle ages (legible traces of which can still be seen to the trained eye today[44]) can teach us how river inhabitants who did not yet believe they could subdue the river, tried to attune themselves to nature's rhythms. By integrating the heritage story into a deeper and broader landscape history, and revitalizing dormant layers of the local culture that still contain some of the older "ecological" wisdom of local communities, it becomes possible to escape the dualist choice between culture and nature, and between cultural heritage and ecological restoration.

Like all narratives, local histories organize the world, and help to understand who and where one is. But, like other narratives, they also create their own audience, as it were. Reframing the restoration issue in narrative terms and complementing the historical self-understanding with deep landscape history can provide inhabitants of a particular landscape with a new story about whom they are and where they came from, and thus create a new sense of community. Place histories can awake a sense of having a shared burden to take care of the land, its cultural heritage and its ecology alike. A narrative

[44] See Martin Drenthen, "Ecological restoration and place attachment."

understanding of restoration can thus deepen the sense of place and develop a sense of ecological citizenship and help to find new, more mature relationships to the world we inhabit.

It goes without saying that this overview of how new nature narratives could help us come to terms with resurging nature in cultural landscapes has to be worked out in much more detail. Probably, it can only be done convincingly *in place*, that is: together with the local community that tries to understand its place, together with historians and ecologists and other experts who know a place, and directed at finding a better self understanding of what it means to be living 'here' today.[45] In a way, a convincing meaningful story about a place is told by that place itself.[46]

Coda: landscape hermeneutics and environmental ethics

We humans are meaning seeking beings, and the world we inhabit is a reflection thereof. We live in a world that is always already interpreted. The meanings and interpretations of our world are no secondary addition to an otherwise "objective" reality, but rather *form*

[45] There is some irony in writing about the hermeneutics of the Dutch river landscape in English language in an international academic volume. The interpretational character of our relation with nature may be universal, but the moral meanings involved in this relation are essentially particularistic. See Martin Drenthen, "NIMBY and the Ethics of the Particular", *Ethics, Place & Environment* 14 (3) (2010): 321-323

[46] Bruce Janz, "Thinking Like a Mountain: Ethics and Place as Travelling Concepts," in Martin Drenthen, Jozef Keulartz and Jim Proctor, eds., *New Visions of Nature: Complexity and Authenticity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 181-195. Also see Cheney, "Postmodern environmental ethics."

the very fabric of the kind of world that matters to us. And yet, although the world we live in is an interpreted (and therefore) thoroughly human world, nature presents us with issues that we have to acknowledge in our interpretations of the world.

Historically, one strand of hermeneutics, emerging from Friedrich Schleiermacher's work, advocates that understanding the meaning of a text amounts to knowing the intention of the author. Analogously, a good understanding of nature would amount to an understanding of the meaning that nature itself expresses. This does not mean that we have a direct access the meaning of nature (after all, the intention of the author is also not readily available but must be discovered through interpretation), but it does presuppose that there is such a thing as a true our original interpretation of nature that is more appropriate than others. Hans-Georg Gadamer has criticized this "romantic hermeneutic" view of meaning for failing to appreciate that our understanding of the meaning of the world differs throughout history and within different cultures.[47] Often, the meaning of something which appeals to us is not clear to us. Meaning does not just lie there waiting to be discovered. Meaningful things appeal to us through experiences, but the *meaning* of those experiences only becomes clear once we attempt to articulate them. The experience may precede our understanding of it, but its meaning only exists through our interpretative appropriation, that is, *after* our attempt to "bring home" what it is that beckons to be understood. It makes no sense to talk about the "real" meaning of nature apart from our articulations in a specific cultural form. For environmental philosophy this means that it makes no sense to refer to nature as having an intrinsic meaning apart from

[47] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975).

our understanding of it. But this does *not* imply, of course, that we the meanings we encounter are made by us, the world outside exists, and throws its questions at us.[48]

An adequate hermeneutic of the landscape therefore has to acknowledge that our relation to the landscape is deeply historical: that is, we humans inevitably, and always already, interpret the landscapes we find ourselves in. Past interpretations of the meaning of a particular place in which we find ourselves can play a role in how we act towards and think about certain places. We may be under the sway of certain past interpretations often without being aware of them. But every now and then, the places we find ourselves in beckon to be interpreted anew, because they appear to us as somehow meaningful in a new way that we have not yet understood.

We get our meanings from the cultural contexts surrounding us, but that does not mean we are imprisoned in that context, nor that we are forced to only conserve the meanings of our cultural tradition. As cultural beings, we are not merely the result of history, but make history as well. We may find that we have gotten stuck with stories and interpretations about our world that have been told before, petrified interpretations, or fixed narratives that do not always properly articulate the actual meaning that these places have for us now. In these cases, we will not always be able to adequately articulate what that new meaning actually is. It is at this point that environmental hermeneutics can play a constructive role.

Moreover, an environmental hermeneutics will also have to recognize that the interpretations of the places in which we live in turn provide an ongoing and ever-

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[48] See Martin Drenthen: "The paradox of environmental ethics. Nietzsche's view of nature and the wild," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (2) (1999), 163-175.

changing narrative context from which we can understand ourselves.[49] Environmental hermeneutics will therefore have to explicate the interpretational base of our being-in-the-world by articulating those pre-existing meanings and interpretations that already play a role in how we act and think, and in doing so force us to have a second look at them. Some of our previous interpretations of the land may prove to be inadequate or outdated once we properly reflect upon them. A hermeneutical environmental *ethics* will ask in what sense these old interpretations can still be considered adequate articulations of how the world we find ourselves in beckons to be understood, or whether we should seek new articulations. Rearticulating these meanings can be laborious, but plays a critical part.

The task of a hermeneutical environmental ethics, then, is to articulate and make

[49] The stories that we tell to ourselves—about who we are and what our lives are about—are built on the contexts that we always already find ourselves in. The most well known is the way that our life stories get shaped by the stories and narratives we hear around us: our culture surround us with a body of narratives—our holy texts, our dearest works of literature and art, and so on—that provide us with words and storylines with which we can tell ourselves who we are and what our life is about. Paul Ricoeur elaborates on this idea in terms of "emplotment." In an interesting paper, Forrest Clingerman has extended on this idea by focusing on the role of "emplacement." He argues that we do not just understand ourselves from the context of the stories surrounding us, but also from the meaningful places we find ourselves in. Whereas texts help us to find the plot of our lives, meaningful places also provide context from which we understand ourselves. See Forest Clingerman: "Beyond the Flowers and the Stones: 'Emplacement' and the Modeling of Nature" *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 11(2) (2004): 17-24. Also see Martin Drenthen, "Reading Ourselves Through the Land: Landscape Hermeneutics and Ethics of Place", in Forrest Clingerman & Mark Dixon, eds, *Placing Nature on the Borders of Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2011). Also see David Utsler, "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics as a Model for Environmental Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 53(2) (2009), 173-178.

explicit those interpretations and meanings that are already at work in our everyday practices, to bring them to light and make them explicit, and to confront existing meanings and interpretations with other, less obvious interpretations. Doing so will increase our sensitivity for the many different meanings that can be at stake in our dealings with a particular place, although it will also make the questions of ethics even more complex than they already are. However, by showing how our understanding of ourselves is already emplaced, a hermeneutical environmental ethics can help us to better understand what is at stake in our complex relation with the landscape.