

From Renunciation to Mysticism: Nature Writing's Residual Religiosity in Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*

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Abstract: Nature writing historically carries religious elements or experiences despite proclaiming a secular genre. Scottish modernist Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (2014) engages eco-spirituality from a mystic perspective which this paper analyzes following her Christian renunciation. In contemporary environmentalism, emotional and spiritual connections recur through nature writers and activists despite the genre's proclamation of secularity. Shepherd's biography and post-Christian context directly engage these tensions between secularity and religiosity in the nature writing genre. This paper argues for the necessity of the religious-like qualities to the genre through Shepherd's interaction with the Scottish Cairngorm mountains.

"Walking thus, hour after hour, the sense keyed, one walks the flesh transparent."

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

An emphasis on physical and emotional embodiment imbues the nature writing genre with religious-like qualities. Nature writing circulates themes of reverence and spirituality, which position the writer ambiguously between a secular genre and a religious approach. Scottish modernist Nan Shepherd uses mysticism to mediate this tension in her elegy to the Scottish Cairngorm mountains, *The Living Mountain*. After renouncing her Christian faith, Shepherd demonstrates a residual religiosity in *The Living Mountain*, which illustrates both her personal tensions and the genre's tensions more broadly. After rejecting Christianity for its intangible abstractions, *The Living Mountain*

is Shepherd's post-Christian text that tracks her spiritual journey from the ineffable to the tangible embodiment that she finds in nature. Beginning with Ernst Conradie's "ecothology" (1), this paper uses eco-spirituality to frame Shepherd's residual religiosity and transition to mysticism. Shepherd's reverential yet secular approach illuminates how mysticism can mediate boundaries between spirituality and secularity in the nature writing genre.

Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* integrates environmentalism and spirituality into literature but received little recognition as a literary text until Canongate's 2014 republication. Before Canongate's republication, the text had fallen from the press for nearly 50 years. Despite providing significant contributions to environmental writing, Shepherd has yet to receive substantial academic treatment. Expanding from theories of eco-spirituality, this paper recognizes Shepherd and her mysticism to analyze the transitional stage "when people increasingly speak of spirituality rather than religion when trying to describe what moves them deeply" in nature writing (Bron 3). Shepherd draws on motifs of embodiment and eroticism, which connects her with mysticism, particularly Christian women mystics like Julian of Norwich and Bridget of Sweden. This paper understands mysticism as an ambiguous spirituality that moves in the fluid space between secularity and religiosity. Moving from Shepherd's mystic approach to the Cairngorms, I argue that *The Living Mountain* demonstrates how "re-positioning the body helps open up new ways to perceive this interconnected world" (Walton 79).

Eco-Spirituality

Theology professor at the University of Edinburgh, Rachel Muers, suggests that nature writers and activists engage "prophetic voices of nonhuman nature" to advocate for the environment (323). In this framework, the nature writer takes on a prophetic quality, albeit from a secular stance. However, residual religiosity gestures toward the presence of eco-spirituality within the genre.

Eco-spirituality presents a secular alternative that allows religious experience in nature without the religious institution. Contemporary theologians trace eco-spirituality to Celtic and Franciscan strains of Christianity and notably to mystics of the Middle Ages like Julian of Norwich and Bridget of Sweden (Conradie 5). Eco-spirituality maintains “a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions” but enjoys the freedom from an overarching religion (Bron 3).

Geographic relativism is a key aspect of eco-spirituality that influences personal interactions with nature. BeldenLane develops the habitus to describe how spiritual interaction emerges from the physical landscape (25). Often in a “process of reading cultural meaning back onto the natural world,” the habitus shapes how cultures interpret the divine through their landscape (33). To demonstrate this pattern, Lane discusses how monotheism is more common in desert or mountainous cultures, while he observes more polytheistic tendencies in forested or oceanic cultures (24). Shepherd’s position in the mountainous Cairngorms appears when she invokes images of the sublime to describe the awe-inspiring mountains. Shepherd draws on the mountain’s fearsome qualities, like snowstorms and jagged peaks, which echoes in the rawness of her accounts. Her singular “Being” which she finds in the mountains demonstrates an encompassing monotheistic approach to the oneness of the mountain. For writers who are intimate with their landscape, the spirituality begins to fuse with their attitude toward the land.

As theologians observe eco-spirituality continuing to grow in nature writing, land interactions become like liturgical practices for nature writers and enthusiasts (Lester and Böhm 57). In Shepherd’s writing, we see this practice as she elegizes and sings praise to the Cairngorms. As humans write poetries about the earth, “humans join in this universal praise [to nature] that is voiced by all creatures” (Gschwandtner 191). What Gschwandtner calls universal praise becomes a secularized form of liturgical practice through the invocation of psalmist and hymnic

language. In Shepherd, this praise is specifically directed to the Cairngorms because the mountains become her spiritual focus. Before her renunciation, her spirituality was directed towards God. Now, her spirituality directs toward the Cairngorms. This transfer of a god-like treatment to the Cairngorms affirms Lane's observation that "talk about God cannot easily be separated from discussions of place" (22)—particularly in the context of nature writing. In works like Shepherd's, this transference process demonstrates how the relationship to land begins to assume a spiritual position for the writer.

Renunciation and Reverence

Often beginning from a place of dissatisfaction with traditional religions' incomprehensible deities, eco-spirituality seeks "a religion of pure experience [which] is typically a modern phenomenon" (Lane 29). Contrasted to traditional religions where the spiritual experience is abstract or mediated by a priest, eco-spirituality is tangible. Like Shepherd, Ralph Waldo Emerson sought an experiential divinity found in nature. After growing frustrated with Christianity's intangible abstractions, Emerson renounced Christianity "to find the ways divinity could be experienced directly" (Robinson 93). Emerson's Christian renunciation and subsequent turn to nature echoes Nan Shepherd's later spiritual pivot. As a formative text in the nature writing genre, Emerson's *Nature* embeds religious frustration into the genre. In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd exhibits the same religious pattern as Emerson. Both writers seek a tangible spiritual experience, which they cannot find in cathedrals or catechism. Instead, they turn to mountains and rivers where they find a physically embodied divine in the natural world.

Willingly or unwillingly, the spirituality of the nature writer's experience positions them in a contested place between renunciation and reverence. For writers who overtly renounce religiosity, mysticism acknowledges the genre's religious origins while maintaining spiritual nuance. More complex than straight renunciation, Bron questions if this

pattern simply transitions classical religion to be “engaged in nature religion” (4). In cases like Emerson and Shepherd, frustrations with traditional religions’ abstractions led writers to the mystic practice of seeking “the embodiment of the sacred in human experience” (Milad and Taheri 611). From this experience, the mystic directly interacts with spiritual dimensions without directly ascribing to a religion. Relying on tangible experiences, mysticism negotiates the desire to experience spirituality but ambiguously directs the spirituality to an unspecified divine.

Contextualized by her own post-Christian biography, Shepherd uses mysticism to engage with nature spiritually yet secularly. Rather than complete renunciation, her residual religiosity positions *The Living Mountain* in tense conversations between science and creation. While not wholly in agreeance, she praises “the scientists [that] have the humility to acknowledge that they don’t know how [nature] has been done” (Shepherd 59). However, while she respects the acknowledged absent logic, she continues to gesture at the ambiguous spirituality in the mountains. “God or no god,” (7), Shepherd’s mysticism addresses the physical world’s spiritual aspects rather than its religiously ascribed traits. Shepherd’s rejection of God did not result from absent spirituality, but from her desire for tangibility. This entangled desire moves through *The Living Mountain*, but Shepherd uses mysticism to negotiate a halfway point between nature and religiosity.

Women Mystics and Embodied Spirituality

Women mystics’s use of spiritual ravishment and embodiment set the historical precedent for nature mysticism like Shepherd’s. Through *The Living Mountain*, “we see [Shepherd] weighing up the merits of scientific and religious explanations,” often as she walks and physically engages with the landscape (Walton 60). Women mystics sought a direct experience with the divine mediated through their physical bodies. When Shepherd engages her body in sensual manners, the experience emulates a mystic experience in a

modernist setting. While Ruiz de Alegria Puig argues that Shepherd's physicality eroticizes the feminine body (170), her post-secular context positions Shepherd's body as the focal point for her spirituality. In "The Senses," Shepherd declares: "I am an image in a ball of glass" (96). This echoes Emerson's infamous transparent eyeball from *Nature*. Rather than dealing in religious abstraction, Shepherd meets the divine in her physical senses. Again, drawing on the desire to be the direct experiencer of the divine, Shepherd uses her embodied physicality to meet the landscape. As she runs her hand through wet heathers and feels glacial water on her body, physicality becomes the catalyst for her mystic experience.

Through her body, Shepherd demonstrates a "certain kind of consciousness [that] interacts with the mountain-forms" (Shepherd 102). Consciousness manifests through the physical nature and "touch, [which] is the most intimate sense of all" (102), intimates her to the landscape. Early on, Shepherd dives into a glacial lake and describes how "[her] spirit was as naked as [her] body" (13). The erotic tones of her spiritual exposure only amplify with "the joy of the wet drops trickling over the palm" (102) or the heather's "wetness on [her] naked legs" (102). Ruiz de Alegria Puig suggests that this intimacy is an erotic connection to the Cairngorms, but more than pleasure, the eroticism becomes the link to divinity. In what is referred to as spiritual ravishment, women mystics often use violent, erotic bodily imagery to physically experience religious ecstasy. Mystic Julian of Norwich considered "the body's suffering [to be] for spiritual transformation" (Godfrey 62), but Shepherd achieves a similar transformation from pleasure. Shepherd's exposures link her to the tradition that positions eroticism in embodiment.

The glacial lakes, the wet heathers, and the heavy rains verge to the erotic experience that Ruiz de Alegria Puig identifies, but mysticism allows "the feminine body [to] be seen as a metaphor/metonym for God" (Milad and Taheri 615). As if signifying her renunciation, Shepherd demonstrates mysticism embedded in her body rather than

a divine or religious body. In this sense, Shepherd's feminine body both experiences and becomes part of the religious experience in nature. Waters observes that women mystics are often framed as "[God's] bride and [His] channel" in the sense that they completely submit their desires to God (135). Shepherd subverts this tradition by indulging her own physical pleasures through physical experience in the mountains. "From that hour [she] belonged to the Cairngorms," she echoes marital rites but subverts them for her individualized spirituality (Shepherd 107). Rather than the self-sacrificial tones common to women mystics, "the body is not made negligible, but paramount" for Shepherd (106). Simultaneously engaging and rejecting the women's mystic tradition, Shepherd's renunciation originates from a posture of religiosity.

Nature Mysticism

Whether walkers, wanderers, or mountaineers "give it conscious thought or not, [they] are touching life, and something within [them] knows it" (82). Eco-spirituality seems to be aware of a life within the earth or the mountains that we can somehow touch. Mysticism bridges spiritual senses through physical senses as a "connective medium between humanity and God" (Walton 71). Shepherd describes experiencing this connectivity as "running to the ends of the body" (104) to achieve a form of annihilation. Somewhat paradoxically, Shepherd uses physical experiences to nullify the physical body and replace physicality with spirituality. As she plunges into the glacial lakes, the water seems "to disintegrate the very self" until she is "lost: stricken: annihilated" (104). This process of annihilation occurs when Shepherd lapses her physical body to touch the environment. She has reached the end of her physical senses and must experience with her spiritual senses. As she "walks the flesh transparent" (106), Shepherd experiences spiritual connectivity unfettered by the physical body. Her body is the vessel for her mystic encounter, but what Shepherd describes are the limits of the body in spirituality.

Mysticism's ambiguity unravels the boundaries between the human and nature. By pursuing "the 'still centre' of being" (106) rather than a specific religion, Shepherd expands senses beyond the physical to touch the spiritual. Like how Bratton (281) identifies the common desire for spirituality in a wilderness experience, Shepherd sees this desire and reaches it. She addresses interaction with nature as a constant expansion of the senses. The abstractions that her Christian faith offered her were insufficient, but in this spiritual seeking, Shepherd experiences the divine that religion could not offer. She knows the mountain more tangibly than the ethereal religious figures she renounced. The process of growing into a relationship with the mountain grounds Shepherd's mystic relationship with nature. Through her annihilation of the physical body, Shepherd explains that she is "not bodiless, but essential body" (108). In one sense, the body disappears, but the essential body which remains is more akin to a spiritual soul. By disavowing religious limitations and abstractions, Shepherd frees herself from bodily and religious confines.

While Shepherd does not use the term "mysticism," she describes "bodily lightness, [which] then in the rarefied combines with the liberation of space to give mountain feyness" (8). What Shepherd calls "mountain feyness" becomes the signifier of her mystic experience. She returns from her spiritual journey changed. Intriguingly, people notice this change and describe it as her "fey" demeanor (8). This feyness, regardless of its source, marks the nature mystic's experience. Like the contemporary spread of eco-spirituality, Shepherd's "mountain feyness attacks" (84) and lures people into nature. Hillmen, sawmillers, and mountaineers all become affected by this feyness from their time on the mountain. Even though *The Living Mountain* has just passed its fiftieth anniversary since publication, the mountains' feyness continues to draw new spiritualists into the wilderness.

“Being” in Ecological Crisis

In the final chapter of *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd refers to her mysticism’s centre as “Being” (108). Throughout her lifetime, she “began to discover the mountain in itself” (108) rather than as the resource that industry had treated it as. The text channels a “manifestation of [the Cairngorms] total life” (106). From “the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan” (106), the mountain’s ecology takes on a total life which Shepherd calls “Being.” The mountain’s Being serves as the focus of Shepherd’s mysticism. The total life and ecology form the full pantheon of the Cairngorms, which Shepherd reveres in her meanderings and in *The Living Mountain*. Following the ecological degradation in the Cairngorms, Shepherd steps into a prophetic role to cultivate respect for the natural environment through the text. If the mountain is spiritually revered, it is far more challenging to justify extractivist sentiments. Rather than approaching the mountain as a resource, Shepherd invites people to “be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him” (15).

Muers theorizes that advocacy’s appearance in nature writing emerges “as the work of the [Christian Holy] Spirit [which] both reveals and realizes God’s history with creation” (323). In this process, nature finds “new ways to speak theologically to the environmental crisis” (324). Whether nature writers call it God or not, the “cry of the earth” (329) resounds in Shepherd and Emerson. The religious or secular status is less relevant than a spiritual movement spurring each writer to speak about nature. Despite her renunciation, Shepherd’s mysticism addresses the “non-human nature [that] speaks out in the power of the Spirit” (333) or the ambiguous *Being* which she addresses. Amidst ecological degradation, Shepherd begins *The Living Mountain* by defending “the mountain itself, its substance, its strength, its structure” (xxxvi). Regardless of spiritual interpretation, she speaks for the Cairngorms.

“Spirituality is intertwined with environmental concern” (Bron 4), which nature writers evoke. Speaking from

their cultural contexts, nature writers draw on spirituality to restore people's respect and value of natural spaces. Even in her highly poetic prose, Shepherd challenges the "human economy that covers this mountain mass" (Shepherd 80). As "the spirit carries [her] up" (7), she engages mysticism to imbue spiritual value into landscapes. The physical embodiment is paramount, not because of personal experience, but because of the physical landscape. Every aspect in *The Living Mountain* engages a way to create intimacy between people and the environment. Drawing on mysticism, Shepherd's embodied experience demonstrates a connective process that fosters respect for the Cairngorms. Whether there is "God or no god" (7), Shepherd conjures respect for the living world.

Conclusion

Across *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd asserts the power of renewing one's relationship to nature, wherein "flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled" (106). While Shepherd's post-Christian writing illuminates a central paradox in the religious and secular tensions within the nature writing genre, she demonstrates how mysticism forms an intimate connection to land and cultivates environmental respect. Rather than drawing a line against religiosity with her renunciation, Shepherd uses mysticism to negotiate religiosity and eco-spirituality to develop "a modern expression of perennial wisdom" (Andrews 29). *The Living Mountain* acknowledges knowledge boundaries between humans and nature and seeks to reconcile them because "we cannot know [it] because we have no way to know [nature]" (Shepherd 105).

By walking to the edge of "ambiguous borders between spirit and substance" (Gifford 425), Shepherd leaves her spirituality in mysticism's ambiguity. Even in tensions between religiosity and spirituality, nature writers echo the "cry of the earth" to advocate for environmental protection (Muers 323). As she navigates her renunciation, Shepherd's work creates an intimate spiritual relationship between

herself and the Cairngorms. Rather than definitively secular or spiritual, Shepherd's mysticism is nuanced. This tension reflects the genre's and her position within eco-spirituality. By leaving this position open-ended, Shepherd shares her mystic experience in *The Living Mountain* to show readers "how the earth must see itself" (Shepherd 11) and how they can learn to see it in this way. *The Living Mountain* demonstrates that regardless of the spirituality's form, nature writing seeks to create respect for the environment through knowing it intimately. All through her ode to the Cairngorms, Shepherd adamants that "to know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountains" (108).

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